

## Death Valley at Two Degrees of Difficulty



A Guide for Visitors Who Want to Get Outside

Wells Shoemaker MD

November, 2020

*The Valley of Light and Life*  
*Water and Fire*  
*Wind and Space*

There is a reason that people...searchers if you will...have sought the *Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (title of a remarkable book by Belden Lane, 1998) in the quest for understanding of those big “Why” questions. I stumbled into that search, too, starting more than 30 years ago, and it’s accelerating. I go back to Death Valley 2 or 3 times a year, mostly in winter and spring. These sojourns have afforded me a chance to accumulate useful experience in this place of naked geology, dazzling light, minute beauty, and inspiring expanses. I’m eager to share the places where it happens.

Death Valley, in the minds of many people who have never been there, is a featureless frying pan—foreboding, ugly, empty—worthless and dangerous. In actuality, the Valley is a cleft between two abrupt mountain ranges which often feature glistening snow while the floor is baking in 3 digit Fahrenheit temperatures. In between you’ll find rare flowers, hardy trees, resourceful animals, clever birds, and frisky reptiles...all of great beauty and stamina. If you’re lucky, you’ll find the water seeping out to nourish them.

It’s a place where Death is an inevitability for all creatures, but which meanwhile engenders constant defiance and versatility...a place where living things have adapted to the most arduous living conditions imaginable. If one ever feels self-pity about some hardship, no matter whose fault or circumstance, simply look at what those plants and animals endure. Skip the whiny introspection and shift into some constructive dedication. I once took “red anger” into the desert for 2 weeks and came home with “blue anger,” long before politics usurped those colors as symbolic contraries. Red anger makes a person impetuous, clumsy, and vulnerable. Blue anger...one can wield like a scalpel. It’s both purposeful and powerful, and it’s virtually invincible.

*I originally wrote this Death Valley visitor’s guide in April, 2015, for a friend who was going to spend a few days in Furnace Creek with sedentary companions, then branch off with his sweetheart for more interesting adventures in his Subaru. I updated and embellished it in 2016, and again in 2020. I broke it into two sections. The guide starts with the easy phase, and then it gets more ambitious. It starts with destinations one can achieve with relatively effortless driving and minimal risk or exhaustion. The second section involves greater tolerance for risk, better skill at the wheel, more physical endurance, and a deeper appreciation for the learning every step can offer.*



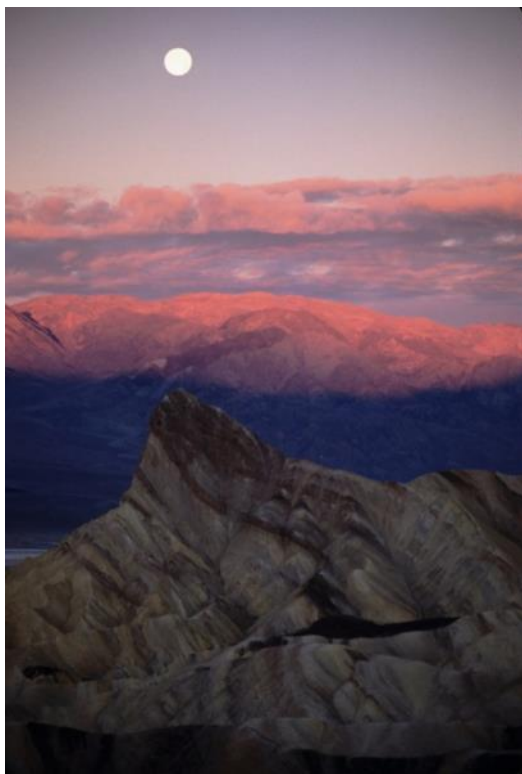
*I hope you enjoy it!*

*Wells*

## Section One: Enjoy Death Valley with easy driving from Furnace Creek Center

Here are some thoughts designed to get you out of the Furnace Creek campground and onto your feet, away from the generators, slamming RV doors, bickering spouses, yapping children, and napalm fumes of charcoal starter. None of these requires even rudimentary rock skills or physical conditioning, and of course, there's beer in the cooler in the car. Wrap the cooler first with foil-faced bubble wrap and then a down blanket, and the little fellers will stay frosty. Organized more or less by time of day:

