

# Utah Rocks

## Fock 13: A Narrow Return

One quest of SW03 had been Arches, specifically The Photo. Another quest had been The Valley Of The Gods, which panned out to be far more than I thought. Hiking Fisher Towers was another quest. When I laid out the plans for this trip, these were all places that I wanted to revisit and do some marrow-sucking.

But when the idea of heading to the southwest first hit me, the one chime that rang the loudest of all in my head was Zion. And Zion meant The Narrows.

That watery hike had overwhelmed me in 2000, and the loss of those photos in the Great Laptop Crash had bummed me bad. I craved (crove?) a return. It needed to be experienced again.

And today it would be.

The morning temperatures in southern Utah are cool. The dry air allows the day's heat to escape easily overnight. It was far from jacket weather, but compared to the 86° sunrises of Key West, a 60° morning feels downright chilly.

From the east, the route into Zion National Park takes you through a tunnel. The tall hills are already nice, but once you get to the tunnel, the park really blooms. These are not bizarre red rock formations like the eastern Utah highlights. Zion's mountains are tall and sturdy, roughly rounded in shape, with peaks that stand regally above the valleys that wind throughout the park. At Arches and Fisher Towers, you turn a corner and say, "Wow"; at Zion, you lay your eyes on a new spread of scenery and you say, "Oh, yeahhh..."



Another cool little touch is the red road. The asphalt pavement actually has a strong reddish tint, making it a much better blend with the scenery than black would be.

So, I got to thinkin' again (uh-ohh): if they can make roads red, why not navy blue for seaside highways, or forest green through verdant woodlands, or a deep majestic purple for mountainous roads? The lines would stand out just as well, and people would be in a much, much better mood. Ya, right: some day.

Knowing the shuttle bus scene already was a good thing; it would not sour my mood this time. Zion is too cathedralic for the overstressed traffic that had become the norm, and you just don't yell out cussy names in a cathedral.

The glass-ceilinged tandem busses bring you hither and thither (they don't go to Yon) for your hiking pleasure. Zion is for hikers. At some of the other parks, it is enough to stroll to the designated lookout area and, well, look out. Grand Canyon is like that; its views are splendid enough without your delving down deep into the hole itself. At other parks, it can be sufficient just to drive through and see the beauty all around without ever getting out of your car. Yellowstone is kinda like that. Yosemite is too. But Yosemite is everything. That place is freakin' gorgeous. If you go to one National Park in your life, go to Yosemite.

You can hike yourself silly at those parks, too, of course, but at Zion, you need to get out and walk. It all looks pretty from the road, but the best views are from up above and from deep within the canyons. If you want to suck Zion marrow, you gotta get out and hoof it.

This time around, I knew what The Narrows – officially, it's the Virgin River Narrows – had in store, and I knew that mid-morning was not quite prime time for it. The sun needed to be higher in the sky to really do that hike right.

So, I dismounted the shuttle at a promising-sounding stop, and set out to explore Weeping Rock and Echo Canyon. I had seen an image of Echo Canyon on a postcard, and it seemed to be exactly the

type of strange, twisting, slot canyon that I had been hoping to find. And Weeping Rock was pretty much on the way.

Aptly named, Weeping Rock was an unusual little spot. The rock itself was huge, basically the entire vertical side of the mountain/hill/whatever. (It wasn't quite big enough to be a mountain, but it was bigger than most hills, so maybe it was a mounhill.) There was a recess in the face of the mounhill that had been easily converted into a sort of balcony. The view outward was grand, but you had to deal with the illusion that it was raining. It was sunny as all get-out out there, but you were getting wet from the steady drops that were weeping from all across the top of the recess. Water was constantly seeping through the hundreds of feet of porous rock, and dripping through at this spot, and apparently this spot only. It was definitely weird.



It only took about four minutes to climb there from the bus stop, so it was a decent little warm-up: a cute little trail that even the youngest or

oldest could enjoy. The Weeping Rock Trail simply ramped upwards a hundred feet or so to the splashy place, then you walked back down to the valley floor. Then there was this arrow pointing to Echo Canyon, and the trail led off to a turn behind some little bushes. I couldn't really tell where it went from there, so with a let's-check-it-out nod, off I went.

