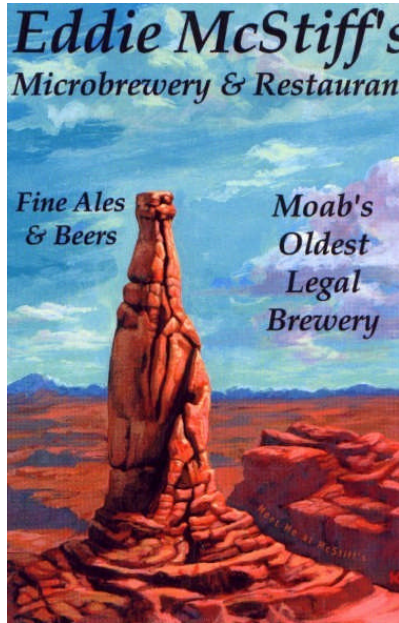


Utah Rocks

Part 4: Bridges, Bikers, and Bryce

Moab, population 3971, elevation 4000 – how big can your city be when your elevation number is higher? – is the only “city” at all in that region of Utah. It’s nice. It’s really nice, actually. Not phony-stuff nice, more like comfy-casual nice. As far as I can remember, it doesn’t have the big chain department stores, but it has the Pizza Hut-type places you’d expect in a motel-oriented town. Moab had plenty of motels and a decent number of bars and saloons. I chose the one with the catchiest name: Eddie McStiff’s. The Microbrewery aspect of it hooked me good, and I pulled right in.



The Australian bartender said if I ordered my beer in Spanish, I’d get \$1 off the price. “Cerveza, por favor” I responded. Good enough, he declared. Perusing the taps, I settled on Moab Rock Amber Ale, a flavorful brew indeed. Not the best amber I’ve ever had, but a fine break from all the ice beers of the previous week. It was good enough, in fact, to procure three 25-ounce bottles to go: one each for Ed, Bryan, and myself when we would be reunited in California’s capitol.

However, as you might guess, they did not last that long. Nooooo, I did not drink them all, they were shared, but not with my Sacramento Sidekicks.

That photo also served as the label for Moab Rock Amber Ale. Kind of a clever picture, I think. I wouldn’t be surprised if there is a rock formation exactly like that somewhere in Utah. If so, I should go there. To live.

But, alas, McStiff’s proved to be kinda dead on this Saturday night. It was Salsa Night – hence the ordering in Spanish -- and there weren’t many salsish-looking people there. There were two instructors there to teach people to dance Salsa-style, but they

ended up dancing with each other on the empty dance floor. Chalk it up as just another bad bar promotion. Why don’t they just leave us alone and let us enjoy our beverages with good tunes?

One thing that was real weird was seeing the TV at the bar. Damn, I had not seen a television in eight days! It seemed strange indeed, it kept trying to seize my attention and lure me into its spell. It almost seemed evil. The bright colors and constant flickering and motions were compelling, and it was a struggle to keep from looking in its direction. But after all the great natural sights I had seen that day, somehow a Dodgers game had even less appeal than usual.

Moab is not only full of motels, but campgrounds abound there too. So, I parked Blue Man on a side street and slept there for free instead. ☺

When I awoke Sunday, there was not a cloud in the sky, and it would remain that way all day. The air was clear and clean and dry!! Humidity? Not a bit. Pollution? Ha! From what??

My mission was clear: head southwest, where Bryce and Zion lay waiting for me. Granted, Bryce was 340 miles away (and Zion another 85 beyond that), but somehow that translated to a three-hour ride. Five, I could see, but three? Yet, there it is in my notbook: “8:43 a.m. *Leaving Moab. Today will be a drive-and-look day, at least till Bryce (noon?)*” Ha. I barely made it there in time for sunset.

So, what kept me? Only the best goddamn day of scenic driving of my life!!

The first 75 miles were not special, though bright sunshine and empty road are always a good mix. But when I hooked that right onto Highway 95 – yes, another Bostonian nemesis – and into what I mistaken thought was the Valley of the Gods area, things got amazing. The desert opened up, flanked by those fantastic red mesas, and randomly broken by jutting buttes. There was nobody else on the road, and Blue Man sailed.

