Overnight Backpacking Trips Near Albuquerque

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Background: In 2005, I moved from Seattle to Albuquerque and was immediately assigned as the Varsity Scout Coach of Team 750. Being new to the area, I had no idea where to take the scouts camping so I bought a “Camping in New Mexico” book. Problem solved…until the scouts wanted to go backpacking. In the summer of 2007, I bought a “Backpacking in New Mexico Book” and we went on our Team’s first backpacking trip. The Team enjoyed backpacking so much that we haven’t been car camping since. Over the years we have done some fantastic trips and have created some wonderful memories. However, I have always found it challenging to find exciting backpacking trips close to Albuquerque especially when schedules are such that we can only leave after work on Friday.

Challenge: Many new scout leaders (new to scouting or new to the Albuquerque area) have expressed that they don’t know where to go for nearby overnight backpacking trips that have a “payoff” at the end. It is especially difficult to find such trips when schedules are such that the Troop, Team, or Crew must leave after work on a Friday and return on Saturday. This type of schedule is typical of many LDS troops.

Objective: The goal of this ticket item is to outline five of my favorite overnight backpacking trips that 1) are within reach after work on a Friday (returning on Saturday) and 2) have a “payoff” at the end for the scouts. These trips can also serve as great preparatory hikes for longer treks.

Team 750
Domingo Baca Canyon

Highlights: Day hike up a challenging canyon trail to the wreckage of a TWA airplane that crashed in 1955. Snow camping and hiking to an iced over waterfall during winter.

Location: Cibola National Forest, Albuquerque

Difficulty: Trailhead to campsite Easy
Campsite to TWA Crash Site Difficult

Distance: 2.1 miles from the trailhead to campsite
1.4 miles from campsite to TWA crash site

Elevations: Trailhead 6,450 feet
Campsite 7,222 feet
TWA Crash Site 8,810 feet

Maps: USFS Cibola National Forest

Fees: $2 Overnight parking fee and no permit required

Facilities: Primitive restrooms. No water.

Directions: Within Albuquerque, take Tramway north past Academy and turn east on Simms Park Road. Continue east to the Elena Gallegos picnic area. You will need to pay the parking fee at the guard post prior to entering the parking area. The trailhead is located near the northeast corner of the picnic area with plenty of parking nearby. Always bring a map (road and trail) and familiarize yourself with the drive and hike.

Water: Domingo Baca Canyon has a stream that runs continuously during the late fall, winter, spring, and early summer. Water in the stream is sporadic to non-existent in the mid to late summer and early fall months. You will need to bring all of the water you need if you plan on hiking during these months. The campsite is located next to the stream and the hike is literally in the stream bed for roughly the first 2.5 miles of the hike.
**Introduction:**

This hike takes you through an extremely rugged and remote area of Sandia Mountain. In fact, the trail is not maintained and is officially classified as a route. I enjoy the rapid change in terrain from the desert extreme at the trailhead to the lush vegetation at the crash site. This is a challenging hike with a little scrambling and some very steep sections. The effort is worth it though as the scouts will enjoy exploring the wreckage at the crash site. Be reverent though, 16 people died in the accident.

**Warning:** *Do not* plan to camp in Domingo Baca Canyon if severe weather is expected. Flash flooding can occur and you will be trapped, with no escape route. The hike from the campsite to the TWA crash site gains 1,600 feet in just 1.4 miles. The hike is strenuous, steep, and rugged requiring a reasonable level of fitness.

**Description:**

The hike begins at the NE corner of the Elena Gallegos parking lot. Follow the signs for Domingo Baca Canyon to the wilderness area entrance at N35°10.262’ W106°28.011’. I recommend using your map to ensure accurate navigation through the open space trails to this location. From here you will wind your way up into the canyon for approximately one mile to the ruins of an old building. From here you will begin hiking in the streambed. Avoid the temptation to follow other routes that lead out of the streambed. Roughly 0.2 miles later you will come to a key juncture in the hike at 35°10.886’ W106°27.594’. At this location you will need to scramble up the embankment to your right (usually moist). Once on top you will pick up a well worn trail that leads to the campsite and on up to the crash site. After scrambling out of the streambed, follow the trail for roughly 10 minutes to the campsite at 35°10.882’ W106°27.442’. The campsite will be on the right side of the stream and has room for a maximum of 4-5 small tents. This is literally the only place to camp in the entire canyon, so if it’s taken, you will unfortunately have to try a different day. I recommend getting to camp as early as possible to minimize that risk. The hike to the crash site is a strenuous 1.4 miles from camp on a well worn trail. Stash your gear, bring a day pack, and enjoy exploring the crash site which begins at 35°11.696’ W106°26.552’. Debris is strewn quite a ways beyond this location. For a winter alternative, continue hiking from the campsite, staying in the streambed, to the bottom of a beautiful iced over waterfall.
Hike to an iced over waterfall during winter

Boulders to scramble up along the trail.
Atalaya Mountain, Santa Fe
Atalaya Mountain

Highlights: Spectacular views overlooking Santa Fe with the Rio Grande Valley and Sandia Mountains in the distance.

