

## Caliente Rock Art and State Parks Road Trip (N25A)

I spent a four-day weekend in the Caliente, Nevada area. Caliente is a small, former railroad town about 200 miles from Las Vegas. But while there isn't a lot to Caliente itself, there are a number of rock art sites to the west, there are five Nevada state parks in the area, and it is the biggest town in Nevada's UFO region and Silver State off-roading area, for people into either or both of those (I suppose that UFO travel is about as off-road as it gets).

The Shooting Gallery Archaeological District was my first target. It is in a remote unit of Basin and Range National Monument, several miles from pavement, and features three distinct styles of petroglyphs, some dating back a couple thousand years, so some of the rock art is quite weathered.

Descriptions of the road to it might scare some people off, but the road wasn't too bad, although there wasn't a single directional sign along the way (none of the rock art sites I visited were marked), so you'll want to have a good map (don't assume you'll get a cell phone signal out here).

It has four areas of with a lot of rock art, but no marked trails. I'd try to follow rare footprints, but they kept disappearing on me (perhaps due to those UFOs). Some areas required more scrambling and climbing than hiking, something my boots didn't permit. So, I ended up not finding as much rock art here as I had hoped.



The rock art was mostly among the boulders that surrounded a sage field.



Rock art panels at the Shooting Gallery Archaeological District

I visited Ash Springs Rock Art Site several years ago, but this time I had a map superimposed on an aerial photo of the site, and most of the featured rock art panels had a numbered signpost, so my goal was to visit all of the sites. But it turned out that the aerial photo was so old that it didn't have the dirt road used to access the site on it. I figured that the biggest streak of dirt in the photo was the road. Turned out that it was just a wash, This caused me to misread a chunk of the map. I ended up missing a few of the panels and stumbled on a few more through dumb luck.



Rock art panels at Ash Springs. The figure with the raised hands in the lower picture is the unofficial mascot of Ash Springs.

I've been to the Crystal Wash Rock Art Site twice before, including just last year. It actually has both east and west areas, and like Ash Springs most of the panels have numbered stakes, but the maps I had didn't agree with each other. Footprints from past visitors weren't as useful as I would have hoped, either, but I did find all the marked panels (and then some) in both areas.



A couple panels from the east end of Crystal Wash. In the lower left corner of the lower picture, you can see some "pit and groove" dimples, one of the oldest types of rock art at the site.



Also from the east end, this angled rock served as a shelter, one that was also decorated with rock art.

The west end of Crystal Wash was the downstream end of the wash, and most of the panels there were pretty limited.



Hiking through the west end of Crystal Wash



For some reason, this boulder at the west in of Crystal Wash had a hole eroded through it. There was no evidence that people helped this hole along. But while this was far too small to be used as a shelter, for some reason the early Native Americans painted the ceiling inside the hole red. Much of it has since flaked off, so there was no particular pattern to see, and my photos didn't do justice to the paint that remained. Why paint it? That's one of life's great mysteries.

This was the last of my rock art hunting on this trip. I capped off my final rock art excursion with a visit to ET Fresh Jerky in nearby Crystal Springs, at the southern terminus of the Extraterrestrial Highway, to get something cold to drink.



For the rest of the trip, I checked out Caliente, Panaca, the old mining town of Pioche and three of Nevada's state parks in the area.

Caliente got its start in 1901 as a railroad town for the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake City line, which eventually became part of Union Pacific. After a major strike in 1922, Union Pacific moved its major division yard facilities from Las Vegas to Caliente. Such a move might seem unbelievable today, but back then the two towns were about the same size, with just a few thousand people each. Caliente eventually lost its railroad importance, and faded into today's town with less than 1,000 people. It caters to local ranchers and visiting tourists.



The Caliente Railroad Depot was built to support Union Pacific operations, but trains don't stop here anymore, and the building is now home to Caliente's town hall, library and some meeting rooms.



Company Row is home to a number of houses originally built for railroad workers.



There isn't much to downtown Caliente. I had dinner at that restaurant one night I was in town. The city is along a wash and is prone to flooding during monsoon season, which was currently underway. Just a week before I took this picture, floodwaters were lapping at the door of that restaurant, and had entered the buildings towards the right.

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**ABOUT OUR WORKSHOP**

Atlatls were used across the globe. In this free workshop, participants will be able to craft an atlatl dart to take home with them. They will also be able to use an atlatl to throw a dart at a mammoth target.

Learning about this hunting technology is an amazing way to explore the ingenuity and craftsmanship of people today and in the past.

