

# Never Nevada

## *Fock 4: A Victim of Vegas Again*

A year later, on Day 10 of Road Romp '04 – that coast-to-almost-coast ramack across the southern tier of the USA -- I found myself back in ol' Battle Born again. Oh yay. Maybe my luck would change. I entered from the west again, but not on I-15 this time. I had just spent the afternoon exploring Death Valley National Park. The bleakness and harshness of the landscape was incredible, and I was still California then: the Golden State, the promised land of gold and fertility. I eagerly awaited Nevada – the Sagebrush State -- so I could see some **real** desolation.

But the sense of Big Change really *was* in the air. This ramack was going to lose its solo aspect and become a team effort. What was extra weird was that my roundabout route to Las Vegas was a hell of a lot more normal than Nate's was. I was just driving from Key West via Tombstone to Yosemite to Death Valley to Vegas. Not so weird, really. He was coming from New Zealand after spending a month on a free-lance tour of that island country and Australia, and was supplementing it with a Grand Canyon hike and a cross-country drive instead of flying straight home to South Carolina.

We had coordinated this rendezvous way back in February. My own plans had called for a roadtrip to Arizona, with a few days at the Big Hole. Knowing Nate's sense of adventure, I had contacted him in January as I was throwing together my own tentative plans. I hurled an IM at him, asking, "Hey, Fats, want to hike the Grand Canyon with me next June?" [Calling Nate "Fats" is like naming Santa Claus "Slim" – he has about as much fat on him as a quarter pound hamburger.]

His response surprised me, "What dates?"

"I dunno. I'm somewhat flexible at this point. Somewhere between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>?"

"That'd be perfect for me, man. I'm flying back from NZ on the 19<sup>th</sup>. I can change my last leg out of LA and go to LV instead of SC."

"Sweet. I can meet you at McCarran. Let's do it."

"OK, I think it's the 19<sup>th</sup>, but I'll get back to you with the exact date."

From there, I researched various hikes, tried in vain to get reservations at Phantom Ranch at the bottom of the Big Hole, and laid my itinerary out around a June 19<sup>th</sup> rendezvous and a 20<sup>th</sup> through 22<sup>nd</sup> GCNP experience.

Nate emailed me a few days later, clarifying that he would be leaving Auckland on the 19<sup>th</sup>, so I should meet him at McCarran Airport (where Serrano got the disks) at 11:20 a.m. on the 20<sup>th</sup>. I emailed back my confirmation, and tweaked my ramack plan accordingly.

It was a perfect fit. The extra day gave me just enough time to spend the full day at Yosemite, and make the extension through Joshua Tree, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon much more worthwhile. Throughout the trip, part of my concern with Moby's various maladies was that I would break down and be delayed for my appointment with the Fat Man.

I played it all through in my head as the Mobe and I departed DVNP. It was 4:07 pm, and the AC went back on. "I'm comin' to get ya, Nate!" I beamed, and chitched open another frosty Dog.

For the last hour, for no particular reason, I had counted vehicles. There wasn't much else to count, except maybe rocks. There had been three cars and two motorcycles. That's all. With such a totally barren landscape, **of course** the road was empty! Who would want to be out here!? Except someone like me. There is no reason to be here: no businesses, no homes, no Christmas Tree farms.

Then I saw a cloud. A tiny one. It looked really lost. Why and how does one such cloud even form?? Maybe a minute later, it was gone. Soon thereafter, though, two more appeared briefly, then splintered and disappeared. That's desert drama for you. I can't remember ever being so occupied by the fate of a few small clouds when I lived in Boston. When there is less to see, you see more.

At 4:41 pm PDT, at the 4508 mile mark, Moby roared into Nevada. Oh, yeah, **much** more scenic. California was done. Would there be a Next Time for the Golden State? I certainly hoped so.

The first town in NV was called Pahrump, and it hailed itself as, "The Heart of the New Old West," whatever the hell that's supposed to mean. This place was the heart of exactly nothing, except maybe itself. It was 60-something miles from Vegas, with no town in between. It sat hotly in a valley – the Pahrump Valley, in fact -- just west of the Spring Mountains, which I would have to climb over to reach Sin City.

