

The old man
of the desert...
A trip to

Joshua Tree

Joshua tree National Park covers an area of 1234 square miles across southeastern California, a large part being designated wilderness. Created in 1994 Congress ensured special protection for three of California's ecosystems: the eastern Colorado desert characterized by spiky Ocotillo plants and "Jumping" cactus, the cooler Mojave with its "Joshua" trees giving their name to the park, and the Little San Bernardino Mountains with Californian Juniper and Pine rising over 4000 feet in the westernmost reach of the park. ▽

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Each ecosystem shares a common theme – there is hardly any running water. A hiker approaching through the town of Twentynine Palms is advised to take their own (as well as sunscreen, and both a hat and a coat for when the wind blasts). They are also asked to respect this treasure of American natural history and leave no trace of their stay in a “pack it in, pack it out” policy. Bicycles are welcome though restricted to vehicular roads, but by foot or on horseback you can be part of the scenery in the land of the Joshua tree.

Early History

The Joshua tree, from which the park takes its name, is a spiny yucca mainly found in the western Mojave section. Some guides refer to Joshua tree forests, but forest is hardly a word which comes to mind viewing these sparse

old survivors dotted across bare rock in the desert. The plant reputedly took its name after Joshua in the Old Testament, it being likened to an old man standing upright with a spear. Another story is that Mormon pioneers thought the spiny trees were the outstretched arms of Joshua pointing to the Promised Land. Whichever is true the Joshua trees have stood unbowed among the desert rock since the first humans – the Pinto – made this desert their home almost five thousand years ago. While the trekkers and day trippers are uploading holiday snaps safely at home these spindly survivors sit out every desert extreme. In February and March some lucky visitors may see the trees send out delicate white “candle” flowers. Then again, they can be elusive and will sometimes skip a year or so before blooming again.

A Joshua tree “forest” thought by early settlers to resemble outstretched arms pointing to the promised land.



The park’s story began 100 million years ago with lava forming bedrock through which water and wind began to carve the twisting geology now seen as a rock climbers paradise. Tough granite outcrops and sheer monoliths offer short climbs at all levels of difficulty, but visitors do not have to clamber up *Old Woman Rock* or the *Giant Marbles* to appreciate the strange shapes that that time has carved out of old rectangular blocks. The granite offered a series of rectangular joints eaten away over time first by ground water when lakes and swamps lay in the area, then by heat and wind in the later more arid climate. What remains are sculptured boulders sitting on top of each other in the strangely beautiful piles seen today. The Mojave section of the park in particular boasts spectacular geological formations now photographed by hikers happy to simply stand and look.

The park was explored by cattlemen in the 1800s who briefly introduced cows to graze on the meagre grassland they could find, though looking out over the desert that is hard to imagine now. In the Mojave section is the preserved ranch house of one settler family, the Keys, who scraped a living for sixty years raising five children in this remote location. These brave pioneers must have had enormous inner strength to survive in this lonely and hard place, but they may also have learnt a thing or two from local Indians, who turned the dagger like leaves of the Joshua tree into baskets and sandals, while the flower buds (when they chose to show) and seeds were roasted to eat. A Park archeologist estimated that at least 121 local plant species have been used by the local Indians as either food or medicine in everyday life.

There are 12 self guided nature walks through the park.

Plants and Wildlife

Plant diversity in the park is only rivaled by the wealth of birdlife. The park falls under a pacific migratory route with species most abundant in the winter months. At 250 recorded species it is not hard to see the arguments for protecting the park as a wildlife sanctuary but only a fraction of these actually nest in the park. Many are stopping over on the way to the Salton Sea (itself referred to as “the crown jewel of avian diversity”) and more come down from nearby mountains to escape the winter snows. Above all the birds are

The Wildflowers of Joshua Tree



With its huge area and distinct ecosystems the Joshua Tree National Park offers a vast range of wildflowers and blooms with an estimated 813 species, in fact it was originally proposed to name it the “Desert Plants National Park”. For wildlife enthusiasts the usual rules apply – what can be viewed will depend upon the time of year and recent weather. Many species are wholly dependent upon rainfall and nearly all growth cycles respond to temperature. Desert annuals will usually germinate between September and December but growth is delayed until rainfall and spring temperature is suitable for the particular species. This in turn determines the eventual blooming period, when visitors to the park can see the wildflower and flora cover at its most beautiful.

