

Coolo California

Fock 2: Cabbies, Beggars, and Boppers

Los Angeles was never in the mix when The Plan for Roadrage2000 was stirred (not shaken) together. Virgin territory was top priority. It wouldn't have been many miles out of the way – it was certainly less off-line than New Orleans was – but past experience had taught me that one just does not zip in and zip out of LA: the place is too big, and the traffic is too snarled. Besides, the two previous visits had pretty much satisfied my curiosity.

The Rude Brothers first struck LA at 4:13 p.m. on June 17, 1984. We eagerly anticipated a full week of world class Track & Field at the Coliseum, and plenty of good nightlife wherever it could be found.

Through an odd stroke of luck, we actually had a free place to stay during the week, and I don't mean The Moose. Durch, a high school track teammate of mine, had called me one night in late April, just to say hi. He was with Tim, another teammate, talking about old times when they decided to ring me up for a howdy-do. It was a Saturday night, about 10:00, and there was no way in hell I would have been home, EXCEPT that I had eaten my very first Wendy's cheeseburger that afternoon, and it had awoken some vile demons within. My party-hearty Saturday night had become a retching, grunting, fever-ridden bout with food poisoning. When the phone rang, I answered it with a groan.

Durch and Tim cheered me up a good bit – it had been about six years since I had heard from either of them – but my spirits rose another few notches when Durch informed me that they were both living in Costa Mesa, just a swallow's flight south of LA. Immediately I hit him up for directions, and invited ourselves in as his guests for the third week of June. He happily agreed.

Though it looks cozy-close on the map, Costa Mesa, which is adjacent to Huntington Beach, is not exactly walking distance from the Coliseum. It was a good 40 miles from gate to door, and the quickest we ever covered it was just under an hour. Still, we were Road Rudes, and didn't quail at a few extra clicks of the odometer. Besides, with the meet often not requiring our presence until late afternoon, Huntington Beach (the next town over) gave us a couple of very nice days of clean sand, warm sun, and refreshing surf.

There was also a widely spaced line of large concrete pots that ran the length of the beach. The pots were about five feet in diameter, with a few hundred feet between each one. Durch explained to us that they were doing the campfire thing on the beach at night. Seemed like a damn fine thing to do, though we never got around to doing it.

Bars were a damn fine thing to do, also, and we spent a few of our nights swilling Bass Ale draughts at Houlihan's, downing Coronas at Margaritaville, or watching Tim get blind at Hogue Barmichael's, all of which were very nice places to get a glow on.

We had to do some self-guided touring of the big city too, of course. The Rudes never hire a guide; if it was worth finding, we would find it ourselves. If we didn't find it, then it couldn't have been that big a deal anyway.

We got chastised by some security people for playing handball at Greystone Mansion in the heart of Beverly Hills, so we harrumphed those stuffy elitists and did the rest of our touring in the Moose, with appropriate tunes, bevs, and sparkers.

It all looked pretty nice -- well manicured, flowery, and expensive – but we found ourselves looking at quite a few gates rather than homes. After a bit, we shrugged of the living quarters of the rich and famous, and sought out more common-man ground for some eats. Richie pointed out a fast-food Szechuan Chicken place, but I leaned towards the more mundane sub shop next door. He got his, I got mine, and we met back at The Moose.

We sat in the front seats and attacked our meals. My roast-beef-and-mayo sub was going down just fine, thank ya much, when I became aware of some gasping coming from my right. Richie had taken the challenge from the server and had ordered the hottest goddamn chicken they had. Clearly, it was living up to its billing.

He was eating it with vigor, but was pausing to gasp in air to soothe his sizzling palate. His face was beet red, and he was beginning to sweat bullets.

"Damn, Richie," I marveled, "If it's that bad just throw it out!"

"No!" he gasped, "it's good – real – good..."

