

Coolo California

Fock 10: Various Volcano Visits

Blue Man and I were alone together again. The ten-day Trials experience was great, but I was surprised how excited I was to be back on the road without human company. There was never any time in the Sacramento Sojourn that I had wished that Ed and Bryan and Doon were not around: that time was what it was supposed to be, and those guys were excellent track-party droogies.

But that was then, and this was now. RR2K had taken a week-and-a-half breather, and now Blue Man was straining at the bit to get back to it. He wanted to take me to new places to see new things. He was My Ride, and he was eager to get back to that duty. We had toolled a cool 623 miles in and around SacreMerde – including the Tahoe Trek – and BM was itching for Open Road. He had done the Surface Creep of the crowded capitol city streets, and had dealt with way too many red lights to suit his vacation mood. He kept asking me through the pedals, *When can we get out and ROLL, Boss???*

We only rolled for an hour up I-5 before calling it a night at a Rest Area near Willows. It was enough to tap into the Road Love again, but to push on through virgin California territory under cover of night was not part of the Roadrage philosophy. After all, the first syllable of “scenery” is pronounced “see”; if you don’t **see** it, it ain’t friggin’ scenic, is it?

Not long after resuming the northbound ride up I-5 the next morning, there was a rest area near the town of Corning. This rest area also served as an official State of California Welcome Center. Having a rest area serve this purpose is very common around the US of A, but this particular Welcome Center was peculiar for one very significant reason: it was in the **middle** of the damn state!!

Oregon, 166 miles to the north was more than a two-hour drive away, and there were no direct easterly routes to Nevada, which was 115 crow-flying miles east anyway. So why is there a WELCOME CENTER there? WTF?? Where are they coming in from? Are they landing from Space?? It made no sense.

The northern half of California is very different than the more renowned southern half. Whereas the roadside views down I-5 from San Francisco to Los Angeles were predominantly parched and brown, the northerly route from Sacramento was becoming greener and healthier by the mile. Trees were taller, and their forest homes were thicker. Fields were more lush and fertile.

BM and I were returning to the **green** parts of the country. With exception of the quick sojourn to Tahoe, Roadrage2000 had seen many more browns than greens, and much more **rock and sand** than **trees and grass**, since Arkansas. And the land of Maurice and the Toad Suckers (cool name for a band) was seeming like a very long time ago.

This was like starting a whole new vacation, with a whole new theme. The Deep South had given way to the Desert Southwest, which had in turn had given way to a Track-ramento Holiday. Now would come the Pacific Northwest, with the Northern Tier, and the Heartland to follow.

We were about 100 miles into our Monday motoring, when a beautiful lake showed itself just off both sides of the highway. It sparkled in the late-morning sun, and sat deep down beneath two sharply rising, pine-covered slopes. One of those informative brown highway signs announced that it was part of the Whiskeytown-Shasta-Trinity National Recreation Area. Quite a mouthful, but it looked really good, I decided, and went down to check it out.

Shasta Lake, which was the part I went to, is the largest reservoir in California. It was created by the building of the Shasta Dam, which is the second largest dam in the United States, with a spillway that is three times the height of Niagara Falls. Coolo, huh?

I guess I was mildly impressed by that, but I was more focused on getting my ass down that steep chunky bank to take a swim in Bailey Cove. It was a pretty reckless slide-and-clamber through the sand and rocks to get to the shore, and as I stepped aggressively into the water, my foot squished up over the ankle in mushy mud. Ughhh. It would have reminded me of Lake Mead, but I hadn’t been to Lake Mead yet (that was a flash-forward, you’ll recall). Fortunately, though, the ground dropped off steeply, and I was able to plunge forward and quickly escape the mire. The swim was refreshing and cleansing, and for a while, I just floated around on my back, looking up at the tall trees and blue sky.

This would have been a tremendous area for hiking, boating, mountain biking, or even just getting baked and vegging out all day. None of the sporting stuff was on my docket for the day, though: a wake-up swim, a couple samiches, a phone call or two, and it was back on the road.

