



TEXAS & NEW MEXICO
NATIONAL PARK ROAD TRIP
OCTOBER 5 - 15, 2023

GETTING THERE

Where to go this fall had been a hotly debated topic in our house for months. Ireland? The Caribbean? Spain? Ultimately we decided to continue our tour of US national parks and do a road trip through Texas and New Mexico that would take us to four brand new (to us) national parks. There were some anxiety-filled weeks leading up to this trip as the threat of a government shutdown loomed over our plans. Thankfully Congress got it together at the literal eleventh hour and we were saved. Our total number of parks now visited stands at 28! We flew to El Paso, TX, via Dallas on a Thursday afternoon, working from a hotel until lunchtime on Friday. After stocking up on groceries, beer, and lunch in town, we set off on the 4.5 hour drive to Terlingua, in south Texas.

Did you know? We didn't. There are US Border Patrol checkpoints IN THE US along the border of Texas. At the first one we came to I panicked. Was this route taking us through Mexico?! I didn't bring our passports! In turns out there are these type of random search points all around the border.

Other strange things we saw on the otherwise very boring drive were a US Border Patrol blimp used for surveillance purposes and the random Prada art installation near Marfa. Speed limits of 75 mph and only one stop additional grocery stop for dinner had us at our cabin in Terlingua before nightfall. We were on the ranch now!

