

Death Valley is a place where legends

never die

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Much less than a century ago, when the rest of the country still thought of Death Valley as an unforgivably hostile environment, a heat-seared wasteland where scorpions crawled over poisonous snakes to inflict hideous pain on misbegotten travelers moments before they perished of dehydration, a few legendary con men were already living well off the place. Among the hucksters exploiting fears of an earthly inferno was Walter Edward Scott, later known as Death Valley Scotty.

Scotty sustained a long, colorful life by suckering effete Easterners into bogus gold mining deals. It was his style to make extravagant "investment tours" of New York and Chicago (one time hiring an entire train, full of gullible reporters, to set a Los Angeles-to-Chicago speed record). All the way he told tales of unfathomable riches bulging from hidden rock seams in the most godforsaken, forbidding place on Earth.

Death Valley! A place so hot, desolate, dry and vast only experienced prospectors were advised to venture in. Fortified with fool's money, Scotty would promptly disappear back into the California deserts, leaving his investors to await word that they were rich beyond all reason.

When word didn't come, as it invariably did not, the few who could face the humiliation of being swindled made their way out West, confronted Scotty and demanded to be led to their mine. They would be obliged without hesitation.

Astride mangy little burros, the intensely skeptical-to-out-right surly investor and Scotty would descend down through one of the numerous mountain passes and out on to the sprawling salt pans of the valley floor; huge, barren spaces denuded of vegetation, absent virtually all animal life and sound and incapable of offering so much as a drop of fresh water or a square inch of protection from a pitiless sun.

If Scotty's companions lasted the first few days on the floor of Death Valley, where surface temperatures have been recorded as high as 190 degrees, they never survived the ambush.

Within striking range of the phantom mine, shots would suddenly ring out, breaking the deafening silence and shocking the unsuspecting investors out of intermediate stages of heat psychosis. As bullets pelted the roasting moonscape, Scotty and his ward would dive for what cover they could find.

During a momentary lull in the shooting, Scotty would announce that their only hope was for him, Scotty, to circle around and subdue the varmint.

Two or three days later, when Scotty returned, the investor was sufficiently shaken by the whole experience — not to mention dehydration — that he gladly excused himself from the first-hand inspection of his mine. He would content himself with a train ride back to civilization and a cold drink, although not necessarily in that order.

As the train disappeared over the horizon, Scotty would pay his hired sniper out of his investor grubstake and return to exploiting Death Valley's reputation as the most hostile and unforgiving environment known to man.

The automobile, air-conditioning and Herbert Hoover's signature, turning Death Valley into a National Monument 1½ times as large as the state of Delaware, changed a lot of that forever.

The sun, the heat and the startling aridity remain of course. (Less than an inch and a half of annual precipitation falls in Death Valley. It is so dry, a lake 12 feet deep would evaporate in a year). Hoover's signature also preserved the magnificent silence and pristine desolation of the place, protecting it from the ramshackle squallor of roadhouses, curio shops and scruffy "resorts" that blot so much of the great Southwestern desert.

The ironic part is that by the time Death Valley was established as a National Monument in 1933 it had already played host to a fantastic collection of schemers — pioneers, prospectors, con men like Scotty and big-time tycoons like the Montgomery brothers and Francis Marion Smith, who would eventually make their respective fortunes off gold and borax. These people left behind artifacts and wrecks of a boistrous, frenzied age, from the 1850s to the 1930s.

Ghost towns, deserted mining

camp, shattered gold mills and abandoned kilns dot the landscape. Against the expanse of Death Valley these relics are physically insignificant, more monuments themselves than ruins, but spiritually they echo with thousands of broken dreams of wealth and adventure, all of which accentuates the ghostly grandeur of the valley.

In its present state all these curiosities are accessible, and with nowhere near the congestion of Yosemite, Yellowstone and the Tetons. Most are tucked off in corners, up in canyons of the Black Mountains and Funeral Mountains, running down the east flank of the valley, or the Cottonwood and towering Panamint Range to the west. Roads of varying quality can get you in to places like the Keane Wonder Mill and the site of boomtown Skidoo by car, but at some point Death Valley — in all its heat, silence and vastness — should be experienced on foot.

Temperatures vary tremendously, creating markedly different experiences depending on the season of the year. Winters are fairly typical of most desert areas. From early November to the end of March daytime highs average from 75 to 80 degrees, falling to the mid-30s during January nights. Summers are something else.

