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## Imperial Valley Road Trip (D25A)

When I travel somewhere with a list of place to see, I often leave with new items I learned about that will motivate some future trip. That happened with my last visit to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in southern California on the western edge of the Imperial Valley. While planning my trip, I turned up some more ideas in the area. Plus, I had some places to see – or see again – along the roads between Las Vegas and the Imperial Valley.

The Imperial Valley is generally the region between Anza-Borrego Desert State Park to the west and the Colorado River to the east, between the Salton Sea towards the north end south to the Mexican border. It is primarily in the Colorado Desert portion of the Sonoran Desert and averages only about 3" of rain/year, which is less than Las Vegas. But it is a very productive agriculture region because of extensive irrigation using water from the Colorado River.

The "Salton Trough" is at the heart of the Imperial Valley. Part of the Great Basin, blocks of earth pulled apart and tilted, creating mountains and valleys. Here, the valley is as much as 236 feet below sea level, second to Death Valley's 282 feet in North America. This used to be part of the Gulf of California (which once extended as far north as Indio, California, but as the Colorado River carved the Grand Canyon, it deposited the eroded rock in this area.


This Spreckels Sugar Company facility between Brawley and El Centro, California (processes sugar beets) has sea level marked on the building (red arrow)

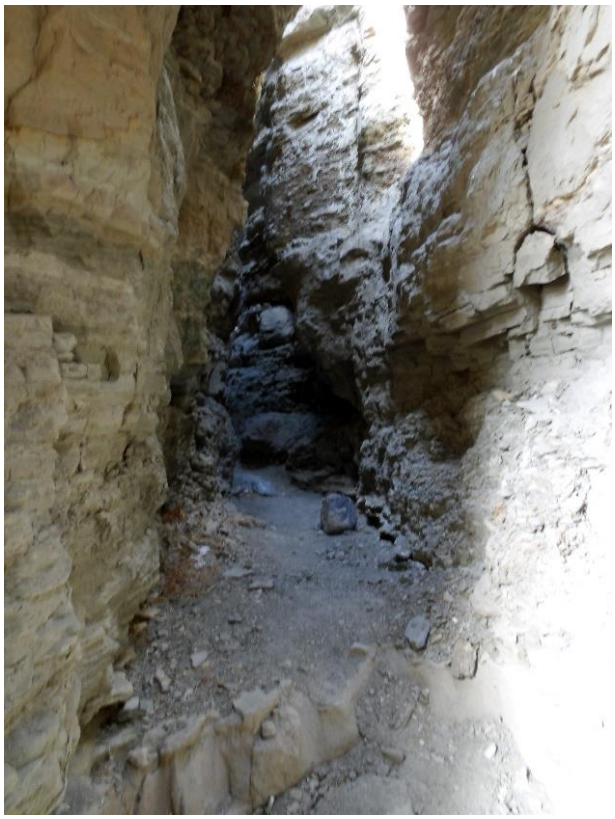
On the drive south, I stopped in the near ghost town of Vidal, California where I saw the Wyatt Earp cottage. Earp, famous for the "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral", and his wife lived here during cooler months from 1925 to 1928 when Earp was in the area working his nearby "Happy Days" mine. It was the only home that they owned during their married life.

After years of study, President Biden created Chuckwalla National Monument in January 2025, so I checked it out, although the places I visited were in areas that I had visited before in 2022. It's one of a number of federal sites – parks, monuments, wilderness areas, etc. – that extend from Joshua Tree National Park in California to Canyonlands National Park in Utah, a continuous 600-mile stretch of protected lands. Two months after its creation, President Trump has proposed un-creating it, although it is not clear that he has the authority to do so. Either way, much of the lands within the national monument boundaries are wilderness areas and wilderness study areas, which can't be developed (not even roads) without congressional action.

I visited Corn Spring's palm oasis, campground and petroglyphs site, about an 8-mile gravel/dirt road into Chuckwalla. Of course I checked out the rock art, some of which is more than 10,000 years old, but I had been here in 2022, and this time wanted to follow the road deeper into the monument.

