

Utah Rocks

Fock 6: Valley of the Gods

Three years later, Next Time arrived. It was a vacation fortnight from the workaday world of Key West, Florida, which had become home. There had been plans for a late-June ramack from Florida to Boston and Rochester, with some canucking up to Toronto and Montreal, but when Blue Man went through three significant repairs in March and April, I reluctantly had to rethink the strategy.

With a full two weeks now at my disposal, and no need to allow for six days of road time, a Plan B was zealously researched. Immediately, Utah came to mind. The Narrows was begging for another visit, and I had a score to settle at Arches National Park. Blue Man would not be making the whole trip this time. The worthy steed would be cooling his wheels at the Park 'n' Save lot near Fort Lauderdale Airport, and I would be taking to the skies.

Some online shopping had found me offers I could not refuse. Airfare from Fort Lauderdale to Las Vegas, then, a week later, from Vegas to Boston, then, another week later, from Beantown back to Fort L, all went for just \$399, plus taxes (\$471 total). It even involved the red-eye easterly leg, so there would be no vacation day lost to the mundane task of air travel. Book it, Danno. Thifty in LV had a Jeep Cherokee just for me for only \$26 a day (a mere \$4 per day more than a puny Dodge Neon would have been), and Alamo in Boston had a Toyota Corolla on hold for the same rate. Sweetness. Orange Alert may well have helped the rates, but that does not make war a good thing.



Leaving on Friday the 13th, the eve of the Full Strawberry Moon, seemed like an appropriate launch for my first real vacation since Roadrage2000 ended. An early escape was artfully conjoined with a work-related errand in Fort Lauderdale, and Key West was departed at noon.

I made the stop at Alabama Jack's in downtown Card Sound on my way out of the Keys, but couldn't linger long because I still had to do my duty for work and get some caulk in Fort Lauderdale before the place closed. [That sentence is much better in print than spoken.] I made it to the caulk place and got more caulk than you would believe. I never seen so much caulk. I got eighty tubes of caulk. That's more caulk than a man should ever need.

So, with work obligations now officially done, it was off to the beach!

If I ever lose the joy of body surfing, you can just put me in a box. Being lifted and carried along by the gush of water is too good. It's easy to spend an hour doing it: riding a wave into shin-deep water, standing and stomping back out, busting through the incoming waves, or diving under them, then waiting at The Good Spot and scoping out the new waves, picking out the best swells where outgoing undercurrents create the optimal rise in the beach-bound flow. Marking time, looking over the shoulder as the chosen wave gathers steam in its approach, lifting off to meet it just right, and getting whoooooosssshed away by the rudimentary physics of moving and shallowing water is a simple pleasure that needs to be savored.

Supper at some Irish pub on Las Olas Boulevard – maybe it was called O'Hara's? – was a tad on the pricey side, but I was into treatin' myself right at that point. A few pints extended the supper hour a good bit, and at 9:30, I found myself back out on the beach, sitting on the soft sand, and watching the Strawberry Moon rise, grinning splendidly, over the softly rippling Atlantic. The night air was wonderfully warm and comfortably dry. A few feathery clouds glowed white in the moon's brilliance, and the breeze that poured across the beach was soul soothing. I sat and lay there for nearly an hour, thinking about next to nothing except how good it all felt and looked and sounded. Not much could be better than this, I mused. Oh, yeah: Utah! Fort Lauderdale would be here when I got back.

The 6:00 a.m. flight that made the airfare so reasonable now became my biggest challenge. My good intentions of being asleep in the van by 9:00 had long since been whisked away by Sam Adams and

the nighttime breeze. It would take more than a half-hour to get to the Park 'n' Save, and with allowances for the slow shuttle service and delays at airport security, a 4:00 a.m. wake-up was about the latest I could afford.

At 11:30, I gave up on trying to sleep in Blue Man. The ocean breezes did not reach as far as this inland parking lot, and the humidity sat on the area like a fat man on a toilet. If I ever did manage to fall asleep, the odds of waking up at 4:00 were miniscule indeed. So, reality faced, I gathered my goods and rode the shuttle to the terminal.

