

Utah Rocks

Fock 5: Zion

Utah was the target of Roadrage2000, and Zion National Park was the bulls-eye. It wasn't until after the 1990 pass-through with Bobby and Kelzo that I found out about The Narrows. From the moment I heard about the eight-mile long canyon that gets as narrow as a car's width and with sheer walls as high as a thirty-story building, I knew I had to go back and explore it.

The ride in from Bryce was, like the rest of Utah, excellent. The terrain changed over again, as mountains grew out of the plain, visible from quite far away, and the road went right for them.

Traffic was stopped at one point due to a single-lane situation in a long dark tunnel. We were forced to wait outside for "about ten minutes." No problem, lady, I was absolutely loving the chance to sit outside the van and revel in the huge rocky peaks that drove high into the cloudless azure sky on all sides.

I struck up a conversation with the very attractive young woman in the Nissan in front of me. She had a mountain bike on her roof, but it was her Boston Red Sox cap in the back window had caught my eye, and I had to comment on it.

Turns out she was from Illinois originally, had gone to Boston University, and had moved out here after college. "I love it out here!" she gushed, "As soon as I first saw it, I knew I had to move here. I live just down in Kenab [a small town at the Utah border, halfway between Zion and the Grand Canyon], and I come up here or to the Canyon to go biking all the time. You should definitely move out here!"

A very tempting proposition, to be sure. The sweet Utah Sirens were singing to me loud and clear!

Zion National Park had been hit by a tourist boom in the last decade. When we were there in '90, we just drove in, right up to the Lodge, parked, got out, went for a run around the Emerald Pools Trails, relaxed a bit, and then were on our way. Those were the days, I guess, because that road is only accessible to registered Lodge guests and shuttle busses now. At first, this vexed me, being denied the freedom of choice to go where I would throughout the Park. Moody, I boarded the shuttle bus, and squeezed in among strangers for a crawl-pace 40-minute bus ride to the final dropoff point, The Gateway to the Narrows, known as the Temple of Sinawava.

As the ride progressed though, I caught bits of conversation from the others about how hellacious traffic had gotten in recent years, and what a horror show parking had been, with people often blocking the road down to a 1-lane standoff. I began to think about how inappropriate such stress and ire would be in such a beautiful place, and sat back to enjoy the ride, looking through the glass panels of the roof at the beautiful cliffs and tall peaks that lined the road.

When we reached the Gateway, the bus emptied. The scenery was outstanding, but people were everywhere. Damn, I thought, so much for solitude. Oh well, I could always just look upward: no people there.

Again, I probably should have read the park map more carefully. The young, long-haired bus driver had said as he dropped us off: "Have a good walk in the water," which made me wonder. I strolled quickly up the sidewalk and onto the trail, trying to get out into nature before my fellow passengers did. The walkway itself was beautiful, with a veritable botanical garden of flowers and leafies hanging down from the spaces between rocks where they had taken root.

Then I got to the Trailhead for The Narrows. There had to be a hundred people there, including many children, all strolling around on the rounded small rocks that made up the river's bank, or stepping in the 2-inch deep water that made up the Virgin River at this point. They all looked happy to be there, and didn't seem to be heading off anywhere.



I strolled through the crowd, delighting in the scenery, but still longing for some alone time in the canyon. After about a hundred yards of walking on the sand and rocks, I came to a spot where there were only two options: walk through foot-deep water for about ten yards, or turn back. That damn whiny voice actually had the nerve to start up: *“Your shoes will get all...”* SHUT UP!! You think I came all the way out here to worry about getting my shoes soaked? And I forged straight ahead into the cold clean moving water.

Walking in the river itself was a slow business, with very uneven footing, and water that at times got quite active. If I hadn't been carrying a backpack with cameras and, uh, stuff, I wouldn't have cared if I took a tumble into the rushing river. It was another hot day, so a plunge would have been just fine.

The majority of the people apparently weren't into wading, because the further I went up the canyon, the fewer hikers I saw. The canyon was more amazing than I could possibly describe. Even all the photos that I took (that subsequently got vomed in the crash) could not begin to project what it felt like to be there. The sole surviving picture that I saved and processed and used for a “Utah Rocks” postcard (and as the intro for this section) was taken by some stranger – thankfully, G-Girl was nowhere around – who did a nice job of trying to get the full canyon walls in, but they were just too damn high; they probably went up another hundred feet.

