
Stop 32. Death Valley

Arrival datetime: Tuesday, June 4, 6:00PM
Sites visited: Yosemite National Park, Mono Lake,
Death Valley National Park
Accommodations: Furnace Creek Inn
States traveled: California

On the way out of Yosemite, we took the same path though Tuolumne Meadows we had taken in search of a hike a few days before. The weather was only a bit more tolerable. We were able to stand outside the car at Olmstead Point for a few minutes for photos and to decide whether or not we were really looking at Half Dome. The peak in our view had the right shape, with a Quarter Dome behind it. But there was a lot of snow between them that we had not remembered from the top or Valley views.

The lounge waiter at the Ahwahnee had highly recommended the “gourmet” food at the Mobil Station in Tioga Pass. We had too see what he was talking about so we had delayed breakfast until reaching it. The omelets were truly gourmet. Outside, we noticed a very blue lake, and inside there were pictures of unusual rock formations emerging from its surface. Thus, we stumbled on Mono Lake and drove in for a closer look.

An interpretive nature trail led to and along the edge of the south shore. Swarms of black flies fed at the edges of the lake. They would stir when approached, but did not approach us. Little blue and white accented black birds swooped overhead like bats. The beaches and paths were sandy with low-lying

shrubs, like the desert. Signs informed us that the formations were called “tufa” and were formed because of hot springs underneath the lake surface. The hot springs contained calcium. The lake contains carbonates. As bubbles of the springs rose to the surface, calcium was released. The resulting calcium carbonate made coral-like columns. As the lake surface recedes, these columns are left rising over the surface. They left uneven gray and white lines of sharp-edged rock that looked like the popcorn formations in Carlsbad Caverns. The azure blue lake from which they emerged and the turquoise blue of the sky lent a starkly contrasting background to the unusual scene.

The desert-like scenes increased as we moved onto Death Valley. We were driving on the opposite side of the Sierra Nevada's we had seen from Panoramic Point in Kings Canyon. From this side, we would see the highest peak in the range, Mount Whitney, white topped and majestic. A Joshua Tree or two began to appear along the sides of the road. All seemed still for miles and miles even before we arrived at about 4:00PM. There was no visitor center at our entrance and barely a whisper of a sign to let us know we had arrived at the park. We stopped at the Father Crowley Vista overlook and



Tufa formations in Mono Lake.

saw a vast flat valley surrounded by mountains, one of which we were on. It seemed to be covered with soot. A narrow and twisting road hugged the edge of the black mountain we descended, offering ever more expanding views of the white flat expanse below. All was quiet.

As we navigated the winding road, the temperature increased. We crossed the Valley floor slowly, stopping often to take pictures of the colorfully striped mountains all around us. These were not stripes in cliffs as we were used to seeing in the Canyons. These surfaces were rounded and flowing. The stripes were not strictly horizontal, but flowed in

graceful patterns, meandering among the slopes. The colors were dusty oranges, yellows, tans, gray greens, and dull reds.

At 4:20PM, we were on the bottom of the valley and the temperature gauge read 101°. The engine temperature indicator lifted one notch above normal for the first time since we owned the car. We were a bit alarmed and turned off the air conditioner. Jennifer got out the owner's manual to read up on the potential causes, effects, and recommendations. But by the time she reached the correct page, we were on our way up the side of the opposite range, the temperature was 97° and the indicator had returned to normal. We climbed a



Death Valley approach from the Father Crowley Vista overlook.

slope of roller coaster dips, flanked by washes, so it was clear that parts of the road had been swept away and rebuilt a few feet lower than the original, probably mostly level surface. Michael took them at about 50 mph and Jennifer's stomach did flip-flips all the way up the slope.

We saw that a motorcyclist had stopped near some gracefully sloping sand dunes, and we decided to stop as well. Getting out of the car was like stepping into a well-heated sauna. Michael exclaimed, "Boy, its hot."

The motorcyclist turned and smiled, "You can't come to Death Valley and complain

about the weather." That phrase became a recurring theme for us.

