

AFALCONGUIDE®

Hiking California's Desert Parks

Second Edition

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1 Mountain Palm Springs Loop

This loop trail in the eastern Tierra Blanca Mountains has several short but steep climbs as it leads to two short forks. Here you will find several native palm groves at isolated oases. These hidden patches of greenery provide excellent birding sites.

Start: About 52 miles south of Borrego Springs.

Distance: 6.5-mile loop with two side trips.

Approximate hiking time: 5 hours.

Difficulty: Moderate.

Trail surface: Mostly clear trail with several clear wash stretches along with short, good sections of rocky cutoff trails.

Seasons: October through April.

USGS topo map: Sweeney Pass-CA (1:24,000).

Trail contact: Anza-Borrego Desert State Park (see appendix D).

Finding the trailhead: From the park visitor center, go 1.9 miles east on Palm Canyon Drive to Christmas Circle; from the circle, take Borrego Springs Road (S3) south for 5.6 miles to the Y intersection, where you bear right. Continue on S3 7.4 miles to the Tamarisk Grove intersection with California Highway 78. Go right (west) on CA 78 for 7.4 miles to Scissors Crossing. Turn left (south) on Park Route S2. Drive 31.8 miles south on S2. Shortly after mile marker 47, turn right (west) onto the dirt road for the Mountain Palm Springs Campground. Continue 0.5 mile to the trailhead and parking area.

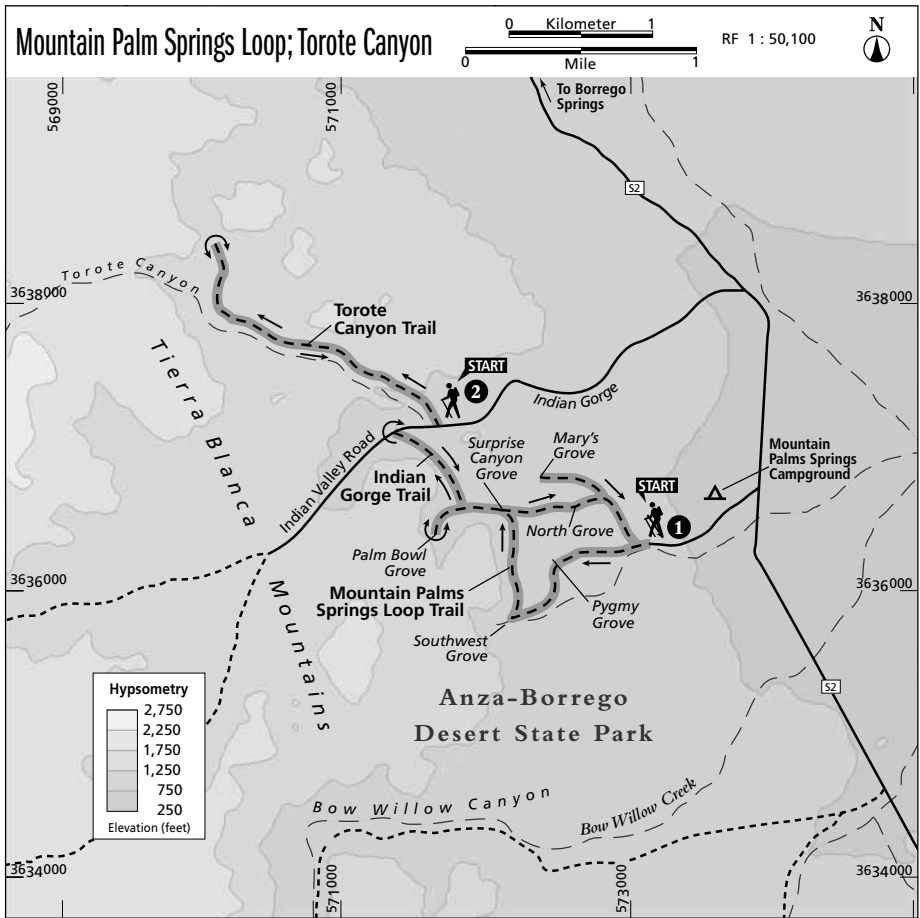
The Hike

The Mountain Palm Springs oasis loop is really two separate hikes from the same trailhead to the end point of both hikes: the extensive Palm Bowl Grove. The resulting combination is a wonderful loop to all six of the captivating palm groves in the Mountain Palm Springs complex. Both trails lead up sandy washes, one westward and the other to the north. It is preferable to begin on the south leg of the loop by heading west to the Pygmy Grove, but it makes little difference which way you hike the loop.

