

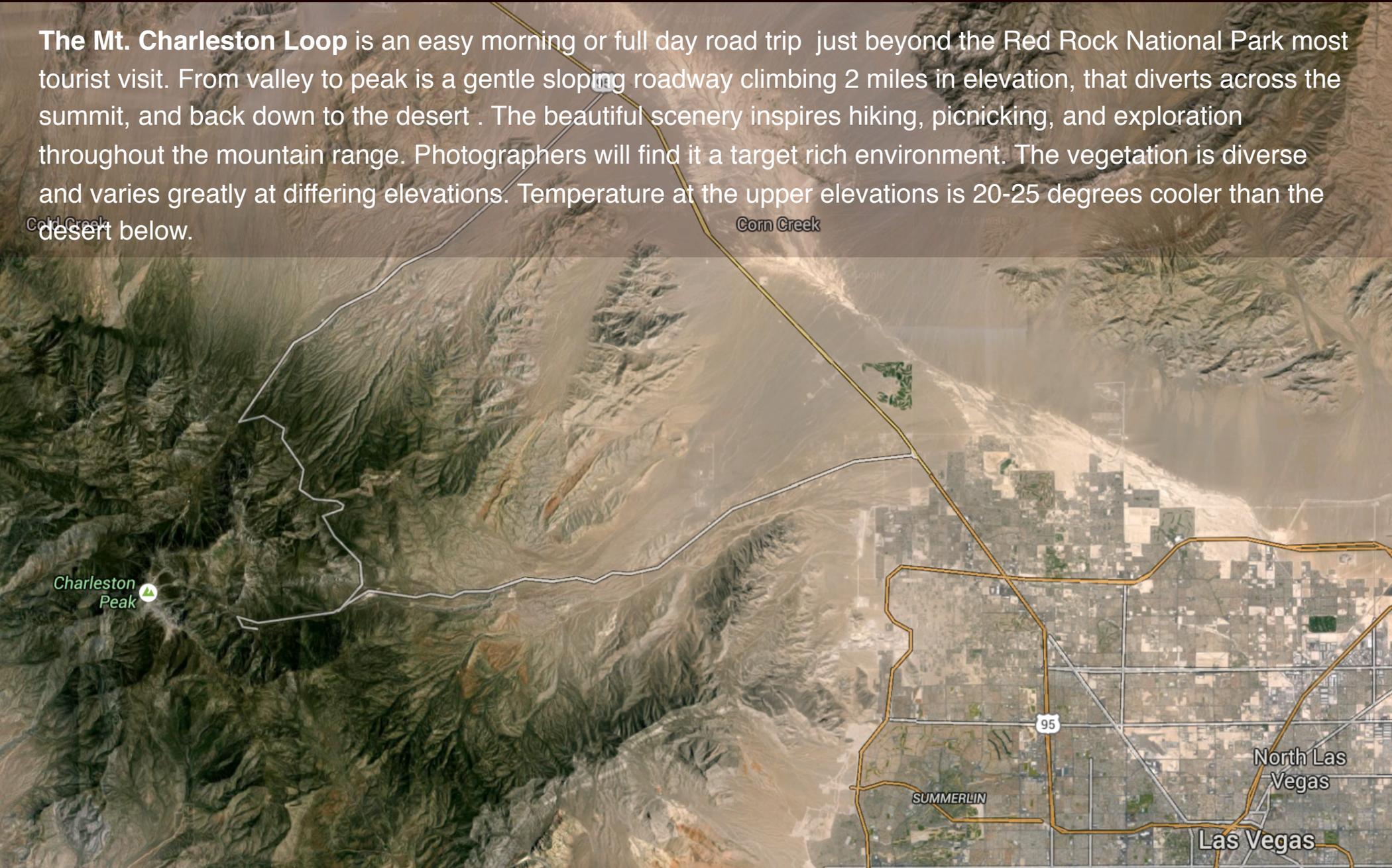
Mt. Charleston Loop, Nevada

Desert to Mountain Top and Back



The Spring Mountains rise majestically out of the Mojave Desert just a few minutes drive North West of Las Vegas Nevada.