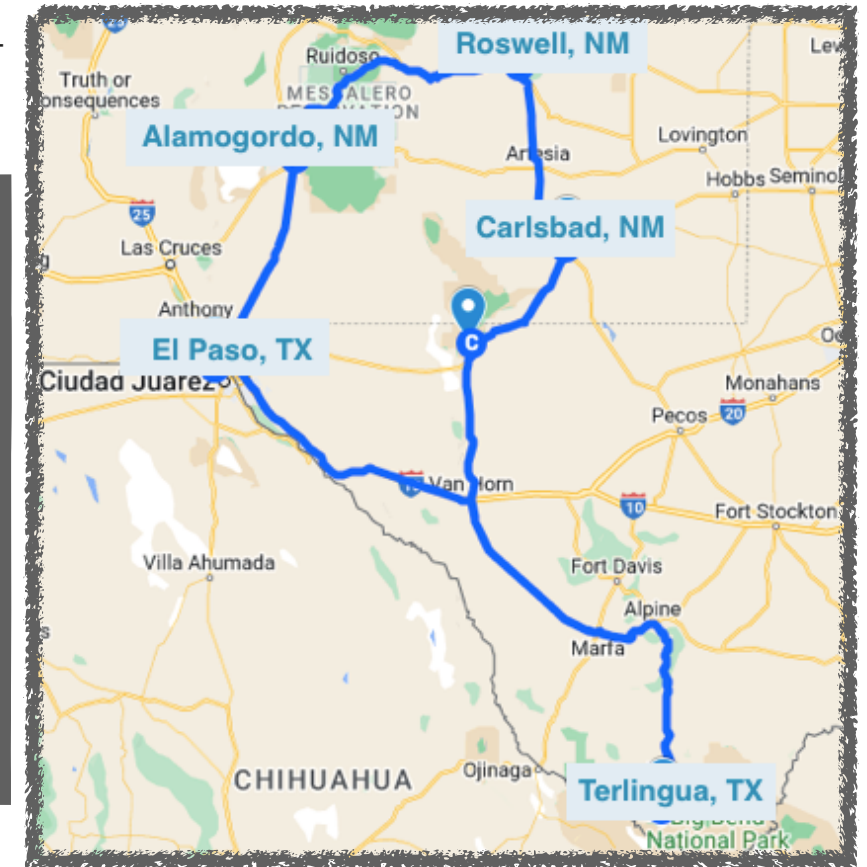
Texas and New Mexico

Road Trip

4 national parks

75 miles hiked

1,664 miles driven



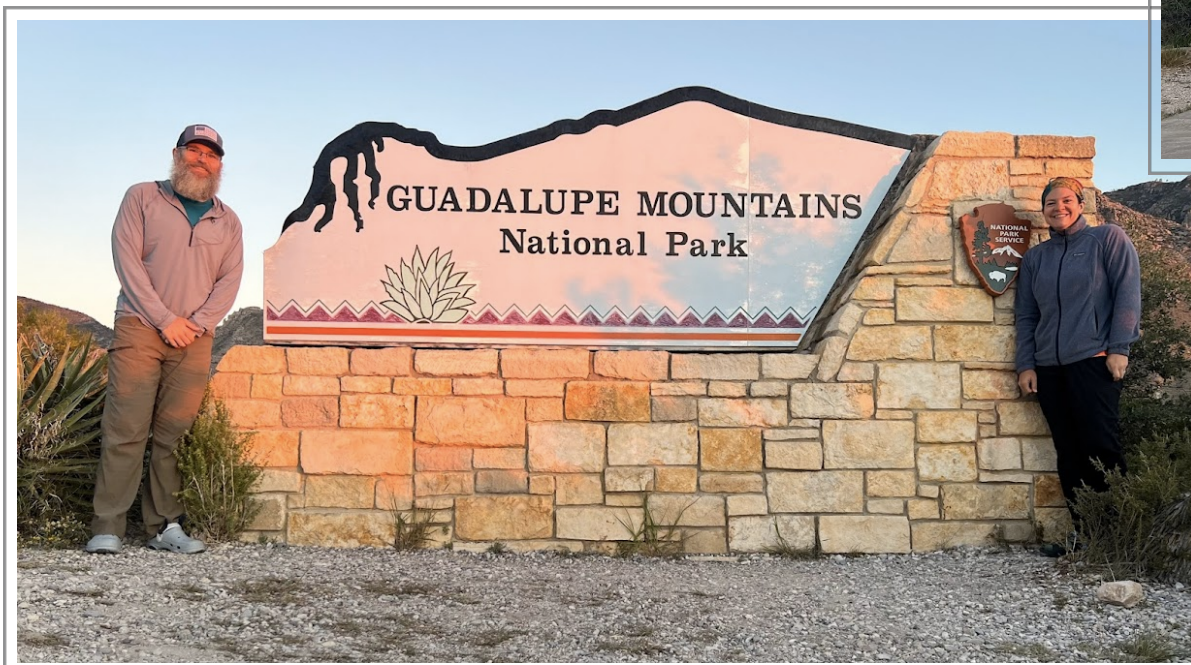
2022 visitation numbers and park ranking (in terms of visitation) for each national park are included below. Compare these stats to those for Glacier which had almost 3 million visitors, or the Great Smoky Mountains with 13 million!! These gems are some of the least visited of all the parks!



500,000 visitors, #38



390,000, #45



220,000, #51

700,000, #30



DAY 1 - BIG BEND RANCH STATE PARK

One thing to note is the erratic time zones we experienced. While El Paso was in the Mountain Time Zone, we traveled into the Central Time Zone on our way to Terlingua. This meant the sun did not rise until close to 8am! We were waking up around 6am, a time we would have been at the trail-head on any other trip. Added to that, it was pitch black and we could see tons of stars. It was crazy!



We spent the day in Big Bend Ranch State Park. This park was always on our radar, but we had planned to do a few short hikes on our way out of the area on Monday. Fast forward to a week before our trip and I learned that most of the park would be closed on Monday for an annual hunt! We switched up our plans and were glad we had time to explore the beautiful area. Our first hike was on the Closed Canyon Trail, a short hike through a narrow slot canyon. Guided by the high walls, we wound our way through the canyon towards the Rio Grande. At one point, the pools of water became too tricky for me to comfortably navigate, so I sent Mike ahead while I waited and admired the scenery. The hike was short and sweet and we had it all to ourselves!

Closed Canyon:

