



The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

RICK'S ROADS

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What



BLOG POST: 2022.09.27
Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Texas



Welcome to the Lonestar State! There are a couple of signs at/near the state line, but, otherwise, there is not much to distinguish it from its western neighbor.

That's pretty true of all the states, though, right? Maybe some have a distinctive feature, like the Mississippi River serving as a natural boundary, but, even so, the land on either side is probably not dramatically different.

One exception I can think of is the VA-NC border on I-95. Coming south out of Virginia, you are practically in freefall, barrel-assing down this miles-long 6%-or-more slope, keeping an eye in your rearview mirrors for runaway trucks (there are several ramps for those), and looking ahead at the small, green plain of North Carolina.

Heading north, of course, you cruise across that plain, all easy-peasy, till you realize that you will not be *going around* that huge wall that lies dead ahead. It's a

challenging climb for the average vehicle, an arduous ordeal for the 18-wheelers -- who are often reduced to flashers-on, grazing-cow pace – and an opportunity for the sporty to show off how fast they can ascend. Speed Limit is irrelevant. The slow lane is very slow, and the fast lane is a gamble. Big rigs might be going 10, and the zoomers and muscle pick-ups might be shooting for 90.

A 55 MPH vehicle “charging” past a 54 MPH vehicle is a death knell for everyone’s momentum.

But there was no such concern passing from New Mexico into Texas on I-10E. Flat as you please, Louise.

Carlsbad Caverns was supposed to be the last National Park of RoadMode2022. It certainly was a fulfilling visit. Good for the soul and all that claptrap.



The veteran roadtripper in me – the one that piloted my vans on my 2- or 3- or 4-week summer vacations over the last four decades – felt the urge to eat up this long and empty highway through West Texas and get to San Antonio in record time.

But that pilot was always trying to pack as many highlights as possible into a



finite amount of time. Right now, my time was far from finite. Well, it *was* finite, but it was a much *looser* version of finity. Last time I passed here, driving just into the edge of the parking lot – enough to claim I had “been to” GMNP so I could check it off the list – I most likely gave it a “next time” wink.

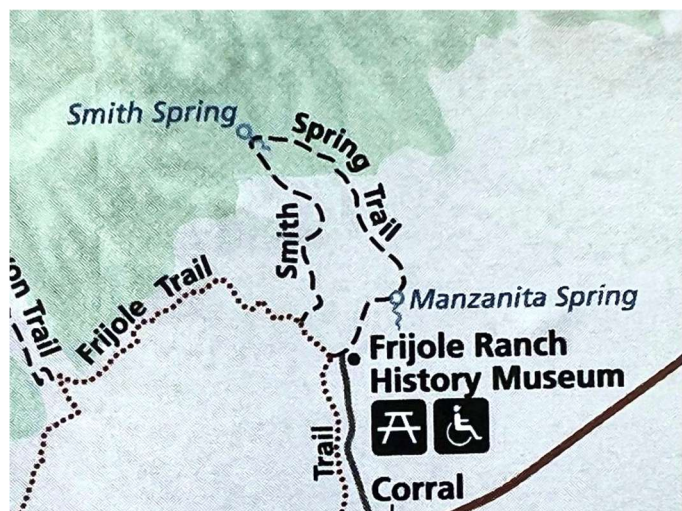
Well, guess what time it was now? Yup, “next.”





I pulled into the parking lot and actually parked this time. It was late in the afternoon by now, but the Visitor Center was still open. The NPS maps are amazing, so I had to go in and get me one.

I usually do not ask the rangers anything -- I do have my male, know-it-all ego to defend -- but this time I did want to get steered in the right direction and not end up clambering my way up a towering mountain to see the sun set, only to have to blunder my way back down in deep country darkness.



GMNP has many long trails. I mean, like two-day-hike trails. I told the ranger that I was after exercise and photos, not adventure and challenge. He understood, and did his best to mask his disdain. (Or did I just imagine that?) The Smith Spring Trail formed a loop that was “less strenuous” and “very popular with the less intense hikers.”

I wasn't sure about his tone of voice. He might've been being kindly, or he might have been shitting all over me. Either way, so what? I took his advice and went there.



On the map, the trail looked puny, but this park is bigger than it looks (it's in Texas, go figure). The description quoted it as 2.3 miles. Sounded like about an hour's worth of hiking to me, which would work out well.

So, I laced up my now-broken-in Timberlands, grabbed both my phone and my DSLR camera, and set out to find some beauty in these mountains.

