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Death Valley: Notes From a Visit

Reed Dillingham

Death Valley is a long, deep, dry, enclosed trough, the bottom dropped between two large mountain blocks of lava and granite. It is separate from the rest of the world, with its own character and geography, a place where human elements like roads and buildings seem inconsequential and out of place.

My entry into this world comes at the end of a long drive north from the town of Trona on the edge of the salt-dry Searles Lake, up the desert of the Panamint Valley and over the 5000-foot Townes Pass.

I first perceive Death Valley as a measureless, dry landscape surrounded by distant mountains. But following the highway along the Valley, I sense its surreal scale and strange, magic quality. Places are separated from each other by long stretches of highway along which there is nothing worth noting on a sign. At a spot near Ubehebe Crater a sign says "Racetrack 27 miles." I wonder whether there is anything, any place, in between. In this strange, extended landscape, what makes a place?

An extensive field of sand dunes sweeps over the north-central portion of Death Valley, covering an area about eight miles long and five miles wide. These rolling sand forms vary in height from a foot to about 30 feet. In some low places between the dunes, the dried mud of an old lake bed has been exposed by the wind and baked a brown-tan color by the summer sun.

As I wander among the dunes, photographing various details in the early morning light, I look for a larger scene that will allow me to connect several photographs in a panorama. At last, a high dune crested with a clutch of young mesquite saplings holds my gaze. I realize the scene's visual sweep: from the dunes' shadowed rise in the north, along a ridge, to where the ridge falls off in the south, with the distant dark shadow of the Amargosa Range lost in the sun's glare.

When I am finished photographing, I stand as if fixed to the spot. Slowly turning, I take in the whole place for the first time. I am within a small space defined by sand hills on the west, north and east. To the south the lower dunes open onto a longer view, rolling away like a sandy ocean with occasional high-topped dunes rising as islands in the general plain.

The size of the space is difficult to judge because I cannot easily relate the scale of the sand and scrub trees to the size of usual things; I guess that the area is roughly circular with a 100-foot diameter. Within the bowl, the lower topography of sand forms is complex with small enclosed bowls bottomed with hard pan, long, low sand ridges and little hillocks crowned with scrub.

My actual position, unconsciously selected as a photo stop, is at the approximate center of this space, on a smoothly sloping plain inclined gently to the south. As I take in the scene, I

decide to stop, sit and see what a little more time will reveal about this place.

