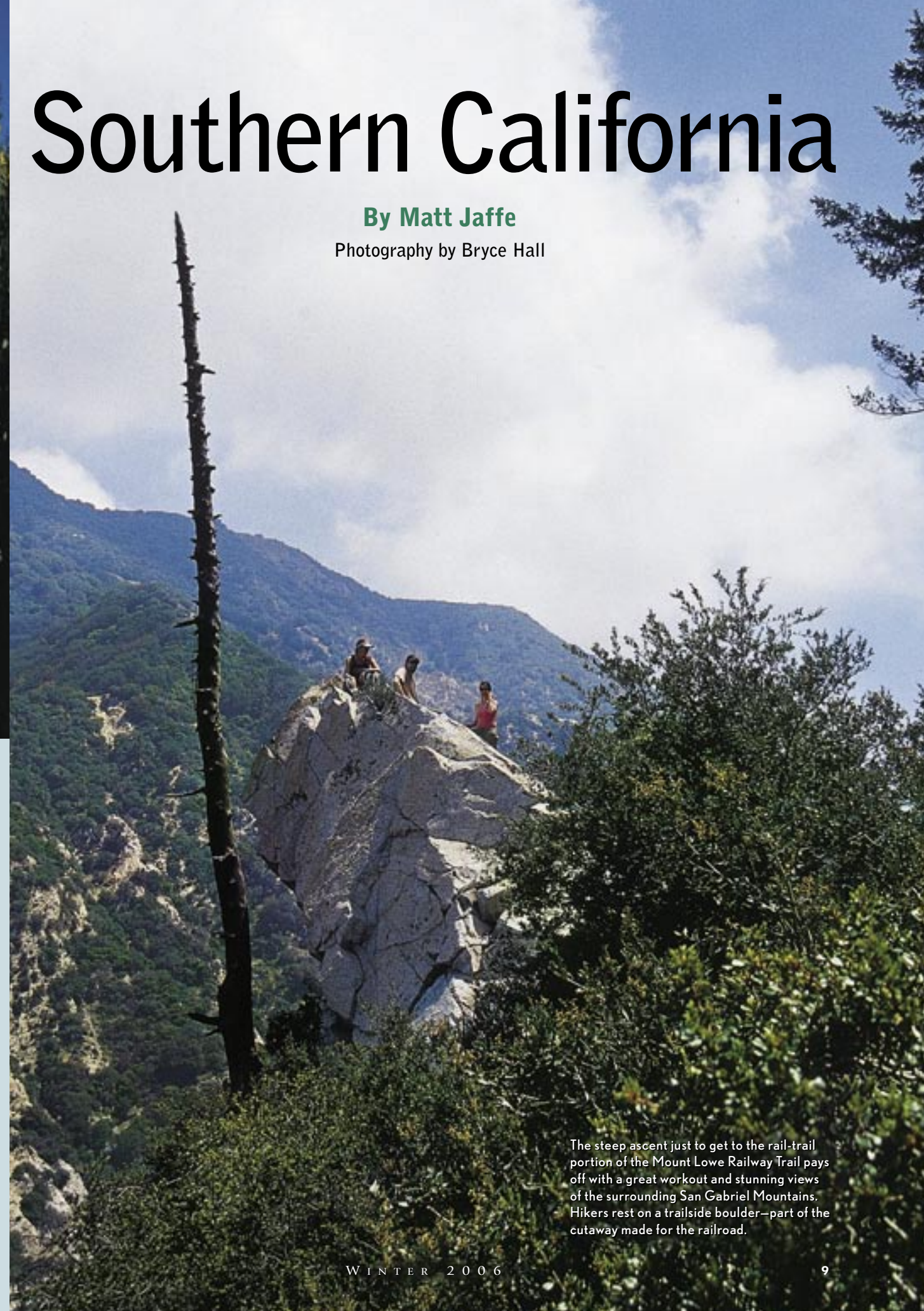


The Other Southern California

By Matt Jaffe

Photography by Bryce Hall



Live in Southern California long enough and you grow numb to the shopworn clichés so often used to characterize the region. We’ve heard them all, sometimes uttered a few ourselves. But we also know that a greater truth is out there somewhere in the megalopolis I once heard described as “the state of Los Angeles.”

