

Petroglyph tours



Background

Concentrated in secluded canyons of the volcanic Coso Range on the test ranges of the Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake, Calif., are thousands of visual reminders of people who, thousands of years ago, hunted and gathered their food in this high desert.

The Coso Range Canyons contain the highest concentration of rock art in the Western Hemisphere. More than 6,000 images have been pecked, engraved, or abraded into the desert varnish or patina that forms on basalt rocks with time and weathering.

No one knows for sure how old these petroglyphs are. A broad range of dates can be inferred from archaeological sites in the area and some artifact forms depicted on the rocks. Some of them may be as old as 16,000 years, some as recent as the 1800s.

Designs range from animals to abstract to anthropomorphic figures.

Opinions vary widely whether the petroglyphs were made for ceremonial purposes, whether they are telling stories to pass along the mythology of their makers, or whether they are records of hunting hopes or successes, clan symbols or maps.

Description

Little Petroglyph Canyon, the only site open for public tours, is about 1.2 miles long, and the walls are 20 to 40 feet high. Elevation is about 5,000 feet. The canyon floor is a sand and rocky wash bottom. Visitors have to negotiate over and around a variety of rocks and boulders to enter the canyon. From there, the walk is moderate until the lower end of the canyon. The lower end, which is optional to visit, involves sliding down some very steep sections. The total drop is around 300 feet, which of course, must be climbed back up.

The only facilities at the site include pit toilets and a covered picnic area near the parking lot.

The road to the site is steep and mostly paved, with only the last seven miles being dirt.

Items needed for tours

The round trip from the NAWS main gate is about 90 miles. Low clearance vehicles are discouraged, but

the trip can be made easily in a car in good condition. Motor homes are not allowed.

For safety reasons, a full tank of gas, good brakes, good tires, a good spare, a jack and other tools needed for changing tires are required.

Visitors must bring their own food and water. At least two liters of water per person is recommended, although during hotter months additional water is advised. Salty snacks are also recommended to help prevent dehydration and heat exhaustion.

As in any high desert area, the weather is unpredictable. Visitors are advised to dress in layers. It may be cool in the morning, but very hot by the afternoon. In the late fall and early spring, it can be very cold all day long. In fact, it can be so cold visitors may want to have hats and gloves. During the summer months, the temperatures can exceed 110 degrees.

Due to the terrain, sturdy walking shoes or hiking boots are mandatory. Sandals and thongs are prohibited. For safety reasons, long pants are encouraged.

While the canyon walls offer some protection, sunscreen, sunglasses and hats are still important in protecting visitors from the heat and sun.

A backpack can be used to carry water, food, extra clothing and camera gear.



Respect

The rock art in Little Petroglyph Canyon is so important to our cultural heritage and knowledge of the desert's past that in 1964 it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Everything in the canyon area is fully protected, including the obsidian chips and any artifacts or tools, as well as the petroglyphs and native vegetation and wildlife. Federal and California laws, along with NAWS regulations, help protect this area. Some of these regulations include:

1. Follow the directions provided by the tour guides at all times.
2. Children under 10, unless they are in the fourth grade, are not allowed on tours. For safety reasons, infants are also not allowed on tours.
3. Don't walk on the rocks lining the canyon walls. Sand on shoe soles, camera tripods and walking sticks can damage the designs. Stay on the canyon's bottom.
4. Photograph or sketch a picture of the rock art. DON'T make your own. Don't touch the rock art. It is

unknown what future damage from the hand may cause to the varnish covering the image. Outlining the designs with chalk or applying any material to the rocks is prohibited. Do not try to make marks on the rocks in the canyon, even if they don't contain any images. This is still vandalism and subject to prosecution.

5. Large vehicles, like RVs and cab-over campers, are not allowed.

6. Pets, alcohol, and glass containers are prohibited. Firearms are also prohibited, even if you have a permit to carry a concealed weapon.

Security

To protect the security of the military installation, the following regulations are in place:

1. Recreational tours will normally be limited to up to 20 people, with a maximum of seven vehicles (two of which must be escort vehicles).

2. Non-U.S. citizens are not allowed on tours at this time.

3. Visitors will be required to provide their full name, Social Security Number, date and place of birth.

4. Additions or substitutions to the list of visitors are prohibited once the Recreational Access application has been turned in.

5. Upon entering the Station, all visitors 16 years of age and older will be required to show a picture ID. Proof of citizenship may also be required. Proof can include a copy of a birth certificate, naturalization papers, U.S. voter registration card, a current U.S. passport, or a U.S. Military Active Duty ID card.

6. All vehicles and belongings will be subject to search prior to entering the base.

7. Visitors must stay with the caravan at all times. Detours and unplanned stops are not allowed.

8. Cameras and binoculars must be kept locked up until reaching the canyon's parking lot.

9. Violation of any of the tour rules could result in the entire tour being cancelled.

Safety

The safety of visitors on board NAWS China Lake is a primary concern.

While in the parking lot, picnic area or in the canyon, visitors are urged to watch where they put their hands and feet. This is the high desert and snakes, scorpions and spiders are commonly observed in the area.

Obey all speed laws. The road coming down Mountain Springs is very steep. As with any mountain driving, it is recommended you use your lower gears when coming down. Don't ride the brakes.

While driving, be on the lookout for wild animals darting out in front of you. This area is teeming with wildlife, including feral horses.

While at Little Petroglyph Canyon, stay off the side of the canyon.

Tours

After the Sept. 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, security concerns resulted in the cancellation of

all petroglyph tours. While security is still a number one priority, NAWS houses one of the largest concentrations of petroglyphs in North America. Therefore, with security in mind, the Commanding Officer of NAWS has adopted a new policy to allow limited tours to the public.

All tours will be conducted with a minimum of two Command-approved escorts. These escorts are volunteers contributing their time so you may see and enjoy the rock art of Little Petroglyph Canyon. Interested parties can join a public tour through a non-profit organization that has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with NAWS to provide assistance with coordinating and/or conducting tours, or arrange for a private tour. Public tours can be arranged by calling the Maturango Museum at (760) 375-6900 or Friends of the Last Chance Canyon at (760) 377-4976. Or, you can arrange for a private tour by calling the NAWS Public Affairs Office at (760) 939-1683. The Public Affairs representative will be happy to mail you a package explaining your tour options and how to set up your own tour.

Please be realistic about your physical ability when deciding to go on a tour. The terrain is rough. If you do have physical limitations, be sure to let the person arranging or escorting the tour to know in advance.

Neither your escort, the organization coordinating the tour, nor the NAWS China Lake Commanding Officer is responsible for injury, death, or property damage on or resulting from a tour.

Tours can be cancelled at a moment's notice due to inclement weather, increased security conditions, or Navy mission requirements.

Call 760.939.1683 for more information about petroglyph tours, or e-mail Peggy Shoaf at peggy.shoaf@navy.mil.

