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The view of Panamint Valley from atop Father Crowley Vista Point, with spring wildflowers in full bloom.

Diverse Desolation:

Flying to and Touring Death Valley National Park, California

by Matthew McDaniel

While covering only 26 miles in a 1.5-hour drive, we'd seen exactly one other vehicle. The temperature hovered in the mid-90s and the reflective surface of the dry lakebed caused me to squint behind my sunglasses. I encouraged my kids to take in the scene. Here we were, miles from anywhere, together; yet alone, standing on a world-famous landscape that only a fraction of a percent of the world's population has ever stepped foot on. The desolation was palpable and the danger in just being there was both simultaneously alarming and thrilling. Deep in the emptiness of Death Valley National Park (DVNP), one quickly senses the park's name is not a hyperbole.

Death Magnetic

There is something irresistible about remote places. Explorers have endured all manner of hardship to step foot where no man had before. In fact, many didn't live to tell the tale of their

discoveries. DVNP may not be as remote as the Poles or the summit of Mount Everest, but it can be every bit as deadly for the unprepared. Nonetheless, over a million people per year are drawn there. As national parks go, Death Valley is massive, encompassing 3.4 million acres. In fact, it covers an area roughly double the size of Delaware and is the largest U.S. national park outside of Alaska. First noticed by the National Park Service (NPS) in the 1920s, the area was designated a National Monument in 1933. Over six decades would pass before it was finally upgraded to National Park status in 1994. Its primary attraction is not any single location, but its diversity and extremes. Elevations rapidly climb from below sea level to over 11,000 feet in mere miles. Volcanic ridges, towering sand dunes, vast salt flats, incredible painted desert vistas, wildflower carpets, and temperature swings from single to triple digits within park microclimates scramble the senses. As such, DVNP can equally appeal to casual tourists and

Final approach, Runway 33 at L06. Furnace Creek Airport (L06) is one of two public-use airports within Death Valley National Park. The field is operated by the NPS, but no fuel or services are available. Use caution, as Runway 15 has a non-standard right-hand traffic pattern and the non-paved shoulders can be quite soft even when bone dry.



passionate rovers alike. A number of features appeal to pilots and aerial adventurers in particular. The most obvious are two paved, public-use airports within the park, each easily capable of supporting Cirrus operations. Aviation and Death Valley are far more compatible than the park's ominous name might imply.

I was aware of DVNP's Furnace Creek Airport (L06) for many years before ever landing there. If you're a bit of an "airport collector," like myself, you're probably already aware that it is the lowest elevation airport in the Western Hemisphere with a field elevation of -210 feet. It is also the hottest airport on earth, where scorching summer temperatures can push density altitudes to nearly 5,000 feet, in spite of the field's below sea level elevation. Death Valley's second airport is Stovepipe Wells (L09). It lies above sea level at a lofty +25 feet MSL. Several other airports encircle the park, as well. While most of them can also support Cirrus operations, they all lay outside the official park boundaries.

Nearly all of DVNP is below military airspace; non-restrictive Military Operations Areas (MOAs) cover a majority of the park's acreage. Additionally, several Restricted Areas share a common boundary with the park's southern edge. Most of the MOAs do not include the airspace below 3,000 feet AGL, which allows general aviation pilots to land at Furnace Creek and Stovepipe Wells without penetrating them. Aerial touring of the park is also theoretically possible between the 3,000-foot floor of the MOAs and the 2,000-foot AGL altitude that all pilots are requested to maintain above national protected lands, such as national parks, memorials, wildlife refuges, and other areas administered by the NPS [Refer to AIM 7-4-6 and to Advisory Circular AC91-36]. However, for any sightseeing flights over the park, pilots should check NOTAMs and contact the controlling agency to determine current operational status before operating in, below or

adjacent to military airspace. Careful planning and attention to the sharp terrain gradients is also a must.

