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WEST TEXAS WIND

Hiking Guadalupe Mountains National Park

Words & Photos – Bill & Susan Dragoo

“About two miles up the trail,

you’ll run into slush. Beyond that, you’ll hit black ice, and the last 500 feet you’ll be walking in at least a foot of snow.” Those few words from a park ranger at Guadalupe Mountains National Park seemed to crush our dreams of taking on Guadalupe Peak as a training hike for a Grand Canyon double crossing later in the month. Late spring snowfall made the higher elevations of the trail sketchy if not downright dangerous and neither of us was interested in risking a twisted ankle or worse for the questionable reward of struggling up and down the slippery pathway.

Bill and I were headed to southern Arizona from our home in central Oklahoma, and we had padded our travel schedule to accommodate the hike. The Guadalupe Mountains offered a convenient stop-over, our target being Guadalupe Peak, the state’s high point with an elevation of 8,751 feet above sea level. The trail to the summit rises 3,000 feet over 4.2 miles, an incline that approaches the elevation change we would face in the Big Ditch.

Fortunately, a few miles down the road from the Guadalupe Peak trailhead and the park’s main visitor center at Pine Springs, McKittrick Canyon, provided an alternative.

MCKITTRICK CANYON TRAIL

Surrounded by the Chihuahuan Desert just south of the New Mexico border, the Guadalupe Mountains sustain extremes in elevation and moisture, from deep canyons carved by cool streams to pine-topped alpine ridges and the gypsum dunes of the salt basin. In the canyons, plants and animals thrive in great diversity, with McKittrick Canyon offering one of the most splendid examples. Lush vegetation and colorful fall foliage along the canyon’s spring-fed stream suggest more America’s North Woods than what you would expect to find in south Texas.

We drove about 4.5 miles northeast of the Pine Springs Visitor Center and another 4.5 miles back northwest on McKittrick Road to the McKittrick Canyon Visitor Center and trailhead. Day hikers should know that the gate to the highway is locked at 5 p.m. if they don’t want an unplanned night of camping in the parking lot.

Leaving from the back side of the visitor center, the trail starts out flat and easy, much of it graveled and on an old roadbed. Although it involves about 800 feet of elevation change to the Grotto, a popular turnaround spot, the grade is so gradual as to be barely noticeable. The path crosses a stream a couple of times; when it is flowing the water runs clear over stark white rock. A prime attraction after 2.4 miles of easy walking is the Pratt Cabin, built by Wallace Pratt. A petroleum



geologist, Pratt bought land in McKittrick Canyon in the 1920s and later donated it to the National Park Service, which combined Pratt’s land with that purchased from others to form Guadalupe Mountains National Park in 1972.



Pratt’s stone cabin was built in 1931-1932 of limestone blocks quarried nearby. It is currently used as an interpretive site and unfortunately, the interior is not open to the public. Looking through the windows however, it is tempting to think of it as an interesting place to overnight, and its big front porch offers an inviting spot to sit and contemplate the idyllic surroundings. Here one begins to really appreciate

the beauty of the canyon. The Texas Madrone trees with their distinctive red bark add color to the landscape, as do even the faded leaves of maples from the previous autumn.

Beyond the cabin, the trail narrows and follows a stream. At 3.5 miles, we descended into the Grotto, a small cave with rock picnic tables in a shaded alcove near a spring. A short distance farther is Hunter Cabin, a structure once used as a hunting retreat and part of a 1920s ranching operation.

Hiking back out of the Grotto, we returned to the main trail, continuing steeply up switchbacks to an aptly named opening in the

ridge at five miles from the start. “The Notch” is a dramatic viewpoint and an excellent destination for a day hike with a total elevation gain of 1,092 feet. Not the 3,000 feet we were hoping for with Guadalupe Peak, but satisfying nonetheless. Beyond The Notch, the McKittrick Canyon trail continues to a backcountry campsite and eventually connects with other trails. In all, the park boasts about 80 miles of hiking trails within its more than 86,000 acres.

