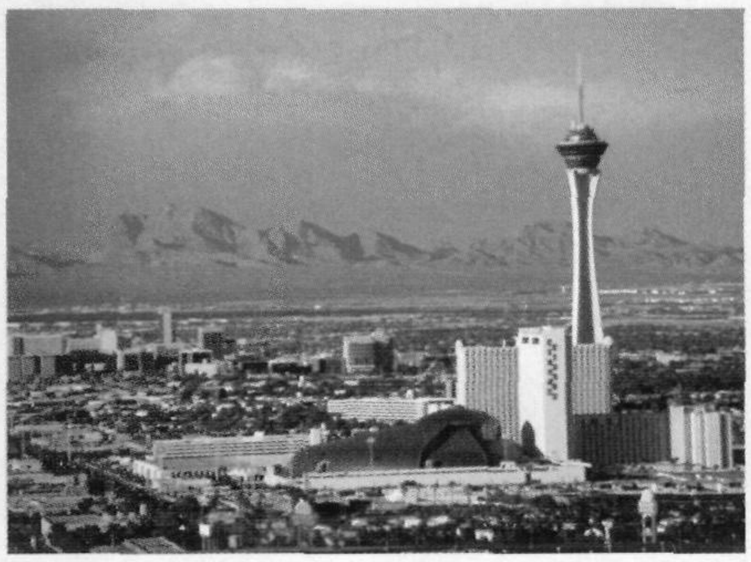
SOMETIMES, STORIES TURN up for a novelist in a rational way. At others, logic has nothing to do with it. Which is a way of saying, "I'm not sure why I've been driving aimlessly around the Mojave desert." I'm not going anywhere in particular. If anything, I'm trying to get away from places. I want to be nowhere. I want to be in between.

It started with Google Maps. I got talking to a friend about Yucca Mountain, the US government nuclear waste storage site. We looked to see where it was and found the words printed across a square of undifferentiated grey. We zoomed out: still grey. Here was a landscape unsuitable for our eyes, a secret geography. Huge areas of the Mojave are off limits to civilians: firing ranges, airbases, training grounds — sites whose very purpose can't be revealed.

The Mojave — the vast backyard of the glittering Pacific — was once the final barrier to Westward migrants searching for a better life in California. Its high, bleak country is characterised by the presence of *Yucca brevifolia*, the Joshua Tree. The tall cactus was named by Mormon settlers, who decided it looked like a prophet beckoning them to the Promised Land. During the Cold War, the aerospace boom led engineers and pilots here, where they found a place away from prying eyes to test the limits of their machines, and occasionally, to lose their sanity. It's no accident that this place has the highest incidence of UFO sightings in the world.

Chuck Costa spent 46 years out in the secret desert, directing nuclear weapons tests at the Nevada Test Site — a vast tract of empty space, 60 miles out from the glittering lights of the Las Vegas Strip. From 1952 until 1992, when they suspended testing, the site saw 928 announced tests, creating an extraordinary, cratered landscape that looks, in aerial photos, like a giant gaming board. Bordering the test site is the fabled Area 51. Home of U2 spy planes and alien autopsies, its very existence was only admitted by the US government in 2003. Chuck is retired now, openly nostalgic for the community at the test site, where there was once a mini-city, complete with shops, cinemas, even a bowling alley. In his office at the Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas, he introduces me to Matthew, an intense young curator whose fascination with nuclear weapons is mildly unnerving. Matthew takes me into the archive, where, with great reverence, he shows photos of early tests; samples of sand fused into glass; and all manner of atomic ephemera, including a Shillelagh anti-tank missile in a crate. Matt looks at it. "We probably shouldn't have it," he muses. "But we do."

West of Vegas, the world seems to fall away. You're left in Death Valley, a vast basin of sand dunes and salt flats flanked by raw, multicoloured mountain ranges. It's the most inhuman place I've ever been. When I switch off the car engine, the silence is absolute. It begins to press down on my ears, the kind of total emptiness that makes a person cast about frantically for something to fill it. But what? Money is one answer. Miners have left thousands of abandoned workings in this desolation. Few ever got rich. The town of Rhyolite, on the valley's northern borders, had precisely four good years after Shorty Harris and EL Cross struck gold in 1904. Ten thousand people flooded in, looking to make their fortune, building banks, shops, saloons and a railway station. Fraudulent reporting of the quantity of ore being extracted led to a panic and by 1910, only 675 residents were left. By 1919, it was abandoned. Now, only the shells of a few stone buildings stand to mark the ghost-town, looking across at a forlorn cemetery. I drive on through the township of Beatty, whose main attractions appear to be a brothel ("trucker friendly") and a hot springs resort, where I sit, neck deep, in a mineral bath inside a dilapidated shed and soak the sand out of my pores.



OPPOSITE PAGE HARI KUNZRU TAKES THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED. *FROM TOP* AREA 51 DIDN'T OFFICIALLY EXIST BUT STILL HAD A GUIDE BOOK; LOOKING OVER LAS VEGAS; RHYOLITE IS CRUMBLING INTO THE DESERT

Heading south on the Interstate, through the hardscrabble township of Baker (home of some run-down motels and "the world's tallest thermometer"), I wind up in Barstow, where the drugs famously took hold of Hunter S Thompson as he drove to Vegas to experience Fear And Loathing. Past Peggy Sue's Diner — whose blowsy middle-aged waitresses wear bobby-socks, nylon uniforms and brightly-coloured eye shadow — I find my way to the old Route 66, the place where once upon a time you could get your kicks, travelling across country in search of the great American vacation. The opening of the Interstate killed the old road and all the businesses along it, stone dead, and now once-famous places like Baghdad (home of the eponymous cafe) have nothing to mark them but a GPS reference.

By the time you get to Amboy, you're about 80 miles from the nearest cold beer. The town (population seven in 2003), is teetering on the brink of extinction, unlike the sinister active volcano just outside, whose ominous cinder crater rises out of the flat desert like one of the Dark Lord's pimples. Amboy is chiefly known for Roy's Motel and Gas Station, its space-age retro sign and swooping-roofed reception a reminder of long-gone optimism and fun in the sun. The motel's been closed for decades, but the gas station recently reopened. The attendant wears a holstered pistol. It's said a previous owner had an animus against long-hairs and used to chase them off with a shotgun, so I suppose this counts as keeping up tradition. After I fill up, I climb the crater. A couple of hours later, I'm standing on the rim, looking out over hundreds of miles of vacancy. The only sign of life is an eastbound freight train inching its way across the landscape, its multicoloured cars like a string of tiny beads.

South of Amboy is the Wonder Valley, a scrubby zone of shacks and trailers, inhabited by people who don't like to live

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