From April through July the heat builds from highs of 88 degrees to 116. In 116-degree heat a gallon of ice-cold water will turn tepid within 20 minutes. You will drink your fill, walk 15 minutes and be parched. For all intents and purposes you will not sweat or urinate. In such heat Death Valley is still a harsh, alien environment — and therefore a fascinating sensory adventure. (Technically, Death Valley is not a valley. It was not formed by river erosion. Geologically it is a "graben," a sediment-filled chasm sinking between dynamic mountain ranges.)

Even in the most intense heat it is possible to take day hikes, most two or three miles in length, from points all around the valley. Some are loops which take you to petroglyphs and into mining ruins, out on the salt pan near Badwater — at 280 feet below sea level, the lowest point in North America — down into a volcanic

crater and to historical oddities like the crude graves of "single blanket jackass prospectors" like Shorty Harris and Ed Cross, miles out on the desert floor near the Eagle Borax works.

Supported with a couple of gallons of water, thick-soled shoes, sunglasses and a hat, the fierce heat of an average day is not only tolerable but surprisingly enjoyable, provided you are in reasonably good health.

Water is the secret to moving on foot in the prime of Death Valley's heat. Drink it. Lots of it. Constantly. You won't need encouragement, but in case you are out to prove you can ration yourself, don't.

Sans any semblance of humidity and removed so far from noise and chemical pollutants, a two-hour hike in Death Valley's mid-day heat produces a peculiar kind of serenity. Radiant heat loosens muscles and joints as walking slows the metabolic rate. Meanwhile, the tremendous contrast in elevation between the valley floor and Telescope Peak (nearly 12,000 feet higher, or almost twice the elevation of the Grand Teton above Jackson Hole) contributes to a pleasant, lulling disorientation — a sensation not to be confused with dizziness from dehydration.

The combination of heat and silence creates an intimacy at odds with the sheer volume of space around you. You feel enveloped and protected, while at the same time you are absolutely vulnerable to extraordinarily hostile elemental forces.

Fortunately, Death Valley can be explored in a variety of ways.

In addition to nine widely dispersed campgrounds (including one, Mahogany Flats, in the coolness 8,200 feet up in the pinon trees and bristlecone pines above the valley), the main service area, Furnace Creek Ranch, is a large, well-equipped complex. Tent sites, RV hook-ups, medium-priced cabins and motel rooms (\$66 to \$94 a night, lower during summer months) are

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available and reservations are recommended.

The centerpiece of Furnace Creek Ranch, though, is a grove of date palms, an 18-hole golf course and a beautiful, unchlorinated fresh water pool that maintains an 84 degree water temperature year-round.

Few moments are as sublime as floating in that warm spring water under a desert night sky of shimmering, unearthly, silky blackness.

A mile southeast of Furnace Creek Ranch is the lavishly appointed Furnace Creek Inn, built by borax and railroad barons in the late 1920s. At \$300 for a deluxe double, you may need a special occasion to spend a night at the Inn, but it is in every way a first-class resort. (The inn is closed from mid-May to mid-October).

However rigorous it may be in the heat of the day, twilight and night are Death Valley's exotic compensations.

A magnet for desert romantics are the sand dunes, located more or less at the crossroads of the four primary mountain ranges. Winds sweeping through a network of passes creates a confluence of migrating sand, trapping it here. The major dunes pile up as high as 100 feet.

You can leave your car off to the side of California 190, Death Valley's main drag, and walk the mile and a half into the center of

the dunes. If you're blessed with a calm day, without an intermittent blasting of blowing sand, the inner folds and mini-valleys of the dunes have, like so much of the valley, an extraordinary calming, cocooning effect.

From atop the largest of the dunes you can see 20 miles or more north, in the direction of Death Valley's main tourist curiosity, Scotty's Castle. One of the Easterners Scotty tried to swindle was a Chicago insurance millionaire by the name of Albert Johnson.

When Johnson came out to personally inspect his investment he was surprised by how good he felt, how a chronic back problem was suddenly alleviated by the heat and how invigorated he felt by the air, the horseback rides and Scotty's tale-spinning company. Eventually Johnson convinced his wife that they should build a desert home 3000 feet up in Grapevine Canyon at the north end of the valley.

Getting there: Death Valley is a 2½ hour drive by car from Las Vegas.

Where to stay: Reservations for the Furnace Creek Ranch and Inn can be made by calling 1-800-528-6367, or writing Furnace Creek Resort, P.O. Box 1, Death Valley, Calif. 92328.

Information: Superintendent, Death Valley Monument, Death Valley, Calif. 92328. Information on other amenities through

the valley, including lodging at Stovepipe Wells near the sand dunes, can be obtained by writing Fred Harvey Inc., P.O. Box 187, Death Valley, Calif. 92328.