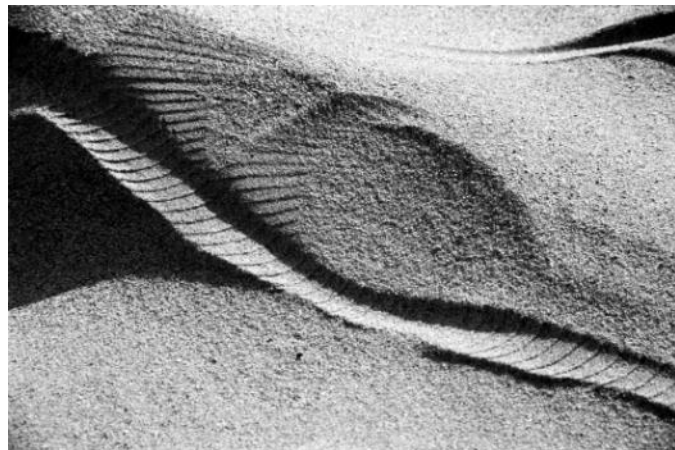
**Zabriskie Point**, justifiably famous. Best visuals before the crack of dawn before the light goes flat. Bring a down parka in the winter...it can be in the 20's. Watch the Earth's shadow slip down in the West, then see the Panamint Range turn raspberry red. As the shadows creep across over the Valley, the sun will eventually illuminate the landforms directly beneath you. Then go back to have a fine breakfast at the buffet at the Furnace Creek Ranch, and consider a bloody Mary to mellow out the morning. Witnessing the full moonset is worth planning the entire trip.



**Stovepipe Wells & Mesquite Sand Dunes.** It's essential to be there before dawn for the amazing shadows and light show. Early rising is also essential to avoid the hordes of tourists who crawl over the dunes like ants at a kindergarten picnic, starting by 8 or 9 AM. The most fantastic situation is to go there the morning after a really windy night. The wind airbrushes all those ant tracks away and reveals the lizard, mouse, beetle, and, ahem, snake tracks. In the rain, it becomes another planet.



Dune buggy



Sidewinder

**Grotto Canyon** is a little advertised destination almost right across the highway from the new, spacious Mesquite Dunes parking lot. It's marked by a subtle sign about 30 yards up the gravel road...not hard to find if you slow down. It turns uphill, runs directly up the alluvial fan towards the dark nose of Tucki Mountain. The road takes you to a line of telephone poles, where prudent 2 WD vehicles park. If you're feeling bolder, descend into a wash for another quarter mile, and then nature will require you to park. Grotto Canyon almost immediately treats you to a scoured alcove of polished gray stone. It takes some climbing skill to get up the slick, water-sculpted dry fall above that alcove, but worth it. It's totally private up there.



