



My name is John and I'm retired and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second-hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log, and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 25 of my **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

California 2022

February 28 to March 10, 2022

It's been two years since the last big trip and I'm thinking the pilgrimages may be over. This will be a short ten-day, half-family-visit journey in familiar territory. I arrive late and spend the first night at the Good Nite Inn in Buena Vista Park, Orange County.

First stop in the morning of Day 1 is familiar downtown Fullerton, waiting for the Half Off Bookstore to open. But I leave the bookstore empty-handed. A good friend who is terminal and more dental issues are leaving me feeling vividly mortal. Is there even time to read more books?

In the afternoon I linger in downtown Santa Ana. Orange County's Latino city is beginning to look gentrified and is almost completely deserted due to the pandemic and tram tracks being laid down on 4th Street, the main drag. I expected California to be more open. Will people ever come back outside?



Santa Ana



Santa Ana



Santa Ana



Santa Ana

I will stick to familiar places again on Day 2, beginning with a drive down the coast to Encinitas to revisit the Self-Realization Fellowship Meditation Gardens. I stop at Huntington Beach on the way, to walk on the beach and breathe some ocean air. There are more beach squirrels than people here. A homeless man who looks to have spent the night on the sand appears to have just woken up and is rummaging in a large trash can.

There are so many military vehicles on the highway as I drive by Camp Pendleton, the marine base that eats up 30 miles of coastline. I can even see naval maneuvers in the water, paratroopers dropping out of planes, probably related to the war in Ukraine.

Encinitas is looking gentrified this morning too, and not as inviting as remembered. But the Edenic Gardens are what I came for. I overhear the ultra-nerdy security guard at the entrance tell someone, "It's like another planet."

There are plenty of meditators here, despite the silence periodically broken by the sharp sound of military helicopters above. I can't see how one could meditate here anyway, with so many people walking about. I see one meditator sporting a perfect mindful-peasant look. He has all the right clothes, hair, sandals, etc.... I assume (correctly it will turn out) that a beautiful woman nearby must be his girlfriend, because she too is dressed just right – perfect clothes, with a perfect scarf, a perfect face and just the right expression of inner bliss. I take a shot of her from a distance and will later notice another woman eyeing me suspiciously in the photo.

A man comes along and prostrates himself face-down between the beautiful mediator and the seaside cliff. He's making a sound like he's sucking up energy from the earth into his abdomen, or maybe it's the other way around, maybe he's spewing his own energy into the earth. Either way, it's hard to tell who's holier, him or the beautiful buddha lady. In the evening, a first meeting with family goes well with plans made for the weekend.



Huntingdon Beach



Huntingdon Beach



Self-Realization Fellowship Meditation Gardens



Self-Realization Fellowship Meditation Gardens



Self-Realization Fellowship Meditation Gardens



Self-Realization Fellowship Meditation Gardens

It takes 90 minutes to get to the other side of Los Angeles in the morning of Day 3. First stop is the Norman Simon Art Museum in Pasadena where the sculpture garden is a bit disappointing, but the art collection inside is good, especially a Van Gogh painting of a tree.

Next stop is Lincoln Park. Where is everyone? Seems people are reluctant to come out after the plague here too, still afraid of the COVID. I decide I will visit more L.A. parks before I leave, maybe make it a theme of future travels.



Norman Simon Art Museum, Pasadena



Lincoln Park



Lincoln Park

In the morning of Day 4, I rent a bike in Santa Monica to ride the beach path to Venice Beach and back. The guy in the shop says they were lucky to have barely survived the plague. Business is starting to pick up, but very slowly. The ride is a lot of fun and I'm reminded what a good combo bike and camera make.

Lunch is at George's Burgers, a Latino diner where people are very chatty. Prices are up everywhere. The world seems to be changing for the worse and there's pessimism in the air. Maybe we'll all be dead soon from plagues or climate change or a Third World War.

Last stop of the day is Vista Hermosa Park, a spot that overlooks the skyscrapers of downtown L.A. There's a strange young woman sitting on the bench with the best view, going on and on about how she is just about to become the star of her own reality show, she just needs to sign the contract. In the meantime, she's selling her paintings, which aren't half-bad.

The Glendale Express Hotel is weird. Black and white hallways and pop tarts for breakfast.



