



Oops I Did It Again!

Intrepid Explorer Wanders Into Death Valley

The Intrepid Explorer

Once upon a time, long, long ago in Middle Earth... Oops! Wrong story. Now where was I. Oh yeah. Back in Death Valley again. My favorite place to go exploring. Having run out of "easy" places to go, like West Side Road and Indian Pass or Chloride Cliff, it was decided to go someplace new. After a quick spin of the bottle, roll of the dice, toss of the dart and an arm wrestling contest, Johnson Canyon came up the winner.

Base camp was at Stovepipe Wells campground. Yes Martha, there *is* a campground there, but it's well hidden. Behind the store at Stovepipe Wells you will find a large campground. However, from the road all that might be apparent if it's at all busy, are a lot of RVs. It is an RV campground, no denying that. But way in the back, up against the sand dunes are tent sites, with the usual metal picnic table and BBQ pit. The parking spaces are sort of marked with two spaces per camp site. The camp sites themselves aren't marked at all. You are free to pitch your tent anywhere from the parking lot back to the dunes as far as the sign that tells you you have gone far enough!

Depending on what you want to see and do, this may not seem like such a good place to be. However, it is pretty well located if you aren't sure what you want to see and do as it isn't so far from the north end of the Park. Emmigrant Campground would be better for trips on the west side like the Charcoal Kilns. However, the facilities are somewhat more lacking there, and it's a bit higher up in altitude. Fine in the warmer months, but a bit more chilly in the winter. Besides, I'd never camped at Stovepipe Wells before, so it was worth a go.

Now, about all those amenities. For the young and energetic, any place would suffice. For you middle aged campers, or those who have RVs and have gotten tired of Sunset Campground down at Furnace Creek, this is a great spot. First, there's

the fact that there is lots of room. And a nice big building with toilets and running water and lights so you can find it in the dark. Not far away is the store for those things you forgot or maybe a cup of coffee in the morning when you don't feel like getting out the stove. There is also a swimming pool/shower facility across the road from the store. The pool is heated, though I can't say I was tempted to try it in November! The Rangers' station is just down the road. And the store sells gasoline so you can fuel up before heading out.

Best of all is the restaurant. I haven't been to the Furnace Creek Inn. At a Ranger talk one night it was suggested that we go down to the Inn and take a look around. And for those of us who were merely rich, we could partake of the Sunday brunch there and not have to sell our entire stock portfolio. But for those of us camping on the cheap, the restaurant at Stovepipe Wells is the best place to eat in Death Valley. We ate nearly all of our meals there and they were great. The service is excellent and so is the food. If you tire of that or need to work up an appetite you can go watch the polar bears swimming in the heated pool, or wander around the gift shop and look for trinkets you can't live without. Or buy an armload of postcards.

OK. Now we're ready to leave, right? Got your camera, water, snacks, hat, hiking shoes and map. Last chance to make a pit stop unless you detour to the Furnace Creek Visitor Center. You might do that anyway, just to find out what the expected road conditions are like. If there has been any rain, and there had been before our trip, it's wise to see what they say. Sometimes they close roads entirely until the road crews can clean them up.

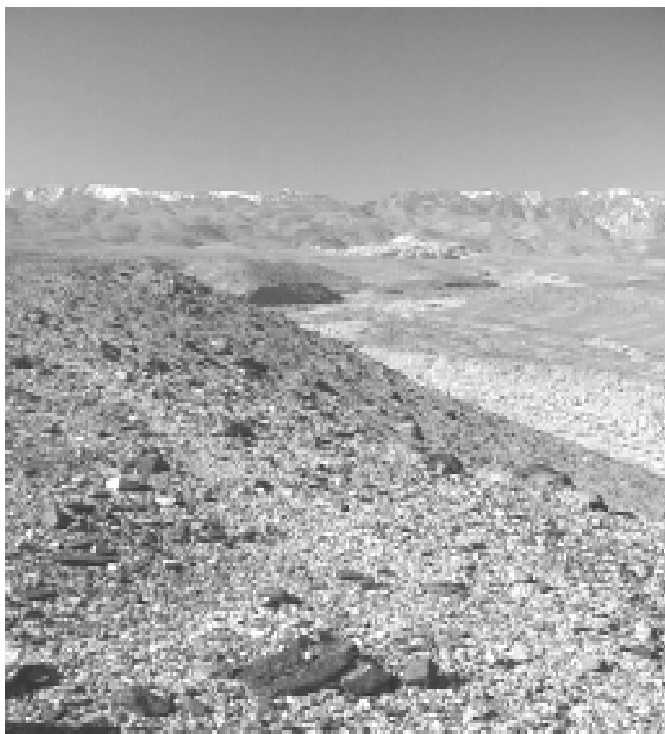


The Road to Perdition

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The tail end of Johnson Canyon where it meets West Side Road

This hasn't happened to me yet, but I have driven over roads that had lots of sediment washed onto them that hadn't been cleared, and they do close West Side Road and Echo Canyon from time to time. Another thing. You can fill out a back country form to let the Park Service and the rest of the world know where you have gone. It's like a pilot filling out a flight plan. It isn't necessary, as you aren't going backpacking into the wilderness, but Johnson Canyon is fairly remote and bad weather or vehicle problems can happen at any time and at least they'll know where to go look for your skeletons if you don't return.

