

SO LONG TO SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Whacky trees, flowering deserts and baby seals highlight final southern California adventures.



A beavertail cactus blossoms among California poppies in Joshua Tree National Park.



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1 Joshua trees grow in whimsical shapes. 2 Rock climbing is a favorite activity in Joshua Tree National Park. 3 A Joshua tree blossoms. 4 Tiny, delicate wildflowers turn the desert terrain gold.

By Rose Muenker
Photography by David Muenker

From vast deserts to ocean beaches, and backcountry hamlets to seaside cities, southern California brims with great getaway options. High on our list was seeing the desert in bloom. Every day it rains, we remind ourselves of the silver lining—the more it rains, the more vibrant and bountiful the desert wildflowers will be.

A few days before the Equinox, we pack the car with camping gear and drive three hours to Joshua Tree National Park. Fortunately, we arrive early enough on a midweek day to seize one of the last remaining campsites at this popular park northeast of Palm Springs and less than 100 miles from Los Angeles.

STEPPING INTO A WHIMSICAL WORLD

Our first reaction to the park is: Did Dr. Seuss create this? Like a cast of fanciful storybook characters, Joshua trees sport contorted branches crowned with green spiky tufts. The surrounding landscape features rocks sculpted into intriguing shapes. Our imaginations go into entertaining overdrive as we come up with names for the most curious ones.

The arrival of spring adds to the park's Seuss-like quality. Golden California poppies carpet the desert floor as if in preparation for royalty. Red flame-shaped blossoms sprout atop towering matchstick trunks of Ocotillo cacti. Minuscule

purple, white and yellow wildflowers dapple the ground like splattered paint. And deceptive “Teddy Bear” cholla cacti lure us toward their fuzzy-looking spines.

Armed with cameras, we search out the sublime amid the beautiful. We admire rare fan palms, peer at pictographs, and explore Hidden Valley, Cholla Cactus Garden and Ocotillo Patch. We hike Skull Rock Trail and scramble up to Arch Rock. Signs along Bajada Nature Trail teach us the names of flowers and plants we have never seen before.

Hours of pursuit reward us with many exquisite sights, among them a delicate pink flower on a beavertail cactus, a huge Joshua tree blossom, and Joshua trees silhouetted by a golden sunset. At night, the full moon floods our campsite with light while the chilly desert air seeps inside the tent. Despite the packed campground, quiet blankets the area after 10 p.m.

The timing of our visit to the park is fortunate. The morning of our departure, gray clouds and high winds sweep in. Temperatures drop, causing poppies to close in self-protection. But most of our stay coincides with sunshine and warm air. We got to see what we had hoped for—a desert in dazzling spring bloom.

WATCHING WATER BABIES

The weather changes quickly in southern California, so we learn not to let scowling clouds deter us from setting out on



IF YOU GO

JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK
nps.gov/jotr

LA JOLLA
lajollabythesea.com

**SACRED ROCKS
RESERVE RV PARK**
sacredrocksreserve.com

an impromptu day adventure. Glancing at our must-see-before-we-leave list one gray Sunday, we head to the popular coast-hugging town of La Jolla.

Rays of sun pierce through clouds as soon as we arrive. While scores of people shop in upscale stores and eat lunch al fresco, we follow the scent of ocean breezes to the shore. Bright, perky flowers edge a cliffside walkway, from where we admire the vast ocean stretching to the horizon.

Eager to walk in the sand, we climb down concrete stairs to Shell Beach. Frothy waves crash on rocks draped in emerald green seaweed. Sunbeams dance on the crystalline blue water. And dozens of white pelicans soar in formation overhead.

Back on the walkway, we quicken our pace when we notice crowds peering over the edge.

Soon, our eyes, too, are riveted on the priceless sight of dozens of harbor seal mommas and their pups basking on the beach. A sign informs visitors that the pupping season runs from December to May, females give birth to one pup a year, and Casa Beach is the only mainland harbor seal rookery in southern California. Another sign lists their births, including one just the day before. We find out that newborn pups typically weigh 20 pounds, can swim, and are completely dependent on their mothers for survival.

For a closer look, we walk out onto the seawall. My heart swells at the sight of a pup riding piggyback on its mother



1 Sunset in Joshua Tree National Park **2** The La Jolla shore features coves and caves. **3** A harbor seal pup hitches a ride on its mother's back. **4** Visitors watch harbor seals with their pups on Casa Beach from the seawall.

through the waves. Like a toddler learning to crawl, another pup struggles to inch over a berm of sand onto the beach. When unsuccessful, it swims to another spot where beach access is easier. The water is so clear that we can watch seals frolicking in its depths.

Our impromptu day trip rewards us with a visual feast of harbor seals, pelicans, cormorants and crashing waves. That would be our last view of the ocean until we reached the Oregon Coast.

As if saying “don’t leave yet,” the high desert flowers and shrubs in Sacred Rocks Reserve burst into bloom, each day showcasing something new. Torch-shaped blossoms top towering yucca stalks. Red sugar bush berries turn into clusters of tiny white flowers. Wild lilacs brighten the terrain with splashes of purple. And stunning goldfields (tiny yellow daisy-like flowers) set the surrounding countryside ablaze.

Filled with great memories, we say *hasta luego* to Southern California and began our journey north.

Rose and David Muenker, a travel writer-photographer team, are traveling the roads of North America by motor home. Read about their adventures in every issue of Out of Denver and on their blog davidandrose.com. Email them at rose.muenker@gmail.com.



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