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# The Salton Sea

## A Mix of Misfit Attractions

With easy access from L.A. and San Diego, and more than 125 courses, Palm Springs, California, is a golfer's paradise, attracting armies of tan, fit, and well-to-do who enjoy America's favorite pastime here.

Yet 43 miles to its south is the quirky Salton Sea, a controversial mass of contradictions with a history steeped in myths, and an eclectic mix of misfit attractions around its circumference that can make you laugh--and cry. It's hard to find a more offbeat, thought-provoking, and moving way to spend a day than prowling around its perimeter. But you better get there soon--according to some, it may not be there long, despite having a history that goes back eons.

Head out into the desert on Route 10 past the wind farm, with its 4,865 turbines standing sentinel, at the foothills of the San Jacinto and San Gorgonio mountains. Pass the cell phone towers dolled up as palm trees, and pass the massive Shadow Hills seniors' community, with its 180 social clubs. Pass Mecca, where you can have a date shake at the date palm farm and RV park combo. Pass the pumice fields, where the spongy stones abound, relics of long ago volcanic eruptions.

Once in the vicinity, you won't be able to miss the Salton Sea--15 miles wide and 35 miles long, it occupies a basin in the Colorado Desert called the Salton Trough, bound by the Chocolate Mountains to the east, the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa mountains to the west, and the Orocopia Mountains to the north.

The Sea is also surrounded by a cast of eccentric characters, and has itself played a role in a number of moody movies and dark documentaries, including Sean Penn's "Into the Wild." Depending on whom you talk to, it's home to a fountain of youth, a slice of heaven, or the mouth of hell. And, in an odd twist on eco-tourism, the Salton Sea offers a glimpse of what has been called both an avian paradise and an environmental tragedy. An enigma in almost every way, there is debate about its very origins.

"There is a myth that the Sea made its first appearance in 1905 as a result of 18 months of flooding by the Colorado River, after a man-made levee breached," said Lee Case, of the U.S. Geological Survey Salton Sea Science Office. "In reality, the Sea has a history of filling up and then drying up that dates back millions of years."

"The Gulf of California once extended as far back as where the Sea is today," he continued. "The migration of the lower Colorado River fanning back and forth over a long period of time, all the while carrying sediment from the Grand Canyon, eventually formed a land bridge at the delta, ultimately cutting the Salton Sea off from the Gulf. The result was ancient Lake Cahuilla, an even bigger body of water than today, which we can tell from water marks on the surrounding hillsides was at one time 39 feet above sea level. Today the Salton Sea is about 230 feet below sea level."

The idea of a prehistoric arm of the Pacific reaching up into the Southern California desert and then being annexed has spawned several folktales of a ship stranded in the sands. Urban legends include an 1870 *Los Angeles Star* report of a lost pirate ship carrying a million doubloons, a 1933 claim by librarian Myrtle Butts of a Viking ship, and sightings as recent as the 1970s of a craft that had carried a Spanish explorer with a fortune in black pearls, supposedly beached in 1615 by a Colorado River tidal bore.

Legend also surrounds another aquatic feature of this desert.



The Salton Sea occupies a basin in the Colorado Desert and its mix of misfit attractions draws the curious traveler. Photos © Meg Pier.



Slab City is "off the grid" but welcomes many snowbirds seeking a home-away-from-home in the dry desert air.



The mud volcanoes will knock your socks off!



The Salton Sea has receded two feet in the past 13 years. Without action taken, the shore of the Salton Sea could fall by more than 20 feet.



A wide variety of constituents are trying to save the Salton Sea, from the federal government to environmentalists.

It's said that a captain with an 1823 Mexican expedition stopped at what is now Palm Springs and was shown bubbling fonts by the locals. Upon sticking his toe in the water, he allegedly screamed 'Agua caliente, agua caliente,' meaning 'hot water' in Spanish. The Native Americans here have been known as the Agua Caliente Band since.

In 1941, entrepreneur L. W. Coffee foresaw a future in the 132 degree waters, and built the area's first bathhouse. Since then, spas have sprung up all over this Valley, including Niland's Fountain of Youth, a Salton Sea-area snowbird RV resort with a winter population of nearly 2,000.

