

Coolo California

Fock 9: National Parking

My droogies boarded their winged tube and took the skies, and, once again, I was alone in a strange land. Well, maybe I was the one who was strange.

The compass pointed north, and that's where I headed. There was a serious tug coming from the east, though: Yosemite National Park. The big Yo is possibly the most beautiful place I've ever been. Bobby, Kelzo and I went there in '90, after we sprung Kelzo from Reno. It was less than 200 miles from Sacramento, so there was a strong temptation to revisit. But it was also just enough in the wrong direction, and it was not virgin territory, so I resisted the tug and headed towards the Arctic.

Yosemite **definitely** deserves a Next Time, though, because our one-day drive-thru did not do that place justice.

We got an early start out of Reno, and headed due south: the perfect way to start a trip to Boston. We got an early morning view of Lake Tahoe – what a lake! – and rolled down green-dotted 395 into California. Bobby and I were back in road mode, and feeling damn good about it, but Kelzo was *paroled* and he was *lovin' it*.

When I first heard about Yosemite, it was the big redwoods that captured my imagination. Beyond that, I knew little to nothing about the Park. When Ed told me about having been there a few years before, I eagerly asked him about the trees so big that you could drive your car through a tunnel in the trunk. He said he really didn't remember if he had seen that or not. To my puzzled reaction, he replied, "because I was so busy staring at the phenomenal rock formations all around."

This, then, was what I carried in my head as we climbed towards the Tioga Pass Entrance to Yosemite National Park. It would be virgin territory, and that had me intrigued, but, beyond that, I wasn't especially wound up in a tizzy about it.

There was a long line of cars, vans, and RV's trickling through the Park gate, and Max sat beneath the looming peak of Mt. Dana (13,035') awaiting our turn through Tioga Pass (9945'). The Park cost money, of course, so Bobby and Kelzo snuck in back and masqueraded as baggage and garbage. It was a very convincing act, and we got in for the price of one.

Once in, things got impressive right away. Huge, whitish boulders began to dominate the hillsides. There was beauty everywhere you looked. Formidable stone created a sense of timeless immovability, and wild flowers in the healthy green pastures of Tuolumne Meadows manifested the fleeting cycle of life. And, as we progressed deeper into the park, it just kept getting better and better!

The road rolled and curved, and it was hard to keep your eye on your driving. Your eyes wanted to stray to this and that and those and these; mere pavement didn't seem worthy of attention. There were numerous turnouts, of course, and we stopped at a lot of them.

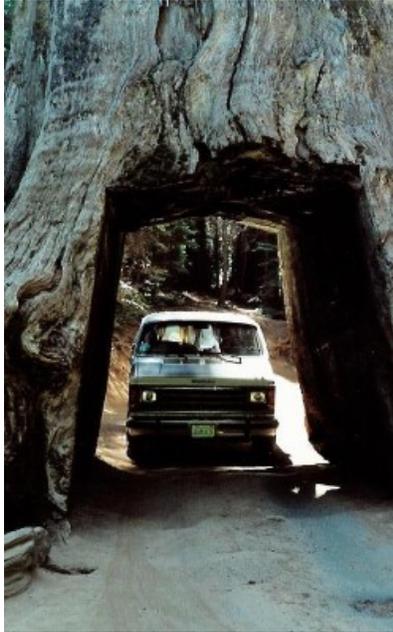
The best of them all was the Tunnel View turnout. The tunnel wasn't especially long, but, like all tunnels, it was quite opaque. But when we came out, holy maloly, what a view! Tunnel View looks right down the middle of Yosemite Valley, with the sheer face of El Capitan towering up on the left, Half Dome in the distant center, and Bridalveil Fall trickling down on the right.

The overlook itself didn't provide a perfect enough view, so, naturally, we had to hop the wall and bound out across the rocks to try to get a hundred feet closer. There were also a couple of tumbling waterfalls out among these rocks. Totally oblivious to the fact that all this stuff was on the wrong side of the barrier, we hopped and jumped from big rock to big rock to work our way down to the pool of cold, clean water that the waterfall poured



into. Dumb luck must have been on our side, because the lower rocks were slick and wet, yet we just went into Deer Mode and lived to tell the tale.

