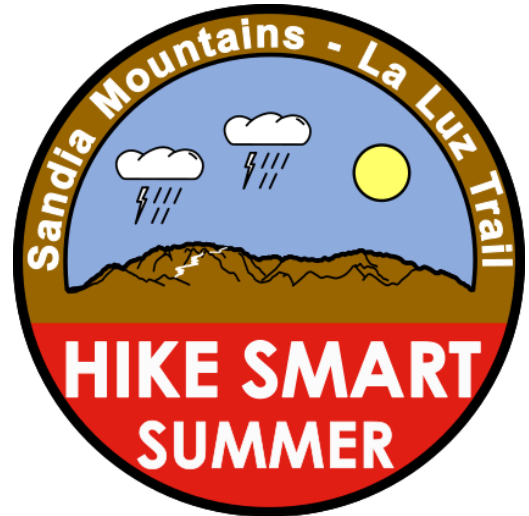


Hike Smart on La Luz - Summer

Summer Hiking

Every year, unprepared hikers, lured by warm weather and easy access from Albuquerque, experience severe illness, injury, or death when hiking La Luz trail. La Luz is situated entirely in the wilderness backcountry and is 7.5 miles in length. The climb is 3,775 feet. Hiking the backcountry has inherent risks and involves unavoidable hazards. Your safety depends upon your judgment, your experience, and a realistic assessment of your abilities.

Check the [Forest Service La Luz website](#) and call the Sandia Ranger Station at 505-281-3304 for current information on trail conditions and situations affecting the Sandia Mountains.



A successful summer hike depends on weather and routes but realize that any hike can be affected by unforeseen natural occurrences. Routes and trails can be muddy. There can be ice and snow well into the summer. Weather, at any time of the year, can compromise an individual's ability to cope with the psychological challenges of backcountry travel. Always be sure you have adequate food, water, and equipment to deal with the unexpected.

Stay on the trail. Staying on the designated trail helps to prevent avoidable injuries, lost hikers, and erosion. If you get lost, stay put and call the NM State Police at 505-841-9256 or call 911.

If you have doubts as to your ability to hike safely in the La Luz area, do not attempt to do so! All visitors should be aware that efforts to assist them may be delayed and limited due to weather, rescuer safety, and incident urgency.

Deep canyons in the Sandias have little to no cell phone coverage. Before you start, let someone know where you will be hiking and what time you expect to return.

Don't rely only on cell phone apps for navigation. A cell phone battery may not last the day. If you are far from a cell phone tower and/or taking a lot of photos, the battery can drain rapidly. Also, if there is no coverage, a cell phone app may not update the map when needed. Always carry a paper map as a backup.

Do not rely on physical strength alone, hiking smart will take you much farther. Use this information to hike smart.

Hike Smart on La Luz - Summer

Summer Hiking Essentials

1. Water - plain and some with electrolyte replacement.
2. Food - especially salty foods. Eat twice as much as normal.
3. First Aid Kit - Band-Aids, ace wrap, antiseptic, moleskin, etc.
4. Map - while many trails are well-marked, maps are helpful tools.
5. Backpack - to carry the essentials.
6. Flashlight/Spare Batteries - allows you to hike out during the cool of the evening.
7. Hiking Poles – to help with footing on steep trails.
8. Spray Bottle - fill with water for your own personal air conditioning system.
9. Hat/Sunscreen - to keep the sun off you and protect your skin.
10. Whistle and/or Signal Mirror - for emergency use.
11. Waterproof Clothing - poncho or jacket; especially useful during monsoon season (mid-July to early September).

Don't Force Fluids - Drink When You Are Thirsty - Rest and Eat Often

Ambient temperature, elevation, and exercise intensity and duration increase the physiological strain, calorie and water demands on our bodies. This makes hiking La Luz more difficult than traveling the same distance on level ground or in cooler temperatures.

Fluid/electrolyte loss can exceed 2 quarts per hour if you hike uphill in direct sunlight and during the hottest time of the day. Because inner canyon air is so dry and hot, sweat evaporates instantly, making its loss almost imperceptible. Keep an eye out for salt rings on your clothes.

Even a mild level of dehydration can make hiking a lot less fun. The more dehydrated you become, the less efficient your body is at self-cooling. This puts you at greater risk for heat related illness. Over-hydration and lack of salty foods can be equally as dangerous, as this may lead to a life-threatening electrolyte disorder called hyponatremia.

The sensations of thirst and hunger are influenced by many factors and should not be used as the only guide to replenishment. Eat and drink enough throughout your hike to replace the calories and fluid your body is using. Make sure that you balance your food and fluid intake, to avoid the risk of becoming exhausted, debilitated, or severely ill.