By the 1950s, the Salton Sea was considered the Californian Riviera and a place to see and be seen for Hollywood's elite. Desi Arnaz put up a hotel, Frank Sinatra did it his way here, and Sonny Bono learned to water ski. According to the Redlands Institute, the mid-1960s saw attendance of more than 500,000 visitors per year, rivaling Yosemite National Park. In 1969, recreational use of the Salton Sea was credited with contributing \$100 million to the local economy.

"It's like 'six degrees of separation'--every time I have guests from California on any of our tours, they seem to have known someone who spent some time at the Salton Sea--usually a grandparent, a great uncle, or a friend's dad," marveled Mark Farley, a desert naturalist with Elite Tours. "It's incredible how many residents of California visited the Salton Sea in past decades."

Yet, two decades later, in a set of cruel ironies, repeated and unpredictable flooding of the Sea's shores in the 1970s due to violent rainstorms caused the resort life to dry up. This deluge was then followed by the Sea suffering seriously from the effects of evaporation--it's receded two feet in the past 13 years. Indeed, the mean annual evaporation rate at the Salton Sea is 70.8 inches, while the annual precipitation is 2.3 inches. The sun evaporates 18% of the Sea's volume every year, something which is not unusual for desert lakes--just as the Dead Sea or Great Salt Lake.

It was this post-heyday Salton Sea that Candice Ellis, of Peabody, Massachusetts discovered in 1993, on a drive from Borrego Springs.

"I drove to the end of a road off the highway, just to see what was there. It was stunning--several blocks back there was a sea! Was it a mirage, I wondered? This is the desert you know!" she recalled. "The footprints of a development were everywhere, streets laid out, but no houses. Peeled billboards promised a whole Salton Sea lifestyle. I stumbled into a fancy golf club house, with a curious smell of decay in the air. Later, the people who owned the motel I was staying in said it was a big plan that fizzled and went bust."

"The Salton Sea is an anomaly and curiosity. It's pretty amazing that California's largest inland lake is in the driest, hottest, lowest desert subdivision in North America," observed Jim Cornett, a Palm Springs desert biologist.

Anomaly aptly describes the first of the seaside attractions I visited--mud volcanoes are not exactly your typical boardwalk fare. Down a random road, in what truly seemed the middle of nowhere, are a half dozen, man-sized heaps of hiccupping earth, spewing up dark streams of wet muck that slide down their sides. Even more extraordinary than the sight of these masses are the naughty noises and sulfur stench they emit, which transport visitors back to the silliness of fourth grade bathroom humor. Gurgling, churning, pinging, groaning, heaving, drain-circling sounds ricochet around this circular grouping of mud mounds, eliciting gasps and embarrassed giggles from the handful of people here.

According to Bruce Bridenbecker, a geology professor with Copper Mountain College, many of the geological attractions around the perimeter of the Salton Sea owe their existence to the San Andreas Fault, which begins at its shores.



Carbon dioxide bubbles up from one of the mud volcanoes near the Salton Sea.



Downtown Niland, California, on the outskirts of the Salton Sea.



Jenny Styx's stage door to Slab City's open-air theatre.



Salvation Mountain's creator Leonard Knight, a man with a mission and a vision.



"The Fault acts like a conveyor belt. As the Pacific Plate moves past the North American Plate at a rate of about a half-inch every year, it transports the magma, fluids, and gases deep within the earth to its surface," he explained. "The area has high heat flow and geothermal activity and the form of the resulting emissions depends on how close it is to a hot body of magma. If close to a "hot spot," an emission will be released as lava, which you see around the Salton Sea as hardened into obsidian, a volcanic glass. If further away from a hot spot, emissions could be released as hot springs or gases, like the cooler carbon dioxide bubbling from the mud volcanoes near Niland."

"You are actually on top of the San Andreas Fault at the mud volcanoes and mud pots," said Elite Tour's Farlay. "The fault is creating reactions below the surface that causes venting at the surface like this. Most people imagine the San Andreas Fault as a big crack in the earth, or as they have seen it portrayed in Hollywood movies, where the earth opens up and Superman has to rescue Lois Lane from falling into the depths of the Earth's crust."

Perhaps a 1948 issue of *Desert Magazine* best summed up reaction to the Fault's manifestations, with a tale of a cowboy exploring in the vicinity of the mud volcanoes. The story goes he got on his horse in a hurry, saying "I'm a fair gambler and an ordinary sinner, but I don't want to take my chances hereabout."

