

# Never Nevada

## **Fock 3: Dust Devils and Mead Mud**

Interstate 15 feeds and drains Las Vegas in both directions, but it would be reasonable to assume that the stretch that lies between LV and LA gets a good bit more use than the up-into-Utah section. I mean, even I had done that Mojave drive a few times now, and I lived on the East Coast!

In 1999, my employer had flown me to Los Angeles to a national conference. For some reason, they flew me out on Wednesday for a convention that did not start until Thursday night, and I could not resist the road's call. Most people would have just hung out and dug L.A. for the day, but I wanted Vegas. More precisely, I wanted the *drive* to Vegas. My disdain for Vegas itself has already been chronicled. It was only about five hours to the northeast, on a wonderfully open highway through the desert.

Traffic was beastly leaving L.A., even at 3:30. That city is so damn huge. It's almost the size of Rhode Island. This Wednesday afternoon escape route, covering only 45 or so miles just to reach I-15 for the Mojave, took over an hour and a half.

Given that it was December, daylight disappeared early, and I zoomed my white Dodge Neon into Nevada under cover of darkness.

Things get mighty dark in the desert, and a couple of roadside pullovers - needed to, uhh, get a breath of fresh air - fed my soul with the sight of a billion-star night over the silhouette of the Sierra Nevada. (My soul was quite susceptible to such things, if you catch my drift.) It put me fully in mind of the Counting Crows song *Mrs. Potter's Lullaby*: "We drove out to the desert just to lie down beneath this bowl of stars..." It was indeed that. With LA and LV each two hours distant, clean air and moonless dark turned the sky into a vast bowl of sparkles, and the longer you looked, the more and more and more there were. It was one of those I-feel-tiny-and-insignificant moments, which I think are pretty damn cool anyway.

But then, on that ride, comes the moment when you crest that range and look from California into Nevada, and are met with an island of electric lights amid the blackness. The first thought is that it is Las Vegas, but nope, it's simply the nameless border oasis giving you the opportunity to gamble away all your money when you're just inches inside the state.

Pressing onward, the desert swallowed me back up in its sightless wrap, with my headlights creating odd grayish cones that were bottom-sliced by bright white painted lines zipping by at 85 miles per hour.

Then, another ridge was topped, and the sight just stopped me. I pulled over to the side of the road, got out, and just marveled at the absolute sea of light that spread out before me. The amount of electricity involved, and the remoteness of the city made for an impossible combination, but there it was, far bigger than I remembered it from the only other ride up this road, 15 years before.

"Giddyap!" I clapped, and wheeled my Neon down towards the lights.

There are no great gambling or boozing tales to tell from that night. And fortunately no fights with a speed-freak barkeep. I pretty much just toured the city on foot for a while, taking a few pics and just soaking up the glitter. The hotels and resorts there are so unbelievable that it's unbelievable. Incredibly so. If you can believe it. I couldn't believe it. Believe me. It was incredible. Unbelievably incredible.

What little gambling I did wasn't even fun. The slots just gulped my coins without giving out so much as a contented belch in return, and the blackjack dealer hit me with face cards four times in a row. Screw that shit. That was perfectly good beer money that just went into the casino's till. God, that galled me! No wonder I'm such a bad gambler: to me, it's just a way to throw away money that could be spent on such a better diversion.

Only those who know my passion for the open road well will know how serious I am when I say that the ride back to L.A. was the best part of the whole weekend. I would have much preferred taking that ride in Blue Man, but White Mouse - as I nicknamed my rented Neon - did the job well. The Mojave drive by day was outstanding! The sky was cloudless and the landscape was so totally brown. I didn't know that many shades of brown existed. Rocks, dirt, grasses, desert vegetation - all brown. The only green was on the highway exit signs.