Flowering begins along the parks southern boundary as early as February and at higher elevations in March and April. Regions over 4000 feet will show blooms much later, notably the higher

Bernardino mountain region. The Joshua tree will flower in February or March but trees have been known to skip a season. Visitors who find it difficult telling the “Hairy Sand Verbena” from a “Forget Me Not” might seek further information in one of the parks visitor centers. Flowers are often recognized first by color group. They often carry descriptive names such as Canterbury Trumpet, Enlemann Hedgehog and Beavertail cactus. The Teddy-Bear Cholla (below right) is also known as the jumping Cholla for the ease with which its spikes transfer into unwary hikers. The Parks administration otherwise reminds all visitors that the blooms are to be viewed only and not picked.



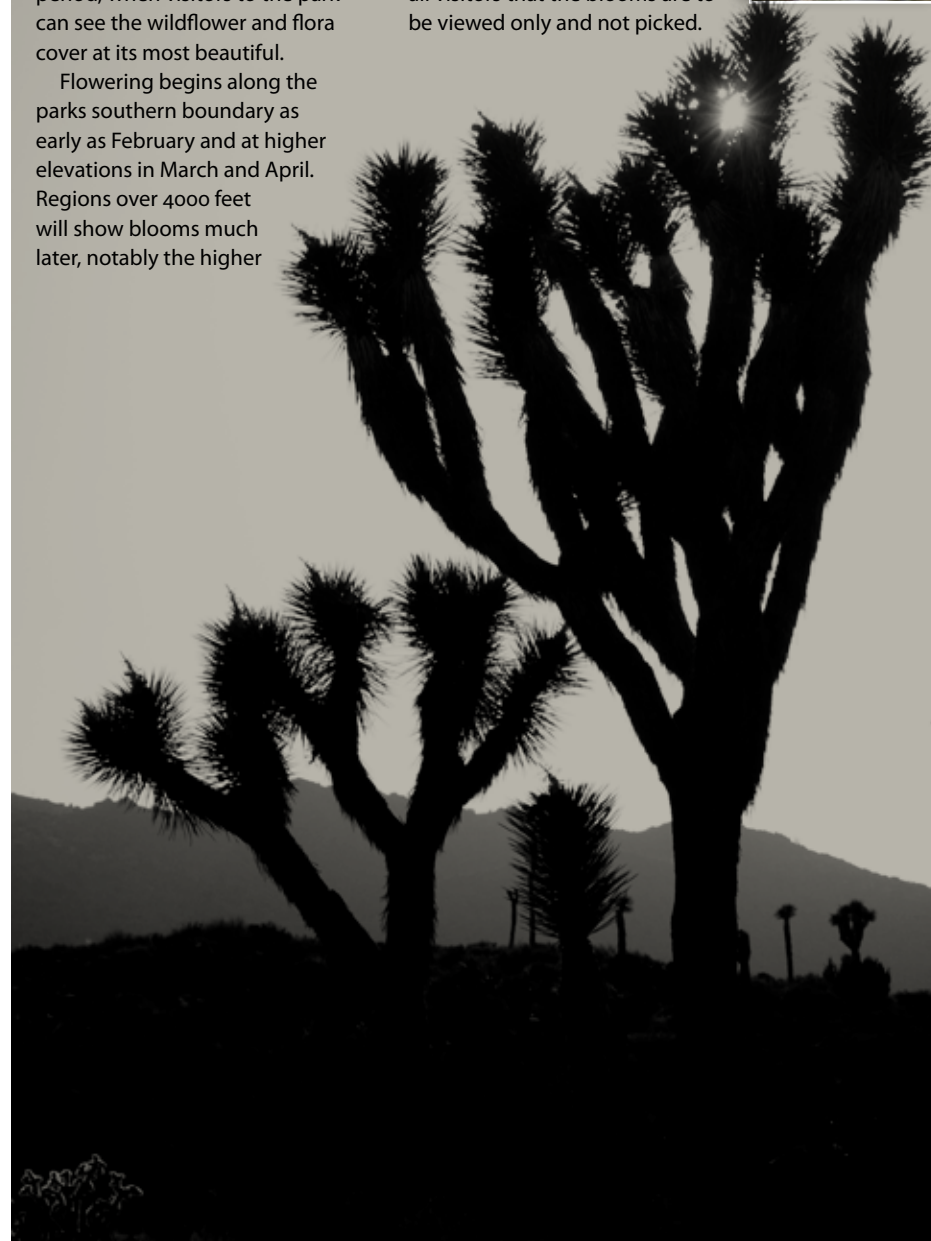
easy to see. There is rarely anything to be described as “dense” vegetation in the Park, a very practical reason why it is so easy to spot them. Harder to find is a local species of red spotted toad, found in the northern edge of the park This lives underground and appears to spawn only after heavy rains, an annual gamble as the cycle of the tadpole must be complete before the groundwater dries away.

