

Baja's Highest Peak Rises From The Desert

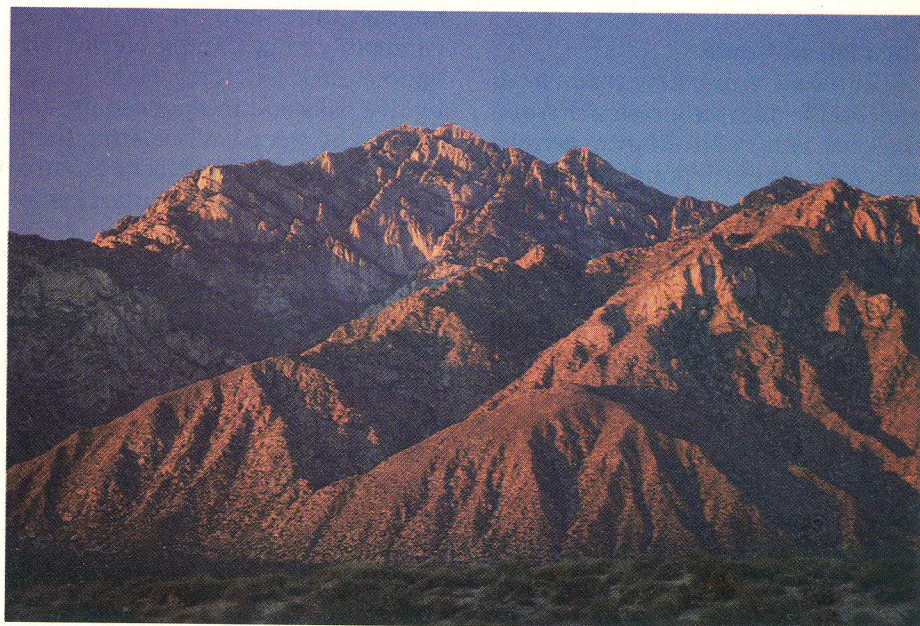
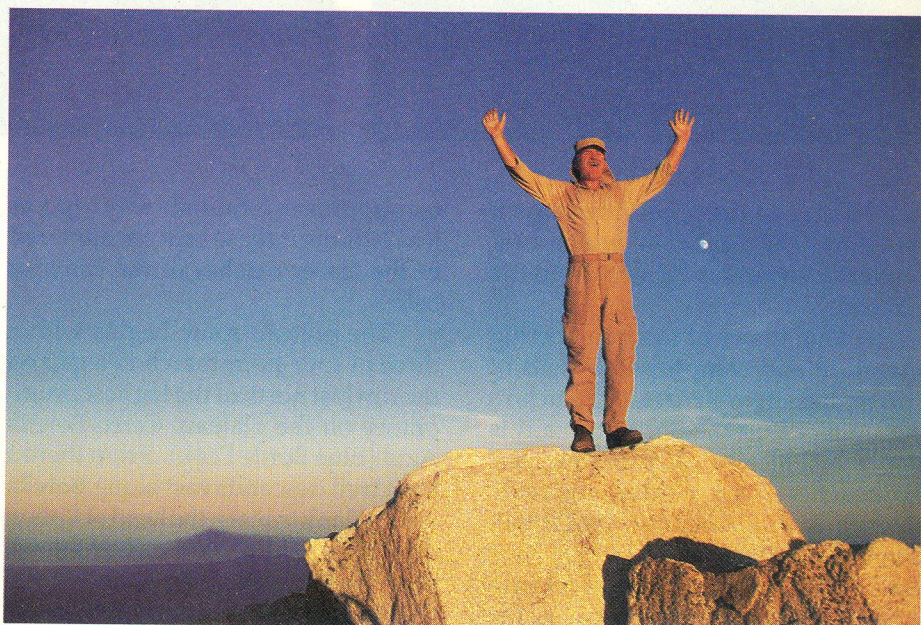
Climbing Picacho Del Diablo

By Jerry Schad

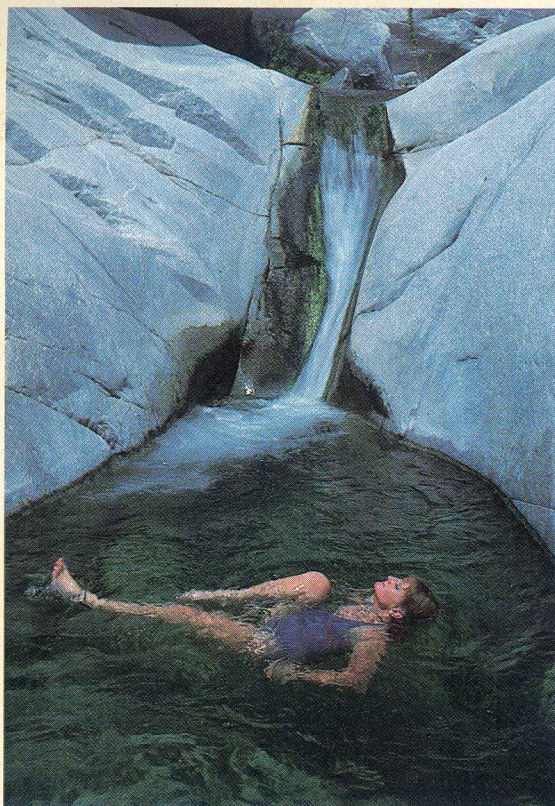
Majestic and aloof, Picacho del Diablo ("Devil's Peak") crowns Baja California's highest mountain range, the Sierra San Pedro Martir, at a height of 10,154 feet. For decades mountaineers have cast covetous eyes upon its elusive summit. It's no wonder. From its airy heights, climbers are treated to a heart-thumping panorama, truly the best in all of Baja. On clear days the view stretches east across the blue Sea of Cortez to the sun-struck wastes of Sonora's Gran Desierto, south across the barren ranges of Baja's midriff, west to the fog-shrouded Pacific coast, and north as far as Southern California's Laguna and Santa Rosa mountains.

