

Wells, Nevada

An Explorer's Field Guide

HERITAGE • GHOST TOWNS
ALPINE LAKES • COWBOY COUNTRY

41.11° N • 114.96° W
Elko County • NV

WELCOME

The town most people only see from I-80

Wells sits at the gateway to some of the least-visited and most spectacular public land in the American West. Most travelers stop for gas and keep driving. This guide is for the ones who slow down.

Within a short drive of town you'll find California Trail wagon ruts, a ghost town built for 7,500 people, a cold glacial lake at about 8,400 feet in the East Humboldt Range, and trails into the East Humboldt Wilderness. The town itself has full services, decent lodging, nearby camping, and a few thousand people who are genuinely glad you're there.

We built this guide from our own trip: three days and two nights in June 2026, camping above town and exploring every stop in these pages. It grew out of a creator visit for Nevada's Cowboy Country and its *Summit to City* campaign.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

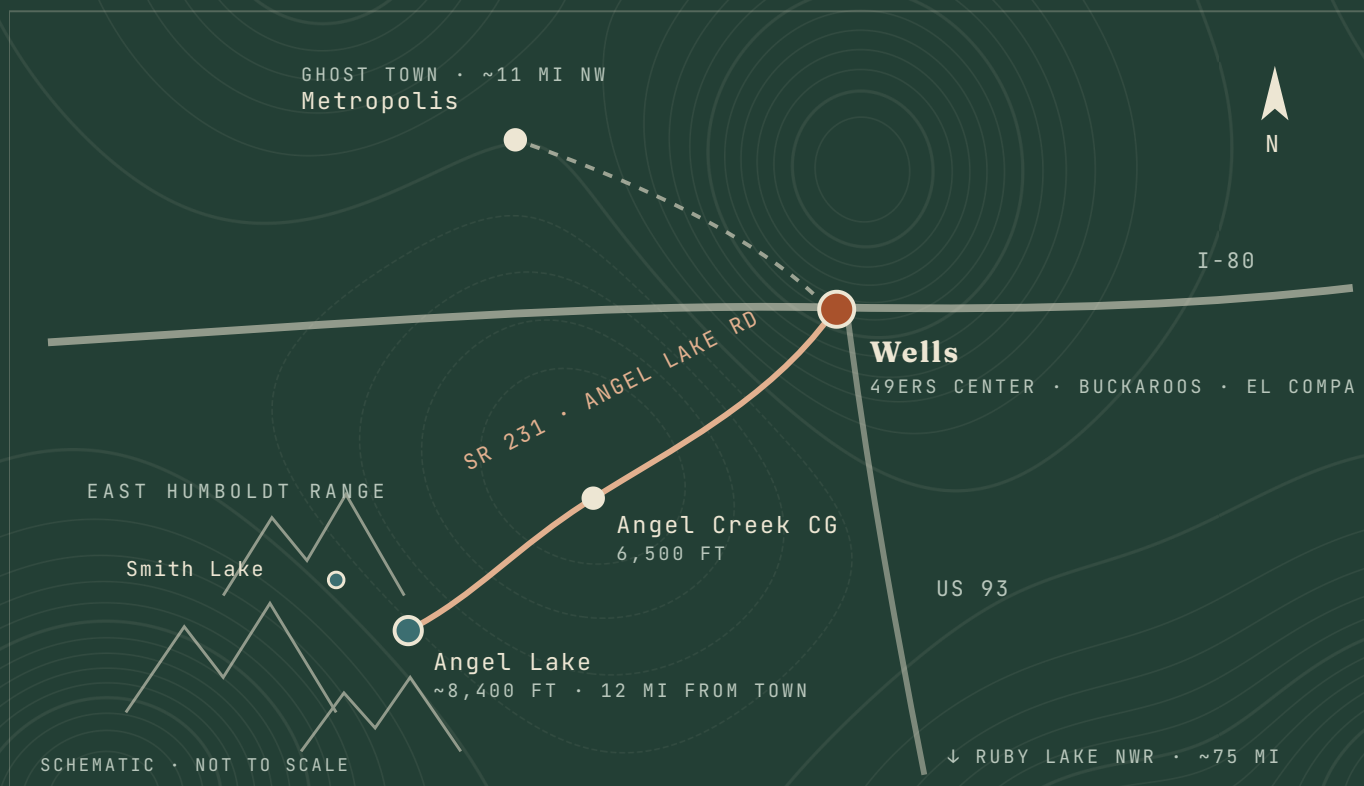
Stops run in the order we'd drive them: town and heritage first, then up the mountain to the lakes. Each stop lists how long to allow, the best time of day, and what it costs. Practical details are collected at the back.

