

A
FALCON
GUIDE®

Best Easy Day Hikes

Death Valley

National Park

WHERE TO HIKE SERIES



POLLY AND BILL CUNNINGHAM

B e s t E a s y D a y H i k e s S e r i e s

Best Easy Day Hikes Death Valley National Park

Second Edition

Polly and Bill Cunningham

FALCON GUIDES

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FALCONGUIDES®

The authors and Globe Pequot Press assume no liability for accidents happening to, or injuries sustained by, readers who engage in the activities described in this book.

To the thousands of citizens of California and elsewhere, past and present, who laid the groundwork for protection of much of the California desert, to those who helped secure passage of the landmark California Desert Protection Act, and to the dedicated park rangers and naturalists charged with stewardship of the national treasure that is Death Valley National Park.

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Death Valley National Park Overview



Introduction

Death Valley National Park contains some of the planet's most imposing and contrasting landscapes—from North America's hottest, driest, and lowest desert to soaring snowcapped peaks. With such extremes, Death Valley commands respect and entices discovery.

The California Desert Protection Act of 1994 upgraded and expanded the two-million-acre Death Valley National Monument into today's 3.4-million-acre national park, 91 percent of which is designated and managed as wilderness under the landmark 1964 Wilderness Act.

Despite its ominous name, Death Valley hosts more than 400 year-round and seasonal wildlife species. More than 300 of these species are birds, the great majority of which are seasonal migrants. Most wildlife is nocturnal and usually unseen by the human eye. Your day hikes in the park will reveal spectacular desert scenery, complex geology, primeval wilderness, historical and cultural sites, and perhaps even a fleeting glimpse of rare wildlife.

Best Easy Day Hikes Death Valley is a shortened and updated version of the Death Valley National Park section of *Hiking California's Desert Parks, Second Edition*. This compact guidebook features easily accessible hikes that appeal to the full spectrum of visitors—from kids to grandparents. These twenty hikes sample the best that Death Valley has to offer, for the casual hiker and also for those in search of a mellow start to a longer, more difficult hike.

Most of the hikes in *Best Easy Day Hikes Death Valley* are short—less than 4 miles round-trip and with less than 600 feet of elevation change. More than half the hikes are ideal for families with small children. All of the trailheads can be reached with a passenger car, and about one-third are accessed by a paved road. The best easy day hikes are well distributed throughout the more accessible central portion of the sprawling park, which is served by paved highways going north-to-south and east-to-west.

For the most part, options listed at the end of each hike description are extensions or longer variations of the hike. Consider these if you find yourself with that wonderful combination of additional time, energy, and determination.

Please keep in mind the park has very few developed trails. Wildrose Peak and Telescope Peak are the only backcountry trails maintained by the park. Most hiking is up canyons, across salt flats and alluvial fans, or over dunes where any trail would soon be erased by ever-shifting sands. Fortunately, hiking on these natural trails is often easier than on constructed paths.

There is a park entrance fee per vehicle valid for seven days. The interagency America the Beautiful and Golden Access passes are honored as well.

For current information on park regulations, weather, campgrounds, park resources, hiking trails, and road conditions, contact Death Valley National Park at (760) 786-3200 or visit the park Web site. The Web site for the park is www.nps.gov/deva/. You can check the official park Web site for weekly ranger programs, including ranger-guided walks offered during the peak season of November through April. You can also use the Web site to request a park map and brochure by sending an e-mail to the

The Furnace Creek Visitor Center is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Ranger-guided hikes are offered during the peak season of November through April. Before you begin hiking, be sure to stop at the visitor center or a ranger station to get updated regulations and other information that will make your trip more enjoyable.

Death Valley is busiest from February through mid-April, and in November. Surprisingly, the lowest visitation occurs during December and January, not during the hot summer months as you might expect.

Wildflowers

Rain throughout winter and spring, along with warm, sunny days and lack of drying winds, produces good wildflower years.

The park hosts more than 1,000 plant species, including twenty-three species endemic to the region as well as thirteen species of cactus. Desert annuals, like poppies and primroses, are the showiest.

Typical peak blooming periods are:

- Mid-February to mid-April at lower elevations (the valley floor and alluvial fans).
- Early April to early May for elevations between 3,000 feet and 5,000 feet (upper desert slopes, canyons, and higher valleys).
- Early May to mid-July for elevations above 5,000 feet (mountain slopes, pinyon pine/juniper woodlands).