The Echo Canyon Trail turned directly toward the steep face of the mounhill between two of the four peaks in this semi-circular ridge. The way to the Canyon would be over that hill, and the hill was real tall. It was much more of a challenge. The trail, as such, was not the challenge -- it was practically a sidewalk -- the challenge was in the climb. By halfway up, I felt like I had climbed thirty flights of steps. The footing was smooth -- practically paved, it seemed -- but the trail sloped upward at a stair-like angle. It went one direction for a while, hair-pinned, then went back up the other direction, and so on and so on.

I got into it though. It was that walking fast thing again, as if the race was on, and the coveted solitude would be the prize. Ah, it's just vanity; who am I kidding? By striding right by the slower hikers, I could flaunt my fitness and scoff at their struggle. Besides, I was motivated by the awesome views, and by whatever sight lay ahead on the upper half of the trail.

There were a few short pauses so I could check out the scenic splendor of the cliffs that stood watch over the small valley, and to just enjoy where I was. But, basically, I was in Get It Done Mode (GIDM): that gear that hit when it makes more sense to get the work phase over with sooner, even if it means higher energy expenditure in the short term. It started back in my caddying days, I reckon, when I had to tote those two heavy golf bags up that steep hill over the railroad bridge to that damn seventh tee. It just worked out better if I churned out one good minute of power stride rather than two slow minutes of burdened trudging. It carried over into high school running, when steep rises in the road were something to attack rather than to endure. GIDM showed up pretty often on canoe trips in Canada, too, whether it was charging up a long uphill portage with a canoe on my head, or pulling furiously on my paddle to drag the canoe through some swamp or quagmire. And anyone who ever had me help them move from one home to another will tell you that GIDM certainly gets the packing done quicker and the boozin' started sooner. Just hand me that sofa and get the hell out of my way. That truck would get (un)loaded in no time.

So, the mounhill was climbed, and the trail leveled off for a while. An impressive wall rose up on the right side, absolutely flat and solid, at least another 500 feet high (photo, next page), and the left side began to show signs of twisting little crevices, whetting my hunger for those cool slot canyons.

I had asked one of the guides back at the Visitor Center about Echo Canyon, and he spoke highly of the place, and seemed to indicate that I would indeed find the convoluted cavities that I sought there.

The trail turned and rose to the left. But straight ahead was where I went. It was a slot canyon. The walls were rounded smooth, and shaped in ripples and rolls from thousands of years of rapidly flowing water. It was about fifteen feet high and maybe four feet wide. That's why they are called "slot" canyons: they're just thin slots that run crazily through the rocks. Many of the ones I had seen in photos were fascinating shades of red. But this one was dingy gray, and closed off with a six-foot-tall brick wall across the entrance. Clearly, this was not supposed to be part of the tour.

Obediently, I returned to the trail, but kept a watchful eye to my right for any place where access to the slot could be gained. After a while, the trail rose sharply again, and although I'm sure wonderful views were to be had from the summit, the chances seemed slim that good slots would be up there.

I doubled back, slithered down a slippery slope, and entered the forbidden slot from the back end. It was interesting, but very ordinary. Drab and gloomy, with a tangle of stones and dead branches cluttering the ground, it was both uninspiring and awkward. Rather a letdown, I'd have to say. Even the photos I attempted came out blurred. It just was not to be.

No worries, though; this was just a warm-up hike to pass the time while the sun climbed higher. It was still a very pleasant experience. The air is so clean and pure. You are just so far from industry and commerce. Damn cool.

