Avi Kwa Ame National Monument

Backcountry Scenic Driving Routes

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Important Message for Backcountry Road Use

These tour routes are intended to help you navigate and experience some of the special resources of the proposed Avi Kwa Ame National Monument. Most of the tours require a high clearance vehicle but not all. Also, some require a 4-wheel drive vehicle as well. Each tour will indicate what is recommended. Please know that conditions on these roads can vary depending on whether there may be any washouts from recent rains.

Taking a vehicle off-highway can be a tremendous adventure -- but it can also be a complete disaster, unless you first take the time to prepare yourself and your vehicle for the backcountry route. You should be prepared before venturing out. The desert can be a dangerous and lonely place, if you find yourself stuck or broke down and without help. You can google a number of sites that can tell you what emergency supplies you should consider taking along as a precaution. Cell coverage is mixed on some of these routes depending on the provider.

Another good rule is to always know where you are, and where you're going. Take good maps along, and consider getting a GPS. You should always let someone know where you are going, and set a time to contact them to let them know you are okay. If you do get lost or break down, then the people at home should know when and where to start looking. That person should have the phone number of the nearest sheriff, Park Service or BLM office (depending on who has jurisdiction over the land you're traveling on). You need to be aware that cell coverage is spotty in some locations, depending on the provider.

Another important element is to be aware of the damage you and your vehicle can do to the desert environment. Absolutely, don't blaze a new trail. Stay on the established backcountry designated road. We all need to Tread Lightly and follow the “Leave No Trace” principles. The first reason is, we are all visitors in someone else's home when we're out on the desert; be aware that many animals live above, on and under the sands, and we don't really have a right to destroy their homes.

Also, much of the Avi Kwa Ame lands have a biological (cryptobiotic) soil crust. This biological soil crust is a living soil that’s comprised mostly of cyanobacteria, as well as lichen, moss, fungi, and other bacteria. Cryptobiotic soil has been dubbed the ‘protector of the desert’. The slow-growing cyanobacteria move through wet soil to form a complex web of sticky fibers. This web is what fuses soil particles together, creating a thick, hard layer for new growth, which also helps to prevent erosion. And, this layer has maximum water absorption thanks to its sponge-like make up. This function helps to regulate water runoff and reduce evaporation.

As a result, this increase in human activity and disturbance to the crust could lead to significant damage due to wind and water erosion, as well as nutrient loss. When damaged, the colony of organisms could take **several hundred to 5,000+ years** to recolonize and reform in arid places (you read that right.) Biological soil crust is the lifeline of the desert because it plays a vital role in soil stability, moisture, and nutrient cycles. Without it, nothing can grow and the plant and animal life that rely on this, would not survive. Also, humans would not be able to fare well in the desert without this intelligent soil crust.

The Bureau of Land Management does allow for dispersed camping on the public lands. There is no fee for dispersed camping, but there is a limit of 14 days one may camp before having to move at least 25 miles from the original spot. You should choose sites that are already established, use existing fire rings, and camp at least 200 feet from water sources. You also need to check current fire conditions. You should dispose of human waste properly (away from water and in a 6” or deeper hole.)
If you are interested in seeing some of the most diverse and biologically significant Mohave Desert habitats, unbroken natural landscapes, rare desert grasslands, rich human history, and impressive sawtooth-type mountains, then this could be just the destination for you. This 10-mile-long drive is certainly a feast for the eyes with **breathtaking panoramas** and **provides a sense of serenity and solitude**. The Walking Box Ranch and the Castle Mountains are beautiful and historically fascinating places—think Joshua tree forests, washes filled with willows, and rugged mountains where herds of desert bighorn sheep still roam.

The Walking Box Ranch Road is accessed off Nevada Highway #164 (Joshua Tree Highway) about 7 miles west of Searchlight. The turnoff for the Walking Box Ranch Road is marked by a large kiosk styled Bureau of Land Management sign. The road is well maintained and can be done with a sedan. A high clearance or 4-wheel drive vehicle is not necessary. The California State line and entrance to the Castle Mountains National Monument is at mile post #10. If you have time, it is recommended that you drive another 5 miles and enjoy the Castle Mountains National Monument.

The route goes through a beautiful Joshua Tree Woodland, the eastern terminus of the world’s largest Joshua Tree Forest. Growing just half an inch per year on average, the Joshua stand is home to some of the oldest and largest Joshua trees on the planet. These ancient ones have grown tall in the silence of the desert, some rising to more than 30 feet over 900 years. Nevada’s largest Joshua Tree is found only several miles from the turnoff to the Walking Box Ranch Road.

The Walking Box Ranch Road area is a hotspot of botanical diversity. In addition to the extensive Joshua Tree Woodland, visitors can also find blackbrush, Mojave yucca, buckhorn cholla, creosote bush, white bur-sage, banana yucca, bunch grass, matted cholla, and prickly pear cactus throughout the drive. There are
are also a number of Nevada Special Status botanical species

The drive from about milepost #6 and extending into California contains a unique arid grassland community. The unique plant assemblage includes 28 species of native grasses, about half of which are rare. This area contains the only stands of diverse C4 perennial grasslands west of the Colorado River, a subtropical grassland that is normally found in the Sonoran Desert uplands in Arizona and Mexico. Grass species common in this plant community flower and seed during the warm seasons of summer and fall, especially after strong monsoon rainfall events.

![Walking Box Ranch after Snowstorm](image1)

![Harris Hawk](image2)

The area has been designated by Audubon as an “Important Birding Area.” The area has a unique Sonoran bird fauna that is more typical of Arizona --Gilded flickers, Harris’ Hawks and a possible resident population of curved-billed thrashers. The area is also important for migratory birds due to its proximity to foraging habitat, nesting habitat, and to the Colorado River, one of the most significant features in the Pacific Flyway. The area contains one of the highest known densities of golden eagles in Nevada. In addition, various species of raptors, which use diverse habitat types, reside in the area: American kestrel, bald eagle, prairie falcon barn owl, burrowing owl, Cooper’s hawk, ferruginous hawk, merlin, northern goshawk, northern harrier, northern saw-whet owl, osprey, peregrine falcon, red-tailed hawk, rough-legged hawk, sharp-shinned hawk, short-eared owl, turkey vulture, and western screech owl.

![Clara Bow & Rex Bell](image3)

![Walking Box Ranch](image4)

The area contains critical habitat for the threatened desert tortoise. Other wildlife roaming this area include coyote, desert cottontail, black-tailed jackrabbit, valley pocket gopher and desert wood rat. There are at least five different lizard species here, including the banded Gila monster. A herd of desert bighorn sheep lives on the steep, rocky slopes of the Castle Mountains. They and other wildlife traverse the area between the Piute Mountains and the New York Mountains. Numerous bat species live in rock crevices and mine
remnants in the area. Wildlife species of special concern include the Townsend's big-eared bat, California leaf-nosed bat, Swainson's hawk, golden eagle, desert tortoise, Bendire's thrasher, and gray vireo.