The Notbook entry: *Sat 6/14: 5:06 a.m., FL Airport*

The van was hot, so I opted for the airport sleep. Couch was VERY comfy, but the incessant announcements about film and parking and "visual announcement boards" were damn intrusive. Bunch of almost-connected naps is what it was. There was also the luggage-protection factor: I tried to keep the straps intertwined and in my hand or arm at all times lest some scurvy vagabond gallivant off with my belongings. Or abscond. Yeah, abscond would be a better word there. Didn't want to cross out, and this damn pen doesn't have a damn Delete button.

Security was a pain. Gotta go shoeless now, Joe. Laptop has to be taken out of the bag, but at least they didn't make me turn it on like they did on that San Diego trip. Spare keys in the wallet set off the metal detector, so I'm damn glad I didn't try chillin' it.

8:16 a.m. Charlotte Airport

A full flight, damn it! No lounging here: just 4 hours of cramped travel. Get me to the wide open spaces! Key West has plenty of open space, but you are confined by the sea. It's not the same, is it? IS IT?!!

Uncharacteristically, SW03 – pronounced "Ess-Wuh-Oh-Three" -- was not truly a ramack, and I felt a tad bad about that. It was *kind of* a ramack, because it did involve a poopload of driving, eating on the run, seeing abundant scenery, sleeping in the vehicle, and all that usual ramack huckus. But it wasn't *my* vehicle, and the majority of the mileage took place in the air. Still, it did allow me to suck some Arizona and Utah marrow, and that's what really counted.

Many people would have maximized the arrival and done dinner and a show and some gambling among the glitz and glitter. Not me. I didn't even glance at Las Vegas. I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I grabbed my Jeep and zoomed off to the southeast.

It was a light gold, 2003 Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo, and this thing was cherry. I was the first one to rent it. I quickly named it Chief.

Chief and I did a northern Arizona drive-around for a couple days. We took in the desert, toured Phoenix, explored a little around Flagstaff, checked out the Grand Canyon, did some off-roading, and launched a new day by driving northeast to Monument Valley. The day was perfect, and the Arizona landscape looked marvelous, but the towering buttes that stood sentinel near the Utah border just signaled even better things ahead. Me very psyched.

Just across the state line and into Utah, there was the tiny town of Mexican Hat. It was just a few workshops and merchant buildings huddled around a small bridge that crossed the narrow San Juan River at a gap in the rocks. As you drive across the bridge, you could easily believe that you are going to smash head-on into a solid wall of reddish rock. A hard-to-see 90° turn spares you that fate, but I was angling left for the general store anyway to procure some beverage. The selection was surprisingly good, so I snagged a six of microbrewed Squatters Full Suspension Pale Ale to complement my cans of macro Coors.

A moment later, I was back in the store looking to buy a bottle opener, but they had none. No worries, I decided, the Universe will provide.

Just after Mexican Hat, the road split. Route 261 North had green dots aplenty, and split the gap between The Valley Of The Gods and Grand Gulch Primitive Area. And it was the best route to Lake



Powell. Nice, it seemed, but not a single town lay along that road till Hall's Crossing, at Lake Powell, about 90 miles away.

Route 163, which I was already on, continued east for 17 miles to the town of Bluff, where gas and bottle openers could surely be found in abundance. And it had green dots of its own. So, I opted for a forty-minute, out-and-back run to Bluff, and then we'd explore what 261 had to offer when we got back.

Well, so, here I was, just toolin' along the empty desert highway, diggin' the coolo scenes all around, when up pops this sign. OK, not pops, really, cuz it was just standing there in the hot sun, like it does 24/7/365+, doing nothing at all, especially not popping. But a sign has only one job: to catch your eye and inform you. And it did that.

Mind you, this was not some bigass, reflective, mombo, highway, monstrosity of a sign. No, sir or ma'am. This was just a timid little green sign, like a residential street sign; it was only a few inches high and a foot or so long. If I had been switching tunes, or reaching for a beverage, or scratching my whatever I probably would have zollied right on by it.

