

# JACUMBA HOT SPRINGS: Riding the Impossible Railroad

## An out of this world riding adventure

The World's Largest Wooden Trestle, Desert View Tower, UFO Salvage and Repair and Gravity Hill.

**Boomer-Ventures** with Koz and Christina



Straddling Interstate 8, between San Diego and El Centro on Mexico's border is the tiny town of Jacumba Hot Springs. Jacumba, (Kumeyaay, an Indian word for, "hut by the water") pronounced ([hə-koom-bə](#)). My home base for this adventure is the Jacumba Hot Springs & Resort located approximately 200 yards from the Mexican border. It was built on Old Hwy 80, an old Spanish trail called Jornada de la Muerte (journey of death) and El Camino del Diablo (devil's highway). In 1975 Highway 8 opened which bypassed the town by 3 miles and Jacumba slipped into obscurity. The current owners of the Hotel obtained the property in late 2011, completed an almost year and a half restoration project and re-opened the resort in 2013. With the restoration and re-opening of the Jacumba Hot Springs Spa & Resort and the development of other properties, Jacumba is full of fun and surprises.

## Desert View Tower

Bert Vaughn, who once owned the town of Jacumba, built Desert View Tower lookout between 1922-28. The 70-foot-high tower was dedicated in memory of the area's rough pre-highway days, when the journey between Yuma and the Pacific Ocean took a month across moonlike terrain. Surrounded by bizarre stone carvings of mythical creatures, it's well worth the visit.



Just outside the gates of the tower, is a row of silver-rimmed, clear bubble-topped saucerettes and a truck labeled "Coyote's Flying Saucer Retrievals and Repairs." Also, there's reportedly Gravity Hills in the Jacumba / Ocotillo area out on Interstate 8. The one in Ocotillo is only available from I-8 westbound. Exit at the Mountain Springs off ramp and at the bottom of the ramp, stop at the stop sign and place your car in neutral to experience the car roll back up the ramp. And that's only the beginning of Jacumba's fascinating topography. An Annual Eternal Music festival draws hundreds to the beat of electronic music and the De Anza Springs Resort. A clothing optional resort in Jacumba is family friendly.



## Gravity Hill-Jacumba

There's reportedly two Gravity Hills in the Jacumba / Ocotillo area out on Interstate 8. The one in Ocotillo is only available from I-8 westbound. Exit at the Mountain Springs off ramp and at the bottom of the ramp, stop at the stop sign and place your car in neutral to experience the car roll back up the ramp. If you are traveling eastbound on I-8, you need to go several miles to exit 87 and turn around to head back to Mountain Springs exit. The Gravity Hill in Jacumba supposedly somewhere on In-Ko-Pah Road somewhere on your way to the Desert View Tower. In-Ko-Pah Road is also off of Interstate 8, west of Ocotillo.



## The Impossible Railroad



At the turn of the 20th century the San Diego and Arizona Railroad was proposed. Conditions were harsh and the treacherous mountain ranges were near impassable with gigantic boulders, deep valleys and numerous ridges and canyons. The prospects were so hopelessly against them, that it became known as "The Impossible Railroad." It took the construction of 17 tunnels, the longest being half of a mile, and 20 trestles, the largest being Goat Canyon Trestle, to complete the mountainous eleven-mile stretch. Completed in 1919, the last passenger train to travel the Impossible Railroad left San Diego on January 11<sup>th</sup> 1951, but the railroad continued to ferry freight. In September of 1976, tropical storm Kathleen washed out the Impossible Railroad in numerous places, and it remains abandoned to this day.

I opted to ride the Impossible Railroad on a Pedego e-bike. The power of the Pedego Trail Tracker offered me the confidence that the return trip would be easily doable. At 62 years old and not an avid traditional trail bicyclist, I would normally be exhausted by the strenuous uphill riding. But the stability and power of the Trail Tracker was confidence inspiring.

Christina's mission was to check out Jacumba Hot Spring Resort. During the '20s and '30s, the small border town of Jacumba boomed with tourism. Jacumba Hot Springs Resort attracted Hollywood stars such as Clark Gable and Marlene Dietrich before Palm Springs rose to prominence. To this day Visitors continue to come from all over to benefit from the water's healing properties. Both swimming pools and the Jacuzzi are fed by natural hot springs mineral water. The water temperature averages about 98° which make it perfect for swimming year around. The Jacuzzi is located in a dedicated area of the main building, this little slice of heaven allows for a certain level of privacy while also giving you the convenience of close access to the bar and restaurant. Sit back and enjoy the view from the open ceiling day or gaze into the starry night. All while being gently massaged by our two motor-driven jets.



I picked The Pedego Trail Tracker for this ride. The fat 4inch wide tires allowed me to effortlessly float over virtually any terrain including sand, large gravel and rocks to railroad tracks. I got the optional wider soft saddle with a suspension seat post for extra cushioning on this harsh terrain. The straight handlebars with a 2" rise for optimum control and comfort. It was the smartest thing I did on this BoomerVenture. Admittedly, I was sorely ill prepared for this level of undertaking and encountered numerous obstacles and potential dangers. The ride began underneath the 8 freeway overpass at the entrance to the De Anza Resort Nudist Colony.



