

Mono's Volcanic Islands

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TWO OF California's most intriguing parcels of land are viewed by thousands of motorists daily, yet few have ever left their footprints there. Although located only five miles from U.S. 395 as, in this case, the sea gull flies, Mono Lake's twin volcanic islands remain remote and nearly inaccessible, truly islands in time, little disturbed by man.

Mono's diverse twins are a unique study in contrasts. The black island, Negit, is little more than a volcanic crater, a towering mass of scorched, jagged lava boulders. Paoha, the white island, is a stark scenic contradiction to Negit's angular silhouette. It has all the physical characteristics of the legendary, romantic desert isle - a long, low sinuous form cresting along a ridge of white cliffs and broad pumice sand beaches. But Paoha's tranquil landscape caps a not-so-placid interior. Bubbling hot springs and hissing steam vents audibly hint of the turmoil still seething deep underground.



Mono Lake's Negit Island, summer nesting site for a large colony of California gulls.

The origin of the islands is explained in a legend told by the Mono Indians. It tells of a once beautiful land ravaged by mountains of fire. For many moons the earth rumbled and trembled, but at last the smoke cleared to reveal a large plain dominated by a snow white mountain. Alongside it was one of the fiery mountains.

The Great Spirit then sent to the white mountain Paoha, the White Angel. From her mountaintop she commanded to all the mountains around that there would once again be peace throughout the land. But the small fiery mountain at her side roared in rebellion. Flames belched forth and out of its belly came a warrior cloaked in gleaming black. A fierce battle ensued between the White Angel and Negit, the Dark One. In the end, the Angel triumphed and she banished the vanquished warrior to the dark interior of his mountain.

However, the land was still ruined and ugly. Many suns passed, during which time the North Wind covered the land with ice and snow. Then the South and West Winds blew gently, creating great canyons and rushing streams. Finally, the Great Spirit replenished the land.

Still the beauty was marred by the jagged black mountain. So Paoha ordered the streams of the mighty mountains to empty their water about her to cover the unsightly Negit. But as the waters lapped higher and higher on the scorched mountain's sides, she relented a little and allowed to its peak to remain free in the sunlight, and she sent to it her white birds of hope and promise.

Although geologists have developed a complex, and more scientific explanation, based on extensive studies of the Mono Basin, their theory and the Indian legend do agree on certain basic facts. The lake first appeared during the glacial ages, and many of the prominent geological features of the basin, including the islands, were created by extensive volcanic activity.

Probably the islands' most famous visitor has been Mark Twain. One blistering summer day, while on a holiday from the mines at Esmeralda (Aurora), the celebrated author and his friend, Calvin Higbie, rowed out to Paoha. They explored its two and one-half mile length, crossing its ash hills several times.

But Mark Twain was not impressed. A few years later, when he recounted their Mono Lake adventures in "Roughing It," he complained of Paoha's silence and solitude. Through his jaded eyes, the island's landscape was "dead," "dismal" even "forbidding."

However, he did recall one bright, picturesque spot. It was the island's only tree—a small, graceful pine whose branches were kept perpetually moist by the mist from a nearby steam vent.



On the lee side of Paoha, Moo's white island.



Holly Shannon looks into an active steam vent, one of several on Paoha.

It gave me an eerie feeling when, several summers ago during our own explorations of the island, we happened upon that same pine, the only one on Paoha. Now no longer small, it is a sturdy 30 or 40 feet tall, but its branches were still wrapped in a veil of steam.

In 1881, Paoha served as a temporary refuge for a group of Chinese laborers, thus perhaps averting a bloody battle along Mono's eastern shore.

The Chinese had been employed to lay the tracks for the 32-mile railroad which was to connect Mono Mills, south of Mono Lake, to the mining camp of Bodie, located in the treeless mountains north of the lake. Work was begun at Mono Mills and proceeded northward.

When word reached members of the Miners' Union in Bodie that Chinese labor was being used, an angry delegation set out, on foot, to meet the railroad and protest the employment of Chinese. By this time the rails had been laid to the lake's eastern shore and the Chinese were camped nearby. But the superintendent received word of the impending trouble in time to load all the Chinese and their supplies on the company's steamer, which had previously been used to haul lumber across the lake, and transport them to the safety of Paoha Island.

They camped there until the union members, finding them gone, had time to cool down and returned to Bodie. The Chinese continued building the railroad until it was within several miles of Bodie. Then they were released and the job was finished by a crew of Bodie's union men.

