

Trip 2 – Episode #32 – The Salton Sea & Beyond



I would love to explain to you why there's a huge saltwater sea in California's interior. But it's really complicated – especially for someone whose last science class was in the late 60s.

Part of the story has to do with millions of years of water from what's now called the Colorado River either pouring into or being diverted away from the area, and creating a salty sea or a lake, alternately (for some geological reason).

Eventually, smart humans came along and offered their help. They built dams and found other ways to divert water into or out of the area, depending on who had the brightest idea at the time. So naturally things got worse.

With humans' help, there's been almost no water feeding the sea since the 1960s or 70s, so it's shrunk in size. Less water means that what's there has become much saltier, too salty for sea life to survive. For a while, it was very smelly as all the fish and other aquatic life died. Apparently you could smell it in Los Angeles.

Now that everything's long dead, it smells okay and it looks like beautiful.



But the “sand” around it is actually made up of formerly living things which are now fine dust.

That’s why they now line up bales of hay to keep the dust from blowing into the community that still surrounds the lake.



Suffice to say it’s a weird place.

However, we were committed. We'd booked a spot in a little RV park there. And it seemed fine. But there were a few surprises. The café, Johnson's Landing, had very friendly staff who served quite a tasty meal. Which was a nice surprise.



The park itself was filled with ... characters. Like this guy who had some unusual friends in his RV.



He also had an eclectic design sense. We chatted with him briefly as he was waiting for his friend to return so they could continue their game of chess.



Another nearby resident had lots going on around her place too.



The other thing we noticed was that most everyone else there seemed to like loud vehicles that were made to drive on sandy terrain.



We seemed to be the only ones who just had a motorhome.



And then we started noticing motorized hang-gliders floating by, above the RVs.



Lots of them.



We walked to the other side of the RVs and discovered that the beach was a launch and landing site for “Powered Paragliders” or PPG. (If you haven’t watched Jim’s video of these folks, please check it out – it’s very entertaining.)



Apparently, there's something about the quality of the air – the lift, the air pressure, who knows, maybe the fine dust?? – that makes it an ideal spot for PPG. Had we been there the week before, we would've been there for the annual Fly-In, to which hundreds of pilots flocked.

It was pretty exciting, but one night there was enough. During our meal there, we asked the server what else was interesting in the area and he told us about Bombay Beach, on the other side of Salton Sea. That was the general direction we were headed in, so we went there the next day.

During the 1950s, when the Salton Sea was still thriving, Bombay Beach was apparently a popular beachgoing destination. Celebrities like Frank Sinatra, the Beach Boys and Bing Crosby frequented the luxury resorts. The area attracted half a million tourists annually.

The welcome sign seems to be a throwback to those days.



But with the death of the Salton Sea, Bombay Beach soon followed.

There are few operating businesses. The only restaurant is the Ski Inn. We didn't ski or walk in(n).



And many of the homes (whether actual homes or motorhomes) are in a disastrous state, with almost nobody living there.





But then ... in a classic case of turning lemon into lemonade, people in the town started creating art, and attracting artists, inviting them to “treat the corroded beach town as a canvas for free expression, experimentation, and spectacle.” One journalist described it as a kind of “something of a Burning Man meets Marfa, Texas.” Which we found amusing since we’d been introduced to both those phenomena just recently.

A number of years ago, they created an arts festival or “biennale”, attracting artists and art enthusiasts from around the world.

There are bizarre art installations throughout the town and on the beach. A lot of the art is a commentary on the loss of the town. There’s a kind of black humour about a lot of it. And a lot of head-scratching “art” as well.











To give you the full effect of this art installation, I also took some video, which you can see below.



I think maybe the weirdest thing about Bombay Beach is that it's in the community of Mecca.

We hoped that our next day's adventure would be a little more uplifting.

It was.