

Embers OF History

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY EMILY FAGAN

Walk, ride and drive through Nevada's Valley of Fire

After driving countless flat miles across endless, vast stretches of dusty desert, we crested a small rise and gasped in amazement as the flaming red-rock spires of Nevada's Valley of Fire State Park suddenly burst into view before us. Two years earlier, we'd been so enchanted by this red-rock-and-

petroglyph-filled park 55 miles northeast of Las Vegas that we decided to return again this year to get a refill of the soaring emotions that accompany each jaw-dropping view. That moment of "Wow!" as we came in the east entrance confirmed our vivid memories: Valley of Fire is worthy of many return trips.

Hiking the short distance

at the entrance to Elephant Rock, we felt our sinuses shrivel in the dryness of the desert air. Kids were climbing all over the rocks near the elephant formation, shouting to each other in glee. And we hadn't even gotten into the park yet.

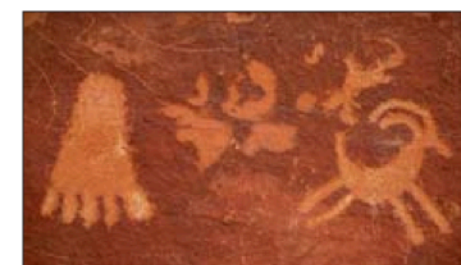
Just a few miles down the road, the towering monoliths of the Seven

Sisters begged for another stop, and we found our cameras clicking away as we alternately breathed in the stunning views and wondered what magic it takes to capture it all in a photograph.

We wandered through the Cabins nearby, and got a glimpse of how earlier visitors enjoyed the park in days gone by. Built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933, the three tiny adjoining one-room stone cabins hosted park visitors for many years. There wasn't much room for anything beyond a bed and a chair in these closet-

sized rooms, but what a view those early tourists had out their windows.

Valley of Fire became Nevada's first state park in 1935, but it has a human history that dates back 4,000 years and a geological history that



goes back hundreds of millions of years. The region was once covered by a warm, shallow sea, and archaeologists have found evidence of sea creatures in the gray dolomite rocks surrounding the park. As the sea retreated and returned many times over the years, a deep, dark seabed floor was laid down.



Later, light colored sands blew in from nearby highlands and formed great dunes similar to those found in the Sahara today. Eventually, underground streams rich in minerals oozed through the sand to stain it red, and the weight of the sand compressed it into rock. A few tectonic plate clashes and some

earth-crushing uplifts finally gave birth to today's brilliant flash of red rocks that smolders against a dark mountain backdrop.

We hiked into Mouse's Tank, a short canyon that leads to a small rock-rimmed bowl that can hold a hundred gallons or so of water when it rains. In the 1800s, a Native American

known as Mouse hid away in this canyon, able to survive because of his private stash of water.

He wasn't the first person to find this canyon, however. As we hiked, we discovered that human history is written all along the canyon walls, but you have to look up as you go. Most of the numerous petroglyphs that were painstakingly chipped out of the flat rock face as many as 4,000 years ago are 15 to 20 feet off the ground. The sites aren't marked, so we felt a little like the early explorers stomping through the soft sand and pointing high above, "There's one, oh, and another. Look there's a sheep, and a deer, and a group of people holding hands!"

Who put that artwork there, why, and what does it mean? These unanswerable questions stagger the mind as the odd shapes of the sandstone at waist level beg to be touched.

Hollowed out by the relentless forces of wind and water, the sandstone forms little pockets tucked between big holes amid long sweeping curves of white-



and-pink-striped rock. The sandstone provides wonderful traction as you clamber over the rocks like a kid, but it wears down easily, shedding granules of sand when you scrape your sole, leaving these towering cliffs with a single destiny: the gradual decay into sand.

