

# TAKING THE LONG WAY HOME FROM LAS VEGAS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LARRY EDSALL

It used to be that the highlight of the drive back from Las Vegas was that part of the trip that involved the descent to, the slow but nonetheless pleasing drive over, and the climb up into Arizona from Hoover Dam. And if you were returning after dark, there was an amazing eeriness to the experience because of the way the lights provided the Black Canyon of the Colorado River with an otherworldly glow.

Of course, now that they've built the elevated and time-saving bypass over and around the dam, we no longer are allowed to drive home across this man-made marvel. (You can drive across the dam from Nevada, but the road on the Arizona side is closed and you have to backtrack back to the Boulder City side and take the new high bridge to Arizona.)

However, that doesn't mean there still isn't a way to break up the monotony of the opening leg of your journey as you make your way home.

Let's face it, except for that dip down to the dam, neither route back from Vegas—

KEEP RIGHT >>





## NISSAN XTERRA PRO-4X

Our vehicle for the trip on Christmas Tree Pass Trail—as well as other off-pavement trails near and in Death Valley National Park and on pavement to Las Vegas—was the 2011 Nissan Xterra PRO-4X.

The Xterra is Nissan's popular sport utility vehicle, which has become even more capable on non-paved routes with the addition of the PRO-4X model.

"Rock crawlers, just strap in and go: roof-rack-mounted off-road lights, Bilstein off-road performance shocks, skid plates, 16" machine-finished aluminum-alloy wheels with P265/75R16 BFGoodrich Rugged Trail T/A OWL tires, electronic locking rear differential, hill descent control and Hill start assist, clutch start/cancel, Rockford Fosgate audio system, Bluetooth Hands-free Phone System and white-face gauges," it says on Nissan's consumer website, [www.nissanusa.com](http://www.nissanusa.com).

And all for a base price of \$29,670, or some \$5,410 more than the basic rear-drive Xterra model.

But if you plan to do any serious off-roading, the cost is worth it, because those shocks, skid plates, BFGs, locking dif, and hill helpers can make sure you not only reach your intended destination, but also get back home safe and sound.

And the upgraded 300-watt audio, which includes satellite radio, can make the drive more enjoyable whether you're on paved highways or rocky trails.

Also increasing your pleasure is the Xterra's 261-horsepower 4.0-liter V6 engine which provides a stout 281 pound-feet of torque. Though available with a six-speed manual transmission, our Xterra Pro-4x had a five-speed automatic gearbox. The powertrain was rated at 15 miles per gallon in town and at 20 on the highway, but we averaged nearly 23 mpg overall on our trip, which included three off-pavement crawls and some Arizona and Nevada rural highway driving at speeds of 65 (and perhaps slightly higher).

The Xterra's interior provides comfort—and plenty of room for gear. Our only truly negative comment would involve the high-beam headlamps. While the low beams and fog lamps provided great illumination, we found the high beams lacking

when it came to driving after dark on paved desert highways.

For the most part, we were able to leave the transfer case in its 2WD High setting, though we had occasion to use both 4WD High and 4WD Low, the later needed to get us moving after we got perhaps a little too close to the Big Dune off US 93 between Amargosa Valley and Beatty, Nevada.

(Speaking of Amargosa Valley, the Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge is a seemingly unknown to tourists gem located just east of Death Valley National Park, which closely supervises Ash Meadows' Devils Hole and its unique and world's only population of Devils Hole pupfish.)

We didn't need four-wheel drive as we explored the Titus Canyon Trail, a 25.4-mile trek that starts west of Beatty, climbs over Red Pass, past Leadfield—a now-deserted former mining boomtown—and on into Death Valley between the high rock walls of Titus Canyon.

Nor did we need power to all four wheels later that day as we drove 27 severely washboarded miles each way to visit the Racetrack, a Death Valley attraction where softball and larger sized rocks leave trails as they make their way across the surface of a dry lake bed—though not even scientists who have studied them can tell you for sure what moves those rocks.

We did, however, use 4WD and hill descent control the following day on the Bonnie Claire Trail, which climbs more than three thousand feet in elevation, up past Hard Luck Mine to more than 7600 feet on Hanging Mesa.

With its 106-inch wheelbase, the Xterra is wonderfully nimble at maneuvering around even tight mountain-trail hairpins turns and through the slot-like openings of Titus Canyon, and those BFG Rugged Trail tires were up to every challenge.

