

TT West 2017 – The ExTTreme Drive

Seventeen TTs are carving corners in the mountain as we climb out of Death Valley. Suddenly we experience a Top Gun moment as two military jets in a low level dog fight appear immediately in front of us. We are driving through an area of Death Valley just north of the China Lake military base that is used almost daily for military flight exercises. As the attacking jet breaks off, it heads our way and passes us only a few hundred feet above ground. We wave to the pilot as kindred spirits, one hot ride to another. The first day of the TT West drive is underway.

TT West is the oldest annual event for Audi TT drivers in the western United States. In 2017 it returned to its roots to start in Las Vegas at Audi Henderson <http://www.audihenderson.com/> on September 24. This year's event combined the destinations of the first two years of the event in 2001 (Lake Tahoe) and 2002 (Las Vegas). The 2017 edition of TT West was named "The ExTTreme Drive" and explored the extremes of the American West by starting in Las Vegas, traveling along and over California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, and finishing at Lake Tahoe. The five day, 950 mile route took drivers to the lowest elevation in the US at below sea level in Death Valley and the highest elevation in the lower 48 as they viewed Mount Whitney while crisscrossing the Sierras. We also expected extreme temperature swings from 100+ degrees in Death Valley to freezing at night at Mammoth Mountain.

Las Vegas is always a big draw for TT West participation. The 2002 TT West in Las Vegas still ranks as the largest gathering in the event's history with over 35 TTs participating. To keep the group to a manageable level, participation has been limited since then and this year's event sold out in a record six days! The last time TT West was in Las Vegas was 2010 which started with a drive through Valley of Fire, Cedar Breaks, Bryce, Capital Reef, Goblin, Canyonlands, and Arches parks. In the past, TT West has attracted participants from Hawaii to Rhode Island, and Washington State to Texas.

Audi Henderson has been a longtime supporter of TT West, even when it is not held in Las Vegas. That is because the General Manager, Jim Diguilio, and Service Manager, Brice McNeely, are both TT owners/enthusiasts. "The Audi TT provides stimulating sports car performance in a package that is best in class for long distance drives like TT West" said Jim. "The TT provides the largest trunk in its class, a compact spare tire in many models (unheard of in any other sports car) and a 'best in class' interior that keeps a driver fresh on long excursions. It is offered in three performance levels, the base TT, the TTS and the race-worthy TTRS." Jim owned and raced the original version of the TTRS which was hailed by every car publication as an amazing performance bang for the buck. On the track, his TTRS outperformed sports cars costing almost twice as much. The latest 2017 version of the TTRS has recently arrived on US shores and leaves the original TTRS in the dust thanks to power and handling upgrades.

The Audi TT is one of the most recognizable cars on the road with its award-winning design and iconic profile. It was initially released in the US in the 2000 model year beginning with a Neiman-Marcus Christmas catalog special edition and was also featured in chase scenes in the Mission Impossible 2 movie released that year. The TT received major makeovers in the 2008 and 2015 model years, each makeover providing power and handling upgrades.

TT West joined forces with Audi Club of North America (ACNA) last year and is now a sanctioned event. This year TT West opened with a Sunday evening social on September 24 consisting of a dinner cruise on Lake Mead. On Monday morning we gathered at Audi Henderson for breakfast and safety checks, and departed for the ghost town of Rhyolite. We then drove through Death Valley to Lone Pine

CA on the eastern slope of the Sierras. Death Valley was experiencing a “cold snap” and only reached 93 degrees while we were there but no one complained about not experiencing 100+ degrees. The lower temperature allowed us to make additional stops in the Valley.

Tuesday’s drive started with a challenging run up to to the Mount Whitney Portal at about 10,000’ to view the mountain and make a short hike to nearby waterfalls. Then we visit the historic Manzanar Detention site for Japanese-Americans during World War II, a sad chapter in our treatment of American citizens of Japanese descent during the war. The day ended with another climb into the Sierras to the Devil’s Postpile National Monument on Mammoth Mountain. Devil’s Postpile is a unique formation of hexagonal rock towers caused by volcanic eruption about 100,000 years ago which was later exposed by glaciers traveling the Sierras.

Many of the roads that we traveled in the Sierras were closed with snow much later than normal or damaged by the record snowpack. The Devil’s Postpile road did not open until July.

Wednesday we drove to Yosemite National Park, crossing the Sierras via the east entrance near Lee Vining CA. We spent the morning exploring the high elevation alpine region along Tioga Road that is only open a few months of the year due to snow. We then spent the afternoon in Yosemite Valley. During our visit, the first of several major rock slides that inflicted fatalities occurred at the El Capitan rock formation. Fortunately, no TT West participants were nearby at the time.

Thursday we re-crossed the Sierras again heading northeast to Virginia City. The main nature attraction on Thursday was a stop at the giant sequoia forest in Big Trees State Park. This drive was the most challenging of the week as we followed Routes 4 and 89 over the mountains. A significant portion of route 4 is very narrow with lots of twisties and minimal traffic. We spent the evening exploring Virginia City whose main street looks much as it did in the early 1900s.

The drive ended Friday with a circumnavigation of Lake Tahoe. Unfortunately, several of the planned vista stops were closed for road construction but we still had ample opportunity to view the lake, its flora, and fauna. Circumnavigation of Lake Tahoe is a holy grail drive for car clubs but congestion throughout the loop makes a group drive difficult. One of our stops was the Taylor Creek nature center where we saw the annual run of local salmon going upstream to spawn. During this swim, the salmon turn a bright red which makes them easy to spot in the water.

Normally, late September is not the best time to explore the Sierras because many of the snow-fed streams and waterfalls are dry. We were lucky that the Sierras had record snowfall last winter so water attractions were still spectacular. The Mammoth resort, where we spent Tuesday night, was still skiing into August! We were hoping we might set a TT West event ‘first’ of getting someone in our group to snow ski during the drive, but the lifts had finally closed.