The steep dirt embankments are an easy ride down to the tracks, but would have been a hell of a fight back up had I not had the rear wheel spinning wildly via the Pedego electric motor.

**Lesson #1:** Know your gear and your limitations. Within the first 10 minutes of riding through a deep valley full of tall thorny bushes and cattails, a massive Mule Deer with huge antlers appeared before me and pranced across the railroad. I soon spotted a large white cross by the side of the tracks, obviously a memorial to someone perhaps as ill prepared as I was. I later learned this was a memorial to a United States Border Patrol Officer who in fact died here of heat exhaustion. I had brought one bottle (16.9 ounces of water) and one fruit bar for this entire journey. **Lesson #2:** Come prepared!



The terrain is rough the Pedego power was welcome assistance up and down the railroad embankments. Arriving at the first small trestle I had to pick the bike onto the railroad ties and walk the length the trestle then get back onto the trail. At times, there was no trail at all.

The wooden ties on the first several trestles are in complete disrepair. Many have completely rotted out.

I had to carefully step on the ones that seem in reasonable condition, avoiding the ones that weren't. Sections are completely gone, and one could easily fall completely through to an untimely end. Again, with a twist of the throttle, I jumped over empty sections as the bike flew easily with me.



It was here that I realized my biggest mistake. **Lesson #3:** DO NOT under any circumstances, attempt this alone. As the ride progressed, sections of the trail became a 12 inch wide path of dirt, along a 500 foot drop into rocky crevasse or just end abruptly at a cliff. No cell service, no other hikers and no way to see into those deep ravines, which means one slip or mistake, down the mountain side you go and there's NO RETURN.



I soldiered on. There was an amazing array of abandon passenger cars littered along the route, with the first batch covered in graffiti. But as I continued on, the other passenger cars were inaccessible and left untouched.

The trestles became larger and higher, the tunnels became longer and darker and the danger became greater as I ventured further into the abyss of this impossible railroad. Although the Pedego Trail Tracker has a headlamp, it became almost useless in the complete darkness of a quarter mile tunnel. You can't ride quickly and it's slow going. **Lesson #4:** Bring a bright-ass flashlight. Only a few hundred feet into the depth of this long tunnel, the sound of something running echoed in the darkness. I froze inside this black hole and listened to the approaching patter, preparing my escape when suddenly two large goats blew by me at full speed. If you're claustrophobic, acrophobic or afraid of the dark, this may not be the ride for you.



The Goat Canyon Trestle is the world's largest wooden trestle and a sight to behold. I had met a local named Rick who was on the trestle maintenance crew in 70s. Rick told me that the curved design required the trestle to sway 12 feet in either direction to support the massive weight of a fully loaded train crossing the bridge. He recalled working underneath the trestle on repairs, as the bridge creaked and groaned, and shifted dramatically.

The Trail tracker performed flawlessly every mile and riding on self-sealing tubes to help prevent flats guaranteed my safe return. The only down side of riding an e-bike on such a treacherous journey was the added weight. Riding all the trestles mandates a continual lifting of the 60lb bike on and off the trestle tracks some 50 odd times.



All in all, the 16 mile round trip is an absolutely amazing-one-of-a-kind bike ride or hike, and people do it all the time. The views are spectacular. It's truly a living museum of tracks, trestles and trains. Be prepared for the tunnels darkness and the desert heat. Go with a group and be sure your family knows your plans (I didn't see another soul the entire time). Finally, **Lesson #5:** Do this BoomerVenture sooner than later. Some of the tunnels have large metal gates, and there may come a time soon that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will shut down access to the Impossible Railroad for safety and security reasons.



While I tackled to the Impossible Railroad, Christina explored the quaint, rustic setting at the Jacumba Resort, and enjoyed a wonderfully prepared lunch. To her surprise, they even have a luscious gluten-free chocolate cake. Sitting out at the resort's outdoor patio she was immersed in a tranquility one can only find in the still of the desert. Christina received a nourishing massage by the healing hands of Sharon Lee Conway, the resort's long-term therapist and medicine woman. Sharon has worked in many holistic clinics in various capacities, and has served visitors at Jacumba Hot Springs for three decades, and is known as one of the areas most revered healers.

Christina and I came away with a tale of two worlds. One of a forgotten past, vanquished to a living museum, fraught with danger and intrigue. A journey through history that challenges personal fears yet pushes the limits of inner strength and determination. Another of the healing waters of Jacumba Hot Springs that bubbled up from the earth, along with the generous, kind spirits we encountered, told a tale of an ever-present force for good that soothes body and soul.

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Kozmo's other adventure travel stories can be found at [www.kozmoto.co](http://www.kozmoto.co)