

## Wet Death Valley Road Trip (D24A)

I have visited Death Valley National Park nine times over the years. So, why a tenth visit? In August 2023, the remnants of Pacific Ocean Hurricane Hilary passed over the park and dumped a record-setting 2.2 inches of rain in one day, more than the park receives in an average year. Because of the nature of the landscape, that rain resulted in a lot of run-off, washing out roads, trails and various park facilities, and led to the closing of the park.

Death Valley is home to Badwater Basin, which at 282 feet below sea level is the lowest point on land in the Western Hemisphere. A lot of that water collected on the floor of Death Valley, creating a large lake. The water slowly soaked into the ground or evaporated, but the lake hung around into 2024, although parts of the park started to reopen.

The lake was still there when an “atmospheric river” dumped a lot of rain across southern California in early February 2024, including another 1.5 inches in Death Valley. The damage to park roads was less severe, but there were a number of road closures that resulted. Key roads, however, reopened recently, so I thought I’d take advantage of a rare opportunity to see a big lake in the heart of Death Valley.

A lake in Death Valley is actually nothing new. During the Ice Ages, runoff from melting glaciers in the Sierra Nevada mountains filled a number of area valleys including Death Valley with water, creating Glacial Lake Manly in Death Valley. More recently, temporary lakes form about once in a generation.





Heading into Death Valley along Highway 190 from the south, you can still see Glacial Lake Manly strandlines – remnants of its ancient Ice Age shorelines – on the surrounding landscape.



Continuing north, I started to encounter evidence of the latest incarnation of Lake Manly, here reflecting the snow-dusted peaks of the Panamint Mountains.





Looking north towards the heart of Lake Manly.



In spite of its size, Lake Manly isn't very deep. But it was deep enough at the time of my visit to accommodate paddleboards and kayaks.

Death Valley is the driest place in North America. It lies in the rain shadow of four mountain ranges. It also holds the official hottest air temperature ever recorded on Earth at 134.1F degrees. So, what little rain that usually falls typically evaporates quickly. Well, not Lake Manly. At this point, Lake Manly is expected to stick around at least until late March or early April 2024.



Badwater Basin is where Death Valley visitors usually walk out onto the salt flats at the lowest place on land in North America. But for now, they instead waded out into Lake Manly.



Accessing Lake Manly at Badwater Basin

Dante's View is remote enough that I've only visited it once before in spite of its terrific views of Death Valley. But it sits more than 5700 feet above Badwater Basin, so I headed there this trip to get a different perspective of Lake Manly.





Lake Manly as seen from Dante's View in February 2024



Back in 2004, I checked out the view of the dry salt flats on the floor of Death Valley from Dante's View.



From more than a mile above, you can see visitors wading out from Badwater Basin into Lake Manly, although they look like ants from up here. Ants that walk upright and wear clothes.

Most people don't realize it, but Badwater Basin actually marks the downstream end of the 185-mile long Amargosa River. The river starts its journey just north of Beatty, Nevada. It heads south until it reaches the Dumont Sand Dunes, and then turns west, and then north as it flows into Death Valley and then continues north towards Badwater Basin. As Badwater Basin is the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere, the river has nowhere to flow from there.

A key reason why most people are unaware of this is because for much of its route, the Amargosa River flows through sand underground. There are a few places where it hits the surface for a bit, but for the most part, the only time you see surface water along the Amargosa's route is when there is temporary run-off after a storm.

As I entered the park from the south, my route followed the course of the Amargosa River, although I've encountered the river at a handful of other sites on various trips as I have explored the region.



The visibly dry course of the Amargosa River in Death Valley Park as it heads north into Badwater Basin. But if you were to dig down a bit, you'd encounter damp sand.

With plans to finish the day in Beatty, Nevada, I headed for the Torrance Ranch Preserve north of Beatty, which was established not far from the headwaters of the Amargosa River in order to protect rare wildlife unique to the area, including the Amargosa toad and the Oasis Valley Speckled dace.

I hiked a couple short trails there for views of the river, springs, ponds and the surrounding countryside. I didn't see any of the toads or fish, though. It's probably a bit too chilly for them this time of year.





One of the few areas where the Amargosa River can be seen flowing on the surface.



The remains of an old miner's cabin stand alongside the flowing water of the Amargosa River.