Photography

The land of extremes that is Death Valley is best dramatized for the photographer when 11,049-foot Telescope Peak casts its afternoon shadow across the 282-feet-below-sea-level Badwater Basin. Combine this astounding vertical relief with recent volcanic craters, towering sand dunes, and flood-scoured canyons, and you'll see why knowledgeable photographers bring extra storage cards and batteries. These geologic wonders are most spectacular during the low-angle-light hours of morning and evening. Sunrises and sunsets are awe-inspiring.

Play It Safe

Wandering in the desert has a reputation of being a dangerous activity, thanks to both the Bible and Hollywood. Usually depicted as a wasteland, the desert evokes fear. With proper planning, however, desert hiking can be fun, exciting, and quite safe.

An enjoyable desert outing requires preparation. Beginning with this book, you need to be equipped with adequate knowledge about your hiking area. The potential hazards of desert hiking can be mitigated if you are prepared.

Dehydration

Plenty of water is necessary for desert hiking. Carry one gallon per person per day in unbreakable plastic screw-top containers, and pause often to drink it. Always carry water, even on short, easy hikes. As a general rule, plain water is a better thirst-quencher than any of the colored fluids on the market, which often generate greater thirst. Keep a gallon of water in your car so you have some available at the end of your outing, too.

Weather

Recorded temperatures range from a sizzling 134 degrees to a freezing low of 15 degrees. An annual average of less than 2 inches of rain falls in the valley. During some years no rainfall is recorded. Summer temperatures average well above 100 degrees. In general, temperatures will be 3 to 5 degrees cooler, along with increased precipitation, for every 1,000-foot vertical increase in elevation. For hiking comfort, the months of November to April are hard to beat. Average highs are in the 60- to 90-degree range on the valley floor, cooling considerably at higher elevations. The higher peaks and ridges are often snow covered from November to May.

The desert is well known for sudden changes in the weather. The temperature can change 50 degrees in less than an hour. Prepare yourself with extra food and clothing, rain and wind gear, and a flashlight.

Hypothermia/Hyperthermia

Abrupt chilling is as much a danger in the desert as heat stroke. Storms and/or nightfall can cause desert temperatures to plunge. Wear layers of clothes, adding or subtracting depending on conditions to avoid overheating or chilling. At the other extreme, you need to protect yourself from sun and wind with proper clothing. The broad-brimmed hat is mandatory equipment for the desert traveler. Even in the cool days of winter, a delightful time in the desert, the sun's rays are intense. Don't forget the sunblock and lip sunscreen.

Vegetation

You'll quickly learn to avoid contact with certain desert plants. Catclaw, Spanish bayonet, and cacti are just a few of the botanical hazards. Carry tweezers to remove cactus spines and wear long pants if traveling in a brushy area.

Flash Floods

Desert washes and canyons can trap unwary visitors when rainstorms hit the desert. Keep a watchful eye on the sky. Check at a ranger station for regional weather conditions before embarking on your backcountry expedition. A storm anywhere upstream in the drainage can cause a sudden torrent in a lower canyon. Do not cross a flooded wash. Both the depth and the current can be deceiving. Wait for the flood to recede, which usually does not take long, before crossing.

Lightning

Be aware of lightning, especially during summer storms. Stay off ridges and peaks during storms. Shallow overhangs and gullies should also be avoided because electrical current often moves at

ground level near a lightning strike.

Rattlesnakes, Scorpions, and Tarantulas

Unexpected human visitors easily terrify these desert “creepy crawlies,” and they react predictably to being frightened. Do not sit or put your hands in dark places, especially during the warmer “snake-season” months.

Mine Hazards

Death Valley National Park contains numerous deserted mines. All of them should be considered hazardous. Stay away from all mines and mine structures. Many of these mines have not been secured or posted. Keep an eye on young or adventuresome members of your group.

Unstable Rocky Slopes

Desert canyons and mountainsides often consist of crumbly or fragmented rock. Use caution when climbing; however, the downward journey is usually the more hazardous. Smooth rock faces such as those found in slickrock canyons are equally dangerous, especially when you’ve got sand on the soles of your boots. On those rare occasions when they are wet, these rocks are slicker than ice.

