

Desert Highway

On his way to San Francisco from Las Vegas, Dan Farrell cycled through the oven of Death Valley before escaping into the Yosemite National Park



At twelve noon, *The natives swoon, And no further work is done, But mad dogs and Englishmen, Go out in the midday sun...*

The refrain was very apt. It was indeed noon at Zabriskie Point in the Armagosa Mountains,

"With the blistering desert wind blowing it was like cycling in a tumble dryer"

California. This was my second day on the road but acclimatisation had been swift. The vast open spaces, the burning sun, every breath rasping dry in my throat, the conservation of water – it was already second nature. Tourists stepped out of their air-conditioned SUVs to gaze at the rock formations and the view down into Death Valley. I rolled up with my laden

bike to a series of questions, offers of liquid refreshment – and a chorus of song. Like me, many of the tourists had experienced the opening performance of the season at the Armagosa Opera House the night before.

I had left Las Vegas the previous morning, early. American transport planners decided to 'go large' on roads and Vegas is no exception, so avoiding the rush hour is a good idea. An hour's ride brought me to Blue Diamond, an abrupt end to the town and the last house, petrol station, shop, anything before Pahrump, 50 miles west 'over the hump'. A friendly cyclist warned me that the hump was 'a long false flat', and I spent a good two hours ascending 3,500' on a road that looked anything but flat.

Las Vegas shimmered in the distance behind me until the road snaked through a cleft in the mountains and my jaw dropped

slightly as the view unfolded, with two black ribbons of tarmac dropping down in the vast Mojave Desert and vanishing into a heat haze. A few cacti lined the road. Other than that, nothing.

NO VACANCIES

Thirty miles west of Pahrump lies the town of Death Valley Junction, where I planned to spend my first night. The roads in this area are quiet, and despite the heat I felt a sudden chill upon cresting a rise. I'd not seen a car for over an hour and, apart from the road, I could see no signs of life anywhere. A reliable bicycle and a careful riding style are essential. A breakdown or an accident may result in something rather more serious than a long wait or walk to get help. With the breeze picking up strongly from the west, the only thing that accompanied me into Death Valley Junction was the whoosh of the warm desert wind as

After the frying pan of Death Valley came the mountains: Lone Pine (right) and the climb to Olmsted Point (below right)



I passed abandoned buildings and a derelict railway station. I eventually drew to a halt outside the arcaded plaza of the Armagosa Hotel.

I have learned since that there are two reasons why people find themselves at Death Valley Junction: they stumble across it on the way to somewhere else or they've come to see Marta Becket. Through ignorance, I was firmly in the first category, but a curious mixture of good and bad luck left me looking for a room at the booked-out hotel on the first day of the season at the Armagosa Opera House, where Marta has performed her show since 1967 whether or not there has been an audience. I had no joy with finding a bed but did manage to borrow a bath, and after the theatre and opening-night party I put a few more miles under my wheels to a motel on the Nevada state line.

'How do you stay cool?' was the question fired at me the next

morning, back at Death Valley Junction.

'I don't.'

A couple on a Harley introduced me to the 'Cobber' neck scarf and told me that such protection was invaluable. As the shop in the town had been closed for over 30 years, the girl took pity on me and gave me hers, tied it round my neck and told me where to go: 'Left for Death Valley and straight on for San Francisco. Way to go, dude.'

INTO THE VALLEY OF DEATH

The descent into Death Valley starts at 3,000' and ends nearly 200' below sea level. The road is fast and smooth, with wide sweeping corners. After passing Zabriskie Point, and with Badwater Basin on the left, the road finally drops into Furnace Creek, arguably the hottest place on earth. With the mercury nudging 40 °C in early October, I could believe it. Death

Death Valley sand dunes. The area averages less than two inches of rainfall a year

Dan rode in early October rather than mid-summer, but even so temperatures hovered around 40 degrees



Valley stretches 100 miles from the Owshead Mountains in the south to the Last Chance Range in the north, with Furnace Creek roughly in the centre. I filled my bottles, and my stomach, at the shop.

Stovepipe Wells was my destination, 28 miles away along the valley floor, all of it below sea level. I took the opportunity to fill the bottles again at the Visitor Centre, but I'd barely covered a mile. Another mile took me to the ruins of the Harmony Borax Works and a spectacular view across the barren, scrubby landscape. The Funeral Mountains loom up on the eastern side, and the mighty Panamint Range towers on the west, topped by the Telescope Peak at over 11,000'. In the 1880s, 40 men worked at Harmony, and a team of 20 mules was used to transport the mined borax 165 miles to the nearest

National Park but traffic levels are reasonable outside of high season.

