



MarkHitsTheRoad

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Great Basin (B17A)

I took a 9-day road trip to visit sites around the Great Basin. But this could just as easily been called my Leftovers trip. I first headed for the Eastern Sierras area of California to visit some sites I dropped from my itinerary there earlier this year due to snow coverage. Then I headed for southeast Oregon to visit some sites that I dropped from my 2015 Oregon road trip due to time constraints on that trip. I picked off a few sites in northern Nevada that didn't fit into last year's Nevada road trip, and then headed for Great Basin National Park, which I dropped from that trip because of a forest fire. Finally I spent some time exploring parts of Basin and Range National Monument that didn't fit into a short trip I took this past June.



I started my trip by passing through Death Valley en route to Lone Pine, California. Mostly just some sightseeing, but I did take one short hike in spite of the warning sign at the trailhead. After all, I live in Las Vegas and take a daily walk, often with comparable temperatures as those I had today.



This is the natural bridge I hiked to.



The Devils Golf Course, on the floor of Death Valley. Also, a close up of some of the salt crystals here.



The colorful Artists Palette, along the scenic Artists Drive.



The less colorful but still scenic Twenty Mule Team Canyon back road.



Even less color, but still pretty scenery along the Scotty's Castle Road.



The Devils Cornfield with the Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes in the distance.



On the California side of Death Valley is the Darwin near-ghost town. Area mines closed long ago. These are miners cabins at the old Anaconda copper mine.



Darwin no longer has any businesses, but it does have a post office and a public library. A very public library.



Abandoned mining towns and mining camps can be dangerous places to explore. Buildings are often structurally unsound. Rusty metal can be scattered on the ground. Old mineshafts and outhouse pits can be hidden by brush. Still, this warning in one old building was a new one for me.



Wild burros, descendants from those brought west by miners, roam the region, including along the road outside of Darwin.



The Alabama Hills, west of Lone Pine, are a rocky area at the foot of the Sierra Mountains – including Mt. Whitney. It's been a Hollywood go-to place for more than 100 movies, from Gunga Din and the Lone Ranger to Iron Man and How The West Was Won.



Be careful where you walk in this part of the Alabama Hills. The “graboids” from the movie Tremors lurk under the ground here.



Mobius Arch, along a hiking trail in the Alabama Hills



Eye of Alabama arch



There are some ancient pictographs scattered around the Alabama Hills, including Face Rock. Alas, like much of ancient Native American rock art, the meaning of this mysterious pictograph has been lost to the ages.



A road through the Alabama Hills leads up to the Whitney Portal Recreation Area. From there a trail leads to the top of Mt. Whitney, which at 14,505 feet is the tallest mountain in the 48 contiguous states. The road gets you above 8000 feet. The trail doesn't require mountain climbing skills, but it does climb 6000 feet more over 11 miles (one way).



I re-visited Manzanar National Historic Site, one of 10 internment camps where Japanese-Americans living in western states were incarcerated during WWII.



The U.S. Forest Service has a sense of humor. Of course, the reality is that far more visitors get hurt by “cute” animals such as deer and squirrels than by bears, mountain lions, wolves, snakes, scorpions and spiders. And inappropriate feeding has a lot to do with that.

Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest in the White Mountains is home to some groves of Great Basin bristlecone pines, the oldest living things on Earth. One trail leads to a grove that includes 4849-year-old Methuselah, long regarded as the oldest living thing (but it isn't explicitly identified along the trail in order to avoid vandalism). But a few years ago they found a nearby tree that is 5066 years old.



After hiking among the bristlecone pines, I headed for the Volcanic Tablelands just north of Bishop. There I saw the Happy Boulders and Sad Boulders.



Happy Boulders



Sad Boulders

I'm not sure makes some of these boulders happy and others sad, but the area is popular with people who like to go bouldering.

The Volcanic Tablelands also feature a number of petroglyphs, including at least four major sites. Some reports suggest that these date back 4,000 years or more. But it was actually hard to find a lot of information about these on the web. Due to some vandalism, the BLM has reportedly contacted some websites to leave out location details. Vandalism is indeed a problem at archaeological sites around the country, certainly disappointing when I come across it. But information on many such sites is readily available. Indeed, I have two widely available commercial maps that pinpointed the major petroglyph sites here. That's how I found out about them. Panels from three different "secret" locations follow:





Nevada's Boundary Peak in the White Mountains is the highest point in Nevada (barely in Nevada – it's actually a sub-peak of California's nearby taller Montgomery Peak). I tried to see this back in May but clouds obscured the view that day.