About a half-mile along the route on the left is the historic **Walking Box Ranch**. Cattle Ranching in the area began in the first decade of the 20th century when the Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company (RSLCC) began to move cattle into the Paiute Valley from their headquarters in California. The Walking Box Ranch became their base of operations. The grazing rights associated with the Walking Box Ranch, totally almost a million acres extended north to Railroad Pass, east to the Colorado River, south to the Newberry Mountains, and west across the Crescent Peaks to the California border.

The RSLCC suffered financial reverses as a result of several seasons of drought in the 1920s and decided to sell its assets, including land, livestock, grazing and water rights. As part of this disposition, the Nevada ranch lands were given to John Woolf. The ranch was then purchased by Rex Bell in May 1931. Walking Box Ranch continued as a working cattle ranch until Bell sold it to rancher Karl “Cap” Weikel in 1951. Weikel sold the ranch to Viceroy Gold Corporation in 1991, which restored the ranch house for use as an executive retreat. The Nature Conservancy acquired the property in the 1990s and the BLM purchased the ranch and surrounding ranch site in 2004. The property was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2009. The BLM has restored the historic integrity of the ranch and will be offering public interpretive tours of the ranch in the future.

The most colorful part of the Walking Box Ranch history was when film stars Rex Bell and his wife Clara Bow owned the property. The remote mystique of the Mojave Desert is what attracted the Rex Bell and Clara Bow to purchase the ranch, who craved solitude and a way of escaping the rat race. Bell and Bow constructed a two-story, 5,060-square-foot home in the Spanish-Colonial Revival style popular in Southern California during the 1920s and 1930s. Walking Box Ranch gets its name from the ranch brand, a camera box.
on a tripod. Structures on the property include the house, a barn, caretaker’s residence, guesthouse, tennis court, a 60- by 120-foot swimming pool and a 575-square-foot cactus garden. On the first floor, a grand living room features a dramatic stone fireplace; upstairs, Rex and Clara’s bedroom overlooks the Joshua Tree Forest.

Rex Bell and Clara Bow were some of the biggest film actors of the 1920s and 30s. Rex Bell acted in a variety of films, but soon earned a reputation of starring in roles he had a personal affinity for: Westerns. By the late 1920s, Rex Bell went on to act as the lead in many westerns, like The Cowboy Kid, Battling with Buffalo Bill, The Man from Arizona, Tombstone, and Lonestar. Bell married Clara Bow in 1931, who had earned the reputation of “The It Girl” in Hollywood. She earned her success in the silent film industry initially before transitioning to “talkies”, or films with audio capability. Typically playing characters who embodied sexuality or broke traditional gender roles, Bow became one of the most famous celebrities of her time and even inspired the famous Betty Boop cartoon character.

Both of their careers took off in a way they couldn’t anticipate. Considering they were some of the most famous actors of their time, their home soon became the most famous ranch in the state of Nevada, attracting other Hollywood icons. The Walking Box Ranch was an escape they all craved, and the ranch soon became a regular hangout for Clark Gable and Carole Lombard, along with Errol Flynn, Lionel Barrymore and John Wayne. Together, Rex and Clara retired from the film industry and lived at their fortress, where they were perfectly content with cowboying for real, tending to elaborate rock and cactus gardens, and drinking in every minute of silence they had created for themselves in their “Desert Paradise.” Here, they raised two sons, Rex Jr. and George. Bell and Bow separated in the mid-1940s, and Bell went on to serve as Nevada’s lieutenant governor from 1955 until his death in 1962.
The sacred Spirit Mountain to the east can be seen along the entire route. To the southwest are the Castle Mountains and the Piute Range. To the west are the Castle Peaks and New York Mountains. During the late afternoon, the crystalline granitic west face of Spirit Mountains turns a light rose color as the sun starts to set.

Shaped by millions of years of geologic forces, the rugged Castle Mountains rise from the to a height of over 5,000 feet, presenting a picturesque skyline visible along the entire route. Hart Peak is the prominent feature in the Castle Mountains skyline at 5,543 feet. The Castle Mountain landscape is formed of early Proterozoic gneiss and foliated granites overlain with deep volcanic deposits. The Castle Mountains provides a critical linkage for plants, animals, and water between the New York Mountains to the northwest and the Piute Mountains to the southeast. A recent study using network models of bighorn sheep genetic and demographic connectivity as tools for landscape-scale conservation found the Castle Mountains habitat to be one of the most important in the Mojave Desert. Botanists are finding new and rare plant populations, and significant new information regarding the range of species such as Mexican panicgrass, in the Castle Mountains area. The remoteness of the area offers visitors the chance to experience the solitude of the desert and its increasingly rare natural soundscapes and dark night skies.
Christmas Tree Pass Scenic Loop Drive

One of the very special drives within the proposed Avi Kwa Ame National Monument is the Christmas Tree Pass Scenic Drive. About half of the drive is within the proposed Monument and the other half is within Lake Mead National Recreation Area. The Scenic Drive through the pass consists of a 12-mile loop that connects U.S. Highway 95 with Nevada Route 163 to Laughlin. The road is gravel and in most places is in good condition, but a high clearance vehicle is recommended, although not mandatory.

Christmas Tree Pass gets its name from the scattered forest of junipers and pinyons growing among the rocky ridges of the Newberry Mountains. In the 1980’s, there was a local tradition of decorating these trees during the holiday season with everything imaginable. Both the native tribes and the National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management took a dim view of this practice and put a stop to it around 1998.

For most of the 12-mile journey, the Scenic Road is flanked by the Spirit Mountain Wilderness Area on one side and the Bridge Canyon Wilderness Area on the other. The drive offers the best that southern Nevada landscapes have to offer. Sculpted granite rock formations rise impressively from the landscape, which is home to a cross-section of Sonoran, Mojave and Great Basin plant communities. Rock-studded canyons slope gently eastward toward the Colorado River. It is easy to spot animal and human likenesses in the jumble of rocks and boulders that abound in the area.

To many first time visitors, the Mojave Desert seems barren and desolate, but a walk through Grapevine Canyon offers another perspective. A fresh water spring flows out of the canyon floor in non-drought years. This desert spring provides life-giving water to a wide assortment of plants and animals. The presence of the water and the abundance of plants and animals may have drawn early humans to this area as well. The relatively lush plant growth in the canyon is in sharp contrast to the stark hillsides. This extra moisture from the
small spring allows a number of plants to grow here that could not survive on drier slopes. Cottonwood, grapevines, cattails and rushes grow in the canyon. The presence of a spring and the variety of water loving plants draw desert bighorn sheep and other animals into the canyon.

Grapevine Canyon is one of the most significant and expansive petroglyph sites in the American Southwest. Archeological research of rock shelters in the area indicates that the Aha Makav people (ancestors of the modern day Mohave peoples) and, perhaps, Southern Paiute people camped here periodically. Evidence indicates that the people camped in the shelters for a few days at a time while they were using the area. The shelters were used as early as AD 1100 and use continued into historic times.

