The **El Malpais National Monument** is amazing, majestic, awe-inspiring, and completely overwhelming….and not just the size!  Planning a trip to visit the El Malpais for the first time can be intimidating.  There is not a lot of information out there for first time visitors and after our trip this summer, we faced a lot of *“I wish we would have done this…gone here…..planned this…..”.*  So, for all my friends out there who have not yet been, here are **10 simple tips to make your first visit to the El Malpais**, well, grand.
**1. Where to Stay?** The El Malpais is about a half hour drive south of Grants.  And while there are plenty of great places to stay near there, be prepared for the drive there and back.  If you want to stay at the El Malpais, there is limited types of lodging available near the park, from camping to cozy lodges. I want to be in the park to see the sunrise or sunset without having that drive so somewhere close is preferable.  The KOA campground has camping cabins and then we are just a short scenic drive to the. There are also a lot of great Park monument Ranger programs available to do on site.

**2. Start at the Visitors Center** Start your day off by talking to a Park Ranger at the Visitors Center.  You can tell them what you want to see, how much time you have, etc. and they can help plan your day for you. They gave us excellent advice of where and when to go to certain points along the trail and they were spot on.  Plus the Visitors Center has an excellent film about the lava flows to view.

**3. Park near the trail head** Access to certain parts of the El Malpais are only accessible by a short car drive to the parking area and trail head. We took the car out to El Calderon picnic area and walked from point to point but there are plenty of places to rest on the trail side for extended rests and water breaks.

**4. Bring Your own Water Bottle, Lunches, Snacks** There are no facilities outside of the visitor center except for the waterless toilet buildings. I found it to be amazing to sit along the lava flow on a log or the cater rim and have a picnic lunch.  It’s not every day you can have that type of view while eating! Also, there are no water bottle filling stations so take along bottled water.

**5. Take advantage of the Park Ranger Programs** There were amazing talks and programs when we were visiting in July.  They were offering hikes, nature walks, story time, and more.  We were able to join a ranger at the Bat Cave for a “Ranger Talk” for a brief time, before it started to rain and he moved us all back to the parking area.

**6. Be prepared for Monsoon Season** Monsoons in New Mexico??  Yes!  Apparently, July is the month for afternoon rainstorms to quickly sweep into the Malpais. It was really cool to watch them move across the lava, and it left as quickly as it came.  It was brief and cooled us down.  But can be dangerous for those who are hiking in the Malpais.

**7. Hold on to the Kids!!** I was a bit surprised at how easy it was to step right along a crevasse in the lava.  I guess in my mind, I pictured improved path surfaces along the trails.  Uh no.  It would take away from the natural beauty of it all.That said, my son was a daredevil.  My 10 year old scampered his way out on several overlooks that this chicken-hearted mom never would have attempted.  It was incredible for him but nerve-wracking for me.  Though most adults would tell me that where there was short cuts, I was still a nervous-wreck when my kids got close to a sinkhole edge.  Stay on the path….just stay on the path.

**8. Be Patient** There are not a ton of people visiting the El Malpais.  With it’s massive size and breath-taking beauty, it is an international tourist destination.  And during the summer, it is more crowded.  The first view of the Malpais we had was at the Visitor’s Center, along with every other first time visitor.  It wasn’t crowded but we didn’t know any better.  Have patience, there is plenty of Malpais to go around.  Had we walked just half a mile south behind the visitor center, we would have had a view to ourselves. And that afternoon, while walking along the trail out of El Calderon, we were alone most of the time.

**9. Plenty of places to take pictures along the triail** When you first come upon the El Malpais, you can’t help but want to take a gazillion pictures of it’s beauty.  You really can’t.  You and 12 other people are trying to get the same shot.  Again, walk half a mile south along the path and you will have plenty of space to take pictures.  The El Malpais is also a great place to [Pay it Forward](http://www.rwethereyetmom.com/2013/08/paying-it-forward-on-our-road-trip.html) and offer to take family shots for others.  We were paid back and got a few ourselves too.

**10. Put your camera down and enjoy** The El Malpais is so majestic, you want to capture the moment with your camera, over and over.  But you have to tell yourself to stop.  You don’t need 245 pictures of the Grand Canyon, you really don’t.  The best piece of advice I have for you is to put the camera down, sit on the side of the trail and take it all in.  The kids and I had some of the best conversations that day just sitting and staring into the wilderness.  It was awesome.

Our brief time at the El Malpais was amazing thanks to a wonderful Park Ranger who planned our day out for us.  But it was just a taste of all there is to do there.  We can’t wait for the kids to get a bit older, so we can spend a few days there and really take it all in.  But for now, if you only have a day, I hope these 10 tips help! Enjoy!