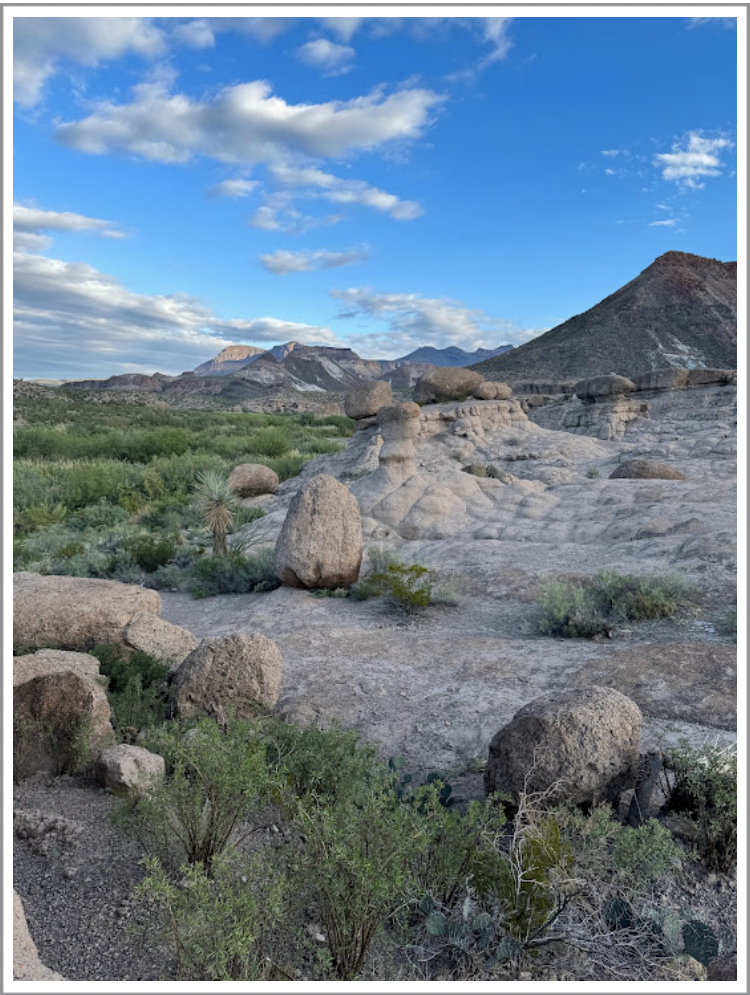
- 1.88 miles
- 138' elevation gain
- 48 minutes



Bathroom on a pier!



Just up the road we parked at the trailhead for the Hoodoo and Balanced Rock Trail, which would take us past hoodoos, along the banks of the Rio Grande, and to the top of an overlook with a view into Mexico. What a fun trail!



Hoodoo & Balanced Rock:

- 1.3 miles
- 125' elevation gain
- 41 minutes



We took our time driving along the main road in the park, FM 170. It felt so deserted, especially for a beautiful Saturday morning. We hardly saw any cars at all, save for a few US Border Patrol trucks. We stopped at several scenic viewpoints, including one where we could take in the famous “DOM” rock featured in the Kevin Costner film *Fandango* (lost on us).



**Our destination
was way up there!**

Our last hike of the day took us just outside the park to a trail-head located in an RV

park. A first for us! After confirming we could leave our car at the RV office, we headed through the weekend warrior campers to an old dirt service road. Thank goodness for AllTrails maps and other hikers' descriptions which went something like - pass the dumpsters, turn right at the second road marked by a utility pole, and look for the white PVC pipe with blue clamps sticking out of the ground. This is the start of the hike. Not exactly well-marked! The trail was rocky but afforded us a good overview of the desert flora and fauna. The views at the top of the prominent mesa were panoramic, BUT we were in the blazing hot sun with zero shade for all 9 miles and 4 hours. It was brutal! Not to mention we dealt with a cactus stick (Mike) and a tumble (me). We were done soon by the end of the day! Dinner was a BBQ meat platter from DB's Rustic Iron BBQ in the Terlingua Ghost Town wolfed down while streaming the Phillies game on Mike's phone.



Lajitas Mesa:

- 9 miles
- 1,785' elevation gain
- 4 hours

There was a log book and a weather station at the summit!



Fun and varied cacti!



DAY 2 - BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK

For our first day of hiking in Big Bend, we tackled Emory Peak (the tallest in the park, standing at 7,825') and made the hike into a loop by visiting the South Rim. We began at the Chisos Basin Visitor Center heading up a steep series of switchbacks. We enjoyed hiking in full shade for the first two and half hours. At the saddle of the mountain, we detoured onto the out-and-back trail to Emory Peak. In a national park first for us, this area had bear storage lockers to store backpacks with food in them for those who didn't want to carry it up to the summit. We were in bear (and mountain lion territory), meaning food security is a top priority. We opted to keep our bags and food on us. The last part of this trail required a rock scramble up about 25' which was fun and relatively easy compared to what I had read. All our Adirondacks training came in handy once again. At the top, we were treated to 360 degree views, with the Chihuahuan Desert and the entire Chisos Mountain Range laid out before us.



Just as carefully as we got up to the summit we made our way down and turned right at the trail junction to continue on Boot Canyon Trail. This served as a connector to the South Rim, but was a nice trail that meandered through the lush canyon. And we hardly saw another soul. Some hikers say the view from South Rim is better than that of Emory Peak. Although we didn't agree, it still was very impressive and we were treated to nice views as we continued to hike along the rim. We saw lots of prickly pear cactus along the way, and even a tarantula!