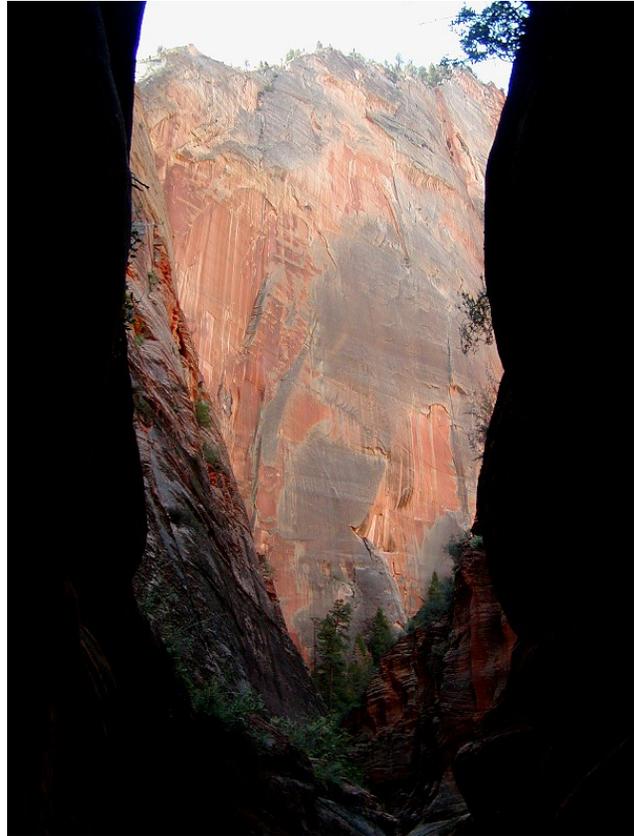
The walk down from there, not surprisingly, was easier and faster than the walk up had been. I was about halfway down and figuring that the time was ripe for The Narrows, when there was fork in the trail. Mindful of Yogi Berra's advice – "when you come to a fork in the road, take it" – I shrugged and branched off towards Hidden Canyon.

It was obvious right away that this trail would be no sidewalk stroll. It carved itself around the outer edge of a couple of enormous promontories, with a yard-wide, rounded ledge as the only way to inch your way along. It was downright harrowing. Others, like Fisher Towers or Delicate Arch, had some sections that could have been dangerous if you got careless, but this Hidden Canyon Trail left no room at all for error, and the fall would have been a few hundred feet. In some especially narrow spots, the Park Service had installed a heavy chain that ran waist-high along the rocks for a hundred feet or so. It was a handrail. You clung to the chain for dear life as you squeezed beyond the toughest stretches of trail. Quite honestly, it was a bit nerve-wracking, and my nerves are not all-that-easily wracked.

It's not a fear of heights; I love seeing things from high above. It's not even the fear of falling; I imagine the tumble would be rather exhilarating. And I'm not even afraid of dying on impact; (a) I'm not afraid of dying anyway, since it would solve a lot of those problems that come with aging, and (b) snuffing out in an instant, like a light bulb swatted with a baseball bat, would be preferable to me than a prolonged demise. I have long said that if a nuclear weapon were going to fall anywhere where I would be affected, I'd just as soon be right underneath that big sumbitch, trying to catch it between my teeth.

No, it's the fear of surviving the fall, with all of the attendant pains and expenses, that makes me extra wary in high places. So, I gripped that chain tightly and slithered along the rock to the next safe spot.

For all that high anxiety, Hidden Canyon itself was merely OK. It had some very cool niceness to it. It was shady, had some leafy trees, plenty of soft sand on the ground, and some rock tumbles where



there was, to quote the sign at the entrance, “scrambling required.” The right side of the canyon was a long, tall, flat, vertical wall, and the left side was a steep foliated slope. The trail officially ended – the sign said so – but you really couldn’t tell. I followed the non-trail – which seemed exactly the same as the trail -- for a good bit before deciding that the time was right to wade the Narrows. Whatever other wonders Hidden Canyon held would just have to stay hidden.

The hike back was only slightly less harrowing. You know the old saying: “Familiarity Mitigates Harrow.” I still clutched that damn chain tightly. In all, I probably hiked about six very hilly miles at that stop, which was ample warm-up.

When I arrived at The Narrows during Roadrage2000, I had no idea what it was. I knew it was narrow – duhh – and I figured it would be good for a few cool pickiwicks, but that was about it. The length of the trail, the enormity of the rock walls, and the fact that it was almost all in water, were all surprises.

Knowing all that in advance this time did not diminish my enthusiasm for this adventure. In fact, since I knew the splendid sights and feelings that lay ahead, the anticipation was high.

And, this time, I knew enough to get a stick! Yes, a stick. This is the type of hike that a walking stick was made for. It’s hard to believe that I had the classic walking stick of all time – The Luckless Log – in Blue Man in 2000, yet I went into this canyon stickless. Dumbass.

A walking stick is key in The Narrows. The footing for almost the whole hike is the bottom of the riverbed, while the Virgin River, at levels varying from ankle-deep to armpit deep, runs vigorously around you. It nudges you, and even shoves you, tilting you one way or another, as you grope for footing on the round, shifting, and uneven stones that the river has worn smooth. With a stick to create the tripod effect, the current is more fun than fearsome. Without it, almost every step is a dance with peril: toppling into the chilly water, and dousing all belongings, including camera, and the ever-present whatnot.

