

Climbing Mt. Signal/El Centinela- Imperial County-Baja California

Brian McNeece



General Tips:

Anybody in reasonably good health can climb Mt. Signal. Or since it is entirely in Mexico, we should use the Mexican name for their own mountain--**El Centinela**. Getting ready by training will make the trip much more enjoyable, but don't hesitate to give it a try even if you are not in good shape. I have climbed the mountain with people who I thought couldn't ascend the bleachers at a high school game, but who made it to the top. However, you can be sure of one thing: people who are overweight and don't exercise will be moving very slowly.

El Centinela is not a volcanic mountain; it's the northernmost extension of the Cucapah range, formed by uplift. It rises to an elevation of 2500 feet. If you begin at the pumping station below the blue pressure-maintenance tower, you start at about 300 above sea level. Counting the three times you'll have to drop during your climb, you'll climb about 2600 feet total. In horizontal distance, the hike is about 2.5 miles each way. So it's a five mile hike--but a rugged five miles.



The more people you have with you, the longer the trip will take. Fast people will be very frustrated if they are not allowed to go ahead. Slow people need someone with more experience to stay with them. Despite my best efforts, any group of over four or five people begins to stretch out right away. A young, fit climber can reach the top in less than two hours. Folks in their 30's will take three hours, and elderly or unfit climbers can take four hours. Count on the same amount of time for descending. Descending is more difficult because of the very rocky terrain.

Cell phone use is spotty at best because your phone can't decide if you are in the States or in Mexico. For person-to-person communication, use a group of walkie-talkies set to a common frequency.



Dress appropriately for the weather. The best hiking season is late October through early April. Plan for chilly mornings and hot afternoons. If possible, wear layers. If you see that the high for the day is in the 80's take more water. Highs in the mid-70's are ideal.

To enjoy your trip more, I suggest that you begin hiking in preparation a few weeks prior to the climb. Just walk a few miles each week. Climb up and down stairs a LOT if you can. I guarantee that you will be quite sore after climbing Mt. Signal if you are over 25.

What to Take:

Bring a sack lunch (plus high carb snacks), good hiking boots or shoes, a wide brimmed **hat**, sunglasses, sunscreen, camera, ibuprofen or acetaminophen, and binoculars. Light gloves come in very handy for grabbing and pushing off rocks.

Most people find a **walking stick** very helpful, especially on the way down. Light weight, professional sticks are expensive: \$75. But any stick is better than none. I like a walking stick to be a little bit higher than elbow height; Rómulo Tiznado, who climbed the Mountain 152 times, preferred one barely above his waist. Sadly, Mr. Tiznado, who created many monuments along the route, died in 2010.

Water is your most essential ingredient. On our last trip, I recommended three liters per person. As temperatures reached 90 degrees, three liters was not nearly enough. Five liters would have been much better. It's a good idea for your stronger, younger climbers to carry an extra plastic gallon and leave it on the trail about halfway for the trip down.

Getting to the mountain

Unless you have some personal connection to the good folks at Homeland Security (aka Border Patrol) you need to go through Mexicali to the base of Mt. Signal. Remember that Mt. Signal is entirely in Mexico.



- a) After you drive through the Calexico port of entry, make your first right turn at the OXXO store on the first corner.
- b) Turn **right** again and then downhill to cross the New River. Immediately go **right** again. You're now traveling due west on Avenida Baja California.
- c) Go west about 9 blocks (I haven't counted). When you see Samy's Mariscos restaurant on your left (painted like *Finding Nemo*) turn **left** at the stop sign.
- d) You are now on Colegio Militar heading south. (The locals call it Calle Once or Eleventh Street because that's what it was thirty years ago.) Follow this three-lane, one-way road south for several miles. You go around a traffic circle and continue straight. Then the road veers to the right (west). Follow the signs sending you towards Tijuana.
- e) You're on Highway 2 towards Tijuana. I'm guessing it's about 12 miles until you see a big feedyard and the Intergen Power Plant on your right. The feedyard sign says Su Karne. Just past the feed yard, you'll see a sign that says "Planta de Bombeo" (Pumping plant) and Panteón or cemetery. Turn **right** (north) there.



f) Go all the way to the end. At the T in the road, you can turn right to Planta Zero, where you can park your cars and they will be secure. However, you are about a kilometer away from the mountain. Better to turn left toward Planta Una, at the base of the mountain.

g) Most large hiking parties park at Plant Una and begin hiking up alongside the blue pipe that leads up to the blue tower. Don't do that. Drive past the pumping plant another half kilometer and then turn south toward the mountain. You will drive past a small guard station where probably you will encounter a group of soldiers. They

are accustomed to climbers, so wave and smile.

