

Timbisha: Appreciate Life at Death Valley

Standing in the night desert in spring or fall, raise your head to the sky, blink up at the universe, and drink the scent of cool mesquite on the still air.

To the Timbisha Shoshone, this fragrance represented the perfume of survival, as they extracted life from the mesquite in this place called Death Valley. (The appellation stuck due to lost pioneers, not lost Timbisha, who based their mythology and their reality on a desert teeming with birds, small mammals, and plants.

The Timbisha regenerated and pruned and harvested the mesquite berries, storing them through the winter months. In the summer, the low basin without forest breaks became the hottest place on the continent, so they moved up to better hunting grounds in the high ranges, living in forbidding enclaves, safe from attacks by the Mojave tribe.

With four mountain ranges separating the salt flats from the ocean, the “shadow rain” seldom reached this valley, creating a literal furnace effect in the summertime. Hence, the name Furnace Creek at the main Death Valley entrance, where your journey will begin.

By 1904, fortune seekers came through, surmising they would outlast any hardship to mine precious gems such as rhyolite, so Herbert Hoover created a national monument to protect Death Valley in 1933. However, he forgot to preserve a homeland for the Timbisha Shoshone.

The tribe at last received federal recognition for its 199 members in 1983. President Clinton then authorized a study of the land with the California Desert Protection Act in 1994. Clinton awarded the actual land grant when he signed the Timbisha Homeland Act in 2000, creating a trust to preserve 7,700 acres. This became the first Timbisha reservation, while the original ancestral homelands extended far beyond Inyo and San Bernadino counties into Kern and Mono Counties and into Nevada.

65. Death Valley's Basin Hikes

Directions: Driving north as you return from Anza Borrego, travel up the 395 and take the road less traveled—through Death Valley. The main road transecting Death Valley National Park from east to west is California Highway 190. The national park headquarters is in Furnace Creek. Rhyolite is between Beatty, Nevada, and Death Valley National Park off Nevada Highway 374, which becomes California Highway 190 at the border. It is open to the public with no admission free.

In the cool months, the valley floor presents surreal landscapes, even as snow caps the highest mountains. In the warm months, you can walk the formidable Telescope Peak trail, while the heat on the valley floor breaks records every day.

Check in at the visitors' to get a sense of proximity between the landmarks. Several trails feature dune walks where you can contemplate the vitality of a people who worked and lived and appreciated the light breeze rustling through the

woven walls of their huts and who found ample food and water here for a thousand years.

To experience the upward views from the lowest point in North America, drive out Badwater Road to Badwater Salt Flats. This ADA-compliant one-mile walk can turn into a five-mile route trip if you prefer that option. However, save time to stop for a separate one-mile walk to the Natural Bridge, one of the park's wonders, sculpted by erosion.

Multiple options exist for walks through rock canyons and dunes, but if you long for mountain views, Emigrant Canyon Road, off CA 190, will lead you to a 14-mile scramble up the treeless summit, where Telescope Peak overlooks Panamint Valley. One of the most dramatic rises of any place in the US, the peak features an elevation gain of more than 11,000 feet above Badwater Basin, which lies below sea level. If you hike this peak, you can see all the way to Mount Whitney, or you can simply settle for that other zenith—a glimpse of the stars from anywhere on the desert floor.

Appreciate life in Death Valley. The clear, starry nights will cleanse your soul.