

ARIZONA'S HOT!

Fock 3: Next Time: SW03

There was little time to enjoy Arizona here in 2000, on the way to Sacramento (!!). I-15 cut, literally, through the northwest corner of the state, with Las Vegas in its crosshairs, just 80 miles away.

Though the AZ stint of Interstate is only about a half-hour of driving (29 miles), it definitely entertains. It squirms through steep, irregular hills, winding with considerable slope through deep man-made chasms. Rough, unfoliated rock towers up on both sides, its pale tan coloring testament to eons of sun-bleached days.

Then, the highway just bursts into the wide-open plain of Nevada, and the landscape goes from rugged to void. As difficult as those hills would have been to traverse, and as delighted as the early settlers would have been to be finally clear of them, at least they offered shade and the occasional stream. The empty void of Nevada offered nothing but unmitigated sun, parched ground, scorpions and rattlesnakes. Oh yay.

Once again, I felt that my childhood fondness for Arizona and its Z was not being fulfilled. The brief pass-through left me thirsty for more. The Grand Canyon, surely, was the highlight of the state, but I had the a strong urge to explore more.

But, as we left 'Zona behind, RR2K wagged its finger and winked, "Next time."

Next Time would finally come in June of 2003, as an appetizer to the Utah Redux that I so cleverly labeled SW03.

Nevada is in the Pacific Time Zone, and Arizona is in the Mountain Time Zone, so an hour was lost into thin air as I crossed the Hoover Dam in my Vegas-rental Jeep and into The Grand Canyon State. It was a good climb out of Black Canyon, which the damn dam dams, but once out of that chasm, the landscape of Arizona just spreads out, big, wide, and very, very empty.



The terrain is as dry as sandpaper, and everything is a brownish hue. The land itself looks tortured and parched, as if it was caught in an ugly-faced moment when it dehydrated to a painful death. What little vegetation exists is thin and wispy grass, or small, squat, scruffy brush. The highway stretches out in both directions, flat and straight and fast. A distant arm of Lake Mead squirms between two barren hills, and then out of sight behind you.

And it is hot.

But, as they say, it's a dry heat.

I pulled over – yes, it was that time – and stood there for a while, absorbing the desert conditions. I walked a little away from Chief, sat on a rock and sipped a Coors. The sun felt great! It was 100°, and



there was no indication that I would begin sweating anytime soon. A similar sit-down in Key West in 85° would have my brow dotted with perspiration pretty damn quickly.

Kingman was the first Arizona town, and it served as a crossroads of I-40 and the famous Route 66. Both roads wended east, so the choice was easy: history over expediency. Besides, the roads out here in this desert country were empty, and 70 MPH on the smaller roads was fine and dandy with all concerned.

It was also cool to see the road signs in Kingman. Somehow, having a sign pointing me towards Los Angeles just really pumped me up for the driving days ahead.

Route 66 itself, at least the section between Kingman and Flagstaff, was a real letdown. It was empty. I guess I expected old towns or historic this-and-that's, but aside from Hackberry -- which was just one general store that used to also be a gas station, with its accompanying dilapidated ranch -- and a couple of Indian-reservation-looking spots, there was nothing but the desert and the railroad tracks.



There was a little leap-frogging going on between Chief and one long train. I would pull over for a stop, for whatever reason, and the train would churn on by. The engineer gave me a good blast on the whistle, and I thumbs-upped him. This happened a few times, but I got bored of it so I stopped stopping.

My roadtrippn' route was largely determined by green dots, which is how Rand-McNally designates their "scenic highways." So, when I rejoined I-40 and zipped off east to Flagstaff, the only thing I knew for sure was that I would be taking a right onto the green-dotted Route 89A towards Prescott. There was a much more direct route, but it lacked the dots, so I eschewed it.

Route 89A turned out to be astounding! The higher elevation of the Flagstaff area yielded cooler temperatures and much more green. The brown deserts gave way to healthy, thriving, evergreen forests, and the hulking mass of Humphreys Peak (Arizona's highest peak, at 12,633 feet), dotted with snow, loomed above it all. If you didn't know where you were, you wouldn't know where you were. Really. But I guess that goes without saying. No, actually, I guess it didn't.



Anyway, 89A led into the woods. It was beautiful. The palm trees in the Keys are real nice, but there are no true forests around there. The mangroves are short and scraggly and, to be honest, ugly. They are also impenetrable. There are no trails through mangroves. Not even any footpaths. My sole longing in my two years of Keys life has been for deep, shady, leafy or evergreen forests. And now here I was driving through a high elevation, cedar forest. "Sweet", I smiled, "this is scenic, all right."

