

Utah Rocks

Part 2: The Mad Deer Man of Fisher Towers

Well, now, in July of 2003 -- on the way to Sacramento!! -- the most anticipated state had been reached.

Styrofoam suffocators removed, and engine happy again, Blue Man rolled me to a stop to celebrate at the "Utah Welcomes You" sign.

Right beyond the border, the landscape changed. Not that Colorado was all flowers and lakes at its westernmost point, but by cresting that ridge and attaining the plateau, things did change. The desert got more desolate, but somehow more beautiful. I was so damn psyched! On all sides there was nothing but empty plain, marked with sparse scrub brush. Not a fence to be seen, or a power line, or any sign of mankind's touch except the gray pathway that I was zooming down at a legal 75 mph, whooping and **YEEEEHAAA**-ing out the window. Soooo goooooood for the soul!! But it was only a very, very small sample of what Utah had in store. I wanted to get off the Interstate and get into some serious Utah backcountry.

It is very ironic that the first road I turned onto – labeled with Scenic Route dots on the Rand McNally – was Route 128. It's a number that makes Bostonians cringe. That Beantown beltway sees the most reckless displays of frenetic driving, and the most choking rush hour traffic. My 23-mile commute from Needham to Woburn used to take me 20 minutes late at night, or maybe even at midday, but it would drag on for as much as 90 minutes at any point between 3:00 and 7:00 pm. So when I saw Highway 128 in such a serene void, my smile broadened even more.

It was a narrow two-lane road that wound and rolled among some depressions and bumps. It was a fun road, and my eagerness grew as some of the distant red cliffs began to get closer. I was pumped to be getting a close-up view. Then 128 swung hard right and angled directly at those cliffs. From a head-on view, I could see a split in the cliffs, and sure enough, 128 plunged right between them and into the Colorado Riverway. With almost no warning, I was gleefully tooling down this very narrow road, with the outside edge of my right tire hanging about six feet above the bank of the active river, and 200-foot-tall, deep red, steep hills towering straight up on my left. An equally wowing wall matched it across the river.



Slack-jawed, and saying "Oh my fucking word!!" and "Fuckin' Aaaayyyy!" a whole lot, I wove on and on for a good twenty miles. I know I bellowed out the rather trite "Whooooaa!" a good many times too.

Occasional widenings in the snaky river valley actually made room for small ranches. Some were just rickety huts with barbed wire fencing around a couple of uninspired horses, and others had classic split rail fences and lush grass fields and fine sturdy ranch houses. The

largest of them even boasted a restaurant that had just opened within it. They probably counted on people like me, or maybe the whitewater rafters and kayakers that camped here and there at the bends in the playful Colorado River, because they certainly weren't going to do much business from the two dozen or so "locals". I marveled at the sight of two very little girls playing in the yard of one of the rickety shanties, and wondered what the *hell* it would be like to grow up out here.

Between twists in the river – you can barely see the thin line of road just above the left bank in the picture at left – I kept getting a glimpse of this tall three-fingered spire jutting up in the distance. It was precisely the sight I wanted to see. That kind of rock formation had somehow struck a chord in my soul the very first time I saw it, and I had come here to get to know them.

I tried snapping pictures from a distance, but I knew they'd be crappy shots. If only I could get close to it...

The river and road suddenly went separate directions, and I emerged into a valley that had to be more than three miles wide. A mighty mesa hemmed in the west side, and those three tall fingers marked the end of a ridge that held in the east.



Then, with a screech, I reined Blue Man to a halt. (Well, the tires screeched, not me.) There on the left side of the thin highway was a small brown sign, with simple white letters: "Fisher Towers" and an arrow pointing right at my spires. The, um, "road" was very red dirt with some very large red rocks, and with those infuriating bone-rattling bulldozer tracks. Blue Man was tossed brutally. He was vexed at me: all

those days of smooth cruise-controlled interstate driving had made him think he was some wussy limo or something. "Shut the fuck up and be a damn truck!" I chastised him, "I thought you Chevy's were supposed to be 'Like A Rock.'" I think I struck a nerve, because he relished every subsequent off-road foray from then on, and there were many, some to quite precarious places.