Venice Beach



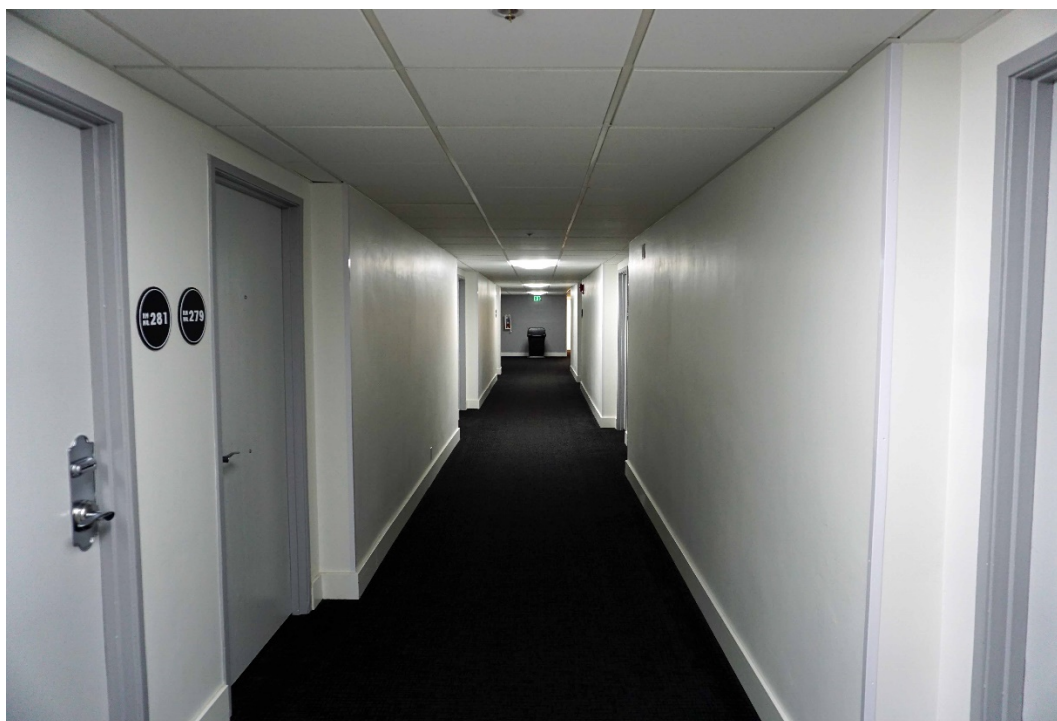
Venice Beach



Venice Beach



Vista Hermosa Park



Glendale Express Hotel

It's chilly at Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills) in the morning of Day 5, cold when the sun slips behind a cloud. This is a different kind of cemetery, meant to be more of a park than a grim place of mourning. The "Builder's Creed" etched in stone explains the concept:

I therefore prayerfully resolve on this New Year's Day, 1917, that I shall endeavor to build Forest Lawn as different, as unlike other cemeteries as sunshine is to darkness, as eternal life is unlike death. I shall try to build at Forest Lawn a great park, devoid of misshapen monuments and other customary signs of earthly death, but filled with towering trees, sweeping lawns, splashing fountains, singing birds, beautiful statuary, cheerful flowers, noble memorial architecture with interiors full of light and color, and redolent of the world's best history and romances.

A security guard tells me I am not allowed to take photos with a "professional camera", but phone photos are permitted. I cheat whenever I think I can't be seen, keeping an eye out for the little white security cars. The light is good with dramatic white clouds in a deep blue sky. I get some nice shots and decide, for future reference, that parks and cemeteries will be in the same photo category. After a quick visit to MacArthur Park, I head to my motel in Anaheim.



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Hollywood Hills)



MacArthur Park, Los Angeles

The Morada Inn is right next to a freeway exit at a very busy intersection, surrounded on all sides by cars. I'm sick of L.A. freeways and traffic already. I think I'll end the trip with a couple of quiet days in the desert.

Mass in the morning of Day 6 is at Christ Cathedral, the re-named and re-designed Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove. The sermon on this first day of Lent is based on the gospel story of Jesus going into the desert to fast and reflect for 40 days. At the end of the 40 days, he is tempted by the Devil in several ways. The priest says these occasions of temptation to sin can be turned into occasions of grace by willfully doing the opposite of the temptation presented.

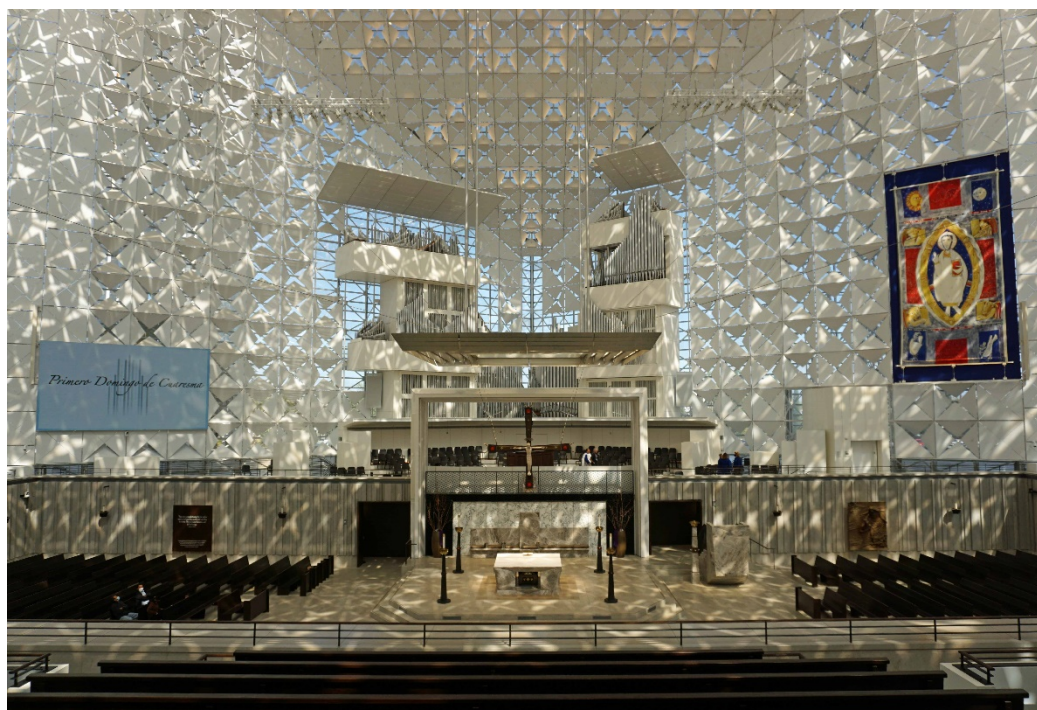
In the afternoon, I meet my son and granddaughter at Laguna Beach where I get an "I love you" from the girl that makes the trip a success.