But little did I know that was a mere

clearing of the throat before the aria. A sign for “Scenic Overlook: Oak Creek Canyon” caught my fancy, and I decided to let Chief take a breather and to give my legs a little shake-out. The view was excellent, as the canyon plunged steeply out of sight, presumably down to Oak Creek, several hundred feet below.

After a nice eyeful, it was back to Chief. The afternoon was beginning to slip away, and there was still much mileage to cover to reach Phoenix.

Almost immediately after getting back on 89A, the road grinned and laughed devilishly. It plunged downward and began swirling through a neck-twisting array of switchbacks, dropping deeper and deeper among the towering rock walls of the canyon. Down and down we fell, brakes fighting gravity and centrifugal force all the way. Finally, after nearly a thousand foot elevation drop, we reached the bottom.

Oak Creek itself was a classic rocky creek, looking cool and inviting as it tumbled over the well-rounded rocks. The rocks that rose up steeply on both sides had the copper-red hue that turns ordinary into artistic, and terrain into scenery. It became apparent that this was the area that the woman at Lake Mead had alluded to as Red Rocks Area. They jutted up in blunt towers between the lush greenery, and seemed to appear at every curve of the very narrow creekside roadway. I was hungry for some rock-scenery photographs, but the road had no turnouts, and it would have been waaaaaaay too risky to take some snaps on the fly. So I simply drove on, taking mental photos, and wishing for the moment that I had a convertible so I could take in the sights above.

The canyon mellowed out, and the road rose easily up and into the beautiful town of Sedona. Sedona was a total surprise. I mean, it was on the map and everything, so it didn't just spring up out some secret chasm and leap into view, but it was nothing like what I was expecting.

The color scheme of the town was reddish-brown – much like the cliffs and rock formations that stood stolidly in all directions – and the style was a modernized Old Western. It was clean, tidy, and prosperous, and gave off a Hey-Come-On-In vibe.

There was an urge to stop and seek out a southwestern style pub, but there was a mightier urge to keep driving and keep feeding my eyes. Besides, the kind of watering hole that I sought was way too underbelly to be found in a nice place like Sedona.

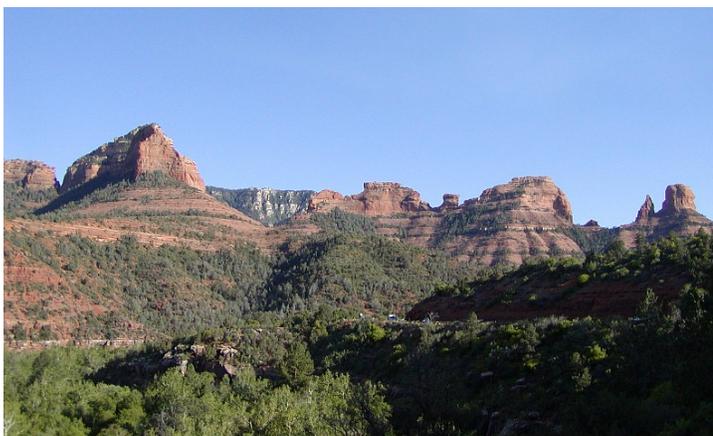
Jerome, about 30 miles to the southwest, was the next highlight. Established more than a century ago as a copper mining town, Jerome is one steep place. The climb from the flat plain below is surprisingly steep and sudden. One minute, you're toolin' along 89A at 80 MPH, digging the sight of the sharply rising hillside ahead of you, and the next minute you are braking down to 20MPH to handle the first of several hairpin turns that lift you up to the town.



Even within Jerome itself, verticality rules. It seems as if each street is totally above the one before it, almost to the point where the roof of one house is fully below the foundation of its rear neighbor. Jerome bills itself as “The Mile High Town With Fifty-Mile Views.”

The population here peaked at around 15,000 in the 1920's, but the Great Depression of the 1930's slogged down the mining biz. World War II gave the mines a boost for a short time, but such towns die young, and by 1953, after 70 years of belching copper - 800 million dollars worth of it! - those great mine shafts fell silent.

The 50 to 100 hardy souls who stayed on promoted Jerome as a historic ghost town. In 1967, the town was designated a National Historic District by the federal government. Today it is a thriving



tourist and artist community with a population of about 450. The town that had nearly been left for dead found new life.

It looked like it would be an excellent place to hang out for a day. There were numerous little shops and galleries and boutiques, some of which occupy former brothels, which were once one of Jerome's leading businesses.

It is also the home of the Damn It Doll: a hand-sewn, vaguely-shaped, stuffed bag that appears to serve primarily as a stress reliever. Their slogan is: *Just bash away and say, "Damn it, damn it, damn it!"* Jerome himself didn't seem like a particularly stressed-out place, but the artist/entrepreneur who came up with the idea was a Jeroman and was selling them over the Internet. Apparently, the idea caught on, but many imitations are now on the market.