While visiting, please respect the traditions of the people who still consider this area to be sacred to their lives and culture. Do not deface the petroglyphs. Even touching them can cause damage.
Archeological artifacts and sites are protected in National Parks and Monuments. It is illegal to remove or damage archeological materials. Disturbance of these sources destroys our heritage. Please do not climb on the rocks and panels. Look, observe, imagine. Be still and listen. Let the rocks speak. And if you are lucky, you might see an eagle or a desert bighorn sheep.

Warning: be sure to take plenty of drinking water. There is none available along the trail. Be prepared for summer temperatures that can be as high as 120 degrees F.

**How to Access Christmas Tree Pass:** To access Christmas Tree Pass, drive south from Las Vegas on U.S. 93/95. At Railroad Pass, head south on U.S. 95 through Searchlight. About 2.3 miles south of Cal-Nev-Ari, turn left on the Christmas Tree Pass Road. There is a small road sign for the turnoff and a fairly large, covered information sign on the east side of the road that you can see in the distance. The gravel road loop is around 12 miles and connects back to the Nevada Highway about two miles west of Laughlin. You then take 163 back to its intersection with U.S. 95 and head north on U.S. 95 back to Las Vegas.
Solicitor Wash Backcountry Scenic Drive

The Solicitor Wash Backcountry Scenic Drive is through an area of colorful landscapes, diverse geologic formations and scenic vistas. The drive offers outstanding views of the rugged Ireteba Peaks, Spirit Mountain, Lake Mohave, volcanic landforms, and the Black Mountains in Arizona. The drive drops around 2,600’ in elevation from the ridgeline to the Cottonwood Cove Road.

The Ireteba Peaks are named for the Mojave Tribal member Iretaba (eecheeyara tav), who would rise into leadership in mid-1800s as he led a faction of the Mojave people to peaceful relations with the Euro American invaders. He guided Lieutenant J.C. Ives on his expedition up the Colorado River.

The Ireteba Peaks are the southern portion of the rugged, volcanic Eldorado Mountains. The highest peak, Ireteba Peak, rises to 5,060 feet above sea level. Hiking and camping is most popular in the canyons leading into the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, or on the peaks and ridges that offer spectacular views. As the route drops off to the east, short, steep canyons cut down the eastern side of the ridge. Rolling hills give way to a series of shallow washes across a broad bajada. From here, the land gently runs out to the north end of Lake Mohave.

The prominent, granitic Spirit Mountain (5639’) to the south, can be seen along most of the drive. Spirit Mountain (Avi Kwa Ame) is acknowledged as the most sacred place in the universe for the 10 Yuman-speaking tribes but is also important to the Chemehuevi Paiute and Hopi tribe. Spirit Mountain is the center
of the Yuman tribes’ creation and figures predominately within their spiritual ideology. The Yuman Tribes believe the mountain is the spiritual birthplace of the tribes, the place where ancient ancestors emerged into this world. All Yuman tribes track their origin to this sacred place. Today, the mountain and surrounding landscape continue to serve as a sacred and ceremonial place.

Joshua trees, mojave yucca, cholla, desert willow, and various cactus species are found along the route. There are extensive stands of Teddy-Bear Cholla along the route. There are two things to remember about the teddy-bear cholla: first, their segmented branches are eager to detach, travel, and take root; second, they are determined hitchhikers.

Wildlife in the area include desert bighorn sheep, bobcats, mountain lion, coyotes, black-tailed jackrabbits, and others. Reptiles include side-blotched lizards, rattlesnakes, and the threatened Desert Tortoise. Birds include Red-tailed Hawk, Golden and Bald eagles, Black-throated Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, Rock Wren, Loggerhead Shrike, and other species. Also, Townscend’s big eared bats can be found in the area.
Visitors are reminded to stay out of open mine shafts. Please use Leave No Trace techniques when visiting to ensure protection of its unique natural and experiential qualities.

Directions: From Las Vegas drive south on Highway 93/95 towards Boulder City. Just passed the Railroad Pass, turn south on Highway 95 towards Searchlight. Drive 28 miles and turn left (East) onto a dirt road just past mile marker 28. Take this dirt road for about one mile until the transmission line. Turn right on the transmission line maintenance road and go about 1.5 miles to the top of the ridge. The transmission line road continues straight ahead. However, you want to turn left on the dirt road just east of the ridgeline. This is the Solicitor Wash Road. The road is sandy and gravelly but not rocky. You do not need a 4-wheeler drive vehicle but a high clearance vehicle is highly recommended. The drive on the Solicitor Wash Road is 11 miles before it meets the Cottonwood Cove Road. Turn right on the Cottonwood Road and travel about 10 miles to its junction with U.S. 95.
Eldorado Canyon/Ireteba Peaks Backcountry Scenic Loop Drive

This 34-mile backcountry drive traverses some of the most diverse and scenic landscapes found anywhere in the Mojave Desert. The route has four distinct sections. If the entire loop is taken, you should schedule a half-day in order to allow stops for photos and for exploration. Section 1 starts at the junction of U.S. Highway 95 and Nevada Highway #165 and traverses the beautiful Eldorado Canyon to Nelson. It is 12-miles on a paved 2-lane highway. Section 2 is on the Aztec Wash Road (Lake Mead Backcountry Road #43) which goes 7 miles from Nelson to the junction of the Ireteba Peaks Powerline Road (Lake Mead Backcountry Road #42b). This is a dirt road and a high clearance vehicle is recommended. Section 3 is on the Ireteba Peaks Powerline Road which traverses the western border of the Ireteba Peaks Wilderness Area. This 10-mile section climbs nearly 2,700 feet in elevation to the top of the Ireteba Peak ridgeline. You will need a high clearance vehicle and preferably a 4-wheel drive vehicle for this section. Section 4 is a 7-mile long dirt road that goes from the Ireteba Peaks ridgeline in the Knob Hill area back down to U.S. 95 (mile post 31). A high clearance vehicle is recommended for this section but 4-wheel drive not needed. You can take this route in reverse as well as some folks prepare going downhill on the steep sections rather than uphill.

Section 1: The paved Eldorado Canyon road climbs 12 miles to a 3,000-foot pass and then drops into the colorful Eldorado Canyon named for the fabled city of gold that Spanish explorers sought for centuries. Partway down the canyon is old Nelson where weathered remnants of buildings from the late 1800s and early 1900s mingle with modern residences. The turnoff for the rest of the loop drive is in the historic town of Nelson. It is suggested that you may want to go an extra 2 miles down the canyon to see additional historic buildings and the Techatticup Mine.
The Eldorado Valley is a good place for seeing spring wildflowers. Purple fiddle-necked phacelia, blue spires of lupine, red Indian paintbrush, orange mallow and fuchsia penstemon paint the desert landscape. Beavertail cactus bearing hot pink flowers are the earliest among several varieties.

