

# Exploring the Calico Mountains

It's the middle of winter and the best time to go out exploring the desert. One treasure trove that has many fascinating places to see is the Calico Mountains. This region is best known for the Calico Ghost Town but not many people know what lies behind the ghost town. These mountains are home to a rich history of classic "old west", California mining. And, best of all, it's just 10 miles northeast of Barstow which makes it so close to home. .

Our trip this month takes you on an introductory tour through the Calicos. As always, be sure to watch our on-line virtual tour on YouTube to get a real feel of the place.

Not only are the Calicos full of history and geologic fascination, they live up to their name by being very colorful. Exploring the Calico Mountains can easily take a full day, but after you see them on this introductory trip and discover all of the inviting dirt roads, you may find yourself going back many times (like we do) to check out all of its hidden corners.

This trip requires that you have a 4WD vehicle. You need to also have experience in driving on rough terrain because there are challenging spots along the way. Your vehicle could sustain serious damage if you are not familiar with its limits. If you don't have such a vehicle, you can still drive a portion of the trip and get a glimpse of what's inside the colorful Calico Mountains.

Read on and we'll tell you where only 4WDs should dare to tread.

As mentioned, the Calicos are also full of historical mines. There are hundreds of open mine shafts scattered throughout the Calicos so be very careful. Some mines are vertical shafts (deep holes in the ground) that anyone could easily step up to, lose their footing, and fall

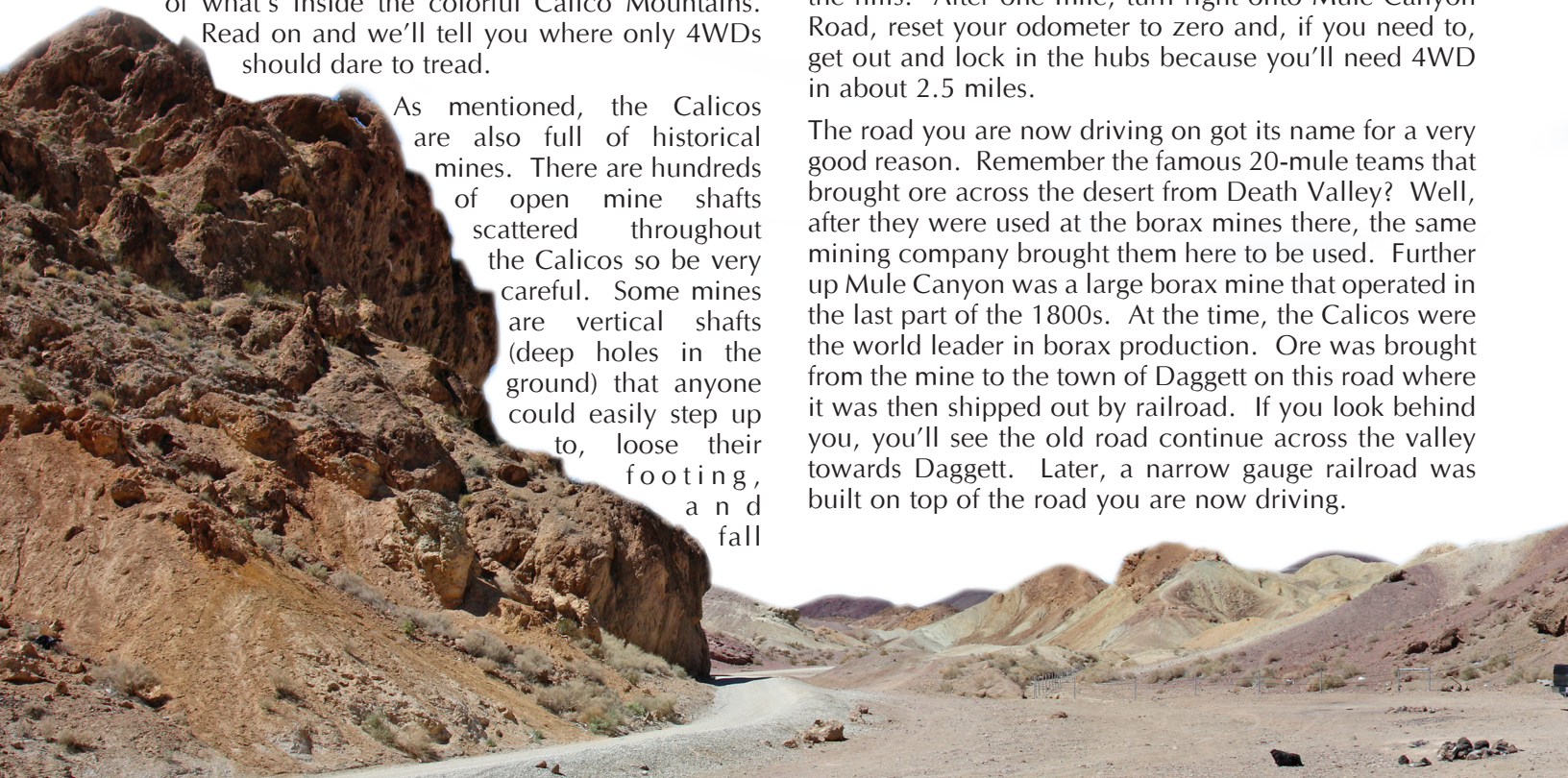
into. There are even a few vertical shafts right next to the road so, even as you step out of your vehicle, pay attention and look before you step! You are a long way



from help and some of the shafts are deep enough that you may not survive.

