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Death Valley Hiking and Nature Tour March 24 -29, 2013 Trip Report

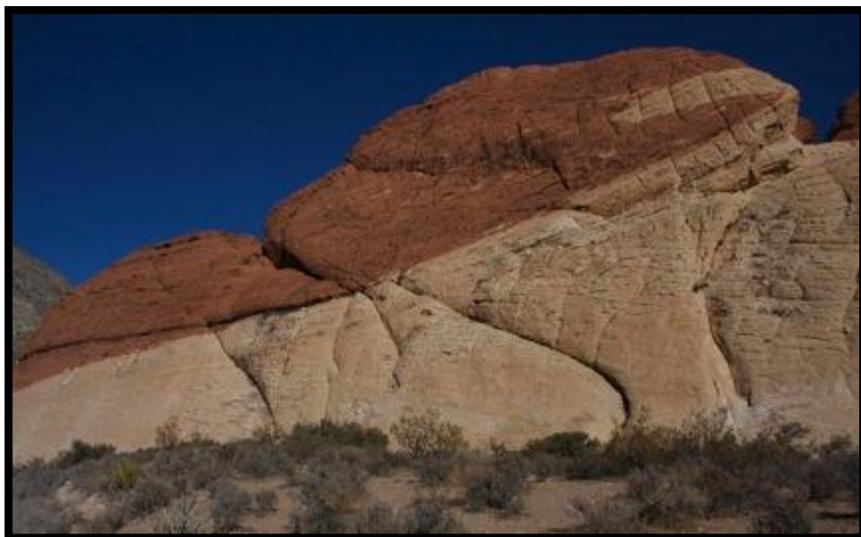
Greg Smith, Guide, with 5 participants: David, Janet, Kathleen, Cathy & Jane



Sun., March 24

Arrival in Las Vegas / Red Rock NCA/ Death Valley National Park

After picking everyone up by early afternoon we made our way to the outskirts of Las Vegas and towards Red Rock National Conservation Area. Red Rock is run by the Bureau of Land Management and lies



within miles of the Las Vegas Strip. You can leave the action of the strip and in fifteen minutes start exploring these wildlands of gray limestone and red and white Aztec sandstone. We spent time investigating the very new visitors' center and then took a drive around the scenic thirteen-mile loop.

It was going to be a two-hour drive to Death Valley as we headed west toward Pahrump and Shoshone. We made that left turn

and headed down toward the valley floor of the national park.

As we drove north, we were greeted by the begging coyote. Now having been spotted for the third year in a row, he sits along side the road waiting for folks to stop and take his picture, then he runs back and forth to either side of the vehicle looking for handouts. Pretty sure he is successful given his condition and longevity...

We made it to Furnace Creek a little after six where we checked into our rooms and then headed out to our welcome dinner.

Mon., March 25

Mesquite Dunes/ Mosaic Canyon/ Salt Creek/ Artist Drive/ 20 Mule Team



Our first stop after breakfast was the Mesquite Dunes near Stovepipe Wells. In the morning light our goal was to investigate what had happened during the previous night by reading tracks in the sand. Walking out into the dunes we stopped and interpreted the different tracks that lay fresh in the sand. Kangaroo rats had zig-zagged up the face of a dune, darkling beetles left trails of their evening's stroll and millipedes using all those legs to move between two different points. It was an interesting

read of the morning news...

After a brief stop at Stovepipe Wells we drove straight up the bajada towards the entrance to Mosaic. We proceeded into the goblet-shaped entrance of the canyon where we got pinned between marble walls that were slick from eons of rushing water and cascading boulders. The walls of the canyon were littered with different conglomerates, breccias and other geologic oddities. The canyon had been much deeper during the times of early visitors, as evidenced by old hand rails higher up the canyon walls. It made you realize that this



was not a static landscape...

The canyon opens up into a more expansive valley where we hiked up to a dry waterfall and took a break to discuss the plants of the canyon. The hike down canyon left you with the feeling that any water had to relentlessly push at the rock walls as it tried to wind its way through this mosaic canyon.

At Salt Creek we set off on a walk through the habitat of the Salt Creek pupfish. It is spring and there are numerous breeding pairs and territorial males trying to outdo one another. The Salt Creek pupfish are probably the least colorful of any of the pupfish species, but they still looked hot with that blue racing stripe on their tail! *Distichilis* grass and *Salicornia* layered the landscape adjacent to the creek in this otherwise inhospitable valley.



After lunch and a short siesta we headed out in the late afternoon to the Artist's Drive loop. The sun was sinking on the Western horizon, which provided perfect lighting for the multi-colored mountains and hills. With the high overcast, the vivid colors of Artist Palette were glowing! Every time we came around a turn in the road we were greeted by more colors, until we dropped back to the valley floor.

We had a little bit of daylight left and took the drive into 20 Mule Team Canyon. This is a canyon of

mud hills that were formerly underwater, all consisting of tuff. The late afternoon lighting with a dark sky background provided just the perfect contrast!

Tues., March 26 **Birding/
Wildrose/ Auergeberry Point/ Mesquite
Dunes (Moonrise)**

We started out heading further north into the park before turning west towards the Panamint Mountains. The further west (and the higher) we went the more one could see how more precipitation affected the plant communities. High mountain valleys were primarily laden with perennials and elevations above 6000-feet was juniper/pinyon pine woodland.





