

Nevada ghost town sampler

Invigorating expanses of the southern Nevada desert are home to a number of Wild West towns that survive as great road trip destinations, set among rally-worthy two-lane highways. **STORY AND PHOTOS BY TYSON HUGIE**

It takes a workhorse to travel back to an 1800s mining town, and Acura has just the right vehicle for the job. This marks the fourth time I've put a third-generation MDX through its paces. After completing over 1,000 miles in the latest iteration of its three-row SUV, I can say with certainty that the latest MDX is a capable, fun-to-drive machine that offers up first class comfort for a trip of that distance. Do I have to give it back?

In April, Las Vegas, Nevada will once again play home to a regional Acura NSX club meetup called WestFest. Last year, the event brought out over 50 cars and 80 people. As part of the planning committee, my role is to establish and plan out the logistics of a scenic group drive to be held on Saturday, April 28. It's not easy to come up with drives for a caravan of that size.

Considerations include finding somewhere we have not yet been; likely traffic and weather patterns on the day and time of our trip; road conditions appropriate for a group of supercars; whether there are any tolls or park fees; whether the group can run all together or whether it makes

more sense to split the group; and places for fuel and snack stops along the way.

As one can imagine, it takes a great deal of effort to coordinate such an activity. I partnered up with my friends Dane and Brandon, both Las Vegas locals, to take the MDX out on a Saturday morning and scout the terrain. It was the perfect vehicle for our expedition to the desert: second-row accommodations are posh, with captains' chairs and plenty of space all around. There are of course independent climate controls for passengers in all areas. Meanwhile, I pampered myself up front with a heated seat, heated steering wheel and convenient cup holder for my iced caramel macchiato.

You'd think we were going to the local shopping mall and not to the middle of nowhere.

Our drive route for the day was about 160 miles and took us four hours from start to finish, including our sightseeing and lunch stops.

Nelson, Nevada is one of many ghost towns in the vast expanses of land around the southwest. It's nestled in El Dorado Canyon, about 12 miles off Highway 95 to the east. If you blink, you might

miss the turnoff, so it's a good thing Dane was coaching me from the passenger seat on where to make my exit at Highway 165. We passed only one other vehicle on the way into Nelson from there.

The two-laner got a little more narrow, a little more rough and more curvy as we dipped down in elevation toward the Colorado River. Soon the buildings of the old mining town came into view, along with dozens of old cars left out to the elements with windows down (or broken out) and interiors rotting away. I parked the MDX in a dirt lot, and we got out to wander around a little, noting how silent it was outside aside from the scuffling sound of our shoes on the gravel.

We must have been the first tourists in town that day, as a resident desert rat came out of what appeared to be the main general store and put away the "closed" sign while inviting us inside. The wooden building doubles as his home, but he sells all sorts of remnants of the Wild West in there. My favorite display was an exhibit of some of the various films the town of Nelson has appeared in, including the Kurt Russell classic *Breakdown*.

Luckily for us (and unlike Kurt Russell's red Jeep Grand Cherokee in that movie), the MDX didn't give us any check-engine lights or troubles of any nature. We snapped a few photos in Nelson before continuing eastward another few miles to where we could drive nearly to the banks of the

mighty Colorado River on a dirt road. There was a nice paved turnaround spot that will be a perfect photo-op for the group of NSXs at the April event.

Our next destination on the drive loop was Searchlight, Nevada, a teeny spot on the map that (like most small towns in that area) got its start as a mining community in the late 1800s but mostly dried up by the mid-1950s. The name came from one of its original prospectors who said, "It would take a searchlight to find gold out here."

We rolled onward toward Highway 164 westbound and then over to Interstate 15 northbound. I hit the gas on the onramp. For a full-size SUV that's loaded down with technology and comfort niceties, the MDX still scoots down the road with more than ample power. I observed an overall combined MPG of about 26 despite going heavy on the throttle a few times. Range on a full tank is in the high 400s.

The Country Club Buffet at Primm Valley Casino, right along the California-Nevada state line, satisfied our hunger before we made our last stop of the day. Stacked along the east side of I-15 are seven columns of vividly painted boulders, referred to as "Seven Magic Mountains." The massive rocks were cut from a nearby quarry and painted fluorescent colors by Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone. The art installation was opened in 2016 and will be removed sometime this year, so I was glad to get a chance to see it.

The MDX stickers at \$58,000 as tested, including Tech and Advance packages with a full suite of

Nelson, Nevada (below left) was pretty much closed when we arrived, but opened for business as soon as we pulled in. Our Acura MDX Sport Hybrid took us to Nevada in 21st century style, where we found 20th century motoring relics kept fresh in the high and dry desert air. The Seven Magic Mountains art installation along I-15 is a sight to see, if you hurry.

AcuraWatch driver-assistance aids. The Lane Keeping Assist System (LKAS) is helpful but I could do without ACC (Adaptive Cruise Control). I much prefer to set a cruise speed and have it be maintained—with ACC engaged, the vehicle starts slowing down well in advance of approaching a vehicle ahead, so you have to change lanes very early, which isn't always possible or convenient, though it's something I could learn to live with.

There's a lot to love about the MDX. Those captivating jewel eye headlights with LED turn signals are just as much function as form. ELS Studio Premium audio system will knock your socks off. I set the bass and the subwoofer to maximum levels for optimal punch, and it retained crisp clarity all the way up to max volume level 40. Sirius XM never sounded so good. If it's solitude you want, a quiet cabin is easy to achieve, too. I sailed along at 75 mph with minimal wind, road or engine noise. The MDX's 7-speed dual-clutch transmission keeps the revs low at those speeds. It was tough to give the keys back after being pampered for seven days.

The region has great options for our NSX event, but just 4.5 hours from Phoenix, we've also discovered Nelson, Nevada is an easy weekend trip. ■