Who would name a town Pahrump? Maybe Jose Pahrump would? What kind of a name is Pahrump? Well, you know me: I had to find out. Turns out that the Southern Paiute Indians, who occupied the Pahrump Valley centuries ago, named it "Pah" meaning water and "Rimpi" meaning stone or rock. "Pah Rimpi" became Pahrump, the Paiute description for springs or flowing waters emerging from rock. As it happens, the town sits atop a large aquifer, so even though it gets very little rain – those disappearing clouds don't help much – the water comes up from beneath.

Unlike the little outposts along CA-395, Pahrump is a real town, and it is, in fact, thriving, with a population of 33,000 "and growing." I was surprised to see that some of the familiar chain stores and restaurants had taken root along NV-160, a new and smooth four-lane highway that surely had been redone to serve as a faster and easier connector to Vegas.

But this place still had "hick" written all over it, from the wide array of mobile homes that were scattered almost randomly around the outskirts, to the unimaginative street names (Z Street, W Street, R Street...), to the parked pickup truck with its cap painted as an ad for "Doghouse Repair." WTF? How much of a call is there for that?? I hope he's not a specialist.

In some cases, I drive through desolate areas and wonder why a town or settlement is there. At least Pahrump had a reason for existing (water), but I still couldn't explain why so many people had chosen to live out here.

Then again, it was just an easy hour removed from a big city, so those who worked in LV but detested city living could find quiet refuge out here. The low-traffic ride would even be a good decompression zone after a hectic day amid the urban crush and greed. By the time you got back home to Pahrump, you'd have squeezed out all your stress through the gas pedal, and be easing on down the long slope into town.

And with a Community College and a Brothel Art Museum (free admission) – not to mention its own Doghouse Repairman -- this town had the goods. Being Nevadan, it also had gambling of its own. *The Pahrump Nugget Hotel and Gambling Hall* was prominently in view, as was *Terrible's Town Casino*.

One big sign pointed the way to *Green Valley Grocers*. Huh?? What color did you just say? Where is this valley again?? Green was something that had gone very scarce again since the Dunmavin area.

As it turned out, I stamped Pahrump as "OK" after all. The largest part of my thumb-up had to be based on that nifty roadway. This was sweet smooth new deep-black asphalt. The guardrail was still shiny, and the road lines stood out like neon. It was truly a car-happy road. Moby was lovin' it.

But, there would be trouble in paradise. I must have been diggin' the road a little too much and not realized just how long and steep this ride out of town was getting.

We were zooming along, gaining momentum as we left the slightly slower speed limits of Pahrump behind and wheeled south for Las Vegas. I don't remember competing against other vehicles, but it wouldn't surprise me if I had been. Anyway, without any warning, Moby coughed and bucked violently, like he was gagging on a big fur ball. His fit lasted only a couple of seconds before he passed out.

I coasted the stalled van into the breakdown lane, and sighed. It had caught up to me at last. Oh well, I figured, at least I'm near a town and not in the middle of the West Texas desert. Poor Moby.

Not knowing what else to do, I got out and knelt down to look under the van. My one past experience with tranny failure had involved sizzling pink fluid streaming out from the casing. There was no such flow to be seen this time though, which, I assumed, was a good thing.

Likewise, a look under the hood accomplished nothing. It rarely does these days, unless my windshield washer fluid is low. I used to be able to see the engine when I opened the hood, but now there is so much stuff crammed in there I'd never know what an engine block looked like. No big deal, I guess. Most of the time, I'd just stand there gaping at the engine and thinking, "yup, that's the motor, all right." Maybe jiggle a few wires, or tighten the wing nut on top of the air filter.

So, I got back in, and with a give-it-a-whirl shrug, I turned the key. Moby started right up like a champion. He sounded great. I ran him for a little bit, and even got back out to reconfirm that there was no leakage. There was none. I was glad of that: I wouldn't have wanted to be responsible for staining this nice new pavement.

The Mobe seemed willing, so I slipped him into D and cautiously started forward. No worries. I guess I fixed it! Within minutes, we were back up to speed and cresting the long rise. I remained wary, but there were no further problems. Yet.

I was close enough to pick up Las Vegas radio, and one of the promos I heard was for a show at Mandalay Bay. The star attraction was the Steve Miller Band. Ohh, pleeease. Speaking of washed-up bands! This retro thing had clearly gotten out of hand. The funny thing was, you could book the SMB into some hockey rink in Lowell, Massachusetts and only sell about 50 tickets for \$10 each. But, you put them in a swank casino hotel, charge \$70 a ticket, and probably sell out the joint.

