Can anyone drive on the Salt Flats?

Where are the Bonneville Salt Flats?

Flats you are on your own. Let someone know where you are and when you plan to return. Review and adhere to the Bonneville Salt Flats Travel Advisory, which is available at www.blm.gov/ut. When driving on the Salt Flats is hazardous and has resulted in fatalities. Salt residue on the surface can be slippery when wet.

The Salt Flats are about five miles wide and 12 miles long. They are comprised mostly of sodium chloride, or table salt. Like the Great Salt Lake, the Salt Flat are a remnant of ancient Ice Age Lake Bonneville, which covered over one-third of Utah from about 12,000 to 10,000 years ago. The Salt Flats are managed by the Bureau of Land Management. They are on the National Register of Historic Places, and are designated as an “Area of Critical Environmental Concern” because of their geology, history and scenic beauty. A place to preserve and protect, the Bonneville Salt Flats attract thousands of visitors each year to witness the marvels of the desert. 

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How did the Bonneville Salt Flats form?

When Lake Bonneville was at the highest level approximately 17,000 years ago, the water exceeded 1,000 feet deep over the Bonneville Salt Flats. Evidence of this great depth is seen as horizontal terraces and escarpments on the sides of the nearby Island Mountains. As Lake Bonneville receded, evaporation left large concentrations of dissolved minerals deposited in surrounding soils. These minerals include potash, which is commercially used as fertilizers and halite (table salt). The Salt Flats are comprised of approximately 90% salt. Today, shallow groundwater flows in from the surrounding watershed, picks up dissolved minerals along the way, and percolates upward to the surface of the Salt Flats’ floor. During cooler months (November to May), this groundwater often reaches the surface, a process that is called spring flow. During spring flow, the water depth can range from a few inches to several feet deep.

Where did the name come from?

In 1833, explorer Joseph R. Walker mapped around the Great Salt Lake. He also crossed the northern perimeter of the Salt Flats while working for Capt. Benjamin L.E. Bonneville. At that time it was common for people to name landmarks after their employers. It is from Capt. Bonneville that the Salt Flats and Lake Bonneville derive their name. There is no known historical record of Bonneville himself ever seeing the Salt Flats or Great Salt Lake.

Early human history

Researchers have determined that primitive humans lived there more than 10,000 years ago at nearby Danger Cave. Where did these people come from? How did they live? What reliable food sources were in the area to sustain them? Although Lake Bonneville was receding at the time, did they have access to reliable water sources? These questions have only been partially answered by archaeologists. Digging or disturbing historical sites is illegal. The Archaeological Resources Protection Act provides penalties up to $50,000 and five years imprisonment for violators.

Recent human history

Trapper and frontiersman Jedediah Smith crossed the Salt Flats while returning from an expedition to California in 1827. John C. Fremont and his U.S. government-sponsored expedition crossed the heart of the Salt Flats in 1845 while trying to find a shorter overland route to the Pacific Ocean. The next year Fremont’s route across the Salt Flats would become known as the Hasting Cutoff as part of the California Trail. Promoted by Larnard, Hastings as a faster, easier route to California, Hastings Cutoff proved to be the opposite for the Donner- Reed Party of 1846. What contributed to the party’s infamous winter survival in the Sierra Nevada was the delay the emigrants experienced while crossing the Salt Flats. Their wagons became mired in mud just below the thin salt crust. Archeologists from the Donner-Reed Party, and other emigrants that crossed the trail, are on display in the Donner- Reed Museum in Gardnerville.

What happens on the Salt Flats today?

Automotive endurance and land speed racing are perhaps responsible for the Salt Flats’ global renown. The Salt Flats were mostly a local fascination when Frank Lockall drove a Beetle to an unofficial speed of 141.73 mph in 1914. Since then land-speed racing on the Salt Flats has grown enormously. Every summer and fall, professional and amateur teams from around the world compete for land-speed records in different vehicle classes. Events such as August’s “Speed Week,” September’s “World of Speed” and October’s “World Finals,” transform the Salt Flats into a magnet for land-speed drivers and spectators. The fastest recorded speed on the Salt Flats is 622.407 mph, set by Gary Gabolich in 1970 in his “Blue Flame” rocket car. The Salt Flats also host a variety of other events every year. The Salt Flats are also internationally renowned as a unique backdrop for filming major motion pictures, fashion layouts, and automobile commercials.
Is it safe to drive on the Salt Flats?

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However, avoid driving along the edge of the salt crust as your vehicle de-sac is at the end of the road. Travel on the Salt Flats is at your own risk. The road leading to the Salt Flats is reached by taking Exit 4 off I-80. The parking lot is located 1.5 miles (2.4 km) from the access road.

What do I need to know about attending events on the Salt Flats?

Is overnight camping available?

What facilities are available?

A permit or entrance fee is not required to take personal photos, view the area, or drive on the flats next to the Salt Flats access road. The parking lot is located 1.5 miles (2.4 km) from the access road.

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