Continuing along the Sea's circumference, I came to Niland, a lonely crossroads. A bank sat forlornly on one corner, its cash flow clearly dried up long before the current crisis, its still-imposing Ionic columns scarred with graffiti. Diagonally opposite, a long train sat dead in its tracks. We headed over them further into the desert, the expanse around us studded with molehill-like protrusions of old Army bunkers. Suddenly, lo and behold, we saw an exuberant oasis of swirling primary colors rising from the dusty desert floor and reaching for the indigo sky. We had reached Salvation Mountain.

Pulling into the parking lot, we passed a baby-blue mailbox proclaiming "God is Love." I couldn't help but grin at the man-made desert garden stretching out before the Mountain's base. An assortment of broken down vehicles had been given new life, every inch of their surface emblazoned with primitive, child-like designs of birds and flowers in vibrant hues. A pickup truck, camper, two motorcycles, and a boat were each transformed into individual beds of vivid blooms--I buzzed from one to the next, savoring the sweet artistry.

A wiry and spry Leonard Knight made a beeline for me from inside the mouth of the Mountain, and cried out a warm welcome. The creative force behind Salvation Mountain, Leonard was tan and lean, with good teeth and tousled white hair. Dressed in a cotton button-down shirt and chinos, he looked as though he could have been on the 19th hole, save the multi-colored paint splatches. His boyish appearance belied his 74 years of age and was enhanced by his earnestness and lack of guile. He was, in short, imminently and instantly lovable. I didn't know what I had expected of someone who had landed here 24 years ago from Vermont and began slapping adobe on the hillside, which he then painted with biblical passages. I was pleasantly surprised and deeply touched by Leonard.

He gave me a personal tour, as it seems he does for every visitor, and enthusiastically showed me around his Candy Land-like patch of desert. He pointed out the evolution over the past quarter century of his three-story Christian cartoon, now spreading over a couple of acres of dunes--for which he has used more than 100,000 gallons of paint, much of it donated.

I took in the latex "sea" at the mountain's base, akin to a huge kiddie pool; the blue-and-white striped waterfall aside the 'yellow brick road,' that climbs to the top of the 30-foot mountain, with a 15-foot cross at its peak, just above the big



Leonard Knight only accepts love letters in his Salvation Mountain mailbox.



Salvation Mountain rises more than three stories from the dusty desert floor. More than 100,000 gallons of paint have been used in its creation.



The heart of the matter and Leonard Knight's mantra is emblazoned below a 15-foot cross.



Leonard Knight keeps an eye out for cast-off material he can transform into art.

red heart shouting 'Say Jesus I'm a sinner, please come upon my body and into my heart.' Leonard then guided me through the latest addition to the Mountain, an igloo-shaped structure attached to its side that he called the 'museum.' He told me that the trees he made here are forged from cast-off wood and tires salvaged in the desert, and showed me his technique for creating the flower swirls embedded in them--balling up his fist and smashing it into the adobe thick with paint. Flower power!

As he briskly led me around the mountain he confessed, "I don't know what I'm doing. But God does. And so I just keep doing it."

And God keeps letting him. In 1994, hazardous waste experts appeared and cited Leonard as creating a toxic site with the lead in his painted mountain. Leonard fought the charge, and won. Publicity surrounding the controversy attracted the attention of a Hollywood producer, who formed "Friends of Leonard Knight," which counts among its members several museum curators. In building his missionary mountain, Leonard has been hailed as a visionary artist, and in 2000 was given a plaque by the Folk Art Society of America acknowledging the artistic merit of the sculpture that is Salvation Mountain.

Just past Salvation Mountain is Slab City, named for its patchwork of concrete squares that blanket the arid landscape, all that remain of Camp Dunlap, a World War II marine barracks. Abandoned by the military and now home to a cadre of squatters in RV campers, at one time General George Patton ran trial maneuvers here he would later deploy in Northern Africa.

Today, the military practices bombing runs in the vicinity and Slab City residents known as "scrappers" make dangerous runs of their own to retrieve the discarded metal as a supplement to their Social Security checks. Part of one of the Star Wars movies was filmed here, the barren yellow earth a good substitute for a moonscape.

