Christmas Tree Pass Scenic Loop Drive

One of the very special drives within the proposed Avi Kwa Ame National Monument is the Christmas Tree Pass Scenic Drive. About half of the drive is within the proposed Monument and the other half is within Lake Mead National Recreation Area. The Scenic Drive through the pass consists of a 12-mile loop that connects U.S. Highway 95 with Nevada Route 163 to Laughlin. The road is gravel and in most places is in good condition, but a high clearance vehicle is recommended, although not mandatory.

Christmas Tree Pass gets its name from the scattered forest of junipers and pinyons growing among the rocky ridges of the Newberry Mountains. In the 1980’s, there was a local tradition of decorating these trees during the holiday season with everything imaginable. Both the native tribes and the National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management took a dim view of this practice and put a stop to it around 1998.

For most of the 12-mile journey, the Scenic Road is flanked by the Spirit Mountain Wilderness Area on one side and the Bridge Canyon Wilderness Area on the other. The drive offers the best that southern Nevada landscapes have to offer. Sculpted granite rock formations rise impressively from the landscape, which is home to a cross-section of Sonoran, Mojave and Great Basin plant communities. Rock-studded canyons slope gently eastward toward the Colorado River. It is easy to spot animal and human likenesses in the jumble of rocks and boulders that abound in the area.

This is one of the most significant and expansive petroglyph sites in the American Southwest. Archeological research of rock shelters in the area indicates that the AhaMakav people (ancestors of the modern day Mohave peoples) and, perhaps, Southern Paiute people camped here periodically. Evidence indicates that the people camped in the shelters for a few days at a time while they were using the area. The shelters were used as early as AD 1100 and use continued into historic times.
To many first time visitors, the Mojave Desert seems barren and desolate, but a walk through Grapevine Canyon offers another perspective. A fresh water spring flows out of the canyon floor in non-drought years. This desert spring provides life-giving water to a wide assortment of plants and animals. The presence of the water and the abundance of plants and animals may have drawn early humans to this area as well. The relatively lush plant growth in the canyon is in sharp contrast to the stark hillsides. This extra moisture from the small spring allows a number of plants to grow here that could not survive on drier slopes. Cottonwood, grapevines, cattails and rushes grow in the canyon. The presence of a spring and the variety of water loving plants draw desert bighorn sheep and other animals into the canyon.

While visiting, please respect the traditions of the people who still consider this area to be sacred to their lives and culture. Do not deface the petroglyphs. Even touching them can cause damage. Archeological
artifacts and sites are protected in National Parks and Monuments. It is illegal to remove or damage archeological materials. Disturbance of these resources destroys our heritage. Please do not climb on the rocks and panels. Look, observe, imagine. Be still and listen. Let the rocks speak. And if you are lucky, you might see an eagle or a desert bighorn sheep.

Warning: be sure to take plenty of drinking water. There is none available along the trail. Be prepared for summer temperatures that can be as high as 120 degrees F.

**How to Access Christmas Tree Pass:** To access Christmas Tree Pass, drive south from Las Vegas on U.S. 93/95. At Railroad Pass, head south on U.S. 95 through Searchlight. About 2.3 miles south of Cal-Nev-Ari, turn left on the Christmas Tree Pass Road. There is a small road sign for the turnoff and a fairly large, covered information sign on the east side of the road that you can see in the distance. The gravel road loop is around 12 miles and connects back to the Nevada Highway about two miles west of Laughlin. You then take 163 back to its intersection with U.S. 95 and head north on U.S. 95 back to Las Vegas.