He was growing redder by the minute, and his supply of napkins was dwindling fast, mainly because he was now using them to mop his brow and cheeks, so I started up The Moose, and got us up onto a highway. He rolled his window down and stuck his head out like a dog to cool off, but he would give no quarter. He finished every bite of his chicken, and spent the rest of the night dowsing the inner flames with Budweiser.



We also filled up at a gas station, and left without putting the gas cap back on. I noticed this miles later when we pulled back into Costa Mesa, and was just lamenting it to Richie when he pointed to the little gutter along the edge of the roof: the cap was still sitting there, right where I had put it. That would have made a good ad for the smooth ride of the Dodge van.

It was at a store called Things For Your Head, along the strip at Huntington Beach, that we bought The

Ugliest Hat In The World. As the store name implies -- without shouting it out -- there were things that would facilitate decorating the inside of your head too, and we checked into those as well.

Bright and loudly-patterned clothing was a popular style in the mid-80's, and Richie was spearheading that drive for our circle of friends. Flowered Hawaiian shirts were simply called "asshole shirts" because you looked like such an obnoxious asshole in one. Our gatherings, especially the one following Richie's Dedham Fourth Of July Road Race, became contests for who could out-asshole everyone else. It was an assault on the eyes, as shirts, hats, shorts, socks, sneakers, shades, ties, and underwear of every conceivable clash was trotted out for the occasion.



But I think the UHITW is what really got the ball rolling. Colorful, flowery shirts had been worn before, but this was the first garment that screamed out, "I dare you to wear me!"

We did, all the way home -- except for the moment when we let the old lady at The Big Hole share the experience.

So, the City of Angels had been OK in '84, and the shorter visit in '99 had been fun too. That second time in town, I saw some other parts of Beverly Hills on foot (running), and took a quick ride up to check out the Pacific Ocean views from Malibu and Santa Monica. There was some delving into the nocturnal world of WeHo, as well, which led to some very late nights. Staying mostly within the Century City and Santa Monica Boulevard areas really magnified the downside of life in the big West Coast city, which was no different than that of the big East Coast city: traffic, and taxis.



Taxis are not all that familiar to me. I have taken fewer than a dozen cab rides in my life. It just plain pisses me off to watch that freaking meter click up the cost as we race snails across town. I prefer the freedom of movement and activity (nudge, nudge) in my own vehicle, even in a crowded city. But sometimes, exorbitant parking costs and the unavailability of busses or trains make cab riding necessary. So it really vexed me when those two Los Angeles taxi drivers tried to take Danno and I for a ride that December evening.

Sure, they must have had us pegged as expense account fueled cavaliers who would toss company cash their way with reckless abandon, and the higher the fare, the higher the tip. After all, we were staying at the Century Plaza Hotel by Westin, among the most sumptuous accommodations in West

Hollywood, but that doesn't mean that we *should have been*. True, both of us had been flown out there on somebody else's dollar, but once we were there, our entertainment costs were very much our own.

So all we wanted to do was to go out on the town a little bit. Maybe up across Santa Monica Boulevard to Sunset Boulevard. I had a rental parked in The Century Plaza's private garage, but at their eye-popping rates, anything after five hours was \$31. Even if you just left to drive around the block, and came right back, the clock started all over again, and you'd be back up to \$31 again by the time the afternoon sessions were over.

Being naturally pragmatic people, we decided to leave the car where it was, avoid the hassle of finding parking on Sunset, and just cab it for the two-mile ride.

Danno and I did make it to this rodeo bar on Sunset Boulevard. I don't remember what it was called. I wrote it down, but, oh well... gone. Anyhow, the bar had this mechanical bull that people were stupid enough to climb onto. Nobody I saw "climbed" off. One guy did a 100% face plant over the bull's horn and onto the floor below. Good thing it was padded or he'd still be pulling splinters out his nose whenever he sneezed.

