



Mojave Desert Road Trip (M20A)

Because Las Vegas is in the middle of the Mojave Desert, I really don't have to leave home to see sights of the Mojave Desert, and I do have a nice yard. But sometimes I just need a change of scenery.

I had planned a more comprehensive Mojave Desert road trip for last March, but pandemic-related lockdowns cancelled those plans. This short trip covered what was to have been the last couple days of what I had planned for the March trip, although I made a day of sightseeing out of the drive to get from Las Vegas to Barstow, California, where I would be based for two nights.

Sandy Valley is a remote city in southwest Nevada that I was simply curious about. It is located about 20 miles off the interstate, so I thought I'd start there, head through Mojave National Preserve to check out the damage from August's Dome wildfire, and then check out the Camp Cady area en route to Barstow.



Sandy Valley is a very wide spot on the road. It's about 25 miles as the crow flies from my southwest Las Vegas neighborhood, but it's a world away.



Many in rural Nevada communities like Sandy Valley balk at the mask mandate that our governor has ordered. Meanwhile, COVID cases in Nevada have recently started to surge again.



Just across the California border from Sandy Valley is the Shiloh Ranch, once owned by late actor Tony Curtis. His wife has put it up for sale.



I continued on this backroad route to Mojave National Preserve, stopping for a picture of this Joshua Tree forest. Joshua Trees are primarily found in the Mojave Desert.

Mojave National Preserve is close enough to Las Vegas that it can be a day trip destination. It has classic Mojave Desert scenery, hiking, a volcanic field, ghost towns and mining camps, the “singing” Kelso sand dunes, caving, camping and Native American archaeological sites. And generally, not a lot of visitors in spite of its proximity to Las Vegas and location between Interstates I-15 and I-40/Historic Route 66.

Mojave National Preserve is home to the biggest and largest concentration of Joshua Trees in the world. A popular preserve hiking trail, the Teutonia Peak Trail, is a fairly short trail that leads to the top of Teutonia Peak and passes through the heart of this forest.

I headed to this trail, however, as this was where the Dome Fire burned, one of several wildfires that struck California in 2020. The fire killed an estimated 1.3 million Joshua Trees here, including those in the pictures that follow.



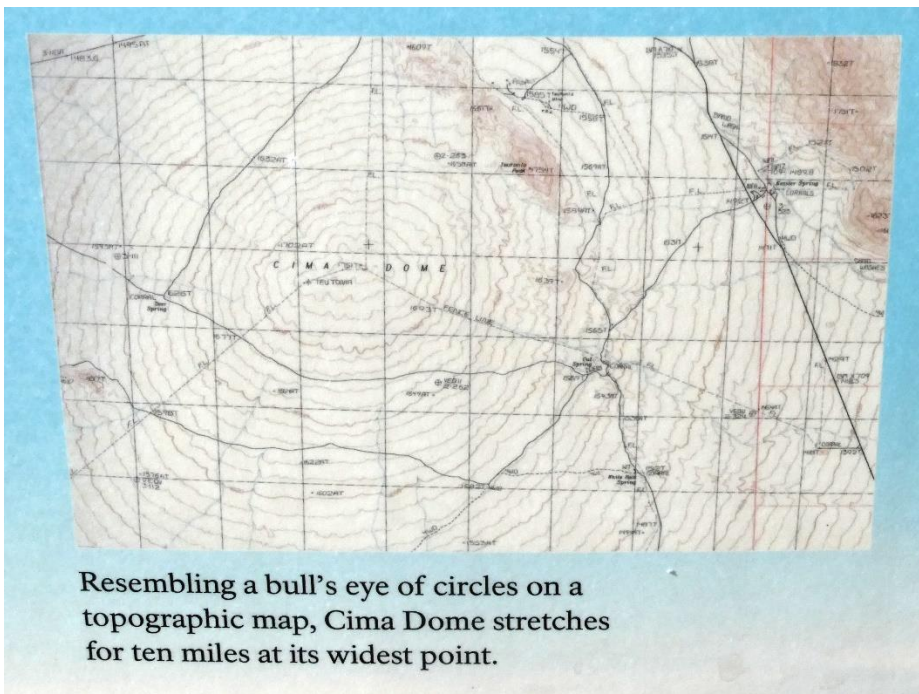
The White Cross World War I Memorial

A court challenge resulted in an order for the cross to be removed once the preserve (government land) was created, but the court then approved a land exchange.

