



MarkHitsTheRoad.com

Great Places. Cool Sights. Across America. Around the World. ™

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and Other Southern California Deserts (A16A)

I decided to take one last trip in 2016, this to visit a favorite state park, California's Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in the Colorado Desert. I've done a few pass through visits over the years, and have hit a number of its sights. But Anza-Borrego is the second largest state park in the 48 contiguous states, encompassing about one-fifth of San Diego County.

Because I read that there are two BLM-managed national monuments near Palm Springs (one new just this year), I tacked on some time in Palm Springs, too, so that I could check them out.

I didn't have a set date or itinerary for my return home – a new travel luxury that results from my recent retirement (as is setting off on the trip on a Sunday – weeknights usually have lower hotel rates). But I did want to make a return to an area in the nearby Yuha Desert that I had to give up on during a 2011 visit due to the limits of the rental car I was using then.



My first stop actually was to hike the Bajada Nature Trail at the south end of Joshua Tree National Park. I had skipped this trail in past visits to the park, even when I exited the park at its south end. A bajada is a fan of dirt, rocks and other debris that has washed down from nearby mountains. This trail featured signs that identified a number of plants, including a couple I've wondered about as possible additions to my backyard landscape. The tree in this picture is a variation of the Palo Verde. It can lose all its leaves in dry weather, but its green bark can provide all the photosynthesis that it needs. I recently planted a different variation of these in my backyard. Pruning and watering will give my tree more of a sculptured look.



View across Palm Springs.



Palm Springs view with San Jacinto Mountain in the background.

The San Andreas Fault and other faults pass through the area. Over millions of years, these have raised the San Bernardino and San Jacinto Mountains to more than 10,000 feet elevation – and some of the sharpest elevation contrasts between mountain peaks and surrounding valleys and flatlands.

Given past earthquake patterns, experts suggest that the Coachella Valley, which includes Palm Springs, is a couple hundred years overdue for a major earthquake.



View of San Jacinto Mountain at the Tahquitz Canyon Visitor Center. This area is part of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument.



I went hiking at Palm Canyon on the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation, also part of Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument.

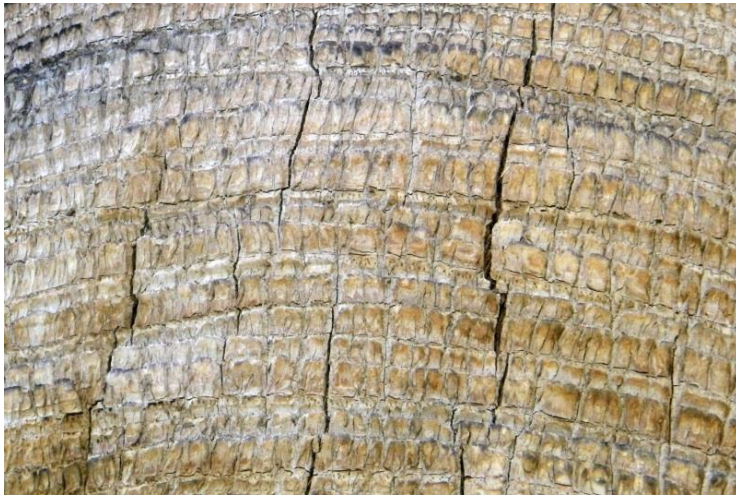


Hiking at Palm Canyon





I've got a soft spot in my heart for those that take their own unique direction through life.



Palm Valley is a great place to practice the lost art of palm reading. The line towards the right suggests that this palm will have a long life.



At first I was puzzled by the reading I came up with for this palm: that it will date a lot. But then I realized that it might be a date palm.



While exploring the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument, keep an eye out for the giant sand lizards.

Highway 74 goes up into the national monument, and then exits the park as it and Highway 243 loop around San Jacinto Mountain, forming the 67 mile long Palms to Pines Scenic Byway.



Coachella Valley Vista Point in the national monument along the scenic byway.



Cahuilla Tewanet Vista Point in the national monument along the scenic byway.



The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail follows mountains from the Mexican border to the Canadian border, including the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Ranges. It crosses the byway as it heads towards San Jacinto Mountain. I spent some time here hiking a relatively non-rugged stretch of the trail.



Towards the end of the byway, the road descending the slopes of San Jacinto Mountain provides this view of the town of Banning and the San Bernardino Mountains. When I traveled to Los Angeles in September, I took a route through the Big Bear area, which is located atop those mountains.

