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ZOOM IN ON THE USA

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THE HOTTEST, THE DRIEST, THE LOWEST



Death Valley, Photo © Bożena Grzebień

Death Valley, a desert on the border of California and Nevada, is a phenomenal place whose description, more often than not, requires adjectives in the superlative form to describe it. For example, in Death Valley one can find: the lowest elevation (282 feet or 85.5 meters below sea level) and highest temperatures in the Western Hemisphere (134°F or 56.7°C). With the average yearly temperatures of 90°F (32°C) and only 2.1 inches (53.3mm) of precipitation each year, Death Valley is the hottest and driest place in the United States. Strangely enough, floods sometimes appear as a result of infrequent rains, as the soil is so dry and hardened that it does not absorb water easily. Large areas of Death Valley are salt pans because of the fact that in the Pleistocene era the valley was a bed of inland seas

whose waters evaporated. In the 19th century, during the Gold Rush, the terrain was excavated for gold, silver, and lead. Today, ruins of mines and well-preserved kilns testify to the industrial past of the area, which since 1933 has been protected first as a national monument and then as a National Park.

It is possible to visit Death Valley National Park and enjoy its unique treasures. Excellent highways, service roads, as well as walking paths and trails make Death Valley easily accessible. But one must not forget that this is a wild area where carelessness can cost a life. Heat and dehydration can kill, and it is of the utmost importance to cautiously plan hikes and learn about potential dangers beforehand.

SECRETS & TREASURES OF DEATH VALLEY



View from Dante's Point, Photo © AP Images



Zabriskie Point, Photo © Bożena Grzebień



A solitary bench at Zabriskie Point, Photo © Bożena Grzebień

Death Valley is by no means dead. In spite of the ominous names associated with it, such as: Badwater, Devil's Golf Course, Devil's Hole, Devil's Cornfield, Dante's Ridge, and Dante's View, not to mention the name of the valley itself, its terrain can be as pretty and delicate as one can imagine. For example, consider its flowers: the rock and Panamint daisy, the golden evening primrose, the Death Valley golden-eye, the mariposa lily, the desert glow, the Indian paintbrush, the Mojave aster, the desert five-spot, and many others. For weeks on end their vivid colors liven up the otherwise gray, brown, white and yellow sun burnt rocks and hills, dried-up lakes, and river beds.

Wild flowers are not the only thing alive in Death Valley. The number of native animals is impressive: there are over 50 species of mammals (including kangaroo rats - animals that do not need a drop of liquid to live), over 300 species of birds, 36 species of reptiles, 3 species of amphibians, and 2 species of native fish. Death Valley's fish are perhaps the most amazing of its inhabitants. The pupfish are descendants of a fish species that lived in Lake Manly until the last ice age. They can live in water temperatures of 112°F with salinity so high that no other species could tolerate it. Salt Creek and Devil's Hole (150 meters deep) are the two habitats of these masters of survival.

Death Valley is home to people as well. The Timbisha, also known as the Shoshone, tribe of Native Americans have lived there for over 1000 years. In the past they lived as a nomadic tribe and moved from the mountains, where they spent the warmer months, to the valley in winter. Today, there are about 300 members of the tribe. They live in Furnace Creek, in Lone Pine, and in Owen's Valley.

The number of inanimate treasures and wonders in Death Valley is so great that it would require far more than one page to list. Badwater is an unforgettable landscape of huge salt flats and the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere. Zabriskie Point offers a magnificent view of a maze of eroded badlands - amazing in shapes and colors and a popular sunrise and sunset viewpoint. A solitary bench on top of the hill has an almost poetic appeal to those who have the fortune to visit it. The most spectacular views of Death Valley are from a mountain-top overlook known as Dante's View. Death Valley has a number of canyons that offer unforgettable hikes. These include Golden Canyon with its golden badlands, Mosaic Canyon featuring narrow, polished marble walls, and Natural Bridge Canyon which has a large natural bridge ending at a dry waterfall.

These are not the only natural wonders that attract visitors' attention in Death Valley. Scotty's Castle is an architectural wonder as unexpected and mysterious as was the care-taker of this Spanish-style mansion from the beginning of the 20th century, a man known as Death Valley Scotty.

What moves rocks called "sailing stones" across the dried-up lake Racetrack Playa? The stones leave visible tracks that testify to the move, though no camera has ever recorded this phenomenon. Are the tracks caused by strong winds, the fine mud covering the surface of the lake and ice that sometimes forms on the rocks? No one knows for sure, but what we do know is that it is one of the many wonders and mysteries of the phenomenon that is Death Valley!



Devil's Hole, Pupfish habitat Photo © AP Images



A pupfish, Photo © AP Images



A runner in the Death Valley marathon Photo © AP Images



Racetrack Playa Photo courtesy PDPhoto.org



ONE NIGHT IN THE OVEN OF DEATH VALLEY...



Stovepipe Wells All Photos © Bożena Grzebieta

"You're going where? To Death Valley? In July? All by yourself?" These were the incredulous questions I received from several Americans when I told them of my plans to visit Death Valley during a visit to the U.S. last year. Although they were not comfortable with the idea of me setting off alone into the famed valley, they gave me a lot of advice on how to prepare for my journey. "Make sure you have plenty of drinking water, your tank is full, and your air conditioning is working" they told me repeatedly. Most Americans do not travel to Death Valley in the summer, especially in July, when the highest average temperatures (of 46° C) are recorded. They don't have to travel there in the heat of summer because they have the option to go any time of year; I, however, did not have that option since I was only visiting the U.S. for a few weeks. If I wanted to see Death Valley, I had to visit it during the hottest time of year; there was no other choice.

