

ARIZONA'S HOT!

Fock 4: Diggin' the Desert

The dry heat was still heat, and as the sun reached for its zenith, I revved Chief to life and aimed north towards Flagstaff.

Interstate 17 is not a scenic highway. It is ugly. UG-LEEEE. I've never seen a filthier highway in my life, and, remember, I've been through metro New York and northern Jersey. The median strip looked like a stage one landfill. For miles, it was littered with crushed plastic buckets, tattered newspapers, broken bottles, old tires, ripped and soiled cardboard boxes, and even an occasional auto part. One full-sized, half-crumpled fender lay there, rusting in the sun. It was making me angry. Even the tall cacti that were now appearing in hillside groves were not enough to distract me from this mess.

Finally, after about twenty minutes of trash – right about at the limit of Greater Phoenix, I reckon – the highway turned clean again, and my aggravation eased away. Still, there was a really odd feeling of being frustrated by traffic. Everyone was rocking along at 80 to 85 MPH, and Chief was eagerly keeping pace. But the road speed itself was making me hurry, when I really had no desire to rush. I'd recognize it, and slide into the slow lane, then find myself riding up on some 75 MPH slowpoke -- is there such a thing as a fastpoke? – and say, "aw, come on, no need to go *this slow*," and pull back out into the zoom lane. This happened over and over, until I realized that I needed a little pause for the cause. I lingered a bit at the far end of a rest area, studying some tiny purple flowers that were struggling to survive in the arid circumstances, and enjoyed a refreshing chilly breeze as it blew through. I resumed the ride in a much less competitive state of mind. And I could only imagine what good old senescent Blue Man would have thought about the 80 MPH rush in 105° heat.

Exit signs began beckoning me to Prescott and Jerome and Sedona, all the cool places from the day before. Given more calendar to work with, I might well have gone back to that burger patio in Jerome, or soaked myself in the tumbling Oak Creek water.

But the week's plan was pretty full, and I simply nodded at those signs with a little "next time" wink, and continued due north.

At one point, there was a hitchhiker at the side of the road. His approach to it was novel, though. He lay flat on his back, sprawled out in the breakdown lane. As he heard a car approach, he raised his arm straight up with thumb extended. As the car roared passed, he lazily dropped his arm back down to his side. I wonder if it finally worked.

Flagstaff is a nice city. It could well be a future home for yours truly – if I ever get weary of the drudgery of Key West. (Yah, right.) Buster's Restaurant served up a tasty cheeseburger, and I washed it down quite adequately with a couple of real frosty pints of Fat Tire Amber Ale. Nice place, Buster's. I give it 13 penguins out of 17.

But, lunch done, it was off to The Big Hole. Last time by, on Roadrage2000, I had turned up my nose at the Grand Canyon as a been-there-done-that kind of thing (that phrase was not yet beaten to death at that point). But, this time, The Plan called for an early-week visit to South Rim, and a late-week stop at North Rim.

The long, lazy ride up to GCNP was nice. Traffic was wonderfully absent.

I mostly just drove Chief from viewpoint to viewpoint, staying a little while at each one, showing him the scenery, taking some pictures, and savoring the view. Even when the sunshine was a tad muted by some thin clouds, meaning that crisp and vibrant photos were not in the cards, I still snapped away with alacrity; so-so pics of The Big Hole will still beat the sacred snot out of great photos of the majority of the planet.

At one point, a lonely coyote came sneaking out of the woods to the roadside. I saw him well down the road and eased to a stop right near him. Naturally, I figured he'd just scurry away,



but he stayed his ground and let me snap his photo. I did offer him a beer, but I didn't really mean it. I knew he'd decline anyway. When he saw that he'd be getting no free meal out of this damn tourist, he turned and trotted off back into the woods.

The low, late afternoon sun did create some unique views at the eastern end of the Grand Canyon (like *Shades of Blue*, right), and as I headed down the road from the high plateau and back into the desert, the sun returned to full force, as if taunting me that I had missed "the prettiest pictures."

