

BLOOMIN' desert

Veteran band tour manager Rick Marino drives us to **BORREGO SPRINGS** for the wildflower super bloom.

WORDS BY **RICK MARINO** | PHOTOGRAPHS BY **RHIANNON COOPER**

This month's road trip, I'm headed to Borrego Springs. Here's why: I have a really good feeling that we are in for a real treat in March. When it rains this much in Southern California in the winter, I get really excited for the wildflower bloom.

There are a few things to know about wildflowers in the Southwest. It's not just winter rain that matters. It's how much, when, and the wind and the warmth. It takes a lot of Mother Nature and luck to produce a super bloom. But, as mentioned before, I feel good about this year.

First off, just driving around the California desert, it's amazing to see how green everything already is. Earlier this month, it looked like it needed to be mowed!

As the desert gets greener and greener in February, I start to notice the sides of the freeway begin to pop with yellow flowers. So, I checked the weather forecast in Borrego to see if things were warming up. It's well worth the hour and 20 minute journey to see the desert floor lit up with carpets of verbena and fields of lupines, desert sunflowers, lilies and on and on. My best memory of Borrego Springs, in 2017, was the sweet smell of wildflowers that filled the air.

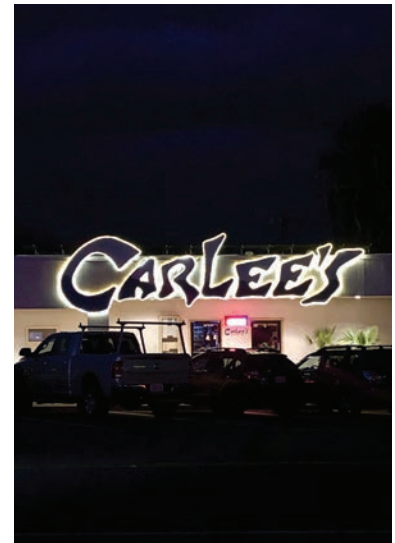
The town is one of my favorite spots to share with out-of-town friends and family. It is clean and quiet, remote and beautiful. The village is surrounded by one of California's largest state parks, Anza-Borrego, which is named after the Spanish explorer, Juan Bautista de Anza, who led an expedition to Alta California through here in 1774, as well as the bighorn sheep ("borrego" in Spanish) that still live in the area today. There are some great eats to be had, art to be made and seen, solid hikes, epic camping and off-road trails to keep anyone busy for days.

On the way, stop at Oasis Date Gardens for some date tasting (usually about a dozen varieties are available) and snacks. Besides a killer date shake, they also have sandwiches and burgers. Also, their famous date cake is delicious! Back on Borrego Salton Seaway, you might want to get some gas as it will be pricier in town.

My next stop is a crowd favorite. Located about 4 miles off the highway, Font's Point is like California's Grand Canyon, and it's easy to get to. The view is stunning and spans from the badlands all the way to the U.S.-Mexico border. You do need a high-clearance vehicle to get there, otherwise tours are available in town.

The best way to get information about the area is to head to the visitors center at the park headquarters just a couple miles north of town. The Anza-Borrego visitors center has great displays and artifacts, as well as a small movie theater and book and gift store. Talk to a ranger or docent to get the latest on driving conditions, camping, hiking trails – or wildflowers. There is even a wildflower hotline! Just call (760) 767-4684.

One of the most popular attractions is the Galleta Meadows metal sculptures. Camels, tortoises, scorpions, eagles, elephants and horses, plus a massive dragon snake and dinosaurs dot the side of the roads. Some are in the prime wildflower areas like Henderson Canyon Road on the way to Coyote Canyon. Wherever you drive, make sure to respect the park, and stay on established roads and parking areas.