The other funny thing is, they just might put on a better show now than some of the ones they did back in their prime. I'm not casting asparagus on the SMB specifically, but some hard rock bands got pretty damn wasted and put on some sloppy, sloppy shows back in their heyday. Now that they've had a few decades to sober up, it's possible they could be just a bit tighter in their music.

I turned on my cell phone, but it was still dead to the world, as it had been since the west side of Death Valley. No signal here. Can you hear me now? NO!!

Soon, the skyline of LV was in sight. Thankfully, there was no smog dome over it like there had been when I came in from Utah in 2000.

I found my way to the Strip easily – after one visit to a city, I usually get the lay of the land imprinted pretty well in my mind – and went straight to the hotel.



When I arranged this trip, I knew I would be spending very few nights in hotels and motels. One would be at Grand Canyon Village, and would be well deserved after a day of hiking the Hole. The other, I declared, would be in Vegas. But I would NOT choose the grim atmosphere of the New York New York, as I had on RR2K. I had long admired the medieval spires of the Excalibur, and booked myself a room there. It wasn't cheap, but since my overall lodging expense was going to be only about \$300 for the 19-day excursion, I had sprung for it.

[In all, 15 of the 19 nights would be spent in Moby. Even if you figure on motel rooms being just \$50 each, the big white Dodge Ram saved me about \$750 for the trip.]

With the Mobe secure in the check-in lot at 5:55 pm (made my 6:00 goal!), I went inside to get my key and make my payment before unloading all my crap. The line to check in was short, and I was chatting pleasantly with the desk girl in no time.

As always, I was braced for a problem. Surely, she would study the computer screen, purse her lips in puzzlement, shuffle some papers, make a phone call, look up and say, "I'm sorry, sir, but we..."

My temperament and demeanor were ready. I certainly did not trust Las Vegas; experience is a through teacher. This city and I just do not hit it off – never have – starting with the run-in with the my 29<sup>th</sup> birthday and running all the way through the depressing post-Utah 16 years later. It's not a gambling thing. I don't gamble. I'd rather spend my money on beer than watch some dealer sweep it off the table, or listen to it clink down the throat of some slot machine.

The best time I ever had in Las Vegas was on the SW03 vacation, where I flew in, grabbed my rental, zoomed outa town, came back a week later, returned the rental and got right on the plane.

So, I was ready for a dire turn of events.

The girl looked up and spoke, "Yes, we have you, Mr. MacKenzie, room 17160. That will be \$153.95 with tax. How will you be paying today?"

"Oh, plastic, please," I replied, opening my wallet. Maybe Vegas was gonna treat me right this time after all! I felt relieved. I was so damn glad that there had been no complications, no screw-ups, no flies in the oint---

FUCK! Where's my MasterCard???

The slot that it always sat in was empty. It stared back at me silently. I fumbled in my pockets and searched the depths of my backpack, but to no avail.

Damn.

I had a Visa card with me, though, so I put the room on that. But that was a new card, with only a \$300 line of credit. The room was not a problem, so I didn't dally at the desk very long. The concern was fuel. I had been planning on plasticizing all my gas all the way home. I was still a good dozen fill-ups

from Florida. This new card would never handle it all, and I couldn't even get a worthwhile cash advance or use it at an ATM.

Even worse, or course, if I didn't have my card, *who did??*

I went back out to Moby and a frenzied search ensued. Not panicked, but frenzied. I moved and removed everything around all the seats, in my duffle bag, in my clothes, in the trash, and even in the cooler. No card.

Where did I use the MC last?? I had been in nothing but desert all afternoon, so I hadn't been buying anything. Last gas was at ... Coso Junction, near the ghost town of Dunmovin, well west of DV. Did I save the receipt? Maybe it had a phone number on it. Nope, I even remember throwing the damn slip of paper out with the rest of my trash at that station. Shit shit shit. Shit.

This was a setback, but not a disaster. I had an Emergency Cash envelope that I had been hoping to bring back home intact, but I guess this is the type of thing I brought it along for.

Oh well, not gonna let it ruin my day. I'll go call Citibank and cancel the little fucker.