The native California fan palm derives its name from the shape of its leaves. As the tree produces new leaves at the top of its trunk, skirts of older leaves die and droop over the lower part of the tree, giving it the distinctive full look characteristic of these palms. These groves are remnants of ancient savannahs. Here water and shade attract scores of bird species, such as the hooded oriole, which weaves its nest on the underside of palm fronds. You may also catch a glimpse of a great horned owl, mourning dove, cactus wren, or western bluebird. In the fall coyotes help regenerate the trees by eating their tiny fruits and leaving seed-laden droppings in new locations.

On the south end of the loop, head west up a sandy wash to the first small grove of four large palm trees at 0.4 mile. Continue up the main wash another 0.4 mile to Pygmy Grove, named after the larger grove of short, fire-scarred trees. The third





small grove consists of five trees in a tight cluster. From here a rocky ravine leads to the right another 0.2 mile to a single palm tree. Turn left up the main valley to a fork in the trail at 1.2 miles. Continue to the right another 0.3 mile to the sizable Southwest Grove, which can be seen straight ahead. Pools of water and nearby elephant trees make this peaceful oasis an enjoyable interlude during the loop hike.

From Southwest Grove, take a fairly distinct trail northward over a rocky ridge 1 mile to Surprise Canyon. From here turn left and walk up the canyon another 0.5 mile to the largest and most luxuriant grove in the complex, Palm Bowl. On the way back down from Palm Bowl Grove, look for the signed Indian Gorge Cutoff Trail leading to the north. This old Indian trail is signed 0.5 MILE TO INDIAN GORGE. The actual distance is closer to 0.7 mile. The narrow, rocky trail gains 200 feet to the top

◀ *The palms of Mary's Grove are tightly clustered on the north end of the Mountain Palm Springs Loop.*

of the ridge then angles down left into Indian Valley. The round-trip distance from Surprise Canyon to Indian Valley is 1.4 miles, providing yet more variety to this already diverse hiking loop.

To complete the loop from Surprise Canyon, continue down the wash to the parking area/trailhead. North Grove is reached 0.5 mile down the canyon, Mary's Grove is a 0.6-mile side trip to the left, and from this junction the trailhead is only another 0.5 mile.

Miles and Directions

- 0.0** From the trailhead, head west up the sandy wash.
- 0.8** Arrive at Pygmy Grove.
- 1.0** Turn left next to a single palm tree and head up the main wash.
- 1.2** Stay right at the fork in the trail.
- 1.5** Arrive at Southwest Grove.
- 2.5** At Surprise Canyon, turn left and walk up to Palm Bowl Grove.
- 3.0** This is Palm Bowl Grove, the turnaround point.
- 3.3** Turn left (north) on the signed Indian Gorge Trail.
- 4.0** Use the turnaround point at Indian Valley Road.
- 4.7** You're back at Surprise Canyon for completion of the 1.4-mile out-and-back side hike.
- 4.9** Turn left (east) at Surprise Canyon Grove.
- 5.4** At North Grove, turn left (north) for the short walk to Mary's Grove.
- 5.7** Use the turnaround point at Mary's Grove.
- 6.0** Back at North Grove, continue south to the trailhead.
- 6.5** Complete the loop back at the trailhead.

Option: If you start the hike on the northern leg of the loop, the trail leads north from the parking area up a sandy wash or, if you prefer firmer footing, up the right bank of the wash. Straight ahead you can catch a glimpse of palm trees 0.2 mile farther. The wash grows progressively rockier as you approach Mary's Grove, where huge 30- to 40-foot palms tower above the rocky gorge. Retrace your steps 0.3 mile back down the wash to the trailpost that marks the mouth of the wash that runs westward. The intersection is rocky, but this new wash becomes sandy as it gains slightly in elevation.

