

# Motorcycling Mojave

## Booming Dunes & Lava Tubes from Zzyzx to the Bagdad Café

Story & Photos Gary Koz Mraz

Singing dunes, volcanic cinder cones, Lava tubes and endless highways are all found at the 1.6 million-acre Mojave Nature Reserve. A visit to its canyons, mountains and mesas reveals mines, homesteads, and ghost towns long abandon and newly reborn. Located between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Mojave provides big sky, endless roadways and supreme solitude only 70 miles from the madness that is L.A. With stops like the Bagdad Café (from the movie “Bagdad Café”), Zzyzx and the Nipton Hotel, the Mojave Desert offers motorcyclists somewhere close to far away.



Inhabited by the Chemehuevi Indians for a millennia they lived on prickly pear, mesquite and roasted agave blooms hunting deer and bighorn sheep. Mojave tribal peoples were concentrated along the Colorado River and the Mojave trail. Gold fever struck California and the General Mining Law of 1872 permitted individuals to stake a claim on an area of land where a mineral deposit was discovered. Copper, iron, gold and silver mines rapidly became established. Mojave's history is as varied and colorful as the individuals who staked their claim in this desert.

**1 Star** “I did it so you don’t have to” and **4 Star** a “Must see before you die!”

**Kelso** – Mojave Visitor Center and the Kelso Booming Dunes. During the 1970s Kelso was known as the town without TV. Children played outside until dark and adults sat outside and talked together... imagine that! Kelso Depot, which once provided food, recreation and accommodations for Union Pacific Railroad employees, is now the principal visitor center for Mojave National Preserve. It's staffed and houses displays, movie room featuring Mojave history, free maps and plans for a restaurant. **3 Stars** - if you're in Mojave you need to stop here.



The Kelso Dunes are notable for the phenomenon known as singing sand, or "booming dunes". Hikers typically climb to the top of the dunes and slide down slowly, generating a low-frequency rumble that can be both felt and heard. The Kelso Dune complex has some of the highest dunes (600 feet) in the region. The road is and hard gravel easily by motorcycle. It had rained the week prior and the dunes don't Boom if damp. The drier they are the bigger they boom. It's definitely on my bucket list.



**Mitchell Caverns** - Jack and Ida Mitchell built a road, trails and stairs where they led tours of limestone caverns now called Mitchell caverns. The ever-popular Westways magazine brought the caverns to the attention of the motoring public in 1933. Jack and Ida decided to build a home and permanently live at the caverns. Considering they live in the middle of the desert and the nearest neighbor was 15 miles away, that's fortitude. Mitchell Caverns, located in the heart of the Providence Mountains State Recreation Area. Spectacular and intricate limestone formations found include; stalagmites, stalactites, helictites, lily pads, draperies, curtains and cave popcorn.



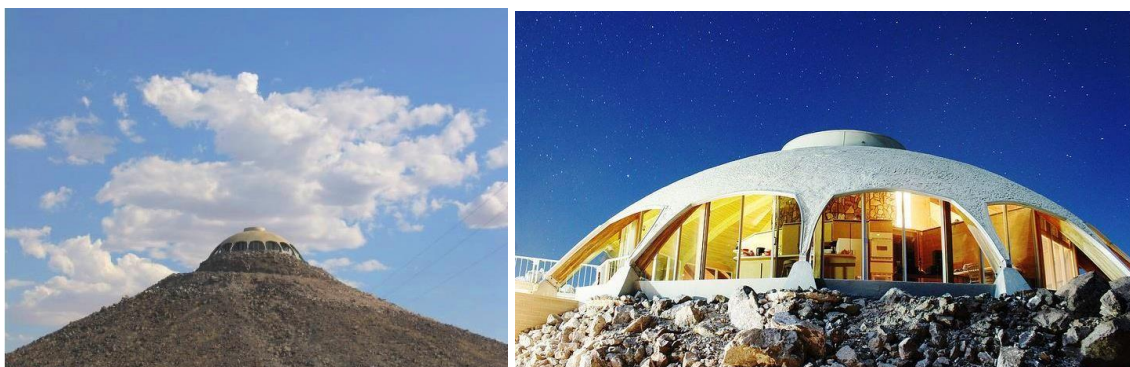
The caverns were purchased by the State in 1954 and are the only limestone caverns in the State Park System.