Driving on to Arizona, we spent the next five days in Bisbee, a quirky, historic mining town within sight of the Mexico border. Bill taught an adventure motorcycle training class at the Desert Adventure Rally hosted each spring by motorcycle and overlanding



personality Eva Rupert and film maker Sterling Noren. I took advantage of the hamlet's crazy steep staircases to continue my Grand Canyon training, retracing the route of the annual Bisbee 1000 Stair Climb each day. Fortunately, our schedule was sufficiently flexible that we were able to reschedule the Guadalupe Peak hike for our return trip. Warm, sunny weather had persisted in between, so the summit trail would by this time be clear of snow and ice.

Turning east from Bisbee, we began looking for lodging for the night preceding our return to Guadalupe. Carlsbad, New Mexico, is about an hour the OTHER (east) side of the national park but towns and hotels are sparse to the west of the park. In a stroke of good luck, I happened upon More Travel Less Talk, a unique campground at Salt Flat, about 30 minutes west of Guadalupe Peak. By the light of day our abode for the night looked like a barn-shaped storage shed out in the desert, a “tiny house” roughly 9 by 13 feet amid a sprinkling of other similar structures, several glamping yurts, and plenty of cactus. It was indeed basic, with just enough room for a queen-size bed, small table and chairs, microwave and fridge. The rustic outdoor shower and toilet were a short walk away.

After dark the place was transformed. We sat outside in the warm night air and gazed at Guadalupe Peak, silhouetted against the eastern horizon. The Milky Way splashed across the sky above and solar pathway lighting adorned the grounds below, almost as though some of the stars had fallen and continued to glow around our feet.



In the pre-dawn of the next morning, the jagged outline of the mountain we were about to climb sliced the orange and pale blue promise of sunrise. I was reminded of what a stagecoach passenger wrote in 1858, “In the bright moonlight, we could see the Guadalupe Mountains, sixty miles distant on the other side of the river, standing out in bold relief against the clear sky, like the walls of some ancient fortress covered with towers and embattlements.”

GUADALUPE PEAK TRAIL

By sunrise, Bill and I were leaving the Pine Springs trailhead, a couple of hours behind several hikers who had made the climb to the summit in time to watch Old Sol peek over the horizon. The trail's elevation profile looks like a fairly constant grade, but the first mile and a half are the steepest. We were thankful for the cool of the morning as we tackled that section.

Once beyond that point, the remainder of the ascent felt fairly moderate. The lower part of the trail lacks shade which, with cool morning temperatures, was not a problem. Even so, it was a relief when the trail turned sharply, entering a pine-and-fir forest on the north slope of the mountain.

Three miles from the trailhead, the terrain flattens at a false summit in an area with high grass and a spur to a backpacker campground. The trail became narrower and more exposed beyond the campground spur, as we approached the summit. We crossed a wooden foot bridge built on the edge of a cliff over a deep fissure. I looked up at the summit, thinking, "We still have that far to go?"

As we approached the top, the back side of the El Capitan formation came into view and the trail became more and more rocky. El Capitan, at about 8,000 feet of elevation, catches the eye from many miles away and has served as a landmark for travelers for centuries with its 1,000-foot-high limestone cliff.

We reached the summit after a bit of scrambling, crossing one or two areas which felt quite exposed but were not difficult to negotiate. A few other hikers were lounging at the top, taking time for snacks and a short rest. It was cool and windy so we didn't linger. Gusts at the summit are reported to reach 80 mph at times. While I expected to see a summit marker, I was impressed by an



"It seems as if nature had saved all her ruggedness to pile it up in this form of the Guadalupe Peak."



aluminum obelisk, placed there in 1958 by American Airlines to honor the centennial of the Butterfield Overland Mail stagecoaches, which passed through the Guadalupe Mountains from 1858 to 1861 on their way from St. Louis to San Francisco. Waterman L. Ormsby, the only through passenger on the first westbound Butterfield stage, wrote in 1858, "It seems as if nature had saved all her ruggedness to pile it up in this form of the Guadalupe Peak." Had Ormsby climbed to the top of that rugged pile, his awe would have been magnified a thousand times, seeing the panoramic view of the salt flats to the west, the Chihuahuan Desert to the south and east, and the forested top of El Capitan below.

