

## Our Trip Takes Us

By Becky Hirn

When I was a kid I thought of the desert as this huge expanse of hot, brown sand. No water, no people, no life. I'd imagine myself stuck out in the middle of a desert lost and alone with no protection from the beating sun and no way to find home. This vision was probably a reflection of some cartoon. I'm thinking Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner.

On our trip we've spent basically the last three months in the desert. I'm not complaining because it kept us warm all winter. The best part is that living in the desert has taught me a few things about its hidden beauty and surviving in it.

Ever since we crossed over from the swamplands of Louisiana, we've traveled through, lived in and experienced four North American desert regions, including the Chihuahuan Desert in Texas and New Mexico, the Sonoran Desert in Arizona, the Great Basin and the Mojave Deserts in Nevada and California. One thing I can say is that a desert is much more than it's hot, brown sand. In fact, in one part of New Mexico, the sand is as white as snow.

Life in the deserts is vast and varied. I can't count how many varieties of cacti I've seen. Even though I know the dangers I'm still tempted to touch the spines, just once, with just one finger. Another huge draw is the desert mountains. Some are rounded mounds of eroded earth; others have super high, snow-covered peaks, like Telescope Peak in California at 11,049 ft. The most amazing part of seeing that mountain was that it towered over us in Badwater Basin, the heart of Death Valley and the lowest point in America, 282 feet below sea level.

We also had the chance to see many of the desert animals, roadrunners, jackrabbits, and lizards. At our campsite outside of Phoenix, we heard the calls of the coyotes almost nightly.

Incredibly, the desert also has flowers. Right now they do anyway. Yellow, purple, orange and pink flowers poke up out of the dry earth and rocks or bloom from within a prickly cactus. It's hard to believe animals and flowers can make it. They've adapted, just like I learned to do in the desert. Sunscreen and water are essential. Dry skin is expected. And never forget a jacket, because when the sun goes down, the heat goes with it.

Beyond the warm climate and the remarkable natural surroundings, we found a few other things that draw people into the desert. Attractions out in the middle of the hot dry landscape lure millions of visitors each year. We waited in traffic for an hour and allowed security guards to peek in our cabinets for the opportunity to drive over Hoover Dam. It's this gigantic 75-year old structure that makes much of the Southwest habitable to humans by controlling the flow of the Colorado River and producing massive amounts of power. When it was built in the 1930s, there was nothing like it. Today it continues to amaze travelers like us.

Another lure in the middle of the Mojave Desert is that shiny gem, Las Vegas. We only stayed one day and spent very little. But the mega casino structures, the Bellagio fountain show, the real lions at MGM Grand, the lights and the costumes are a must-see on any trip across the country.

In the past couple months, my outlook on desert life has certainly changed from childhood. That's what I like about traveling. No matter what I think I know about a place before I visit, there's always something to shift my preconceptions. As for finding my way home, that notion has changed with travel too. I can make myself at home wherever we park.

Becky Hirn is a Delphos resident traveling America with her family for a year. She documents the journey at [www.ourtriptakesus.com](http://www.ourtriptakesus.com). Follow the Hirn family in photos, blogs, on Facebook and Twitter. Or learn how to partner with the trip as an advertiser. You may e-mail Becky at [beckyhirn@ourtriptakesus.com](mailto:beckyhirn@ourtriptakesus.com)