

B Y J O H N

Down the **DEVIL'S**

*Got the cojones to face armed drug smugglers, venomous
Hairy Scorpions? You'll need 'em on Arizona's el Camin*

A I L L A N T

HIGHWAY

*reptiles, feral cacti, unexploded ordnance and Giant Desert
del Diablo, the wildest ride in the American outback.*



The Harlans' 1966 Bronco tracks westward along el Camino del Diablo toward the Cabeza Prieta Range.

ALL PHOTOS BY JOHN VALLINI

IT IS MIDNIGHT IN BORDER COUNTRY. The smuggling hour. A stone's throw from Mexico and a long way from anything else; a waning moon is breaking free of the Tule Mountains, casting ragged shadows across the sparkling granitic sands of the Sonora Desert. Somewhere out there in the *despoblado*, a great horned owl has fallen silent, leaving only the sound of gravel being ground beneath heavy weights.

"Do you hear that?" I hiss.

"I think it's coming this way," whispers Walt from the stygian depths of his sleeping bag. Walt Cressler, the paleobotanist, a man who has devoted much of his life to reconstructing the story of Life on Earth and who snores like Dizzy Gillespie playing the snorkel.

We're stretched out in a little dry wash lined with creosote bush and paloverde at the feet of southwestern Arizona's Cabeza Prieta Mountains. Surrounding us is the largest piece of uninhabited country in the Lower 48, but right now even that's not enough to suit me, because we've got company.

The spasmodic jerk of headlights moving over rough terrain flickers like lightning through the creosote scrub. Whoever it is is coming from the Tinajas Altas (High Tanks) Mountains to the west of us and, given the business likely at hand, they're pretty brazen to be running with lights. The van is moving at a walking pace down the only road through this legendary no-man's land of sharp mountains and sharper cactus—a rugged jeep track with a checkered past. The road is called el Camino del Diablo, the Devil's Highway, and the battered Econoline coming toward us now is only the latest chapter in a long, usually grisly story.

HERE, ALONG THIS LINE drawn by the Gadsden Purchase, a jagged, once-molten seam simultaneously joins and separates Mexico and the United States, and meandering back and forth across this line is el Camino del Diablo. Originating in Caborca, Mexico, and winding 250 miles northwest to Yuma, Arizona, its way is a painful one—through country that rivals Death Valley for being the hottest, driest, least forgiving place in North America; a place that can see less than three inches of rain a year and temperatures of 165°F at ground level.

For millennia, desert natives traveled through this country carrying salt and shells inland from the Gulf of California to trade. In 1540, a detachment of Coronado's men passed through here in search of the Pacific. Jesuit priests later crossed these wastes in search of souls and gold, followed by Mexican and American Forty-Niners. Many died. In fact, the millennial death toll for travelers in this region is estimated in the thousands.

"The routes over these wastes are marked by the countless skeletons of cattle, horses and sheep," wrote Raphael Pumpelly, a mining engineer turned travel writer, in 1861, "and the traveler passes thousands of the carcasses of these animals wholly preserved in the intensely dry air. Many had been placed upright on their feet by previous travelers. As we wound through groups of these mummies, they seemed sentinels guarding the valley of death."

The writer Edward Abbey, dean of late-20th-century desert rats, called this stretch of country "the villain among badlands, most wasted of wastelands, most foreboding of forbidden realms." It is, he wrote, "the final test of desert

rahood; it is here that we learn who is a true rat and who is essentially only a grasshopper mouse."

Of course, I had to learn for myself. I had read travelers' accounts of the place; I had even seen its dark volcanic craters and pale granite peaks as I drove down Highway 85 on my way down to Gringo Pass and the Gulf of California. But until now, I had never screwed up the courage to venture into it.

El Camino del Diablo is not a place to sojourn idly. Not even in the relative cool of early April, when 10-foot-high ocotillos heave their flaming red blossoms into the sky while brittlebush and hedgehog cactus dot the desert floor with clusters of yellow and magenta blooms. Not even when there is a chance of seeing the fantastically rare Sonoran pronghorn, a creature evolved to outrun Pleistocene-era cheetahs and still capable of outrunning cars on the highway. Not even when rumors of lost gold mines and ancient, multicolored cave paintings beg confirmation. The Sonora Desert is a damned dangerous place. I needed a guide.