But I loved it. It was so different and so big. Trees were miles and miles apart. It was so empty and lifeless, and the dinky towns that dotted the map were so spread out. Puny dirt roads that were not much more than jeep tracks, snaked up and over the foothills and off to God-knows-where. If I hadn't had

to be back to the L.A. hotel by 4:00, I think I just might have gone off-road and seen how that little White Mouse got into some desert hills exploring.

Nevada would be both the starting line and the finish line for SW03. It's not that I coveted more Sagebrush time, but just that Las Vegas offered a better deal (no pun intended). The flight prices to Phoenix, LV, and Los Angeles were all in the same ballpark, but the car rental situation tipped the scales. Jeeps could be had at all three, but the \$26-a-day option in McCarran Airport was in another galaxy, and the proximity to Zion was nice too.

The flight from Fort Lauderdale had gone reasonably well, once I got past that pre-dawn, pre-flight ordeal. Most people would be eager to fly into Las Vegas, do some gambling, take in a cuppla shows, have some good din-dins, yada yada foonbag.

Bah! Not this doggy.

I didn't even glance at Las Freaking Vegas. As you've seen, I really don't "click" with that city. I grabbed my Jeep and zoomed off to the southeast. It was a 2003 Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo, light gold, and absolutely cherry. I was the very first person to rent it. I quickly named it Chief.

Boulder City, former home of my good bud Jack, lay along the route to Hoover Dam – in fact, Boulder City was created solely to house the thousands of workers who built the damn dam. The necessities of travel – a case of bottled water, two twelve-packs of Coors Original, a bag of ice, two gallon jugs of water (for showers), and a Styrofoam cooler – were procured and placed strategically (i.e., in arm's reach) within Chief, and it was off into the desert.

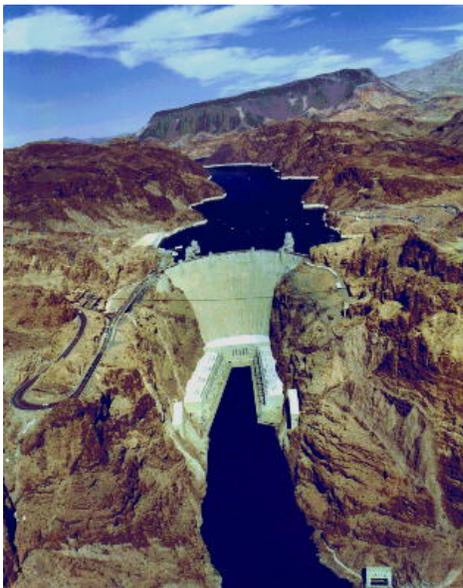
Almost immediately, the urge hit me to deviate from my "schedule." Lake Mead was dead ahead, and the water looked nice and wet. The outdoor thermometer on Chief's console read 98°, so a swim seemed like a dandy idea.

The closer I got to the lake itself, though, the less sure I was of that. The water looked blue enough, and boats zoomed hither and yon across its surface. But the "beach" was all packed gray mud, with a plethora of rocks. And not just little rounded stones, either: these were big, ragged-edged rocks – enough to make me swerve to dodge four-wheel-drive Chief around them.



Still, I reasoned, a dip in the famous Lake Mead would be refreshing. Two words of advice: DON'T BOTHER!!

As you enter the water, the firm mud of the shore immediately softens into a foot-sucking mire. The sandals that gave protection from the rocks now struggled desperately, straps straining, against suffocation with each foot-deep plunge into the muck. It took a mighty heave to pull the sandaled foot from the hungry mud, which seemed with each step to get more and more ravenous. Finally, I lunged forward and slid into the water, hoping to float and swim beyond the miserable Mead mud. Still, the water was murky with stirred silt, and it would be a goodly swim to reach clearer circumstances. The outward swim did not daunt me as much as the lengthy return through even more murk. I abandoned the endeavor, removed the sandals and squished my way back to shore, where I took one of my gallon jugs of store-bought water, poured it all over me, and rinsed myself clean of the filmy residue.