—Larry Edsall

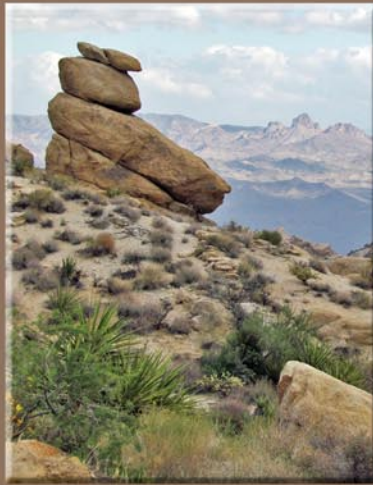


US 93, which runs nearly arrow-straight on its diagonal through the Detrital Valley to Kingman, nor US 95, with barely a kink in its way as it searches its way to Searchlight—offers much of interest as you gaze through the windshield.

But—Happy Holidays!—there is a wonderful if somewhat rugged road on the way home that offers both natural and man-made wonders to behold. It's called the Christmas Tree Pass Trail. It starts a dozen or so miles south of Searchlight and returns you back on pavement just above Laughlin on Nevada 163 (which links to Arizona 68 and brings you into the northwest side of Kingman).

We'd seen the sign indicating the trail on previous trips to and from Vegas, and after being sent a copy of the new book *Nevada Trails/ Southern Region: Backroads & 4-Wheel Drive Trails* (\$24.95 from Adler Publishing, Parker, Colorado), we made a point of taking the trail on our way back from an automotive trade show at the Las Vegas Convention Center.

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We were driving a sport utility vehicle—a 2011 Nissan Xterra PRO-4X—though as the new off-pavement guide book notes: “The trail is a wide, graded two-lane dirt road,” which, it adds, “can be corrugated and slightly eroded in places.”

Nonetheless, it rates the route a mere “1” on a 10-point scale for degree of driving difficulty, and thus Christmas Tree Pass Trail can be driven in your typical family sedan. However, we’d recommend something more along the lines of a sport or crossover utility vehicle, a pickup truck or at least a rental car, because there are places where the road is washboarded and others where there are rocks sticking up a couple of inches through the road surface. As with any desert road, we recommend more caution in or after rainy weather.

But in decent weather and road conditions, if you’re comfortable driving the Apache Trail out to Roosevelt Dam east of Phoenix, you should have no worries about the route to Christmas Tree Pass.

And while the Christmas Tree Pass Trail is rated only a 1 in difficulty, the guide book gives it an 8 in scenic splendor.

You can drive the trail in either direction. We took it on the way back, which meant a left turn off US 95. The first mile or so traverses the Piute-Eldorado Area of Critical Environmental Concern, with signs warning you to please stay on the road and to leave plant and animal life alone. The road is wide and covered in sand and gravel as it crosses the flatland before tightening and twisting up into the Newberry Mountains.

The tallest of the Newberrys is Spirit Mountain (5639 feet), which the guide book notes is believed by the Yuman tribes of the Colorado River to be the spiritual

birthplace of their ancestors and is included on the National Register of Historic Places as a Traditional Cultural Property.

The Newberrys are an amazing outcrop of naked rock and boulder formations, of peaks and spires and wind- and water-carved sculptures. Near the top of the pass there’s a stack of four huge boulders that looks as though Mother Nature placed a cairn so she wouldn’t lose her way.

The guide book doesn’t specify how Christmas Tree Pass got its name, except to note that for some period of time, travelers have decorated trees near the pass with shoes, beer cans and other objects as though they were Christmas tree ornaments. We saw a tree with tinsel hanging from some low branches, and a small Christmas stocking duct-taped to a Rough Road Next 16 Miles sign.

After traveling east up to and over the pass, the road turns south toward Laughlin. Just two miles from its finish, there’s a sign indicating the Grapevine Canyon trailhead parking area. There’s a deep wash just north of the parking area. Walk about a quarter-mile hike west along the wash and you come to a cut in the mountain. On the rocks on either side of the cut are hundreds of petroglyphs.

The guide book says they were made as long ago as 800 years, by AhaMakav and Southern Piute people who used the canyon as hunting grounds.

The Christmas Tree Pass Trail runs for only 16.3 miles, and the guide book says it should take only about 45 minutes to travel that way. We’d suggest you carve out a couple of hours because, like us, you’ll likely want to stop frequently to take pictures or simply to inhale the amazing vistas. ■