As you continue west up the new wash, you will pass North Grove, which consists of several clumps of palm trees, providing a delightful shady interlude in your journey. One spot to keep in mind for later is a distinctive row of palms (appropriately called Surprise Canyon Grove), for it is there that a marked cutoff trail climbs over the ridge to the south to the Southwest Grove. Meanwhile, however, keep moving west, because another lovely surprise awaits you: a huge array of majestic palms arranged like an orchestra in an amphitheater valley. This is the Palm Bowl Grove. Plan on allowing ample time to enjoy this magical place before hiking back down the wash.

Contents

Acknowledgments xii

Introduction 1

 The California Desert Protection Act of 1994 3

 The Meaning and Value of Wilderness 4

 Have Fun and Be Safe 6

 Zero-Impact Desert Etiquette 8

 How to Use This Book 9

Map Legend 13

The Hikes

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park 15

 1 Mountain Palm Springs Loop 23

 2 Torote Canyon 27

 3 Moonlight Canyon 29

 4 Squaw Peak/Pond 32

 5 Box Canyon Overlook 34

 6 Foot and Walker Pass 37

 7 Ghost Mountain: Marshal South Home 38

 8 The Morteros 41

 9 Pictograph Trail 43

 10 Wind Caves 45

 11 Elephant Trees Nature Trail 48

 12 Narrows Earth Trail 50

 13 Kenyon Overlook Trail Loop 51

 14 Cactus Loop Trail 54

 15 Yaqui Well Nature Trail 55

 16 Wilson Trail 56

 17 California Riding and Hiking Trail: Peña Spring and Culp Valley Overlook 59

 18 Panorama Overlook/Extended Overlook 62

 19 Borrego Palm Canyon Nature Trail 65

 20 Alcoholic Pass 67

 21 Lower Willows 70

 22 Indian Canyon 73

 23 Cougar Canyon 75

 24 Sheep Canyon 78

 25 Pacific Crest Trail: Table Mountain and Combs Peak 81

Joshua Tree National Park 85

 26 Lost Palms Oasis 95

 27 Cottonwood Spring/Moorten’s Mill Site 98

 28 Mastodon Peak Loop 101

29	Cottonwood Spring Nature Trail	103
30	Conejo Well/Eagle Mountains	104
31	Coxcomb Mountains	107
32	Porcupine Wash/Ruby Lee Mill Site	111
33	Porcupine Wash to Monument Mountain	115
34	Golden Bee Mine	118
35	Cholla Cactus Garden Nature Trail	120
36	Pleasant Valley to El Dorado Mine/Pinto Basin	122
37	Hexahedron Mine	125
38	Sand Dunes	128
39	Pushawalla Plateau/Canyon	130
40	Keys View Loop/Inspiration Peak	134
41	Lost Horse Mine Loop	137
42	California Riding and Hiking Trail: Keys View Road to Park Route 11	141
43	Arch Rock Nature Trail	145
44	Skull Rock Nature Trail	148
45	Crown Prince Lookout	151
46	Ryan Mountain	152
47	Cap Rock Nature Trail	155
48	Lucky Boy Vista	156
49	Desert Queen Mine and Wash	158
50	Pine City/Canyon	160
51	Contact Mine	164
52	Fortynine Palms Oasis	166
53	Sneakeye Spring	169
54	Indian Cove Nature Trail	172
55	Wall Street Mill	173
56	Wonderland Wash	176
57	Barker Dam Nature Trail Loop	178
58	Hidden Valley Nature Trail	180
59	Boy Scout Trail/Willow Hole	182
60	Quail Wash to West Entrance Wash	187
61	California Riding and Hiking Trail: Covington Flat to Keys View, Quail Mountain	191
62	Black Rock Loop Trail: Eureka Peak and Back via California Riding and Hiking Trail	195
63	High View Nature Trail	198
Mojave National Preserve		201
64	Silver Peak	211
65	Quail Spring Basin	214
66	Kelso Dunes	216
67	North Lava Bed Wash	219
68	Lava Tube	222

