

Utah Rocks

Fock 9: Mission Accomplished

Despite crack-o'-dawn intentions, the comfort of the Apache – especially after the previous night in Chief – kept me bed-bound late, and it was 8:45 when Chief and I buckoed out of the motel and headed on up to Arches. In 2000, on the way to Sacramento (!), I was one of the very first to get through the entrance in the morning, and had some great moments of solitude as a result.

Just entering Arches is a trip. The road angles up the side of the rock ridge that defines the eastern edge of the Moab Fault, and the impressive formations of reddish rock start almost immediately. The shapes are a beautifully appealing blend of flat surfaces and rounded edges.

The very first trailhead is for the Park Avenue Trail. Though it was outstanding when I had it all to myself three years before, I took one look at the small parking area, saw that there were already about a half-dozen cars, and decided to zoom on by. The main appeal of that trail had been the almost prehistoric isolation there, as if I had traveled back in time.

But with those cars already there, I knew that that sensation would not recur, and I was, after all, a Man On A Mission.

I also bypassed The Windows Area, cool though it had been. There were no tour busses to be seen yet, but my Mission was calling me, and I rolled on by.

I paused and snapped some very nice pics on the roads that lead into the depths of the Park. The morning sun gave some favorable angles on certain views, and I delayed my Mission only for those few quick-stop photo ops.

The first step of the Mission was to get back to the Delicate Arch Trail. Since that lengthy hike had been a surprisingly arduous endeavor in 2000, I approached it with a more workmanlike demeanor this time around.

The Wolfe Ranch (below) is at the head of the trail. It is an old one-room shack and corral left by one of the original settlers of the region. A large plaque details his story, but the shack itself told the story better. It was very small, and must have been a very hot and dusty place to call home. It was very cool to see, though, as a way of showing just how hardy these pioneers had to be.



The trail, strangely enough, was under repair. I reckon it was broken. A broken trail: well, I'll be dipped. Orange cones, uneven temporary poles, and yellow plastic tape routed us intrepid hikers off what

used to be the easiest and most even stretch of trail, and sent us clambering over a makeshift footpath. It really seemed weird having all that crap on the trail; a trail gets formed naturally by many, many footsteps, and to have some orange-vested workers rebuilding it just seemed odd.

But, anyway, the climb went just dandy this time. Attitude really does make a difference. I was in no hurry, really, but somehow, I had to walk faster than everyone else. Must be the runner in me. Or maybe I just like to walk fast because I can. As if anyone gives a flying fox fart how fast I'm walking.

And then, there it was: Delicate Arch. Even if you've seen it before, when you step over that final lip and up onto the edge of the arena, the Arch totally stops you in your tracks.

It stands alone, and is perfectly placed along the rim, with a wide, flat spot right underneath it that is perfect for standing and posing for dorky-wave photos, like the one that G-Girl had botched. The Arch almost seems like it had been built there. But this is no construction, no Stonehenge. This is what a few million years of water and wind erosion will do to a fin of solid sandstone when the currents and angles are just right.



It's an inspiring sight. Standing like a stone giant who had been cut off at the waist, it looms more than fifty feet high, with relatively narrow knees, and wide, elephant feet. The natural amphitheater that it stands sentinel over is all smooth, copper-hued slickrock.

There were a couple dozen people there when I arrived, but that was OK. This arena is big enough to share. Everyone was respectfully quiet, and everyone understood the need for an uncrowded photo.

Well, almost everyone.

I waited patiently while a few people took their turns under the Arch, gazing up and around at it, and posing for their pictures. A family of six went down next and basically made camp. With a sigh, I strolled down and joined them. I was there a few seconds, taking some photos straight upwards and generally

dropping the photo-op hints loudly and clearly. Then, the ultimate vulgarity: the little girl's cell phone let out its shrill cry. Oh my God, you clueless little beast, shut your damn phone off for just a few minutes, can't you??

What was worse, it was a Nextel walkie-talkie, the most obnoxious communications device since, well, ever. Like having a phone isn't enough? You have to have one that broadcasts the dialogue to everyone within thirty feet, and punctuates each exchange with a loud beep. Can't these damn walker-talkers keep their stupid freaking conversations to themselves??