The real show was behind the bar. Holy shadow of cartwheeling Jesus! This woman was beautiful and tight and trim, and wore low jeans, bared her abs with rightful pride, squeezed into a too-small halter top, had long silky black hair, dark smiling eyes, and topped it all with an alligator cowboy hat. And, best of all, SHE GAVE US EACH TWO FREE BEERS! Talk about the perfect woman!!

I don't think she *intended* to give us each two free beers; she just kinda forgot to charge us. But think about it, you male chauvanist pigs, isn't that just as good???

But the taxi ride had pissed me off. Right off the bat, the guy seemed resentful of us. He wasn't outwardly nasty, just the kind who wouldn't let you finish your sentence because he had to show you that he knew what you were going to say.

Not at all like Akmed, the cabbie who brought Patrick, Cliff, Dugg and I to Central Park in NYC on Memorial Day. That guy was A-OK. Of course, having me leap into the front seat and begin grilling him on his whole life story probably made things seem a bit more personal, if not unnerving. He got a thumbs-up from us though. Well, I can't speak for the other three -- they were in the back, probably thinking I had gone loony on them -- but he was OK in my book, which is right here, I guess. ☺

Akmed was late-30's, with a non-working wife and three children, ages 8 through 13. He had worked as a bank manager in Pakistan until 1993, then quit his job, grabbed everything he valued, and came stone-cold-unemployed to New York City. He drives his cab five days a week, 12-14 hours each day, pays the leasing company something like \$300 a day (I forget the figure he gave me, mighta been higher), and all the rest is his to keep. So he **pays** \$1500 a week -- \$6,000 a month! \$72,000 a year!! -- and still makes a sound living off what's left. He says his wife does not need to work; she just raises the kids. He must be doing OK, to support five people in NYC. Here's to ya, Akmed!

But the L.A. cabbie was a freaking crook. He had no way of knowing that I had been exploring Santa Monica Boulevard on foot when I went for my runs, and by car when I arrived in the city, so he assumed we were just clueless outatowners. When he took a right out of the hotel instead of a left, it was pretty fucking obvious he was taking us for a ride, in more ways than one.

I immediately asked him where he was going, and he stammered a surprised and lame answer. Then he got to Santa Monica Boulevard, and instead of turning left to go up to Sunset, he was angling straight, where construction cut the road to one narrow (and sloooooow) lane. I challenged him again. He relented, claiming we'd be sorry once we saw the traffic on Sunset.

I think the outpost of Baker had as much traffic as Sunset did -- maybe the counter girl did too (oooooowww, did I say that??) -- and we got to the bar area real damn quick. The cabbie babbled about how he never seen such light traffic up here, and how we got so lucky, and blah blah blah, yeah, up yours, taxi man. We paid his \$16 fare, and tossed him a pitying buck tip. A-hole.

Then, wouldn't you know it, the cabbie on the ride home tried to rip us off too. He went right down onto Santa Monica, but then, for no apparent reason, went left for three blocks, right for one block, then back up right again for three blocks. Hold the fucking phone, Jose, I had to call shenanigans on this bloke too. He mumbled something about "construction...blah blah", but when I noted to him that the construction was still three blocks ahead on Santa Monica, he had no reply. Fucking thief. We stiffed his ass.

And, all in all, we paid more than the \$31 it would have cost to take the rental out of the garage. Damn smart of us, eh, Danno?

Oh, well, on future trips, we'll know better. That is assuming, of course, that there will be someplace worth going out to. Well, now that think about that, even a hotel bar is worth going to. Even your own room with a sink full of beer and ice is worth going to when the room is paid for by someone else!!

On that trip, I had this awesome 23rd floor room with a balcony, that ran about \$180 a night, and I spent almost no time in it. I was out every night till 3 or 4, exploring the various local clubs and clubbers, and then barely getting up in time for the convention sessions.

Stan, whom I had met through Skott, and who had invited me to split the room with him, thought I was depraved. Not exactly a live wire when it comes to all things party, Stan was not shy to comment on the fact that his sound sleep was disturbed when I came in – quite quietly, to be honest -- at precisely 3:17 a.m., or to observe that my snoring ("is that alcohol- induced?") was louder than it had been the night before.