We parked at the trailhead for Wildrose Peak which is where the Swiss-designed charcoal kilns constructed by Chinese laborers are located. These well-constructed beehive-shaped kilns have been restored twice but still retain their original character. During their height of operation, most of the adjacent hills were completely logged to create charcoal for smelting operations.

The hike to the top of Wildrose is over four miles in length with an elevation gain of a little over 2200'. Some went all the way to the summit, while the rest did about 2.5 miles of the trail gaining 1500' in elevation. Wonderful views no matter how far you hiked!

After kilning about we headed off to Aguerberry Point to view the Death Valley. The photo shows the hidden canyon that can't be seen from below or from the other side of the valley. It was an exquisite view that we shared with only one other vehicle.



Then it was off to Stovepipe Wells for an early dinner. Our goal was to watch the full moon rise out of the dunes. Shadows started to race up one dune and down the next when all of a sudden we watched the moon peek over the Funeral Mountains. A

spectacular view with an incredible quietness as we watched it grow into the Eastern sky...

Wed., March 27

Borax Works/ Ubehebe/ Scotty's Castle/ Rhyolite/ Titus Canyon

Our first stop as we headed out was at the Borax Works exhibit. Borax was a short-lived phenomenon and we learned just how desperate people were to make money and survive over a hundred years ago. It must've been backbreaking work in that wicked heat of the valley in summer. It was a long haul for the mules and the skimmers to get the borax over to the Eastern Sierra for a train ride south.

We turned to the north end of the park to where Ubehebe Crater was located. These small craters were created ~800 years ago when water came in contact with magma and caused super heated water eruptions creating these craters. We hiked around Ubehebe and two smaller craters and looked at how

sterile and moon-like the surface looked compared. Very reminiscent of Isla Bartolome in the Galapagos...

A quick stop at Scotty's Castle where the cottonwoods were just starting to leaf out provided an opportunity to bird and check out the castle. A perfect temp of around 60 degrees made it a very comfortable to hang out. Not too many birds...

We drove to Beatty for lunch before heading to 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 spent a little time at the bottle house before doing a short drive through what was left of this ghost town. Now it was time to head to Titus Canyon.

A short drive back towards California is where the turn off to Titus Canyon is located. The late afternoon lighting provided perfect conditions for driving

down this dramatic 23-mile canyon.

The narrow one-way road twisted and turned as it followed the sinuous edge of the steep-sided mountains. Down into a canyon to the bottom and then up the other side only to repeat this three times. Green mountains, iron-rusted mountains, limestone layers that went from horizontal to vertical in a hundred feet, made for stunning examples of eons-old geologic processes.



When we hit the narrows, the vertical limestone walls climbed towards the sky! Some walls had faces of dolomite-infused breccia. Still most

of the walls were solid limestone. We had been on the road for quite a while and were wondering how much longer this would go on? All of a sudden we popped out onto an alluvial fan created by debris that had washed out of the canyon over the millennia. Now it was a four-mile drive down to pavement and the road back home to the ranch...

Thurs., March 28

Zabriske Point/ Golden Canyon/ Dante's View/ Mesquite Dunes Sunset



Early morning provides the best of lighting when photographing the world from Zabriske Point. And when we got to the top the lighting was good as we joined numerous photographers lined up photographing Gower Point. As the sun rises, the light starts at the top of everything to the west and works its way to the base, 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, lighting another piece of the jig-saw puzzle that is Death Valley.

We took another quick drive through 20 Mule Team Canyon before starting our climb to Dante's View in the mountains on the east side of Death Valley. As on the west side of the valley the vegetation changed as we gained elevation into a slightly more mesic environment.



We made it to the top and looked directly down on Badwater. Dry saline lakebeds lined the floor of Death Valley. On the far side of the valley we were able to pick out Ageureberry Point. To the

north was Dante's Peak, just a couple of hundred feet above the parking lot. The air was cool, in the upper fifties, which was a marked difference from the valley floor where we were headed. So down we went, heading to those ninety-degree temps and a fine lunch at the Furnace Creek Inn.

We had all decided that we wanted to spend the evening back in the dunes watching the sun set. Just the slightest hint of a breeze as we sat on top of one of the dunes and watched shadows race from the tip of one dune to the next. It really was a special time to be in such a special place.

Fri., March 29

Return to Las Vegas/Departures



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...

Trip Report and Photos by Guide, Greg Smith



Photo of Greg by Gwyneth Ragsine

In Closing ...

We came to Death Valley from distant coasts
Wondering what would intrigue us the most.

At Salt Creek we saw the little pupfish
And we learned to lure in birds with phish, phish, phish.

We hiked up the draw of Canyon Mosaic
With its colors and rocks, nary a one prosaic.

We even hiked the Wild Rose trail
'Specially reserved for the hearty and hale.

'Twas a morning hike through canyon touched by Midas,
And a 27-mile drive through Canyon Titus.

We saw conglomerate and caliche topped by tuff
Dolomite and rhyolite and all the other stuff.

We hiked the Crater Ubehewe
And ID'd the little Say's Phoebe.

At Zabriskie Point we saw sunrise on Gower.
We'd arrived on site at a quite early hour.

We saw the red cathedral and TVs' dihedral.
But giving even more satisfaction was the peregrine pair's soaring action.

Greg, for all these joys we think you a heap.
Now if only you'd deliver that elusive sheep.

A Poem by Cathy Cooper
March 2013