There was one terrific place that I wish I had stopped at. It's called The Palace, though it held no such grandeur. It was just an ordinary-looking 1920's style two-story house, but it had an outdoor back-porch kind of restaurant that boasted great burgers and had a view to die for. The place was full, and the afternoon was waning, so I merely paused, regretted the hour, and pressed onward towards Prescott, and Phoenix beyond. Another note in the Next Time file.

Once again, Route 89A changed personalities. Well, I guess only a *person* can have a *personality*, so I reckon Route 89A had a *roadality*. Or maybe a *rouality*. Anyway, the road changed. The terrain became a series of high, rolling, evergreen-covered hills. To navigate through them towards Prescott, 89A described a dramatically serpentine course where you would often find yourself having driven a mile or more just to be a quarter-mile's crow-flight from the last sharp turn. The sun was quite low now, so the snaking road was deeply shaded, and Chief's thermometer was showing a frigid 64°.

It was real nice and all, but at this point I had been driving for about nine hours, and still had about 125 miles left to Phoenix. A wide-open, flat and fast desert highway would have suited me just fine, so this slow-paced, swervy-curvy thing was beginning to get on my nerves. If I had wanted a road like this, I would've gone to Virginia.

Prescott was a nuthin' place. I'm sure it's a wonderful city, but it just seemed like a bunch of stores and stuff, without the unique *townality* that Jerome and Sedona had had. The sun was down, anyway, by the time Chief and I reached Prescott, and we just sped on through. The highway had opened up shortly before, and we were into Fly Mode. We hauled onto Route 60, and angled southeast for Phoenix.

Holding to the strategy that had worked so well on Roadrage2000, the arrival of darkness was supposed to signal bedtime. We would live by the sun: get up when daylight arrives, and bed down when it departs. It was already well into darkness when we reached Route 60.

But as we turned onto that highway and crested a small rise, one last beautiful sight appeared dead ahead. Shining a brilliant orange color, the Full Moon had just risen above the eastern horizon. It looked enormous, fiery, crisp and clear. It would slowly climb in the sky, paling as it rose, as we wound down our first day's ride.

When we reached Greater Phoenix, in the area known as El Mirage, I called *no mas* and pulled into a Motel 6, where I learned that I had been misled for most of the day. Although Arizona does lie in Mountain Time Zone, the state does not observe daylight savings time, so they were the same as Pacific Daylight Time, which meant that I had not lost that hour at the NV/AZ border, after all.

Ching, ching, and extra hour's sleep comin' right up! Thank ya much.

I blew off Tonto National Monument with its cliff dwellings the next day. It was part of the original plan, but when the Saturday evening exploration of Phoenix didn't happen, something had to give. Yeah, it probably would've been nice to see remnants of the SW native culture, but I was positive that the Grand Canyon would be nice too, and this day just didn't hold enough hours to do both.

Things began on a great note. The shower in my Motel 6 room was marvelous. It was better than marvelous. It was extramarvelous! Water pressure and water temp were both outstanding, and the stall was shaped all funky. It was a corner booth, with a curved curtain rod so you could sweep the curtain from one wall to the next, and the showerhead was in the middle of the arc, aiming back at the corner. Perhaps it was the unusual configuration that made me especially attentive, or perhaps it was First Day



On The Road zeal that made me extra perky, but that shower was treeeeeeeeemendious. The pressure was enough to be stimulating, but not enough to sting. The temperature held steady at the not-quite-warm, not-quite-cool, perfectly tepid level that gives you that I-could-stay-here-all-day feeling.

But I didn't fly 2500 miles for a shower. Phoenix awaited, gently drumming it's sun-scorched little fingers in the distance, so I saddled up Chief and headed out into the Sunday morning brightness.

At 10:00 a.m., it was already 101°. The ride in from El Mirage on Route 60 was pretty damn blah. The flat, straight road paralleled a few railroad tracks, it had more than its share of traffic lights (especially red ones), and there was no skyline to be seen even though I was getting damn close to downtown. Phoenix is home to about a million people, but it's mostly a low-level, spread-out place, that, at least along that road, was very unimpressive.

Maybe there is more to it than I perceived, but the heart of the city seemed awfully small as well. The streets were empty, so it was perfect for a casual walkabout. The Copper Square area had nice buildings, and was just a few minutes' walk to the Convention Center, Symphony Hall, an outdoor concert pavilion, some Spanish-style Cathedral that the Pope once performed at, plenty of garden cacti, several naked bronze women (they might have been copper, to keep with the general theme of the city, but they sure felt like bronze, hehe), and both of Phoenix's major sports venues: America West Arena and Bank One Ballpark, complete with its mega-baseballs out front. [See photos.]