As an un-Botoxed, non-freeway-commuting Southern Californian who neither surfs nor arrives in the fourth inning of Dodger games, I could cite myself as a living, breathing refutation of a slew of regional stereotypes. The reality is that generalizations don’t work very well here. Southern California is just too diverse. Sure there’s a labyrinth of freeways and a blanket of suburban sprawl, but the region also encompasses historical city neighborhoods

and small towns, desert expanses, high mountains and ocean.

Probably the best way to discover the area is to commit an alleged SoCal sacrilege—get out of your car. Then hit the trail. Three former rail lines converted to trails near Los Angeles offer looks at Southern California’s history, ecology and culture that are impossible to get when sealed up in a climate-controlled dream machine. Spend three days on the Mount Lowe Railway Trail, Her-

mosa Valley Greenbelt and Ojai Valley Trail and you’ll gain a new perspective on Southern California that may forever dispel the most stubborn of myths.

DAY ONE: Mount Lowe Railway Trail

Thirty minutes from downtown Los Angeles, the Mount Lowe Railway Trail edges along scrub-covered slopes to an elevation above 4,400 feet in the San Gabriel Mountains. It follows the bed of a railroad built in the 1890s by inventor and self-taught engineer Thaddeus S.C. Lowe, and was considered one of the world’s engineering marvels.

More than three million people from all over the world came here to experience a three-stage mountain adventure before the railway ended operations in 1937. After taking trol-

The steep ascent just to get to the rail-trail portion of the Mount Lowe Railway Trail pays off with a great workout and stunning views of the surrounding San Gabriel Mountains. Hikers rest on a trailside boulder—part of the cutaway made for the railroad.



After a rainy season, flowers spring out from rocky crevices all along the Mount Lowe Railway Trail. (Left) Switchbacks made the mountain climb easier on the rail cars, and offer today's hikers multiple chances to enjoy the view.



leys—the first stage—they transferred to cable cars for an ascent to the railway. This stage, known as the Great Cable Incline thanks to a 62 percent grade and 1,500-foot elevation gain over just 3,000 feet—employed technology similar to San Francisco's cable car system. The incline transported tourists to hotels and attractions atop Echo Mountain, where the railway's 3.5-mile alpine section began. Less precipitous than the incline, this stretch offered its own thrills, with open-air cars skirting around 127 curves.

With the incline long gone, it's now a nearly three-mile hike and 1,500-foot climb just to reach the alpine railway. The Sam Merrill Trail switchbacks up the mountain face near the onetime incline, but I opt for the Sunset Ridge Trail, which instead runs above Millard Canyon. Although houses bump up against the base of the San Gabriels maybe half a mile away, the trail is cut off from the city thanks to one of the canyon's steep walls. And remarkably in a

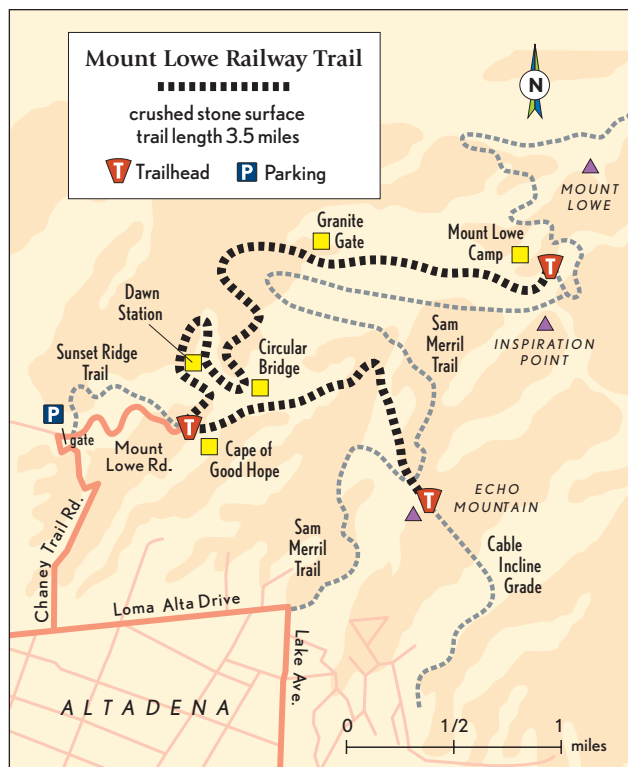
metropolitan area of 15 million, I see just two other people—backpackers bound for Mount Lowe Campground—during hours of hiking.