Sand to Snow National Monument was established earlier this year, and roughly covers the south slopes of the San Bernardino Mountains. Little that is specific to the national monument has been built or marked, but I checked out three areas on its southern edge, which included a couple short hikes.



Sand to Snow's Cottonwood Preserve area features this view of San Jacinto Mountain. I hiked a short stretch of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail here as well.



The Whitewater Preserve at Sand to Snow National Monument. Most of the land off the road was currently marked as off-limits due to fire danger – apparently just the threat of fire as there was no evidence of any actual fire underway in the area.

The problem with sightseeing in November, especially after the end of daylight savings time, is that you start getting long shadows by mid-afternoon.



Reflection on a pond along the Whitewater River.



View of San Bernardino Mountains in the national monuments Mission Creek Preserve area.

And that pretty much wrapped up my sightseeing in the Palm Springs area. Next up – Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.



A talking head on one of the cable news networks suggested that after the 2016 election results the Democrats will be spending the next four years wandering the political desert. Turns out that he apparently was being more literal than I realized.



The things you learn while traveling. I think I'll send this to the facilities department where I used to work – they're always looking for cost-saving ideas. Just imagine the money they could save on air conditioning.



More serious was this reminder in the bathroom at a national monument visitor center. Those experienced with hiking in the desert pay a lot of attention to their hydration through urination. Too many desert novices get into dehydration-related trouble each year because of the combination of desert heat and their exertion from hiking and other activities.

On Tuesday I headed for Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. It's actually not very far from Palm Springs, so I was able to spend much of the day there.



My first stop, though, was Salton City where I checked out the view of the Salton Sea. It's a rift lake that straddles the San Andreas Fault. Over the eons, earthquakes in the area have changed the flow of the Colorado River several times, occasionally filling the lake. With the Colorado's flow now heavily controlled, it's primary sources of water include rain and farmland run-off, resulting in a very salty lake with concentrated farm chemical run-off.



The highway leading to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park passed through the Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area, a state park open to off-roading. Some of the off-road routes pass through some badlands scenery.



More badlands scenery at Ocotillo Wells SVRA.



Scenery along Highway S22, the paved road that leads into the park from the northeast.

Font's Point is a rise in the land that overlooks the extensive Borrego Badlands. Eons ago it was an area where the Colorado River delta met the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, and it has the sediments and fossils to prove it. It is reportedly the best place in North America to see deposits from the Pliocene and Pleistocene Epochs.



Font's Point is reached via a drive that follows a wash for about four miles.



View of the Borrego Badlands from Font's Point.

For my next bit of exploration I decided head deep into the park via the Rockhouse Canyon backroad.



Along the way the road passed the Clark Dry Lake.



A tarantula. Alas, it never so much as twitched while I was there, so I suspect it was dead.



Scenery along the Rockhouse Canyon Road.



A smooth but sandy segment of the Rockhouse Canyon Road. It was pretty rocky in other areas, and can be impassable when wet.



I stopped the Jeep when I saw a snake lying in the road in front of me. Turns out it was a desert sidewinder, sometimes referred to as a sidewinder rattlesnake. One source describes them as “dangerously venomous”. Watch where you step in the desert. Note how the snake blends in with the ground.

I didn't want to risk running over it. After all, these snakes play an important role in the desert ecosystem: they scare casual tourists away from the backcountry. So I coaxed it to move out of the road and then took a couple pictures of it before continuing on.



This is an ocotillo, a flowering shrub – not a cactus – common to the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts. When it gets water it covers its branches quickly with small leaves, and produces bright flowers.



Ocotillo flowers.



When the water dries up, the ocotillo sheds its leaves and flowers, and to the casual observer it looks dead. But a closer look at its bark reveals greenish patches. There's enough chlorophyll in these patches to meet the plant's photosynthesis needs for survival.



I hadn't stopped at the park's visitor center on past trips so I made a point to go there this time to find a good, detailed map of the park and its trails. From the visitor center I took this picture of the heart of the town of Borrego Springs, where I'd be staying for a couple nights. The state park completely surrounds Borrego Springs but does not include the town.

My last stop of the day was The Slot, a badlands area that features a small slot canyon. It was late in the day, so I took advantage of the last of the daylight to hike along the ridges of the badlands. It was my first stop the following morning, when I actually hiked down into the slot canyon.



Late day sun on the badlands at The Slot. Font's Point area is in the distance.



View into The Slot from above.



