

Death Valley and Goldfield (D19A)

A relative moved to Las Vegas, and we planned a short road trip. I thought I'd show her sites in and around Death Valley, and she wanted to see a car art park in Goldfield that she'd heard about. So we combined these into a 2-day trip, and tacked on a few extra sites. Except for the excursion north to Goldfield, most of the sites on this trip could be done as day trips out of Las Vegas.

We left Vegas at 7AM and grabbed breakfast at Pahrump before heading towards the south road access to Death Valley.

Along the way we made our first sightseeing stop, a short visit to the Dublin Gulch Miners Camp at Shoshone, California. I had driven through Shoshone a handful of times over the years, but the camp site is not well-marked, so I only found out about it through a recent news article.

Like a lot of such sites, it had a short life as a mining camp, but what was left behind stands out. The miners carved their homes into a caliche clay embankment, and then added wooden floors, doors, windows, chimneys, and so on. The homes have been used by others after the miners left, reportedly as recently as the 1970s.





Inside a cave home. Note the wooden plank floor and soot in the fireplace alcove and on the back wall. Some of these homes had multiple rooms and were even multi-level.

Death Valley is a popular day trip out of Las Vegas, but it is a sprawling park, so a day trip provides only enough time to visit a handful of park highlights. As this was a visit to introduce my traveling companion to the park, I picked a handful of destinations in the park to showcase some of the diverse features that the park has to offer.



One of the first sites one encounters when entering Death Valley National Park from the south via Hwy 178 is the Ashford Mill Ruins site. The mill was built in 1914 to process gold ore brought here from the Golden Treasure Mine, five miles to the east. The mine was operated off and on over a few decades but was never particularly successful. The mine has long since shut down and the mill has fallen into ruin.



Badwater Basin is arguably one of two must-see stops in the park (the other is the thermometer at the Furnace Creek Visitor Center on a hot summer day). At 282 feet below sea level, it is the lowest point in North America (on land – some lake bottoms are lower). Visitors walk out on the basin, flattening the surface, which develops a salty crust. Dig just a few inches into it and you may encounter water. Very salty water (hence the name “Badwater”).

The way massive blocks of Earth broke apart and tilted originally created a very deep Death Valley. But eons of erosion have filled the valley with thousands of feet of rock, gravel – and salt.



The Devil's Golf Course is a large salt pan on the valley floor. Large halite salt crystal (i.e. rock salt) formations give the salt pan its rugged surface.



A closer look at the salt.

You'd think that taking people out to one of the hottest places on Earth to look at salt would make me a popular travel companion, but strangely it hasn't worked out that way.

So let's find something more scenic to look at. Like Artists Drive and Artists Palette.



Scenery at a stop along Artists Drive



More color along Artists Drive at Artists Palette



For colorful scenery, though, my favorite stop may very well be Zabriskie Point. Zabriskie Point, Artists Drive and Twenty-Mule Team Canyon are relatively close to each other as the crow flies, so you will see some of the same colors in the rock, but in different settings.



An outcropping at Zabriskie Point



We walked the short trail through the Harmony Borax Works site, which started processing borax ore back in the 1880s. Because water didn't cool down enough in Death Valley summers for borax to crystalize as part of the processing of the ore, borax was eventually hauled to a processing site at Tecopa, California using "twenty-mule teams". Old timers may remember commercials for "Twenty-mule Team Borax" laundry detergent. This is how it got its name.



Scenery at Harmony Borax Works



We also walked the interpretive trail at Salt Creek. Yes, water flows in the desert – although the stream is considered seasonal.



A Salt Creek pupfish, found only in Salt Creek. The area was much wetter during Ice Age times, but the water eventually receded creating isolated pockets of springs and creeks. This also isolated populations of pupfish. Over thousands of years, each isolated population of pupfish evolved to adapt to its own peculiar surroundings, resulting in a number of unique breeds of pupfish, each limited to one place.

That was the last of our Death Valley sightseeing as we reached to road that heads northeast out of the park to Beatty, where we'd spend the night.



On the way to Beatty we stopped at Rhyolite Historic Townsite, a mining ghost town that once boasted a population of as many as 8,000 people. Rhyolite's train depot and a handful of other buildings survive.



The Tom Kelly Bottle House at Rhyolite. Glass bottles are built into the house's exterior walls, giving it its unique look.

The Goldwell Open Air Museum is private outdoor sculpture park that's adjacent to the Rhyolite Ghost Town. It features a handful of rather interesting sculptures that are worth checking out. Learn more about Goldwell Open Air Museum at <http://goldwellmuseum.org/>

We got to Beatty at about 5PM. Beatty is on US Hwy 95, which heading south leads straight to Las Vegas, about 120 miles away. So for someone making a Death Valley day trip, this is where they would start their return trip to Las Vegas.

We stopped here for lodging, dinner and breakfast. Goldfield is just 67 miles to the north, but it has limited dining and lodging options, and there is almost nothing between Beatty and Goldfield, so we figured we'd start our second day here.

After breakfast we made the easy drive to Goldfield where our first stop was The International Car Forest of the Last Church, a car art park.





Old cars, some vans and even a couple buses serve as canvases for artistic expression at the car forest. Currently unsigned and located off the main road through town, I didn't know of its existence until my travel companion told me about it, even though I've passed through Goldfield a number of times.

One thing puzzled us. Except for one of the buses, we didn't see how these vehicles could remain upright with only a fraction of the vehicles buried in the ground. Later on in Goldfield a local filled us in.



The area was littered with abandoned mineshafts like this one at the nearby Florence Mine. Stick the front end of a car in a small mineshaft opening, and it's not going anywhere anytime soon.

When exploring ghost towns keep a sharp eye out for abandoned mineshafts and outhouse pits.

After checking out the Car Forest and the Florence mine, we took a short walk around Goldfield before starting our drive back to Las Vegas.

But we had a couple more stops. The first was lunch, which we got at the Area 51 Alien Travel Center at Amargosa Valley (great food; and for those looking for a different kind of stop, the Alien Cathouse Brothel is located next door).

Our second stop – and final sightseeing stop of the trip – was at Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge. Located just to the east of Death Valley, Ash Meadows is home to a number of productive springs (much of the water for which comes from the Spring Mountains, which mark the western boundary of Las Vegas). There are a handful of hiking trails along the springs and associated creeks; swimming is permitted only at Crystal Reservoir. The isolated springs are home to isolated species of pupfish.



Crystal Spring, along the boardwalk trail at the Ash Meadows visitor center.



Devils Hole (technically part of Death Valley National Park) is home to the Devils Hole pupfish. The population of about 100-200 (depending on time of year relative to breeding season) fish lives only in this pool. The Devils Hole pupfish are described as the rarest fish in the world.

A rock ledge in the pool, just below the surface towards the bottom of the picture, is where they spawn and where they get their food from algae growth. Water levels are closely monitored to ensure that the ledge remains under water.

The pool itself is a bit deceptive. Filled by an aquifer, what we see here is the small opening to an extensive water-filled cavern system that is at least 500 feet deep.



A walk along the Point of Rocks Trail features this spring, home to another species of pupfish.



A couple blue (male) pupfish are visible in this picture.



The Point of Rocks Trail also passes these holes, created and used by early Native Americans to grind mesquite pods.



As we were leaving Ash Meadows for the drive back to Las Vegas, we passed this oddly green expanse.

I guess there's more than one way to get a green landscape in the desert.