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Exploring the Mojave Desert (M18A)

For my second trip of the year I stayed fairly close to home as I focused on the southern Mojave Desert, and in particular on Mojave Trails National Monument and Mojave National Preserve, both in southeast California.

On Day 1, however, I took all day to cover the one hundred miles from Las Vegas to Kingman, Arizona, checking out some destinations in Lake Mead National Recreation Area along the way. Then for Day 2 I took all day to cover the sixty miles between Kingman and Needles, California, where I would stay the next three nights. Because Historic Route 66 is the main road through Mojave Trails, I covered Route 66 from Kingman to Barstow, California, both cities mentioned in the song.

The Mojave Desert is America's driest desert and generally its hottest as the Mojave is home to Baker, Needles and Death Valley – and Las Vegas, one of the country's hottest destinations and where some of the country's hottest people live. The Mojave features classic Basin & Range Province topography, interesting plants that include the Joshua Tree (seeing a Joshua Tree is a good indication that you're in the Mojave Desert), petroglyphs, geoglyphs, ghost towns, sand dunes and a lot of wide open space.



Lake Mead National Recreation Area is well-known for Hoover Dam and the massive Lake Mead that Hoover Dam created. But it is also home to Lake Mohave, created when Davis Dam backed up the Colorado River downstream from Hoover Dam. Willow Beach provides easy access to the river/Lake Mohave, and to the Black Canyon Water Trail, a boating trail that follows this stretch of the Colorado.



Inspired by a Mormon temple, an early settler named this small butte The Temple. It can be found in the Temple Bar Basin area of Lake Mead NRA.



Over millions of years a large geological chunk of the American Southwest was lifted up. An area centered on today's Four Corners (where Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado meet) was raised pretty much intact, creating the Colorado Plateau. The Grand Canyon and Utah's Arches, Bryce, Capitol Reef, Canyonlands, Zion and Grand Staircase-Escalante parks are all on the Colorado Plateau.

To the west and south, the earth's surface broke into several large chunks which often then tilted. This became the Basin & Range Province, and includes most of Nevada, a lot of Arizona and parts of a handful of other states.

The Colorado Plateau and Basin & Range Province meet in Lake Mead NRA. The west-facing Grand Wash Cliffs, pictured, form the western edge of the Colorado Plateau.



Lake Mead from Pearce Ferry Road. Its distinctive 100-foot-tall “bath tub ring” shows how much the lake’s water level has dropped due to persistent drought in the Colorado River watershed.



The Colorado River at Pearce Ferry marks the upper reaches of Lake Mead. Those are the Grand Wash Cliffs in the distance. Where the Colorado River flows out the cliffs marks the western end of the Grand Canyon. If you take a raft trip through the Grand Canyon there’s a good chance your trip will end here at Pearce Ferry.

I had plans to check out the Hualapai Reservation's Grand Canyon Skywalk, a glass walkway that extends out over a piece of the Grand Canyon. But it cost about \$40 to get a required shuttle bus pass and about \$30 more to actually go out on the skywalk. No cameras allowed, either (but you can get a picture they take of you on the Skywalk for \$16). The Skywalk also is built over a side canyon rather than the main canyon.

I've seen the Grand Canyon from numerous North Rim and South Rim overlooks and from its eastern and western ends. I've got pictures from when I've flown over it, and I've hiked down into it. The novelty of seeing a small piece of the Grand Canyon from a glass walkway just wasn't worth over \$70 (per person!) for me. Especially when my National Parks/Federal Lands annual pass costs only \$80 for a year and lets me bring carloads of people with me to Grand Canyon National Park as often as I want.

If you're in Las Vegas, seeing the Grand Canyon is on your bucket list, and you think that you'll be kicking that bucket soon (or you just want to get back to the casinos by evening), then you might think the Skywalk experience is worth the cost. But heading to the park – especially the North Rim – gives you some terrific views for a lot less money.



Fortunately the drive to the reservation wasn't wasted as I was able to take a walk through this grove of Joshua Trees with a view of Grand Wash Cliffs in the distance.

I took an Arizona road trip in February but cut it short after days of rain and even snow. But at least this time I was going to vacation in one of the hottest, driest parts of the country.



But it was sprinkling by the time I reached my Kingman hotel. And when I got to my first stop the next morning – Hualapai Mountain Park – steady rain had turned to snow.



Rain and overcast skies continued as I headed west through the Black Mountains along Historic Route 66.