We passed a green road sign announcing that we were at Sea Level, indicating that the Valley floor had been below Sea Level. We found the visitor center still open at 5:30PM, and found that we had passed one of the lowest points in the park, 280 feet below sea level. We also found that the high had been 111° earlier in the day. We got the Ranger's advice for safe hiking for the next day.

Our room at the Furnace Creek Inn was a stylishly furnished high-ceilinged stone cabin set between the main building and the 25-meter, spring fed swimming pool.

The gourmet menu of American Cuisine was very refreshing after the Ahwahnee. After dinner, we walked out our back terrace to the pool and stepped in it without noticing a change in temperature. The thermometer by the pool read 98°. We got a diet coke from a machine and basked by the side of the pool as if it was midday.

We rose with the sun and tried to get going early in the morning to hike before the heat set in, but the restaurant did not open till 7:00AM. Fellow travelers at



Furnace Creek Sunrise.

breakfast were loading ice water from their tables into their water bottles, and we congratulated ourselves on having put our water bottles in the refrigerator in the room the night before.

Miscellaneous tasks in the room kept us from starting on the trail right away. We started through Golden Canyon at 9:20AM and it was already 88°. We took five liters of water for the two-mile hike. We also took the GPS unit to make sure we could find our way out of the canyon.

At the beginning of the Canyon was an alluvial fan. This was a deposit of dirt left by successive floods. Each flood deposits its silt in a pattern that the water finds of least resistance. The deposit hardens and forms a barrier for the next water flow, so the silt ends up being pretty evenly deposited in a fan-shaped

pattern around the mouths of the canyons. Looking across the valley, the fans are all over the place. Above them are worn down slopes that have deep ridges in them from whence the silt came. They form triangular mini-ranges at the base of the mountains. Exposed in these ridges are rocks of various types and colors. The same pastel variety we had seen from the road, with more clarity and contrast that the close up view affords.

The floor of the canyon was alternately rocky and sandy, but mostly sandy. There had been a road leading into it that was washed away twenty-five years before. Huge chunks of macadam looked as if split by a jackhammer, but had actually been split by floodwaters. Even larger boulders were randomly placed in the path, which curved constantly as if we were walking the dry bed of a winding river. Most of the surfaces were light tan or white, the walls got higher the further we traveled, and we were receiving stronger and stronger reflections of the sun's rays, an ever increasing heat. We stopped every couple of minutes to take a drink of water.

We had picked up a pamphlet corresponding to numbered sites on the path, a self-guiding nature trail. As we arrived at a number, Jennifer would read the description. The number ten was a mile into the hike. The Ranger had advised we turn around at this point. But the pamphlet described a formation of fluted red walls, called "Red Cathedral" a quarter mile up the trail. We could see the top of it from where we were and decided we could make the extra quarter mile. We did get very close to the wall,



Golden Canyon with the Red Cathedral in sight.

but did not reach the base before deciding maybe the Ranger was right. We had been steadily drinking water, three liters so far, yet we were getting a bit faint, and a mile walk in that heat seemed like a challenge. Also, we could see three-quarters of the impressive red flumed walls, for several hundred yards, we had been convinced that we would be at the base as we rounded the next curve. The GPS said we were a 1.1 miles from where we had started, and it has not been a straight line. We turned back. By the time we got back to our car the temperature was 103°.

We headed for the air conditioned Visitors Center to watch the film that we had been too late to see the night before. Actually, it was a slide show. We liked the

descriptions and pictures of the various park attractions. Like all the Visitor Center films, it gave us ideas of the where next to visit. But we were not yet fully recovered from the hike. We meandered around the gifts shops at Furnace Creek for a bit before we set out for Zabriski Point. Had we kept walking three more miles on our trail in the morning, we would have ended our hike there. It overlooked the Canyon we had closely examined and it was very interesting to see the rock formations from the top and opposed to the bottom. We could also see the white desert floor and the brown alluvial fans at the base of the mountains on the opposite side of the valley. We drove on to Dante's View. It was about 105° and the car temperature indicator rose a notch again. But as we passed a



Mid-day, the valley from Dante's view.