Our trip starts by driving up Mule Canyon. Exit I-15 on Calico Road (which is one exit beyond Ghost Town Road as you head northbound) and head north towards the hills. After one mile, turn right onto Mule Canyon Road, reset your odometer to zero and, if you need to, get out and lock in the hubs because you'll need 4WD in about 2.5 miles.

The road you are now driving on got its name for a very good reason. Remember the famous 20-mule teams that brought ore across the desert from Death Valley? Well, after they were used at the borax mines there, the same mining company brought them here to be used. Further up Mule Canyon was a large borax mine that operated in the last part of the 1800s. At the time, the Calicos were the world leader in borax production. Ore was brought from the mine to the town of Daggett on this road where it was then shipped out by railroad. If you look behind you, you'll see the old road continue across the valley towards Daggett. Later, a narrow gauge railroad was built on top of the road you are now driving.





Soon, you will be in Mule Canyon. You'll notice the colorful hills of different hues indicating that there are many different types of minerals in the dirt. In 1.4 miles, you'll reach several rocky outcroppings known as Camp Rock. This area is popular with people who enjoy exploring by motorcycle or quad-runner.

At 1.9 miles from the pavement, we're going to leave Mule Canyon and turn left. Mule Canyon Road continues several miles to the east and can easily be explored on 2WD. At 2.1 miles, you'll pass through some contorted landscape. This is evidence that the Calico Mountains are heavily faulted and earthquakes are common. Park off the road here to get out and see all the crazy formations on both sides of the road.

Continuing a short distance, our next stop is at 2.3 miles. Here is a parking area on the left where you can hike about half a mile to see Kramer Arch. This natural arch, located half a mile due west of the parking area, is a prelude to the wild and crazy landscape you'll see further along on this trip.

Our first rough section of road is at 2.5 miles. This is where the 4WD challenge begins. Here is also where we'll start seeing a lot of mine shafts. The road is very steep here and the difficulty is compounded with big chunks of old pavement. In the 1950s, this road used to be paved and was a one-way scenic loop that regular automobiles could travel on but it was washed out during a downpour.

As you follow the main road that heads west, you'll pass by a few more mines and some distorted landscape



and, at 3.1 miles, you'll come up to the top of a ridge of a deep canyon. Here, the road turns north, but before continuing, use the large turnout near the turn to enjoy the view into the deep canyon below. This is Odessa Canyon. Opposite the turnout (across the canyon) are the remains of the huge Odessa Silver Mine. This mine operated between 1882 and 1896 and was one of the biggest producers in the Calicos. All you will see today are many holes, or mining adits, where ore was taken out of the hills. Watch our virtual tour to see what the remains of the mine looked like in 1950.

Continuing on our trip, head north alongside Odessa Canyon. In 3.7 miles, the road will descend into the canyon and, at 4 miles, make a left turn out of the canyon onto a well-defined dirt road. Continue following this road as it turns left and right and slowly gains elevation. In about 4.7 miles, you'll reach a summit and see a vista of the Calico Mountains to the west. You'll also see the bizarre workings of the Bismarck mines. From the summit, bear left on the road and then turn right to reach Bismarck.

Bismarck is the site of numerous mining operations. Although most of the mines in the Calicos were for silver, many different

minerals were extracted, including gold. The last operation at the Bismarck exposed all of the older underground workings and left them looking like gigantic open caverns. Geologists refer to this style of mining as "gopher works". We've explored a lot of old mine sites across the Southwest but we've never seen a mining operation quite like this one.

Park your vehicle along the road that goes





to the left of the first diggings you see. This is also a nice high spot to survey the surrounding area and the valley below. Although it is very dangerous to walk through old mines, we've seen many people explore the workings of the Bismarck.

We're ending this introductory trip into the Calico Mountains here but there is so much more to see here that you just can't squeeze it all into one day. There are so many roads leading off in different directions and they're all screaming to be explored! You'll be like us – going back over and over.

To end this journey, we advise first time visitors to simply retrace your trip back to Mule Canyon and I-15 using the same route you came in on. However, from Bismarck, there are a series of roads that lead northwest to Fort Irwin Road.

To learn more details about visiting the Calicos, see what it looks like and,

most importantly, get detailed trip directions with a map, watch our virtual video tour on YouTube or read our webpage at:

<http://www.backroadswest.com/trips/?p=1693> or "surf" all our trips at BackRoadsWest.com. You can also search for "Calico Mountains road trip" by BackRoadsWest1 on any YouTube-enabled device.

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