Yeah, yeah, whatever, Stanny. He even found a way to fly out a night early! Why the hell would anybody want to leave Los Angeles and rush back to Asheville, North Carolina? The nice thing was that I was left with that big expensive hotel room to myself. The not-so-nice thing was that, despite concerted efforts, it stayed that way.

Talk about hosings, though. As always, I had hooked my laptop up to local AOL access numbers and got on the net for email, local info, and yada yada foonbag. Welllll, this desk had a data input, so I wouldn't even have to go through all that bother of unplugging the phone. I used it liberally in my three days there, and it wasn't until I was unplugging on the morning of departure that I noticed the dinky cardboard sign, lying *face down* on the desk, and *behind* the lamp: "Internet access...50¢/minute." OUCH!!!! I don't even want to mention what that totalled out to. But, as Big Brudda Bob always tells his customers in the auto parts biz, "if you want to live like a sport, you gotta spend like a sport."



Just as there was no need to travel to L.A. on Roadrage2000, there was also no inclination to venture south of the city either. A Spring Break trip to San Diego a few years before had covered that.

On that trip, I even went international, by crossing into Mexico. Not that I stayed very long. About three hours, I guess, but that was plenty long enough. Tijuana, it was. What a *depressing* place!

The city name allegedly derives from *Rancho Tia Juana* – Aunt Jane's Ranch – and refers to some legendary woman who never refused hospitality to anyone who happened by. Skeptics (like me) maintain that that's a load of twaddle intended to make tourists feel welcome in Tijuana. I'll tell ya, this was a hard place to feel welcome.

The city's entire economy seems to be fueled by the peddling of trinkets. Everywhere you go -- on the sidewalks, in the squares, on the ramps, on the streets themselves sometimes – there are vendors selling trinkets. And they're all selling the same useless stuff. People come up to you with silver and gold chains hanging from their arms, mumbo-jumboing about "real good stuff, senior." Or, "hey, amigo, I got something special for you." They're ubiquitous (that means "everywhere") and they're relentless (that means they have no relent -- if they did, they'd try to sell it to you).

Every block was an assault. God help you if you actually paused long enough to look at something on a cart or table, or in a



store window. They were on you like flies on shit, tossing their sales pitches, offering this, that, and whatever. Barkers blew shrill whistles and hailed you as you walked past bars and titty clubs, desperation in their tone and deception in their eyes, casting a pall of sleaze over the whole shebang.

And they all looked so Mexican, but I suppose that's to be expected.

Their zeal was downright disconcerting. I had thought that Key West's gauntlet of merchants was a tough trip, but those KW barkers and sellers were almost all just transient vagabonds (like I had been) who were pocketing minimum wage to bring business in for their bosses' coffers. Their hearts weren't in it at all.

Conversely, the Tijuana pests manifested much more urgency and sincerity; these were their own stores and tables and carts – their very livelihood -- and the competition for the tourist dollar was brutal.



They forced themselves on us with a passion born of a need to eat.

I did buy a nice leather backpack. The strap had broken on the one I bought for \$15 in KW three years ago, so I figured I could get a bargain here. The vendor said \$100. I laughed and put it back. He responded: "Hey, amigo, I have to try. You might be rich American." I shook my head. He tried again: "Forty-five dollar." I responded, "No, I can't do that, how

about 25?" He paused pensively, "I got to make living, senior, 35." I pulled out my wallet and said, "How about 25?" He paused, I began to put away my wallet, he nodded. In retrospect, I could have gotten him down to 20 or 15, but it's a decent bag, he was a decent guy, and MIT was paying for everything except my meals anyway, so WTF.

