

Utah Rocks

Fock 8: Who Pulled the Plug on Powell?

A good 40 or so miles later, we rejoined Highway 95, and headed back to the southeast. This was familiar road from Roadrage2000, though Blue Man and I had driven it the opposite direction then. It had been exhilarating then, it was just as wowing now. Maybe it's because the southeasterly route threw scenes at me that I had not seen while traveling northwest, or maybe this road's unnamed and unhighlighted spectacles has been lost in the overwhelm of scenery that day, but I found myself accompanying turn after turn with a loud "Hol-eeeeeeee Shittttttt!!!"



Sheer rock walls, nearly shiny, towered everywhere. The smooth rock faces gleamed as if they had been sliced by God's favorite ginsu. Thin, rain-washed traces of minerals had painted age-old



streaks of darker hues down the impassable walls, staining them with colors that made no sense.

I began a new category in my picture taking: The Faces of Rock. For the rest of the week, I devoted several shots at each location to zoomed-in photos of just a casually selected section of Utah rockfaces. Amazing stuff. (See final pages of this fock.)

But sad reality would dampen the scene just a little. The Colorado River feeds Lake Powell, and the Colorado River was down. Like WAAAAAY down. Like unbelievably WAAAY down. Places where the river had been narrow were noticeably lower, but the spots where the Lake used to sprawl out and extend its mighty fingers were just plain dead.

The first real statement came at the Hite Overlook (above, and below). A grand viewpoint atop a vertical cliff several hundred feet high, the Overlook overlooks what was once the town of Hite, and what had now been reduced to a struggling marina.

In 2000, it held me rapt with the breathtaking sight of Lake Powell's deep blue waters (left photo, below). Three years later, the swath of vivid blue that had filled the wide, sweeping basin had receded almost out of sight (right photo, below). Brown and green had replaced the blue. Silty mud and lush grass soaked up the sun where twenty feet of water had stood. Even without the photo for verification, it was a slap in my memory's face. The view was still pretty good, but knowing what it had been made me a tad sad, Brad.



The road down was very cool, with the tall dark cliffs along the lake looking like an unending fortress and moat. The road construction crew had chosen to cut right through a tall rock arm at one point, and had created a very nice slot through which you could see the Hite Bridge over the Colorado (right).



Like I said, in RR2K, Lake Powell had ambushed me with two extraordinary swimspots, and the second of those lay shortly beyond that bridge. Three years before, it had stopped me dead in my tracks, and it did so again. But in 2000, I had been brought to a halt by the beckoning of fjord-like canyons that crept almost up to the road. Steep rock plunged into deep, sparkling water. I had driven Blue Man right out onto those rocks, and did a good half-hour of diving and reveling (left photo, below).

This time, it was bone dry (right photo, below). And it had been for a while. Thirsty weeds suffered in the sun in places that were deeply out of my reach before. That water had to have been twenty feet deep, and now not a drop was to be seen. The contrast was intense. I gazed at it for a while, regretting the change, and moved on.



The original grab of Lake Powell had been Farley Canyon, just as Highway 95 had entered GCNRA land. That was glimmer that had grabbed me from three miles away, and I had rallied to it. Blue Man had rumbled dustily down to the sandy shore, and I had sprinted into the waiting water and swum to a small island in the middle of the canyon.

This time, I found myself driving Chief right up onto that island. But the island was an island no more; it was just a weedy little mound surrounded by weedy little swales. The low spots that I bounced my Jeep through were well underwater just three years before. Small, cinder block restrooms had been constructed in a spot where boats had zoomed. The scrubs and bushes were tall and very well established. A wilderness hiking trail had been fashioned and designated through here. You would never have guessed that water had ever filled this place.

I was glad I had been there in 2000 because my memories of Lake Powell in 2003 were pretty damn blah, by comparison.

But, as Chief spun off the dirt road and back onto Route 95, my disappointment evaporated. We immediately crested a small rise, and were faced with a view that totally revitalized my Utah Love.

Highway 95 swept down into a wide expanse that was hemmed in by rows and rows of noble mesas. White Canyon, which zigged for miles like a narrow crack in the flat basin floor, dictated the path of the highway. The canyon might be named simply for its color because it seemed, from my passerby viewpoint, to be all white rock. It tucked down out of sight, and crawled like a wounded snake across the arid landscape.

This area was what I had thought, on RR2K, was The Valley Of The Gods. It certainly seemed worthy of that title. It had overwhelmed me then, and it gave me a damn good lift again this time. I even played *Wish You Were There*.



There was no single focal point here. There was no specific name for this wowing place. And that seems appropriate: except for the thirty-foot-wide black ribbon of asphalt, this place is the exact same as it was a few thousand years ago. Rocks, sandy dirt, and gasping vegetation. Put in those terms, it sounds so ordinary and unimpressive. And I'm sure there are people who would find this region godawful boring. But screw them. They can launder my shorts -- by hand -- because, to me, it is just freakin' beautiful.

