

***Las Vegas to Las Vegas***  
***A Driving Trip through the***  
***National Parks of the Southwest***



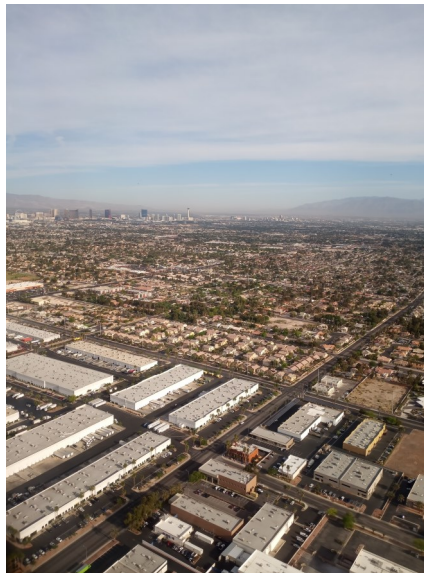
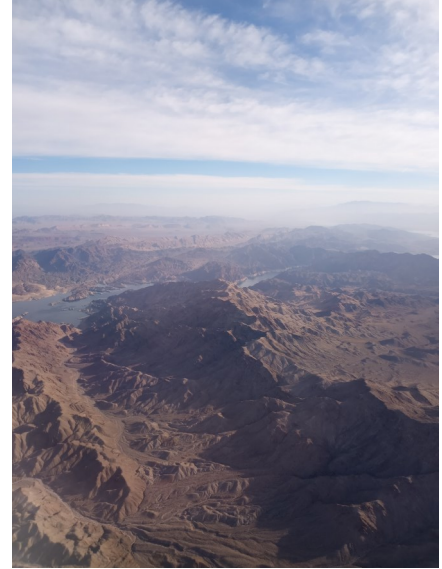
***April 2022***

***Bob and Molly Hillery***

## *Las Vegas to Las Vegas, April 2022*

**Monday April 11**

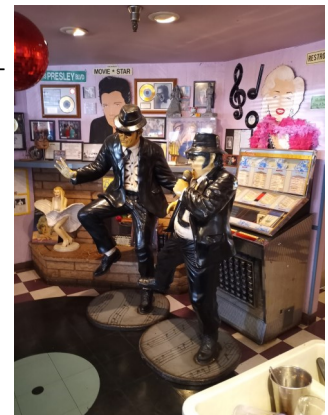
We were up at 5am after a night at the airport Marriott and caught the 5:30 shuttle. Our flight to Las Vegas left on time at 7am and we had a rather bumpy ride for much of the journey. However, we had a good breakfast and arrived in Las Vegas soon after 8am local time.



*Our flight over the  
Rockies, the canyons,  
and into Las Vegas*

Picking up the car was simple enough (although it is quite a distance off airport) and we were on our way west soon after nine. It was bright and sunny and extremely windy, such that sand was blowing across the highway much of the way. It was so dense at times that it was almost like driving in a snowstorm.

Our first stop after getting on I-15 was after about 120 miles at the 50s Peggy Sue Diner. This is an authentic old-style diner with waitresses in light blue smocks and 50s music playing continuously. We knew all the words! We had a good lunch and shortly



afterwards got off I-15 and took a much quieter road south to Palm Desert. It was a very pleasant ride after we left the expressway, although the scenery was magnificent all the way from Las Vegas.

We arrived at the Fairfield about 3:30, made dinner reservations for both nights that we are here and then I went for a two-mile walk in the upscale, small business neighborhood. Tonight, we ate at Ruth's Chris, a place we have enjoyed in several cities, notably Louisville and Salt Lake City.

It was the usual very good meal in pleasant surroundings, and we were back at the hotel shortly after nine – after an extremely long day.

### Tuesday April 12

We went to a local diner (CJ's) for breakfast and then set off for our day in the Joshua Tree National Park, about 40 miles west of Palm Desert. It was a beautiful sunny day but by the time we arrived at the south entrance to the park (3000 feet elevation) it was relatively cool (high fifties) and there was a stiff breeze. Nevertheless, after picking up a map at the visitor center, we drove north as far as Happy Valley (15 miles from the north entrance) and made a number of stops along the way. We took several walks of varying lengths and saw many different species of plant.