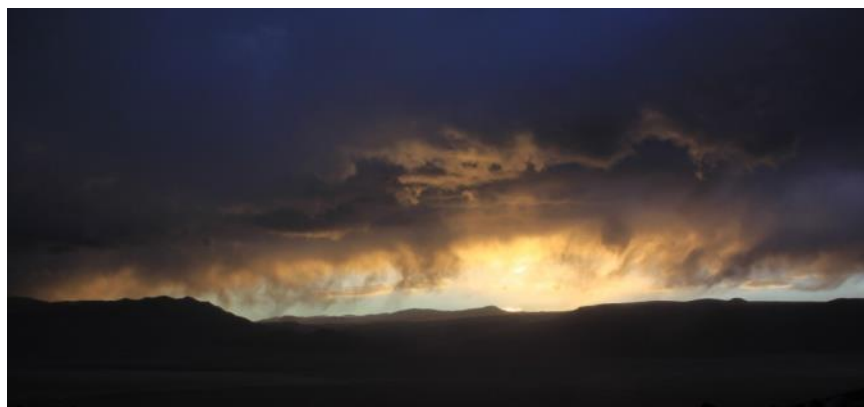


A much younger me above the first obstacles in Grotto Canyon

**Mosaic Canyon** is a popular destination with an access road less than 2 miles uphill from Stovepipe Wells. It's a nasty dusty road because of all the traffic, but once on foot, the canyon nearly immediately enters layers of water polished stone that would have been worth a much more difficult effort. The canyon, as fairly typical in Death Valley, opens up into some broad areas, usually indicating softer, more erodible mineral layers, then constricts down again in harder material. It ends with an unclimbable dry fall several miles from the mouth. If you go that far, you'll probably be alone.

**Salt Creek** is home to the unique, Pleistocene survivor pupfish...a natural wonder clinging tenuously to life in the most improbable of places. Take a well-marked turn off the highway North of Furnace Creek and then an easy boardwalk hike. It's blistering hot in the full sun, and frequently crowded in middle of the day, so I'd recommend morning, perhaps after seeing the Mesquite Dunes sunrise. Not too pleasant in a big wind.

**Harmony Borax Works and Mustard Canyon.** Both of these are well-traveled tourist stops, right off the main highway leading to Furnace Creek. They display the low altitude colors and contours of the Valley Floor and a little last-century engineering ...worth a short visit unless it's insufferably hot or windy.



**Rain** comes rarely to Death Valley, but it surely makes a spectacle. Get out in it!



Blue Norther engulfing Cottonwood Canyon Wash, above Stovepipe Wells



Mesquite Dunes in the Rain



Rainfall on the Eastern flank of the Panamint Valley

**Dante's View**...long but beautiful drive through varied terrain, with short hiking opportunities once up there. From 6000', the view over the Valley salt pan is spectacular, but it can be windy and chilly up there! (It's 25 degrees cooler than the Valley floor). Best to visit in the morning, with less wind and brighter reflections of the snow on top of the Panamints, crested by Telescope Peak.



Death Valley Floor looking North for 50 miles on a crystal clear day from Dante's View  
Once upon a time this was Lake Manly

