

MOJAVE



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KYLE CASSIDY

I long ago stopped giving people post cards when I went somewhere. It seems impersonal and a waste of the experience. So you get this instead. Here is an account of my trip through the Mojave desert in February of 2008 while I was in Nevada for a series of book signings. This PDF is meant to be viewed as a book, with left and right pages, some of the photos bleed from one page to the other. Think of it as a book, but free. It was formatted legal size, meaning if you print it out, (or better yet, take it to a printers and have them make you a nice copy on photo paper) you should be viewing it at 8.5 x 14. If you're looking at it squashed down to 8.5 x 11 you're missing some of the large size goodness.

I should thank Paul Kennedy, my editor at Krause Books for believing in me, and Beth Gissinger, Aaron Katzmarek, and the other people at F+W for sending me to the desert in the first place and giving me this opportunity.

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If you're looking at a web-resolution version of this, you can find a high resolution at www.kylecassidy.com/pix/travel/2008

Thanks so much,

Kyle Cassidy
Philadelphia — February, 2008

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MOJAVE: A
TRAVEL DIARY
IN WORDS AND
IMAGES

a travel diary in words and images



SIX HUNDRED MILLION YEARS AGO THE MOJAVE WAS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN....

And in another six hundred million years, it might be back there. Such is the ebb and flow of land masses when dancing to the measure of geologic time. But for the blink of an eye that everything we know exists, it will be desert: Immutable and unchanging.

We can carve the shape of men's faces into the side of a mountain in a dozen years, but nature's plan for that place will win out in the end. The best we can hope to do is scratch our names in the sand and pretend it's permanent. We are creatures far too delicate to watch the stones move.



The City of Las Vegas rises like an infected boil from the strong back of Nevada. If your plane lands at night, it may seem deceptively beautiful as row after row of orderly suburban lights give way to vast piles of pulsating, rippling, pillars of illumination – the hotels strive for the sky and flash their names at you. But in the daylight, under the revealing rays of the sun, you can see them for what they really are — vast and trunkless effigies — and the city takes on a vile pallor.





Founded in the first dozen years of the twentieth century, Sin City legalized gambling in 1931 and went to Hell in 1946 when mobster Bugsy Segal opened the Flamingo Hotel. The cultural downfall of this former Mormon fort isn't its lax morals or copious adult entertainments, but rather its complete lack of good taste. Here the axiom holds true that anything is better if it's bigger, lit like a Christmas tree, and painted gold. The past is re-invented, bigger and gaudier — the Egyptians built a pyramid, but only the Luxor hotel flashes at night like a disco ball and a million watt beam blasts out of its pinnacle, blinding buzzards and astronauts.

I find everything about Las Vegas abhorrent — from the ghostly piles of human skin chained to slot machines by their ATM cards, mindlessly pulling a lever over and over again, to the faux gold plated faux Eifel tower, to the hideous concrete Greek in front of Caesar's Palace.

Vegas seems to have risen from its sandy ashes in the 1960's and has forever been trying to stay frozen there. Everywhere, Las Vegas is trying to tumble backwards in time. Elvis impersonators play to packed houses, as do Liza Minelli impersonators, Frank Sinatra impersonators, Dean Martin impersonators — here we have Caliban, staring at a faded photograph and mistaking it for a mirror.

Outside of the city, however, signs of life drop away quickly and the



desert takes over. Nearly 87% of the State of Nevada is sand and brush owned by the Bureau of Land Management and in the span of time Nevada is used to, the travesty that is Glitter Gulch won't even be the blink of an eye.... 600 million years ago Nevada was at the bottom of the ocean, hundreds of feet down. Layer upon layer of mud and shells collected, pressing ribbons of alternating sediment miles deep. Then, 400 million years later, the oceanic plate to the west of north America collided with the continent, causing the earth to buckle and mountains to be pushed up. The sea receded, some cracks in the earth's surface allowed molten magma to pour up like water into a leaky boat — you can easily see them as you fly into Vegas, huge black puddles against a brown/grey background. A whole new epoch was begun.

After the mountains were thrust up, millions of years of erosion — wind and water — sought out the weak parts and chiseled them away, smoothed the stones, cut improbable hollows from the rock an invisible sliver at a time. There is an old Buddhist proverb that talks of a mountain being ground down by a feather dragged across its pinnacle once every thousand years by a raven and, given enough time, that mountain will turn to sand. This is how the Earth counts the hours.



LET ME EXPLAIN MY FASCINATION WITH THE DESERT...



