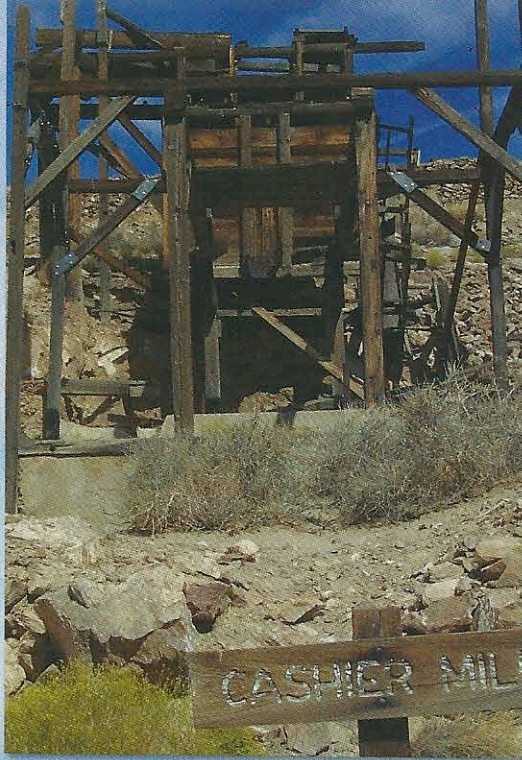


DEATH VALLEY

LAND OF EXTREMES ALIVE WITH MINING HISTORY

Death Valley has more abandoned mines than any other national park. Thousands of old mine sites are scattered across the park's more than 5,200 square miles. It's really not surprising when you consider that gold, silver, lead, zinc, antimony, flourspar, cinnabar, Epsom salts, mercury, tungsten, copper, borax, talc, sodium chloride and manganese all have been mined here for more than 150 years. Some of the strikes were short-lived, others lasted for the lifetime of the miner, but all prosperous large-scale metal mining in Death Valley ended around 1915.

Story & Photos by Denise Seith



TOP & BOTTOM: Built in 1909 and powered by gasoline engines, the mill pulverized the ore coming from Pete Aguerberry's mines.

CENTER: Pete Aguerberry's camp still stands today and is open to the public. His camp includes his original two-room house, guest cabins and outbuildings.