The Nelson area is a fun place to spend some time walking around the old historic buildings. Nelson and Eldorado Canyon have one of the widest ranges of historical events in the Southwest. The area was first home to the ancient Anasazi Indians, and later the Paiutes and Mojave tribes. Living peacefully for hundreds of years, the Indians were intruded upon in 1775, when the Spaniards arrived in the canyon in their constant quest for gold. Founding a small settlement at the mouth of the Colorado River, they called it Eldorado. However, these early Spaniards somehow missed the rich gold veins just beneath the canyon’s flanks, finding silver instead. They soon found that silver was not in high enough quantities to justify their operations, and moved on.

Seventy-five year later, in the 1850’s, prospectors began to arrive and gold was discovered here about 1859 and soon rich mines were developed. In the 1860’s the area was bursting with a rowdy population, many of these said to be drifters from the Civil War.

Eldorado Canyon was equally well known for its three largest mines, the Techatticup, Wall Street, and Savage which yielded millions of dollars during their nearly 70 years of operation. As the ore was extracted from the many area mines, it was then transported to Nelson Landing on the Colorado River and shipped by steamboat to Yuma, Arizona for overland shipment to San Francisco. The Colorado River was navigable at this time, making it possible to bring in food and supplies by boat.
Eldorado Canyon was notorious for its feuds and shootings. So extreme was the lawlessness that in 1867 a small detachment of infantrymen from Las Vegas Fort was stationed at the mouth of the Colorado River, charged with keeping an eye on things. A total of 136 soldiers rotated through the camps. In 1880’s more people lived in Eldorado Canyon than all of the Las Vegas Valley. Steamboats ran the Colorado River for over 40 years.

But blood wasn’t spilled only at the hands of prospectors. Eldorado Canyon was also home to two of Nevada’s most notorious renegade Indians—Ahvote and Queho. Ahvote is said to have murdered five victims, while Queho is believed to have killed more than 20. According to a plaque near the Techatticup Mine, Queho killed his last victim, Maude Douglas, in 1919, then successfully eluded sheriff’s posses.

In the 1920s, nearby Nelson’s Landing—a port on the Colorado River which lies at the mouth of Eldorado Canyon—became one of the most important ports on the river. Because prohibition skyrocketed illegal moonshine prices in neighboring Arizona, the landing allowed for brisk and lucrative trading of illegal spirits between states. Preliminary work on the Hoover Dam also made Nelson’s Landing an attractive place for surveyors to operate small boats, and, after the dam’s completion, acted as a popular destination for fisherman and tourists.

There is a great mine tour in Nelson, operated by Eldorado Canyon Mine Tours. The mine tour headquarters are in the historic general store and museum. The tour is well worthwhile. It’s the oldest, richest and most famous gold mine in Southern Nevada – the Techatticup Mine. The name derives from the Paiute Indian word for hungry, a term often heard by early settlers from the starving Indians inhabiting the surrounding hills. The Techatticup Mine was once owned by Senator George Hearst of California, father of William Randolph Heart of publishing fame. The tour also includes other historical sites where steamboats docked and stamp mills operated over 100 years ago.
**Section 2:** This starts the backcountry part of the Loop Tour. Turn right on the Aztec Wash Road in Nelson. This 7-mile section is through a hilly and wash environment with outstanding views of the Eldorado Mountains and the blue waters of Lake Mohave. The multi-colored Fire Mountain on the Arizona side of Lake Mohave can be seen along much of the route. This is also an area that offers good wildflower viewing in the spring.

Lake Mohave is a reservoir on the Colorado River created in 1951 following the completion of Davis Dam near present-day Laughlin, Nevada, and Bullhead City, Arizona. Named for the Mohave Indians, Lake Mohave extends approximately 67 miles along the valley from Hoover Dam to Davis Dam straddling the southern Nevada and northwestern Arizona border, which follows the original river channel. **Construction of Davis Dam** was a requirement of the 1944 Water Treaty with Mexico to regulate water released from Hoover Dam for delivery to Mexico. Lake Mohave is used for that purpose through integrated operations with Hoover Dam. Unlike Lake Mead, Lake Mojave has very little fluctuation in water levels, averaging only about 11 feet during the year. The lake, part of Lake Mead National Recreation Area, is a very popular recreational area with clear waters, sandy beaches, and three marina complexes.

**Section 3:** This 10-mile section is the most scenic section of the loop tour as the road climbs some 2,700 feet through a series of switchbacks to the ridgeline of the Ireteba Peaks. The transmission line maintenance road (Marked on the ground as Lake Mead Backcountry Road #42b) is generally somewhat wider than just a single lane road but there are steep drop-offs so drivers just need to be careful. There are ample places in which to let on-coming traffic pass and places to stop for photos.
The transmission line road is the northern boundary of the Ireteba Peaks Wilderness Area. The Peaks were named after Ireteba, a Mohave tribal leader who guided Lieutenant J.C. Ives on his expedition up the Colorado River. The Wilderness Area is 32,745 acres in size. It is a region of colorful landscapes, dramatic geologic formations and scenic vistas. The backbone of the area at 5,060 feet is a high, narrow ridge and the canyons on the east are narrow and deep. The Ireteba Peaks are volcanic, some with colorful banding and all with steep, rocky outcrops. The road follows close to the spine of the volcanic Ireteba Peak Ridge with deep valleys along the way. The views up and down Lake Mohave are striking, as you can see the rugged Black Mountains across the lake as well as the multi-colored Fire Mountain.

There are no established trails off of the route but the sandy washes make foot travel reasonably easy. The overall habitat type in this section is Mojave Desert Scrub, dominated by creosote bush, white bur-sage, Mojave yucca, and a few other low-growing shrubs and grasses. There are also barrel cactus and Nevada jointfir on the steep, rocky hillsides. In the washes, the vegetation is more diverse. Catclaw acacia and mistletoe are common, plus there are numerous other shrubs, buckhorn cholla, and prickly-pear cactus. Big barrel cactus even occur in some slopes and washes.

There are large stands of teddy-bear Cholla on many of the adjoining hillsides. Teddy bear cholla have chocolate brown stems with fuzzy golden arms. A teddy-bear cholla has sharp spines covering its stem densely. They tend to grow in clustered formations, like small societies in the sand, serving as a bright audience to the sun’s rise and fall in the desert sky. There are two things to remember about the teddy-bear cholla: first, their segmented branches are eager to detach, travel, and take root; second, they are determined hitchhikers. Similar to other species of cholla cacti, teddy-bear cholla wear an armor of slender, barbed spines. Their sharp covering is particularly dense, which has the effect of obscuring the stem and shielding it from exposure to intense sunlight. Unlike other cholla, however, the arms are eager to detach from the central stalk — a brief encounter with the tiny barbs is enough to dislodge a fleshy segment.
This fragment quickly embeds in any passerby; removal is painful and difficult. The cholla hopes to travel as far as it can, hitching a ride, because these easily fragmented stem segments are its preferred method of reproduction.

While teddy-bear cholla do develop springtime flowers, the yellow-green blossoms produce fruit whose seeds are usually sterile. And so the vegetative arms are designed to detach so easily that even a strong wind can send the small segments tumbling. Asexually reproducing in this way, these cholla populations can become dense forests, sometimes composed of individuals that are in fact a single clonal plant, all grown from fallen, rooted branches.

