Felicity, Calif.—I left the “Museum of History in Granite” a citizen of world history, and in my pocket I carried a certificate to prove it.

The certificate, presented to me by the museum’s founder, Jacques-Andre Istel, confirmed I had visited “The Pyramid.” This mystical structure, along with 922 granite panels depicting the history of the world, was masterminded by the scholarly Istel. French by birth, and now the lord and master of more than 2,000 acres of pristine California desert landscape, Istel is a man with a purpose. “The Museum of History in Granite is dedicated to remembrance; to engrave in granite highlights of the collective memory of humanity is my mission” he tells me.

I heard about the museum from Mark Farley, founder of a tour agency in Palm Springs. Farley discovered this rocky memorial to humanity en route to the Heber Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area on Interstate 8, a sand dune-swept area bordering Mexicali.

Driving along the road, one notices a few Border Patrol inspection points before the exit to Felicity. Then suddenly, a mirage: a 25-foot sculpture of the original stairway from the Eiffel Tower. Not far away, rising from the desert sand and flanked by a U.S. Post Office, is a pyramid. What?

Putting the pieces of this puzzle together was a challenge.

During my forty years as a travel journalist I thought I had seen a high percentage of the world’s oddities, from the remnants of a Saint’s toe at a church near Goa, India to possibly the world’s smallest airport, a ten-by-ten-foot square of floating driftwood stabilized by a bobbing flag pole—this is where a helicopter dropped me off, somewhere in the crystal waters of the Maldive Islands.

But these nods to off-the-beaten-path tourism paled in comparison to the Museum of History in Granite. Istel founded the museum in 1973 with his wife Felicia Lee, who inspired the naming of the town “Felicity,” as you may have guessed.

When viewed from the air one can see 362 engraved panels.

“It takes six hours to read them all,” says Istel. The weight of all of the monuments together is more than 4 million pounds.

Dr. Istel has organized history in such a remarkable style that it would fascinate even the most bored sixth-grader.

“This is a project without known precedent,” Istel says. “The design and construction were the easier parts.”

It reminded me of visiting ancient ruins found throughout Italy or Greece, where history is engraved on marble slabs. And truthfully, Dr. Istel has transformed enough granite to rebuild the Acropolis. This living museum is a mesmerizing journey revealing history icons from Attila the Hun and Julius Caesar, to Chinese emperor Shih Huang-Ti and Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, and Hannibal Barca of Carthage. There are panels on the origin of languages and scholars of all ages and, dedicated in 2003, a history of the French Foreign Legion.

The granite monuments, all precisely engraved with enough information to keep you moving along the “granite pathway,” trace a path through world history.

It starts at the beginning with “The Birth of our Universe,” and continues with treatises on the solar system and the galaxy, thoughts on volcanic eruptions, nomadic tribes, barbaric invasions, “The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World” and the Byzantine Empire—it’s a pretty wide-ranging tale. You would be unlikely to find a similar history lesson anywhere else in the world.

A little less than 1,000 feet from the Pyramid there is a chapel for wedding ceremonies, and plans are to enhance the museum with a section on Arizona history, including a panel titled “Scoundrels of Arizona!” Viewing all of this from the air must seem only second to spotting Stonehenge.

The whole experience, by turns impressive and bewildering, begs the question, who is Dr. Istel and why is he so obsessed with cultural history? Even more puzzling, how did he manage to import that section of staircase from the Eiffel Tower and install it in the middle of the desert? This enlightened gentleman may not be able to move mountains, but he somehow managed to install a distance of 3,080 feet of granite in the California desert to create his own shrine to the human past.

If you don’t believe me, look for Exit 164 off I-8, take a left on Center of the World Drive. You have arrived at the brink of a remarkable journey through world history.

For more information, go to [www.historyingranite.org](http://www.historyingranite.org/) or call 760-572-0100.

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