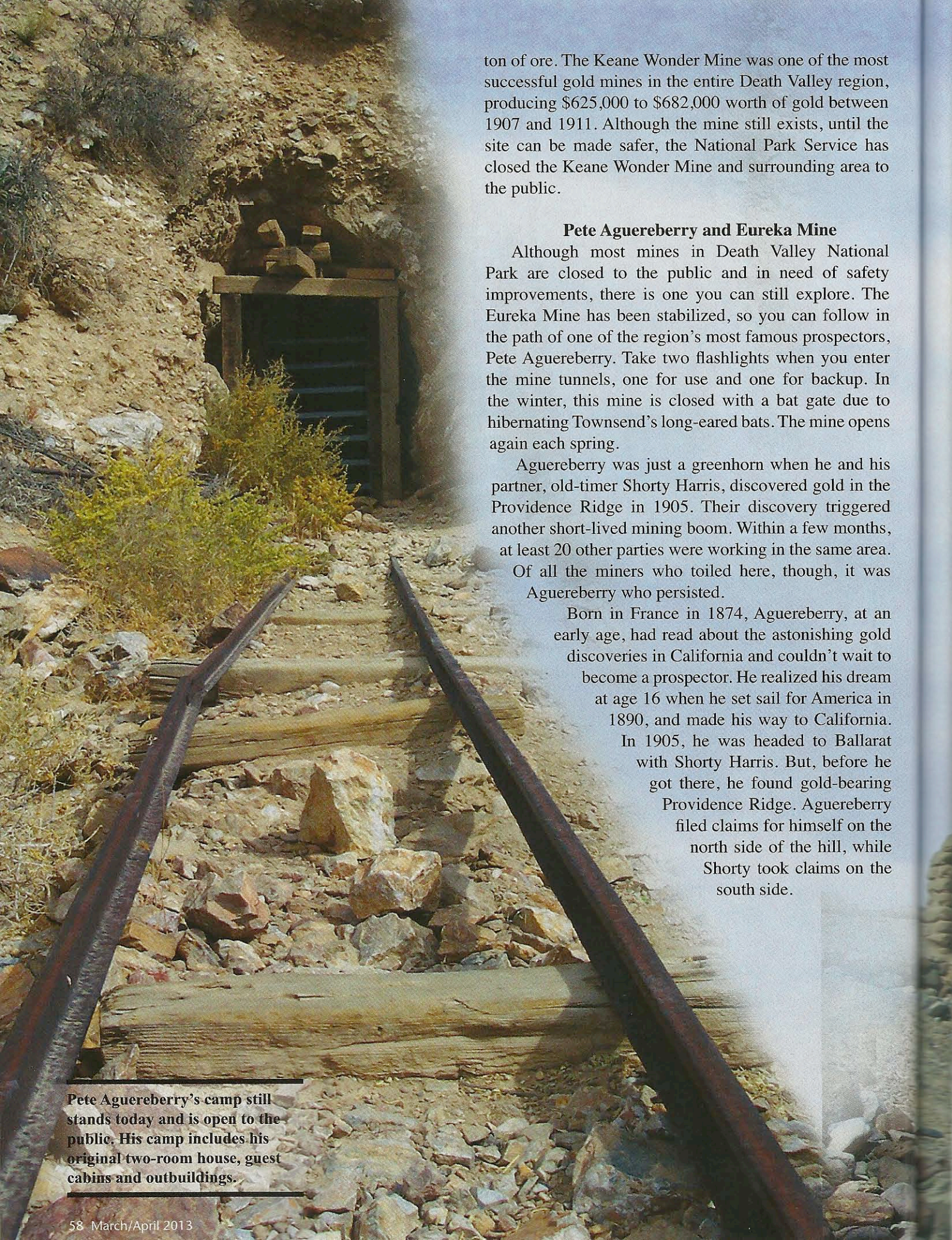
Although details are sketchy, legend has it that the Death Valley mining boom began when a westbound '49er stumbled on a mound of pure native silver. The prospector used some of the silver to mold a primitive gunsight for his rifle. That bit of metal grew into the legendary Lost Gunsight Mine. As word spread, prospectors headed to Death Valley to search for the hill of silver. It was never found, but it set off a wave of mining that would continue for decades.

The first big strike in the Death Valley region occurred in 1873, when incredibly rich silver deposits were discovered in the Panamint Range, near the head of Surprise Canyon. Immediately, the mining camp of Panamint City sprang up and became home to 2,000 citizens.

The town was abandoned after only three years, when the silver stopped producing. A flash flood in 1876 destroyed what was left. Panamint City was called "the toughest, rawest, most hard-boiled little hellhole that ever passed for a civilized town." Its founders were criminals who accidentally found silver while hiding from the law. They gave up their life of crime to mine silver — at least for a while.

The next big strike was in 1897 when gold was discovered near the mouth of Pleasant Canyon. Named after a famous Australian gold camp, the town of Ballarat took hold and was home to 400 people. The gold mines at Ballarat boasted good yields before the yellow metal veins gave out. The Radcliffe mine alone produced 15,000 tons of gold ore from 1898-1903. Although just dots on the map now, the once rich ghost towns of Panamint City, Ballarat, Chloride City, Skidoo, Harrisburg and others were wild and booming in their heyday.

Generally, all gold prospectors got started the same way — they looked for veins of quartz or seams of red or yellow iron-stained rock. Miners followed these veins, drilling and blasting to break the ore loose. They then sent the ore to mills to extract the gold. A profitable mine would yield about an ounce of gold per



ton of ore. The Keane Wonder Mine was one of the most successful gold mines in the entire Death Valley region, producing \$625,000 to \$682,000 worth of gold between 1907 and 1911. Although the mine still exists, until the site can be made safer, the National Park Service has closed the Keane Wonder Mine and surrounding area to the public.

