

From Disneyland to Sacramento via Death Valley



April 2013

Bob and Molly Hillery

This trip was originally planned as one of our usual weekend visits to Sacramento to see Cyndi, Christopher and Samantha. However, Cyndi contacted us to say that they were planning a visit to Disneyland on the weekend before our visit and would we like to join them there first and then perhaps spend a few days traveling up the coast to see them again at home. They, of course, had to return home after their Disneyland days for both work and school.

We decided that it would be fun to spend more time with our children and grandchild so we extended our trip to spend two nights in Los Angeles, followed by three driving north and finally three more in Sacramento. Rather than drive up the coast, however, we decided to visit Death Valley, which has been on our “To Do” list for some time . This seemed the perfect opportunity to spend a little time there.

So, our planned weekend visit to Sacramento was expanded to nine days in California during which we drove from Los Angeles to Sacramento, added another National Park to our list and spent several days with our family.

California—from Disneyland to Sacramento via Death Valley. April 2013

Saturday April 20

We left home around 7:30 pm and had dinner at the relatively new Ruth's Chris restaurant in the Banks area of the riverfront in Cincinnati. We have eaten at the Ruth's Chris in Louisville many times and have always enjoyed the food and service. This restaurant is on two levels and is much bigger than the one in Louisville but, despite being only a block from the river, there is no view to speak of. In Louisville the restaurant is on the top floor of a tall office block and has a commanding view over the entire city.

The food and service here were comparable to other Ruth's Chris restaurants but the overall experience was not quite the same as that we have enjoyed so much in Louisville—and it cost \$12 for valet parking! However, we enjoyed the meal and it was a pleasant way to begin our trip.

We left Cincinnati and drove to the airport Marriott where we checked in about 10:30 and immediately went to bed.

Sunday April 21

We were up at 6:45 to check out, leave our dinner "togs" in the car and catch the shuttle to the airport for our 9am flight to Los Angeles. It was a very cold morning (right around freezing) so it was nice to think that we were headed for the warmer climes of California.

The flight left on time and we were soon over the mid-West enjoying breakfast before settling down for the remainder of the four hour flight. The skies were clear for most of the journey and we had good views of the endless plains before reaching the Rockies, which this past week had received a fresh whitening from a late winter storm.

Beyond the Rockies we were over the predominantly red coloration of the Utah Canyonlands which looks even more barren from the air than it does at ground level. We caught a distant view of the Grand Canyon and then flew directly over Lake Havasu City—the new home of London Bridge. Then we were over California (Palm Springs) and the coastal range (with just a dusting of snow at the peaks) as we began our descent to LAX. After 20 minutes or more flying over the sprawling city we landed in Los Angeles around 10:30.

We quickly got our bags and got the shuttle to the rental car lot and then we were on our way to Anaheim on a beautiful sunny afternoon with temperatures climbing into the 70s. We called Christopher and made our way to an Italian restaurant near Disneyland where we all met for lunch. Samantha was dressed in one of her Disney outfits—fully coordinated of course from head to toe.

After a very pleasant lunch we left them for their afternoon and evening at one of the theme parks and we drove directly to the Sheraton where all of us were staying. There was a mix up with our reservation

but that was eventually sorted out and we checked into our room for the afternoon. And slept!

We woke around 6:30 and felt awake enough to go for a light meal. We chose Tiffy's Diner, just a few blocks from the hotel and recommended by Cyndi. The food and service were good and the music (Fifties and earlier) was good accompaniment. We turned in around 9pm.



Monday April 22

I was awake before seven so I got up and went for a three mile walk in the neighborhood of the hotel. I walked in a direction away from the hotels and fast food restaurants that serve the Disney land clientele and was in a residential area in less than a block. The homes were small, mostly ranch-style and at first I thought they looked a little rundown. But there were many that had been kept in good repair and had some very beautiful gardens, many in the Chinese style. I did see one obvious Chinese person tending to his yard but there weren't sufficient people out at this hour to tell whether that was the predominant ethnicity. In any event, it was a very pleasant walk and got me nicely warmed up on a cool morning.

The temperature was in the mid-fifties but there was already a little sunshine as Molly and I walked to a nearby Starbucks for breakfast and the forecast looked even better. We were ready to leave for Disneyland as Christopher, Cyndi and Samantha (Princess Belle) when they joined us in the lobby at 10am.



