

Utah Rocks

Part 3: Awesome Arches

It was about 8:00 a.m. when I got to Arches National Park, just north of the small town of Moab. It was still overcast, and the Saturday crowd had not begun to arrive yet.

The National Parks Annual Pass was easily the best purchase of the trip. It cost \$50, but was good for admission to every National Park in the United States for a year. I ended up using it at eight more National Parks and/or Monuments in the next three weeks, which would have easily cost me over \$120. (I would find out in late August that it even let me into the beach parking lots on Cape Cod National Seashore for free too. ☺)

The first stop in Arches, only about a mile or so within the park, is an area called Park Avenue Trail, a rather urban-sounding place. Only a few cars were in the park at this point, so it was nice and empty. The view from the overlook was outstanding: two steep rows of spires and sliced boulders, some piled almost totem-pole-style, balanced precariously for thousands of years, between which a flat valley wound down and out of sight.



The trail was barely influenced by man. Much of the floor of the valley was solid rock, and flatter than many apartment floors I've seen. I wandered down the trail, gazing up at the fantastic formations, again feeling as if I had gone back in time. I felt like one of those apes in the opening scene of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, except not quite as furry.

The trail was amazing. I took at least a dozen pictures, but we know what happened to them. Grrrrrr. (Note: the photos you see here were taken on subsequent revisits.)

I moved along through the park – I would spend over eight hours there – I came upon The Windows Area, so named for the odd arches that had eroded away right in the middle of thin rock wall formations. The sun burst through while I was there, and the temperature soared.

Again, many pics were taken, but not without frustration. You see, I don't like having people in my photos, even if I'm on a trip with you, I will rarely take a picture that will have you or I in it. You see, I like my photos with nobody in them. When I photograph scenery, I want to see the scenery, not some schmucko giving a dorky wave or smiling like a goddamn mannequin and blocking out the background. The only person I ever want to see in my photos is **me**, and that's just to prove I was there.

Tourons were all over the good parts of the Windows, frustrating every good shot, putting their stupid grins into otherwise timeless shots. And the park was beginning to get crowded by now, including – *shudder!* – tour busses. Nothing ruins a quiet scenery stop more than the fussing of a busload of overdressed tourons. I resent them not just for their sheer numbers, but also because



they are not earning the scenery for themselves. They are simply taken from spot to spot, having made no independent decisions or selections. They walk out of the bus, get in everybody's way, make quiet places loud with silly chatter, and say stupid things like "Is this spot the prettiest?" And worst of all, the busses clog the roads! Get behind one of those mothers on a long uphill stretch, and you're bummin' bad. Not only because they're slow, but they block the scenery too!

The signature shot of Arches NP is Delicate Arch. Everybody has seen this picture somewhere. One thing you can never tell in the photos though is how damn BIG that arch is. I mean, it could be like



18" high, like the Stonehenge stage props in *This Is Spinal Tap*. It's not. So, even though I coveted people-less pics, I did take one with a couple in it for scale.

Also, you can see how the rocky ridge that the arch is perched on begins to curve towards the camera. Delicate Arch is perched on the edge of an amazing natural amphitheater, with a rim of flat boulders to sit on, and a smooth sloping surface to lie on and catch some sun while you dig the Arch. It then drops into a deep canyon.

As I lay there on the opposite rim of this bowl, just

chillin' out for a while (nudge, nudge), a very large black hawk or eagle came on the scene. Motionlessly riding the winds at this high elevation, it skimmed over the sitting rocks to my left, passing only about four feet over the heads of the other hikers who were enjoying their rest there. Still without so much as a twitch of its wings, it swooped downward into the canyon, and looped back. It casually circled through the scenic bowl several times, flying within inches of the big arch each time, but, to my disappointment, never through it. Very, very cool to watch.

[Oh, by the way, I brought my 20-year-old Pentax K1000 35mm camera on the trip as backup. It's in sad shape and has to be held together with thick rubber bands and athletic tape, and it has been very unreliable because of that. Still, I took about 16 shots with it during the trip, at some of the best places: if they did come out, I could have some posters made. Happily, they did (see above).]