There is a healthy population of Desert Bighorn Sheep that reside in the area. The unique landscape found in the Ireteba Peaks is excellent habitat that provides remote refuges for these animals. They are commonly seen on steep terrain and cliffs. Desert Bighorn sheep are highly adapted for desert climates and can go for extended periods without drinking. They are social animals and form herds that are usually 8–10 sheep. Rams battle to become the dominant animal in a herd, charging head on at each other with their horns until one ram retreats.

Other mammals include coyotes, black-tailed jackrabbits, bobcat, mountain lions, and the full complement of small rodents. Reptiles include side-blotched lizards, rattlesnakes, and desert tortoises. The most common bird species include Red-tailed Hawks, Golden Eagles, Black-throated Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows, Rock Wrens, and Loggerhead Shrikes.

When the route reaches the crest of the Ireteba Peaks ridgeline, there is a prominent granite peak, locally known as Knob Hill, just to the west. The elevation of Knob Hill is 4,423 feet. This peak and the surrounding landscape is strewn with huge granite boulders configured in amazing shapes and forms. This is an
excellent place to get out and explore the area. It is also a good backcountry informal campground.

**Section 4:** This section of the loop drive starts at the Knob Hill area and heads west down the broad gentle bajada of the Eldorado Mountains in a creosote/bursage desert habitat. The road is dirt but is wide and fairly smooth in this section. Along the route, you get commanding views looking west of the Highland Range and, behind that, the South McCullough Mountains. To the northwest, you can see all the way to the Spring Mountains and Mt. Charleston. To the south, you have good views of the Eldorado Range and Spirit Mountains to the far south. To the southeast, you can see the Castle Mountains and the Castle Peaks. The horizons are amazing, and this is a particularly great spot to watch sunsets.

Although the area along this section may look sparse, it is actually critical Desert Tortoise habitat. The desert tortoise is a listed Threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. This area has the highest density desert tortoise habitat in Nevada. Apparently, the Desert tortoises have lived in the area for millions of years.

The Desert Tortoise is one of most elusive inhabitants of the desert, spending up to 95% of its life underground burrows. The burrows are excavated by the animals to escape the harsh summer and winter weather conditions of the desert. But if you plan your trip for early spring during the wildflower season, and are patient, you may see one of these popular residents of the Mojave Desert.
Keeping wild tortoises in the wild and appropriately managing their habitat is the key to recovering the species. Prior to protection as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1990, desert tortoises were collected as pets and individuals have been legally allowed to keep those desert tortoises as well as their progeny. However, since desert tortoises are now protected under the ESA, state and federal laws prohibit further collection of the species from the wild. Please stay on the designated route and do not travel anywhere off the road.
South Eldorado Mountains Backcountry Scenic Drive

The South Eldorado Mountains Backcountry Scenic Drive traverses the same general area as the Solicitor Wash Scenic Backcountry Drive but is a little further south and a bit more challenging. A 4-wheel drive vehicle with high clearance is recommended for this route. The route follows the transmission line maintenance road from the top of the ridgeline down to the Cottonwood Cove Road at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area entrance station. The drop in elevation is around 2,400’. Like the Solicitor Wash Backcountry Scenic Drive, this route is through an area of colorful landscapes, diverse geologic formations and scenic vistas. The drive offers outstanding views of the rugged Ireteba Peaks to the north, Spirit Mountain to the south, and Lake Mohave and the Black Mountains in Arizona to the east.

What is fascinating about this route is the number of interesting rock outcropping and geologic formations. Also the blue waters of Lake Mohave offers a beautiful backdrop to the drive. Lake Mohave, a reservoir on the Colorado River, was created in 1951 following the completion of Davis Dam near present-day Laughlin, Nevada, and Bullhead City, Arizona. Named for the Mohave Indians who previously inhabited this region of the Colorado River Valley. Lake Mohave extends approximately 55 miles along the valley from Davis Dam to Willow Beach, straddling the southern Nevada and northwestern Arizona border, which follows the original river channel. Lake Mohave is part of Lake Mead National Recreation Area.

Construction of Davis Dam was a requirement of the 1944 Water Treaty with Mexico to regulate water released from Hoover Dam for delivery to Mexico. Lake Mohave is used for that purpose through integrated
operations with Hoover Dam. The 200 feet high dam was completed in 1953. Because it is a re-regulating reservoir, Lake Mohave does not experience the fluctuations in water level that Lake Mead does. The maximum yearly fluctuation is 15 feet. Lake Mohave also offers many sandy beaches and protected coves. Lake Mohave has a maximum depth of approximately 100 feet, and just over 28,000 surface acres with roughly half of the lake found in Arizona and half in Nevada.

Along the route, you get good views of the Ireteba Peaks to the north who are named for the Mojave Tribal member Iretaba (eecheeyara tav). He rose into leadership in mid-1800s, leading a faction of the Mojave people to peaceful relations with the Euro American invaders. He guided Lieutenant J.C. Ives on his expedition up the Colorado River. The Ireteba Peaks are the southern portion of the rugged, volcanic Eldorado Mountains. The highest peak, Ireteba Peak, rises to 5,060 feet above sea level.

The prominent, granitic Spirit Mountain (5639’) to the south, can be seen along most of the drive. Spirit Mountain (Avi Kwa Ame) is acknowledged as the most sacred place in the universe for the 10 Yuman-speaking tribes but is also important to the Chemehuevi Paiute and Hopi tribe. Spirit Mountain is the center of the Yuman tribes’ creation and figures predominately within their spiritual ideology. The Yuman Tribes believe the mountain is the spiritual birthplace of the tribes, the place where ancient ancestors emerged into this world. All Yuman tribes track their origin to this sacred place. Today, the mountain and surrounding landscape continue to serve as a sacred and ceremonial place.

Hiking and camping is most popular in the canyons leading into the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, or on the peaks and ridges that offer spectacular views. As the route drops off to the east, short, steep canyons cut down the eastern side of the ridge. Rolling hills give way to a series of shallow washes across a broad bajada. From here, the land gently runs out to the north end of Lake Mohave.
Joshua trees, mojave yucca, cholla, desert willow, and various cactus species are found along the route. There are extensive stands of Teddy Bear Cholla along the route.

Wildlife in the area include desert bighorn sheep, bobcats, mountain lion, coyotes, black-tailed jackrabbits, and others. Reptiles include side-blotched lizards, rattlesnakes, and then threatened desert tortoises. Birds include Red-tailed Hawk, Golden and Bald eagles, Black-throated Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, Rock Wren, Loggerhead Shrike, and other species. Also, Townscend’s big eared bats can be found in the area.

Visitors are reminded to stay out of open mine shafts. Please use Leave No Trace techniques when visiting to ensure protection of its unique natural and experiential qualities.

