

Baja's Highest Peak Rises From The Desert

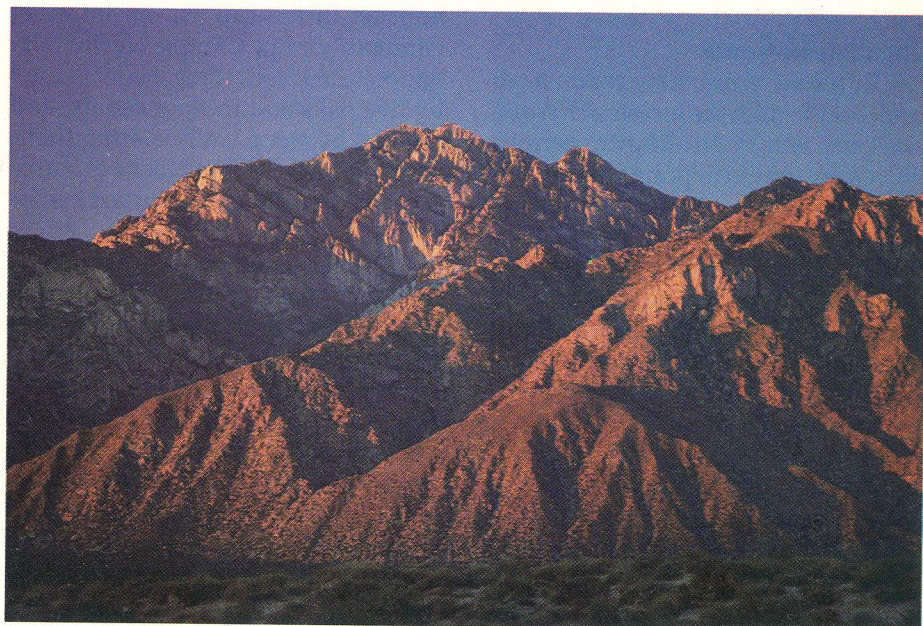
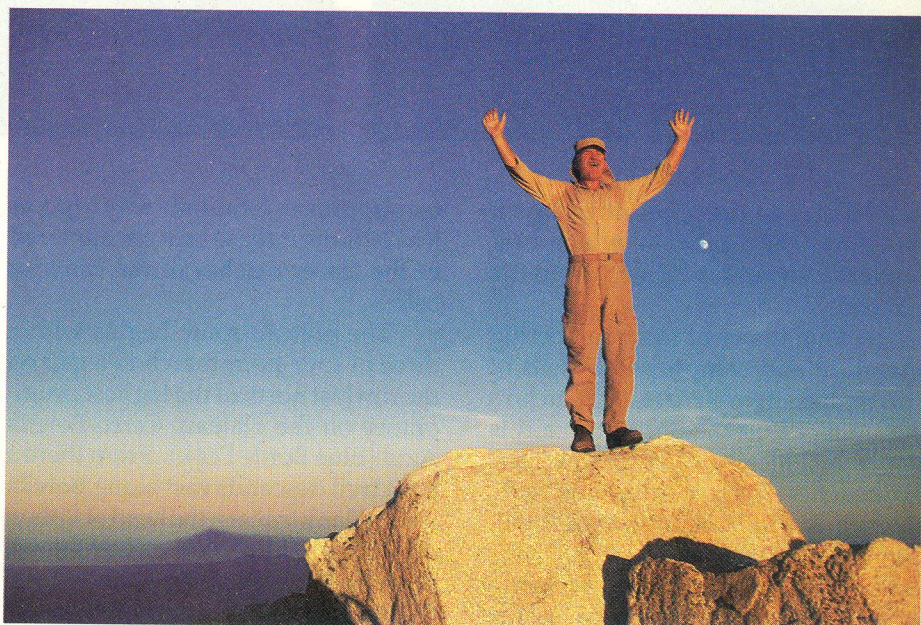
Climbing Picacho Del Diablo