Located only a mile from the airport, the main park visitor center is adjacent to the town of Furnace Creek and the two resorts there. The Oasis at Death Valley is the newer, more upscale resort. The Furnace Creek Inn has been in operation almost since tourism began in 1927 and includes much history and panache. In the end, either resort will meet your needs for lodging, meals and amenities. The airport itself is perfectly suitable for Cirrus operations with clear approaches to both runway ends (15/33) and 3,065 x 70 feet of usable asphalt runway. While it's not in perfect condition, it is acceptable. Care should be taken to remain on the paved surfaces at all times, as the shoulders can be very soft dirt. There are four mountain ranges between Death Valley and the Pacific Ocean. Those ranges push Pacific clouds ever higher, cooling them and extracting most (or all) their moisture along the way, keeping Death Valley's average rainfall to less than 2 inches per year. Thus, the area seldom experiences IFR weather conditions and no instrument procedures exist. However, planning ahead is a must. The airport is unattended and no fuel is available. Crews should bring their own chocks and tie-downs. Your cellphone signal may be marginal or non-existent, but a landline phone is available near the bathrooms (adjacent to the parking apron). With pre-arrangement, either resort will pick up incoming guests at the airport. Similarly, arrangements for rental vehicles can be made to coincide with arrival at your chosen resort.

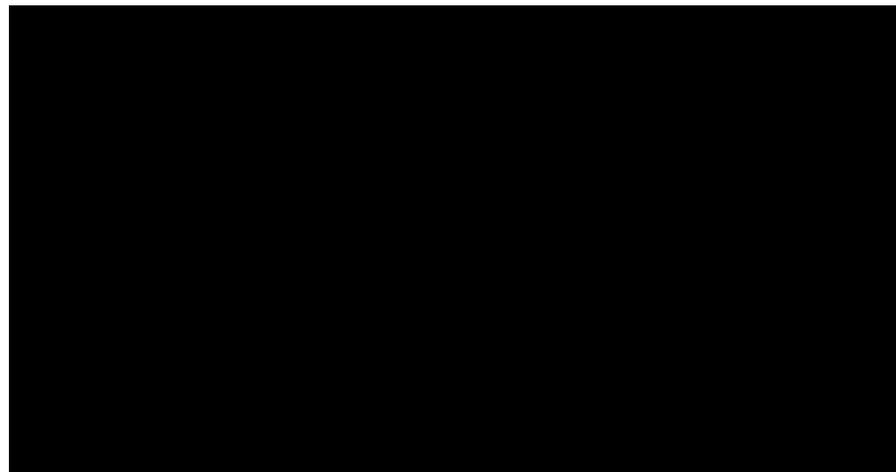
Stovepipe Wells might not check the "lowest airport" or even the "below sea level" box, but it is a viable alternate to Furnace Creek. All the same caveats apply, but L09's runway (05/23) is a bit longer at 3,260 x 65 feet and in similar condition. Situated across the street from the tiny village, its only about a 10-minute walk to the local resort – Stovepipe Wells Village

Hotel – with its western style restaurant and saloon; it has perfectly adequate rooms and amenities as well. Rental cars here require pre-arrangement and may be more difficult and expensive to reserve, but if you are looking to avoid the crowds without totally abandoning the civilized trappings of climate-controlled lodging and prepared meals, Stovepipe Wells can fit that bill nicely.

Death Valley is also relatively close to Las Vegas, opening many additional options for airports, FBOs and high-level aircraft services. Since I'd already flown into Furnace Creek and Stovepipe Wells multiple times, and I was traveling with my wife and two kids, we elected to fly into Las Vegas McCarran International Airport (LAS). Rental car options are plentiful and inexpensive in Vegas, as is lodging; allowing us to get a full night's rest before launching into DVNP the following morning. We rented a high-clearance vehicle and found the two-hour drive to Furnace Creek to be quite pleasant. By leaving Nevada on Highway 160 and entering California on Highway 190, you pass through Death Valley Junction and enter the park from the southeast, only a few miles from Furnace Creek.

Ghosts and Aliens

As with most national parks, Death Valley has a tourist season and an offseason. Summers (May-Oct) are brutally hot. So hot, in fact, that the highest temperature ever recorded on earth (134.1°F) occurred at Furnace Creek Ranch in 1913. Thus, November through April are far more popular for tourism, with March and April being particularly well liked in years when the spring desert wildflower bloom is forecast to be especially abundant. We chose April mostly to coincide with our kid's school spring-break schedule, but were pleasantly surprised by the relatively uncrowded conditions and amazing desert diversity on display that time of year. Even in April, the temperatures in the low elevations were hot and we planned our days to be in the valleys in the early morning and again in the evenings, while spending the peak-heating hours in the higher elevations of the park.



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A solitary Union Pacific caboose is just one of the many abandoned items and structures at the Rhyolite Ghost Town site, near the current town of Beatty, Nevada.

