
Stop 14. Carlsbad Caverns

Arrival datetime:	Monday, April 22, 5:00PM Central Time
Sites visited:	Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Carlsbad Caverns National Park
Accommodations:	Best Western Guadalupe Inn
States traveled:	Texas, New Mexico

The desert plants had been a constant source of enjoyment for us in Big Bend. But we were annoyed with ourselves for forgetting the names. So we decided to try to find a local plant guide in the first town we came to, Study Butte. But though we could get coffee and gas, there were no touristy items in the two foodmart-type stores that were open. We never expected to find a National Park border town with no open Visitor Centers or gift shops at 9:00AM.

After Study Butte, there was no civilization for miles. Road signs pointed out the mountains on either side. A smoke colored mesa on our right was Santiago Peak. A long flat mesa with a lower one to the side and a gradual slope at the end was reminiscent of an elephant's head, ear and trunk. A sign confirmed that it was called Elephant Mountain. We saw three deer leap high in the air over barbed wire fences to cross the road in front of our car.

Near a sign that pointed out Mount Ord, a "Stop when lights are flashing" sign led us to a Border Patrol Inspection Station. A large uniformed bodybuilder asked two questions: "Is everyone in the car a US Citizen?" and "Did you cross the border into Mexico?" We answered Yes and No, figuring our rafting lunch on the

wrong side of the Rio Grande did not count. He told us to drive on.

We finally arrived in Van Horn, a small town that looked civilized enough to have lunch. There was a roadside café with two police cars parked outside. The Texas State Troopers inside looked like they were biding their time between Olympic weightlifting tournaments, putting the border patrol bodybuilder to shame. We never felt more safe.

Our route to Carlsbad Caverns took us right by the Guadalupe National Forest Visitors Center. It was not a planned stop, but we went in and decided to do a ¾ mile round trip Nature Trail. A sign advertised juniper, wildflowers and cactus, accompanied by snake warnings. Sure enough, about a half mile from the Visitors Center, Jennifer heard an unmistakable rattle. She leapt into the air, though before landing, realized that the rattle was not intended for her. A 3-foot long snake was coiled around a small furry creature. Michael already had his camera out and pointed in the general direction.

"A rabbit," Michael said, as if Jennifer was overreacting to the scene.

"A snake!" Jennifer said.

“Where?” Michael asked.

A foot from the coiled snake and prey was a cute little eight-inch long rabbit. Michael did not see the snake and kept taking pictures of the rabbit. Jennifer drew his attention to the snake.

Together, we realized that the rabbit was staring down the snake, apparently trying to distract the snake into dropping its prey. Jennifer by then was 10 feet down the path. She whispered as loud as she could and it came out like a hiss, “Get away!” But Michael was hooked. We watched as the brave little creature crept to within 6

inches of the snake and stared it down. When the snake sprang out at it, it jumped a foot away, then slowly crept up again. In the meantime, the snake was slowly finishing the kill. It bit its already limp prey and squeezed it tighter. The saga was too heartbreaking. We moved on to look at more desert flowers and juniper. We lingered near the ruins of an old Fort that protected the mail route before American Airlines came in and made it unnecessary. Finally, we had to head back, Jennifer searched in vain for an alternative path, but we had to pass by the rabbit again.



A rabbit trying to distract a rattlesnake into dropping a baby rabbit in its grasp.

Another couple shushed us as we approached. The saga was still in progress as before. But the snake was now angling for camouflage under some grass and the leaves of a dying yucca plant. In four very deliberate hops, the bereaved rabbit approached the four of us humans and stared at us, as if begging for help. We cringed. The snake moved further into the grass. The rabbit returned to stare at it, but could no longer look directly into its eyes. Perhaps at that point, the rabbit realized that if the snake sprang from within the grass, it may not be able to anticipate the direction of the attack. Or perhaps it was obvious that the prey was far beyond hope. Or perhaps our helplessness persuaded the rabbit there was nothing more to be done. Whatever the reason, the rabbit turned suddenly and hopped out of sight.

