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Ghost Towns, Geology and Little Green Women (T17A)

I've stopped in Tonopah, Nevada for the night on four past trips. While there I've come across information on ghost towns and other sites in the region that might be interesting to check out on some future trip. This was the trip for that. I had a day of sightseeing on the drive from Las Vegas to Tonopah, spent three nights in the town using it as a base for more day trips, and then took a California route back to Las Vegas.



Outside of Pahrump I headed into the Spring Mountains to check out the ruins of these old charcoal kilns. Area trees were turned into charcoal which was then used in smelters for the local mining industry.

Next it was on to Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge for a couple hikes and sightseeing. Rain and snow that falls on the Spring Mountains soaks into the ground and emerges here in a number of springs. The springs are home to varieties of pupfish, leftovers from when an Ice Age lake covered the area.



Crystal Spring



A pupfish. And, no, a pupfish is not just a young dogfish.



Adjacent to Ash Meadows is Devils Hole, a small unit of Death Valley National Park. This water-filled cave is estimated to be at least 500 feet deep and is the only home to the Devils Hole pupfish, of which there are only about 100 to 600 left, depending on the birth cycle of the pupfish.



After finishing up at Ash Meadows and Devils Hole, I made a refreshment stop in Amargosa Valley, located near the military's top secret Area 51 where space aliens and crashed spaceships reportedly are housed. Area 51 Alien Travel Center has gas, food and snacks like any other travel center. It also offers a wide assortment of alien and Area 51-themed merchandise.



The travel center is also home to Alien Cathouse Brothel, one of a number of legal brothels in Nye County, Nevada. The sign is a little misleading. No close encounters with little green women – all the employees are earthlings. But the alien theme reportedly carries over into a number of rooms, such as the Alien Abduction and Probing Room.



A nearby billboard. So who is Dennis Hof? Mr. Hof owns several legal brothels in Nevada, including the Bunny Ranch and the Alien Cathouse.

The Democrats like to say they're the "big tent" party. But I think that the Republicans certainly can lay claim to the title, seeing as they somehow manage to accommodate both a brothel owner and Donald Trump.



The Monte Cristo Castle area west of Tonopah is a region of colorful eroded volcanic ash deposits. It's not actually marked on any of my maps, but the Tonopah hotel I stayed at on a previous trip had some information and directions.



Silver Peak is an active lithium mining town but it has a number of mining operation ruins associated with its past as a silver mining town. The road to Silver Peak also passes what little is left of the Blair ghost town.



Things were looking pretty Dyer for a while.



Ruins of the mining operation at what was once Palmetto. Silver mining was begun here in 1866, but ended a year later. Mining resumed twice more over the decades but quickly shut down each time. A lot of mining camps in the region had similarly short lives.



The entrance to an old mine. This one was pretty obvious, and it was also fenced off. One has to be careful when exploring ghost towns and abandoned mining camps because not all mine entrances are as obvious – or fenced off. The same holds for old outhouse pits. You wouldn't want to accidentally fall into either one.



Gold Point ghost town. Only about 10 people live in the area, but this ghost town has been positioned as a tourist destination.



This Gold Point scaffold probably isn't original but instead caters to the tourist industry. After all, there's nothin' like a good hangin' to draw a crowd. But if they ask for volunteers, you might want to take a step back.



Goldfield was once the biggest city in Nevada. Today it is mostly a ghost town, but 300 or so people still live in the area. The Santa Fe Club is reportedly the oldest continuously operating saloon in Nevada.



A modern mining operation continues at Goldfield.



In the post-WWII period, the government encouraged uranium mining. For a small fee, people could make a mining stake claim on public lands, but they had to move some specified amount of dirt, leaving behind mounds and holes like this one. Several such claims were staked in the area north of Tonopah as higher than normal levels of radiation were detected there. But no uranium mines were ever established there. The radiation was most likely due to fallout from an area upwind where the government used to test atomic bombs above ground.

Berlin Ichthyosaur State Park preserves two rather unrelated features.



Berlin was a not very productive (relatively speaking) gold and silver mining town, generally abandoned in the early 1900s. It is preserved as part of the state park.



The ichthyosaur was a 60-foot fish-like reptile. This fossilized ichthyosaur is one of a few dozen found in the mountainous area included in Berlin Ichthyosaur State Park, evidence that this area was once well under water.



I came across this shoe tree near Middlegate, Nevada. I prefer freshly harvested shoes over those that come in boxes at some store. I looked for my size, Size 15, but only found one pair, and they were too ripe for my taste.



After finishing up in the Tonopah area, I headed into California for the drive back to Las Vegas. I initially had a number of candidate sites to check out in California, but most everything in the mountains was still closed due to this past winter's heavy snowfall, including the highway to Yosemite National Park, which is just beyond the mountains in this picture.



I've been to the Mono Lake area a few times now. The lake is one of the oldest in North America, and the valley it is in is the westernmost basin in the Basin and Range Province (Great Basin). The rock outcroppings are tufa, basically the result of mineral-laden (hard) water coming out of springs here leaving mineral deposits of assorted shapes underwater. Since the mid-1900s, Los Angeles diverted water destined for Mono Lake, so the lake's water level has dropped several feet, exposing the tufa outcroppings. The lake's water itself is quite green due to an abundance of algae.



This tufa formation reminded me of a small bear near the top of a tallish tree stump.