The last part of our hike took place along the Laguna Meadows Trail. By this point it was hot and we were tired on our feet. There were still points of interest to take our mind off things though, including walking through a short portion of the trail on black sand (very soft underfoot!) and we had some nice vista viewpoints. Once back at the trailhead we checked out the Visitor Center, then picked up pizzas on the way back to our cabin before relaxing for the rest of the evening and checking out the stars. The Milky Way was on full display!

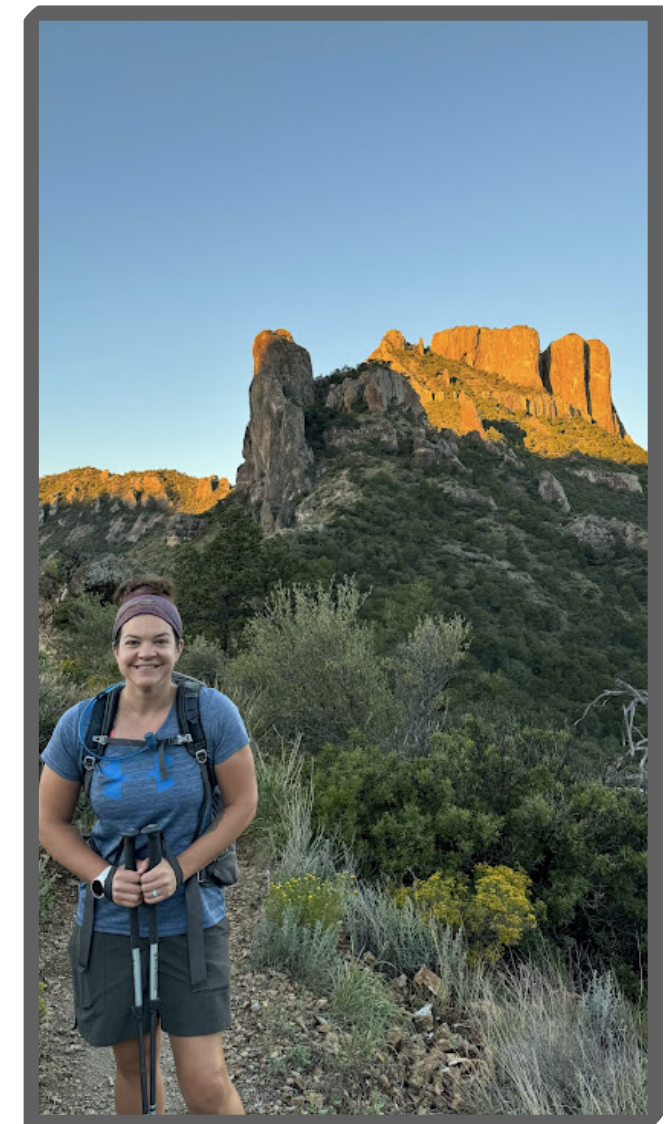


Emory Peak & South Rim:

- 15.89 miles
- 3,232' elevation gain
- 8 hours

DAY 3 - BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK

Before heading out of Big Bend, we had two more hikes on our list. So we packed up the car and set out early in the morning, arriving at the Lost Mine Trailhead. Touted as a great introduction to the area's flora and fauna, with scenic views to boot, we quickly saw why this trail was one of the most popular in the park. We watched as the golden, early morning sun hit nearby mesas and climbed higher and higher through juniper and pine forests until we reached the ridge line. Once at the top, we had 360 degree views of Pine Canyon and the Sierra del Carmen in Mexico. At just under 5 miles roundtrip, we were hard pressed to think of a better hike for the distance!





Lost Mine Trail:

- 5.0 miles
- 1,114' elevation gain
- 2 hrs 4 mins

Our last hike was along the Window Trail. Beginning in Chisos Basin again, we descended 900' through Oak Creek Canyon. It was HOT by this time, but going down helped and the trail went through what I called the valley of the cacti, with dozens of prickly pear cactuses lining the path.

Our destination - The Window





Towards the end of the trail we walked through high canyon walls on either side and arrived at a water pour-off known as The Window, desert vistas visible in the distance. The payoff at the end of this hike made it worth it, with the last mile along slick rock and stairs carved into the canyon making it so neat! We were dreading going up in the hot, midday sun, but we made great time and it wasn't too bad at all.

It was time to say goodbye to Big Bend and make our way towards Carlsbad!