Hoover Dam (left), just a few miles down the road, is a

pretty cool place, though. I definitely recommend stopping, paying the parking fee, taking the lengthy tour and immersing yourself in the story of its construction and its value as a power producer.

I didn't do any of that *myself*, of course, but I would recommend it if you are into the dam, because simply by driving across it, you see nothing, and get no appreciation whatsoever for any of that other stuff. You aren't even allowed to stop and take pictures, fer cryin' out loud. There was one illegal turnout that I was going to grab for a quick stop-and-snap photo op, but the car in front of me pulled into it and foiled my plan. Bah. Bastards.

From there, of course, it was off into The Grand Canyon State. And you've already been told about that.

A week later, though, after the second Narrows experience, I had to bring my now-wizened Chief back to his home in Las Vegas. The sky was brilliantly clear, and under its azure glow, the land looked even starker. All the beiges and vermillions, and all the artistic shapes and unique formations of Utah, and of Corkscrew Canyon, were replaced by bland shades of brown and gray, and rows of dead hills.

You can really fly along this Interstate, and you want to. There is nothing to slow down and look at, and the most unlikely oasis of Las Vegas is waiting. I was going 90, and I was catching nobody.

You reach a certain point on I-15, and the distant city sprawls out in front of you. No matter how many times you've seen it, it still looks impossible. Why, why, why is such a sea of life *here*?? What ever made anybody drop anchor at this place? It always amazes me, though more so at night, when that dazzle of a zillion lights sits brazenly amid the intense desert darkness, vainly -- in both senses of the word -- trying to rival the sky for dazzle.

When you catch a day when Vegas squats in its own smog, though, it's bad. Even when you know what to expect, it still deflates you.

It's not a difficult city to navigate, though, and the airport is easy to find. The sun sets late in Las Vegas, and it was still bright and hot when I took Chief home. True to my word, there was not a scratch on the big fella, though I had deliberately not washed him off at all during the week. A couple of rain events had given him a light rinse, but there was still gray Lake Mead mud from Day One adorning his fenders and wheel wells, and his body was caked with red dust from all the random offroadings. He was not light gold anymore; he looked more like a tie-dyed burnt amber. He looked damn cocky. I'm sure he enjoyed our week together.

I had also been less than meticulous about cleaning the Jeep out. Thus, it took a good deal of squirming and peering to make sure I would be leaving nothing of value behind. I did the rent-a-car slaves a favor while I was at it, and cleaned out all the trash that had slithered under the seats and between the cushions, but I was mainly making sure that things like, say, a credit card was not going to be accidentally abandoned.

Packing everything back into the bags for the flight was a real treat. I had less stuff, all in all, but it still wouldn't fit. I stuffed the front compartment of the laptop's carry bag with every techno-related gizmo that I had: charger, tripod, mouse, camera cable, extension cord, inverter, and God knows what else. It would surely cause a pause at the X-ray machine.

The old blue comforter that had made the trip west with me was left behind. Similar to those Nikes that I retired at The Narrows, this slightly tattered and mildly stained, several-year-old comforter had outlived its everyday usefulness as Blue Man's bed cover, and had been replaced by a newer and spiffier edition. And, again like the shoes, it had been kept as a Might-Need-It-Someday thing. You know, the old "it's better to have and not need than to need and not have" hokey that you all hear me say all the damn time.

It had been intended to cushion my hips, back, and overall everythingness as I sought blissful sleep in Chief's belly. Didn't work worth a damn. Maybe it's good that it didn't, because then I might have felt compelled to keep it, and to somehow cram it back in that duffle bag for the flight home. As it was, I just left the worthless rag in the back, along with the trusty Styrofoam cooler from Boulder City, now full of empty cans and bottles.

I patted Chief affectionately on the rear quarter panel, thanked him for a good week, wished him well with future renters, and shuffled off to the shuttle bus.