**Directions:** From Las Vegas drive south on Highway 93/95 towards Boulder City. Just passed the Railroad Pass, turn south on Highway 95 towards Searchlight. Drive around 30 miles south to the turnout to Grandpa’s Road. Take a left on Grandpa’s Road and then an immediate left on the dirt road that heads northeasterly. Follow that road to it meets the transmission line. Then turn right on the transmission line maintenance road that heads southeasterly towards the ridgeline. Continue on the transmission line maintenance road until it meets the Cottonwood Cove Road close to the Lake Mead National Recreation Area entrance station. There are a few eroded sections just east of the ridgeline that are a bit tricky and may require 4-wheel drive but most of the road is okay to drive with a high clearance vehicle.
Knob Hill Backcountry Drive

This area does not have an official name but is locally called Knob Hill. The granite rock outcrops and rock shelters make this area very striking. It is located between Eldorado Canyon and Searchlight, Nevada and is accessed by an approved backcountry road that takes off from U.S. 93 just south of mile-post 31. The area is located within the AvI Kwa Ame National Monument. It is not well known but is a highly scenic area near the crest of the west flank of the Eldorado Mountains.

The area overlooks Lake Mohave, some 3,000 feet below. There are sweeping views extending to the Black Mountains in Arizona, the Highland Range and South McCullough Mountains in Nevada, and the Castle Mountains and Castle Peaks in California. There are also views of the Ireteba Peaks Wilderness Area to the northeast. This is a desirable place to camp among the rock formations, although there are no formal camping facilities. This is an excellent place to experience dark night skies and natural quiet.
There are coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions and desert bighorn sheep in the area. There are enough smaller mammals to support several species of hawks, golden eagles and peregrine falcons. For reptiles you might see Gila monster, Western chuckwalla, side-blotched lizard and several species of rattlesnake. This is also critical desert tortoise habitat. Most of the vegetation in the area is typical creosote bush community but there are pockets of dense desert scrub oak nestled among the dramatic rock formations. There are also a good variety of cactus species which are quite spectacular in the spring bloom. The beavertail cactus are some of the largest you can see in the Mohave Desert.
Empire Wash Backcountry Drive

The Empire Wash Road starts at the town of Calnevari, Nevada and heads straight east all the way to the shoreline of Lake Mohave. The section highlighted here is the 8-mile stretch that goes through the eastern section of the Avi Kwa Ame National Monument to the Lake Mead National Recreation Area boundary. The road goes through critical desert tortoise habitat. This is the largest area of high quality habitat in the State of Nevada and may possess the highest desert tortoise population densities.

What makes this drive so rewarding is the spectacular views of **Spirit Mountain** to the south. Spirit Mountain (Avi Kwa Ame) is the center of the Yuman tribes’ creation and figures predominately within their spiritual ideology. The Yuman Tribes which include the Mohave, Hualapai, Yavapai, Havasupai, Quechan, Maricopa, Pai Pai, and Kumeyaay believe the mountain is the spiritual birthplace of the tribes, the place where ancient ancestors emerged into this world. The area is empirically tied to their creation, cosmology,
Spirit Mountain was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a *Traditional Cultural Property (TCP)* on September 8, 1999 in recognition of its religious and cultural importance. A TCP is an area that is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places because of its association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community. The Spirit Mountain TCP is rooted in the Yuman community's history and is important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community.
Highland Range (East Side) Backcountry Scenic Drive

The eastern side of the Highland Range is one of the biggest surprises in Southern Nevada for sheer beauty and backcountry exploration. The volcanic Highland Range is about 10 miles long and remarkably rugged and ragged. The multicolored volcanic peaks tower several thousand feet above the surrounding valleys and are remarkably scenic. The area is critical desert bighorn sheep habitat, some of the best in Southern Nevada.

You will need a high clearance vehicle and preferably a 4-wheel drive vehicle to penetrate more deeply into the valleys. The area is accessed from U.S. Highway 95 just 20 miles south of the junction of I-11 and U.S. 95. At the 20-mile mark, there is a 2-mile long transmission line maintenance road that takes off U.S. 95 towards the west to the base of the Highland Range. That road goes through the Paiute/Eldorado Valley Area of Critical Environmental Concern established to protect the Desert Tortoise. This area is critical desert tortoise habitat with one of the highest density of tortoise in the state. That road then intersects with a north/south transmission line corridor road. Take a left (south) on that road. In the first 4 miles, there are a series of four backcountry roads that head west into the heart of the Highland Range, following the valleys. You can take one or all four of the roads. Each road is distinctively different, offering spectacular views of the colorful and rugged peaks and also good hiking opportunities, although there are no designated trails in the area.

You can either return the way you came in or continue down the transmission line maintenance road for another 16 miles where it comes out on Nevada Highway #164 just west of Searchlight. There are several other backcountry roads that take off from the west for further exploration. There is also a 5th backcountry road at mile 7 and a 6th at mile 8.
The washes and alluvial plains that lead to mountain ridges in this area are filled with scattered Mojave Yucca, Banana Yucca, Barrel Cactus, various species of cholla cactus and other cactus species. There is a surprisingly diverse vegetative mix and the area is good for wildflower viewing in the spring.
South McCullough/West Highland Range Scenic Backcountry Drive

This backcountry scenic drive is on a 22-mile long dirt road that cuts through the valley separating the Highland Mountain Range and the South McCullough Mountain Range. A high clearance vehicle is necessary and a 4-wheel drive is recommended, particularly if there is flooding from a rain event. The drive is best done from south to north starting on Nevada Route #164 about 7.8 miles west of Searchlight and ending at the intersection of U.S. 95 and the Eldorado Substation Road. This is 11 miles south of Railroad Pass.

The road during the first section follows the eastern boundary of the Wee Thump Wilderness Area. The road then connects with the transmission line maintenance road and that road is followed until it intercepts at U.S. 95 and the Eldorado Substation Road.

The drive from an ecological standpoint is particularly interesting as you travel through three distinct Mojave Desert habitats. It is one of the richest and most diverse parts of the Mojave Desert. Three natural springs and several guzzler water developments provide precious water for the wildlife found throughout the area.

The southern part of the scenic drive follows the eastern boundary of Wee Thump Wilderness area and the eastern terminus of the world’s largest Joshua Tree Forest. The United States Congress designated the Wee Thump Joshua Tree Wilderness Area in 2002 and it has a total of 6,489 acres. This Wilderness is characterized by gentle slopes and an impressive expanse of old-growth Joshua trees. In Paiute language, Wee Thump means "ancient ones." On average, Joshua trees grow only a half-inch per year. Many of the trees in this wilderness are more than 25 feet tall and could be more than 900 years old, making them some of the oldest and largest Joshua trees in the world. This is Mojave Desert’s version of an old-growth forest. This is a great place to get out of the car and stretch your legs among the "ancient ones,” Grab your binoculars to take in the
sights and sounds of what may possibly be one of southern Nevada’s best birding spots.

