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Desert Wildflower Superbloom and Southwest Arizona Sites (A17A)

In Fall 2016 I traveled to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in southern California for a couple days of hiking and exploration. I originally planned to follow that with some exploration of sites in southwest Arizona. But when I tacked some sightseeing in the Palm Springs area onto that trip, most of the Arizona sites were cut.

For my first trip of 2017 I planned to hit those Arizona sites. But as the trip approached I heard that the Anza-Borrego Desert area was experiencing a wildflower superbloom thanks to California's rainy winter. I had to see that, so I tacked a bit of California time on the trip. I kept the Arizona sites, though.

I started the trip with a drive down to Indio, California to position myself for the next morning's visit to Anza-Borrego. I made a couple stops along the way to check out some geoglyphs.



The Topock "Maze" features these windrows across about ten acres. There were originally about fifty acres of these, but stagecoach trails, train tracks, Route 66 and finally Interstate 40 cut across the area, also obliterating a nearby large geoglyph of a human figure holding a snake.

Geoglyphs are fairly rare. In the US they're mostly found in this area of the southwest. Down the road to the south are the Blythe Intaglios, a set of six geoglyphs.



A human figure at the Blythe Intaglios site, 102 feet from head to toe.



The head and arms of a second human figure. This one is 105 feet from head to toe, and its arm span is 92 feet.



In spite of its long legs, this animal geoglyph is believed to represent a mountain lion. It is 54 feet from head to tail.



Superbloom or not, brittlebush were in bloom across the southwest. The small one to the right is about twice the size of the brittlebush I planted in my backyard last month. The mature brittlebush on the left is what I hope to end up with in a few years.

I spent the following morning checking out wildflowers at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, although I didn't have the sunny skies I had hoped for.





Smoke Trees were also in bloom.



A visiting family is about to be devoured by a Borrego sand serpent.

This creature is one of about 130 metal sculptures created by Ricardo Breceda for the Galleta Meadows Estate near the town of Borrego Springs, which is surrounded by the state park.

So how long does a superbloom last? Depends on the weather. And it depends on the local caterpillar population, which thrives when the wildflowers do.



Uh-oh. I think the caterpillars are turning on me.



As long as I was at Anza-Borrego, I decided to hike the stretch of Fish Creek Wash through Split Mountain, a planned stop in the park that I ended up skipping last fall.



I passed through the Imperial Sand Dunes on my drive to Yuma.



Fringe of the Chocolate Mountains. (Mmmmm, chocolate!) Most of the Chocolate Mountains are closed to the public as the military uses them as a bombing range.



Not a geoglyph, but rather the trace of a pre-Columbian Native American trail that connected the Colorado River to today's Imperial Valley.



My last stop before Yuma was the Tumco Ghost Town, once the site of a productive gold mine and home to as many as 3000 people. A 1.5 mile trail passes building ruins, a cemetery, and remnants of the mining operation, including these cyanide tanks (a weak cyanide solution was used to separate gold from ore).

I spent the next two nights in Yuma, Arizona so that I could spend a full day visiting sites and taking some hikes in the surrounding area.



I started my Yuma-area day with a hike along the short trail at Betty's Kitchen, named for a café in a settlement that was once here.



Mittry Lake Wildlife Area



An example of “desert pavement” at Imperial National Wildlife Refuge. Over thousands of years, gravel and sand create this interlocking surface common in the region, blackened with “desert varnish”. Scrape off a layer of this, and you can create geoglyphs that last for centuries. Drive across it, and you’ll create tire track patterns on the desert pavement that will also last for centuries.



View from Imperial National Wildlife Reserve across the Colorado to some California mountains just to the south of my last stop of the day.

While at Imperial National Wildlife Reserve I hiked the Painted Desert Trail through a colorful volcanic landscape.



My last stop of the day was Picacho State Recreation Area at the end of a 22-mile gravel and dirt road on the California side of the Colorado River. There I hiked a trail to the old Picacho Townsite and gold mining stamping mill ruins along the Colorado River.



Along the trail



Upper mill ruins



Lower Mill ruins, the Colorado River and view towards Imperial National Wildlife Refuge.

As remote as it is, little more than a century ago the town of Picacho had about 3000 people, one of a handful of mining towns served by riverboats that headed up and down the Colorado River.

I started heading north the next day, but only as far as Quartzsite, as I planned to spend much of the day exploring the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge. The forecast was for thunderstorms, though, which can pose problems when exploring the gravel and dirt back country roads in the desert. I ended up with mostly overcast skies – with a few periods of sunshine – and the rain held off until I was finishing up at my last stop of the day.

