

PASS THE BATON

Lone Pine Run 2027

We are aging. Bruce is gone. So are many other club pioneers. Part of the inspiration for this run is to introduce younger members to trail routes and the in's and out's of leading runs and outings.

These are probable (!) runs. We won't know the difficulty of each for certain until we do pre-runs in the days before the MC outing. My summaries are based on what the routes were like when I last took them. All distances are estimates.

The only restrooms along the way will be in established villages or campgrounds. In some cases screening geography or vegetation isn't available. Some have been known to hold up a privacy tarp for their wives/womenfolk. Be prepared.

I urge taking extra water when in the desert. Nights are cold on the desert if you break down or get stuck. Be prepared.

These are great routes, especially to the uninitiated. Unproven buggies should take the street run where their machines can be easily retrieved. Buggies in reliable condition are desired on all runs, and mandated on the more difficult off-road runs.

Don't leave the dirt roadway. Stay on established roads, especially when on Death Valley. Stay within reasonable speeds. Nothing crazy. (Outside DV we may be a *little* more lax.) If in doubt of where you are consider yourself on DV. Rangers may be shadowing us both in vehicles and from a spotter airplane. We have had them do that before. In that instance Park personnel approached us that evening and complimented our lack of violation and trespass. Keep the Club reputation clean. Thanks in advance.

Be safe. Have fun.

MojaveMel. #1598

Saline Valley/Hunter Mountain. Difficulty: Easy to moderate. Estimated distance 100-120 miles (45-55 are off road).

This route turns off-road about 30 miles from Lone Pine, then skirts Panamint Dunes from the rim above. We will extend down Grapevine Canyon and the western edge of Death Valley. In this area it is not unusual to encounter an unexpected event. The Naval Aviation Weapons Test Center at China Lake is nearby and their pilots frequent the airspace over Saline Valley. The Navy fighter school Top Gun also uses the air above Saline Valley to do mock dogfights. Several times our colorful buggies have been buzzed by fighter jets we didn't know were coming. Be advised the doppler effect of their hidden approach causes a massive adrenaline rush! You will think the world is coming to an end. Due to this possibility, if you have a weak heart reconsider whether to take this run!

Saline Valley is named for salt deposits found there. Before refrigeration salt was the best preservative, and folks went to great lengths to obtain the mineral. You will see remnants of an old tram and cable system on the right as you pass the playa. This tram took two years to build and went completely over an 8,500 foot tall mountain to a railroad on the Owens Valley side.

The Saline Valley area is known for hot springs. Unknown visitors years ago went to great lengths to tile some of the springs into hot tubs. 55+ years ago Charlie Manson and family frequented the place. Today the springs and pools are a bathing suit optional area. Don't be surprised at what you may see.

After backtracking part-way we will come to a large obelisk on the left. We turn left there and proceed up Lippencott Road. Lippencott Rd is basically one lane, steep with switchbacks, with a fantastic view of the terrain we just left behind. There is one washout we had trouble getting around. Hopefully that spot will be accessible. Halfway up Lippencott you cross onto Death Valley. At the top of the grade is an old weathered sign warning the unsuspecting or ill-prepared not to attempt that road. From there we will go on to the Racetrack, where wind is known to blow rocks across rain-slicked playa. Perhaps you have heard of it or seen a documentary. Then north to Teakettle Junction. If you have an old teakettle you want to part with, bring it along. At the junction we make a right turn and proceed toward Hidden Valley. When approaching the mountain you will wonder how the road gets through the face. In Hidden Valley there is an old mine off to the right (if memory serves correctly) called the Jackass Mine. If the National Park Svc hasn't closed this site, the digging is full of stopes excavated by miners following ore veins.

An upcoming location off to the right is perhaps the best primitive campsite in Death Valley. You will notice some barrenness and a few Joshua Trees in that area.

