

Diversions

More than caverns await near Carlsbad

By David Salcido
FOR MY LAS CRUCES

Living in New Mexico for any length of time, one soon discovers that the wonders of this ancient and fascinating land far surpass those outlined in tourist pamphlets and AAA road maps.

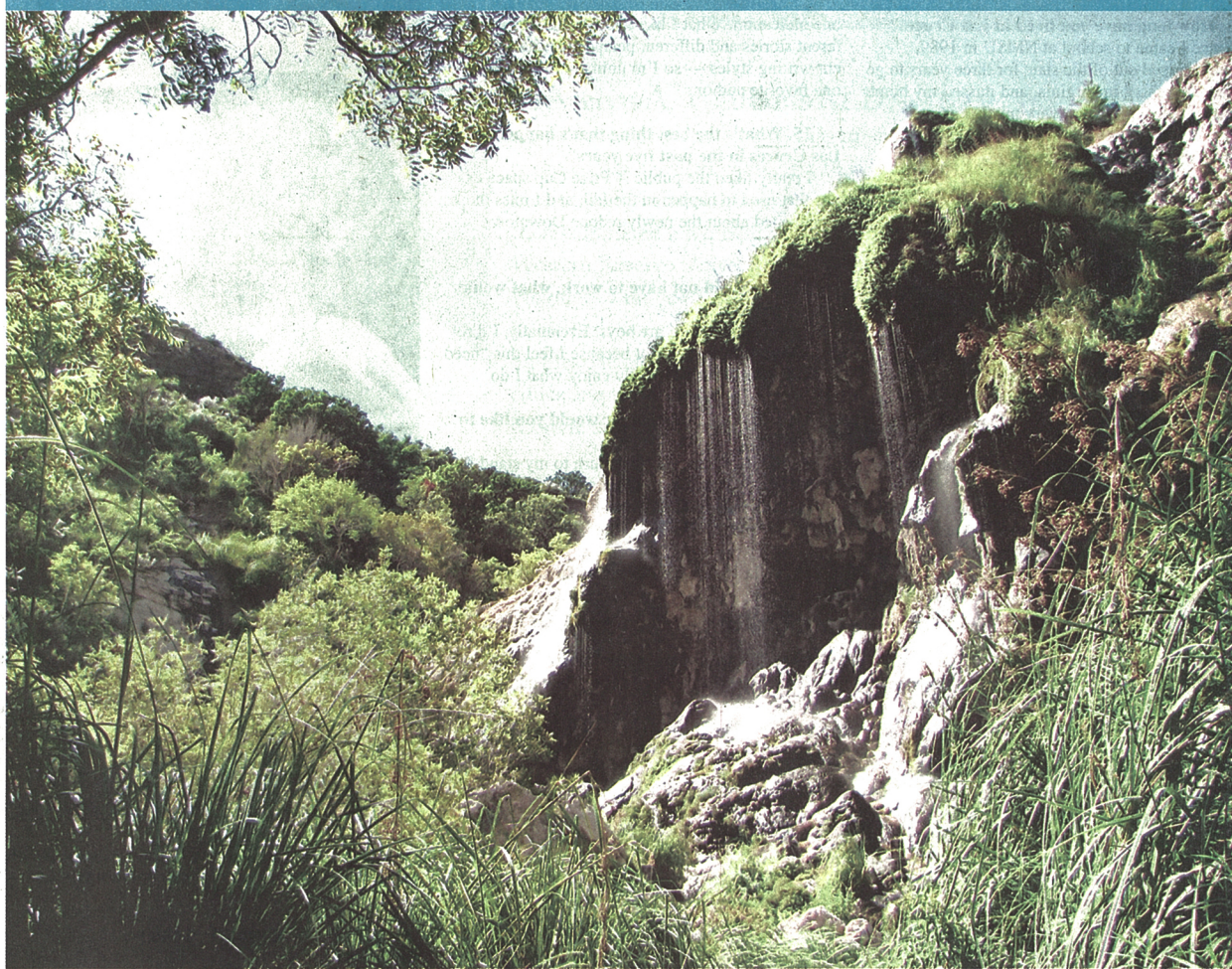
Contrary to popular belief, it isn't just northern New Mexico that corners that market.

