



Backcountry: Be prepared for rugged beauty



A Wilderness Experience

What comes to mind when *you* think of wilderness? In the 1964 Wilderness Act, Congress defined wilderness as “*an area where earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.*” Each individual tends to imagine and describe wilderness differently. To someone unaccustomed with the outdoors, nearly any area without paved roads and electric lines may seem like “wilderness.” For those seeking an outdoor “wilderness” experience, a hike in the park’s backcountry may provide solitude, solace, and views of remarkable scenery. Several kinds of habitat await. Most of the park’s 33,000 acres of designated wilderness is Chihuahuan Desert—rocky, dry, and spiny with little shade. In a few places, water seeps to the surface allowing numerous water-loving plants and animals to thrive. In higher elevations, one may see tall pines and the occasional elk. Compared to many parks, few people explore away from the pavement and developed areas. We encourage you to enjoy the wilderness, but be ready for harsh, unpredictable conditions and awesome beauty.

Leave No Trace

Leave No Trace is an ethic regarding awareness, appreciation, and respect of wild lands. To have a safe, enjoyable adventure and to protect the Carlsbad Caverns Wilderness, follow these park policies:

- Plan ahead and prepare – your safety is your responsibility.
- Carry and drink at least a gallon of water per person per day.
- Travel and camp on durable surfaces. *Stay on established trails*—short-cutting and cliff-climbing is dangerous and causes erosion.
- Dispose of waste properly. Human waste must be at least 300 feet from any cave, trail, or water source.
- Pack out *all* trash—your own and any you find, *including* toilet paper.
- Leave what you find. Do not collect or disturb any animals, plants, cultural artifacts, or minerals.
- Do not clear soil or vegetation, or dig trenches around tents.
- Camp at least 100 feet off established trails, ½ mile (1 km) from any road or parking lot, and at least 300 feet (100 meters) from any trail, cave, or water source. Be out of sight and sound of these areas, as well. (Overnight parking and camping is not permitted in parking lots or other developed areas.)
- *Campfires are not permitted* within park boundaries. Use a containerized fuel stove only when fire danger is low.
- Do not enter caves. A special permit is required.
- Pets are not permitted on park trails or in the backcountry.
- Carry and use a map. Maps are available at the bookstore in the visitor center.
- Lock vehicles and carry valuables.
- Firearms are prohibited.

Notify friends and family of your plans. Give them the time and date you plan to leave the backcountry. Have them call park staff at 575-785-2232 if they do not hear from you.

Other Reminders and Regulations

Hiking in the desert is a very rewarding experience. It can also be dangerous if you are unprepared or careless. Remember this:

- A free permit is required for all overnight use of the park’s backcountry. Get one at the visitor center.
- There is NO RELIABLE water source in the backcountry. Pack plenty of water, at least a gallon per person per day.
- Check the weather forecast. Expect temperature changes and possible thunderstorms. If lightening is nearby, avoid open areas and cave entrances.
- Carry a first aid kit and signal mirror. Consider that many things in the desert stick, sting, or bite. Give rattlesnakes plenty of space and do not harass them.
- Wear clothes appropriate for rough trails, weather conditions, sun exposure, and spiny plants.
- Saddle and pack stock are permitted only under special regulations. User must provide all feed, water, and care.
- Wheeled vehicles are prohibited.
- If you carry a cell phone, be respectful of other backcountry users and be aware that signal strength is rare and variable.

Trail Descriptions

The park has an incredible diversity of plants and animals. A short walk along any park trail provides enriching experiences for anyone willing to move away from the parking lots and buildings. Most of the trails are marked only by rock cairns (rocks piled or stacked into a noticeable heap), so we recommend using a topographic map. Few of the routes loop back to their beginnings. Most have little shade or shelter from weather conditions. Trail difficulty is rated accessible, easy, moderate, and difficult. Trail lengths and elevation changes are approximate and hiking times are relative.

