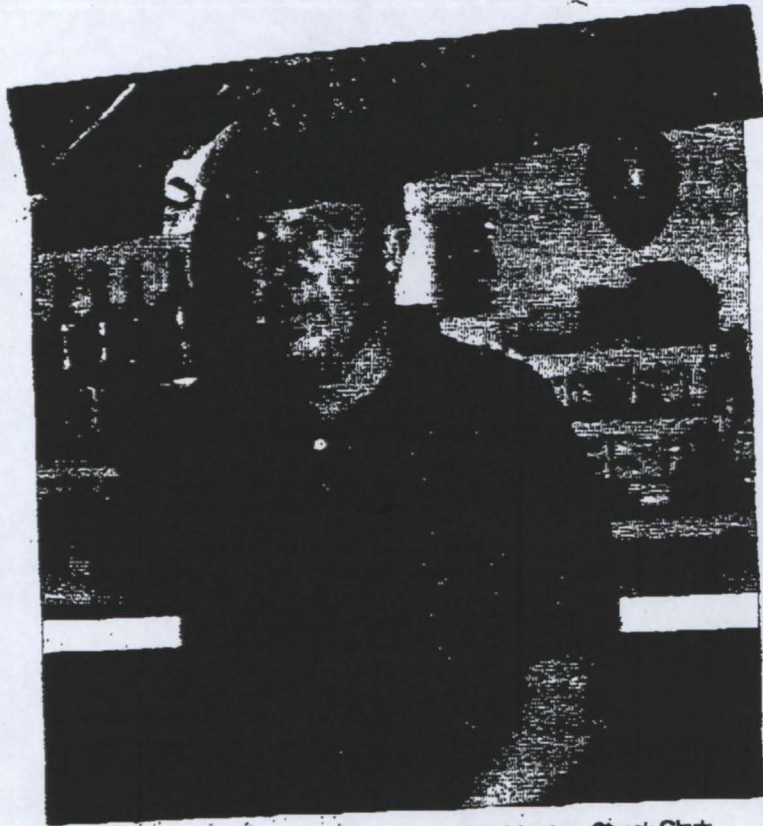


GREETINGS TO THOSE WHO DARE: The road sign by the Extraterrestrial Highway.



SPACE MAN: UFO expert and possible Martian, Chuck Clark.

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Nevada nightwatch and real-life X-Files

A small town in the Nevada desert is known as the UFO capital of the world. **BRETT THOMAS** entered the Twilight Zone.

TWILIGHT was just starting to darken the endless desert skies above the Little A'Le'Inn at Rachel, Nevada (population 100, or thereabouts) as Chuck Clark, the town's resident UFO expert, warmed to his favourite topic.

"We may be Martians," said Chuck, his excitement evident by the spittle foaming in the corners of his mouth. "We may be evolved versions of Martians who came to this planet millions of years ago and managed to scrape by."

It was hard not get to get caught up in the spirit of Chuck's argument. All around the cosy restaurant-cum-hotel-cum-bar were reminders that perhaps we're not alone; plastic ET dolls, models of flying saucers, photographs of strange objects hovering in the sky... shades of *The X-Files*.

The eerie feeling was further enhanced by the establishment's roadside sign.

"Earthlings welcome" was the greeting printed next to a drawing of an alien.

At a table nearby, a bearded, burly visitor from California was telling an elderly tourist couple about their past lives while his female companion talked to someone else about her "personal angel".

Right behind me, pinned to the wall, was a notice from Lady Seraphim Isis III and Ambassador Merina II, who claim to be the Earth-bound representatives of a distant civilisation in outer space.

"Tourists from Alpha Centauri will land on Nevada's Extra Terrestrial Highway in approximately three years," said the memo, dated April 9, 1996.

I gulped. The Extra Terrestrial Highway, the official name of Nevada State Route 375 since last February, ran right outside the Little A'Le'Inn. What if the visitors came early?

Rachel, some two-and-a-half hours drive north west of Las Vegas, is the only town with any kind of amenities along the 163km stretch of road, famous for its many UFO sightings and proximity to the mysterious US military establishment known as Area 51.

Surely, the Alpha Centaurians would want a drink or a hamburger after such a long trip.

Luckily, Chuck - relatively pragmatic as far as people who think we're descended from Martians go - put me at ease.

"I'm much more inclined to believe these (UFO sightings) are inter-dimensional craft rather than extra terrestrials," said the 50-year-old amateur astronomer, photographer and deep-sea fishing fanatic.

"A lot of the theoretical physicists now believe there are as many as 10 or 23 dimensions that we don't discern with our senses. There could be entire civilisations inhabiting the same space we're living in now and it seems much more logical that the visitors are coming from those other dimensions rather than travelling all those light years through space."

By now, the sky had turned a deep shade of blue-black.

Chuck suggested it was time for us to drive to an infamous area known as the "black mailbox" where it was most likely a sighting would be made.

When we reached the mailbox, a roadside parking spot about 30km south of Rachel on the ET Highway, a small gathering of hopefuls was already peering into the heavens.

They included the elderly couple from the inn, their newly found new-age guru friend, his companion, a young man wearing an alien T-shirt and badge and a woman called Kathleen Ford, who had been camping at the site.

Kathleen, a "psychic photographer" whose randomly shot pictures often contained inexplicable images of what she called "critters", said she wasn't afraid of being alone on the Extra Terrestrial Highway.

"I've got Big Dog and a gun," she said, as Big Dog - a friendly old mutt - greeted every new stranger with a wag and a lick.

Soon, two things became evident. Most of the UFO enthusiasts double as conspiracy theorists who are obsessed with Area 51, a base so secret the air force refuses to acknowledge it even exists.

Area 51 was the testing site for top secret aircraft like the Stealth bomber and the Aurora spy plane and its aura is magnified by sealed government lips, sinister boundary signs which threaten the use of "deadly force" and guards in unmarked jeeps who patrol the area regularly.

Some say the base also contains the bodies of dead aliens as well as their space craft.

The other thing that becomes obvious is that most of the UFO sightings can be explained by activity from Area 51 and the nearby Nellis Air Force base.

On the night I was present, there were plenty of strange lights in the sky but, as Chuck explained, they were merely flares dropped from jet fighters on the losing end of mock dog-fights. There were also booms as the planes streaked through the sound barrier and bright flashes from behind a mountain range as they test-dropped live bombs.

It was a common occurrence for the locals but for a stranger driving along the lonely road at night...

After a surprisingly comfortable

night in one of trailers that serve A'Le'Inn's \$US30 a night accommodation (no TV, no air conditioning). I met hotel owner Joe and his wife, Pat.

"After we came here in 1988, this UFO thing came up and at the time we didn't have a proper name for the restaurant, the bar and the motel. My wife and I talked about it and we came up with Little A'Le'Inn - every business needs a theme, a gimmick."

Joe smiled when asked whether he was a believer.

"We've seen lights in the sky that don't act like airplanes," he said. "But we work 14-16 hours a day so we don't have much opportunity to watch the sky."

FAST FACTS

THE best way to get to Rachel is to hire a car in Las Vegas for either a day trip or, better still, an overnight stay. You drive north on route 15, then north again on route 93 before reaching route 375, the Extra Terrestrial Highway. The drive will take about 2 1/2 hours.

If you plan to stay at the Little A'Le'Inn, it is advisable to book ahead (702 729 2515). Be warned however, it's the desert, so temperatures can be extreme.

Another warning: Crossing the boundaries that mark Area 51 can result in arrest and a heavy fine.

The sub-headline above Little A'Le'Inn might account for condition of Travis