

The Railfan's Guide to Cajon Pass By Al Bowen

Part Three: Cajon Station and Sullivan's Curve

This segment contains one of the most visited areas in the Pass and one of the most exotic photo locations anywhere. If there is a "Heart" to the Cajon Pass, then this area is IT. Here is where the BNSF tracks split apart. The South Track follows the basic original 1885 alignment and steeper 3% grade to Summit, While the North Track winds its way through the Sullivan's Curve area, it adds two miles to its length in order to achieve a 2.2% maximum grade before rejoining its neighbor just before the Summit. Add to this section, the increased merger traffic of the UP/SP Palmdale Cut-off, and you have a high concentration of traffic, in an environment full of unique rock formations and stunning backdrops. As the day progresses here, the shadows and lighting seem to provide a variety of new scenes for the photographer with a little patience.

First, Let's look at the Cajon Station area. If you are on Old Highway 66, just continue north and you will see the BNSF tracks running beside you as you leave Cozy Dell and the old Cajon Campground mentioned in the previous segment. A little over a mile up the road you will see the current Station Marker for "CAJON" next to the tracks and just beyond that the sidings and crossovers are very visible from the road. Old 66 bends to the right here to intersect with Interstate 15 again at the Cleghorn Road interchange.

If you are coming up the Pass on the freeway then exit at Cleghorn Road and turn left. At the bottom of the hill the Cajon Station area is directly in front of you. There is a parking area at this intersection and you can almost always count on some railfan's cars being parked here. This is a great place for morning photography, while as the sun shifts in the sky, many photographer's will follow the paved road to the north a short distance to the grade crossings over the BNSF tracks and return to the station area on the west side of the tracks. The foundations for the water tanks are visible next to the mainline and a few building foundations can be seen in the undergrowth, but no buildings remain from the original community that was here in earlier years. A little walk around the station site will provide several photo opportunities from 'remote' locations like a shot of a train framed by the oak trees that form groves at both ends of the station site. At the north end of the site, where the tracks split apart, you can walk beside the South Track to get another uncommon shot. Just a short distance up the South track you will come upon the 1912 monument that John Thompson mentioned in some of his notes a short time ago. It is located in a grove of trees on the west-side of the track, around the curve from the station.

Since both tracks curve to the left as they leave the upper end of the station site, the photographer should position himself on the west side of either track, to get the inside curve angle when a train is coming down the Pass. Photographing trains leaving Cajon coming up the Pass will depend on the time of day and other lighting circumstances.

Before we venture out to Sullivan's Curve, allow me to mention some of the possibilities near Cajon before heading out into the 'Boonies'. There is one maintainer's road beside each of the tracks as they leave Cajon. It is possible to follow these roads to a number of great photo locations away from the station site. The road that follows the North Track will eventually lead you to Sullivan's Curve, but before you get that far... at the first grade crossing a short distance from where the tracks split, is the entrance to Crowder Ranch. This property is now owned by the San Bernardino County Museum. It is in the process of being restored to its 'pioneer' look. When the restoration is complete it should appear as a working ranch of the 1860's. On the property is a monument marking the location of the Mormon Pioneer Trail, and several native American artifact sites that are being uncovered by local historians. Exploration of this area is possible, but you should contact the county museum in San Bernardino for permission. Non-prearranged visits are discouraged, but not impossible.

One road departs from the station site and goes directly west. It fords Cajon Creek and climbs a slope west of the station. Near the top of the slope the road forks. The right hand fork goes to the grade crossing

previously mentioned and then on to the county museum site. The left fork, obviously the most traveled, leads further west to another grade crossing of the North track. After crossing the rail line turn left on the maintainer's road here and you are entering Sullivan's Curve. You can park at several areas around the curve and walk up to any of a hundred different locations for great photo's. You will notice that the UP/SP line joins the BNSF North Track in the Curve and they run side-by-side for several miles. The SP line is above and slightly to the west of the BNSF line.

While shooting from the inside of the curve is always good, if you climb the slope between the tracks and cross the SP line near the southern end of the siding, there is an overlook where you can sit about 75 feet above the SP line and get the best photos of trains coming either up the hill out of Cajon or down the hill around the length of the curve. I think this spot is the best location in the curve, and so did Herb Sullivan, who photographed many trains from this place. Even though the alignment has changed the spectacular scenery and intense activity hasn't. It is worth the effort to have a chance to view this historic location in person.

For those of you who are a bit more adventuresome with your vehicles, it is possible to drive right to this fantastic location. If you get on the SP maintainer's road at the Swarthout Canyon Road intersection, and follow the maintainer's road north for about 2 miles you will have some really fine overlook shots of the Cajon Station area from a different perspective, plus when you reach the point where the siding makes a double track of the SP line look to your left and the overlook described earlier is right next to you. There is room to park at the base of the hill and it is a short walk up to the overlook.

To exit continue on the maintainer's road to the north, thru the curve. The road exits onto Lone Pine Canyon Road just a few feet from where that road intersects with Highway 138. Turn right on Highway 138 and you will be back on I-15 in less than a mile.

For those you are in a hurry to get to Sullivan's Curve, you can reverse these directions... Take 138 west from the freeway. Turn left on Lone Pine Canyon Road. At the first turn from the intersection, take a left onto the dirt maintainer's road and follow it beside the SP line, to the desired location in the Curve (about 1 1/2 miles). At this writing, they are replacing ribbon rail in the siding so at times access can be temporarily blocked by MOW crews. Your cooperation with these crews makes it possible for us to continue to use their roads.