The jaw-jarring dirt road was about three miles long, and it eventually brought me to a flat parking area only about 300 yards from The Titan's base. The sun was about the same angle as in that photo above when I pulled in, and I grabbed my camera for some classic snaps. I took several...then noticed the trail!

An awkward and hurried scramble over the beautiful large Utah boulders and red dusty sand soon found me at the foot of a wall that I believed to be the Titan, staring straight up a few hundred feet to its tip. The Titan is taller than the famous TransAmerica Pyramid in San Francisco, and nearly as tall as the Eiffel Tower. (In the yellow circle on the photo, next page, you can barely make out two bluish dots – those are people.)

The sun was dipping below the western mesa, and the shadow inched up the giant spire slowly. It was totally silent there. A light breeze blew, but there was nothing for it to rustle. I sat in awe and watched The Titan turn from brilliant Autumn Orange to a majestic Burnt Amber – if I remember my Crayolas correctly.

Still excited to giddiness by the scenery that surrounded me and looking for even more sights to gobble up, I dashed off onto the Lookout Trail, which led around the towers to the back of the ridge. The air was clear and clean, the trail was serpentine and steep, and the

elevation was a *lot* higher than I thought – this was well more than a mile above sea level – and I was all too soon lying flat on my back on a big flat boulder, my lungs heaving and my heart hammering out the message “Stop-STOP, Stop-STOP, Stop-STOP, Stop-STOP, Stop-STOP, you loony!!”

It was so great!!! You kinda have to be a runner to know what I mean.

Two people in an SUV had pulled in to the flat lot to catch the end of the sunset. I didn’t notice them in the distance until I sat up on the rock, lungs still clawing for air, and heart clearly calling, “Not-Yet Not-Yet Not-Yet Not-Yet Not-Yet Not-Yet Not-Yet...” But I’m sure that they saw me. The temperature was still in the mid-90’s but I had only broken a sweat now that I had stopped. I never did make it to the top of Lookout Trail. It really wasn’t that long a run at all, but after spending the better part of ten hours with my ass cozied into a nice comfy chair - *the comfy chair? The comfy chair??* – and my heart lulled into a snoring snail’s pace, the shock of the exertion was significant.

But I was still really pumped by it all, so when my pulse got back under 200, I bounded back down the trail. I got kinda in what I call Deer Mode. I usually reserve Deer Mode for running in winding, narrow, wooded trails, when zigzag bounds make better progress than choppy strides. I always picture myself as a big raging stag, antlers ablaze and hooves akimbo, launching myself across the uneven terrain, lighting briefly on one safe spot and not finding the next until I’m already airborne. Leaves me pretty winded, but then, well...I just slow down.

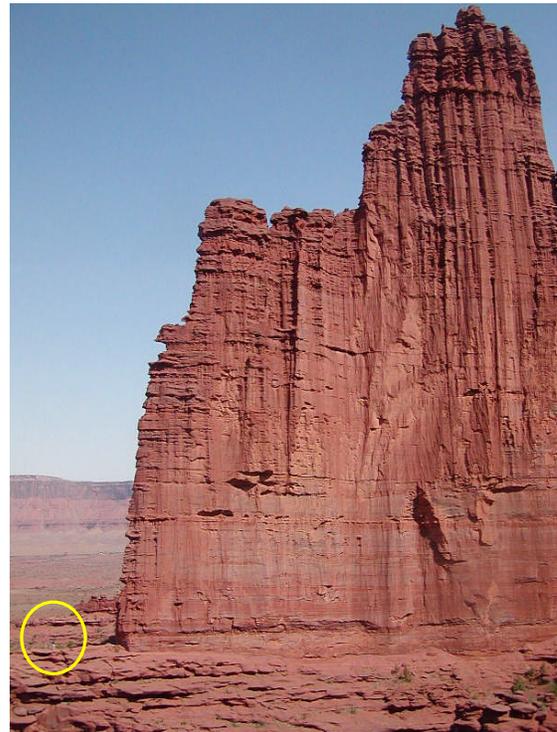
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OK, yeah, Deer Mode. Well, anyway, my downward jaunt started as a jog, but between gravity and my zeal, I went Deer. I forgot all about the two sunset viewers who lingered quietly on a large rock sipping water from a plastic bottle, only remembering them when I came bounding out of the shallow ravine, hell-bent for Blue Man (and the cold beer within). I damn near ran the poor coots over. They were caught very much off guard: the woman semi-shrieked, and the man spilled water all over his chin and shirt. I bounded foolishly on, with just a brief, gasping apology.