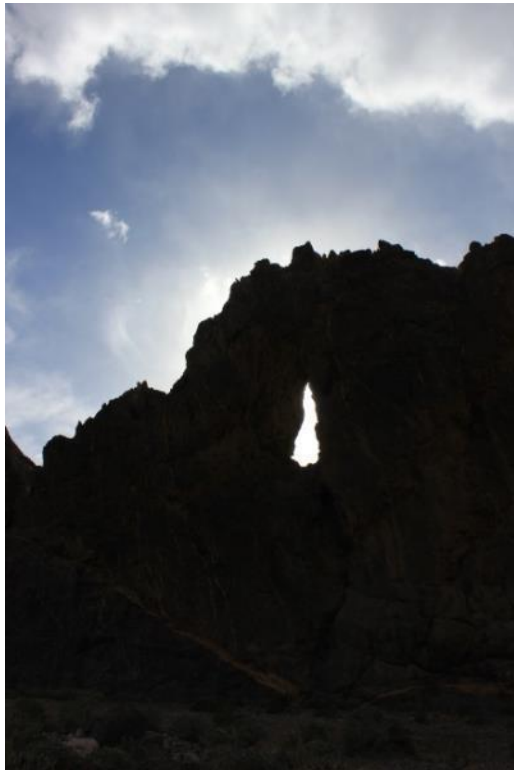


View downwards to Badwater, and what I call the spermatozoa landform



**Echo Canyon.** This is more adventuresome—possibly better suited to Part 2 of this blog—and more serious challenge to driving. Leaving Furnace Creek, go 3 miles up 190 as if leaving the Park to the East. Peel your eyes for a left hand turn (East) onto a gravel road...a short distance downhill from the easily found Zabriskie Point parking lot. It's marked with an inconspicuous signpost, and, despite its proximity to the Furnace Creek lodgings, it gets very little traffic. It's deceptively easy for high clearance vehicles for a while until you meet the black rock "gates" to the canyon, but there are patches of deep gravel and some troublesome holes which made 4 WD a comfort. You'll find the window rock (photo below) in a black fin that protrudes into the roadway about 4-5 miles in. The road continues with some rougher spots which could be managed easily with 4 WD, but probably a turnaround challenge to 2 WD. The road opens for a while into a wide wash which climbs inexorably to over 4000 feet. You will eventually reach a "Y." Bear right! Left takes you into serious 4 WD territory which I explored and turned around. The Right fork takes you past a sign noting "Inyo Mine 1.7 miles and Amargosa Turnoff." The Inyo Mine is well preserved, with typical desert timber engineering and some impressive iron wheels and machinery... abandoned around 1912.

Keep going, and about 10 miles in from the highway, you'll dead end at a wilderness boundary. The Echo Canyon beyond this point shows spectacular colored layers, with a potential to climb up to 5000'...with no chance of meeting another person. The trailhead would be a fine place to camp and get an early start on the hike the next morning.



Window Rock



Easy driving stretch through Echo Canyon narrows  
Note the wee arch silhouette





Relic engineering from the Inyo Mine



Serious tectonic stress in upper Echo



Purple rocks in abundance

**Hole in the Wall**...this is also poorly advertised. It's the very next left turn to the East after Echo, past the busy Zabriskie Point parking lot. It starts with a decent gravel road up a wash, not a problem for high clearance 2 WD as long as there has been no recent flooding. It goes through a natural break in a big fin of rock into a secluded valley. I've camped and hiked up there, and it's quiet and private, with some intriguing but challenging canyons above the fan. Continue to the end of the road to the aptly named Red Amphitheater. You'll probably have it to yourself for a pleasant, easy day hike. It's not spectacular for savage landforms, but it's a peaceful desert experience. I made my talisman there to commemorate the new liberated me in 2000.



Wells was here



Foreshortened ridges and Panamints in the rear

**Golden Canyon**, barely 2 miles South from FC on the road to Badwater, you'll find a splendid hike with embarrassingly easy access right off the main road. Hiking is easy with a gentle grade and a well-worn track. On either side, you'll see gorgeous land forms in a 2-3 mile round trip if you go all the way in. This 1-2 hour walk is most scenic in the mid to late afternoon for the magical light and sharp, contrasting shadows. The parking lot always seems full, but it's worth it anyway. If this spot were desperately hard to reach, it would be a centerfold feature for an outdoor magazine.





**Desolation Canyon** is another unheralded destination just another couple miles south of Golden Canyon on the Badwater Road. Turn off the highway onto a well-marked, nicely graded road up the alluvial fan. It's maintained to be friendly for any vehicle except, perhaps, after a big storm. You'll reach the end of this half mile road and park. A gentle trail takes hikers up several miles through pretty landforms, although not as spectacular as Golden Canyon and Artists Palette which lie just to the north and south, respectively. It would be a fine destination for a half day hike and picnic, after which you could go to see the light shows on those other places in the late afternoon.

If you don't have much time, go up and park anyway. If you look off to the left, you'll spot an intriguing pink and black landform which turns out to be a 3 story high dry waterfall once you get closer! It's only a 10-15 minute walk across easy gravel to see it, and definitely a "taste" of what deep canyon hikers seek in the really remote areas.



Dry fall to the north of the main Desolation Canyon



Three story view up to the sky through the fall



**Artists Palette** is one of the deservedly most famous geological features of Death Valley. You start on a very well-marked turn about 8 miles south of FC in the direction of Badwater. A ten mile, one-way, paved road makes a spectacular loop up into the Funeral Mountains through stunning desert scenery...and abundant flowers in the spring. While the multicolored mineral deposits of Artists Palette mark the destination, the geology of the whole route takes your breath away, especially the volcanism and the starkly eroded highlands. It's better still on a bike, but this is a strenuous ride (2000' elevation gain and lots of up and down—not casual!). It's best to do the loop in the afternoon for the best colors, but morning is glorious, too, and rain is spectacular.



