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Introduction to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park

By

90 miles NE of San Diego; 31 miles E of Julian

The sweeping 600,000-acre Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, the nation's largest contiguous state park, lies mostly within San Diego County, and for many city-weary residents, a couple days here is just the ticket to rejuvenate overburdened minds.

A sense of timelessness pervades this landscape; travelers tend to slow down and take a long look around. The desert is home to fossils and rocks dating from 540 million years ago; human beings arrived only 10,000 years ago. The terrain ranges in elevation from 15 to 6,100 feet above sea level. It incorporates dry lake beds, sandstone canyons, granite mountains, palm groves fed by year-round springs, and more than 600 kinds of desert plants. After the winter rains, thousands of wildflowers burst into bloom, transforming the desert into a brilliant palette of pink, lavender, red, orange, and yellow. The giant ocotillo bushes flower extravagantly, hummingbirds fill the air, and an occasional migratory bird stops off en route to the Salton Sea. The park got its name from the rare bighorn sheep, or *borrego*, which can sometimes be spotted navigating rocky hillsides. The other half of the name came from the Spanish soldier Anza, who in 1775 led a group of 242 men, women, and children, plus cattle and horses, from the Gulf of Mexico to the California coast (eventually founding a community at the present location of San Francisco).

Many people visit the area with little interest in the flora and fauna. They're here to relax and sun themselves in tiny Borrego Springs, a town surrounded by the state park but exempt from regulations limiting commercial development. It is, however, somewhat remote, and its supporters proudly proclaim that Borrego Springs is and will remain what Palm Springs used to be -- a small, charming resort community, with more empty lots than built ones. Yes, there are a couple of country clubs, some chic fairway-view homes, a luxury resort, and a regular influx of vacationers, but it's still plenty funky. One of the valley's unusual sights is scattered patches of tall, lush palm tree groves, perfectly square in shape: Borrego Springs' tree farms are a major source of landscaping trees for San Diego and surrounding counties.

When planning a trip here, keep in mind that temperatures rise to as high as 125°F (52°C) in July and August. Winters days are very comfortable with temperatures averaging around 70°F (21°C) December through January, but note that nighttime temps can drop to freezing -- hypothermia is as big a killer out here as the heat.

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