Hooves Akimbo would be a great name for a rock band, don’t you think? (Yes, I know it’s a nonsense phrase. Sniff my socks.)

Several minutes later, as I stood pouring water over my head and clutching a cold can o’ beer, they timidly approached the lot to return to their SUV. They averted their eyes and wordlessly departed, not wanting to further rile the infamous Mad Deer Man of Fisher Towers. If they had given me a glance, I would have offered an apology, but they didn’t, so screw ‘em, I say. They saw me as I started galloping down the damn trail, and they were seated right ON it, so they shouldn’t have been so startled. Harrumph.

They left. I stayed. It was getting quite dusky, and it was a good 25 more miles to Moab, the next (only) town on the map. I didn’t want to miss a moment of Utah scenery by driving it in the dark, so I looked around, relished the fact that I was the only person within



several miles in any direction, and said, "I am home." This place was about to earn the Best Sleeping Spot accolades of RR2K.

It was only about 9:15 local time when I stretched out in the Belly O' Th' Whale. Rather than closing the shades and curtains, I opened them all as far as they would go. Had it not been for the persistent sand fleas that became active at dusk, I would have slept on the roof. I wanted to see the sunrise light up that mesa, and see Fisher Towers point their shadowy fingers across the valley.

The deep starry night became cloudy. It was one of the only cloudy nights of the trip. It was unbelievably quiet here. The breeze had died, and the silence was profound.

Hotel parking lots and Interstate rest areas accustom a van-sleeper to the consistent rush of passing vehicles, and the almost-comforting feeling that there are people just generally around. This silence was almost unnerving: it crossed my mind that if some band of scurvy vagabonds were to happen upon this clearing for some nocturnal human sacrifice or something, then I would have little hope of finding help. I got a good laugh out of that thought though, considering quickly that: (a) nobody, but *nobody* would be coming out here, (b) this would actually be a damn cool place to be sacrificed -- I mean, if it was your destiny to *be* sacrificed anyway -- especially right at The Titan's feet, and (c) I had slept in the van on three different NY City streets, right in Manhattan, on Memorial Day weekend, and had never had a second of worry, yet here among the rocks and the nothingness, a concern had brushed my mind. So weird.

There were a few critter sounds during the night, but mostly just a total lunar silence that matched the barren and bizarre-shaped landscape. I awoke for good at about 5:15, and watched Utah brighten. The clouds took away my sunrise, but watching the redness return to those gray ghostly shapes was very cool indeed.

I stayed and savored that spot for well over an hour, peacefully strolling around the trails and boulders, sitting and just looking, seeing virtually the same thing that the ancients would have seen many millenia ago.

It's so good to know that such places exist, that the world is not all traffic and buildings and electricity and cell phones and computers. Even if it's 2500 miles from here, I can always still go there in my mind and be alone...

Sated and soothed by the solitude, I eventually moved myself onward. After all, I had not even reached any of the National Parks yet: this was merely a single red dot on the map, a curiosity. I steered Blue Man down the dirt road – Hey! wake up, van!! – left Fisher Towers behind, and rejoined Highway 128, aiming for Arches National Park.

The remaining 22 miles of 128 were as awesome as the first, though the rock styles changed somewhat, becoming those sheer red walls that look so much like a huge roast beef sliced off in the middle. Maybe that's why they appeal to me so much: it's the carnivore in me that is saying, "Mmmmmmm, roast beeeeeef..."

And how much did they bum



out the westering settlers, hills you could climb, but *only halfway*. Then they shot straight up. They might as well have faced cinder block walls.

Like I said, I'm glad I did this trip my way, and not theirs. *Survivor*, my ass! I'm not on this trip to *survive*, I'm here to *enjoy!!!!* And I guarantee that Blue Man treated me better than any covered wagon, stage coach or railroad ever treated those poor bastards.

Timing really *is* everything, I reckon.