There's a lot of evidence of volcanic activity in this part of California. At this spot, a lake of lava as much as 400 feet deep formed here during one eruption. When lava hardens into basalt, it commonly cracks into hexagon-shaped columns. Ice Age glaciers exposed the basalt columns in this area, now the Devils Postpile National Monument, west of the Mammoth Mountain ski area.



The tops of basalt columns that form the Devils Postpile.



View of the Minarets, in the Bitter Range of the Sierras, seen from near Mammoth Mountain.



Called Earthquake Fault, it's actually a fissure near Mammoth Mountain. As much as 60 feet deep, some information suggests that it's only about 600 years old.

Time to head north.



Moving on to Nevada, I next headed for the Aurora Ghost Town, still some miles in that direction. But the unsigned back roads didn't match the map I had so I'll save it for a later trip. One famous past resident was Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain).



The hydrographic Great Basin is a region that includes much of Nevada, eastern California and parts of a handful of other states. Rivers there have no natural outlet to the sea. Instead water evaporates or soaks into the ground (or as we Las Vegans like to say, What Moistens the Great Basin Stays in the Great Basin). The Humboldt River crosses northern Nevada, and is the second longest river in the Great Basin. Here it reaches the Humboldt Sink, where it runs out of places to flow and fades away.



I spent the night in Winnemucca, Nevada and then headed to Oregon the next morning, making a photo stop at Winnemucca Sand Dunes along the way.



Several years ago I heard about the Steens Mountain scenic loop drive, which climbed Oregon's Steens Mountain, pictured, from the west. I took that trip back in 2008 and got a decent view of the Alvord Desert on the east and thought I'd like to check it out someday. Someday was to happen in 2015, but I had too many stops planned for the day so I dropped it then. I finally hit it on this trip. The desert features the Alvord Playa, a dry lake bed, the west edge of which is also in the picture.



Just to the northwest of Steens Mountain is this spot along Oregon's Highway 20. A roadside marker notes that this spot is the northernmost point of the Great Basin.



I reached Vale, Oregon, my target for Thursday. I stopped at the Bates Motel on the edge of town. After a hot, long day's drive, I was looking forward to a nice shower. Alas, No Vacancy.



Do you sometimes feel like you're in a bit of a rut? Then you know how I felt standing in these ruts created by wagons traveling along the old Oregon Trail at Keeney Pass. Here you'll find a portion of the 15% of the Oregon Trail that is still visible.



The Owyhee River (pronounced Hawaii – named for Hawaiian trappers brought to the region who then disappeared) is outside of the Great Basin, flowing from northern Nevada and across southwest Idaho and through southeast Oregon into the Snake River. In several areas it has carved canyons through the “Columbia River Basalt Group”, formed about 15 million years ago. The Owyhee region is a remote, often beautiful canyon country.



An Owyee River dam supports Oregon's Lake Owyhee State Park.



In 2015 I visited Succor Creek State Natural Area, volcanic landscape to the west of Lake Owyhee. This time, in addition to Lake Owyhee I explored nearby Leslie Gulch, a volcanic landscape canyon that leads down into the lake. This is the view from Leslie Gulch's Dago Gulch.



After spending a night in Boise, I headed south back into Nevada, stopping at Idaho's Bruneau Dunes State Park along the way. It's the tallest single-structure sand dune in North America (470 feet).



The Wild Horse Dam across the Owyhee River in Nevada creates this reservoir, the heart of Nevada's Wild Horse State Recreation Area.

I headed south to Ely, Nevada for a couple nights, and used that town as my base for a day trip to Great Basin National Park.

With hotels filling up with people heading north to get into the path of August 2017's full eclipse, I settled for a fairly cheap hotel in Ely. However, it did advertise all the basic room amenities, such as TV and phone.



Here's the phone. They did provide instructions on how to use it for younger guests who have never seen a rotary dial phone. I was able to figure out how to use the hand-cranked TV on my own.



I do like to get pictures of quirky hotel bathroom features. Like this light switch and outlet located on the wall several feet above the toilet. Yes, that's the light switch for turning on the bathroom lights. And those outlets are where you'd have to plug in your hair blower or electric razor. I suppose that this is one way to child-proof – and short adult-proof – an outlet. But when I saw this I did get a mental image of someone standing on the toilet so they could dry their hair.



