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Northern Nevada Road Trip – Various Locations, Nevada (N16C)

I moved to Nevada in January 2016. I had been to the state a number of times, often using Las Vegas as a starting point for road trips around the American Southwest. I had also made it to Virginia City and Great Basin National Park a couple of times. For the most part, though, my visits to central and northern Nevada were drive-throughs as I was on my way to someplace else.

I planned a week-long trip, heading north out of Las Vegas to Tonopah, and then from there I bounced around a number of sites along and between U.S. Highway 50 and Interstate 80, and to a lesser extent U.S. Highway 6. I made numerous stops, some destinations and some just to get ideas for potential future trips as I learned more about what Nevada has to offer.

During the trip I managed to cover most of U.S. Highway 50 in the state, which has been called The Loneliest Highway in America. I cover those stops separately.

The photos here are mostly from Nevada. I did make one stop in California, and I returned to Las Vegas via St. George, Utah and Mesquite, Nevada, adding some last stops along that route.



I began the trip with a drive after work from Las Vegas to Tonopah. I didn't do any sightseeing along the way as I've traveled this route earlier this year. This time Tonopah's Historic Mining Park was open, though, so I did check that out. Tonopah is a historic mining town – the site of the second richest silver strike in Nevada. Today the Tonopah Test Range rather than mining is the town's primary employer.



North of Tonopah off of Highway 376 is the living ghost town of Belmont. Like most of Nevada's ghost towns it was once a thriving mining town. The ruins of its downtown buildings still line the main road through town. Belmont is also home to Belmont Courthouse State Historical Park. It may have had as many as 15,000 people, but after the mines played out and the population drifted away, the Nye County seat was moved from Belmont to Tonopah..



Nearby Manhattan is another of Nevada's mining boom-and-bust towns, but it hasn't reached ghost town status yet. An active gold mine operates about 10 miles just up the highway.



I spent three nights in Reno. The first of the full days I headed north past Pyramid Lake to explore the Black Rock Desert. Pyramid Lake is the largest natural lake in Nevada. It gets most of its water from the Truckee River, which flows from Lake Tahoe.



The Black Rock Desert covers a large swath of northwest Nevada. Its playa is the largest in North America. When the playa is hard and generally water-free, it's a popular Off Highway Vehicle destination.

Much of Black Rock Desert and the emigrant trails that pass through it are now part of the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area.



The Black Rock Desert Playa plays host to Burning Man every year. When I was in the area they were setting up the temporary “Black Rock City” out on the playa in preparation for this year’s Burning Man, a mix of art and revelry that draws as many as 70,000 people to this isolated spot in the middle of nowhere.



Further north into the desert are the Calico Mountains. It’s pretty open, arid and empty country.



For my second full day in Reno, I focused on area state parks, including one quick stop in California, Donner Memorial State Park. The park preserves the site of the Donner Camp, where the Donner-Reed Party unexpectedly spent the winter en route to California. The party is notorious for the fact that some of the pioneers turned to cannibalism. There's a monument that pays tribute to the party, but it photographs much better in the afternoon than in the morning.



Lake Tahoe is the largest alpine lake in North America. Earthquakes created the lake, glaciers shaped it, and snowmelt is its primary source of water.



Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park protects a segment of the lake's shore, but also includes inland hiking and wilderness areas. Sand Harbor is popular for its large sandy beach, although for photo purposes I found a spot that featured a more rocky shore.



Founded in 1851, Genoa became the first American settlement in what would become Nevada. It began as a trading post, the last stop for California-bound emigrants crossing the Great Basin before heading up and over the Sierra Mountains. The Mormon Station State Historical Park in town features a reproduction of the old post. The town's historic district preserves a number of older buildings, including this one, the Genoa Bar, the oldest tavern in Nevada.



I made visits to other state parks in the area, including Washoe Lake State Park, although the lake seemed to be mostly dry.



