

Sunday, December 4th

I had a whole day to explore on Sunday and I'd been contemplating going down to the Salton Sea when Anne Elisabeth informed me of the existence of Slab City and Salvation Mountain. I spent some quality time with maps and things fell into place; I'd head down to the Salton Sea and circle it clockwise, taking in whatever desert madness I could on the way. There was plenty to choose from.



Sunrise outside my lodging in Yucca Valley.

It was barely above freezing when I left, difficult to dress for a day when you plan on hiking and driving through forty degree temperature swings. I dropped down south, circling Palm Springs and then took a detour at Mecca. I was hoping to hike the Painted Canyon's

Ladders trail.



"Road" to Painted Canyon.

Online reviews noted it was posted as four wheel only access but some visitors in normal cars seemed able to make the trek. Others got stuck attempting to do so. Nobody mentioned attempting it on a motorbike, which is good enough for me so off I went!



Sand Trail

It's a neat drive, out of the desert and into these rocky hills, but it's packed sand at the best of times. I made it to the trailhead but the parking lot was all loose sand and I veered dangerously around making sure I didn't stop moving and struggling to stay upright. Eventually I gave up; there was no way I was going to be able to park the bike much less get it started if I stopped. I veered, swerved, and occasionally used my feet to push me back out drawing surprised stares by motorists struggling to drive the other way.



"Passable for 4 Wheel Drive Vehicles Only" – entrance to Painted Canyon

Anyhow, I bet it's an awesome hike, but maybe don't try accessing the trailhead on two wheels.



Water in the Desert

Seeing open air rivers and canals in the desert always freaks me out a little bit. It's like watching liquid gold casually drift by.



Haulin'

I stopped by the gas station in Mecca to refuel and saw the above packing job trundle through.

While I hadn't been able to visit my first planned stop for the day it wasn't all bad. I was a bit worried I'd be returning in the dark, so saving a couple of hours was a relief. I got back on the main road and headed towards the nearby Salton Sea.



Howdy!

I did not wire money to anyone from the attached shop but did stop long enough to say “hi” to Burt. It’s often difficult to tell exactly what prompted certain crazy desert creations. Looks like he used to be holding something? I also tried to stop at the nearby International Banana Museum but it was closed at the moment.



The Salton Sea! There's a picnic table still open!

We probably need to talk about the Salton Sea. It’s a crazy thing; an inland lake below sea level in the middle of a desert. It’s extremely salty and the largest lake in California. It’s also an accident. Historically the Colorado River moved around a lot, and would occasionally come through here and make this a big fresh water lake, then change paths and this would shrink and become increasingly briny before turning back to desert until the river came back a few hundred years later. The last naturally occurring time this happened seems to be in the 1600-1700 time frame.

European types find wandering rivers to be inconvenient and through various machinations we've mostly nailed the Colorado River into place. Except in 1905 when a miscalculation led to a cut in the Colorado River overwhelming engineered canals for two years until it could be fixed. This was long enough to recreate the Salton Sea. Today it's fed only by agricultural runoff and the little rainfall in the region and is shrinking and increasing in salinity.

In the 1950's there was a boom in tourism, but the increasingly polluted (agricultural runoff) and salty (it's saltier than the ocean by now) water doesn't smell too good and leads to things like masses of dead fish washing up. So now there's really not much left around it. Abandoned structures? Water in the desert? The occasional beach made up of fish and bird skeletons? Yes, of course I love it out here.



A desert resort!



Fishes at the Salton Sea. No vacationers sunning themselves by the shore today.

Salvation at Slab City



Picnic Time! I did have a snack here although the smell is not the most appetizing.



Perhaps not the busy season.

Eventually I dragged myself away and headed down the road, making a left through Niland and out towards the famous Slab City.



Welcome to Slab City, "The Last Free Place".

Slab City is basically a bunch of folks in RVs squatting in the desert. No power, no water, no sewer, no taxes, just a bunch of run down vehicles and a lot of trash strewn about. It's just a few miles from nearby Niland, which is a tiny town but has things like a grocery store. I saw a few folks bicycling or walking that direction. Before you get to Slab City there is the amazing Salvation Mountain.



Salvation Mountain

One man, inspired by god, with a hill, some junk and a whole lot of acrylic paint.



Salvation Mountain



Salvation Tractor



An inspired desert scooter!

After Salvation it was time to scooter through Slab City and into a local art collective: East Jesus.



Welcome to East Jesus.



Art of East Jesus



Is that a rocket in your mouth or are you just happy to eat me?

Salvation at Slab City



Obey!



Don't Kill Mermaids

Important anti-dolphin propaganda from East Jesus. It was a bit of a theme.



Desert Elephant



East Jesus

I spoke for a while with one of the inhabitants of East Jesus, an older man with white beard, dressed all in black with a matching beret and wood cane. He claimed to have spent times “in both sides of mental institutions”. It was pretty much the exact conversation one would expect.

Salvation at Slab City



Not a great photo, but representative of most of Slab City. Piles of old vehicles and trash.



Love Wins – Leaving Slab City.



Niland was perhaps more thriving in times past.



Aqua 2000

You know you're in the desert when you see freestanding water vending machines.

I slowly drove around the Salton Sea, going from desert scrub to long rows of trees and other agriculture. The pastel hues of the sea appearing and vanishing off to my right.



Salton Sea from the east; the park I first visited is on the other side.



Unlawful to Litter



Mural



Pioneer Town

I ended up back near Yucca Valley in Pioneer Town. There's a bar there (Pappy & Harriet's) that's well known for bringing in music. It's definitely an attraction, but I had no idea that "Pioneer Town" actually did have a fully operational little wild-west set of shops in it. At this point I was tired and hungry. The bar was filled to the brim and I didn't feel like waiting so I got back on the bike and arrived home as the shadows were lengthening. It'd been a long and lovely day.



Cholla and Joshua Trees as the sun sets.