Exploring The Great Salt Lake: The Stansbury Expedition Of 1849-50

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Great Salt Lake is salty because it is a terminal lake, meaning that it does not have an outlet. About 50,000 years ago the river began flowing southward into western Utah through Cache Valley into the Great Basin. By 30,000 years ago, the diversion was complete, sending larger amounts of water into the basin. The climate at this time was much cooler and wetter than it is today because it was during the Wisconsin Ice Age. At the Gilbert and Stansbury lake levels the lake was a terminal lake, meaning there was no outlet. The level of the lake fluctuated with the seasons. The terraces are relatively flat areas which follow a contour line. Great Salt Lake, the shrunken remnant of prehistoric Lake Bonneville, has no outlet. Dissolved salts accumulate in the lake by evaporation. Salinity south of the causeway has ranged from 6 percent to 27 percent over a period of 22 years (2 to 7 times saltier than the ocean). The Dominguez and Escalante expedition reached Utah Valley, 50 miles south of Great Salt Lake, in 1776. The indigenous Timpan-gotzis Indians told them of a very salty lake in the valley to the north. The explorers were anxious to return to Monterey and did not investigate this saline lake. The Stansbury expedition entered Salt Lake Valley to make maps and describe the area in 1849 under the direction of the U.S. Government. The expedition succeeded in mapping the entire shoreline of the lake by 1850.