Zero Impact

The desert environment is fragile; damage lasts for decades—even centuries. Desert courtesy requires us to leave no evidence that we were ever there. This ethic means no graffiti or defoliation at one end of the spectrum, and no unnecessary footprints on delicate vegetation on the other. Desert vegetation grows very slowly. Its destruction leads to wind and water erosion and irreparable harm to the desert.

The Falcon Zero-Impact Principles:

- Leave with everything you brought with you.
- Leave no sign of your visit.
- Leave the landscape as you found it.

Avoid making new trails. If hiking cross-country, groups should follow one set of footprints. Try to make your route invisible. Darker crusty soil that crumbles easily indicates cryptogamic soils, which are a living blend of tightly bonded mosses, lichens, and bacteria. This dark crust prevents wind and water erosion and protects seeds that fall into the soil. Take special care to avoid stepping on this fragile layer.

Keep noise down. Desert wilderness means quiet and solitude, for animals and other human visitors.

Pack it in and pack it out. This ethic is truer in the desert than anywhere else. Desert winds spread debris, and desert air preserves it. Always carry a trash bag, both for your trash and for any that you encounter. If you must smoke, pick up your butts and bag them.

Remember, artifacts fifty years old or older are protected by federal law and must not be disturbed.

Treat human waste properly. Bury waste 4 inches deep and at least 200 feet from water sources and

trails. Pack out toilet paper and feminine hygiene products; they do not decompose in the arid desert. Do not burn toilet paper; many wildfires have been started this way.

Respect wildlife. Living in the desert is hard enough for the wildlife without being harassed by human intruders. Please remember, this is the only home these animals have. Be respectful and use binoculars for long-distance viewing. Do not molest the rare desert water sources by playing or bathing in them.

Beyond these guidelines, refer to park regulations for specific rules governing backcountry use. Enjoy the beauty and solitude of the desert, and leave it as you found it for others to enjoy.

How to Use This Guide

To provide a geographic reference, Hikes 1 through 11 are numbered south to north and are located east of Death Valley in the eastern region of the park. Hikes 12 through 20, from south to north, are west and north of Death Valley in the western and northern sections of the park. The hikes presented in this book are rated according to difficulty, from easiest to most challenging. The “Ranking the Hikes” page will help you choose suitable hikes for everyone in your party.

Types of Hikes

Loop: A loop hike begins and ends at the same trailhead without duplication of all or most of the route. If there is any retracing of the route it is only for a short distance. Round-trip mileage is provided for loop hikes.

Out and back: Out-and-back hikes reach a specific destination and return via the same route. Round-trip mileage is provided for out-and-back hikes.

Shuttle: A shuttle hike is a point-to-point route requiring a car shuttle between the starting and ending trailheads. The mileage is the total distance between the two trailheads.

Use Trail: A use trail is an obvious footpath created by visitors that is not maintained by the park or another agency.

How to Get There

Primary access to the park from the east is NV 160 out of Las Vegas connecting with the Belle Vista Road out of Pahrump, Nevada, to CA 127. CA 190 heads west into the park from CA 127 at Death Valley Junction. From the south access is via CA 127 from I-15 at Baker. CA 178 leads west into the park from CA 127 near Shoshone. On the west side, CA 178 takes off from US 395 and enters the park by way of Panamint Valley. CA 190 takes off to the east from US 395 at Olancho, entering the park just west of Panamint Springs.

Maps

The map referred to as *Trails Illustrated Death Valley National Park Map* in the map section for each hike is the Death Valley National Park topographic map (1:160,000 scale), published by Trails Illustrated/National Geographic. It is an ideal overview map for trip planning and navigating the roads between trailheads.

In general, the more detailed 7.5-minute USGS quadrangle maps (1:24,000 scale) listed for each hike are not needed for hikes of less than 2 miles unless you are venturing beyond the described route. Refer to the small-scale hike maps provided in this book, especially for shorter interpretive trails that are typically well signed.

Campgrounds

To reserve a campsite in the Furnace Creek Campground, call (877) 444-6777 or go to www.recreation.gov. ~~The rest of the campgrounds are first come, first served, and there is a fee for most of them. Check the current fee schedule on the park Web site.~~

Pets in the Park: Leave Home without Them

You can bring your pet to the park, but it isn't a good idea for you or your best friend. Pets must always be on a leash or confined in a vehicle. They may not be left unattended in a campground. You cannot hike with them on trails, cross-country, or anywhere else off an established road. You can walk with them on a leash on backcountry roads, but with the above limitations designed to protect park values, it is best to share other experiences with your pet, not Death Valley.

