

SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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Summer travel could look different (again) this year

By Christopher Muther
GLOBE STAFF

First, some important perspective.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a humanitarian disaster. Hundreds have been killed, Europe is facing a refugee crisis the likes of which haven't been seen since World War II, and Ukrainians are dodging bombs and sleeping in subway stations to stay alive.

It's a minuscule issue in comparison, but travel experts say the war that's taking place more than 4,500 miles from Boston could impact you this summer as you budget for your vacation. Spiking fuel prices will not only add expenses to much-desired road trips, but could potentially mean increases in airfare. After two years of cautious COVID-19 travel, this is not welcome news to those who

are itching to pack a suitcase and (hopefully) enjoy a variant-free summer in the sun.

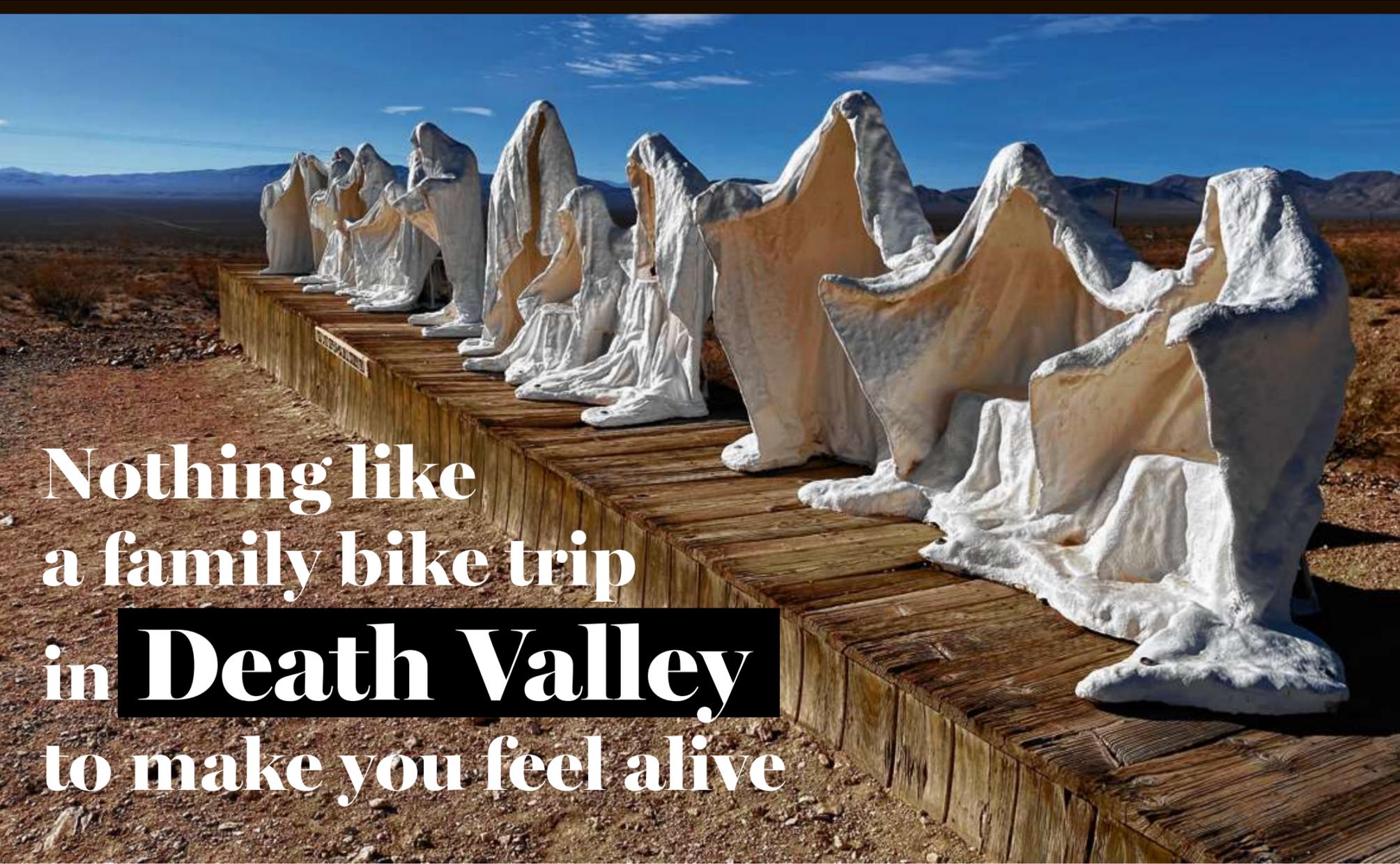
Before we delve into the gloom, here's one sliver of sun. Not everyone in the travel sector is convinced that ballooning crude oil prices, which have risen to nearly \$125 a barrel this week from \$64 a barrel a year ago, will strike the entire industry with the same sever-

ity. Airlines, still in the early stages of recovery from a COVID punch in the gut, may not hike fares with the same tenacity as oil companies. But the advice for travelers thinking of a summer escape is to book sooner rather than later.

Let's start with the worst of it, which is where you'll feel the biggest vacation pinch on your purse. The jarring increases that consumers are seeing every

day at the gas pump are not expected to wane in the coming months. According to a forecast released by Boston-based GasBuddy on Monday, prices will continue to rise through the spring and summer, peaking at \$4.50 a gallon nationally by August, before finally dropping under \$4 a gallon in November. In California, that price could go as high as

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Nothing like
a family bike trip
in **Death Valley**
to make you feel alive

PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN LELAND

A sculpture outside a ghost town.

