
Stop 16. Gila Cliff Dwellings

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| Arrival datetime: | Thursday, April 25, 7:50PM |
| Sites visited: | White Sands Missile Range, Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument |
| Accommodations: | Sierra Grande Lodge |
| States traveled: | New Mexico |

The White Sands Missile Range guard checked our driver's licenses and car registration, then allowed us in. Obviously distaining any hesitation based on racial profiling concerns, the military security officers detained two young Middle Eastern looking men at the same the checkpoint. Our pass only let us into the museum. The "Trinity" site where the first atomic bomb was exploded was open only two days a year, and today was not one of them. We were relieved that morbid curiosity did not tempt us to risk residual radiation exposure.

The museum was an eclectic collection of military history, Indian artifacts, pioneer stories, and Missile Range cultural events. There was no coherent structure to their organization, and no guide or signs to explain their juxtaposition. For example, there was a newspaper clipping and some artifacts related to a local march on the anniversary of the Bataan Death March. But there was no explanation of the Bataan incident itself, or what, if anything, it had to do with the Missile Range, other than some veterans of the Bataan Death March were from the area. There was also a display of people that gave up their farms so the Missile Range could be established, and its focus was on the women of the families. But there was no coherent thread to the story and also in

the display were pictures of female missile range employees, all in menial jobs like secretaries, so it was hardly a women-of-influence display. Side rooms devoted to one subject had better focus, and had short explanatory videos that were very helpful. The one on the V2 missiles brought over from Germany in particular was very good. The German engineers came with the Missiles and helped us figure out how to use them and refine their design. There were clips of early Missile tests, including one that failed and destroyed a fence at the launch site. Outside, there was a great display of actual missiles and equipment used to launch them. We took pictures of them against the San Andreas mountains, stark white projectiles framed against rugged crimson ranges in the hazy morning clouds.



Missile Park at the Missile Range

Though the desert plants and changing landscape continued to stop the car every 10-20 minutes for a photo, the westward part of the drive to Gila Cliff Dwellings was the most commercial in New Mexico, dotted with industry, hotels, and fast food places. The most excitement was when we were stopped between Las Cruces and Deming by border patrolmen that were built like Texas State Troopers. They strolled by us with a dog then nodded at us to move on. Then there was no civilization between exits, just a series of loud billboards announcing the next gift shop.

This landscape continued until we hit the Gila National Forest, at which point we would go half an hour without seeing a building or a person. We climbed winding roads through forests of tall evergreens and light green deciduous trees. Every once in a while, there was a parking lot for a hiking trail. Every once in a while, a small bridge took us over a clear bubbling stream nestled in lush green ferns, moss, leafy bushes and steep slopes. The road was separated by cattle guards, though we saw very few cattle. When we did, they had horns and were right on the roadside, less than a few feet from the passing cars.

We could not go very fast and kept stopping for photos, mostly photos of pointy peaks or tall sandy rocky buttes with smoothly rounded edges. Very high on what may have been Black Peak, there was a breathtaking vista of the Gila River winding its way through the foothills and desert valley below.

We arrived at the National Monument well after the last Ranger tour, which was at 2:00PM, but in plenty of time to take

the self guided tour of the Cliff Dwellings, which closed at 4:00PM. It was cold and we donned sweatshirts for the trek. Just as we passed the gate and headed over a footbridge toward the mile loop trail, it started to rain. Jennifer went back to the car for rain ponchos and an umbrella while Michael asked the Ranger at the gate whether there was a downpour expected. It was the surliest Ranger we had ever run into, at first he didn't answer the question. Then he admitted that the weather was completely unpredictable and there was no way to tell. So we went anyway.

We stopped at each numbered sign and Jennifer read to Michael from the self-guiding booklet we had purchased in the Visitors Center. The Cliff Dwellings were stone and brick walls built into caves, using the sides of the caves for ceilings, floors, and an occasional wall. Each room had a window and a hearth. We had not seen structures from the 1200s that well preserved except churches in Europe. Of course, these were no comparison on the degree of preservation. Most walls were missing, and one part of the self-guided tour was blocked off for safety reasons. A Ranger was posted at the site to help us find things like pictographs and grinding pestles. She also admitted that she was not really sure what the things were as no one knows what types of people lived here and there is very little evidence at the site other than what we could see for ourselves. By the time we left the site, the sun was shining and it was so warm that we had to take off our sweatshirts.

We were headed north, and looking at the map, opted for what looked like a short cut back to the northbound highway. It



Michael and Jennifer at the Cliff Dwellings.

took us straight through the Black Mountain Range, over 8000 feet in elevation according to one historical marker. The intense beauty of the forest was mildly offset by the tense driving as we navigated curves where the recommended speed was 10mph. The sun was setting and deep orange and blue overlooks became common.



Descending Black Mountain.

We could see for several hundred miles from the outer edges of sharp turns that were foreboded by yellow signs warning of 180° or 270° turns. An occasional clearing showed us wildflowers and pale orange cliffs along scrubby pastures. The last part of the drive was through flat Valleys and had nice views of single mountains framed by desert. We were amused to find another mountain called “Elephant Butte” because it was shaped like an elephant, like the one we had seen in Texas.

Our hotel in Truth or Consequences advertised Hot Springs but we arrived too late to take a Hot Springs bath. However, the tub in the hotel bath was huge, fitting us both lengthwise and not overlapping, so we took a plain bath in our hotel room instead. We had dinner in their very cold restaurant, choosing carefully from an eclectic menu where every fourth

ingredient was spicy hot. They were out of the only vegetarian entrée on the menu but offered the daily pasta. It was a lentil and pepper sauce that was too hot for Jennifer to eat. She had to ask for parmesan to tone it down and that did not work, so she ate the pasta on the edges that was not yet soaked with sauce. But at least they knew how to serve a vegetarian. From that and the way Michaels's fish was over-seared and over-garlicked, we got the impression that

an excellent chef designed the menu, while a novice was executing it.

We did a Hot Springs bath first thing in the morning. A tile-lined adobe-looking tub was set in the private courtyard of the house next door to the hotel. Thatched fences and desert plants surrounded it. A walkway led from the hotel parking lot. It could have fit 4-6 people, but once the gardener left, the bath was private and supposedly had been drawn especially from the Hot Spring for us.

Miles traveled: 347
Departure datetime: Friday, April 26, 10:20AM
Departure weather: 78° Sunny