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GHOST TOWN, ARIZONA

Braying for Time: the Wild Burros of Oatman

By Jon Deinzer



Night settles in and the heat of the day makes its way deep into the surrounding hills. You hear the soft braying of sleepy burros, the spooky howl of the desert wind, and (if you're lucky) you may find yourself an eternal drinking partner...

The story of Oatman - a once-deserted ghost town that's been resurrected as a tourist pit-stop along Route 66 - began a long time ago, when gold was discovered in the surrounding mountains. (As legend has it, the town of Oatman was founded in 1902 and given the name for a young girl that was kidnapped and enslaved by Indians in the mid-1850's.) As time went on, the town became an industrious and important mining

town, but in 1921, a fire burned down much of it. However, it did spare the Oatman Hotel.

One of the original buildings constructed in 1902, the Oatman Hotel is a historical landmark and is especially famous as a honeymoon stop of Clark Gable and Carol Lombard. It's said that Gable fell in love with the area and frequently returned to play poker with the miners. The other notable guest of the hotel is "Oatie the Ghost." Oatie - actively promoted by the hotel's current owners - is a friendly ghost (no relation to Casper), whose identity is believed to be that of William Ray Flour, an Irish miner who died behind the hotel, presumably from excessive alcohol consumption (go figure). Flour's body wasn't discovered until two days after his death and was hastily buried in a shallow grave near where he was found. No services were performed, and it's believed that he roams the town looking for his next beverage.

The town ebbed and flowed for many years, never quite reaching the status it had attained during the height of the mining days. The construction of the new I-40 should have been the final nail in the coffin for this little town, but then someone came up with the idea of using the "wild" burros as an

attraction. These burros are direct descendants of those animals used during the mining years; after the mines played out, the burros were released...but never left.

People come from all over the world to see the burros, who literally have the run of the town. It's not unusual to see them standing just outside the stores or alongside cars, or following young children waiting for ice cream to fall from the cone. Although feeding the burros is encouraged, a strict diet of carrots and/or alfalfa cubes is essential for their continued good health. (Many of the town's burros live long, happy lives.)

On the day we visited Oatman (en route to a weekend in Laughlin, Nevada) the burros were out in full force, as were the other visitors to the town who were lining up to watch the local "gunmen" that present staged gun battles in the middle of main street. We, however, made our way to the historic Oatman Hotel.

Once inside, we noticed the rustic decor - which included a climb on rustic stairs to view the hotel rooms upstairs. We peered inside several of them, and reading the newspaper blurbs posted on the walls outside the rooms was a fun diversion.

Back downstairs, we headed into the restaurant/bar where visitors from the world-over have posted up their local currency on the walls and ceiling. Bills from around the globe were tacked up everywhere, literally covering every square inch of space. After we amused ourselves trying to find the one that had traveled the farthest, as well as the oldest one (many are signed and dated), we meandered back outside to get a better look at the town.

Walking down the raised wooden walkways, we popped into a handful of shops and bought some carrots for the burros who watch their visitors with nonchalance until food appears, and then suddenly you become quite interesting.



There aren't too many places you can go anymore where animals have the run of a town and no one seems to mind. But Oatman *is* such a place: where ghost town meets hometown for a group of "wild" burros.

FAST FACTS

Oatman Chamber of Commerce

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