Ranking the Hikes

The following list ranks the hikes in this book from easiest to most challenging. The ranking applies only to the primary hike described, not to any options that may be included.

Easiest

7 Salt Creek Interpretive Trail

6 Harmony Borax Works

1 Badwater

17 The Grandstand

9 Keane Spring

2 Dante's View and Peak

14 Lower Darwin Falls

18 Ubehebe Lead Mine/Corridor Canyon

5 Golden Canyon Interpretive Trail/Gower Gulch Loop

4 Desolation Canyon East

3 Natural Bridge

19 Ubehebe and Little Hebe Craters

8 Monarch Canyon/Mine

13 Nemo Canyon

10 Titus Canyon Narrows

15 Mosaic Canyon

20 Eureka Dunes

16 Grotto Canyon

12 Wildrose Trail

11 Fall Canyon

Most Challenging

Trail Finder

Hikes for Canyons

3 Natural Bridge

4 Desolation Canyon East

5 Golden Canyon Interpretive Trail/Gower Gulch Loop

8 Monarch Canyon/Mine

10 Titus Canyon Narrows

11 Fall Canyon

13 Nemo Canyon

15 Mosaic Canyon

16 Grotto Canyon

18 Ubehebe Lead Mine/Corridor Canyon

Hikes for Open Desert

1 Badwater

7 Salt Creek Interpretive Trail

17 The Grandstand

20 Eureka Dunes

Hikes for Panoramic Views

1 Badwater

2 Dante's View and Peak

5 Golden Canyon Interpretive Trail/Gower Gulch Loop

12 Wildrose Trail

17 The Grandstand

19 Ubehebe and Little Hebe Craters

20 Eureka Dunes

Hikes for Historic Mines

6 Harmony Borax Works

8 Monarch Canyon/Mine

18 Ubehebe Lead Mine/Corridor Canyon

Hikes for Birding

7 Salt Creek Interpretive Trail

8 Monarch IIs

14 Lower Darwin Falls

Legend

Transportation		Symbols	
	U.S. Highway		Trailhead
	State Highway		Building/ Point of Interest
	Park/Other Road		Parking
	Unpaved Road		Restroom
Trails			Scenic View
	Featured Trail		Visitor Center
	Trail		Picnic Area
	Direction of Route		Campground
Water/Land Features			Mountain/Peak
	Body of Water		Spot Elevation
	Dry Lake		Towns and Cities
	Intermittent Creek	Land Management	
	Waterfall		National Park
	Spring		
	Sand		

East of Death Valley

1 Badwater

This is a perfectly flat hike on a boardwalk that leads you onto the salt flats at the hottest and lowest point in the United States and the lowest elevation you can drive to in the Western Hemisphere. This vast bed of salt lies 282 feet below sea level.

Distance: 1 mile out and back on boardwalk or 2 miles out and back to edge of the salt flats

Approximate hiking time: Less than 1 hour

Elevation change: Minimal

Difficulty: Easy

Trail surface: Boardwalk, clear salt flat

Best season: Late October through March

Maps: Trails Illustrated Death Valley National Park Map; USGS Badwater quad

Trailhead facilities: There is a signed parking area alongside a paved highway along with vault toilets and interpretive signs.

Finding the trailhead: The signed parking area for Badwater is on the west side of CA 178 (Badwater Road), 16.7 miles south of the CA 190/178 junction at the Furnace Creek Inn.
GPS: N36 13.823'/W116 46.273'

The Hike

As bleak as it looks, the popular hike onto the salt flats at Badwater is arguably the ultimate Death Valley experience. If you have been to Dante's View or Telescope Peak, you probably saw the human ants on the white expanse of valley floor and wondered what could be so fascinating. Here you will find individuals, especially families, cavorting like they're at the beach or enjoying a spring snow. To gain a genuine sense of the enormity of the salt flats, hike beyond the heavily traveled section.

The hike begins at the parking area beneath the cliffs that soar up to Dante's View, 5,755 feet above. There's a sea level sign on the cliff face, high above Badwater, making very clear what minus 280 feet represents. Walk out to the salt flats on the causeway, but continue beyond the well-trod area depending on the temperature and wind, to a clear area of the flats. Getting away from the highway is essential to get a sense of the magnitude of the salt flats. You'll reach the edge of the 5-mile-wide salt flats after only 0.5 mile.