When I had pulled in to the designated parking area for The Delicate Arch Trail, I was chagrined to find the large lot almost filled, and people milling about everywhere. I had the Park Map with me, of course, but for some reason, I never looked at it in much detail. I grabbed my small backpack with cameras (no water, of course – what the hell would I need that for??) and started walking. Most of these parks are laid out so that you have a very short walk to the scenery you crave, so I was expecting maybe a quarter-mile at most.

It was about noon now, with not a cloud left in the sky, and it had to be about 100 degrees. So, after about a half-mile of slow walking with a fairly steady stream of people, I began to look around, and began to notice some things: (1) we were in a valley, and all the pictures I had seen of Delicate Arch were clearly on top of a ridge, (2) the people coming the other way looked tired and sweaty and bitchy, and (3) it was getting really hot out.

After another turn in the trail, I was astounded to look ahead and see a huge rock ridge angling upward. It was still a good half-mile away, but I could discern a thin line of slow-moving dots crossing it, much as ants would cross a stone bench. The dots, to my horror, were people. And the ridge went up and out of sight.

It was time for an attitude change. I had to get into Get-It-Done Mode! When faced with an arduous task, such as moving a lot of furniture from a truck to an apartment, or portaging a canoe two

miles up a logging road in Canada, or rowing that same canoe through the muddy quicksand of Sludge Bay, I go into Get-It-Done (GID) Mode. My jaw sets, my breathing deepens, and I become Workin' Man!!

Just ask Cliff. He knows. He had the misfortune of being in the back of my canoe when that Mode beset me in Algonquin Provincial Park. We plowed our way through a seemingly endless swamp, and suffered in the beastly heat as I feverously charged away in pursuit of non-existent world records. He was gasping at my tenacious and torrid pace and wailing, "I'd rather be at work!" in the back seat.

Anyway, this path to Delicate Arch clearly called for such a mindset. I did not intend to spend hours and hours at this one spot, so it was time to get down to brass tacks (whatever that means).

Even in that Mode, the hike still took quite a while to reach the Arch. The official NPS map for Arches NP describes this trail thus: ***Elevation gain of 480 feet; no shade – take at least one quart of water per person! Open slickrock with some exposure to heights. Best at sunset. (3.0 miles)***

Indeed it was all that and much more. Near the top, there was one ledge about three feet wide that overhung a drop of 100-feet or more. That "open slickrock" was superheated by the July sunshine, radiated heat like a frying pan, and sloped stubbornly upward for about a half-mile. But as I neared the top – still with not a glimpse of the coveted Arch itself – people starting downward were offering reassurances that it was "*definitely* worth the climb."

It was.

What an awesome and soul-soothing place. And that's the true definition of "awesome", not the trite 1990's usage. I laid down there for about a half-hour or so, comfortably melting into the rocks, and thinking of almost nothing. It seemed spiritual there. I could easily imagine primitive man worshipping there. I could also imagine the westering settlers taking their women there for a little ride on the hobby horse under the towering stone. It'd be a marrrrvelous place for that.

On the way back down, though, I was amazed at the poor souls who were even more clueless bastards than I had been. Some small-stepping senior citizens had made it to the slickrock and were pausing to reconsider, a couple with three school-age girls were already dealing with some fussin' and had a long way to go. As I neared the bottom, a very overweight woman with a 4-year-old boy, whom I had passed at almost the same spot on the way up well over an hour before, was seated in the hot sun, waiting for the man who had accompanied them to return. I asked if she was OK, noticing that she was very red, and the kid was very restless. Guessing that her man still had a bit of trail to cover, I suggested that she go wait in the air-conditioned car.