Despite the Mars-like extraterrestrial atmosphere and combat history, Slab City has an artsy side as well. One of its main attractions is an open-air theater, starring a covered stage festooned with a skull and crossbones flag and a life-size Marilyn Monroe cutout. Facing the stage in a semi-circle is a ring of battered sofas, in the center of which is "Jenny Styx's Stage Door," a door within its frame and a guitar mounted above it--but unencumbered by adjoining walls. This befits the resident renegades who resist rules and regulations and are drawn here by virtue of Slab City being, literally, off the grid, with no electricity or running water.

Nathan Trotter, a student at San Diego State University, spent a weekend in January camping at the Salton Sea, making the trip there with about 30 fellow members of an Urban Explorers Club. He said he was drawn to the area by its "oddities." Slab City exceeded his expectations, in part because his visit coincided with the community's talent show.

"There were about 150 people milling around, retirees, social drop-outs, gawkers, young people with missing teeth, the Hash House Harriers, a running group who call themselves 'drinkers with a running problem,' the whole gamut," he said. "We saw three or four musical acts, your basic rock and roll, all pretty good, with the exception of an old hippie woman, with a sixties-ish name like Moon or Sundance, who sounded like a dying cat."

Fortunately, the songs and calls of birds were the score to my picnic lunch at the Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge, the next stop on my circuit around the Sea.

"In a typical February, six million birds fly through the Salton Sea, representing two-thirds of North America's bird species. We get at least 500,000 gulls each winter. In the past we have had one million or more Eared grebes," said Christian Schoneman, Project Leader at the Refuge.



The Mountain's museum is supported by trees made with "flower power."



An oasis of love in the Colorado Desert.



In 2000, the Folk Art Society of America recognized Leonard Knight's artistry.

"While birding season generally refers to the cooler months that are more tolerable to be outside, we get dedicated birders all year long, even when it's 115 degrees," he continued. "That's because we can get such rarities as Boobies, Frigate birds and Yellow-footed Gulls in the heat of summer."

From the Refuge, I took another road less traveled to Obsidian Butte, a series of five volcanic domes about 150 feet high. I pulled off the beaten path and down a hill where a large glistening, bumpy black ball of obsidian was perched on a small dune. On closer inspection, I saw shards of obsidian scattered across the sand and took care to avoid stepping on them--pieces have been known to puncture car tires.

I drove further down to a marsh, considered one of the best spots for sighting gulls around the Salton Sea. My arrival prompted the departure of a huge blue heron, which lifted off from the open pond before me and glided away. It was no wonder the sound of the tires had spooked the bird--as I walked around the shoreline, barnacles crunched noisily below my feet--I was later told these hard-shelled crustaceans had arrived at the Salton Sea on the pontoons of coastal seaplanes.

According to Susan Fox Hodgson, a Davis, California geothermal historian, the Butte was once an Indian obsidian quarry.

"California Indians prize obsidian highly and bring it so completely into their lives, and there are many myths about its importance," she said. "Obsidian was critical to Indian religious and healing ceremonies--shamans often danced holding sacred, double-edged ceremonial blades, hunters prized obsidian projectile points as being more effective than bark or stone and everyone used obsidian knives, scrapers, and razors. Obsidian-point tools helped to make decorative tattoos--and scars in times of sickness and grief. Obsidian pieces were carried on trade routes throughout California for marketing in what are now other states and countries."

"Today California Indians still include obsidian objects in religious and healing ceremonies," she continued. "Modern doctors cut with obsidian blades, artists create obsidian objects, and archeologists and anthropologists study ways obsidian affected ancient lives. The story of obsidian is one both ancient and modern, where the newest uses intertwine with the old."

My last seaside stop was "Unit One," an outpost of the Bono Refuge, where another set of worlds collide. To reach the wooden observation tower, I made my way down a long dirt road, escorted by a squadron formation of a dozen red-winged blackbirds. To my left, on one of the area's many vast commercial farmlands, cigar-smoking hunters in camouflage clothing and Ray Bans tailgated in lawn chairs. Ahead of me, avid birders were stealthily on the move, many armed with massive cameras.

In yet another head scratcher, both birdwatchers and hunters alike are virtually surrounded by extensive, industrial-sized agricultural enterprises, where seemingly endless green rows of lettuce disappear into the horizon. In the middle of the Colorado Desert, an ecosystem generally believed to be unable to support life, the Coachella Valley has 85,000 acres designated as farmland; total crop production for 2007 was \$486 million.

