

# FLAT OUT FAST

## NORTHERN UTAH'S LEGENDARY GO-FAST TERRAIN

By Joe Sage

If you want to take a good road trip, you already know we live in the heart of some incredible terrain. Southern California, northern Mexico, New Mexico, southwest Colorado, Nevada and Utah are all an easy and well-worthwhile drive from Arizona.

Southern Utah is well known for its spectacular national lands: Zion, Capitol Reef, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands and Arches National Parks, the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument and more. In the north are Dinosaur National Park and Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area. Arizona is well known for its own parks, but don't stop at the state line. These lands were made for driving, and there is much to see.

In fact, all that scenery in southern Utah is one great reason to take a drive to northern Utah. We recently headed there, but by air instead of road. Salt Lake City, with easy air service from Phoenix, sits on I-80 along its run from southern Wyoming to Reno, making it the perfect gateway for a focused trip to several highlights of the region. Motorheads, night owls, sunrise hounds and



nature buffs will enjoy the Bonneville Salt Flats and Bonneville Speedway, especially if fortunate enough to visit during Bonneville Speed Week, as we did. En route from Salt Lake City to Bonneville is the Miller Motorsports Park, an incredible private operation with activities open to the public, including a museum and challenging multipurpose track. And Wendover, which straddles the state line and is your best bet for lodging in the area, is home to an Air Museum of unparalleled significance. Buckle up, and let's check out all three.



### BONNEVILLE SALT FLATS

One look at this area, and you can tell its history is measured in epochs and eras. The cars and bikes are fun, but both geological time and US westward expansion are inescapable. Lake Bonneville, a huge body of water once trapped in the high reaches of today's Great Basin, is said to have evaporated and reformed almost 30 times in the past 30 million years. Today, it comprises the Great Salt Lake and, to its west, the Bonneville Salt Flats.

The Bonneville name, though associated with such all-American images as Utah and Pontiac, is French in origin, after Brigadier General Benjamin Bonneville, born in France but serving in the US Army. Though he explored extensively in the Oregon Territory and Great Basin, he never saw the lake that bears his name. Field Lieutenant Joseph Walker explored and mapped the area in 1833, and in a custom of the times named it after the boss. (We all say Chevrolet, but nobody says "Bawn-VEE-lya." Thanks again to the French, though, for the Louisiana Purchase and the Statue of Liberty.)

At its highest, some 17,000 years ago, Lake Bonneville was over 1,000 feet deep. The old waterline is still clearly visible on the surrounding mountains. As the lake evaporated, huge mineral concentrations remained, including potash (used today as fertilizer) and halite (used as table salt). The Bonneville Salt Flats today are about 90 percent salt. Shallow groundwater picks up dissolved minerals that percolate to the surface. In the hottest months, the water evaporates quickly, leaving behind the famous salt crust. (In winter and spring, several inches of water build up over the Flats.) The stratified layers of the Salt Flats are almost five feet thick near the center, but only an inch or two near the edges. At over 46 square miles, the Salt Flats contain about 147 million tons—or 99 million cubic feet—of salt.

### BONNEVILLE SPEEDWAY

It didn't take long, even on the remote American frontier, for motorsports to hit the Salt Flats, with the first recorded events in 1912 and the first land speed record runs in the 1930s. For decades, the Utah highway department took care of track preparation, annually marking out a 10-mile straightaway for land speed records and a 10-to-12-mile oval for distance records. (Then, as now, details depended on salt conditions year-to-year.) The Utah DOT has ceded this job, and for the past 20-25 years, track prep has been performed by event organizers. The straightaway used to be marked by one big black line, but that would wear away too quickly, so now you will find flags and cones along the outer edges. Exact distances are professionally surveyed before events begin.

Bonneville Speed Week, run by the Southern California Timing Association (SCTA), runs in August, on three tracks. In September, the Utah Salt Flats Racing Association hits the Flats for World of Speed. SCTA returns in October for the World Finals. We visited during World of

Speed in September.