Next, we proceed to where the road forks. The left fork goes to what is left of Quackenbush Mine site. Most of the structures have fallen down due to folks cannibalizing them for firewood. Depending on time we might just stay with the right fork and climb switchbacks up to Hunter Mountain. On top are the largest Pinyon pines I have ever seen. There is also an old hunter cabin down a left lateral. Eventually this route ties back in with the road we came in on, and brings us back to civilization.

Darwin and Darwin Falls. Difficulty: Mostly easy with a few moderate places. Approximately 100-130 miles (30 miles off road)

Following the road east out of Lone Pine we might make an optional stop after about 30 miles to view the U2 Joshua Tree (if we can find it again). It is famous for being pictured on the cover of their "Joshua Tree" album. Most folks assume it's on Joshua Tree National Park. I heard a rumor that it was east of the Lone Pine area, and using the album cover we triangulated off surrounding peaks on several trips before stumbling on the place. Over time word of the location has leaked out and now visitors have made it a shrine of sorts.

From there we head back to the east and the Darwin cutoff. Darwin isn't quite a ghost town, but close. The old cemetery there is the attraction. The desert has claimed many of the wooden markers. The necropolis is still in use. A few folks interred there have chiseled headstones. My favorite is the guy who wanted a VW engine case for his marker. On our most recent visit the cemetery had been cleaned up quite a bit. When exiting the site and coming out of the wash a few diggings can be seen in the sandstone face. I suspect these were once dwellings for workers at the huge mine we passed on the way in.

Next, on through Darwin and a left turn. Then around a knob and down into a wash which we follow downstream. Eventually this ends up at a fork in a canyon. The left fork takes us down to an oasis. This is a typical desert spring that emerges suddenly and disappears into the sand soon thereafter. It's a good lunch spot if we are there around noon. Because of the water Chinese looking for work after the railroads were completed started gardening there and traded produce with miners. Hence the name of the place: China Garden. One would never suspect this oasis on Death Valley.

Backtracking to the fork we go left and climb up out of the canyon. Along the way, in various places, one can see stones built up to support the side of an old narrow roadbed. This was part of a toll road constructed from Darwin to Stovepipe Wells in 1925-27 so folks from the west coast could access the mysterious place called Death Valley.

The coming stop at Darwin Falls is worth a visit. The falls itself is a ¼ mile hike up a trail, and sometimes one must walk through a shallow stream. As usual for the desert, this water makes an appearance from underground to form a decent waterfall and soon disappears into the sand. You enter an entirely different ecosystem with shade trees and birds because of the stream. Enjoy. Try not to pollute the water as it is the drinking supply for Panamint Springs.

Next, down the road again to the highway. Panamint springs is only a few miles to the right. A small store sells ice cream, etc. Then back to Lone Pine on paved highway.

Cerro Gordo / Salt tram. Difficulty: Moderate to Severe. Estimated distance 80ish miles. (35-45 Off road).

This is a more difficult run because of elevation and loose shale in several locations. Carbureted buggies usually have trouble if they aren't jetted down. (I learned that the hard way.)

The route starts up towards the old mining camp of Cerro Gordo from the northeast area of Owens dry lake. Stop and read the marker where you leave the pavement for some history. Side note: This route is steep in places and in summer some air-cooled buggies have been known to overheat. When we start up notice the ore tram in the hills to the far right of the road. Last visit an ore car was still suspended between stanchions over one valley. Cerro Gordo is now run by a guy who is trying to restore the place. A tour for the club is being worked on. Stay tuned.

After Cerro Gordo the route wanders around a knob and goes into a steep downhill. I personally wondered if I could get back out via that route if I had to turn around. From thence into the loose shale and a tough climb. My carbureted 1776cc had trouble. I couldn't make it until my passenger got out and several buggy friends gave me a push.

The next stop is the main scaffold of the tram at the peak of the ridge. The tram was built between 1911 and 1913. It's quite a feat of engineering for its time. The beams are massive and one wonders how they got them there. Pulling the cable up steep valleys to the top must have been a huge endeavor. It's a good lunch spot. The view of Saline Valley is great.

