

How to Plan a Joshua Tree Stargazing Trip

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Joshua Tree National Park is known for its amazing vegetation, stunning rock formations, and pristine dark skies. The park was even honored with Dark Sky Park status by the [International Dark-Sky Association](#), and ranks among the [best national parks for stargazing](#).

Once you arrive in the national park at night, you'll see that the whole park is one gigantic stargazing spot. The National Park Service has three general guidelines for stargazing in Joshua Tree:

1. **If you are not staying overnight in Joshua Tree**, you can use any of the roadside pullouts to safely move your car off the road and stargaze from these areas. Do not move more than 20 feet from your car, as you'll have limited visibility and the terrain can be uneven.
2. **While camping in Joshua Tree**, most campgrounds have good stargazing right in the area. If you explore the area, be sure to bring lights and water and be aware that terrain may change suddenly beyond the camping area.
3. **If you are exploring the backcountry in Joshua Tree**, you will need to register for a backcountry permit from the National Park Service and note your intended route and destination. Backcountry areas are not open after dark unless you have a permit.

Most visitors to Joshua Tree fall into the first two categories, so you shouldn't need to roam far from your car or campsite to have an amazing view of the night sky.

The Most Popular Joshua Tree Stargazing Spots

- **Skull Rock:** This famous rock formation is right near the road, and there are good roadside pullouts available to park your car in.
- **Cap Rock:** There's plenty of parking and a short, well-maintained trail to the rock formations at Cap Rock, as well as Joshua Trees all around – making for perfect foreground silhouettes in your [astrophotos](#). Additionally, it is close to the most popular entrance to the park.
- **The Ocotillo Patch:** Located on Pinto Basin Road within the park, this is one of the darker areas for stargazing. There is no trail or seating, so if you plan to stay for a while, be sure to bring your own camp chairs.
- **Arch Rock:** Near the White Tank Campground, this rock formation provides a great 'gateway' through which you can admire the night sky. (**Note:** Arch Rock is only accessible by night if you are staying in White Tank Campground. Parking and walking in is not permitted and you will likely be ticketed by the Park Service.)
- **Roadside Pullouts:** It might seem uninspired to simply pull off the road for stargazing. With one of the darkest skies in [California](#), there's no need to get fancy in Joshua Tree. Throughout the park, roadside pullouts will give you a stunning view of the sky without needing to walk or camp in the park.

Stargazing Spots near Joshua Tree National Park

While inside the national park is by far the best place to get away from light pollution, you can certainly see the night sky from the surrounding region.

Just outside the Twentynine Palms entrance, the **Sky's the Limit Observatory** (pictured above) is open to the public on Friday and Saturday nights. You can come and admire the stars with your eyes, or peer through local telescopes to see certain astrological features in greater detail. (skysthelimit29.org).

Astrophotography Tips While Visiting Joshua Tree

If you want to photograph the night sky in Joshua Tree National Park, here are some tips:

1. **Use only red lights.** Once your eyes adjust to the darkness, you won't want to turn on other lights which impede your ability to see the stars.
2. **Bring a tripod and remote to set up your [camera](#).** You'll need the extra stability to ensure you get a clear shot.
3. **Bring extra batteries.** Nightly temperatures in Joshua Tree are colder than elsewhere in the region, and your batteries may drain more quickly than you anticipate.
4. **Set up your camera correctly in manual mode.** In [this post full of astrophotography tips](#), I detail how to set up your camera properly for a great night sky photo.
5. **Use the Joshua Trees as a contrast for your night sky.** The Joshua Trees are fascinating to look at, and they provide a great contrast to the stars and night sky, as evidenced by the photo above. *(Editor's Note: the above photo was shot by an amateur on my scouting trip in April 2018 – you can do the same with the right gear!)*

In the end, don't forget that you're there to experience the wonder of the night sky with your own eyes. While your camera is shooting, be sure to admire the view for yourself.