After a great dip on the cool pool, as I was climbing out, my foot skidded on the slippery rock and my leg went shooting straight down between two large, very hard, boulders. For some reason, I didn't fight the tumble, and just let myself fall where I would. When all the motion stopped, I was on my stomach, my left leg was straight out behind me, and my right leg was sunk up to the hip in this narrow crevasse. My foot was held tight between two rocks; it was as if the rocks were saying to me, "move one muscle, and we snap your freaking ankle." I snickered at my position. Trying to yank my leg out would have led to cracked bones, and torn tissues. My leg went in relaxed, I somehow reasoned, so it would come out the same way. I let the leg go limp, and easily slid it out of the rocks' grip. Bobby and Kelzo never even knew about the mishap.



Max took us down into Yosemite Valley itself. The place was teeming with people. The large campground there was at full capacity, and everybody seemed to be just hanging out. Kids were jumping off a bridge into the river. Traffic choked the road. The grocery store had long lines. It was a Sunday afternoon, and the newest batch of Yosemite campers were settling in for the week.

With supplies in hand (i.e., beer and ice), we sought sequoias. Tuolumne Grove, which is a good twenty miles from Tuolumne Meadows, gave us our feast of redwoods. They just suddenly began appearing. There was no great change in terrain or anything; we just suddenly were saying, "Damnnnn, look at that size of that fucking TREE!!" And they got bigger as we penetrated the Grove.

Max even got the thrill of tooling on through one. Gotta keep the van happy, you know.

The biggest one we saw was about 60 feet around – our measurement was my six-foot wing span, and I "hugged" the tree from spot to spot till I was all the way around it – and stood hundreds of feet tall.

Our day concluded with a drive up to Glacier Point. This was the closest I had ever been to heaven. The view was – though

I hate the word in most usage – exquisite (see photos, next page). Talk about taking your breath away. From the top of this high cliff, you look straight down 3200 feet to the valley floor, and you get a commanding view of the entire Yosemite Valley. It blows you away. I was overwhelmed. Not merely whelmed, definitely **overwhelmed**.

"Whelm" really is a word, you know. Or maybe you didn't. It means: *to turn (as a dish or vessel) upside down usually to cover something; or, to cover or engulf completely with usually disastrous effect; or, to overcome in thought or feeling : overwhelm*. So being over-whelmed, is being whelmed over, or, as it were, come over.

OK. Let's move on.

Yosemite is huge. It covers more than 1200 square miles – 750,000 acres! That's bigger than Rhode Island (1045 sq.mi.), fer cryin' out loud. There are 1600 miles of streams, and 800 miles of hiking trails. I mean, if you had a place that was just 1/10 the size of Yosemite, you could fit TEN of those in this Park. Really, it's THAT big.

Somehow, my pity for the explorers and settlers waned a little bit here. Sure, they had a rum go through the deserts and mountains, but they got a little bit of a reward from their maker when they arrived at places like Yosemite or Yellowstone.

That pity came back in spades the next day, though. After a half-decent night's sleep at The Grand Motel, in Independence CA (pop. 1000), we ventured into Death Valley. Is there a more cheerful moniker anywhere on earth? That sounds like something out of a fantasy novel: Death Valley, at the foot of Mount Doom, across Hemorrhoid River, at the edge of Syphilis Swamp.

Death Valley is the hottest place in the United States, having recorded the 134° reading that I told you about in Baker. It is also the driest place, getting less than two inches of rain per year. Two inches: that's just one good thunderstorm in some parts of the country.



What a contrast from Sunday to Monday. Sunday was grass and trees and streams and waterfalls, and noble activities; Monday was sand and rocks, parched and starved. Sunday's landscape was way beyond friendly; it hugs you and nurtures you with everything that is good for body and soul, and you do The Ahhhh Thing. Monday's environment was eager to torture you till you gasped your last delirious breath.

