



Looking east across Lee Flat and into Death Valley National Park. PHOTO: Kyle Hamada



Enjoy the expansive views of Conglomerate Mesa. PHOTO: Ken Etzel



The old mining road is growing more faint but continues to be a scar on the landscape. PHOTO: Ken Etzel

GET OUT

Navigating the Old Mining Road at Conglomerate Mesa

DIFFICULTY: MODERATE

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In February, 2020, longtime desert advocate, Tom Budlong, and I ventured out to Conglomerate Mesa for a routine monitoring trip. While I have been to Conglomerate Mesa countless times, only once before have I explored the since restored mining road from the 1980's. On our way, we bumped along a rocky but manageable road in Tom's vintage Land Cruiser with over 500,000 miles on it. Tom knows how to take care of his vehicle. This trip is just as much a backroad driving adventure as it is a hike. If you enjoy old desert roads, putting your high-clearance, 4WD vehicle to the test, and capping off the trip with a hike, this is the excursion for you.

Getting There

Strap in for a 2.5 hour drive from Lone Pine. Navigation to this location requires a bit of skill and a mid-to-high clearance vehicle, such as a pick-up truck with beefy tires. Head eastbound on Highway 136 just south of Lone Pine. This will turn into Highway 190 once you pass the community of Keeler. Follow the road for roughly 35 minutes until you reach Saline Valley Road, directly across from Centennial Road, located at 36.331000, -117.715035.

Drive along this road for about 10 miles at which point you will arrive at a bit of a hidden left turn which is located at 36.48650, -117.70788. Do not continue north at this point. You will hit a terribly rocky, tire-eating road. Once you make this left turn, you are now off of Saline Valley Rd, venturing westward along the early stages of the old drill road. There are minor splits in the road but stay on the straight obvious path. Follow this road until it ends with a small dirt roundabout and park here. While the road technically continues on, it is blocked

off and is inaccessible by vehicle. You must now venture on foot. If you struggle to locate where to park, log these coordinates into a mapping application or your GPS device, and you will be taken there: 36.49544, -117.74893. From this parking area, you will see the trail/restored mining road.

Being There

Soak it in. This is a view of Conglomerate Mesa that not many people get. Explore new vantage points as you wind back in time and imagine the Paiute and Shoshone people harvesting pine nuts, or miners and mules lugging charcoal up the hill to Cerro Gordo. Tom and I set up the path looking for evidence of mining-related ground disturbance like rock sampling and hand trenches. Tom is swift for a man his age and I grew to appreciate his rustic yet practical style when wielding wooden canes as hiking sticks rather than fancy carbon fiber trekking poles. This trail is an out-and-back route that can be as long as you desire. The road varies from moderate hill climbing to flat hiking and winds along the Mesa for about 2.5 miles. Don't hesitate to hop off the road/trail to get views. If you are there in early summer, keep an eye out for blooming desert plants such as the rare California Monkey Flower or the Inyo Rock Daisy, or give a Joshua Tree a gentle hug.

What to Bring/Wear

Sturdy boots, hiking pants, camera, mid-to-high clearance vehicle, one liter of water per anticipated hour spent hiking and one gallon of water per person per day, plenty of food and snacks, sun protection, at least one spare tire, an emergency satellite device.