Chief, was, of course, a rental. He was brand new, having been driven only the obligatory 500 miles before being set loose to the public's mercies. Highway 64, from Desert View down into the Painted Desert, commenced with a lonnnnnnnng, straight, steady decline.



The road just begged for a land speed test. The landscape had gone barren again, and there was no place for Officer Unfriendly to hide with his radar bazooka. There were no other cars at all in sight, in fact.

So, as my Driver Education instructor taught me, I *squeeeeeezed* the gas. Around 100, Chief felt like he was beginning to work just a tad. At 105, there was a noticeable resistance, though it was probably more wind than anything. That tied my personal velocity record, so I let it be. Chief could share the mark that the 1999 Pontiac Grand Am, another brand new rental, had posted on Route 531 just west of Rochester four years before.

The sun was nearing the horizon, and I was still 100 miles shy of the night's planned destination, when a small dirt road off to my right caught my attention. It led

through a gap in the thin wire fence, and in among some rolling badlands-style hills of dried mud. Tracks from dirt bikes and ATV's streaked the numerous hills. Chief seemed like he wanted to go play. I hadn't taken him off-road yet, so it was time to test out this Four-Wheel Drive concept.

It was a simple downshift into 4WD on the console, and we roared into the playground. Chief took to the hills and dunes and soft sands with glee. The hills were not big, maybe only twenty feet high, but they were fairly steep and rounded. Kicking up sand, Chief would churn up the front, and go blindly over the top. We'd roll up the side, then cut the wheel hard and roller-coaster into the next hill. There were no rocks, just sands of varied firmness to cavort in. After several minutes, we wildly spun a hootin'n'hollerin' doughnut round and round and round before shooting through the gap in the fence, and right up onto the empty highway. Now that's what I call a rental car!

Not even a half-mile up the highway, a similar gap in the fence gave passage to a narrow reddish dirt road that quickly disappeared over a small bank. Chief seemed full of vigor, there was still some sunlight left, and I really didn't feel like being a slave to schedule anyway, so we abandoned the highway again and ripped off into the desert. The road was long, mildly windy, and had plenty of soft ruts. We attacked it at about 50. I'm sure you could see our dust plume for miles.

Then, veering off yet again, was a set of double tracks



that disappeared even deeper into the undulating sandy terrain. Before I could rein him in, Chief careened onto the path less traveled. Soon, we ran out of tracks altogether, and were just romping in the barren desert. Zooming this way, then that, bounding through dips, and roaring through soft dry creek beds.

After a while, the terrain seemed to drop just ahead, and a large, curious object lay nearby, so I roped in Chief and stopped for a breather. We were absolutely in the middle of nowhere. The object turned out to be a petrified tree trunk. It was big too: probably four feet in diameter, and maybe thirty-five feet long. It was broken into chunks, but maintained its tree trunk shape. Scraps of it littered the ground.



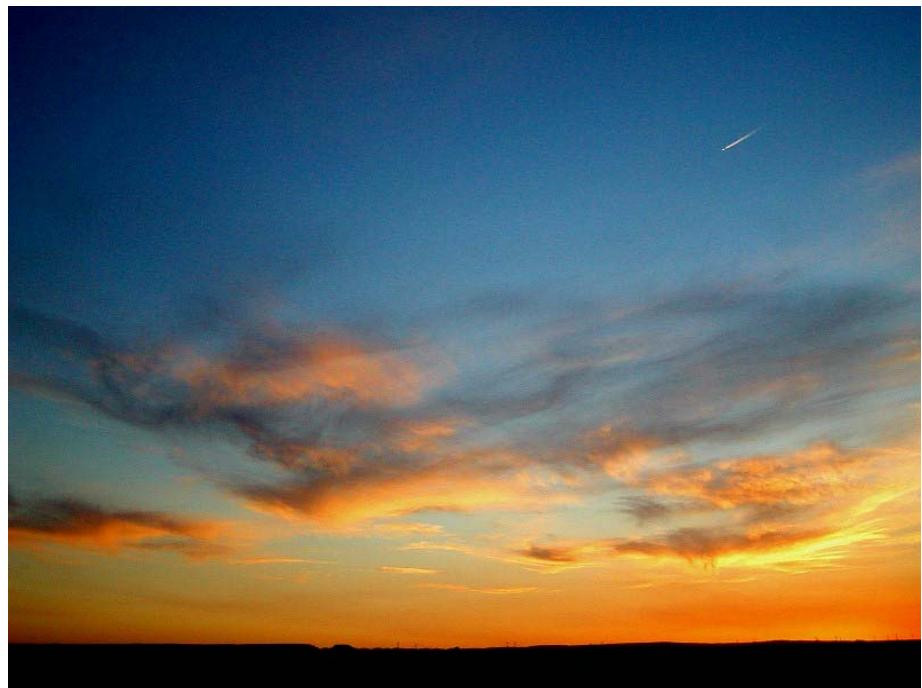
It was the only thing for miles that resembled any type of tree. And it lay very close to the upper edge of some steep and colorfully striated badlands trenches. It has probably been there for tens of thousands of years. I mean, things like this don't generally *move* a whole lot.

