

## California Deserts Road Trip (D22A)

Exploring the deserts of southeastern California makes for a nice winter road trip. But my plans were put on hold due to the COVID Omicron surge. When that wound down, I carried on with my trip, also adding a couple days in Victorville, California so that I could use that as my base for a trip out to the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve. Beyond that, my trip focused on sites in the Palm Springs-Joshua Tree area, the Salton Sea area, a lone stop in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and sites west of Blythe, California.

The deserts visited included parts of the Mojave Desert and – to the south – the Colorado Desert, which is a part of the Sonoran Desert. Due to an elevation difference, the Sonoran Desert is hotter, more notably during the winter, resulting in a big difference in plants. The boundary between the two deserts is especially apparent in Joshua Tree National Park, which is one of that park's features.

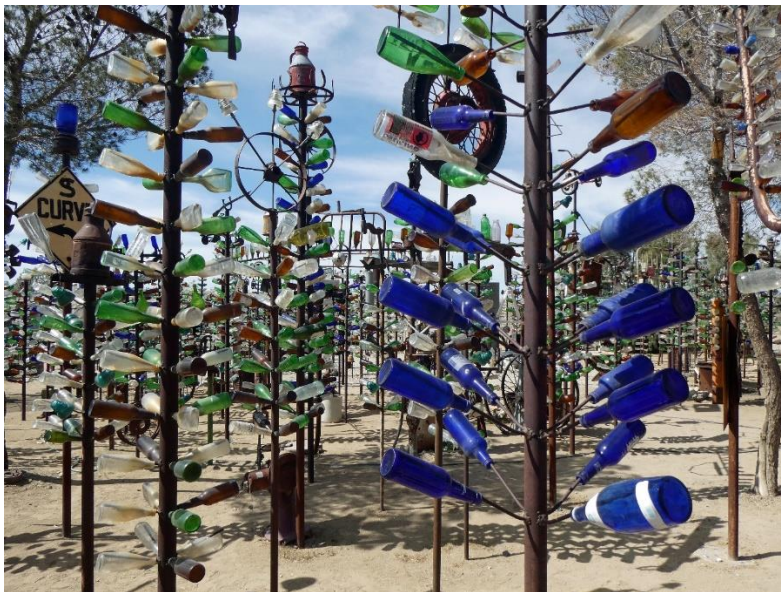
The region has interesting geological features, Native American archaeological sites, historic sites, the San Andreas fault, Route 66 kitsch, and unique flora and fauna, giving me reasons to keep going back.



My first stop was at the privately owned Liberty Sculpture Garden at Yermo, California (No Communists Allowed! according to the sign). Most of the sculptures seemed to be inspired by events in Communist China or in Hong Kong.



At Barstow, I planned to visit the Desert Conservation Center, but it was closed. Too early to continue on to Victorville, I headed over to the train station, where I toured the station and train yard. I found that its second floor was home to the visitor center for the Goldstone Deep Space Communications Complex, which partners with two other sites around the world to support our space communications, such as those associated with our missions to Mars. The actual complex is out in the desert northeast of Barstow, and is generally off limits to the public.



Scrap metal folk artist Elmer Long filled his front yard with a forest of bottle trees, tree-like sculptures whose branches or leaves consist (mostly) of colorful glass bottles he had collected over the years. I thought I might try something similar at home, but my Diet Dr Pepper bottles probably wouldn't do.

I continued along Route 66 to Victorville, where I'd spend two nights. I made one more stop along the way, at the Roy Rogers Ranch, once owned by singing cowboy Roy Rogers and his wife Dale Evans.





Roy Rogers and Dale Evans bought the ranch, which they named the Double R Bar Ranch, in 1964, and owned it until their deaths in 1998 (Roy) and 2001 (Dale), although they lived in nearby Apple Valley. Current owners have set it up as an event center.



When they owned the ranch, Roy and Dale bred horses there. Today, their old horse barn recognizes Roy's horse Trigger, Dale's horse Buttermilk, and other famous movie horses.



Roy Rogers (born Leonard Franklin Slye) and Dale Evans (born Frances Octavia Smith) were buried in Sunset Hills Memorial Park in Apple Valley.

A bit of Roy Rogers trivia... Leonard Slye was born in a Cincinnati tenement that had been located where Riverfront Stadium stood before it was demolished in 2002.