But I guess the whole point is to show off that you have this supposedly cool device. To me, it is a regression. We made huge advances in private communication, and we took a HUGE step backwards with a loud and intrusive contraption that was marketed, ironically, by an actor who claimed that he does "not do commercials," and who plainly states that it was "because they lie." So, here's a liar, openly admitting that he's lying, and obnoxiously broadcasting his conversation to all of us who do NOT want to hear it.

It's a bonehead concept, and if you have one, and you use it that way, then you are a bonehead too. Sorry, you just are. Go to Radio Shack if you want to play with walkie-talkies.

I had an urge to grab that spoiled little bitch's phone and hurl it into the deep ravine behind the Arch. But, it's probably good that I didn't do that. Anyway, I couldn't stand them anymore, so I wandered back up the arena to seek a suitable photographer and plan my picture.

I started chatting with this guy from Somerville, Massachusetts, which is just north of Boston. We talked about the Red Sox, and Pedro, and Nomahhhhh. He seemed fairly sharp, especially for a Somervillian, so, as the walkie-talkie family dispersed, I asked him if he would take my picture standing under the Arch. He said, "Shoo-ahh."

The Arch was all mine. I walked directly into position, assumed my pose, and he clicked. Sweet, I thought: Mission accomplished.

For three long years, since 2000, when G-Girl slogged up the reebo, I had coveted this very same photo. I departed that day, muttering through gnashed teeth, "Next time..."

Well, THIS was Next Time, *damn it!* Three years in the making, and now it was done. The pressure was off. I thanked Somerville Sam, and wandered off to just have a sit along the arena's gentle slope and just relax and soak in the unusual beauty of this place.

After a bit, I turned the camera on to view my prize image. What I saw appalled me. Somerville Shithead had cut off the whole top of the Arch! Not only that, but somehow he had widened the zoom and managed to get a half-dozen people in the picture! What a ree-tahhd!

This would not do. Thankful that I had double-checked the photo (right), but chiding myself for trusting a slovenly Somervillian with my Mission, I scanned the crowd for a better photographer. Third time had to be the charm.

I approached two young women and politely asked if they would take my picture. I explained that the camera was all set, zoomed, and focused, and that all they had to do was press the silver button. They looked at me, then at each other, spoke a couple of phrases in German, and nodded back at me to indicate that,

though they spoke no English, they were cool to my zool. I smiled.

By the time I walked back down to the Arch, a woman about my age had kinda settled in for a little rest. Refusing to be denied, I amiably asked if she would mind hiding behind the front leg of the Arch while I had my picture taken. She looked a tad bemused, but complied.

The German girls took not just one, but two perfect shots. I look all alone under that Arch, but what you can't see is the woman in hiding, making stupid faces at me while I posed.

Now, the Mission truly was accomplished (see final page).

After a bit more relaxing, I decided to explore the rest of the arena. I took several photos of the arena itself, looking out from the Arch. It is an amazing place. It was easy to picture it underwater, with the stone so smoothed and rounded.

I had noticed a small white shape atop the huge cliff (photo, left) that stood across the ravine from



Delicate Arch, and it turned out to be a white-shirted person. What a cool vantage point that must be, I thought, and set out to cross the deep bowl of the amphitheater to get there.

First, I took some less-common-angle shots of the Arch, including one from behind it that required sliding down the steeply sloping rock face for about ten feet, into a narrow niche about five feet across and a foot wide. I lay on my back there, and snapped a very nice photo (right). Under the niche, the slope dropped dramatically. I would not know how dramatically until I saw it from the other side (next page, top, left). Glad I didn't know at the time, to be honest, because if I had slid past that niche, I would've been doin' a whole lot of rollin' and tumblin',





like Wile E. Coyote, into the abyss. (That's the Arch, from a side-on view, in the upper left, and my niche is just below it to the right.)

The far-side views back into the arena were tremendous (photo, below, right). As bizarre as it had all looked from within the bowl, it looked doubly surreal from outside. I sat for quite awhile, just gazing around, savoring the breeze, the quiet, and these sights that I might never see again.

A woman that I'll never know unknowingly posed for a photo that she'll never see, creating a terrific silhouette in one very cool window. (If you know who it is, let me know and I'll send her a big blowup of it.)