View across Mono Lake towards the Mono Craters, some of the many volcanic features in the area. Two of Mono Lake's islands and Black Point on its north shore are the results of volcanic eruptions. The area also features the Long Valley Caldera to the south and more evidence of lava flows and cinder cones further south.



Although Highway 395 is the most direct route south, the Highway 158 route known as the June Lake Loop is a pretty drive through the mountains that passes a number of lakes, including Grant Lake in the picture.



The Hot Creek Geothermal Area is in the heart of the Long Valley Caldera. Massive eruptions more than 700,000 years ago emptied the magma chamber below the area, which collapsed, creating the 20-miles-long, 11-miles-wide, 3000-foot-deep caldera. Ash from those eruptions traveled as far east as western Nebraska and Kansas.



On one of my Tonopah-based day trips I headed for the Boundary Peak Viewpoint only to find that Boundary Peak, the highest point in Nevada, was obscured by clouds. Boundary Peak is in the White Mountains. Just across the state boundary in California is a higher peak, pictured here. Boundary Peak lies behind it.



The highest point in California – and in the 48 contiguous states – is Mt. Whitney, the peak in the middle of this picture. The peak to the left, Lone Pine Peak, appears to be higher, but it is actually about 1500 feet lower. But Lone Pine Peak is a few miles closer, so the viewing angle is different.

I spent a day in and near Death Valley, checking out some sites in the park's more remote western side, sites I hadn't visited before.



Cactus in bloom along the Saline Valley Road Back Country Scenic Byway, which follows part of the park's western boundary.



The stringy orange-yellow plant is a California Dodder. It doesn't have roots like typical plants. Instead, it's a parasite that grows on other plants. It actually squeezes nutrients out of the host plant. Over time, though, it strangles the life out of the host plant. That's a bit of orange globemallow to the left.

I stopped at Rainbow Canyon, a volcanic canyon carved into the park's western landscape. While I was there, a couple military jets made several passes diving into the canyon. Apparently the canyon has long been used for pilot training exercises – Edwards Air Force Base and the China Lake Naval Weapons Center and other military bases and training facilities are in the area.

While watching this I thought that such training would come in handy for preparing to drop proton torpedoes into the thermal exhaust port of the Death Star, as happened at the end of the original Star Wars movie. Turns out that the canyon reminds others of the landscape of Tattooine, Luke Skywalker's home planet in that movie. Folks have nicknamed it Star Wars Canyon. Search for Star Wars Canyon on Google, and you'll retrieve a number of pictures of the planes making their test flights.

Some of my own pictures follow.







I hiked the trail towards Death Valley's Darwin Falls, but didn't quite make it to the falls itself. I reached a point on the trail where I had to do some climbing and jumping, including a jump that would have placed me near this 5-foot snake that was sunning itself on the trail. Once I got access to the internet that evening, I figured out that this was likely a gopher snake and thus harmless.



These ten very well preserved charcoal kilns are located in Death Valley about 27 miles from the main highway through the park.

The road to the charcoal kilns passes a couple mining ghost town sites, including Harrisburg.



The Cashier Mill at Harrisburg's Eureka Mine.



Looking inside the entrance to Eureka Mine.



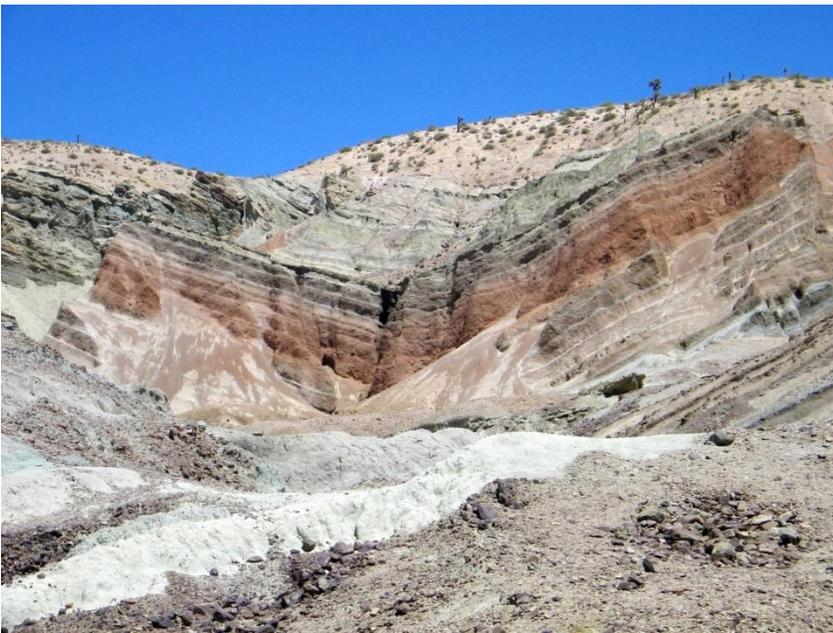
Heading south of Death Valley, I took a short hike at Fossil Falls, a dry falls carved into this basalt-covered area when this area was a lot wetter.



California's Red Rock Canyon State Park preserves an area of eroded colorful layers of volcanic ash deposits.



Rainbow Basin National Natural Landmark is a colorful area of eroded rock that holds extensive fossils from 12-16 million years ago.



This geological fold is part of the Rainbow Basin syncline.



Another view in Rainbow Basin.



To avoid heavy LA to Las Vegas Friday afternoon traffic on I-15, I took a backroad route, stopping at Salt Creek Hills Area of Critical Environmental Concern for short hike at this Mojave Desert oasis.