

ROCKIES and ROLLIES

Fock 3: Dandy Dunes, Gorgeous Gorge

Five years after that, on the return leg of the *Trans-Canada Trek*, Kelzo, Bobby and I, not yet sated with sights, and knowing that the droning roads of Kansas and the midwest lay between us and home, happened upon a place we had never heard of before. We rode Max through the scenic San Juan Mountains of southern Colorado, cruising Highway 160 from Durango to whatever generally east town 160 would take us to, and we spied a strange light brown blur all along the base of the distant Sangre De Cristo Mountains. That range was sharp and steep, and stood on the eastern edge of a long, flat, and arid plain. It wasn't desert, really, but it was dusty and sandy, and was full of withered grass and sage brush kinda stuff. The mountains were not towering, but they did create a solid, dark green line between the dry plain and the summer blue sky.



That all made sense, but the light brown part didn't. Our curiosity rose as we approached, and we gradually figured out that we were looking at the biggest sand dunes we had ever seen. The scale was hard to discern, since we still had this stupid Boston-area feeling that [The Great Blue Hill](#) (elev. 635') was the biggest hill ever. Given that perspective, the dunes looked like, well, dunes.

We had time on our side, and enough curiosity, and the vague notion that this was where six-time USA National Cross Country Champion Pat Porter, who (we believed) hailed from nearby Alamosa, did his grueling dune runs. And, as confirmed runners, we felt we had to

visit this shrine.

It was amazing. We stood at the edge of the parking lot and looked out at the vast field of towering, pure, soft, sand. There were no weeds, no rocks, no impurities of any kind. This was Nature's fine sand, swept from the plain by the prevailing easterly winds, and deposited at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo by that great equalizer, gravity. The winds would pick up the finest granules and carry them eastward, but when the wall of mountains broke the smooth flow, and forced the air to turn 90° straight up, the sand just had to go. As a result, centuries of blow-carry-drop had left an astounding accumulation of beautiful sand standing separate and distinct from the ridge. And Great Sand Dunes National



Monument was the result.

Kelzo said simply, "Let's climb it." Bobby and I nodded assent. After all, we were all endurance athletes, this was merely a pile of sand, and we had an hour or so to kill.

It was brutal. Just plain brutal. We never even reached the top. Kelzo had the lead and we found ourselves trudging – and I do mean **trudging** – up the long side of this eternal dune. There was nothing to help us judge distance or size. Nobody else was on the dune. Nothing else was on the dune.



The Colorado air was thin, and the sand was unforgiving. You stepped forward four feet, and sank in about three. Net gain: one foot. Over and over. No shade either.

What started out as a lark soon became a quest, and we found ourselves grinding away with grim purpose.

Finally, I declared "no mas." Kelzo was ahead of me, his shoulders hunched in that "goddamnit, we're gonna do this" attitude, and Bobby was behind me, sweating and wheezing as much as I was.

I called a time out, and we sat our butts down on the comfortable sand. We took a quick vote and decided that none of us really gave a hyena's heinie if we made the top of the dirt pile or not. We sat in the sun and sand for a few, relaxing and catching our respective breaths, then decided it was time to dismount this dune. Bobby opted to linger behind for a photo op, to give posterity a sense of just Great this Dune was, and Kelzo and I plummeted down the slope like human avalanches.

It was incredible! We flailed our legs forward and splashed into the gentlest cushion of sand with each step. We fell and rolled and rose, fell and rolled and rose, laughing all the way down. The same dune face that had taken us almost forty-five minutes to almost-climb had been descended in about two minutes. Bobby then followed, mugging for the Pentax.

After we left there, we drove for a while, then pit-stopped in LaJunta, where we graced a public swimming pool with our presence. All we really craved was rinse of our sandy, sweaty, road-filmed bodies, but the diving board caught our attention, and then we, in turn, caught everybody else's attention with a dazzling array of backflips and spazflops into the deep end. The parents and lifeguards regarded us with caution, and maybe even horror; the kids all thought we were hilarious. But we got that coveted roadtrip amenity – a hot shower – and began our gallant gallop eastward, through Dodge, to St. Louis.

Roadrage2000 also went through LaJunta, and right past that public pool, but it was late at night, so no swim or shower or diving display would be happening. It was only an hour west of Lamar, and the unplanned nap had revived me a good bit.

Though the basic trip philosophy was to live and drive by the sun, this was not virgin turf, and was not green-dotted on the Rand-McNally, so there would be no significant scenery to miss.

But, at Pueblo, it was time to call it a night. Royal Gorge was not far beyond, and that sounded like a worthwhile take. So, with Pueblo being a good-sized city, with plenty of good-sized motels (and, hence, plenty of good-sized motel parking lots), Sleepy Time Time was decreed, and the Best Western seemed to offer the nicest parking area aesthetics.

