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SIDE ORDERS

Flower Safari in a California Desert

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We found life on a Mars-scape.

In Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, six adventurers, including me, rattled around the rugged Southern California terrain in a former military truck. We were barreling around shallow craters and over mounds of red earth when, suddenly, a palm shot up, its green fronds waving hello in an otherwise unfriendly landscape. Five others soon materialized, followed by a small grove of the tufted trees. Considering the dry-as-toast surroundings, this was a virtual Eden.

Of course, with a trained eye and a green thumb, one can uncover the park's more verdant side, assuming one can find one's way around the largest state park in the Lower 48. Trails appear to have been plotted by sandstorms, and the cactus and low-lying shrubs are sprinkled around like confetti -- hardly reliable landmarks. In addition, the visitors map reveals more open space and chicken-scratch lines than well-defined routes.

Joe Raffetto, however, does not need signage or even GPS to find his way around the 630,000-acre park. The former Jersey boy and dolphin researcher operates California Overland, the park's only tour concessionaire. Since starting the Borrego Springs company nearly three years ago, he has gotten lost only once, due to bad directions.

The tours are held in M35-A2 trucks that were used on military bases to haul cargo (soldiers and/or supplies). The camouflage-painted vehicles roll on 10 big wheels, making them unstoppable in rough and tough terrain. (Those without four-wheel-drive don't have a chance in many portions of the park.) Wood side gates prevent tour-goers from popping out, and a tarp overhead protects heads from sunburn and eyes from sand sting. Most important, passengers look very GI Joe rambling around the desert in a truck that runs on testosterone.

The excursions vary in length (two hours to overnight) and intensity (easy, moderate, challenging). The Sheep Canyon tour, for example, traces Juan Bautista de Anza's 1774 trek through Coyote Canyon and includes stream crossings and an eight-mile round-trip hike. My more mellow half-day affair in the southern portion below Font's Point involved some bumpy drives, occasional ambling and lots of flora gazing.

I visited the park, a two-hour drive northeast of [San Diego](#), in late February, the start of wildflower season. The desert version of East Coast leaf peeping typically peaks early to mid-March. (Those who can't make it for peak season can still see cactus flowers, which appear throughout spring; some blossoms last even longer.) However, the wildflowers aren't a sure thing.

Last year, not one bud bloomed. The winds, temperatures and rainfall must be perfectly aligned or else the flowers won't unfold. This year, the park's Wildflower Hot Line is ringing off the hook with sightings, and its online Wildflower Update is constantly adding new regions that are turning from drab brown into an impressionist's canvas. But even with a map and a volunteer's suggestions, I only found a scattering of white flowers that from afar resembled blown tissues. I needed help.

"There's the Holy Grail of flowers," Raffetto hollered from the front seat, before stopping the truck abruptly and pointing out a pale desert lily growing unobtrusively in a sand wash.

Raffetto has a telescopic eye for desert wildlife. He spotted dainty flowers where I'd only noticed thorny cacti; he pointed out an antelope ground squirrel in what I'd considered a lifeless expanse. "You can go to the visitors center and ask them where to go," Raffetto said over lunch in Hawk Canyon, which was sprinkled with purple lupine, desert lavender and brittlebush. "But you don't know what you are seeing."

The tour covered about 50 miles of parkland, starting at San Felipe Wash, a broad swath of desert buttressed by pastel-tinged mountains and salted with desert foliage. In our outdoor classroom, we learned about agave (of tequila fame), the creosote bush (a cure-all for dandruff, arthritis and indigestion) and the dens of scorpions (nocturnal critters, thankfully). As we bombed around washes, canyons and the corkscrewed badlands, I became mindful of the small flourishes: a gold-mining excavation site in the mountain; dried-out desert holly that tastes of potato chips; the otherworldly San Felipe Hills, where Mr. Spock would feel at home.

For a finale, Raffetto parked us at Font's Point, the panoramic mesa named after a curmudgeonly priest from Anza's second expedition to [California](#). As we stood at the edge, a free-fall away from the badlands, Raffetto retraced our route with a wave of his hand. After six hours in the desert, I was amazed at how little of Anza-Borrego park we had covered, yet how far we had come.

-- [Andrea Sachs](#)

California Overland (866-639-7567, <http://www.californiaoverland.com>) offers year-round tours in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, including drive/hike excursions, mountain wine tours and overnights. Rates start at \$45. For info on the park: 760-767-5311, http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=638.

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