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Death Valley Trip Report

March 12 – 17, 2012 – Daily Journal

Greg Smith, Guide

*Participants: Kelly, Pat, Kathy, Mary Kay
& Jim*

Monday, March 12, 2012 – Arrival in Las Vegas / Death Valley National Park

After meeting at the airport early afternoon we made our way to the outskirts of Las Vegas and out into the desert. It was going to be a two-hour drive and there was so much to see as we headed up Highway 95!

From the Joshua tree woodland, to uplifted, then tilted mountain peaks. Seeing the different



landforms without their usual blanket of vegetation is an eye-opener, as is driving through Death Valley Junction and seeing the Amargosa Opera House! The last thirty miles was our descent into the valley where we checked into our below sea level lodging.

We had an excellent welcome

dinner at the Wrangler, after which we got ready for the next day's adventure.

Tuesday, March 13 – Twenty Mule Team / Wildrose Canyon / Agureberry Point / Artist Drive

We stopped at the Twenty Mule Team exhibit and learned just how desperate people were to make money and survive a little over a century ago. You could imagine the backbreaking work in the torment of a heat over a hundred degrees. It was a long ride to where the borax was unloaded and it all depended on the mules and the muleskinners to get it there.



We headed north before turning west and headed up into the Panamint Mountains. The further west (and the higher) you go the effects of more precipitation become apparent. High mountain meadows are filled with perennials and elevations above 6000-feet have a mixed juniper/pinyon pine forest.

We parked at the trailhead for Wildrose

Peak which is also at the location where Swiss-designed charcoal kilns had been constructed by Chinese laborers. The well-constructed beehive-shaped kilns corroborate the fact that most of these hillsides were stripped of their forest to create charcoal for local smelting operations.

After kilning about for a short time we headed off to Agureberry Point for lunch. The point offers you the opportunity to view the valley from north to south, but also has the hidden view of a canyon directly to the south that can't be seen from any other point. An exquisite view that we had to ourselves!



On our drive back we stopped at Pete Agureberry's Eureka mine and looked at another level of trying to make a living in these harsh climates. Pete mined for gold in this area until his death in 1945. The mine is preserved in a state of arrested decay by the park so folks can get a feeling

of life prior to WW II.

Late afternoon is the best time to drive the Artist's Palette loop. The sun is low in the horizon, which lights up the multi-colored mountains and hills with that "sweet light". The vivid colors of Artist Palette were a colorful end to an outstanding day in Death Valley!

Wednesday, March 14 – Zabriskie Point / Mosaic Canyon / Mesquite Dunes

Early morning provides very good lighting when looking at the world from Zabriskie Point. And when we got to the top we weren't disappointed and we weren't alone. There were photographers lined up watching the changing colors as shadows raced down the Panamint Mountains on the other side of the valley.



The tip of Gower Point emerged from the shadows ever so slowly, putting another piece of geology in the morning light. This was an exceptional sunrise and we were all there for this special experience!

No sand here as we drove straight

up a bajada and parked at the entrance to Mosaic Canyon. We proceeded into the wine glass entrance of the canyon where a surprise awaited us as we hiked around the first boulder. The marble walls were slick from eons of tormenting water and boulders that had cascaded down the canyon. The walls of the canyon yielded conglomerates, breccias and other geologic oddities. Old hand rails from times past when the canyon was deeper appeared out on the stone walls in different sections of the canyon. We realized that this was not a static landscape and was open to change with any rainstorm.

This narrow canyon opens up into a smaller valley where we hiked up to a fall of rock and took a break to discuss the formation and erosion of the canyon. The thought of how torrents of water had to squeeze out of this watershed through the narrow canyon made us understand just how hard the "mosaic" was.

Our second stop after breakfast was at Mesquite Dunes near Stovepipe Wells. In the morning

light we were going to investigate what was going on in the sandy habitat the night before. Walking out into the dunes we stopped and interpreted tracks in the sand: beetles zigzagging up the face of a dune, kangaroo rats leaving trails of last night's dance and millipedes with all those legs. It is always a treat to visit the dunes and read the morning news...