When I was six years old I read an article about the Desert Land Act. The vast percentage of desert in America is uninhabited — and for good reason — there's little or no water, oppressive heat, and not much in the way of resources, unless you're a Horta. So, in 1877 the federal government began to give away patches of desert to people who would be willing to irrigate it and make it livable — sort of like giving away abandoned houses in the city to people who will rehab them. This was followed by the Homestead act which eventually drew millions of Americans west into the wide open areas of the country. The government was, and still is, doing this. I was fascinated by the idea of becoming one of the landed gentry — smashing my piggy bank and buying some property at \$2.50 an acre. My father patiently explained some of the down-sides — mostly that it was isolated and there were no roads to it — you'd need to get there by helicopter or blimp. Still, I imagined myself hanging from a gondola with a sextant, searching for my patch of arid sand. Eventually, my burning desire to become slum-lord to a coterie of lizards and sidewinders waned, but my fascination with the idea of a desert did not. I imagined endless fields of shifting sands. I asked if we could visit the desert — Death Valley in particular, because its name and my penchant for melodrama coincided. My father said



that we could, but we'd need to take a lot of water. I imagined us huddled in our green Volkswagen Beetle, stuffed in amidst gallon milk jugs filled with water and the sun beating down on us like a mallet on foil, searching for an acre of sand. It seemed Romantic; in the Coleridgeian sense of the word. And it was that same dream that settled Oklahoma, the desire to see four tent pegs in the ground and to know that you could boss around all the field mice between them, fire shotguns at trespassers, and make a world for yourself on your own little patch of ground.



Sometime in the last three thousand years, between 1200 BCE and the time of the Reformation going on in Europe in 1500 CE, the Anasazi lived in Southern Nevada. Their tribal tales told that they came from beneath a lake to the North, and they settled in amongst the Paiute and the Shoshone and lived in seeming harmony before vanishing completely almost overnight, leaving behind their tools, food, and possessions. Their name, “Anasazi”, is Navajo and means either “ancient people who are not us” or “ancient enemy,” depending on what pamphlet you pick up and where. They were the ones who replaced the atlatl with the bow and arrow, wove baskets tightly enough that water could be carried in them, and built modern style pueblo houses into functioning cities in the walls of cliffs. They also wrote things all over the Mojave desert. There are petroglyphs littering the landscape. Unfortunately, nobody knows what they mean, nor do they know when they were written — there’s currently no way to date petroglyphs. I have faith though that



some geology ABD somewhere will figure out a way sooner or later.

So this is where I am, on the Moapa Indian reservation, looking at things carved into rocks with rocks by people who left everything behind but themselves. The Moapa are angry and annoyed people. In the 1800's when Europeans first came through their land, disaster followed. Their land was taken, their water was taken, their heritage started to fade. A treaty which left them 39,000 square miles was later amended to squeeze them down into 1,000 acres. In 1941 they tried to start farming but couldn't get enough water and were forced to lease their land to a dairy farm; they ended this in 1968 and don't ever want to go back. Today they run a fireworks mall, casino, and liquor store just off of Route 15 about an hour north of Las Vegas. All the doors have signs on them that say NO CAMERAS. Whatever the Moapa are doing now, they want to keep it to themselves.

In the desert behind the store are the remnants of thousands of fireworks — as though people buy them, retreat a few dozen yards into the sand, and blow them up before moving along. Distended cardboard shells and faded ribbons tumble across the parking lot and dirt road.

This is not the desert of shifting sand of my imagined youth — there is much more to the Mojave which stretches over 22,000 square miles — making it larger than some, 125 countries or territories including such notables as Switzerland, The Netherlands, Taiwan, Belgium, Kuwait,



and Lebanon — it's home to cougars, coyotes, bighorn sheep, gila monsters, mule deer, scorpions, tarantulas, jack rabbits, kangaroo rats, foxes, rattlesnakes and dozens of types of plants from the monkeyflower to the rock pea and the jumping cholla; so called because of the ease with which the seed pods will attach to a person or animal, as though they'd leapt upon you as you wandered past.

I'm driving through the desert now on my own, packed down with food and water. I've been once before, two years ago, in July, in a car with no air conditioning. Cleverly now, I'm visiting in February. It's surprisingly cold, forty or so degrees. But it's not the heat that will kill you here, it's the remoteness. Humans are collective creatures, we survive best working in groups, we rely upon one another to take upon specialized knowledge and tasks, and without access to our peers, here, isolation can kill you.



IT'S EASY TO SEE HOW I GOT LOST, LOOKING AT THE SATELLITE PHOTO....

A few years ago I saw a photography exhibit by [insert name of minor celebrity who you know but haven't thought about in a long time] — beautifully illuminated photographs of slot canyons, eroded, soft, pastel ... and I thought “Sweet barking cheese! this guy is a fantastic photographer!” But as my own photography progressed I came to realize that he may or may not be a great photographer, but the only thing those photographs showed was that he was in a slot canyon and he had a camera. Slot canyons are beautiful and nearly every photo IOI student who ventures out to them gets the same photograph. And it's beautiful. Part of me wants to ring the bell saying that the Emperor has no clothes, but the rest of me just want to take a bunch of beautiful photos that people mew over like parents at a rosy cheeked baby.