Pete Aguerberry and Eureka Mine

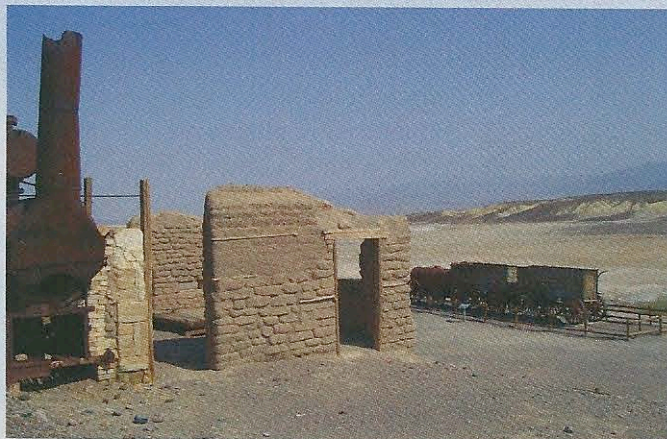
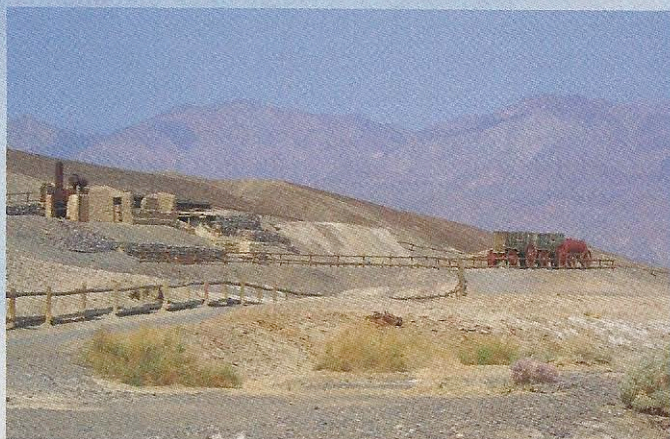
Although most mines in Death Valley National Park are closed to the public and in need of safety improvements, there is one you can still explore. The Eureka Mine has been stabilized, so you can follow in the path of one of the region's most famous prospectors, Pete Aguerberry. Take two flashlights when you enter the mine tunnels, one for use and one for backup. In the winter, this mine is closed with a bat gate due to hibernating Townsend's long-eared bats. The mine opens again each spring.

Aguereberry was just a greenhorn when he and his partner, old-timer Shorty Harris, discovered gold in the Providence Ridge in 1905. Their discovery triggered another short-lived mining boom. Within a few months, at least 20 other parties were working in the same area. Of all the miners who toiled here, though, it was Aguerberry who persisted.

Born in France in 1874, Aguerberry, at an early age, had read about the astonishing gold discoveries in California and couldn't wait to become a prospector. He realized his dream at age 16 when he set sail for America in 1890, and made his way to California.

In 1905, he was headed to Ballarat with Shorty Harris. But, before he got there, he found gold-bearing Providence Ridge. Aguerberry filed claims for himself on the north side of the hill, while Shorty took claims on the south side.

Pete Aguerberry's camp still stands today and is open to the public. His camp includes his original two-room house, guest cabins and outbuildings.



Beginning in 1907, Aguerberry worked his Eureka Mine and other claims for 40 years, mostly on his own. Historians estimate that he extracted about \$175,000 worth of gold during his lifetime (then valued at \$20 per ounce). He died in 1945 and is buried in Lone Pine, California.

It was Aguerberry's remarkable persistence, not his financial success, that made him one of the most recognized prospectors in Death Valley. Aguerberry's camp still stands, so stop and take a look around when you explore his Eureka Mine. His original two-room house, including an antique gas stove and refrigerator are still in their places. Outbuildings and two other guest cabins are next to it. Although it may be tempting to take a

souvenir, federal law protects every rusty drum, car part, and nail, so leave everything undisturbed.