Here, salt crystallizes when the groundwater that carries it to the earth's surface hastily evaporates. If you sit on the salt flats, you will find yourself among tiny salt pinnacles, a miniature mountainous world at the bottom of this mountainous basin. In close contact with the surface you will also discover that salt is a tough commodity. The white flooring of the flats is only inches thick, but very firm underfoot. Salt's power as an erosive force is noteworthy in this desert, where it functions much like frost heaves and ice do in a wet climate. Salt crystals grow and force apart boulders, breaking them down to be further eroded by wind and water. The salt crystal crust may be covered with a temporary

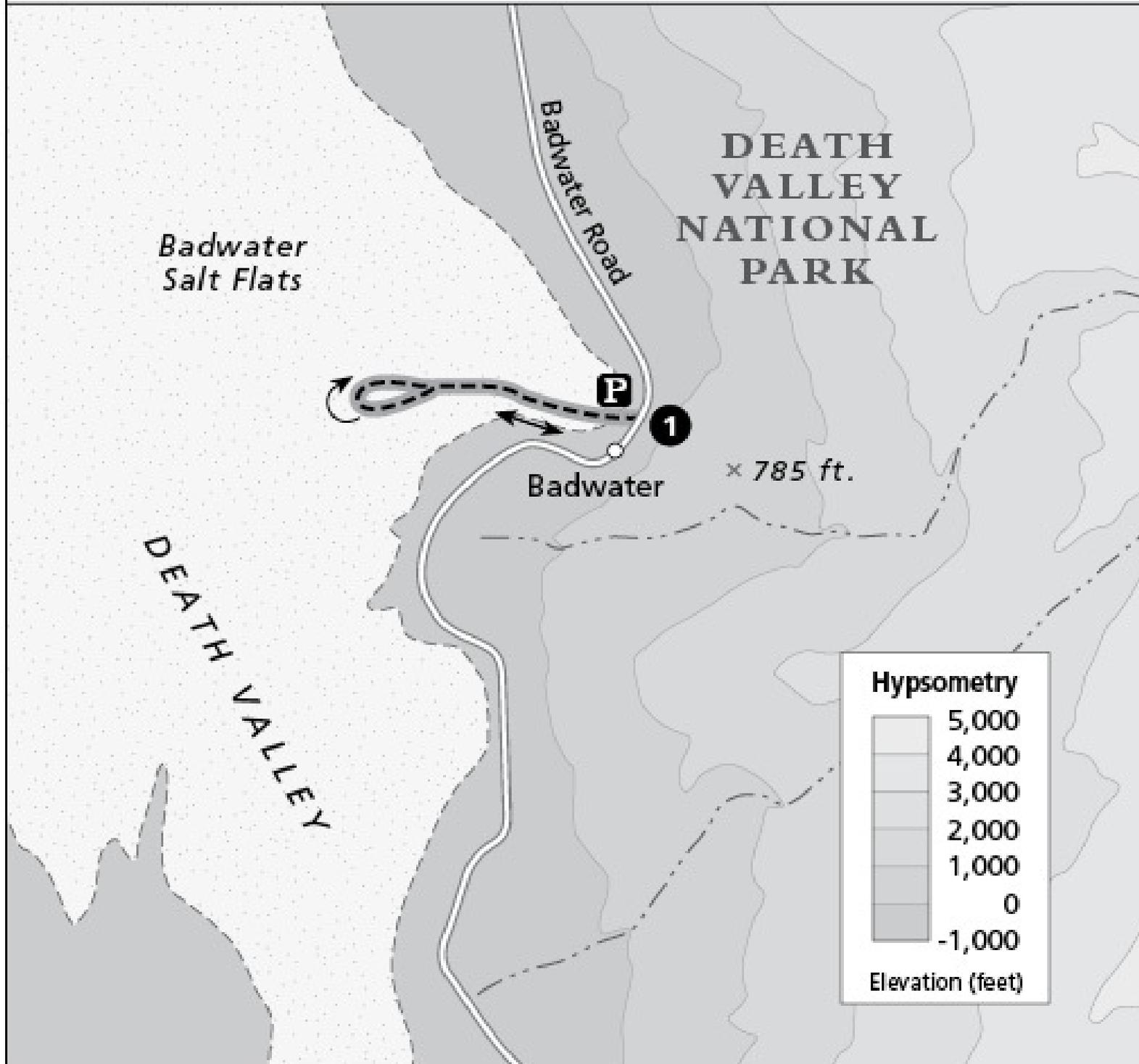
lake following a rare heavy rainstorm.