Wendover, Utah and the Bonneville Salt Flats are about 650 miles from Phoenix, taking about 12 hours with a stop or two. With all the parks and sights in between, you may want to figure a lengthier and more complex trip. Flying takes about 75 minutes, PHX-SLC, and the drive from Salt Lake Airport to Wendover is about 115 miles, so under two hours. Wendover, Utah offers only minimal lodging, so we did what most do,



grabbed a room at a casino hotel across the line in West Wendover, Nevada. Don't get too comfortable and don't stay up too late, as the day starts pre-bright and very early—you want to be out on the Flats before the sun even comes up. You'll find a great Mexican café at the exit off I-80, but predawn it is not yet open. Hit it for lunch or dinner. Heading out to BLM lands, there are a great many who forgo the casino hotel and camp in their RVs for an early start. Although the sun is blazing hot during the day, the Salt Flats are at an altitude of over 4200 feet, so bring a good jacket.

Access to the Speedway area and the event was sur-





prisingly open—we drove out to the edge of the action with other participants and spectators (some of whom were working on their own speed records). Park with everyone else, and you'll have a chance to mingle with the racers as they prep their cars, trucks and motorcycles, as well as to hit vendor tents with food and mementos. The racers are envelope-pushing enthusiasts and hobbyists who are generally not at all bothered by those who want to get a good look at things.

We headed to the starting line of the land speed runs and found much the same—the crowd is simpatico, and the racers don't mind the attention. You can stand right by the cars as they prepare to launch down the straightaway. (It was noteworthy to see how much attention was drawn from the import tuner crowd, as huge American V-power on steroids would fire up for the run.)



In all, 26 new Bonneville Class Records were set during the World of Speed event, including Skip Hedrich in the fastest car (#992, the eagle on this page and also our lead photo) at 336.064 mph in C/GS class (12.60 or more lbs. per cubic inch gas supercharged class), Mark DeLuca on the fastest bike (#3182 APS-F), at 237.664 mph, and in a nod to gender separatism, Rhonnie Vesco at 310.981 mph (#444 D/GS).

Land speed records at Bonneville include Sir Malcolm Campbell at 301.129 mph in 1935, Craig Breedlove in Spirit of America at 407.447 mph in 1963 and in Spirit of America Sonic 1 at 600.601 mph in 1965. Mickey Thompson was the first American to break the 400 mph mark, in 1960, and Gary Gabelich hit 602.407 mph in the Blue Flame, in 1970. Pushing the envelope with newer fuel systems, Roger Schroe hit 314.958 mph in his electric

Buckeye Bullet in 2004, and Andy Green hit 350.092 mph in his JCB Dieselmax Streamliner in 2006. A day on the Bonneville Salt Flats, even as a spectator, is definitely bucket list material. The World of Speed race dates for next year are September 8-11, 2012.

#### THE ENDANGERED SALT FLATS

The Bonneville Salt Flats are a Registered National Landmark, a place like no other, and its history—and fun factor—are unparalleled. Whether for racing, gawking or quiet contemplation, this area is so broad and flat you can see the curvature of the earth. And the surface is unmatched for motorsports. Unfortunately, the Flats themselves are disappearing, so significant efforts are afoot to try to reverse this. This is not your typical green movement: fully 20 racing and motorcycle organizations have formed the Save The Salt Coalition, in an effort to gain essential BLM and Utah state support.

By the early 1960s, Salt Flats racers began to notice subtle changes in the surface—it seemed to be getting weaker and it was shrinking, with track length typically down to seven miles or less. Analysis led quickly to the mining industry on the south side of I-80, which covered about 50 square miles of the Salt Flats. Industrial operations were shifting large amounts of salt accumulation to their settling ponds. Industrial canals crisscrossing the Flats fed more and more into evaporation ponds for potash extraction, removing about 850,000 tons of salt from the Flats each year. A formerly reliable 18-plus inches of salt had become so fragile that the race courses had to be moved farther and farther east. The long International Race Course had to be abandoned.