Not far from the Eureka Mine is Mr. Aguerberry's Cashier Mill. Built in 1909 and powered by gasoline engines, the mill pulverized the ore, then chemical processes using mercury and cyanide extracted the gold. The mill site and surrounding mines were originally part of Shorty Harris's claim, which he sold to the Cashier Mining Company. Aguerberry later bought the mill site, adding to the seven Death Valley mining claims he already owned.

Harmony Borax Works

In addition to precious metals, the Death Valley region was also mined for minerals such as borax, commonly used in detergents and as a fire-resistant additive to fiberglass and other materials. The Harmony Borax Works, built by William Tell Coleman, was active from 1883 to 1888. This mill was famous not so much for its ore deposits, but for the twenty-mule team

The Harmony Borax Works, built by William Tell Coleman, was active from 1883 to 1888. The ruins are open to the public.



wagons used to transport the borax across the desert. A very memorable advertising campaign using the wagons' image was used to promote Boraxo soap and the Death Valley Days radio and television programs.

When in full operation, the Harmony Borax Works employed 40 men who produced three tons of borax daily during the winter months. The works could not operate during the summer because it was too hot. So, for several months out of each year, the Amargosa Borax Plant near present day Tecopa, California was utilized. After only five years of production, the Harmony plant went out of operation when the owner's financial empire collapsed. Acquired by Francis Marion Smith, the works never resumed, but became part of the borax reserves of the Pacific Coast Borax Company and its successors. On Dec.31, 1974, the site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

You can learn everything there is to know about the Harmony Works from information and displays both inside and outside of the Borax Museum. Located on the park grounds of Furnace Creek Ranch, the museum is worth a visit before you check out what's left of the borax plant. At the site, you'll find ruins of stone buildings, old machinery, tanks, wagons and waste tailings.

Wildrose Charcoal Kilns

In remote southwestern Death Valley National Park, is another mining point of interest this is often overlooked by visitors — the Wildrose Charcoal Kilns. The middle of the desert might seem like an odd place for a row of beehive-shaped stone structures, but since these are the best-preserved kilns of their type in the western states, it's worth a long drive down a dusty road to take a look. They are in remarkably great shape for being over 130 years old! To this day, the kilns still smell strongly of smoke, just as if they had been recently fired. Each of the

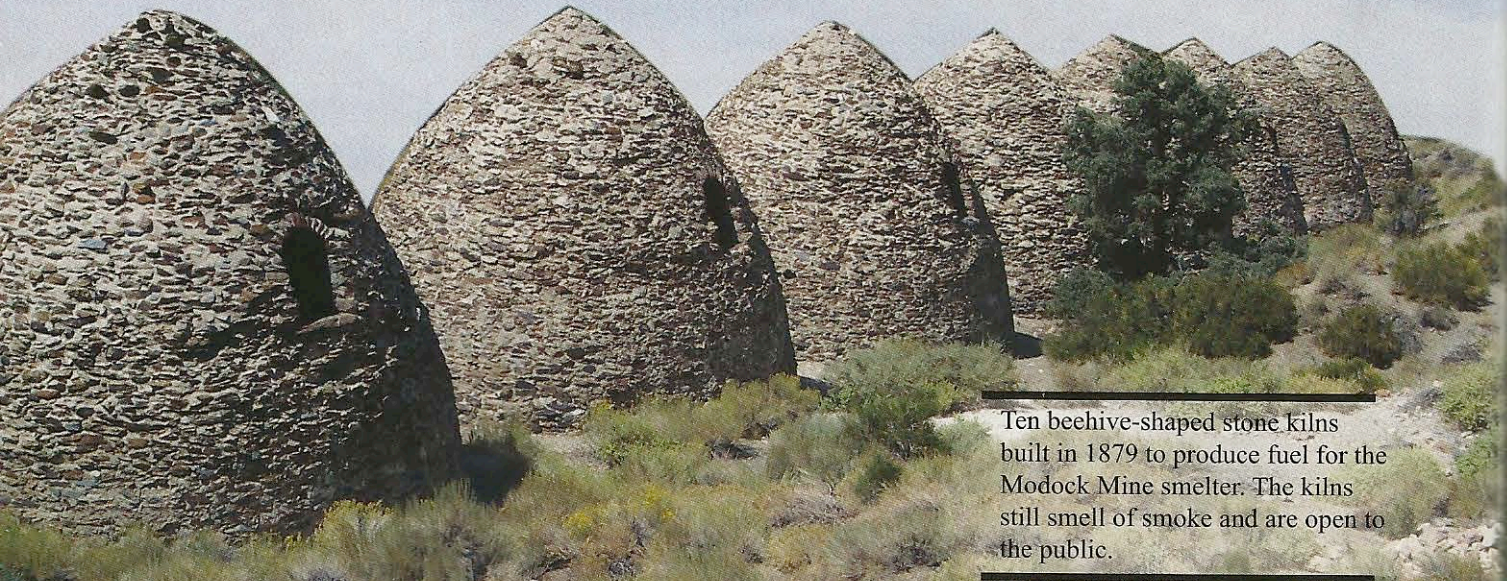
10 identical beehives is about 30 feet wide, so it's easy to walk inside and take a look around. The walls rise 25 feet overhead and are blackened as you'd expect.

