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The Truth is Out There on Nevada Highway

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Headline: GOOD HEAVENS!
THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE ON NEVADA HIGHWAY FAMOUS FOR UFO SIGHTINGS, MILITARY SECRETS, BEAUTIFUL STARGAZING

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Text:
In the desert darkness, the night sky is alive with celestial dandruff:
zillions of stars, cosmic punctuation marks that ancient shepherds and cowboys turned into bears and drinking dippers. And sometimes, late at night in the darkness north of Mercury, Nev., sitting on the hood of a rented Pontiac, enjoying a soda and staring into the sky, one can see the
stars move. Sometimes, on the quiet desert floor on the cusp of a secret
government test site, you could swear the moving stars were something else;
something like flying saucers, maybe, or visitors from another planet.
``People come out from cities, where they can't see the stars like they
can in the pristine skies of the desert,'' says Glenn Campbell, maven of

all that is secret and mysterious in the southern Nevada desert. ``So they come out here, wanting to see UFOs, and they notice a lot of shooting stars, and planes and flares. You know, they can be whatever you want them to be.''

So, are they shooting stars, or the armored pods from some alien mother ship?

Asking that is about the same as asking which joint on the Las Vegas Strip has the best $3.99 prime rib. It doesn't really matter. When it comes to chasing aliens on the southern Nevada desert, suspension of disbelief is the key to everything. Las Vegas was built on it, the Extra Terrestrial Highway is paved with it, and, if you saw ``Independence Day,'' you not only suspended, but you had to completely abandon disbelief to enjoy the show.

So, just leave your suspicion and logic at the curb, buddy, and get into the Pontiac. We're gonna get taken for a ride.

We're headed for Area 51, or as close as you can get to the patch of desert the government currently treats the same way they used to treat mainland China: a place that doesn't exist.

If you paid attention during ``Independence Day,'' you already know Area 51 is where the government keeps captured aliens and spaceships. And, depending on whom you talk to along Nevada Highway 375, the Extra Terrestrial Highway, Area 51 is either a secret saucer test site or the place where the Air Force's top guns test domestically produced aircraft.

The UFO angle was forged in 1989 when a man named Robert Lazar went on television and claimed he'd worked on some captured alien flying saucers to determine how they used Element 115, a super-heavy substance not found on Earth, in their propulsion system. He worked near Area 51.

``At first, when I came out here, I was perfectly willing to be the skeptic and debunk everything out there,'' says Campbell, 36, relaxing in his small Las Vegas apartment squeezed between the Strip casinos and the corner of McCarran Airport, where Area 51 workers are allegedly ferried to and from their jobs in unmarked jetliners. ``But now, I've come to admire what a good job the government has done to keep the whole thing a secret.''

Campbell, who is making his living selling UFO information and his own writings on the territory surrounding the government's secret site, seems of two minds when it comes to cosmic critters and government secrecy. On

the one hand, he said he feels the government is being almost tauntingly unaccountable by keeping the area so tightly secured; on the other, he knows if the government turned the place into a kind of Happy Alien Village theme park, he'd be out of work.

``All they would really have to do is invite some reporters in there for lunch, say, `OK, here it is. Yes, we do a lot of secret work here and we can't talk about it.' That would be it, end of story,'' he says.

Instead, the government commandeered two hills where people could hike up and see the air base at Groom Dry Lake, which was a lot like yelling, ``fire'' in a crowded flying saucer. And, the entire area is patrolled by ``camouflage dudes,'' men in fatigues who drive around in unmarked jeeps and chase off visitors who have ventured too close to the restricted area.

Knowing a public-relations coup when it flies past them, the state of Nevada officially renamed its Highway 375 the Extra Terrestrial Highway last spring.

Some legislators had tried to do it a couple of times previously, but were laughed down by a more sober element who thought the whole idea was stupid. This time, however, the renaming came just as the release of ``Independence Day'' loomed on the horizon between Hollywood and Las Vegas like a massive alien war wagon. The renaming won approval.

``The Fox movie company essentially purchased the highway (by lobbying for the renaming),'' says Campbell. ``They would have bought Area 51 if they could, but they couldn't, so they bought the highway instead.''

Suddenly, what had been the domain of the UFOgnoscenti became public property. And everybody, rather than just those with friends in high places, became privy to the road lore. They know that on Wednesday nights if you went to the black mailbox and thought loving thoughts, the UFOs would come out and dance. They knew all you had to do was look skyward and flying saucers would appear before your eyes.

``You realize there are a lot of military and celestial activities out there, so if you want to see UFOs, you're gonna see UFOs,'' says Campbell.