National Park Status

The Park land had been recognized as a national monument as early as 1936 and as Southern California grew so did the park’s popularity. It now lies within a short drive for 18 million Californians, and the official protected park status conferred in 1994 is an ever greater draw to the interested visitor. Although open to visitors every day of the year the Park can still be closed to respect the first peoples of the area. By law the Californian Desert Protection Act requires the park authority to close portions “at the request of an Indian tribe or religious community” to protect the privacy of traditional local customs.

A hiker here should also prepare for extremes. The locals in Twentynine Palms boast of recent temperatures up to 119 Fahrenheit recorded in 2005, but dropping as low as 9 in the cold dessert night. As there are no hotels or lodges actually within the park this makes camping out at one of the nine designated sites a challenge for the less adventurous. For the rest of us there are hotels in Twentynine Palms and the other local access town of Joshua tree.

Visitors to the park may benefit from a visit to the museum collection and visitor centers, showing the cultural and natural history of the park and how the parks resources are managed for posterity. Native American



temperatures can soar to 119 F, or drop as low as 9° in the cold desert night



history in the area is chronicled, and some precious artifacts found showing the lives of the Native Americans and early settlers. Among the collection is a simply woven carrying basket found in a rocky shelter. It is unknown how the artifact survived intact across time against the attentions of insects and the elements.

How to Get There

To get to the park you will need a car as there is no direct public transportation from Palm Springs airport, located 37 miles east of San Bernardino. The park itself lies 140 miles east of Los Angeles, 215 miles southwest of Las Vegas and 175 miles northeast of San Diego. Access is by Interstate 10 and Highway 62 with the main access through Twentynine

Palms just south of the junction of Highway 62 and Utah trail.

A victim of its own success?

The park’s increasing popularity also presents a dilemma. A study of 2004 revealed that of all the visitors to the park in any one year (of whom half comprised sightseeing couples or family groups and 92 percent of whom were American) the single most admired feature mentioned by visitors was the “unspoiled natural beauty” of the park and the “peace and solitude.” But when asked what they liked least the most common answers were was “noisy camping neighbors” and “RVs in the park.” These telling responses suggest that what is most prized about such a place is precariously balanced against

its own success – the draw of more and more people seeking immersion in a place naturally devoid of human interference. By contrast, of all those asked, only four responses complained of the park being “too hot”.

Visitors often ask the age of the Joshua Trees which gave the park its name. Nobody knows for sure. Without traditional growth rings to count, the Joshua Tree (*Yucca Brevifolia*) is an endocrinologists nightmare. The tallest specimen is almost forty feet high. That is unusual, but by dividing that by an average growth of one and a half inches a year this suggests an age of about 300 years. But against the 100 million year scheme of things in this arid and fascinating wilderness, even these biblical trees are just passing through. ❖