Geologic forces have strewn the climber's path to Picacho del Diablo with formidable impediments. The peak (actually two closely spaced summits of near equal height) rides an immense granite block thrust by tectonic forces into its present position, east of the main Sierra San Pedro Martir plateau.

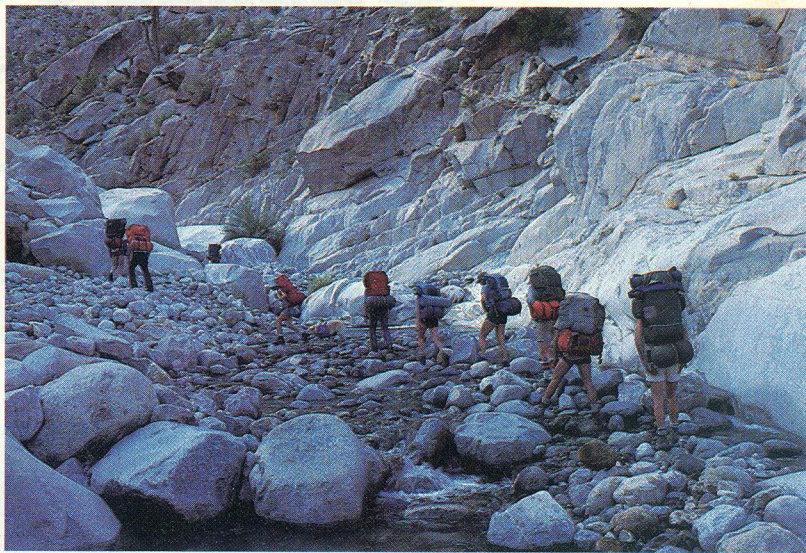
Weathering and floods have chiseled away at the mountain's flanks, sculpting sheer rock faces and yawning ravines filled with boulder rubble. Faulting has created more than 8,000 feet of relief between Picacho's summit and the desert floor, and has



Sunset at the summit of Picacho Del Diablo. Below, the peak from the San Felipe desert. Photos by Jerry Schad.



A refreshing break in the Cañon Del Diablo. Below, boulder hopping toward the summit. Photos by Jerry Schad.



helped carve a deep, curving canyon — Cañon Del Diablo — which dramatically separates Picacho from the plateau.

A long litany of mountaineering literature and campfire tales tells of frustrating attempts to reach Picacho's summits. While the climb normally is not a technically difficult one, the approach is long and tiring, and route finding is problematical. Although climbers have ascended by way of at least eight distinct routes, two methods of attack have emerged as the most trustworthy.

The Plateau Route

In recent years, new roads have been cut through the forests of Parque Nacional San Pedro Martir, permitting easier access to points on the rim of the plateau opposite Picacho's summits. Accordingly, the plateau route has become the shortest and most popular way to attempt the climb. Normally the entire round trip takes three or four days, though one climber managed to bag both summits and return to his car in less than 18 hours.

Possible heavy snowfall or ice accumulations can render the plateau route inaccessible or unacceptably hazardous from December through March. In summer, however, the pla-

teau approach is the only way to go, as it avoids the intense heat encountered in the lower reaches of the canyons below.

The plateau route begins with a three or four-hour march to a gap on the rim just north of the highest promontory on the plateau, Cerro Botella Azul (Blue Bottle Peak). From there a faint trail descends east along Botella Azul's flank to reach the head of Cañon del Diablo. The route then turns north down the canyon and descends 2,600 feet over talus and around dry waterfalls. After the first dependable water appears in the canyon, an informal climbers' camp, Campo Noche (elevation 6,300 feet), is reached. Shaded by live oaks and incense cedars, and flanked by steep walls soaring thousands of feet, Campo Noche is one of Baja's most wild and secluded campsites.

On the second day, climbers make their way east up the slope behind Campo Noche on the intricate "Slot Wash/Wall Street" route pioneered by climber Bud Bernhard in the 1950's. Four or five hours of rock scrambling are required to reach the northern summit — at 10,154 feet the highest point on the Baja peninsula.

From the north summit, the way across to the seldom-visited south summit (estimated at only two feet

lower than the north summit) involves a spooky traverse. Both summits contain climbers' registers with records dating back many years. The register at the south summit features the faded signature of famed Sierra Nevada mountaineer Norman Clyde, who helped pioneer routes in these mountains in the 1930's.

On three-day outings, climbers normally descend to Campo Noche for the second night's camp, then retrace their steps back to the plateau on the third day. A four-day trip, however, allows the possibility of hauling overnight gear to the top for a night's bivouac. Some of the lucky few who have spent a clear, calm, moonlit night atop Picacho have reported the experience as being akin to nirvana.

The Canon del Diablo Route

On this, the complete tour of Picacho del Diablo, climbers start from the edge of the desert and use semicircular Cañon del Diablo as a ramp to ascend to the mountain's base camp— Campo Noche. From Campo Noche on, the route is the standard "Slot Wash/Wall Street" approach described earlier.

In all, from desert to mountain top, the total elevation gain is a whopping 8,000 feet. Virtually every step of the way is off trail. During the three