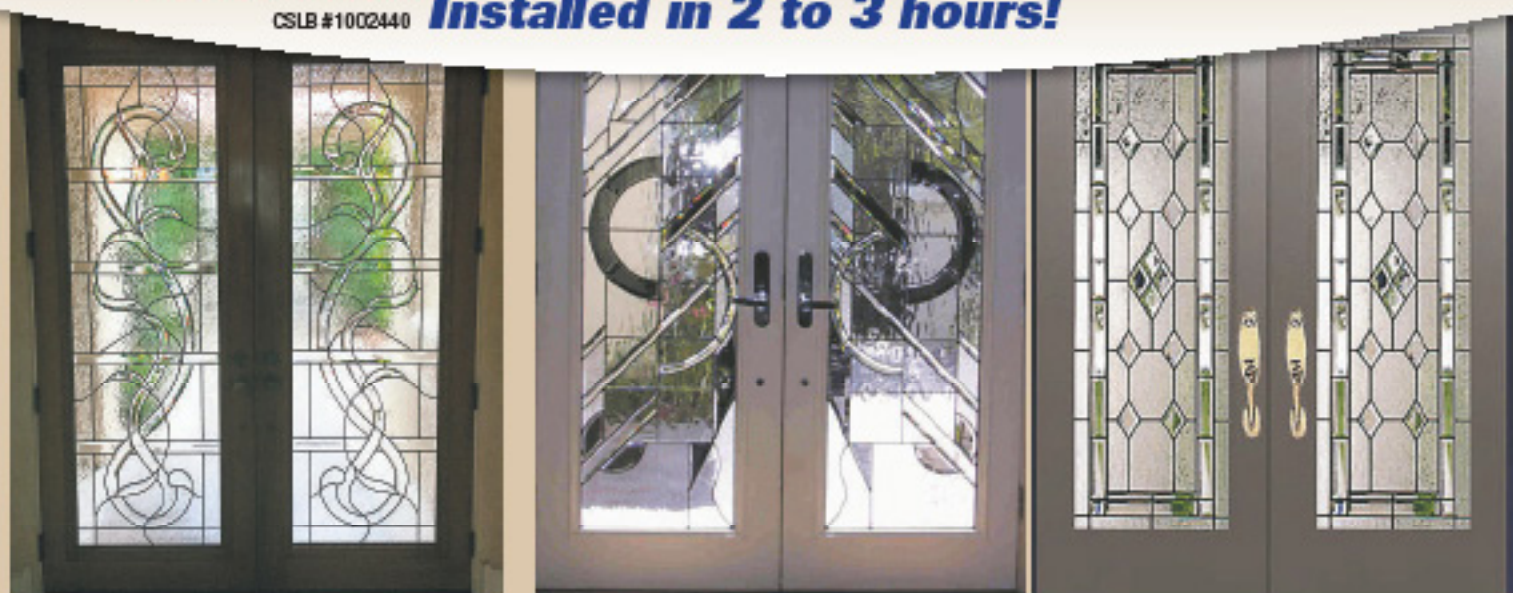
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: La Casa del Zorro Resort and Spa; Carlee's serves steak and seafood; wildflowers in Borrego Springs; Palm Canyon Hotel & RV Resort has vintage Airstreams for rent; Font's Point is a crowd favorite, located about 4 miles off the highway, with views that span from the badlands to the U.S.-Mexico border.



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Stars seen over the Anza-Borrego visitors center. TONY PRINCE

Borrego Springs is considered a Dark Sky Community, which means it's a great place to see stars. Plus, there are accommodations for all budgets and styles. Stanlunds Inn & Suites is a recently renovated desert classic. The Palm Canyon Hotel & RV Resort has vintage Airstreams for rent. Or, you can pitch your own tent out in the backcountry. Hire California Overland for off-road tours and overnight camping set-ups complete with chuckwagon dinner and breakfast.

My personal favorite is La Casa del Zorro Resort and Spa. I discovered this hotel a few years back, and I consider it the best in the California desert. This is a real road trip gem, with a full-service spa, heated pool and hot tubs open 24 hours. Plus, five-star appointed rooms with fireplaces and white marble bathrooms complete with robes and slippers. Stop by the legendary Fox Den Bar to see its painted mural of foxes that Wes Anderson would be proud of – ask the bartender to tell you the story!

BORREGO SPRINGS IS CONSIDERED A DARK SKY COMMUNITY, WHICH MEANS IT'S A GREAT PLACE TO SEE STARS.

They even have private casitas from one to four bedrooms, many with their own pools and hot tubs. Ok, ok so I'm fancy. But after living in hotels for the past 20 years, I want a little comfort after a long day in the driver's seat!

On this trip to Borrego, I made it a point to eat at all the places I'd never been before. Kesling's Kitchen offers wood-fired pizza and salads, beer and wine, and desserts.

Across the street is Carlee's, a restaurant around a bar with steak and seafood. For breakfast or lunch there is Kendall's Café, an old-school diner that I love for its time capsule '70s décor. Red Ocotillo is another delicious spot – they even grow their own veggies on-site after spring. Carmelita's has the best Mexican food and drinks. El Borrego is solid, too, for order-at-the-counter-style Mexican food.

Weekends are naturally busier in Borrego Springs, especially during wildflower season, so if you can swing it mid-week, go for it – even better if you can make it for a couple days. If things go the way I hope they do, then this March could be as epic as 2017. Make sure you get out there and check it out for yourself, after all it's just a road trip away. 🌵

Follow Rick Marino's travels on rickmarinotravels.com or on Instagram @rickmarinotravels. You can also write to him with questions at rickmarino@att.net.



PALM SPRINGS

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