My drive from Barstow to Victorville followed the old Route 66. Victorville itself is home to the California Route 66 Museum.



The museum actually didn't have a lot to say about Route 66. Most of its artifacts were contemporary to Route 66's heyday, but weren't specifically related to Route 66. However, the above set of painted artificial finger nails are one of only four such sets in the world that showcase the path of Route 66 and some of the sites one finds along the way.

The next day I headed west in search of poppies, following *The Musical Road* for part of the drive.



Grooves have been cut into a stretch of the road here, so that when you drive across them at 50 MPH, you should hear part of the *William Tell Overture*. I can't say I was impressed. But then, as an aging music fan, I'll point out that back when I was young, we drove on gravel roads to listen to the music they made – the original rock music. Not this groovy pavement racket that today's young people listen to.





Had I taken this trip early in the year, I probably would have skipped Victorville in favor of more time at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. But I have wanted to see the Antelope Valley poppy bloom for some time now, and it was underway when I took this trip. Thus, I spent a couple nights in Victorville so that I could drive out to Antelope Valley and see it.



California poppies once were common across much of California, but development has limited their coverage of the state. However, Antelope Valley, west of Lancaster, still has large scale natural poppy blooms, including on land preserved as the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve, a California state park.



In years with wetter winters, springtime showcases a poppy superbloom. No such luck this year, but I was still treated to plentiful blooms as I hiked along the Tehachapi Vista Point Trail and followed Lancaster Road along the park's boundary.





I took a different route back to Victorville, passing the Mojave Air and Space Port, above, and another airport near Victorville, where excess airplanes are stored or scrapped – so-called airplane graveyards. The Mojave Desert conditions here are actually ideal for long-term aircraft storage.



I also stopped at the Rio Tinto U.S. Borax Mine visitor center. I had planned to stop here in October 2020, but it was closed for COVID pandemic-related reasons at that time.



After finishing up my Victorville regional sightseeing, I headed to Palm Springs, where I stayed for four nights. For my first full day there, I saw the sights of Palm Springs proper, my first real city explorations since the pandemic started (in Dallas last month, I only visited a museum and then made a few stops by car in the region). I followed that with two full days exploring nearby Joshua Tree National Park.



Palm Canyon Drive is the restaurant-shopping-museum hub of Palm Springs.



As a celebrity destination in Hollywood's Golden Age, Palm Springs has elements that reminded me of both Hollywood and Beverly Hills, including its own Walk of Stars, which went beyond movie, TV and recording stars to honor local luminaries, such as William "Bill" Torrance, Car Dealer to the Stars.



The McCallum Adobe is one of four museums I visited. This oldest surviving building in Palm Springs is home to a small Palm Springs history museum.

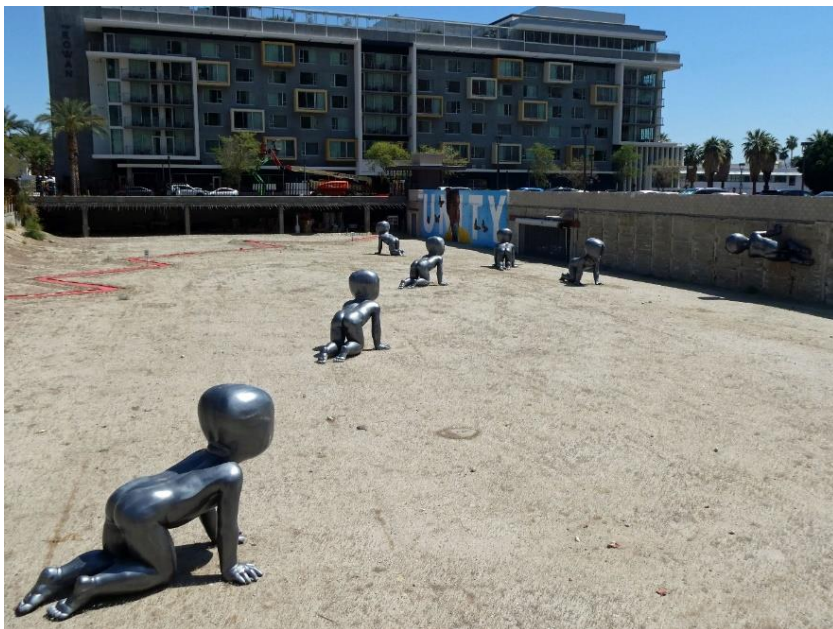


Palm Springs is to Mid-Century Modern design what Miami Beach is to Art Deco, and it has the largest concentration of Mid-Century Modern-style houses in the country. So, I was hoping to learn more about it at the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center. Alas, it only had one exhibit, this currently focused on *The Modern Chair*. There were perhaps three dozen chairs on display, most looking so uncomfortable that I didn't try out any of them.





