

Come On Down, Sweet Virginia

Fock 2: Skyline Driving

When Richie and I fled DC on that debut roadtrip, though, we headed west. We bopped on up to Front Royal to find the opening to Skyline Drive. While we were in the area, we came upon Ruby Falls, and had our first taste of spelunking.

The caverns and the falls were very cool: all those stalactites and stalagmites sticking up and down – or down and up? – and flowstones all around. Colored lights were rigged up throughout the caves to make everything seem less like just rocks. The Falls itself was pretty puny – kinda like a garden hose pouring down a chimney – but the overall experience for a first-time spelunker was good.



However, beware the bumper stickers! When we came out to the parking lot after our tour – we couldn't just wander around like we could at the Capitol, we had to be part of a tour – there was a Park Employee crouching behind a car. He was there for a moment, then scooped over and crouched behind the next car, then the next. As we got closer, we could see what he was doing: putting big ugly bright bumper stickers on every car! And not on the bumper that people would see when they came out from the cavern; the plan was to have people be totally ignorant of the fact that they were driving around as mobile billboards for Ruby Falls. Clever attempt at free advertising, I suppose, but pretty despicable.

"I hope you didn't put one of those on that van!" I shouted at the crouching man in my best menacing tone.

He stammered a weak response that he hadn't gotten down there yet.

"Well, don't even THINK about it!" I warned him angrily.

He looked confused and paused in his task. I continued to berate him for doing such an odious thing. He looked back blankly, apparently surprised that somebody would actually object to his gluing garish paper to a stranger's car. He began to object that it wasn't even my car, so why should I care, but I countered by suggesting that we go inside, find the owners of all these cars, and see how many like the "free" bumper sticker bonus. Even Richie was a wee bit puzzled by my ire.

But if your car looks good, why the hell would you put some ugly sign on it? The only vehicles I ever adorned with such meretricious stickers were ones that were on a downslide from their prime anyway, and a little spot of color could only help. But even at that, the stickers tended to be pretty tame.

Some of them were ones I made myself. Probably the most eye-catching one was the one on my '66 Plymouth Belvedere that read in simple lettering: "Caution: Blind Driver." I entertained the notion of strapping long white, red-tipped poles to my fenders, but potential navigational problems in tight traffic nixed that idea. Plus, I figured it would be kind of a shit-on to blind people – not that they'd see it. [Hey! Did I say that!?!]

So, anyway, we drove down into the town, stopped at 7-11, and when we hit the road again, we saw two cars with RUBY FALLS bumper stickers. Damn dupes.

Skyline Drive pretty much parallels both I-81 and the Appalachian Trail as you angle southwest across Virginia. While the Interstate takes a foothills path, Skyline Drive meanders across the succession of peaks as it carves a serpentine course through Shenandoah National Park. It costs \$10 to enter the Park, but given the length of the stay, and the



amount of scenery that will be seen, it's worth it. High-elevation Overlooks abound, steep acclivities sit unnervingly close, tunnels cut through rock that was too formidable to be removed, and deer graze placidly along the lushly forested roadsides.

The deer especially made an impression on Dugg when we were on the 1987 Roadtrip For Roadtrip's Sake Roadtrip. As we ambled up the early slopes of the Drive, with my "sporty" Dodge Caravan (named "Spuds") purrin' away, the roadside deer seemed totally unfazed. Occasionally one would lift its head and give us a disinterested look, but there was no scurrying for cover, no panicked pounces into the underbrush, not even a look of alarm.

