

Bike Riders Tour ET Highway [news]

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BIKE RIDERS TOUR ET HIGHWAY

By Nichole Davis
LAS VEGAS SUN, May 5, 1997

RACHEL -- In a town so small and remote that only beer companies and the ice cream man deliver to its businesses, the one-year anniversary of the dedication of the Extraterrestrial Highway brought out the crowds.

More than 50 visitors spent the weekend in Rachel, 150 miles northwest of Las Vegas. About 30 of them participated in the X Rides, a two-day bike-riding event.

On Saturday, 30 bikers took a 40-mile "X Ride into the Twilight Zone" with "Area 51 Handbook" author Chuck Clark. The path of the evening ride offered beautiful views of the Joshua trees in the high-desert mountains that surround the sleepy town.

"At sunset, it was like riding in a postcard from a planetarium at night," said Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center emergency room nurse Lou Marino. He was testing out a new bike on the trail as his wife, Vicky, followed.

"I have to call in sick just to be with him," she said, laughing. "He needed the moral support."

On Sunday, 20 survivors rode in the "Tour of the Extraterrestrial Highway," in which bikers made 30-, 75-, 100- and 120-mile trips.

For most, it was their first visit to the area.

"My son talked me into it. He comes to all the Nevada off-road races," said 59-year-old motorcycle racer George Purser. "I love this."

Tour organizer Curtis Fong of Reno hopes to make the rides, which were co-sponsored by the Nevada Commission on Tourism and the Tonopah Convention and Visitors Authority, an annual event.

"Whenever you hear of 100 miles of great pavement with no cars, it makes for a great bike ride," Fong said. "I really like rural Nevada and open spaces are what I really appreciate."

"Being that it is the ET Highway, it kind of adds to the mystery and mystique," Marino said.

The ET Highway was designated by the Nevada Legislature as a tourism gimmick. The remote area is popular with UFO enthusiasts because of its proximity to Area 51, the secret air base where the United States tests experimental aircraft.

Bike riders weren't the only weekend visitors. The town's only hotel and restaurant, the Little A'Le'Inn (pronounced alien), was bursting at the seams. Tourists camped out in tents, slept in rooms and hooked up RVs.

While bike riders came mainly for the road, tourists came to see UFO and military aircraft.

"I came to shoot anything that flies," said photographer Bill "Big Dog" Wiffin, who started visiting a year ago. "I've seen a lot of lights flying around that I can't explain."

Restaurant owners Pat and Joe Travis have tales of their own. Pat said

once she saw a beam of light about four inches in diameter shine through her two-inch steel doors and illuminate the entire frame of the door. There was nothing outside when they went to investigate, she said. Joe reported seeing lights in the sky moving at speeds of 50,000 mph, then making a hard turn.

It has to be aliens, he said. "They've rewritten physics if it's ours. No pilot could survive a turn like that."

Whether you believe in them or not, aliens and secret aircraft are big business in the town of 98 people. Alien figurines, jewelry and cup holders are among the memorabilia sold in the restaurant. A research center sells maps of Area 51.

But the town still doesn't get Postal Service deliveries on Saturday.

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