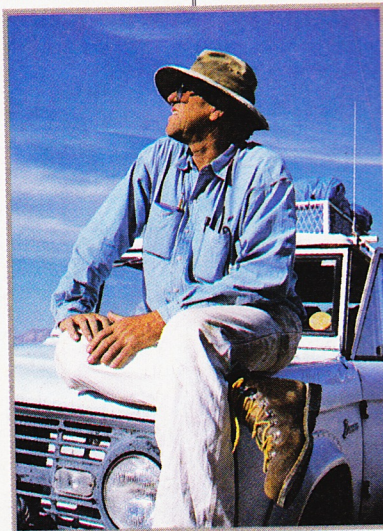
It was by pure chance that I ran into two of the best while loitering in the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge office in the old copper town of Ajo, Arizona. I was poring over a topo map, trying to locate a circle of stones known as the Grave of Eight, when a large, raffish-looking character straight out of *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* ambled in with a tall, elegant woman. "I can show you where it is," said the man, after I'd told him my business. "I can show you all sorts of things that you'd never find

unless you knew where to look."

Dr. Annita Harlan and her husband, Tom, have been wandering the length and breadth of el Camino del Diablo for nearly 40 years. Tom is a dendrochronologist at the University of Arizona and a Westerner to the core. While he has traveled throughout the world, including a stint in Morocco as Dendrochronologist to the King, in the United States he has set foot east of Texas only once, a record he is clearly proud of.

Where Tom is burly, sunburned and a little rough around the edges, Annita, a botanist specializing in desert plants, is slender, almost ethereal, and remarkably fair in spite of her considerable desert time. Both are in their 60s but could easily pass for much younger. They moved to Tucson in the 1950s, and when they realized the desert was an affliction that wasn't going away, they bought a used 1966 Bronco equipped with a winch, heavy-duty jack, boulder-proof bumpers and externally mounted jerricans for water. Inside, they added a portable library, sample-collecting equipment, cooking gear and three radios. Thus prepared, the Harlans headed out to the desert every chance they got. More than 30 years later, the Bronco's still running.

Not only are the Harlans walking oral histories of the Sonora Desert, they know how to survive in it. Between them they have logged more than 60 years in the field as volunteers with the Southern Arizona Rescue Association, handling every-



Tom Harlan surveys the scene at the Mesita de los Muertos graveyard.

thing from snakebites and cactus impalements to corpse retrieval. If you're going to hitch a ride down the Devil's Highway, these are the people you want to ride with.

MUCH OF EL CAMINO DEL DIABLO passes through the 860,000-acre, 75-mile-wide Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge. At the refuge's western boundary, 50 miles southeast of Yuma, Arizona, el Camino makes a dash across a particularly nasty stretch of desert into the 2.7-million-acre Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range. The combined areas, Cabeza Prieta, the Goldwater Range and the adjoining Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument total nearly 5000 square miles, a region larger than Connecticut.

However, in order to travel all the way through on el Camino del Diablo we needed permits from the Wildlife Refuge and from the Marines who oversee the western half of the Goldwater Range. These permits are essentially "hold harmless" agreements indicating that you have been warned that said range 1. Contains the danger of injury or death due to falling objects such as aircraft, live ammunition, missiles, etc. 2. Contains the danger of not-yet-exploded ordinance lying on or under the ground. Etc.... Etc.... Further down, one is reminded that there are no road signs, no services, no regular patrols and no sources of safe drinking water. After initialing item number six (*If I get lost, if my vehicle breaks down, or in the case of any emergency, I AM ON MY OWN* [sic]), and acknowledging a few other minor hazards like venomous reptiles, flash floods and open mine shafts, we were good to go.

While gassing up in the crossroads town of Why, the proprietor of the Why Not Travel Store asked me if I was planning to take a gun. "No, it's a wildlife refuge," I said, naively. He walked away, giving me a look with an unmistakable two-part message: "I'm not talking about hunting, and you don't know jack." In fact, this portion of the U.S.-Mexico border sees a lot of northbound traffic in the form of drug smugglers and illegal immigrants; southbound gun runners are not unheard of either.