The worst part of it, though -- the part that really made me soulsick -- was the beggars. Damn, does that country have a dollar to its name, or what?? We crossed the border into some little square, and were nibbled at by a couple of panhandlers, but when we set out across a footbridge into Downtown Tijuana, we waded through a moving tide of tiny brown children, ranging in age from about three to about nine, all holding out your basic medium-sized, somewhat tattered Burger King drink cup (always empty) and walking beside us, gazing forlornly up at us. They weren't pushy or rude; they just held out their cups (or hands) and walked next to us for a while. I tried being a little pleasant to a couple of them, but it only seemed to encourage them to maintain their pursuit. So I had to start ignoring them. Everyone did.



I wished I had a pocket full of pennies and nickels so I could shower the throng of them with small change and see if they knew how to smile, but I had nothing smaller than 20's on me, and I would have had to fend them off with a stick if I ever dropped a twenty in one waif's cup. On one downtown corner, somebody dropped a quarter on the sidewalk. The chink was clearly audible. In a second, the guy was swarmed by cup-holding children -- like pigeons flocking to a crust of bread. It was incredible.

Many of them had some elderly woman as base camp. She was also dirt poor, and served to underline the need to donate to the child. A few of the little girls sold candy or gum. In the half-mile stretch between the tourist square and downtown, there must have been a hundred little beggars. Man, was it depressing. All I kept thinking was that this was how they spent **all day, every day**. Good lord.

But amid all the squallor, came one bright thought. In a break from begging, a group of six or so really little kids were running playfully up and down the ramp, racing one another to this point and that, smiling, and laughing that high, loud child's laugh. It echoed around the ramps and seemed refreshing.

See what running can do? It is the key to happiness. It brings joy to even the grimmest of scenarios: while running, they were happy and giggling and alive; while sedentary, they were forlorn and pathetic. Think about it. No wonder I like coaching track.

Which, of course, is why I was in Mexico in the first place. The M.I.T. Track Team took its annual Spring Break Training Trip to San Diego that year, and for an afternoon diversion, the 25 of us took the half-hour ride to the border. Just what everyone wanted after a grueling noontime track workout at USD: three hours of walking around. I branched off by myself for a while, simulating a solo RAM Roadtrip, albeit on foot, and wandered some of the lesser traveled streets. There was nothing enjoyable about that city at all. Maybe if I was with a party crew and we were going down there to get hammered, it could be fun, but I don't think I could ever relax; there's just a feeling that your money (or worse) will be gone if you let your guard down for a second. Maybe I'm way off, but I think the whole group felt similarly about it.

Add this to the list of Jobs You'd Never Want To Have: border guard at the US entry point -- "the busiest pedestrian border crossing in the world." Picture a shift (eight hours?) of standing at the end of a common feeder line, checking an ID and asking a question or two to everyone who comes through.

As I waited my turn, I listened to his questions. He rarely repeated any, obviously doing anything he could to reduce the redundancy of his work:

"What's your citizenship?"

"Where were you born?"

"Where do you live?"

"What country are you from?"

"What state is your home?"

All of those, and variations of them, were posed to us as we eagerly sought re-entry into our re-appreciated country. But I had to wonder if he ever got so bored that he started fucking with the tourists:

"Got any pets?"

"What's your favorite TV show?"

"Ever eat buttered popcorn?"

"Do you spank your children?"

"When did you last cut your toenails?"

"Do you tip your barber?"

"What kind of deodorant do you use?"

"What's the difference between *flammable* and *inflammable*?"

"Who played Number Six in the 60's cult classic show *The Prisoner*?"

I think I'd make a great border guard. I wouldn't let anyone back in unless they could pass my oral quiz. And they'd better be up on their African and European swallows.

Near the border, the highway has a few large yellow caution signs, the kind that usually show the black shape of a tractor, or somebody with a floating head on horseback. These, however, boldly display the black silhouettes of a father, mother, and small daughter, hands joined, and sprinting desperately. I don't think they are sprinting *towards* Mexico.