Mt. Shasta looms high above the landscape, standing 14,162 feet above sea level. It is one big-ass mountain. It can be seen from about 100 miles away. Maybe even 110, I'm not really sure. The really impressive thing about it is that it is not the highest peak of a tall ridge, with numerous 12,000-footers all around it; it stands alone, towering above a landscape where the other peaks average about 6000' of elevation. It just thrusts upward by itself, with its chest all puffed up, and says BIG. The immediate area around it is pretty flat, too, so it looks out of place. I mean, how often do you see just one mountain? They always travel in packs. Shasta must have gotten lost. A rogue mountain.

But, care to guess why it's so solo? Ohh, you nailed it: Mt. Shasta is a volcano! And northern California volcanoes were familiar ground to this road rager.

A decade before, Bobby, Max, and I had been all over volcanoes. We had come into the Golden State from the north, and had gone southerly across this northerly ground. We had totally scorned I-5, the vertical central artery of the state, and had gone exploring on the lesser highways to the east. We weren't making any kind of anti-Interstatement by doing so; it all made sense. Coming from central Oregon, on scenically-designated Route 139, and aimed gradually southeastward towards Reno, I-5 would have been well **out** of our way.

Bobby was still green around the edges from our final day in Seattle – this was one of the longest and ugliest hangovers I have ever had the misfortune of witnessing – but we were doing a good job of faking an early morning rally. Thank God neither of us suggesting *running*. But we were up early.

The California border had been breached under cover of night, and we had blindly found our way to Lava Beds National Monument. Now, I don't recollect if it was because the word "Beds" sounded promising or what, but we pulled over in a pullover place, and called it Z-time in the serenity of the Park.

LBNM is not close to *anything*. It is a good 40 miles east of I-5, and the nearest cities (i.e., 20,000+) are Eugene OR, 150 miles northwest, and Sacramento (!), 220 miles south. So what, you ask? So it's QUIET out there. Reaaaaaal quiet. No distant highway sounds. No airplanes. No hustle or bustle, or even bugtustle. They only thing we heard all night were some coyotes howling fairly nearby, and the occasionally snuffling and scrapping of some animal right outside our window. That inched the anxiety up when it came time to ease open those side doors for the inevitable bladder drains, but any animal who got a whiff of us rude riders would have been more scared than we were anyway.

Awakening at a place like Lava Beds, when you haven't seen it in daylight the evening before, gives you a spark. Though it's not a scenic wonderland, like Yosemite or Yellowstone or the Big Hole, it still strikes you right away as being unique and well worth a few hours of lookaround.

The first thing we did was to hike up to the top of Schonchin Butte, where a ranger maintains a fire watch from a tower. The view of Mt. Shasta, to the south, was especially nice. It was a good climb that took several minutes, and left us winded; the overall levelness of the landscape belied the 5000+ feet of elevation. You see flat ground and you think "sea level," or at least I do.



It was surprising to us how flat this area was. Lava, to us, meant volcanoes, and volcanoes are big hills. Ha! How wrong we were! Turns out that not all lava is hill-bound. Quite a bit of it bubbles up from under the earth's crust in areas of level plains. It's not as spectacular as a mountain that heaves its peak skyward in one fiery blast, but it's still white-hot magma, baby. And white-hot magma eventually cools. And when it does, it contracts and drains, leaving long and twisting veins of open space under a thick solid surface. And those veins, known as "tube caves," are the highlight of Lava Beds National Monument. There are over 400 of them in the park, but only about two dozen have been groomed for use by the unskilled general public, with ladders and stairs, and cleared paths to the entrances. It is an amateur spelunker's playground.

The caves were remarkably clean. These were not muddy crawlspaces; the cooled and resolidified lava, being underground and away from wind erosion, had shed very little dirt and dust over the years. There was no intrusive vegetation either. The walls and floors and ceilings were all smooth rock. Some passages were huge: not simply high enough to walk without bending over, but as much as 50 feet in diameter. Others required a little scrambling or squirming. I got a few scrapes on my back from being too lazy to stoop and squirm lower.