This outcropping is now a small enclave of privately held land surrounded by the preserve, allowing the cross to remain in place.



The very gradual rise of land on the horizon is the Cima Dome. Once a rugged mountain of granite, it eroded into a smooth granite dome about ten miles across. The top of the dome is about 1500 feet above the surrounding desert, although that's not particularly obvious in this picture.



Especially noteworthy is the dome's near circular shape, as this topographic map shows.



The Mojave Trail was used by Native Americans to cross the Mojave Desert. The route connected travelers to a number of sources of water. It eventually became the Mojave Road, a wagon road used by settlers. During the Mojave War, army forts were established along the route to protect settlers.



Kelso, now a ghost town, was a railroad hub that served military and mining interests until after WWII. Its railroad depot now serves as Mojave National Preserve's visitor center.



The Cima Volcanic Field in the northwestern part of the preserve features about 40 volcanic cones and 60 lava flows. A 300-foot-long lava tube is usually open to the public for exploration, but not currently during the pandemic. The volcanic field and Cima Dome are part of a national natural landmark.



Site of Camp Cady, one of the army posts established to protect the Mojave Road.



The Mojave River. It doesn't look much like a river, but it's one of a handful of Mojave Desert rivers where water flows through the sand beneath the surface. Parts of the Amargosa River in and near Death Valley are similar.



I've been to Amboy Crater along historic Route 66 a couple times, but I didn't have time to do the hike to the rim on those trips. At this point in the day, I had a few hours left before I'd run out of daylight, so I thought I'd head back to Amboy Crater and finally try that hike. Alas, while I remembered how to get there, I forgot how long that drive was. So, once there I didn't have time to hike to the rim, but I did hike some of trail, saving the rim itself until next time. On to Barstow.

A key goal of mine for visiting this area of California was to see the Trona Pinnacles, a national natural landmark north of Barstow and southwest of Death Valley National Park.

During the Ice Age, some of the valleys of the Great Basin province were filled with water, creating a number of ancient lakes. Lake Manly, for example, filled much of what is now Death Valley.

To its west was Searles Lake, which was as much as 600 feet deep at times. Much like at Mono Lake to the north, calcium-rich ground water seeped into the alkaline water of Searles Lake, resulting in the creation of tufa pinnacles under the water. The tufa pinnacles have since been exposed as water levels dropped at Mono Lake or the water evaporated completely at Searles Lake.

At the Trona Pinnacles site there are more than 500 tufa pinnacles, ranging from 11,000 to 100,000 years old. As these only form underwater, they give you an idea of how deep Searles Lake once was.



Horizontal strandlines on nearby hillsides are old indicators of Searles Lake water levels at various times.



Some of the Trona Pinnacles



Some of the tufa pinnacles at Mono Lake. These haven't been exposed to the elements for as long as those at Trona Pinnacles, so they're "rougher", i.e., less weathered.



Part of the Searles Lake dry lake bed. More than half of all the known natural elements can be found in the Searles Lake bed. Borax, potash, soda ash and lithium are among those that have been mined here.



Some of the ruins found at Ballarat ghost town, which had been established to support area miners. The mountains to the east in the background are the Panamint Mountains. Death Valley is the valley located on the other side of this range.



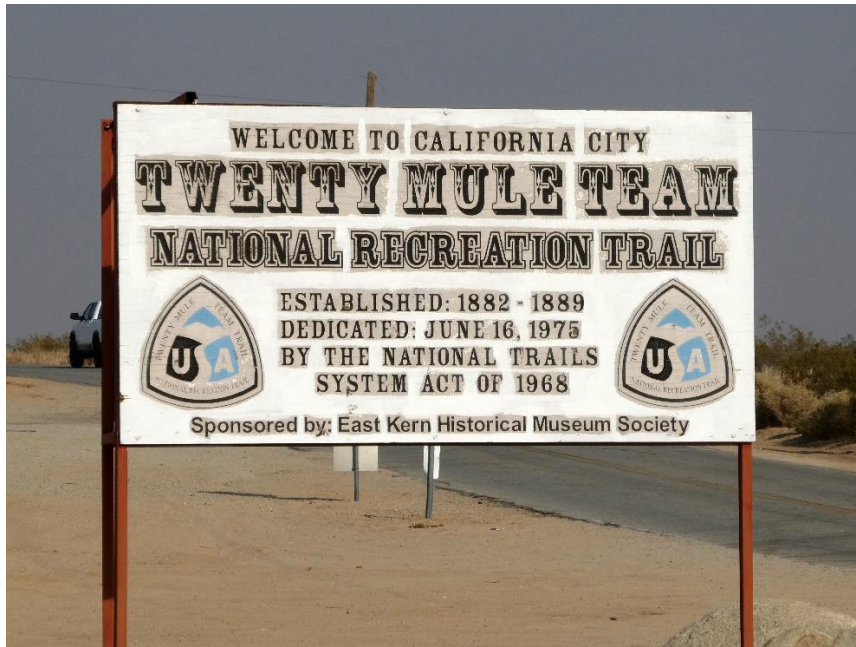
Panamint City was a lawless mining camp established in Surprise Canyon in these mountains just to the north of Ballarat. Heavy rains scoured the canyon, wiping out the town and its mines. Surprise Canyon is now a popular hiking destination.



