

## Review of the Painted Desert/Petrified Forest and Meteor Crater, AZ

In this issue we continue our journey westward around the Southwest Loop from Albuquerque, NM. (See “Southwest Loop”, *Vance Jackson Views*, November 2008.)

From Albuquerque, go west on I-40 for approximately 210 miles to the National Park entrance in Arizona. As you enter the park, the first thing you will see is the visitor’s center, which is well worth the stop. They have amazing artworks and pieces of petrified wood for sale as well as a large amount of educational materials about how the spectacular formations were created. As you leave the visitor’s center you can proceed along the Petrified Forest Road through the entire park to the south entrance, which drops you off on highway 180. Follow 180 to the northwest back to I-40 to complete the adventure or reverse course and see the park from the opposite direction.



While in the park be sure to stop at the pull offs to take photos. There isn’t a single pull off that doesn’t provide an amazing view. The drive begins in the Painted Desert with its vistas of beautiful multicolored hills formed when erosion slowly uncovered the brightly colored layers of soil and rock. Scattered throughout the park there are also examples of early human petroglyphs.

After looping around north of I-40 you will pass over the highway and continue south into the Petrified Forest. This region is also very picturesque with a large amount of color striations but you will notice an increase in fossilized wood. At times you will feel like the whole hill you are walking on is one large pile of petrified wood. There are scenic overlooks where you can peer down into valleys literally strewn with petrified trees that have been uncovered after millennia of being buried. These overlooks give you a feel for just how many trees were buried and how many more are probably still right below your feet waiting to be released over the coming years.



After exiting the Petrified Forest, proceed west on I-40 for about 70 miles and exit on Meteor Crater Road. Located several miles south of the highway is a prime example of Nature's fury. Fifty thousand years ago a hunk of rock entered the Earth's atmosphere at tens of thousands of miles an hour and impacted the Arizona plains in what must have

been a titanic explosion. The impact instantly created a huge crater nearly a mile across and over five hundred feet deep. Attesting to the power of the explosion are boulders the size of houses tossed around like pebbles. The floor of the crater is large enough to host 6 football fields.

I have seen the Moon's cratered surface through a telescope and have seen photos of the scarred surfaces of the other planets and moons, but to actually stand on the lip of a crater and stare into its depths is truly awe inspiring! It's difficult to contemplate the reality that our own home planet must have been similarly abused through the millennia and only the erasing effects of wind and rain keep the evidence hidden.



The welcome center and museum has a small chunk of the original meteorite that wasn't vaporized on impact. It has very interesting presentations explaining the crater's formation and history and a large section of interactive games and activities for you and your children. My kids' favorite "game" allowed them to select a planet, choose the size, speed, and angle of impact and view the results. It was rather disconcerting to see the Earth destroyed so gleefully and so often!

Between the Petrified Forest, Painted Desert and Meteor Crater, this stretch of highway rates as one of the most picturesque and awe inspiring ones in America.

**Jim Bray**

Links: <http://www.nps.gov/pefo/index.htm> & <http://www.meteorcrater.com/>