The Window Trail:

- 5.9 miles
- 978' elevation gain
- 2 hrs 19 mins



Along the drive, we stopped at the Panther Junction Visitor Center in Big Bend, as well as the Fossil Discovery Exhibit. Here we saw specimens from Big Bend's incredible fossil record. The drive to Carlsbad was close to 5 hours and there is no way around it...it was eyewateringly boring. With the high speed limits we made good time, but I found it depressing how many oil fields and other industrial areas we passed. Every other car on the road was a white pickup truck bearing the logo of an energy or defense company. Whole RV parks and temporary houses sprung up alongside the road to house these temporary workers. Rarely had I seen firsthand such a stark display how we are ruining the earth.

Fighting our way through rush hour in Carlsbad, we stopped to stock up on groceries and then gratefully checked in to the Airbnb that would serve as our base for the next 4 nights!



Massive prehistoric fossils and replicas on display!



“Casa de Roitan” in Carlsbad



DAY 4 - GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

Back in the land of a somewhat earlier sunrise (~7am) we were up early and made the hour drive south to the Pine Springs sector of Guadalupe Mountains National Park. Guadalupe is a “hiker’s park” known for its incredible hikes. You won’t find scenic drives with overlooks here, which made us particularly excited for our visit. While the weather forecast looked rain-free, the wind was expected to pick up as the week went on. So for our first day we prioritized summiting Guadalupe Peak. The top of Texas stands at 8,751’ tall and would be quite a challenge. The first mile was steep with a ton of switchbacks, causing us to stop often and soak in the views, and catch our breath!



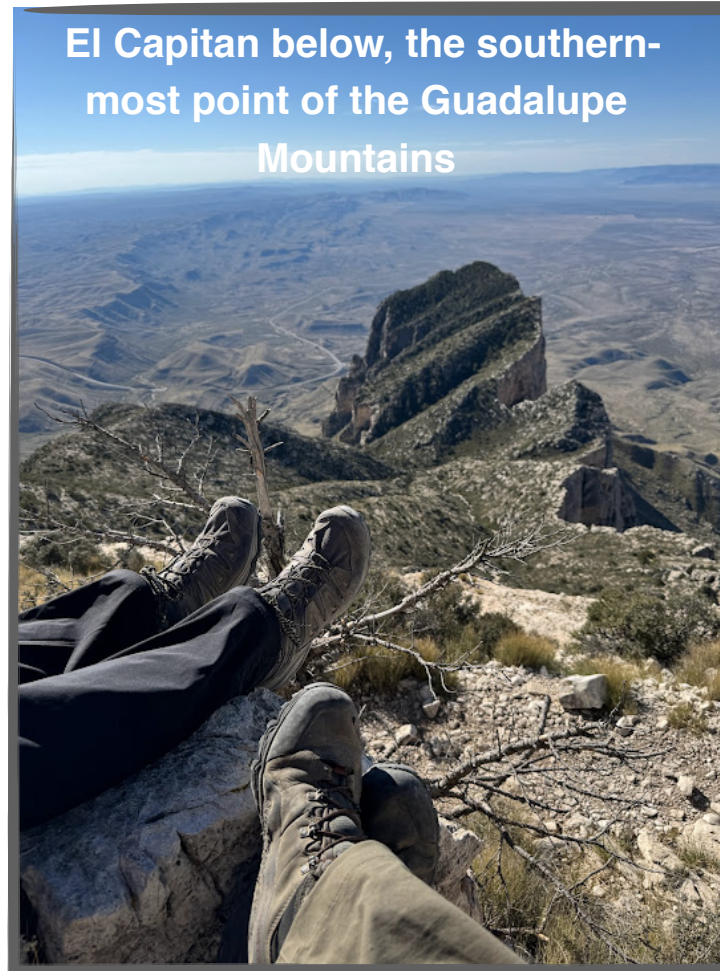
Fun fact: You can ride your horse to the top of Guadalupe Peak. Now that must be an adventure!



We continued to climb up steep stone steps and then the trail wound around the back of the mountain we had just been climbing, offering shade among the trees. We reached a small bridge built into the side of the cliff and then looked up, finally seeing the summit. It looked so far away!



The final mile was once again up a series of very steep switchbacks. The trail narrowed and we had to skirt our way along cliffs at times. We were huffing and puffing but at last made it to the top! We took lots of pictures with the (gaudy?) summit marker and surrounding views, and enjoyed our lunch on a rock.



We made our way back down the same trail, but nearly a mile from the start we detoured onto the “stock” trail as a linkup to Devil’s Hall. This hike was along a rocky wash, ending at an impressive natural rock staircase leading to a “hallway” formed by steep canyon walls. This hike was on our list and even though it would make for a long day, it made sense to connect the two trails rather than hike each independently. Mike was in his element scrambling over huge boulders!