My first stop was at the private Castle Dome Museum – home to the Castle Dome City ghost town and mining district, primarily silver galena mining. The ghost town is a collection of a mix of authentic and reconstructed buildings from the area relocated together to an area adjacent to the mining district. There are a number of mines in the area, some up to 700 feet deep.



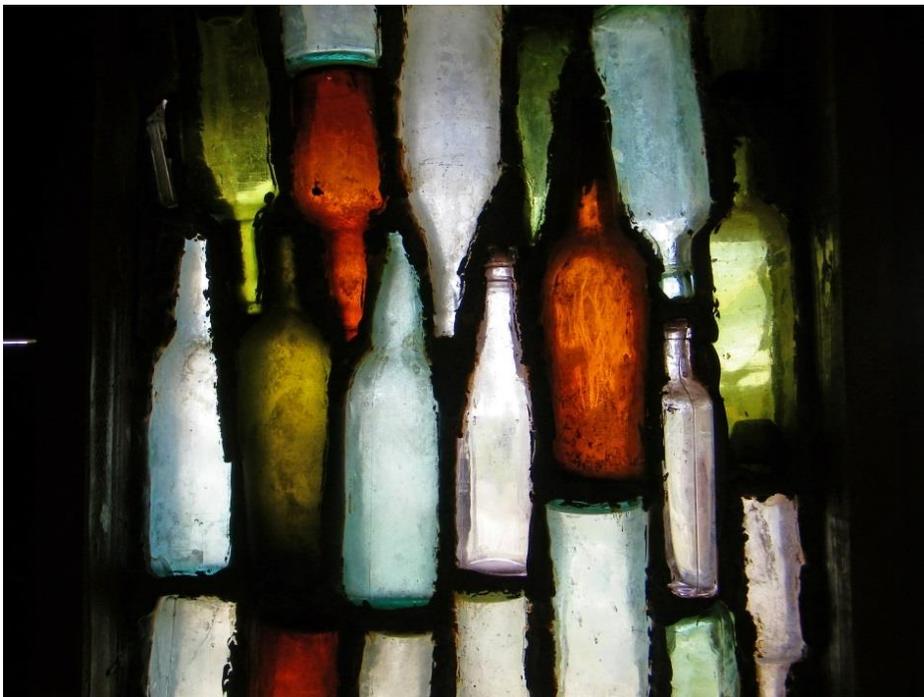
The heart of the recreated town.



The 1871 Flora Temple Mine, the second patented mine in Arizona.



Brothels were common in mining towns, but most of the displays I've seen focus on the madams and the women who worked there. I think this Castle Dome display is a first for me, depicting one of their customers instead of one or more of the women. It does note that Madam Toole Handley brought this bathtub with her as she set up business from one mining camp to the next.



A couple windows in one of the mine buildings were made with glass bottles cemented together.

I then drove several miles along King Road into the heart of Kofa, primarily to check out the scenery.