The Hazardous "H's"

WATCH OUT FOR THESE HEALTH HAZARDS!

HEAT EXHAUSTION - The result of dehydration due to intense sweating. Hikers can lose one or two quarts (liters) of water per hour.

Symptoms: pale face, nausea, vomiting, cool and moist skin, headache, cramps.

Treatment: drink water with electrolytes, eat high-energy foods (with fats and sugars), rest in the shade for 30-45 minutes, and cool the body by getting wet.

Hike Smart on La Luz - Summer

HEAT STROKE - A life-threatening emergency where the body's heat regulating mechanisms become overwhelmed by a combination of internal heat production and environmental demands. Your body loses its ability to cool itself. Untreated heat exhaustion can lead to heatstroke.

Symptoms: flushed face, dry skin, weak and rapid pulse, high core body temperature, confusion, poor judgment or inability to cope, unconsciousness, seizures.

Treatment: the heatstroke victim must be cooled immediately! Continuously pour water on the victim's head and torso, fan to create an evaporative cooling effect. Immerse the victim in cold water if possible. Move the victim to shade and remove excess clothing. The victim needs evacuation to a hospital. Someone should go for help while attempts to cool the victim continue.

HYPONATREMIA (water intoxication) - An illness that mimics the early symptoms of heat exhaustion. It is the result of low sodium in the blood caused by drinking too much water and losing too much salt through sweating.

Symptoms: nausea, vomiting, altered mental states, confusion, and frequent urination. The victim may appear intoxicated. In extreme cases seizures may occur.

Treatment: have the victim eat salty foods, slowly drink sports drinks with electrolytes, and rest in the shade. If mental alertness decreases, seek immediate help!

HYPOTHERMIA - A life-threatening emergency where the body cannot keep itself warm, due to exhaustion and exposure to cold, wet, windy weather.

Symptoms: uncontrolled shivering, poor muscle control, careless attitude. Look for signs of the "umbles" - stumbling, mumbling, fumbling, grumbling.

Treatment: remove wet clothing and put on dry clothing, drink warm sugary liquids, warm victim by body contact with another person, protect from wind, rain, and cold.

Avoid hypothermia by checking at the weather reports for the latest weather, taking layered clothing for protection against cold and wet weather, eating frequently, replacing fluids and electrolytes by drinking before feeling thirsty, and avoiding exposure to wet weather.

Hiking La Luz in The Summer

The La Luz trail is well known, and the trailhead is easy to access. The primary access road is FR 333 which is administered by the U.S. Forest Service. The trail is 7 ¾ miles long with an elevation gain of 3,775 feet. The slope is about 9% average, which is moderate, but there are sections which are double this.

Hikers usually start at the La Luz trailhead and hike up to the Sandia Peak Tramway upper terminal. Most ride the Tram back down, but some do an out-and-back round trip.

Some hikers start at the Sandia Peak Tramway lower terminal and hike Tramway Trail to the intersection of La Luz, and then continue up La Luz. This adds about two miles to the hike for a total distance of 9.6 miles with an elevation gain of 4,000 feet.

Hike Smart on La Luz - Summer

START EARLY – AVOID HIKING LOWER LA LUZ AFTER 10 AM!

Plan to start early. Even if you are eating and drinking correctly, you still need to avoid hiking in direct sunlight during the hottest part of the day. Sun temperatures are 15F to 20F (9C-11C) degrees hotter than posted shade temperatures.

Lower La Luz can be a furnace! Plan your day so you are not hiking the first three miles of La Luz between the hours of 10am and 4pm. Enjoy a predawn start and an early afternoon finish in the cool upper mountain. Experienced hikers know that the timing of their hike is the most important factor in avoiding hazards. Most of the people who need emergency medical help in the lower Sandias due to heat illness are hiking between 10am and 4pm.

Always bring a lightweight flashlight or headlamp to give yourself the option of hiking out after dark in the event that illness, injury, or enjoyment should slow you down.

Warning! Summer thunderstorms bring lightning. Monsoon season in Albuquerque often brings afternoon storms so check the weather reports and plan to be done before the storm rolls in.

Hikers usually start at the La Luz trailhead and hike up to the Sandia Peak Tramway upper terminal. Most ride the Tram back down, but some do an out-and-back round trip.

Some hikers start at the Sandia Peak Tramway lower terminal and hike Tramway Trail to the intersection of La Luz, and then continue up La Luz. This adds about two miles to the hike for a total distance of 9.6 miles with an elevation gain of 4,000 feet.