Beatty is home to Death Valley Nut & Candy, the biggest candy shop in Nevada, this in a town of fewer than 900 people. You'll also find Jed's Gourmet Beef Jerky in town. I'm not much of a gourmet, however, preferring small-town diner fare over gourmet food, so I skipped the jerky.

The next morning, after a small-town diner breakfast in Beatty, I headed south to my last planned stop of the trip. I did make a refreshments stop at the Area 51 Alien Center convenience store.



Next door to the travel center is the Alien Cathouse Brothel. Unlike Angel's Ladies, the Alien Cathouse is one of Nevada's 19 currently operating legal brothels. It had closed during the pandemic. Apparently face masks and mandatory six-foot social distancing don't work out too well in a brothel.

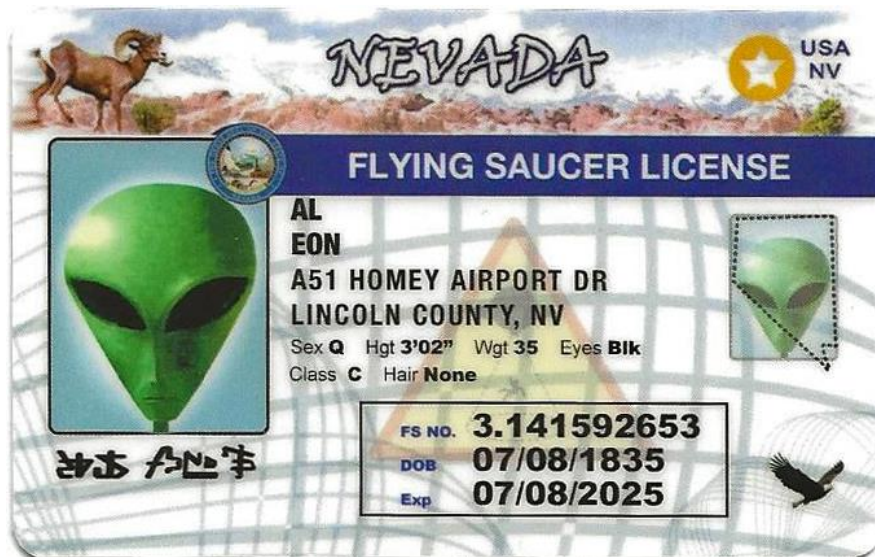
Alien Cathouse is the closest brothel to the military's notorious Area 51, a highly classified Air Force facility in the Nevada Test and Training Range. Some believe that the military hosts meetings and conducts joint undertakings with extraterrestrials at Area 51.

After a long flight across the galaxy in one of their UFOs weather balloons, apparently even aliens appreciate a little of the kind of attention that Alien Cathouse provides.





Entrance to the Alien Cathouse



One of their patrons apparently dropped his flying saucer license in the brothel's parking lot, so I left it with one of the hostesses at the front desk. Imagine getting all the way to Alpha Centauri only to realize that you left your license back on Earth. Of course, if Al Eon has to explain to the missus what his license was doing in a brothel's parking lot, that could just add to his problem.

My last destination was Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, which is home to the largest surviving oasis in the Mohave Desert. The isolated springs and surrounding habitat are home to at least 26 plants and animals found nowhere else in the world, the greatest concentration of endemic biota in the U.S.

My first stop was at the restored Longstreet Cabin. Andrew Jackson Longstreet homesteaded here in 1896, building a stone cabin near a spring. While living here, he married a locale Paiute woman.



Destroyed in a flash flood in the 1980s, the Longstreet Cabin has since been restored.



The spring, now called Longstreet Spring, produces 16 gallons of water per second.



I completed my visit with a hike along the boardwalk at Crystal Springs.



An Ash Meadows meadow viewed from the Crystal Springs boardwalk trail



Crystal Spring is about 15 feet deep, and produces 2800 gallons of fresh water every minute.



Depending on whom you're hiking with, you may not want to stand under this. Desert mistletoe is common at the refuge.



Water that comes out of Ash Meadows' springs originates as rain or snow in the Spring Mountains, the snow-covered mountains about 40 miles away in the distance. The water is called "fossil water" because it takes thousands of years to make this journey.

The Spring Mountains are found along the western edge of the Las Vegas metro area, preventing the city from spreading further west. The tallest peak in the picture is Mt. Charleston, which reaches 11,916 feet elevation. Mt. Charleston gets enough snow during the winter that you can go skiing just a short drive from the Las Vegas Strip.