I have to admit, on my first view of GMNP, that cheap stat-padder back in 2005, I thought it looked ugly. But it was a beastly hot, mid-summer day, with high humidity and that milky, grayish-white sky that kills the contrast which fuels so many good scenery shots.

Today was beautiful, though. The temperature was just under 80, the breeze was light, the air was dry, and the sky was vivid blue with enough puffs floating by to make every shot of a mountain look just different enough to warrant the extra click.

The trail started in open country, with some shrubs, but wound in among small trees and floral patches. There was plenty to capture.





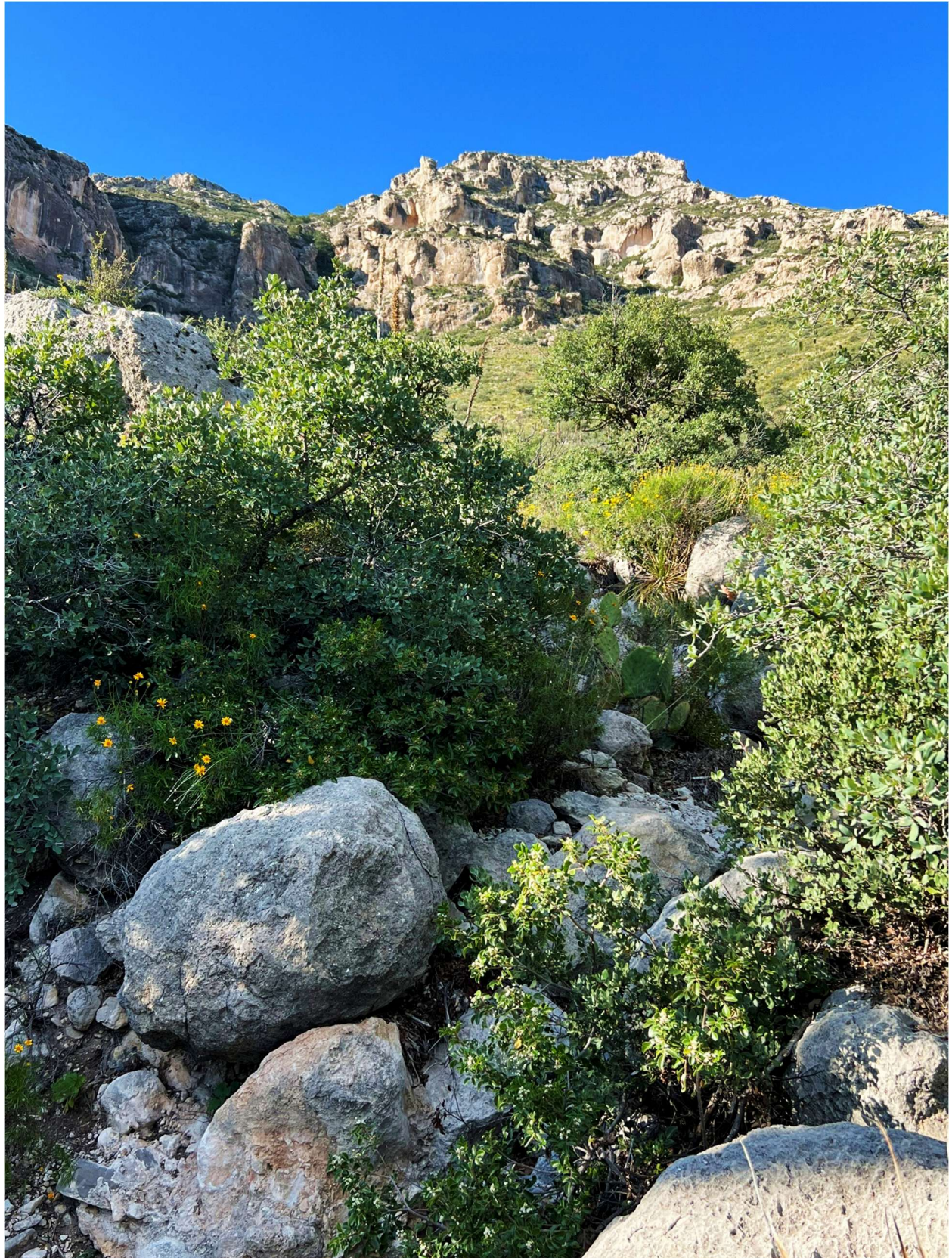




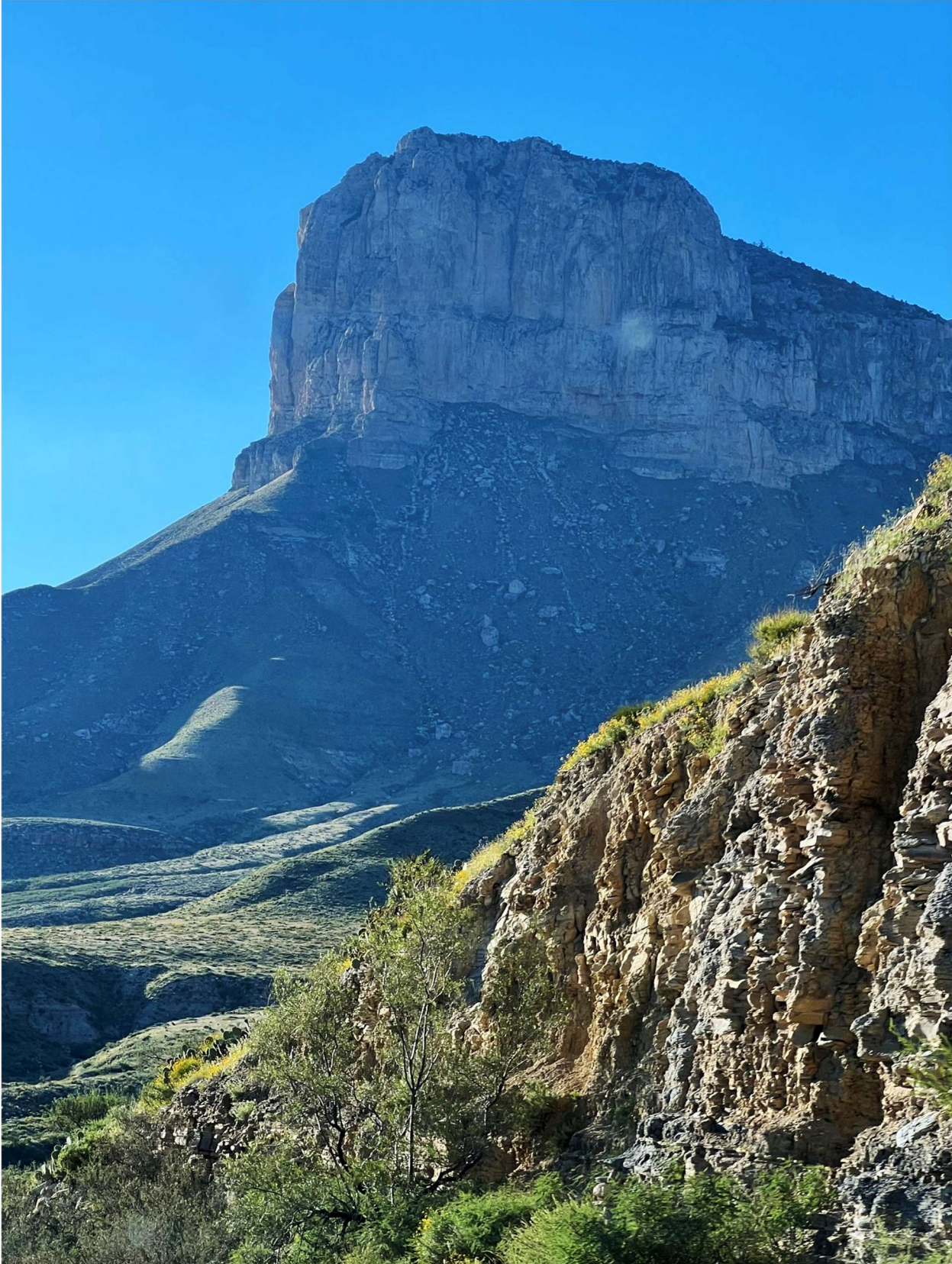




Smith Spring









So, feeling less-strained than a more serious hiker would have, I completed the trail and got Blue Maxx back onto the empty Texas highway, glad that I had legitimized GMNP's check mark on my National Parks Been-To List.

