

# Desert Won

Nevada's Historic Railroad Hiking Trail

It's sunset at Lake Mead in southern Nevada, and Alan Gegax barely has time to look up, let alone enjoy the full moon rising overhead or the panoramic view of the massive reservoir several hundred feet below in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area. Gegax, 34, and his dog Scout, a nine-month-old German Shepherd mix, are too busy herding scores of hikers—about 130—past steep drops and through five 300-foot tunnels along the seven-mile Historic Railroad Hiking Trail.

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**By Benjamin Spillman**

Photography by Jared McMillen

Jason Sellman wanders off the trail for some rock hopping and stunning views of the marina in Lake Mead.

Visiting from Wyoming, Eron and Kristin McLaughlin and their dog Sophie head toward the second tunnel.



Gegax is stocky, wears glasses and has a shaved head that's dripping with sweat in the desert heat. He and Scout dart from the back of the group to the front and back again. A postal worker by trade, Gegax has a heavy bag on his shoulders in addition to the burden of keeping the chatty, unfocused group intact. Neither the bag nor responsibility for such a large group seems to weigh him down. In addition to setting the pace and herding the stragglers, Gegax and Scout mingle with group members, stopping on occasion to dig cold cans of Miller Genuine Draft from the backpack to give to thirsty hikers. They're all enjoying this former rail spur between Boulder City, Nev., and Hoover Dam for a moonlight hike and pot-luck event.

### Western Adventure

The Historic Railroad Hiking Trail is about 30 miles from downtown Las Vegas and slightly closer to the Strip. The trail is a great choice for visitors who want to get outdoors and enjoy fine Mojave Desert scenery without leaving the bright lights too far behind.

Most visitors pick up the rail-trail east of Boulder City in Lake Mead National Recreation Area at the Alan Bible Visitor Center, behind the 16-story Hacienda Hotel and Casino, and finish at Hoover Dam Visitor Center (you can hire helicopter tours of Hoover Dam from the Hacienda Hotel). Yet if you want the full trail experience, start a few miles west of the visitor center at a trailhead off Pacifica Way, where the pathway follows a paved, winding route.

On a bicycle, this ride to Alan Bible is a breeze, with plenty of opportunity to gaze at the giant reservoir shimmering in the distance. The trail passes through a small tunnel and emerges at a fork, with the visitor center, Lake Mead and the midpoint trailhead to the side, and more trail dead ahead. You can stop and refresh at the center, which has toilets, drinking water, a gift shop and information on the area.

Continuing east, the surface changes from pavement to gravel, but it remains a smooth ride or walk. The first 2.6 miles are wide and flat, with broad views of Lake Mead and



Rachel Elliott and Justine Ritsko hit the trail for a run after work; (above left) bighorn sheep cluster just off the pathway; (at left) Las Vegas locals out for a day trip.



Debbie Dillon of Sun City Anthem, Nev., and her friend Linda Burns of Los Angeles enjoy a quiet Sunday afternoon on the trail.



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the five, 300-foot-long, 25-foot-diameter tunnels. Hikers and cyclists frequent this most popular section of the trail, and the flat surface is wide enough to accommodate groups and folks out for exercise with their dogs. Come equipped with water and a hat: While the trail is open year-round, the sun is intense and the temperature is regularly well above 100 degrees in the summertime, peaking in July. The coldest month of the year is January, with average highs in the 50s and overnight lows in the high 30s.

As you cut into the Eldorado Mountains in the Black Canyon Wilderness Area, bighorn sheep are a common sight on the trail. On a recent morning, I spotted about 12 sheep on the mountainside south of the second tunnel. Some scampered over the top of the tunnel, while others ran along the center of the trail, kicking up dust in their wake. They reconvened on the other side of the trail and stood statue-still on the dark rock outcroppings overlooking the reservoir below.

Keep an eye out as well for cormorants, falcons, osprey and bald eagles in the air, not to mention squirrels, scorpions and lizards on the ground.

