

Head out on the E.T. Highway

By Aleza Freeman
Vegas.com

Boom, boom.

The sonic boom collides with the eardrums like an explosion in the otherwise placid desert air.

"Welcome to Rachel," says resident Ken Langley as he pulls out a fresh cigarette. "You never get used to them. But you stop jumping after awhile."

Rachel, Nev. sits on less than half a mile of land on the south side of the Highway 375, designated the Extraterrestrial Highway in 1996. It is the town closest to Area 51, the popular name for the top secret government research, development and testing facility located within the 3-million acre Nellis Bombing and Gunnery Range — also a hotbed for conspiracy theories on alien life.

It's lunchtime when the Adventure Photo Tours SUV pulls into the parking lot at The A'Le'Inn in Rachel and parks near a UFO parking space, alien mural and sign reading, "Earthlings Welcome." Langley, who is standing in front of the inn smoking, says he meets more people standing at this tourist destination than he would in the Atlanta airport.

A lunch stop is part of the day-long Area 51 tour, which also includes roundtrip transportation to and from the Las Vegas hotel of choice. The meal, served at the inn, is an ABC, or Alien Burger with Cheese.

"Is that actually hamburger?" asks Colleen MacWilliams, a tourist from Ontario, Canada who is taking the Area 51 tour with her husband, Albert. She seems to be only half-joking.

The 150-mile drive from the Las Vegas Strip to Rachel takes the group through virgin country filled with artesian springs, snow dusted mountain tops, lush cottonwoods and animal life such as elk, coyote, bobcats, mountain lions, wild mustangs and desert tortoises. And while the target is Area 51, the tour itself incorporates many non-alien stops.

"Most people don't live around the corner," explains tour guide Jeff Arbacauskas, a jokester with a salt and pepper moustache. "The additional



Top, Alien Mark Stone stands in the desert between Alamo and Caliente, Nev. Bottom, the Alien Mailbox is a popular destination for UFO enthusiasts.

stops give you a broader idea of the area that we're in. It gives you a good feeling of what pioneers coming into this area created."

One such stop prior to lunch is in the city of Alamo, about 70 miles from Rachel. The tour SUV turns off onto a winding dirt road, part of the old Caliente Stage Line. The tires kick up dirt from the adobe silt road as the group heads past the Joshua tree-filled desert to the site of a dry lake.

The SUV stops several hundred feet from a large triangular stone set upon a larger rock in the distance, which Arbacauskas calls Alien Mark Stone. Not too far from here is another rock covered with eroding Native American petroglyphs.

"Maybe the drawings on the rock were from Indians who saw aliens trying to tell other generations they were here," speculates Albert MacWilliams.

The MacWilliams learned about Area 51 from television documentaries and decided to take the tour because they share an interest in UFOs and the possibility of life on other planets.

"I've considered the possibility of aliens for many years," says Colleen MacWilliams. "I think 99 percent of it

Area 51 Tour

Company: Adventure Photo Tours
Tour Length: 9 hours, hotel to hotel
Price: \$195 adults, \$165 children

is people making up stories, but I still think there's something to it."

Her husband adds: "We've seen things and believe there's someone else out there too. We wanted to try and find out for ourselves."

But the only unidentified object found on the tour is a rusted vehicle covered in bullet holes, sitting around the corner from the petroglyphs. Arbacauskas manages to identify it as a stripped, 1967 Chevy Nova Super Sport hot rod car that was abandoned several years ago and used for target shooting.

Arbacauskas, however, claims he spent a night camping here with friends eight years earlier and they saw something much more suspicious.

"We were looking at satellites and beautiful stars, and then one just stopped and went the other way," says Arbacauskas. "It's not unusual to see stuff moving around in the sky out here, but this particular one — whatever it was — stopped."

From here, the SUV heads onto the Extraterrestrial Highway and takes several turnoffs, headed toward Area 51's southeast gate.

Arbacauskas says he read that there is a triangular shaped aircraft being built at Area 51 called the Aurora, and that it will be able to leave the regular airstrip and go on space missions, eliminating the need for billions of dollars spent on space shuttle launches.

About an hour later the SUV stops. Signs reading "Warning U.S. Air Force Installation" are nonchalantly mounted on either side of the road. Arbacauskas points out a truck standing guard in the distance and barely visible sound, motion and thermal alarms, many of which are disguised as Joshua trees in the nearby hills.

Lines of exhaust condensation fill the open sky as fighter pilots engage in mock air battles in the distance.



Photos by Aleza Freeman

Little A'Le'Inn in Rachel, Nev., provides lodging, food and a gift shop to all walks of life.

"If you look up at the galaxies out there you'd have to be awfully shallow minded not to think there's someone else out there."

— Connie West,
Little A'Le'Inn owner

This is where the SUV turns around. Trespassing could mean jail time.

The group makes one more stop before lunch, heading down a remote road toward the Alien Mailbox, a large white box installed nearly 10 years ago by a local rancher who was tired of receiving mail addressed to aliens. The MacWilliams write up a note and deposit it in the mail slot.

"In Canada, we hear about UFO sightings," says Albert MacWilliams. "In the last 20 years there have been numerous sightings, and they were all covered by the mainstream media."

In the United States, on the other hand, "We are literally blocked," says Arbacauskas. "[The government] is afraid people will panic, or they'll believe it and go to all possible extremes to actually confront this head on."

As the group eats lunch, A'Le'inn owner Connie West says that Rachel

plays host to people of every shape, size and nationality. With seven rooms for lodging, the inn, restaurant and gift shop has no typical customer.

"I've got people from all walks of life coming out here. Some pretty normal, some out there," says West. "People bawl their eyes out — they've been waiting their whole life to be here. We are also a watering hole for the military, or anyone who comes down the highway."

She once had to kick out two men who showed up wearing nothing but silver and green spray paint.

"I live eight miles from the most publicized top secret military installation in the world," explains West. "Of course I see strange things."

Langley says he hangs out at the inn since there's not much else to do in town. He visited Rachel while on a pilgrimage to find alien hot spots, and stayed because of the clean water and air, lack of traffic and beautiful sky. He has been interested in aliens since he was a little kid and had recurring dreams of being abducted.

"When the disclosure happens and the mother ships start appearing, we'll be in the front line," he says.

West says it is none of her business what goes on at Area 51. The military needs a place to train and this area has substantial terrain. But she adds:

"If you look up at the galaxies out there you'd have to be awfully shallow minded not to think there's someone else out there."