``Of course, you could explain all of what you see with logic, but why? Now, I'm looking at it as a philosophical challenge to fight every instinct that tells me this is all rubbish. I'm willing to give it the benefit of the doubt.''

That's why we're out here on the ET Highway, a seemingly endless

stretch of lonely blacktop, where a desert pilgrim is not necessarily a welcome sight to others wandering the dirt and sagebrush in search of alternative intelligent life.

The road runs straight as a Baptist picnic, so you can see seekers from miles away. You hope to reach out and make contact with others who have ventured out in their rental cars to find UFOs. But as soon as they notice you have spotted them, and you're slowing down to talk, they scramble into their autos and speed away. The Pontiac scared two of these parties away. People, it seems, have been frightened with tales of strong-arm camouflage dudes, and camera-snatching sheriff's deputies. But it would be nice to find someone to talk to.

Three lonely hours out of Vegas, you reach Rachel, a town constructed primarily of mobile homes, home address to about 100 souls and the celestial center of the southern Nevada saucer search.

Campbell has a place here, as do Pat and Joe Travis, the couple who appear to have benefited most from the saucer shower. They own the Little A'Le'Inn, an oasis of burgers and beer that caters to earthlings and others who visit Rachel, the town named for the first and only baby born in this patch of desert.

Joe, 57, sits at the edge of the bar in the bright tavern, decorated in Plan Nine from Outer Space Modern and Roadhouse Practical. Big bottles of booze line the bar, beer and soda fill the coolers and the sounds of sizzling come from the back room, where Pat is grilling up an Alien Burger (made from unmutilated cows, not aliens). Otherworldly art covers the walls: A life- sized picture of a space creature stares out from a door, and the area behind the bar is decorated with alien masks. In one corner, there are all the alien souvenirs you could want.

``Who's to say? I mean, we get all kinds of people in here: those who are interested in aliens, those who say they are aliens, those who believe, those who don't. It's all fine with me,'' says Joe, a garrulous, bearded man who seems to enjoy the celebrity he has found on the Extra Terrestrial Highway. ``You can say whatever you want, but whenever someone talks about aliens, people listen. And the more educated you are, the more likely you believe. It's a fact.''

Outside, Air Force jets scrape across the sky, tiny dots that move as fast as, well, as fast as flying saucers. Off in a field, 200 yards from

the tavern, someone fires smoke flares into the sky.

``Planes pretend they're enemy missiles,'' explains Steven Phipps, gesturing skyward as the desert breeze blows through his long hair and beard. ``You can see all kinds of stuff flying by here.''

``We have had what you might call a couple of experiences,'' says Pat Travis, resting her hands on the bar as she chats.

There was the beam of light that shone through a solid door. Then, there's Archibald, the alien who lives at the bar and reassures the Travises.

LaRae Fletcher looks over from a nearby table.

``I saw the ship once,'' she says softly. ``It was big, kind of shaped like a sugar shaker. It was just over there and I was scared. Then, I heard well, I didn't really hear it, it was more like a thought -- `If you don't come closer, we won't come to you.' And I left. It was the most frightening thing.''

On the lonely road, thoughts like that play on your mind. They haunt you. And the quiet desert road offers the Pontiac nothing but time.

TripTips

If you go

From Las Vegas, drive east on Interstate 15 to Highway 93, then north to Highway 375, the Extra Terrestrial Highway.

Make sure you have plenty of gas;there are only two stations between Las Vegas and Rachel, which is a three-hour ride. Also, pack food and drinks. There are no convenient places to stop for food.

On Highway 375, a number of unmarked, westward dirt roads lead to secret government bases. Go only as far as legally possible. Arrests or confiscation of cameras and film are not uncommon.

Rachel is a small but interesting place to stop. If you're looking for souvenirs, try the Quik Pick convenience store, Area 51 Research Center or the Little A'Le'Inn, the only restaurant in town.

Once out of Rachel on 375, you can finish out the ET Highway at Warm Springs, then go west on Highway 6 to Highway 95 for a return trip to Las Vegas. But if you're on a tight schedule, go back the way you came, which is quicker.

PAT CRAIG; KNIGHT-RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

Caption:
PHOTO: (2 color), Pat Craig / Knight Ridder Newspapers
MAP: (b&w), Knight-/Ridder Tribune
* Nevada's Route 375, top, was renamed Extraterrestrial Highway because of many rumored UFO sightings. Above, Joe and Pat Travis own the Little

A'Le'Inn (Get it? Alien?) in Rachel, Nev., along the stretch of desert
road.
* An otherworldly road
The Nevada Transportation Board has named Highway 375 its official
Extraterrestrial Highway.

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