We were in the park by about 10:30 and began our nine hour marathon of rides and walking amongst the attractions on a beautiful sunny day with temperatures in the mid-seventies. There was an occasional cooling breeze so the weather was just about perfect for a day of sightseeing and watching Samantha as she quickly moved from one venue to the next.





We lost count of the number of rides that were visited but Grandma and Granddad probably were on about of them before the day was over, including a somewhat soaking experience on Splash Mountain as we traversed a log flume towards the climactic finish—a

very steep drop into a pond, passing underneath a spray just for good measure.

We also went on several rides which took us through fantastic animations, all of which were very well choreographed and very life-like in many cases. Most were in small cars that traveled a rail but others were in boats floating through the various scenes from Disney movies and productions. A particularly well presented ride was the Pirates of the Caribbean and, one of Sammy's favorites, "It's a Small World".

We had a lunch break at a very pleasant café on "Main Street" and one other short break for a drink towards the end of our visit. Other than that, we were on the go the whole time until we had to make our way out of the park just before 8pm so that Cyndi and Samantha could be taken to the Orange County airport for their late flight back to Sacramento. We said good-bye to them there after a tiring but absolutely wonderful day in Disneyland. We were so glad that we had decided to join them rather than just meet up in Sacramento at the weekend.

Molly, Christopher and I went to Mimi's for a late dinner (he was driving home the following day) and it was almost 11pm before we said good-night at the hotel.

Tuesday April 23

It was 8:30 before we got up today (I guess we were over jet lag and/or recovering from our hectic Monday) so we had a Starbucks breakfast again and then checked out for our drive to Death Valley.



We made one stop (not originally planned) at the [*Crystal Cathedral*](#) which it turned out was just two blocks from our hotel in Anaheim. The structure (or structures, there are about five large buildings on the property) are spec-

tacular, especially the crystal cathedral itself which is a built entirely of glass (and open steel frame) on a four point star footprint. It is nearly 200 feet high and can seat almost 3000 people. It has an enormous organ, a \$2M, 17000 pipe instrument which was the fifth largest in the world when built.

The Crystal Church Ministries, founded by famed televangelist Robert Schuller, fell on hard times in the first decade of this century as succession was passed to the older son and then to one of his sisters. According to the second generation, the father didn't "move with the times" and step away from the leadership as he should have and finally the Ministry filed for bankruptcy. The cathedral has now been sold to the Roman Catholic Church but at this point in time is still being used by the Ministry until imminent conversion (and takeover) by the Roman Catholic Diocese. Hopefully the cathedral itself will continue to stand and thrive—whatever faith it embodies—as it is a truly remarkable structure and must be a wonderful place to hear music at its best.

Leaving Anaheim, we were soon on the Interstate that leads ultimately to Las Vegas, although we took it only as far as Baker, about 200 miles Northwest of Los Angeles. We had stopped for a light lunch in Barstow, gassed up in Baker and then headed the final 100+ miles to Death Valley.



The whole route from Barstow is very scenic and dramatic, being mostly barren desert with several high peaks to the north. Once we turned at Baker, however, we were headed directly to Death Valley and the terrain became more spectacular, with many different rock types and colors. Much of the area was sand or soft-looking sandstone but there were several places where we felt that the rocks were lava and obviously the result of past volcanic activity. Certainly we hope to learn more of the topography and geology in our full day in the National Park on Wednesday.

For today, we satisfied ourselves with a couple of stops at scenic overlooks on our way to the Furnace Creek Inn where we had reservations for two nights. The Inn is close to the valley floor and we had excellent views of the lowest spots (230 feet below sea level) from our room and balcony.

We spent a couple of hours in the room and took in the view across the valley. Based on nearby signs, we estimate that our room is about 50 feet above sea level and so is over 300 feet from the valley floor at its lowest point. The valley looked to be predominantly white (salt) but the mountains on either side (one of which is over 11,000 feet high) contain rocks and features that seem to cover just about every color imaginable. Tomorrow is our day to explore this in detail but for tonight we ate a rather uninspiring meal in the lodge (although the wine was good!) and retired about 10pm. An initial observation about this place is the absence of noise—we can see a road from our balcony but even the car noise doesn't reach us. Absolute silence and an almost full moon; just about perfect.