From there it's a somewhat steep downgrade and in some areas that is on semi-slippery shale. The route somewhat parallels the tram line to the bottom. Then back to paved road and Lone Pine. This description is short but the route is a great trail to brag you have completed.

Manzanar / Alabama Hills / Whitney Portal. This is basically our street run. Estimated length 90-110 miles (without the Whitney Portal option.)

Manzanar is the WW2 Japanese internment camp north of Lone Pine. The only time I was there a Japanese lady was standing next to me during the opening orientation. A mural enlarged from a picture covered a presentation wall. After the speaker finished the Japanese lady leaned towards me and quietly said, "See that little girl in the picture?" I responded I did. She said, "That's me." Instead of a tour of a neutral site that encounter brought home the human aspect of what happened there.

As an option we may visit the Eastern California Railroad Museum in Independence. I've never been there so don't know much about it.

In the 1872 a monstrous earthquake completely destroyed the town of Lone Pine. Measurements weren't accurate 150 years ago, but the shaker is estimated to have been between 8.0 and 8.4! Twenty-seven people were killed. Many are interred in a mass grave just north of Lone Pine.

On the other side of the highway from the mass grave is an old cemetery that the desert nearly reclaimed. When we first stumbled on this burial site we were looking for old glass bottles. Dale spotted a weathered wooden headboard of a grave in the brush. The cemetery was mostly overgrown with sage, but we discovered several other graves at risk of being reclaimed by the desert. I'm told that today the old burial ground has been fenced off and One needs to walk a bit to access the area.

Next stop is the Alabama Hills. This picturesque area is hidden from the highway and has been used in hundreds of movies. On Manx Club outings 25 years ago we could wander the rocky areas with our buggies. That made the sightseeing a much more personal experience. Today, unfortunately, much of that has been closed off. But once you realize the scenery, if you see a movie with large roundish rock hills and the Sierras in the background you will exclaim... "Alabama Hills."

Options at this point:

- 1) You can drive the climb up to Whitney Portal. This portion will be self-guided. The ascent is to the trailhead for 14,505 ft Mt Whitney, the tallest peak in the contiguous 48 States. The drive to the portal ascends to 8500 feet, plus or minus.
- 2) An alternate if you choose not to drive to Whitney Portal is go back to the Movie Museum in Lone Pine and see some of the memorabilia that made this area famous in film.

OPTIONAL RUN if enough interest: Ballarat, Briggs, Goler, Mengel. This is the most severe run. It's also the farthest from Lone Pine. Estimated distance: 170 miles. (About 60-70 miles is dirt.)

After about 50 miles of pavement we will turn right beyond Panamint Springs, and proceed to the old ghost town of Ballarat. Most of the old buildings have fallen down but there are a few adobe walls standing. There is an old cemetery there with the graves of prospectors. The headstone I remember: "Seldom Seen Slim."

From Ballarat we will proceed down the edge of the playa to a turnoff that will start some narrow switchbacks that lead up into a small canyon. The switchbacks are on the edge of the mountain face. If this makes you fearful or nervous consider a different run. I haven't been there in 25 years, but back then the canyon had some tight turns and some water crossings. The destination is two stone cabins which have been restored. They have running water, and, at least back then, working Servel refrigerators. One has a grape arbor and a shooting bench. They are very popular so I suspect they will be occupied.

As we head back your brakes will get a workout on the way back to the bottom. Have good brakes! Then left to Goler Canyon. The canyon can have a steep smooth washout near the entrance if it hasn't been worked on since the winter rains.

On to Barker Ranch, where they arrested Charlie Manson and family. The house at Barker burned down, which makes the place less interesting. When the edifice was standing you could see the cavity under a sink, covered by a cloth over the opening, where Charlie was hiding when they found him.

Time permitting, backtrack and take a right lateral up to Mengal Pass. Then return down Goler Cyn and begin making our way back to Lone Pine.