Once we signed our lives away and fueled up, we headed out, the plan being to make time on the graded road through the Growler Mountains marking the western edge of Organ Pipe, cross into Cabeza Prieta proper (whereupon the road goes—figuratively speaking—to hell), through the O'Neill Hills, past O'Neill's Grave (David O'Neill was a prospector found dead of thirst in 1916 with his head in a hole), and spend our first night in the San Cristobal Wash, a vast network of arroyos about 30 miles from the main road. Tom and Annita set the pace in their battered Bronco, followed by Bill and Helen Rice, both retired from careers with the U.S. Geographical Survey. Walt and I brought up the rear.

The road we traveled on is the only road in the refuge open to visitors; it is exactly the width of a Jeep's wheel-base and is entirely unimproved. In fact, it is without a doubt the slimmest excuse for a road I've ever been on—a bone-jarring, oil-pan-puncturing, tire-shredding horror of razor-sharp lava, bowling-ball-sized rocks, wheel-swallowing gullies and deep, shifting sand. Most of the time, it is simply infeasible to go faster than about 12 mph.

The right-hand side of our Jeep disappeared into a ditch for the first of many times, giving Walt, the paleobotanist, an opportunity to study a creosote bush very closely. This one happened to be in bloom—fragrant yellow flowers lurking among shiny, delicate leaves.

"Ever rolled?" he asked in a deceptively calm tone of voice, white knuckles clutching the steeply sloping dash.

"Yes," I said, "but I'll try not to do it again."

The Sonora Desert is referred to, somewhat oxymoronically, as a lush desert, but this is a relative term. Saguaro cactus abounds, along with hedgehog, barrel

S and many types of cholla. The broad washes that fan out for miles across the desert floor are dotted with creosote bush and bursage, occasionally interrupted by the long tendrils of a furiously blooming ocotillo. Lining the deeper arroyos are actual trees: ironwood, mesquite and paloverde.

Shortly after Franklin Roosevelt declared Cabeza Prieta a "Game Range" in 1939, Congress withdrew the surrounding area for use by the Air Force and the Marines, with one result being that a wide variety of intriguing objects now litter the landscape: bombs, rockets; 50-caliber and 20mm machine-gun bullets; car-sized aluminum tow targets, among other things. Last year, the Marines lost a Harrier jet in here.

The Cabeza is now theoretically off-limits to the military except for overflights and, while you may hear the distant roar of F-16s or the death rattle of an A-10 Warthog on a strafing run, the only things we had to worry about were our own mistakes and the various creatures that ran, crawled, slithered, flew and occasionally drove about us in the arid vastness.

After dinner at our camp in San Cristobal, the Harlans and the Rices retired to their tents while Walt and I each selected our own acre of desert and simply lay down. Tom was walking the perimeter with a black light, looking for scorpions; this is standard procedure. The six-inch-long, snake-eating Giant Desert Hairy Scorpion (its real name) may be the scariest looking, but the far smaller *Centruroides sculpturatus* (Arizona scorpion) can actually kill you. The Sonora Desert hosts a wide variety of poisonous creatures, ranging from gila monsters and sidewinders to killer bees and the tarantula hawk, a species of wasp that really goes for the gusto at feeding time. Even now, many of the Sonora's denizens have never been classified. Something to ponder as you roll out your sleeping bag.

OVER BREAKFAST WE DETERMINED THE AGENDA for this stunning spring day: el Camino itself. The old trail often deviated from the more recent jeep track and, here, it was marked only by a slightly higher density of vegetation that has made the most of the rainwater gathered in old wheel ruts and horse tracks. We headed south on foot, past a small mountain, and came to a clump of rocks in whose clefts were hidden jugs of water; the jugs were glass

because plastic would be chewed through by coyotes.

And it is in the mountains and dunes, between here and the interstate, 60 waterless miles to the north, that most modern fatalities occur. Many of the immigrants are equipped with little more than a flashlight, a water jug and a bag of tamales. But they're not always Mexicans; last year the Border Patrol rescued five Bulgarians who had entered illegally from Mexico and got stranded in the middle of the Cabeza.