Location: Santa Fe National Forest, Santa Fe

Difficulty: Moderate

Distance: 3.3 miles from the trailhead to Atalaya Peak

Elevations: Trailhead 7,550 feet
Atalaya Peak 9,100 feet

Maps: USGS Atalaya Peak Quad

Fees: No parking fee and no permit required

Facilities: No facilities exist at the trailhead.

Directions: From Albuquerque, take I-25 north to Santa Fe. Take the exit for Old Pecos Trail and head north. Go right on E Zia Rd and take a left onto Old Santa Fe Trail. Next go right on Camino del Monte Sol then right on Camino de Cruz Blanca. Follow Camino de Cruz Blanca for approximately 0.8 miles (you will drive past St. Johns College) and you will see the trailhead and small parking area on the left at N35°40’13.77” W105°54’02.54”. Overnight parking is not allowed at the trailhead so you must park about 0.25 miles away back at St. Johns College. The parking lot is safe, free, and no permit is required. Always bring a map (road and trail) and familiarize yourself with the drive and hike.

Water: There is no water available on this hike. You must bring all of the water you will need.
Introduction:

The drive from Albuquerque to the trailhead takes approximately one hour and is easily reached after work on Friday. Departing from Albuquerque at 4pm sharp on a Friday afternoon will get you to the campsite on top of the mountain by 7:30pm. The payoff on this trip is a spectacular view of Santa Fe and the Sandia Mountains in the distance. If the scouts are up for it, you can take a more challenging decent back to the car or just return the way you came. I recommend the full loop hike.

Warning: No water is available on this hike so be sure to bring all of the water you need. Also, the Santa Fe watershed “no fire” protected area is clearly marked (signs on trees) near the campsites. There are fire pits, but given the proximity to the watershed, you may want to forgo the campfire during this campout. There is cell coverage on top of the mountain.

Description:

This trail gains approximately 1,560 feet over 3.3 miles making for a challenging experience for younger scouts or inexperienced backpackers. From the trailhead, head south on Wilderness Gate Road to some stairs located on your left at N35º40’00.67” W105º54’02.24”. From this point, the trail heads east up the mountain. Near N35º40’02.09” W105º53’44.99” you will come to a power line and service road where you will need to pass through a wooden fence on your way up the mountain. About half way up the trail you will be faced with a decision (marked by a sign) to follow a steeper route up and over a sub-peak or take the easy way out and walk around. Taking the steep route will give the scouts a sense of accomplishment.

To locate the campsite, head NE from the peak at N35º40’04.36” W105º50’34.45” and follow a faint trail to find a number of sheltered campsites. Depending on how much time you have, this is a great trail to explore for a more remote campsite about 0.25 miles away or short hike the following morning. To find the steeper (and more scenic) return trail, head north from the peak and stay to the left at the fork just north of the peak. This return route (only 2.1 miles long) is steep in some sections and has loose gravel and scree, so be careful. The trail terminates at the Wilderness Gate Road inside the Ponderosa gated community so remember to stay on the trail/road as you trek through this private area.
A view of Santa Fe from the peak

Happy scouts on top of the peak
San Lorenzo Canyon, Socorro
San Lorenzo Canyon

**Highlights:** Fantastic location for playing capture the flag and sardines. Perfect first backpacking trip for new scouts. Very interesting geology and landscape. Lots of side canyons to explore.

**Location:** Public BLM Land, North of Socorro

**Difficulty:** Extremely easy

**Distance:** 1 mile from the trailhead to campsite

**Elevations:**
- Trailhead: 5,160 feet
- Campsite: 5,248 feet

**Maps:** BLM Socorro Quad, USGS Lemitar Quad

**Fees:** No parking fee and no permit required

**Facilities:** No facilities exist at the trailhead.

**Directions:** From Albuquerque, head south on I-25 and take Lemitar exit no. 156. Go west under I-25 and then turn north on the paved frontage road. Follow the frontage road for 4.4 miles until you can go no longer go north. Turn west on county road B90 (dirt road). Follow B90 for 1.9 miles and then turn north at the sign for San Lorenzo Canyon. Continue for another 2 miles to the mouth of the canyon located at N34.244192 W-106.993339. The last two miles of the drive weave in and out of an arroyo. Stay in the main arroyo to avoid getting stuck in the sandy side branches. A high clearance 4WD vehicle is absolutely required to get to the canyon mouth. For clarification on driving instructions, call the Socorro BLM office at 505-835-0412. Always bring a map (road and trail) and familiarize yourself with the drive and hike.

