



THE ACCIDENTAL SEA

The Salton Sea, in the middle of the Californian desert, is an engineering disaster and a failed resort, but it has its own brand of attractions and art galleries. Be ready for the bizarre

TEXT AND IMAGES BY GISELLE WHITEAKER

IT'S 113°F (45°C) as I step out of the car I hired in Los Angeles. I have driven 170 miles through largely uninspiring landscapes to arrive here, around 40 miles south of Palm Springs. And I am wondering where I am. The fishing and general store squatting on the sand by the side of the road is the first retail outlet I have seen in miles. It has a forlorn air, out-of-date flyers and "For Sale" signs stuck to the barred windows, ripped and baked by the harsh Californian sun.

The door groans in protest as I enter, parched and overheated, the jeans I wore on my overnight flight clinging heavily to my frame. The wiry middle-aged woman inside gives me a weary look. She is wearing denim shorts, a cut-off shirt, and a gun. I collect a gallon jug of water and ask if I can use the bathroom. As she hears my Australian accent, she breaks into a welcoming smile. "Sure you can. Where ya from?" she drawls as she directs me through the back storeroom.

Changed into a temperature-appropriate

outfit I stop for a chat. Barbara was born and raised here by the Salton Sea. Her father owned the store during the Salton Sea's heyday in the 1950s. When he passed away a few years ago she moved back to run the business. She can't afford to leave, but she doesn't want to die here.

