

# *Witt's Wanderings*

by John W. Witt

Four of us were sitting around the house one evening (whose house, I have no recollection), musing about scenic wonders available right here in California. Someone said “What about Death Valley? I’ve never been there, have you?” We acknowledged that none of us had ever been to the huge National Park (largest in the lower 48 states), even though it’s very close to San Diego. We agreed we’d do it as soon as weather permitted—Death Valley isn’t particularly meteorologically attractive in the summer—winter is preferable.

That was at least two years ago, perhaps two and a half. One winter passed without mention of the trip. Another went by before someone brought it up again—too late to avoid daytime temperatures in the 120° range. I’m happy to report, however, this year we finally made the trip. I’m awfully glad we did.

On a mid-February Wednesday morning, the four—John and Louise Durrant, Lenora and I, threw ourselves and our “stuff” into our somewhat elderly Ford Explorer and headed north up the I-15 to our rendezvous with one of the most arid, yet strikingly beautiful, places in the world—on purpose, I might add.

The route is fairly straightforward: Get on I-15 and head north to its intersection with US 395. Take 395 to an unmarked highway, which passes east of Ridgecrest and through Trona, to an intersection with State Route 190, in the Park, just east of Panamint Springs, a distance from San Diego of about 275 miles.

Our headquarters in the Park was the perhaps curiously named Panamint Springs “Resort.” It consists of some 14 cabins, a campground, a camper/motor home park, a café-bar, a gas station and a somewhat limited “general store,” all of them similarly “rustic.” Luxurious it’s not, but our cabins were clean, the heating and plumbing worked and the café’s rather brief menu produced some pretty good hamburgers.

Besides, the accommodations were substantially cheaper than those available closer to the center of the Park. Spas and swimming pools, usually found in “resorts,” were noticeably lacking, as was pavement, but at about \$75 per night per unit, it beat the \$150-\$300 range in the center of the Park. As Lenora says, “If I’m spending money on holiday, I’d rather eat it or drink it, than sleep on it.”

Panamint Springs sits just inside the Park at an elevation of 1,920 feet, on the western slope of the Panamint Mountains, overlooking the valley of the same name. It’s about 30 miles to the northeast, over the 4,950-foot Towne Pass, to Stovepipe Wells, which is in Death Valley proper, right at Sea Level.

Stovepipe is the second largest tourist oriented settlement in the Park. We stopped at the Ranger Station there to get our Park Entrance Permit (free for Golden Eagle Pass-bearing old folks, like us). It’s about 12 miles on California SR 190 from

Stovepipe to Salt Creek, where a wooden boardwalk extends a half mile along the creek bed to allow observation of the rare pupfish.

The inch-long fish has remarkably adapted to the warm (90°F), saline (five times as salty as seawater) creek water. They are descendants of fish which lived in a lake in this location more than 10,000 years ago. In winter, they're dormant and difficult to see. We thought we spotted one wiggling on the stream bed, but it may only have been a small twig being carried along by the current.

Before leaving the area, we visited Mosaic Canyon, a little over two miles south on a graded road from Stovepipe Wells Village. What a marvelous sight! Water action has smoothed and polished multi-colored stone on the walls and floor of a narrow canyon, creating a mosaic effect, slick as polished marble. John and I climbed up the canyon a little way, through passageways so narrow we had to squeeze through. As we told the ladies, who remained at the canyon mouth, it was the highlight of the trip.

The next day, we set out for Scotty's Castle, some 74 miles from Panamint Springs via Stovepipe Wells. It's a monument to a rare friendship between two men, totally unlike one another, or anyone else for that matter. The one who caused the "Castle" to be built on the unique desert in Death Valley was Albert Johnson, the multi-millionaire president of a large Chicago-based life insurance company. His sidekick was Walter "Scotty" Scott, a ne'er-do-well ex-cowboy and spinner of yarns, most of them completely false, but cleverly crafted to seem plausible. They shared a mutual love of the desert.

Having been fired as an exposition cowboy, personally, by William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, owner of the famous "Wild West" Show, Scotty showed up, penniless, at the northern end of Death Valley. Realizing he needed money for food and shelter, he began widely proclaiming he'd found gold and soliciting investments in his mine. When asked by benefactors to take them to the mine, he came up with plausible excuses to relieve him from the request.

Albert Johnson was one of the "investors." Scotty never took him to the mine, but Johnson didn't seem to care. He just loved the desert and Scotty's cowboy stories. In 1924, he started building the Castle, in faux Spanish design, with thick walls, perfect for a desert home. Johnson was educated as an engineer and the Castle included all the comforts of mid-20th Century technology, even a freezer in the kitchen fridge.

Important world figures were Johnson's guests, but Scotty hung around, too. Johnson named the place Death Valley Ranch, yet Scotty insisted its real name was Scotty's Castle, implying *he* was the owner. Asked why he allowed that, Johnson's answer was always, "Scotty repays me in laughs." It's magnificent, though, and worth the long drive to get there.

It rained hard that day. We had to run between the car park and the ticket office and from there to the main Castle door. A substantial amount of the Park's annual rainfall was delivered that day—the day we decided to visit one of the driest places on the face of the earth.

From the Castle, we headed south 55 miles to Furnace Creek, location of the Park Headquarters and Visitors Center. We had a nice lunch at the Furnace Creek Inn,

a classic pre-World War II resort hotel, about the only non-budget treat we enjoyed on the trip.

Our much too brief Death Valley sojourn ended with a drive almost all the way back to Panamint Springs and south from there home to San Diego. We didn't get to visit a lot of places worthy of our attention; for instance, the lowest point in North America, Badwater, 282 feet below Sea Level, or the higher altitude viewpoints offering spectacular views of desert majesty. They beckon for a future return.