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Name Giant Rock

Location Southern Mojave Desert, northwest of Landers, California

Size Seven stories tall

Claim to fame The geologic erratic has been the site of UFO conventions, epic raves and meditation gatherings

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Landers, California

It is deep summer on the southern edge of the Mojave Desert — a hallucinatory landscape of mesas and basins, dotted with creosote bushes and Joshua trees that dance in the heat of late afternoon. Here, just off Old Woman Springs Road and down a rutted path, sits Giant Rock. Slate-gray and shaped like a tilted egg, it stands seven stories high on a patch of bare Bureau of Land Management scrub. There's not much out here, just snakes and sand and emptiness all the way to the horizon. It's sort of a poor man's Ayers Rock, a place that has inspired its human visitors to extremes of both reverence and abuse.

Local legend has it that the Chemehuevi people, who have lived in the high desert for thousands of years, witnessed the rock's arrival: Their ancestors watched it float down from the sky in a beam of sunlight, light as a bubble, before it came to rest on the Earth. Supposedly, tribes from all over the Southwest came to see this sacred rock, but only the highest-ranking chiefs were allowed to lay their hands on it.

Giant Rock found devotees of a different sort in the 20th century. One was Frank Critzer, a German immigrant who was trying to make a living as a prospector in the desert. Critzer excavated a home under the rock and was living there when he met George Van Tassel, a Los Angeles aeronautical engineer and test pilot with an interest in extraterrestrials. Critzer died in the 1940s; according to some accounts, local law enforcement, who suspected him of being a Nazi spy, raided his underground home with tear-gas canisters and set off a store of dynamite.

After Critzer's death, Van Tassel moved to Giant Rock. In the early 1950s, Van Tassel claimed that Venusians had contacted him during a meditation session and instructed him to devote his life to building a "human rejuvenation chamber" on the "energy vortex" surrounding this stark spot. So he constructed a white dome-shaped "Integratron" a few miles away and hosted UFO conventions, which, at their peak, drew upwards of 10,000 people. Van Tassel and his wife, Eva, also operated the "Giant Rock Interplanetary Airstrip" as well as a restaurant next to the rock. Howard Hughes, for whom Van Tassel once worked as a test pilot, occasionally dropped in for a slice of apple pie.

After Van Tassel died, the spacecraft conventions ended, and Giant Rock became another backroad Mojave curiosity, as neglected as the ramshackle trailers that dot the landscape here. But its remoteness held a lure of its own, and in the 1980s and 1990s, the rock became the site of epic parties and open-air raves held under the star-spangled desert sky. In the 1990s, a teenager from the nearby town of Joshua Tree died at such a party, overdosing on the drug GHB.

The most recent chapter in the rock's story is weird even by California standards. On Feb. 20, 2000, at 8:20 in the morning, Giant Rock split apart for no apparent reason. A slice the size of an eighteen-wheel truck fell away, exposing a pure white granite interior. A Los Angeles shaman and his followers, who said that they'd been praying at the rock for days, claimed that the split fulfilled a prophecy. For their part, BLM personnel theorized that heat from years of bonfires might be responsible.

Recently, Giant Rock has found new acolytes. Members of the Friends of Giant Rock occasionally remove graffiti and pick up trash from the area, but their cleanup efforts seldom endure. Today, Giant Rock is burn-scarred and scrawled with graffiti — *Slayer*, a few swastikas, I Love You Lover. Car parts, broken beer bottles and a shredded sleeping bag litter the ground, reminders that the rock's strange pull — and its devotees' irreverent worship — endure.

Michelle Theriault freelances from Anchorage, Alaska.

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