From above it looks like an easy mile and a half in a semi circle through some slot canyons. I pull the car off the road and drop down into one. The light is gorgeous and the air crisp and beautiful. The sun is waning, but the few hours of light left will easily get me back.

Looking later at the arial photo I can see exactly where I went straight when I should have turned right, but it was so beautiful and the pho-







tographs so close to one another that I'd walked a good four miles before it dawned on me I'd missed a turn. And now the light was starting to vanish. If I tried to turn back, it would be dark before I got to the car and I wouldn't be able to navigate up the several cliff faces I'd gone down.

I'd packed plenty of food and water and while I was prepared to spend the night in the desert, I really wasn't looking forward to it. I decided to climb the canyon wall and have a look around realizing as I did that a bone-breaking fall could be fatal — my cell phone hadn't worked for the last twenty miles. I climbed carefully. From the top of the cliff I was somewhat relieved to see a road about three hundred yards away. There was only one on the map, so it must be the one my car was on — somewhere — the road twisted around like a snake. When I at last reached it, I recognized the view — I was about five miles down the looping asphalt from where I'd parked, but the amazing thing was I'd been belched into the most scenic landscape at what photographers call the “Golden Hour” the time from about an hour before sunset to maybe half an hour after sunset. Most nature photographers take all their photos at this time and the landscape around me stretched 360 degrees as far as they eye could see — an unreal arena of stupefying color and beauty. The scope of the wilderness was overwhelming. What was five miles? I set up my tripod every hundred feet and saw a new vista unfold before me, a new stone, a new sea. After about two miles I began to wonder if I could climb one of the low ridges and find a shortcut



to the car. I decided to have a look but not leave the road if I couldn't actually SEE the other end of the horseshoe of pavement from the top of the hill. I figured a short cut off the road was probably the best way to end up lost and dead. Beyond the hill though was another, taller hill, so I backtracked to the road, resigned to the long way and walking in the dark. Even if it got to be pitch black, I'd still be able to feel my way across the asphalt. *And who knows, I thought, every ten or eleven hours, a car might even come through this way.*

As I approached the northern most curve of the road as it hair-pinned I cut across the sand while kangaroo rats scuttled across the sand in front of me — long eared jack rabbits loped and the crepuscular life of the Mojave came quickly alive. Here were many indications of a recent flash flood — the hammer that has chiseled this landscape. Patches of moist mud abounded.

I put my hand on the car door about ten minutes before it became pitch black.

In the car now I continue on, sometimes stopping to open the camera's shutter for outrageous periods of time, to see if I can paint the desert with scattered light from the sky. Eventually, I start using the glow of my cell phone on multi-minute exposures like a brush oozing light over the cacti and creosote bushes. The silence is almost audible, I've never, ever, heard quiet like this. Total, utter silence — apart from the noises



I myself am making, and in the pitch black which leaves only the outlines of mountains silhouetted against the slightly grey sky, it is like an enormous sensory deprivation tank. Coming, as I do, from a city, this is positively mind numbing.

It's as though the whole world belongs to me. I stop the car and get out, standing in the middle of the road, and as far as I can see in any direction there's not a light, not a sound, not a sign of a human being. The sheer expanse is intimidating, the aloneness. Always in the city you are interacting with other people, stepping on their traces, jostling them, and being jostled by them. But here, one might lie in the road and call it home and live unmolested.

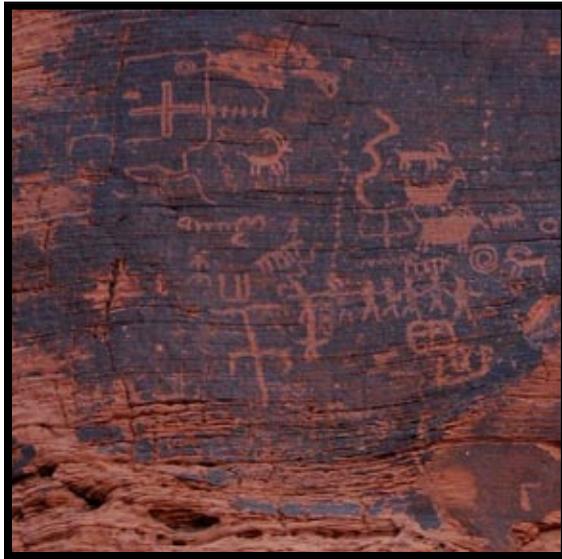
Here though my GPS connects me to the rest of the world, I'm not lost as long as I can see the sky. Down to feet I know where I am and how far I am from everything else. It makes the world seem manageable and I'm somehow comforted by the thought that I could return to this very, exact, same spot if I ever wanted to: I could lay a quarter down in the sand and come back twenty years later and find it.