69	Teutonia Peak/Cima Dome	225
70	Crystal Spring Overlook	228
71	Hole-in-the-Wall to Mid Hills	231
72	Eagle Rocks	236
73	Table Top Mountain Loop	238
74	Caruthers Canyon	242
75	Keystone Canyon	245
76	Fort Piute/Piute Gorge	249
77	Castle Peaks	253
78	Clark Mountain/North Canyon	256

Death Valley National Park	261
79 Through-Granite Canyons	271
80 Ashford Canyon/Mine	274
81 Sidewinder Canyon	276
82 Willow Canyon	280
83 Dante's View	283
84 Badwater	286
85 Natural Bridge	288
86 Desolation Canyon	290
87 Golden Canyon/Gower Gulch Loop	293
88 Pyramid Canyon	297
89 Harmony Borax Works	298
90 Upper Hole-in-the-Wall	300
91 Keane Wonder Mine	304
92 Keane Wonder Spring	307
93 Monarch Canyon/Mine	309
94 Hungry Bill's Ranch/Johnson Canyon	312
95 Surprise Canyon to Panamint City	316
96 Telescope Peak	320
97 South Fork Hanaupah Canyon	324
98 Hummingbird Spring	327
99 Wildrose Peak	329
100 Nemo Canyon	331
101 Darwin Falls	333
102 Panamint Dunes	336
103 Marble Canyon	340
104 Mosaic Canyon	344
105 Grotto Canyon	348
106 Little Bridge Canyon	350
107 Salt Creek Interpretive Trail	353
108 Titus Canyon Narrows	356
109 Fall Canyon	359
110 Red Wall Canyon	362

111 Ubehebe Peak 365

112 Ubehebe Lead Mine/Corridor Canyon 369

113 Ubehebe and Little Hebe Craters 372

114 Eureka Dunes 375

Afterword 379

Appendix A: Our Favorite Hikes 381

Appendix B: Recommended Equipment 383

Appendix C: Other Information Sources and Maps 385

Appendix D: State and Federal Park Management Agencies 387

Index 391

About the Authors 395

very slowly. Its destruction leads to wind and water erosion and irreparable harm to the desert. Darker crusty soil that crumbles easily indicates cryptogamic soils, which are a living blend of tightly bonded mosses, lichens, and bacteria. This dark crust prevents wind and water erosion and protects seeds that fall into the soil. Walking can destroy this fragile layer. Take special care to avoid stepping on cryptogamic soil.

Keep noise down. Desert wilderness means quiet and solitude, for the animal life as well as other human visitors.

Leave your pets at home. Most parks have regulations forbidding dogs on trails; check with park authorities before including your dog in the group. Share other experiences with your best friend, not the desert.

Pack it in/pack it out. This is more true in the desert than anywhere. Desert winds spread debris, and desert air preserves it. Always carry a trash bag, both for your trash and for any that you encounter. If you must smoke, pick up your butts and bag them. Bag and carry out toilet paper (it doesn't deteriorate in the desert) and feminine hygiene products.

Never camp near water. Most desert animals are nocturnal, and most, like the bighorn sheep, are exceptionally shy. The presence of humans is very disturbing, so camping near their water source means they will go without water. Camp in already-used sites if possible to reduce further damage. If none is available, camp on ground that is already bare. And use a camp stove. Ground fires are forbidden in most desert parks; gathering wood is also not permitted. Leave your campsite as you found it. Better yet, improve it by picking up litter, cleaning out fire rings, or scattering ashes of any inconsiderate predecessors. Contradictory though it may be, remember that artifacts fifty years old or older are protected by federal law, and must not be moved or removed.

Treat human waste properly. Bury human waste 4 inches deep and at least 200 feet from water and trails. Pack out toilet paper and feminine hygiene products; they do not decompose in the arid desert. Do not burn toilet paper; many wildfires have been started this way.

Respect wildlife. Living in the desert is hard enough without being harassed by human intruders. Remember this is the only home these animals have. They treasure their privacy. Be respectful and use binoculars for long-distance viewing. *Especially important:* Do not molest the rare desert water sources by playing or bathing in them.

Beyond these guidelines, refer to the regulations of the individual park areas for their specific rules governing backcountry usage. Enjoy the beauty and solitude of the desert, and leave it for others to enjoy.