The Mt. Charleston Loop is an easy morning or full day road trip just beyond the Red Rock National Park most tourist visit. From valley to peak is a gentle sloping roadway climbing 2 miles in elevation, that diverts across the summit, and back down to the desert. The beautiful scenery inspires hiking, picnicking, and exploration throughout the mountain range. Photographers will find it a target rich environment. The vegetation is diverse and varies greatly at differing elevations. Temperature at the upper elevations is 20-25 degrees cooler than the desert below.



Topography of Mt. Charleston and Las Vegas from Google Maps

A Beautiful Day

Sept 29, 1991 was a gorgeous day in North Atlanta, GA to get married. I had merely only met the beautiful woman I would spend the next 25 years with only nine months before. Over the course of those 25 years my wife has inspired us to travel to places near and far and provided me a life rich in experiences, good food, and a life filled with love and wonderful memories. For our 25th anniversary she had wanted to travel to Italy. But financial priorities prevented such a trip at the time. So we settled for a long weekend in Las Vegas staying at the Venetian with its Italian inspired themes including gondolas and singing gondoliers.

We awoke on the morning of our anniversary and walked to the nearby LINQ hotel and devoured an oversized breakfast at Hash House A Go Go whose portions are more than a mere human should consume in one sitting. We waddled back to our hotel, picked up our tourist maps and camera gear, then hopped into the car and headed out toward the Spring Mountains. It was a sweltering 90 + degrees around 9:00 A.M. in Las Vegas, so a drive in the mountains offered a cool retreat. Within 45 minutes in the middle of nowhere was a left turn lane for Mt Charleston Loop and only a small sign to indicate it was there.

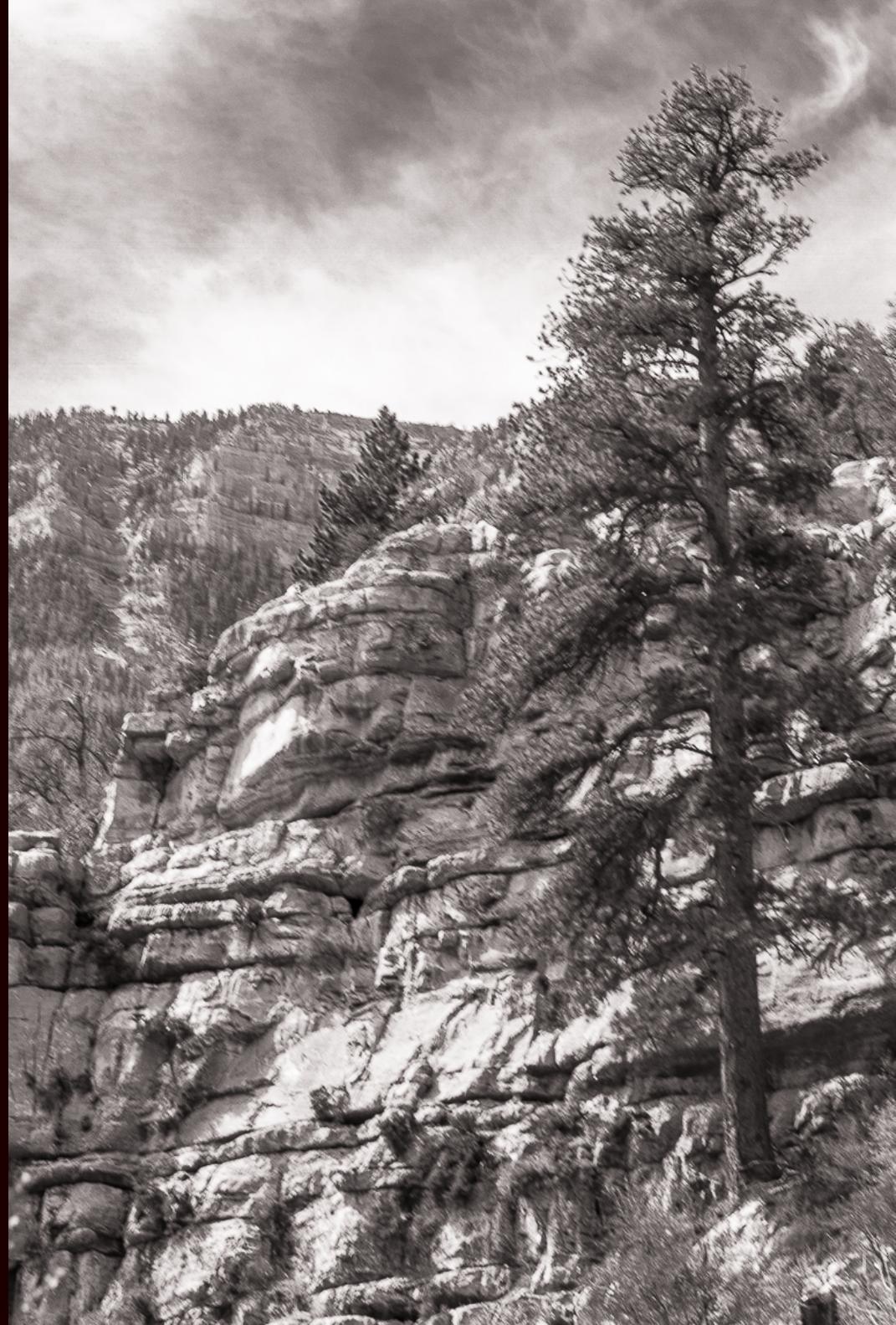
In the first few miles of the road way we drove through a sparsely populated residential area with not much to look at besides desert and a few Joshua trees. Then suddenly the landscape began changing. It became much more rich in plant life and the distant mountains were much closer and clearer. The yucca plants were now much larger, plentiful, and more diverse in shape. The photographer in me wanted to stop and explore each one, but we continued our ascent to the top of the mountain, marveling at the scenery before us. The temperature had dropped to a mere mid 70 degrees and was much more comfortable.