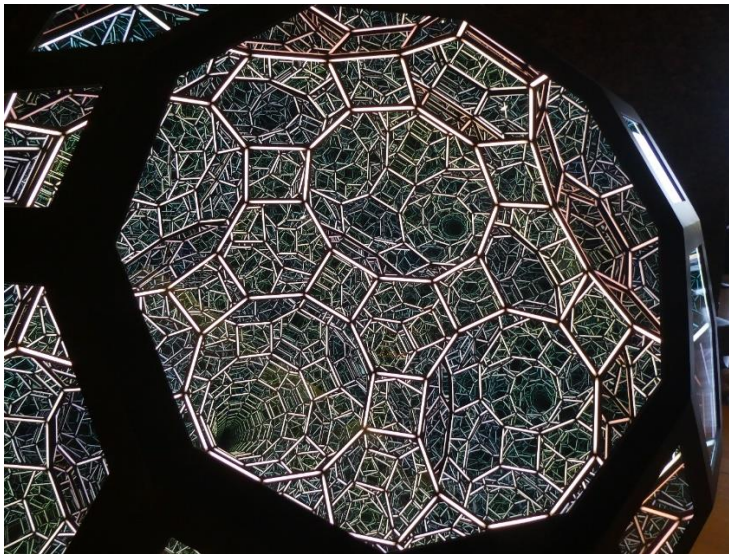
On my walk over the main Palm Springs Art Museum, I passed Seward Johnson's *Forever Marilyn* statue. I'm not a fan of Johnson's work as it tends to be what I'd call "lowest common denominator" art – lots of mass appeal, but little challenge or charm. *Forever Marilyn* has some added controversy as it seems to encourage people to look up Marilyn's dress, something that offends a lot of women and Californians. Johnson also created the *City Life* sculptures that dotted downtown Dayton, Ohio back in 2015. Of the more than a dozen sculptures on display then that featured various "city residents" in various activities, all of the people depicted were white, this in a city that is half Black.



I wonder what the residents of those apartments think when they look out their windows at the sculpture *The Babies*, which features several large babies with barcodes instead of faces crawling towards their building.



My favorite sculpture inside the Palm Springs Art Museum was this sphere, where one-way glass endlessly reflected neon lights mounted inside along all of the frame edges.



The one-way glass allows us to look in on the reflected lights.



I also liked this sculpture, *Old Couple on a Bench* by Duane Hanson, although it did bring to mind the Roger Corman classic movie *A Bucket of Blood*.

