

Death Valley - Land of Extremes

Extreme Heat, Dryness and Beauty



Death Valley

The combinations of geological forces in Death Valley have created a magnificently rugged and colorful desert landscape that's surrounded by 11,000 foot snow-capped peaks.

Within Death Valley is the lowest spot in the western hemisphere (**Badwater at -282 feet below sea level**). And, this lowest spot is only 100 miles from the highest spot in the lower 48 states (**Mt. Whitney at 14,495 feet**).

If the breathtaking beauty of the landscape isn't enough, Death Valley has:

- Old mines and ghost towns for exploring
- Deep, narrow canyons for hiking
- The mysterious sailing stones of the Racetrack
- A volcanic crater, and
- An extravagant mansion built in the middle of the desert

Travel Tips

- **Plan your trip:** The size of Death Valley makes it important to plan your trip. Death Valley covers 3.3 million acres, a million more acres than Yellowstone, and is the **largest national park** in the lower United States. Many of the popular places to visit are very remote and there are **only 3 places to get gas**; **Furnace Creek**, **Stovepipe Wells** and **Scotty's Castle**. Be aware of the distances between the different places you want to see and plan accordingly.
- **Make reservations:** Make hotel reservations as early as you can. During the peak visitor season, October through March, places to stay inside the Park fill up quickly.
- **Visit the National Park Service website:** (www.nps.gov/deva) Find out about any possible closures (roads, campgrounds, etc.).

Remember - This is a Desert!

A lot of people are not used to the high temperatures or the low humidity found in Death Valley. Here are some very important things to remember when traveling in the desert:

- **Drink water.** Drink a minimum of 1 gallon (4 liters) of water per day - twice that would be even better. Always keep plenty of drinking water in your car and take extra if you are hiking.
- **Watch for dehydration.** If you feel dizzy, nauseous or develop a headache, these are the warning signs of dehydration. Get out of the sun immediately and drink plenty of water. Wetting your clothing will help to lower your body temperature.
- **Dress appropriately.** Outdoor activities in the desert require a shirt, sunglasses and a broad-brimmed hat. On warmer days, light colored, loose-fitting clothing.
- **Be aware of the weather.** Storms and flash floods are possible at any time of year. Stay out of canyons during rain storms and be prepared to move quickly to higher ground. If driving at night, watch for water running in washes and across dips in the road.

Staying There

The facilities in the park are limited so *plan* and *reserve* your overnight stay as far in advance as possible.

Another important factor to keep in mind when making your overnight arrangements is the enormous size of the Park. Depending on what attractions you choose to see, you could be driving considerable distances.

It is a good idea to choose your lodging as closely as you can to the section of the Park that you will be exploring. This will require changing lodging locations but will save a lot of driving.

- There are only three settlements within the Park and all are very small. The two most popular are **Stovepipe Wells** and **Furnace Creek**. **Stovepipe Wells** is the smaller of the two and consists of a rustic hotel and restaurant, a gas station and a campground.
- The **Furnace Creek** area is larger and has a hotel, a world-class Inn and golf course, an airport, three campgrounds and the main Visitor's Center for the Park.
- **Panamint Springs** is the third and least popular settlement. It's about the same size as **Stovepipe Wells** with an even smaller hotel, a restaurant and a gas station. Its location on the western edge of the Park makes it far from the majority of the popular attractions.
- For the hotels and campgrounds within the park itself, the National Park Service website for **Death Valley** (www.nps.gov/deva) is the best source for current. The campground descriptions they give are very basic and the hotel descriptions are even less informative unless you go to the websites provided.

Hotels

- **Stovepipe Wells** offers an average priced hotel of average quality and an above average restaurant with a bar. There is in-room plumbing but the water is not drinkable. You must go outside to designated faucets for drinking water. Across the street from the hotel and restaurant is one of the few gas stations in *Death Valley* and a convenience store.
- **Furnace Creek Ranch** is a moderately priced hotel with many nice rooms, a general store, a small museum, a café and a bar/restaurant. The general store has lots of souvenirs as well as snacks.
- **Furnace Creek Inn** is a Four-Star Resort with a world class golf course, an airport and a very nice restaurant and bar. You usually need reservations for the restaurant and there is a dress code but both the food and service are excellent.
- **Panamint Springs Resort** is similar to Stovepipe Wells in many ways. There is a hotel with 15 rooms, campground, a small restaurant and a gas station. The facilities are located on the west side of the Park in Panamint Valley along S.R. 190 and are privately owned.

Climate

- **Death Valley** is one of the **hottest** places in the world. In the past, most of the businesses would close their doors in the summer. That has changed due to the increase of visiting Europeans who apparently enjoy the extreme heat. Now, businesses are open year-round and, if you don't mind the heat, hotel rates are cheaper and campsites are more available.
- In **winter**, the lower elevations are mild during the day but temperatures can drop to below 40°F at night. **Winter** days are short and, in **December**, the sun sets around 4 p.m..
- In **summer**, while the valley is sizzling under triple digit heat during the day, the higher elevations (above 4,000 or 5,000 feet) are pleasant. **Summer** days are long and hot and temperatures commonly do not dip below 100°F for many days in a row.
- The most popular months for visiting **Death Valley** are **October - May** with **October** and **March** being the ideal months. These 2 months offer the most comfortable temperatures and longer days. **March** probably has a slight edge because the mountains still have snow and the desert blooming season is at its peak. Because this is the most popular time of year, prices for hotel rooms will be at a premium and hotels will fill up quickly so make reservations whenever possible.
- Remember that you are in this is a place where weather conditions change rapidly. Extreme heat, flash floods, strong winds, blowing sand and freezing temperatures are normal events. The average annual rainfall on the valley floor is only 1.86 inches due to the Sierra Nevada mountains to the west which captures most of the moisture coming in from the Pacific Ocean.

