

## The Great Salt Lake

It would be a grave omission, having spent six months in Salt Lake City, to fail to mention the geographical feature for which the city is named. The Great Salt Lake (this is what it is called locally to distinguish it from the city which is called just plain Salt Lake) is located in a wide valley bounded by the Wasatch range on the east and the Lakeside mountains to the west. It is 80 miles long, 30 to 40 miles wide and it is at an altitude of 4300 feet above sea level.

The nearest point on the lake to downtown is about fifteen miles. It is visible from my apartment window as a thin silver streak that becomes more intense as the afternoon wears on. At the nearest point to the city there is a refreshment stand. You can go swimming there if you care; there are dressing rooms and fresh water showers. As you approach the lake, it begins to smell a bit like the sea. If you approach

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the water's edge in the wrong season you will find a barrier of black flies hopping around in the sand. Jump over the flies toward the lake and all is clear.

The lake is pronouncedly salty to the taste, though my recollection is that it is less salty than the Dead Sea in Israel. It is said to contain  $4\frac{1}{2}$  billion tons of salt and 120 million tons of potash. The salt is harvested constantly (Morton's) by pumping the water into evaporating ponds , and allowing the sun to evaporate the water. Then more water is pumped in until a layer of mineral is built up. There are no fish in the lake, but there are many tiny shrimp about a quarter inch in length.

The lake is the sad relic of a much larger and deeper fresh water lake perhaps 150 miles wide and 350 miles long which geologists designate as Lake Bonneville. Lake Bonneville was around as recently as 10,000 years ago. The "shore line" of Lake Bonneville is visible. It extends for miles as a kind of shelving jutting out from the adjacent mountains.

The lake is fed by underground springs and by several rivers, the largest of which, the Bear, is is reputed by geographically minded boosters to be the largest river in the United States whose waters

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do not reach the ocean.

There are a number of islands in the lake. The largest, Antelope Island, has a striking mountain on it and is visible from the city. The islands have colonies of birds, prominent among them are the pelican and the gull. The gull plays a particular role in Mormon hagiography since they miraculously descended to consume a plague of grasshoppers that were threatening the crops. There is a herd of buffalo on one of the islands. There are deer, coyotes and many other smaller animals.

The 250 mile periphery of the lake is not accessible to the average tourist driving the average car. There are only four or five normal roads that come down to the edge of the lake. There are many jeep roads and with some precautions one can drive at will over hundreds of square miles of salt flats. The uninitiated are warned against this and the experts themselves hardly ever go to the remote areas alone and then only after they have equipped their cars with food, protective gear, and extra gasoline, tires, fan belts, etc.

When you stop and think of it, there is a good reason for this lack of access. They are not necess-



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*From high atop the island, a spectacular view unfolds across the lake toward Antelope Island.*



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try as the lake has few recreational charms. You can't fish in it and after the first few minutes in it the swimming is vile. There is a fair amount of sailing on the lake but the peculiarities of the shore line and the crystallization of the salt on the hulls pose special problems. It comes down to this: only a very few Great Salt Lake nuts "do" anything with the lake. It is largely ignored by the Utahns and for good reasons.