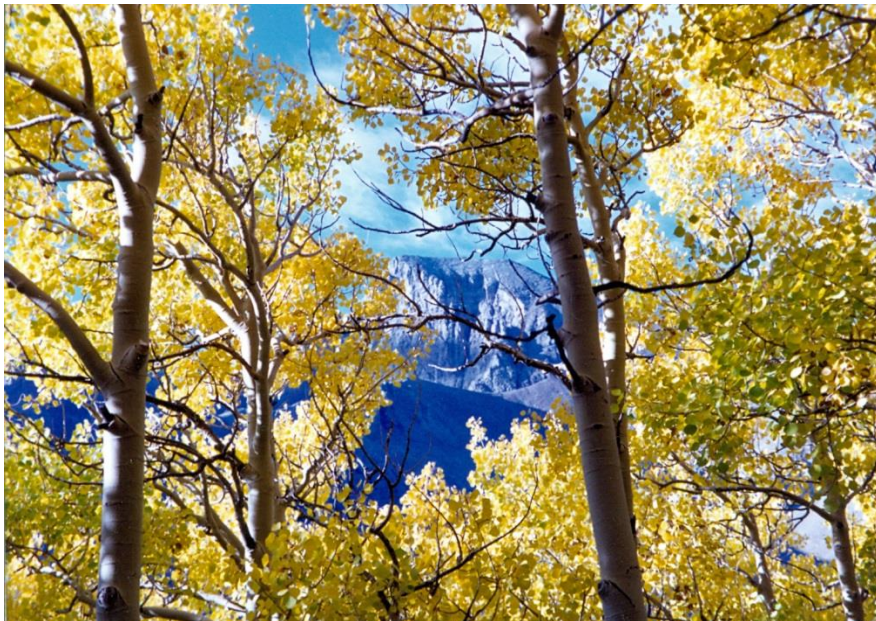
Wheeler Peak is one of the major highlights of Great Basin National Park, in eastern Nevada. A forest fire led to me canceling my planned day trip here last year.



In the cirque at the base of Wheeler Peak is a small glacier. Much of it is covered with rock fall and thus is not all that visible.



I took a couple short hikes while I was here, including part of the aspen-lined Summit Trail. I camped here back in 1994 and again in 2000. One of my favorite old travel photos was a glimpse of Wheeler Peak through aspens in their fall color from the 1994 trip, scanned print photo below. I looked for a similar shot on this hike, but trees can grow a lot in 23 years – and I forgot that my camera back then only had 3x optical zoom rather than the 15x optical zoom of my current camera.





The Snake Range including Wheeler Peak, taken from a later stop that day. It's Nevada's second tallest mountain (less than 100 feet shorter than Boundary Peak), but it's the state's tallest independent peak. Its prominence (difference between the peak elevation and elevation of the surrounding landscape) is 12th-greatest in the U.S.



Osceola Ghost Town is an old gold mining town on the slopes of Wheeler Peak.

Time to head home. Heading south I made a return visit to Basin and Range National Monument, a recently created remote Bureau of Land Management park.



View towards Water Gap. The whitish horizontal line across the upper center of the picture is “City”, a massive outdoor earth art sculpture decades into its construction. It’s scheduled to open to the public in 2020. For now this is about as good a look as you can get. Berms hide it from view when you get a lot closer. One of numerous mountain ranges in the park, below.





I was too far south for the full August 21 solar eclipse, but this part of Nevada was expected to have about 70-80% coverage of the sun. I was in Basin and Range during the time leading up to the eclipse peak, and I could tell that the sun was getting less bright.

I also stopped several times for pictures of the sun, including this one taken at peak coverage of the sun. My camera is simple enough, with no filters, so the sun itself was a bright blob. I assume the slightly darker part in the middle was the moon.

But I also got a few echo images that became increasingly clear the more the sun was covered. So I did get a fairly decent image of the moon's coverage of the sun in the biggest of the echo images here, towards the bottom center of the picture.

After I left Basin & Range, I stopped at Crystal Springs. Crystal Springs is located at the south end of the Extraterrestrial Highway, a Nevada scenic highway that passes the military's top secret Area 51. I just wanted to pick up some cold beverages for the final 2-hour drive back to Las Vegas.

But I took an unexpected detour...