The first part of our trip is easy, and scenic for those who are new to Death Valley, or at least the northern part. Lots of interesting things to see and do along the way, but they can wait for another time. I hope it's still early. You need to make a reasonable start. One source says that Johnson Canyon is a two day trip. Well, not exactly, but it's not one of those two hour trips. And of course it can be as long or short as you care to make it. We made lots of stops for pictures and exploring some of the sights on West Side Road as it isn't somewhere that most people get to very often. If you don't get around that much, you might do the same thing, and just figure that you won't be able to hike all of Johnson Canyon this trip, but might come back again later. Most of Death Valley is like that for me. I make an exploratory trip to check things out, and then go back better prepared the next time.

But I digress. We zoom past the sand dunes and Devil's Cornfield. Speed past Salt Creek and the Harmony Borax Works and on to the Visitor Center. After checking road conditions there, it's back on the road heading south. Take the road to the right at Furnace Creek Inn. Again we shoot past Golden Canyon and the exit of Artist's Palette and on to the sign that indicates West Side Road is to the right. There is a large metal gate there, which should be open. You did check at the Visitor Center, right?

Now the real adventure begins. For those of you who are new to West Side Road, fasten your seat belts. You won't see any paved road again until you return, or until you complete the drive down the road and meet the road you are now on once again, many miles to the south. I can tell you that the road conditions vary. You don't need four wheel drive or even a big truck to drive West Side Road. I've done it a couple of times in my old blue Geo Metro. Be warned, however. For Johnson Canyon you will need something beefier. It's not a road I'd take my Geo on, and I'll go almost anywhere with it as long as I don't think I'll get stuck.

The first thing you'll pass is part of the salt "flat." It's not exactly flat. Basically it is the same terrain as Devil's Golf Course. But the road is quite nice. Salt flattens well with a bulldozer. After crossing the salt pan and heading further west towards the mountains the road will get coarse. Some places it's a bit sandy, particularly if it has rained enough for sediment to wash down across the road. In other places the sediment may have washed away, exposing the gravel underneath. It's not a bad road, but you need to pay attention as large rocks that weren't there last year or even last week may suddenly loom in front of you. "Captain. There's an iceberg dead ahead!" Oh no. Down goes the



Looking at the mountains just to the north of Johnson Canyon from West Side Road

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*Here's what the "road" looks like.
This is one of the better stretches.*

Titanic, and your nice new SUV.

Once again, there are lots of sights along the way. The old Eagle Borax Works, the grave of Shorty Harris, one of the most famous, or possibly notorious, prospectors in the whole region. Marshes. Yes, Martha, marshes! There are several springs just off the road and they support some very nice vegetation. One marsh marches off quite a distance towards the mountains on the other side of the salt flats. It's amazing what a little water will do in the desert.

By now you've no doubt noticed those rather spectacular mountains to the west. The tallest "peak" is Telescope Peak. There is no Telescope on it, but early explorers thought it would be an ideal site for one, and that the views from on top were as clear as if one were looking through a telescope at some distant location. You can also see Roger's Peak and Wildrose Peak and several others. Unless it's summer or the winter precipitation was poor, there may be at least a little snow on some of them. Or there may be a lot. Stop to take pictures. Telescope Peak is only a tad shorter than Mt. Charleston, and being west of it tends to do a fair job of accumulating snow and rain from storms coming off the Pacific.

Once you pass Telescope Peak you are nearing the road to Johnson Canyon. Look for the sign as the road isn't very obvious until you are right upon it, and if you miss it you can drive quite a way before coming across another sign. It helps to have a map and a guide book with exact mileage readings and descriptions of what to look for is even better. There are a couple of good ones. One is specifically written for people who are driving, *The Explorer's Guide to Death Valley National Park*. Another, *Hiking Death Valley*, is more for hikers or backpackers, but comes in handy if the other seems to be a bit bereft of impor-

tant details at important times in your trip. More about that on the trip to Telephone Canyon. First we must survive Johnson Canyon.

Now that we're on the road to Johnson Canyon we can take a better look at things. Those of us who aren't driving, that is. My comments about icebergs in the road goes double on this road. The first several miles goes almost straight up the alluvial fan coming down from the mountains. This may look like a giant sand pile from a distance, but up close those grains of sand are large rocks. There are even huge boulders in places, and not so awfully far from West Side Road. It would have been interesting to see them wash down from the mountains. An umbrella may not have of-

fered much refuge in a deluge of that size!