How to Use This Book

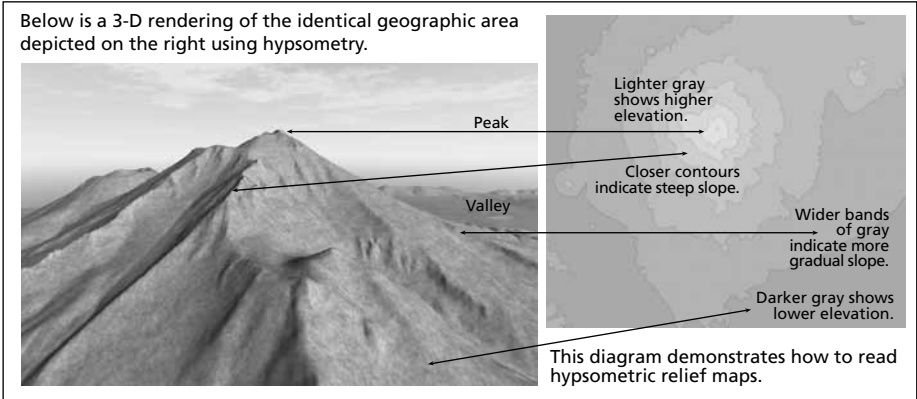
This guide is *the* source book for those who wish to experience on foot the very best hikes and backcountry trips the vast and varied California desert has to offer. A

broad array of hikes is presented here for each of California’s four major desert parks. Hikers are given many choices from which they can pick and choose, depending on their wishes and abilities.

The maps in this book that depict a detailed close-up of an area use elevation tints, called hypsometry, to portray relief. Each gray tone represents a range of equal elevation, as shown in the scale key with the map. These maps will give you a good idea of elevation gain and loss. The darker tones are lower elevations and the lighter grays are higher elevations. The lighter the tone, the higher the elevation. Narrow bands of different gray tones spaced closely together indicate steep terrain, whereas wider bands indicate areas of more gradual slope.

Maps that show larger geographic areas use shaded, or shadow, relief. Shadow relief does not represent elevation; it demonstrates slope or relative steepness. This gives an almost 3-D perspective of the physiography of a region and will help you see where ranges and valleys are.

For a general geographic orientation, begin with the overview map of south-eastern California near the front of this book. Here you’ll find the relative sizes and locations of the four parks—from Anza-Borrego, just north of the Mexican border, northward to Death Valley. The book is divided into four chapters, one for each of the four major parks. The parks are presented from south to north, beginning with Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, followed by Joshua Tree National Park, Mojave National Preserve, and Death Valley National Park. The numbering of the individual hikes in each park also generally runs south to north, although this is sometimes altered by the clustering of hikes sharing common access. This south-to-north presentation roughly parallels the progression of seasons. For example, spring comes earlier in Anza-Borrego as compared to Death Valley, due to its lower average elevation. Thus, the desert hiker seeking comfortable hiking weather can start the season earlier in Anza-Borrego and work gradually to the more northern desert parks as the season advances.



After selecting the park you'll be visiting, refer to the hike locator map at the beginning of the applicable section, along with the "Hikes at a Glance" matrix for a quick overview of all of the hikes presented for the park. After making your selections, turn to the specific hike descriptions for added detail. Each hike is numbered and named and begins with a general description. This overview briefly describes the type of hike and highlights the destination and key features.

The "start" is the approximate road distance from a nearby town or park visitor center to the trailhead. The idea is to give you a mental picture of where the hike is in relation to your prospective travels.

Hike "distance" is given in total miles for the described route. The mileage is in one direction for a loop, in which you return to the place where you started without retracing your steps, or for a one-way hike, in which you begin at one trailhead and end at another, requiring two vehicles, a shuttle bus, or another driver to pick you up or deposit you at either end. Round-trip mileage is provided for an out-and-back hike, in which you return to the trailhead the same way you came. A lollipop loop combines a stretch of out-and-back with a loop at one end. Mileages were calculated in the field and double-checked as accurately as possible with the most detailed topographic maps.

"Approximate hiking time" provides a best guess as to how long it will take the average hiker to complete the route. Always add more time for further exploration or for contemplation.

