

# A Walk Through The Valley of Fires

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By Mark C. Blazek, Earth Science, Winter 1979-1980

Three miles northwest of Carrizozo, New Mexico, at an elevation of 5250 feet, is a 430-acre tract of land adjoining US-380 which was dedicated as the Valley of Fires State Park on May 6, 1966. The park encompasses a large portion of the black, fissured lava of the Carrizozo Malpais, which has fascinated travelers for many years. Park facilities include campsites with shelters, tables, barbecue grills, playground equipment, restrooms and electrical hook-up for trailers. Motels and restaurants are available in Carrizozo, the county seat of Lincoln County, N.M.

The Carrizozo Malpais and Valley of Fires were born in violence. This blackened, misshapen phenomenon that stretches for 50 miles through the northern section of the Tularosa Valley east of Carrizozo and directly north of White Sands is the result of a fiery upheaval that has produced one of Nature's strangest caprices.

The Carrizozo Malpais is one of the youngest and best preserved lava fields in the United States. The field covers about 250 square miles. The term malpais (meaning "badlands") was used by Spanish explorers and travelers in the southwest to designate rough-surfaced lava flows that seriously obstructed travel. Even today 4-wheel drive vehicles are no match for this terrain.

One of the fascinating things about the lava is the evidence of its awful writhing movement as it crept relentlessly over the land. The great rips, blowholes and thin-roofed blisters create a tumbled mass of upheaval, needle sharp and tortuous. Shoe leather lasts no time at all when you try to explore this forbidden land.

Two principal basalt flows, originating from a volcanic vent at Little Black Peak near the northern end of the Tularosa Valley, are responsible for the Carrizozo Malpais and Valley of Fires. The glowing molten lava oozed southwest for 44 miles blanketing everything in its path. In narrow segments of the valley the flows were constricted to ribbon one-half mile wide, whereas in wider parts of the valley they spread out to a width of over 5 miles. A thickness of 162 feet was measured at one point 2 miles south of U.S. Highway 380.

Believe-it-or-not, plant and animal life abounds in the Malpais. Windblown topsoil vegetates cholla, sotol and cedar. Even pinon and yucca find foot-holds here. But perhaps the most interesting phenomenon of the lava is the animal life. The mice are dark brown or black. The same species a few miles away in White Sands National Monument are light-gray and white. This is also true of bugs and lizards; in the Sands, nature has whitewashed them. But here in the malpais she has lacquered them dark brown and black. These tiny creatures are the only things that haven't been conquered by the lava. They have taken it over by adapting themselves to it.

The New Mexico State Parks and Recreation Commission has recently constructed a nature trail, complete with interpretive brochure, through the park. Also, a small pond has been created at the end of the nature trail to aid wildlife in the area.

Valley of Fires State Park offers visitors a chance to see something truly unique in the country. With the history of Lincoln County adding spice to the geologic and environmental impact of Valley of Fires, an area of outdoor recreation is created in the Southwest with diversity enough to please everyone.

For more info, see the University of Texas at El Paso website.