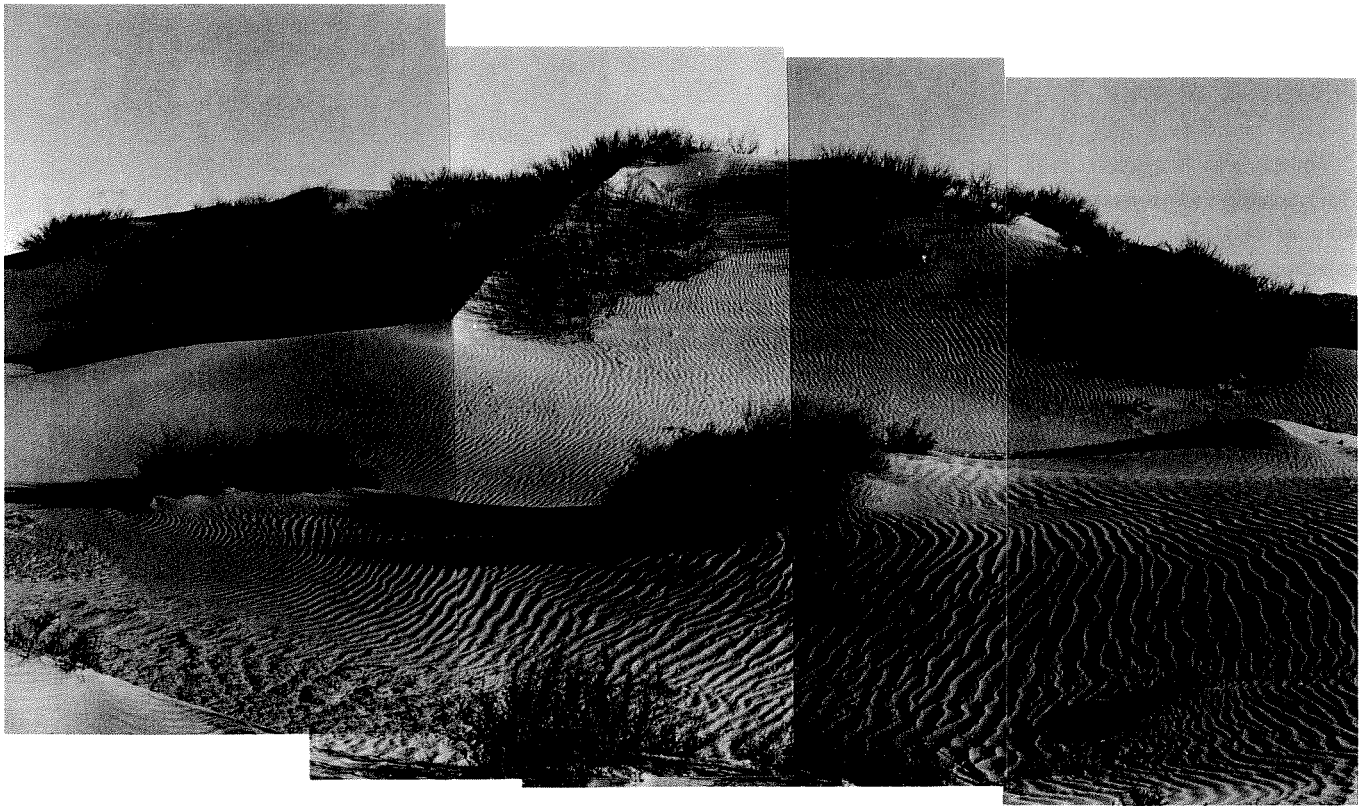
Visually, the dunes are striking. Their wind-caused forms, constrained by the physical constraints of sand, are characterized by clean, uninterrupted lines, with no slope greater than the angle of repose (34 degrees). The wind details the sand surface with assorted inexplicable ripples that catch the eye, reminiscent of smoke patterns seen in wind-tunnel tests. The sand itself is uniformly fine and almost white, with no appreciable moisture content.

Here and there, small discontinuous patches of low brushy desert scrub grow along the low ridges and the tops of the dunes. That plants could survive in such a harsh environment is strange; the scrub adds to the dramatic visual counterpoint of the shrubs against the white dunes. The starkness of the setting suggests a Chinese brush painting: a pastel green plant splashed against the white expanse of rice paper.

Although any small sound would carry a long way here, the air is quiet. In one direction, a small bird is chirping. From another comes the faint sound of a distant car. But mostly it's so quiet that I can almost hear the sound of my blood pumping.

A raven caws and flies by a hundred yards to the southwest.

A beetle appears. From where it came I do not know; it is at least 20 or 30 feet across the hot sand to the nearest twigs and scrub. The beetle scrambles around, through and under my pack before disappearing.



Courtesy Reed Dillingham.

Morning creeps on; the sun climbs higher. As it passes overhead, I notice that the clear blue sky has begun to haze over to a milky white. There are still shadows, but they are now very soft. The dramatic early morning light is gone.

Perhaps I will best remember the quiet, subtle visual enclosure of this place, its stark physical forms reflecting back the play of light and shadows. The backdrop of dramatic yet limited sensory information tends to highlight the small details and events of the place: the quality of light, the bird tracks in the sand, the ravens flapping north. The smallest note of sound or appearance takes on exaggerated importance. All of the detail I ordinarily miss in my usual urban life has been clarified and presented here in a way that is impossible to ignore.

I decide to take a tour, a walk around my spot at a radius of 50 to 100 yards, just beyond the rim of the dunes that I can see from here. I notice several animal burrows set below small scrub-topped hummocks. Rabbit and bird tracks trace zig-zag paths through the dunes. A lizard darts over the warm sand and dives under some brush.

I am looking hard, hoping for the unexpected. After a day of only sand dunes, my brain wants novelty, something different: an arrowhead, a dried snake skin, even a rusty tin can might be interesting. Half of me wants the novelty of finding something, the other half wants to believe that the sand dunes and the desert are pristine and unsullied by cheap tricks. In the end, fate preserves my romantic image of the sand: I see nothing unexpected.