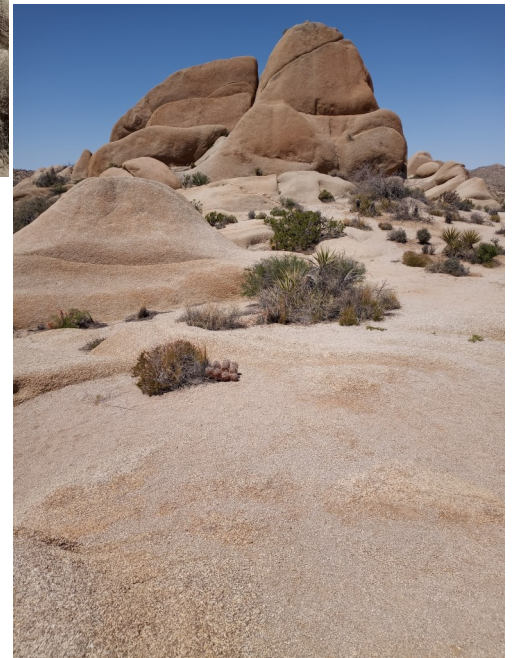
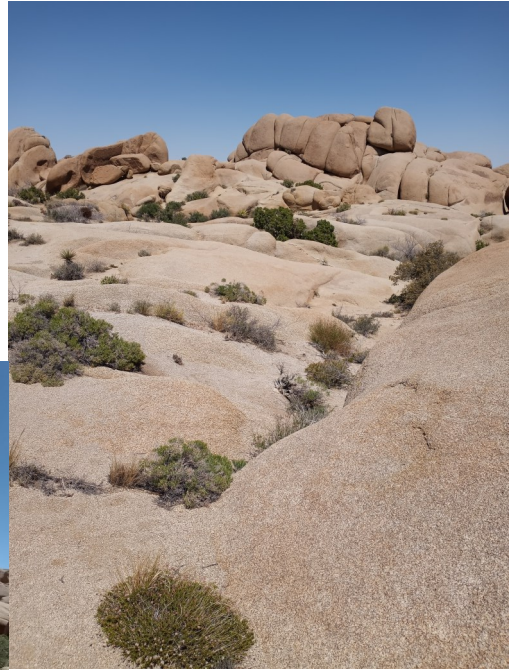
We were in the park for almost two hours before we saw the first Joshua Tree!

We were fortunate that the spring blossoms were just coming out on most of the plants and the desert showed touches of many colors from white to yellow and red to cream – and, of course, green.





The rock formations in many areas are as interesting as the plants and many have formed rounded clusters, having been eroded by chemicals in the soil when they were buried. Many are “recognizable” as figures and some have been given names to match.



***Joshua Trees and Rock Formations, including Skeleton Rock***

We were in the park for over five hours and thoroughly enjoyed our day, before retracing our footsteps to the south entrance and back to the hotel on I-10.

Tonight, we ate at Castelli’s, an Italian restaurant about 15 minutes from the hotel and had an excellent meal.

**Wednesday April 13**

We had breakfast at another local diner (JT’s) and then started our drive to Phoenix. Rather than follow I-10 all the way, we drove south from Palm Desert along side the Salton Sea (actually a few miles to our left) and through rich farmland of date palms, rice, fruit trees and corn – amongst others. Between the farms, which were extremely well irrigated, the land was dry desert and, although there were a few mountains around, our drive was mostly along flat land.

We passed through the southern end of the North Algodones Dunes Wilderness, a 40-mile stretch of very large sand dunes,



before heading north to Blythe, where we picked up I-10 – and stopped for a coffee lunch. We then drove directly to Good-year on the western edge of Phoenix where we reached the Spring Hill Suites around 3pm. I went for a very short walk as there were essentially no sidewalks around the hotel.

Tonight, we drove into Phoenix for dinner at the Cheesecake factory with Christopher and family who just happened to be visiting Scottsdale on their vacation. We had almost three hours with them and enjoyed catching up over a very pleasant meal.

#### **Thursday April 14**

We went to another local diner (Haymaker) for breakfast before setting off on our roundabout route to Tucson (only about two hours away via I-10). We started out driving about 20 miles west before heading south on Arizona Route 85. We followed this for about 35 miles before we arrived at the southwestern end of the Sonoran Desert Wildlife Wilderness, which we decided to enter. The “park” is just a straight-through drive with little to indicate what we might be seeing. It looked as though the main draw of the area would be to go off-roading or trail walking to find wildlife, so we saw none of that. The road climbed for about 40 miles through some spectacular scenery, so the drive was worth it. We arrived at Maricopa – a very smart town, much bigger than we anticipated – and then drove south to I-8 and turned back on the AZ 85 South at Gila Bend. From there we drove about 75 miles south to the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, which sits right on the Mexico border.



***Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument***



## *Organ Pipe Cactus*

Inside the park we took a 32-mile drive from the Visitor Center on an unpaved road that took us past many organ pipe cacti as well as hundreds of the more common variety and a number of other desert plants. The road rose steeply into the mountains, so we had some great views across the valley and into Mexico. Apparently, this area has had a number of examples of illegal alien crossings and even some violence which resulted in the death of a ranger some years ago. The scenery, however, was fantastic and one amazing aspect was just how green the ground cover was – not at all desert-like. Presumably this will change as spring turns to summer, but it made for a very pleasing drive.

From the park, it was about 2 ¼ hours driving to Tucson where we arrived just before 6pm after a long but interesting day. We checked in, cleaned up, and drove to Fleming's Steakhouse in the foothills (about 30 minutes' drive) for a very good meal and were back at the hotel about 9:30pm.

### **Friday April 15**

We ate at Jerry Bob's diner, almost next door to the hotel, and then left for our day in the Saguaro National Park. The park is in two, unequal sized halves, about an hour's drive apart. We began our day in the West Park, the smaller of the two, and took the unpaved loop drive from the Visitor Center, which is well inside the park. We were able to take a couple of walking trails along the way as well as a short nature trail that gave us a detailed look at virtually all the plants of the park. After a couple of hours or more we left for the East Park and took another loop drive (paved) just inside the park perimeter. I took a two-mile walk close to the start of the drive and then we continued round the loop, which climbed considerably to give some magnificent views across the valley to the distant mountains.



## *Saguaro National Park*



We arrived back at the hotel around 4pm after a very pleasant day out, during which the temperature reached 86F.

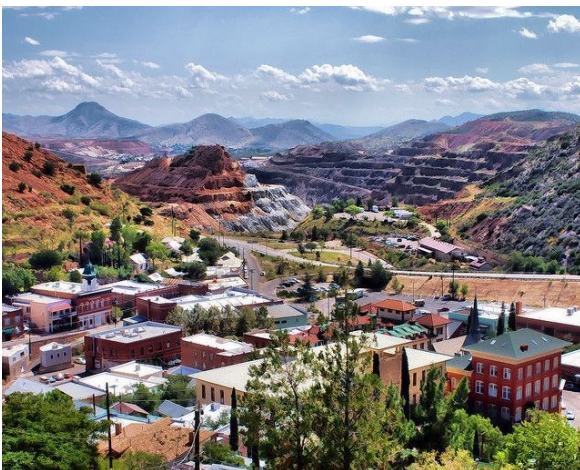
Tonight, we drove about 30 minutes north to Le Rendezvous, a restaurant that we had enjoyed

when we were here 18 months ago. Although the restaurant was not where we remembered nor did it have the same appearance, it was still a very good meal, with excellent service, and we both agreed that it was indeed the same we had enjoyed on our previous trip.



### Saturday April 16

We had breakfast at Jerry Bob's again and then set off for Las Cruces. Rather than go straight along I-10, we turned south on Arizona Route 80 ("Historic US 80") to Tombstone (just drove through and saw the street where the gunfights are held daily!) and then to Bisbee. We pulled off the highway here to admire this charming old mining town, with its turn of the century buildings and narrow streets. It appears that mining is still strong here as we passed by several huge pits on the east side of town. Copper and silver were the major minerals mined in the old days and it would appear that copper is still being mined.



From Bisbee we continued southeast to Douglas, which is right on the Mexico border. We stopped for a restroom break and then continued on

Route 80 until we crossed into New Mexico, at which point we turned east on Route 9. This paralleled I-10 but was within a few miles – sometimes a couple of a hundred yards – of the border, where the border wall is clearly seen for a stretch of about 150 miles.