The "difficulty" rating is necessarily subjective, but it is based on the authors' extensive backcountry experience with folks of all ages and abilities. Easy hikes present no difficulty to hikers of all abilities. Moderate hikes are challenging to inexperienced hikers and might tax even experienced hikers. Strenuous hikes are extremely difficult and challenging, even for the most-seasoned hikers. Distance, elevation gain and loss, trail condition, and terrain were considered in assigning the difficulty rating. There are, of course, many variables. The easiest hike can be sheer torture if you run out of water in extreme heat—a definite no-no.

"Trail surfaces" are evaluated based on well-defined trail standards. Dirt trails have no obstructions and are easy to follow. Rocky trails may be partially blocked by slides, rocks, or debris but are generally obvious and easy to find. Primitive trails are faint, rough, and rocky and may have disappeared completely in places. In the desert some of the best hiking takes place on old four-wheel-drive mining roads that are now closed to vehicular use because of wilderness designation or to protect key values, such as wildlife watering holes. Many of the desert hikes are off-trail in washes, canyons, ridges, and fans. "Use trails" may form a segment of the route. A use trail is simply an informal, unconstructed path created solely by the passage of hikers.

The best "season" is based largely on the moderate-temperature months for the particular hike and is greatly influenced by elevation. Additional consideration is given to seasonal road access at higher altitudes. The range of months given is not necessarily the best time for wildflowers, which is highly localized and dependent

on elevation and rainfall. Nor is it necessarily the best time to view wildlife, which may be during the driest and hottest summer months near water sources.

The maps listed are the best available for route-finding and land navigation: the relevant 7.5-minute topographic map (1:24,000 scale or 2.6 inches = 1 mile) with a 40-foot contour interval. These U.S. Geological Survey maps can usually be purchased at the park visitor centers, except at Mojave. They can also be purchased for \$6.00 each (price as of this writing) directly from Map Distribution, USGS Map Sales, Box 25286, Federal Center, Building 810, Denver, CO 80225; by calling (800) ASK-USGS; or online at www.usgs.gov/pubprod/. See appendix C for a listing of other useful smaller-scale maps for each park.

For more information on the hike, the best available “trail contact” for the park management agency is listed. See appendix D for a complete listing of all agency addresses and phone numbers.

“Finding the trailhead” includes detailed up-to-date driving instructions to the trailhead or jumping-off point for each hike. For most hikes, there is no formal trailhead but rather a starting point where you can park. To follow these instructions, start with the beginning reference point, which might be the park visitor center, nearby town, or important road junction. Pay close attention to mileage and landmark instructions. American Automobile Association (AAA) map mileages are used when available, but in many instances we had to rely on our car odometer, which may vary slightly from other car odometers.

The text following the driving directions is a narrative of the actual route with general directions and key features noted. In some cases interpretation of the natural and cultural history of the hike and its surroundings is included. The idea is to provide accurate route-finding instructions, with enough supporting information to enhance your enjoyment of the hike without diminishing your sense of discovery—a fine line indeed. Some of these descriptions are augmented with photographs that preview a representative segment of the hike.

