

Inexplicable Moments

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POINTS OF INTEREST

Strange things happen at this wacky crossroads of the hopelessly alien-addled in the Nevada desert

Except for the silvery images of bulbous-eyed **aliens** that decorate the place, the boxy structure at one end of the only paved street in Rachel, Nevada, looks pretty much like any other roadhouse in the American West. But what goes on inside this saloon and, some say, in the night sky overhead has rendered the Little A'Le'Inn (get it?) one of the most intriguing spots on earth.

Each year, thousands are drawn to this windswept town of about 100 year-round residents as if by supernatural force. "The thing that gets us attention," the inn's motherly proprietress, Pat Travis, is telling me, "is our location—we're about 25 miles from **Area 51**. Many people think Uncle Sam is hiding at least nine **alien** spacecraft out there. Many also believe six **alien** beings, not all of them dead, are kept there, too: a large- and a small-nosed gray, an orange, a blue, one reptile and a humanoid."

Pat's husband, a tall, white-haired gent named Joe, stands behind the long bar peering out a window at the birdbath he's just refilled. Sunset drapes the desert in gold. "Some people say this is a little crazy," he concedes. "But everybody still comes and looks—beautiful folks from all over the world." As if on cue, a dark-haired woman walks through the door and sits at the bar. She orders a soda, revealing a European accent. "Where you from?" Joe asks.

"The Netherlands," she replies. "I'm on a business trip. I've heard so much about this place—the spacecraft, the **aliens**, your restaurant—I had to see it."

"There's what I mean," Joe says to me. "I don't think about us as some sort of **alien** spot. We're more like a crossroads." Rachel wasn't even a crossroads, much less a town, until fairly recently. Silver miners started settling the hills and valley near Tempiute Mountain in the late 1800s. Union Carbide opened a tungsten mine in the 1970s, which sparked modest growth. A bar and restaurant on the north end of town, called the Rachel Bar and Grill, was a struggling concern until Pat and Joe Travis bought it in the summer of 1988. Although they didn't know it then, they were on the verge of something strange and wonderful.

Sprawling southwest of Rachel is an expanse of desert much larger than the state of Connecticut, all of it off-limits to the public. This is the Nellis Air Force Range and the Department of Energy's Nevada Test Site. **Area 51**, named after the grid it occupies on an old map, is located within this forbidden region. It came into existence in 1955 when Lockheed landed there to test the U-2, a high-altitude surveillance plane. The top-secret base later became a proving ground for successive generations of high-tech prototypes, including the F-117A Stealth fighter. For the first 34 years of its existence, local miners and ranchers tolerated their mysterious neighbor. Sonic booms rattled the valleys daily, and some nights people would look up and see strange, fluttering lights or oddly shaped aircraft. Most of the phenomena could be explained. Some, however, could not—especially the hovering points of light that, in an eye-blink, shifted position in the sky. Shortly after the Travises purchased the inn, a self-described physicist named Bob Lazar shattered Rachel's placid existence. Lazar claimed that he had worked at a facility south of **Area 51** on a project to "reverse engineer" one of nine captured **alien** flying saucers held there, dismantling it to see how it worked. Lazar's story got big play on a Las Vegas television station. Much of it didn't check out, but word of Lazar's intriguing assertion spread quickly, drawing ever-growing numbers of the inquisitive, confused and downright **alien**-addled to Rachel. "I remember thinking at the time that we were a business," Pat Travis says, "and whether we believed in **aliens** or not, God had put this opportunity in our laps. It was ours to use."

The Travises added seven rooms to their establishment for overnight guests. They also rechristened the place the Little A'Le'Inn. Within a few years, Nevada designated the stretch of deserted Highway 375 fronting Rachel "The Extraterrestrial Highway," and for a while TV and movie producers became as common in town as ranchers. "On peak days," Pat says, "we get hundreds of people through here. The curious, the skeptics and a lot of people who claim they've had 'encounters.'"

Among the inn's unique visitors have been a 300-pound transvestite who believes he was abducted by **aliens**, and a character who purports to be an interstellar emissary from the planet Draconis. He calls himself Merlyn Merlin II. "I've had commercial airline pilots come in and tell me they've seen UFO's," Pat says. "Most of them don't report it because of the hassles they'd get. But they want to talk about it. So that's what we do here: allow people to come and talk freely, and listen."

The inn sponsors twice-yearly symposiums attended by everyone from serious UFO scholars to less reliable thinkers. There's also an annual "Walk to the Boundary," during which hundreds of people hike up to the unambiguous signs

delineating the Nellis property line. They read: "Warning. Restricted **Area**," and one even cautions "Use of Deadly Force Authorized."

The Traveses maintain a good-natured open-mindedness about what they hear, but they've had some inexplicable moments of their own. "My niece and I saw a saucer-shaped light moving erratically in the sky several weeks ago," Pat tells me. "And about a month ago, Joe and I were driving back from Vegas, and I saw this round object, like a circle of translucent light, moving along the side of the highway. I said to Joe, 'Did you see that?' And he said, 'Yeah, but I thought I was imagining it.'"

Joe points to the inn's back door. "That door is solid steel. It's facing the sunset right now, and no light from the sun is getting inside, right? But a few years back, we were sitting here and a cylinder of light about three inches across shot through the steel and then stopped-it stopped-about six feet into the room. It illuminated the doorjamb in blue. We both witnessed it, and we've never found anyone who could explain it."

I look around the room. Near that back door, a wall is plastered with photographic images of what are said to be **aliens** and flying saucers. My favorite shows a cowboy pouring a can of beer down a horse's throat as a saucer streaks through the sky. I start to order the house specialty, the **Alien** Burger, then have second thoughts. "Don't worry," Pat reassures me. "It's made out of beef."

PHOTOS (COLOR): Patrons of the Little A'Le'Inn re-create the mysterious cylinder of light that allegedly pierced the solid steel door a few years ago.

PHOTO (COLOR): An unidentified visitor, possibly a waitress in disguise, sizes up the joint. Some of the inn's human customers are even stranger.

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By Donovan Webster