200-foot elevation mark, it went back to normal. By the time we reached Dante's View at 5475 feet, it was only 88°.

It was very windy and we walked along a ridge trail at the top for only a quarter mile or so. We had great views of the salt flats below, they began and ended in narrow streaks that looked like white rivers winding through the valley. We could clearly see where the roads in the valley met the black canyons we had driven through the previous day. The snow-covered Sierras were visible in the far distance. The canyon where we had experienced such a grueling hike so small a part of the landscape we had no more than dipped our toe into it. It was part of a small patch of pastel and rust

that surrounded the Furnace Creek area where we were staying.

We had refilled our water bottles at the Visitors Center and continued to drink them throughout the day, just as if we were hiking. Every time we opened one, it was a different experience. If we had just climbed in altitude, the bottle would be shrunken and expanded upon opening with a crackling of plastic. If we had just descended in altitude, the bottle would be bursting and release gas upon opening with a sound like "pszzzzz."

We headed back to Furnace Creek to escape the worst heat of the day in the comfort of our lodgings. As June was the beginning of the off-season for the Furnace Creek Inn, it was not open for

lunch. We found an open restaurant at its sister property, the Furnace Creek Ranch. We roamed the shady, palm-filled gardens along the creek at the Inn, then swam and lounged by the pool. The thermometer at the pool read 118°.

At 5:30PM, drove out to the Devil's Golf Course. It was a set of pillars reminiscent of those at Mono Lake. There were acres and acres of these pillars. There was no water anywhere near them or flat area in between them. Most were less than three feet high. Interpretive signs said they were rock salt, eroded by wind and rain. The name came from someone saying "only the Devil could play golf on such a landscape."

We drove on to the salt flats at Badwater. The literature all said, "do not walk on the salt flats in hot weather." Not "it is not advisable," but "Do not." As park literature is rarely this dictatorial, so tempting as the view was, we resisted the temptation to venture far into the flat white landscape. It was extremely hot. We were wearing shorts and the reflection from the ground scorched our bare legs. High on a cliffside above the parking area was a sign that we could only read with our binoculars. It said, "SEA LEVEL." We were 280 feet below.

Our next stop was Artists Drive. We had timed our drive to arrive there an hour before sunset. We were a bit early, but the late afternoon colors were in full bloom. The patterns of pastel here were not horizontal, but seem to be splotched in mounds of dirt, as an artist dabs paint on a palette. Little wonder why one particularly colorful spot was named "Artist's Palette." The shadows from the sunset drew out contrasts between the



Jennifer and Michael 280 feet below sea level at Badwater, pastels and dark shadows in the foothills. On an interpretive sign at Artist's Palette, iron oxide and manganese were credited for the reds, oranges, yellows, and blue, as in all the other parks. In addition, the green was credited to decomposing mica.

We stopped and wandered about as much as we could in the 109° temperature. The car's temperature gauge occasionally crept above normal. We lasted till past sunset, then headed back to the Inn after sunset. We were almost there when we were amazed to see someone on a bicycle approaching. The car temperature said 110°, and he was headed in a direction where a sign announced there were no facilities for 73 miles.

We dined at the Inn, then ventured onto the "Stargazer's Deck." It was a stone deck on the top floor. We dragged lawn furniture out from under awnings and lay down on it to gaze up at the stars. From horizon to horizon, the sky was packed with them, as if they were a continuously changing but uniformly dense pattern on a deep blue carpet. Michael even picked out a few planets, Venus and perhaps Mars. He also identified a few stars that actually twinkled.



The hills of Artist's Palette.

In the morning, we got up at 6:00AM for a swim in the 90° heat. We had breakfast at 7:00 then headed out. There was not a cloud in the sky. We noticed that the sky had been cloudless during

our entire stay. We finally realized what the line, “and the sky is not cloudy all day” meant. With great appreciation and feeling, we sang “Home, Home on the Range.”

Miles traveled: 428
Departure datetime: Thursday, June 6, 9:10AM
Departure weather: 103° Sunny