My first unplanned sidestep was at Natural Bridges National Monument, a small loop on the map, only a few miles from 95. I wielded my Parks pass, and took the ride. Great place! It was all about three

large thick arches of rock – like 200' up, 250' across, 10-20' wide -- that erosion had formed over eons. Each one had a hiking trail down to the bottom of it, and I took them all. There was one long (19-mile) foot trail that would have passed through all of them, but I kept my sanity and saved that for “next time”.

The bridges were most impressive. After getting an overlook view from above, then hiking down 350 feet across rock ledges and down log ladders, and standing creekside underneath them, I was wowed. I took some really great photos from all angles, but...

The climbs back up were even fun. I got back in GID Mode, but in exceedingly good nature, and made some slower hikers laugh as I grinningly zoomed on by.

Back on 95, I next came upon White Canyon, a 40-mile stretch of totally empty road, curving through rolling hills at some points, plunging into small valleys, twisting between buttes, and dousing me in great Utah sights.

It was an amazingly liberating feeling. The world opened up wide and empty. Unspoiled scenery lay nobly and beautifully in all directions. Not another person or vehicle was in sight for miles and miles. Only the narrow, winding, black line that Blue Man rode on betrayed humanity's existence. I slowed the van to a stop – leaving him right in the middle of the highway -- and got out to enjoy it even more. Outside the metal container, the sky fully opened overhead, and the full 360° of Nature's majesty overwhelmed me. I've seen more “beautiful” places – Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon come to mind – but they were all anticipated; this was not. I was expecting a swift ride through emptiness to the next National Park, and instead I was wowed.

Blue Man had been playing music, of course, and, as I de-vanned, I left the door open to let it pour out. The song was one I hadn't heard in years, from an old early-80's Misc. tape that had been lying idly in some dark box, probably for a decade or more. The throwback tunes and comedy bits had been great, stirring memories of people and times. But the final song on the tape threw me. I had forgotten it completely, forgotten that it even existed, yet it had been a soul-socking song to me some twenty years before. REO Speedwagon is known for their kickin' rock and screaming guitars, but they have a mellow side too, and in their non-hit *Wish You Were There*, they combined slow but powerful music, with Kevin Cronin's formidable lungs, and made a song that shivers my spine.

There were fond personal memories to it, too, of the deepest love of my life, and as I stood there under the hot desert sun, in the clean air, with all of the man-made world's stresses or strains melted away from my bones, and such sublime remembrances rushing back, I threw out my arms, bellowed along with the song, and let the tears just flood out. It was fantastic.

When the song ended, all was quiet. I wiped my eyes and relished the sights. BM's contented purring was the only sound to be heard. Then, way off in the distance, a car appeared, reminding me that this was, after all, just a dot on the trail, and there were many miles left to cover.

That wide valley, in turn, led into Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, and Lake Powell. It came by surprise too. An average-looking sign welcomed me to GCNRA but there

were no immediate changes in the landscape. Then, on my left, it appeared, three miles away but striking. Shimmering in bluish green sparkles, Lake Powell stood out like a sapphire on sandpaper. I slowed Blue Man to a stop, and sat in the middle of 95, gazing at it. Some little wussy voice in my head was tugging at my cerebrum, whining “*but we gotta get goooooing -- we gotta get to Bryyyyyce.*” Screw that, I replied, we're goin' *swimmin'!*

Once again, Blue Men went off-road, bouncing and rumbling down the 3-mile-long rocky path. Laundry, cassettes, and empties scattered wildly about the interior, and brownish-red dust rooster-tailed in BM's wake. I drove him right down to the water's edge – no more than four feet from the shining clean oasis.



Two campsites, with two vehicles apiece, were there, but their empty boat trailers assured me that nobody was around. This was the very end of a small finger of the lake, and there was a sandbar island about 100 yards or so out, and I plunged in and swam out to it. In the 100+ degree heat, and the baking sun – I had been driving with windows open rather than with AC on, so I could enjoy the light dry desert air blowing around me – the water was an amazing refresher. It immediately jump-started my roadbuzzed mind and filled me with new vigor. When I reached the island, I let the sun evaporate the lake water off me, cooling me again. Once dry, I dove in for another swim and a third cooling, and finally stood drying in the sun for a fourth. Four coolings in one dip. *Nice*. And clean for the first time in three days. *Nicer*.