I gathered a few small pieces as souvenirs, and just strolled around for a bit. The silence was tremendous. I cracked another cold Coors, made an appropriate offering, and, after surveying the area for traces of snakes or scorpions, I sat down to watch the sun set.

It wasn't Key West, but it was damn good. There was no shimmering trail of gold across the multi-hued sea, but there were shadows of the badlands hills that deepened in both color and length. The warm breeze almost immediately cooled, and there was nothing to be heard. Nothing. Not a goddamn thing. It was as if I had gone deaf.

The few splayed clouds that hung just above the horizon glowed brighter and brighter. The upper sky darkened from azure to indigo as the earth's shadow engulfed it. And the very distant, very small, but very bright vapor trail of some Vegas-bound jet streaked across the high sky like a comet.

It was sweetly mellow. Perfect for the Ahhhhh Thing.



But, you know, here I was, way out in the desert, with no clue how I got to be exactly where I was, and now having to find my way back in the dark. Smooth move, Ex-Lax.

Amazingly, Chief was able to sniff out his own tracks for most of the way, and we just kinda wung it for the rest. I knew we had come from the east, since we had been driving directly towards the setting sun, so as long as the west yet glimmered with some streaks of day (to paraphrase from my buddy Willy Shakes), my bearings would hold true.

It was a bit disappointing to touch asphalt again, and it was real country dark by the time I reached the next town, Tuba City.

I didn't know what to expect from a place called Tuba City. Would there be tubas everywhere? Would there be deep, brassy notes, harrumphing at me as I entered the town? As unlikely as it seemed, was it possible that this small desert village was the origin of that cumbersome wind instrument?

No. What are you, nuts? Of course not. It's a little crossroad trading post type of place, barely more than a motel, a couple of restaurants and gas stations, and few small stores where the residents of this Navajo Indian Reservation, and the nearby Hopi Indian Reservation, could buy the necessities of daily life.

I was the only non-Indian in Hogan's Restaurant at about 8:30. The food sucked and so did the service. And I couldn't even get a beer with dinner because, to my astonishment, it is illegal to sell alcohol on Indian Reservation land. I didn't stay long.

The parking lot of the Quality Inn (which charged an outrageous \$78 for a room, by the way – I guess being the only hotel within 100 miles has its advantages), became my home for the night.

It was here that I definitely yearned for Blue Man. With the back seats folded down, Chief had enough space for me to lie diagonally across his back room, though jussssst barely. I double-folded the old blue comforter that I had brought with me and laid it out length-wise on my proposed sleep zone. A stack of T-shirts wrapped in a soft towel served as a pillow. It seemed like it would work fine. Almost, but no such dice.

It was a bad night's sleep. With my feet cramped on top of each other and tight up against the back of the driver's seat, the unconscious urge to roll over and curl into a more comfortable position kept taking over. I'm typically a side sleeper anyway, so it was my natural somnolent propensity to roll that way. Trouble was, Chief's back room was not made with padding – or sleeping -- in mind.

I guess the good folks who designed the Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo figured that if you could afford the vehicle, you could also afford a *motel room*.

