

Death Valley – ISEB-style Comprehension

Optional time limit: 40 minutes

Death Valley, in California, is arguably the hottest place on Earth. It holds records for the world's highest recorded air temperature (56.7°C) and ground temperature (93.9°C).



In the newspaper office where I worked was a constant parade of adventurers. Talented press agents, promoters, moguls of mining and prospectors* who, having struck it rich, now lived grandly in palatial homes, luxurious hotels or impressive clubs. In their wake, of course, was an engaging breed of liars, and an occasional
5 adventuress who by luck or love had left a boom town* crib to live thereafter in marble halls, with servants at her command. All brought arresting yarns of Death Valley.

More than 3,000,000 people lived within a day's journey in 1925, but excepting a few, who lived in bordering villages and settlements, those who had actually been in Death Valley could be counted on one's fingers and toes. The reasons were practical. It was
10 the hottest region in America, with few water holes and these far apart. There were no roads—only makeshift trails left by the wagons that had hauled borax* in the Eighties. Now they were little more than twisting scars through brush, over dry washes and dunes, though listed on the maps as roads. For the novice it was a foolhardy gamble with death.

15 I had been up and down the world more perhaps than the average person and this seemed to be a challenge to one with a vagabond's foot and a passion for remote places. So one day I set out for Death Valley.

At the last outpost of civilization, a two-cabin resort, the sign over a sand-blasted, false-fronted building stressed: "Free Information. Cabins. Eats. Gas. Oil.
20 Refreshments."

Needing all these items, I parked my car and walked into a foretaste of things-to-come. The owner, a big, genial fellow, was behind the counter using his teeth to remove the cork from a bottle labeled "Bourbon" —a task he deftly accomplished by twisting on the bottle instead of the cork. "I want a cabin for the night," I told him, "and when you
25 have time, all the free information I can get."

"You've come to headquarters," he beamed as he set the bottle on the table, glanced at me, then at the liquor and added: "Don't know your drinking sentiments but if you'd like to wet your whistle, take one on the house."

Adapted from *Loafing Along Death Valley Trails* by William Caruthers

- * *prospector* Somebody searching for mineral deposits, such as gold or oil
- * *boom town* A town growing rapidly in size and wealth
- * *borax* A mineral used for many things, such as in household detergents

1. What things do all the people described in paragraph 1 have in common?
 Answer using your own words as far as possible. (4)

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2. Why does the author point out that "more than 3,000,000 people lived within a day's journey in 1925" (line 7)? (2)

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3. Explain the effect of each of the following words.

(a) parade (line 1) (2)

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(b) scars (line 12) (3)

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(c) items (line 21) (2)

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4. (a) Look at lines 7 to 14.

Give three reasons why few people used to visit Death Valley. (3)

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(b) Look at lines 15 to 17.

Why did the author want to visit Death Valley? (3)

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5. Explain why the “two cabin resort” is referred to as the “last outpost of civilization” (line 18). (2)

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6. What do we learn about the personality of the shop/hotel owner? Give evidence for your points. (4)

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TOTAL 25 MARKS
