

Arizona and New Mexico, March 2021

Description

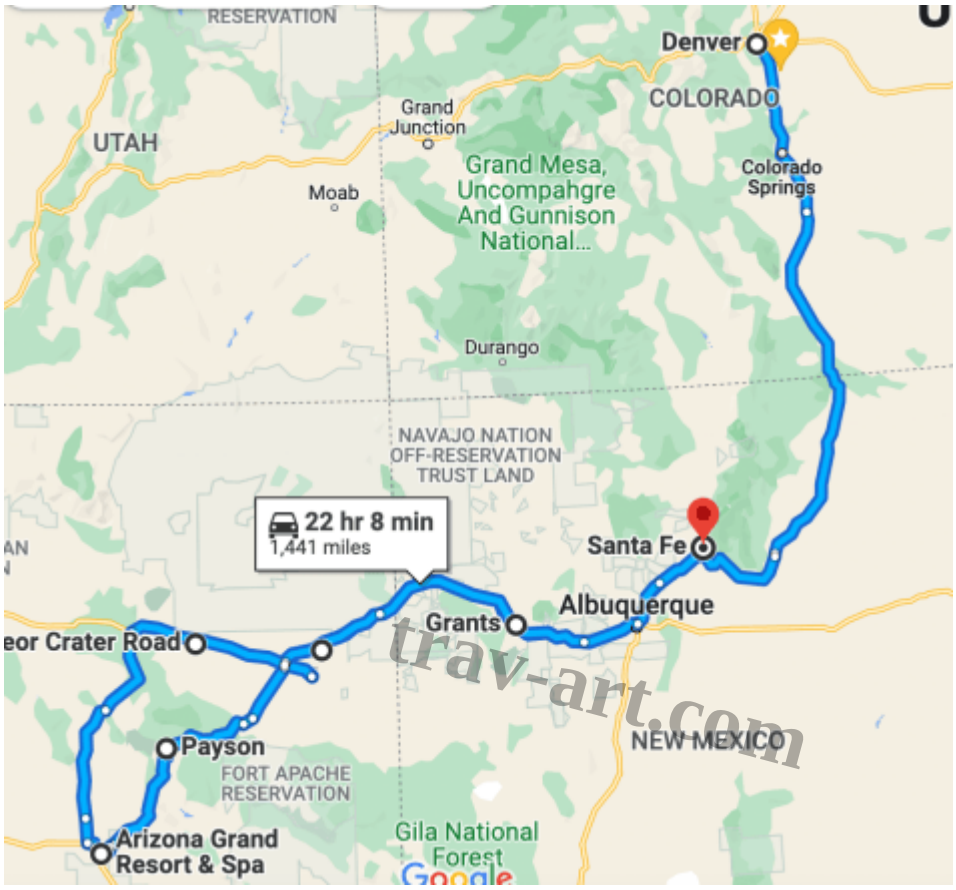
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In March of 2021 we set off on a five day journey to Arizona and New Mexico from Colorado. Our goal was to see Petrified Forest NP, enjoy the Arizona Grand Resort and waterpark, spend a morning in Saguaro National Park, visit Tucson for the first time, and see White Sands NP in the evening and the following morning before returning home. As sometimes happens, road trips donâ??t always go exactly as plannedâ?¦

Highlights: Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona Grand Resort, Meteor Crater, Hotel Santa Fe
LowLights: Holiday Inn Express in Grants, NM

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Day 1: Albuquerque and Grants, NM

We left around noon to arrive in Albuquerque around dinner time. Our goal was dinner in the Old Town area of Albuquerque. We love the architecture and food of Spanish/Native American New Mexico and the thought of a good dinner in the historic district was a good incentive to not stop along the way for dinner.

Unfortunately we made a key mistake in not making reservation beforehand and found ourselves arriving at the door of a restaurant that was closing in an hour. And that was pretty much the case for the rest of the restaurants there. Bummed by the realization that we would not be eating good hatch green chili anything, we got fast food and pressed on our night of rest in Grant, NM.

Weâ??ve stayed at a number of Holiday Inn Express hotels over the years and itâ??s usually a favorite option in the mid-range category. But the **Holiday Inn Express in Grants, New Mexico** was a big disappointment. We checked in and were given a dirty room. Not just the bathroom or the carpet. Literally dirty sheets. We called the front desk and asked for another room and amazingly, it was just a tad less dirty than the previous room. We were tired after a long drive and there just wasnâ??t going to be any options elsewhere so we ended up turning the pillowcases inside out and sleeping mostly in our clothes. Never staying there again.

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Day 2: Petrified Forest NP and Phoenix

Nobody slept well as you can imagine and the cheap fast-food dinner the night before made my stomach upset. So far, things were not going great. But we pressed onward on I-40 westward for Arizona hoping that things would improve. We stopped off briefly at one of the Navajo trading posts for souvenirs then continued on to Petrified Forest NP.





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Petrified logs, the Painted Desert, and Anasazi petroglyphs

Petrified wood can be found all over the world, but I donâ??t believe there are many places where it can be found in such abundance over a vast swatch of Arizonaâ??s Painted Desert. Short loop trails and overlooks allow you to see a great deal in a surprisingly easy day visit. Anasazi Indian ruins and petroglyphs can also be seen in various spots in the park.

We stopped at a few overlooks and then walked the loop trails at the Puerco Pueblo, Crystal Forest, and Rainbow Forest.

After spending time at the park we proceeded on to Holbrook to find food before heading south to Phoenix. Google Maps led us to a street called â??Bucket of Blood Streetâ?? where a restaurant was supposedly located. The only problem was, there was nothing but boarded up, derelict buildings. Have I entered a horror movie?