We crossed a line of thicker vegetation and Tom congratulated us: "You are now standing on el Camino del Diablo." We could see the ancient trail clearly now, meandering toward a break in the O'Neill Hills to the east and a flat-topped cinder cone to the west.

We followed el Camino on foot for several miles toward las Playas, the occasionally damp and green remnant of an ancient lake. Hurricane Nora, followed by a wet spring, had broken the drought's death grip and now las Playas were lush and blooming with poppies, penstemon and desert mallow. But even in the comparative cool of April, I could feel the hammerlike effect of the sun.

As we walked, we found ample evidence of the ancients: a half-dozen metates, countless potsherds, fragments of worked obsidian and centuries-old seashells litter the path. Whenever we found something of note, Tom balanced his GPS in the crown of his aged, sweat-stained hat and took a reading, jotting the coordinates in a small spiral notebook. Walt found a 50-caliber machine-gun round in the middle of the trail, pointing due west; it had been in that spot for more than half a century and yet looked as if it had been placed



Final resting place of an anonymous traveler on the Pinacate lava flow.

there only the day before. Here, a bullet is not a bullet, but a means of measuring time; part of the desert's vast historical record of itself and all who have passed through it.

That night, we camped on the northernmost tip of the Pinacate lava flow, in a clearing surrounded by what looked like the scorched ruins of a castle. All the major craters of this 1.7-million-year-old no-man's land are south of the border, but here, the lava has oozed across, leaving a chaotic jumble of volcanic cobble and desert pavement surrounded by an orange halo called the Pinta Sands.

THERE IS VIRTUALLY NO LIGHT pollution in this region and, for the first time in my life, I saw the Gegenschein, a pale white glow in the western sky caused by sunlight reflecting off cosmic dust long after the sun has set. It was eerie to think that, centuries ago, other travelers—Indian, Spanish, Mexican—were seeing the same thing, experiencing what must have been the same feeling of unnerving yet enchanting isolation.

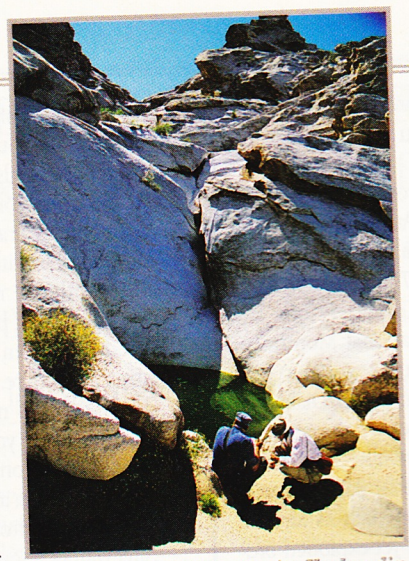
The sun was still behind the Sierra Pintas when I wakened. Made of a silvery gray stone called Gunnery Range Granite, the Pintas erupted from the desert floor like a mouthful of barracuda teeth. I was hoping to catch a glimpse of an antelope in the predawn, so, half-awake, almost dreaming, I crept southward across crumbling lava, looking for some high ground. No one knows for sure how many Sonoran pronghorn there are, but the estimate is around 100. Last year's count for the more wide-ranging desert bighorn was, for Cabeza Prieta, less than 500. Not surprisingly, I came up empty.

El Camino del Diablo may be the world's longest cemetery and, today, Tom was going to give us a tour of its graves. Most of those buried here were interred by strangers who came after, following a trail of castoff belongings and disordered sand. Virtually all of those who died out here succumbed to exposure and thirst, which has to be the most horrible way to die this side of Ebola.

Freezing and drowning are cakewalks compared to dying of thirst. There are distinct stages to this process, which usually takes around three days. Most of us have never proceeded past the first stage of dry mouth, headache and mild disorientation. Beyond this, however, waits an excruciating shrinking of the skin, swelling and splitting of the tongue and lips, followed by a casting off of clothes and possessions, desiccation of the eyes resulting in an unblinking stare, delusions that a cactus is a water pump, that a dark shadow is a spring. And so people are found naked with their heads in dry holes, faces partially mummified and studded with cactus spines, fingers worn literally to the bone.