**Badwater.** At 268 feet below sea level, Badwater is the lowest point in North America. It's a popular destination, as well as an overdone photographer's tripod site for pictures of the snow covered Panamints reflecting in the shallow pools at dawn after a bit of winter rain. I think seeing Badwater once is enough.



Badwater on a rare rainy day



Death Valley Salt Pan from West Side Road

**Aguereberry Point.** This is a 6600' promontory along the Panamint ridgeline, with a spectacular view of roughly 80 miles of Death Valley when the air is clear. It's accessible on a 5 mile dirt road that leaves the paved Wildrose Road. It's a bit of a trip from Furnace Creek, but a fine way to wrap up a day. Ideally, plan to be there at sunset, watching the shadows creep across the valley and eventually engulf the Funeral Range on the East Side. I've been there at dawn, too, watching the light fill the valley. Actually, it's always cool, and for a side benefit, you can explore the Harrisburg mine site, on the same access road and close to the highway. The Skidoo site is up in the same area, but honestly, there's practically nothing left there.



Aguereberry Point at an icy dawn



Harrisburg at sunset

**Titus Canyon.** This is a Must-Do for anybody who's a capable back road driver with no fear of heights. It's a 25 mile dirt road that leaves from the Beatty Road, just over the Nevada state line (if you get to the turn off to Rhyolite ghost town, you've gone too far). It runs up to 5000', descends to 3500', back up to 5000', and finally all the way down to the Death Valley floor. It goes through polished marble narrows that pop your eyes. It's doable with 2 WD if the weather has been pleasant and the grader has been there recently, but it can be rough enough after rains for the Park Service to close it.



Red Pass in Titus Canyon



Entering the Titus narrows

**Scotty's Castle: Skip it.** I would strenuously discourage wasting time, gasoline, tire tread, or spiritual harmony on the tacky tourist trap of Scotty's Castle. Scotty was a 1920's scammer who built a curious structure at the mouth of Grapevine Canyon, supposedly validating his claim of gold finds. *2016 addendum—the entire Grapevine Canyon Road was wiped out by a savage flood in late 2015, and Scotty's infrastructure was seriously damaged. Reconstruction still not complete in late 2020.*



*OK, Wells is opinionated. That's not really news.*

**Ubehebe Crater.** Bypass Scotty's, which is blocked now anyway, and keep going on the paved road to the Ubehebe Crater, and there you'll see something absolutely amazing. Cool any time of day, with worthwhile hiking along the rim or down into the crater. It's almost always windy, so tighten the drawstring on your hat.





**The Racetrack.** Continue on the Ubehebe Crater road for another rough 25 miles to the Racetrack, home of the famous windblown rocks on the playa. This is a dusty, bumpy road strewn with sharp rocks that have little mercy for ordinary street tires.



Not all Mirages are mind tricks

**Teakettle Junction.** Funky signpost with teakettles on the Racetrack Road, with access on decent dirt roads to a network of back roads and Lost Burro mining site.



No littering....



No sheep, Mon!

Zig Zag Canyon is down in that vicinity, too, unmarked, unacknowledged, inaccessible to vehicles, and unparalleled for petroglyphs...but I honestly think that is a treasure that needs to be shared only with buddies or serious lovers.

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**Phase Two—Get Away to more adventuresome, less populated destinations.** Some routes doable with AWD sedan or high clearance 2 WD truck with a skilled backroad driver. 4WD substantially better.

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## Panamint Crest



View of Telescope Peak from the East by the light of the Blue Moon

Ten miles uphill from Stovepipe Wells on Hwy 190, turn southward (left) up the paved Wildrose Road. It's a well-marked intersection with some dated structures and a windblown, desolate, roadside campground at around 3000' elevation. The road goes past the Aguerberry Point road as mentioned above, and then reaches an intersection.