The volcanic Highland Range on the east side of the valley is about 10 miles long and remarkably rugged and ragged. The multicolored volcanic peaks tower several thousand feet above the surrounding valley and are remarkably scenic. The scenic drive route goes through the heart of the Avi Kwa Ame National Monument. The area has the largest area of high quality tortoise habitat in the State of Nevada and may also possess the highest desert tortoise population densities. The National Monument also provides critical habitat for Mojave Desert wildlife like the desert bighorn sheep, mule deer, bobcat, mountain lion, golden eagle, Swainson’s hawk, gila monster, prairie falcon, Bendire’s thrasher, grey vireo, and Townsend’s big-eared bat, among others. The area contains one of the highest known density of golden eagles in Nevada and serves as an important migratory corridor for desert bighorn sheep.
The area also has a unique Sonoran bird fauna that is more typical of Arizona --Gilded flickers, Harris’ Hawks and a possible resident population of curved-billed thrashers. The area has been designated by Audubon as an “Important Birding Area.”

The view on the west side of the scenic route is of the South McCullough Mountain Range which also provides a unique and beautiful backdrop. The mountains in the South McCullough Wilderness are comprised of dramatic uplifted fault block of gneiss and granite, with steep slopes, narrow deep canyons, and deep sandy washes. The United States Congress designated 43,996 acres here as the South McCullough Wilderness in 2002. All of this wilderness is located in Nevada and is managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The landscape ranges from approximately 3,000 to 7,000 feet in elevation and displays a thriving Mojave Desert filled with creosote bush, Mojave yucca, banana yucca, buckhorn cholla, catclaw acacia, apache plume, blackbrush and Joshua trees. At the higher elevations, you’ll find single-leaf pinyon pine, Utah juniper, various kinds of cholla, prickly pear cactus, hedgehog cactus and California juniper.
The view on the west side of the scenic route is of the South McCullough Mountain Range which also provides a unique and beautiful backdrop. The mountains in the South McCullough Wilderness are comprised of dramatic uplifted fault block of gneiss and granite, with steep slopes, narrow deep canyons, and deep sandy washes.
Spirit Mountain Overlook Backcountry Scenic Drive

This overlook is not well known but offers perhaps the most stunning views of Spirit Mountains and some of the other parts of the Newberry Mountains. The view is of the south side of Spirit Mountain with its rugged granite spires. The overlook is within the Avi Kwa Ame National Monument.

Rising to an elevation of 5,639 feet above sea level, the granitic Spirit Mountain and the surrounding landscape as seen from the overlook are sacred grounds for the 10 Yuman tribes of the lower Colorado River. The mountain plays a prominent role in the religion and mythology of these people. They believe the mountain (called Avi Kwa Ame by the Mohave people and Wikame by the Hualapai) is the spiritual birthplace of the tribes. From the overlook, you can also look south and see the Dead Mountains, also an important sacred landscape for the local tribes.
Pine Springs Backcountry Scenic Drive

The 10-mile long backcountry drive (one way) is accessed off Nevada Highway #164 about 8 miles west of Searchlight, Nevada. The turnoff is a mile west of the Walking Box Ranch Road junction. The road is gravel but does not require a 4-wheel drive vehicle, although high clearance is needed. The first several miles parallels the eastern boundary of the Wee Thump Wilderness Area through a beautiful Joshua Tree forest. The Joshua Tree stand is home to some of the oldest and largest Joshua trees on the planet. Wee Thump was the first unprotected tract of public land to be designated wilderness in Nevada.

The name Wee Thump means "ancient ones" in the Paiute language. Scientists have learned that Joshua trees often grow as little as a half-inch per year. These “ancient ones” have grown tall in the silence of the desert, some rising to more than 28 feet over 900 years. This is a great place to get out of the car and stretch your legs among the "ancient ones." Walk among them, and you'll know intimately that you're in the company of grand and wise giants, the Mojave's version of an old-growth forest.

Grab your binoculars to take in the sights and sounds of what may possibly be one of southern Nevada's best birding spots. Birdwatchers can spot-gilded flicker (known to occur in Nevada only in this location), northern flicker, ladder-backed woodpecker, black-throated sparrow, red-tailed hawk, great horned owl, crissal thrasher, golden eagle, loggerhead shrike, and cactus wren. Other wildlife roaming this area include desert tortoise, bighorn sheep, kit fox, coyote, desert cottontail, black-tailed jackrabbit, valley pocket gopher and desert wood rat.
After leaving the Wee Thump area, the Pine Spring Backcountry Drive traverses gently sloping bajadas with rich and diverse habitats as it heads to the eastern slopes of the South McCullough Mountain Range. The landscape ranges from 3,000 to nearly 5,000 feet in elevation along the drive. The gently sloping alluvia deposits on the bajadas are comprised of un-sorted sand, gravel and cobbles. The soils are composed of the broken-down metamorphic rock of the McCullough Range. In addition to the Joshua Trees, you find species such as blackbrush, Mojave yucca, buckhorn cholla, creosote bush, white bursage, banana yucca, bunch grass, matted cholla, and prickly pear cactus. As the drive gradually climbs towards the South McCullough Mountain Range and Pine Springs, you go through a pinion-juniper forest.

The boundary of the South McCullough Wilderness area is just past Pine Springs where the backcountry drive ends. This 44,245-acre wilderness area encompasses the southern portion of the north-south trending McCullough Range and is comprised of ancient metamorphic rock. From a distance, the mountains appear soft, with mellow rounded edges. Upon closer inspection, you will see that the peaks and ridges are rocky and rough, reaching heights over 7,000 feet. The mountains in the South McCullough Wilderness are comprised of dramatic uplifted fault block of gneiss and granite, with steep slopes, narrow deep canyons to the east and west, and deep sandy washes.
The backcountry drive ends at Pine Spring. The actual spring is further up the mountain but the water is fed through pipes and gravity feed to a metal wildlife guzzler (container) which serves wildlife during dry periods. Pipe Spring is a good place to camp but you have to bring your own water as there are no facilities.

This backcountry drive is about the journey as you traverse some of the best habitat in the entire Mojave Desert. It is so neat to see how the habitats gradually change as you gain elevation and aspect. I particularly enjoyed the section where the Joshua Trees and yuccas were intermixed with the pinion pine and juniper trees. A friend of mine called this the “Desert Garden of Eden.”

**Directions:** From Las Vegas, there are two routes to the backcountry road turn-off. The first route is to take I-515/U.S. 95 South towards Searchlight. Turn west at Searchlight on Nevada Highway #164. Go about 7 miles. After reaching the intersection of #164 and the Walking Box Ranch Road, go another mile and look for the backcountry road that takes off to the north along the eastern boundary of the Wee Thump Wilderness Area.

The second route is to take I-15 south to the intersection of I-15 and Nevada Highway #164. Turn south of #164 towards Nipton and Searchlight. About a mile before you get to the Walking Box Ranch Road, you take a left on the backcountry road that traverses the eastern boundary of the Wee Thump Wilderness Area.

