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Rachel, Nevada, capital of the intergalactic federation

FROM GILES WHITTELL IN RACHEL, NEVADA

IN THE UFO capital of the world there is no disagreement about whether or not alien spacecraft exist near by, merely about what the Pentagon is doing with them.

A dozen or so miles from the US Government's most secret military testing site in the bleak desert of central Nevada, the psychic and the merely paranoid gathered at the weekend to demand that the authorities own up about the flying saucers they have, apparently, been "reverse engineering" since the 1940s.

"We are big boys, and we can handle this," said Don Suttle, the diehard "ufologist" who organised the meeting almost within binocular range of the base on Groom Dry Lake, known to enthusiasts as Area 51. "Our Government is treating us like children. We could be in danger of invasion and we ought to know about it," he said.

Dr Barbie Taylor, wide-eyed and purple-clad, was less confrontational. "We need to raise our consciousness enough to come into the inter-galactic federation, but we can't do it while we're fighting each other," she said.

For the people of Rachel, aliens are real, imminent and very good for business. This lonely scattering of mobile homes survived until recently on a trickle of visitors to the aptly named Little A-Le-Inn, its only motel. Most were UFO believers who frequently reported sightings at a famous "black mail-box" 20 miles down the road. Some were conspiracy theorists hoping to photograph Area 51 installations from a vantage point known as Freedom Ridge. A few came out of morbid curiosity to be close to the vast Nellis Nuclear Test Site of which Groom Lake is a part.

Yesterday's gathering, some 300 strong, confirmed the town's rise to dominance of the global UFO industry. The release of *Independence Day*, which depicts aliens captured in New Mexico in 1947 and stored in a vault in Area 51, has turned a stream of visitors into a flood.

The Little A-Le-Inn is fully booked for most of the summer. Marcus Pizzuti, a "criminologist-artist", is selling alien statuettes as fast as he can make them. "I do believe in the great possibility of alien abduction," he said solemnly.

Equally solemnly, Meisha Johnstone declared that she was "part of a hybrid programme". Abducted by aliens three years ago, she was gone from this Earth for an hour and 20 minutes and returned with extraterrestrial implants in her legs. She was later impregnated by aliens and now makes regular visits to her hybrid child on another, "brown", planet, probably in the constellation of Orion. When on terra firma, she runs support groups for fellow abductees in Las Vegas.

The closest thing in Rachel to an objective source on Area 51 is Glenn Campbell. A self-appointed watchdog over government ethical and financial misdeeds, he calls Groom Dry Lake "our own little pocket of communism", but dismisses talk of UFOs. Leaving his caravan, this reporter was briefly alarmed by a bright white disk in the night sky. It was the moon.

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