I have since learned the street was named after a cowboy bar fight in the late 1800s. But we did not see the Arizona Tavern and Cowboy Grill anywhere on that strange street.

Quickly abandoning the search for the restaurant we settled for fast food again. So far, the food on this trip is batting zero.

To make our way to Phoenix we had the option of the faster, but longer distance drive on I-40 and I-17, or the more direct, but slower and more scenic highways 260 and 87 through Payson. We elected for the latter. It was infact a windy drive, but the views and the forest more than made up for it. There were, however, no real stops along the way that we had time for.

The Arizona Grand Resort

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The **Arizona Grand Resort** was a big improvement over the prior nightâ??s crappy lodging experience. The hotel is a big resort with several pools and a waterpark, and the rooms are suites spread across the several buildings. A few restaurants are also on the property but due to COVID only one was open (COVID miraculously doesnâ??t spread in that restaurant only). The resort is showing its wear which also keeps it from reaching 5 Stars.

Rustlerâ??s Roost Restaurant



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The photo above is either really cool or really gross depending on your tastes. In my opinion itâ??s the former. So why not 5 stars? Well, a few thoughts on Rustlerâ??s Rooste.
Rustlerâ??s Rooste is one of the restaurants in the Arizona Grand Resort. Itâ??s the most popular and it was the only one open when we visited. Is it fun? Sure. Itâ??s Western-themed and there is even a longhorn cow outside to pet while you wait for a table. But the day we were there it was both insanely crowded and everything was rushed. Everything suffers when nobody can relax including the cooks who are dealing with hundreds of people all at once.
So would I recommend going? Yes. But donâ??t be disappointed if it isnâ??t quite awesome. At least until other restaurants are open to take some of the crowd away.

Day 3: Phoenix, AZ

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South Mountain Park and Preserve



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Right outside the Arizona Grand Resort is the South Mountain Park & Preserve. I woke up earlier than the rest of the family and decided to get a little exercise on the trails, as well as to get some photographs of the saguaros and surrounding desert. Itâ??s a nice urban wilderness area.

Arizona Grand Waterpark

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The two water slides were great fun for kids, the lazy river was crowded but relaxing for adults, and the food was expensive, but convenient. All in all, itâ??s not the biggest or best water park, but if you paid for the room itâ??s a fun daytime activity that comes as a free amenity. Otherwise you can pay for entrance specifically to the water park.

Agua Fria National Monument

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But now we also lost an opportunity to go to Saguaro National Park. And I was at this point the only one that had yet hiked among and seen the great cacti up close (of course, we donâ??t see these things every day like the typical Phoenician).

So what happened that caused our plans to change from a southerly journey through Tucson and White Sands, NM? Well, a blizzard was forecast for Colorado the afternoon of the following day which meant we needed to take a speedier route home. To cut travel time in half for the following day we needed to overnight somewhere further north which meant switching to Santa Fe, NM.

As we left town heading north on I-17 we took an exit ramp that led to a back road, that led to another back road that led to â?¦. Agua Fria National Monument. We entered this back entrance to the park where there were massive numbers of saguaros and many other impressive desert cacti and plants (beehive cactus, cholla, barrel cactus, prickly pear, etc). Since we were only able to access a portion of the monument itâ??s difficult to ascertain the full scope of the monument until a later date.

Having fulfilled our desire to see the beauty of the Sonoran Desert as a family, we proceeded north at a relatively quick pace and decided that we would only have time for one more big stop along the way. There are a few interesting spots on the path between Phoenix and Santa Fe including Montezumaâ??s Castle, Sedona, Walnut Canyon, and the Route 66 Town of Winslow, but we chose the most logical based on our available time and our kidsâ?? personal interest: Barringer Crater or as itâ??s more commonly known, Meteor Crater.

Meteor Crater

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There are few places on earth where an impact crater is visible and none that are so easily defined as a result of the desert landscape of Arizona. While the crater is effectively just a hole in the ground, it is fascinating and the museum does provide a very interesting overview of its formation as well as other space and geology topics. The wind here can be quite strong as we discovered so you might spend more time indoors at the museum than outside examining the crater.

With a long drive ahead we left the crater and continued on past sundown until we at last arrived at our destination for the night. Our favorite town in New Mexico: Santa Fe.

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Hotel Santa Fe

We had to make a reservation while on the road and these quick decisions tend to have mixed results. In this case we hit a home run. The generic name makes it sound like like a typical roadside motel, but in fact this is a really beautiful hotel with fairly reasonable prices compared to many of the other luxury hotels in Santa Fe. Our room had a nice balcony and was a suite. There are coffee bars on each floor for guests in the morning. My only regret was we couldnâ??t stay longer.

Day 4: Santa Fe, NM

Typically we like to enjoy our time in Santa Fe, but unfortunately a blizzard was forecast to hit Colorado in the afternoon so we had to be home ahead of it. That left us only time for a breakfast before returning north on I-25.

Palacio Cafe

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We went to the historic downtown district to find a restaurant and decided on this one, partly because another one nearby was crowded and the line to get in was populated by rude guests. This restaurant was able to seat us quickly. Unfortunately, the huevos rancheros were not the best I ever had and the service was snailsâ?? pace slow. Eventually due to the fact that we were on a tight schedule we had to ask for the bill and pay at the front rather than wait for the server. Maybe things will improve in the post-COVID era.

As we proceeded north, the clouds began to gather, the winds began to pick up, and within 20 miles of home, the snow began to fall. We made it home just as the blizzard hit, safe and sound.

Category

1. Travel

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