Bill and I marveled at the number of people just then starting their grueling climb to the summit during the heat of the day as we were wrapping up our descent. Most of them appeared ill-prepared in every possible way, sweating, groaning and struggling to catch their



breath as they trudged upward with afternoon temps forecast at 97 degrees. How many rescues, we wondered aloud, must the National Park Service do on this mountainside and who in their right mind would start this ascent in the middle of a hot day? I hope they all survived.

Two previous hikes in the Guadalupe are also worth mentioning: Devil's Hall and Pinery Station.

DEVIL'S HALL

Devil's Hall trail in Pine Springs Canyon also begins at the Pine Springs trailhead and is 3.8 miles round trip. It starts out unremarkably on a gradually increasing slope and offers only about 650 feet of elevation change but is rated as strenuous because after the first mile it enters a wash filled with huge boulders and loose rock, requiring scrambling, cautious footing and careful attention.

At the end of the trail, we approached a "hallway" of high stone walls, but to reach it required a steep climb up a stair-like rock formation called "The Hiker's Staircase" before edging around a water-filled tinaja. The effort was unquestionably worthwhile. The Devil's Hall formation is a spectacular narrows 200 feet long with walls 100 feet high and only fifteen feet apart.



PINERY STATION

Near the Pine Springs Visitor Center is the ruin of Pinery Station, one of about 200 relay stations along the legendary 2,800-mile Butterfield Overland Mail route. All that remains are stone walls now propped up by timbers. Named for the nearby pine forests, Pinery Station was the highest station on the Butterfield route, at 5,534 feet of elevation, and one of the most isolated. A 3/4-mile trail runs from the Visitor Center to the ruins. It can also be accessed from a parking lot along Highway 180, just outside the park entrance.

Our two hikes in the Guadalupe Mountains National Park proved a worthy test and training grounds for our Grand Canyon rim-to-rim-to-rim and is a fine destination regardless. With much more to explore, the Guadalupe Mountains invite us to return for camping, scenic drives, backpacking, and many other day hikes.





PLANNING YOUR GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS ADVENTURE:

Guadalupe Mountains National Park offers a substantial network of trails and backcountry camping. It is also adjacent to the Lincoln National Forest and near Carlsbad Caverns National Park. Ample lodging and dining are available in Carlsbad, New Mexico. For authentic Mexican food, try El Jimador, 509 S. Canal Street in Carlsbad.

BOOKS AND MAPS:



Best Easy Day Hikes Carlsbad Caverns and Guadalupe Mountains National Parks by Stewart M. Green:



Hiking Carlsbad Caverns and Guadalupe Mountain National Parks by Bill Schneider:



National Geographic Trails Illustrated Map, Guadalupe Mountains National Park:



National Park Service map:

RESOURCES:



Guadalupe Mountains National Park:



American Southwest/Guadalupe Mountains National Park:



SUSAN DRAGOO

Susan embraces adventure travel in many forms – two-wheeled, four-wheeled, and on foot. As long as it involves experiencing more of the great outdoors, she is hard-pressed to resist an opportunity. When not on a break from leading women backpackers through the Ouachita Mountains, Susan explores together with her husband, Bill, in their Toyota 4Runner.

A desire to connect contemporary explorers with the places and people of the frontier led Susan to study and travel the region of Comancheria. Susan devotes much of her time to historical travel writing and outdoor photography, and is currently working on an extensive book highlighting the rich history of the Butterfield Overland Mail Route.

CAMPGROUNDS:

We highly recommend More Travel Less Talk, 30 minutes west of the national park at Salt Flat. See moretravelllesstalk.com or More Travel Less Talk on Facebook.

Developed campgrounds in the national park include Pine Springs, located at the Pine Springs trailhead, and Dog Canyon, two hours north of Pine Springs.

BEST TIME TO GO:

Mild winter days offer comfortable hiking and you can expect temperate weather in spring and fall. Colorful foliage also makes autumn a good time to go. The heat makes summer less desirable for hiking.

GETTING THERE:

Guadalupe Mountains National Park is located in far west Texas, 110 miles east of El Paso, Texas and 56 miles southwest of Carlsbad, New Mexico or 62 miles north of Van Horn, Texas on Highway 54.

The closest large commercial airline service is El Paso, Texas.

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