By Jerry Schad

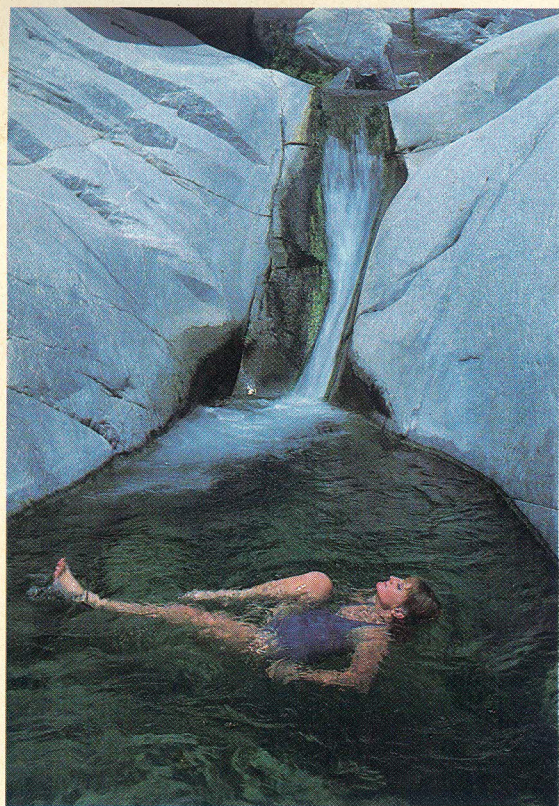
Majestic and aloof, Picacho del Diablo ("Devil's Peak") crowns Baja California's highest mountain range, the Sierra San Pedro Martir, at a height of 10,154 feet. For decades mountaineers have cast covetous eyes upon its elusive summit. It's no wonder. From its airy heights, climbers are treated to a 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.

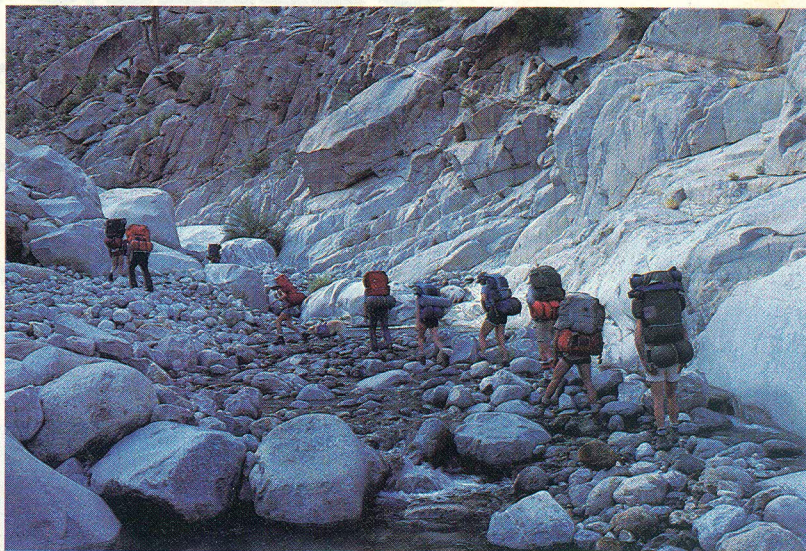
Weathering and floods have chiseled away at the mountain's flanks, sculpting sheer rock faces and yawning ravines filled with boulder rubble. Faulting has created more than 8,000 feet of relief between Picacho's summit and the desert floor, and has



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

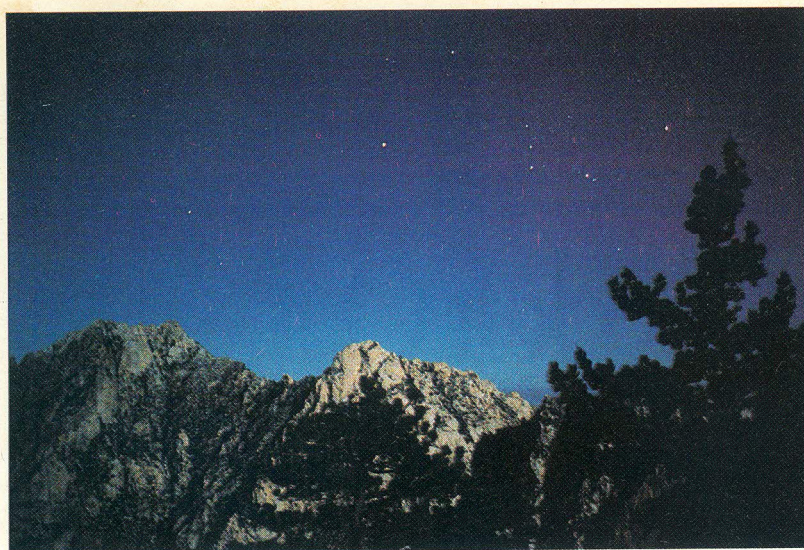
lower than the north summit) involves a spooky traverse. Both summits contain climbers' registers with records dating back many years. The register at the south summit features the faded signature of famed Sierra Nevada mountaineer Norman Clyde, who helped pioneer routes in these mountains in the 1930's.

