

Adventures with Kids

Age: 5 plus, although younger ones will also enjoy these locations, as will their parents

Text and photos by Pat Flanagan; Dylan Gatlin is the rock climber

Joshua Tree National Park is a wonderland for those with short legs, boundless energy, and a need for adventure. It is pretty great for their parents as well. The open desert landscape, full of boulder piles and dotted with Joshua trees designed by Dr. Seuss, makes sitting in the car painful beyond endurance. Once out the door, the first order of business is always to climb a rock and feel the excitement of having shoes grip the granite for ascents not imagined on home turf. However, even with climbing wall experience, it is the rare child that is ready to mimic the adults seen climbing with ropes to the top of a vertical monolith. So where are some of the best places to take the kids -- where the challenge fits their expertise?



Split Rock—10 miles from the Oasis Visitor Center in 29 Palms

You can bill Split Rock as the largest broken rock. There may be others but this behemoth will not make a liar out of you. Your child's head will need to drop completely back to see the top of the split and standing at the base for a picture will make a great take home story. After getting the full impact of size, walk around to the right for a view of the bouldery environment beyond. Then, take the trail on the left and walk around to the bottom of the boulder—you can stand underneath it! Soot on the overhanging roof shows that many have camped here. Continue on the trail to explore a landscape of rock gardens designed for hobbits. It is a bit of a challenge straight north, up and over the pass toward the Elton Mine (difficult to find without a map). It is easier to take a trail which breaks off to the west. After awhile this trail leads into a wash which you can explore. The edge of the plateau to the west is Lucky Boy Vista, described below.

Since you will return the way you came, this is an excellent area to make a game of observing boulder formations and rock shapes to use as landmarks for the return trip.

Why did the boulder break? No one knows for sure. It could have been a lightning strike or an earthquake following tens of thousands of years of water seeping between the crystals and expanding until a crack formed. What would it sound like when it broke?

Lucky Boy Vista (for directions see Pine City Area Hikes)

This is an easy and scenic hike along an abandoned mining road. A mile in you will pass old diggings and shafts. The view from the overlook is toward the area you explored from Split Rock. Mine shafts are everywhere in the park and are an important part of our history. Not all the mine shafts have been fitted with protective screening, or the screening maybe in need of repair, so take care.

This is an excellent walk for the end of the day when the boulders glow with the golden light of the setting sun. If you are looking for a short walk with plenty of rock piles and gardens to explore the first half mile from the trail head provides it all.



View toward Split Rock area from Lucky Boy Vista

Desert Queen Mine (for directions see Pine City Area Hikes)

If you are interested in mining history this hike takes you to a beautiful area with multiple (screened) shafts and old machinery to help you visualize the activity in the 1890s. Just into the hike you will pass the remains of a stone building which kids love to explore.



There are a number of mines in this region, all of them close enough that trails leading between them suggest the old sourdoughs went visiting at the end of the day. On the other hand, there are tales of claim jumping, shootings, feuds, and general mayhem—so maybe the minors were loners. As you wander along the old roads and connecting trails look for evidence of dwellings, such as rock outlined squares. The remainder of the walls may have been recycled into other cabins. Kids are excellent at writing their own history with just a few clues for starters.

Cabin remains at beginning of trail



Mine shaft with fencing



Remains of a miner's cabin—can you find it?

Ryan Ranch (For directions see Ryan Ranch Hike)—18 miles from the Oasis Visitor Center in 29 Palms

Kids love the idea of “way back when...” and the Ryan Ranch gives them the opportunity to explore old adobe buildings, burial sites (there are 8 if you find them all), Indian sites with grinding holes, and some intriguing rock figures which are modern but by nameless artists. And, of course, there are rock piles to climb on. The Ryan brothers originally homesteaded the Ranch in the late 1800s to take advantage of the nearby spring to provide water for their Lost Horse Mine. The large water tank at the ranch is at the lower end of the pipe which they laid up valley and over ridges to the mine, about 9 miles to the south east. If you walk on the California Riding and Hiking Trail to the east, you will see the pipe appear and disappear. Much of it was buried at one time.



Hidden Valley Nature Trail—20 miles from the Oasis Visitor Center



If you only have time for one hike this would be it. Plan to spend at least an hour on the 1 mile trail. What makes this so special for children? First off, you have to enter it through a narrow portal. This entrance was blasted open in 1936 by Rancher Bill Keys just months before Joshua Tree National Monument was declared. He wanted his cattle to have access to the lush ungrazed grasses on the valley floor. Once inside, you will find yourself surrounded by boulder ridges, several with fanciful names given by rock climbers. Kids will find rocks for climbing, logs for balance

walking, nooks for exploring, and in the spring and after the summer rains plenty of wildflowers, insects, birds, and who knows what else looking at you from behind a rock. Lizards are out except in the coldest months. From about August on, throughout the park, baby lizards will appear. There are lots of them darting around, hungry to put on weight before the insects disappear with the winter cold.

Car Activities

To entertain and inform your rock climbers during their drive to the desert go to the Desert Protective Council website <http://www.dpcinc.org/kids.htm> and print off the Kid’s Pages crossword puzzles, word searches and wraps.