By 1989, the mining operation had been sold and was granted a new 20-year lease. The racers' goal seemed simple: to return that salt to the Speedway, and the Save The Salt Organization was born. The new potash operator agreed to mitigate conditions from 1997 to 2002, pumping brine water back to the north side, adding salt at the rate of 1.5 million tons a year. From the beginning of the pumping project, racers began to notice improvements in the surface, and by the end of five years, they were back to running on the old International Course. Though not as long, there was a noticeable difference in the hardness and durability of the race courses, and on a few occasions they were able to lay out as much as an 11-mile track. Tests confirmed that their aquifer was also regenerating. But the program ended at that time, and

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#### BONNEVILLE SALT FLATS

Utah Salt Flats Racing Association (USFRA)  
[www.saltflats.com](http://www.saltflats.com)

Southern California Timing Assn. (SCTA)  
[www.scta-bni.org](http://www.scta-bni.org)

Save The Salt  
[www.savethesalt.org](http://www.savethesalt.org)  
(also linked via USFRA or SCTA)

Lodging in Wendover / West Wendover  
[www.wendoverfun.com](http://www.wendoverfun.com)  
800-537-0207





another new owner took over.

During our visit, we heard the story over and over, from organized efforts in tents, to various race organizers, timers and general enthusiasts. The track is typically even shorter now, and thinning is becoming alarming and treacherous in spots, at times. Today's Save the Salt Coalition is seeking reinstatement of the 1997-2002 program, or an initiative that restores the salt at an equivalent rate. Their goals are to bring those mass quantities of salt back to the Bonneville Salt Flats over an extended period of months, to replenish with as much salt as is removed, or more, given the years of attrition, and that this salt be of the same quality as, or better quality than, that which was removed, and, most ambitious of all, that no more salt be removed from the Bonneville Salt Flats region.



The Save the Salt Coalition is still working with both the BLM and current potash plant owner Intrepid Industries. "While there is still a lot more to be done," they say, "our vigilance appears to have paid off, not just for the racing competitors but also by preserving this historical natural treasure, the Bonneville Salt Flats, for future generations." On the ground at World of Speed, though, the urgency of the situation remained a hot topic.

### WENDOVER AIRFIELD MUSEUM

Wendover, Utah has another site of national significance—Wendover Airfield. Its claim to fame is rooted in a combination of pride and controversy, so funding has been light and many are unaware of its existence. The Airfield was quickly (and comprehensively) built during World War II, and it is where crews were trained in loading and delivering the world's first nuclear bombs, the ones dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Wendover is the only remaining field from that time and still has over a hundred of the 668 structures built on over 3 million acres—the largest military reserve in the world—from 1940 to 1945: hangars, barracks, a control tower, mess hall and operations buildings. Favorable desert air and low traffic due to low awareness, plus a general lack of development in Wendover, have kept much of the facility intact. At the height of operations, Wendover Airfield hosted a population of 20,000 on base. One B-29, eight B-17 and twelve B-24 bombing groups were formed and trained there. The enormous hangar shown at left was built in record time to house the Enola Gay for secret modifications to haul its heavy payload, while Manhattan Project crews test-dropped over 150 prototypes in the desert.

Wendover Airfield has received a Preserve America's Communities planning grant, and its buildings are listed on the National Historic Register. Additional fundraising efforts are underway to raise the facility's profile and perform upgrades. Restoration work is beginning already, with the hangar due to receive a reskinning of its roof. Efforts are being coordinated through a partnership between the private Historic Wendover Airfield organization and Tooele County.

Wendover operates for general aviation and a regular run of commercial flights bringing gambling enthusiasts to the gateway of West Wendover, Nevada.

The control tower building includes a growing museum and low-key gift counter, while various test, control,



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### WENDOVER AIRFIELD MUSEUM

Wendover, Utah is just two or three miles west of the exit to the Bonneville Salt Flats. Wendover Airfield is on the south edge of town, in Utah, on the Nevada state line.