According to Jerry Boles of the Salton Sea Office of the California Department of Water Resources, runoff from all this farmland is the main water source of the Salton Sea, and contains nutrients, pesticides, and other contaminants. In fact, in 1928, President Coolidge designated the Sea as a repository for agricultural waste water. These nutrients cause heavy growth of algae in the Salton Sea, which eventually break down, often resulting in huge fish kills.

"Another Salton Sea pollutant is selenium. Water diverted from the Colorado River is used to irrigate crops in the Imperial and Coachella valleys, located on the southern and

northern shores of the Sea," he said. "Selenium contained in the river water concentrates in the agricultural field soils and when farmers flush the selenium from the soil, these pollutants are discharged to water ways draining to the Salton Sea. Selenium is required in living organisms in small quantities, but becomes a toxin in higher concentrations and has been implicated in deformities and deaths of birds in other areas."

Ellis of Massachusetts, an avid bird watcher for more than 35 years, saw this sad side to the Salton Sea as well.

"On the south side of the sea there were what looked like shallows. I was thrilled by the massive numbers of brown pelicans. Some noisy and flying, some perched on every possible spot," she remembered. "There was a woman booted, gloved and masked in the water, loading bags. She wore a ranger's uniform. I walked towards her to ask about the birds and the sea. When I was close enough to talk, I saw tears on her cheeks. I saw too she was loading bodies of brown pelicans into the bags. I asked if I could help. She had extra boots, gloves and mask. So I stood there with her helping her to load those feathered bodies into the bags. It would keep more bacteria out of the sea. There was no more bird watching there that dayâ€¦I had seen enough."

Birders are just one of a wide constituency concerned about the Salton Sea habitat, for a variety of reasons.

"There is a cross-section of stakeholder groups--local, state and federal government agencies, water and environmental groups, and universities and academics--involved in making recommendations for the future of the Salton Sea, with science being a big part of the decision-making process," said Case of the U.S. Geological Survey. "The recommendation presented to the legislature in 2007 calls for a marine sea to be created in the northern quarter of the current sea, and the establishment of 62,000 acres of shallow habitat for wildlife, which would cover some of the exposed lake bottom sediments, preventing dust problems."

According to Michael Cohen of the Pacific Institute, a member of the Salton Sea Coalition, even after approval, any large-scale restoration project is still at least five years in the making, given planning, permitting and construction. He believes that if consensus on a plan can't be reached in the near-term, that time-table could mean the Salton Sea ecosystem will crash.

"If California fails to act, the surface of the Salton Sea will fall by more than 20 feet, exposing more than 100 square miles of dusty lakebed, while its volume will contract by more than 60%, more than tripling its already-high salinity," he stated. "The Sea's once-robust fishery will disappear within a dozen years. Most of the hundreds of thousands of birds that rely on the Sea will be forced to find food and shelter elsewhere. With fewer and fewer wetlands left, many of these birds will not survive."

"The Salton Sea is a critical stop for migratory birds on the Pacific and Central Flyways. More than 400 species of birds, including 80 percent of the western population of white pelicans and 20 species of concern, use the system," said Case. "Some people ask 'If the sea has dried out before, haven't birds had to figure out what to do and survived?' The answer is yes, but it's important to understand that the birds had a number of alternatives back then that they don't have now. California has lost greater than 90 percent of its wetlands since the Sea last disappeared."

"Fortunately, a short-term solution exists," asserts Cohen. "California should act quickly to construct shallow ponds--similar to those that have enjoyed great success in South San Francisco Bay--upon the Sea's exposed lakebed. This would create valuable habitat for birds, reduce dust emissions and the threat to public health, and buy time for a more comprehensive restoration plan to be refined and implemented."

As this is the Salton Sea, there are, of course, differing points

of view.

"If I look in my crystal ball, I see the Salton Sea being allowed to die a slow death, particularly now with the economy and the biggest problem on Planet Earth being fresh water," the desert biologist Cornett predicted. "Left to its own devices it will start shrinking and be a dry salt playa in less than 100 years, just like it was in 1904."

An enigma wrapped in a riddle until the end, whenever that may be.

Meg Pier

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