BETWEEN THE SPEAR AND THE BOW WAS THE ATLATL....



An atlatl is to a spear as the recurve is to a bow ... the clever addition that makes a useful weapon a lot more useful. Physically, it's just a stick a foot or two long with a spur at one end that hooks on to the back of a spear and is used to prolong the thrower's contact with the shaft by essentially lengthening the arm. The result is a spear throw twice the distance of an unassisted one. I've seen video of a 60 pound child using an atlatl to hurl a spear through a full grown deer.

I remember as a ten year old making an atlatl with my father (who is a man fascinated by function) and using it to hurl an aluminum clothes pole across a baseball field.

The Anasazi began the transition from atlatl to the more useful bow and arrow, but they left drawings of atlatl's all over the southwest. On some of the petroglyphs you can see that the spears had fletching on them, like gigantic arrows to help them travel straighter. I see lots of drawings of big horn sheep, fat ones, skinny ones, medium sized ones, and what look like snakes, and maybe lizards and lots of people holding hands. I also find one that looks to be some guy about to throw a stick at a swing set.



No one reads petroglyphs, but I imagine they go something like this:
“Went for a walk today with my overweight friend. We saw a snake.”



Weapons development in the Mojave didn't stop with the bow and arrow. About 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas is the old Nevada Proving Ground, owned by the Atomic Energy Commission, where starting in 1951 the U.S. government has tested over a thousand nuclear bombs. You can actually get a tour of the Proving Grounds but, like the Moapa fireworks shop, cameras are strictly verboten. The detonations all have clever names like Operation Latchkey,” “Operation Bedrock” and “Operation Upshot-Knothole”. One of the most interesting was “Operation Plowshare” where in 1962 the government detonated a 104 kiloton nuclear device to show that bombs could be used to make artificial lakes and reservoirs and harbors. The resulting crater is 1280 feet across and 320 feet deep. You can find it on satellite photos at +37° 7' 0.00”, -116° 2' 60.00”.

Walking across Nevada finding arrowheads is not uncommon. I wonder what future archaeologists will make of all the pock marks and small mountains made by underground nuclear tests.





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RECEDING....

Some places are made by their geography, the people who live there are formed by their relationship with the sun, with water, and with distance. The American southwest wears its history on its sleeve, so to speak, the forces that formed it left their signature.

There's a saying amongst photographers: *F8 and be there*. Meaning that your camera's settings are not important, what's important is being in the right place.

The next morning I'm carrying my Hasselblad and tripod a bag of lenses and food and water and filters up a hill to find the right light and the right place. At the summit I meet David and Jim, two local photographers looking for the same thing. It's like a convention of high priced photo gear. We talk about cameras while the light approaches. This is old hat to them, they've been photographing nature and landscapes for years, but still it's not lost on them and they'll be back again and again.

The sunrise is a private performance for us as the light peeks up through the valley. A symphony of colors begins to play, grey stones become red, yellow, pastels — if we mined the color pink like we mine gold this place would be El Dorado.... In the crisp air I stand with my arms draped over the camera, unable to breathe in the great panorama



unfolding around me — the expanse of it is intimidating. Suddenly I realize that the saving grace of Las Vegas is that it's there. It's a place in the middle of the desert that millions of people come to every year. Most may be looking for nothing more than the numbing repetition of pulling a lever, watching an Elvis impersonator, and seeing if they can still drink as much as they did the night of the senior prom, now faded romantically into memory, but of those a small few may stop along the way — may find this dirt road, get out of the car as the sun is about to rise, walk up this hill, and look out over the Mojave to witness this unimaginable tapestry unraveling stories around them. And there, in that moment, like this one, while the sun sends the first curve of her crown between two mountains and across the stones, we all stand in dumbstruck wonder at how very very small we are, but how very lucky to have shared this one, unique moment with the Earth.



ABOUT WHAT'S LEFT....

Kyle Cassidy is a writer, photographer, and graphic designer living in Philadelphia. He is the author of six books, most recently *Armed America: Portraits of Gun Owners in Their Homes* which was named one of the ten best art books of 2007 by Amazon.com. His Photo-a-Week blog was one of the first photography blogs on the Internet and is viewed by some crazy thousands of people every day. He often writes about travel, photography, and video art and is a contributing editor for *Videomaker* magazine.



He realized he'd turned an important corner when he was no longer writing his own publicity blurbs, but still enjoys the idea of writing about himself in the third person. You can find him at www.kylecassidy.com.

The photographs were taken with a Leica d300 and a Hasselblad 500cm.

The text is set in Centaur, the captions and end notes are in Century Gothic and the title font is Trajen Pro.