Among the sites I saw was this old miner's cabin, albeit a bit more elegant than the miner's cabins I usually come across. Some less than credible reports suggest that it was once the home of Gus Lederer. Lederer, who did in fact live in the area, unfortunately met his end after getting bitten by a black widow spider and was too remote to get timely treatment.

When leaving Joshua Tree National Park in 2022, I decided to take a back road route to return to Palm Springs, and passed through the Box Canyon Mecca Hills area.  Now also part of Chuckwalla National Monument, I returned this time to do some hiking in the Mecca Hills Grotto Traill area.



Part of a cliff face had collapsed, revealing layers of sea deposits, including these petrified mud flats (left); water from monsoon storms carved this slot canyon through layers of sediment deposits (right)

Anza-Borrego Desert is the largest desert state park in the country and the largest state park in California. This was my eighth trip to the park, my fifth since moving to Las Vegas. My first sightseeing target, though, was technically outside the park in the adjacent Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area, an off-roading park. I took a, well, more of a route than a road to an area called the Pumpkin Patch. The Pumpkin Patch rocks are a geological phenomenon called concretions. These form underground when layers of sediment build up around a nucleus like a pebble or shell. Eventually erosion exposes the concretions. Although concretions can be any shape and come in a variety of sizes, above ground erosion – wind, weathering, etc. – eventually give them spherical shapes. The Pumpkin Patch features an unusually high number of pumpkin size concretions.

Next up was Rockhouse Valley inside the park, where I passed along the Clark Dry Lake. Unfortunately, the road to an old homestead beyond the lake was closed.

A smoketree a.k.a. smoke bush

The Palm Canyon trail departs the Borrego Palm Canyon campground, and eventually leads towards an oasis of native palm trees, the third largest in the state and a motivation for creating the park. But the trail doesn't actually reach the trees, and it reportedly gets too rugged for my booted feet, so I only hiked far enough along the trail to see some of the Kumeyaay archaeological sites along the way.


It's always nice to know when I'm hiking some remote trail that there's a chance that I might come across some wildlife.

This small round depression in the granite is a mortero, one of a few seed and bean grinding sites I came across on the Palm Canyon hike.


What should have been my final highlight in Anza-Borrego didn't go to plan. A five-mile rugged in places, sandy in places road led to this spot, the remains of the Dos Cabezas Railroad Station along the "Impossible Railroad". San Diego entrepreneur John D. Spreckels (yes, of the Spreckels Sugar Company) founded the company that built a railroad line from San Diego to El Centro, crossing the rugged Jacumba Mountains and Carrizo Gorge, and over the Goat Canyon Trestle, the world's longest all-wood trestle. Monsoon season floods, tunnel collapses, desert climate and Mexican revolutionaries all contributed to the challenges of building and maintaining this short stretch of railroad tracks.

There should have been a crossing here for continuing past the tracks, but I wasn't impressed. Someone had piled some rocks along the tracks, but the piles were in poor shape with many rocks missing, so I decided to park here, turning a three-mile hike into five miles.