At about 2.75 miles, hikers reach Ponderosa Point. This area offers great views of the city and is a good turn around point. If you are getting tired, don't continue. Turn around and return to the trailhead.



Just past the Five Mile Sign, hikers enter the mile long rockslide/switchback area. The rockslides are talus fields which present challenging footing and can slow progress. Under icy conditions the rockslides can be especially difficult. A photo of a rockslide stretch is shown at right.



At 6.4 miles, hikers reach the junction with Crest Spur. Some hikers turn up Crest Spur and have someone pick them up at the Sandia Crest. This shortens the hike a bit but be aware that Crest Spur trail is much steeper than La Luz.

Hike Smart on La Luz - Summer

Hikers planning to return via the Tram should call Tram Operations at 505-846-1532 to ensure that the Tram is open. The Tram closes for maintenance periods several times a year. Operators also close the Tram during high winds. If the Tram is closed, hikers must either hike back down, or hike 2 additional miles to the Sandia Crest and have someone pick them up.

Spring and Fall Trail Conditions

Be aware that winter ice and snow drifts can be present in early fall and late spring – even well into June.

It is a good idea to pack a light-to-medium weight insulation layer and/or puffy jacket as well as a beanie and gloves. Even in the fall or early summer, it can be cold on top of the mountain. High winds in the upper mountain can be bone chilling. Not being prepared for wind, snow flurries, and drenching rain can lead to hypothermia. It is also a good idea to carry over-the-shoe traction devices to safely traverse early or late season ice and snow.

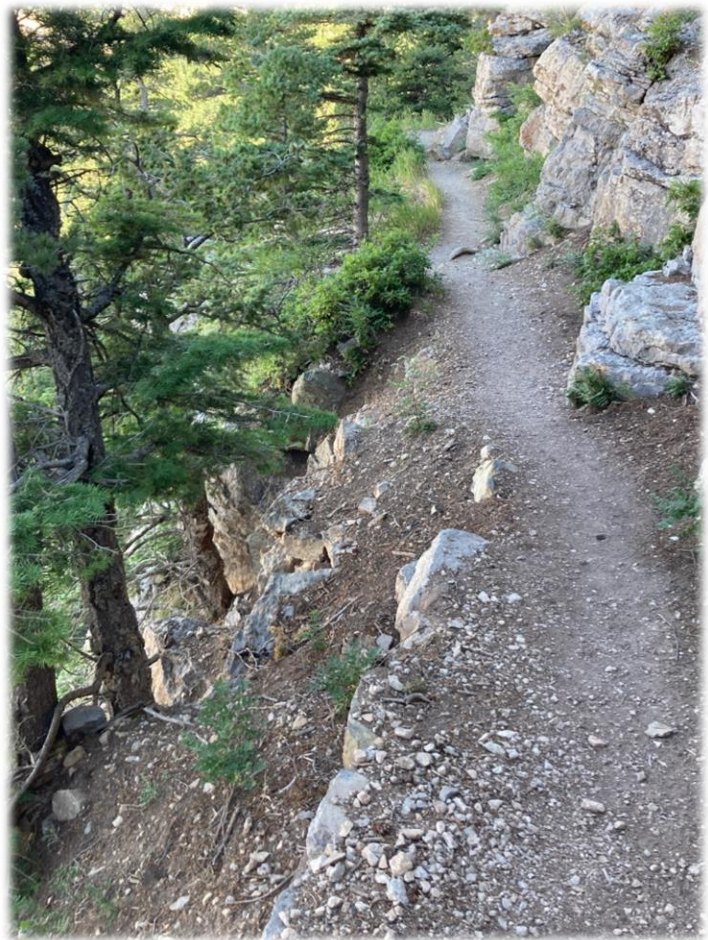
Stop by or call the Sandia Ranger Station at 505-281-3304 prior to your hike for a trail update.

Photos of Upper La Luz and Crest Spur Trail During Summer (Courtesy of J. Browning)

In many sections of upper La Luz trail, there are steep drop-offs at trails edge. These sections can be treacherous in bad weather and/or if the trail is slippery due to snow, ice, or mud. A slip or misstep along these areas can have severe consequences, including death.

The Crest Spur trail also has narrow sections with steep drop-offs. In addition, there is a long narrow stairway which must be climbed.

Narrow Section of Upper La Luz



Hike Smart on La Luz - Summer

Narrow Section of Crest Spur Trail



The Crest Spur Stairway



I would like to thank Cibola Search and Rescue, Albuquerque Mountain Rescue, Sandia Search Dogs, and the US Forest Service for contributing to this article.

J Browning
Friends of the Sandia Mountains
2/6/24

