

BLAST FROM THE PAST

*VETERAN BAND
TOUR MANAGER
RICK MARINO
DRIVES US TO
BARSTOW FOR
A GHOST TOWN
ADVENTURE.*

WORDS BY **RICK MARINO**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **RHIANNON COOPER**

I needed to get behind the wheel. Work, work and more work had made me antsy to get on the road. A trip into some unknown desert was the remedy.

I kept it close and ventured out to the high desert crossroads town of Barstow. As a native Angeleno, I can't count the number of times I have passed through, fueled up or eaten in Barstow on the way to Vegas.

I spent my summers going to Lake Mead with the family, stopping at the McDonald's at Barstow Station. Here, you can eat your meal in one of three real train cars! It's a cool place to stop if you have kids with you.

Until now, I had never explored the long history of the area. Route 66, Interstates 15 and 40, and California State Route 58 all meet up here. Prior to that, the Mormon Trail, the old Spanish Trail and Mojave Road followed the Mojave River to Barstow, so it definitely has an epic past.

My first stop is about 20 miles east of Barstow in Boron. The town is very desolate, but I'm always intrigued by that, so I first head to the Borax mine. One of the world's largest open pit Borax mines, it is a huge complex and refinery, and there is an excellent visitor's center located on a hill above the mine.

As a kid, I knew about Borax from the commercials I saw with the 20-mule team for Borax laundry detergent. But Borax is used in all kinds of things, from glass and tools to cleaning supplies and eye drops. I had no idea what it takes to operate a place like this. The staff and docents are really knowledgeable, and there are displays about the different ores with information on the process. They have a gift shop, too!

The little town of Boron is located on the south side of Highway 58, and the hill above the town is covered in rocket launch pads on Edwards Air Force Base. In the '50s and '60s, NASA tested all kinds of rockets here, which I'm sure was a sight to see back then.

Though it's not a big town, there are some cool spots to check out. The Col. Vernon P. Saxon Jr. Aerospace Museum is chock full of the area's history and artifacts. It is open every day for a donation, I'm told. The docent had me watch a short VHS about Pancho Barnes, a smart businesswoman who lived in town and was quite a character. She was one of the first female pilots that raced Amelia Earhart!

Next to that is the 20-mule team museum and Boron train depot. Go find the real fighter jets outside!

My next stop takes me about 5 miles north of Barstow to Yermo. It's time for lunch, and for the first time in my life, I am going to Peggy Sue's 50's Diner. Exiting off Interstate 15 on Ghost Town Road, Peggy Sue signs have been pulling hungry folks off the freeway since 1987. It is what you think it is: classic diner fare with '50s flair. This place is huge! There are six dining rooms, all with different themes, and a waitress tells me that some Sundays fill them all. They make their own pies and comfort food, plus ice cream sundaes seem to be a thing. There is plenty of parking, and a nice outdoor area with dinosaurs.

Five minutes up the hill from Interstate 15, Calico Ghost Town brings back long lost memories for me. My folks stopped here on the way to Vegas back in the '70s. Founded in 1881 in one of the richest silver deposits in the state, Calico was quite the boomtown producing more than \$85 million in silver, \$45 million in Borax – with a population of 1,200. The Silver King, Oriental and Bismarck are some of the more famous mines in the district. In 1907, when silver lost half its value, Calico slowly became a ghost town. In 1951, the town was restored by Walter Knott – yes, of Knott's Berry Farm – and in 1966 he donated it to San Bernardino County.

Off the highway, follow the road to the big 'Calico' sign etched into the mountain. At the large miner and shovel sign, I pull into what is now a county regional park. Admission is \$8 for adults and \$5 for kids, and it is worth every penny. It's just like I remembered – a real Old West ghost town. Yeah, it's been restored and it's an attraction, but even that happened more than 50 years ago. The dry desert climate seems to keep the place intact.

Now, admission covers your entrance into Calico Ghost Town and there is plenty to do and see at that price. Several of the buildings are shops and eateries, and a few of them are museums, too. It's pretty fascinating to see what these boomtowns were like to live and work in. There is even a place to get your old timey photos taken – I'm told this is one of the most popular spots in town.

