

Monday Nov 23



Pahrump was a surprise – a retiree boomtown an hour or so from Vegas. On the way into the Park, a sidetrip thru 20 Mule Team Canyon (Donna drove!) and a short walk out to Zabriskie Point.



The mudstone badlands overlooked by Zabriskie Point reminded me of that scene in *Fantasia* where dinosaur carcasses lie drying to bone in the hot sand. The lowest point in the United States, or maybe the world – I was too struck by the view to take note of the park info sign – and it looks it.



A quick lunch in the Park HQ parking lot and then a hike in Golden Canyon (appeared to my NM eye to be built inside out, narrow at the mouth and widening out into badlands), followed by a drive along the Artist's Palette before checking into Furnace Creek Ranch. Nice oasis in the middle of the Park, with a post office, one terrible restaurant, a saloon and general store.

Tues. Nov 24:

Beatty Nevada

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14.0



Rhyolite is just outside the park in Nevada, less than a mile off the hiway to Beatty on BLM land.





Rhyolite was a bottlerocket even by Western boomtown standards, soaring from a population of zero to 10,000 or more and back to about 40, all in less than 10 years' time. There's still an active mine nearby, so there must still be gold in them thar hills. But what killed the town was the one-two punch of the 1906 San Francisco quake and the Panic of '07, which wiped out the town's investors.



The BLM has done a nice job of preserving the town, considering the visitation the place must get.



Either because it can't get rid of them or due to sheer bureaucratic inertia, BLM has even left in place the detritus of cranks, hermits and eccentric artists who make every ghost town so interesting. This old caboose was at one time (and possibly still is) the nest of some crazed Vietnam vet.

From Rhyolite, we drove off pavement through Titus Canyon, a narrow, twisting, washboarded challenge on dizzying slopes that rivals – and in some spots far surpasses – the road up to South Baldy from Water Canyon, which is my personal gold standard for 4WD thrills. What made Titus Canyon so frustrating was the traffic! It's one-way, but there always seemed to be somebody ahead or behind me, or in the next decent pullout. No photos; I had my hands full, and Donna had all she could do to hold on. There's another interesting ghost town (Leadville) about midway along this road, but I didn't stop.



We did stop at a spring at the head of the canyon, where there's a petroglyph site (*contrast extremely pushed in this photo*). I think the animals are bighorn sheep; Donna thought antelope. Whatever, as always I find the images strangely evocative. I try to imagine what it was like to be camped beside this spring sometime before the time of Christ, owning nothing but a hide loincloth, moccasins or straw sandals and a few crude stone tools, remembering the last time I killed something large and juicy, dreaming about our next square meal. The man who carved these glyphs is dust; not even his bones survive in this desolate place. But he left this enduring image in the rock as his testament. It's an inspiring tribute to the human spirit, and I'm inspired to drive on. I really want to get out of this damn' canyon. Below this point, the canyon abruptly squeezes down into a notch often less than 20' wide that threads its way through vertical sandstone cliffs. Like Golden Canyon, a bad place to be in a rainstorm.



From Titus Canyon, we drove west toward Stovepipe Wells and took a walk in the dunes, trying to identify all the little critters that had left tracks in the sand. Lizards, snakes, kangaroo rats, a rabbit, a coyote. Absolutely empty and still in the daytime, with not even a circling crow or vulture to be seen, but obviously a busy place by night.

It was near here that the lost '49ers killed and ate the last of their oxen. They burned their wagons and fashioned crude packs out of the oxhides to carry what they could. It wasn't much – a gallon of water weighs 8 lbs, and a man would need at least two gallons a day just to stay alive, walking through this sand. After Stovepipe Wells, the nearest potable water is at Panamint Springs, 26 miles away and nearly a mile uphill.

Death Valley bones may be missing German tourists

DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL PARK, Calif. (AP) – Nov 13, 2009 — Authorities say remains found in Death Valley may be those of four German tourists, including two children, who vanished 13 years ago.

The Inyo County Sheriff's Department says two people found skeletal remains on Thursday in a remote area of the Southern California desert park. Undersheriff Jim Jones says identification for one of the missing tourists was discovered near the area where the bones were found.

Authorities will try to identify the remains and determine a cause of death.

The tourists, including two boys ages 4 and 10, vanished in Death Valley in the summer of 1996, when daytime temperatures had topped 120 degrees. Months later, their minivan was found in a ravine. Nevada and California authorities used helicopters and dozens of searchers to scour the area but found nothing.

The remains were found in a remote area of Death Valley, South-East of Goler Wash. Every year, search parties have gone out to look for the bodies, but have always come up empty handed.



Back to Furnace Creek. These are the famous 20-mule-team wagons, used to haul tons of laundry salts to the housewives of America. As with the petroglyphs, I try to imagine what it was like to labor over 40 miles of dusty roads, driving 20 stubborn, straining beasts through 120° heat.



The mules were replaced, briefly, with a steam engine, and I'm sure they were glad to catch a break. But the era's latest technology was no match for the Valley's dust and heat. What finally ended the long Via Dolorosa of animals and men was the discovery of more accessible borax deposits in the Mojave, closer to rail lines.



The Borax museum at Furnace Creek is a fascinating window into the past. It's too bad they couldn't have left all this junk *in situ*, to sink gradually into the sand and delight future archeologists.



The front end of the train that ends with the derelict caboose in Rhyolite? I'm sorry now that I paid such scant attention to the locomotives at Chama and Durango. What a delight it must have been to see one of these iron horses alive and steaming!