

Cara AnnMarie at Imperial Dunes, where movie magic happens.



WHAT THE SAND KEEPS

By Cara AnnMarie

An RV life can seem impermanent, and so can sand dunes. That's why they're the perfect match.

I didn't find the Imperial Sand Dunes on a map. I had never actually heard of them. I found them the way you find most places on the road—through other travelers.

We were in Austin for a month, settled into a kind of routine. Our son had made friends, we had our favorite coffee spots, and one day we were chatting with another RV family who were also traveling with kids. They told us about this croissant place—like, a truly next-level, change-your-standards kind of croissant—and they told us about the dunes. Honestly, if you get a croissant recommendation that right, I'm in. No follow-up questions.

So, the dunes went on the list.

After Austin, we headed west, passing through Fort Stockton and El Paso, along long stretches of road where everything starts to blur a little from the dust. Eventually, we landed at a Harvest Hosts spot in Brawley, California, a 20-minute drive to the dunes. I had it in my head that we needed to see the dunes at sunrise. It felt like one of those places where the light matters—where you either catch it just right or miss something.

The next morning, I woke everyone up around 5:15. They were not impressed. Dave, my husband, was half asleep. Whitt, our five-year-old, was confused. I'm pretty sure I got a look that said, "This better be worth it," before anyone even got out of bed. Oscar, our dog, was the only one fully aligned with my vision—completely ready, tail wagging, just thrilled to be included.

Our host had told us about an overlook near his home and said it was the spot. He was right.

We pulled into a simple parking area, where there were already five or six camper vans and RVs—people who had clearly decided this was worth staying the night for. People who knew something we didn't yet. And the second I stepped out, I could see it.

Not just the dunes—but the version of them that lives in movies.

It wasn't hard to imagine a full film crew set up right there in that same lot. Trucks lined up, gear everywhere, that quiet, focused energy right before a scene. The landscape does so much of the work. You don't have to dress it or explain it; you just point the



Cara and her husband, Dave, watching the sun rise over Imperial Dunes.

camera, and it already feels like somewhere else.

That's exactly why Hollywood has been coming here for nearly a century.

As early as the 1930s, filmmakers realized that the Imperial Sand Dunes had something special. Movies like *The Lost Patrol* used the dunes to create a kind of isolation you can't fake. You look out and nothing interrupts the horizon. It's all sand and sky. A few years later, *The Garden of Allah* used the same area to stand in for the Sahara, proving how easily this landscape could become somewhere else entirely. Hollywood didn't just come here for convenience—it came here for scale. The dunes were close enough to Los Angeles to be practical, but, more importantly, they could transform into almost anything.



Over time, the dunes became one of those quiet industry go-tos, a place crews could return to again and still make something entirely new. Through the '40s, '50s, and '60s, more productions followed—war films, adventure stories, survival dramas. At one point, a production built an entire desert fort out there for *Beau Geste*. Not a facade—an actual structure sitting in the sand as if it had always been part of the landscape. When filming wrapped, it was left behind to weather and eventually disappear back into the dunes.

Legend has it that pieces of old sets lingered longer than expected. If you came back at the right time, you might find something half-buried—wood, fragments, something sun-bleached and out of place. Whether those stories are true or just part of the mythology almost doesn't matter; the dunes invite that kind of thinking.

That's the part that stayed with me—not just the history, but what happens after.

You walk out onto the sand and leave tracks. Footprints, tire marks, proof that you were there. Then the wind picks up and starts softening everything. Not dramatically—just enough that you notice it changing. Give it a little time, and it's gone. Sometimes overnight.

It changes the way you think about what was filmed there.

Return of the Jedi's Sarlacc Pit and sail barge scenes were shot in these dunes. That entire sequence that feels so specific and iconic—it happened right here. They used



This sweeping dunescape has been used in films as deserts and alien landscapes.

the fake production name Blue Harvest while filming, trying to keep things under wraps. But standing there, it almost feels unnecessary. The place already feels hidden.

Over the years, fans have returned to this area hoping to find remnants of the set. Most of what was built was removed or lost to time, but the idea that something could still be out there has become part of the story. And that's kind of the magic of it. You're never entirely sure what you're looking at.

Other films followed. *The Flight of the Phoenix* was filmed in this region, and that production carries a more sobering piece of history—a fatal crash involving a stunt pilot during filming. It's a reminder that the dunes aren't just a backdrop. They're a real environment, and not always a forgiving one. Later, *Stargate* used the dunes to create another world entirely—an alien planet, a completely different context, the same sand.

What makes the dunes especially useful on camera is how little they date themselves. There are no landmarks to tie them to a specific place or time, which is why the same stretch of sand can convincingly become North Africa in one film and something entirely different in the next.

And then, of course, your brain goes to *Star Wars*. And also to *Spaceballs*. Visually, it all connects. What makes it work isn't just how it looks—it's how quickly it resets.

That idea hit me differently because of how we live.

RV life is temporary. You pull into a place, and within a day or two, it starts to feel familiar. Your kid makes friends. You recognize people. You fall into a rhythm. And then you leave. No big moment. No real ending. You just go.

And then the next people pull in.

There's something about that kind of living that makes you pay attention. You don't assume anything is permanent, so you actually experience it while you're in it. The dunes feel like that, just bigger.

They're managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which means it's public land, and you can camp out there. You can park your RV, stay for a stretch, really live in it. Typically, that's up to 14 days in one area, which is standard for BLM land—long enough to settle in, but not long enough to forget you're passing through.

And while some people are out there quietly camping, others are flying across the dunes on ATVs and off-road vehicles, carving temporary



paths into the sand. You hear engines in the distance, see riders cresting the dunes like waves, and then it all fades again. Stillness and motion share the same space.

We didn't take the RV out onto the dunes this time, and I think that was the right call. There's something about seeing a place first—understanding it a little—before you move into it. Now that I've been there, I'd go back and do it differently. I'd park out there, wake up in it, and let it be the full experience.

But even from the edge, it did something. It shifted how I saw it.

Because the Imperial Sand Dunes aren't just a filming location. They're a reminder that everything we build is temporary—sets, stories, even the versions of ourselves we're living in at the time.

Hollywood came here to create something that would last on screen. We come here living something that doesn't. And somehow, both feel important.

The dunes don't really care which one you're doing. They'll take your footprints either way. And by morning, they're gone. **R**

Cara AnnMarie is an actress (*Cobra Kai*, *Detroiters*, *Florida Man*) and the creator of The RV Actress, where she shares life on the road while working in film and television. She travels with her husband and son, running their eco-friendly pet brand Doggy Do Good from wherever they park.