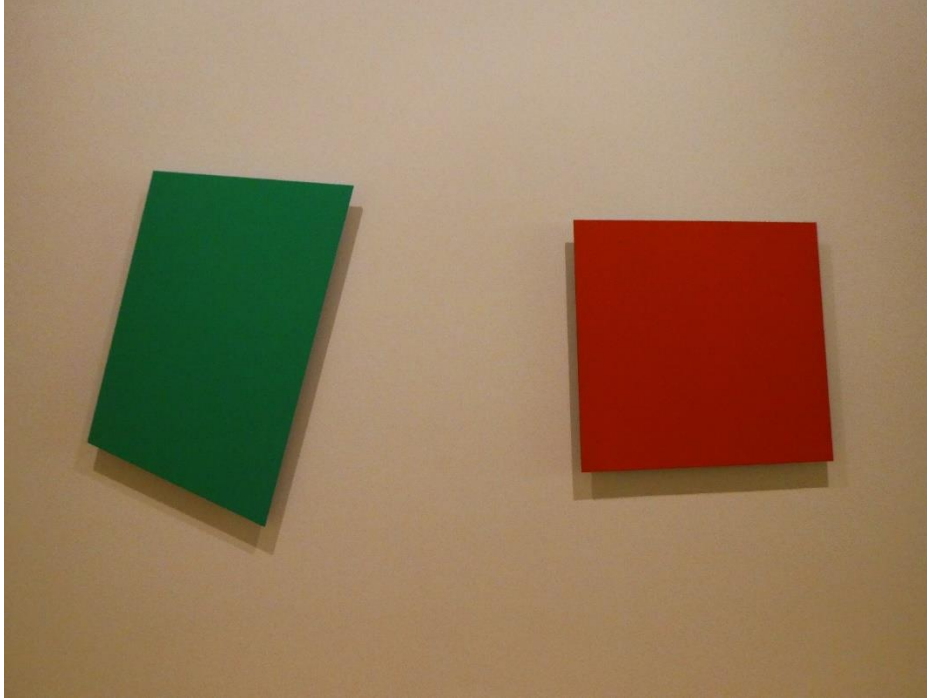




From across the room, the large item on the left reminded me of Native American basket weaving techniques. But upon closer look, the “weaves” were actually crushed beverage cans.



In the modern African art exhibit, from across the room I thought I was looking at a large quilt-like tapestry. On closer examination, I found it was made from small pieces of plastic held together with copper wire.



You, too, can be a modern artist. All you have to do is be able to cut a piece of aluminum or Masonite into some shape and paint it a solid color. Just make sure you add some pretentious-sounding highbrow description that would never actually occur to anyone looking at the art, e.g., “The juxtaposition of these two pieces is evocative of the tensions between computational linguists who adhere to symbolic methods and those who have adopted empirical models.”



Back on the street, I saw this sculpture of the late entertainer, Palm Springs mayor and congressman Sonny Bono.





Many celebrities escaped Hollywood to their homes in Palm Springs, whether year-round or just weekends.

Elvis Presley's Honeymoon Hideaway, that he shared for a year with his then-new wife Priscilla Presley.



Former home of Frank and Barbara Sinatra.



Just a couple blocks from the Sinatra house is this house where the lawn ornaments seemed to have gotten a little bit out of hand. My HOA probably wouldn't allow this.





My last stop in Palm Springs proper was at the smallish Moorten Botanical Garden. I can't say that any of the plant displays really caught my eye, but I enjoyed seeing this desert tortoise.



The Agua Caliente Indian Reservation is adjacent to Palm Springs, and the heart of the reservation sits at the base of San Jacinto Mountain. The tribe maintains a number of hiking trails that are usually open to the public. I hiked at their Palm Canyon Trail when I was in town in 2016, and since then I had wanted to check out their Tahquitz Canyon Trail, which features some archaeological sites and a waterfall.



I hiked as far as Sacred Rock, pictured, one of the oldest Cahuilla village sites in the area, with artifacts found here that date back more than 1000 years.

There were a number of these morteros (mortars) surrounding Sacred Rock that the Cahuilla people used for grinding seeds and Mesquite beans. I also found some badly faded pictographs on the sheltered side of Sacred Rock.



This trip marked my fifth visit to Joshua Tree National Park. I had been to the park's more famous destinations before, some repeatedly, so this time I focused on four more out of the way destinations as well as the numerous pull-outs along the park's two main roads, avoiding the crowds at most of my stops.



Joshua Tree National Park is named for the Joshua Tree, a member of the lily family. The tree is native to the Mojave Desert – if you see a Joshua Tree in nature, you're most likely in the Mojave Desert.

But the park actually straddles the boundary between the Mojave Desert and the Colorado Desert, a part of the Sonoran Desert found at lower elevations to the south. In the Colorado Desert portion of the park, you won't find any of the park's famous Joshua Trees. Creosote, cholla, brittlebush, Palo Verde trees and ocotillo are much more common in the Colorado Desert portion of the park.





One of my targeted destinations was the hike out to the Desert Queen Mine, one of a number of old mines scattered across the park. Here, you will primarily find sealed mine shafts (red arrows) as well as the ruins of an old mine-related building and some mountainside tailings piles.



Another of my targeted destinations was the unpaved Geology Tour Road. There are several numbered stops along the route where the tour brochure provides information about what you're looking at, especially as it relates to the geology of the park.





A short hike led to yet another of my destinations, Cottonwood Spring. Morteros are among the archaeological evidence that Native Americans made use of this natural spring. Some remnants of later mining activity can also be seen here. As can a sign closing part of this area due arsenic, lead and cobalt, dangerous leftovers from the mining activity.



