

BEST JOSHUA TREE HIKES FOR FIRST-TIME VISITORS

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by Ryan Moore

The beauty of Joshua Tree National Park is made up of 794,000 acres that straddle the Mojave and Colorado deserts. The first time I drove through the western gate it felt like I was stepping into one of Dr. Seuss's books with the spiny Joshua Tree's shaking their pom-poms across the valley floor. Legend has it that Mormon pioneers saw the outstretched arms of the trees and were reminded of the biblical character Joshua, who was to lead them to the promise land. The name stuck.

Headed to Joshua Tree National Park for the first time? Here's details on the 3 best Joshua Tree hikes.

The West and North entrances off of Interstate 62 open up to the Mojave side of the park while the entrance off of Interstate 10 in the southeast quadrant opens up to the Colorado Desert. This is important to know because the scenery is dramatically different between the high and low deserts.

The west side of the park stands above 3,000 feet and is covered with expansive Joshua Tree groves that are speckled with gigantic piles of monzogranite boulders, while the east side of the park sits well below the Mojave covered in creosote bushes among the towering Cottonwood, Eagle and Coxcomb mountains. Both sides are memorable, but if you're limited on time make sure to hit the Mojave side first.

If you don't have the time to scour every inch of Joshua Tree, here's three of the best Joshua Tree hikes for first-time visitors that will highlight the best of what the national park has to offer. All three of these Joshua Tree hiking trails are easily accessible, moderate in length, and require little more than some water, a map, and your favorite sunglasses.

— Warren Peak Trail Stats —

Distance: 6.0 miles

Elevation Gain: 1,000 feet

Time: 3.0 hrs

Rules of the Road: Hikers only. No dogs or mountain bikes.

Warren Peak is located in the northwest corner of the park adjacent to the Black Rock Campground. It's a 6 mile round trip that is a great place to start, especially if you're coming from the West, as it's the first stop off of CA-62.

The trail up to Warren Peak starts on the Black Rock Canyon Trail, which can be a bit of a pain to find. To find the trail, walk directly east of the Ranger station through all of the campsites

and across a section of dense shrubs about the size of a football field. When you hit the trail you'll know it. It's wide, sandy and flanked by blackbrush. Take a right once you hit the trail and start heading up the hill. Along the way you'll pass a number of joshua trees, the mojave yuca and some huge blocks of black and grey gneiss.

Make sure to stay right as you work your way up. You are going to pass up a number of opportunities to turn left. If you have your eyes set on the peak, don't.

Once you hit a post in the ground with a PL and a WP painted on it you are about 80% of the way there with the most difficult portion of the hike to go. The last 20% takes you up a fairly steep grade that will undoubtedly get your heart pumping. There may be one or two places where you have to scramble on all fours but for the most part you'll remain on two feet. As you climb higher and higher the view of the surrounding mountains will get bigger and bigger. The payoff atop the 5,103-foot peak is a 360° view of Southern California's tallest mountains.

*If you are looking for additional hiking trails near Black Rock Canyon, Eureka Peak is another nice option...but it's a solid 6-hour trek, offers very similar views and doesn't feel quite as remote with car access available from Covington flat.

Directions:

From I-10, take CA-62 north 18.3 miles to the town of Yuca Valley. Turn right onto Kickapoo Trail and then take a left onto Onaga Trail. Drive on Onaga trail for 2.4 miles and turn right onto Joshua Lane. Joshua Lane dead ends into San Marino Drive. Take a right when you hit San Marino. San Marino quickly turns into Black Rock Canyon Road. The trail is directly east of the ranger station past the campgrounds and through 100 yards of brush.

— Hidden Valley Trail Stats —

Distance: 1.0 mile

Elevation Gain: flat

Time: 30 minutes to 3 hours

Rules of the Road: Hikers only. No dogs or mountain bikes.

Hidden Valley is located off of Park Boulevard 12 miles southeast of the west entrance. It looks a bit like a real-life Bedrock from the Flinstones with huge piles of white tank monzogranite piled up in every direction. The trail is rumored to have been a famous hideout for cattle rustlers. You can see why as you work your way through the trail. The huge stacks of boulders are primed for climbing and create distracting acoustics that make it difficult to determine where anyone is.

While the loop is only 1.0 mile long, you can easily spend hours exploring the rock formations, which are very easy to climb. The white tank monzogranite has a very solid and tacky surface,

but be careful. It's often easier to go up than come down, especially without climbing equipment

The trail is well groomed and much more populated than the trail to Warren Peak.

Directions:

From CA-62 take Park Boulevard (which turns into Quail Springs Road before changing back to Park Boulevard) for 14 miles until you see the Hidden Valley Campground on your left. The nature trail is just a bit further up the road on your right. Parking is available at the trailhead.

— Ryan Mountain Trail Stats —

Distance: 3 miles

Elevation Gain: 1,075 feet

Time: 2 hrs

Rules of the Road: Hikers only. No dogs or mountain bikes.

Ryan Mountain is located 3 miles south of the Hidden Valley trail off of Park Boulevard. There is no signage that points the way until you are right on top of the Ryan Campground so just keep following signs to Keys View. The 5,470 ft peak offers some of the best panoramic views of the park. San Jacinto, San Gorgonio, Wonderland of the Rocks, Pleasant Valley...you name it, it's there.

The march onward and upward gets going as soon as you leave the parking lot. The trail includes a 1,075 foot elevation gain that is moderately steep but very well maintained with great foot-holds. In fact, an impressive stone staircase winds up and around the vast majority of the mountain.

As you climb, the drama builds. Your views change from the expansive desert floors of the Queen and Lost Horse Valleys to the rich red and orange stone piles of Wonderland of Rocks. The payoff includes huge views of the San Gorgonio and San Jacinto Mountains.

Directions:

From CA-62 take Park Boulevard (which turns into Quail Springs Road before changing back to Park Boulevard) for 16.7 miles until you see the Ryan Mountain Campground on your right. The trail is just a bit further up the road on the right hand side. Parking is available at the trailhead.