

SHOWCASE

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A living monument

Joshua Tree National Monument offers solitude, except for the 200 species of birds, the leaf-nosed bat and the occasional sighting of big-horned sheep. See inside.

Photo by Karla Tipton



Joshua Tree Monument offers a living alternative

By KARLA TIPTON
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When many people think of the Great Outdoors, it's the forests and lakes which first come to mind. It's there the deer romp and the fish swim. To commune with nature, people seek out the woods.

But there's life in the desert, too. And for those people who seek the wide open spaces, but don't want to go to Yosemite yet again, the Joshua Tree National Monument offers a fascinating alternative. And it's located just a couple hundred miles from home.

However, don't think you're leaving the Antelope Valley for more of the same.

Deserts differ as greatly as wooded areas do. And even within the 559,960 acres of Joshua Tree, the terrain, temperature and wildlife vary greatly.

More than 200 species of birds and a wide range of animals, from a leaf-nosed bats to the rare, big-horned sheep, have been sighted in Joshua Tree, which is located north of Interstate 10 and east of Desert Hot Springs in Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

At times, odd-shaped plants

such as the spindly ocotillo, the barbed jumping cholla cactus and, of course, the Joshua Tree, lend to many areas the aura of an alien landscape. In the springtime, as in the Antelope Valley, the desert radiates with many colors of green, as well as the purples, reds and yellows of blooming wildflowers and cacti.

The area also features balanced rocks, jumbo quartz monzonite formations, sand dunes and oases. The monument is also noteworthy because of its transition zone — the boundary between the Mojave and Sonoran deserts. Plants and animals in-

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igenous to both live there.

One of Joshua Tree's more tranquil areas — as well as one of the wettest — is near Barker Dam.

The dam, built around the turn of the century to hold water for cattle and mining purposes, catches the runoff from the infrequent rain showers and provides wildlife with life sustaining water through much of the year.

But the abundance of water set within part of the thousand-acre Wonderland of Rocks, makes Barker Dam a setting full of incongruity. Huge fists of rock, seemingly stacked precariously upon one another, reflect from the large still pools of water trapped by the dam. Vegetation includes green trees and bushes. And plenty of wildlife — including the endangered Bighorn Sheep — can be spotted near the dam, making the 1.1-mile trek along the Barker Dam Loop Trail worth the effort.

Another species seen quite often in the monument are rock climbers. Hundreds of climbers visit the monument on weekends to take advantage of the variety of rock formations. No permits are needed, but the park rangers encourage climbers to attend their weekly lecture on climbing rescue and safety presented at 1 p.m. Sundays at Intersection Rock, located across from the Hidden Valley campground.

Manmade points of interest include the picturesque Desert Queen Ranch and Lost Horse Mine.

As is the case with Death Valley National Monument, Joshua Tree has its share of unusual stories about people who lived and died there. And visitors may run across some graves of the area's early — and later — residents.

Near Ryan Mountain, named after Thomas and Jep Ryan who owned the Lost Horse Mine, is the pioneer cemetery at the brothers' old homestead.

Eight graves, scattered between boulders and desert vegetation, are within sight of the skeletal ranch buildings. Broken rings of boulders, with larger rocks for headstones, mark some of the burial sites. Others are denoted by an adjacent rock, on which is painted the person's name and date of death.

Of the two graves identified by name is that of Frank L. James, who was murdered by Jim McHaney in 1894 so he could confiscate James' claim to the Desert Queen Mine. The other marked grave belongs to "Lopes," who might have been one of five Mexican miners who — according to legend — killed each other in a brawl and were buried in the makeshift cemetery.

A site that may be of interest to pop music fans is a rock for-

mation in front of which lies a cement square marked with the initials "G.P." Located near the Ryan campground, the site designates the place near which the body of Gram Parsons (of the Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers) was cremated.

Before Parsons, 26, died at his desert retreat at the monument, he had expressed a wish to be cremated. Instead, his parents made preparations to bury him in New Orleans. En route, however, Parsons' body was stolen by two of his friends, taken back to Joshua Tree and set afire.

Besides the cement slab, the musician's monument is marked with words from his songs — spray painted there by his fans — and the sentiment: "A bird flying high over the San Andreas fault."

Camping in Joshua Tree is an unusual experience for those used to tree-sheltered campsites. Here, you can pitch a tent in the shade of enormous rock formations, on the open desert or in scrubby mountainous areas.

But campgrounds are for those who really want to get away and rough it. Not only are there no motels, restaurants or gas stations on the monument grounds, but water must be carried into all but one (Cottonwood) of the nine campgrounds.

What visitors lose in comfort, however, they gain in solitude. Since Congress designated most of Joshua Tree as "wilderness" in 1976, permits must be acquired before venturing into the areas beyond the road corridors. Sign-up stations are set up throughout the monument.