With these details firmly in mind, Tom showed us where the bodies were buried. Some graves are piles of stones still marked by wooden crosses, others are cruciform alignments of granite and lava. Sometimes a block of quartz will mark the heart or head of the fallen. One of the more famous memorials is a large ring encircling the numeral eight. It was here that an entire family perished after breaking the glass demijohn containing their water supply. Most of these monuments are remarkably hard to spot unless pointed out, one reason they are so well preserved, but there is one grave we were not shown. It is significant because it belongs to probably the only person ever willingly buried out here, and that person was Edward Abbey himself. His gravesite is marked, but it is a secret, the way he and his family wanted it to be.

If not for the Harlans, we wouldn't have noticed any but two or three of the graves they



Walt Cressler and Dr. Annita Harlan dig at the lower tank of Tinajas Altas.

showed us over the 125 miles between Ajo and Wellton. Nor would we have seen the fragment of Pleistocene tortoise shell that Annita picked out of a wash, nor the fresh prints of the Sonoran pronghorn, nor the multicolored pictographs of lizards and suns arcing across the ceiling of a polished granite cliff cave like an atavistic Sistine Chapel.

"We're generalists," said Tom with a big smile. "We stop to look at things and find other things. That's what we do."

We had seen four vehicles in the past two days, and half of those had been Border Patrol helicopters. This portion of the border is only intermittently fenced and, in the fading daylight, we surprised a family of ghostly white, Mexican cattle, wandering in a forest of saguaros. We made our last camp a mile beyond them, at the foot of Tordillo Mountain on the southwestern edge of the Cabeza Prieta Range. The name means "dark head," inspired by the blackened lava that has forced its way up through the granite, capping some of the peaks. Tomorrow we would cross the Lechugilla Desert, a

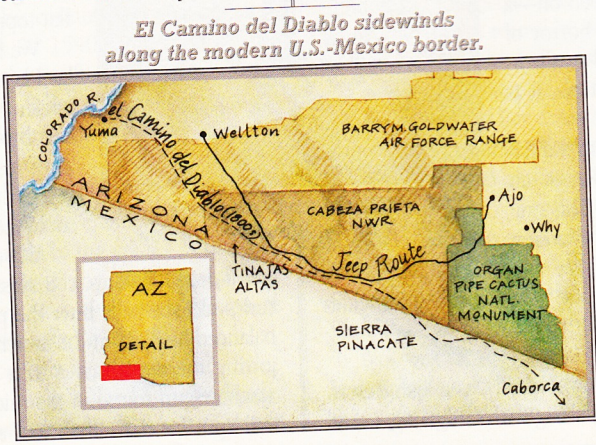
soul-killing waste of ocotillo and creosote that lies between us and Tinajas Altas. We bedded down in the shelter of a sandy arroyo, at the foot of a large saguaro, and were lulled to sleep by the hooting of great horned owls and the oscillating cries of coyotes. It was at this point that Walt and I were awakened by the van, vehicle number five—the Midnight Coyote Express.

WATCHING IT FROM OUR HIDING PLACE, we hope it doesn't decide to stop; illegals tend to travel on foot, but vehicles usually mean smugglers, and smugglers usually mean hardware. All we have in our arsenal is a can opener and a severe case of gastrointestinal distress. The van limps past on its way east, toward Tule Well, the place where one Mexican entrepreneur made the fatal mistake of trying to sell water to desperately thirsty travelers. He learned—the hard way—that another side effect of advanced dehydration is extreme irritability.

We learn later that the van in question will eventually lose a tire, that it will continue on the rim and without lights until it runs across some other travelers near Tule Well, among them Vergial Harp, the refuge's outdoor recreation planner. Mr. Harp will go to the assistance of the van but will become apprehensive when a number of men emerge, requesting the loan of a tire. Apprehension will turn to grave concern at the appearance of a standoffish fellow sporting a Bulls jacket who will attempt to place a call on a cell phone—probably not to Triple A. At this point, Harp and his friends recall that discretion is the better part of valor and get the hell out of there. The van will be intercepted by Wellton Border Patrol agents a short time later; it will contain the equivalent of two baseball teams.