I grabbed my first load -- duffle bag and laptop and such -- and started back in. When I got to the room, and began to put down my stuff, I noticed that my cell phone had stirred back to life here within the urban bubble. It said that I had five missed calls.

The first was a hey-howyadoin-where-are-ya-now call from Roberto, my bossman at the time. There was no need for a callback -- the call had been more or less a postcard in reverse.

The second was a 9:30 a.m. call from Nate. Hey Nate! He was telling me that his flight out of L.A. "was going to be delayed an hour or so," and that he would be late arriving in Vegas as a result. No prob, I thought; it just means I can sleep a little later. I did think it odd, though, that he would know about a delay in tomorrow's flight already, but I didn't worry about it and pressed on to the next message.

It was Nate again. Hey Nate! This time it was about 11:30. "Hey, man. Just hangin' here in the terminal. Come and get me." WTF?? He was calling from McCarran Airport. SHIT! He's a day early!

The next two calls were Nate again. 12:30, then 1:30. "Where arrrrrrre ya, mannn? Gimme a call or somethin'..."

Fuck!

The final message was one last try by Nate, at 5:00 -- just an hour ago! "Hey, Rick, I don't know what happened, man, maybe you got in a wreck or something. I been hangin' here all day. Been travelin' forever. I don't know what to do, so I'm just gonna catch a flight back to SC..."

NO!!! DON'T DO IT, NATE!! I'M ON MY WAY!!!

I frantically tried calling him back on his cell phone, but I just got his voice mail. Shit. He probably had his phone shut off for the flight or packed in his bag already. DAMN!!

I raced out to Moby, and careened off to McCarran. Moby was a tad miffed; he thought he had earned a rest, but here I was playing Speed Racer in the streets of downtown Las Vegas. I got there pretty quickly -- it was not far away -- and did a rapid search of the terminal. No Nate in sight. I checked departure gates and ticket counters. Maybe he couldn't catch an east coast flight till later, I hoped.

I had him paged. No response.

After 45 minutes of combing McCarran, I surrendered. Nate was gone.

Fuck this city!! Bad, bad karma here for me.

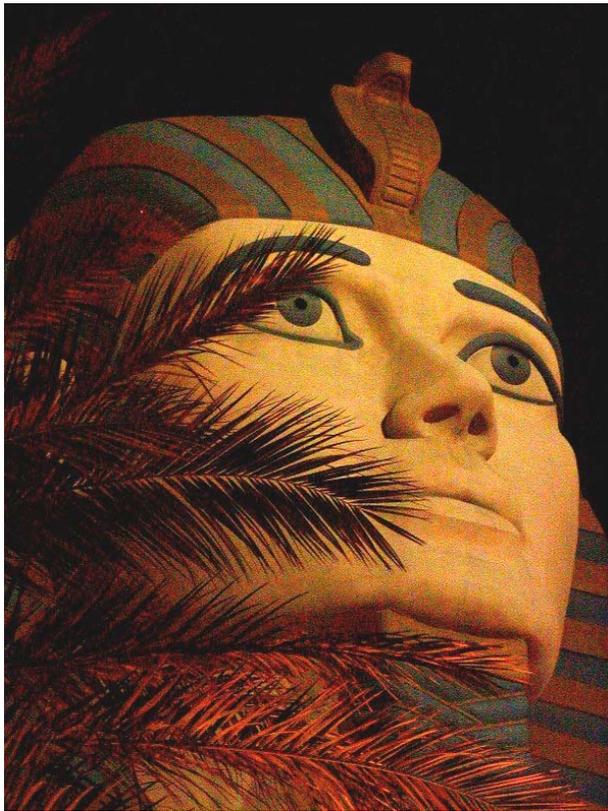
There was only one thing to do that would properly address the situation and attend to my current mood: get blind drunk. I resolved to do so forthwith, and went straight back to room 17160.

I needed a shower, but I didn't let that delay the proceedings. The half-gallon growler of Sierra Blanca Pale Ale that I had procured at Pub 48 in Ruidoso NM was brought out. It was ice cold, and heavy with brew. It didn't stand a chance. I killed it in short order. It barely lasted till I dried myself off. The last of the Alien Ambers chased it down, making not much of a dent. I was bottomless.