During cooler, wetter times, there was a small stream that passed through Pinto Basin here in the park. Archaeological evidence shows that there were a handful of Pinto Basin Culture villages along that long-gone stream. Carbon dating puts the Pinto Basin people here about 9,000 years ago.





The Cholla Cactus Garden is home to thousands of Teddy Bear Cholla. They spread by easily attaching pieces of their branches to human or animal passersby, which transport those piece to new places. Visitors are warned to not touch the cacti.

Hiking trails wind their way through the garden. Alas, since my last visit, the park has erected fences along those trails, separating people from cacti, and taking all the fun out of hiking through there.



The Silver Bell Mine, as seen from one of the roadside pull-outs.





Just to the south of the park is this marker for Camp Young, the headquarters for the World War II Desert Training Center: California-Arizona Maneuver Area. More than a dozen military camps were established in the deserts of southeastern California and southwestern Arizona to train U.S. soldiers for fighting in North Africa. Little remains of these camps today except for historical markers and scarring on the desert floor where camp roads used to be laid out.



Returning to Palm Springs from Joshua Tree, I took an “off the beaten path” route through Box Canyon where I took a short hike at Painted Canyon. The colorful rock and jumbled or tilted rock layers in several places are evidence of the impact of the adjacent San Andreas Fault. A number of slot canyons have reportedly been carved into this area.

During World War II, the Marine Corps built a training ground and associated base east of the Salton Sea in the Colorado Desert. It was used until the late 1940s, and fully dismantled by 1956, leaving only concrete slabs behind. The land was transferred to the state of California, but it was kind of a no man's land, and soon was used as an RV camp. Some settled here more permanently, creating Slab City, an off-the-grid community, a "squatter's paradise", according to Smithsonian Magazine.



I wonder if this Slab City resident's attitude towards President Biden is due to apparent supply chain issues.



Slab City's *Salvation Mountain* art installation





Near the Salton Sea along the San Andreas Fault are these mud pots, where mud occasionally bubbles up through the ground.



Nearby is this, the Red Island Volcano. Although dormant for thousands of years, this is the only active volcano in southern California.

California's Anza-Borrego Desert State Park is my favorite state park in the country, and I would have liked to have spent a few days there. But with my Victorville stay, I decided to save a return visit to Anza-Borrego for a later trip. That is, except for one stop, a place I only recently learned about because it wasn't on any of my park maps – the Ancient Kumeyaay Winter Village Archaeological Site. The site appears to have been used by various peoples for thousands of years, with the Kumeyaay people using it for seasonal food preparation and other activities at various times over the past 1100 years.



Desert landscape and the outcropping of boulders that were at the heart of the ancient village site.



Numerous morteros can be found here. Kumeyaay people used these to grind a variety of seeds and beans into flour for cooking.

Can you imagine spending your days sitting on a rock grinding away? Thankfully, modern conveniences have made this kind of food preparation labor unnecessary, freeing us up for other things – like spending our days sitting in cubicles and attending meetings.



A shallow mortero and some primitive rock tools that had been fashioned by the Kumeyaay who used this site.





Ocotillo are especially common around the Ancient Kumeyaay Winter Village Site, and most were in bloom when I visited there.



My plans to visit Fossil Canyon south of Anza-Borrego were thwarted when I came across a group with guns using the area for target practice. However, during my short stop, I did find some of the sea shell fragment fossils that the site is known for. This area was covered by sea millions of years ago.

Plans to visit nearby Painted Gorge were also thwarted, this time because a local highway bridge was closed.



So instead, I headed into the Yuha Desert to the south of the park for a return visit to the Yuha Geoglyphs, wondering if the late afternoon sun would make them easier to photograph. Well, yes and no, with this one photographing the best of the three sites I found.





The Algodones Sand Dunes, now mostly part of the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area, stretch for 45 miles and are up to 6 miles wide. They're at the eastern end of California's Imperial Valley near the Arizona and Mexican borders. Interstate 8, pictured, crosses the southern end of the dune field today, but that wasn't always the case.



Early in the automobile age, San Diego built a plank road across the dune field to better connect it with Yuma, Phoenix and Tucson. Remnants of the 7-mile-long Old Plank Road have been preserved near the Buttercup portion of the dune field.