Average Temperatures by Month

Month	Maximum	Minimum
January	65°F	39°
February	72°F	46°F
March	80°F	53°F
April	90°F	62°F
May	99°F	71°F
June	109°F	80°F
July	115°F	88°F
August	113°F	85°F
September	106°F	75°F
October	92°F	62°F
November	76°F	48°F
December	65°F	39°F

Photographing In Death Valley

Death Valley offers some of the most spectacular and unique scenery in the world! The challenge facing most photographers is not *where* to find the beauty but *how* to capture it.

Winter or early spring is the most comfortable time of year. Also, the sun is lower in the sky and it creates those wonderful shadows. The "downside" of this time of year is that daylight hours are shorter and with the tall mountains to the west, the sun sets early. Sunrise and sunset are the most dramatic times of the day - no matter what season.

Zabriskie Point

Surrounded by a maze of wildly eroded and vibrantly colored badlands, this spectacular view is one of the park's most famous. ***Zabriskie Point*** is a good sunrise and sunset location. The viewpoint is a short walk uphill from the parking area, located east of Furnace Creek on Hwy 190.



Badwater

Lowest point in North America at 282 feet below sea level, ***Badwater Basin*** is a surreal landscape of vast salt flats. A temporary lake may form here after heavy rainstorms.



Racetrack: Mystery of the Sailing Stones

This rare phenomenon of rocks "mysteriously" moving across the flat lake bed of the Racetrack Playa continues to fascinate and puzzle geologists. The mystery lies not in *if* they move but *how* they move.

As the rocks move across the playa's surface, they leave clear evidence of their movement by etching "tracks" into the mud behind them.

No one has ever actually seen a rock move so geologists and scientists continue to study and theorize about this anomaly.

Getting there:

At the junction of NPS Route 5 and Grapevine canyon, bear left and follow the signs for Ubehebe crater for 5.6 miles. Bear right onto Racetrack Valley Road. It is 27 bone jarring miles (my tripod was in pieces when I got there) to the parking area. The light is only good, for the tracks, right before sunrise. You must leave very early in the morning to get there in time. We left at 3:00 am, in February.

A hard 2-stop graduated neutral density filter will come in very handy.



Sand Dunes

Many first time visitors to **Death Valley** are surprised it is not covered with a sea of sand.

Less than ***one percent*** of the desert is covered with dunes, yet these dunes define "***desert***" in our imaginations.

Mesquite Flat Dunes

These dunes are the best known and easiest to visit in the national park. Located in central Death Valley near Stovepipe Wells, access is from Hwy. 190 or from the unpaved Sand Dunes Road. Although the highest dune rises only about 100 feet, the dunes actually cover a vast area.

The secret to photographing these dunes without footprints is to park almost a mile before you get to the Mesquite Flat parking and lot and set out to the right-most section of the dunes. There is a pull-out for parking. For sunrise shots, start at least an hour and a half before sunrise and carry a flashlight.



Panamint Dunes

Travelers crossing Panamint Valley on Hwy.190 may view these dunes as a distant, pale smudge to the north. Those wanting a closer look must drive 5 miles down the unmarked dirt road leading past Lake Hill, then hike cross-country 3 miles. The other dunes of Death Valley are all situated on flat valley floors, but these are perched on a slope. The view from the summit of these dunes reveals their star shape and an impressive view down the valley.



Ibex Dunes

Visitors to **Saratoga Springs** may notice these dunes, but they are shielded from paved roads by rocky desert hills.

Hike about one mile from the **Saratoga Springs Road** for access. An old talc mine at the base of the **Saddle Peak Hills** overlooks the dunes from the east.

The Mojave fringe-toed lizard lives on these dunes.



Other Places to Visit

- **Artist Pallet** – This area of breathtaking mosaic of red, pink, green, yellow and violet beauty is one of the park’s most popular destinations. Artist Pallet is located along Artist Drive, a one-way paved road. From Furnace Creek, go south on Badwater Road for 7.9 miles.
- **Marble Canyon** – one of the most beautiful and unique canyons in the park. It has 2 sets of narrows that are an easy hike from the end of the road.
- **Dante’s View** – High atop the Black Mountains, at 5,500 feet is Dante’s View – an overlook with some of the best panoramic views in all of Death Valley. From Furnace Creek, go south 10.5 miles on Furnace Creek Wash Road and turn right on Dante’s View Road.
- **Scotty’s Castle** – This “castle in the desert” is one of the most popular attractions in the park. There are 2 guided tours daily. NPS Route 5 begins at the junction with SR 190 which is about 7 miles east of Stovepipe Wells and 17.4 miles from Furnace Creek. Go north on NPS Route 5 33.8 miles to the turnoff for Scotty’s Castle.
- **Titus Canyon** – This is a popular “off-road” adventure. You will need a 4WD, high clearance vehicle. The spectacular views from the summits, the colorful rock layers and formations and the narrows at the bottom of the canyon make this road popular. You can rent a Jeep for a full or half day at Furnace Creek.
- **Ubehebe Crater** – Located at the far northern end of Death Valley, it worth visiting if you go to Scotty’s Castle or the Racetrack. This is a very large and colorful crater created by a violent explosion. It is the only volcano of its type in the Southwestern U.S.