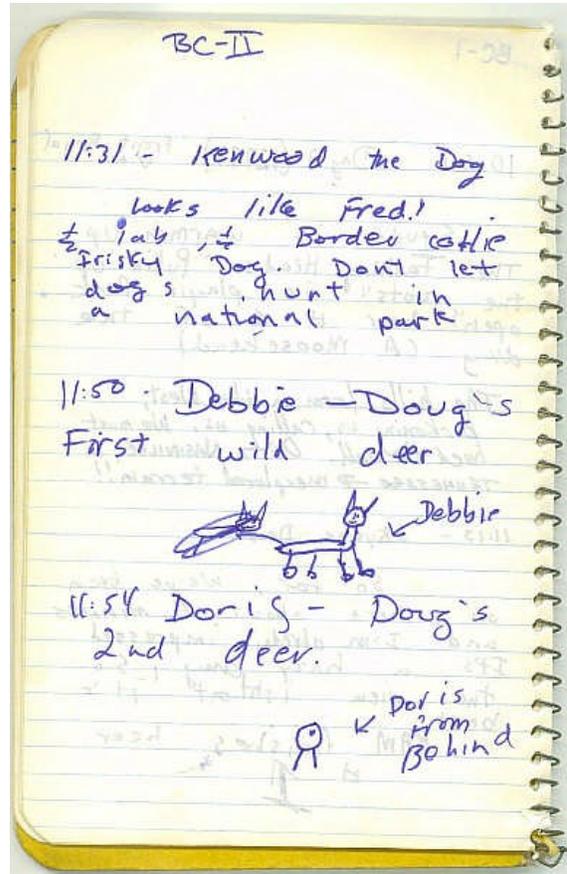
For Dugg, who was not yet into his redneck, hick, WVU stage of life, tame deer were something new. His state of moderate inebriation enhanced the experience quite a bit, as his Notbook entries demonstrate.

Though his rendering does manifest considerable artistic talent, the real Debbie (previous page) was much cuter. I'm sure you all would agree.

Humidity is the only drawback to the scenic views, as the moist summer air hangs in the valleys and only slightly mitigates the soothing vistas. It makes the air a bit more pale, as if the azure paint had been cut with ghostly white, and blends the vivid greens in the landscape with a dulling gray. The views themselves are still excellent, but if you drive Skyline Drive in summertime, you may find yourself saying "if only..."

It is a friendly road and a happy road. It's not unusual to encounter the same folks at numerous turnouts, everyone smiling and nodding as they share the views together. You drive a few minutes, pull out to absorb the views again, return to the winding road for a few more minutes, maybe even skip a turnout or two, then turn into another turnout and maybe linger long enough for a spam samich and a chilled bev as you enjoy the neggy ions. And people that you passed before drive on by.

But, if it's a turnOUT, why do you turn INto it? Hmmmm. Kinda turns you inside out, duddinit?



Roadrage2000 didn't take Skyline Drive, though, partly because of the been-there-done-that philosophy, and partly because Skott was going to be waiting for me late in the afternoon at his wilderness home in North Carolina. There would end up being an irony to that logic a few hours later.

The pleasing aesthetics of Virginia help the miles to pass quickly. You make good time, too, since the highway is never bogged down; even construction zones – the ever-present evil in the Interstate network -- are usually navigated with ease.

Virginia has some really nice free scenery, but I was very disappointed to find some rather aggressive gouging too. It was at an attraction called Natural Bridge, in the town of Natural Bridge, just around the Mile 175 exit for Natural Bridge. What it is, you see, is a natural bridge of stone. No, really. Not a particularly big deal, just a big span of rock connecting two high rock faces. Pretty damn tame compared to the formations that lay ahead in Utah. I couldn't see it being worth much more than a quick look, a shutter-snap, and that's it. Barely time to pick your nose.



But, there was a little time, and the detour was minimal, so I went for it. Signs proclaimed its wonder, and its numbers – 215 feet tall, 90 feet wide, 100 million years old – made it seem impressive indeed. The claim that it was one of the Seven Natural Wonders Of The World made me skeptical, though. Top Seven east of the Mississippi I could buy. Mayyybe top ten in the country. But the world??

There was a Hotel and Gift Shop, of course, and there were caverns. There was also a Wax Museum, a Toy Museum, a Monster Museum, and they may have even been constructing a Museum Museum.

Well, I had no need for all that tourist claptrap; I just wanted a good Nature pic to get the photographic ball rolling, so to speak. However, Natural Bridge itself could *not* be seen from the road. Buildings had been strategically placed to prevent accidental

viewing of the Natural Bridge. No, indeed, if you wanted to feast your eyes or your camera lens on this geological dandy, you had to fork over ten U.S. dollars. One sawbuck to glimpse a rock.

Cut the shit, will ya please? And those other features aren't free. No, no, Nanette. If you want to take in the cavern, OR one museum, that'll be \$14. Combo of two are a "bargain" at \$17, and you can do the whole shebang for ONLY \$22.50 per adult. Oh, that does not include Professor Cline's Haunted Monster Museum, which is a separate \$5 charge.

I gave the finger to the sign, and returned to Blue Man. He soothed my ire with music and libation, and I returned to I-81, a very slightly more bitter man.