For only the second time ever, though, I got roused from my chosen sleeping spot. At 2:23 a.m., less than an hour after settling in to BW's almost empty parking lot (it was a Thursday night), I heard a walkie-talkie rasp outside my screen window, and a husky voice say "Yeah, we better call the police on this one." I looked out, saw the Security golf cart, and the uniformed man with his clipboard (no doubt

listing all appropriate cars in the lot), and said, "No, you don't have to do that, I'll move." Ten minutes later, I was drifting off to dreamland in the Super 8 lot across the street.

The only other time I've been chased out of my chosen bed-down spot was about 15 years before, on Route 6 on Cape Cod. I had headed down at night, as I usually do, to beat the daytime traffic, and had pulled in to the Rest Area just before Exit 7 at about 2:30 a.m. to get some shuteye. A Statie -- that's what we Massholes call our State Troopers -- soon pulled in, and came rap-rap-rapping on my window, telling me to park here nevermore, and be on my way. I gave him my best you're-a-loser look, and said he could scrape up my carcass about 15 miles down the road after I nod off at the wheel, and that I only hoped I didn't smash into somebody else when it happened. I pulled into the very next turnout, only a few miles down the road, and was not disturbed. I'm sure Officer Unfriendly drove right by.

But this was the first hotel to oust me. My undoing was the emptiness of the lot. A big blue van with NY tags, parked away from the building, is going to stand out a little anyway, but when the lot is pretty full you blend in a lot better. Makes me wonder though: suppose I had been visiting somebody who was an honest-to-murgatroid guest at Best Western that night, and they towed me away? You know, like maybe the guest had made my acquaintance at some local Bingo parlor that night and had invited me up to the room to play Parchesi? My van would have been legit.

The Security guy said he was actually checking to see if the vehicle had been stolen and abandoned, but he made me leave anyway. He did it nicely though, so I didn't curse the damn bastard out too much.

Royal Gorge was first on the itinerary for the next day, Friday, July 7th. It sounded like a serious scenic treat: The World's Highest Suspension Bridge, 1035 feet above the canyon floor, though a mere quarter-mile long, offering vistas that would take one's breath away. It was a gorgeous day for visual gorging on a gorge: blue sky, with a few wispy clouds, upper-70's temperatures, and a light breeze.

Highway 50 climbed rapidly up into the high hills. The terrain, already more light brown than green, turned almost totally tan with rock and good clean dirt. A few twists and turns, and there we were. A small, manufactured, amusement-park-style village stood guard around the east end of the bridge. The gray steel towers rose up beyond it, beckoning with a "hey, come take a look!" allure.

I pulled up to the small booth, and greeted the booth girl affably. She returned my good nature, and I announced my intention to cross the bridge, and confirmed that I was, in fact, alone. I had my change cup at hand to cover whatever toll was about to be necessary.

"Fourteen dollars," she stated, much too cheerfully.

I was flabbergasted. It was as if someone had poured a big bucket of flabbergast all over my head.

"Fourteen dollars!" I ejaculated, spewing gast right out my flabber. "I just want to drive across the bridge!"

"Well," she replied, getting a bit defensive, and gesturing to the village, "there are all these games and attractions that are included in the price."

I reiterated my disinterest in such bushwa, and clarified that passage across the two-furlong span was all I sought, with the exception of stopping to take a few photos.

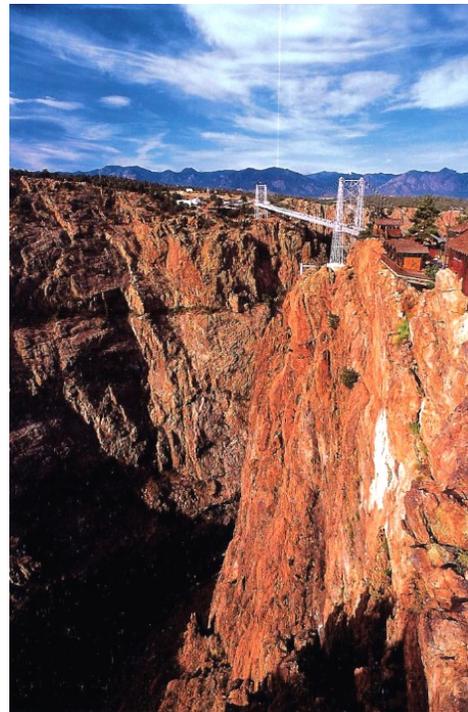
"Oh, there's no stopping on the bridge."

"So, you want fourteen dollars so I can spend less than one minute driving across a bridge, and I can't even take any pictures???"

I didn't wait for any further reply, and reversed Blue Man forthwith. We left an angry little cloud of dust as we spun out of that gouging gorge.