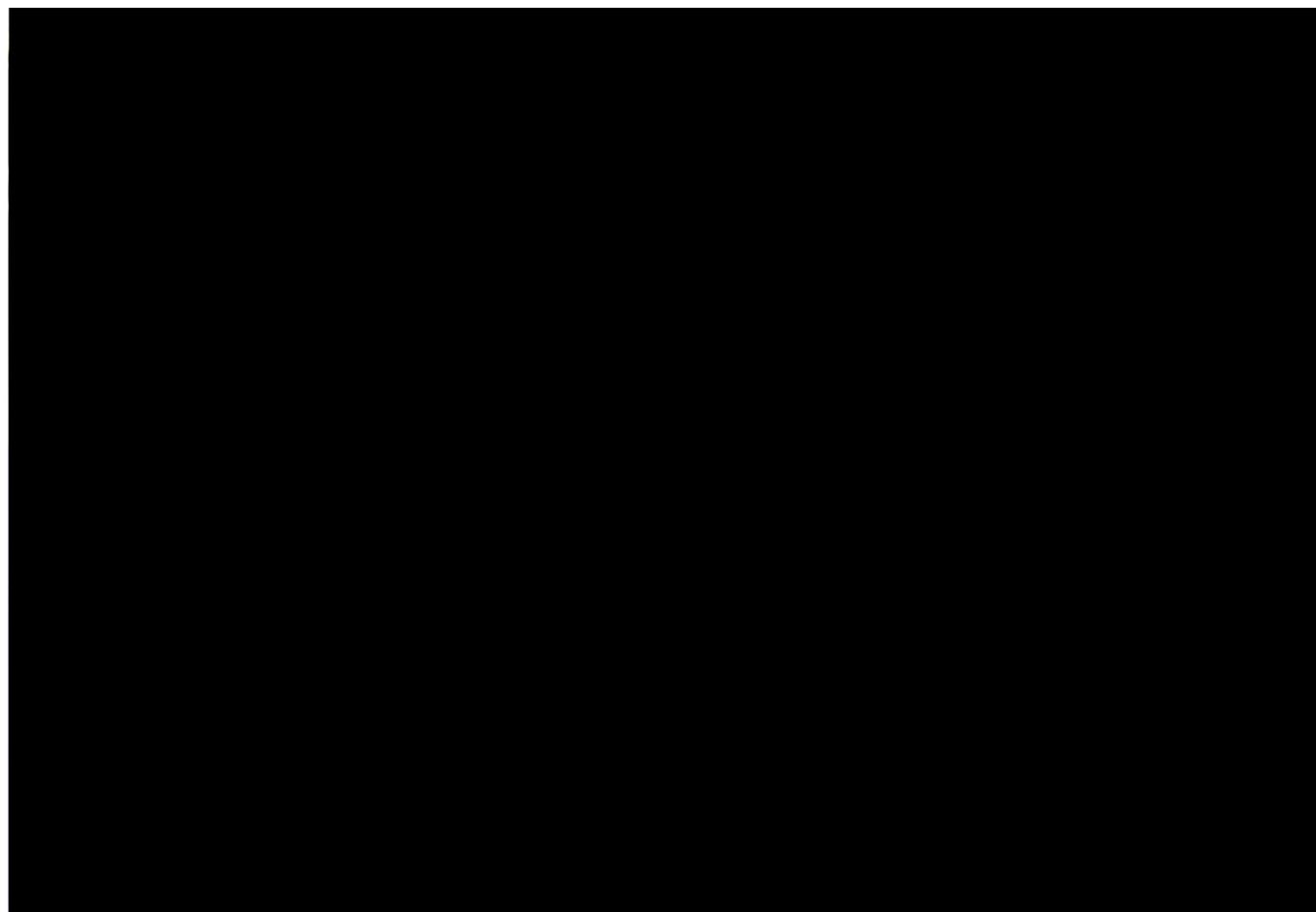


you'd have missed the true spirit of DVNP. Our exploring began along Highway 190, where we drove through the 20-Mule Team Canyon before taking in the breathtaking vista of colorful badlands from Zabriskie Point. Then, just beyond Furnace Creek, a quick stop at the Harmony Borax Works provides historical background on the borax mining industry that first brought non-natives to the area (mostly laborers). It was that industry which utilized the famous 20 mule teams to haul wagon trains of borax weighing in excess of 30 tons. While short-lived (1891-1898), the 165-mile mule trek from the mine sites to Mojave is an image that still endures today in advertising of borax products. Further north, the Salt Creek Interpretative Trail is a great opportunity to stretch a bit, while walking the wooden boardwalks and stopping to watch rare pupfish feeding in the shallow pools of the salt marsh.