But it did its job. It was on the right shoulder. I flew by at 75 mph, but it read out clear as day "Valley of the Gods," in plain white letters, with a little arrow pointing left. I had just enough time to glance left and saw a funky bumpy dirt road that rambled over a few mounds, berms, and banks, and ran off into parts unknown.

Brakes applied. Cargo shifted, but did not spill. Dead stop in the middle of the highway. Too enticing to pass up. Reverse. Gun it in reverse, Mr. Sulu. Nobody else on the road, so why not?

One of the high points of Roadrage2000 had been the Valley Of The Gods, or, at least, what I had thought was Valley Of The Gods. On that trip, that was where I was serenading the heavens roadside with REO, with mesas all around in a broad, flat valley of pure unspoiled emptiness. It all seemed very Valley-of-the-Godsish to me.

But there had been doubt, too. Look on the map and you see that red square kinda stuck out in the middle of those three roads: 163, 261, and 95. You could easily think that by driving on any of them that you experience VOTG.

Ahh, but not so, turtleface.

Chief eagerly clawed into the soft dirt and churned off away from 163, kicking dust and stones back at the pavement with disdain. Initially, the road was fairly straight and fairly flat, and Chief ripped into it fairly insanely. There was nothing extreme yet, at least not for a Jeep – Mom's Buick might have had issues with this terrain, though – and we charged into it with zeal. An unexpected dip in the road dropped us down suddenly, but the upside of it was like a take-off ramp, and I gunned it. I think we went airborne. We sure hit the ground hard enough. Chief bounced jauntily, the cooler clinked and rattled, and the TD CD never skipped a note. The Jeep was in its element.

We soon slowed, though, because the scenery suddenly awoke. The road had been in a low stretch, and the bumps and squiggles had been playfully occupying my attention. But then we roared up a slight slope and I reined Chief in.

Holy shit, it was beautiful.

We were miles from any highway, and, other than these dirt tire tracks I was following, there was no sign of civilization at all. And the landscape went prehistoric. THIS was what I had come for! THIS was why I had eschewed the thriving cities, and the beautiful lakes, and the sun-drenched beaches, and the verdant golf courses, and the lush forests that lure other vacationers. This was unspoiled, unmarketed Earth, the way God had made it. Nobody was making money off my being here. There was no entrance fee, and there were no concession stands along the way. It was what it was,



and it was pure, and it was majestic, and it was perfect.

A series of steep, sheer, narrow buttes thrust upwards from the desert floor. They were ringed by a natural amphitheater of red mesas, just as steep, just as sheer, and totally impassable. Traces of the tiny dirt road peeked here and there as it slithered across the Valley floor, promising some really great driving ahead.



The road cut hard left to pass beneath an impressive cliff. Faint traces of past explorers led upwards to the base of the cliffs. Chief was up for it, so there we went. He took me to the edge of the bottom slope, and then, carried away by the rush, I went after it on foot, clambering my way up over rock and dirt almost frantically, laughing foolishly and breathlessly, till finally I was face to face with a sheer vertical wall of red stone. I turned, and the Valley Of The Gods looked even more amazing from this panoramic viewpoint. I sat down on a rock in the cool shade and let it just sink in.

Nobody was in sight, anywhere. I just chilled right out and enjoyed the solitude.

Have you ever noticed that climbing up something is often easier than climbing down? I've noticed that a lot. The leverage in each step is so different. If you slip while striving for an upward foothold, you probably just steady yourself with one hand, place your foot on a sturdier spot, and up you go.

But when your foot slips on the way down, it's trouble. Your leg accelerates unexpectedly and throws itself wildly forward into unsupported air, and your balance disintegrates. Gravity laughs at you and pulls you forward into a very painful split. Your reflex reverse motion, which was not enough to prevent the fall, now has caused your upper body to launch itself backwards, and you know that your tailbone, your spine, or the back of your cranium – or all of those – is about to smack rock. Hard. There is truth, after all, to the adage about the relationship between bigness and the hardness of the fall.