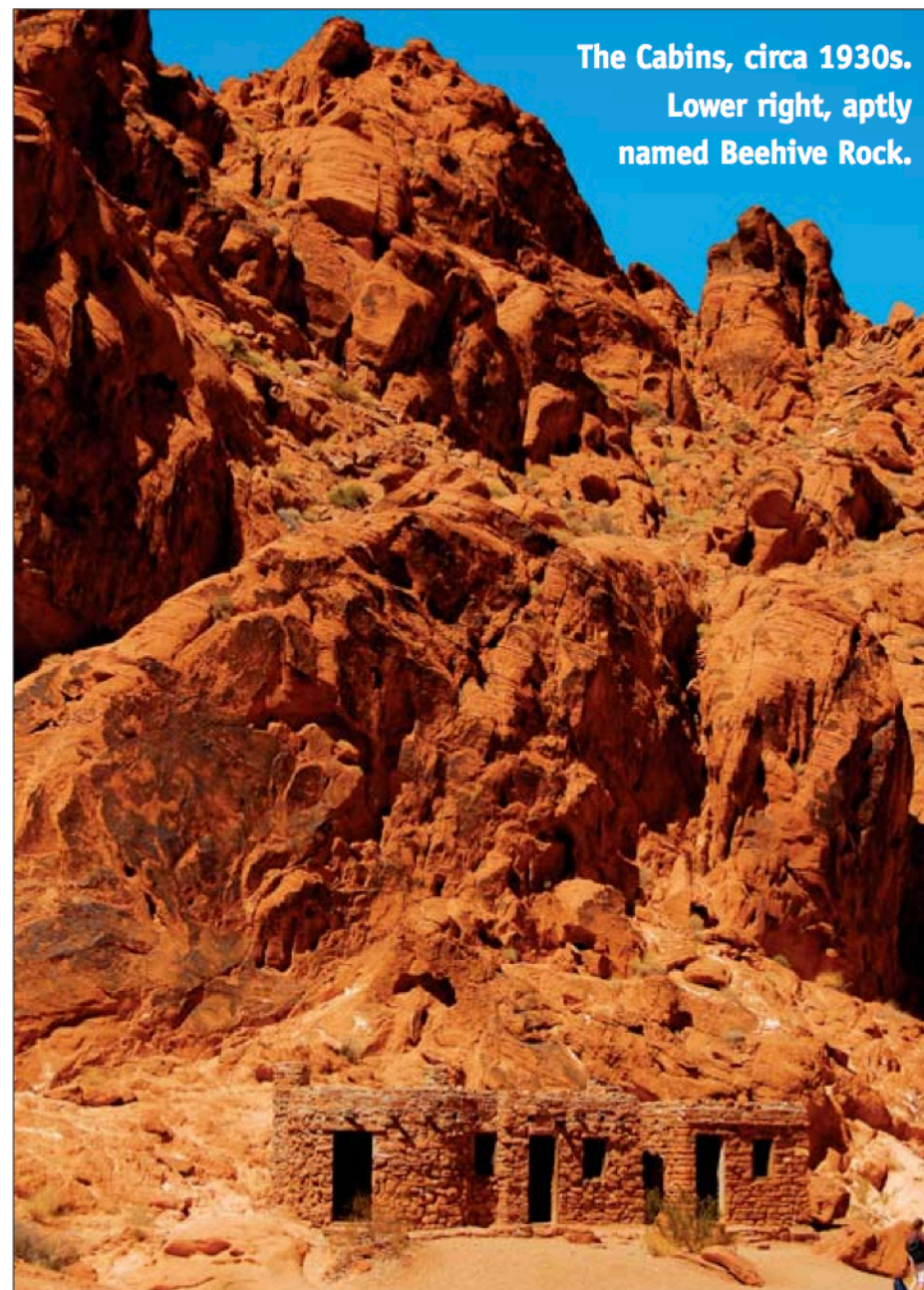
The park's visitor center offers extensive displays explaining every aspect of the area, including a diorama that shows the many tools, saddles, horseshoes and eating utensils unearthed in the park. These date back to the early settlers, pioneers and Mormons who made their way

through this hostile environment to a better life elsewhere.