We actually crossed into Texas at El Paso, before turning north into New Mexico again and were soon in Las Cruces. We arrived a little before 5pm local time (Mountain) and left before six to visit and old GE friend. We spent 1 ½ hours with Ed in his lovely home overlooking the valley and the Organ Mountains. He is remarkably alert for a 93-year-old and apparently has no hearing nor vision problems. We talked about mutual GE colleagues and the time we spent together, as well as talking about his life out west and how he and his wife (who died three years ago) came to live in Las Cruces. As with many life changes, it was almost an accident but they both enjoyed the area and the home they built.

Molly and I left to have dinner at a Mexican restaurant on the old town plaza and enjoyed the meal and the ambiance.

### Sunday April 17



We checked out of the hotel, had breakfast at a local Village Inn, and then set off east over the Organ Mountains to White Sands National Park. We did a few short walks in the park before heading north towards Santa Fe.

It was about a four-hour drive during which we made one stop for coffee and another for a short nap! The terrain was various degrees of desert, with areas of high plains covered in already dried grass, to almost barren with a little brush, to the more rugged mountain terrain closer to Santa Fe. It was a very pleasant drive and we arrived in Santa Fe at 6pm after a very

interesting day of travel.

Tonight, we drove into town to dine at La Boca, a restaurant we have enjoyed on several previous visits. Although, once again, it wasn't the place we had visualized, we know that we had been there previously, and we had an excellent Tapas meal with wine and dessert We were back at the hotel by 10pm.

**Monday April 18**

Today was a lazy day in Santa Fe. We had breakfast at a local café and then parked near the plaza, from where we walked to see various sites of interest. We were able to see the "magic" staircase in the Loretto Chapel (it had been closed when we



*Above: The Loretto Chapel*

*Left: The oldest church*

*Right: The oldest house*

*Below: The plaza*



**Santa Fe**

were last here during the pandemic), the oldest house in Santa Fe, and the oldest church in the country. On the plaza was the Palace of the Governors and close by was the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi. We also had a coffee at a small outdoor café and walked around the jewelry shops lining the plaza.

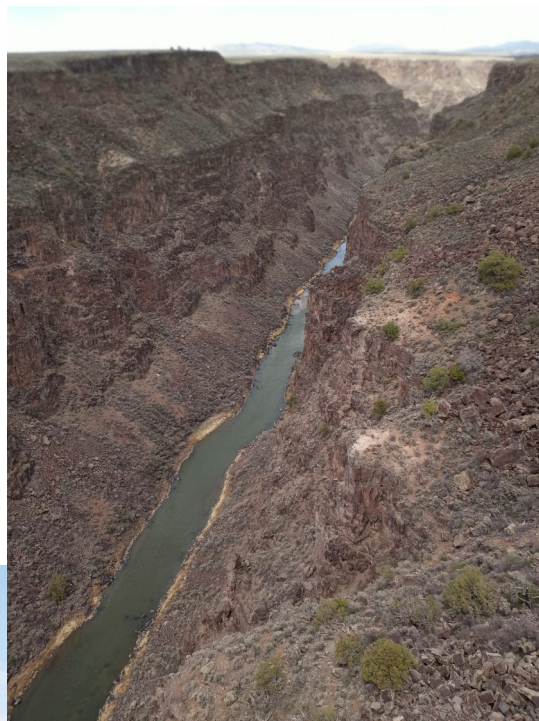
I went for a three-mile walk from the hotel in the afternoon and tonight we dined at Pasqual's. The restaurant was right on the plaza and, as we checked in, it looked a little "down market" and very crowded – no wonder they wanted to see our vaccination certificates! However, once we got settled and looked over the menu, we realized that they had some very interesting dishes. We shared a salad (excellent) and I had the lamb while Molly selected a chicken mole dish. Both were very good, and the service was great. We finished with dessert – and port.

## Tuesday April 19



We had breakfast at Weck's and then started a day out to the north of Santa Fe. The road to Taos was scenic but the almost constant road works detracted a little. We had coffee on the plaza in Taos and then drove a short distance west to the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge, which straddles the river at a height of 656 feet. We parked and we both went for walks. I walked across the bridge and back (about a mile) and then did another 2.5 miles (out and back total) along the west rim trail. This is part of a much longer Rio Grande Trail that will eventually cross the entire state of New Mexico.

We drove back to Santa Fe further to the west and crossed back over the Rio Grande not long before reaching the city. It was an extremely pleasant day out.



## *Rio Grande Gorge Bridge*

Tonight, we ate at Geronimo's in town. It was an excellent meal in a super ambience. Although it was full, it was very quiet and a very relaxing way to spend the evening.