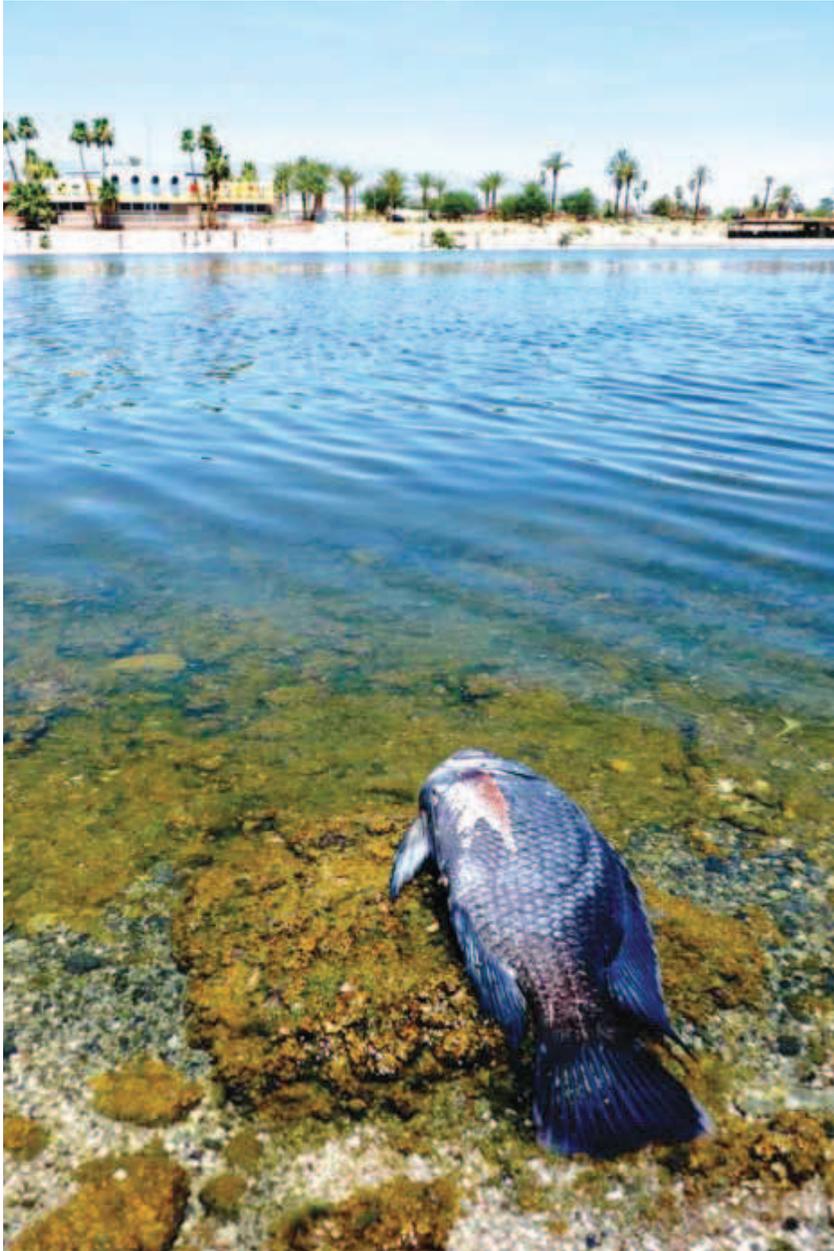
A LOW SPOT ON EARTH

The Salton Sea is one of the world's largest inland seas as well as being one of the lowest spots on Earth at 227 feet below sea level. It is also an accident. In 1900, the California Development Company began creating irrigation canals to divert water from the Colorado River into the area, allowing farmers to plant crops. In 1905 a combination of silt, heavy rainfall, and melting snow caused an engineering mishap. The canal gates crashed and for the next 18 months the entire volume of the Colorado River rushed downward into the Salton Trough. By the time the engineers halted the flood, the Salton Sea had been

born - 45 miles long and 20 miles wide with around 130 miles of shoreline.

Contrary to the widely held view that the sea would evaporate in the harsh desert climate, it stayed put. Development began and by the 1950s, the accidental sea was well on its way to being a resort area, cities springing up along the shores. The future looked bright as the waterfront playground began to attract the rich and famous. Roads were plotted, construction began, and "the Riviera of the West" as it was marketed, came into being. Salton City, the largest town, enjoyed a boom that lasted well into the 1960s.

As I drive past an abandoned real estate office it is hard to imagine this place booming. Faded signs advertise neighborhoods that no longer exist or never came into being. Roads end abruptly in piles of sand and a boarded up building is decorated with ominous graffiti, the only sign of life. One message reads "Live free or die," while another scrawled in black paint



is a harsh statement: “Desolation.” I pull into the parking lot of the recently restored North Shore Beach and Yacht Club, now the Salton Sea History Museum. It’s closed.

I walk down to the deep blue water of the sea, the sand scrunching and popping under my feet. It doesn’t feel right. I bend down to pick up a handful of sand and find it is not the pure white sand created from granulated rock worn down over millennia. The chunky grains are fish vertebrae, bones, and crushed shells; the remnants of the marine life that once thrived here.

Being a basin, the Salton Sea has no outlet. Fed largely by agricultural run-off, the water was contaminated with salts and chemicals. Soon the fresh water sea became salt water, now boasting around 25 percent higher salinity than the Pacific Ocean, increasing one percent every year. The salinity levels, fertilizer run-offs and algal blooms elevate bacteria levels, making the water inhospitable to most marine life. Only the hardy tilapia fish have shown an ability to survive, albeit tenuously. Every few meters along the shoreline a dead fish lies on the wet sand. Higher up the fish are baked into crusty corpses slowly disintegrating into the sandy graveyard.

Despite the toxic environment, the Salton Sea is an important bird migration path. A large band of pelicans congregates on a rocky outcrop. The Salton Sea supports 30 percent of the remaining population of the American white pelican and is a major resting stop on the Pacific Flyway. Conservation efforts have been proposed, but have stalled with the slowing economy.

FAILING TOWNS

The towns are also failing. In the first community I find, around a third of the buildings are clearly abandoned, vandalized and forsaken. Many of the homes are trailers, made permanent with timber porches rigged onto the sides. Children’s toys lay scattered as if left mid-play, the children long gone. Caravan doors lay open, allowing access to uninviting interiors torn to pieces. Sofas are separated from their stuffing, and the skeleton of an outhouse still contains its porcelain fixture. A further third of the community appears inhabited, neat and tidy with gates locked and bolted, likely owned by migrant laborers. The final third sit on the fence, tattered and unkempt, but not confirmed empty.

