

bringing DEATH VALLEY to life

Michael McCormack
The Clackamas Print

Spring break this year for most college students was a week of non-stop partying and fun in the sun, but for 20 Clackamas students, the break was literally the beginning of spring term.

On March 17, science students and instructors were able to venture off to Death Valley, California in a three-credit course offered by Clackamas. Even though the field trip took away a "true" spring break, it opened students' eyes to one of the most fascinating natural phenomena in North America.

"This trip allowed students to learn about something that they may never see again ... it was an invaluable experience," said Science Instructor Jen Bown.

Bown, who has made this trip 15 times now, along with Geology Instructor Sarah Hoover, supervised Clackamas students on a 10-day journey to the desert, but supervising wasn't their main prerogative. These two science gurus taught Clackamas students the evolutionary trends that formed what we know today as Death Valley.

"We wanted students to observe firsthand the world around them; to take in what they were surrounded by and to work as a team," Bown said. "Those were the main focus points of the trip."

2004-2005 has been a wet year by Death Valley standards, with nearly seven inches of rainfall since July of last year. Because of the uncharacteristically wet year students were able to observe what some called the "bloom of the century." In the 15 years that Bown has made the trip she has never seen so many flowers, as well as expressing that no two years had ever been the same.

On the valley floor, flowers such as the Desert Gold and Phacelia illuminated the national park and made a scene for tourists from all over to observe Death Valley in a way that some may never see.

"It was an experience like no other," student Anthony Brown said. "I plan on coming here again for a vacation with my friends ... the trip was simply amazing."

In addition to the bloom of the century, students were able to hike and learn about the numerous canyons

which have eroded over millions of years, not to mention the warm springs that host the nearly extinct Desert Pup fish.

On the canyon hikes the class was able to stand atop mountain peaks and overlook the desert in its natural state and really observe beauty in the purest of forms.

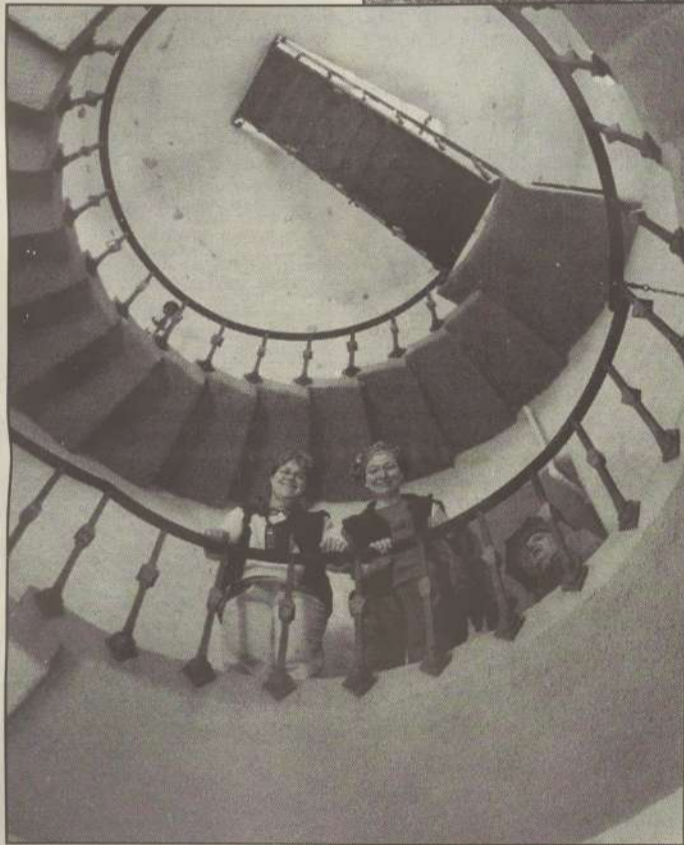
"The hikes were unbelievable; just being able to discover things that I may never see again made the trip worth it," student Jaime Wilson said.

Death Valley is a land of extremes, making a home for the lowest point in the United States at Badwater, which sits at 282 feet below sea level. In addition to Badwater, high mountain tops such as Telescope Peak, which stands at over 11,000 feet high, give tourists a chance to see the desert in a Northwest-type atmosphere. It's amazing that in a matter of two miles a per-



All photos contributed by Max

ABOVE: Geology Instructor Sarah Hoover (far right) explains a type of river rock called strained ellipsoids to the students at a site along Wild Rose Canyon. LEFT: Biology Instructor Jennifer Bown (left) and student Amanda Brookshire enjoyed exploring Scotty's Castle in Death Valley.



son can be sitting in 90-degree weather and then climb atop a peak and be standing in the snow. No where else can an experience like that be taken in.

One of the sites that interested students greatly was the salt rock floor of the Devil's Golf

Course. This particular natural formation isn't really a golf course, but if it were, Satan would be the only to score below par. Devil's Golf Course sits on the valley floor and was formed by the evaporation of salt-laden groundwater that draws out to

make large rock formations from the ground. It's a sight that words don't do justice to.

Aside from all the natural history that was taught on the trip and the gorgeous views from mountain tops, students were able to walk out of this class with friendships that might have never been made. The enthusiasm of Bown and Hoover to take the initiative allowed students to observe life outside of Oregon City.

On the voyage, the class camped out in Furnace Creek, which lies on the valley floor. After each day of learning was done students and faculty would retreat back to the camp site and spend the night under the desert sky hunting scorpions and listening to the coyotes howl.

On the final night of the trip a monsoon hit Death Valley hard and fast. The soil in Death Valley is made of clay and with the combination of rain and that clay, mud began to run through many of the

camper's tents making a night's sleep for some very ally impossible.

"That rain sucked. I had to get out of my tent and sleep in the van; I'm just happy it was on our last night in the desert," Brown said.

Despite the final night, the class experienced so much in just a matter of a week. Without the tutelage of Bown and Hoover the trip would have just been another camp out. Both instructors kept students actively involved in the learning process of how Death Valley formed and made a memory that will last in students' minds forever.

Unfortunately, budget cuts have taken away other school chances to take a trip like this, but Clackamas Community College needs to know that a trip like this allows students to learn in an active state of mind that makes learning in Death Valley was a trip that will always remember, and just because it was fun, because I learned things I never thought I could comprehend.



Devil's Golf Course, found at the bottom of Death Valley, is a natural phenomenon created by the evaporation of salt-laden groundwater which carves out land formations. This was one of the many sites the group went to see during the spring break trip.