

SECRET STAIRS WEBWALKS

Pacific Palisades—Castellammare

Duration: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Distance: 3.2 miles

Steps: 518

Difficulty: 3.5

Bus: RTD Bus #2, 302, 430

The most scenic of all the city's stairwalks, this hillside stroll offers sweeping Pacific views, ocean breezes, and grisly Hollywood film lore. Its handsome hidden staircases are adjacent to the Getty Villa, the Self-Realization Fellowship, and Topanga Park, making it an ideal all-day recreation destination.

Find yourself by bus or car at the doorstep of Gladstone's of Malibu, the popular seaside seafood restaurant at the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Pacific Coast Highway. You may enjoy a few sunny moments on their patio, whether you are a customer or not—the patio is public property. You may picnic here, and even bring your own food, as long as you first request a table from the host station at the Gladstone's entrance. The restrooms here, and coastal access, are also open to the public, though the parking is not. (There is, however, a warning: Across the street, on Sunset, is a sign saying, "Entering Tsunami Hazard Area." What you're meant to *do* with this information, I don't know, but there are similar signs in Santa Monica Canyon and as far south as Laguna Beach, and as far north as Humboldt County. The community of Port Hueneme, in Ventura County, has a tsunami warning *siren*.)

Begin walking north, on the ocean side of PCH, through the parking lot behind Gladstone's. You'll notice remnants of old staircases and an old promenade on the eastern side of the highway—wiped out not by tidal waves, but by the landslides that have plagued the area. Continue past a bank of public restrooms (fitted with outdoor showers), and past lifeguard tower #2 to the pedestrian overpass crossing PCH. Take the stairs up and over—35 steps up, a walkway across the highway, then 40 steps up again—to land on Castellammare Drive.

The big white Spanish structure you've just walked over was once known as Thelma Todd's Sidewalk Café, a roadhouse-speakeasy operated by the silent film actress of that name. Ms. Todd, who died nearby under suspicious circumstances in 1935, was the blonde beauty featured in the Marx Brothers' *Monkey Business* and *Horsefeathers*. She was found dead in her Lincoln Phaeton, killed by carbon monoxide poisoning. Suspects in the case included her boyfriend, her business partner, her ex-husband, and the gangster Lucky Luciano. The building now houses the inspirational film company Paulist Productions.

Cross Castellammare and walk a short few steps uphill to the next staircase, a steep construction with green handrails, rising 69 steps and lifting you to Posetano Road. Across the street, behind a wooden barricade, you will see evidence that the steps used to continue on up the hill. A series of landslides wiped out that staircase, and several others, and closed pieces of roadway all over the Castellammare hillside. You can still see some staircase wreckage rising behind the barricade.

So, turn left onto Posetano and walk to the next corner. Here, another stair remnant. There is a lovely flight of finely maintained stairs rising straight up from the intersection. These stairs end on a platform, and serve nothing—except to deliver a better view of the sunset, perhaps. Turn left down Revello Drive instead, and just after the house at 17712, find the nearly hidden staircase going down on the left.

Like most of the staircases in the Castellammare area, this set is marked with a contractor's stamp reading "Braun, Bryant + Austin," and is dated 1927. This one is two flights, 91 steps total, and quite steep, but fitted with handrails. It deposits you at the corner of Breve Way and Castellammare. Follow Breve down to the right, to where it meets Porto Marina Way. Across the road, you can see the remnants of yet another fine old staircase. This one is broad and beautifully built, and delivers you more or less into the traffic on PCH.

You don't want that. Instead, climb Porto Marina to just past the house at 17737, and find your next staircase. This one, another Braun, Bryant + Austin, rises 86 steps and drops you back on Castellammare. Turn left, and continue uphill. High above on your right, you may see the pilings supporting the enormous villa at 17800 Tramonto Drive, and above them, a cantilevered tennis court and gravity-defying patio. Enormous efforts have been made to hold the hillside together here, including, at street level, sheets of raw iron that look like a Richard Serra construction.

Past this, and just past the house at 17878, hidden in bougainvillea in the vacant lot below, you can see the remnants of yet another abandoned staircase. This one is still in good working order, though it is entirely overrun. It drops down through some underbrush, and past the concrete foundations of a ruined house, dropping down 61 steps to Porto Marina Way. There is an unlocked gate at the bottom and the stairs are open, but not recommended.

Instead, continue up Castellammare a little further, enjoying the ocean breezes and mountain views. At the first corner, turn left and walk downhill a bit. Here at the edge of the bluffs is Villa de Leon, the Italianate mansion designed in 1928 by architect Kenneth MacDonald for wool magnate Leon Kauffman. The 12,000-square-foot limestone residence features marble floors, a circular ocean-view dining room, nine bedrooms, 11 bathrooms, and a seven-car garage with its own car wash. Four naked wood nymphs watch over the road. Over the door is the head of a fierce looking ram, keeping an eye on the wool-bearing sheep that made the Kauffman fortune.

Turn around and go back up the hill. You're on Tramonto Drive now. Down and left, across the canyon, you will catch glimpses of the magnificent Getty Villa and surrounding glades and gardens. Continue uphill, then turn right onto Vicino Way. At the next corner, bear right back onto Tramonto. Though a contractor's stamp on the pavement sets the date of the street at 1927, most of the houses here are of more recent construction. Pause at 17800, the 6,000-square-foot confection, built in 1931, whose cantilevered tennis court you admired from below.

Press on along Tramonto. Near the houses at 17646 and 17612 the Pacific spreads out before you. The ocean views are magnificent, and on the hillsides below you can see evidence of the landslides that put some of the now-defunct staircases out of business.

Down and around you go. Turn right at the T-intersection where Tramonto meets Revello Drive, and follow Revello down until it crosses the narrow bridge and approaches its cul-de-sac end. But, just before that, you'll find another Braun, Bryant + Austin staircase on the left. It's a nicely balanced set of 122 steps, over four staircases, 25 steps each, bottomed out with a set of 22.

This will land you on Posetano Rd. once again. Turn right, go to the corner of Stretto Way, and stop. Here is Castillo Del Mar, a looming blue and brown structure that was the home of Thelma Todd at the time of her asphyxiated death. Take a deep breath, enjoy the sea air, and continue down Stretto. Where it meets Castellammare, turn right. Follow this down to the end of the road.

Castellammare used to continue, and return to its meeting with Breve and Porto Marina. But those 1960s landslides shut it down. Today, there's a nice little path going where the road once led. Take this path, down one side and up the other. After you are back on pavement, just past the house 17560, find the final staircase to cross PCH once more.

For one final stairwalk thrill, walk down the last 14 steps (more or less, depending on how much sand the tide has pushed onto the beach), take your shoes off and complete this walk along the shore. You can access the Gladstone's parking lot from the beach side, and you are back where you began.

