

Land of Extremes

QUESTIONS? Contact Local Content Editor Richard Montenegro Brown at rbrown@ivpressonline.com or 760-337-3453.

SHOWCASES THE BEAUTY OF THE DESERT

Desert in the round: a panoramic view



Images taken in Carrizo Gorge that are part of the 360 panoramic that will be part of the exhibit. PHOTO COURTESY OF IMPERIAL VALLEY DESERT MUSEUM

BY NEAL V. HITCH

Special to this Newspaper/Imperial Valley

We are in the final stages of the fabrication of the permanent exhibit at the Imperial Valley Desert Museum. We are down to the point of developing the media and interactive computer programs, which will be unique to our exhibit.

Currently, we are working on the Land of Extremes introductory touch screen 360 panoramic interactive.

This will be the primary interactive exhibit that showcases the beauty of the desert and our regional destinations. It requires the development of a unique program that will run a touch-screen computer, mirrored to a 9-foot-by-12-foot LCD projection.

The program will allow a visitor to view the desert around the museum and visitor center from a 360-degree perspective.

From the first screen there are options to get to secondary locations, which will be unique landscapes or hiking destinations.

The program is being developed by GIGAmacro in Napa. The company founder is a technology innovator with a passion for developing scientific tools, exhibits, and educational programs that provide ways of exploring the world.

He has been very hands-on with our project.

The big picture

The computer program that most people will interact with does not happen without first seeing the "big picture," so to speak.

Typically, the panoramic images that are used for a panoramic interactive are taken by a professional photographer working with GIGAmacro.

We are completing a very big exhibit on a very small budget, however, and the cost of getting a photographer to some of our locations quickly became cost prohibitive.

In December, museum staff were trained how to use the 360 panoramic camera and over the last three months we have been hiking to various destinations and shooting the panoramics ourselves.

This has involved finding a great location, setting up the camera, and setting up the Gigapan 360.

The Gigapan unit shoots the 360 automatically, taking up to 260 images to document a single location.

Usually, multiple panoramics were shot with the camera to insure we got what we needed. In some cases, multiple trips were required to photograph different light

conditions or because there were problems with the first results.

Once the panoramics were successfully shot, they were sent to GIGAmacro.

They are currently being stitched together and content is being imbedded in the graphics.

Locations and destinations

There are some remarkable locations in the Imperial Valley region. The museum is surrounded by state park lands, a national park and wilderness areas.

Many locations where the landscapes are amazing are difficult to get to. They require a hike or an off-road vehicle, or in most cases both.

One of the biggest issues was waiting on a day with perfect weather.

The best day for shooting large views of the Valley, it turns out, is the day right after a storm.

The skies are clear, no dust in the air, and there are a few clouds to give some interest.

Over the last several weeks we have had two storms come across the Valley.

This provided a good opportunity, but a very limited window.

Carrizo Gorge is a destination many people know about, but it very difficult to get to. It offers spectacular views of a desert canyon, but it is also the location of 11 miles of the San Diego and Arizona Eastern Railway, a line known as "The Impossible Railroad."

The 11-mile stretch running through Carrizo Gorge took eight years to build, and contains 17 tunnels and many trestles, including the Goat Canyon Trestle.

This wooden trestle is 630 feet long and 186 feet tall. It is the tallest curved wooden trestle in the world.

The hike

Carrizo Gorge and the Goat Canyon trestle can be reached by hiking up through Montero Palms, a well-known hiking destination in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.

The trail head is just a few miles from the museum in Ocotillo. The hike is up and over the Jacumba Mountains. It is approximately a three-hour hike with a gain in eleva-



Initial sketch of the Land of Extremes interactive exhibit designed by Dean Weldon Exhibits.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF IMPERIAL VALLEY DESERT MUSEUM

tion of about 1,500 feet.

We shot the 360 panoramic image of the gorge last weekend between storms.

The trip seemed chancy when we started. But we were able to get a good break in the weather with nearly perfect light and cloud cover.

Land of Extremes interactive

We have not seen the finished product yet, only test images up on the big screen we are building this week at the museum.

The locations that we have been able to capture with the 360 camera are some of the most remarkable places that a person could ever see.

When the exhibit is up, we hope it inspires hikers and adventure seekers to get out into the desert and experience what the Imperial Valley has to offer.

If you cannot make these hikes, however, the Land of Extremes interactive will offer a nearly life-sized view of what there is to see.

Neal V. Hitch is director of the Imperial Valley Desert Museum.



Taking 360 degree panoramic images in Valley of the moon.



The user interface of the interactive will be on a touch screen with icons for locating destinations and activities in the Imperial Valley region.