McCarron Airport has a Cheers Restaurant and Pub. There was time to do a little blinging, so I settled into a bar stool, got out the trip notbook, and ordered a cheeseburger and a tall Sam. To my

delight and amazement, the burger was in front of me before I could write three sentences. Granted, some of my sentences can get long and convoluted – yes, it’s true! – but this burger was there real fast.

One good look at it, though, confirmed my suspicions. This place had no kitchen. The burger had been taken out of the refrigerator, defrocked of its cellophane wrapper, plopped on a plate, zapped in the m-wave, and deposited in front of me. And it tasted exactly like you would expect: with all the appropriate love and care that had gone into its preparation just washing across my palate. Ugh. What a suckass sandwich.

The beer was good, and it went down quickly. The barkeep asked if I wanted another one, and, for some reason, I picked up the check and looked at it before answering. It was \$7.99 a glass. Holy hops and barley, Batman! You gotta be shittin’ me. I thanked-but-no-thanked her, gathered my goodies and fled.

McCarron also has what every other place in Nevada has: slot machines. God forbid that you would have to wait for your flight without one more chance to flush several more dollars into those cash-slurping devices. I had about three dollars in change on me, so I dutifully poured the quarters into one of the machines, and it chugged them gluttonously. So much for getting rich quick.

When I had pieced together the travel plans for this vacation, the red-eye from Vegas to Boston was a key element. By spending the night in the air, I’d gain a day of vacationing. And, I figured, how bad could the flight be? I’d probably sleep through a good chunk of it anyway, right? So why squander a full Saturday or Sunday on a plane? Plus, if Lady Luck were to grin my way, I’d have a vacant seat next to me, and I might even get a whole empty row to stretch out on.

*But*, there would be no such vibes from Lady Luck. That mean bitch didn’t smile on my quarters and she didn’t smile on my ticket either. “No, sir, the flight is full,” was the reply I got from the man at Gate B-13. I grimaced, and hoped the person who would be settling in next to me would be neither obese nor garrulous.

Often, I keep the laptop unstored so I can plip some blings for a while during the flight, but this time I shoved it into that overhead bin; I knew I would not be doing anything that didn’t begin with, “zzzzzzz...”

There was an elderly woman on the aisle seat, and I excused my way past her to reach my coveted window seat. I always take the window seat. It’s my only means of maintaining sanity on a flight. I love seeing the world from 20,000 feet, but I hate everything else about flying. It has nothing to with fear; I’m not the least bit afraid of crashing and dying. Hell, if you gotta die anyway, that’s not such a bad way to go. Kinda violent, I guess, but only for a second. It definitely beats being castrated, crucified, and covered with fire ants.

So, flying doesn’t *scare* me, it just sucks! You’re crammed into this tube, with no room to stretch out, your ears are popping, you can’t really even get up and move around because the aisle is so narrow and that freaking beverage cart is always in the way, and you can barely even fit in the bathroom. Even the windows are so small and inconveniently placed that you have to contort your neck like a goddamn slinky to see anything. You have these retarded safety lectures to listen to. I mean, why bother telling anybody how to use a seatbelt? Maybe back before 1965, when auto seatbelts first came into use, it was a good idea, but by now, I think everybody has a pretty good idea about the intricacies of belt clicking. Take-offs suck, landings suck, turbulence sucks, competing for the goddamn armrest sucks, and that whole security horseshit sucks.

So, to cope, I lose myself in the view. Often, I have a personal listening device playing cool, vibrant, instrumental tunes to help me forget that everything I’m not looking at is still there. Nighttime flights only give occasional entertainment, and cloudy days, of course, suck.

The Seat E occupant arrived. He was not fat. He was a 35-year-old black man who looked like he had spent the last 72 hours at a crap table. He sank into Seat E without a grunt or a nod either to me or the old lady. He pulled his cap low over his eyes, folded his arms over his chest, and effectively said “leave me the fuck alone.” Perfect! I wouldn’t even have to fight for the armrest.