Just a few miles before Natural Bridge, the Interstate system had dropped a subtle math quiz on any traveler keen enough to detect it. From Staunton to Buena Vista, I-64 and I-81 share one roadbed: 8-squared ($8 \times 8 = 64$) and 9-squared ($9 \times 9 = 81$) coexisting. I tell ya, you just can't drop your vigilance for a second. Then I-64 bid bye-bye and headed west, i.e., towards California. Of course, BM and I continued on I-81.

Somewhere along that route, there is a small green sign that apparently indicates some small waterway. But to a long-time track coach, the sign "Blacks Run" just makes you nod in appreciative agreement.

When the route to Sacramento turns due south – *what? due south ???* – it leaves I-81 behind and takes up I-77, just beyond Pulaski, and, if anything, the ride just gets better. It's only about 33 miles to the NC border from that junction, but the road clammers up towards Beamer Knob and slips through Fancy Gap, right where the Blue Ridge Parkway crosses it, before dropping like a rock into Tarheel Country. Fancy Gap has an elevation over 3100 feet, and the state line sits at about 1100.

The view coming out of the final ridge is tremendous. The southeastern sky seems large indeed as the terrain shifts from mountainous to flatlands.

Even better than that, though, is the road itself. The grade gets slippery steep and the forces of physics take over. As with most such slopes, the highway describes a serpentine course down the hillside, with the switchback turns necessitating momentum-checking slowdowns. There are stretches within those few miles, though, where the roadway straightens out and you can sense that gravity is drooling.

It is a Runaway Truck zone. There are three Runaway Truck Ramps in that six-mile stretch. I've never seen a Runaway Truck, and I know I would NOT want to see one galloping like Secretariat in my



rearview mirror. But I see those ramps – those tongues of deep gravel that fork off into the upslope – and I wonder what it would look like to see a big rig go barrel-assing into one. It obviously happens fairly frequently, or they wouldn't even be there. Plus, there often seems to be a pair of deep parallel trenches, about a truck-width apart, extending well into the rocks. So, they do get used.

I don't imagine the driver of the rig is particularly entertained as he aims his out-control, fully-loaded, eighteen-wheeler into that stony safety net. But, someday when I have absolutely, positively NOTHING else to

do, I'd like to set up a little chaise lounge at the top end of the ramp, put a discreet cooler next to me, chill out on the ions, and wait for Rubber Ducky to go careening off the road and splash explosively into the loose little stones. I'd be up pumpin' my fists and YAHHHH-ing like one of those redneck morons at a WWF match.

Runaway Truck Ramps, as they are called on the highway signs, are officially named Truck Escape Ramps, and they are officially initialized as TER's in Highway Department parlance.

I have no idea why they don't use the same name on their signs as they do in their paperwork. Recent statistics indicate that 2450 trucks went runaway in a one-year period – that's nearly seven trucks a day! -- and that 2150 of those crashed into the almost 200 TER's around the USA. The other 300 must've done some serious damage. Brake failure due to overheating is the primary cause of those crashes.

That stretch of road in wintertime is a bear. When snow and ice thrive, avoid this drive.

However, on this sweet summer day, the clear skies and dry pavement made the descent into North Carolina a breeze. Blue Man reveled in gravity's pull, and his mighty roar had become a whispering purr by the time we left state number six behind.

My parting thought on Virginia, however, was that its nickname's just gotta go: The Old Dominion State. Please. Especially since it's something that goes back to King Charles II. He quartered the arms of Virginia on his shield in 1663, adding it to his other dominions of France, Scotland and Ireland. Now, unless they use the word "old" to suggest "that's the old way, but it ain't that way no more," it makes little sense that they would want to perpetuate that pre-independence status. They can come up with a much better nickname for such a fine state. If New Jersey can claim "Garden" as its nickname...

The state flag is a keeper, though. Apart from being too complex to draw, it's kinda cool. It's a woman – Virtue, some goddess or something – stompin' on a conquered tyrant, over the motto (in Latin) "Thus Always To Tyrants." It's pretty much a don't-screw-with-us attitude that women probably dig even more than men do, *if* they ever look closely at the flag, which, I will wager, they do not.

Ranked 12th in population among US states, Virginia has the same number of people as Burundi – wherever the hell that is -- and nearly as many as the province of Quebec.

By the way, the answer to that Math Question back there: 10,000. Duhhh. I really hope you got that right.

And, yeah, the Round Mile *is* a really dumb concept, thanks for noticing.