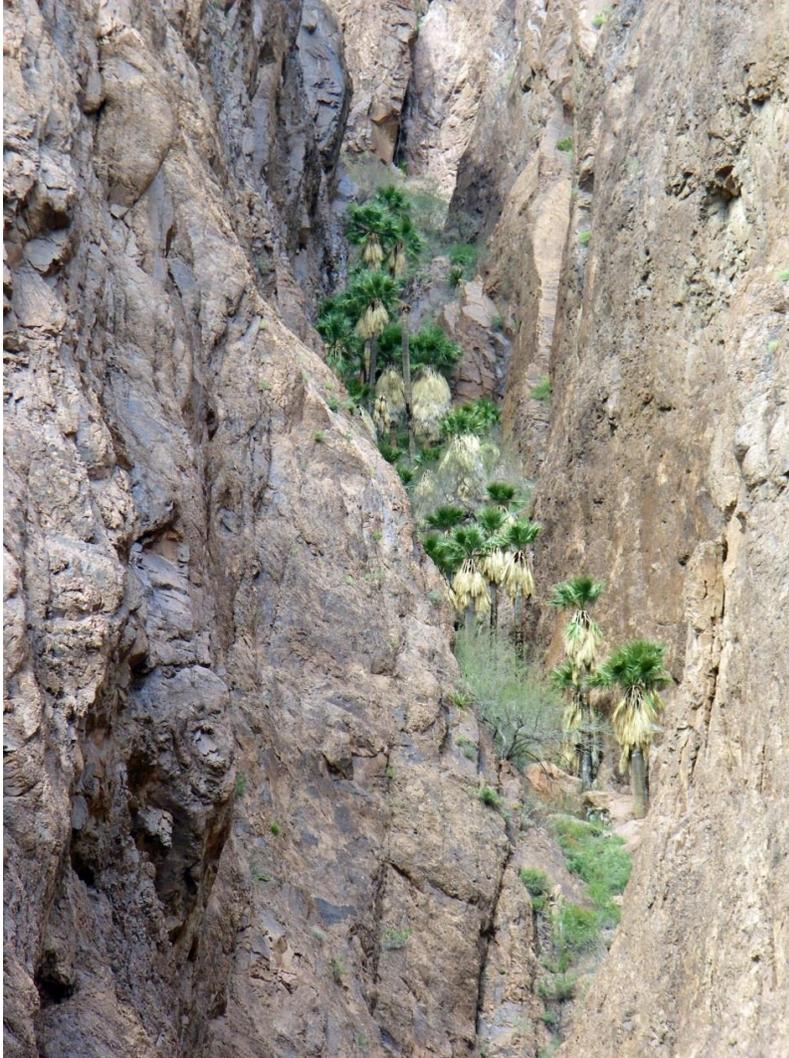


View of Castle Dome in the Castle Dome Mountains south of King Road.



View of the Kofa Mountains to the north of King Road.

- Start at Yuma, Arizona in the heart of the Sonoran Desert.
- Drive north towards the middle of nowhere.
- Once you get there, turn right onto a gravel/dirt road.
- When you reach the end of that road, get out of your vehicle and find the trailhead. It shouldn't be hard to find as it's the only marked trail in more than 1000 square miles.
- Hike the trail up into the mountains until you reach its end.
- Look to the left.

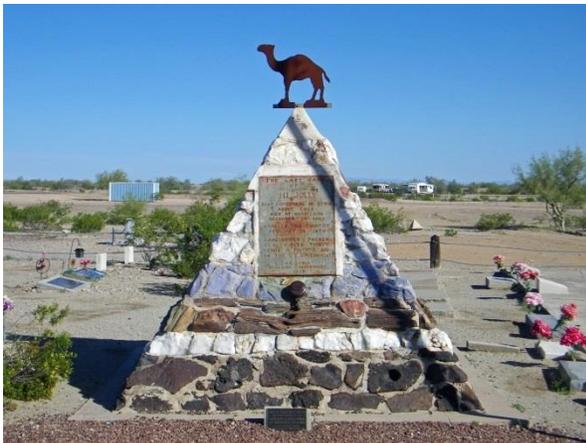


There's a grove of California fan palms growing here. These are believed to be the only native palms growing in Arizona, leftovers from an era when the climate was cooler and wetter. There are of course a lot of palm trees in Arizona, but those are transplants or descendants of transplants.

This is Kofa's Palm Canyon, and the trail is indeed the only trail in the refuge. Basically you can hike almost anywhere in the refuge, although don't touch any unexploded ordnance you may come across – the military used to practice here.



Some are too small to identify in this picture, but in this small area near the Palm Canyon trailhead I found 10 different types of wildflowers in bloom.



The grave of Hadji Ali – Hi Jolly – in Quartzsite. He was hired to manage camels as part of a failed US Army effort to use camels in its southwest operations (the camels spooked horses, burros and mules).



A 38-mile paved road leads to Alamo Lake from the south. This very remote lake was created by the Alamo Dam. My originally planned route leaving the park headed north along remote gravel and dirt roads, but weather radar the night before showed that area getting lots of rain. So I took a longer, but paved route north to Kingman, the only change to my plans due to weather.

Leave Interstate 40 west of Kingman, Arizona to drive the Route 66 National Back Country Byway, an original segment of Route 66 that passes through the Black Mountains and Mount Nutt Wilderness.



Along original Route 66 in the Black Mountains.



Route 66 passes through Oatman, Arizona. The Oatman brochure I have refers to it as “an authentic western ghost town and mining camp.” It was a gold mining town, and eventually was all but abandoned, but it underwent a tourism renewal. Too over the top and crassly commercial for my tastes, though.

I spent the night in Laughlin, Nevada. I was close enough to Vegas that I could have headed home for the night, but I wanted to explore some of the sites in the southern part of Lake Mead Recreation Area the next morning.



Lake Mojave’s Nevada Telephone Cove. Lake Mojave is created by Davis Dam along the Colorado River below Hoover Dam (which creates Lake Mead).



Petroglyphs at Grapevine Canyon, the oldest of which are believed to be almost 1000 years old.



I made a couple minor photo stops after visiting Grapevine Canyon and then headed home.