

NEVER NEVADA

Fock 1: Snow Capped

And your mind drifts and rambles and rolls as you zoom away the highway miles. Busy roads keep you occupied in The Moment, because, let's face it, if you stray out of that moment, you might soon be singing the Insurance Blues. Really scenic roads keep you absorbed in The Moment also, and that's just fine.

Sometimes those scenic Moments trigger other ones in the back of your head, and sometimes you let them ziggle forward and play with your eyes for a bit, and you can almost see what you saw Last Time. Other times, you're too into This Time, so you put that memory on the clipboard and save it for when This Time has passed on by.

Really empty roads just open the floodgates, though. Alabama's roads kept me entertained for hours with Florida flashbacks. The scorched void we call Nevada promised a whole new level of mind roaming.

The official state line welcome sign does not feature glitter and gambling, or even prostitution. It's a guy with a pick, and mountains in the background. It's done in the classic "warm" colors of the spectrum's upper end: red, orange, and yellow. The greens and blues that suggest coolness, fertility, and water are absent. No surprise.

Coming out of the Arizona mountains, with Blue Man's helm aimed at Las Vegas, and hell bent for Sacramento (!) on Day 11 of Roadrage2000, it was time to make tracks. After the saunter-along pace of the Narrows hike, and the winding roads leading out of the Zion area, the wide-open Nevada stretch of I-15 just dared you to open up the machine. The highway was dead straight, it had almost nobody on it, there was nothing roadside to give you any perspective about your speed. There is a consistent downward incline that pulls you in, and you fall into gravitational greed: soon you're almost racing to get somewhere, *anywhere!*

But Blue Man, in his maturity and wisdom, insisted on a saner approach, and slowed me down. His temperature gauge had risen quite a bit – duhhh, it's a frigging 120° desert, and the asphalt has been soaking up rays all day long, so of course the van is running "a little hot." I had little choice but to shut down the AC and loosen the noose on BM's heart.

It worked; I could see the temp needle begin to move almost immediately. Still, given my druthers, I would have picked a different area for windows down and local ambiance. A strong wind was barrelling unchecked up from the southern desert, bringing dust and furnace-hot blasts with it. The roar through the driver's side window was hard. Too hard. I shut that one and kept the leeward window open.

At 5:47, when leaving Utah, I had noted that there was "Not a tree in any direction." An hour later, there was still no sight of anything you could call a tree." It was a stark and forbidding landscape. Settlers died in every state on their westward treks, I know, but I bet a whole lot more of them died in Nevada. "Shade" is a foreign concept here. You might get the shadow of a truck or maybe a tall rock, but in midday, there is not a hint of cool and protecting shade in any direction!

Harsh. Killer. Dangerous. Walk ten miles and you're icked-fay.

There comes a point in that ride where you finally lay your eyes on Las Vegas. Just sitting there in the desert scorch. Not even a river there to serve as a lifeline. It just doesn't make sense. The late afternoon sun showed me an inverted bowl of brown haze, with silhouettes of buildings and towers dwarfed within it. The humidity out here was nil, so that haze was pure pollution: exhaust fumes from a thousand different kinds of motors and engines.

It made me gulp, "I'm going into *that??*" After so many days in the company of barely spoiled Nature, this was daunting.



It was exactly 6:26 as the LV city limits were reached. Perhaps it would be a good omen? Once the pace of the ride slowed, I noticed how dusty the ride had been. The interior had a lovely brown-gray film all over it.

I'm sure the majority of travellers revel at their arrival in this gambling and theatrical mecca, but I found myself feeling as though I were being engulfed. But, Vegas was the plan, and the plan was Vegas. Now, to find a hotel. Several nights of van-sleep had earned me the right to splurge a bit on my only room-rental of the westward ride. Hotels, of course, were everywhere, and I had my pick. There are times in life when you look back and ask, "What was I thinking???" This would be one such time.