After walking through forests thick with ferns and the tangled vines of wild cucumber, I hear 50-foot Millard Falls plunging into the canyon before catching a glimpse of

the cascade from across the chasm. In other sections, the slopes are more arid and brushy, covered with such chaparral plants as chamise, laurel sumac and buckwheat.

The trail comes out at a fire road and in a short distance merges into the onetime Mount Lowe Railway. Go straight ahead and the railway leads to the summit. Before doing that, I turn right and follow the railway bed above Las Flores Canyon for less than a mile back toward the ruins at Echo Mountain.

Echo Mountain lives up to its name, as the call of a red-tailed hawk bounces around the canyon. The hotels, observatory and attractions succumbed long ago to fire and other disasters, but stone foundations and rusting machinery give a sense of just how ambitious Lowe's dream was. There's also a feeling of antiquity that I have experienced at other Southern California ruins. So much has changed so rapidly that a century here can feel like a millennium.



DAY TWO: Hermosa Valley Greenbelt

Although popular with local residents, the Hermosa Valley Greenbelt is virtually unknown to outsiders. Instead they throng The Strand—the oceanfront walkway that parallels the greenbelt. If The Strand is all about pecks and pulchritude in the finest see-and-be-seen beach tradition, the 3.7-mile greenbelt has more of a walk-in-the-park quaintness.

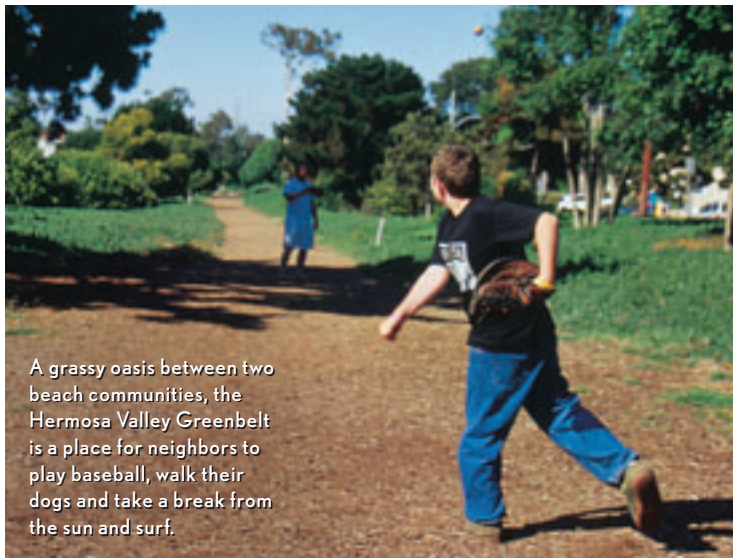
At its northeast end in Manhattan Beach, the greenbelt begins inauspiciously beneath an overpass. A short section of track is still visible in the parking lot of a nearby big-box electronics store, a remnant of the Santa Fe railroad line first built in 1888 that the trail follows.

The Manhattan Beach section, known as the Veteran's Parkway, runs through upscale suburban neighborhoods that give little hint of their proximity to the beach. The trail's sandiness is a reminder, though, that this area just south of L.A.'s west side was once coastal dunes.

The trail is busy with joggers, dog walkers and moms pushing the latest and priciest in stroller technology. Although Manhattan and Hermosa are famous for surfing and beach volleyball, passing the 1930s-vintage Live Oak Park I hear the thump of basketballs, the plunk-plunk of tennis and, much to this purist's chagrin, the plink of aluminum baseball bats.

One of the most appealing trail locales is the Mariposa Pathway, where stainless steel totems with butterfly-shaped figures line the trail. As if on cue, a yellow and black tiger swallowtail flutters through a cutout before settling on a totem.

In the distance, jets take off from Los Angeles International Airport, and where cross streets open to the west, I catch glimpses of the ocean. But following the swales and vales of the old dunes, the trail feels cut off from the rest of the L.A. area. It's only at a pair of busy street crossings where



A grassy oasis between two beach communities, the Hermosa Valley Greenbelt is a place for neighbors to play baseball, walk their dogs and take a break from the sun and surf.