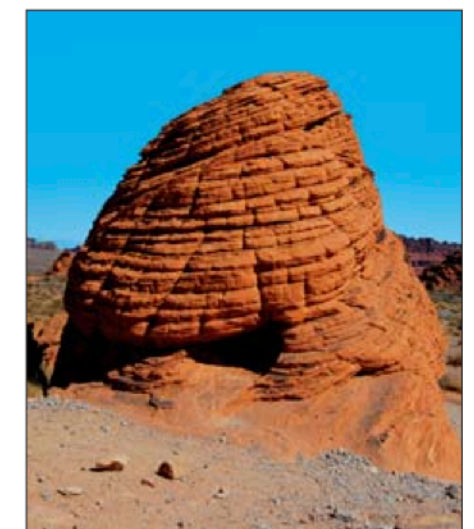
A plaque out in the park shows where an unfortunate Canadian soldier, Sergeant John Clark, was found dead under his horse-drawn buggy in a spot where it is believed he was making a fruitless search for water. He had survived battle wounds and typhoid fever fighting for the North in the Civil War but succumbed to the ruthless forces of nature in this exquisite but harsh land. Driving on beautiful asphalt roads in air-conditioned comfort, an icy bottle of

water in hand, it's hard to imagine anyone attempting to travel anywhere near here in a horse and buggy.

The 7-mile drive—or exhilarating bicycle ride—out to the White Dome loop hiking trail is the highlight of the park. The road swoops and turns, first



The Cabins, circa 1930s.
Lower right, aptly named Beehive Rock.





along steep, craggy orange canyon walls and then through wide domed red-and-white vistas. Bicycling this scenic road, we were treated to the majestic sight of a pair of bighorn sheep peering down at us from the dizzying heights of the red cliffs. A spectacular sunrise greeted the world that morning, and we stopped to see the fire in the sky play with the fire of the rocks around us.

Short hikes along this road offer rewarding views in exchange for a brief trudge through soft sand. Rainbow Vista is just that, a colorful palette of reds, oranges and whites at the end of the trail. Aptly named Fire Canyon and Silica Dome can be seen from

the car, although a walk of a few hundred yards brings you to a precipice overlooking a jagged bowl lined with rugged peaks.

At the end of this scenic drive, the mile-long White Dome loop hiking trail awaits. The sand was virgin when we arrived, a perfect canvas for the tracks of lizards, birds and insects. The trails crisscrossed, telling the story of a cool desert morning filled with animal activity. In this area the sandstone is not just the familiar burnt orange but also takes on a yellow hue or even a turquoise green in places. The leisurely hike, which includes a skinny walk through a short slot canyon, took us two hours because we kept stopping

to marvel at the unearthly world around us.

Back in 1966, the movie *The Professionals* was filmed in this canyon, and remnants of the set can still be seen. Fortunately, Hollywood now does a better job of cleaning up

after itself, following the camper's creed, "Take only pictures and leave only footprints." However, 40-some years ago, the ethics were a little different.

Near the western entrance to the park, Atlatl Rock features a huge panel of rock art that may be 4,000 years old. Geometric shapes, footprints, bighorn sheep, people and an *atlatl* (throwing stick) are clearly visible.

The rock face is on the last of a series of huge cliffs, facing a wide valley, so it's easy to imagine why the art was placed in that location. But those early people had quite a scramble to get to the spot,

without a climber's belay. How did they cling to the side of the rock wall while they pecked out their designs? Today, tourists can climb a long, steep staircase to get a close-up view of those petroglyphs.

Not far from this spot are the formations affectionately called the Beehives. Here, the wind must have swirled relentlessly, patterning the dunes into rounded, almost conical, shapes. An indentation in the front of one makes a perfect entrance for would-be giant bees.

A final tour of the 3-mile backcountry road that loops behind the campground rounded out our

visit. We came across an arch that looks much like a divine hand making an OK sign with thumb and forefinger. Turning a corner near sunset, the horizon suddenly seemed filled with the burning embers of red rocks set against the dark, almost charred-looking dolomite rock behind. It's hard to imagine that the dark rock, the remains of the fossilized seabed, is 550 million years old, and the sunbursts of red-rock sandstone are a mere 200 million years old. The many faces and cultures of humankind that have left their footprints in this land seem fleeting by comparison. 🦋

Easy trails lead to petroglyphs and painted sandstone vistas.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Valley of Fire State Park

www.parks.nv.gov/vf.htm

Nevada has one Coast Deluxe Resort, three Coast Classic Resorts and two Good Neighbor Parks. Consult your *2010 Resort Directory* for their locations or visit the Coast to Coast website, www.coastresorts.com.

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