From that intersection, you can go uphill to the **Charcoal Kilns** (interesting for a short look) and the Wildrose camping area. Snow conditions permitting, the progressively steeper and rougher road continues further uphill to the **Mahogany Flats** campground at 8000'. That's a fine destination in its own right, and it's also the trailhead to hike up to Telescope Peak at 11,000'. You gain 3000' in 7 miles and enter the Bristlecone forest! The drop from Telescope to Badwater (-268' elevation) is the largest delta in height in shortest horizontal distance in North America. The wind can be fierce and the weather changeable really fast at any season. It's not for the casual hiker, but with luck in weather and sensible preparation, it's a lifetime memory.



Bristlecones on Telescope Peak



View to West from Telescope over Panamint Valley  
Snowcapped Eastern Sierras on the horizon

(The Wildrose Road normally continues downhill into the Panamint Valley, eventually intersecting the Panamint Valley Road down at 1000', but that section can be closed for flood damage...and snow. Signage is reliable, but best to check in advance with the rangers if there has been any recent rain.) Road closures are also updated daily on the DVNP website. All was open in early November, 2020, but that can change in a day.

**Telephone Canyon** is a poorly known destination, leaving the Wildrose Road on an unmarked road where the alluvial fan meets the rocks just a couple miles uphill from the junction with 190. The first few miles are doable, barely, with an AWD sedan, but honestly, better with a truck with better clearance and 4 WD. It's interesting, although not spectacular, with 12 miles of steady uphill driving through changing terrain to a windswept saddle. You can see Mt. Charleston above Las Vegas and Mt. Whitney, both 90 miles away, on a clear day. Talk to me if you are considering this ride.



Telephone Arch



The **Eureka Dunes** are the tallest dunes in North America, jutting 750 feet above the 3000' elevation Eureka Valley floor. Two hours from the nearest paved highway at the far Northern end of the Park, these stunning landforms cover a 1.5 x 3.5 mile patch located at the southern end of an 8x35 mile desert wind tunnel. I think that's too far for a day trip, but camping makes this a playground. Bring everything you need...no services. The dunes only exist because of big wind, so it's not fair to resent the wind when it comes. Better to be lucky.



The 2010 lunar eclipse at Eureka



Frosty morning, time for coffee



Morning after a big storm on the Eureka Dunes



Red sky in morning...harbinger of another storm

You can get to primitive camping at the base of the Dunes with a sedan, but beyond that, deep sand and occasional mud calls for 4 WD. Talk to me about camping and hiking if you decide to go, as there are some hazards as well as secrets worth advance awareness. It is my favorite of all places in the Park.

**Cottonwood and Marble Canyons.** From the Stovepipe Wells general store (gas available), a dirt road runs a few hundred yards to the airport (really!), and then it continues 10 miles across the desert to the mouth of Cottonwood Canyon. It's usually 2 WD, with a few stretches of deep sand and lots of washboard. A parking area marks the end of the road for 2 WD vehicles, with nice hiking and petroglyphs within a mile.

With a 4 WD vehicle, you can descend into the wash and get up with a little patience another 7 miles up Cottonwood Canyon, where ephemeral surface water supports a lush, thoroughly improbable oasis of trees (cottonwoods, indeed!). An offshoot of that road leads up Marble Canyon, which I think has Death Valley's coolest narrows and some fine rock art of both divine and human origin. Camping is primitive but easy.

There's a splendid 3-day/35 mile loop backpack, most of it off-trail, that connects the two canyons, that is if you can tolerate miles of tramping through flowers, drinking spring water, and observing the wild horses that glare, eagles that dare, lizards that scamper, and owls that prowl. Surface water has become fickle over the last 20 years with climate change, so older literature is no longer necessarily accurate. Upper Cottonwood Springs is reliable, but you need to know if Dead Horse Springs is wet, damp, or dry. That's essential info.



