

## THE PAINTED ROCK PETROGLYPH SITE

A SACRED TRADITIONAL PLACE

This remarkable place preserves stories about the lower Gila River and the various Native American communities who have lived here for millennia. The petroglyphs testify to their legacies, and they speak of a time before Euro-Americans expanded into the Southwest. Local communities continued to make petroglyphs here after Spaniards entered the region in 1699. Descendants of the petroglyph authors continue to visit Painted Rocks. It is a sacred traditional place.

Today the Painted Rocks are managed by the Bureau of Land Management and listed on the National Register of Historic Places as

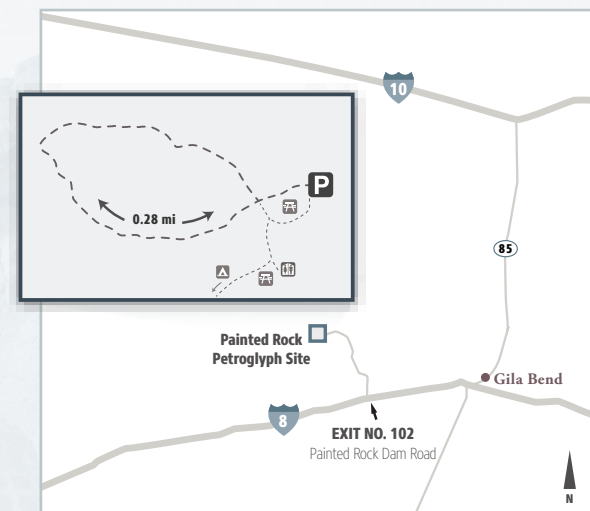
the “Painted Rock Petroglyph Site.” Although this place is a popular and public attraction, it remains especially meaningful to descendant communities. For example, the O’odham and Pii-paash of southern Arizona regard Painted Rocks as a place of traditional cultural importance. Similarly, Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribal Elder Ted Vaughn described the writings on stone to be the “libraries” of the Yavapai.

As you visit, remember that these inspiring images have stood here for countless generations. Your help and respect are needed to make sure future generations can also appreciate and learn from this place.



Archaeology Southwest

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**DIRECTIONS:** Exit Interstate 8 at Painted Rock Dam Road (Exit 102) approximately 12.5 miles west of Gila Bend. Travel north on Painted Rock Dam Road (paved) 10.7 miles to Rocky Point Road. Painted Rock Petroglyph Site and Campground is 0.6 miles west of Painted Rock Dam Road on Rocky Point Road.

**FACILITIES:** Picnic tables, barbeque grills, steel fire rings, and a vault toilet are provided for picnicking and primitive camping. A ramada is available for group activities. No potable water, trailer hook-ups, or dump stations are provided—these facilities are available nearby in Gila Bend. From October through April, a campground host may be on site. Fees: \$2.00/vehicle for day-use; \$8.00/vehicle/night camping. Golden Age, Golden Access, and all “America the Beautiful” passes are accepted for applicable discounts.



[www.blm.gov/visit/painted-rock-petroglyph-site](http://www.blm.gov/visit/painted-rock-petroglyph-site)



*A Guest's Guide to the*  
**PAINTED ROCK  
PETROGLYPH SITE**



A SACRED TRADITIONAL PLACE



#### WHAT ARE PETROGLYPHS?

Petroglyphs (from the Greek *petro*, “rock,” and *glyph*, “carving”) are figures and designs carved into stone. Unlike hieroglyphs, petroglyphs cannot be directly translated.

#### WHY IS THIS PLACE CALLED PAINTED ROCKS?

Although only petroglyphs are preserved at the site, historical records indicate pictographs (paintings on stone) and geoglyphs (designs on the earth’s surface created by placing or removing stones) were once found here, as well. In 1748, a Jesuit described petroglyphs at Painted Rocks as having been painted over. Similar accounts continued into the 1880s, which led to the colloquial Spanish designation of “*Piedras Pintadas*,” or “Painted Rocks.”

#### HOW MANY PETROGLYPHS ARE HERE?

It is impossible to know how many petroglyphs once adorned the Painted Rocks. Many have been lost to erosion, vandalism, and theft. A recent inventory counted over 3,800 individual designs on 428 boulders.

#### HOW OLD ARE THESE PETROGLYPHS?

Archaeologists use a number of techniques to date petroglyphs, including stylistic comparisons, associations with other archaeological sites, the portrayal of datable subject matter, and the amount of “patina” on the petroglyphs. Based on these clues, we can say that local communities probably began creating the petroglyphs by at least 1,400 years ago. Some of the petroglyphs depict people on horseback, indicating Native communities continued making petroglyphs here until comparatively recently.

#### WHO MADE THESE PETROGLYPHS?

Many of the petroglyphs at Painted Rocks were authored by people from nearby villages along the Gila River. The closest villages were less than two miles to the north and west—a 20-minute walk away. People lived there year-round, farming on the floodplain. Archaeologists attribute the earliest of these communities to the Hohokam and Patayan cultural traditions. During the Spanish colonial era (1699–1821), explorers met descendant communities of O’odham-speaking “Pimas” and “Papagos” and Yuman-speaking “Cocomaricopas” living in nearby villages. Today, we know them by their own names: Akimel O’Odham, Tohono O’Odham, Hia C’ed O’Odham, and Piipaash. Several other contemporary Native American tribes in Arizona, New Mexico, California, Sonora, and Baja California recognize ancestral connections to Hohokam and Patayan traditions and cultural properties. These include Quechan, Cocopah, Yavapai, and Mojave, among others.

#### WHAT DO THESE PETROGLYPHS MEAN?

While many of the figures are recognizable, such as humans, lizards, and deer, interpreting petroglyphs is never straightforward. Archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians may sometimes attempt to interpret the designs using scant evidence and in ways that reflect their own worldviews and cultural backgrounds. However, the stories and literal meanings of the petroglyphs are unknown to non-Native people. Indeed, where the petroglyphs are and how they are being used by descendent communities today—their context—is necessary for a more complete understanding.

#### WHAT THREATS DO THESE PETROGLYPHS FACE?

Even though they are carved in stone, petroglyphs are vulnerable to the negligence and ill-will of visitors. Graffiti, vandalism, and theft are major threats. Less obvious are the impacts from touching, climbing on, and even walking near the petroglyphs. As you tour the Painted Rocks on the designated trail, note how eroded and faint the petroglyphs are near the trail compared to petroglyphs farther away. Footsteps kick up dust and sand onto nearby boulders, and over time, this scours their surfaces and slowly erases the petroglyphs.

#### HOW MIGHT WE HELP PRESERVE THIS PLACE?

The Painted Rocks are protected under several federal laws, including the Antiquities Act, National Historic Preservation Act, American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and Archaeological Resources Protection Act. Preserving the petroglyphs and the larger site area entails leaving the petroglyphs untouched and the surrounding ground undisturbed. Staying on the designated trail around the base of Painted Rocks is the best way to help preserve the petroglyphs. Making new carvings on the rocks is graffiti, not rock art. Such vandalism is illegal, degrades the site, and is offensive to the many people who care about this place. By respecting this place, you honor those of the past, present, and future.

*The Painted  
Rocks are vital  
to descendant  
communities.  
Their continued  
endurance and  
integrity depend  
on respectful  
viewing and  
adherence to the  
posted rules of  
conduct.*