

The Railfan's Guide to Cajon Pass By Al Bowen

Part Two: Blue-Cut, Swarthout Canyon, and the Keenbrook Overlook

These three locations are grouped together due to their geographic proximity and overlapping area. To reach these points and the next few up the Pass, it is necessary to get onto 'Old Highway 66'. To do that, you come north out of Devore on the Interstate. If you are on I-15, the exit for Kenwood Drive is the first one following the merger of the two freeways, just stay to the right and exit at the Kenwood ramp. If you are on the 215 you must move to the right immediately after the merging of the two freeways. This isn't as easy as it sounds because the traffic coming in over your right shoulder on the I-15 is thick and moving very fast, making moving to the right lane rather difficult in time to exit at Kenwood Drive. If you miss the exit you can continue up the hill and U-turn at Cleghorn Road, the next exit. Assuming you make the correct exit, turn left at the end of the ramp and proceed down the hill. Kenwood Dr. ends at the Old Highway 66. Turn right and you will be pointed up the Pass on what used to be the main road over the mountains. The State maintains two lanes of the old freeway for local traffic up to Cleghorn Road. A reminder that this is a 'two-way traffic' road and you should be alert to oncoming traffic.

About 2 miles up Highway 66, the Keenbrook Road branches off to the left. Follow this dirt road, fording Cajon Creek and crossing the BNSF line on an unmarked grade crossing (**CAUTION**). Turn right on the maintainer's road that runs beside the tracks and proceed about 1/4 mile to the site of the Keenbrook Station and water tanks. Only a few pieces of the buildings remain, and some of them are really difficult to locate. The track for the siding is all but lost in the fill and dumping of gravel and ballast by MOW crews.

Retrace your steps to Highway 66 and turn left (up the Pass). Proceed for a mile or so. The canyon turns almost 90 degrees to the right (east) and the creek, the road, and the rail-lines all squeeze into a rather tight area known as Blue-Cut. There are a number of turnouts and parking areas here that allow one to walk to many photo locations. One word of Caution... Lock your car here and don't leave valuables visible when you leave your car, as there are many people who come to this location for a variety of reasons, not all of which are honest.

Blue-Cut (milepost 65) gets its name from the unique color of the rock formations that are visible on the hillside and in the road and rail cuts that cross the area. This is where the San Andreas Fault crosses the Pass and evidence of seismic activity is visible all around you. John Brown had his first 'Lower Toll House', built alongside the creek at the western end of Blue-Cut. The excavation is still visible in the cliff-side under the highway. He moved the location to what is now Cozy-Dell, after suffering repeated flash-flood damage in the mid-1860's. This was the lower end of his road that reached the top of the Pass behind what is now the Summit Inn on the Freeway. His road cut almost two travel-days off the time from San Bernardino to Victorville compared to the traditional trails that followed the Mojave River course throughout Summit Valley.

A bit further up the highway, the canyon turns to the left (north). In the curve the Swarthout Canyon Road intersects on the left. Turn left and follow the road, fording Cajon Creek on a paved crossing. As you come up the slope from the creek, the BNSF lines are on your immediate right. There are several turnouts where one can park and in a few steps be in several great photo locations. In addition nearby, at the 64.1 milepost, track detectors are located on both tracks that not only report train conditions, but also axle count, speed and temperature. Be sure your scanner is on. If you continue a bit further on Swarthout Canyon Road you will reach the BNSF grade crossing. Parking here is available and the photo locations are many. (**CAUTION**) Remember, this is a double-track, and while you are shooting that train pulling up the Pass, it is easy for one coming down to coast right up to you.

If you continue across the BNSF line a short distance up the road you will reach the SP (UP) line crossing. Cross the track and turn left on the maintainer's road. It is gravel and ballast, but is in pretty good condition. Follow this road back through Blue-Cut, you will find several places where you can look down the pass and get great photos of the trains pulling up the hill. About 2/3 of a mile from the Swarthout Canyon Rd. crossing,

the access road forks. The left fork follows the track around and down the hill to Keenbrook. The right fork climbs the hill and eventually crosses the ridge to the Lytle Creek Canyon. Going up the right fork will bring you to a series of pull-outs where you can see for miles down the canyon. These are collectively known as the Keenbrook Overlooks This road can get a bit rough after bad weather so proceed with caution.

Return down the access road to where it intersects with the Swarthout Canyon Rd. Here you have a choice to make.

1. If you enjoy driving on the access road, you can follow it up the pass beside the SP line. It will eventually take you to Sullivan's Curve and Highway 138. It is a bit rough, and I advise caution especially in the 'cuts' where the road and rails are quite close together. Watch for rail traffic from both directions in these areas. I recommend using a High-Clearance vehicle, especially after any bad weather.

OR

2. Return to Highway 66, turn left and proceed up the Pass, going by Cozy Dell and what was the old Cajon Campground, this is now private property and access is not available. Cozy Dell was the site of the relocated Lower Toll House.

It is easy to spend an entire day in this area, as the number of different locations for photo work is amazing.