*View
from
hotel
balcony*



Wednesday April 24

We were up about eight and had a light breakfast in the hotel dining room and then left on our day in the Park about 9:30.

First we re-traced our steps of late yesterday afternoon and headed back south towards the expressway but made a couple of stops along the way. About ten miles from Furnace Creek (where we were staying) is a 13 mile road that climbs from the main road to Dante's View. The viewpoint is at an elevation of 5500 feet and it was noticeably cooler at this height—in the high sixties versus almost 80F when we left the hotel.

Dante's View looks directly over the valley and has an almost sheer drop of 6000 feet to the valley floor. A half mile walk from the parking area took me to a rather narrow promontory from which I could see the entire valley from south to north, as well as the ridge of mountains to the west which were at least ten miles away.



One of the immediate observations in Death Valley is that the enormity of the place distorts both distance and elevation, such that something which looks to be a few hundred yards away could be a mile or more and what appears to be a gradual climb is actually quite steep, which shows immediately in the la-

boring of the car. Consequently I was quite surprised on this initial short walk that I was out of breath at times until I realized that I was doing the walk at mile high altitude after being at sea level only 30 minutes earlier.

Once back down from Dante's View and on the main road south again we continued past majestic mountain scenery out of view of the valley itself until we reached Shoshone, about 60 miles from the hotel.



Here we filled up with gas again and bought a few food supplies for the rest of the day before turning west and driving another 25 miles (over a couple of passes of 3300 and 1300 feet) to the southern end of the Death Valley Park.

Motorcycles are prevalent in Death Valley—but these were among the most unusual



From Ashford Mill (the ruins of an old gold mining settlement we were close to the valley floor for virtually all of the rest of the day as we drove north back to Furnace Creek.

There were, however, a number of information stops and photo opportunities along the route. One of the more unusual and unexpected sights was of a family of coyotes that surrounded our car as we stopped for them. It seemed obvious that they had been fed by tourists in the path as they looked longingly at us through the closed windows. Even as we slowly drove away, they followed us for a while before giving up—and waiting for the next car!



Soon afterwards we reached Badwater, the lowest part of the Valley at 282 feet below sea level.



Here we could walk for about a quarter mile on the salt and turn around to see the sheer cliffs along the side of the road, complete with a seal level sign at the appropriate level.

By now the temperature had reached 96F and, although it didn't feel too oppressive, a 20 minute exposure was sufficient to be ready for the air-conditioned car again.



**The Lowest
Point in the
United
States**

So, it was on further north to another stopping point at Natural Bridge. Here we had to drive on an unpaved road for about 1.5 miles after which there was a half-mile trail up to a natural bridge across a narrow canyon. Molly joined me for a part of that walk but it was relatively steep so she decided to return to the car while I went on to the bridge. In fact, the bridge could be seen well before the half mile advertised so Molly could have seen it with perhaps another quarter mile walk.



More interesting than the bridge itself, however, was the canyon that we had to walk along (or up). It was quite narrow in places (twenty feet?) and the sides were several hundred feet high. It may have been formed by fissuring of the mountain side at this point or there may have been significant wind and water erosion over the millennia. What is obvious now is that this path now allows sudden and massive water flows that create flash floods all through the Death Valley area. It is quite surprising that an area that averages only two inches of rainfall a year can be so prone to flash flooding. Most of the roads we traveled bore signs warning of flash floods and several areas had "yardstick" markers at the side of the road to indicate water levels as deep as 3 1/2 feet so obviously when it rains it really comes down and the steep hills focus the streams to turbulent rivers.