After breakfast, we pack up and make our run across the Lechugilla. Even with full tanks of gas and water we do not linger; the place is still intimidating. It is here, in the homestretch to Tinajas Altas, that we pass out of the Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge and into the Goldwater Air Force Range. The narrow, rutted track we've been creeping along for three days transforms abruptly into a wide, graded thoroughfare; power lines appear as if from nowhere and tire tracks spiral off in all directions through the once-virgin desert. After what we've seen, it's like being slapped awake from a dream, and it becomes vividly apparent how crucial it is that the refuge be preserved and that access be strictly limited.

"There is a difference between a refuge and a park," explains Bob Schumacher, former director of the Cabeza Prieta Refuge. "Refugio is the Latin word for sanctuary, and that's what Cabeza Prieta is; it is not a playground for humans."



Arriving at Tinajas Altas, we park on the Mesita de Los Muertos where, at one time, some 75 marked graves could be found.

"We never camp here," says Tom, eyeing a freshly dismembered bighorn whose spine stands on end in a creosote bush. "The place is haunted."

The nine granite tanks, rising hundreds of feet up a flood-scoured ravine on the east side of the Tinajas Altas Mountains, were the end of the line for many a traveler on el Camino del Diablo. The pools are deep and they can hold rain-water for months, sometimes all year long. All who passed would stop and drink, and those lacking the strength to go farther would die here, not of thirst, but of hunger. When the lowermost tank was empty, they would climb up to the higher tanks over rotten rock whose hand- and footholds have a tendency to give way at critical times. Some would become stranded, others fell into the pools and drowned.

As we contemplate this graveyard oasis, a lone buzzard circles overhead,

§ ever the optimist. This is not the sort of place that invites one to hang around. As we make our way back to the vehicles, I take a closer look at the creosote bushes along the periphery of the mesita; each one is growing out of a carefully piled mound of stones.

It's time to go; Wellton and the rest of the 20th century wait for us down the road. As we say our good-byes, rain clouds lumber across the distant horizon, trailing wisps of virga. I ask Annita when she and Tom think they'll go back into the Cabeza. "Tomorrow," she answers. "On our last trip we think we found some giant sloth bones at a site south of Tacna."

"We're going back for another look." ♣

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THE WANDERLUST ITCH-SCRATCHER

BY MIKE KESSLER

GOT THE URGE TO GET LOST? WELL, HERE ARE 20 PLACES TO STRETCH YOUR LEGS, FLOAT INTO OBLIVION OR JUST GET AWAY—WAY AWAY—FOR A WHILE.