They were not straight-ahead tunnels either. Most of them looped and forked and curled in all directions. Pretty dang cool.

The cave named Hercules Leg was memorable. It twisted a serpentine course through acres of ancient lava. Bobby and I had to crawl through some narrow windows and just kept exploring deeper until it eventually popped us back out on the plain.

The best one of all, though, was Skull Cave. It was a somewhat daunting name, referring to human skeletons and bighorn sheep skulls that were found by the discoverer of the cave. At least, that's what the sign said. I had to wonder, though, how he could be the discoverer when there had clearly been people there before him. But I guess it's because no one before him had brought the place into "known" status – certainly the two dead people didn't. Basically, he had taken the "cover" of secrecy off it, and "dis-covered" it. Make sense? Yeah. Lick my toes.

Anyway, the entrances to the caves routinely sported signage that instructed all spelunkers to carry sufficient light sources. The Visitor Center rented flashlights and hard hats, but we believed that we had our needs covered; I had two big flashlights in the van, and our heads were pretty hard anyway. The flashlights probably had less than an hour of total use in them, but that use was spread over a couple of years, and, unfortunately, the batteries were not new. They had never been called on to produce much juice, but they were not new. Can you guess what's coming?

Skull Cave was billed as an "ice cave." It was a two-level jobber, with one atop the other. A long, steep, and narrow steel staircase angled and zagged down from one to the other. We delved into it with eagerness. Bobby's light dimmed and died out before we reached the stairs, but, we figured, if we stayed close, we really only needed one light anyway.

It was still pretty early in the day, and we were the only people that we had seen in the whole park so far. That was great, of course, since we had the tubes all to ourselves for yodeling and stupid shit like that.

So, we clambered down the steel stairs, with the shaky frame rattling and clanging and echoing over and over. We were hooting and laughing – Bobby is a human laugh machine anyway – and digging the darkness and coldness of this deep chamber.

The floor was indeed ice. Moisture that seeps through the cracks from the surface drips slowly onto the cave floor, and freezes on contact with the already frozen floor. As a result, the bottom of the cave is ironing-board-flat, and the ice is as smooth as a skating rink. The chamber was more-or-less round, and probably about 100 feet in diameter. The ceiling was very high too, and seemed even higher because the flashlight beam did not reach it. That should have told us something, but we were in Stupid Mode, I guess.

We goofed around a good bit, skidding and sliding across the ice. In our distraction, we failed to realize that the room was getting darker. Then, with nary a whimper, the flashlight beam, which had become little more than lantern, then candle, strength, quit completely. And, of course, it died while we – Bobby, me, and the light -- were in three different parts of the chamber. Man, it was blinding. It was like I had rolled my eyes up too far and was now looking at the thick and infernal blackness inside my head.

Bobby, of course, just laughed even more heartily. It was pretty funny that we had been so stupid, but there was a certain uncertainty about having to fumble our way out. We groped around and finally found the flashlight, hoping that the old Off-On trick would revive the light just enough to show us the stairs. It didn't. We thought maybe removing the batteries and shuffling them around – a tad more difficult in pitch darkness – might stir some life in those D-cells. It didn't. The flashlight stayed stubbornly dead, as most dead things do.

Now, at this point, we realized that it might have been convenient to have other people around. Even though they surely would have derided us for our plight, we could have at least mooched off their light. But, no, that solitude that we had thought was so neato was now snickering at us.

So, we inched around, sliding our feet forward, with arms fully extended, in what we hoped was the direction of that staircase. We found rock. We figured that, in this reasonably round room, a steady grope in either direction would eventually strike steel. We picked left. I suspect we probably first touched

the wall immediately next to the staircase and then went in the wrong direction, because we kept feeling our way around the wall to our left and there was nothing but rock.