AT A GLANCE

WHERE	Northeast Nevada, at the junction of I-80 and US 93
TRIP	2–3 days. We did 3 days, 2 nights
BEST TIME	June and September. Mountain campgrounds generally open Memorial Day to Labor Day
ROADS	Angel Lake Road is paved. Not maintained in winter
STAY	Camp at Angel Lake or Angel Creek, reserved on recreation.gov
WATER	At Angel Creek. None at Angel Lake
DOGS	Welcome on a leash
RANGER	Wells USFS office (775) 752-3357

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Town below, mountains above



A THREE-DAY PLAN

MORNING

- DAY 1** Trail of the 49ers Interpretive Center, then a walk through downtown
- DAY 2** Sunrise at Angel Lake, then hike to Smith Lake
- DAY 3** Sunrise photos at Metropolis Ghost Town

AFTERNOON

- Lunch at Taqueria el Compa. Drive the byway and set up camp
- Swim, walk to the west end of the lake, sunset from camp
- Breakfast or lunch at Buckaroos before you hit the road



A board member at the Trail of the 49ers Interpretive Center shares the story of Wells.

STOP 1 • HERITAGE

Trail of the 49ers Interpretive Center

ALLOW 1 HR COST FREE WHEN ANYTIME

Start here. The center on 6th Street anchors the whole Wells heritage story. The California Trail, the route that carried hundreds of thousands of emigrant families west during the Gold Rush era, passes through Wells, and the headwaters of the South Fork of the Humboldt River begin here. You can still see original wagon ruts pressed into the landscape.

The board members who run the center were the highlight. They shared great stories about the history of Wells, and they're the reason to come in person instead of reading a sign.

Hours vary, so check locally before you go.

STOP 2 • TOWN WALK

Downtown Wells

ALLOW 1 HR WHEN ANYTIME

A compact downtown worth a slow lap on foot. Look for the old casino buildings, which tell their own story of the town's highway years, and the painted murals celebrating ranch country.



"Home Means Nevada" mural by Andy Woods, downtown Wells.

Cowboy country cooking

The food here is straightforward, generous and surprisingly excellent. It tastes best after a morning outside.



Buckaroos Hitching Post & Coffeehouse

ALLOW 1 HR WHEN BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER

The community hub. Come for coffee and a meal, stay to watch the game on TV, catch live music, or just talk to whoever's at the next table.



Taqueria el Compa

ALLOW 30 MIN WHEN ANY MEAL

Some of the best Mexican food we've had out of a food truck. Order the chicken quesadilla. It's one of the best we've ever had.



STOP 5 • HISTORY

Metropolis Ghost Town

ALLOW 3 HRS COST FREE WHEN SUNRISE, SUNSET, NIGHT
WHERE ~11 MI NW

A planned city for 7,500 people that never got the water it was promised.

The Pacific Reclamation Company laid Metropolis out as a farming town with concrete sidewalks, electric streetlights, a hotel, a school and a railroad connection. Then the water rights fell through, the crops failed, and the town emptied out.

What remains is the iconic brick archway, scattered foundations, and the shaft of one of Nevada's earliest elevators, standing in open sage under an enormous sky. It's free, and you'll likely have it almost to yourself.

This is a great spot for cool sunrise, sunset and nighttime photography.

RISE AND FALL

- | | |
|---------|---|
| 1911 | Streets and lots laid out |
| 1912 | A 100-foot dam is built. About 700 colonists arrive |
| 1913 | Water lawsuits. The company goes into receivership |
| 1925 | The railroad branch is abandoned |
| 1936-47 | The hotel burns, then the school closes |

Dates: Travel Nevada

RESPECT THE RUINS

Walls and foundations are fragile. Stay off the structures, take only photos, and leave every artifact where it lies.



STOP 6 • SCENIC DRIVE

Angel Lake Scenic Byway

ALLOW 30 MIN ROAD SR 231 • PAVED

Twelve miles from the I-80 interchange, Angel Lake Road climbs nearly 3,000 feet through rolling sagebrush foothills, aspen groves and mountain mahogany. It has been a Nevada Scenic Byway since 1995, and it's an experience on its own.

Heads-up: the road isn't maintained in winter and is dangerous in snow and ice. Watch for cattle on the road.

WHERE WE STAYED

Angel Creek Campground

ELEV. 6,500 FT FROM \$17/NIGHT

We camped here two nights, booked on [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov). It sits partway up the byway in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, with potable water and vault toilets. Cattle graze the area, so expect company on the road in and sometimes in the campground itself.