Our final attraction of the day was a nine mile scenic drive (on paved road) to view the Artists Palette. This is a one way drive which climbs to the one thousand foot level very quickly and passes through some of the most interesting and colorful rock formations in the entire park. At one point in particular, greens, blues, reds, oranges and yellows were "painted" on the gray, off-white and pink background surfaces creating a very real image of the artist's palette. The road back down to the main north-south road

was very narrow and twisty and passed close to—in some cases under—the jagged rock formations at the base of the cliffs. It was a beautiful drive to end our day in th



THE ARTIST'S PALETTE

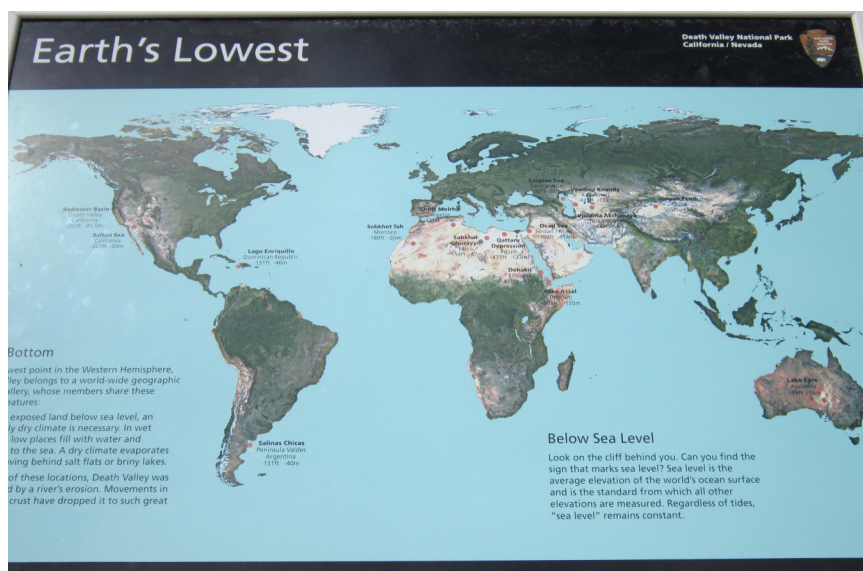


Just one more brief stop, however, at another trail—*The Golden Canyon* Interpretive Trail—almost back at the Furnace Creek village. This was another canyon going deep into the mountainside which eventually reaches a “Red Cathedral”. I walked about a half mile into the canyon and saw what must have been the top half of the sheer red cliff that presumably (had I gone another half mile or so) gave the impression of a huge cathedral carved out of the rock. (Later Googling confirmed this and convinced me that I had seen most of the structure from my lower vantage point!).

Virtually all of the trails headed away from the valley floor into the mountains to the east. However, the walk on the salt flats obviously went west along the valley floor as did one other attraction that we visited. This was the “Devil’s Golf Course” at which point the muddy salt has been eroded by wind and rain to form jagged spikes perhaps one to two feet high and spanning a several hundred square yards area. Within this somewhat dangerous place (where a fall could result in some serious cuts and bruises on the pointed salt protrusions) are hidden beautiful crystals of salt formations. Unfortunately we had to take their word for that one—although we didn’t venture very far across the course!



So, we had a wonderful eight hours in Death Valley and saw a tremendous amount of spectacular scenery as well as experiencing the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere. Interestingly that point is a “stone’s throw” from one of the highest points in California—the 11,000 feet high Telescope Point.



One information board listed all the other “low points” around the world and there are several that are similar in depth (some more, some less) to Badwater in Death Valley. However, the lowest point in the world by a huge margin is the Dead Sea in Jordan at an elevation of –1300 feet. We had visited that point several years ago and I certainly had forgotten just how far below sea level it was—almost five times “deeper” than Death Valley.

Tonight we ate at the hotel restaurant again this evening (there isn’t much choice in Death Valley!) and we had a much better meal than the previous night, a bottle of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc helping things go down well. We turned in about 9:30 after a very full and interesting day. The maximum temperature we experienced was 96F and the lowest was 64F, at –200 and +5500 feet elevation respectively.

Thursday April 25

We had an early breakfast outside on the terrace of the hotel restaurant and then finished packing and checking out. We were on the road before 9am as we had over 350 miles to cover before our next stop in

Fresno.

We first headed north from Furnace Creek (with a brief stop at the Visitor Center for Passport stamping!) and then turned west after about 20 miles. We crossed over the northern end of the salt flats and then followed scenic Route 190 over a couple of 5000 foot passes. Before heading up the first climb, however, we stopped at the Mesquite Sand Dunes, beautiful pristine “mountains” of white sand rising to heights of 100 feet or so. The main dunes were about a mile from the parking area—although they looked to be much closer—so we just admired them from a distance.



