

Where imagination dwells: Rising up out of the desert, a city time forgot

By David Salcido
FOR MY LAS CRUCES

There are places in this world that defy rationale and, as a result, stir the imagination. New Mexico is home to many of these oddities — one of the very reasons for its appellation as the “Land of Enchantment.” Those wishing to experience these “enchancements” for themselves rarely have far to go. Take for instance a one-square mile patch of wonderment sprouting from the desert floor like an ancient city visited in the world’s infancy by the wrath of an angry and despotic god. Such a place can be found just a few miles northwest of Deming, on the edge of the Chihuahuan Desert: the aptly named City Of Rocks State Park.

Rising out of the plain like a ragged skyline, the City of Rocks is something of a revelation when it is first encountered. Completely hidden from the state highway four miles west, it slowly ascends into the blue sky the closer one gets, shimmering on the horizon like a fabled metropolis. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that this is no civilized outpost. Though it resembles a city in many ways, with its monolithic towers rising as high as fifty feet, offset by low-lying structures and bisected by what appear to be ancient worn streets and sidewalks, the only living things making their homes here are ground squirrels, chipmunks, jackrabbits and a variety of other desert creatures.

When not gazing into the sky at the variety of bald and golden eagles, hawks, horned owls and ravens floating gracefully in the tranquil air, hours can be spent wandering the “streets” of the City of Rocks, contemplating what appear to be courtyards, chimneys and arched passageways, or finding humorous shapes tossed about like sculptures in a mad artist’s garden. Giving it an even more surreal feel is the occasional desert willow or oak tree, tenaciously clinging to the rocks and offering shade on warmer days.

Created some 35 million years ago by volcanic activity and the subsequent erosion that is normal in the windswept desert, the city has been temporary home to nomadic peoples going back into prehistory. The evidence of this can be found scattered about in the form of arrowheads, pottery shards and small cylindrical mortar holes, created by prehistoric peoples grinding seeds and nuts with stone manos. In later years, Apache Indians used the area as a campsite, as did Spanish conquistadors and other explorers. Their marks can also be seen at various points along the city walkways.

Established as a state park in 1952, the City of Rocks is a popular destination for many travelers and it is estimated that more than 50,000 people visit the park each year, though it is entirely possible to have the entire city to oneself on certain days. A 1.5-mile dirt road encircles the labyrinthine compound, making it easy for cars or even RV campers to find the perfect place to roost. The facilities include 62 campsites, 10 of which have electrical and water hookups, hiking trails, picnic areas and even a Visitor Center with modern restrooms and solar heated showers.

Despite the fact that winter is quickly descending upon us, this is the perfect time of the year to visit the City of Rocks State Park. Tourism is minimal and much of the more dangerous animal life, such as rattlesnakes and scorpions, is going into hibernation mode. The hardy soul will even contemplate an evening visit, where a warm fire will keep the frigid temperatures at bay at the same time that the clear night skies



David Salcido photos

A natural structure rising out of the desert gives a unique “civilized” perspective to the City of Rocks.



Natural windows like this one can be found throughout the site, giving even more evocative power to the view of the park as an ancient stone city.

will offer up a panoramic view of the cosmos that is both breathtaking and humbling.

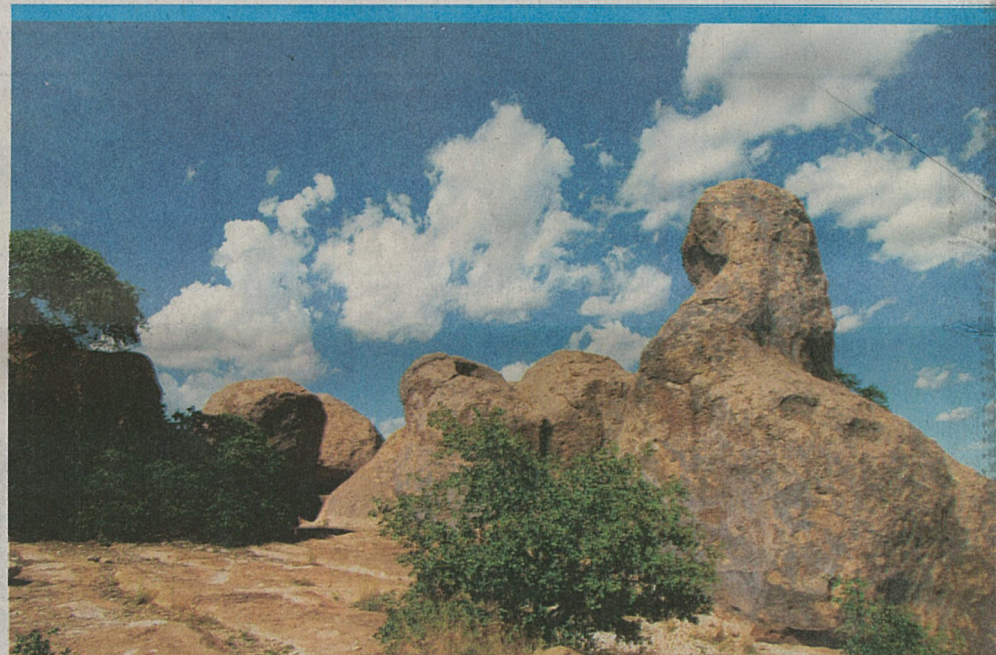
There are even “star parties” offered once a month at the park’s public observatory, a 12-by-16-foot building with a roll-off roof and equipped with a 14-inch Meade LX-200 telescope and a 20-inch monitor for image viewing. More information can be found at the park’s official website, www.emnrd.state.nm.us/prd/cityrocks.htm