So, then I set out with Bryce again as the goal. But the Lake Powell overlooks were so outstanding that I kept stopping to savor them. And then, well, LP threw me another beauty, and sidetracked me again. This time, it wasn't long dirt roads and a sandy beach: it was big white boulders



that bounded a small but deep lagoon, and I just drove right off the road onto the rocks. The rocks were steep enough for real aggressive diving, and I came nowhere near bottom. I thrashed about in the water like a madman, clawing up the little gaps between the boulders, getting a sprint runup, and long-jumping or flipping into the cool fresh water.

That spot even became my lunch break. I chilled out in Blue Man, hung my shorts on the outside mirror and put my aquasocks on the windshield to dry out in the summer sunshine (didn't take long). I made a couple of yummy samiches and locked this spot in my mind. Great cliffs loomed above it from the other side of the

road too. That spot had everything I craved, and far more than I had expected to find on this desert drive. I really did not want to leave – even the whiny voice was finally saying, “*yeahhh, we've been to Bryce, fukkit.*”

Damn, what a great spot.

I bought four T-shirts on the whole trip: Olympic Trials, South Dakota, Iowa, and a greenish one with an empty-sandals graphic and the words “Kick Back, Relax – Lake Powell”. It has become my favorite T-shirt, and I never wear it without dwelling on the scenery, refreshment, and feeling of being TOTALLY unwound.

There was definitely a need for a revisit someday. I was sure of that.

Reluctantly leaving it behind, I headed for Bryce again. As I neared my turnoff from Highway 95, a motorcycle that had been behind me on the twisting uphill road, pulled out to pass me on the next straight stretch. I stuck my hand out the window and pumped my fist with a Go-Go-Go motion as it sped by. The man driving and the woman passenger both gave me thumbs up and zoomed off.

Fifteen minutes later, I pulled in for gas at Hanksville – I'm sure you've heard of it – and they were there too. We struck up a conversation. They were great. The guy was Dave, about my age, and it was his birthday that day. The woman was “just call me C”, and a 53-year-old California native. When they asked where I was headed, and I said “Sacramento!” to which Dave replied, “Oh, for the Trials?” I was amazed. Nobody knows that, I laughed, how do you? “I'm going there too. I'm a sound engineer for a BBC documentary. Don't ask how I got that gig. I did it in Atlanta too.”

As we talked, Dave tinkered away on his bike. C explained, “We went off-road and were flying down by this riverbank and we dumped it! We just lay there in the dirt, laughing our asses off.” What hot shits they were.

And, yes, “hot shit” is a compliment. And, no, I don't know why; it just is. I used to think that everyone just knew that, but I used it once in an elevator full of fellow coaches as we talked about a colleague. “Yeah, Jeff's a hot shit,” I offered, and was met with an awkward silence. “Ummm,” Skott said, “I think he's a pretty good guy.” Nods all around.

"I know, I do too," I replied. Their odd stares nudged me to explain further. "That's a compliment," I said.

"It is?"

"Yup. Everyone should want to be a hot shit."

Puzzled looks. "Why?"

"No idea, but where I come from you'd beam with pride if you were called that."

"Is a cold shit good?"

"Of course not."

"Okaaaayyy..."

I suspect it's a spin-off of "hot ticket," which is good because it's a popular thing, in demand, something that makes you go, "oooooh." And somewhere else along the way, it got vulgarized into "hot shit," just like "shooting the breeze" became "shooting the shit."

I guess it's self-explanatory why "chewing the fat" never became "chewing the shit," though maybe that one came and went quickly, and somehow spawned the "shit-eating grin" before it passed out of favor.

And, of course, "chewing the fat" came from the Inuit (different from Eskimos, but not very), who used to chew on pieces of whale blubber, almost like chewing gum, while they sat around talking about whatever stupid malarkey that you'd talk about when you're dressed in polar bear hide. The blubber took quite a while to dissolve, so it just sort of helped pass the time while they were doing something else.

Anyway, I bid Dave and C well, and lit out westward again. I caught them in my rearview mirror a good while later, and they were flying. Dave flashed his light as they closed, and I waved them by. As they passed, I snapped a great picture of them waving at about 90 mph. But, the hard drive... well, you know.