The Sea Level sign right outside the hotel



The Mesquite Sand Dunes



The views from the mountain road were fantastic in all directions and the roads themselves were interesting at, at times, quite difficult to negotiate and very steep. Certainly the many RVs that we saw were taking it very cautiously in many spots and, because the climbs were so long (20 miles in one case) signs advised us to turn off the car air conditioning. We did so and opened windows and, particularly at the

higher elevations, it didn't feel at all uncomfortable.

We were now on the western side of the Panamint Range (which itself is west of Death Valley) so we were seeing the 11,000 foot peaks now from an entirely different angle to that we had had yesterday from the valley bottom. Perhaps not too surprisingly, even these very high peaks were not snow-capped, underscoring once again the intense heat that is prevalent year round in this region.

We continued essentially due south, now on Route 395, through areas in which there were a number of Joshua trees. We had been told just before we left Ohio (by one of the waitresses at our local Bob Evans) that the Joshua trees in the Mojave Desert were blooming for the first time in several years so we were on the lookout for any sign of blossom or flowers. We eventually convinced ourselves that we had seen a few with buds that looked as though they were due to open so we gathered photographic evidence for our friend. Later on—in the Mojave Desert proper—Molly saw several trees with obvious flowers but they were not in areas where we could stop for photographs.



Joshua Trees and Blossom



It was almost a 100 mile drive south at approximately the 4000 foot level, running alongside mountain ranges and experiencing again dozens of different rock formations, evidence of volcanic activity and a wide variety of colors. Perhaps this wasn't as spectacular as the first part of the drive nor as varied as that we had seen in Death Valley yesterday, but it was still a very impressive and interesting route to follow.

Snow-capped mountains near Mojave

We turned west again at Mojave, just outside the massive Edwards Air Force Base, and stopped in a small town (Tehachapi) for a Starbucks lunch. Then it was another 20 miles to Bakersfield where we joined Route 99 for the remainder of the drive to Fresno. Now we were in the fertile Central Valley and the road was lined on both side (and as far as we could see in any direction) with fruit and nut trees. I was surprised to see that there were miles and miles of grape vines, having pictured all of those to be further north in the Napa and Sonoma Valleys. Presumably many of these ultimately became some of California's wines but we also knew (from Samantha earlier in the week) that this area produces the grapes for all of the Sun Maid raisins. In fact some vines were labeled as Raisin Grapes.

We followed Route 99 north as far as Fresno, stopping only for rest breaks and gas, and then found our hotel a little to the northwest of the city on the road that ultimately leads to Yosemite. Despite being a few miles from the city center, however, our search for a restaurant for dinner didn't take very long as there was a Ruth's Chris less than two miles from the hotel. So, decision and reservation made for an 8pm meal.

And it was excellent as usual!

Friday April 26

We checked out of the hotel and had breakfast at a local Starbucks before getting back on Route 99 for Sacramento. We made just one restroom break and covered the 170 miles quickly such that we were in Sacramento by about noon and able to meet Christopher for lunch at Panera.

We then checked in at our hotel, I took a two mile walk and we got ready for the evening. We met Shirl and Sammy at Sammy's karate class and then were joined by Christopher and Cyndi for dinner at a local Brewhouse. Bill was home working—despite having “retired” some time back; apparently his consultancy is widely needed.

Following dinner we went in several directions. Christopher went to a gaming venue (some new game was being previewed), Molly, Cyndi and Shirl went to Davis to see a local production of “Oklahoma” and Sammy and I went to her house for the evening. The plan had been for the two of us to go for a bike ride before dark but Sammy had a little tummy ache so we stayed indoors, played some games, finished a jig-saw puzzle and then she went to bed. She was no trouble at all and didn't make any fuss about going to bed without Mommy or Daddy in the house—and told Granddad every step that had to be completed before she went to sleep.

It was almost midnight before Cyndi and Molly returned, at which point Molly and I went straight back to the hotel and slept very soundly.

Saturday April 27

We were up at nine, had a short walk for a light breakfast at Starbucks and then waited for a call from Cyndi to tell us where to meet for lunch. They had been up relatively early to take Christopher's new car to the shop for an estimate on a scrape that Cyndi had experienced at work yesterday, so we had an early lunch at Firebirds (used to be Qdoba) and then ice cream at Coldstone Creamery.