Even though I make no discoveries, looking for the unexpected reminds me of the value of a place that has the potential for surprise. Places are not

always coherent, nor are they possible to anticipate. Events and conditions change. Unexpected developments modify what we thought we saw. Our mind's quest for novelty looks for change and then the relishes surprise. In many ways, the places that offer the most potential for surprise are the ones that pull us back again and again to look for the possibility of such a gift.

Another raven flies by going west.

It is 3:30. The breeze has stopped; there is complete calm. The air is warm and feels slightly muggy.

I am getting tired of staying here. I can feel my patience turning to boredom. What seemed calm and tranquil now breeds tedium. Is the only reason to wait because I dared myself to wait it out?

The sun is taking forever to fall. This morning I wanted time to stop and now it just about has. Of course, with the lack of shadows and the gradual occlusion of the sun behind the gathering haze, there is no visible sign of passing time.

I hike out of the dunes at 4:30, meeting three people on the way who say "Hello" — the loudest sound I have heard in nine hours.

At night, lying in my sleeping bag with my eyes closed, I can still see the place in all its detail. But the sense of what I have seen eludes me. Was that place more real to me, did it have more meaning or significance to me than, for example, a place in a town where two streets meet?

The next day I visit Zabriskie Point. The sign interpreting this place tells of geologic history and of Christian Zabriskie, who oversaw borax operations in Death Valley until 1933. The relevance of his name to this place is slight, yet no less than many other place names. I find this way of naming places disturbing because it overlays some level of social meaning on a dramatic natural scene, as if the name gave this place a human purpose and a greater validity than its natural character.

Locations, specific spots are existential; they only exist and are void of meaning until we give them one or find one. Meaning can turn location or position into place. Ultimately the reality of a place is unknowable except within the limits of a point of view, such as human activity, geologic history, or visual drama.

Even then, places are known only to a limited extent. Their true nature is hidden, changing, affected by passing conditions, weather, people and seasons. We bring our preconceptions, knowledge and interest to a place's reality and overlay them. We wonder if what we see and experience has any relationship to to what we brought.

Regardless of our ideas, each place has its own reality, its own inherent sense of identity, different from the reality of anywhere else and ultimately unknowable in the fullest sense. A location is a place, then, because we call it so, we give it a name, use it, recognize it and pay heed.

The spot in the dunes, my station for nine hours, became distinct for me and different from the areas around. It was a place. Although I stumbled upon it, I found identifiable qualities that differentiated it from its surroundings and from my other place memories: the bowl of space, the strange pattern of sand dune topography, the patterns of light and wind, the sounds of breeze and birds.

In a place like the bowl in the dunes, where no human-made element is perceived, we are unable to use our typical frameworks, that is, function or social meaning, for evaluating places. We cannot ask about its traffic capacity or its history of accidents. Such a place can only be considered on its own terms: the natural causes that made it and the forms or natural effects of those causes. The purely natural place has no inherent social meaning. It only is what it is.

To really understand a place like the bowl in the dunes, we cannot be told a name, glimpse at a few facts on a sign board or even read a guide book. We have to sit and watch and let information come to us in its own way and its own time.

The University of Oregon Science Complex

In compiling this special report on the expansion of the University of Oregon science complex, *Places* asked several people involved in the project each to tell their part of the story.

Significantly, all of their reflections are filled with the involvement of others. Each author — architect Buzz Yudell, Stephen Harby, Christie Johnson Coffin and Charles W. Moore; artists Alice Wingwall and Kent Bloomer; and J. David Rowe, John Moseley and Lotte Streisinger, members of the University administration and faculty — speaks both of collaboration between architects and users as well as how individuals bring their own ideas to bear on such an undertaking.

Our report concludes with critical assessments by Mark Pally and Robert Campbell, who approach the place from external vantage points. Timothy Hursley's elegant photographs, which accompany many of these articles, tell a story of their own.

We also weave throughout this report a roster of people who channeled their experience and energy into this project — a reminder that good places depend on the care and contributions of many people.

This report was funded in part by a grant from the Graham Foundation.