The road along the valley floor is undulating, but even the short climb up from Salt Creek was taxing as the ambient temperature exceeded body temperature. With the desert wind blowing it was like cycling in a tumble dryer and I felt rather nauseous for the final few miles to Stovepipe Wells. The thermometer outside the hotel indicated 108°F (42°C). Inside, air-conditioning has never felt so good. I tied my freshly washed kit to a fence and it was bone dry within 20 minutes.

One becomes forcibly aware upon leaving Stovepipe Wells that whilst Death Valley itself is reasonably flat, any road out must cross some punishing terrain. A large sign announces 'Avoid Overheating. Turn Off Air-Conditioning For 17

"How do you stay cool?' I was asked at Death Valley Junction. 'I don't.'"

railhead at Mojave.

There is no shelter in the valley, and no respite from the blazing sun until it dips behind Panamint in the late afternoon. The stark terrain is bleached to pale hues of yellows and browns – rainfall is minimal, with Furnace Creek receiving around two inches a year on average. The main tourist season covers the winter months as summer is unbearably hot, with July and August posting average daily maximum temperatures of 46°C. Cycling is permitted only on the main, metalled roads in the

Miles', for the road climbs 5,000' in that distance. My strategy to avoid overheating was to get on the road before sunrise – this was a mild success and I crested Townes Pass before ten. Panamint is more rugged than Death Valley, and was almost entirely deserted. At 10:30 I had my legs under the table at the oasis-like Panamint Springs Hotel for a much-needed second breakfast, whilst watching the roadrunners scurry around.

INTO THE SIERRA NEVADA

Between Panamint and Owens Valley lies the formidable bulk of the Argus Mountains. The climb is not as severe as Townes Pass, but is not to be treated lightly – 3,800' of ascent over 20 miles in the full heat of the day. Looking back across to Death Valley one can almost pick out Badwater, nearly 300' below sea level. It's another 15 miles to Owens Lake, and 30 to Lone Pine.

Ahead lay the Yosemite National Park. It's dominated by spectacular granite peaks and studded with beautiful glacial lakes. It is perfect cycle-touring country – afterwards I reckoned I had never experienced a better day on a bike. Coming so soon after Death Valley it was literally a breath of fresh air – albeit thin, high-altitude air. And on leaving it there's a 25-mile descent...



Borax works at Harmony, just north of the rather more appropriately named Furnace Creek

FACT FILE:

DEATH VALLEY AND THE SIERRA NEVADA

WHERE: Southern California, USA. **ROUTE:** I rode from Las Vegas to San Francisco in nine days, covering 70 to 80 miles per day

CONDITIONS: Fierce. Summer in Death Valley is strictly for mentalists, and it's busy in winter. April/May and October are the best months for cyclists. Early October is the only time of year when it is reliably possible to combine Death Valley and Yosemite.

Good sun protection is essential, especially at altitude. Mudguards are not required, but warm clothing, including hat and gloves, should be carried.

TERRAIN: Spectacular but tough. Major climbs on four days, the hardest day being 82 miles and 9,000' of ascent between Stovepipe Wells and Lone Pine.

BIKE: I rode a Pashley-Moulton TSR with a rear bag, front panniers and a handlebar bag. Carry a comprehensive tool kit and essential spares. There is a bicycle shop in Bishop.

ACCOMMODATION: Limited, so plan ahead, particularly in Death Valley and Yosemite. Hotels/motels are typically \$50-80 dollars for a double room. Camping is possible in most areas, but bear-proof containers will be required in Yosemite.

AMENITIES: Typically – but not at Death Valley Junction – where there is a hotel there will be a restaurant/café or shop too.

GETTING THERE: Virgin Atlantic fly direct from London (Gatwick) to Las Vegas and San Francisco. Baggage allowances are generous and bicycles go free as one of your two 23kg bags allowed (economy). Bike boxes are not provided, if you need one for your return flight United Airlines sell them at airports for \$20. Amtrak rail services serve the San Joaquin (South Central) Valley from San Francisco (Oakland). There is no passenger service to Las Vegas.

HAZARDS: Sunburn, sunstroke, heatstroke, altitude sickness, dehydration and, in Yosemite, bears.

MAPS: I used an American Automobile Map of California, 1:1,000,000, which was just adequate. Imus Geographics do a good 1:500,000 of the Sierra Nevada area. Good maps of Death Valley and Yosemite are available from National Park Authorities.

FURTHER INFO: Entrance fees are charged in US National Parks, around \$10 per cyclist for a seven day pass. For more information about Marta Becket, see

www.armagosaoperahouse.com



Central Valley, California: 'only' Mediterranean hot rather than Sahara hot