For some reason, and I'll be damned if I can remember what it was, The New York New York Hotel struck my fancy, and I pulled in to see if they wanted to host me for a night. Why the fuck I picked the NYNY, when I was using every chance I could get to escape all-things-city on this trip, is beyond me. I can only assume I was brainwashed by some subliminal shit in the air. Maybe my NY tags somehow triggered an ultrasonic beacon that melted my will and shredded my reason.

Whatever it was, I soon found myself, room key in hand, standing in a gray and depressing lobby, with my ears filling with that incessant bong-bong-bonging sound that all casinos seem to pipe in 24/7. Luxor, Excelsior, Caesar's, Paris... any one of those would have been such a better choice. WTF?

But I was stuck with it. Ninety-four dollars. Fuck. Well, live with it, moron. Where's that swimming pool? After that hot and dusty ride, a refreshing dip was definitely in order.

I leaned back to the registration desk, and asked, "Which way to the pool?"

The young man never changed his NY-replica aloof expression, and pointed. As I nodded and went to take a step in that direction, he bluntly stated. "It's closed though," and looked back down at his papers, with a poorly concealed smug satisfaction.

"What???"

"It closes at 7." His growing resentment of my imposition on his precious time was palpable.

I looked at my watch: it was 7:10. Double fuck. I questioned him sternly, "Why does it close so early?"

He gave me an irritated look, and said, "It just does. Most people find other things to do by that time." He tamped his papers into a neat pile, rolled his eyes as he turned, as if to say, "Deliver me from this awwful public," and strode off, leaving a visible wake of Big Appletude.

New York, all right. Sheesh. Good casting.

There were slot machines aplenty handy, so I figured I'd test the waters before going up to my room. Five dollars of quarters tumbled into the abyss of Vegas greed, and nothing came tumbling back out. I might as well have thrown my coins into the desert. At least that way I wouldn't have been feeding the monster. The bonging noise began to sound like a mocking laugh to me. I needed to seek refuge.

I got to my room, and looked out to see a bigass roller coaster right outside my ninth-floor window. Oh, listening to that would be a treat in the wee hours. Too bad that didn't close at seven too.

There is nothing positive that I can think of about the NYNY, except maybe that it was clean. Even at that, though, the color scheme gave you the grayish, never-see-sunlight feeling of the concrete jungle. I speculated that the folks at Excalibur (right) were in a much more upbeat frame of mind.

An hour or so later, freshly showered and willing to give this city another chance, I set out on the Strip to see what was what.

One thing that had struck me as coolo as I had entered the city, was the high number of taxis that were PT Cruisers. The PTC's were very new on the market, and they really looked pretty nifty, zipping around as cabs.



And, of course, the hotels themselves are a kick to look at. They are an amazing array of one-upmanship-gone-amok. Everything gushed the concepts of glamor, excess, and MONEY. How much did any ONE of these over-the-top hotels cost to build?? How could that money ever be recouped?? Yeah, yeah, I know how, but it still didn't seem possible.

Many of the people that I passed by on the sidewalks were dressed MUCH more nicely than I was, not that that would've been hard to do. I wasn't a slob, but I really had bothered to bring any "nice" clothes with me.

As the evening wore on, I got to feeling a tad peckish, so I sallied forth into a place of purveyance to negotiate the vending of some pizzish comestibles. (I wanted to buy some pizza.) (And, yes, please stop that bloody bazuki playing.) It was in the pizza place that I found the underbelly side of Vegas life. This place was right on the Strip, but walking through the door was like walking through a portal into a third world country. Outside, clothes were spiffy, faces were bright and positive, and an air of prosperity dominated. Inside, skin was swathy, clothes were dingy, voices had a hard edge, there was bitterness in many eyes, and it was crowded. The contrast was remarkable, and I was figuring out that I wasn't liking either extreme.

My individual pizza took almost an hour, and my frame of mind slowly spiraled downward the whole time. I wanted nothing further to do with this city. After those four days in the sacred peace of Utah's Rocks, this smoggy haze, these lights, the noise, and the *people* seemed, respectively, too gross, too bright, too incessant, and too greedy. I **hated** it. Even the bed in the New York New York Hotel was less comfortable than the one in Blue Man.

