

Independence Trail East

Like the Independence Trail West, the East trail follows the gentle gradient of an old mining ditch and is wheelchair accessible. It offers occasional views of the South Yuba River canyon and passes seasonal side streams and bogs. Tree cover and a generally northerly orientation keep the trail relatively cool and green for its 1400-1500 foot elevation. Along the trail are two picnic tables, several benches, and several wooden bridges that have replaced the flumes of yore. At 2 miles, the trail crosses Excelsior Ditch Camp Road and connects to more rugged trails that lead to swimming holes along the river.

Place:	South Yuba River State Park about 6 miles northwest of Nevada City, CA
Season:	Year-round
Land:	Mixed state, federal and non-profit organization
Trail signs:	The main trailhead is well marked. A secondary trailhead at the overflow parking area is unmarked. No other trail signs.
Length:	2.2 miles (each way) to the end of East trail. Last 0.2 miles unmaintained. 2.25 miles (each way) to the South Yuba River via Independence Trail East and Excelsior Ditch Camp Road. For a longer option, this trail can be combined with the Independence Trail West.
Altitude change:	Independence Trail East on ditch nearly level (60'). Side trails to the river descend about 200 vertical feet.
Difficulty:	Independence Trail is easy. Short trails to the river are moderate to difficult.
Trail surface:	Dirt
Environment:	Mixed conifer and hardwood on generally north-facing slope
Rules:	Dogs on leash; no bicycles or motorized vehicles; no smoking or fires; no camping

Trailhead:

From the north end of Nevada City where Highway 49 turns west toward Downieville, go 6.25 miles on Highway 49 north. A highway sign tells northbound travelers the Independence Trailhead is coming up. There is a parking area along the east side of Highway 49 at the trailhead, and overflow parking just around the next curve down Highway 49. In the main parking area look for a "Trail Entrance" sign, display case and restrooms (N39.29164 W121.09734).

For the Independence Trail East, go left (northeast) at the display case. If you park in the overflow/secondary parking area, take the wooden steps that lead up the bank, follow the connecting trail a short way, and turn left when you reach the main ditch trail.

A bit of history: The Independence Trail was the first identified wheelchair accessible wilderness trail in the country. It utilizes the old Excelsior Ditch, built around 1859 to carry water for hydraulic mining. The ditch tapped the South Yuba River more than two miles upstream from here and it ran all the way to what is now the dam at Lake Wildwood, then by the China Ditch to the Smartsville mining district, 15 miles west of Grass Valley, CA.

The trail includes views of another mining artifact: the Miners Tunnel. It was blasted through 800 feet of bedrock in the late 1870's to divert the flow of the South Yuba during summer months so miners could work the main river channel. Both ends of the tunnel are visible in this area, as described below.

Trail tips: Much of this trail consists of two parallel paths, one in the ditch bottom, and the other on top of the ditch bank. The wheelchair-accessible path generally follows the ditch bottom through the first mile or so. (This stretch has muddy patches for a few days after wet weather. Walkers can hop on the ditch bank to bypass any mud, but wheelchair users don't have this option.)

The trail crosses several seasonal streams and bogs on good bridges, converted from old flumes and recently rebuilt by the California Conservation Corps. Ferns and wildflowers, in season, thrive in the dappled light of the trail. At about 0.6 mile the trail passes under a huge boulder. In the second mile the trail features two picnic sites, both wheelchair-accessible and beside seasonal streams.

At 2.0 miles the trail crosses an unmarked dirt road, Excelsior Ditch Camp Road. The Independence Trail continues along the old ditch for 0.2 mile. Along this 0.2 mile section are views, through the vegetation, of Hoyt's Crossing and the Miners Tunnel inlet about 200' below. The trail dead-ends at a steep drop-off. From this point a steep, unmaintained use trail, festooned with poison oak, winds down to the river.

A somewhat easier way to reach the river is to turn left on Excelsior Ditch Camp Road (not wheelchair accessible). After hiking about 400 feet along this road, you'll reach a "Hoyt's Crossing Day Use Area" sign where the road splits. Going left (west), the road continues 0.15 mile through a deeply rutted section to its end at a flat area near the Miners Tunnel outlet and sketchy trails to swimming holes. Going right (northeast) at the "Hoyt's Crossing Day Use Area" sign, the road promptly diminishes to trail, then becomes nebulous when it reaches a rocky, driftwood-strewn flat in 0.1 mile. Turning left, downstream, at the flat and hiking about 100 yards gives a close view of the Miners Tunnel inlet. Footing is difficult and poison oak is prevalent here.

Note: It is possible to reach Independence Trail East and the Hoyt Crossing area by walking down the Excelsior Ditch Camp Road from above. Only hikers with good information on local roads should attempt this, via Cement Hill and Augustine Roads. The road becomes deeply rutted and impassable to vehicles. Park along the road and start hiking before this section.

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