Rattlesnakes also have been spotted on the trail, so watch your step. If it happens to rain while you're out, you'll notice a pungent, smoldering scent from the creosote bushes growing on the hillsides.

After the fifth tunnel, the trail gets narrower and steeper as it slips down to the Hoover Dam Visitor Center. This steep portion is open only during daylight hours. The scenery here shifts from expansive lake views to power lines, storage sheds and electrical equipment related to the dam. Bicycles and dogs are prohibited at Hoover Dam, so people with their canine friends need to turn back when the trail reaches the parking structure. Bicyclists can leave their bikes at a bike rack next to the trail.



The rail corridor was originally built to service construction of Hoover Dam, which still generates electricity for about 25 million people.

At the visitor center, you can load up on ice cream, hot dogs, candy and just about anything else you might want to eat to replace all the calories you're sure to burn on the way back. The rigorous uphill return route to the Alan Bible Visitor Center covers an elevation change of about 400 to 500 feet, with another 400-foot gain on the final leg to the Pacifica Way trailhead.

### Building Feat

Don't be fooled by the leisurely ambiance around the trail these days: Eight decades ago, life here was anything but relaxed. Creation of the rail line to haul concrete supplies, penstock pipe and other material to the Hoover Dam construction site was a grueling undertaking.

Work on the rail line started in September 1930. It was part of a bigger project to lay track between Las Vegas and the dam site. Union Pacific built the corridor from Las Vegas to Boulder City; the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation created the spur from Boulder City to the crest of the dam site in Black Canyon; and contractors through Six Companies, a consortium of firms that served as lead



contractor on the dam project, formed a network of rail throughout the canyon to service the site.

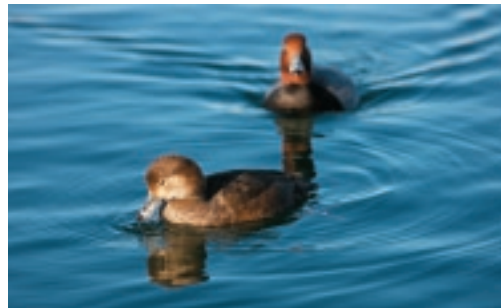
“People think the government built the whole thing, but they didn’t,” says Dennis McBride, curator of history and collections at the Nevada State Museum in Las Vegas. More impressive than how the dam project was organized, though, was how it was built. At peak times between 1930 and 1936, there were about 7,000 to 8,000 workers on the Hoover Dam site. That’s about as many as are erecting CityCenter, an \$8.4 billion resort that opens this fall on the Strip and is billed as the largest-ever privately funded construction project in the country.

Hoover Dam workers scaled steep canyon walls on ropes, planting charges to blast everything from tunnels to surfaces that connected the dam to the Black Canyon walls. Much of the work was done by brute force, including construction of the rail line—now the trail—to haul materials to the site. “Initially, they would have to lay a rail by hand,” says McBride. “Then they would have a railroad car loaded with rails and ties and stuff like that, then they would just move ahead—guys out there with rakes, essentially, doing a lot of the work.”

At the time, one small road connected the site to Las Vegas. The 30-mile distance was too far to commute, so the men stayed in camps and worked seven days a week, sometimes getting a day off for the occasional holiday. When they weren’t working, they would head to Las Vegas or hang around Boulder City, which was built and owned by the government to keep the workers close and out of trouble.

Six Companies ran a recreation hall, a pool, a barber shop, a tobacco stand and a lunch counter in Boulder City. Las Vegas entertainment options were more diverse. Saloons and brothels lined what is still called the Boulder Highway, the road that heads from the casino district in downtown Las Vegas to Boulder City. “They’d hang out at the brothels and the bars,” says McBride, adding that the taverns of the day were nothing like the posh lounges popular in Las Vegas now. Back then, “[Bars were] really rough places.”