San Diego was a nice spot. We actually stayed in a section called LaJolla (translation: "The Jewel"). The area lived up to its reputation for great weather: low-70's and sunny every day, about 60 every night, with not a drop of rain. When we flew in on Sunday, we were met with a lightly overcast sky, and upper 60's. The radio in our rented van proclaimed it to be a "suckbag day" that was "butt ugly." We thought it was pretty damn nice for March.

We found time to hit the beach on Monday to do some surfin', to check out the fifty or so seals as they sunned themselves on the rocks and sand, take the aforementioned Tijuana tour on Tuesday, check out San Diego's Historic Gaslight District on Wednesday, and visit Wild Animal Park on Thursday.

Wild Animal Park was no Prairie Dog Town, but it didn't quite live up to expectations, either. The lions never came into view, the tiger appeared out of the brush for about 20 seconds and then hid behind a big rock, the rhinos were about a quarter-mile away, the gorillas all had their backs to us and wouldn't

turn around, and the cheetahs (though only 20 feet from me) were snoozing. They don't look very fast lying down.

On the other hand, a giraffe did walk within 10 yards of me (it was tall), I fed hedge clippings to a funky African deer who couldn't reach the hedge by itself, one of the gorillas had a tiny and curious baby clinging to her back, a trio of gnus let me get way too close before deserting their meal, and those cheetahs were cool even when snoozin'. All in all, it was OK. Definitely not worth \$18.95, but we didn't pay anyway (MIT did), so who cares?



At sunset one evening, I ventured out alone to the high cliffs that stand against the Pacific Ocean. Sunset was what I craved (crove?), but I got a great bonus from the hang gliders. As I pulled into the large dirt parking area, dozens of brightly colored wings were coasting and swooping across the sky. Even cooler, the source was right in front of me. One portion of the cliff must have been especially conducive to launching, and many gliders were congregating here, including a couple of apparent first-timers (they were the worried-looking ones) with their rented wings and jovial instructor.

I followed their concerned gaze and watched as a winged dude sprinted towards the cliff. With a bellow, he leapt off, and immediately FELL from view!! A breathless few seconds later, his distinctive red-and-blue wing reappeared, zooming out against the setting sun, and high over the ocean. Shhhhit, I smiled, that is soooooo cool.

I decided that this just might be the time for Rick to fly. Dennis had once sent me letter from his home in Draper, Utah – a hang gliding mecca, it seems – in which he described after-work episodes of gliding. Certain phrases grabbed my imagination and stuck with me: *I drive to the mountaintop after*

work, put on my wings, and just fly and fly and fly...

But I had never acted upon the urge, and now the opportunity was clearly at hand. I was gathering my money and my nerve when something paused me. The two first-timers were looking and pointing. I followed their point. A glider was zooming in for a landing, and it didn't look like things were going too well. *Too low, dude*, I'm thinking, *too LOW!!*

His speed was high and his angle was not good. He disappeared from view, and I prepared to run to the cliff to witness the wreckage.



But a second later, he rose gently into sight, as if on some slow and invisible elevator, and casually stepped onto terra firma. I'm sure it was under control all the way, and very cool to experience, but I also reckon that you needed to be a little bit more of a veteran than I was to judge those last minute updrafts quite that well.

I satisfied myself with sitting near the edge of the cliffs and watching the sunset. The cliffs were a good enough show in themselves, rising an sheer 400 feet from the beach below, and extending for miles in each direction. Awesome place.

Next to our hotel was a deep-dish pizza restaurant called BJ's Pizza, Grill and *Brewery*. The vixen who served me tempted me with their selection of microbrews -- the Piranha Pale Ale was clearly calling my name (especially given the connection to the antihero in *Racer*) -- but I had to decline. You see, I had proclaimed this Spring Break Training week to be my Week Of Purification: run twice a day, eat nothing but healthy food, drink no beer, drink *no Coke* (that was even harder, especially the first two days) and don't do anything that Lea wouldn't do. So, I ignored the sirens' call, and had yet another glass of ice water and ordered up a small Sweet Pig -- a delightfully light deep-dish 'za with ham and pineapple toppings. Yummmm. It's called Hawaiian Pizza, I think, in the northeast, but the name Sweet Pig just has a great ring to it. I can only assume that their brews would have met my approval as well.