I thought about this after I had lingered in the shade for a good bit, chillin' my life away. My zeal had catapulted me to this lofty perch, and now, in my much mellower state, I began to wonder how the hell I was going to get down.

I had run myself into similar jams before, when overzealous glee had carried me across treacherous ground, but calm reason looked at that return trip and said, "NFW."

And NFW was how I felt about this downward climb back to Chief, who waited patiently down there, looking kinda small. I remember thinking, "I really need to think these things through a little better," as I carefully started down the top level of sloping sand and loose rock.

But I lived to tell the tale. As you see.

The rest of the ride through Valley Of The Gods was outstanding. I don't know if this 17-mile-long road was planned by somebody, or if it just evolved from primitive footsteps, to hoofprints, to wagon ruts, to tire tracks, as generation after generation passed through in amazement. It was certainly not an expeditious route. It meandered through the whole Valley, coming as close as possible to each and every remarkable rock formation. And there were no markers or signs of any kind anywhere.

The two centerpieces of the Valley are tall and narrow and flat across, like the tombstones of giants. You almost expect to see inscriptions on them. (Almost.) Like so many of these stone monoliths, they rise from a pyramidal base of dirt and broken rock that is about half their height, then they jab straight skyward. These two seemed to be perfectly aligned and might well have



belonged to the same wall a long, long time ago. From the side, they looked ridiculously narrow, and from a distance they looked quite phallic, as if the earth ... well, maybe we'll just let that thought die right there, eh?

Anyway, the road was fun too! It rolled quite a bit, and was dusty as all hell. Chief wasn't shiny champagne gold any more: he was lookin' like a redskin.

Just before the road ended and joined up with the aforementioned Route 261, there was a house by the roadside. It was a medium-sized residence, whatever that means, with a thin wire fence surrounding it, and a metal bar gate in front. There was also a large, carved wooden sign hanging in a frame that was made from three tree trunks. It stood amid a clump of lifeless brush at the edge of the road. There was a brochure available from a small box. It read "Valley Of The Gods Bed & Breakfast. Open All Year."

There was also a sign – a small, black-and-white one – on the gate. It read, "Closed."

Hmmm. Conflicting information. Or maybe I was between years. I sure as hell didn't know what time it was out here, so maybe they do their years differently too.



So, with a sigh, I bid VOTG adieu and took to Highway 261 to head north to beautiful Lake Powell. The offroad cruising was done for now, and it was time to hit the gas and make up some time.

Or not.

Almost immediately after returning to solid smooth pavement, the road turned slightly and aimed directly at a huge mesa that walled in the whole Valley. I began to speculate that the highway would have to turn hard left, and soon, and that we would be going way around to the west to circumvent this baby. Funny how the map didn't show that.

Well, 261 had other ideas, as I figured out when I saw what looked like a big dumptruck driving slowly along a sloping ledge waaaaaay up the wall. A

sign warned of "10% GRADES. 5 MPH SWITCHBACKS. GRAVEL ROAD. NEXT THREE MILES." I looked up at the top of the gray rock wall at a spot where the truck had last disappeared. It looked like 1000-feet to me, and it was going to take three miles to climb it.

It was quite a ride. And quite a construction project! The ledges were cut crisp and there were no rails or fences. I stayed well away from those edges. I knew they had to be sturdy if all that heavy equipment could drive up and down on them all day, but they sure looked like just packed dirt to me.

At one tight switchback, a very large, downbound truck appeared. There was no way we were both fitting on that roadway. I backed up to a small recess on the inside shoulder, and tucked Chief under an overhanging rock as the beast rumbled by. He gave me a blast of his airhorn, like a bull walrus barking out its dominance over a cowering younger rival.

When we reached the top, there was a pullout where you could look down on it all: the Valley Of The Gods, the bed and breakfast, the highway, and the switchbacks. The sign facing southbound traffic said, "Mokee Dugway / Elev. 6425 ft / 1100 ft. drop / Next 3 miles." I had to wonder, "What the hell is a Dugway? And who was this Mokee dude??"

Maybe I'll find out Next Time. ;]