Back at the Morada Inn, I try to go for a walk at dusk, in search of dinner, but the zombies are coming out. The sidewalks seem to belong to them; regular people don't walk in this part of the world. The next morning, I will notice the homeless encampment on the strip of grass between the freeway and the carwash next to the motel.





Morada Inn



Christ Cathedral, Garden Grove

I'm taking the familiar drive up to the high desert in the morning of Day 7. First stop is the Bagdad Café in Newberry Springs, which appears to be closed but the door is unlocked. Inside, I meet the owner, Andrea Pruitt, who tells me her husband bought the café after it was made a landmark by the 1987 German film of the same name. Even though the café needs renovations before it can reopen, Andrea is determined to hold on to it until she goes to meet her dead husband on the other side. I sign the guest book before I leave.

I linger in Barstow, as I always do on this drive, before reaching the nearby Mojave National Preserve, which is just what I'm looking for, virtually empty of cars or people. I'll come back tomorrow morning. Just across the border in Nevada, there is hardly anyone to be seen at Primm Valley either. One more night in a casino motel.



Bagdad Cafe, Newberry Springs



Andrea Pruitt



Barstow

Day 8 begins with a visit to the Seven Magic Mountains art installation just off the highway between Primm Valley and Las Vegas, where I get some nice shots of the seven painted boulder totems in morning light. I get some more shots of a dead motel in Baker before re-entering the Preserve where I do the loop road twice, hoping there will be some people at the Teutonia Peak Trail where I would like to see the burnt Joshua tree forest but don't want to wander into the desert alone. It's easy to get lost with faint trails and hardly any landmarks.

It seems I am one of only a handful of people in the entire Preserve today and, with no other cars in sight, forty miles an hour feels like the perfect speed to drive through the barren landscape. At one point, I pull over and walk into the desert to soak up the silence and emptiness on this windless day.

I find a circle of stones, then discover another circle around a nearby bush. Why did I stop here? Who has made this spot a sacred place? I place a rock in the center of the first circle, a rock with a small projection that points to the bush where I also add a rock of my own to the others. You can feel the presence of God here, the perfect place to pray. You just need to nudge the oceanic expansiveness into the prayer.

Back in the car, strange noises seem to be coming from behind me, and the screen on the dashboard keeps telling me to check the back seat for passengers. Oddly enough, the message disappears when I actually turn my head to check. There are glimpses out of the corner of my eye too.

What would I do if I did see something when I turned around? The hair stands up on the back of my head. Is this a fear of the unknown? Of losing control? Maybe we structure our lives around these fears and then forget they are there.

A ten-minute nap at Kelso Station is interrupted by a passing train which I decide to follow on the road that parallels the track, leapfrogging for a while, taking photos. There's no one at the Teutonia Trail but I make it to the burnt forest and back without getting lost. This time spent in the Mojave will be the highlight of the trip.



Seven Magic Mountains



Seven Magic Mountains



Baker, California



Mohave Nature Preserve





Mohave Nature Preserve



Mohave Nature Preserve



Mohave Nature Preserve



Burnt Joshua tree forest, Mohave Nature Preserve

The scent of stale cigarette smoke as I walk through the casino in the morning of Day 9 is depressing. Will this be the last time I stay in a casino hotel? I used to be able to see this purgatorial Vegas culture with detachment and humor, but it's looking a bit like hell now.

On the way back to L.A. I finally make it to ZZYZX, the abandoned desert resort and alphabetical end of the world. So quiet. No one else here. A lovely spot.



Road to ZZYZX



ZZYZYX



ZZYZYX

After one last night in the grimmest hotel ever, I have seven hours to kill before I head back to John Wayne Airport. It's an uneventful, slightly boring Orange County end to the trip.

Things felt different on this trip. Books were not a factor and hotel rooms seem to have lost their appeal. I hardly wrote either, leaving me still unsure if these trips are over.

But it was good to see family and to walk in the sun for ten days. It was good to be in public places without a mask. It was good to take photos, to walk with eyes open and searching in this familiar way. It was good to see the ocean and breath it in. And it was very good to be in the desert, alone on a fine, windless day.

I'm sure I would never be able to find it again, but I'll remember the random pullover in the desert where I found the sacred place, the two circles of stones.