After leaving Reno, I headed for Elko, mostly but not strictly following Interstate 80 across northern Nevada. One of my stops was Rye Patch State Recreation Area, where a dam across the Humboldt River has created the pictured lake. The Humboldt River cuts across northern Nevada from the East Humboldt Range. Its waters never reach the ocean, however, emptying into the Humboldt Sink.



Just some pretty scenery along Highway 278.



Setting out from Elko, I began the day exploring the Ruby Mountains, including the Lamoille Canyon Recreation Area, a scenic glacier-carved valley that leads into the heart of the Ruby Mountain Range.



A nature trail in Lamoille Canyon leads past these beaver dams, possibly the biggest and most elaborate beaver dam complex I've seen. I was also impressed by how much of the nearby land the beavers had clear cut to get the wood for their dams.



South Fork State Recreation Area is yet another Nevada state park that is centered around a reservoir.



I took the road up and over the Ruby Mountains as I made my way towards Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. I took this picture from the summit.



I saw precious little wildlife at Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. It's known for its birds, but August isn't when the birds are migrating.



Third time's a charm. I've set out for the Metropolis ghost town, northwest of Wells, two previous times, but the lack of signage prompted me to turn back. This time, thanks to Google Maps and Google Satellite Images, I knew exactly where to go. Unlike most Nevada ghost towns, Metropolis had nothing to do with mining. Rather, it was an attempt to create a farming community in the area. But water rights were never secured, attempts at dry farming were devastated by rabbits and then drought and Mormon crickets took their toll. The project soon failed and the site was abandoned. Foundations, basements and a few building remnants, such as the pictured Lincoln High School, are about all that's left of Metropolis.



Pilot Peak rises almost 6000 feet above the surrounding plains, making it one of the most prominent peaks in Nevada. A permanent spring at the base of the peak was an important water source for California-bound emigrants.



Lake Bonneville was once a massive lake filled with Ice Age glacier run-off that once covered much of northwestern Utah and parts of eastern Nevada. The Great Salt Lake is a modern-day remnant of Lake Bonneville.

Around 14,000 years ago the lake was breached at Idaho's Red Rock Pass, sending massive floodwaters west through the Snake River and then down the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean, helping to deepen the Snake River, and contributing to the Ice Age Floods that shaped present-day Washington and Oregon.

Like Glacial Lake Missoula, water levels in Lake Bonneville fluctuated, leaving ancient lakeshores visible on some surrounding hillsides, such as the one pictured.



I spent two nights in Ely along Highway 50. After visiting a few places along the highway, I headed south along this gravel road to Highway 6 to continue my area sightseeing.



Along this road is the Duckwater Shoshone Reservation, home to Big Warm Spring, which is usually open to the public.



Once I reached Highway 6 I headed west towards Lunar Crater National Back Country Byway, which winds its way around a playa and through a field of several volcanic features that comprise Lunar Crater National Natural Landmark.

This picture features part of the playa and a cinder cone.



Lunar Crater was formed by several volcanic explosions and is about 400 acres in size.



Easy Chair Crater is a cinder cone that gets its name from its shape. Frankly, because of the crater, I think it more closely resembles a modern, low-flush toilet than an easy chair. But apparently Modern Low-Flush Toilet Crater had already been used elsewhere.



After finishing up at Ely, I headed south on Highway 93 to check out a cluster of Nevada state parks before heading for St. George, Utah for my last night on the trip. My first stop was Echo Canyon State Park. A nearly dry reservoir would usually be its highlight, but I liked the scenery of Echo Canyon.