I navigate a confusing set of crosswalks and where drivers seemed stunned to see anyone on foot that I feel briefly thrust back into the metropolitan maw.

After the trail dead-ends at the Redondo Beach border, I cut through the Hermosa Beach Civic Center and past the art deco Hermosa Playhouse for a detour down Pier Avenue and The Strand. As usual, it's hopping and the ocean is gorgeous. I follow The Strand north but quickly tire of dodging bicyclists and inline skaters. Back on the greenbelt, I settle into a steady rhythm, content to have traded The Strand's sensations for the greenbelt's solitude.

DAY THREE: Ojai Valley Trail

If the Hermosa Valley Greenbelt begins inauspiciously, then this trail in Ventura County 70 miles north of Los Angeles begins almost apocalyptically. I start on the Ventura River Trail, which sets out from an industrial section of Ventura that seems to double as graveyard for all things Volkswagen, before traveling 6.3 miles to connect with the Ojai Valley Trail. Together they form 16 miles of Class I bike path. And by traversing a



The parallel horse and bike/ped tracks of the Ojai Valley Trail allow trail users to mingle safely, while taking in the stunning hillsides and sweeping valleys of the region.

few blocks on city streets you can connect to the oceanfront Omer Rains Trail to create a unique mountains-to-the-sea route. Or in my case a sea-to-mountains route.

It's foggy as I set out on the trail where it parallels busy California Highway 33 and runs through a battered landscape of grasshopper-style oil wells and truck yards. Cycling inland, I escape the fog and the trail takes on more of a rural feeling, with views of mountains and citrus groves. Once on the Ojai Valley Trail, I catch glimpses of great blue herons and egrets flying over the river, and I have to swerve suddenly as a covey of quail scurries across the path.

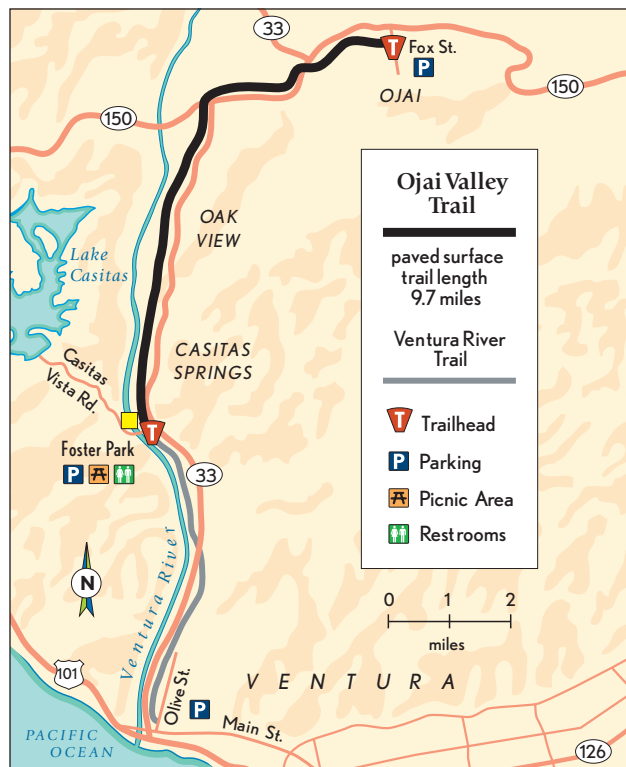
California pepper trees and palm fronds hang low over the trail, while sway-backed horses and llamas laze in backyard corrals. A few equestrians pass along a parallel bridle path, but the majority of trail users are bicyclists. At one spot a group of hardcore guys who look fresh out of the Tour de

France peloton stop to help a young girl with a flat tire.

It's a steady climb to Ojai. Just outside of town the trail passes a pasture with views toward the rugged mountains surrounding the valley. Soon the trail crosses the highway, then travels under a canopy of oaks as it passes

backyards of vintage cottages and bungalows. Not far beyond Libbey Park, site of the town's celebrated music festival, the bike path ends and becomes a bridle path.

Heading back, I cut through the park, walking my bike beneath a Spanish-style pergola and past Ojai's landmark post office tower with its domed roof. When the tower was built in 1917, the local train was still carrying oranges from Ojai to the coast. For that matter, Mount Lowe Railway was climbing high into the San Gabriels and most of Manhattan Beach and Hermosa Beach remained dune. Ojai is a reminder that, for all that has changed in Southern California, some things are forever. Like the fresh breezes that push against me as I cruise down toward the Pacific.