Besides belongings, the hiker’s health and well-being is also in peril. Though each step is carefully placed, it is way too easy to slip off a slick stone once your full weight shifts onto it, and a quick slide down between two big stones can lead to a snapped ankle very easily. Snapped ankles always suck, but when you are four miles deep into an eight-mile long canyon, such a plight would definitely be The Sultan Of Suck. You couldn’t even get airlifted out of there because there is no place for a helicopter to land. I suppose they could hover over the slim canyon opening and drop down a rope and basket for you, and you could be pulled out, swinging like a pendulum, bouncing that dangling hoof off one wall then the other as the chopper fought the desert winds to hold you steady. The view would be kinda cool, at least.

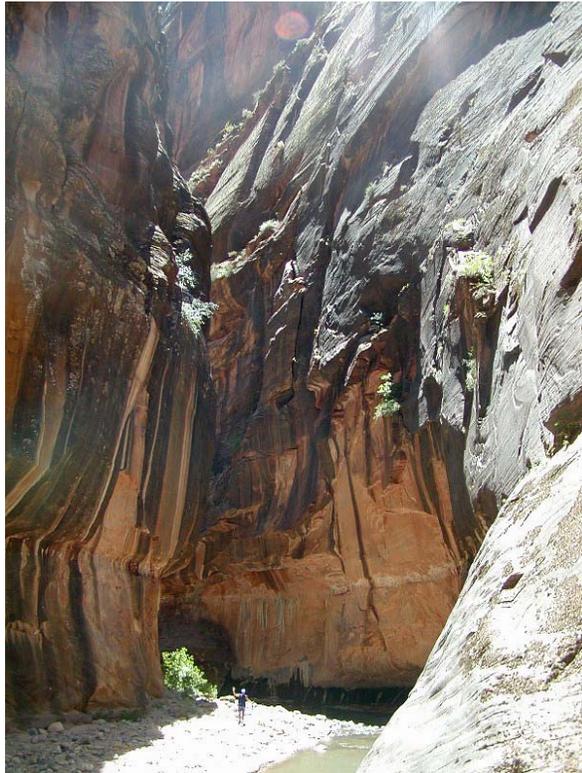
So, anyway, the point is, each step was an adventure unto itself. While most of the hikes required your attention at certain spots, but allowed mindless strolling at others, The Narrows demands real focus for 90% of the hike. The small amount of time you spend walking on dry ground is a welcome relief because your mind can relax. The water walking is very very cool – don’t get me wrong – but after a few hours of thinking, “reach, feel, foothold, go” with every step, it’s exhausting.

Hence, rest breaks are truly refreshing. I stopped under one enormous overhang to chow down a couple of packs of peanut butter crackers and drink a bottle of water. It was excellent. The canyon air was cool and moist. There was a shady breeze, if you know what I mean. Sitting atop an elephant-sized boulder in my wet shoes and shorts, it even got a bit chilly as I watched several other hikers pick their way along the riverbed. The rocks above me glowed with a pinkish-gold tint as the brilliant sunlight from directly above the slim canyon opening reflected its rays off the water and up underneath the ledge. It was one very cool effect.

As a precaution, I had packed my camera in double sandwich bags. Therefore, every time I stopped to photograph another grand Narrows sight, I was forced to stop, unsling my pack, extricate the camera from its protective layers, click the pic, then carefully repack it all. Each photo was a built-in rest stop, which was fine, because I was in no hurry here. Occasionally, the unraveling would take just long enough so that people would wander into my plain nature shot. Sometimes I’d just hang out and wait for



them to drift on by, and other times I would take the photo anyway, figuring that their presence gave perspective and scale to the canyon walls.



The trouble with a hike like The Narrows, though, is that you tend to hike till you get tired. And then you have to hike *back*.

Maybe my warmup hiking had been a bit over the top, but by the time I got about four miles into this seam in the earth's crust, I was feelin' a tad weary. Another huge boulder that happened to be sitting in a passing beam of hot southwestern sunshine looked like the perfect place to rein in the hike and regroup for the return.

After the damp, shaded coolness of the previous two-and-a-half hours, the sun-heated rock and the radiant rays felt really good. I mean, realllly good. I doffed my shirt, laid it on the flat top of the boulder, and stretched myself out to enjoy a good warming.

