
Stop 15. White Sands

Arrival datetime: Wednesday, April 24, 6:00PM
Sites visited: White Sands National Monument
Accommodations: White Sands Inn
States traveled: New Mexico

Driving out through Carlsbad, we took in a totally automated car wash. It took money like a vending machine then flashed instructions on a digital display. “Drive forward.” It splashed us with water. “Put car in park.” Vertical pipes circumnavigated the car, spraying first soapy solutions, then rinses, then a clear coat sealant, the display charting its progress when we could see it. We drove out slowly to take full advantage of the two minutes dry time, picked up some laundry we had dropped of when we arrived in town, then headed back out for a desert drive.

We expected a desert drive for the whole trip between Carlsbad and White Sands. But we had not been out an hour before we entered rolling hills and forests. Before we knew it, we were in ski country, the Sacramento Mountains. We stopped at Cloudcroft for lunch. It was a ski tourist town. Tasteful gift shops, sandwich shops, and coffee shops offered a comfortable rest stop. Like the good tourists we were, we shopped and had ice cream.

As we drove on, we glimpsed views of our destination. Framed by the lush green mountain range we were descending was a great flat stretch of bright white sand in the valley below.



White Sand in the distance from the Sacramento Mountains.

The White Sands National Monument was indistinguishable from a National Park. It had a Visitors Center with an explanatory film and exhibits, a gift shop, a nature center, interpretive hikes, and ranger programs. We asked the Ranger what the difference was. She said that the President could designate a National Monument while it took an act of Congress to make a National Park. She also told us that National Parks had a wider charter for things to protect, wildlife and so on, whereas their only charter for protection was the sand.

The film left us in amazement that the so many square miles of gypsum beach sand could be deposited by evaporating lakes and subsequent prevailing winds. The sand was as fine and smooth as any near the ocean.

We went on two interpretive hikes. One had a pamphlet with numbered signs so you could read along with the exhibits. The other had pictures of the exhibits you were supposed to be looking at on the signs. The second type was better



Jennifer reading an interpretive trail guide.

because we suspected that some of the plants we were supposed to be looking at on the first hike had died and they had not yet had a chance to move the signs.



A desert flower on the nature trail

We took pictures of the top two feet of thirty-foot high yuccas and other desert plants. We had learned in the film that the plants get covered by sand, poke out their leaves, and build elaborate root systems in the sand to keep growing above it. The plants are really as high as the sand dune plus whatever part you see, which is

usually about 2-3 feet. For some plants, the sand blows away again, but their root systems keep as much of the sand as possible around them, so they look like they are growing on pillars of sand. We did not see good examples of the pillars on the interpretive hikes, but we saw some when we walked a mile out onto the dunes on a trail marked only by red signposts, line-of-sight distance apart.

On the way back, we saw the bare footprints of a person who had gone before us. This gave us the courage to take off our hiking boots and plunge our toes into the sand. It was by then past 4:00PM. The sand was warm but not hot. Walking up the dunes was like walking in snow, we had to dig our toes horizontally into the side of the slope. Walking down the dunes, our feet sank up to our calves. We had to alter course more than once because we sank too deep and caused mini-sand-avalanches on the surface.

At low points between the dunes, it was actually cool and moist like damp clay, as if dew had recently evaporated. A Ranger at the Nature Center had told us that it was the hottest day they had had this year, and it had only reached the low 90s.

We wanted to go on the Ranger-led Sunset Walk but we were done hiking at 5:00PM. At that time, Visitors Center was closed, the Sunset Walk did not start until 6:30, and our hotel was 17 miles away in Alamogordo. So we skipped the sunset and headed for town for dinner. In the



The top 2 feet of a 32-foot yucca plant (the lower 30 are under the sand rooted in the desert floor)

evening, Jennifer caught up on an ongoing software requirements saga via work email and Michael wrote postcards.

Miles traveled: 220
Departure datetime: Thursday, April 25, 8:50AM
Departure weather: 77° Sunny