Eventually you will get to the top of the fan and the road will level out. It is still pretty rough, but now there is some vegetation. The road isn't hard to follow as the canyon is fairly narrow. It actually drops down once you get to the top of the fan, and then climbs back up again as you progress up the canyon. Lots of interesting rock formations along the way to gander at. Every mile the geology seems to change as the canyon cuts through different layers. Very quickly you will lose sight of the road behind you.

After a few miles you will reach the end of the road. You can't miss it. There is a grove of large cottonwood trees, and even after several years of drought there was running water in the spring that fuels all that greenery. Park your car anywhere



This is the end of the road. Park here and hike.

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Look for this arrow to find the beginning of the trail.

you can, but if you aren't at the very end, be mindful that you probably won't be the only one heading this way so don't block the road. We ran into a whole herd of vehicles at the top of the fan and almost drove off a cliff trying to get around them. Someone had car trouble and everyone else stopped to help. At least you can pretty much depend on people stopping to help if you have a problem, but don't expect them to carry a spare engine or transmission.

Once you've parked and have your hiking gear on we're ready to go. Almost. Make sure you've got water and appropriate clothing. This time of year, no matter how warm it is, it gets very chilly once the sun goes down. And the sun goes down very early when you are in a canyon. Not to mention that tends to be windy even on a calm day. Except in summer when you are praying for a little breeze and then it will be dead calm. So bring a jacket or sweater. It doesn't weigh much, but you will be so glad you brought it once it gets cold. There will be plenty of good exercise up ahead and you'll work up a sweat.

Depending on where you parked, it could be a way until you come to the foot path that you'll be on for the rest of your journey. Just head up the canyon and look for the big arrow made from stones. Once you find it you are on your way. The early part of the trail is easy. It meanders back and forth as it crosses

the stream that is on the bottom of the canyon. It was a dry streambed for us. At least at first. There were plenty of signs that there was water there not so long ago. Lots of shrubs and bushes growing all over. Pretty thick in places. Eventually, you'll find some actual water. The path, at times, may not be so obvious. Frequently you will find the path blocked by a string of small rocks. That means you've probably gone the wrong way. Usually this will occur at a point where the path appears to branch and it tells you which branch to avoid. In a dry year it may not make any difference, but when the stream has more water in it and you forgot to pack your wet suit, following the right path might keep you nice and dry and save you time. I wish someone had done that at Darwin Falls.

One of the first things you'll come across that will let you know you are going the right way is Stonehenge. OK. Maybe it isn't really Stonehenge, but it sure looks like it. One of the guide books says it's an arastre. This was a device used by early miners to crush ore. I don't know that anyone ever found any gold or anything else in Johnson Canyon, as they did at Keene Wonder Mine, or found silver at Chloride Cliff, and goodness knows what else in the region. There were people out scratching in every corner of every canyon looking to strike it rich. A very few, like Shorty Harris, actually did. And like him, many of those promptly blew it having a good time and then went back to look for more when the money ran out. A few went through several fortunes in their careers as two blanket one burro prospectors.

The next landmark of sorts is a big rock. It is on the side of the stream and the side you should be on. Someone has gone to great lengths and put in a runoff channel along the base of the



STONEHENGE!

Or maybe it's an arastre.

You decide which you want to believe.

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*A hobbit I met along the trail,
or else that's a very big rock!*

rock to funnel rain water down into the stream. There is much more of this as you continue on. The path proceeds onward, crossing and re-crossing the stream. But, this will end. You will see a thick stand of small trees and bushes and even hear rushing water at a narrow point in the canyon. If you look to your right and up above, you will see a path up on the side of the canyon that will get you past the jungle. However, from here it will all be like this. If you are afraid of heights or aren't too sure of your scrambling ability, then this is a good place to stop. You don't have to be a mountain goat to continue, but there are spots where it would be wise to proceed cautiously, and if it is very wet, perhaps to stop. If you take your time, check your footing, and know your limitations, then you should do fine.

After some time climbing along the side of the canyon I finally had to stop and turn back. It wasn't that the path got treacherous, but that I had simply run out of time. I would have liked to go on. As you can see from the photograph, the end was in sight. The goal was



The view towards the end of Johnson Canyon.

Hungry Bill's Ranch. The story is that an Indian named Hungry Bill (apparently he was a rather large gentleman) had a fruit and vegetable garden and sold the pickings to the miners over the mountains on the other side. The Rangers said that there were apples growing up there, but that the rest of the garden had largely gone back to nature. Apparently there are still some signs of rock walls. And if you've gotten this far, you've seen plenty of that sort of thing along the way. Who put in the rock walls down by that big jungle? Another story is that someone had some livestock up there and wanted to keep them out of the stream, or maybe keep them from running away. All I know is that Hungry Bill's Ranch will have to remain a mystery to me until the next time. I got close, I may have even seen it from a distance, but didn't realize I was looking at it. If anyone has been there maybe they can tell me how much further it is and if the path gets any better or worse. But there is more adventure to come next time. Telephone Canyon and getting swallowed up by Ubehebe Crater - and living to tell of it!