And that was one of the wider spots. Around that bend, it narrowed considerably with each twist. One tributary got so slim that I could almost touch both walls with my outstretched arms, and only see the sky through a gap at least 300 feet up (that's *double* the height of the Statue of Liberty, by the way).

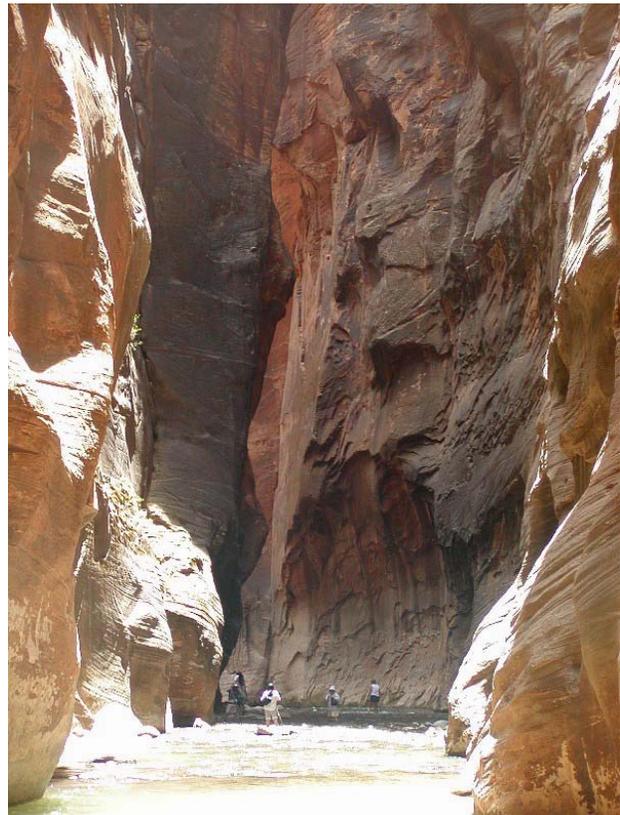
In the narrowest spots, the water ran deepest and swiftest. I really left the crowd behind when I had to wade chest-deep through the current. The Narrows are a large version of what are called “slot canyons” and were made so smooth by thousands of years of raging river battering the walls. Flash flood warnings are prominent at the trail head. If a T-storm like the one at Canyonlands comes by, smaller slot canyons can fill up real fast, and there would be nothing to do but get out the surfboard and ride the wave. There are no handholds on the smooth canyon walls, no way to climb to safety, and you can tell that water has been damn high in here.

Way down in that tributary, the water formed a deep clear pool, about ten yards square, and easily eight feet deep. A small waterfall tumbled down from the level above. Nobody had followed me down that trail, so it was the perfect time to stop for a bath and a waterfall shower. So good for the soul to be just lounging in the clean river water, splashed by the falls, and viewing these beautiful multi-colored smooth canyon walls.

I said “wow” and “holy shit” a real lot on that hike.

The entire Narrows Trail is a sixteen-mile hike – eight miles out, and the same back. I figure I did about half of it. I would've done the whole damn thing except that daylight would have become a factor, and also because I had arranged to meet my runner buddy Jack in Las Vegas that evening, so time was limited. In retrospect, I should have arranged it for a day later, because I could easily have spent another day or two finishing the Narrows, and hiking the Great White Throne Trail and the Kolob Canyons.

It was no less spectacular retracing my steps back to the shuttle though. If anything, familiarity with the river bed gave me more chances to enjoy the walls. A couple of times, I put the bag down, and took a dip in the deeper spots along the way. It was, after all, a very hot July day, and the sun warmed



the breezeless canyon well. The dunks in the clean, fresh river water were extremely refreshing. I was a sopping, shirtless, smiling guy when I emerged from the Trail and headed back for the bus.

So, I felt I still had some unfinished business at Zion – more hiking, and maybe a Narrows repeat -- which gave me a Next Time to add to the list.

Utah had been phenomenal once again. I had high expectations, and it surpassed them all. Utah does indeed rock. And, I crossed into Arizona on the way to Sacramento (!), I vowed that I had not seen the last of The Beehive State.