- h) If you have a four-wheel drive vehicle, you can drive all the way up the service road to the blue tower. The condition of the road, however, is highly variable. Sometimes after a rain, the road is impassable. Just park wherever you are comfortable leaving your vehicle. We have parked at the tower, or just down the road a couple hundred meters, or in front of the pumping station. We have not had any problem at all.

Climbing the mountain.

- a. The route begins just behind the blue tower and rises along that eastern ridge and shoulder of the mountain. Although from El Centro or Brawley, El Centinela looks like a tidy triangle, in fact it's a long sinuous ridge trending north to south. Because there's not a whole lot of ordinary dirt on the mountain, there isn't a clear trail all the way, but various painted arrows make up for this defect in many places.
- b. Start climbing uphill just behind the blue tower. As you go up, slant toward the east. It doesn't matter exactly where you go at this point. Just remember that you're looking for the ridgeline of that particular arm of the mountain.
- c. About 20 minutes into the climb, you will arrive at a very narrow, precipitous section of ridgeline that makes most people very nervous. If you have overweight climbers, insecure climbers, or frightened climbers, this is where they will have the most difficulty on the entire climb. Footing is very sure, but drop-offs on both sides can give people vertigo. The cliché admonition not to look down is a very practical one here. If a person does not look down, the short traverse is not that difficult. Some people will be clinging to the rocks; my son has crossed this zone with his hands in his pockets.
- d. After this "Stegosaurus Zone," or what I've heard called "El Paso de la Muerte" (Death Pass) the trail is obvious and nearly level for about 100 yards, at which point it apparently veers left and continues flat alongside a steep slope. You can go this way, but most people head to their right, straight up the slope aiming at the white rock far above. The rock has been painted white. (I should say WAS painted white; on my last trip, the paint was mostly gone.) That is the ridge trail. It's tough going, rather steep and covered with loose rock.
- e. If you go toward the white rock, just keep going up and up along that shoulder. Now you are going just about due west. You will reach the top of this shoulder after about half an hour of rugged climbing. To me this is the most difficult section going up or down. Then the trail turns back to the south and drops down about 120 feet.
- f. Where the trail reaches its lowest (saddle) point before rising again, you once again have two options. You will clearly see a path to your right heading west. That's a very good route, but it circles far to the west then



south before approaching the final ascent back to the east along another steep, loose slope. On this route, there are a few arrows painted on rocks, a few cairns (rocks stacked on top each other) and a few green plastic bottles stuck in Ocotillo bushes to guide your way. (On my last trip, someone had removed the green bottles.)



g. Your second option at that saddle is to not go to the right but continue the trail straight south. It goes up steeply along the left (eastern) side of the slope in front of you. This route goes around that slope, then up a water course, and veers left to the radio towers. It's very steep with large boulders to negotiate.

h. Either way, you just continue up and up from here. The main thing is to go up. You have about an hour more to climb.

i. When you get to the radio towers, you are not at the top. I'm sorry to report this. But you have another 20-30 minutes of hiking, which includes a drop of about 60 feet before you rise

again. The next section is my favorite—a narrowing stretch of broken, jagged rock where the trail leads you to dramatic views on both sides of the mountain.

j. Go to the white cross that stands at the southernmost edge of the plateau that forms the top of the mountain. If you're climbing on a weekend, you're likely to run into two or three other parties. I have met some of the same people on several climbs. Enjoy.





The aerial view of El Centinela at left comes from Google Earth. You can download this program yourself and play with the zoom feature for close-up viewing.

Notice first the red line indicating the international border. You'll agree that the mountain lies entirely in Mexico. With north at the top of the page, you also see that the border is not a latitude line. Finally, notice the axis of the mountain. It trends about 20 degrees to the east of due north.