**Water:** There is no water available on this hike. You must bring all of the water you will need.
Introduction:

The drive from Albuquerque to the trailhead takes approximately 1.5 hours and is easily reached after work on Friday. Departing from Albuquerque at 4pm sharp on a Friday afternoon will get you to camp by 6:30pm leaving plenty of time to set up camp, eat dinner, and play some games. The camp area is especially well suited for capture the flag and sardines since the scouts are confined to a portion of the canyon that has no branches. The payoff on this trip is a great game playing area and lots of fun canyon exploring on the hike out. It can take hours to make the one mile walk back to the car. In addition, there are numerous geocaches in the area if your scouts enjoy geocaching.

Warning: No water is available on this hike so be sure to bring all of the water you need. Do not attempt this trip if severe weather is expected since you will be hiking and camping in a canyon/arroyo. However, there is plenty of high ground for safety if the unexpected occurs unlike Domingo Baca Canyon.

Description:
This is an extremely easy hike that gains just 88 feet over 1 mile. The hike is nothing more than an easy walk along a wide sandy arroyo. After about 30 minutes of hiking you will arrive at what looks like the end of the canyon. This spot is marked by a gnarled old cottonwood (a geocache is hidden on top of the tree). Climb up the embankment and you will see that the canyon continues on. There is some fencing that seems to identify the rest of the canyon as a restricted wildlife area but this is not the case. The wildlife area actually heads off to your right. Another 15 minutes or so of hiking up the canyon will bring you to a nice flat campsite on the left side of the canyon, but you can pick anywhere that looks good. A framed tent works best here since the loose sand makes pitching a frameless tent difficult. On the hike out, be sure to take time to explore some of the side canyons. They are full of neat rock formations, caves, arches, and other interesting features.
Parking area at the entrance to San Lorenzo Canyon

Walking up the canyon
Serpent Lakes, Pecos Wilderness
Serpent Lakes

**Highlights:** Direct access to the Santa Barbara Divide high country. Amazing views of Truchas, Pecos Baldy, and Sante Fe Baldy Mountains. Big horn sheep and elk are common. Beautiful meadow camp setting.

**Location:** Santa Fe National Forest, Pecos Wilderness

**Difficulty:** Trailhead to Serpent Lakes Moderate
Serpent Lakes to Jicarita Peak Moderate

**Distance:** 3.5 miles from the trailhead to Serpent Lakes
2.0 miles from Serpent Lakes to Jicarita Peak

**Elevations:** Trailhead 10,380 feet
Serpent Lakes 11,750 feet
Jicarita Peak 12,840 feet

**Maps:** USFS Pecos Wilderness

**Fees:** No parking fee and no permit required

**Facilities:** No facilities exist at the trailhead

**Directions:** From Albuquerque, take I-25 north to Las Vegas. Follow State Highway 518 north to FR161. Follow FR161 for approximately 3.5 miles to the trailhead. FR161 is a maintained gravel road passable by 2WD (4WD recommended in bad weather). The drive is approximately 3 hours from Albuquerque. Always bring a map (road and trail) and familiarize yourself with the drive and hike.

**Water:** Water is available intermittently along the trail and at Serpent Lakes. The best spot for water at the lakes is the little drainage stream you cross over just about 50 yards shy of the campsite. Water is not available on the Santa Barbara Divide so bring enough for the duration your day hike if you choose to access the high country the following morning.
Introduction:

Although the drive takes 3 hours from Albuquerque, the hike takes approximately 2 hours. Departing from Albuquerque at 2pm sharp on a Friday afternoon will get you to Serpent Lakes by 7:30pm. In the summer months, you will have just enough time to set up camp before nightfall and collect wood for a fire. On this hike the scouts will eat dinner under the stars before retiring to bed. The payoff on this trip is a day hike the following morning along the Santa Barbara Divide. The high country is simply spectacular. If the scouts are up for it, the hike can be capped off with bagging nearby Jicarita Peak to the north.

