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OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Anza-Borrego State Park

Los Angeles-based reporters weigh in on what to do in this Southern California desert escape.

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What do to: The largest state park outside of Alaska offers a range of desert vistas, terrain and hiking trails. Anza-Borrego's calling cards are wildflowers in the spring (check conditions at the hotline: Tel. 760-767-4684) and the endangered peninsular bighorn sheep. Your best shot at glimpsing the camouflaged sheep is along the Borrego Palm Canyon trail. The three-mile loop starts at a campground a short drive north of the park's excellent visitor center (Tel. 760-767-4205, www.anzaborrego.statepark.org) and rises alongside a stream to an oasis of palm trees. Head out early in the morning to Fonts Point in the Borrego Badlands for panoramic views from the edge of dramatic cliffs. Below them, the 18th-century explorer Juan Bautista de Anza established a land route from modern-day Mexico to California. At Split Mountain, a one-mile uphill trek past spiny, majestic ocotillo cacti brings you to the so-called Wind Caves, interesting rock formations hollowed out by wind and water. When driving to the area, don't let Mapquest divert you from the most scenic route into the valley. From Los Angeles, find your way to San Diego County highway S22 for a stunning descent into Borrego Springs. From San Diego, California State highway 78 takes you through the quaint town of Julian, which hosts an apple festival in the autumn and serves apple pie year round. The Borrego Springs valley is relatively flat and good for cycling, including the 30-mile route east to the Salton Sea, a salty pit stop for migrating birds.

The Wind Caves are great for children to climb and explore.

Where to stay: The small town of Borrego Springs isn't as posh as Palm Springs, to the north. But La Casa del Zorro does offer luxury resort facilities: five pools, six tennis courts, an archery range and a lush family friendly campus (rooms from \$295 a night, casitas \$350; Tel. 800-824-1884; www.lacasadelzorro.com). The Borrego Valley Inn is a pleasant hotel in town, with 15 rooms and two pools, including an adult-only one that is "clothing optional" (rooms from \$200 a night; Tel. 800-333-5810; www.borregovalleyinn.com).

Where to eat: La Casa del Zorro offers the town's only fine-dining option, with meat and fish dishes at resort prices. The best value in town is Kendall's Cafe, where breakfast starts at 6 a.m., and dinner specials include a very respectable prime rib and fixins' for \$15.95 (The Mall, 587 Palm Canyon Dr., Tel. 760-767-3491). Down the road, the Red Ocotillo is popular for California cuisine (818 Palm Canyon Dr., Tel. 760-767-7400). Upscale picnickers can find provisions, from wine to cheese to smoked salmon at Gourmet Outfitters in The Mall shopping center (Tel. 760-767-4310, www.borregogourmet.com).

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