

Rent Car, Will Travel: Amazing Southwest Drives and Day Trips

By Cynthia Beisiegel



With vast stretches of desert, majestic mountain ranges and the breathtaking Pacific coast, families will find the sights and activities of the southwestern United States as diverse as the region's exceptional landscapes.

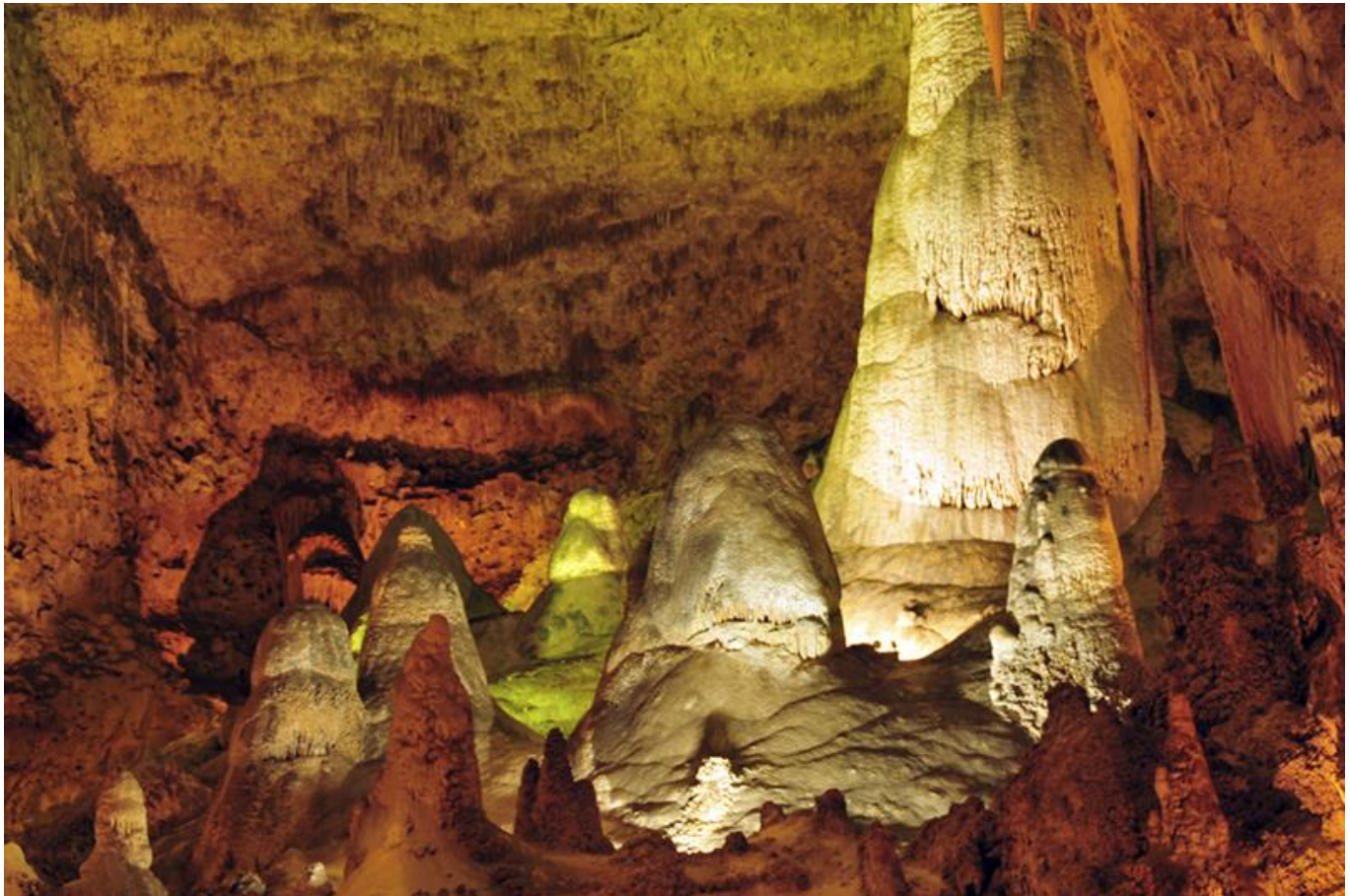
And there's no better way to explore some of the Southwest's most amazing destinations than by car. So jump in a rental car and visit caverns, desert towns and even America's most recognized and iconic highway, Route 66.

Carlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico

- From [El Paso International Airport](#), 120 minutes

Grab your helmet and light to do a little spelunking in one of the most popular caverns in the U.S. Drive just a few hours from El Paso and you'll find yourself at the edge of [Carlsbad Caverns National Park](#), which encompasses more than 46,000 acres of the Chihuahuan Desert. The landscape is composed of curiously shaped vegetation as well as oases and pools harboring unique aquatic organisms that cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

From the park's entrance gate in White City, take the scenic 7-mile drive to the visitor center, where you can access the caves. While you can take an elevator down about 750 feet to reach the cave's largest chamber, appropriately named "the_Big Room," the 1.25 mile steep descent from the Natural Entrance is also an incredible experience. Then, depending on the time of year, stick around until dusk to see hundreds of thousands of Brazilian free-tailed bats take flight.



Sedona, Arizona

- From [Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport](#), 120 minutes

Glorious red rock formations paint the landscape of this desert town, drawing visitors from around the world to experience its splendor. Tour [Sedona's](#) sandstone spires, pinnacles and domes that can be seen from the Red Rock Scenic Byway. Afterwards, head over to Tlaquepaque village, a popular spot for artists and visitors for shopping and fine dining. You may also want to visit one of the nearby wellness spas that offer unique Sedona-inspired treatments. Don't forget to leave the red rocks behind for a bit to enjoy a scenic drive through the pine forests of Oak Creek Canyon. Pack a sack lunch and your bathing suits to picnic at [Slide Rock State Park](#).



Julian, California

- From [San Diego International Airport](#), 80 minutes

About 65 miles northeast of San Diego, the historic gold mining town of Julian awaits. This popular weekend retreat for Southern Californians offers a scenic drive through the Cuyamaca Mountains and options for outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, horseback riding and camping. Visit one of Julian's original gold mines at the Eagle Mining Company, take in the town's history at the Julian Pioneer Museum or head to a tasting room at one of Julian's many local wineries. For a one-of-kind experience for the whole family to enjoy, check out the California Wolf Center, where you can get up close and personal with one of wildlife's most misunderstood species. Don't drive away before trying the local specialty in Julian: apple pie.

Tucumcari, New Mexico

- From [Lubbock Preston Smith International Airport](#), 170 minutes

No exploration through the Southwest would be complete without a trip along America's most iconic highway: Route 66. Running from Illinois to California, the "Mother Road" – as it is affectionately called – was one of the first roads to connect the Midwest to the West. While much of the fanfare has been forgotten, the highway's spirit still lives on in Tucumcari, New Mexico, population about 5,000. Along its 5-mile stretch of Route 66 you will find the

original Blue Swallow Motel, which still takes reservations, and Tee Pee Curios, where you can shop for Route 66 memorabilia. Cruise the strip at night for a light show of some of the most colorful neon signs outside of Vegas. And, if you just can't get enough of Route 66, stop in at the New Mexico Route 66 Museum for artifacts from the highway's heyday.



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