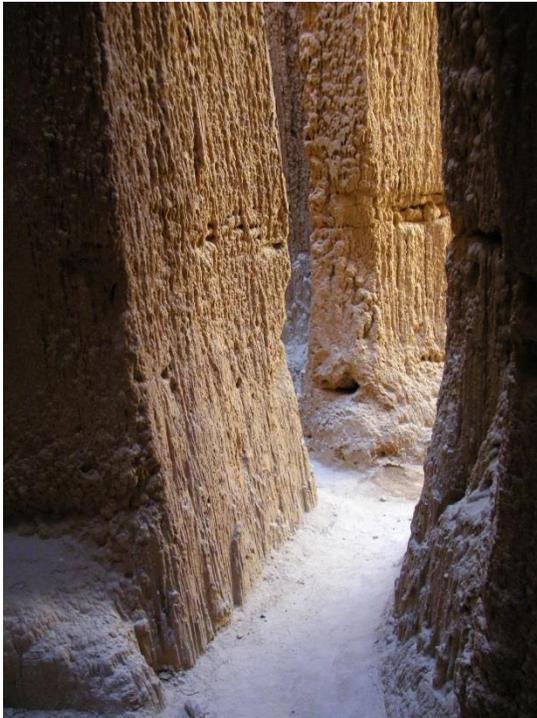
The echoing properties of these cliffs at Echo Point are so strong that reportedly you can hear the echo even when you yell to pictures of these cliffs. Give it a try.



Another dammed reservoir is upstream from Echo Canyon, creating the heart of Spring Valley State Park.



Cathedral Gorge State Park preserves a gorge that has been carved into bentonite clay. The resulting canyons and spires create an interesting landscape. Hiking trails lead into the canyons.



Cathedral Gorge has some “caves”, really more like small slot canyons leading into the clay, with straight walls rising far overhead. The clay doesn’t look all that strong, really just a conglomerate of sand and rocks, which makes these towering walls all the more impressive.



Highway 317 heads south out of Caliente. It passes Kershaw-Ryan State Park and through scenic Rainbow Canyon.



My destination for this drive was Elgin Schoolhouse State Historical Site. Unfortunately there wasn't a lot to see here as the schoolhouse was fenced off. But at least the drive was quite pretty.



Mormon pioneers had been frequent targets of harassment and violence when they were still out east and as they made their way west to what would become Utah. But in September 1857 a Mormon militia became the aggressors, attacking the Baker-Fancher emigrant wagon train, emigrants from Arkansas that were heading towards California. More than 120 members of the party – men, women and children – were killed. Only seventeen children, none more than six years old, were spared. The Mountain Meadows Massacre Site preserves the location and includes a handful of monuments honoring the dead and signage that describes the events.



As I approached St. George, Utah I came across Snow Canyon State Park. It looks intriguing from the overlooks, so I've added to my list of places to visit in the future. Note the mix of volcanic rock, including the basalt cap center left atop the red sandstone.



My last stop was an exploration of Nevada's Gold Butte Area of Critical Environmental Concern, that covers much of the desert landscape between Mesquite, Nevada and Lake Mead.

I came across this sign along the road into Gold Butte. I apparently enjoyed my exploration a lot more than the sign installer did. That said, Gold Butte has one mediocre paved road leading into it that is leads to a reasonable gravel road. Side roads – called designated travel routes – are a lot rougher. I made small inroads on a few of those with my Jeep, but those were rocky and very slow-going. There are no services, no water, and little to no cell phone coverage. And in fact I saw no other travelers while I was exploring the area for six hours. So be prepared to handle flat tires and hot radiators on your own.



Patches of color pop up in Gold Butte ACEC.



The Devils Throat is a sinkhole that's about 75 feet across and 120 feet deep. It's apparently still growing, but fortunately not while I was there.



There actually is a butte named Gold Butte, and it was the site of what may now be referred to as the Gold Butte ghost town. There are foundations of some buildings, a couple graves, mine shafts, a ranch corral, and some rusty mining equipment and vehicles that mark the site.



Scenery along Grand Gulch Road, which leads into Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument.



A couple gravel-dirt roads lead into Grand Canyon-Parashant, including Grand Gulch Road. Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument in Arizona is even more remote than Gold Butte. I wanted to at least sample it on this trip, so I only ventured a couple miles into the national monument. The Cockscomb, pictured, was one of the features I saw.



The road I was on started following a wash. With some clouds looking like rain in the distance, I decided I had reached my turnaround point.

And that was the end of my sightseeing on this trip. Of course, I was pretty far from the highway by this point, so I enjoyed the scenery on my way out of Gold Butte.