Throughout our time in the canyon we heard fighter jets zooming over our head which is always a sight to behold, and hear!



Devil's Hall



We had to climb up this staircase to get to the hallway!



Guadalupe Peak & Devil's Hall:

- 11.82 miles
- 3,327' elevation gain
- 7 hrs 1 min

DAY 5 - GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK & ROSWELL



With the wind predicted to pick up as soon as that afternoon, we got an early start on the day's trail. We'd be hiking another premier trail in the park to the top of Hunter Peak via Bear Canyon Trail. Hunter Peak is at an elevation of 8,368' making it another challenging day. We had seen the trail and Hunter Peak as we climbed Guadalupe the day prior, so we were excited to now see it up close and personal. We got an earlier start than the day prior, hiking the first half hour in the dark with our headlamps. We had incredible solitude on this trail, encountering no one the entire day! At the top, we both agreed the views here were better than that on Guadalupe. On one side we could see across Pine Spring Canyons to Guadalupe Peak, to the other was a panorama of the vast desert to the south, and the remainder was of other mountains and the pine forest of the Bowl to the north. It was epic! The trail down was much more gradual and we enjoyed views the entire descent.





With plenty of time left in the day, we drove north for two hours to Roswell. This was another boring drive, but when we arrived, Roswell embracing its alien theme was on full display. And we loved it! We first saw this from the road driving by famous fast food chains...with an alien twist.



Hunter Peak:

- 8.78 miles
- 2,687' elevation gain
- 5 hrs 2 mins



Source: seeroswell.com



Photo Shoot in "Area 51"





International UFO Museum and Research Center

We ended our time in Roswell at the International UFO Museum. This was a small museum focused largely on the 1947 Roswell Crash and later supposed UFO incidents in the United States and elsewhere. It was an interesting mix of first-hand accounts, news reports, and artifacts. We were glad to have visited Roswell being relatively close to it in Carlsbad and it was a nice way to spend a few hours in the afternoon!



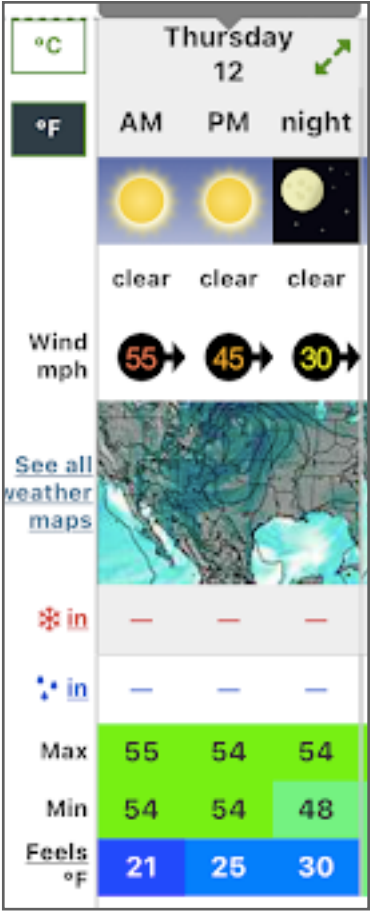
DAY 6 - GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

By this point in the trip I was absolutely sick of breakfast bars so I was happy that beginning on this day of our itinerary, we had room to get a “real” breakfast. Lucky for us, just down the block from our Airbnb was Blue House Bakery & Cafe. We had delightful iced lattes and breakfast sandwiches with green chilies and eggs. We then set out for the day to the McKittrick Canyon area of the Guadalupe Mountains. This area is gated and does not open until 8am, so we arrived shortly after the appointed time. Today was the day the wind was supposed to really kick in, and boy did it. When I parked the car, it was literally shaking from the wind. I half expected it to be blown over by the time we got back!

We were hiking the out-and-back Permian Reef Trail which climbed the north side of the canyon to the top of Wilderness Ridge. Once at the top, we had sweeping views of the south side of the canyon. We hiked all the way to the boundary of the park line, which is also at the state line, where from there the trail continues into New Mexico and the Lincoln National Forest.

The forecast we were up against!