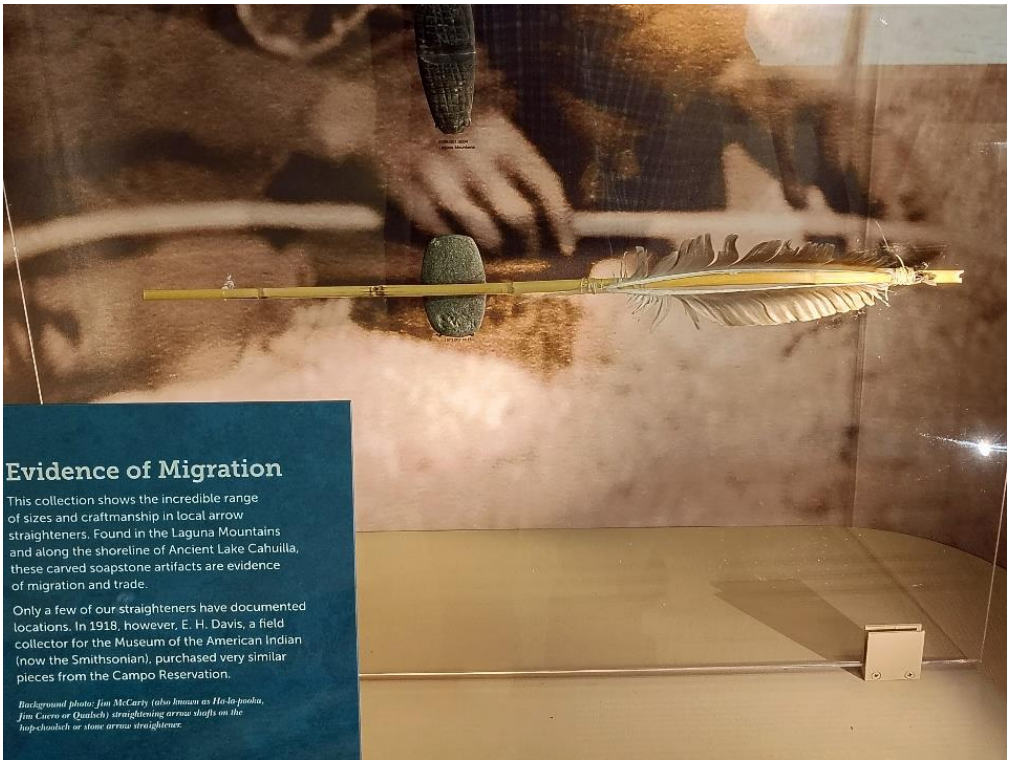

My target was the Piedras Grandes Cultural Preserve. One trailhead off this road leads to another native palm trees oasis. I was more interested in a second trailhead, which leads into the archaeological area left behind by the Kumeyaay. The map I had placed that trail in the middle between two higher elevation areas. At about the spot I expected to find it, I found what looked like a trail. Or possibly a broad wash where the water didn't carve out a depression or ditch of any sort. But I didn't see any footprints from previous hikers. Looking further down the road, I didn't see anything else that looked like a trail, so I figured this must be it. I started heading up the slope looking for archaeological sites.

I hiked all the way up to where the trail dead-ended, seeing only a couple possible food grinding sites along the way. I figured this was the wrong trail, but my feet aren't what they used to be, so I was in no position to look elsewhere for it. I was about 2/3s back to what I originally thought was the trailhead when I saw them – a pair of signboards in the distance at what I would later confirm using Google Satellite was the trailhead I had been looking for, albeit much further to the south than my map showed. Oh, well. I'll just have to make a ninth trip to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park to get this hike right.

Other stops in the area include Painted Gorge. A missing bridge caused me to miss it during a previous visit to the region. Although not as colorful as I would have hoped, it was more colorful than a lot of the surrounding landscape.

Even the plaque was missing at the fenced off site of Fort Romualdo Pacheco. Built in 1825, this was the only fort that post-independence Mexico built in Alta California, today's state of California. It was only used for a few months. As an adobe structure, it has mostly melted away in the centuries since then.


The Imperial Valley Desert Museum in Ocotillo is small but it displays a nice collection of ancient Kumeyaay pottery found in the region.




The museum also featured a collection of “shaft straighteners” used to straighten arrow shafts. The Salton Trough often filled with water, something that ancient natives built their lives around. Every time it filled, it deposited more sediments. A construction crew ended up finding artifacts from 9,000 years ago under 21 feet of these sediment deposits.

The Desert View Tower in the Jacumba Mountains promises outstanding views of the surrounding area. I wasn't impressed enough by the views from the parking lot to justify taking the stairs to the top.


I made a quick photo stop next door at Coyote's Flying Saucer Retrievals and Repairs Service. Alas, the photos I saw of it online from a couple years ago looked a lot better than what I found. The joke's over, I guess, but the internet never forgets.