The week were in town happened to be the week that the Hale-Bopp Comet was at its closest point to planet Earth, meaning that those Heaven's Gate yahoos punched their tickets for the Uptown Train while we were out there, sharing a big cyanide cocktail so they could rendezvous with the Big Enchillada who was riding behind the flying rock. Yeeesh.

What gets into these people?? I mean, the minute I find out that the group I just joined has *SUICIDE* as a requisite for membership, I begin to look elsewhere. How **good** a salesman was the guy who persuaded them all to do it? And how **mush-minded** were the ones who followed?? I really think I would've at least put up my hand at the last meeting, and asked, "Uhhh, Garryyyy, tell us again how you *know* that eternal life is tailing that rock, cuz, you know, I'm just havin' trouble seein' it, k?? And, uhhh, don't take this the wrong way or anything, but, uhhh, the 'have faith, brother' thing is really stretchin' pretty fucking thin right about now, k? Like I could have tickets to the Lakers game next week if we miss this bus, y'know?"

Their celestial launching pad was only about ten miles from where we were staying. As several of the trackies and I watched in one hotel room, the preliminary reports on TV said the group was: about 20-25 in number, all males, ages 18-24, and all wearing running shoes. Hmmmm. One of our distance runners heard that, ruminated on it for a few seconds, then, realizing that the description fit our traveling squad almost perfectly, said, "I think I should call my parents." Many of them did just that. MIT students do have a reputation of being a tad high-strung sometimes.

The next winter, in fact, as Davey P (my ebullient assistant coach) and I were walking back across campus from the Muddy Charles -- an outstanding little on-campus bar facing the Charles River and the Boston skyline, where inexpensive brew and very cool tunes made post-practice "strategy sessions" a delight -- we came upon a cluster of security vehicles and personnel around the base of the 23-story building in the middle of campus. There was calm all around, and no crowd of any kind, but there was also a shattered wooden desk chair and some odd red-stained clumps on the brick taped-in courtyard.

We learned the next day that some 21-year-old total genius senior, who was one of the tops in the world in computer graphics already, and who had been in and out of MIT a couple of times to take a break and to set up businesses, which could be almost immediately sold for big big bucks, had blown a mental microchip over something, and had hurled himself and the chair through the 21st floor window and fell to his death on the bricks below. Odd red-stained clumps...

It is an intense place, for sure.

But I am happy to report that the MIT stereotype of all-brains nerds was refreshingly untrue -- in most cases. The guys seemed like an ordinary collection of young men, and I had to keep reminding myself that they were really smart buggers.

For instance, we were shopping at the Nike outlet store just on the US side of the border on our way back from merry Mexico, and this thrower came over to me all excited because he found a pair of javelin shoes (normally about \$130) in his size for only \$20. Cool, I said, get 'em! Alas, he lamented (he didn't use the word "alas", of course), he only had \$17, so would I lend him the other \$3?

Remembering an almost identical example that the Athletic Director had cited when he interviewed me the previous summer, I explained to George that if I did so, it would be an NCAA violation, so he should try to borrow the cash from a teammate. Well, his teammates couldn't cover him, so he came back to me. I said, "George, do you mean to tell me you only have \$17 to last the rest of the week,

for all your meals and everything?" He replied, "Well, no, I've got my bank card," and showed me his debit card, complete with MasterCard logo. I said, "George, why don't you just charge the shoes?" The Duhhh look on his face was excellent.

So, southern California needed no further exploration at this time. I waved a distant "hi!" to LA and SD and the Mexican beggars, and proceeded just slightly north of due west, off towards Bakersfield, with **Sacramento** now just a swallow's flight away!!