→



The wind was CRAZY! At certain portions during the climb four points of contact were needed. And at other times I needed to stop completely for fear of being blown off my feet and knocked into a cactus. The one good thing was the wind was blowing us towards the mountain and not off of it, otherwise that would have been a whole different ball game. We arrived at the top of the ridge line and entered a beautiful pine forest. There, the wind felt even MORE intense! I remember wondering if I should have brought a helmet and hoped none of these trees were weak enough to snap in two. We briefly stopped for some views but otherwise pushed forward towards the end of the trail. We each took a turn through the gate to cross from Texas into New Mexico, and then found a flat rock on which to eat our snack, somewhat sheltered from the wind by huddling so low.



Then we had to turn around and do it all over again! The trail was great because we had nice views nearly the whole way down, but it was still tough going as the wind was even more strong now and it took so much more energy to hike and stay on our feet. I am pretty sure at one point in a moment of frustration I stopped and yelled into the wind, “This is fucking ridiculous!!!”. No one else was crazy enough to be out hiking this trail in the wind so we saw no one else until a group of geologists near the very end of the hike who were studying some seams in the rock formations. They looked surprised to see us! Once back at the car we were wind burnt and exhausted, happy to be done early and have the rest of the day to relax before the Phillies playoff game!



Permian Reef Trail:

- 9.29 miles
- 2,385' elevation gain

DAY 7 - CARLSBAD CAVERNS & WHITE SANDS NATIONAL PARKS



After fueling up at Blue House again, with an added cinnamon roll this time, we left our Airbnb behind and drove to Carlsbad Caverns for our 8:30am entrance time. We showed our tickets and park pass and walked down the pathway to the cave's Natural Entrance Trail. This 1.25-mile trail led us down into the cave and past some iconic formations. All told, we descended 750 feet!! Just descending took over an hour and then once at the “bottom” of the cave, we embarked on the Big Room Trail. This 1.25-mile trail led us in a loop through what is the largest single cave chamber in North America. We were blown away by the size and number of varied formations we saw throughout our hike. It was way better than we expected!!



Carlsbad Caverns



We left the Caverns midday and drove ~3 hours to our final destination near White Sands National Park, Alamogordo, NM. As we approached our destination, this drive was much more beautiful traveling through national forests. We passed through Cloudcroft, NM, which had beautiful views through a canyon. We could even see the glimmer sands of White Sands in the distance! From there, we descended over 3,000 feet into town! Our first order of business? Ice cream! We stopped at Caliche's Custard and each had their famous Green Chile Sundae. Frozen vanilla custard topped with locally grown green chilies and salted pecans. They were so delicious!! The sweet and spicy combination was perfect.

We then made our way to White Sands National Park in the late afternoon. White Sands is an area of gypsum sand encompassing 275 square miles of desert, the world's largest gypsum dunefield. One of the things I find the most fascinating about White Sands is that it is so bright and distinct, it's visible from space. So much so, that the area was an alternative space shuttle landing location. AND this was activated for the Space Shuttle Columbia in 1982 when, due to poor weather, they were diverted and landed in White Sands!



Another important fact is that the majority of the dunes are actually part of a missile range. In 1945 the first atomic bomb was test detonated here. To-day, it is still very much an active testing site. This means that often White Sands National Park and/or the surrounding roads are closed when missile testing is occurring. Despite obsessively checking these alerts leading up to our trip, it was only in Carlsbad that I discovered the main road leading to the park, Highway 70, would be closed all Saturday morning. It turns out a near total eclipse would be passing directly overhead and three rockets were being launched to collect data!!



As a result, we switched our itinerary around to spend two half days in White Sands National Park. To acclimate ourselves to the area, we did a short hike on the Dune Life Nature Trail. We were both surprised how much vegetation was present. It felt like walking through the dunes going to the beach!

Once done the hike we headed back into town to stock up on groceries and check out our rental in Alamogordo. This turned out to be the most well-stocked Airbnb we ever stayed at! The host had left fun snacks for us and even breakfast items such as pancake and waffle mix. There were lawn games for use and even sleds and wax we could take to the dunes. Our host even left us eclipse-watching glasses which turned out to be a lifesaver otherwise we would have seen nothing!



Dune Life Nature Trail:

- 1.1 miles
- 89' elevation gain
- 31 mins



DAY 8 - ECLIPSE, PISTACHIOS & WHITE SANDS NATIONAL PARK

With the peak of the eclipse scheduled to take place mid-morning and access to White Sands blocked, we opted to stay at the house. I made waffles for us and then we headed out to the backyard to play baggo and other lawn games. We are so glad we had the opportunity to see the eclipse. It was called a “ring of fire” because although the sun was nearly totally blocked, a ring of the sun could still be seen around the moon. We were really surprised that if we didn’t have the glasses, we literally wouldn’t have even known there was an eclipse! It got somewhat darker, but the dim light was more like what you’d experience on a normal, cloudy day. It shows you just how bright the sun really is. We kept an eye out for the three rockets too. We saw the trails of one in the sky, but not the actual rocket. Still pretty neat!