Sammy took her nap during the afternoon and the rest of us watched photographs of our most recent trips—Singapore and Hong Kong and this week’s visit to Death Valley.

By this time it was about 6pm, Sammy was still napping so Molly and I returned to the hotel for an hour before dinner. We all met up again at an Indian restaurant in West Sacramento that we have visited several times in the past and once again enjoyed a good meal and excellent company.

Sunday April 28

Molly and I had a light Starbucks breakfast and then drove directly to Christopher and Cyndi’s home where Samantha and I had a cycling date. We had hardly stepped out of the car when she was on the driveway fully dressed for a ride—helmet, gloves, knee and elbow pads as well as water and a snack for our “100 million mile” ride.

I borrowed Christopher’s single speed, coaster brake (!) - also complete with helmet, basket and water for the journey—and Sammy and I set off on our trip. I found Christopher’s bike a little difficult to maneuver but it was fun to be out with Sammy. She still has the training wheels on her bike of course but she is very capable in the steering and braking department. In fact, she almost had me in her saddle the first couple of times she stopped but I soon learned to give a little more distance and to administer the coaster brakes more efficiently.

Sammy did make frequent stops—for crosswalks and turns, obviously, but also for a chat, a snack, to hunt ladybugs, or whatever else was on her mind at the time. Consequently, the ride around the neighborhood took the best part of an hour, by which time we were both quite warm (it was in the high eighties already) and ready to get inside the air-conditioned house.



When Daddy got up we all went to iHOP for breakfast and then said farewell for the afternoon while Sammy napped and Molly and I returned to the hotel. Actually I went for an almost 5 mile walk along the trails close to the hotel and despite the afternoon heat, I found it a very pleasant interlude and, presumably, fairly good exercise.

*Sammy's favorite
iHOP—it has a small
“park”!*

At a little before 6pm we went back to Sammy’s house to watch photos and videos of her dance, piano

and drum recitals as well as her first attempts at roller skating and her two karate “graduations” to higher level belts. We also saw several pictures of the time they spent with the Shepards in March and saw how much all of the cousins enjoyed the company of the other part of the family.

At 7:30 we went to Chevy’s on the river—Christopher’s choice as it was his belated birthday dinner with us. Sammy was dressed appropriately in a Mexican dress and we all enjoyed a good meal and another pleasant chat.

Then it was time for hugs and kisses and farewells for this trip as tomorrow we leave for Cincinnati. We are planning to see them twice in August, however, at the beginning and end of our driving trip with Geoffrey and Christine. So we were able to look forward to “see you in the summer” times together.

Monday April 29

We were up before 8 and had checked out of the hotel by 8:30. We had breakfast at Starbucks and then drove to the airport where we were quickly through check-in and security and had about an hour before boarding our flight for Atlanta. We hadn’t been on board very long, however, before the captain told us of a mechanical problem that they were still troubleshooting. As often seems to happen after such an apparently innocuous statement, the delay stretched to the point that we would surely miss not only our connection in Atlanta but also the last flight from there to Cincinnati.

So we disembarked and were first in line for re-routing, which we appeared to accomplish rather successfully—fly to Salt Lake today, overnight there at Delta’s expense and then get the 10am flight home on Tuesday. This was all done over an hour before we left Sacramento and we were assured that our bags would be available for pick up in SLC for our overnight stay there!

It was only when we got to Salt Lake that we found out that the bags had been sent to Cincinnati via Seattle—or was it via Atlanta, or even SLC? No-one at Delta seemed to know for sure but what was obvious was that we weren’t going to see them tonight. After a fruitless discussion with rather unhelpful baggage claim personnel we left for the downtown Radisson with an amenity bag!

Despite having to wear our traveling clothes we still made a reservation at Ruth’s Chris, about 3 blocks away from the hotel and hoped that they would accept us in our rather casual dress. As it turned out, our dress fit right in and we were by no means under-dressed and had another excellent meal.

Tuesday April 30

We were up before eight and got a taxi almost immediately so we had time to use our Delta vouchers at the airport Starbucks before our flight to Cincinnati at a little before ten. We arrived in Cincinnati at 3pm, picked up the car at the Marriott and started home. The traffic on I-71 was a little heavy but we were still home before 5pm after a very interesting and varied trip to California.