It's a strategy that worked well, allowing us to enjoy reasonable temperatures throughout the day, while avoiding most the extremes that Death Valley is famous for.

It's important to understand that covering the distances between points of interest within DVNP without a car isn't feasible. For getting the most from touring, a Jeep or other high-clearance vehicle is necessary. Otherwise, many roads will be uncomfortable, impractical or even prohibited. Dirt and gravel paths allow access to some of the most desolate, yet desirable, locations within the park. By skipping them,

Proceeding northeast along Daylight Pass Road toward Beatty, the namesake town of the co-located VOR, a fun excursion awaits just outside the park boundary; Rhyolite Town Site. The largest of several ghost towns near Death Valley, Rhyolite was once home to over 10,000 people around 1905-1910. Wandering around and through its long-abandoned bank and train depot, one can't help but wonder how a town so large (50 saloons, 19 hotels, 18 stores, various doctors, dentists and undertakers) can seemingly just evaporate into the dry air. The mute folk art



sculptures just add to the eerie stillness of the place.

Leaving ghosts in our rearview, we headed back west. If you have a four-wheel drive vehicle, consider using the Titus Pass Road to re-enter the park. It's a slow ride on a rough and challenging road, but the views within and beyond this deep, narrow, gorge, within the Grapevine Mountains, is reward enough. Eventually, you'll exit onto Scotty's Castle Road, from which you can rejoin Highway 190 to continue to the park's western edge. Stop for refreshments as you pass through Stovepipe Wells or Panamint Springs, but don't linger too long. Slightly further west, Father Crowley Vista Point beckons lovers of aviation ... and believers in celestial visitors. Aviation photographers and plane spotters traverse the globe to set up their tripods on the cliff sides of Crowley. Abeam those cliffs, military fighter and attack aircraft dive steeply through Rainbow Canyon toward the dry lake beds of Panamint Valley. They bank and strain under G-forces as they navigate between black lava flows and volcanic cinders into a twisting gorge often referred to as "Star Wars Canyon." Small areas of designated airspace allow them to descend to low-level at near supersonic speeds. Often looking down on the fighters as they scream through the gorges and valleys below you, it's a view no airshow can compete with! Search online for information sources about prime viewing times and utilize hand-held UHF radios for clues of inbound fast movers. Some spectators are more into E.T. than F-22s and believe me, this area is ripe with proof of interstellar travelers. Their tripods, long lenses, and lawn chairs tend to have a little more flair than those of traditional plane spotters!

Shifting Sands and Water Sources

After the adrenaline rush of Father Crowley Vista, head back east for a brief hike to reconvene with nature. Just before Panamint Springs, take the unmarked gravel road to Darwin Falls. From the trailhead, the scenery quickly changes from gravel dust to green and lush, along the 1-mile (mostly shaded)