But the most clueless of them all – candidate for Biggest Dope of 2000 – was the idiot in his full cycling spandex outfit who was starting off on the trail *in his bike shoes!* You know, the ones with hard plastic soles and the big nub on the forefoot? Yeesh. I looked at him heel-walking in the first dusty stretch of trail, laughed out loud, told him "Not a chance, pardner" and walked on, shaking my head. Don't these people read their maps? ☺

One very unfortunate thing about the Delicate Arch experience, though, was my failed quest for The Cool Photo. There was *always* the quest for The Cool Photo. And I had it all lined up at DA. You see the people in that photo a page or two back? The little dot under the arch, and one standing on the rock uphill from him? Well, picture me in the Arch, and G-Girl on the hill. That was what the shot was *supposed* to be.

See, what I wanted was a picture of me in a really, really Cool Place, so I could make postcards of it and send it back to everybody on the Blings Mailing List. I ended up doing that with a Zion NP photo, and a Lone Cypress photo, and a Trials Tour Team at Tahoe photo, but this one would have really been The Balls.

It was pretty much a geek thing to do, I suppose, bringing my printer with me so I could print postcards with me in them, but, c'mon, you gotta admit that it was kinda cool too. What made it an Ultra-



Geek thing to do, though, was that I printed the Zion batch of cards *while I was driving*. No shit, really: I had the printer bungy-corded into one captain's chair behind me, and the laptop similarly bound in the other one. Both were being powered from the cigarette lighter by my AC Anywhere Power Pack, and the batch printed out on card stock as I wound my way up the Pacific Coast Highway.

That photo on the postcards *should* have been of me under this Arch, instead of waving a dorky wave from The Narrows in Zion. Well, it would have been one of each: I do like that Zion pic.

So what happened was that the person I selected from all the nearby fellow hiker-tourists, was a dark-haired 17-year-old girl with a floppy-rimmed hat that had a big "G" on the front (Georgetown? Gastroenteritis?). She looked Asian – am I stereotyping? sorry – and had a camera of her own, so, when the last group of tourons finally vacated my coveted photo spot, I quickly went over to G-Girl and asked if she would take my picture, getting both me and the entire Arch in the shot. Obviously, she had to be kind of far away to get the shot.

I ran back under the Arch, gave a dorky wave, and she gave me the a-ok that the pic had been taken. I ran back up and thanked her, and tried to check if it had come out ok. Trouble is, in that blinding sun, the view screen of the camera is like a black square, you can't see much at all in it till you get back in some shade. I thought it was all hunky-dory, but then I got back in some shade – back in the van, in the parking lot.

Photographic wiz that she was, G-Girl had put her thumb over half the lens! I had a pic of me far away and waving, with a huge amorphous pink blob hovering Damocles-style over my head. I was pissed, because there was no way I was going to hike that hot 35-minute trail again! There were too many other sights to see, and only so many afternoon hours left. Arrrrrrghhh.

A Next Time would definitely be required here.

My Double-O Arch Trail hike, just a couple miles up the road from Delicate Arch Trail, brought two more RR2K superlatives: "Best Rain" and "Most Daring Feat."

Delicate Arch Trail was hands-down the most arduous tourist-hike I've ever taken. I'm not counting portages with a canoe on my head: those are hike-hikes, where the whole object of the hike is to hike. I'm talkin' tourist-hikes, where the purpose is to look at cool scenery, but you have to actually put up some hiking to do it.

Double-O Arch, though an attraction in itself, was not the photogenic temptress that Delicate Arch was. Double-O was a hike-hike: you took it so you could hike, and as a reward, you get to catch some cool arches along the way. And they were very cool arches indeed.

It was hot: mid-afternoon, easily 100° in this Utah desert, and dry as a rat's ass in a saw mill, maybe even drier. As I started the 4.2-mile hike, there seemed to be no clouds in the sky. In all, I guess I was out there about two hours, including a couple of stop-sit-dig-scenery stops, and by the time I was halfway back, a dark cloud bank had rolled in from the southwest. As I stood next to Navajo Arch, overlooking the Salt Valley, I could see the gray wall striding quickly RAM-ward. The view was striking, the wind was really blowing, and I was *verypsyched* to get poured on.