A small herd of clouds meandered along and dimmed the sunlight, so I took that as my move-along-young-fella nudge from above. I clambered down from my lofty lookout, but something caught my eye. I did a double-take when I saw them, because I couldn't fathom how they got there, but standing up on the top of a twenty-five-foot-high column of rock were two curly horned mountain goats. I told myself that they were rams (for obvious reasons) but they weren't. The side of the rock that I faced was strictly vertical, and the other sides were not a lot different. The backside had just enough footholds to enable these sure-footed creatures to attain their safe perch.

The two of them watched me warily for a bit. I was the only one on this side of the arena, and there was no indication that anyone across the bowl had noticed them. They both eventually settled into comfortable lying-down positions, and just stared off



across the wide valley at the snow capped mountains far in the distance, exactly as I had been doing just a few minutes before.

The hike back down was uneventful. I could probably still write a couple thousand words about it, but I won't.

Since I was here at Arches National Park, Double-O Arch was another photo that I wanted to reclaim. It still galls me that all of those 300-plus digital RR2K pics got obliterated. I never even had a chance to save any to disk or CD; I had just turned on the laptop to begin processing them, and its brain went hoey. It started killing the frozen crewmembers, cut Frank Poole's air hose while he was outside trying to replace the A-15 radar unit, and wouldn't open the pod bay doors for me when I got back. When it started singing "Daisy," I knew it was all over.

Many of those voomed pix were scenery shots that could be retaken, but I knew the odds of catching another gymnastic move atop DOA were slim.

The July sun had since come back out in full force, and it was Hades-hot here, Harry. The trail seemed every bit as long as I remembered it. I actually passed right by Double-O itself -- because there were people there -- and finished the trail, all the way out to a spot called Dark Angel.

Dark Angel was a towering black-faced rock that looked like it had been carefully placed on top of another huge flat-topped boulder. To the casual eye, the two enormous stones didn't line up all that great, but they didn't seem like they would be toppling anytime soon either.

By now, a shady break from the sun seemed like the cow's pajamas to me. The hill facing Dark Angel had an arch-shaped recess in it, making it reminiscent of the Hatch Shell in Boston, or some other outdoor performance venue. It wasn't deep enough to be a cave, but it was recessed enough to be cool and restful. It was clear that I wasn't the only one to think so, because, as I got within a few steps of it, a full-grown deer came bounding out, looking peeved but unafraid. He was big, too! This wasn't some wimpy Bambi deer, like Dugg's Doris in Virginia; this one was a big brawny buck that was every inch as tall as me. He was handsome as all get-out, though. He stopped about twenty feet away and stared back at me. I grinned at him, and said affably, "Hey, deer." He turned his head, pretended to stare at something else for a moment, and then trotted briskly out of sight.



On the way back, the crowd at Double-O had left, so I got to pick my primo spots. One mid-30's woman did climb through just as I lined up my favorite angle, but she saw me with camera poised, offered a smiling apology and moved out of the line of sight. Refocused, I readied the Olympus, just to have her husband strut into the center of the arch and stand there like Abe Lincoln at the Vatican. The woman made some comment to him about me, and he replied with something like "Oh, he's OK." She finally said, "So get out of the way so he can take the picture!"

"Oh," he replied. Dumbass.

The afternoon sun retreated behind some high clouds as I wheeled Chief towards the exit of Arches NP. I stopped to take a few photos, including a couple at the overlook of Park Avenue Trail (below), but my pesky companions, Hunger and Thirst, were whining in the back seat, so it was off to Moab for some victuals and refreshments.

I downloaded all my Arches photos into the laptop as I ate and quaffed and listened to Supertramp's *Dreamer* on the boogie-woogie box at Moab Brewery. Still very aware that the pix were not safely in the vault yet, I did not erase the best ones from the camera's memory card. I had planned ahead on this too, having bought a card that could hold about 300 high-resolution photos (over 1300 at low rez), so I left anything Good – with a capital G – on the memory card for safe keeping. I felt a bit geeky doin' the laptop dance on the bar like that, but I really didn't give a penguin poop what anybody there would think: my precious pix were more valuable than the noisy opinions of the bit characters in the play of my life.

