

Utah Rocks

Fock 12: Cedar Breaking

So, now my sense of purpose became a Sense Of Purpose, and I gave Chief a lash of the whip and let him open up to full gallop.

Almost immediately after resuming our northerly course on 191, the landscape went desolate. This was the desert wasteland area of Utah. There would be no cries of “holyyyyy shiiiiit!” for a while. The terrain on both sides was empty, whitish-gray, with ugly little hills. But it was virgin territory for me! And I like being places I have never been before.

The northern path met up with I-70, and we turned west with the early afternoon sun, challenging it to a race to the horizon. Foolish challenge. The horizon is like tomorrow; it’s always right over there, but it always stays right over there. You go and go and go, and it’s still over there. It may look a lot different, but it’s still over there. After a few hours, the sun had an insurmountable lead, so I graciously admitted defeat, and turned back south onto Route 89 towards Zion.

I-70 had started out lifeless and grim, and I had begun to wonder. My good friend Jack, from Boulder City, Nevada, had spoken glowingly about this highway before. I had told him, after Roadrage2000, that I thought Routes 95, 24, and 12 across southern Utah were just plain goddishly damnishly gorgeous roads, and he had said, “Ha! Talk about beautiful, you shoulda gone 70.” Hence, I had high hopes. Plus, I-70 had green dots all along it in the Rand McNally, so I was confident that this road would start showin’ off at some point.

Well, I-70 did not live up to Jack’s tall talk – it did not rival the amazing variety of awesome cliffs that 95 through Glen Canyon had, nor the grandeur of Capitol Reef NP on 24, nor the phenomenal rounded white-boulder mountains of Escalante along Highway 12. Those, my droogies, are truly wow-ing roads. I-70 turned out real nice, mind you, but “real nice” is no match for “Wow!”

Those ugly hills gradually grew larger, turned more of a blonde shade, and became more scenically rounded. There was snow to be seen, though I never felt threatened by it; it was far away and on the tops of some very big mountains. Still, the late afternoon temperature at ground level in this high country was a shivering 67°.

At one point along that highway, I caught up to a couple that was traveling by motorcycle. It was the classic cruisin’ bike, with the big windshield, the elaborate console, and the full flowing fenders. It was a splendid shade of turquoise. Both the man driving and the woman lounging on the large back seat had big helmets with microphones and visors, and wore nice leather (or pleather) riding outfits. They were a splendid shade of turquoise. Behind their bike, they towed a matching trailer. Yep, turquoise. Splendid. Large enough to contain three or four dead bodies, it rolled happily (and splendidly) along on its two wheels. It even had a cooler strapped to the top. Want to guess what color the cooler was? Mmm-hmm.

I had only one thought: get a goddamn convertible! A big, cruisy, fancy-schmancy, turquoise T-Bird convertible. You’d have a trunk to put those bodies in, you’d have the open-air feeling – like you’d actually have the wind *in your hair*, instead of *on your helmet* – you wouldn’t need a freaking intercom to talk to each other, and, somewhat significantly, if it rains, you just put the top up and carry on instead of getting sopped by water pellets slamming into you at 70 MPH. You can be comfy and casual in shorts and a T, instead of wrapped like a mummy in those silly bodysuits under the 100° sun. And you won’t have to stop and unstrap the cooler if you want a bevviwev.

I mean, if they had been in tank tops and tattered jeans, with crappy old backpacks – like Dan and C had been on RR2K – then I’d say OK, stick with the bike and enjoy every extreme you get. But, if you have to tow a trailer, just get a freaking car, dude.

Route 89 South was a nice ride too, but after all the spectaculars that preceded it, it was hard to do anything more than just sit back, relax, nod a little, and say “that’s kinda nice.”

When I had made my itinerary, Cedar Breaks seemed like a likely take. But then I changed the route a little, and it was out. Then it was back in again. Now, it was out. There really were no scheduled stops on Day Five; it would just be drive-drive from Fisher Towers to someplace close enough to Zion, most likely the little town of Mount Carmel Junction. I had no idea what Cedar Breaks was, other than it was a National Monument, and it was about 25 miles off my route.

But, as Chief sped southward, and it was clear that there would be a good amount of bright, clear daylight left, the opportunity to be seduced by more scenery became available. Bryce Canyon was an obvious option. Totally surreal in its colors and shapes, Bryce is a true wow-er. But I did the sunset at Bryce in 2000, and the “next time” shtick for that Park was a day-long hike of its trails, not another quick sunset-then-leave.

On an impulse, I blew off Bryce, cavalierly tossed Cedar Breaks back into the mix, and took the right turn onto Route 14 to go there. Immediately there were signs warning of road closures in winter due to high snow accumulations, so I knew the elevation would be rising.