Near the summit we found some places to pull over to take some photographs. The variety of trees was now a mix of mahogany and pines. The rocks had changed in color from reddish tones in the valley to almost white. We continued our drive and found a trail head to Mary Jane Falls.

My photographic theme for 2015 is Rocks, Water, and Trees so I was delighted to have found such a place. There was almost no information at the base of the trail to inform us of the trail distance or other information. We met a hiker on her way back and she informed us it was a somewhat strenuous 2 mile hike up the mountain on switchback rocky paths.

We were not properly attired for such an adventure so we merely hiked a half mile or so and enjoyed the scenery around us.

The trees at this elevation were a mix of conifers and the lovely white barked Aspens with yellow leaves I had only seen in photographs by Ansel Adams. So I took several shots of these but found most had been vandalized by visitors carving their names into the bark.





view from the trail to Mary Jane Falls - wispy rapidly changing clouds , large sandstone peak, and 50+ foot trees.



THE POETRY OF PEAKS – HIKING WITH GARY SNYDER

*The higher you push into Charleston's wilderness, the more the topography opens: you leave behind smaller brush and trees and move into harder areas where the vegetation has to be stronger to survive harsh winds and low levels of moisture, though some seasons can be wetter than others. There are no streams up here, no real springs like what Snyder walks through in his part journal/part poetic illustrated *The High Sierra of California*.*

The limestone of Mt. Charleston resists all but the ever-present wind. On those wind-swept ridges, pushing above 10,000', stand some of the longest-living beings on our planet: the bristlecone pine, gnarled and twisted, sometimes only a piece of green on one burnished limb, some of them in this area well over 3,000 years old. They live all across the basin and range at higher elevations.

You have to wonder what stories they could tell.

— by William Huggins, 2014

< The trail to Mary Jane Falls



A sandstone outcrop near a scenic overlook illustrating how fragile the rock is when not held in place by the trees.