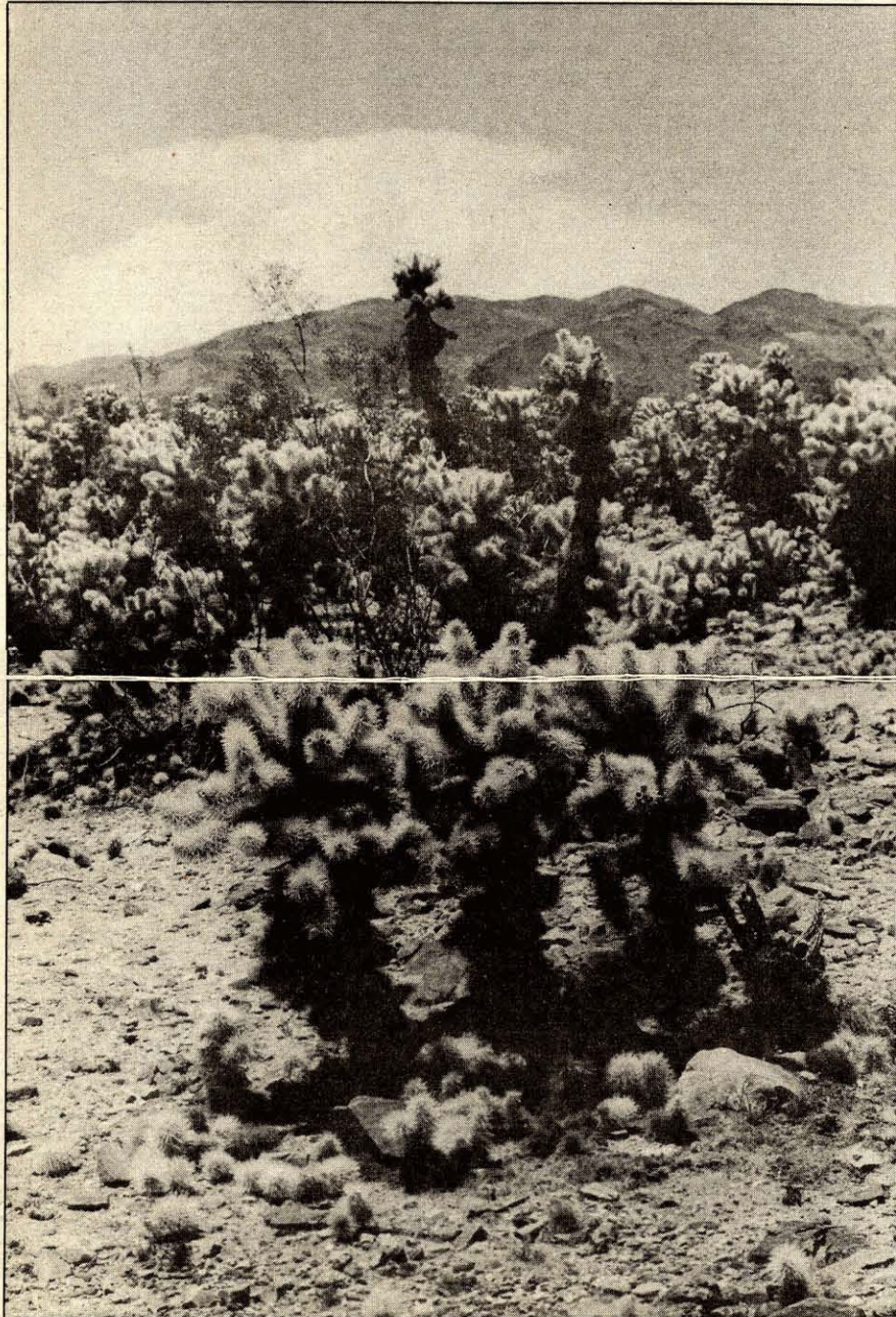
There are nine self-guiding interpretive trails and many other trails to points of interest. Most are not strenuous, and tennis shoes are usually adequate for the shorter-distanced ones.

Roads leading far from nearly all signs of civilization offer numerous opportunities to see land little disturbed by humans — as long as you're in a four-wheel drive vehicle.

An exception to this rule is the Geology Tour Road, which is usually in good condition and safe for most cars (except during rainy weather, when flash floods may occur). It's well worth the time it takes to drive the 18-mile round trip, because, by following along with the guide map, visitors can learn much about the area's geology in a short time.

Whether it's explored on foot or by car, Joshua Tree National Monument provides a glimpse into a desert quite different from our own.

For information, write to Joshua Tree National Monument, 74485 National Monument Drive, Twentynine Palms, CA 92277, or telephone (619) 367-7511.



KARLA TIPTON/valley press

STANDS OF unusual cholla cacti at Joshua Tree National Monument create an alien landscape.