Enough, I decided, and escaped back to my room, having parted with less than ten dollars for my Night Out On The Town. I was in bed by 11:30. How about that? Just seven days after the all-night binge in New Orleans, Party Boy CEO Rick cashes in his chips and is in zizzyland before midnight in Las Vegas. A sudden onset of Maturity? NFW, babe.

That was my only night in a hotel bed the whole month-long trip. Even during the 10-day Sacramento sojourn, I would end up choosing to sleep in the van eight nights, after camping on the floor of Ed and Bryan's room for the first two. I just love sleeping in that van. It's such a fine feeling to look up at the plush ceiling, and wood trim, and accent lighting, and thick dark curtains, and sloping skylights, and to sink into those wide comfortable cushions, and think: I'm in my car! Damn, I enjoy that!

Hosts get offended by that sometimes. They just don't get it. I know it used to bug Marilyn when I would drive up to Maine to visit, and opt for my van over the guest room. Ed and Byran probably thought that their odors bothered me when I bowed out of the Heritage Hotel in SacreMerde after a couple of nights. And there have been countless others that I have similarly snubbed. Well, my hosts, don't take it personally; I just love sleeping in my van. So there. :-P

As I settled into my \$94 New York New York bed, and listened to the coaster rumbling by, I thought about my trip so far, about all the highway miles, and about Nevada escapades of bygone years.

I've always loved maps. In moments of boredom or bathroom, I can open up the Rand McNally and just browse. In moments like this, on a roadtrip, in off-to-lala-land mode, it's great to just peruse the map. You can find something good for tomorrow's route that you had overlooked before, and you can re-travel the routes of previous ramacks...

The very first foray into Nevada came in '84, when the original Rude Brothers crossed the lesser-traveled northern half, heading west en route to LA via San Francisco. That trek showed us the true Nevada. Las Vegas is not true Nevada, just as Hilton Head Island, Key West, and New York City do not accurately reflect the majority of their respective states. The true Nevada is desolate and grim. This is, of course, ironic, since the word "nevada" means "snow-capped," which is not exactly what you picture when you think of this place, and definitely not what we saw in mid-summer. Images of snow and cold did not come to mind at all, but, truth be known, they are every bit as common in this state as the 116° summer temperatures in Las Vegas and Boulder City.

We had driven in from the Great Salt Lake Desert of northern Utah, along the Dwight D. Eisenhower Highway (I-80) and past the Bonneville Salt Flats. The Moose prudently declined an attempt at the land speed record, citing a bad hangover from his Topeka-to-Rock Springs gallop. The dry emptiness of the flat, white plains was a good prelude to the dead-looking Pequop Mountains as we entered the brown-gray blankness of Nevada's upper half. It was a cloudy day, with showers imminent along the way, so things looked even more grim. For about half the year, though, these high hills wear a dazzling, bright white mantle.

To our surprise, we found out that Elko, the nearest big town (pop. 16,708 – 7th largest in the state), actually sports a colder climate than Boston does. Here's a few stats:

The town's average daily high temperature for the year is slightly higher than Beantown's – 62.2 to 59.3 – but the daytime highs in November and December climb higher by Boston Hahhbahh than they do by the Pequops.

The daily lows differ greatly, though, with Elko's 30.7° annual average looking mighty chilly by comparison to Boston's 43.8° mark. May through September in Boston, on average, do not dip below the balmy 50° level. In those same months in Elko, the low spot does not stay above 50°. That 5000'+ of elevation cools those nights off real good.

Amazingly, the mean temperature of a summer day in Elko is almost 6° cooler than breeze-bathed Boston (Elko 62.0°, Boston 67.6°).

Even Boston's record highs are mostly higher. In each month from September through May, Boston-by-the-Sea has recorded temperatures as high as, or higher than, Elko's desert environment ever has. And Elko's marks only *slightly* surpass Boston's in June (104°-100°), July (107°-103°), and August (107°-102°).