We had picked up a flier for Carlsbad Caverns at the Guadalupe Visitors Center, and knew the last cave entry for the day would be 3:30PM. It was approaching 4:00PM so we knew we would miss it. We reached the Carlsbad Cavern Visitors Center at exactly 4:30PM, or so we thought. The time zone had changed and it was really 3:30PM. We could have descended if we went immediately. But we were not dressed for the 56° temperature that was the cave average and we were not wearing walking shoes, so we attended a ranger talk on rope climbing instead. It left us feeling that we could handle a cave rescue if need be, so we were not disappointed.

We checked into our hotel, then headed into town to drop off some laundry and have a decent dinner. Using a chamber

of commerce-looking publication, we searched Carlsbad looking for what appeared to be the best restaurant in town. We drove circles around the block it should have been on, but there was no sign of a restaurant. On a hunch, Jennifer looked up the address of the Best Western that was on the same block. The address was the same. The restaurant did not advertise from the street, and it was definitely above the average Best Western fair. The food would have rated at least 20 from Zagats. We figured the hotel chain had recently bought a privately held Inn and changed the signs, not realizing or perhaps not caring that it meant people could no longer find the restaurant from the street.

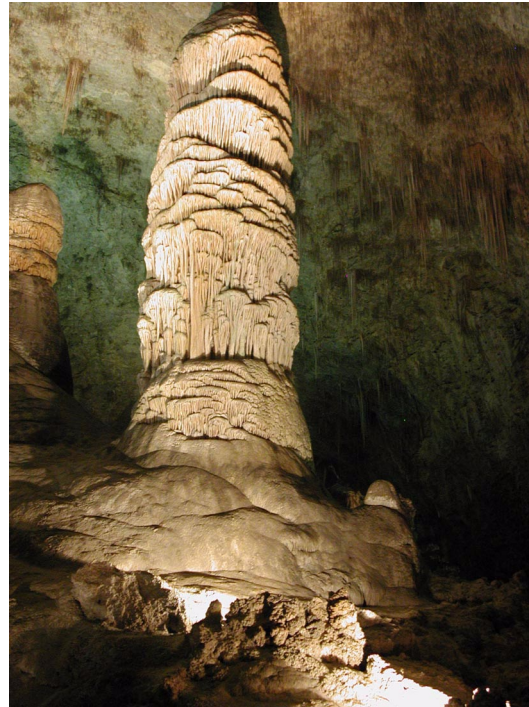
In the morning, we arrived at the Caverns twenty minutes early for a tour of the Left Hand Tunnel, but still managed to be ten minutes late. We had gone with other ticket holders 750 feet down the elevator only to find that our particular tour met at the top. The Ranger was understanding and thankful we had already received the “do-not-touch-anything” orientation in the elevator lobby. She gave us candle lanterns and taught us how to hold them without burning our hands. She examined our clothing and boots, made us sign a statement saying we knew the rules, how hard the tour would be, and any accidents were not the fault of the Parks Department, then led us into the cave.

We were to only use the lanterns on the way in so we could experience the cave as did the early explorers. On the way back, we would be allowed to use our flashlights and take flash pictures. Having forgotten a flashlight, we were very happy for the candles. We traipsed

after our guide through the limestone and flowstone, careful to stay between the red tape that outlined the sacrificial path we were allowed to desecrate so the park service could fulfill its goal of allowing people to enjoy nature. Pools of water in the cave were so pristine, they looked like a change of color in the walls of a dry pit. Only when a drop fell from the ceiling and rippled on the clear surface could you tell you were looking into water. Stalagmites and stalactites, draperies, and chili pepper formations in Carlsbad Caverns made Mammoth Cave seem like a desert, and this tour did not even include any of the grandiose formations for which Carlsbad was famous.