Historic Wendover Airfield, Inc.  
1940 East 10980 South  
Sandy UT 84092  
801-571-2907  
[www.wendoverairbase.com](http://www.wendoverairbase.com)  
James S. Peterson, President  
[admin@wendoverairbase.com](mailto:admin@wendoverairbase.com)





administrative and barracks buildings are preserved and slated for additional preservation and renovation. Flights in a historic Navy or Air Force T-33 jet can be scheduled when you visit.

### MILLER MOTORSPORTS PARK

People like Henry Ford or Steve Jobs can make even the most accomplished individual marvel at how much one person can achieve in one lifetime. The same can be said



### MILLER MOTORSPORTS PARK

Miller Motorsports Park is just 30 miles from Salt Lake City Airport, an easy stop en route to the Bonneville Salt Flats, or an easy flight up and back for a day on the track. Over a dozen events run per year; a season pass is just \$110 through December.

Miller Motorsports Park  
2901 N Sheep Lane  
Tooele UT 84074  
435-277-RACE (7223)  
[www.millermotorsportspark.com](http://www.millermotorsportspark.com)

of Larry Miller. You'll recognize his name from his auto dealerships: he had 41 in total throughout the western US, many of them in Arizona. Miller also owned the Utah Jazz basketball team and the Triple-A baseball Salt Lake Bees, high-profile real estate and business holdings including shopping malls, Megaplex Theatres, KJZZ-TV, the EnergySolutions Arena, a chain of sports apparel stores, an advertising agency and more. Miller and his wife Karen were also well-known for their philanthropy. They raised five children and had 26 grandchildren.

Miller's early life included heavy involvement in softball, drag racing and construction. (He raced actively from 1963 to 1970, from about age 19 to 26.) A parts

and service job at an auto dealership was his gateway into the Larry Miller dealership empire.

Miller Motorsports Park began as a personal quest: Larry Miller and some of his buddies needed a place to drive. Starting with a budget of \$5 million, the project generated so much interest, it grew into an \$85 million project. A handful of personally interested enthusiasts thus built a racetrack on a par with—or exceeding—many a professional racetrack.

The main racetrack is a clever split layout. The full track is a 4.486-mile 23-turn circuit—the longest road-racing track in North America—which can be divided into two separate and complete tracks, each 2.2 miles long, which can host events simultaneously. The front straightaway easily accommodates speeds of 200 mph. The outer course hosts AMA superbike events running at over 100 mph. (MMP also hosts the time trial stage of the Tour de Utah bicycle race.)

A 20-acre paddock features 220 team garages, 40 day garages, 27 Grand Prix garages along the hot pits, an on-site medical facility and helicopter pad, a vintage car museum, and a five million dollar Club House.

We started our tour at the museum, guided by the facility's John Gardner, who we knew from his days as ad director at Vintage Motorsports Magazine (in Florida) some years back. The museum is somewhat reminiscent of the Penske Racing Museum in north Scottsdale, in that it's largely based on Larry Miller's personal circle of experiences and acquisitions, though the common thread is "vintage" as much as "racing." Prepare to spend a good hour in here, or more depending how much specific detail you want to get into. Every car, poster and piece of memorabilia in there has a story.

From the museum, we drove the entire perimeter, ending up at the Club House (some of which is a big of a museum in its own right.) With dining facilities and an outside deck overlooking the track, this is a primo spot to watch the races. Membership has its privileges.

MMP also has a kart track, 0.89 miles long, and though we didn't know it was on the agenda and hadn't eaten all day, we ran a full ten-lap race there with several other media types. Our group included Québécois Grand Prix racer Simon Dion-Viens, who beat the rest of us handily (just a tick off a track record without even trying), but a serious run was made by all.

To decompress, we then took a ride on the facility's Zip Line, a hair-raising backwards climb in a light double seat to its 150-foot height, with a quick release and rapid descent along its 700-foot length.

The kart track at Miller Motorsports Park opened in September 2005 and the main track in April 2006. Sadly, Larry Miller passed away in February 2009, at age 64, but his sons are ensuring continuity of operations. Whether to race, be a spectator, tour the museum or perhaps house your vehicles in this cool high-altitude climate, Miller Motorsports Park is a must-see destination. ■