Generally open Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Angel Lake

ELEV. ~8,400 FT WHEN SUNRISE, SUNSET

If the town's heritage is Wells' story, Angel Lake is its superpower. The byway ends at a glacial cirque in the East Humboldt Range. Three sides of the basin are sheer rock walls, and the fourth is a dam holding back the clearest, coldest lake in this part of the country.

Walk the trail to the west end of the lake and look out over the lake and valley below.



A site at Angel Lake Campground.

Our pick for camping. Reserve a site at Angel Lake Campground and wake up for sunrise on the water. On a hot day, the lake is a cold, clear swim.

Smith Lake and the East Humboldt Wilderness

DISTANCE 2.5 MI OUT & BACK ALLOW HALF TO FULL DAY START ANGEL LAKE CAMPGROUND LOT

EFFORT SHORT BUT STRENUOUS



Lupine and wildflowers along the trail in June.

The trail leaves from the Angel Lake Campground parking lot and climbs into the East Humboldt Wilderness. Hiking up to Smith Lake was one of our favorite moments of the whole trip.

It's only about 2.5 miles out and back, but it works you. Part of it runs along an exposed ridgeline, and there's a short scramble near the end where you need to watch your footing.

Strong hikers can push on to more alpine lakes: Greys Lake and Boulder Lake. If you'd rather not, the Angel Lake shoreline and picnic area are reward enough.



A cold reward at Smith Lake.

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME

Further afield

Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge

DRIVE ~75 MI SOUTH OPEN YEAR-ROUND, DAYLIGHT

World-class birding and bass fishing at the foot of the Ruby Mountains. The South Marsh supports the largest population of nesting canvasback ducks west of the Mississippi outside Alaska, and the refuge is a Globally Important Bird Area.

Getting there: US 93 south 27 miles, SR 229 west 14 miles, then Ruby Valley Road south. The last 30 miles are well-maintained gravel. Check road conditions with refuge headquarters from November through May.

Spruce Mountain Mining District

BRING ATV OR HIGH CLEARANCE

About 135 years of mining history and ATV trails linking five ghost towns. Worth a look if you have an extra day and the right vehicle.

The Cowboy Corridor

Open-range ranch country surrounds Wells in every direction. Slow down for cattle and enjoy the drive.

Everyone we met in Wells was the very definition of "good people." This is a town that deserves much more than a pass-through for gas.

Practical notes

CAMPGROUND	ANGEL LAKE	ANGEL CREEK
ELEVATION	8,350 ft	6,500 ft
FROM WELLS	12 mi on SR 231	About 8 mi on SR 231
NIGHTLY FEE	\$18 single · \$36 double	\$17 single · \$34 double
WATER	None. Bring your own	Potable water
TOILETS	Vault	Vault
BOOKING	recreation.gov. A few first-come sites	recreation.gov. Some first-come sites
SEASON	Generally Memorial Day to Labor Day. Dates change with weather	

When to go. Spring and fall avoid the summer heat in the valley. Up the mountain, snow often lingers into early summer, so June and September are the sweet spots for the lakes.

Roads. Angel Lake Road is paved and fine for any car in season. It isn't maintained in winter and is dangerous in snow and ice. Call the Wells USFS office at (775) 752-3357 for conditions.

Supplies. Wells has plenty of options to fuel up and stock up. Do it before you head up the mountain.

Dogs. Welcome on a leash.

Accessibility. The campgrounds and the area by Angel Lake are easy to get around. The Smith Lake trail is not, with a steep, exposed section and a scramble.

Watch for. Cattle on the road and in the campground. Cold water and altitude at the lakes. Ice and snow outside summer.

Leave No Trace. This is public land and wilderness. Pack out everything, camp only in established sites, stay off the ruins at Metropolis, and follow current fire restrictions.

Fees, seasons and distances from the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. Information checked October 2026.

IF YOU ONLY HAVE ONE DAY

*"You must visit Angel Lake and catch
some great views."*

Night at Angel Creek Campground

Wilderness Ahead

Real people. Real trails. Stories that bring visitors. We make on-location content and field guides for destinations and outdoor brands.

wildernessahead.com · wildernessahead@gmail.com
@wildernessahead on Instagram and TikTok

Made in partnership with Nevada's Cowboy Country as part of the *Summit to City* campaign.

SOURCES

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest (Angel Lake and Angel Creek campgrounds) · Travel Nevada (Metropolis Ghost Town, Angel Creek Campground) · U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Ruby Lake NWR) · Nevada Scenic Byway designation for SR231. Photos and stories: Wilderness Ahead.

Conditions change. Check with land managers before you go. © 2026 Wilderness Ahead.