Throughout the final mile, most people were scurrying to find cover as the first few drops fell. I had been shirtless all day, and a revoltingly slick coating of sweat, sunscreen, and sand covered me. I smelled bad. I scoffed at the cowardly shelter-seekers. "Bring it on, clouds!" I bellowed as the downpour hit. I stood on a large rock next to the main trail, stuck my arms straight out, and let the rain drench me. The drops were huge, and splatted loudly as they slapped into me. I savored the chill sting of each one. In a minute, I was sopping wet. What a wake-up!! The storm raged on, and I revelled in its powerful release.

Then I remembered about... *hail*. Uh-ohhhhhh.

Fortunately it didn't do that. *Hahahaha*.

Another photo that I was so disappointed to lose would have preserved The Most Daring Feat of RR2K. In the middle of that hike-hike, there was, of course, the star of the show: Double-O Arch (DOA).

DOA (Double-O Arch, remember?) is about 60-feet from ground level, spans a gap that is about 50 feet across, and is about 7-feet wide. When I finally arrived there, a guy and two women, all in their early 20's, were up top at one end of that bridge. One woman boldly walked out and across it, the others did not follow. The first woman then calmly walked back.

I kinda shrugged, and walked between the half-dozen high school kids who were sitting and getting stoned in the smaller bottom hole – the lower O, as it were -- of DOA. By the time I got through

the arch and stretched out in the closest shade, the guy from up top had come down. We chatted briefly. I think he was Brad from Ohio and it was his wife Christine still up on the top arch. She seemed happy as a clam up there, and I commented on that to Brad. "She's a gymnast," he replied, "To her, it's just a big balance beam."

Taking the cue, I called up, "Christine, do a handstand!"

Brad was like, "Fuck you! Don't tell her that! She'll do it!"

Cheryl held out her index finger in that just-a-second signal, and Brad went, "Ohhh nooooo, what's she going to do??"

She lifted one leg in front of her, took hold of her foot, and extended both arms out from her sides, *with her right foot still in her right hand!* She stood up there doing a 1-leg whatever-you-call-it stand (when I see it in the Olympics, I'll be able to find out its name), while her husband yelled "Cheryl, I'd like to stay married to you, will you please stop that" and I took a really cool picture of her.

Buuuuut, you know what happened to the picture...

Thus concluded my Arches NP experience, and it was off to Canyonlands NP, just 30 miles to the north. The park is south of Arches, but you drive north to get to it. Go figure.

It was as if God had decided on a different Theme Park. Arches NP is bizarre rock formations and shapes. Canyonlands is broad sweeping canyon vistas from atop tall steep mesas. There are desert canyons and the lush Green River Valley. And, for me at least, there was rain. The welcome wave that had washed over Double-O Arch Trail had long since passed, but as I reached The Grand View Point

Overlook on the extreme south edge of the tall plateau that they call Island In the Sky, it was obvious that sunset would not be here tonight. To the south, a slate-gray wall of blur was advancing rapidly across the Park's central plains.

As a solo roadtripper, it's difficult to jot down milestones, points of interest, observations and foolish thoughts. So, on recent journeys, I've used a hand-held voice recorder, which I later listen to and transcribe worthy passages into the Official Roadtrip Notbook. Trouble is, I'm even more verbose with the recorder than I am with the pen, especially when moved by a good roadbuzz. Then, of course, I have to listen to myself babble on and on, while I pick out the actual noteworthy entries.

This is how I chose to sit out the storm at Grand View. The wind whipped from the south, I was parked facing west, so I sat in my back seats, with my north-facing side doors partly open, put on my walkman, and watched the torrents for an hour as I jotted down about seven pages of tape recap.

The storm passed just in time to give a final glimpse of sunset, and I headed for the big city.



Delicate Arch, Utah
June 17, 2003

Left: *The Coveted Cool Photo, 2003.*