After a late lunch everyone went exploring the museum and visitor center. Then it was off to Stovepipe wells for an early dinner so we could watch the last of the sun settle over the dunes.



Shadows had raced up one dune and then down the next. It was pretty quiet as we headed back to our rooms. Night was approaching very quickly and filling the sky with thousands of stars.

Thursday, March 15 - Ubehebe Crater / Scotty's Castle / Titus Canyon



We headed to the north end of the park to Ubehebe Crater. These small craters were created ~2,000 years ago when super heated water (steam) caused eruptions and created the craters. We hiked around Ubehebe and marveled at how sterile and moon-like the surface looked compared to other areas in Death Valley. We took our time as we hiked around the primary crater, passing numerous archeological

sites while being treated to rare images of a land still changing - what a treat!

Lunchtime was spent at Scotty's Castle where the cottonwoods were just starting to leaf out and ravens were sizing up our lunch. Perfect lunch temps of around 65 degrees made it a very easy place to linger. Not too many birds, but this allowed us to explore the grounds of Scotty's and see some of the different views.

After a drive to the south we turned up Titus Canyon and parked at the entrance for our next experience. We slowly hiked our way into the canyon, marveling at the vertical cliff wall. Some areas had huge sheets of dolomite-infused breccia, while other areas were eroding at a much faster pace. It was another one of those opportunities where we took a break after about 2.5 miles and listened to the silence. Death Valley provides so many chances to feel what silence is like.

We headed back down the canyon to our van and then drove back to Furnace Creek where dinner and a good night's sleep awaited us.

Friday, March 16 - Rhyolite / Salt Creek / 20 Mule Team / Dante's View

It was an overcast morning as we headed out, one of those mornings that probably teases the desert with the promise of moisture and doesn't deliver. We were headed to Nevada and the ghost town of Rhyolite.

The town is named for rhyolite, an igneous rock composed of light-colored silicates. Rhyolite started up in 1905 in the Bullfrog Hills after a gold strike. A man by the name of Charles Schwab (sound familiar?) funded the infrastructure to support the mine. Shares were sold and then the mine played out. By 1911 the town was all but abandoned and has survived into the 21st century as a ghost town!



We explored the outside of the bottle house, the train depot and many of the other abandoned buildings. The weather had not changed as we headed over to the town cemetery. Lots of graves with only a fraction of them marked. There were rows and rows of

mounds with no headstone or anything else to mark who was buried there. They had been lying there for over a century...

At Salt Creek we set off on a slow hike through the habitat of the resident endangered pupfish. It is winter here and the numerous breeding pairs and territorial males of summer are hiding in the submerged vegetation waiting out the cold season. Both *Distichlis* and *Salicornia* punctuated the landscape in this otherwise inhospitable area of Death Valley.

After lunch we drove into 20 Mule Team Canyon. A canyon of mud hills, all gold in color, these are tuff mounds that were originally underwater. These small outcroppings of calcium carbonate blended into the subtle gold of the hills.

We started to climb through a broad canyon in mountains on east side of Death Valley heading towards Dante's View. We discussed how the vegetation changed as we gained elevation into a mesic environment.



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We made it to the top and looked down on the dry saline lakebeds that made up the floor of Death Valley. We were able to pick out Ageureberry's Point where we had had lunch the day before. We watched as migrating Turkey Vultures and a Red-tailed Hawk glided by below us. They just pointed themselves into the wind coming from the north and with a flick of a wing or their tail made mid-air adjustments that pushed them out of view very quickly.

It was time to head back to our rooms where we prepared for our farewell dinner at the Furnace Creek Inn. Fig compote, fresh fish, Caesar salad and more, it was a sumptuous meal to celebrate our journey...

Saturday, March 18 ~ Back to Las Vegas

The ride back to civilization seemed to be shorter than the ride into Death Valley; it always is. But we were ahead of the storm, a storm that was going to tease the “Valley” with the possibility of rain...

