

Mono Lake

Wish You Were Here

story and photography by Gary (Koz) Mraz



REMEMBER Pink Floyd's album, "Wish You Were Here"?

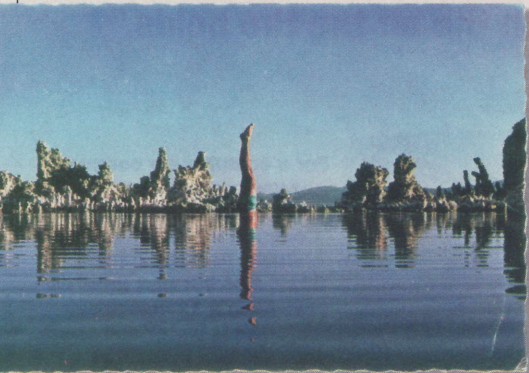
On the front cover was a burning man, and inside was a picture of Mono Lake. They included an actual postcard from Mono Lake as the enigmatic "here." Tripping over these bizarre image flashbacks inspired me to take a motorcycle trek to this strange lunar landscape. The grand vistas and expansive panoramas of the High Sierras always provide a spectacular riding adventure.

Leaving L.A. reminds me of a massive heart attack, its main arteries clogged with cholesterol-rich SUVs. How drivers survive its daily coronary is a miracle of modern man. The scenery changes dramatically as I motor up Highway 14 to the Mojave Desert. It's July, it's 110 degrees, and a shimmering mirage of endless freeway lies before me. What was I thinking? What is the SPF of my sunscreen? Before sheer terror sets in I behold the Indian Wells Brewery at Inyokern, where I stop to sample their wares. My favorite is the Lobotomy Bock, but be careful—it's a potent 10.8 percent.

Highway 395 soon appears. Nestled between the Inyo and the eastern Sierra Nevada mountains, this newly paved divided highway is a dream to ride. Entering Owens Valley, the temperature cools and the road invites me to savor its sweeping curves and grand vistas. The purr of modified pipes in fifth gear resound; this is what Road Kings do best.

Two miles past Lone Pine is Manzanar, a former concentration camp. Rabid anti-Japanese-American racism surfaced after Pearl Harbor, and 120,000 men, women and children were imprisoned here from 1942 to 1945. The Manzanar camp was surrounded by barbed wire and eight guard towers manned by military police wielding machine guns. The visitor center is outstanding, with a multitude of interactive and informative displays. You can drive the perimeter of the camp but the road is dirt and loose gravel. This lone monument guards the barren terrain as a chilling reminder of World War II mentality.

North, past the town of Mammoth Lakes, is Hot Creek natural hot springs. Turning east on Hot Creek Hatchery Road/Airport, after less than a mile, I see a sign to "Hot Creek Geothermal Area." The last mile before the parking lot is also a gravel road. The "hot" part of the springs is in the middle of a freezing stream. I jump in; hot water bubbles up and washes over me. Occa-



Travel the world over and you'll not find anything like this.



You don't have to be a Pink Floyd groupie to appreciate it.



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sionally it's closed because of intensified geothermal activity, so check with the forestry service. Bathing suits required...or so they say.

The Obsidian Dome lies about 20 miles farther just past Deadman Summit. It's a mile-long mound of black glass reaching up to 300 feet high. Obsidian is the result of volcanic lava coming into contact with water. From the parking lot at Obsidian Dome, I climb up the mound, remembering that the rock is quite sharp. This is the same material used by the Paiute Indians to sculpt arrowheads, spearheads, and knives.

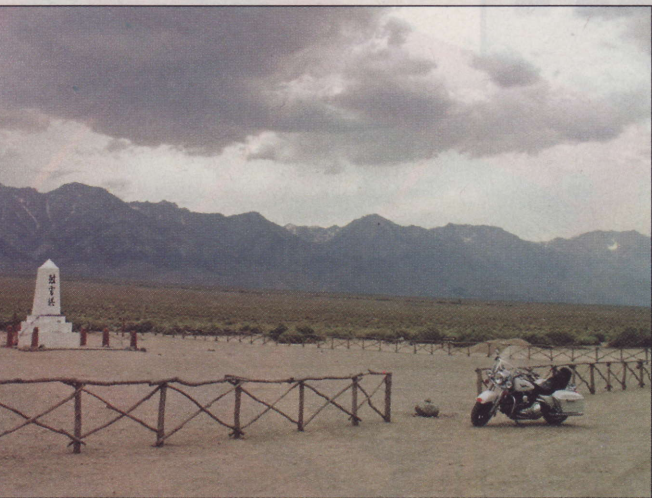
Continuing north up the 395 there is snow on the mountains and it's getting cold (didn't I just mention it's July and hot?). The dark clouds that loomed at Manzanar now pelt me with light rain. As I approach 7,000 feet at Lee Vining my concern shifts from sunscreen SPF to the icy hail that's hitting me in the face; glad I brought my leathers and goggles. The lesson here is to be prepared for anything. Completely frozen, I pull into the local Mobile to gas up. But there is a rich reward here—inside is the Whoa Nellie Deli, where chef Tioga Toomey makes the best blackened seared sesame ahi tuna I've ever had at a gas station.

“Mono” means “flies” in the language of the Yokuts, the Native Americans who live to the south of this region. Among the oldest lakes in North America, Mono Lake has existed without an outlet for nearly a million years. Surrounding the lake are the Mono craters, rising up to 9,000 feet. Most of the eruptions that formed these craters occurred within the last 10,000 years, making this one of the youngest volcanic mountain ranges in North America. This geological contrast is absolutely amazing.

A must-see are the bizarre and unusual rock formations known to geologists as tufa (TOO-fah) that grace Mono Lake's shores. The most visible and remarkable formations are the towers of Mono's south Tufa Grove. Mono Lake has the most active formations around and they are between 200 and 900 years old. It's the alchemical cauldron of this lake that forms these strange limestone spires, some growing 30 feet tall. This is where Pink Floyd photographed the diver postcard. The lake is three times as salty and 80 times more alkaline than the Pacific Ocean. No one would think from a distant view that the water, which seems so bright and enticing, is in reality so dense and alkaline that it would quickly cause death of a traveler who could find no other water with which to quench his thirst.

I hike to the top Panum Crater. Otherworldly, this mysterious landscape could be the dark side of the moon. Simply by turning my head, I can view the panoramic vistas from this summit, the whole of the Mono Basin, the Sierras, and the White Mountains. Before me lie a million years of geology viewed by my meager half-century existence.

Standing on this summit and slowly scanning this surreal diorama, I am struck with the answer to the meaning of life. The answer is...to ask the question. It's the question, not the answer; it's the journey and not the destination. That's why I rode here, loving every moment, and I wish you were here. ☺



Uncommonly peculiar form: the sights are but music to the eyes.