The plane took off, and that weird sea of electricity glittered and glowed underneath us. It retreated into the dark behind us as we veered eastward.

It was off to Boston.

But, first, it was off to sleep...

And it was not a good night's sleep at the NYNY Hotel, on Night 11 of Roadrage 2000. That fucking roller coaster really did run all night.

As I was exiting Vegas the next day -- escaping felt like a more accurate term -- I noticed that all the traffic islands, instead of having grass on them for aesthetics, had arrangements of different colored stones, like an outer rim of reddish stones, and an inner pattern of whiter ones. Green was *definitely* lacking here. And what green was there was clearly artificially induced. Well, to be fair, green had been scarce since the Black Canyon Of The Gunnison, back in central Colorado. Green needs water, and you just don't find a whole hell of a lot of that in the desert.

I swung down south of LV through Boulder City to have lunch with Jack. We went to lunch at a casino called The 5¢ Diner, and the Tuesday afternoon shift was stone cold dead. Spiffily dressed dealers and rollers manned or womanned each blackjack table and roulette wheel and all the other gambling apparatus, but there was NOBODY there. That is not hyperbole. I couldn't see one gambler at any of the tables. But the staff stood faithfully ready. And there were plenty of them on duty too! Very weird sight. What a godawful boring shift those people must have had! But at least it was air conditioned, and they weren't outside laying asphalt or doing roofing on some new condo complex in the 102-degree heat.

And speaking of artificially-induced green, on my way out of Boulder City, looking to steer my steed westward onto the Mojave Desert, I came upon one very odd street: Adams Boulevard. If any of you ever have the occasion to travel down this road, *please* give me an update. Adams Boulevard in itself is nothing special: it's straight, pretty flat, maybe a kilometer long, brand new, with crisp bright new sidewalks and two roomy lanes of traffic. To all appearances, it is made to handle quite a bit of traffic. There were two things about it, though, that made it stand out in my mind.

First, it was empty! There was NOTHING on this street! There were some homes or some sort of buildings well up to the right, but it didn't look to me like many or any connected onto Adams Boulevard in any way. And to the left, there was only the flat bleak hot dusty desert, populated visibly only by scrub vegetation and dust devils.

Jack tells me that those scrubby creosote bushes "smell like rain" when you rub the buds in your hands. And, on the way west, one of those swirling dust devil miniature tornados darted out onto the highway and hip-checked Blue Man and I right up onto the shoulder. It was cool. Kinda like being in the movie *Twister*, but not as twisted.

The second thing about Adams Boulevard that was pretty stupid was that it was lined, on both sides, with about 200 baby trees!

They were all very young, wispy thin, and about six feet tall. With their fresh soft green leaves, they all looked healthy and eager to grow, now that they were beyond their previous sterile greenhouse/nursery infancy. I don't know what kind they were, but they looked almost maple-ish or something else very leafy green -- you know, the kind that need **water** to survive?? I don't know who was going to water those poor sun-pounded saplings, but it didn't look like Mr. Sky would be doing it any time soon.

When I reached the far end of the spanking new roadway, there was a truck there. A round logo on the door identified that it was from the Nevada Division of Forestry. Now, that's about as useful as the Wyoming Coast Guard, or the Key West Bureau of Snow Removal. And to underscore that very thought, four absolutely idle "workers" kept the truck company: two were slumped on the running board on the slightly shady side, and the other two were just lying right *under* the truck for shade. Mmmm, nothing like hard, fresh, skillet-hot concrete and asphalt to give one a nice cooling break, eh?

So, I'm rooting for those trees -- ooh, no pun intended, sorry -- to make it. If they ever do thrive, that street will look like some suburban Illinois parkway.

It was good to see old Jacko again, but it was time to resume my road raging. I didn't dread the ride. No, sir or ma'am, I didn't. I was eager for it. Out there beyond the hills lay the Mojave Desert of California.

And you all know what the capitol of California is, right? **Sacramento!!!**