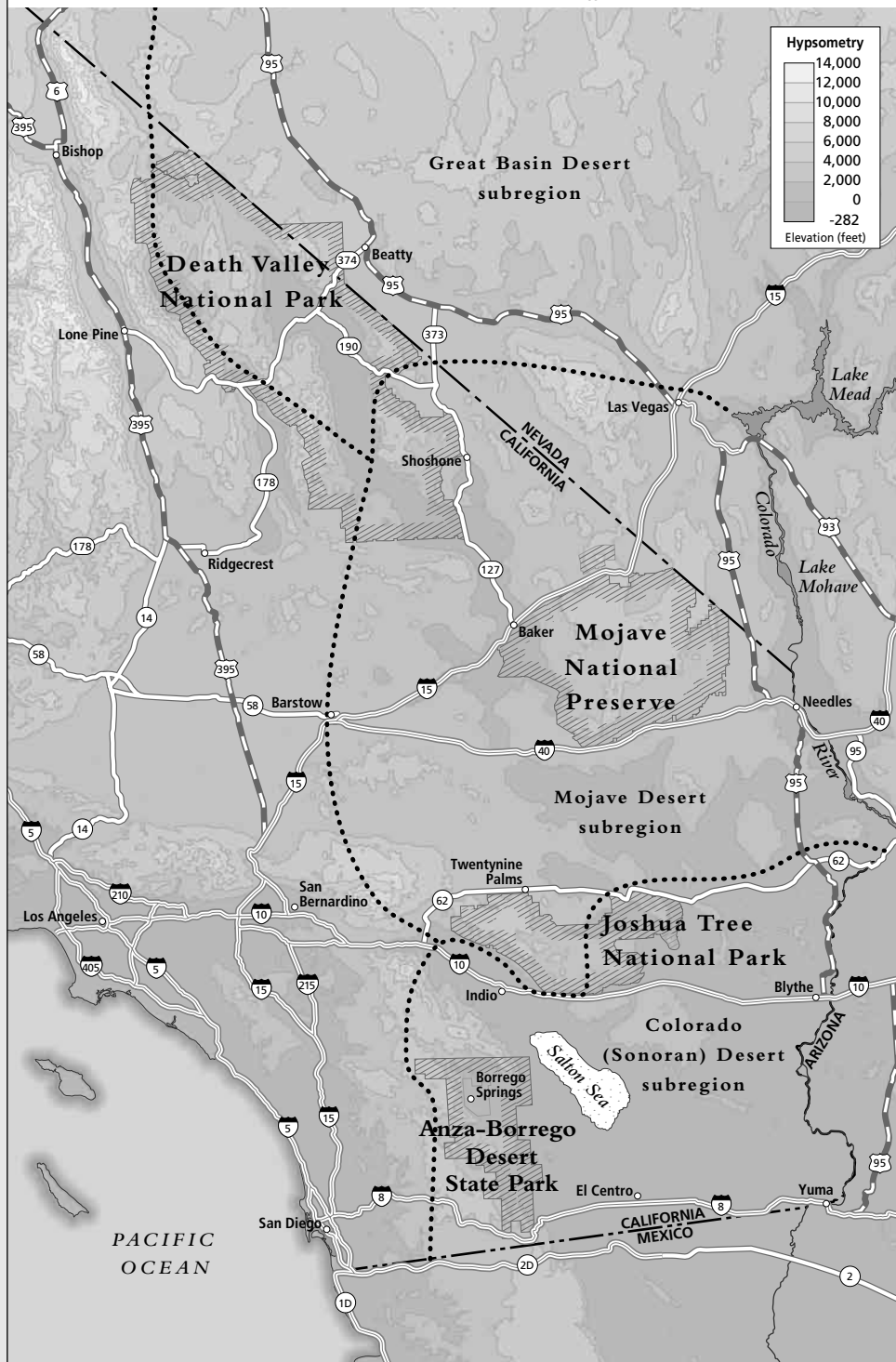
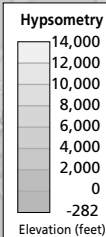
The trail itinerary, “Miles and Directions,” provides detailed mile-by-mile instructions while noting landmarks, trail junctions, canyon entrances, dry falls, peaks, and historic sites along the way.

And last, please don’t allow our value-laden list of “favorite hikes” (appendix A) to discourage you from completing any of the other hikes. They’re all worth doing!