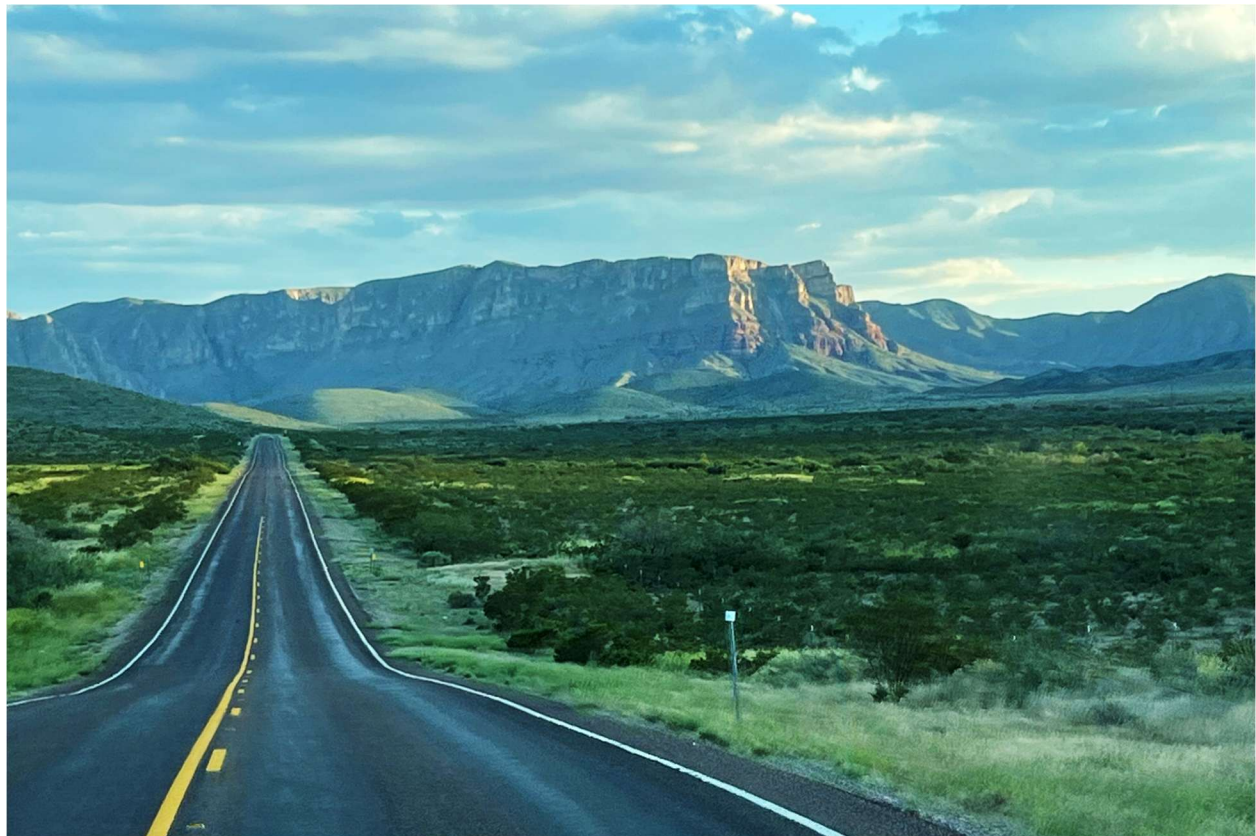




The Guadalupe looked pretty cool in my rearview mirror, so I stopped to snap a photo. Maxx got all ego-ey and wanted to be in one, so there he is, grinning from fender-to-fender, happy as all get-out to **not** be a contractor's rolling toolbox anymore.



TX-54 was an almost straight shot due south to connect with I-10. It was a 55-mile ride, and I think I saw two cars the whole way.



Shortly after reaching I-10, the sun said good night (metaphorically, of course) and I was soon driving eastward in darkness. Ninety miles later, at about 9:20 *Central Daylight Time*, I saw the Pecos West Rest Area and called off the jam.

San Antonio was still 338 miles away. That would be a full day's ride. GooGirl said the driving time was 4:33. Really?? I always budget a mile a minute for open highway driving to allow for rest stops, construction, whatever. 338 would be more than 5.5 hours.

That 4:33 would just be a 75 MPH average, though, and that's only the speed limit, so it is reasonable. A couple of decades ago, I would've been trying to do it in under four hours.

Maxx doesn't need that kind of stress, though, and neither do I. I was gonna sleep in, have a nice breakfast, do a chill cruise control ride at 69 or so, take a long lunch break, and I'd get to San Antone whenever I get there. Nice to be retired. =)