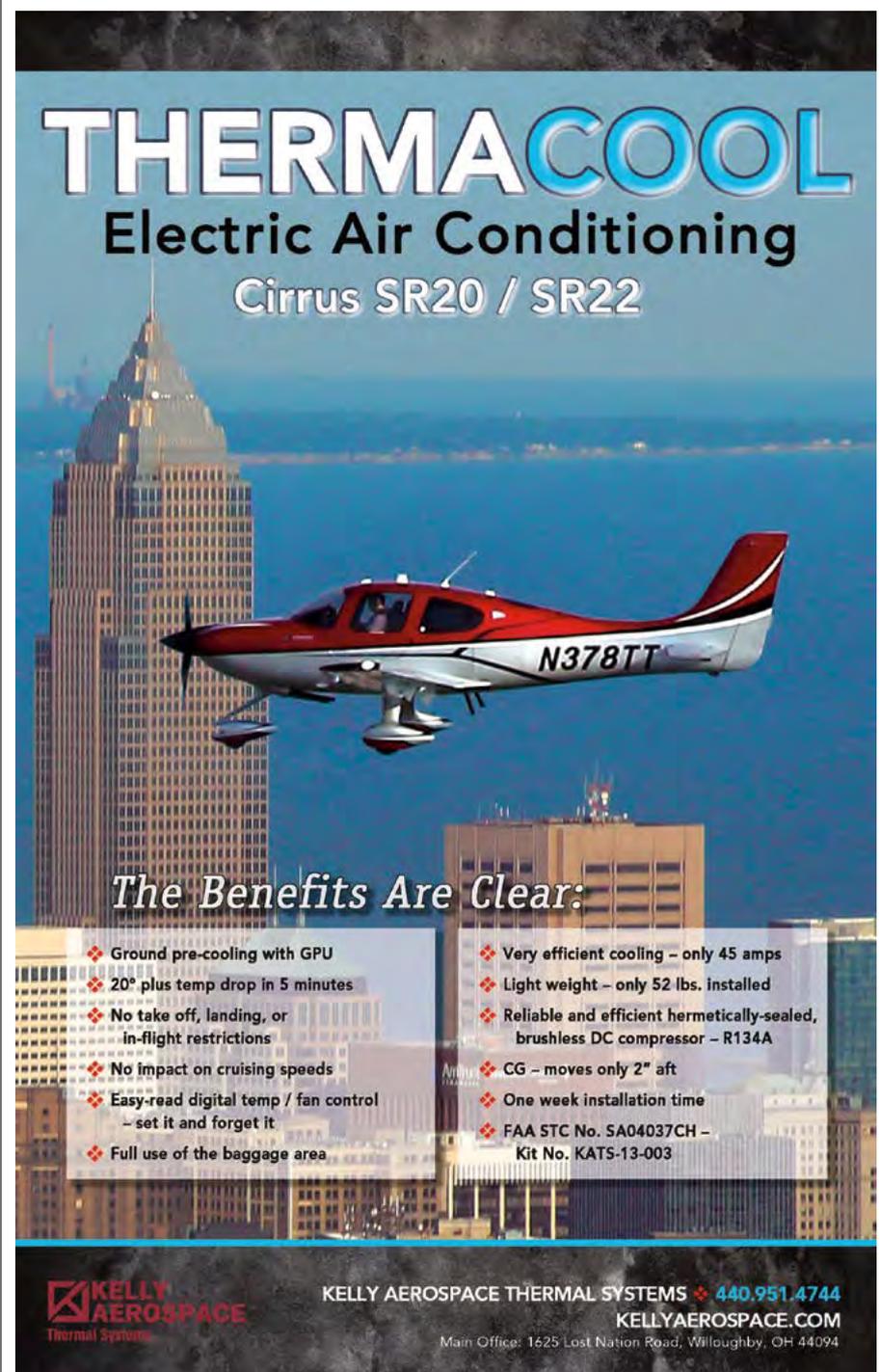
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The author's son relaxes at Darwin Falls. This unexpected oasis provides not only a beautiful hike in green and shaded vegetation, but it is also the sole water source for nearby Panamint Springs.

Death Valley's Natural Bridge, with the moon reflecting above, is one of many scenic hikes available throughout the park's southern portions.



hike to this desert waterfall. A bit of required scrambling up rocks along the way keeps it interesting. No swimming though, as Darwin Falls remains Panamint Springs' sole water source.

While DVNP is known for its vast salt basins and high peak overlooks, it also contains some expansive sand dune fields. The most accessible are the Mesquite Flat Dunes (near the geographic center of DVNP), where you can hike across the dunes while staying within a mile of the parking area. This dune field is popular for sunrise, sunset or full-moon strolls. For more aggressive dune hiking, be prepared and equipped for the conditions and environment. For example, the Panamint Dunes are accessible only by four-wheel drive, followed by a 7-mile roundtrip hike.

How Low Can You Go?

Any visit to DVNP would be incomplete without setting foot on the lowest land in North America. Heading south out of Furnace Creek, take Highway 178 for a daytrip through the park's most famous areas. Many sites along the way, allow for great opportunities to break up the drive with frequent short hikes. Golden Canyon, The Devil's Golf Course, Natural Bridge, and Mormon Point are each unique experiences. Artist's Palette is a 9-mile scenic driving loop through the hills displaying many hues and bands of color.

The main attraction of this southeast section of DVNP is Badwater Basin. A sprawling salt flat, the basin's lowest elevation is -282 feet MSL. Walking in the small briny pond areas is not permitted, but one can stroll across the salt flat for miles. Arrive early, as temperatures can reach dangerous levels by midmorning out on the dry lakebed. The salt left behind when the water evaporated a few thousand years



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A very small portion of Death Valley's Badwater Basin salt flats, looking east toward Dante's View. The mountains of Death Valley are some of the tallest on earth (from base to peak altitudes), sharply rising from below sea level to above 11,000 feet.

ago is up to 5 feet thick in places. Badwater Basin is one of the park's many areas where extremely low elevations rise quickly into towering mountains. Practically right across the highway, tourist peer down at the salt walkers from the nearly 5,500 feet elevation of Dante's View. The rising sun reflecting

off the white salt flat and illuminating this steep rock face make for spectacular morning viewing and photography.