Heading out on the town seemed like a good idea, so I grabbed my camera and some money and set out. I figured I'd take a bunch of



photos of the Excalibur, but I ended up taking a lot more of the Luxor next door. Once again, I had picked the wrong hotel. Excalibur was cool, I guess, but its chief effects showed from the outside. Luxor had much more cool stuff on its inside.



I walked the Strip some, and looked at the hotels and such for a while. I walked in and out of a few. My mind had been made up to blow \$100 at blackjack or roulette or something like that, but when the No-Nate News came through, my swerve lost its verve. I walked past those tables, but felt no desire to play. I kept my money in my pocket. Bought a cuppla beers instead: a much more sure bet. The Boozin' Tempo was slowing though.

Deciding that food would be a half-decent idea, I got some lame-ass chicken samich at Mister

Hot Dog. Ugh. By far the best part of that whole experience was listening in on the conversation of the three teenage girls at a table outside. One was fairly good looking, one was obese, and the third was kinda-pretty-with-significant-cleavage. They all used the word “fuck” about ten times every sentence, and then they agreed how much they hate it when some guy dares to use that word in conversation with them. *Like then the fuckin' guy fuckin' says, 'Hey, you want a fuckin' drink?' I'm like, fuckin' jerk, don't fuckin' use that fuckin' word around me. Fuuuuck.*

Mindless Vegas ho's.

I went back to the hotel to drop off the camera, then headed back out. It was closing in on midnight by now. I checked out a couple of off-the-strip night clubs, and was definitely not impressed. Of course, I wasn't especially impressive either. I had not bothered to dress up for this safari. In all, I must've walked five miles far and wide around those city streets. Real safe thing to do, huh?



It was about 4:00, and I had pretty much sobered up from all the walking. Hunger hit me again on the walk back to Excalibur. A Quizno's was still open, so I ordered up a steak-n-cheese sub, with **no onions**. The Mexican behind the counter was holding the bucket of steak and onions – it was the last sandwich of the night, oh yay – and looked right at me as he dumped both on the bun. Too much effort to just take the steak out with tongs and toss the onions out. Noooooo. Dump it all down, onions and all. Lazy shit.

When it came to me at the register, the other employee, a California-hippie kinda guy, rang it up,

trying to be cheerful. I paid him and took my grease-and-onion sub. I walked towards the door but stopped at the last table, near where I had ordered from the Mexican, who had already started doing a half-assed job cleaning the cooker. I smirked as he looked at me, and I slowly removed the dripping strands of onion one by one, and dropped them on the formica table. He was glaring at me. I met his gaze and kept dropping them.

Finally, when most of the soggy blobs were lying in a puddled heap, I closed my sandwich and said to him, "I said 'no onions', chef." I took a bite of my sandwich. It was really gross. I dropped the rest of it on the onion pile. "What a piece of shit sandwich. You should be proud." I flipped Mex the bird and strolled onward. In retrospect, I'm lucky he didn't knife me.

Back at the Excalibur, I roamed the casino for a few minutes, lost four quarters in a slot machine, and figured it was time to call it a night.

There were two guys on the elevator. Just ordinary tourist guys, like me, who had just thrown in the towel too.

Out of the blue, one of them asked me, "Have you ever been a Marine?"

After a second of stunned hesitation, I told him with a chuckle, "No."

"Well," he said, "you have a real Marine aura about you." The door opened at their floor and they exited. When the doors closed again, I looked at myself in the mirrored wall. I was wearing ragged tan shorts, dirty running shoes, a green sleeveless Key West T-shirt, and a shabby old black leather cowboy hat. Somehow, the phrase "the few, the proud" did not leap to mind.

"Marine aura??" I asked nobody. Maybe that's why Onion Mex didn't attack me. Then I thought about it, and wondered if he used the lower case "m" and, in commenting on my "marine aura" he was really saying that I smelled like fish. I could see that.

Anyway, this Marine Cowboy hauled his weary butt back to room 17160 and collapsed into a real bed for the first time in a week. I had been up for more than 21 hours, and had covered 514 miles – 509 of it in Moby. I had nearly busted my ass on a snow bank, failed at overplaying a song, misplaced a town, seen Mars, taken my van on a roller coaster, gotten scorched on a desert golf course, lost a credit card, lost my traveling companion, got hammered, taunted a Mexican, and been mistaken for a Marine.

It had indeed been a full day.