Matthew Jaffe is a senior writer in Sunset Magazine's Los Angeles bureau and is currently working on a book on the Santa Monica Mountains.

Travel Facts

MOUNT LOWE RAILWAY TRAIL

GETTING THERE. From Interstate 210 in Pasadena exit Lake Avenue and go north 3.5 miles toward the mountains. At Loma Alta Drive, look right for a set of gates. The Sam Merrill Trail begins here and climbs to Echo Mountain. From here follow the former railway's route as it climbs another 1,100 feet. Placards identify sites of onetime landmarks. Views are outstanding but little remains from the railway. To reach a second trailhead, turn left at Loma Alta Drive and continue about a mile to Chaney Trail Road. Head up the winding road and at a Y, look right for a locked gate. Park here and, past the gate, hike the road about a quarter-mile. Look left for the Sunset Ridge Trail sign. The trail drops into the canyon. Before reaching cabins, veer right and follow trail signs. After steady climbing (and a couple of



slide areas) the trail rejoins the fire road. Go left and in a short distance the railway comes in from the right. Go right to reach Echo Mountain or continue up the road to follow the railway. It's about six miles round-trip via either route to Echo Mountain; 11 miles to the end of the railway at Inspiration Point.

HERMOSA VALLEY GREENBELT

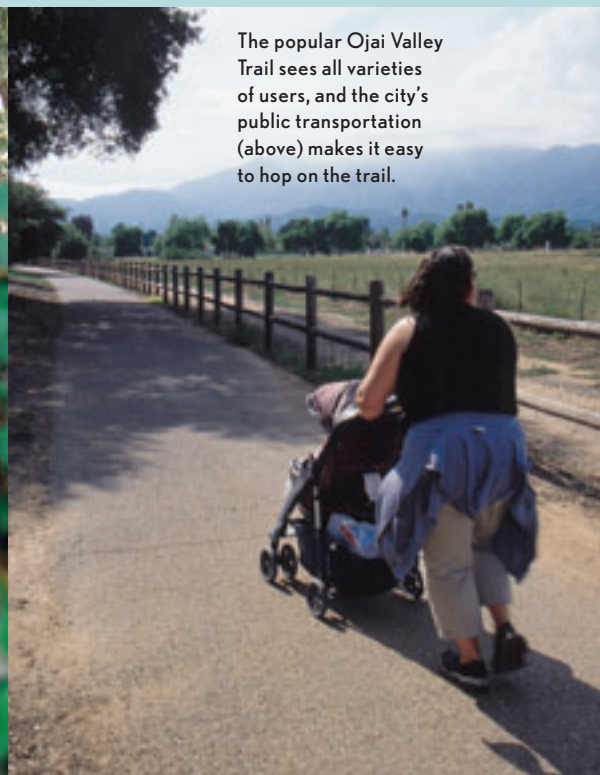
GETTING THERE. Take Interstate 405 south from Los Angeles International Airport to the Rosecrans Avenue exit. Follow Rosecrans 1.5 miles and turn left into a parking lot just before Sepulveda Boulevard. The trail begins at the lower lot's south end. The trail runs between Valley Drive and Ardmore Avenue, with some parking along the route.

OJAI VALLEY TRAIL

GETTING THERE. For a combination of the Ventura River Trail and Ojai Valley Trail, head north from Los Angeles approximately 70 miles on U.S. 101, exit at California Street in Ventura and go right. Continue a few blocks to a left on Main Street, then turn right onto Olive Street. Turn left at Rex Street, where the trail begins. For a shorter ride and to skip the River Trail's industrial stretches, take U.S. 101 to California 33 and exit at Casitas Vista Road for Foster Park, where the Ojai Valley Trail begins.



Ruins are the only signs that opulent mountaintop hotels and casinos ever existed on the site of the Mount Lowe Campground.



The popular Ojai Valley Trail sees all varieties of users, and the city's public transportation (above) makes it easy to hop on the trail.

For More Information

To help you plan your Southern California rail-trail trip visit www.railtrails.org/news/magazine/, for information on accommodations, eateries, bike rentals and more.