

Sledding White Dunes, Then 750 Feet Underground — A 3-Day White Sands & Carlsbad Caverns Road Trip

Southeastern New Mexico packs two of the country's strangest landscapes into one easy loop: a sea of blinding-white gypsum dunes you can sled down, and a cave system that drops more than 750 feet underground beneath the Guadalupe Mountains. This self-drive route bases out of Alamogordo and Carlsbad — a rental car and about 220 miles of two-lane highway are all you need.

DURATION
3 Days

BEST TIME TO GO
**Late April – May or
September – October**
mild desert temps, and bats are still
flying at Carlsbad through October

FROM
\$430 USD / person
for 2 people — lodging, park fees,
gear & meals on a self-drive from El
Paso

Day 1

Into the Dunes

Pick up a rental car in El Paso and drive north into the Tularosa Basin, where the world's largest gypsum dune field spreads out white as snow against the Sacramento Mountains.

Self-Drive — El Paso to Alamogordo

~1.5 hr drive via US-54 N · rental car recommended

El Paso International Airport is the closest major airport to this route. From there, US-54 runs straight north through the Tularosa Basin to Alamogordo — an easy, mostly two-lane drive with the White Sands Missile Range and the Sacramento Mountains filling the horizon the whole way.

White Sands National Park — Dunes Drive & Sledding

Half-day · \$25 per vehicle (7-day pass)

An 8-mile scenic drive winds into the heart of 275 square miles of pure white gypsum sand — park anywhere along the way and start climbing. Snow saucers are sold (not rented) at the visitor center gift shop for around \$20, plus \$5 for a block of sled wax; the dunes stay soft and cool even in the shoulder-season sun. Time it for the hour before sunset, when the ripples throw long blue shadows across the white sand.

White Sands National Park Visitor Center · +1 (575) 479-6124 · nps.gov/whsa

Check-In — Hampton Inn Alamogordo

Check-in 3pm · rooms from around \$140/night

A reliable, comfortable base on the north side of town, a short drive from the White Sands entrance — free breakfast and a pool make it an easy stop after a day spent climbing dunes.

Hampton Inn Alamogordo · +1 (575) 434-4200 · hilton.com

Dinner — Hi-D-Ho Drive In

Dinner · \$8–12 per person

A vintage 1950s drive-in on White Sands Boulevard that's been an Alamogordo institution for generations — carhop service, green chile cheeseburgers, and a classic-car cruise-in on weekend nights.

Hi-D-Ho Drive In · +1 (575) 437-3364

Day 2

Sunspot Scenic Byway to the Caverns

The scenic way to Carlsbad Caverns climbs into the Sacramento Mountains before dropping back down to the desert — then it's straight underground for one of the largest cave chambers in North America, capped off with a sunset bat flight.

Sunspot Scenic Byway via Cloudcroft

~1 hr detour · NM-82 & NM-6563

Instead of the flat desert highway, climb NM-82 into the pines at Cloudcroft (elevation 8,600 feet) and follow the Sunspot Scenic Byway along the ridge to the National Solar Observatory overlook — a cool, forested detour with views back down over the white dunes you sledded the day before.

Self-Drive — Cloudcroft to Carlsbad

~2.5 hr drive via US-82 & US-285

The road drops out of the mountains and rejoins the desert grasslands of the Guadalupe Mountains foothills before reaching Carlsbad Caverns National Park in the early afternoon.

Carlsbad Caverns — Natural Entrance & King's Palace Tour

Half-day · \$15/person entrance + \$1 timed-entry fee, ranger tour ~\$8/person

Walk down through the Natural Entrance switchbacks into the Big Room on your own, then join a ranger-guided tour of the King's Palace — a chain of four decorated chambers 750 feet below the surface, reservable through Recreation.gov. Bring a light jacket; the cave holds a steady 56°F year-round.

Carlsbad Caverns National Park · +1 (575) 785-2232 · nps.gov/cave

Bat Flight Program at the Natural Entrance

Dusk · free, seasonal (roughly May–October)

As the sun sets, several hundred thousand Brazilian free-tailed bats spiral out of the cave's Natural Entrance for their nightly hunt over the desert. Rangers give a talk at the amphitheater beforehand — check the park's current bat flight schedule, since photography and electronics aren't permitted during the flight itself.

Check-In & Dinner — The Trinity Hotel

Check-in 3pm · rooms from around \$150/night

A restored 1892 bank building turned boutique hotel in downtown Carlsbad, with a well-regarded steakhouse-style restaurant on the ground floor — easily the most atmospheric overnight on this route.

The Trinity Hotel · +1 (575) 234-9891 · thetrinityhotel.com

Day 3

Desert Wildlife, Aliens & the Road Home

Close out the trip with New Mexico's desert wildlife, a stop in the town that put UFOs on the map, and the drive back toward El Paso.

Living Desert Zoo & Gardens State Park

~2 hrs · \$5 adult / \$3 child

A Chihuahuan Desert zoo and botanical garden on the edge of Carlsbad, home to rescued mountain lions, black bears, and a walk-through aviary — a good, mellow morning before the drive out.

Living Desert Zoo & Gardens State Park · +1 (575) 887-5516 · emnrd.nm.gov

International UFO Museum & Research Center, Roswell

~1.5 hrs · suggested donation ~\$5

An hour's drive northwest of Carlsbad, downtown Roswell leans all the way into its 1947 "Roswell Incident" fame — this museum walks through the case files, witness accounts, and pop-culture spinoffs with a straight face and a gift shop full of alien merchandise.

International UFO Museum & Research Center · +1 (575) 625-9495 · roswellufomuseum.com

Scenic Drive Home via US-70

~2.5 hr drive back to El Paso

From Roswell, US-70 cuts southwest across the Mescalero Apache Reservation and back over the Sacramento Mountains through Ruidoso before dropping to the desert floor at Alamogordo and on to El Paso for the flight home.