Even though I didn't show it, I did have some misgivings about making the trek in July. What if the car breaks down? What if I have problems handling the heat? Despite my fears, I made a plan: I decided to drive all day and arrive at the entrance to Death Valley in Lone Pine in the late afternoon. "It will be cooler to cross at night," I thought. In Lone Pine, I was the last tourist at the visitors' center. "You could stay in Lone Pine for the night and begin your journey through the Valley in the morning," the lady behind the counter at the visitors' center suggested. "Is it not safe to drive through the Valley at night?" I inquired. "Oh, no," she replied, "you would just be more comfortable during the day." I would have liked to engage her in a longer conversation but I knew she wanted to wind things up for the day. I told her goodbye, took the leaflets she had given me, and left. My car was the only one left in the parking lot in front of the center. I started the engine and gave Lone Pine and the high mountain peaks in the background one last look in the rear view mirror.

Within the first mile of my journey I stopped to take some photos, but as soon as I got out of the car, some huge buzzing insects swirled around me. "The guardians of Death Valley," I smiled to myself. The air outside the car was hot, just like the air in a sauna. The inside of the car, however, was pleasantly cool. Somehow it did not agree with the landscape outside which changed from barren to even more barren; as the vegetation disappeared, the color of the landscape became increasingly brown and the hills on either side grew higher and closer. The road, straight and flat at the beginning, later became a winding road, which forced me to slow down a bit. Sitting in my well-air-conditioned car, observing these

spectacular and awesome views I felt like I was playing a computer game. Then I switched the air-conditioning off and rolled down the window. Hot air filled the car immediately. Suddenly, it all felt right.

The sun had still been high when I set out on my journey across Death Valley. But, shortly after I entered the Valley, it began its quick descent and vanished behind the hills on the horizon. For a brief moment the sky over the hills assumed fabulous hues of gold and red. The hot air that filled the valley had an almost visible bluish haziness. Dusk in Death Valley is spectacular.

I stopped less frequently once it got too dark for photos. I was in the middle of the desert when it got totally dark. I could see only one bright star in the otherwise pitch black sky. Suddenly, a beam of light appeared somewhere miles ahead of me - it was another car heading in the opposite direction. Only God knows if there were any other headlights penetrating the impenetrable darkness of the vast Valley that evening.

I continued the journey through the quiet and desolate desert. Even at night the air was still hot. Judging from the mileage counter I was more or less in the middle of my desert drive. I began to think that maybe I should have listened to the advice of the lady in the visitors' center and started my journey the next morning, when suddenly I saw the lights of a small town.

My first impulse was to continue driving. If I had kept on driving I may have made it to the town of Beatty before midnight, but the unexpectedness of the sight, this oasis in the middle of the desert made me put my foot firmly on the brake. Stovepipe Wells was not a mirage; it was a little town complete with a motel, bar, gas station, and a general store. In less than fifteen minutes I was taking the most wonderful swim of my life in an open swimming pool, under the sky, now spangled with dozens of stars. A bird was flying over my head and calling. I understood his intentions and decided to let him have his share of the pool. After all, he was a permanent resident here.

That night in the Stovepipe Wells motel was the most memorable of my whole trip (a trip which also took me to some wonderful national parks in the western U.S. states). It was also a very noisy night. The room air-conditioner was turned on "high," and even though I tried to switch it off once or twice, it turned out to be indispensable.



ACTIVITY PAGE

Win a Prize!

February 2009 CONTEST

Which anniversary of the National Park Service in Death Valley was celebrated in 2008?



Send the answer (with your home address) to: madridIRC@state.gov

Deadline: March 31

Win a Prize!

The answer in the January 2009 Contest:

Words that contain the word "house" are, for example: household, housekeeper, housewife

Thank you for participating

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IN ON THE USA

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Exercise 1 Answer these questions about the articles:

1. Why does a description of Death Valley require adjectives in the superlative form?
2. What makes the Death Valley pupfish so extraordinary?
3. How do we know that the "sailing stones" move?

L I G H T E R S I D E



Photo courtesy and © Clayton Mansnerus

Exercise 2
Work in groups:

1. If you have watched George Lucas's "Star Wars," tell your group about a desert scene you remember from the film.

These scenes were shot in Death Valley. If you haven't watched the film, present your own scenario of an episode happening in a desert.



Photo © AP Images

2. Do you know U2's "The Joshua Tree"? Released in 1987, it has been the band's biggest selling album. The cover photo was taken in Death Valley. Discuss the importance of the right venue for album covers and music videos. Give examples.



Photo © AP Images

Glossary

(in the order of appearance)

salt pans - a container or depression in the ground in which salt water evaporates to leave a deposit of salt

evaporate - turn from liquid to vapor

kiln - a furnace or oven

ominous - giving the impression that something bad or unpleasant is going to happen

salinity - a solution of salt in water

badlands - extensive tracts of eroded lands with little or no vegetation

incredulous - unable to believe

misgiving - a feeling of doubt or apprehension about the outcome or consequences of something

dusk - the darker stage of twilight

indispensable - absolutely necessary

(on the basis of *The New Oxford American Dictionary*)

I N S P I R A T I O N S