Above the microworld of salt, the world of Death Valley soars. Less than 19 miles to the west is Telescope Peak (11,049 feet), the park's highest point. The difference in elevation between Badwater and Telescope Peak is one of the largest in the United States.

A hike at Badwater is an essential introduction to the expanse of the valley floor. The emigrants and the miners who lived in this environment were a tough lot.

The glare from the salt flats can be as intense as on snowfields at high elevation. Wear sunglasses. Do not hike to the salt flats during the extreme heat of summer. Keep in mind that when the temperature tops 100 degrees F, ground temperatures exceed a sizzling 180 degrees F!

Badwater



Miles and Directions

- 0.0 Depart from the trailhead.
- 0.5 Reach the end of the boardwalk at the edge of the salt flats. Continue hiking into the flats.
- 1.0 Turn around and retrace your steps toward the trailhead.

2.0 Arrive back at the trailhead from the salt flats hike.

2 Dante's View and Peak

This short, easy hike offers magnificent panoramic views of the highest and lowest points in the continental United States. Surrounded by some of the most dramatic and colorful relief found anywhere, you are nearly 6,000 feet directly above the lowest spot in the nation at Badwater.

Distance: 1 mile out and back

Approximate hiking time: Less than 1 hour

Elevation change: 229 feet

Difficulty: Easy

Trail surface: Clear trail

Best season: October through June

Maps: Trails Illustrated Death Valley National Park Map; USGS Dante's View quad

Trailhead facilities: There is a large signed parking area with interpretive signs at the end of the paved road. The road climbs gradually, passing by an interim parking area just before the final ¼ mile, which has a grade of 14 percent.

Finding the trailhead: From CA 190, 11.9 miles southeast of the Furnace Creek Visitor Center and 18 miles west of Death Valley Junction, turn south on the signed Dante's View Road (paved, all-weather). Drive 13.3 miles on this steep, winding road to its end at the Dante's View parking area. GPS: N36 13.238'/W116 43.603'

The Hike

The unsigned trail to Dante's Peak is clearly visible to the north as it climbs toward Dante's Peak from the parking area. If possible, take this hike in the early morning with the sun at your back. This makes for better photography and for enhanced enjoyment of the superlative vistas and astounding 5,986-foot drop to the salt flats of Badwater, which sits 282 feet below sea level. The temperature at Dante's View averages 25 degrees cooler than that of Badwater. This exposed location is usually windy, necessitating a windbreak garment for the hike.

This lofty vantage point in the Black Mountains enables you to almost see, or at least visualize, how the mountains are both rising and slowly moving to the left (south) relative to the surrounding terrain. Looking across Death Valley to the highest point in the park, 11,049-foot Telescope Peak, you can easily note the major vegetative life zones stretching westward like a giant map. Bristlecone and limber pines thrive high in the Panamint Range. Below is the pinyon pine–juniper zone. Dante's View is situated in a hotter, drier midslope of blackbush and sage. Floods from the mountains result in graveled fans that support spreading root species such as creosote bush. Fresh water displaces salt from the fan edges, allowing mesquite to grow. Pickleweed gains a foothold in the brackish water below these edges. The muddy tans and grays of the valley floor grade into white beds of almost pure salt—a chemical desert.

From the parking lot, hike north along the road for 0.1 mile to where the Dante's Peak trail begins. ~~fairly steep climb up the hill. Soon it winds to the left (west) and contours gently along the mountain~~ west slope. This route provides an even more impressive view down to Badwater, with an almost overwhelming vertical relief dropping more than a mile straight down! At 0.3 mile, the trail intersects the summit ridge, then climbs the short distance to the 5,704-foot-high point. Although unofficial, the trail is clear, well defined, and easy to follow. Return the way you came to complete this 1-mile out-and-back ridge walk, and don't forget your camera.

Option

For a slightly different perspective, hike a well-used path 0.25 mile southwest of the parking area. The rock outcropping at the point of the ridge is especially useful as a windbreak for setting up a tripod for early morning photography.

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