

Rhyolite Ghost Town: Where Spirits Await You

Hitting the road to or from Death Valley or Las Vegas? Here's a stop along the way that's sure to create a lasting impression.

Located in Amargosa Desert about 120 miles northwest of "Sin City," the ghost town of Rhyolite makes for a great day trip and a cool Nevada adventure.

Once a thriving mining town, Rhyolite (named for a native volcanic rock) is best known today for its eerie quiet and dilapidated buildings left over from a bygone time. Rhyolite's feeling of remoteness and fabulous Wild West setting have made it a tourist attraction and backdrop of choice for several movies (most recently, 2005's "The Island"). But what remains of this historic town also makes it easy to conjure up images of a simpler yet "golden" life—in a town that went bust almost as fast as it boomed.

Rhyolite in its Heyday

In a region richly pocketed with gold, Rhyolite was born in 1905, when prospectors discovered high-grade ore in surrounding hills. Since ore samples fetched the equivalent of \$80K a ton in the early 1900s, word of the two-tent mining camp spread fast. Within six short months, Rhyolite had transformed into a bustling town of about 5,000 people—complete with 50 saloons, 19 lodging houses, 16 restaurants, a public bath house, newspapers and four daily stagecoaches to Goldfield, a town nearly 100 miles away!

By 1907, Rhyolite was a full-blown, swanky boomtown, thanks largely to industrialist Charles M. Schwab, who bought out the local Bullfrog Mining District and infused Rhyolite with infrastructure, including concrete sidewalks, piped water, electric lines, railways, a hospital, three banks, two churches, a public swimming pool, a busy train station—even a stock exchange and opera house.

Rhyolite on the Decline

Sadly, Rhyolite fizzled out almost as quickly as it grew. After a prosperous three-year run, the mining town began to stall as ore production decreased and the full effect of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake was felt through disrupted railways. Mines started closing in 1910, followed by banks, newspapers, the post office and train depot. By 1914, the power companies had killed the electricity, leading to Rhyolite's almost complete abandonment within a year. Its last known resident, a 92-year-old man, died in 1924.

Over time, parts of Rhyolite were relocated to other towns and mining camps—like nearby Beatty, whose Old Town Hall was once Rhyolite's Miners' Union Hall, and whose school is made of parts of several Rhyolite buildings.

But today's best Nevada ghost town still evokes the spirit of long, long ago.

Goldwell Open Air Museum: Where the Ghosts Pose

At the southern entrance to Rhyolite, next to the railway depot, is the Goldwell Open Air Museum. There, you'll encounter Belgian artist Albert Szukalski's "ghosts." These life-sized statues of empty flowing robes depict Jesus and his disciples, a nod to Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting "The Last Supper." Szukalski created the figures in 1984 by draping plaster-soaked burlap over live models and letting them dry. His nearby sculpture of the "Ghost Rider," which was made using the same plastering technique, adds another ghostly inhabitant to remind visitors of the many who once called Rhyolite home.

While we only stayed a short time in this strange place, it was a thrill to experience something so unique, obscure . . . and beautifully haunting. Before you visit, especially if you're intrigued by the gold rush era, you might want to read up on Rhyolite and its brief but exciting glory days.

Just keep an eye out for speed signs on your drive there, since you'll likely be the only one on the road. Yes, I learned this the hard way, while visiting Beatty, just four miles away. While seeing Rhyolite is highly recommended, rushing—for gold or otherwise—is no longer a goal in and around this incredible ghost town.

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Rhyolite: An Old Boomtown Still Has Its Ghosts OR . . .

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Once a thriving mining town, Rhyolite (named for a native volcanic rock) is best known today for its eerie quiet and dilapidated buildings that are left over from a bygone time. Its feeling of remoteness and fabulous Wild West setting have made it a tourist attraction and backdrop of choice for several movies (most recently, 2005's "The Island"). But what remains of this historic town also makes it easy to conjure up images of a simpler yet "golden" life—in a town that went bust almost as fast as it boomed.

~~and one that disappeared almost as quickly as it arrived. —was also fleeting.~~

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At the southern entrance to Rhyolite, next to the railway depot, you’ll encounter Belgian artist Albert Szukalski’s “ghosts.” The only residents of the area, these life-sized statues of empty flowing robes depict Jesus and his disciples, a nod to Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting “The Last Supper.” Szukalski created the figures in 1984 by draping plaster-soaked burlap over live models and letting them dry. His sculpture of the “Ghost Rider,” which was made using the same plastering technique, adds another ghostly inhabitant to remind visitors of the many who once called Rhyolite home.

While we only stayed a short time in this strange place, it was a thrill to experience something so unique, obscure . . . and beautifully haunting. There’s quite a bit written on the short, gilded life of Rhyolite. ~~and its short, gilded life. but opportunistic history.~~ If you’re intrigued by the gold rush era, or even the wild, wild West, you’d do well to read up on Rhyolite and its brief but exciting ~~but brief~~ glory days. ~~before giving this incredible ghost town a visit.~~

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