DIVE NEWS & EVENTS

Desert Diving in Sin City

CALIFORNIA DIVER — JULY 10, 2010

When you think of Las Vegas, several colorful expressions come to mind:

"What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas"

"The city of Lost Wages"

"Sin City"

Well, when you wander down the Las Vegas strip, all of these phrases seem appropriate. Whether it's the incessant call of the casinos, the quickie wedding chapels, the never-ending happy hours, the burlesque shows or the advertising trucks driving by beckoning you to call for some evening companionship, Las Vegas seems to have something for everyone. These days, the seedier side of Vegas is balanced with fine dining, luxury hotels and top-flight entertainment and, in many ways, is an exciting vacation destination.

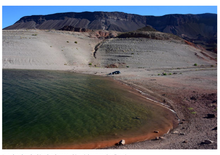
Many people don't think of diving when they visit Las Vegas

Words & Photos by Michael Salvarezza & Christopher P. Weaver

What you don't often associate with this desert playground is scuba diving...

We were only about 30 minutes outside of Las Vegas but it seemed like an entirely different planet. We were driving through barren but beautiful desert vistas, with colorful rock formations, groups of cactus and low brush, and dramatic mountains in the distance. We had quickly left the glitz of the city behind and we were in the wilderness.

Before long, we found our exit and suddenly we were "off road" on a 3-mile stretch of unmaintained dirt and loose rock. The destination: a dive site known as Kingman Wash on the banks of Lake Mead. Technically, we had crossed the border into Arizona. Nevertheless, we were in the Mojave Desert and ready to don our scuba gear for underwater exploration.



In a desolate looking landscape, drive right up to the dive site

In 1931, construction of the Hoover Dam began. The idea was to harness the power of the mighty Colorado River to generate electricity and supply water for the region. The reservoir that was created by this structure is Lake Mead, named after Elwood Mead, the Bureau of Reclamation commissioner at the time. The lake is approximately 112 miles long, spanning the states of Nevada and Arizona, and has 247 square miles of surface area. At an elevation of about 1,221 feet above sea level, and with a maximum depth of 532 feet, the lake is an impressive body of water in an otherwise dry and inhospitable location. Because of an increase in water demand, and a sustained drought, the lake's level has been dropping and the most visible and dramatic evidence of this is the so-called "bathtub ring" on the rocks near the shoreline.

Kingman Wash is located in a protected cove not too far from the dam itself. With little more than rock, and a few hardy stands of low desert vegetation, there is no shelter here. The desert sun can be brutal so be prepared on hot days. The dry climate is another concern: divers must be diligent in remaining hydrated.

After suiting up, it was time to dive. The 77-degree water was a welcome relief from the heat of the desert and we submerged quickly into a garden of aquatic plants growing near to the shoreline. This jumble of vegetation provides shelter for the local fish population and almost immediately a shimmering school of small baitfish swam by, reminding us of schools of shiners and glassy sweepers on marine coral reefs.

Lake Mead is home to large schools of baitfish

The vegetation only seems to inhabit the immediate shoreline and by the time we had dropped to 20 feet, we were swimming over a muddy, silty bottom punctuated by large rocks and boulders every so often. Here, we would occasionally encounter larger fish, like the Largemouth Bass, the Channel Catfish and even a large Carp. Bluegill Sunfish would also swim by, although most of those seemed to stay by the vegetation in shallower water.

A large Bass comes to check out the divers

As we descended deeper, the visibility remained a steady 10 feet until we reached 60 feet. Here, a billowing cloud of silt reduced visibility to almost zero. It was time to ascend to clearer water.

In order to keep the visibility to a manageable level, divers must be careful to avoid kicking up the silt on the bottom. Much of the lake bottom at Kingman wash is muddy silt, so proper buoyancy and fin control is a must.

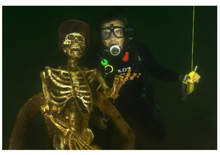
The bottom is mostly silty

As we began our return to shore at the end of our first dive, we suddenly encountered a spine-tingling moment...that is, a frightening jolt until we realized what we were looking at and began to laugh.

As we swam towards shore, what emerged out of the edge of visibility was a skeleton! Sitting on a lawn chair! And holding a beer! Suddenly, we looked around and found ourselves in the midst of a garden of skeletons in various humorous poses. One was on a toilet reading the paper. Another was reclining in a lounge chair. In the gloomy water backlit by the desert sun, these figures struck an ominous pose!

Skeletons in various poses make for a surprise

Of course, they are fake skeletons, plastic figures placed on the bottom by some unknown person. For divers, it is quite an entertaining part of a dive in Lake Mead. Indeed, there have been other reports of similar fake skeletons being found in other dive sites on the lake, all deposited by an individual whose identity has not been revealed. Is it an elaborate hoax? Is it the work of an anonymous artist? Is it a Halloween prank? Whatever the reason, these figures make for a colorful story over dinner.



Making a new friend underwater

As we emerged from the water, we took a moment to savor the sublime quiet of the location. Looking around at the rocks and gazing out across the lake to the mountains on the other side, we appreciated the unique opportunity to scuba dive in the heart of the desert. Suddenly, on shore, a Road Runner scampered by...we waited for Wile E. Coyote to follow but he didn't! But it was a sign that the desert is alive, even when it appears lifeless and desolate, he didn't! But it was a sign that the desert is alive, even when it appears lifeless and desolate, an ecosystem as vital to the health of the planet as any other. And equally as beautiful.

Lake Mead is host to other dives sites nearby. Placer Cove and Boulder Beach are alternate shore diving destinations to Kingman Wash. In addition, there are several sites accessible by boat, including Cathedral Cove and the Black Canyon in Boulder Basin. Many divers have heard about a lost B-29 bomber discovered by divers in deep water in 2002. This is a protected site and scuba diving on the B-29 is highly regulated.

Kingman Wash is a unique dive site in the desert

Diving Lake Mead is a unique opportunity and one that you should consider next time you are visiting Las Vegas. Martin Davidson of Simply Scuba can provide the gear you need and guide you on your underwater exploration of the desert lake. Imagine, making two dives in the desert and getting back in time to enjoy the lunch buffet at your favorite hotel!

And while you are at it, perhaps you can solve the mystery of the skeletons under the waters of Lake Mead.

Now that's a story you can feel comfortable sharing when you return from Las Vegas. What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas...well not for divers!

Words & Photos by Michael Salvarezza & Christopher P. Weaver

HEALTH & FITNESS

Copyright © 2018 California Diver Magazine. All rights reserved.

↑ Back to top