There's plenty to see and do right here in our own backyard. Take Carlsbad Caverns, for instance: Here's a celebrated destination point for thousands of people each year from around the world. The caverns are not, however, the only recreation area worth noting. A simple daytrip, for those who have already experienced the caverns, can lead the curious traveler to a rare treat on the national landmark's back doorstep: the tallest waterfall in New Mexico, Sitting Bull Falls.

Like many of New Mexico's many enchantments, the toponym of Sitting Bull Falls is somewhat obscured by legend, liberally sprinkled with tall tales. Perhaps the most oft-told tale is one in which, on a bright moonlit night in 1881, a small group of natives led by the infamous Lakota chieftain rustled some cattle and were followed by a posse into the canyon, where they discovered the falls and named them accordingly. The problem with that legend, however, is that the real Sitting Bull was in Canada in 1881 and probably thinking of more important things than rustling cattle from New Mexican ranchers — like surrendering to the U.S. Cavalry.

Some say the area was named by an early explorer who had a gift for telling tall tales — which would explain the legend mentioned above. There are records that indicate the Apaches called the place "gostahanaguti," or "hidden gulch," but that was probably too much of a mouthful for early settlers. Wherever the little oasis is in the middle of the Chihuahuan desert got its unique name, the 150-foot, spring-fed waterfall is an unexpected pleasure of the Guadalupe Mountains and the Lincoln National Forest. Like most treasures of the dusty, boulder-strewn area, getting there is a bit like peeling back the plain paper wrapping of a gift box to reveal a gorgeous polished jewel inside.

Upon arrival, you'll find yourself in a literal oasis, with rough-hewn, shaded picnic structures, modern restrooms, cooking grills, trash cans and sidewalks providing easy access to the waterfall viewing deck, all surrounded by lush green vegetation. The sign kiosk at the entrance, where the \$5-per-vehicle entrance fee is collected, provides a wealth of information for the first-time visitor. Take a moment to read



Depending on the time of the year, the falls can be either a roaring torrent or a lazy trickle.

If you go:

Where: Sitting Bull Falls Recreation Area is located about 50 miles southwest of Carlsbad. To get there from Las Cruces, take US-180 East approximately 150 miles. Turn left at County Road 408 (about 10 miles east of White's City, the turn-off for Carlsbad Caverns) for approximately 20 miles, left on NM-137/Queens Highway for approximately three miles, right on County Road 409/Sitting Bull Falls Road for approximately 8 miles.

When: Open year round. April 1 to Sept. 30, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Oct. 1 to March 31, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Gate closes 30 minutes before closing time.

them and you'll discover that the sheer cliffs surrounding the area are remnants of an ancient reef complex dating back approximately 250 million years, when the entire area was covered by an inland sea. You'll also find that hidden directly beneath your feet are a series of magnificent wild caves, which

attract scientists and spelunkers from around the world.

The hike to the falls, itself, is a light one and can barely be considered a hike at all, unless you want to climb the rough, step-like trail to the top of the falls. Even that is likely to leave only the most out-of-shape visitor winded. Either way, reaching the area where the waters cascade down from sheer rock cliffs into natural, moss-covered pools is a real treat, especially if visited on a week day, when the area is much less crowded. It's also probably best to plan around the rainy seasons, in early spring or early fall. Remember, this is a desert and like most desert waterfalls, this one is dependent on the rain to live up to its potential. Many a traveler has been disappointed to find only a trickle if visited during the drier months.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the area around Sitting Bull Falls is designated as "cougar country," not so much for the lipsticked variety as for the big cats who are natural residents of the area. Read the signs and heed their warnings, just as you would in any natural area, and everything should be fine. Prepare a picnic lunch in advance and spend the day enjoying one of the rare wonders of this enchanting state; a literal oasis of lush riparian vegetation



Cool lagoons and sparkling pools surround the area.

and dancing waters shimmering in warm desert air — a diamond in the rough for those willing to take the road less-

traveled.
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