Wildflowers and Racing Rocks

Of all the fascinating features of DVNP, perhaps none is more mysterious than the famous sailing stones of Racetrack Playa. Getting to them is an adventure unto itself. We headed northeast on 190, then up Scotty's Castle Road to where the pavement ends at Ubehebe Crater. Ubehebe's south face was covered with vibrant wildflowers as visually explosive as the steam eruption that created the crater centuries ago. From the parking area near the north rim, you can take the moderate hike along the rim or the grueling hike to the bottom of the 700-foot crater (and back up again). Be advised, sturdy shoes are required to negotiate the steep terrain and loose rocky soil.

After touring Ubehebe, you are faced with a decision. All points further west in the park are via unpaved roads. You could simply return whence you came. Or, if properly prepared and equipped, you can choose to venture down one of the dirt or

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Two of the famous "Racing Rocks" resting on the cracked mud surface of Racetrack Playa; their "tracks" imprinted behind them. This utterly remote portion of Death Valley shrouded the mystery of these moving rocks for centuries. It can be years, decades, or even longer before conditions are right to move some of the rocks to new locations on the playa. Only in very recent years has this phenomenon been captured in action and previous theories scientifically proven or disproven. Yet, mystery still surrounds many of the specifics related to these "sailing stones" and what perfect set of conditions cause them to move.

gravel roads to more remote tracts of DVNP. For us that decision was to brave the notorious Racetrack Road to walk among the mystifying racing rocks. Not to be taken lightly, the 26-mile drive (each way) alternates between tooth-chattering washboard surface to inching across jagged rocks, all while twisting through ruts, gaps, washes, stands of Joshua trees, and the occasional patch of vivid wildflowers (if you're lucky). You'll rarely exceed 20 MPH (if you want tires and suspension to remain intact). Yet, who can skip such an opportunity and not regret it later?

Racetrack Playa is a dry lakebed imprinted with the "tracks" of stones (large and small) that "sail" across the surface. At the north end, an island of black rock erupts from the playa in stark contrast to its surroundings. With a quick climb, this "Grandstand" provides a perfect viewpoint of the "Racetrack" that encircles it. Theories of how the rocks move across the playa's beige-mud surface abounded



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for decades. The remoteness of the lakebed, harsh conditions to be endured to remain on-site for long-term observation and research, and years between the right set of conditions, have stymied scientists since the 1940s. Finally, in 2013 scientists were there at the right time to narrow, if not totally solve, the mystery.

Fortunately, nothing adds to an adventure like a bit of mystery and Death Valley has that in spades. Consider a trip to this remote, yet easily accessible national treasure. Complete with a choice of airports and resorts to choose from, a visit is yet another reason to exercise your Cirrus time machine and your flying muscles. ⊕

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Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 30 years of flying, he has logged over 18,500 hours total, over 5,500 hours of instruction-given, and over 5,000 hours in all models of the Cirrus. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (www.progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he is an Airbus A-320-Series captain for an international airline, holds 8 turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown over 90 aircraft types. Matt is one of less than 15 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for 9 consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at: matt@progaviation.com or (414) 339-4990.