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.

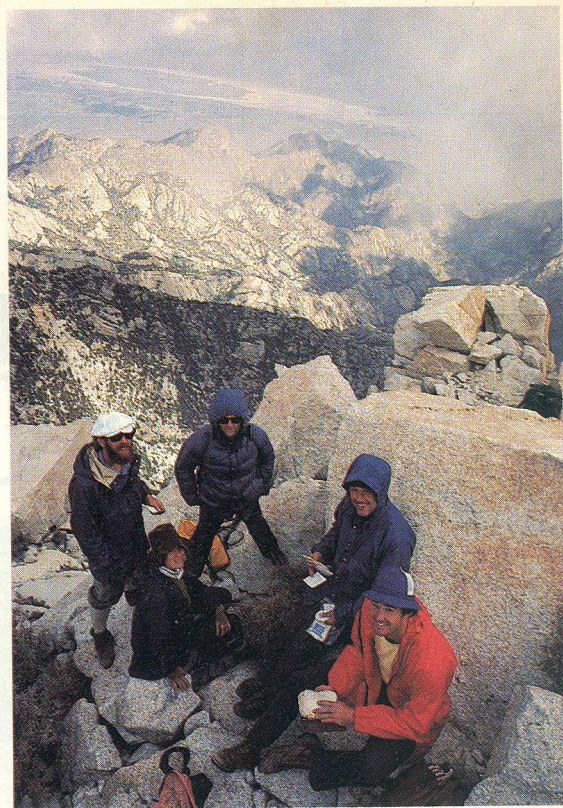
The Canon del Diablo Route

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



Orion rising above the peak. Right, the north summit, facing east.



days or so it takes to reach the summit, climbers journey through biological habitats ranging from sun-blasted desert spiked with ocotillos and cardon cactus to alpine slopes sporting scattered pinyon pines, sugar pines, incense cedars, and cypresses. Cool, delicious water flows through Cañon del Diablo year-round. Nevertheless, this route is best avoided from June through August, when 100-degree plus temperatures are the norm in the canyon's lower reaches.

The trek begins at the road's end (elevation 2,000 feet) which is reached by way of a sandy road leading west from Laguna Diablo dry lake in the San Felipe Desert. After a short hike across the desert floor to Cañon del Diablo's mouth, climbers turn up the canyon and scramble past a series of waterfalls, cascades, and pools hewn into sheer granite. A steel cable anchored alongside one of the falls now permits relatively easy passage around what was formerly a daunting obstacle.

After a total of two days or so of arduous boulder-hopping and bush-whacking, climbers reach Campo Noche, tucked into the upper end of the canyon's main branch. A third day to climb the peak, and a fourth day to return to the desert rounds out a rather fast trip.

Let it be noted that some travelers can easily be distracted by the enticing pools to be found in the canyon and end up spending a lot of time lounging in the water. Some get so

carried away that they abandon the quest of climbing the peak altogether, choosing instead to spend their time exploring the enchanting depths of Cañon del Diablo.

Preparing For The Climb

Climbs of Picacho del Diablo are plainly not for novice hikers and backpackers. A shakedown trip is recommended if you're of untested ability. A day spent poking around the east rim of the San Pedro Martir plateau, for example, will afford you with excellent views of Picacho del Diablo and give you a feel for the magnitude of the challenge. Likewise, a day spent exploring the lower confines of Cañon del Diablo will give you valuable insight into the difficulties of travel over trailless, boulder-strewn terrain.

Don't attempt a trip on your own without doing some homework. You'll need more information than that contained in this article to find and follow successfully any of the routes to Picacho's summits. Fortunately a large body of information on the subject exists, much of it in old magazines and climbing journals. The best sources of contemporary information are John Robinson's *Camping and Climbing in Baja* (La Siesta Press, 1983), a softcover guidebook containing a useful bibliography; and *Parque Nacional Sierra San Pedro Martir* (Centra Publications, 1988), an annotated English-language topographic map of the Sierra San Pedro Martir plateau and Picacho del Diablo detailing various hiking and climbing routes.