

Desert Spirit

a Yoga and Meditation retreat in
Joshua Tree National Park

Joshua Tree

The Desert is in the Details

Rock climbers at Joshua Tree National Park

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Reprinted from VIA Magazine • January 2008

The best deserts, I think, horrify at first glimpse. Seeing nothing between yourself and the horizon but sharp edges and heat rising in waves, you should experience a quick rush of fear. Without taking another step, you can almost feel cactus spines in your heels, your throat closing from thirst.

It's enough to make you turn around and never look back. Yet a lifetime in the Southwest has taught me that the best deserts hide their secrets, keeping them under cacti and between boulders, offered up only to those who stay awhile. Joshua Tree National Park, whose western border lies 140 miles east of Los Angeles, is one of the very best deserts. Two of the best, in fact, because in valleys between six ranges of mountains, the park holds pieces of both the lowland Colorado Desert and the high Mojave Desert.



First set aside as a national monument by Franklin Roosevelt in 1936, Joshua Tree became a national park in 1994. Its boundaries run east between Highway 62 and I-10 toward the Arizona border, encompassing 794,000 acres more or less evenly split between the two deserts.

The Colorado is the hotter of the two, with summertime temperatures easily hitting 115; the higher Mojave, to the west, often runs 10 degrees cooler and gets around eight inches of rain a year, three more than the Colorado receives. Spring and fall, with temperatures ranging from 50 to 85 degrees, are the most comfortable times to visit.

Both deserts seem to meet your first glance with utter hostility: mountains shaped like jawbones sprouting filed teeth, plants with needles that can penetrate leather boots.

But the wise traveler stops to look more closely. Then the landscape comes alive with some 900 varieties of flowering plants: golden poppy, desert trumpet and aster, woolly daisy, and wide blue Canterbury bells. "Over 200 species have been added to the list in the last four years," says Tasha LaDoux, a botanist at the park.

Butterflies of nearly 80 species sprinkle their shadows over tarantulas, and tiny shrimp swim upside down in small pools caught in the crooks of folded mountains. In the lower Colorado, spiders spin webs between the spines of cholla (called "jumping cacti" for the ease with which their barbs attach to passersby); in the Mojave, lizards perfect the art of invisibility under the fallen bark of Joshua trees. Deserts are landscapes for the miniaturist.

I enter the park through the town of Twentynine Palms, which puts me on the north side of the Mojave. Less than 20 minutes from the park entrance, just past the formation called Skull Rock, I see a sign for Geology Tour Road that suggests only fools go farther without four-wheel drive. I shift gears in my truck and head there without hesitation.

I want to understand what the park is like when it's all alone. The dirt track skirts the Hexie Mountains, and after nearly 20 miles of arguing with cacti that sprout up in my path, I get out, the cooling engine making the only sound. Then I start to hear bees gathering nectar, the hiss of wind through Joshua trees. The air smells like warm rocks. Three hours from 20 million people, yet not another person is in sight.

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"Is this really the end of the world?" a girl asks as her father leads her to the Font's Point overlook above the badlands of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. The landscape looks melted, its hills falling away like globs of wax. "Can't you tell?" he says.

But the badlands at the park's northeast corner are only the beginning. So large it accounts for roughly half the acreage in the California state park system, Anza-Borrego is less than two hours south of Joshua Tree and only a bit farther from San Diego or Los Angeles.

This section of the Sonoran Desert is wilder than Joshua Tree, less visited, and marked by more fits of geologic excess— badlands, deep-cut washes, areas that look like the world's largest patch of kitty litter interrupted by dragon-spine mountains.

"There's no place where you'll find solitude like this," says Michael Rodriques, a park interpreter, "where you can experience quiet— real quiet.

"Even on the popular Palm Canyon Trail—10 minutes from the visitor center near Borrego Springs—I have the landscape nearly to myself. Fan palms, the only palm native to California, grow to 70 feet high and can live almost 100 years. They require a constant supply of water, so the sight of them here is like a neon sign pointing to an oasis.

When I sit still, four Borrego cimarron (Spanish for "bighorn sheep") start moving. The park is the last large habitat left for this species. The sheep browse for shoots in the river shallows as I marvel at the optical illusion of their dun hides disappearing into the rocky background that seems to shift with their footsteps. And here at the end of the world, I can't help but imagine this is just what the beginning of the world looked like.

Stepping around the long silver spines of a devil's cactus, I climb some rocks that look like petrified bread. Joshua Tree is a paradise for rock climbers, who have set hundreds of routes on these odd beige formations. I once came to watch my wife climb in Hidden Valley, a popular area where you can follow one of the park's 12 self-guided nature walks. Lynn was 60 feet up a sheer cliff when a woman stopped and got out of her car to gawk. "Do you think she's OK?" she asked. If only she could have seen the euphoric smile that I knew was on Lynn's face.

I'm not that ambitious. I scramble up 20 feet or so. In a crevice of sand, lizard tracks scratch a pattern I can't read. A patch of rock goldenbush seems to grow without roots, offering pinhead yellow flowers to the bees that waft by. A hummingbird buzzes me and moves on, and when I look to the horizon, the Joshua trees in full bloom, the world suddenly becomes too big for a glance. Vultures casting shadows over quartz veins laced through the giant boulders seem to have no trouble taking it all in.

I first visited this park not knowing what a Joshua tree looked like. Then I thought to check the cover of U2's album *The Joshua Tree*. ("We still get people asking about that," says Joe Zarki, the park's chief of interpretation.) It is believed the plant got its name from pioneers who saw the tree's branches as the arms of Joshua in the Old Testament— thirst and hope are powerful stimulants to the imagination. The Joshua tree is an ecosystem unto itself. *Yucca brevifolia* shelters orioles and owls; kestrels rest in it between hunting sorties; loggerhead shrikes skewer lizards on its spines. On spring nights, yucca moths pollinate the tree's flowers, which look like popcorn bouquets.

Other animals know what it took humans a while to learn. "Anybody who lived out here had to meet the landscape on its own terms," Zarki says. "The desert only offers so much.

" For those who learned the lesson, the desert could be surprisingly gentle. In 1917, Bill Keys settled in a tiny canyon near the old Desert Queen Mine at the northwest edge of the park. He and his family farmed and mined the area for more than 50 years. They dug 25 feet to hit water and took in any guest who walked by. The ranch, now open for tours, shows how to survive in the desert: Waste nothing. Pay attention to the details.



Back then, the landscape simply absorbed human impact; when the people left, the mines caved in and dirt blew over the trails. Now more than a million visitors a year leave their mark. Air quality has worsened as cities and agriculture draw closer. Coyotes lurk near campgrounds, and trash has helped create a raven boom, which in turn has exacerbated a crisis for one of the ravens' favorite snacks, the desert tortoise.

I walk into the desert once more, trying to see it the way it was before its first human visitor, when the only light came from the gleam of bobcat eyes in a night whose sky was deeper by hundreds of light-years than the one we know and where the morning petals of a white ghost flower glistened with dew.

I watch a trail of ants working a low hill and observe the curved track a snake took toward shade. "When I first came, this all looked dead to me," says Jenn Schramm, a ranger in the park. "And now I see all kinds of stuff." The very best deserts teach you how to look. It just takes a little time.

[Reprinted from VIA Magazine](#) • January 2008