
Stop 27. Joshua Tree

Arrival datetime: Sunday, May 19, 6:00PM
Sites visited: Joshua Tree National Park
Accommodations: Joshua Tree Inn
States traveled: California

Leaving Palm Springs, the first thing we noticed were the windmills. There were thousands of them to the east of a break in the mountains to the west. Then there were pockets of them here and there, filling a valley to the west, on a hilltop to the east.

The second thing we noticed was the dramatic change in temperature. We had enjoyed desert hot dry intense heat the whole time we were there, yet 15 minutes out of town the temperature was 63°. We motored along what seemed small hills compared to the mountain heights we had previously encountered. Joshua Trees became fixtures along the highway. We knew they were Joshua Trees because we had seen them at the living desert. The

trunks had the look of palm trees, but they had Saguaro-shaped arms and there were tufts of course cactus needles at the ends of the branches. They filled the landscape on both sides of the highway.

We stopped for a box lunch and headed straight into the park. There was no visitor center at the West Entrance, so we used the National Park map and newsletter to determine where to go. We did a mile loop trail in the desert around rock formations and Joshua Trees. It was pretty bleak, lots of dead or dead-looking plants. All around were piles of rocks that looked like abandon construction materials. The sand was nothing like the fluffy stuff that made up the dunes in New Mexico and Arizona. It was a course,



Thousands of windmills outside of Palm Springs.



Joshua trees.

grainy, pebbly sand that stung when it flew up onto your calves, and it made you stop and take off your shoes when it got into them.

Our second stop was at an overlook point, Keys Overlook. We were surprised that it looked out of the park, not into it. Instead of fields of Joshua Trees, we gazed at the far-off San Bernadino Mountains. The ground directly below us was mud brown. There was a light brown sandy ground at the base of the mountains. The mountains themselves were deep blues and grays. They sky was brilliant turquoise blue, smeared with smooth, wispy white clouds. The mountains were not very



Michael and Jennifer at Keys Overlook.

tall, their shapes not very distinctive, but the color combination was a pastel masterpiece and so the overall impression was one of beauty and wonder as befitting a National Park.

Our next stop did give us an overlook of the inside of the park. The hike was a slow steady 1 ½ mile uphill to the top of Ryan Mountain. The path was strewn with the pebbly sand, whose uneven texture made for bad traction. Despite our high tech hiking boots, and the firm rock underneath the quarter-inch layer of sand, every step was subject to sliding. We ate our lunch on the top, gazing at the San Bernadino Mountains to the west, and the Palen Mountains to the east.

We had learned from various signs both here and at the Palm Desert that these mountains and the local rock formations were the result of molten rock rising under the earth's surface. It rose

underneath the layers of sandstone and limestone we had been learning about in the canyon parks. But in this case, those layers had eroded away with wind and water, leaving exposed igneous rock to surface. There had also been cracks in the sandstone layers where molten igneous rock had seeped, and after the igneous rocks cooled, cracks in it had allowed water to deposit other types of minerals in its seams. Some of these cracks had eroded away as well and left large boulders and layers of feldspar, quartz, and granite rock in precarious positions stocked on top of each other or precariously balanced. There was some evidence that some of these boulders fell and broke into a million pieces.



Joshua trees and typical rock formations in the park.

The sun was high and hot and we decided it was time for the cool air conditioning of a Visitor's Center, perhaps even a dark auditorium and a geology movie. We drove about 20 miles to the Cottonwood Visitors Center to find only a gift shop. Michael was wearing a T-Shirt Jennifer had bought him at the Grand Canyon. It had a little diagram that had both the North and South Rims on it and it said: Grand Canyon Rim-to-Rim. The Ranger at the Cottonwood Visitors Center was ready to be impressed, "You hiked from rim to rim?" she asked.

Michael blushed. Jennifer supplied the answer, "Actually, he drove from the North Rim to the South Rim, but since he did not want to drive that far, he deserves the T-Shirt." The Ranger laughed and confessed that on her one trip to the Grand Canyon, she had been unable even to approach the overlooks at the South Rim, due to her fear of heights. Michael told her the stories of holding onto the back of Jennifer's collar as she took pictures from the edge. The Ranger said that if any of her friends had gotten close enough to the edge to go over, they would have gone because from where she was standing, she could not even reach their collars.

We refilled our water bottles and took a short hike in the Cottonwood Springs Oasis. California Palm trees were the big attraction there. Sixty to eighty feet high and two to three feet in diameter, the wide-reaching palm branches gave it an even thicker appearance, bowing and green at the top and progressively straight and darker brown at the bottom.

We saw some beautiful pink flowers on hedgehog and prickly pear cactus. We saw one prickly pear with both yellow and pink flowers on the same green oval pad. The sand in the wash of the oasis was just as large pebble-filled as the sand on Ryan Mountain, and it was deep. We trudged around for a while before heading north. We stopped for a few more cactus gardens as we drove to Arch



A cholla (teddy bear) cactus garden. Rock.

Arch Rock was neither a natural arch nor a natural bridge, as its sides did not rest on the ground. It was an oval boulder, hollowed-out on one side, and rested on other boulders, mostly oval, though at the bottom they were dome-like. We were able to scramble right up to the arch, but scrambling on the rocks was hard on the hands. The surface was crystalline, exhibiting its quartz component. It was very sharp to the touch. Here and there, a smooth boulder surface was cracked in a straight line, and the crack was filled with rock of a different type and color that protruded along the seam. A trailside sign informed us that these were called "dikes." Weakness in the original rock had allowed seepage of molten minerals. The minerals hardened and further split

the original, sometimes cracking it, but often not, just forming a scar on its surface. We stayed on the paths, where there was very little sand and absolutely no loose rock. Nothing small enough to lift, just huge smooth boulders all around, precariously perched on each other. We figured that floods of water had washed all looser rock away.

It was after 5:00PM and we headed out of the park, hoping to find dinner on the road between the north park entrance and our bed and breakfast. But we drove all the way from 29 Palms to Joshua Tree without coming across a suitable place to eat, so we checked in first then continued into Yucca Valley. There we found

Stephano's and had our first genuine Italian meal since leaving New Jersey.

The next day, we tried to make a Ranger Tour at the Desert Queen Ranch, but arrived at 10:00AM as the Park Newsletter had advised. When we called the Visitor's Center from our cell phone, they told us the tour left at 9:45AM. We advised them to update their literature. We hiked a bit at Skull Rock instead.

There was not a published hike in the newsletter, but there were a variety of paths leading away from the parking lot. We strolled along, admiring the smooth-looking though coarse oval and dome formations, examining the splinters of red or green or multicolored cracked rocks in



Hiking at Skull Rock

our path, until we came across a campground and decided to turn back. Then we discovered we were quite lost. We had left the GPS in the car. But we headed back in the direction we had come, several times running into dead ends where rock crevasses did not allow our passage. It was by far the most fun we had in Joshua Tree.

The wind kicked up to 50 knots. The whole town was talking about it. We spent the afternoon doing chores like getting our hair cut, getting parts to fix our cooler at Radio Shack, and sending home packages. Dinner was pizza delivered to the Inn.

Miles traveled: 209
Departure datetime: Tuesday, May 21, 8:15AM
Departure weather: 54° Sunny