



CALIFORNIA DESERT

Death Valley springs to life

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN



A sea of Desert Gold wildflowers lined the valley slopes on both sides of the road. Farther on, we drove past Golden Evening Primrose, mixed with bluish-purple Phacelia and dotted with wispy white blossoms of Gravel Ghost.

For a closer look, we took a wildflower hike guided by a park ranger who pointed out 10 flowering species while standing in one spot. The most amazing part of all this colour is that we're in the parched desert of Death Valley, which averages 50 mm of rain per year and where the soil seems little more than sand, gravel and stones.

While it's normal for a few flowers to bloom in spring, in an El Nino year normal goes out the window. Last fall brought heavy rains and huge floods, plus timely rains in February were just what the dormant flower seeds wanted. The result was a rare event dubbed a "superbloom."

Visiting Death Valley had been on our wish list for many years, so when we read reports promising an exceptional spring for flowers, we decided on an early March trip.

Calling Death Valley a land of extremes is an understatement. Badwater Basin, with its large expanse of salt flats, is the lowest point in North America at 86 metres below sea level. Yet overlooking it are snow-capped mountain peaks.

High temperatures were around 30 C during our visit, and this was still early spring. We wouldn't want to be here in mid-summer when 30 C is the average low and highs soar to the mid-40 C.

Death Valley holds the record for the hottest temperature ever recorded on Earth: 56.7C, or 134 F.

The morbid name for this magical place dates to 1849 when a group of

California-bound pioneers decided to take a shortcut through the desert and became lost.

One man perished and things got so desperate that they killed and ate their oxen. When they were finally rescued, one of the group said "goodbye death valley," and the name stuck.

The largest national park in the U.S. outside Alaska, Death Valley is a series of mountain ranges, valleys, canyons, badlands and sand dunes. Most impressive are the vibrant multi-coloured rock formations, such as the aptly named Artist's Palette that looks like gigantic splotches of paint.

Much of the park is reached by paved road, with numerous minor gravel roads (some requiring four-wheel drive) to explore farther afield. Hiking trails abound, from easy walks offering close-up views of spectacular canyons to major backcountry treks.

The most famous view, and our favourite as well, is sunrise from Zabriskie Point. As the sun clears the horizon, the distant mountains take on a reddish tinge, then a golden glow washes over the valley of wild badlands below, bringing the craggy terrain to life.

The point is named for Christian Zabriskie, head of the company that mined borax, which was the main industry here before the park was established. To move the heavy material out of the rugged terrain in the 1880s, they used massive wagons pulled by 20 mules.

Advertising campaigns for the famous 20 Mule Team Borax soap are credited with bringing Death Valley to public attention in the early years. Remains of the borax works and the huge wagons are displayed in the park.

While Death Valley is in Califor-

nia, it is next to the Nevada border, so the closest airport is Las Vegas, about three hours away. The park has limited and pricey accommodation, making camping the main option for most visitors.

We stayed at the primary campground, Furnace Creek, which takes reservations. Most other campgrounds are first-come, first-served.

For more information, visit www.nps.gov/deva.

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LEFT: Wild flowers, including the desert five spot, line the road thanks to heavy rains last fall.

TOP: The badlands near Zabriskie Point offer a superb sunrise.

ABOVE: Artist's Palette got its name from the multi-coloured rocks.

| ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

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