

THE LAST FREE PLACE IN AMERICA

WAYWARD ARTS/VOLUME 4/ISSUE 6

Live the life you love.

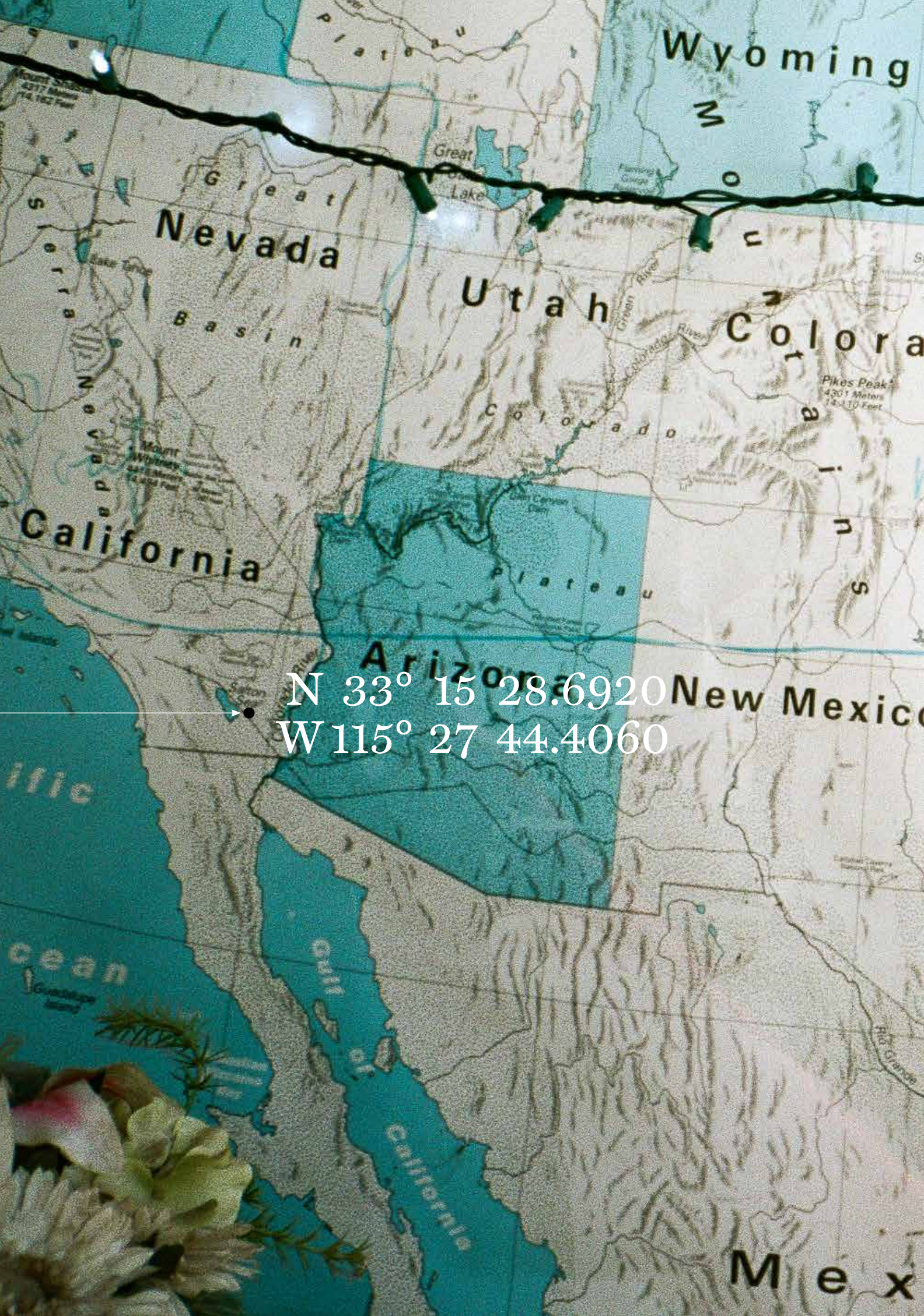
NILAND, CALIFORNIA

Slab City

In the middle of the Californian desert, 140 miles east of San Diego, there's a city that goes completely dark at night, save for the odd solar-powered light. There's no electricity grid in Slab City, and no running water or sewage. It's really more of a squatter's campsite than a city. There's no mayor here, no government, and visits from county police are rare. Slab City used to be on the grid—originally the area was Camp Dunlap, Marine training grounds during the Second World War. Dismantled in 1946, the leftover concrete foundations provide clean surfaces—the slabs—on which to park an RV, pitch a tent, or build a primitive structure.