Whether you’re a left-brained science nut, a right-

brained dreamer or something in-between, there is plenty to keep you occupied in the City of Rocks State Park — one of the more unique destinations in our big, beautiful state and just a day trip away for the adventurous soul who doesn’t have a lot of time to spare.

Like a fabled city rising out of the past, there are wonders to be found around every corner.

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Despite the harshness of the rock environment, plant life finds a way to thrive.



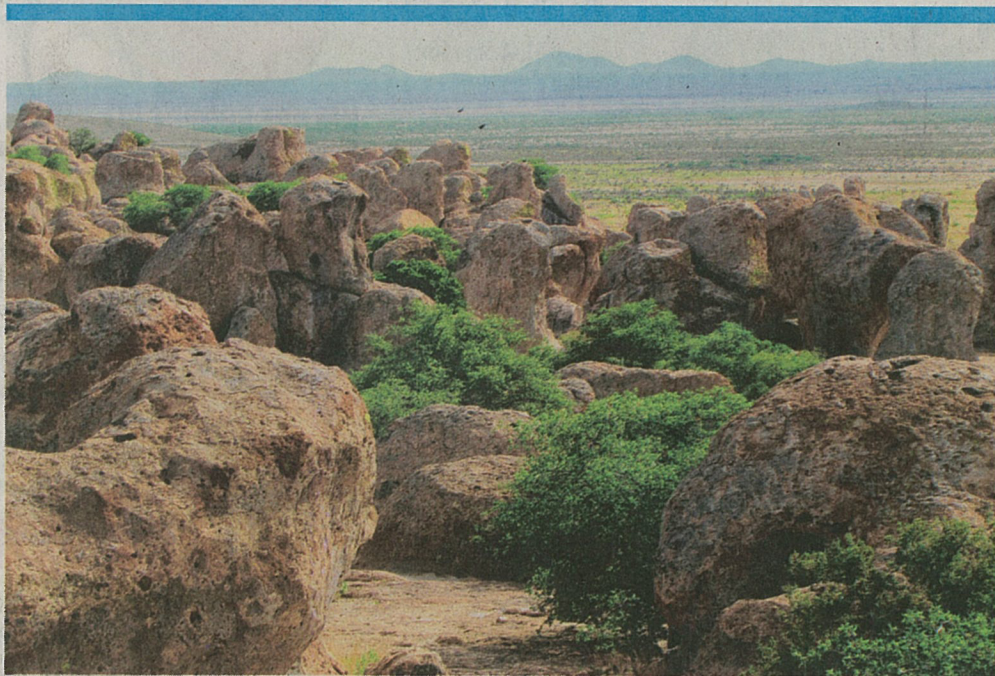
Many have compared the City of Rocks to Stonehenge in England, though everything here is a creation of nature, not man.

If you go:

Where: City of Rocks State Park is located 24 miles northwest of Deming, off U.S. Highway 180. To get there, go northeast on NM 61 for approximately 4 miles to the park entrance road.

When: Open year round, the gate hours are 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. A small fee to help with the upkeep of the park is requested at the park gate.

Info: (575) 536-2800 or www.emnrd.state.nm.us/prd/cityrocks.htm



Like a labyrinth of old, the City of Rocks offers hours of exploration and discovery.

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