Oatman, Arizona is an old mining town, now considered a ghost town, although it's really been transformed into a tourist trap, er, destination. I stopped here about a year ago when it was jammed with tourists, and didn't see any charm to it then. It was a better today without the tourist crowds. And the sun did finally come out. This old school house was featured in the movie How The West Was Won. A number of movies have been filmed in the area.

Miners brought burros/jackasses with them, but some went wild when they escaped or were left behind. A wild jackass population – their descendants – sometimes ventures into Oatman. Watch where you walk. Especially after a rain.



One of Oatman's wild asses.



For my last stop in Arizona I did some hiking at Havasu National Wildlife Refuge. In the distance are The Needles, the rock formations that give Needles, California its name.



Route 66 used to pass through the heart of Needles. During the Dust Bowl era of the Great Depression, folks followed Route 66 as they headed west looking for work in California. Many stopped at Carty's Camp at the southern end of Needles. The camp even put in an appearance in the 1940 movie *The Grapes of Wrath*. The 66 Motel eventually put Carty's Camp out of business. Hotels at intersections along the new interstate helped end Motel 66's motel days.



A Needles, California mural pays tribute to The Peanuts. Cartoonist Charles Schwartz made Needles home to Snoopy's brother Spike (far right).



Much of my exploration of Mojave Trails National Monument followed Historic Route 66, although I left the highway at several points. When I-40 opened, traffic along Route 66 plummeted, and most of the railroad towns along the way faded away, leaving behind a number of ghost towns.

This is Essex, California, a ghost town.



Classic Mojave Desert basin & range scenery, along Kelbaker Road in Mojave Trails



Cadiz Dunes Wilderness Area, several miles south of Route 66 along a dirt and gravel road in Mojave Trails



What's left of the Roadrunner's Retreat Restaurant, along Route 66 just west of Chambless ghost town



Impressive Amboy Crater National Natural Landmark is a 250-foot tall cinder cone, one of a number of volcanic features in this area. It is extinct, having last erupted about 10,000 years ago.



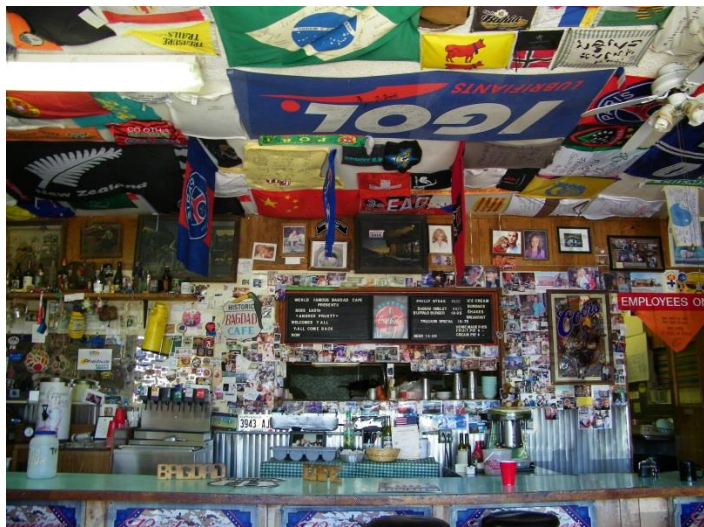
Nearby Pisgah Crater, another cinder cone, rises up about 300 feet, but it was mined for cinders for several years and thus doesn't have Amboy Crater's symmetry.



Pisgah Crater cinders come in various shades of red and black. Same basic kind of rock, but iron content and exposures to various gas combinations at eruption impacted the color.



I felt for the cinder mining operation employees who were tasked with sorting the cinders into separate red and black piles.



The 1987 movie Bagdad Café was set in the small (now missing/ghost town) town of Bagdad, California along Route 66 west of Amboy. But it was actually filmed at the Sidewinder Café along Route 66 in Newberry Springs, California. The Sidewinder has since changed its name to Bagdad Café due to its movie connection. I had lunch here.

Most neighborhoods in the golf course-centered planned community I live in have streets named for various golf-related terms. But my neighborhood is different. Its streets are named for Mojave Desert “springs”, including Newberry Springs and Halloran Springs.



I expected to see more cholla as I drove away from the paved highway towards Bigelow Cholla Gardens Wilderness Area in Mojave Trails. But it was quite a while before I came across any, such as this Teddy Bear Cholla Cactus.



The Mojave River begins in the San Bernardino Mountains and eventually ends at Soda Lake. Much of its flow is actually underground as the river seeps its way through sandy channels such as this one.



But it does spend some time on the surface at Afton Canyon, although much of the low flow on the day I stopped here was hidden by the local flora.

I capped the day with a return visit to Kelso Sand Dunes in Mojave National Preserve. Much of the next day was spent exploring parts of the preserve I hadn't been to on two past visits.