The grandiose formations were in the “Big Room,” where we next embarked on a self-guided tour. The Big Room had twenty and thirty-foot large columns made by stalagmites and stalactites that were fused. It had stalagmites with flat surfaces in water pools that were called “lily-pads.” It had stalactites with flowery formations at the bottom that were called “lion’s tails.” It had numerous side caverns full of straws, icicles, and draperies, and dimly illuminated so that they looked like alters in the distances.

We ate lunch on the surface and met the Ranger again for an afternoon tour of the “Lower Cave.” Two of our potential companions were turned away for not wearing proper shoes. We were glad we wore our hiking boots not only for that reason, but because we started by rappelling about 10 feet down a not-very-steep, but smooth surface, then walking down 80 or so feet of a stainless steel ladder.



A giant stalagmite in the hall of giants.

On this tour, we did not carry candles, but got to wear hard hats with flashlights on the forehead, and knee pads. The formations were again awe-inspiring. The landscapes were varied. Tall gothic columns one minute, minute doll-sized skylines the next. Smooth white limestone floors and ceilings were a few feet from jewel-like stalactites and popcorn crystals. The ceilings were three hundred feet high in some places, and we could look up and see the railings of the Big Room where we had earlier gazed down in wonder at the depth of the cave. At one point, we crawled on our hands and knees through a dusty passage and left our names and addresses in a time-capsule-like tube on the bottom.

The Lower Cave had the same formations we had seen in the Left Hand Tunnel and Big Room. It also included a plethora of “Cave Pearls,” jewel-like smooth pebbles

a few centimeters in length that form in small pools of water on the cave floor. The Ranger gave us the theories of how all the various formations were formed and at the same time gave us stories of cave geologists and how they came up with their theories. When anyone asked a question she could not answer, she smiled broadly encouraged any of us that were thinking of a change in career to go into cave geology as many avenues of research had not at all yet been touched. Soon the broad smile and the quip, “the field of cave geology is wide open,” became a familiar refrain.

We bought some cowboy hats in the gift shop, thinking they would be useful in the Grand Canyon and other like western destinations. Jennifer wore hers that evening at the Bat Flight Watch. We arrived at the amphitheater overlooking the natural cave entrance at about 7:00PM, armed against the boredom with a beer and pistachios we had gotten from a nut company in Gatlinburg, TN. Sparrows flitted overhead, looking annoyingly like bats. We waited with some RV-Park families whose fathers debated the relative merits of air conditioning power sources while their children ran up and down the seats of the amphitheater as if they were steps. There was at least one group of young-ish adults, one of whom carried a martini glass. There were two men in suits with ties that were trying to sneak a little of the local culture into a business trip. There was a photographer with a tripod. About thirty people altogether.

The photographer was the first to notice the gorgeous sunset colors in the sky in the opposite direction of the bat cave. Vivid deep pinks with fluffy soft white

and powdery blue edges against an ever-deeping turquoise blue background drew our attention to the extent that we were afraid we might miss the bats. We need not have worried. The bats were not in a hurry. We opened another beer. The businessmen gave up and left. The sky grew more and more dark. Michael fiddled with the settings on the camera.



Waiting for the sunset bat flight from the Natural Entrance of Carlsbad Cavern.

At about 7:50PM, the bats started. They came out of the cave in groups of 20 or 30. They flew back and forth in front of the entrance, climbing about 6 inches with each swing, eventually breaking the surface of the crest of earth that covered the cave entrance. Once above the horizon, they soared to the south across the deep turquoise sky that no longer bore a trace of pink or white. There must have been 10-20 waves of this pattern, at first seconds apart, then minutes apart. As the time between the waves lengthened, we quietly crept away. Unfortunately, due to the time spent

fiddling with the settings on camera, we did not get any good pictures.

Miles traveled: 395
Departure datetime: Wednesday, April 24, 9:10AM
Departure weather: 77° Cloudy