**Wednesday April 20**

We left Santa Fe after breakfast at Weck's and drove south on I-25 to Albuquerque to turn west on I-40. Rather than stick to the expressway, we soon turned south to visit the Malpais and El Morro National Monuments. Malpais visitor center was closed so we simply drove through the area on our route – very nice scenery but no places to stop and visit. However, El Morro was a totally different story. The visitor center was open, and the staff were very helpful. We saw a short video on the area and received a map and guide for the two major trails in the park.



The 250 feet high mesa-like rock behind the center had been a beacon for early Native Americans, Spanish and American explorers as they headed west and, with a plentiful supply of water in one pond, became the place to stop. Many visitors wrote their names on the sandstone rock face – not modern-style graffiti but fancy cursive – so it is now called Inscription Rock.

We both took walks on the trails but on the one I took I found it very windy at the top and turned round rather than crossing the narrow top of the mesa. I had already climbed the 250 feet up but re-traced my footsteps to climb to the same elevation again on the other side of the loop. I estimate that I missed less than a quarter mile of the trail, so I consider that I made the loop “in effect”. It was a fabulous trail, hard work at that 7000 feet elevation (or at any elevation) and I thoroughly enjoyed it. The name carvings were also interesting to see.

We then drove the remaining 60 miles to Gallup where we checked in to our hotel about 4:30 and soon made a reservation

for dinner. It was a local Mexican restaurant with a not very appealing ambiance, but we enjoyed our food.

#### **Thursday April 21**

We had breakfast at a local diner (Sandra's Place) and then drove west on I-40 to the entrance to the Painted Desert/Petrified Forest National Park. We took the entire 26-mile drive through the park, stopping perhaps a dozen times at overlooks and to take walks on the many trails. There were innumerable spectacular views of the multi-colored desert terrain, which contained many mesas and hilly areas.

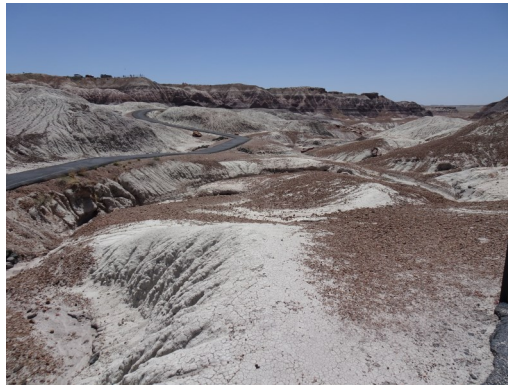


#### ***The Painted Desert—and a relic from Historic Route 66 in the park***

Walks (generally on well-paved trails) provided a lot of information about the formation of these “Badlands” and the reasons behind the many examples of petrified wood formations. There were also several areas of petroglyphs and examples of ancient dwellings in this area. Altogether, the five hours we spent in the park were very informative, very interesting and very scenic.



#### ***Ancient Dwellings and Petroglyphs***



## *The Petrified Forest*



We then drove on to Flagstaff, where we arrived about 4:45 local time – Arizona does not switch to DST, so is equivalent to PST at this time of year.

We found a nearby Mediterranean restaurant for dinner. Coincidentally, we had enjoyed a meal there on our last visit and this, too, was a pleasant evening.

### **Friday April 22**

It was cold and there were a few snowflakes in the air as we went to breakfast at a nearby café. We then set off west on I-40 towards Las Vegas, but after about an hour we turned off at Seligman to take about 70 miles of Historic Route 66 as far as Kingman.





Here we had lunch at D'z Diner (where we have visited several times) and then continued the final 100 miles to Las Vegas. By the time we reached the hotel (4pm) it was in the high sixties, so I went for a 3.75 mile walk along the city streets. Tonight, we ate at Morton's.

### **Saturday April 23**

We had a light breakfast in the hotel and checked out about 10am to return the rental car and check in for our flight to Minneapolis. We were able to get a light lunch before we left Las Vegas. The flight to Minneapolis was quite bumpy as we approached Minneapolis and the onward flight to Cincinnati was even more turbulent. However, we arrived at Cincinnati before 11:30 and took the shuttle to the Marriott. Unfortunately, the car wouldn't start so we spent the night at the Marriott and called AAA for a jump about 7am. Not the best way to conclude what had been a great trip.



