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Third Time Lucky
Tackling Death Valley

Metzeler Karoo Street
One Tire for Many Riders

Titus Canyon
Two-Up Adventure

Sept/Oct 2018 | No. 106

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Third Time

"I'm done—get-me-out-of-here!" One afternoon on the Las Vegas Strip was all I could handle. Neither of us could escape the desert metropolis fast enough. Three hours from Vegas, we arrived at cozy Emigrant Campground. Situated 21 miles from the park boundary at Panamint Springs and 10 miles south of Stovepipe Wells, we set up home in the desert of extremes.

// Titus Canyon, Nevada

Leadfield, once thriving on mining and now a ghost town, is located on Titus Canyon Road, an adventurous backcountry byway in Beatty. Packing our steeds the following morning before temperatures got silly, we loaded all the water we could carry from the campground's spigot. Bright and early saw us back on the road for gas and a resupply in Stovepipe Wells. And, I went from "Lank Mouse" to bushy-tailed, thanks to the \$4 showers at the resort swimming pool.

Jumping on Highway 374, our wheels hummed to the song of a 27-mile one-way route through Titus Canyon, which started a couple of miles east of the park boundary. Despite the vultures overhead searching for carrion, plunging into Death Valley for the second time gave me the confidence to get out there and kill it. As canyons go, Titus lived up to its Greek meaning, "of the giants." Its swath of mountains possesses endless ruggedness, and led us on a serpentine, stony trail, some of it loose, meandering through vivid rock formations, adorned with desert flora and petroglyphs. A spectacular finale ensued as the canyon narrowed to a winding finale at the western end. Back with a vengeance, bring it on Death Valley!

// Here We Go Again

It seemed like as good a time as any to attempt it again. Exactly two years before, we were forced to leave Death Valley due to a failing stator on Jason's motorcycle. En route, but never making it to the Racetrack, Jason was geared up to take it on again.

LICKY

in Death Valley



Alabama Hills, Lone Pine: Getting my yah-yahs out in the Alabama Hills—a consolation prize after the second short-lived stint in Death Valley.

"Oh, you're kidding me! No, you've got to be joking," Jason spluttered in sheer disbelief on the roadside. We were not even a mile outside of Titus Canyon.

Don't tell me it's the stator again? Not for the first time, I felt a shiver of dislike for his *F800GS*—it was beginning to behave like a cheap umbrella.

"That's the second bloody stator that's gone in two years." The realization kicked in as the bike flatly refused to start. The irony was almost comical. In derision, the machine gurgled to a halt and just sat there radiating sadness. "I think the universe is trying to tell us something—it doesn't want us to go to the Racetrack." Death Valley had claimed Jason's stator a second time but at least we'd live to die another day....

Alabama Hills, Eastern California

A surge of power from the *Weego 22*, a portable battery pack, enabled Jason to reach the nearest town with me. Lone Pine, where the washing machine, hot water and a fresh change of clothes became my new objects of desire. A high-end stator and regulator (with the *MOSFET* upgrade) could be overnight shipped thanks to the timely support of *RM STATOR*, and with Dave Mull's graciousness, installed at the back of *Napa*, his auto parts store. Might as well camp just up the road in the Alabama Hills, a range of jumbled rock formations near Mt. Whitney on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada.

The morning had finally settled into a beautiful afternoon, high clouds rolling across the big blue sky. Muted orange volcanic rock, large boulders and dozens of natural arches make it a popular movie set location, big scenes from *Iron Man* and *Django Unchained* included. Best of all, it was *BLM* (*Bureau of Land Management*)—free, public camping.

Alabama Hills, Lone Pine:
Mobius Arch as the sun melts
into the mountainside.

The Racetrack

Heroically back on the same ribbon of pavement the following day, we re-entered Death Valley, passing the pleasing sights of Ubehebe Crater, narrow canyons, dunes and the odd Joshua tree. There was practically no sign of human life as we embarked on another 27-mile bobbled ride of loose rock, but mostly back-jarring and skull-shaking washboard. At least the temperature was smack dab perfect at around 80°F. And, deflating my *DR650's* tires made a world of difference.

At Teakettle Junction, we took a breather from the concentrated corrugations—blood pulsating in my ears—before riding west over more sharp ridges and aggravating grooves. It's "a curious dry lake, almost perfect oval in shape," as Phil Townsend Hanna observed the playa. Three miles long, ringed by mountains, and flat as a pancake. The dried-up lakebed does resemble a racetrack. Undeniably though, it's out of place even in this geologically jaw-dropping park. Third time lucky, as they say.

The "Moving Stones"

The area is famous for rocks that tumble down the mountainside, land on the playa and then somehow "race" around the track. They actually "move" by themselves across the desert, marking their journey with tracks, which befuddled scientists for decades. I came across rocks ranging from the size of a lemon to a 700-pounder (scientists dubbed her "Karen"). Most leave tracks scored in the dirt, like a snail trail etched in the earth. Some are straight and short, other tracks go the length of a rugby pitch and curve or zigzag off at odd angles. Surely no magic's involved but if they were removed from the lakebed, as some increasingly are by pebble-brained plunderers, then to my reckoning, all of the magic would be lost forever.