But then, just beyond the outer edge of the parking area, there was a sign indicating the way to a Scenic Overlook. "WTF?" I wondered aloud. Wary of another fee, we gave it a shot.

It was great. Structured almost like a balcony hanging out from the ledge, unoccupied, and **free**, it was just as good as going across the bridge itself. Part of the view was blocked by the curve of the



canyon, but I could leisurely soak in the sights, and save my somewhat limited funds for more noble (and more liquid) things. I guffawed over beating the system, and celebrated appropriately.

After a bit, we retraced our tracks down the mountain, and zoomed off to the west.

Beyond Royal Gorge, we reached the Highest Elevation of RR2K: 11,312 feet above sea level, at Monarch Pass, Colorado.

This point on the Great Divide in central Colorado was without a doubt Blue Man's toughest climb. For several miles, I put BM into overdrive and just settled into the right hand lane at about 40 mph. Lighter, sportier vehicles passed us by smugly, but, respecting my worthy steed's purposes and limitations, I offered no resistance, content in the knowledge that I would be far more comfortable snoozing in the back of my vehicle than that Accord owner would be in his. The couple of vehicles in my lane ahead of me were clearly of the same mind, and we scaled that mountain as a team.

It was quite a contrast to the Worst Drivers In The World on the Blue Ridge Parkway en route to Skott's deep-woods NC abode.

The view was spectacular. Tall, healthy pines stood all around, and a rest stop at the crest gave ample time to soak in the high Colorado landscape, as well as giving Blue Man a nice long chance to catch his breath. I caught mine too, inhaling deep and long, and exhaling with a grin.

Mountains are such a rush.

After a meaningless tour of the gift shop, we plunged down the Pacific side of the Continental Divide to a more lung-friendly elevation, to the town of Gunnison (7703'). This did even more good for the already-beaming mindset. It was about lunchtime – in other words, I was hungry – and a western style saloon struck my fancy. There was a formidable burger-and-beer hankering to attend to, and Timbers Bar & Grill seemed to smile and wave as we approached.

I always eat at the bar when the option is available. Maybe it's the proximity to the taps, and the comfort of knowing that my next beer is that much closer. Maybe it's the acquired preference of bartending over waitering. Maybe it's the temporary nature of your bar neighbors, who drift in and out as tables become available, or as drinks get bottomed up. Maybe I just like the tall chairs. Maybe it's the fact that the barkeep will be there at my beck and/or call, while my table server might be out in the back alley on one of those cigarette break things.

When I bartended at Uno's, the servers – and some of my fellow bartenders (i.e., the women) -- were notorious for their frequent tobacco time-outs. One Saturday night, as soon as a five-second breather appeared amid the fooding-and-boozing madness, Catherine declared, "everything is fine here, I'm going for a cigarette," and literally dashed from the bar. Of course, her exit signaled the return of Slam Time, as numerous customers suddenly craved (crove?) attention, and the order printer began the infuriating whirring and clicking that always made me gnash my teeth.

I eventually got fed up with being the non-smoking-shmuck, and started taking cigarette breaks of my own. The fact that I do not, did not, and never did smoke cigarettes seemed irrelevant to me: if they could take several minutes off from work and just stand around chit-chatting about their pain-in-the-ass customers, then so could I.

One of the new Assistant Managers tried to flex his authority once and came out in the alley while a few of us were out there. He saw the three servers smoking their lives away, and then asked me, "What are you doing?"

"Taking a cigarette break."

"Where's your cigarette?"

"I don't smoke."

He paused for a second, then seemed proud of an idea. "Sorry, you need a cigarette in your hand to take a cigarette break."

"Jen, can I bum a cigarette? Thanks." And I stood there smirkingly holding the unlit cigarette.

Not to be outfoxed so easily, he parried with "...and it has to be lit."

With a flick, Jen and Christie both had lighters lit and extended. I held the end of the cigarette over the flame – nowhere near my mouth – until it caught on fire. I smiled at the Assistant Manager, saying, "Don't you have a restaurant full of people to worry about?"

It was at that point that the whole concept of smoking struck me as more absurd than I had ever realized. I had to wonder: at what point in the evolution of man, did someone set fire to something, and then decide that sucking in the smoke was a whizbang thing to do.

I theorized that it began in a cave somewhere, or in some gathering of fur-clad or loin-clothed people who huddled close to the fire to stay warm. Somebody brought in some "brush" to fuel the fire. The brush turned out to be a leafy weed that gave off a different kind of smoke. After a few minutes they were all laughing their fur-clad or loin-clothed asses off. Once they figured out what caused the extraordinary mirth, they began to stick their faces in it and haul in huge breaths till they passed out from laughter.

Then, I guess, people started experimenting with smoking this and that, and the stuff that gave the favorite buzzes caught on...fire. Hahahahahaha.