AREA	DESCRIPTION	CONTACT	
MOUNTAINS	BIGHORN MOUNTAINS, WYOMING	Less crowded than the Tetons, these mountains in the north-central part of the state are remote even by Wyoming standards. Hike in and camp among the moose near Bucking Mule Falls, more than 100 feet high.	Bighorn National Forest: 307/672-0751
	GREAT DIVIDE MOUNTAIN BIKE ROUTE, MONTANA	Mountain bikers—both the experienced and the green—lose themselves on the just-completed 696-mile trail through the Big Sky State, a section of the 2456-mile Mexico-to-Canada fat-tire route.	Adventure Cycling: 406/721-1776
	LONG TRAIL, GREEN MOUNTAINS, VERMONT	Countless above-treeline views from this segment of the 270-mile Vermont-to-Canada trail (which has 173 miles of off-shoot trails to explore), including the Green Mountains' highest peak, 4393-foot Mount Mansfield.	Green Mountain National Forest: 802/747-6700
	MOUNT ADAMS, WASHINGTON	The capstone of a trip into Gifford Pinchot National Forest is seven lung-searing hours up Washington's second highest peak (12,307, crampons required), rewarded by one of the Cascade's longest glissades down.	Mount Adams Ranger District: 509/395-2501
	MOUNT WHITNEY, CALIFORNIA	A 22-mile, sunup-to-sundown quad-burner from 8360 feet to the highest point in the Lower 48 at 14,494 feet. Then hike the Sierras on the Pacific Crest Trail through Kings Canyon and Sequoia national parks.	Inyo National Forest: 888/374-3773
	PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST, NORTH CAROLINA	Backpack into a relatively undiscovered, camp-anywhere swath of fog-shrouded, tree-topped 4000-foot rolling ridges between the Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah National Park.	National Forest Service, Asheville: 828/257-4200
	SAN JUAN NATIONAL FOREST, COLORADO	Southern Colorado's most challenging range, featuring five hikeable fourteeners (Uncompahgre, Handies, Redcloud, Wetterhorn, Sunshine) among a cluster of smaller but equally rugged volcanic massifs.	San Juan National Forest: 970/247-4874
WATER	ALLAGASH WILDERNESS WATERWAY, MAINE	Stroke along for 100-mile stretches in northern Maine's non-motorized canoeing sanctuary. Nothing but moose, trout, the north woods and endless stretches of pristine paddling.	Allagash Outfitters: 207/398-3277
	BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA, MINNESOTA	Find solitude and refine your stroke canoeing through 1.2 million acres of countless lakes, people-free portages, and unadulterated campsites in this huge wilderness along the Minnesota-Canada border.	Wilderness Outfitters: 800/777-8572
	CHEAT RIVER, WEST VIRGINIA	Spot the occasional bald eagle while gliding leisurely (Class I rapids only) through Monongahela National Forest; dangle a line for smallmouth bass and trout in a series of action-packed holes.	Blackwater Outdoors Center: 800/328-4798
	MIDDLE FORK OF THE SALMON RIVER, IDAHO	Negotiate Class III and IV rapids, which drop 3000 feet from the Sawtooths to the "main" Salmon below, camping on beaches at the edge of forests of pine and Douglas firs along the way.	Middle Fork Ranger District: 208/879-4101
	OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, GEORGIA	This south Georgia alternative to the Everglades can be toured only by canoe, stopping at mid-swamp camping platforms. The largest black bear stronghold in the Southeast, and watch the gators don't get ya.	Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge: 912/496-3331
	ROGUE RIVER, OREGON	Oregon's whitewater pride, serving rafters and kayakers who plan ahead and reserve one of its crowd-preventing 2500 permits per year for the lower Class III and IV "Wilderness" section.	Rogue Pacific Adventure Center: 800/525-2161
	YOUGHIOGHENY RIVER, MARYLAND	Ambitious paddlers can tackle western Maryland's narrowest, most roiling rapids, which contain Class V stretches, thanks to the two-to-three times weekly dam releases April through October at Deep Creek Lake.	Upper Yough Expeditions: 800/248-1893
DESERT	ANZA-BORRERO DESERT STATE PARK, CALIFORNIA	A colorful and palm-laden low desert just north of the Mexican border. Hike in to Walker Pass or the palm groves near Mountain Palm Springs; mountain bikers make tracks through Canyon Sin Nombre.	Anza-Borrego Desert State Park: 760/767-5311
	BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK, TEXAS	Giant river gorges, cacti, jaguars and peregrine falcons give life to Big Bend's seemingly dead landscape. Spend a weekend with the coyotes hiking the 13-mile Chisos Mountains' South Rim trail.	Big Bend National Park: 915/477-2251
	CAPITOL REEF NATIONAL PARK, UTAH	Slickrock and arches without the Moab crowds. Hop rocks, puddles and even quicksand as you wander the Halls Creek Narrows, with cliffs up to 1000 feet narrowing at times to only four or five feet apart.	Capitol Reef National Park: 801/425-3791
	JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK, CALIFORNIA	Miles of angular cactus arms and smooth sandstone make Joshua Tree more surreal than L.A., just 2½ hours to the west. Hike to 5814-foot Quail Mountain, the park's highest peak. And, oh, those trees!	Joshua Tree National Park: 760/367-5500
	PETRIFIED FOREST NATIONAL PARK, ARIZONA	The world's largest deposit of ash-covered, petrified trees adorn 93,000 acres of grassy desert prairie. Backpack through "painted" desert red rocks, mesas and igneous peaks.	Petrified Forest National Park: 520/524-6228
	WHITE SANDS NATIONAL MONUMENT, NEW MEXICO	The word here is "wander," which is what you'll do in the monument's 143,000 acres of soft gypsum dunes decipherable only by plastic markers on designated trails. But there's nary a drop of water—so bring plenty.	White Sands National Monument: 505/479-6124