It was fantastic. Looking up at the amazing rock walls, hearing the river babbling by, seeing the brilliant azure sky straight above, and just soaking up a little life-giving sun. My mind just wandered off. Key West is a great place to live, for sure, but this was so scenic, so peaceful, so remote, and augmented by such a delicious tiredness, that I could only smile wide and let out a long, soft "ahhhhh....." All the gorgeous scenery of the trip swam around in my mind, and the total relaxation of a week without telephone calls or job stresses just mellowed me out

right there. Every muscle let out its last tensions, and I felt as if I was just melting into the rock.

Totally unwound, I was just dozing off when the voices of a few approaching hikers brought me back. It's probably a good thing, because there would not be many other people out here for the rest of the afternoon, I'm sure, and if I had fallen asleep, I would've slept for a good while. Hiking The Narrows in the dark would have been more of an adventure than I had signed on for.

So, I rallied myself into a sitting position, and broke out the last of the crackers and water. It was going to be a half-hour R&R stop, and not a minute less. You hike to enjoy the hike, but you also hike to enjoy the places your hiking brings you to. The walk back would be nice, but it was all stuff I had just seen, so I just enjoyed hanging out for a while.

It took less than two hours to get back to the shuttle bus. I was surprised when I reached the trailhead so soon, but I didn't really take any pictures on the way back, and I got myself into a bit of a race with three British guys. It was an unofficial race, but it was just some stupid point of pride that I could outwalk these unruly Brits. They had seemed kinda smug when they rushed past as I was beginning my backtrack, and I just resolved to stick it back up their limey butts. Damn, I get my dander up easily. ☺

Anyway, when I got back to the Visitor Center, it was time for the ceremonial retirement of



the Nikes. All of my dry-land hiking had been done in a brand new pair of Saucony Grid Trignons, but I knew that the Narrows excursion would pretty much soak the life out of those puppies, so I had brought the aging pair of white-blue-and-orange Nikes that had once been my running shoes, had recently been my walkaround shoes, and were ready for the dustbin. I have often retired old running shoes by heaving them up onto the roof of some building, but this pair deserved to go out in grander fashion.

They spent most of their last five hours of usefulness underwater, which, I'm sure, is not what Nike had in mind. When I pulled the soggy slabs of rubber and nylon off my feet, they looked limp, thoroughly exhausted, and cleaner than they had been in a long, long time. I carried them reverently across my row of the parking lot to the trash barrel. While two people sat silently watching, I made a strange gesture that looked vaguely Aztec over the shoes, and dropped them in the bin. I smiled cryptically at the two people, tapped my shoulder as if it meant something, winked, and walked away.



A pair of beautiful peaks loomed over the Visitor Center lot. It was a nice place to send those foot soldiers to their Valhalla.

There was plenty of late afternoon daylight left, and Zion was looking mighty nice. There was still time to hike one or two of the smaller trails, and maybe catch a sunset from the top of some high ridge, but I was pretty much hiked out for the day. Zion's marrow had been sucked out; I doubt I'll need to revisit. Chief was eager, and the road was calling.

We packed up and headed west, back

out through the tunnel. Since it's a pretty narrow tunnel through the mountain, any time an RV wants to pass through it, all other traffic has to stop and wait outside. The walls that enclose the road are rounded, so that the tunnel is a tube. Neither lane has high enough clearance to allow RV passage; such a vehicle can barely fit right down the center stripe. So, a message gets radioed through, and the rest of us stop and wait.

But it's OK. It's a really nice spot to chill for a few. And it got me to thinking: how the hell did they build this tunnel? I mean, it was back in the 1920's or something, and it's about a mile long. Not only that, it curves, ostensibly so it could stay close to the outer edge of the mountain and allow for a few openings to be cut, either for airflow, or for scenic viewing. I would guess it would be airflow, since the whole damn area is scenic anyway, not just the tiny bit you see from the tunnel's windows.

So, cheers cheers to the engineers who figured out exactly where and how to dig this thing. Maybe I give them too much credit though. Maybe they started on the east side, drilled till they accidentally knocked out some rock into the valley below, said, "oops, that's not right, try turning left a little," and just popped the damn thing out wherever they could, figuring that it's easier to match the road to the tunnel than to drill a tunnel to meet the road.

Whichever it was, Zion sure is nice.