When 95 ended, and we took a left onto 191 toward Moab, I kinda settled back for a less interesting drive. This road (in the other direction) had opened an amazing day of scenery three years before, but I had no recollection of it having any scenic significance of its own. Rand McNally didn't give it any green dots, and the first town, called Blanding, seemed to herald a more ordinary road ahead.

But, once again, Utah exceeded expectations. I found myself driving in the last two hours of daylight, and constantly saying to anyone who might be listening, "I do NOT remember this road being this great!"

As if there hadn't been enough weird rock shapes and formations already, 191 tossed a few purely bizarre ones my way. One was just a squat, round rock. It was huge, though, like fifty feet tall. And it seemed almost perfectly symmetrical. It was shaped like some gigantic ceramic crock, with a bulbous lid. There even seemed to be a small square doorway in the base. And it just sat by itself in the middle of a field.

Right after Crock Rock -- I would find out later that it is officially named Church Rock, but I like the ring of Crock Rock better -- I had to do a double take at a grass field. Yes, real grass. Not the wimpy,

clumpy, clinging-to-life kind that I had been seeing for three days, but a real, healthy carpet of green blades of grass. Funny how something so common and ordinary can sometimes seem so unusual. It



was striking! So vivid and lush and alive. It was vivid, lush, and thriving **green**, and this was a land dominated by tans, beiges, browns, grays, and copper tints.

Then, a few miles later, there was the hidden corral. A small, soft, sandy path led away from 191 and dropped out of sight behind another oddly-rounded rock. This one looked almost like a huge, crude, duck decoy. WTF, I figured, and I took Chief for another offroad excursion.

The sand was very soft and we did some cool wheel spinning in spots. Then the path forked, and the right hand route led directly behind the big decoy. Again, WTF, why not? To my surprise, the rock had been somebody's home! A gray and crooked split rail fence stood

feeble guard around a badly overgrown yard, and a slightly more sturdy corral, with a long-dried water trough, abutted it.

The strangest part, though, was the rock itself. Whereas Crock Rock had seemed to have a doorway, the back of Decoy Rock had a clearly carved rectangular opening that led within. It was partially blocked by scrub brush, and two rotted planks crisscrossed the bottom of the opening, in a lame attempt at being a barricade. I walked right up to the door and looked in. The daylight was fading anyway, and this was on the shadowed side of the rock. The only thing visible besides the first two feet or so of sand was just a roomful of darkness. There was no telling how big it was. Might've been a closet, might've been a cavern. Without a flashlight there was no way to tell. There was also no way to tell if it was teeming with scorpions and snakes. Or rotting bodies of long dead outlaws. Curiosity deferred to prudence, and I resisted the urge to explore within. It was probably full of money. Oh well. Next time...



Moab is a great little town. Small, clean, and fairly prosperous, it thrives on the summer season. Kayakers, hikers, and mountain bikers by the thousands descend on this area to revel in eastern Utah's natural playground. The Colorado River runs down from Colorado (go figure) and right through the town. Arches National Park lies immediately north. Canyonlands National Park lies immediately west. Fisher Towers lie directly east. Hundreds of quaintly-named, and adventurous trails run along the various rims and mesas in all directions. Moab is the hub of it all, and healthy, outdoorsy types abound.

At this point for me, though, after fourteen hours of driving, it just needed to have a restaurant, a pub, and a cheap motel.

The restaurant and pub were not a problem: I remembered Eddie McStiff's from the 2000 trip. Atmosphere and beer were good, as they had been before, and the Australian barkeep was the same. The food still kinda sucked though: a small, flat, dry burger, with tepid, mushy fries.

The funny thing was that you were forced to eat at McStiff's, so you would've thought that the food would be better. I mean, there were other places to eat, but if you went to McStiff's, it was mandatory that you ate. Local codes or licensing restrictions were such that you couldn't just go into this brewery and drink. The barkeep had a practiced spiel that was as dry as the burger, "We are a restaurant, so if you want to drink alcohol, you have to order food. Would you like an order of nacho

chips for 85¢?" His classic, down-under accent made it seem a little less like extortion, but when the nacho chips arrived all purple, blue, orange and green in color, even the 85¢ seemed like gouging.

The Super 8 Motel was booked solid for the night, but the full-bodied counter girl wrote me up a coupon for The Apache Motel, which was a couple of blocks off the main drag. It was a better choice anyway. A throwback to the days when individually owned motels were the norm, The Apache was a nice alternative to the all-too-common chains. There were several John Wayne autographed photos in the lobby. The Duke had stayed at The Apache whenever he worked on westerns back in the day, and he had endorsed it heartily, so I reckon if it was good enough for him, it was good enough for me. And it was. Quiet, comfortable, and less than \$45, including tax. Sweet.

