

Far from the madding crowd by Tyson Hugie

Tucked into the southeastern corner of our great state lies an oft-overlooked National Monument that merits a weekend trip for anyone craving some fantastic Arizona scenery without being surrounded by tour buses. Best of all, it's free!

Chiricahua National Monument covers 18 square miles along the New Mexico state line. It's known for its vertical rock formations, believed to be the remains of a volcanic eruption millions of years ago. The monument was set aside 92 years ago, but it is far less-traveled than many of Arizona's other natural wonders. It's almost as if the Grand Canyon steals the show, and many of these smaller parks go unappreciated. I know for a fact that I've lived in the state for 10 years now and hadn't even heard of this one until just a few months ago.

It was a perfect day for road tripping on a Saturday morning, as I departed from the Phoenix area with three friends in search of a little adventure. Luckily we had two-way radios on hand for the duration of our 233-mile trip to Willcox, so we were able to pass the time by bantering back and forth (since we'd each opted to take our own vehicles—this was a “group drive,” after all).

Two other friends from Las Cruces, New Mexico met up with us in Willcox just in time for lunch. The service was top-tier at The Dining Car, but James didn't have much pos-

itive to say about his rubbery rack of ribs. Our next jaunt was to the entrance to the National Monument—extremely remote and only accessible via some twisty two-lane back road sections of Highway 186 that go where no T-Mobile cell signal has ever gone before. Our less fortunate friends on T-Mobile were out of cell phone range for virtually the entire day. It's no wonder we passed a blue sign stating NO SERVICES shortly after hanging a left onto Highway 181 for the last couple of miles.

The attendants at the Visitor Center were kind enough to draw out some instructions on a folded map. They asked if we'd be driving or hiking. “A little of both,” we answered. We learned about a 6-mile scenic drive that would take us past rock formations called Organ Pipe, Sea Captain and China Boy. She also gave us directions to a 3-mile and a 7-mile hike. And we were off! Back in tandem, we climbed in elevation to the final roundabout at “Massai Point,” at 6,870 feet. The wind was gusty but the skies were beautiful, and we hiked around on the nature trail, enjoying panoramic views. Jack and Chandler got feeling exceptionally brave and dangled their legs off a steep cliff. We also subjected ourselves to Jack's self-stick for a group shot.

The afternoon was full of scenery as we made our way around the National Monu-

ment, snapping pictures and capturing a little GoPro video along the way, too. A favorite part of the hike was “The Grotto,” where we could actually climb through a cavern of sorts, created by all the rhyolite rocks coming together.

Around 4:30 pm, we set out on a hike up to a fire lookout station that's on the National Register of Historic Places. It was a steep and rocky trail originally blazed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. From the vantage point at the top, administrators could view conditions on a clear day for more than 50 miles in any direction. We hurried back down the hill and made it to the parking lot just in time for dusk. Then we rallied to the parking lot and returned to Willcox.

When inquiring with the front desk attendant at our Super 8 Motel for dinner recommendations, I asked, “What about that Rix's Tavern on Haskell Avenue?”

“You have to cook your own steak there,” he said. Well, forget that! We instead went to Isabel's South of the Border, a Mexican place with great tacos and some of the tastiest horchata I've ever had. I chugged two glasses at \$3 each, and they were worth every penny.

The next time you're entertaining a visitor who wants to experience some of the best scenery Arizona has to offer, give some thoughtful consideration to Chiricahua and leave the crowds behind. ■