There are some attractions that cost from \$2 to \$5 per person, or you can pay \$8 for three attractions. The Maggie Mine is an original 1,000-foot hard rock mine shaft that is a self-guided tour. There is also the Odessa Railroad, which is an eight-minute ride around the hillside to see the mines and the town. I really enjoyed the views on this one.

Back on Main Street, you can pan for real gold! For a few bucks you can try your hand and find some to take home. Last but not least is the Mystery Shack, but I'll leave that for you to discover.

There are a few places to eat in town, and I recommend the Calico House Restaurant. Get the ol' fashioned fried chicken dinner, complete with homemade pie. They also serve breakfast and lunch.

There is the sweet shop that makes fudge in-house, and several other places to get burgers and dogs. Plus, the Saloon has cold beers on tap. I also discovered there are RV spots, tent camping and cabins for rent. A cabin for \$65?! I wanna go back! And there are several off-road trails all around the area – off-road tours are offered on Main Street



Calico was quite the boomtown in the 1800s. However, it slowly became a ghost town after silver lost half its value in 1907. Walter Knott restored it in 1951, and now it's a county regional park open to visitors.



Exploring Barstow led me to some classic imagery of railroad crossings and Route 66 nostalgia. The Harvey Houses are hotels located along rail lines and there is a very nice one in town called Casa Del Desierto. It is actually a Route 66 Museum and a Railroad Museum. Further up the road, I found a real working drive-in theater in the desert – maybe I'll come back at night! After all, it's just another road trip away.

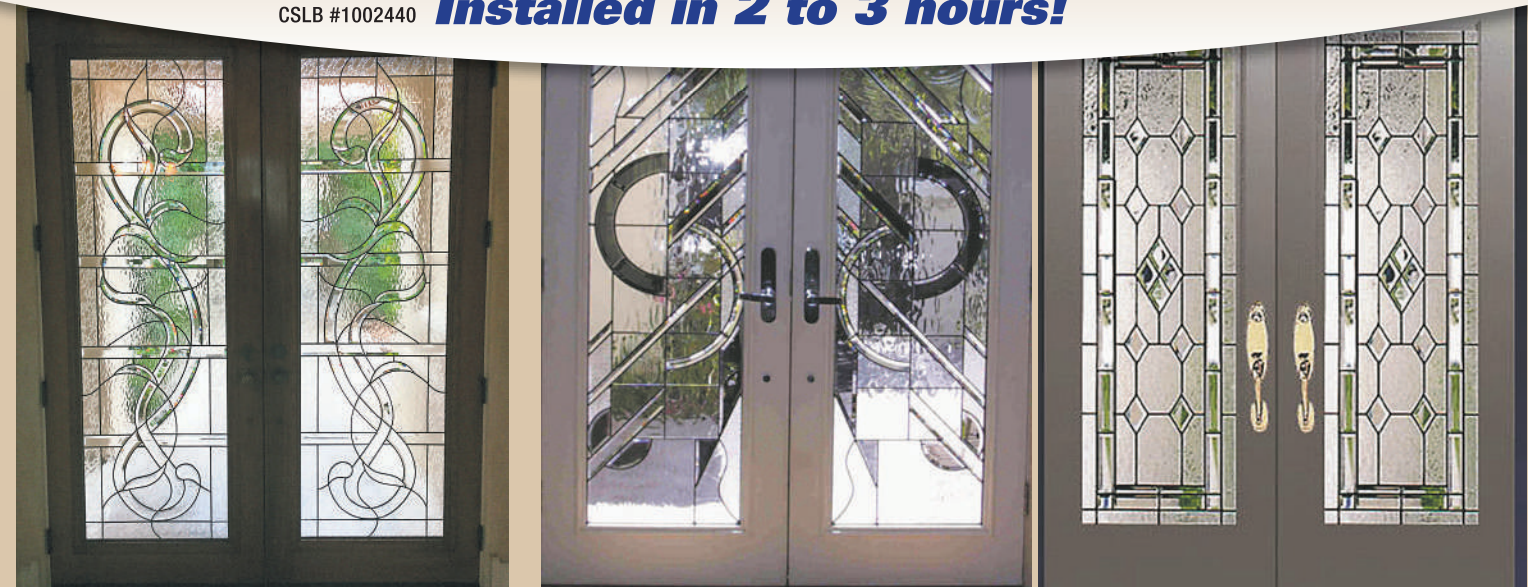
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