



Einstein's sile

DUSK has descended on Rattlesnake Mountain. A thin crescent moon hangs over the ridge, while Venus shines through thin wisps of cirrus clouds. The Yakima people call Rattlesnake “the land above the water”, apparently because it once

stood untouched while floods ravaged the plains below.

Today the treeless ridge stands 1000 metres high overlooking a silent sagebrush-covered steppe in the east of Washington state. Its silence holds secrets. “...The mountain’s folds and

shadows / roll with stars, soft April greens, and lupine / belying missile silos hidden in catacombs / and the waste of 50 years of atomic bombs,” wrote Washington’s poet laureate, Kathleen Flenniken, who grew up nearby.

In December 1942, US military



nice

Catching the faint murmurs of space-time requires a place quieter than quietness itself. Anil Ananthaswamy pays a visit

PHOTOS BY ANIL ANANTHASWAMY
personnel flying over Rattlesnake saw what they described as the perfect “isolated wasteland” in which to produce plutonium for the wartime push to build an atomic bomb. The fissile core of Fat Man, which laid waste to Nagasaki, was made here at the Hanford nuclear site. At

the height of the cold war, it was home to nine nuclear reactors and five fuel-processing factories.
Fly over Rattlesnake today and two rather different, enigmatic features stand out: a pair of concrete pipes, kilometres long and metres in diameter, shooting off

arrow-straight at right angles to one another on the stark plain below.
The ghosts of Hanford’s nuclear past are gathered in by the night, and the silence seems to intensify. But for what is going on inside those concrete tubes, no ordinary silence will be enough. ➤

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