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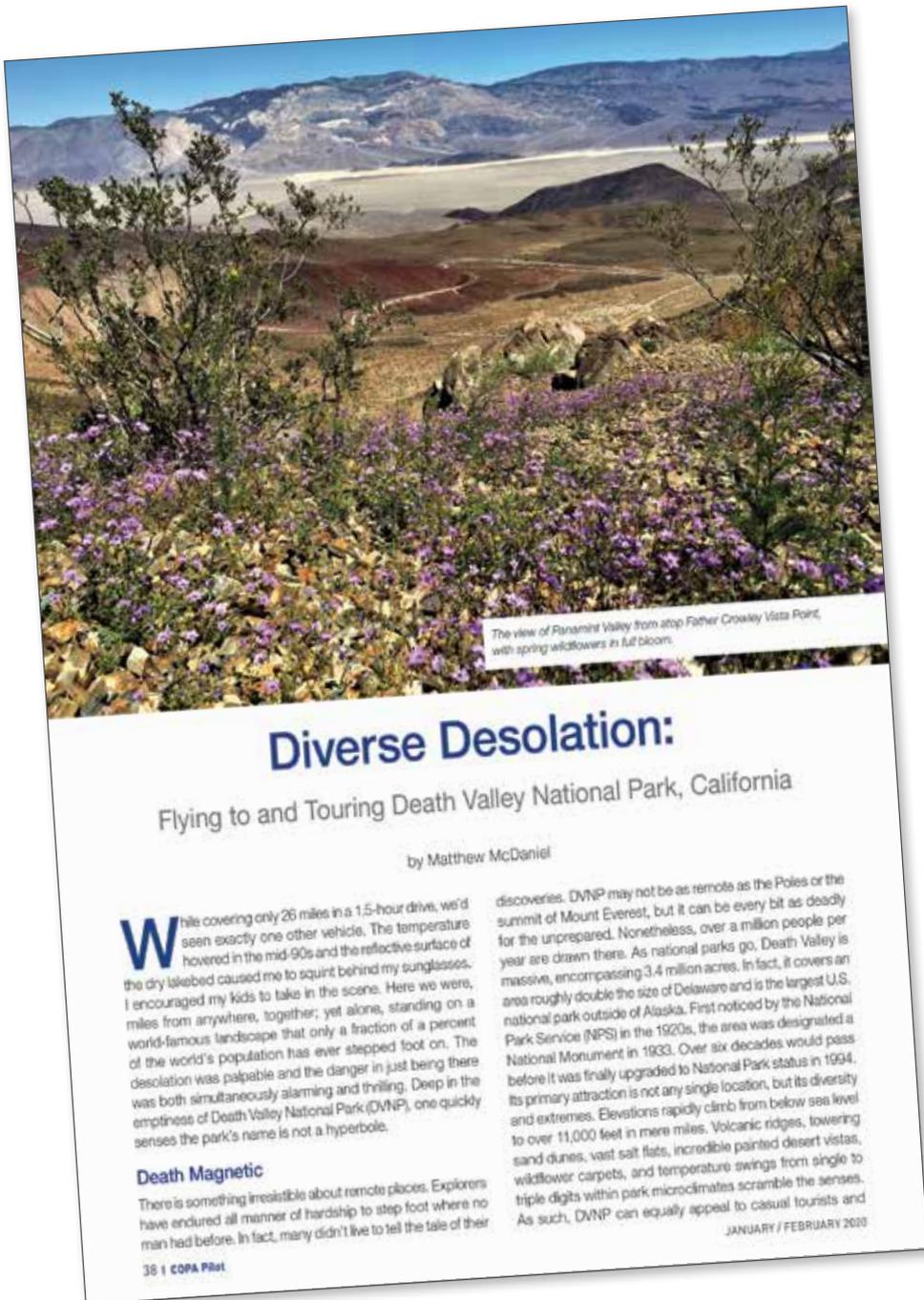
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Comments on Death Valley Article