Accessible for All Day Use Only

Chihuahuan Desert Nature Trail: mostly paved, ½ mile (1 km) loop, ½ hour

Begin this trail at the base of the hill leading from the visitor center to the cave entrance. For mobility impaired access, start from the east end of the upper parking lot south of the Visitor Center or. Interpretive signs, benches, and limited shade present. A short spur trail leads to the second natural entrance of Carlsbad Cavern and historic ruins of guano mining. This trail is closed during bat flight time.

Easy Hiking Trails, Day Use Only

Old Guano Road: 3.7 mi (6 km) and 2 hrs one way, elevation change: 710 ft (216 m)

Start at the dirt road adjacent to the natural entrance to Carlsbad Cavern. This trail follows the old road used to haul guano from the cave in the early 1900s. Ruins and debris from the mining operation are evident within about a mile from the entrance. The trail descends the escarpment and ends at Whites City campground.

Juniper Ridge: 3.5 mi (5 km) and 2 ½ hrs one way, elevation change: 800 ft (240 m)

Trailhead is located on Desert Loop Road about one mile past interpretive marker #15. The trail has a gradual climb to a ridge top. The park boundary fence is about one mile from the trailhead. Continue about another 2 miles for a canyon overlook. Return via the trail or “bush-whack” carefully with a map down a side canyon to the road.

Moderate Hiking Trails, Overnight Use by Permit Only

Rattlesnake Canyon: 3 mi (4.8 km) and 3 hrs one way, elevation change: 600 ft (183 m)

Trailhead is located on Desert Loop Road about two miles from the visitor center at interpretive marker #9. The trail steeply descends into a side canyon and leads to the intersection with the larger Rattlesnake Canyon in about one mile. Turn left/south at the intersection and find ruins of an old homestead dating from the 1930s in about a half mile. The canyon mouth is another mile or so. Return via the same route and trail.

Upper Rattlesnake Canyon to Guadalupe Ridge Loop: 6 mi (9.6 km) round trip, 4 hours to complete loop, elevation change: 670 ft (204 m) – map highly recommended

Trailhead is located on Desert Loop Road about two miles from the visitor center at interpretive marker #9. The trail steeply descends into a side canyon and leads to the intersection with the larger Rattlesnake Canyon in about one mile. Turn right/north and follow the wash north. Climb out of the canyon and continue east until you intersect with Guadalupe Ridge Road (now closed to motorized vehicles). Follow this road east/right to the Desert Loop Road; then up to the Rattlesnake Canyon trailhead.

Backcountry camping is only allowed west of Rattlesnake Canyon trailhead off the Desert Loop Road and south of the Guadalupe Ridge Trail to the park boundary for approximately two miles.

Difficult Hiking Trails, Overnight Use by Permit Only

Guadalupe Ridge Loop: 12 mi (19 km) one way, over night recommended for entire length and return, elevation change ascend: 2,050 ft (625 m)

Now closed to motorized vehicles beyond one mile, this former 4-wheel-drive road climbs from the Desert Loop Road to the park’s west boundary. Private vehicles must be left at the gate where the Desert Loop Road intersects the Ridge Road. Do not block the gate as park staff need access to the road for management purposes. The trail climbs and dips several times, and provides great views into canyons to the north and south.

Slaughter Canyon: 5.3 mi (8.6 km) one way from parking lot to intersection with Guadalupe Ridge Road, elevation change to ridge top: 1850 (564 m)

Follow the signs from highway 62/180 to the parking lot as the mouth of Slaughter Canyon. The canyon is very large with several branches including West Slaughter, Middle Slaughter, and North Slaughter. The trail goes up Middle Slaughter which forks into North Slaughter and finally ends on the Guadalupe Ridge trail. Unless only going a short distance up canyon, a topographic map and knowledge of its use is essential.

Yucca Canyon: 7.7 mi (12.4 km) one way, elevation change: 1520 ft (464 m)

Just as the road to the Slaughter Canyon parking lot crosses the park boundary, there is a dirt road heading west. This road requires a high clearance or four-wheel-drive. Check with a ranger for road conditions. The trail climbs quickly up a side canyon to the top of the escarpment. From the ridge, there are awesome views of the basin. The trail continues across the plateau until it reaches a sheer drop and view into Big Canyon. This is one of the few trails in the park where you may encounter ponderosa and other pines.