While Boston winters may seem cold, this high desert pushes the mercury far lower. Only three months in Boston claim record lows below zero, with the worst being the -18° in February. Six months – that's half the year, you know – in Elko have had sub-zero lows, bottoming out with -38° in December, -43° in January, and -37° in February. It has been -2° in April, and in deep-down summertime August, Elko has been as low as 20° -- yes, 20°, in August!

Even Las Vegas is only the frying pan that we typically picture for half the year. For the five months of November through March, the average daytime high does not top 70°. And though the record highs for the summer months are 113°-116°, it has also been in the nippy 40's in June and September.

But, hey, enough of that meteorological claptrap.

We were there in the **summer** of '84, and there was a smattering of snow that was clinging to the highest Pequop peaks, but dry dirt and gasping sagebrush constituted at least 99.9% of what we looked at for 410 miles to the California border. Most of the other 0.1% was asphalt.

The notbook – and this was the original NOT BOOK, mind you – for 6/15/84 recounts our passage thusly:

[2:42 pm PDT] Enter Nevada, and a casino already!...

[4:46] Nevada is grim. No people, very few signs of life. Why would anyone live here? The land is poor – no crops, very limited grazing...



[6:09] Saw a buzzard. Honked at it. There is NOTHING out here anywhere...

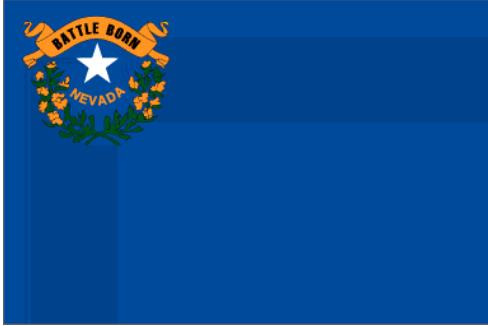
[7:18] It's a damn good thing I like wide-open scenery, because this state sucks for everything else...

[7:40] Rye Patch, NV (not even on map) We cleaned up!! Richie won \$2.50 from a slot machine, then I won \$5.00! Bring on Vegas! The Rude Brothers are hot!...

[8:40] Somewhere on I-80 – this is a lonnng state. The vast stretches of unenclosed wild (*not* the one known as Egdon Heath, which embrowned itself moment by moment) are still impressive in their total emptiness, but this state is getting REALLY BORING! BRING ON CALIFORNIA!...

[9:01] Nevada desperately needs Reno and Las Vegas and legalized prostitution. There's not much else.

Nevada has three official nicknames: [1] The Silver State, which refers to the vast amounts of that precious metal that has been mined out of the ground there; [2] The Battle Born State, which alludes to its admission to the Union during the Civil War (probably to better take advantage of its mining yields); and, [3] to us the most appropriate, The Sagebrush State, which needs no explanation. Some factions don't seem to recognize "Battle Born" as an official nickname, but that phrase does appear on the state flag.



The Sagebrush State is the driest state in the country, averaging only 7" of rainfall a year. Rochester averages that much in August and September alone.

Nevada is also big: ranked seventh in land area, it equals Illinois and Wisconsin combined. Their 2002 population of about 2.2 million is about the same as Hawaii and Montana added together, and ranks 35th overall. Given all that emptiness, it was hard to imagine that 15 states have fewer residents than Nevada does. But Las Vegas' total of just under half-a-million people accounts for nearly a quarter (22%) of the state's residents.

The most noteworthy number to throw around, though, is that, from 1990 to 2002, Nevada's population increased **80%**, by far the biggest rise in the U.S., moving it up from 39th to 35th in rank. Arizona grew an impressive 48%, but that was chickenfeed compared to the Sagebrush State's growth. Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Georgia, Florida, Texas, and North Carolina all added at least 25% more people in that 12-year period. Only one state underwent a population decrease: North Dakota (-1.1%). Amazed? Didn't think so.

So there must be something in this arid land that is attracting people. Maybe it's the prostitution. It's not the gardening.