Thousands come to Slab City from the north during the cold season, but as the temperatures rise to 120 degrees in the summer, the majority of them roll away. Giant tarantulas crawl out of their holes to replace those who flee, joining the 200 or so "Slabbers" that call this last wild frontier their permanent home.

Some Slabbers are running from the law, others running away from home. Some were spit out of the American dream during the economic collapse, while others never found acceptance anywhere else. They live on pensions or food stamps, whatever they can beg or barter, and—whether they mean to be or not—are all part of an experiment in sustainable living. Surrounded by a society of gross overabundance, residents of Slab City exist without material comforts and all their attendant laws and landlords. Those who live in this capital of counterculture like to call it "The Last Free Place in America."





AMERICAN DREAMERS

This young romantic hopes to sell his trailer so he can buy a truck and show his girlfriend America. She's never been outside of Niland and Slab City. In the meantime, he works on an underground cave in which to escape the heat.





SECOND IMPRESSIONS

I got my first impression of Slab City before I ever set foot there. This well-known California counterculture has often been documented, but mostly as a down-and-out last resort for washed-up freaks and drug addicts. In fact, because of this, I feared I'd encounter trouble upon arriving and might have to turn right around after a day and leave. As it turned out, this isn't what I found at all after driving my rented van past the welcome booth, and pulling up to a ramshackle internet café. There, I was greeted instead by a one-man welcoming committee named Wandering Bob. Bob, an affable merchant marine from Louisiana, told me I could park next to his spot and then he showed me around and introduced me to others. He was friendly with them all—the nomadic “dirty kids” just passing through, the Snow Birds escaping civilization for the season, the creatives who worked on Slab City’s art projects, and everyone in between.

With Bob as my guide, I learned during my short stay that there’s more to the story of this community. While many Slabbers come to this place alone, they soon find each other. People from all of Slab City’s subcultures gather at the pirate radio station trailer for acoustic night, or head to The Range for the weekly talent show. There’s movie nights and drum circles. Everyone is welcome, and indeed, the greatest freedom Slab City offers may be the freedom from judgment. While no laws govern this place, there’s an underlying rule that as long as you stay here, you are accepted for who you are. You can carve out your little space within the vast desert and just do your thing, whatever that may be.





THE GOOD LIFE

Set adrift when he lost his business after the economic collapse, this man and his partner decided to become nomads. "It's a blessing to live this lifestyle," he says.



“PEOPLE
CALL ME
A NUT,
BUT I’M
SCREWED
ON THE
RIGHT BOLT
AND THAT’S
JESUS
CHRIST.”



RUNNING ON FAITH

When this chef prayed to the Lord, the Lord told him to come to the desert to cook food for others. Slabbers are fed surprisingly well in exchange for whatever they can pay.