Had we come into Death Valley from Nevada's wastelands, we would have noticed that things had gone from unfriendly to hostile, but coming in from Yosemite, it was like passing from the Garden of Eden into Purgatory.

In Max, our air-conditioned luxury coach, the environment's only real change was what we saw out the windows, so it wasn't like we were suffering. We could enjoy these extreme surroundings, just as we had enjoyed yesterday's very different extremes. Scenery has many faces, after all, and Death Valley was certainly impressive.

There are numerous historical markers, telling tales about borax mining, and twenty-mule-teams, and wagon trains that just plain never made it across this frying pan. Ruins of mills and small towns still stand here and there throughout the Park, and they all look, predictably enough, dead.

In the middle of Death Valley, just in case you were thinking that this might not have been that hard to cross in covered wagon, you come upon The Devil's Golf Course. The name is bitterly ironic. Do not envision lush fairways and trimmed greens. The Devil don't play the game that way. We got out and walked it for a few minutes, getting an appreciation of the intense heat as well as the bizarre ground. The earth in this area looked like it died an agonizing death, that all the moisture had been slowly sucked out

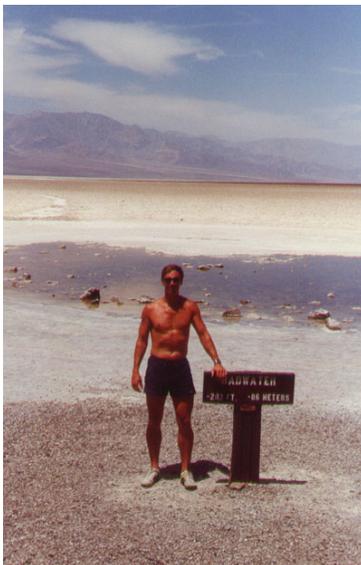
of it, leaving six-inch-deep crooked ruts between jagged brown crystals and rocks. The ruts were only a foot or two apart from one another, spidering in every direction. They were wide enough so that a foot, or



a hoof, or a wheel would easily fall in, but probably not without damage, and definitely not without facing a slow and careful extrication.

We picked our way across only about a hundred yards of this, and it took several minutes of good focus on each foot plant. Horses, mules, and other quadrupeds would have been absolutely flummoxed by it.

Just a few furlongs down the road, we came upon the lowest surface point of the United States at a place known as Badwater Basin. A highly-salted puddle of what does indeed look like very bad water



sits 282 feet below sea level. A ridge of The Black Mountains rose steeply on the other side of the road, and a square white sign well up on the hill stated, simply, "Sea Level." To the west, just 15 miles away, Telescope Peak towers 11,049 feet high than that sign. The Highest Point in the contiguous United States – Mount Whitney (14,494') -- stands only 88 miles, as the crow flies, to the northwest. It's pretty remarkable that those superlatives are so close together.



Their proximity, in fact, inspired some crazies to create a race from one to the other. The Badwater 146 starts at that minus-282 point, and traverses 146 miles

of Park roads and California highways to the finish line high up on Mt. Whitney. The temperatures can be 120° in the early miles, and be in the 40's when the runners complete their trek the next day. The record for the course is just over 26 hours, and it was set by a Coloradan named Marshall Ulrich. Marshall (speaking of extremes) also holds the record for an event called the "Badwater Quad" – 584 miles, from Badwater to the top of Whitney and back again, *twice!* – which took a little over 10 days. What a sicko.

There were some spots that we missed in our 1990 sojourn to GVNP that I would later see pictures of, but not enough to warrant Next Time status. Yosemite, I knew, though, would get another visit some day. There were tall waterfall trails to hike, huge groves to explore, and just more time needed to sit and soak in the Park's beauty. And, since it's right next door, Death Valley would probably get another drive-through too.

Those Next Times would not be in 2000, though. The pull was strong, but north was the right place to go: north from Sacramento!!