Warning: The Santa Barbara Divide is above tree line and extremely exposed with no cover. Weather conditions can change quickly in the mountains so keep an eye on the sky and beware of afternoon thunderstorms. Descend immediately to cover at lower elevation if bad weather is building.

Description:

In general, the trail climbs steadily without getting too steep or flattening out for too long. The trail is forested the entire way making for a rather uneventful hike to the lakes. However, during early to mid-summer, wild flowers are abundant making for a pretty trail. About 3.5 miles into the hike, a well-marked spur trail leads to the right .25 miles down to the lake basin with views opening of Serpent Lakes and the continental divide shelf. The campsite is located at N36º02.822’ W105º32.505’ in the trees just west of the larger of the two lakes. The mosquitoes can be thick in damp areas so chose a dry area if possible and bring DEET. If you can leave a little earlier, you may have time to follow an unmaintained trail to a secluded alternative campsite located at N36º03.393’ W105º32.743’ (4-5 tents max).

Rise early in the morning and make your way up onto the divide by hiking back out of the lake basin to the junction with trail #19. Go right onto trial #19 and follow this route up numerous switch backs to the junction with divide trail #36. From here you can hike south with expansive views of the Pecos Wilderness and Sangre de Cristos, or north and summit Jicarita Peak. An alternate route up to the divide trail is to head south along the base of the continental shelf rather then following the switch backs up trail #19. This route is not a maintained trail but allows for a little adventure and finding your own route up onto the divide trail.
Looking down from above at Serpent Lakes

View of the Sangre de Cristos from the Santa Barbara Divide
Vallecito Damien, San Pedro Parks
Vallecito Damien

**Highlights:** San Gregorio Reservoir is a popular fishing destination. The large meadow at the campsite is great for games.

**Location:** San Pedro Parks Wilderness, Northeast of Cuba

**Difficulty:** Trailhead to Reservoir Extremely Easy  
Reservoir to Campsite Extremely Easy

**Distance:** 1.0 miles from the trailhead to San Gregorio Reservoir  
0.7 miles from Reservoir to campsite

**Elevations:** Trailhead 9,200 feet  
Campsite 9,300 feet

**Maps:** USFS San Pedro Parks Wilderness

**Fees:** $5 parking fee and no permit required

**Facilities:** Primitive restrooms. No water.

**Directions:** From Albuquerque, take Unser Blvd north past the National Guard Amory to Hwy 550. Follow Hwy 550 north to Cuba and turn east on Hwy 126. Follow Hwy 126 for 10.2 miles and turn north on FR70. Follow FR70 for approximately 3 miles to the parking lot for trailhead 51. The drive takes roughly 2 hours from Albuquerque. Always bring a map (road and trail) and familiarize yourself with the drive and hike.

**Water:** Water is available at San Gregorio Reservoir and Clear Creek right next to the campsite. However, the area is used heavily by cows for grazing and you will need to make the choice whether or not to pump/purify. Since this hike is short and easy, I recommend taking all of the water you need to eliminate any risk of consuming unsafe water.
Introduction:

The drive from Albuquerque to the trailhead takes approximately 2 hours and is easily reached after work on Friday. Departing from Albuquerque at 4pm sharp on a Friday afternoon will get you to camp by 7pm leaving plenty of time to set up camp and eat dinner. The campsite has plenty of room and is a great setting for a campfire program. Spend the following morning fishing back at the Reservoir or trekking out on a day hike up trail 51. Following the trail further into the wilderness is an enjoyable hike leading through beautiful high mountain meadows. In addition, there are numerous geocaches in the area if your scouts enjoy geocaching.

Warning: See the water source description. Cow pies may be plentiful near the campsite.

Description:

The location of trailhead 51 is obvious and is well marked at the parking lot. The first potion of the hike is a 1 mile stroll to the San Gregorio Reservoir. This is a popular fishing location and made for a fun activity on the return hike the next morning. Trail 51 runs along the east side of the lake and tails of into the forest at the northeast corner. Continue hiking for roughly 0.7 miles until you arrive at Vallecito Damian. The entire trail is very wide and well defined. Vallecito Damian is a very large meadow with a little stream (Clear Creek) running along the southern boundary. A nice camping area with a fire ring is tucked in the most southwestern portion of the meadow. You have two options the following morning. Rise early in the morning and make your way back to the Reservoir for a few hours of fishing or head deeper into the wilderness area on trail 51 and explore the beautiful scenery of San Pedro Parks.
View San Gregorio Reservoir

Vallecito Damien from the campsite