There are a number of date farms in the area. Date palms are interesting in that there are male and female trees. The male date palms fertilize the female date palms, and the female date palms produce the fruit. A single male date palm can fertilize as many as 50 female trees.

A married male date palm, however, can fertilize just one.

The Imperial Valley Desert Museum's small display on local agriculture noted that the valley produces 812 million pounds of lettuce, 163 million pounds of broccoli and 2.3 million tons of hay every year.

The region is crisscrossed by canals that carry water from the Colorado River into the Imperial Valley for "flood irrigation". Earthen ridges are built up around farmland parcels, especially where they grow alfalfa and grass hays. They then flood the fields with abundant Colorado River water. That water soaks into the ground or evaporates. Any surplus drains into the Salton Sea, the largest lake in California.

Of course, Colorado River water isn't actually abundant. Its waters were over-allocated in the Colorado River Compact of 1922 after a few unusually wet years. And they're seriously over-allocated now after 20 years of drought.

About 5 million acre-feet of Colorado River water is used each year just to grow water-thirsty alfalfa, much of which is exported to China and Saudi Arabia. In contrast, the state of Nevada (primarily the Las Vegas area) is allocated just 300,000 acre-feet/year, and thanks to conservation efforts Nevada uses less than 200,000 acre-feet/year. (An acre-foot is the amount of water it would take to cover one acre of land with one foot of water, which is about 326,000 gallons.)

A lush Imperial Valley alfalfa field in the heart of the Sonoran Desert

Because of the Compact, California is allocated 4.4 million acre-feet/year, and has senior water rights. Arizona is allocated 2.8 million acre-feet/year, and Mexico gets 1.5 million. So, that's 8.7 million acre-feet that Lake Mead's Hoover Dam needs to send to downstream reservoirs. (Nevada pulls its allocation from Lake Mead itself, above the dam.)

But thanks to the long-term drought conditions, there's some concern that Lake Mead may reach "deadpool" levels, that is, water levels are so low it can no longer send water over the dam. That would suck for California and Arizona, but they've been slow to adopt water conservation measures. Deadpool would be far less of an issue for Nevada, because even at deadpool levels, Lake Mead would still be one of the largest reservoirs in the country, with enough water to supply Nevada for a couple decades.

The current tariff situation may actually be good for the Colorado River. There was already a global alfalfa surplus, which prompted the Imperial Valley Irrigation District to propose paying farmers to leave alfalfa fields dry. The money to be made from saving water would be more profitable than growing alfalfa. Now with the tariffs, Chinese dairy farms have already all but stopped buying U.S. alfalfa, reducing demand for Imperial Valley alfalfa even further. Banking that water in Lake Mead could help delay or prevent deadpool down the road.

My primary sightseeing target for the drive home was to pass through the remoted eastern portion of Mojave National Preserve so that I could get a little more familiar with the area. I had planned to do that during my return from last year's visit to Palm Springs, but it actually snowed there that day.

I got to Goffs, a ghost town at the south end of the park, and was surprised to find that the Goffs Schoolhouse Museum was open. So, I toured the indoor and outdoor exhibits before entering the park.


Goffs was a railroad water stop and a place to take a break along the original Route 66. But more powerful trains and a rerouting of Route 66 left Goffs without a reason to exist.

Outside displays include some old buildings, mining equipment, and these military artifacts found scattered around the desert. During World War II, the Desert Training Center: California-Arizona Maneuver Area was established. It included eleven camps and was used to train American soldiers for fighting in North Africa. The soldiers left behind helmets, canteens, spent bomb shells and other assorted equipment and weapons.

Mojave National Preserve protects a variety of desert landscapes and ecosystems, the largest Joshua Tree forest in the world, and archaeological sites that cover 10,000 years of human history.

A Joshua Tree forest, with Lanfair Buttes in the background. I learned in Goffs that there are a lot of petroglyphs to be found at Lanfair Buttes, something to check out on a future visit.

One of a handful of abandoned ranches in the park.

A 2020 fire killed an estimated 1.3 million of the park's Joshua Trees.

I exited the park near I-15 which leads right into Las Vegas.