Hiking in The Slot



I then headed for the eastern edge of the park to hike the Elephant Tree Trail. Here's a rare elephant tree. A member of the Frankincense family, Anza-Borrego is one of the few places it grows north of the Mexican border.



Desert scenery along the Elephant Tree Trail



A stop along the Narrows Earth Trail. Anza-Borrego is criss-crossed by faults. A crack like this one, with rounded edges along the crack and different kinds of rock on either side, provides surface evidence of an active fault below.



A great view of the Mescal Bajada. This one is bigger than the bajada from my Joshua Tree nature trail hike at the start of the trip. And technically it's not even a bajada but rather a pediment, a result of shifting land along a fault system.



A view above Box Canyon. During the Mexican-American War, the Mormon Battalion passed through here (on its longest overland march in U.S. military history) and carved out a functional road (by standards of the day) through this canyon.



Several stage coach and mail routes crossed the area, a relatively flat route from points east to San Diego and Los Angeles. These passed over this pass into Blair Valley, as did the Mormon Battalion and Kearney's Army of the West, both of which played key roles in securing California from Mexico.



View from the pass into Blair Valley. During my last visit to Anza-Borrego, I headed a few miles into Blair Valley to check out some ancient morteros (rock depressions where Native Americans ground grain and seeds) and to hike out to see some petroglyphs. I didn't have time to repeat those stops on this visit.



Further south I headed off-road to find Palm Spring, a small oasis. Historically there was more water at the spring and thus more palm trees, but settlement has apparently changed all of that.



View of the edge of the badlands near Palm Spring.



The Well of the Eight Echoes. No one knows for sure how this metal tube, which goes more than 100 feet down, ended up here. But they should rename it Well of the Late Echoes – apparently visitors have dropped so many rocks down it that it has lost its echoing properties.



My last stop of the day was at the Corrizo Badlands Overlook near the south end of the park.



As I was leaving the park the next morning, I thought I'd make one more stop – a drive off the highway seven miles out to the site of an old stagecoach station. But just a couple miles into the drive I encountered this wash. Loose, powdery sand was more than a foot deep, although vehicles with higher clearance and bigger tires than my Jeep clearly had made it through. I decided to turn around. Getting stuck here would have cost me at least half a day.

I had one more desert site to explore – the Yuha Desert to the south of Anza-Borrego. I tried to check it out back in 2011, but its roads were too much for the car I was renting at the time. The Juan Batista de Anza National Historic Trail passes through here – the route that Anza took from Mexico into California 1774 to help secure the area for Spain.



Yuha Well site. The Anza expedition was led here for its reliable access to water.



To get to Yuha Well, the road follows a wide gully down from the plateau in the background and then follows the wash for a few miles.



The area also has some geoglyphs, now-faint patterns in the ground's rock cover created in prehistoric times by Native Americans. Unfortunately, several geoglyphs have been damaged or destroyed – sometimes deliberately – by folks driving around the desert.

That was the last of my primary targets for the trip. Time to head back to Las Vegas. I had a list of places to consider stopping at in southwest Arizona to pick and choose from for the drive back north.



The highway east across southern California towards Yuma, Arizona cuts across Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area. It preserves the largest active erg (moving sand dune field) in North America. The dune field is about 40 miles long and five miles wide.



In Yuma I visited the Yuma Crossing/Quartermaster Depot State Historic Park. A US Army depot located here on the banks of the Colorado River supported many western Army forts. At the time, its location was reachable by steamboats that brought goods upstream from a harbor where the river flowed into the ocean.

Today, so much water is removed from the Colorado River that it becomes barely a trickle south of the Mexican border. The building in the picture is the oldest non-native adobe structure in Arizona.



North of Yuma I thought I'd take a hike at the short Painted Desert Trail at Imperial National Wildlife Reserve, but I could tell I was losing the sun. But I did check out the views at one of its overlook areas. There are a lot of wetlands maintained along the lower Colorado River, pictured here.



Further north I passed the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge, skipping another hike on the list.

So now I have a list of places to check out on a southwest Arizona trip sometime down the road.



Getting creative with tire rims in Bourse, Arizona.



East Cactus Plain Wilderness Area, along the 27-mile gravel and dirt roads leading out to Swansea ghost town, once a mining town.



Ruins at Swansea ghost town.



A photo stop on the drive home at Bill Williams River National Wildlife Refuge. This is back on the main highway, several miles downstream from Swansea.



Highway marker at the south entrance to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.