**Bagdad Café** - Newberry Springs. Bagdad became the fictionalized setting of both a popular novel and a motion picture called Bagdad Café. The Café location shooting was actually done at the Sidewinder Cafe to the west in Newberry Springs, which has since been renamed the "Bagdad Café." The actual town of Bagdad is gone. I can't tell if they sell hot food or hot car stereos by the way they miscellaneous electronics are stacked up in the corners. It's a mess visually and esthetically. I didn't eat there but you can try your luck. **1 Star Rating.** I did it, you don't have to.



Newberry Springs is also home to the unique Volcano House built in 1968. Donated to Chapman University by its last owner, Huell Howser, it literally sits atop a lava done with a spectacular 360 degree view. I have crossed paths with Huell and have seen this home. It's a remote as it gets and unless you are faculty at Chapman University, you never will. **1 Star Rating.** Awesome place but completely inaccessible,



**Zzyzx – Soda Springs.** In 1940's, Dr. Curtis Springer, a Methodist minister and physician, (he was neither), established a mineral springs resort. He named the resort Zzyzx designed to be the final word in the English language. He promoted it wildly on his quasi-religious Los Angeles based radio show. He claimed his mineral spring's spa and his special diet could cure everything from hair loss to cancer. Attracting much attention he built up a thriving business that lasted over 30 years. The American Medical Association gave Springer the dubious title of "King of Quacks". The government discovered he built the spa on land he didn't own. In 1974 he was evicted, arrested for food and drug law violations and spent several months in jail. Zzyzx is now home to California State University's Desert Studies Center. Open to the public, you need to drive down here next time your heading to Vegas. Incredible views of Soda Lake and open Mojave. It's a paved road, parts are washed out but don't panic, it will pass. Feel free to walk around and its history is posted on the bathrooms. It's remote, unkempt and somehow forbidding but don't be afraid, it's ok to be there. **3 Star rating.** A must see.



Soda Springs on Zzyzx Road



Zzyzx

**Nipton - Hotel Nipton.** 35 years ago Nipton was virtually abandoned but in 1984 the entire town was purchased for 200 grand by geologist Gerald Freeman. He installed solar panels to power the entire town and Wi-Fi. Home to the Hotel Nipton it was originally constructed in 1904 and was restored by Freeman in 1986, and again refurbished in 2004. This 5-bedroom Hotel is open as a bed-and-breakfast inn to serve visitors of Mojave. This 100-plus-year-old Hotel was a favorite getaway to silent film actress Clara Bow. Room 3 was her room and is a patron favorite. Room 1 is the train room because it faces the train tracks and has many windows. I stayed in room 5, the newest additions, and wasn't bothered by the train whistles.



In early 2022, along came an unusual buyer. Spiegelworld, is a Las Vegas-based theater company known for adult-themed acrobatic performances. They quietly acquired Nipton for more than \$2.5 million in cash. **2 Star Rating.** It's the "only" hotel within the Mojave National Preserve and a unique experience.



**Cinder Cones & Lava Flows** About 16 miles southeast of Baker, Kelbaker Road traverses a 25,600-acre area of lava flows and volcanic cinder cones thought to range in age from 10,000 to 7 million years old. In 1973, the area was designated as Cinder Cones National Natural Landmark.

**Aiken Mine Road** (19.5 miles southeast of Baker) offers an interesting side trip through the heart of the area and access to a lava tube. You won't be getting here on an Electra Glide, high clearance and/or four-wheel drive recommended. As the lava streamed out across the land, it slowly began to cool. Often, the top of a flow would cool while liquid lava continued moving underneath, creating a tunnel. Accessible via a 5-mile drive from Kelbaker Road. Climbing through a collapsed hole in the tube's roof, visitors have a rare opportunity to view this lava tube.

## Joshua Tree National Park – 4 Star



## Amboy Crater



**Old Route 66.** Littered with abandon Cafes and Hotels the remnants of Americas motoring past lie scattered along this lost highway. An eerie ride traverses much of the Mojave Preserve. This alone is worth a visit to Mojave. 3 Stars



If you spend time hiking this terrain you will find petro glyphs dating back centuries and places named devils playground for good reason. Remember this is the desert with triple digit days June through September and freezing nights winter months with elevations of 2,000 to 5,000 feet. Considered a "high desert" has extreme fluctuations of daily temperatures, and very strong seasonal winds. The Mojave offers endless miles of magnificent motorcycling proving that you don't have to travel far to get far away.