Rock art, some divine, some human, in Marble Canyon

**Hanaupah Canyon.** The West Side Road runs down along the west side of the main Death Valley Salt pan for 20 miles or so. It's dirt, intermittently graded, always washboarded, and lightly traveled. It crosses the salt pan in the middle, worth seeing in its own right. Ten miles from the highway, you'll come to Scotty's Well. A marked turn leads to the right, up the alluvial fan to Hanaupah Canyon. That first uphill section is doable with 2 WD high clearance, but marginal. At the top of the fan, 5 miles up, you'll find one of the most splendid campsites anywhere in the United States. You look directly across the Valley, over Badwater, and up to the whole Funeral Mountains ridgeline that marks the Eastern geological boundary of the park. Dante's View is the high point to the East. If you turn around and look West, instead, you'll be staring right up the gullet to Telescope Peak. The sunrise, moonrise, and sunset shadow lightshow may be the best of the Park, although Zabriskie takes the moonset honor.

From that campsite at the top of the fan, you can use 4 WD to descend into the wash for a 4 mile, slow, rough road to the end. From there, hiking another quarter mile, you'll hear an unusual desert sound: running water! Adventuresome hikers can continue (talk to me, as routes are tricky) another couple miles to a mystical grotto of drooping ferns, little frogs, and wild grapevines...all supported by snowmelt from Telescope.

I've done this as day hiking as well as overnight backpacking.



West to Telescope with early light



Sunset shadows creeping across the Death Valley floor



**Panamint Valley Dunes.** The Panamint Valley lies one valley West of Death Valley in the classic basin and range configuration. The valley floor is a large playa 1000' above sea level. Between flanks of the Argus and Panamint ranges, you'll find a split volcanic crater, while the remote Panamint Dunes beckon at the North end.

A 6 mile flat, dirt road runs to the parking area at the end, leaving a 4 mile hike to the Dunes. These dunes are not as spectacular in dimension as Eureka, but they are rarely visited and practically unspoiled. The access road is doable most of the time in high clearance 2 WD, assuming prudent caution with bumps, but it can hide axle-snapping ruts after rainfall. On the way in, you could stop alongside the split crater and go for a short hike into the eerie feeling maw of that volcanic remnant. There are multiple turnouts from the entry road for camping. They're not ideal because of proximity to the road and total exposure, but with perhaps 4-5 vehicles per day going there, it's not such a big deal. People often camp at the parking area, too. There is a 4WD uphill extension from the parking area. I have a favorite destination up that track, but it's not for 2 WD or for casual 4 WD drivers. The Four Square Mine relics at the end of that spur seem quite fresh, definitely worth the hike up the wash from the parking area. If it's windy, though, Panamint Valley is a wind tunnel, which is how those dunes got up there.





Needless to say, there are more places out there.



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Aptos, California  
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More photos next few pages



Above: Earth's shadow creeps over the Funeral Range and the DV floor from Hanaupah Canyon  
Below: Crimson sunset over the Saline Range from the Eureka Dunes