Kelso Dunes in Mojave National Preserve



Providence Mountains State Recreation Area is surrounded by Mojave National Preserve.



Entrance into Banshee Canyon along the Rings Loop Trail in the Hole-in-the-Wall area of the preserve



Petroglyphs along the Rings Loop Trail



A small part of Mojave National Preserve lies to the northeast of the main part of the park. It is home to Clark Mountain. But it also features views of the more distant Spring Mountains, which pass just to the west of Las Vegas. I believe that's Mt. Charleston in the distance, whose peak is at almost 12,000 feet elevation. At this point I'm only about 50 miles from home as the crow flies.



A treat for geology geeks. This is the Cima Dome, basically a granite bulge that covers about 70 square miles, rising from 2100 feet to nearly 5000 feet elevation. It's also fairly symmetrical, with elevation lines on maps shown as concentric circles. Cima Dome is believed to be the erosional remnant of granite plutons (I learn a lot from Wikipedia).



At my last photo stop of the day in the preserve I got this picture of Nipton, California.



I did make one last stop in the preserve on the final day of my trip as I was heading home. This is the view from Zzyxx Road across Soda Dry Lake towards the Devil's Playground.



At the south end of Zzyxx Road is Soda Springs, originally established as a religious spa retreat and now home to the Soda Springs Desert Studies Center of California State University.



Wee Thump Joshua Tree Wilderness Area east of Nipton, California

It's about 140 miles from Needles to Barstow along I-40. I took a different route, heading south to Blythe and then west to the Palm Springs area before ending up at Barstow about 325 miles later. One reason was so that I could return to the Blythe Intaglios site where ancient natives scraped rock off the darkened desert floor in order to create large geoglyphs of humanoids, animals and spirals. I stopped here a year ago and visited two sites along the gravel/dirt road that led off the highway. There are four geoglyphs at these sites. But site information says there are six geoglyphs here. Using Google satellite I located the other two. There is no explicit trail to them, but I hiked across some desert floor and then crossed a broad wash before following a faded old Jeep trail to get to the site. It only took me about 15 minutes to find them – someone more directionally-challenged could spend hours wandering around out here trying to find them if they didn't know what they were doing. The geoglyphs here included the largest of the Blythe humanoids and another animal.



View of the humanoid from above its head looking down. This humanoid is over 170 feet tall and has an arm span of almost 150 feet. It is best viewed from a UFO overhead piloted by alien visitors.



The animal, perhaps an abstract mountain lion



The Thousand Palms oasis in Coachella Valley Preserve in the Palm Springs area. I checked out the palm grove here and took a short hike.



This isn't my fault. It's actually the Mission Creek Strand of the San Andreas Fault, running right through the grove here. Not that it looks like much. But the San Andreas Fault has contributed to the formation of springs in the area that support a handful of palm groves. According to a park volunteer, the bluff in the previous picture is being lifted up about 3/4s of an inch per year as fault-related activity continues.



The Casa del Desierto Train Depot in Barstow is one of a handful of fancy railroad stations built along the Santa Fe Railroad line through the region.

After a night in Barstow I headed home, checking out a handful of sites along I-40 that I had noted but driven past on previous trips.



Peggy Sue's Nifty 50's Diner in Yermo, California. Classic diner menu, strong 1950s vibe in the décor with pictures, posters, music, film stills, celebrity headshots, news coverage, memorabilia, waitress uniforms, etc.



Elvis joined me for breakfast at Peggy Sue's.



With more posters, Burma Shave sign reproductions and song titles on the walls, Peggy Sue's '50s theme even extended into the bathroom.



I don't remember if they've got Del Taco restaurants out east, but if you're a fan of the chain you might want to check out the Burger Den in Yermo. It was originally the first Del Taco restaurant. The oldest surviving Del Taco restaurant is in nearby Barstow.



I found the Yarrow Ravine Rattlesnake Habitat Area on one of my maps so I thought I'd check it out and perhaps get in a short hike. But the access road was poorly maintained, there was no signage when I got there, and I found little useful information about this place online. It's almost as if they were trying to discourage people from visiting the ravine for some reason.



North of Baker I made a return visit to Salt Creek Hills Area of Critical Environmental Concern for the short hiking trail here. It's another one of the Mojave Desert's rare rivers.

My last stop was to check out the hot springs at Tecopa, California. There are a number of such springs in the area, and many have been developed/commercialized for tourists. But there's a hot springs site nestled among the Mud Hills on public land and open to visitors. Just watch out for the mud mites.

