

Review of Carlsbad Caverns, NM

It's finally happened that my writing about local campgrounds has matched my explorations of the local area. It's not that I've run out of places to try, it's just that I haven't yet been able to get to them. In my articles I often say, "This is one of my family's favorites" and that means that we go back to a good number of them rather than explore new ones. So for the next few articles I have decided to explore a bit further afield.

One of my first articles was about a Southwest Loop that my family and I took a few years back for some serious together time on a long road trip. (See "Southwest Loop", *Vance Jackson Views*, November 2008.) I'll be reviewing a few of the major sights along the way to give you a firsthand perspective.

Our first stop is Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico. Carlsbad Caverns National Park is located southwest of Carlsbad, NM, in the Guadalupe Mountains, approximately 450 miles or 6-1/2 hours drive time from San Antonio. The most direct route is to take I-10 West to Fort Stockton and then turn onto 285 North through Pecos. (A word of warning though. If you intend to spend the night along the way as I did, make reservations in advance! The oil industry often fires up out in West Texas and there wasn't a single hotel room until we reached Pecos.) Continue North until you see CR-720. Precede West on CR-720 and then South on 180/62 to the park entrance. (If you miss the turn as I did, you can backtrack on 180 from Carlsbad!)



The park entrance road winds up into the hills which are said to contain hundreds of known caves carved over millions of years. The park offers many different tours of various caves. The most famous of these is the 8.2 acre Big Room. This cavern is accessible via a self-guided tour either from the walk-in "Natural Entrance" or the handicap accessible elevators that take you to the main section. We chose to walk down via the Natural Entrance, which can be steep in places but I wouldn't say is truly stressful considering we were going down. (I wouldn't have wanted to walk back out that way though!) I would suggest making advance reservations for all but the self-guided tours well in advance.

The main cavern is absolutely huge and completely mind blowing. It's so large that it doesn't feel real. It seems to go on forever. The quality and quantity of stalactites, stalagmites, soda straws and ribbons are truly amazing. Expect to spend several hours walking down and strolling around inside, although you can speed it up considerably depending on how crowded it is and your personal fitness.

Lesser known attractions in the park include hiking and bird watching, but I'll have to refer you to the Caverns homepage (<http://www.nps.gov/cave/index.htm>) for details. As a natural wonder it's hard to beat something as impressive as Carlsbad Caverns. It's one of many locations I had on my "bucket list" that I can now check off. It's well worth the trip!

Jim Bray