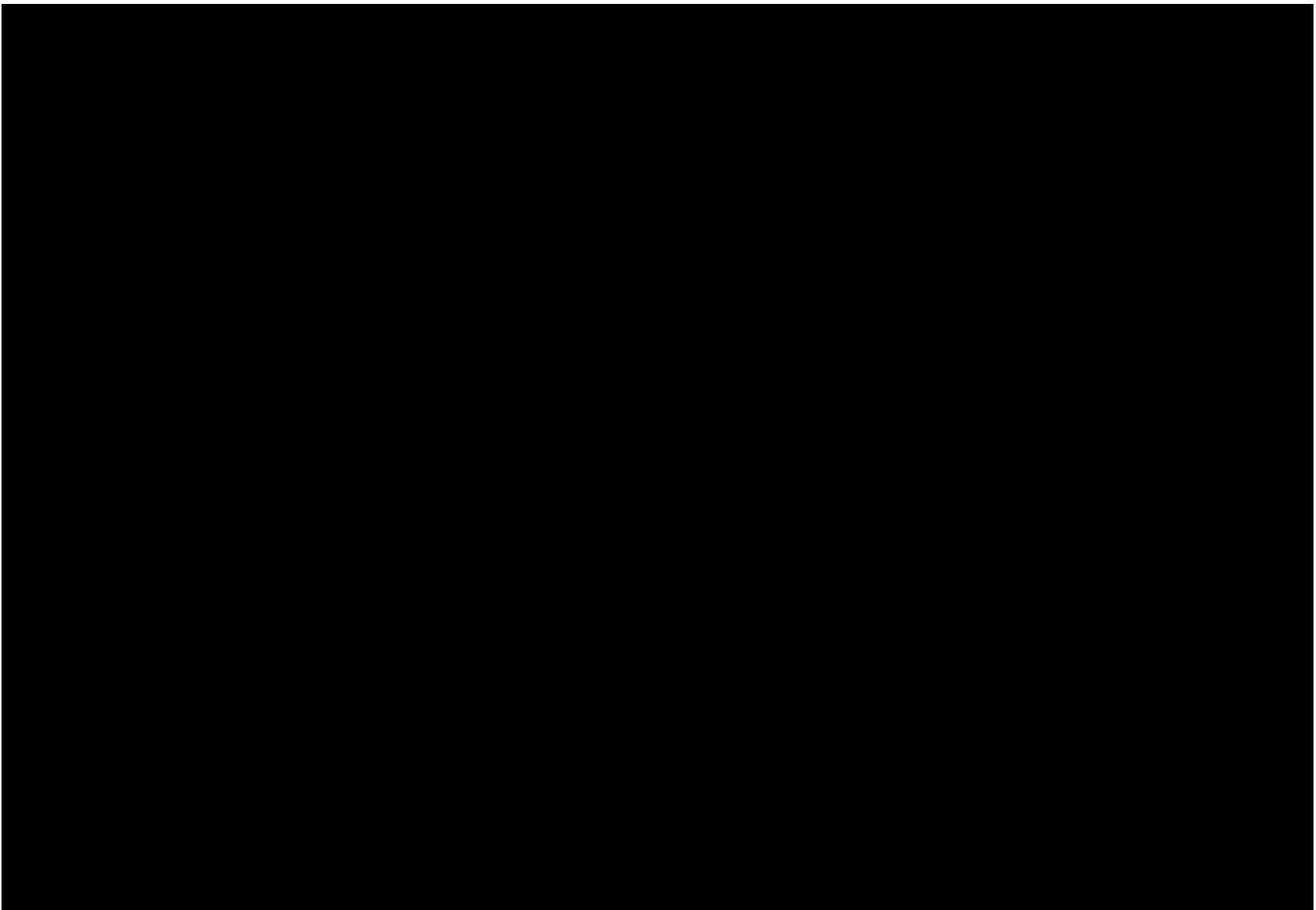
In my 17-plus years of writing aviation articles, rarely has one generated as much correspondence as *Diverse Desolation: Flying to and Touring Death Valley National Park, California*, (written during the summer 2019) which appeared in the January/February 2020 issue of *COPA Pilot*. I received numerous emails and phone calls about the article, universally complimentary of its style, photos, information and general content. To say I am flattered would be an understatement. ▶

Final approach, Runway 33 at Furnace Creek Airport (L06).



Many of those contacting me were planning future visits to Death Valley National Park (DVNP) themselves and were looking for additional details and suggestions about the area (in general) and Furnace Creek Airport (in particular). It seems that opinions about the airport's current condition were mixed across "internet land" and even within several "reliable"

sources. As mentioned in the article, my flights to both Furnace Creek (L06) and Stovepipe Wells (L09) airports were in years past and the trip which generated the article began by flying into Las Vegas International (LAS), then driving into DVNP from there. The photo taken on final to L06's Runway 33 (shown above) was also taken on one of those visits from years past. ▶



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In the course of responding to the many messages I received, I learned that the National Park Service (NPS) had issued a news release about the current condition of L06's runway (released after the article was published). Obviously, I encourage all pilots to always check NOTAMs and other sources of information about airport conditions before using any airport or aviation facility. Doing so is not only good aviator-sense, but it is required. Sometimes getting real time and accurate information can be difficult at remote and/or low-utilization airports. Such is the case within DVNP. I'm sad to report that the NPS is now reporting that numerous cracks and bumps have developed on L06's runway. This damage has been caused by the runway's close proximity to the water table and salt-surface heaving from below. The airport does, however, remain open and in daily use. Its runway condition is now stated to be "poor" and pilots are warned to take appropriate precautions. Due to an estimated cost of \$3 million, repairs are unlikely to happen anytime soon. The NPS also stated that Stovepipe Wells airport (L09) is in better condition and remains a viable alternative for pilots flying into DVNP.

Again, I'd like to express my appreciation to all those who took the time to contact me with kind remarks about the article. I often learn great information from my readers, just like any good instructor endeavors to both teach and learn from their students. May your future aviation explorations be both safe and enjoyable.

Sincerely,

Matthew McDaniel

ATP, CFII, MEI, Platinum CSIP, 9-Time Master CFI

Matt@progaviation.com ☺