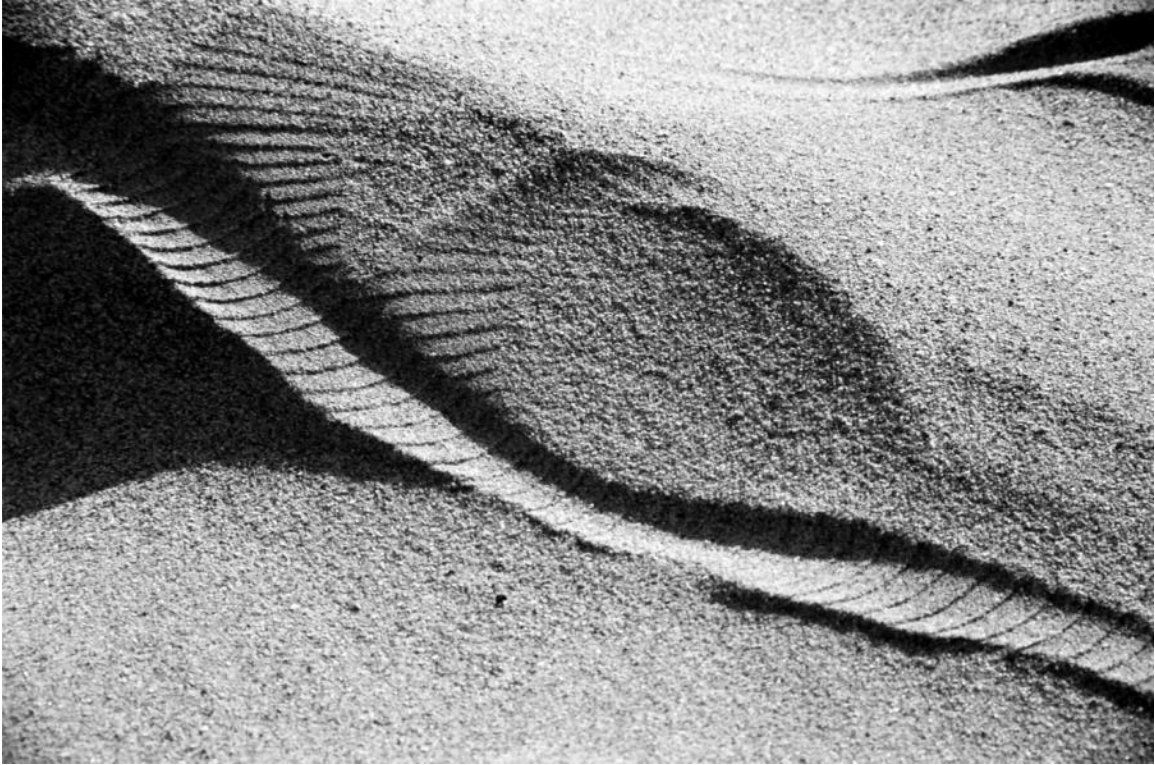




Above: Last Chance Range as viewed from the Eureka Dunes  
Below: The Mesquite Dunes near Stovepipe, viewed from Grotto Canyon at dawn







Above: Morning on the dunes  
Below: Sheep and sinuous form (snake?) on a limestone wall







Above: Death Valley Buttes in the rain  
Below: Talus tapestry in the Panamints above the Panamint Valley







Above: Wild horse in the high desert in the Cottonwood-Marble loop  
Below: Jet fighter on training run over the Panamint Valley...a fairly regular sighting





Above: Spring bloom near the Kit Fox Hills  
Below: Globe mallow finds the light





The sand dunes in the angular light around the solstice accentuate shadows and wind patterns, with no human trespass to spoil the image.





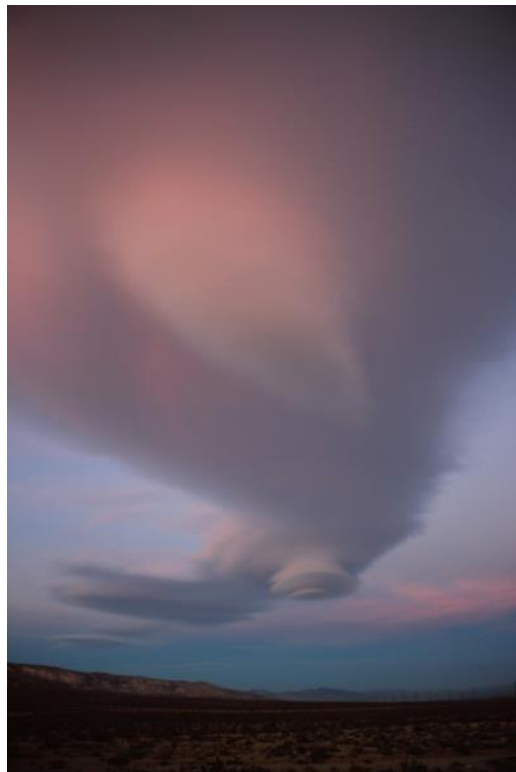


Above: Even simple things become intriguing with the light and expanse of DV  
Below: Relax. Come with a friend. Take out other people's trash... 'cause they won't.  
Be grateful the government is protecting this place.





Magical things happen above







It's important to walk in these places.



Wells Shoemaker, Wilderness Photography