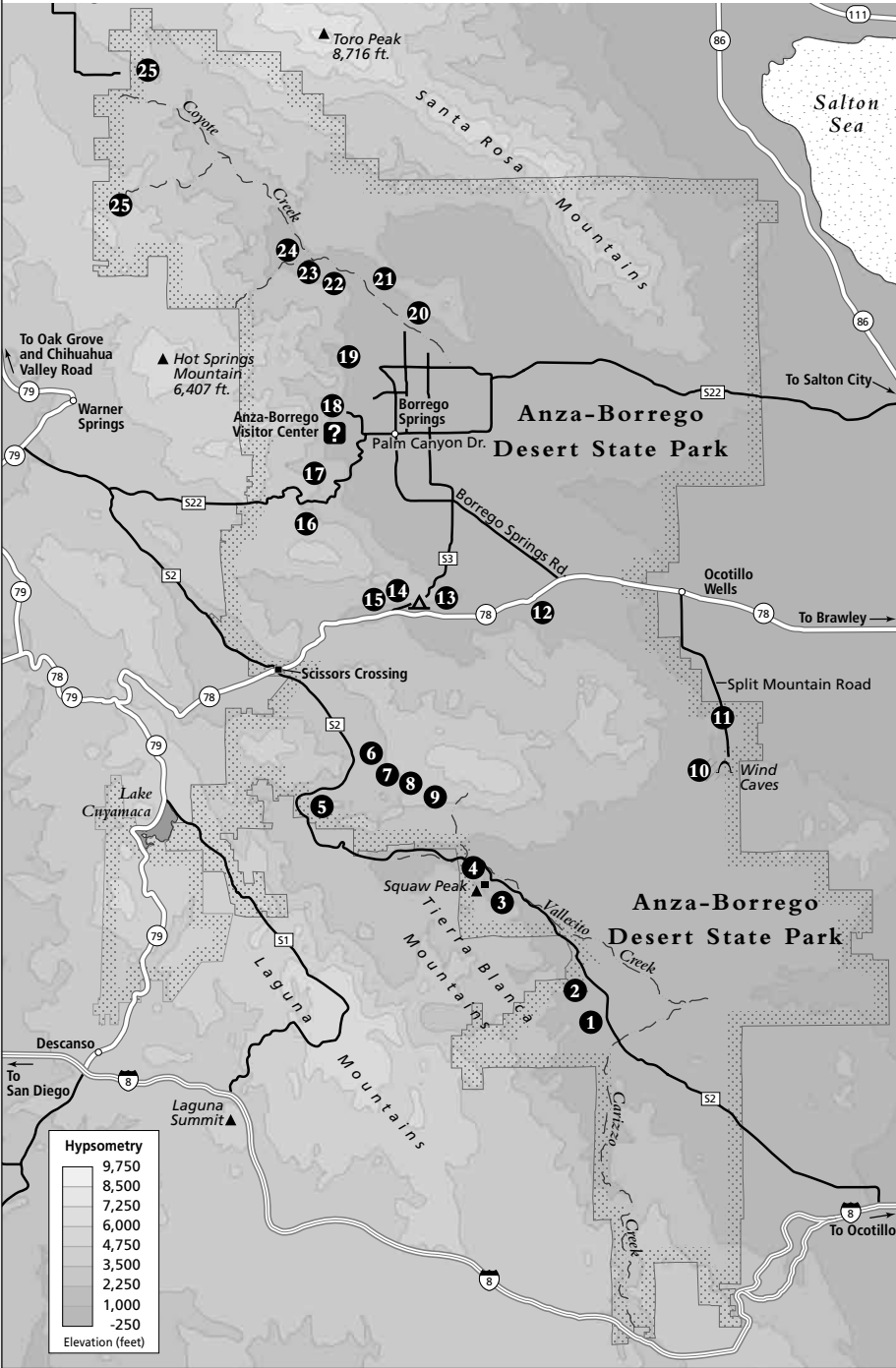
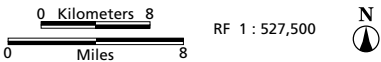
Overview

0 Kilometers 50
0 Miles 50

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Anza-Borrego Desert State Park Overview



Map Legend

Boundaries

	National wilderness/ preserve boundary
	National park boundary
	State park boundary
	County park boundary
	State boundary

Transportation

	Interstate
	U.S. highway
	State highway
	Primary road
	Other road
	Unpaved road
	Unimproved road
	Featured unimproved road
	Featured trail
	Optional trail
	Other trail
	Railroad
	Power line

Hydrology

	Intermittent stream
	Spring
	Fall
	Lake
	Dry lake
	Lava bed
	Sand/wash

Physiography

	Spot elevation
	Pass
	Peak
	Cave
	Cliff

Symbols

	Trailhead
	Trail start
	Trail locator
	Trail turnaround
	Parking
	Restroom/toilet
	Campground
	Backcountry campground
	Lodging
	Visitor center
	Ranger station
	Telephone
	Picnic area
	Town
	Overlook
	Point of interest
	Mine/prospect
	Gate
	Bridge
	Airport/ landing strip

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