He proposed they take the family excursion to celebrate his 84th birthday. 'I've always wanted to go there,' he said. 'We need to do it before I get old.'

And so off they went, all six of them.



The Leland family.

BY JULIE HATFIELD AND TIMOTHY LELAND
GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

The wife thought the matter was settled the morning she told her husband her biking days were over. Regretfully, she said, she wasn't up for any more of those glorious guided bike tours they had taken over many years together. Advancing age and a recent bike accident had convinced her that she couldn't handle another journey.

But the very next morning the husband announced a surprise: He had signed them up for "just one more bike trip."

It would be a grand occasion, he said. It would be the perfect way to celebrate his 84th birthday.

He wanted to take his kids and their spouses, as well. "Where to?" the wife asked, mildly interested. "Death Valley," he replied. *Death Valley?* Yes. He had signed up with Backroads, the bike-touring company, to take everyone to Death Valley, Calif., said to be the hottest place on earth. The Death Valley at the foot of "Funeral Mountain." The same valley of death in the Mojave Desert that an anonymous writer in the *New York World* in 1894 called "the loneliest, hottest, most deadly and dangerous spot in the United States — a pit of horrors, the haunt of all that is grim and ghoulish."

Hot? It's said that in summer here a person sitting in the shade for one day can lose 2 gallons of water.

That's the bike tour the husband proposed they

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PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN LELAND

Biking through ‘a very special place’

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take on his 84th birthday. “I’ve always wanted to go there,” he said. “We need to do it before I get old.”

And so we went, all six of us.

Biking in Death Valley is like biking nowhere else — unless perhaps you’ve biked on the surface of Mars. The roads (there are only a few) stretch ahead on the desert floor as far as the eye can see, pencil thin and ruler straight, until they dissolve in a dot on the horizon. When vehicles pass (there are few of those as well) the drivers invariably pull far out in the other lane, giving the biker a wide berth. For the most part you pedal through this brooding, prehistoric land in silent awe, alone with your thoughts. There are no bird sounds. No motor sounds. No people sounds. Just the faint hum of your tires on the macadam as you make your way through this mysterious, starkly beautiful landscape, shrouded in the stillness of time.

The area is a confused geological mash-up of other-worldly landscapes, a mix of ancient mountains, gullies, rock-slides, and flat desert plains. And in November, when we were there, the temperature is pleasantly cool. Except when it’s not. (It was 94 degrees on our first day of biking.)

Everywhere you look there are signs of powerful geological transformations caused by the erosion of rushing waters; mysterious dunes from huge clouds of wind-borne sand; red sedimentary debris spreading out on the desert floor; jumbled mounds of black volcanic matter and evidence of dramatic ruptures of the earth’s crust from deep below the surface. The area is a geologist’s dream for studying the forces of nature, or a nightmare of ancient activity almost too complex to unravel. Either way, for bikers traveling through the arid, treeless landscape (including those on electric bikes, as were the husband and wife), it presents a surreal spectacle, a mosaic of colors in sand and rock and crumbled lava contoured through the ages. The



ravines and shimmering salt flats and yellow-white dunes and copper-colored deposits are an ever-changing kaleidoscope of shapes and hues, and in the distance are the ground-down mountains whose flanks — wind-blasted and water-eroded — have been shedding debris in Death Valley for millions of years.

There are only two places to stay in Death Valley and Backroads put us up at the nicest, a Spanish Mission-style resort situated in the middle of a lush desert oasis surrounded by towering palm trees. The Inn at Death Valley features (believe it or not) a swimming pool filled with soothing mineral waters that bubble up from a spring. We biked from the inn for three days — first to Badwater, the lowest point in the United States, 282 feet below sea level and al-

Clockwise from top left: The Inn at Death Valley; hiking in Death Valley’s badlands; bike riding in Death Valley, where roads stretch ahead on the desert floor.

ways hot. The second and third days, cooler, we visited a ghost town and passed by the rusty remains of a mining operation on our way to Mesquite Flat, an enormous network of sand dunes that dropped from the sky — literally. Death Valley has been called “the worlds largest wind tunnel.” In the past, fierce winds roared down the valley, picking up vast clouds of sand that swirled along for miles before dropping to earth when the wind died down. Over the millennia, with repetition, this resulted in the startling array of massive

dune formations in the area. Some of them are said to “sing” when the wind passes over them from a certain direction.

The Amargosa people lived here 10,000 years ago. The Shoshone still do. Flowers live out here, too, in spring: larkspur, poppies, lupin, and more. One night, Backroads brought an astronomer out from Las Vegas to discuss the stars in the coal black desert sky. Unpolluted by city light, they provide a far better show than the marquees on the Strip.

Four years ago, the husband had taken his wife and family on another bike trip — this one in the Loire Valley, France — to celebrate his 80th birthday. No one questioned going to that iconic tourist location in the center of European civilization, even if a few of his

friends wondered about the biking part at his age. But when word got around this year that the husband was taking his family on a bike trip to mark his 84th birthday in Death Valley — that raised a few eyebrows. “Why Death Valley?” they asked.

“Because I hear it’s a very special place,” he answered.

And it’s true. But after the trip was over, an old friend suggested another reason, which also might be true. “Tim just keeps pedaling to stay ahead of the Grim Reaper,” he speculated.

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