

Area 51 Viewer's Guide

The Highway and the Land

As a cut-off between the lightly traveled US-93 and even quieter US-6, State Highway 375 easily qualifies as one of the loneliest roads in America. There are only a handful of residents along its hundred mile length, most of them in the tiny settlement of Rachel at the highway's midpoint.

Geography. The highway runs southeast to northwest through a sagebrush desert along the northern boundary of the vast military restricted area. The terrain is a series of parallel desert valleys, each running roughly north to south and separated by rugged and treeless mountain ranges. Each valley is a vast, bowl shaped basin that was probably a lake in wetter times. Today the only hint of standing water is usually a dry lake bed to which seasonal rainwater flows and then evaporates. A typical valley is about 15 miles wide and 30-40 miles long and seems from a distance completely barren and reminiscent of the planet Mars. The absence of trees, concave valley shape and dry desert air mean that from any one point in a valley you can usually see every other point, even dozens of miles away. There is little privacy here, but then again, there is usually no one watching you either. In a typical desert valley, a ranch is the only habitation, meaning that the population density is considerably less than one person per square mile. It is more like one cow per square mile.

Plant and Animal Life. The most visible residents of most of these desert valleys are cattle, who wander unfenced across the road. You will also see jackrabbits, many kinds of little lizards and perhaps a coyote or deer. Most other animal residents remain out of sight during the day. A walk through the desert reveals the ground riddled with burrows, home of nocturnal creatures who you will probably never meet. Likewise, you will not encounter much impressive plant life in this desert, like the giant saguaros of Arizona, or even a tree. Only desert scrub grows here, even on the mountains. This desert is on the border of the Mojave and Great Basin deserts. The only large plant is the Joshua tree, the signature plant of the Mojave. It was named by the early Mormon settlers who saw in this tall plant the prophet Joshua raising his arms to heaven. These can grow 20 feet in height, but they are limited to the eastern half of the highway where winter snow does not last long. Most of the vegetation elsewhere is stiff shrubs and grasses which appears gray and lifeless most of the year. When the weather is windy, tumbleweeds blow across the highway like in the Hollywood westerns.

Climate. Although this area is relatively close to Las Vegas, the climate is much cooler. The town of Rachel is at an elevation of 5000 feet compared to 2000 feet for Las Vegas, so temperatures are usually 10f to 20f lower, and snow is common in winter. While winter weather is considerably worse than Las Vegas, the summer climate is much more comfortable. In Las Vegas, July and August may be unbearable without air conditioning, with temperatures over 110fF, but Rachel is easier to take. The temperature here rarely breaks 100f, and due to the dryness of the air, 100f here can be more comfortable than 80f in more humid states.

Summer offers the most comfortable weather for outdoor activities. As long as one dresses lightly, wears a hat and drinks plenty of water, the heat is not dangerous or uncomfortable and does not prevent most activities. The weather in the fall is usually pleasant, with highs of 60f to 80f during the day and lows of 30f to 50f at night. Spring days can be just as nice but are more likely to be marred by fierce winds in the afternoon. Winter weather can be overcast and painfully cold if you are not prepared for it. The daily temperature is usually directly related to solar energy, so the shortest days of the year are also the coldest. The nighttime low can approach -10fF around the first of the year. The rest of the winter is milder in temperature but often equally uncomfortable due to violent winds. Light snow is common along 375 in the winter, but after January, it usually melts in the valleys within a couple of days.

The Skies. For a visitor from any urban area, rural Nevada's nighttime skies are an amazing show--with or without aerial craft. On moonless nights, stars usually blanket the heavens in an amazing density and are perfectly clear down to the horizon. There are so many stars that it can be hard to pick out the major constellations among the clutter. The Milky Way cuts a bright band of white across the sky, and the whole celestial production casts enough light, without a moon, that you can see the outlines of your immediate surroundings on earth. In the rural Nevada skies, there is very little of the "light pollution" found in populated areas. In most other areas of the country, the sky glows with the overflow of

street lamps reflecting from the clouds and haze, but here there are almost no artificial lights. Along 375, the only noticeable light pollution is a smudge above the southern horizon. This is the reflected glow of Las Vegas, a city known for its superfluous lighting. The extreme clarity of the night sky may make it easier to spot aerial objects, but it can also disorient watchers with deceptive distances and common celestial phenomena like meteors and satellites which would go unnoticed elsewhere.

The Road. Although Highway 375 seems remote by most definitions, it is not hard to get to, at least from the south. From Las Vegas to the Black Mailbox is any easy drive of just over two hours on top quality, cruise-control compatible highways. 375 itself is a two lane blacktop in excellent condition. It has wide shoulders, few curves, only moderate grades and no potholes. Needless to say, there is not much traffic to contend with: no more than a dozen cars an hour at "rush hour" and less than one an hour late at night. The only significant traffic danger is the cattle that wander across the road.