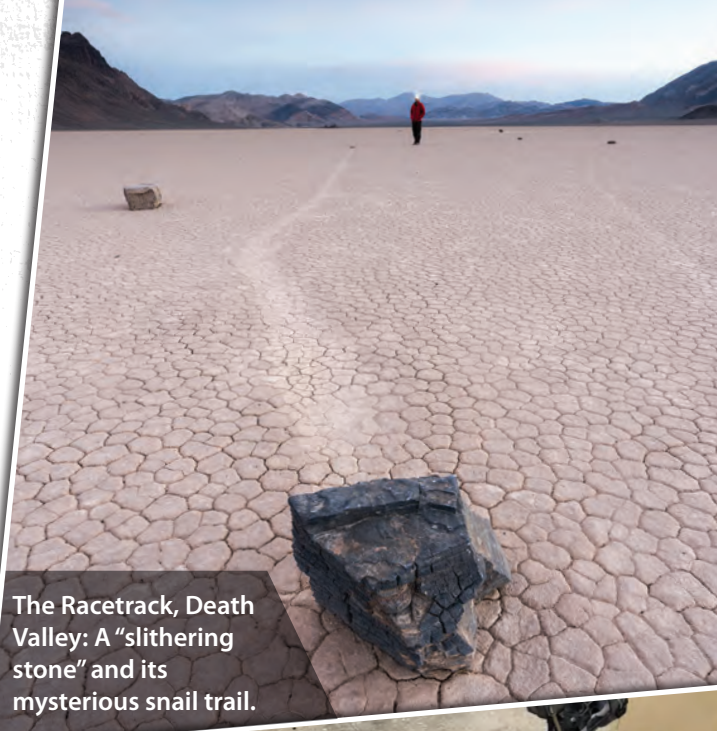
// If they're not magic, what does cause the stones to shift?

Staring down at these “slithering stones,” I was split between two realities: These rocks looked like they’d sailed of their own volition across the desert floor and yet they couldn’t have moved on their own. The mystery is embedded in an astonishing fact: No one’s actually seen them advance. And, unsubstantiated theories around magnetism, energy fields and aliens have erred on the side of the farcical.

Cue Ralph Lorenz, a planetary scientist at *Johns Hopkins University* and his team who presented their findings in 2011: “Basically, a slab of ice forms around a rock, and the liquid level changes so that the rock gets floated out of the mud,” he explained. “It’s a small floating ice sheet which happens to have a keel facing down that can dig a trail in the soft mud.”

In 2013, cousins James and Richard Norris unearthed a similar truth behind the bizarre marks. With sufficient rainfall, the southern end becomes a shallow lake. During winter, the lake surface freezes into a floating sheet of ice, rooting the rocks. The sun causes the ice sheets to break up, while steady breezes catch the floating ice sheets, pushing them along with their embedded rocks. Eventually, the ice melts and the water evaporates, leaving the rocks relocated. That is, until the next event.


The truth usually provides a simple explanation. Back at camp, clusters of desert dust erupted in a fine spray that pirouetted around us as we sat watching the sun melt into the mountains. Overcome with weariness, an impromptu party with some great guys and a traveling nurse we met, sleep crept through my veins like anesthetic. Tired, I sank like a stone into a deep slumber.



The Racetrack, Death Valley: A “slithering stone” and its mysterious snail trail.



Lone Pine: Extracting another faulty stator for a new one—by the garbage units at the back of Napa!



Emigrant Campground near Stovepipe Wells, Death Valley: An intimate snugger and brilliant base for your day sorties in Death Valley.





A stroll across the Eureka Dunes.

✓ Eureka Valley Sand Dunes

As the first pale fingers of light pried my eyes open, we wended over 15 miles of good gravel in the Eureka Valley, and descended with the Eureka Dunes sparkling on the horizon. Rising to around 700 feet, it's one of the highest dune fields in North America, with dry camping and concrete picnic tables located at the sandy bottom. Curiously, they're also known as "singing dunes." At certain times when the wind is just right, they produce high-pitched whistling sounds.

While no soothing tunes emanated from the dunes for us, they whispered softly as the breeze whipped the sand around our feet. Magnesium white in the morning sun, they later take on a golden glow, which intensifies as the sun sails westward on its afternoon journey. With every curve and striation on the sand burnished red by the setting

sun, it's perhaps the last place I stood that completely bowled me over.

My heart thumped, my skin tingled, and a dawning sense of paralysis slowed my feet upon each barefoot climb up the steep slopes. Keep pushing, Morris! The thigh-burning throb would be worth it as I withdrew into my jagged thoughts. Hot and breathless, each heaving effort led us to magnificently sharp ridge lines split perfectly by the stark shadow; by daylight, twilight and moonlight.

Wow! It was so stunning stomping around in the remote desert wilderness in the very dreamy and earthly locale in which I now found myself—seeing is believing. **ADV**

British born, **Lisa Morris and Jason Spafford** are self-confessed thrill-seekers. Lisa helps to keep the wheels rolling by contributing their tales to publications in the U.S.,



Canada, U.K., and France, where field-testing outdoor product complements the brand ambassadorships.

As an advocate for female riders, she consults with manufacturers of women's motorcycle gear. Not the most natural off-road rider, Lisa is living proof that if you get a license, you can jump in the saddle and go. Jason loves all things adventure travel, ultimately amid the wild places left in the world. With an infatuation for chasing light in big open spaces comes the pursuit of photography, which has been his lifelong addiction. Jason's globally published portfolio is layered with adventure, landscape, wildlife, commercial and underwater photography. He's also a skilled drone pilot and a growing videographer. **JasonSpaffordPhotography.com, TwoWheeledNomad.com, Facebook and Instagram @TwoWheeledNomad.**

Titus Canyon, Death Valley: Incredible sedimentary layers in the rock at Titus Canyon; the travertine infilling the fractures looks like congealed lightning.