A section of the southern border wall is visible at the Old Plank Road site. A couple interesting wall tidbits... Thanks to the strongly bipartisan-supported Secure Fence Act of 2006 (amended in 2007), both President Bush and President Obama actually added more miles of new wall along the Mexican border than President Trump did. In FYs 2019-2021, the wall was breached 3,272 times, typically by cutting through it with inexpensive power tools. That likely explains why I saw so many border agents monitoring the wall as I traveled along the Mexican border – and so many water stations along the wall marked by blue and orange flags.





The Center of the World, located at Felicity, California, is home to the Museum of History in Granite, which features several excerpts of history etched in words and pictures on granite panels. It is also home to the “official” Center of the World.

I have also been to the Center of the Universe in Wallace, Idaho. But it’s probably not at all a surprise that you could find me at both the center of the world and the center of the universe.



Not far from the Center of the World is this. Identified as “The Mound” on some sites, it has the makings of a religious shrine, but I haven’t found much in the way of an explanation of who created this site or what their intent is.



The Palo Verde Mountains in southeastern California. Several small mountain ranges rise up from the desert floor in this area. Geologically, this is part of the Basin and Range Province, which also includes Nevada and most of Arizona and New Mexico south of the Colorado Plateau.

I heard of a geoglyph or intaglio in the form of southwestern lore figure Kokopelli scraped into the desert floor west of Blythe, California. Although I thought that this was a bit out of range for Kokopelli, numerous online descriptions connected it to ancient Native American practices, so I was curious to see it. I tried to visit it using descriptions of the site when I was returning home from a trip to southern Arizona in early 2021, but it wasn't at the archaeological site that I did find.

When I got home, I started looking it up on Google Satellite images so that I could better pinpoint its location for a future visit. I easily found it. However, the image made me highly skeptical that this was an authentic ancient intaglio.



The Google Satellite image is on the left. The legs and the button nose more closely resembled something you might see on the comics page, especially when considering other humanoid geoglyph figures that I've come across elsewhere, including north of Blythe. Still, I went out to the site to check it out. On the right, you can see Kokopelli's face, the flute sticking out of his mouth, and part of his neck and upper arm (and a pair of tire tracks heading up through the site).

This location is Bureau of Land Management-managed land. If this were an authentic intaglio or geoglyph, it would likely have been marked with signs identifying the archeological site, and very likely it would have been fenced off.

I found someone online who shared my skepticism of its authenticity. He went back through historical Google Satellite images, and found that it disappears once you go back past 1994. Rather than a nifty bit of archaeology, it's just a rather large bit of graffiti scraped into the desert floor.



The archaeological highlight of the day was at Corn Spring Campground, an isolated oasis found about 8 miles off pavement. The oasis itself is interesting, of course, but there were a number petroglyphs at the site as well. I hiked around for a bit, checking out the rock art and plants, and looked for other archaeological features, such as morteros and shelters.



The oasis. Mesquite (near right) was an especially useful tree/shrub for the Native Americans who originally used this site, including Chemehuevi, Desert Cahuilla and Yuma bands.



Corn Springs rock art. Some of the rock art at Corn Springs is more than 10,000 years old.



This highway signpost tells you how far you are from several possible destinations. For example, you're 48 miles from Joe and Karla's place.



Palm trees make lousy foundations for shoe trees, so people have made do with this old auto canopy.



This would have been an all-California sightseeing trip except for this last stop – Keyhole Canyon north of Searchlight, Nevada. I have wanted to visit this as a day trip from home for a while now, but I never got around to it. So, I left Highway 95 and followed the 4-mile road that was so rough and rocky that I had my car display tire pressure rather than speed.



This looks like just a short in-and-out trail to a currently dry waterfall (red arrow), but this is actually a 1.6-mile loop hiking trail. Depending on which way you go, you're expected to scale or climb down the waterfall.

I was more interested in seeing the rock art at the mouth of the canyon. Considering the drive, and I have to say that I was a bit disappointed with what I was seeing.

Until the last panel I looked at.



The panel itself was more interesting than most, but look at the rock at the bottom left. Its top has a number of hand-carved "dimples", far too small to be morteros. Inside a nearby rock shelter is another one of these dimpled rocks.

The combination of the rock art and the dimpled rocks suggest that this was a special location. I have yet to find a good explanation – one website proposed that this may have been a shaman's workbench (at archaeological sites in Hawaii, people left the umbilical cords of newborns in similar rock dimples as offerings).

This great but mysterious find was a nice way to cap off a very good road trip.