**SEPTEMBER 27, 2025**  
 Saturday | 10:00 AM - 3:00 PM  
 Caliente Depot Ballroom

**CLASS IS LIMITED - RSVP ASAP!**

- ✓ Flintknapping Demonstration
- ✓ Hafting a Projectile Point
- ✓ Fletching a Dart
- ✓ Target Practice

Funding provided through a grant from the Lincoln County Archaeological Initiative.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: [nvfc.org/calendar](http://nvfc.org/calendar) CONTACT US: [contact@nvfc.org](mailto:contact@nvfc.org) 702-466-3013

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You can tell when mammoth season is approaching, because atlatl classes start filling up.



I first passed through Panaca, Nevada back in 1994, when this oddly greenish outcropping caught my eye. Of course, my western travels have since exposed me to all sorts of colorful rock – including green.



Teapot Arch on the outskirts of Panaca



Just outside of Panaca is Cathedral Gorge State Park, a place that looks like what you might get if you had lots of Silly Sand (a “toy” popular in the 1960s for all you young’uns reading this). A million years ago, there was a freshwater lake that lasted long enough for a thick layer of sediment and volcanic ash to build up, creating a thick layer of bentonite clay. Erosion has cut into the clay, which holds its shape here well enough that it didn’t just turn into a bunch of shapeless blobs. In fact, cracks and crevices have been eroded into short slot canyons. If you’re thinner and more agile than I am, you can even crawl through tunnels into hidden chambers.

I hiked a couple of the trails here, and explored some of the slots. Unfortunately, my third planned hike at a canyon overlook area had to be canceled. Some people got hurt there when they ignored the warning signs and got too close to the edge. The edge gave way, and they slid down the side of the canyon. This isn’t rock, after all. You could do quite a number on the formations with a shovel or even your bare hands if you wanted to.



A slot canyon entrance



Scenery along my first hike



A closeup of the sides of a slot canyon



If you look up in Cathedral Cave, you'll likely see some pigeon butts directly overhead.



I think it kind of looks like a cathedral



Scenery along the second trail I hiked at Cathedral Gorge



Near Pioche, I checked out the Caselton Mine Area and Mill Site (top) and Ely Valley Mine (bottom). Abandoned mining operations and related ghost towns are common in Nevada. In fact, Nevada has more ghost towns than populated towns. They can be interesting to explore, but one has to be careful – loose rock, hidden mineshafts and outhouse pits, cave ins, old explosives, rotten support timbers, exposed rusty nails and sharp metal edges, hidden rattlesnakes, and so on create risks. But even more so for these two mines. Both are fenced off because each has plenty of ground contaminated with lead, arsenic and other fun by-products of mining.

Pioche itself was the site of a major silver strike, and the influx of prospectors created quite the rowdy town, full of gunmen, robbers and other ne'er do wells, making it one of the roughest towns in the old west. In fact, in the early 1870s, about 60% of Nevada's homicides occurred in and around Pioche. Local tradition holds that 72 men died in gunfights here before anyone died a natural death.

But the mines played out and things quieted down. It feels rather authentic – there's little evidence of the kind of commercialization you find in Virginia City, Nevada or Deadwood, South Dakota.



Downtown Pioche



Opening in Pioche in 1907, the Historic Silver Café is the oldest café in Nevada.



In spite of its history, Pioche is served by modern utilities.



Pioche is home to the Million Dollar Courthouse. Budgeted for \$26,400, it was actually built for \$75,000, and paid for with bonds. But they kept having to issue new bonds to pay off old ones, so by the time it was finally fully paid for, the courthouse had cost the better part of a million dollars.



The Lincoln County Historical Museum is located in downtown Pioche. Unfortunately, it is just a collection of collections of old stuff that says little to nothing about the history of the town.



The Pioche Aerial Tramway was used to carry large “buckets” of ore from Pioche’s Treasure Hill down to processing mills. In spite of the size of the tramway and the weight of the loads, it was operated with a single 5-horsepower motor. The weight of the ore loads heading down was enough to bring the empty “buckets” back up.



After breakfast on the day I headed home, I first stopped at Kershaw-Ryan State Park, just outside of Caliente, where I hiked its Overlook Loop trail, which sits above a small, well-watered, lush oasis.



About 20 miles further south on Highway 317 is the ghost town of Elgin and Elgin Schoolhouse State Historic Site. The one-room school for grades 1 through 8 was established by local ranchers at a time when the nearest public school was in Pioche, over 40 miles away.



From Elgin, the shortest route to Las Vegas follows the unpaved Kane Spring Road for about 40 miles. The road was in fairly good shape except for a handful of areas where the rains that had flooded Caliente and also cut across the road. Kane Spring Road passes between four different federally-designated wilderness areas, so there were no buildings along the route. And in fact, I only saw two other vehicles during that drive. No cell service, either. That's why when traveling around Nevada, you want to carry food, water and a spare tire (that you also know how to put on). After all, you're about as likely to encounter a UFO as you are someone who could actually help.