During the early years of this century, the Mono Basin experienced a minor economic boom. There were indications of oil-black gold-and slumbering Paoha suddenly became a hub of excitement. Lumber was barged from the railroad siding at Warm Springs on the lake's eastern shore. A derrick was erected on the island's southern tip and in 1909 drilling began. However, the project was abandoned a year later. The well had reached a depth of 1500 feet but the only gusher was hot water.

Paoha's silence and solitude, that was so depressing to Mark Twain, has been an attraction to others. For awhile, the Wallace McPherson family lived on the island, homesteading 160 acres on the western side. They built a home with a magnificent view of the Sierra Nevadas, and raised vegetables and Toggenburg goats. Their house burned in the early 1930s, but the goat barn, with its double row of stalls, still stands.

But the strangest buildings are over the ridge on the eastern side of the island. Nestled against the hill, now almost hidden by the encroaching bitterbrush, are three dome-shaped, concrete cabins. They front on a broad, white sand beach, which curves around into a crescent shape creating a natural harbor, for this is the lee side of the island where the wind usually blows down off the snowy peaks of the Sierras.

This was to have been a sanatorium, the dream of a doctor from Southern California. The location seems ideal, remote and quiet. Nearby are several mineral springs where you can have your choice of hot or cold water. But we were told the project was abandoned before it really began. In the jungle of bitterbrush we found the rusted skeleton of a doctor's examining table. In one of the cabins was a doctor's leather bag, twisted and shrunk from its years of exposure to the dry desert air.



A gull chick blends into the landscape of one of Mono's tufa islets.

Some of the scenes for the Hollywood swashbuckler, "Fair Winds to Java," were up their headquarters at Yates Harbor on Negit Island. The script called for an erupting volcano, so a plaster model was built on one of the nearby, small tufa islands. Fueled by gallon-size jars of gasoline, it looked, throughout the Mono Basin, like the Dark One had finally escaped his millennia-long imprisonment.

It has been more than twenty years since the movie-makers have packed their cameras and returned to Hollywood, but the volcano and several other fragile props are still standing.

Until now man's impact on the islands has been temporary, a transitory fling and he was gone again. It has remained the domain of the White Angel's birds, the California gulls and other shore birds.

During the nesting season, which begins in June and extends through July, Negit and several nearby islets literally become one vast gull factory. The slightest depression, when linked with a few feathers and dried weeds, satisfies a gull's nursery requirements, so almost every available spot of bare ground is utilized. Two or three speckled eggs are laid in each nest. After hatching, the fluffy gull chicks become cave dwellers, among the many crevices and under ledges of lava boulders and tufa formations.

Throughout the summer, gulls, in various stages of development, monopolize the Mono landscape. But in September, the entire colony leaves its island homes and wings westward to the coast. Because of Negit's importance as a nesting site for the gulls, the island was recently designated a natural area by the Bureau of Land Management. But just how long Negit will remain a sanctuary where the gulls may nest undisturbed is seriously questioned.

During the past two decades, the lake's level has dropped drastically. The insatiable thirst of the City of Los Angeles has caused most of the shrinkage. Water from several mountain streams that once poured into the lake is now diverted to the Los Angeles aqueduct. A recent survey concluded that in perhaps as few as three or four years the receding waters will create a land bridge between Negit and the shore, thus opening this once wild island to all predators, man and animal.

Caspian terns, killdeer, grebes, and phalaropes are also attracted to Mono's marine environment. A small colony of avocets stakes its territorial claim to one of Paoha's secluded beaches, far from the raucous cries of the gulls, while rock wrens and swallows take advantage of ready-made homesites within the islands' abrupt cliffs of lava and tufa. However, if more water is not released into the lake, eventually all of Mono's birds will face a precarious future.

The outboard motor has replaced oars, but otherwise it is not much easier to get to the islands now than it was in Mark Twain's day. The receding lake has left the Mono Marina's launching ramp high and dry, so that facility is now dosed. There are no boat rentals at Mono Lake, but a small boat may be launched at just about any place where it can be carried to the water.

However, a word of caution. Winds can suddenly whip a mirror surface into a foaming froth. Throughout the years, Mono's alkaline waters have capsized several large boats, sending a number of victims to its depths.

In the summer and fall, the lake is most likely to be calm during the morning hours. There are two good harbors on the lee side of Paoha, one at the southern tip, the other toward the northern end of the island. If you are caught out in the middle when the wind begins, it's best to wait it out on Paoha. The wind usually stops just as suddenly as it began, and by late afternoon Mono is once again serene and calm, her twin islands aglow in the last golden rays of sunlight.