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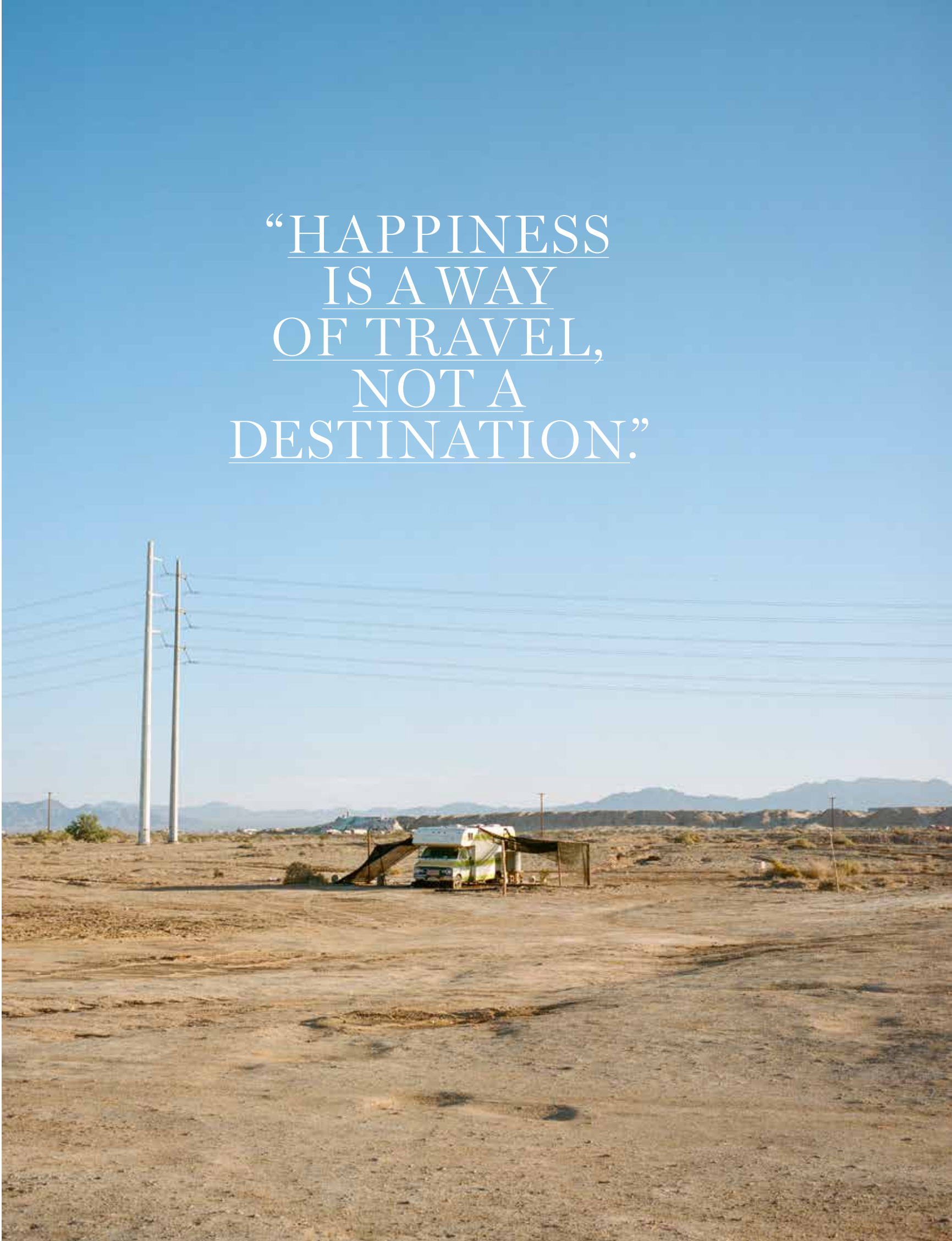
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ONLY THE LONELY

One of many subcultures within this desert subculture, the LOWS (Loners on Wheels) camp is for singles only.



“HAPPINESS
IS A WAY
OF TRAVEL,
NOT A
DESTINATION.”

glue section

A large roadside sign in a desert landscape. The sign is shaped like a mountain and features the text "GOD NEVER FALLS" on a wooden top section and "SALVATION MOUNTAIN" on the main body. The word "LOVE" is written in small letters at the base. The sign is decorated with colorful circular patterns. The background shows a clear blue sky and distant mountains.



Off the grid but still with access to Wifi, Slab City residents gather at the Internet café for their favourite TV shows and some company.



TUNE IN

An artist from NYC runs a pirate radio station out of his solar-powered Airstream.





Wayward Arts

Wayward Arts is a inspirational monthly magazine showcasing the pure unfiltered spirit of Canadian graphic design. Each month a prominent Canadian design studio will design a new issue filled with innovative design, featuring specialty printing and finishing techniques. Every issue will be an unpredictable expression of creativity!
waywards.arts.ca

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Jim is a Toronto-based freelance graphic designer and photographer. He believes great design is driven by strong, differentiating ideas. Working strategically with clients, he helps them deliver their key messages with words and images in perfect balance. His trip to Slab City was his first-ever time sleeping in van, which he found surprisingly comfortable.
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