

Welcome to This Is America with VOA Learning English.

Today we visit one of America’s great national parks. It is a place of strange and silent beauty. As beautiful as this place is, its name provides evidence of very real danger. Come with Phoebe Zimmerman and Steve Ember to Death Valley.

Death Valley is a land of beautiful yet dangerous extremes. There are mountains that reach more than three thousand meters into the sky. There is a place called Badwater that is the lowest area of land in the Western Hemisphere. If there were water there, it would be eighty-six meters below the level of the ocean.

Death Valley can be dangerously cold during the winter months. Storms in the mountains can produce sudden flooding on the floor of the Valley.

The air temperature during the summer has been as high as fifty-seven degrees Celsius. The sun can heat the ground so that the temperature of the rocks and soil can be as high as seventy-four degrees Celsius.

The extreme heat of Death Valley has killed people in the past. It will continue to kill those who do not honor this extreme climate. Death Valley does not forgive those who are not careful.

Death Valley is a good example of the violence of nature. It contains evidence of several ancient volcanoes that caused huge explosions.

Evidence of one of these explosions is called Ubehebe Crater. The explosion left a huge hole in the ground almost a kilometer and a half wide.

In many areas of Death Valley it is easy to see where the ground has been pushed up violently by movement deep in the Earth. This movement has created unusual and beautiful rock formations. Some are red. Others are dark brown, gray, yellow or black.

Other areas of rock look as if some huge creature violently broke and twisted the Earth to create unusual, sometimes frightening shapes.

In other parts of Death Valley there are lines in the rock that show clearly that this area was deep under an ocean for many thousands of years. Much of the Valley is flat and extremely dry. In fact, scientists believe it is the driest place in the United States. In some areas the ground is nothing but salt. Nothing grows in this salted ground.

However, it would be wrong to think that nothing lives in Death Valley. The Valley is fully of life. Wild flowers grow very quickly after a little rain. Some desert plants can send their roots down more than eighteen meters to reach water deep in the ground.

Many kinds of birds live in Death Valley. So do mammals and reptiles. You might see the small dog-like animal called the coyote or wild sheep called bighorns.

Other animals include the desert jackrabbit, the desert tortoise or turtle and a large reptile called a chuckwalla. Many kinds of snakes live in the Valley, including one called the sidewinder rattlesnake. It is an extremely poisonous snake with long sharp teeth called fangs.

Death Valley is a huge place. It extends more than 225 kilometers across the southern part of the state of California, and across the border with the state of Nevada. Death Valley is part of the Great Mojave Desert.

The area was named by a woman in 1849. That was the year after gold was discovered in California. Thousands of people from other parts of the country traveled to the gold mining areas in California. They were in a hurry to get there before other people did.

Many people were not careful. They made bad choices or wrong decisions. One group trying to reach California decided to take a path called the Old Spanish Trail. By December they had reached Death Valley. They did not have to survive the terrible heat of summer, but there was still an extreme lack of water. There were few plants for their work animals to eat.

The people could not find a pass through the tall mountains to the west of the Valley. Slowly, they began to suffer from a lack of food.

To survive, they killed their work animals for food and began to walk out of the Valley. As they left, one woman looked back and said, “Good-bye, death valley.” The name has never been changed.

Almost everyone who visits Death Valley visits a huge house called Scotty’s Castle. The building design is Spanish, with high thick walls to provide protection from the fierce heat. The main building is very large. It was built in 1929 in one of the few areas of the Valley that has water.

The castle is named for Walter Scott, called Scotty by his friends. He was a gold miner. He told everyone that he built the house with money he made from his gold mine. Many people believed him. But it was not really the truth. Scotty was not a very honest man.

Some years earlier, he had asked several people to invest in a gold mine he had in Death Valley. One of the men he asked to invest was a businessman from Chicago, Illinois named Albert Johnson.

Mr. Johnson invested in Scotty’s mine. In 1905 he traveled to Death Valley to see the mine. Scotty put Mr. Johnson on a horse and took him far into the mountains. Many people believe that while they were on this trip, Scotty told Mr. Johnson the truth: There was no mine. There was no gold.

Albert Johnson suffered from extremely poor health. He had been in a severe accident a few years before. Doctors did not believe he would live much longer. However, something happened on his trip with Scotty.

When Albert Johnson returned from the mountains, he felt better than he had in several years. Perhaps he felt better because of the clean mountain air. Perhaps it was the good food Scotty cooked. Or it may have been the funny stories Scotty told that improved Mr. Johnson’s health.

Whatever it was, Albert Johnson fell in love with Death Valley. He and Scotty became lifelong friends. Soon after, Albert Johnson began building a home on the western edge of Death Valley. He did not live there all the time. But Scotty did.

And, he told everyone the huge house was his -- bought and paid for with the money from his gold mine. Scotty told everyone that Albert Johnson, his friend from Chicago, came to visit sometimes. Mr. Johnson never told anyone it was just a story made up by Death Valley Scotty.

Albert Johnson lived another thirty years -- many more years than the doctors thought he would. Some years before he died, in 1948, Albert Johnson signed documents that said Walter Scott could live in the house until he died. Scotty died in 1954. He is buried on a small hill near the house.

In 1970, the National Park Service bought Scotty's Castle. It has since become one of the most popular areas to visit in Death Valley National Park.

More than one million people visit Death Valley each year. Many people come for just a day. Buses bring visitors from the famous city of Las Vegas, Nevada. They ride around the park in their bus, visit several places and are back in their Las Vegas hotel by night. However, many other visitors stay in the park. The most popular area to stay in is Furnace Creek.

Furnace Creek is the largest area of human activity within Death Valley National Park. There is a hotel. There are also camping areas where people put up temporary cloth homes, called tents. Visitors who arrive in huge motor homes can also find a place to park their vehicles.

The famous Furnace Creek Inn is a beautiful hotel that was built of stone more than 75 years ago. The inn is built on a low hill. The main public room in the hotel has large windows that look far out over Death Valley. Hotel guests gather near these large windows in the evening to watch the sun make long shadows on the floor of the Valley and on the far mountains.

This beautiful image seems to change each minute. The sun slowly turns the Valley a gold color that deepens to a soft brown, then changes to a dark red. As night comes, the mountains turn a dark purple color, then black.

Usually, visitors are very quiet when this event takes place. A few try to photograph it. But the Valley is too huge to capture in a photograph. Most visitors watch this natural beauty and leave with only the memory of sunset at beautiful Death Valley National Park.

This program was written by Paul Thompson and produced by Caty Weaver. You can read and listen to our programs at learningenglish.voanews.com. Listen again next week for This Is America with VOA Learning English.