Sure enough, the road kept going up and the temperature kept going down. The sky was gorgeously blue, and the sun was blindingly white as it slipped lower in the totally clean and dry air. The road was lined on both sides by tall, healthy trees, including countless stands of pale-trunked aspens.

Strange fields appeared here and there on either side of Route 14. At first, it seemed as though some construction equipment had tilled entire fields, and left stove-sized chunks of black mud in toppled disorder. But there was no equipment anywhere, the fields had no pattern, nor was there any sign of a plan.

Then an information sign solved the mystery: they were lava fields. I had experienced lava before, at Lava Beds National Monument in northern California in 1990, when Bobby Bligh and I had done some spelunking in the strange, twisting, and even ice-bound underground caverns encased in ancient lava. But these were much more odd looking.

So I began to deduce that it was these lava things that were the big attraction of Cedar Breaks. Wrong, fish face! Very wrong!



I reached the first official Cedar Breaks Parking Area and readied myself for a little lookaround. The elevation was over 10,000 feet, and Chief's thermometer read 61°. I was in tank top, running shorts, and sandals. After all, 61° is NOT cold to a native New Englander. I could tell that this area would be getting very chilly indeed as night fell, but I'd be long gone by then.

I walked around Chief to get the camera, and ended up doing a quick tidy-up of a few things: packing empty cans into a trash box, placing the laptop back in its case, shoving some used clothes back into my duffle bag, that kind of stuff. With camera in hand, I hit the Lock button, took a step, and swung the door.

In the flash of a millisecond, my mind broadcast a message to my legs and arm and hand: **KEYS, shithead!!** It had always been something I wondered about with rental cars: what do people do if they lock the keys in the car? I asked a rental agent about that once and his succinct reply was “They're screwed.”

I whirled backwards and extended my right arm out as far and fast as I could, desperately hoping to arrest the progress of the rapidly swinging door. Best I could do was to get the very end of my fingers on the outer door frame, and the tip of my thumb on the inside. The door's momentum was too great for such feeble resistance, and it lodged itself into the door frame. With my thumb in it.

It hurt a lot. I could rant on about the excruciating pain that coursed through me, but I don't want to sound like some wussy pro baseball player. What was far more important than any thumb-pain, was the fact that that chubby little appendage had gotten just enough in the way to keep the latch from finishing its closing click.

And the thumbnail did its job. We rarely think about the practical purposes of our nails, but one of their two principal ones – shock protection for our sensitive feelers – really came into play here. There was a nasty black-and-blue shape already beginning to cloud up the lower part of the nail, and I knew I'd be dunking the throbbing little digit in a cup of ice later, but that was nothing compared to what I would have gone through if that door had shut just a teench tighter.

What do you do? When you're locked out, miles and miles from anyplace, wearing hot weather clothing on a quickly-cooling mountaintop? When you are carrying no phone and no money? What could you do except smash a window? Ideally, one of the ones in your own vehicle, so you could retrieve the keys and drive away. Simply breaking a random window would do little good, though it might assuage your ire a bit.

Of course, expense and hassle follow such a course of action, too, and the vacation would have been mutilated.

But, fortunately for everything but my thumb, the keys were found, and off I went to see what this Cedar Breaks thing was all about.

It was amazing!

The walkway through the spruce trees opened up onto a wide, fenced-in, cement veranda. At first, nothing but sky and empty air could be seen. But as I approached the rail, I was met with a gorgeously striped and spired canyon that stretched out for a good three miles, and down for 2000 feet. Vivid red and bright white striations dominated the view. They ran in ragged, descending ridges all around the vast amphitheater. The fantastic colorings seemed even more unlikely against the forested and grassy backdrop of the high hills behind them, most notably the 11,000-foot crown of Brian's Head (photo, right).



The shapes of the ridges themselves were striking, though not quite as irregular or bizarre as Bryce, but the colors were as eye-filling as anyplace I have ever seen. I could only stand and stare for several minutes. (check out the photos, on the next pages).

The sun set, as it often does, and Chief and I found ourselves riding back down Route 14 in dusk. I felt as content as if I had just had a delicious dinner. My thumb throbbed a bit, but it was a well-deserved throb, and it was a would-you-rather-have-a-throbbing-thumb-or-a-broken-window throb.

Back on 89, en route towards a yet-unfound motel, there was an accident. I assume it was an accident, since I doubt anyone would deliberately jackknife and capsize a flatbed 18-wheeler loaded with a few dozen twenty-foot long sections of two-foot pipe. Local police routed traffic around the flipped vehicle and its former cargo, which lay caddywampus all over the road.

It was after 9:00 when I settled into my quaint, knotty-pine-paneled, \$38-a-night room at the Golden Hills Motel in the quaint village of Mt. Carmel Junction, with another day of very cool rocks was in the books.