The path was directly over us!



What we saw looking through the glasses at peak eclipse



vs.

what the sun looked like to the naked eye





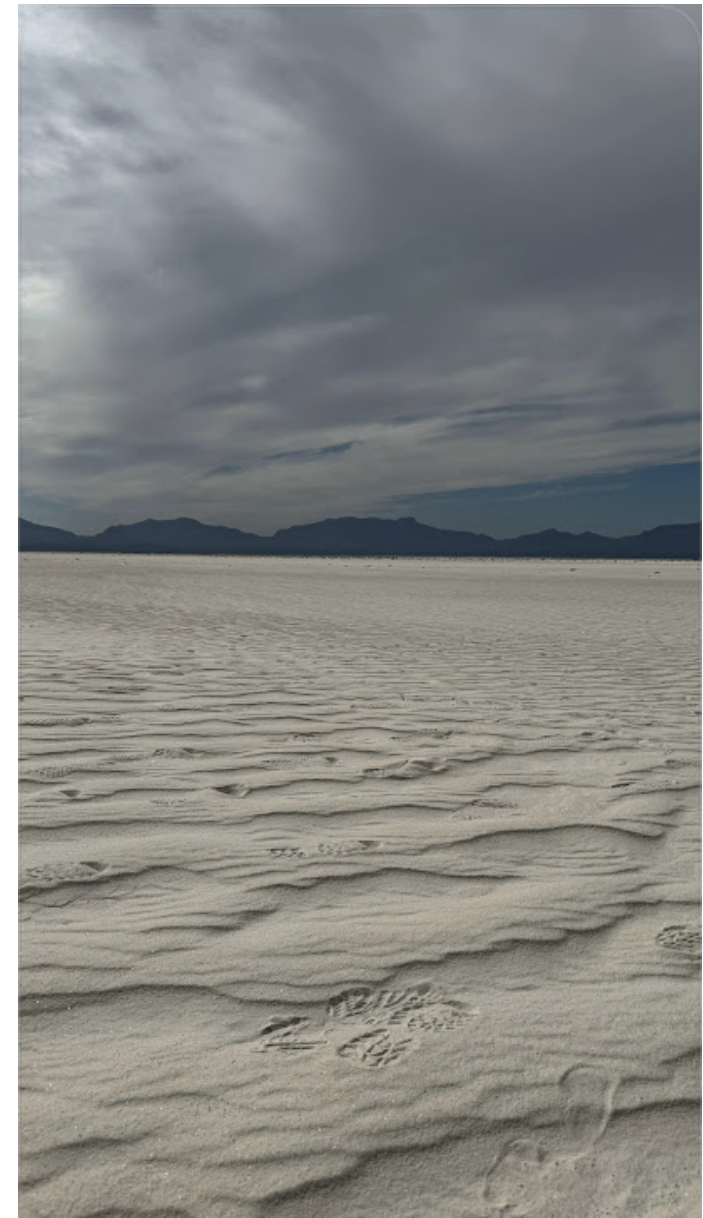
For some fun, just before lunch we visited PistachioLand, home of the world's largest pistachio! It was also home to a fantastic gift shop and ice cream stand. We sampled all the pistachios they had on offer, taking bags of dill pickle and chili flavored pistachios home. We took a tour of their farm and learned how pistachios grow and are harvested and capped off our time with a cup of homemade pistachio ice cream!



In the afternoon we once again visited White Sands to do a longer loop hike through the dunes. It was hot in the sun, but the sand was cool to the touch. This trail was more remote and we hardly saw other people once we got away from the trailhead. There was also way less vegetation on this trail. Just miles and miles of soft, white sand! To stay on trail, we followed red markers which were always visible from one point to another.



Alkali Flat Trail





Alkali Flat Trail:

- 4.6 miles
- 607' elevation gain
- 1 hr 59 mins



The trail led us up and over a lot of dunes and was pretty tiring! We had one last item on our list though - dune sledding! We picked up our sleds from the car, waxed them, and found a good looking hill. We each took three trips down, going faster and faster each time. We would have done more but it was super tiring walking back up the dunes, so we called it a day.

And that is a wrap on our massive road trip through Texas and New Mexico! Our favorite park was Big Bend and the biggest surprise (in a good way) was Carlsbad Caverns!