**(Clockwise from top left) Jim Holland of the National Park Service surveys Lake Mead; a paddlewheel boat tours the lake; the Morris family of Las Vegas out for an afternoon hike; Lake Mead provides a wildlife oasis in the Mojave Desert; flowers come to life after rains.**



**The marina at Lake Mead is minutes from the trail and offers boating services, rentals and supplies year-round.**



## TRAVEL FACTS

**TRAIL INFORMATION:** The portion of the Historic Railroad Hiking Trail from Lake Mead National Recreation Area through tunnel five is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The segment from tunnel five to Hoover Dam is open only during daylight hours.

For details on the history of the trail and links to maps and information on the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, visit [www.nps.gov/lame/planyourvisit/hikerr.htm](http://www.nps.gov/lame/planyourvisit/hikerr.htm). To access a free geographic information system map of the trail, as well as user reviews, more photos and other features, visit Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's [TrailLink.com](http://TrailLink.com).

**GETTING THERE:** One of the great things about the Historic Railroad Hiking Trail is how easy and cheap it is to get there. Thanks to the location near Las Vegas, you can land within 30 miles of Lake Mead via one of hundreds of daily, direct flights to McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas. That's how nearly half of the more than 35 million people who visit Las Vegas annually make the trip. Most of the others take Interstate 15 north from the Los Angeles area.

Once in Las Vegas, visitors can reach Boulder City and the Lake Mead area by taking Highway 95/93 south through Henderson, then following signs to Lake Mead. There are free parking areas at two trailheads off Highway 93 at Pacifica Way and at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area.

From Arizona, take Highway 93 north to Hoover Dam and park at the visitor center; parking costs \$7. You can get on the trail from the parking garage and walk it all the way to the recreation area, taking the five tunnels in reverse order from number five to number one. The advantage of starting at the dam is that the return trip is downhill.

**BIKE RENTALS:** All Mountain Cyclery in Boulder City (<http://allmountaincyclery.com>; 702.453.2453) offers guided bike and kayak tours. It also rents bikes and kayaks for self-guided touring.

## Reincarnation

The wild times didn't last. When the rail spur was completed in 1931, and the dam finished in 1936, the community of workers dispersed. The rail line remained intact until 1961, used occasionally to haul massive concrete and metal parts to and from Hoover Dam. (The dam still uses water from the Colorado River to generate electricity for about 25 million people in Arizona, California and Nevada.) But in 1962 the tracks were finally dismantled.

On the south side of the trail, just before the first tunnel, you can still see remnants of a concrete floor that was hauled out in the 1960s and dumped in the desert. The former rail line continued to attract visitors, sometimes to its detriment. In 1978 an arson fire burned tunnel five. The tunnel was sealed off until 2001, when it was restored and reopened. A separate arson fire in 1990 burned tunnel two, which was repaired with shotcrete, a type of mortar applied with pressure hoses.

In 1984 the former rail spur became eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and the corridor officially opened to the public in the 1990s. Since then, the pathway has quickly entrenched itself as one of the most iconic rail-trails. Alan Gegax regularly hosts hiking parties—like his August moonlight trek—all around the Las Vegas area. But this rail-trail is his favorite venue. From the wide, friendly flats to tunnels and the steep descent to the immense Hoover Dam, the route provides a one-of-a-kind experience and history lesson. It's a reminder of how the nation conquered the West and struggled to emerge from the Great Depression with large-scale public-works projects. "You think back to your own family, like mine, which was dirt poor during the Depression," says John Zenor, 60, a Las Vegas resident who was out for a morning walk on the trail. "It makes you realize how lucky you are."

Journalist Benjamin Spillman writes in California, Nevada and Wisconsin and maintains an outdoors Web site at [www.NevadaOutdoorNews.com](http://www.NevadaOutdoorNews.com). He covers water issues, national parks and air pollution in southern California and Nevada.