Designed by Swiss engineers and built by Chinese laborers in 1879, the kilns' purpose was to produce fuel for the Modock Mine smelter, about 30 miles west. Workers filled the air-tight kilns with pinyon and juniper logs. The tree stumps you see today are the result of the demand for wood over a century ago. The burning, which reduced the wood to charcoal, took six to eight days and produced 2,000 bushels of charcoal. Cooling took another five days. Mule trains then hauled the charcoal to the smelter where it was used to extract silver and lead from the rich ore extracted from Modock's mines.

Wondering why charcoal was used? When charcoal is produced from wood, it retains its basic shape and texture, but is converted to 96 percent pure carbon. In the 19th century and earlier, charcoal generally was used as furnace fuel because it burned more slowly than wood. It also created a much greater heat that was needed for the refining of ores such as silver and lead.

It seems logical that a fairly large labor force of wood-cutters, charcoal-burners and haulers would be needed, but there's no sign now of any kind of settlement near the kilns, so perhaps it was just a tent city. Permanent structures wouldn't have been needed anyway because these kilns were only used for about three years — probably because the mining company found a more profitable way to ship their raw ore elsewhere for smelting, or they found fuel sources closer to their operation.

Records show that the Modock lead and silver mines were worked intermittently until about 1900, but were not hugely successful, grossing only about \$3 million over 30 years. Although huge profits weren't realized, the history left behind by the kilns is interesting and



Ten beehive-shaped stone kilns built in 1879 to produce fuel for the Modock Mine smelter. The kilns still smell of smoke and are open to the public.

once again demonstrates the tenacity of early miners. Hauling charcoal, or anything else, 30 miles across the desert could not have been an easy task. But they did it anyway!

Death Valley National Park is a land of extremes. From Badwater Basin, at 282 feet below sea level, to Telescope Peak at 11,049 feet, there is much to explore in between. Be prepared for extreme temperatures when you visit, especially from April through the middle of October. As with all national parks, you must keep your pick, pan and metal detector in the car. Bring your camera, though, and enjoy the wealth of mining relics and ruins still visible throughout the largest national park in the lower 48 states.

Denise Seith is a freelance travel writer and treasure hunter in Salem, Oregon. She and her husband Larry own www.GoldRushTradingPost.com, an online prospecting equipment and supply store.

IF YOU GO: Death Valley National Park

www.nps.gov/deva
(760) 786-3200

- Entrance fee \$20 per vehicle, good for 7 days.
- Cell phone reception may not be reliable inside Death Valley National Park.