Once you get on the backcountry road, you are following the eastern boundary of the Wee Thump Joshua Tree Wilderness Area. When you get to the first several forks in the road, bear left. At about 3 miles, there is another fork in the road, bear right here. When you get to the powerline maintenance road, continue under the powerline. About one-fourth of a mile past the powerline, you will take a right hand turn which weaves around and heads west towards the South McCullough Range. The road ends at Pine Springs.
Dead Mountains/Crystal Hills Scenic Backcountry Drive

This 10-mile scenic drive offers a wide range of vistas. Although the road is gravel, it is in pretty good condition and can be navigated by 2-wheel drive sedan vehicles, although high clearance is preferable. Looking north are the Newberry Mountains with the prominent and sacred Spirit Mountain looming above the horizon. Looking south are the Dead Mountains which are also sacred to the native Indian tribes in the area. To the west are the granitic crystal hills with interesting rock formations. To the east is the Colorado River Valley and the high peaks of the Hualapai Range in Arizona as backdrop. The green fields along the Colorado River in this area are part of the Fort Mojave Indian Reservation. The Fort Mojave Indian Reservation covers nearly 42,000 acres in the tri-state area of Arizona, California, and Nevada. The Mojave Indians are Pi-pa Aha Macav — “The People By The River.” Mojave culture traces the earthly origins of its people to Spirit Mountain.

Prior to the arrival of white settler to the region, the Mojave Indians were prosperous farmers with well-established villages and trade networks that stretched as far away as the Pacific Ocean. In the 16th Century, the time the Spanish arrived in the territory, the Mojave’s were the largest concentration of people in the Southwest. With the ever-growing insurgence of non-Indian people to the region traditionally occupied by the Mojave Indians, a United States military outpost was established in 1859 on the east bank of the Colorado River to give safe passage to American immigrants traveling from east to west. Initially, this outpost was called Camp Colorado, but it was soon renamed Fort Mojave. After the military fort was closed in 1891, the buildings were transformed into a boarding school, which operated until 1930. Ruins of Fort Mojave still exist today as a reminder of the once-troubled historic relationship between the Mojave and American civilization. The ruins are located on a bluff overlooking the Colorado River just south of the boundary of present-day Bullhead City.
The prominent feature along the southern part of the drive is the jagged, steep rust-colored Dead Mountains which is an important sacred area to both the Mojave and Chemehuevi Paiute. The portion of the Dead Mountains in California is officially designated by Congress as the Dead Mountains Wilderness Area. However, the Nevada portion of the Dead Mountains and the important Granite Springs area, did not have protection until the Avi Kwa Ame National Monument was established in January, 2023. The Dead Mountains contains areas of both sacred and ritual importance that are associated with traditional cosmogony, religious events, embodied religious figures, and defined burial places. It should be noted that the Dead Mountains Wilderness Area was specifically designated to provide protection of Native American values. Centered in the northern half of the Dead Mountains is its highest point, Mount Manchester at an elevation of 3,598 feet. The area was established primarily to protect the cultural features of the area which includes many petroglyphs and other sites important to the Indian tribes in the area.

There are also important biological values in this southern part of the drive as well. Bighorn sheep populations utilize the Dead Mountain area. The Homer Mountain Ocotillo Plant Assemblage and the Piute Valley Smoke Tree Assemblage also occur here. There are important petroglyphs elements at Granite Springs.

There is a lot of important history that took place in the area. One of the most noteworthy is the Garces Expedition. Seeking to open a land route between the Missions of Sonora and California, Fray Francisco Garcés, a Spanish Franciscan Missionary priest and explorer, was the first European to enter the present boundaries of Nevada. He departed Mission San Xavier del Bac near Tucson in October of 1775, and by late February of 1776, Garcés had reached the Mohave villages located just south of Laughlin on the banks of the Colorado River. Garcés was now traveling in areas never before seen by a non-Native American.
Relying on Native American guides, he walked from village to village. The Mohave agreed to lead him to the Pacific coast along a route used for trade purposes. On March 4, 1776, accompanied by four natives, Garcés left the banks of the Colorado and set out across the lands in the southern part of the Avi Kwa Ame National Monument and the remainder of the Mojave Desert. He reached Mission San Gabriel Archangel 20 days later. Upon his return, he again visited the Mohave villages in May of 1776. His route followed a much older prehistoric trail (Mojave Trail) used to bring shells and other trade goods to the tribes of the desert and mountain west.

Also, in the southern part of the drive is a section of the historic Mojave Trail/Road. The Trail was originally used by Mojave and other Native Americans to transport goods from the southwest to trade with the Chumash and other coastal tribes. This trail originated at a crossing at the Colorado River and connected numerous springs and water sources throughout the Mojave Desert that formed the backbone of the Mojave Trail.

Between 1857 and 1859, Lt. Edward F. Beale surveyed for and established a wagon road from Fort Defiance, New Mexico Territory along the thirty-fifth parallel to the Colorado River. As part of his survey, Beale used 25 camels imported from the Middle East to better deal with the desert conditions that he would encounter. Once entering the Mojave Valley, he crossed the Colorado River at what would become known as Beale’s Crossing and followed the Mojave Trail west. What he called Beale’s Crossing was indeed the indigenous crossing used for centuries by Native Americans that signified the eastern terminus of the Mojave Trail. Due to the early use of the Beale Road, relations between emigrants and the local Tribes resulted in the establishment of Fort Mojave, located on the eastern banks of the Colorado River at this crossing. Due to early problems with supplying such a remote military installation, the Mojave Trail was modified into the Mojave Road, also called the Government Road.

This route later served to some extent in the westward expansion. In the 1860s, the Mojave Road served both civilian and military travelers, mail carriers and supply wagons between Arizona Territory and
California. The U.S. Army built a series of small military posts along this important supply route, including Fort Piute, to protect key water sources and provide assistance for travelers.

Today, the Mojave Road is a popular four-wheel drive road and is unique in that for most of its 138 mile stretch is in much the same condition as the pioneers would have found it, and a lot of the trail passes through country that is virtually unchanged since prehistoric times. The vegetative cover along the drive is quite diverse, including some significant stands of Teddy Bear Cholla, also called “Jumping Cholla.” Since this species usually makes no viable seed, it relies on detached segments to form new plants by rooting and growing. The Teddy Bear Cholla earned its nickname because of the seemingly soft blanket of silver, white spines covering its branches. These one inch spines are actually anything but soft and, in fact, form an impenetrable fortress around the cholla, preventing animals from eating its flesh. Teddy Bear Cholla buds provided food for Native Americans historically. The young cactus branches, or buds, were plucked and then cooked. Once cooked, the Teddy Bear Cholla could be dried and stored. Spines were also employed as needles for sewing.

**Directions:** From Las Vegas, head south on U.S. 95 towards Searchlight and Laughlin until you get to Nevada Highway #163 (Laughlin cutoff road). Head east on #163 towards Laughlin. Just past mile-post 3, there is a dirt road that takes off to the right. Turn right on that road which starts the backcountry drive. The road goes approximately 10 miles until it intersects with the Needles Highway which is just south of Laughlin. You can either backtrack the way you came on the 10-mile long dirt road or turn the adventure into a loop tour. If you choose the loop tour, turn left on the paved Needles Highway and take that road all the way to the intersection with Nevada Highway #163. Turn left on #163 and go back to Las Vegas the way you came using U.S.95.