We returned to the car and explored the lodge near cathedral rock and a visitor center we had passed on the way up. We then took the north-westward highway near the ridge across the mountains and saw even more diverse terrain than we had encountered before. We stopped at a scenic overlook from which you could see for many miles the surrounding desert and mountain ranges in the distance. In this image there is a highway in about the center which was 15 miles away. The ranges on the top half of the image were about 30 to 50 miles away to give you an idea of the scale.





Clouds erupting like a volcano over the mountains shaped by the peaks and upward winds of the other side

After this stop it was time to head back down the mountain. At about the halfway mark I began seeing the plethora of Joshua trees once again. I spotted a couple I wanted to investigate further so I pulled over.

I made a couple of exposures and realized the light was fairly harsh by this time of day (noon-ish) . The clouds and haze were adding somewhat interesting layers of color but the dynamic range of light was getting to be too contrasty.

Yucca brevifolia - Joshua Tree

The name *Joshua tree* was given by a group of Mormon settlers who crossed the Mojave Desert in the mid-19th century. The tree's unique shape reminded them of a Biblical story in which Joshua reaches his hands up to the sky in prayer. — wikipedia





I took the classic road way shot into the desert and mountains opposite the highway and turned around and shot the other way too and managed to capture an interesting cloud formation seen on the first page.



I crossed back to the car and spotted the tips of a burned bush in a ravine heading into a valley. So I walked a few yards towards the bush and saw an interesting composition. I fired off a couple of shots but knew my time was limited as my wife was waiting in the car. Out of all the images these taken at this last stop are my favorites, I felt as if the mountain had saved its best for last. It had truly been a beautiful day.



The remainder of a beautiful day.

Leaving the mountain we headed back to our hotel where we spent the afternoon resting. In the late afternoon, we dressed up and headed for the gondolas at the front of the Venetian. Gio the gondolier sang That's Amor'e and some other French/Italian ballads. While it may not have been the canals of Venice, it was a romantic experience as the gondoliers baritone voice echoed under the bridges. We then headed to one of the finer restaurants, Delmonico Steakhouse by chef Emeril Legassi and had a memorable meal complete with champagne and the best banana cream pie one could ever imagine. After dinner we shopped and gambled a bit more, but mostly we enjoyed being together for another perfect day.

Artist Statement

Is this art? Well no its photography and an expression of my thoughts, remembrances, and experiences. For me the art is being present in such a wonderful place. The compositional opportunities were limitless, but time for the visit was short and there was much to explore. The grandeur of the mountains both excited me and distracted me from the noise of daily life. The newness of this place and going to Las Vegas for the first time added a level of stimulation not normally felt in the more familiar areas near home. The act of capturing the vastness and details around me provided a challenge to my technical skills and a provided a purpose to utilize what I have learned throughout my life as an image maker. To render all that was seen, heard, smelled, and felt can not be passed in a few images or my poor story telling. These images and words will only be art for you if you can imagine yourself in such a place and you derive pleasure from knowing someone else had an amazing experience.

This collection of images and text is dedicated to my lovely wife who puts up with me while I peer through glass at the world and try to capture it.

Gear and Processing

For the photographers: Normally I can be found with a 4x5 field camera or a Leica rangefinder shooting black and white film, but this was a quick trip so I chose to bring my digital gear only. I had no idea we would find such a wonderful place for photography.

GEAR: Canon 10D (6MP) , Canon 24-70L (used mostly below 40mm) or Sigma 15mm with polarizer as needed, ISO 100-400, No tripod (but could have used one).

PROCESSING: The images were processed in Lightroom changed from Color to B&W then to a brown tone. I chose the brown because it better fit the color tones in the rocks just above the desert. The monotone was chosen because the tones throughout the loop varied quite a bit and were incongruous.

OUTPUT: This PDF created in Pages and saved as PDF format. It was inspired by the works of Brooks Jensen who suggests PDF files as a way to expand audience and to share images in formats other than print.

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