Fish Rocks. Not to be confused with rockfish.



The Desert Tortoise Natural Area preserves 40 square miles of desert tortoise habitat. The tortoises often burrow into the ground around creosote shrubs. Alas, by late October they've often started hibernating for the winter, so I didn't see any tortoises when I hiked through the park.



The Twenty Mule Team National Recreation Trail follows part of the route used to haul borax from the Amargosa Borax Works and Death Valley's Harmony Borax Works to train connections at Daggett and later Mojave, California. The wagons used were designed to carry nine metric tons of borax ore at a time, among the largest ever pulled by draft animals. The mules, ore wagon and support wagons combined for a 180-foot-long caravan.



This Rio Tinto mining operation is home to California's largest open-pit mine, the largest borax mine in the world. It produces about half of the world's refined borates supply.



For the drive home, I took the interstate to Baker, California, site of the world's tallest thermometer, and followed a local roads route the rest of the way home, making a few stops along the way.



I first targeted the remote southeastern area of Death Valley National Park. The Amargosa River drains the Amargosa Valley area of Nevada and California, heading south until this area, where it makes a U-turn, heading north-northwest into Death Valley, terminating at Badwater, the lowest point on land in the Western Hemisphere. The river flows underground for much of its 185-mile length.



The Amargosa River and the Ibex Hills near Death Valley National Park's Saratoga Springs



The distant Ibex Dunes, seen from the road to Saratoga Springs



Saratoga Springs is a year-round wetlands in the southeast corner of Death Valley National Park. Important to early Native Americans and to migrating birds and wildlife, the lakes fed by numerous springs also provided a reliable water source for the twenty mule teams hauling borax.



Looking north from the same vantage point, here's the Amargosa River heading into Death Valley towards Badwater, about 50 miles to the north-northwest.



Little is left of the Amargosa Borax Works, several miles upstream on the Amargosa River near Tecopa, California. The Amargosa Borax Works and the Harmony Borax Works, located in Death Valley, were owned by the same person. During the summer heat, it was too hot at Harmony for borax to properly crystalize, so operations were moved here during the summer. The first twenty mule team borax caravans started at Amargosa Borax Works.



Tecopa Hot Springs County Park. Water from hot springs around Tecopa is captured and used to support several “resorts”, which you can visit if sharing a tub of warm water with a bunch of strangers is your thing. Of course, you could instead use this nearby natural site for a warm soak – this pool is lined with bentonite clay, which is good for your skin. (Bentonite reportedly can also help with constipation, diarrhea and diaper rash, although I would probably avoid this pool if someone else was already there to address one or more of those problems.)

The COVID pandemic has disrupted many things in our lives that we used to take for granted. For instance, I hadn’t had a date since early this year before the pandemic took hold.

So, when I was in Tecopa, I decided to stop at the China Ranch Date Farm, where I picked up one of their date variety packs to bring home with me.



Date trees at China Ranch Date Farm grow in a seclude oasis along Willow Creek. China Ranch grows its own dates, and make a number of date-based products including cookies, date nut loaves and even date shakes.



A hiking trail follows Willow Creek and leads to a slot canyon. Although China Ranch is primarily a working date farm, the people who operate it support and maintain access to hiking trails and historic sites here, making it a place worth exploring further, whether you're by yourself or with a date.

On to Pahrump, Nevada and then home.