

SIDE TRIP

The Road Out There

Visitors keep their eyes on the skies while traveling the ET Highway.

By Carolyn Graham

At first glance one wonders why even aliens would land in Rachel. The tiny town is situated on State Route 375, a 98-mile ribbon of asphalt flanked by volcanic hills and sparse vegetation. It is a route without theme parks, casinos, or palm trees. So why travel this road to nowhere?

In a word, UFOs. The hope of a close encounter lures people from around the world to Rachel, 150 miles north of Las Vegas. UFO watchers claim that nearby Area 51 at Groom Lake, a super-secret Air Force testing facility, is where alien spacecraft and their pilots are studied and stored. (Visitors beware: The military is darned strict about keeping binocular toting tourists from peeking into Area 51's hangars and runways. Trespassing is not an option.)

State Route 375 was dedicated this spring as the Extraterrestrial Highway in honor of its unique reputation. But travelers will find an ET Highway trip worthwhile even if ET is not to be found.

"There's a little bit more to the community of Rachel than people think," says Burnadine Day, owner of the Quik-Pik, a convenience store packed with traveler's necessities such as ice, soda pop, and glow-in-the dark alien key chains.

After rattling off a list of service clubs and nearby attractions, Day points out that at eight miles east you'll find the old mining camp of Tempiute. Also, the Lunar Crater Volcanic Field is 96 miles north of Rachel. Surprisingly, the Tempiute Range offers pine forests and pleasant day hikes. In fact, Day says that aliens are only half the lure of the area. "People can go out all day," she says, "and then at night sit and watch the UFOs."

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Rachel, a community of 105 residents, has a few new businesses in the works. Day says her brother-in-law is starting a business this summer called Close Encounters, where he will sell Area 51 memorabilia and memberships in the Groom Lake Yacht Club. The Little A 'Le' inn, a popular UFO-watchers' hideout, has an RV park, motel, restaurant, UFO library, and a shop with alien-themed T-shirts and mugs.

The town really hit the big time last April when the ET Highway was officially dedicated. The 4H club sold hot dogs to the bizarre gathering of celebrities, state officials, Elvis impersonators, and curiosity seekers. Actors Jeff Goldblum, Bill Pulman, and Brent Spiner (who plays Data on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) and news crews occupied the town for one wind-blown afternoon.

The Hollywood stars dedicated a time capsule and a concrete obelisk to serve as a "beacon for visitors from distant stars." The event helped promote 20th Century Fox's new sci-fi flick, *Independence Day 4*, or *ID-4*, and put Rachel on *Inside Edition* and in *Newsweek*.

Subsequent travelers pursuing UFO sightings near Rachel will find a new support system. The ET Highway Experience, a club sponsored by the Nevada Commission on Tourism, provides maps, information, and itineraries for the journey on

State Route 375 (call 800-NEVADA-8 for information). To join you must send a receipt from two businesses at opposite ends of the loop that includes the ET Highway and US Highways 6, 95, and 93.

You also must submit a "truthful" tale of your travels on the ET Highway for the club I newsletter, Eyes Only. As an official member, you'll receive a bumper sticker, map, and a glow-in-the-dark license-plate frame that sums it all up: "I was out there."

Carolyn Graham, Nevada Magazine's associate editor, plans to join the Groom Lake Yacht Club this summer.

Photo caption: Travelers will see signs of flying saucers along Rachel's Extraterrestrial Highway east of Tonapah.

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