

Arco and Atomic City

In 1955, tiny Arco won fame as the world's first nuclear-powered city. Today, it mainly serves as a jumping-off point for excursions into the nearby [Craters of the Moon National Monument](#). Arco is one of Idaho's strangest little towns, although nearby Atomic City manages to be even stranger. And littler.



Besides the lava-scorched earth to the south and a range of mountains to the north which include both Idaho's highest peak (Mt. Borah) and its most awesomely-named (Appendicitis Hill) the most striking feature of Arco is its "Hill of Numbers". For decades, the senior classes of the local high school have been decorating the nearest mountain with the last two digits of their graduation year. Graffiti on a grand scale.

Arco's story has been tied to nuclear power ever since our country started experimenting with it. The reason that the government chose this corner of eastern Idaho as one of its nuclear sandboxes is fairly self-evident. Remote and sparsely-populated, Arco is the kind of place that a nuclear accident might go unnoticed. Or at least under-reported. Case in point: did you know that the USA's only fatal nuclear accident occurred in Arco, Idaho? In 1961, there was a core meltdown in the National Reactor Testing Station which killed three servicemen. [Uncle Sam clutches his chest in mock concern... "Oh, you didn't know about that?"]

Thirty miles to the southeast, Atomic City is even more closely associated to nuclear power than Arco. A ghost-town for all intents and purposes, Atomic City still clings to life with a bustling population of 29. We cruised slowly down the town's only street and were vaguely creeped out. Although we didn't see a soul, I