About ten minutes later, I came around a bend, and there they stood, camera poised. I leaned out the window and waved my cowboy hat as I roared by. They laughed, snapped and waved. I never saw them again. Sob. ☺

The remaining ride to Bryce was no letdown at all. Quite the contrary, it was like a tremendous encore to follow up a killer concert. Dan and C had told me about Escalante – "The Grand Staircase" National Monument – which I had totally blanked on when I had planned my route.

The focus was so much on Arches, Bryce, and Zion that it was easy to overlook the things that lay between. I think that's why I was so psyched by Highways 128, 95, and now 12, which led through Escalante; they were such terrific unexpected bonuses.

I'm running out of adjectives here. I knew I would. You can't believe the diversity of the rocky landscapes in southern Utah. There are similarities, for sure: no trees, no grass, no green, very odd rock formations, and no sign of civilization. But the differences are enormous too. Escalante was beautiful: the rocks were gigantic white boulders, as if piled there by children who were the size of Minnesota, and the road snaked right along the top of the high and narrow ridge. I even went off-road for a bit, and parked ol' Blue in one very precarious spot. He loved it. I'm glad his weight wasn't too much for that little tongue of ancient rock, because if that had let go...



Anyway, it was 7:39 when I pulled into Bryce Canyon N.P. (Yeah, *noon*, right.) Those surreal spires were everywhere. That place is like going to another planet, really. Or at least to the bottom of the ocean.

After my long and scenically intoxicating ride, a good sunset was just the chaser I craved. Rainbow Point is the overlook area that is deepest within the Park. That was what I sought. I got to the very end of the railed-in overlook first, a good twenty minutes before the sun would begin to disappear.

The early evening air was devoid of humidity, and slightly chilled by the beginning of radiational cooling. The sky was richly blue and clear, save for a small herd of clouds innocently grazing near the western horizon.

The young, good-looking, healthy, blonde Norwegian woman -- whose perch I had kind of stolen when she went to fetch her boyfriend -- returned, and instead of settling in several feet or yards away, like any air-space-paranoid American would, she cozied right up about six inches beside me on the rail. We shared an approving wordless nod, and turned our eyes to the setting sun. In the next few moments, about a dozen more people sauntered out onto this double-edged escarpment. Everyone maintained a church-like hush, with any conversation in whispers. Cameras clicking became about the only noise on this breezeless evening.

Except for the Laughing Boy.

About eight years old, and clearly toting some form of mental affliction through life, the baseball-capped boy, holding his large mother's hand and laughing raucously as they came down the path, was the most cheerful person I have ever seen. He gigglingly chatted away to mom and dad, showering joyful smiles on all of us. We all smiled back at him. I know I did. His happiness was infectious, but it was also thought-provoking and dropped a small dose of sadness into my soul. The boy laughed non-stop, almost out of control, with no desire to stop. His parents, recognizing the solitudes that we had all been seeking,



soon led him away, giving up their share of the sunset. The boy's innocent and genuine laughing never waned, and slowly faded off as they departed. I looked at the Norwegian girl, and shared a small smile over him, and I noticed her eyes were moist. I think mine were too.

The sun was a brilliant white-gold as it bid us a fond good night, and most of the people quietly slipped away. Only a persistent female photographer, the two Norwegians, and myself remained, eyeing that herd of clouds with anticipation. Our patience was rewarded as the sub-horizon sun

hurled sheets of bright gold, orange, and pink in its wake. The clouds blazed, the camera lady snap-snapped, and we all squeezed every drop of sun out of the set. As the clouds finally turned purple then dark blue, we left. I wanted to be last to leave, but I gave the Norwegians that opportunity; they seemed to want to do some smoochin'.

It was deep dark by the time I got back to the Park Entrance and the campground just beyond. A free spot probably could've been had, but I shelled out for a campsite just to guarantee an uninterrupted night's sleep, and a legit shower in the a.m.

An outer edge campsite struck my fancy, and I nudged BM in between two healthy bushes. No other amenities were necessary; just a space to hitch the big blue horse for the night. As I bedded down in the Belly o' th' Whale, though, I lamented my bad choice: a bright white beam was flooding down into the back windows of the van, and causing me undue consternation. Damn, I thought, how did I not see that freaking streetlight when I pulled in? But one look outside through the curtains turned my frustration into amusement. It was the light from the blinding full moon. *That*, I could live with, and I settled into serene slumber.