In Niland, several functioning shops lie scattered amongst the shells of failed businesses. Here the houses are solid, made of brick and concrete. One row of conjoined properties appears complete despite boarded up windows. At the back of the structure the entire back wall is missing, allowing a dollhouse view into the former homes set up with lounge room furniture. The swimming pool is drained, covered in childish scrawl. In the final room of the row, a man sits on a semi-intact sofa, a beer in his hand. “Do you live here?” I ask. “I exist here,” is his enigmatic reply.

Three miles along a dirt road heading into the desert, a colorful spectacle rises from the sands. Made of adobe, straw, and thousands of gallons of paint, Salvation Mountain was created by Leonard Knight, to express his beliefs and share the message - “God is Love.” Leonard will be the first to tell you he is not an artist, and many would look at Salvation Mountain and agree. But there



SOME OF THE "SLABBERS" LIVE ON GOVERNMENT CHECKS; OTHERS CHOOSE TO LIVE OFF THE GRID. THE SITE IS DECOMMISSIONED AND UNCONTROLLED, THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA CONSTANTLY SEEKING WAYS TO SHUT IT DOWN

is no denying that in a desert of beige, the colorful monument stands out from the surrounding sands.

Leonard lived in a truck on the grounds until his failing health forced him into a care home. The project of a lifetime will never be complete, but a team of volunteers maintain the area and visitors donate paint, brushes, and time, to make it live on. Today in the scorching midday summer temperatures no work can be done. I leave my paint cans in one of the unlocked cars permanently on site and move on.

LIVING OFF THE GRID

Further down the road sits Slab City. Once Camp Dunlap Marine Training Facility, the 640-acre compound ceased operations in 1946. The buildings were removed and sold and the base abandoned, leaving only the cement foundations of the buildings - the slabs. RV campers began to occupy the area during winter to take advantage of the rent-free parking. Attendance grew over the years, and now thousands of visitors return every winter. A hardy segment of the population stays year-round.

Some of the "Slabbers" live on government checks; others choose to live off the grid. The site is decommissioned and uncontrolled, the State of California constantly seeking ways to shut it down. The camp has no electricity, no running water, no sewers, no toilets, and no rubbish collection service. It takes a special kind of person to live here. Many are artists, others are not.

I am not sure how I will be welcomed by the permanent population, but those I speak to are warm and friendly. One man is working on an art car left when someone drifted out of the community. He is also renovating a disused caravan to turn it into a community art project. Inside the caravan tinned food

remains in the cupboards, swelling in the heat. The mirrors are surrounded by toy cameras and feather boas. Hundreds of small dusty plastic bags crunch on the floor. I wipe the dust away and find a candy inside in the shape of a grinning shark.

In a remote location two water tanks have been painted with extensive murals. Behind one sits an open suitcase containing several empty photo albums. In the still air I wonder if this is rubbish left behind, or a work of art I don't understand. In a nearby piece of scrub, a large canister has been painted to look like a spacecraft. An alien dummy dangles next to a sign that reads, "Alien Crash Site." Slab sense of humor.

There are no signposts here, only dirt tracks. Unmarked on the furthest edge of the community sits East Jesus, population 1. East Jesus is an art park, all of the works constructed from found objects. Dozens of plaster ducks swim in the sand in one corner, and in another the sculpture of a weary man slumps in a chair. A woolly mammoth made from strips of blown truck tires looms next to a house sinking into the sand. A mini van contains the "First church of the chocolate martini," while a bank of broken televisions extols a more political message.

As I drive away from the sea I feel strangely unsettled. A million questions run around my head that will remain unanswered, the main one being, "Why?" I leave dehydrated, baffled, and intrigued in equal measure. I'll come back in winter to use my paint.

BIO: *Giselle is the editor of two lifestyle and property magazines, Exclusive Home Worldwide and Property Scene and is the group deputy editor of Etihad Airways' in-flight magazines amongst others. See giselle.weebly.com for more of her work.* ■

