
Stop 26. Palm Springs

Arrival datetime: Friday May 16, 3:30PM
Sites visited: The Living Desert
Accommodations: Village Inn, Palm Springs, CA
States traveled: Arizona, California

We decided to stop in Phoenix to break up the trip, but did not know what to do there. It was the only major city we approached that did not have a Visitor Information Center strategically located on the outskirts of town, easily accessible from the major highway we were traveling (Route 17). We selected what seemed from the map to be a major drag downtown, and got off on Van Buren Street. At first, the neighborhood was a disappointment, adult clubs and lounges, decrepit buildings. There was no one on the street. But as we got closer to downtown office buildings and banks, we realized that was most likely due to the heat. There were no people downtown either. We followed signs for a Civic Center and found what looked like a decent restaurant, Kincaid's. By then it was 3:00PM and we had the place to ourselves. It was a delicious gourmet meal, and we congratulated ourselves on our good luck. But a stroll through the adjoining office building lobby, gift shop, and street revealed nothing of the rest of the activities hiding in the Civic Center other than what seemed to be children's museums, so we rode onto California.

Once outside Phoenix, we finally figured out why Saguaro Cactus had been all over the souvenir shops and coffee mugs in Arizona. Though it was nowhere we

had already been, it was everywhere west of Phoenix. Some were 20 and 30 feet high. Some were tall and straight like mini green spiky telephone poles with rounded tops. Others had branches that first grew perpendicular to the stalk, then curved up toward the sun, causing the branches to have a 90-degree angle. Some had one or two branches, and some had 10 or 20. They were set on a mostly flat arid plain with pointy-topped, charcoal, low ridges far behind them.



A saguaro cactus outside Phoenix.

Our gourmet meal in Phoenix had seen us through want of dinner, but we still had the issue of where to spend time instead. We pulled off the highway at a Best Western and scanned the Internet for something to do between where we stopped and Joshua Tree National Park, our next destination. We decided on the alternate way point of Palm Springs. We stopped at a donut shop in Palm Desert

for breakfast. Jennifer ordered by pointing to a pastry with which we were unfamiliar and said, "Two of those." The young woman behind the counter looked confused, she pointed to another pastry and mumbled something unintelligible. "These," Jennifer pointed, "two." Again a blank look. We suddenly realized that we were facing a language barrier. Was everyone in Southern California bilingual? "Due," Jennifer smiled. The woman behind the counter called for help and Michael smoothed things over in English. We were outside before we realized that Jennifer had tried the alternate order in Italian rather than the Spanish equivalent, "Dos."

We were at The Living Desert when it opened at 9:00AM. Though the temperature was high and the air was dry, the atmosphere was generally murky. We could barely see the mountains that bordered Palm Springs to the west. The Living Desert was a non-profit organization that managed thousands of acres of desert land, and had laid out roughly 5 desert habitats on about 200 acres. All habitats had plants native to the corresponding desert. Some also had animals and birds, mostly in cages, but in a few cases, they had tried to imitate what some nicer zoos do to display the animals in their natural environment. Because we had just driven through them, we recognized the Saguaro Cactus of the Sonoran in Southwestern Arizona and the prickly pear of the Chihuahua in Texas and New Mexico. We figured out that we were presently in the Mojave Desert. There were also environments from Africa and Mexico.

We were glad that our only experience in mountain lion country was seeing one in a



A cactus garden in The Living Desert.

cage. It was much bigger than we had expected from the footprints we had seen. It was about five feet long and had to weigh 200 pounds. We also saw zebra and big horned sheep, bat-eared foxes and a little beaver-like creature that turned out to be a relative of the elephant.

The also had a 1.5 mile loop trail that overlooked the San Andreas Fault. The corresponding display on how the earth shifted around the fault line was interesting. But our favorite part of the Living Desert was the bus shuttle stops. We called them "misting stations." Fine mists of water sprayed continuously from spouts tucked discreetly in thatched roofs. It evaporated not a foot away from where it was released into the air, but it cooled the air all around it and sent cool waves wafting in the breeze.

Once in the heart of Palm Springs, we found misting stations everywhere. A bookstore had one tucked into its awning. Outdoor cafes had them lining the windows looking out to the sidewalk. We had lunch and shopped in little tourist shops, then came back to the hotel for a swim and shower before dinner. Dinner was at a fairly new dance club/restaurant owned by the same people who owned



View of the San Andreas fault from The Living Desert.

our hotel. The waiter had a lackadaisical attitude and the food was eclectic. But we enjoyed our meal and danced a bit to

nondescript unrecognizable disco sounds that the maitre d' confided he had stolen the DJ from the Sky Club LA.

Miles traveled: 186
Departure datetime: Sunday, May 19, 7:00 AM
Departure weather: 79° Sunny