Naturally, Bobby thought this was hilarious. "How big is this room??" he howled, as we kept going and going. We had no reference point of any kind, no sense of curve, and it felt like we had gone around the whole freaking thing three times.

We had just about convinced ourselves that the stairway came down in the middle of the chamber, and, like total morons, we were circling it again and again, when my foot hit the side of the bottom step. OK, the easy part was done. Now all we had to do was negotiate this shaky walkway without plunging our feet into the open gaps between steps. The rattling and rocking of the structure didn't bother us on the way down, but when you can't see where you're stepping, that unsteadiness is disconcerting indeed.

Bit by bit, we made our way up. It was series of a few very steep steps, then a landing, then more steep steps, then another landing, and so on. The landings, again, were easy with light, but in darkness, there were problems. We had to deal with that "one more step" thing, where you lift your leg up the same amount as all the previous steps, but then find nothing but air underneath it. And with such high steps, it really feels like you're never going to hit anything solid as you lurch forward.

Then, once you feel along the handrail – thank God for those – to figure out which direction you have to turn, you never know when to lift up for the next step. You can walk like a high-stepping schmuck till you reach one, or you can slide your foot along till you whack your shin on it, or you can let your hand reach way ahead of you, and lean like you're walking into a hurricane, until you feel the handrail rise sharply, then try hard to lift your foot up in time before you trip and fall and break your front teeth on the stairs. We did the latter, but without the dental damage.

Just when I was beginning to feel pretty good about our progress, Bobby laughed, "What the hell are we gonna do when the handrail stops?" At first, I didn't get what he meant, and then I realized that we had reached the staircase down into the ice cave only after a bit of a walk through a tube cave that had no stairs or rails or anything.

Well, we eventually did run out of handrail, and had to just grope along the wall of the cave. It wasn't so bad, since the tube cave was smooth, and we really didn't need to worry about unexpected obstacles at our feet. The cave floor was not flat or even, but if you kind of skated along, your feet just rode the undulations.

Then Bobby started laughing again. "Uh-oh," I said, "What now?"

"Wasn't there a fork in the cave somewhere along here??"

Shit.

Fortunately, his memory was faulty, and after a few more minutes of groping, faint light began to reach us. We soon saw the stairway to the outside world, and we de-caved with alacrity.

That pretty much quenched our thirst for spelunking, though, and we departed Lava Beds National Monument, following Rand McNally's green dots southward across the rolling and winding roadways of northern California.





miles into the heavens. That was the biggest blow, but the volcano kept belching, farting, and vomiting cinders from 1914 until 1921. There is plenty of cool stuff in the Park, if you're in that geology stuff – including hydrothermal areas (hot springs and such) -- but since much of it involved extended hikes, Bobby and I passed, and contented ourselves with a ride-through in Max's comfy chairs.

We passed through a little village of buildings cleverly called Hot Rock, and saw an area that was officially labeled a "Devastated Area" at Emigrant Pass. The road wound higher and higher up the mountain, and brought us purdy dang high up on the backside of the cone. As we descended, we saw a sign for Bumpass Hell, a geothermal area. The name itself was eye-catching, and we gave it strong consideration. We were three days removed from our last thorough cleansing, and were tempted to go have a nice warm bath, but it was 94° day, under bright July mid-afternoon sunshine, so a sit in Nature's hot tub wasn't really what we craved.

Just a few hundred yards later, though, right beside the road, sat Emerald Lake. It was a fairly small lake, maybe only 200 feet across, but it sang to us immediately. Snowmelt had created this pure, clean pool, and that struck a whole different chord.

Bobby had some system that his uncle had taught him about cold swims: splash some water on both wrists, then on the sides of your neck, and you won't get that heart-stopping shock when you jump in. I don't know if it worked, or if the water just wasn't that cold anyway, but it sure felt great. "Bracing" is a good word for it. It gave us that good *wooooooooooooo!* feeling that really snaps you awake.

The water was amazingly clear. We swam out to the middle, and even though it got quite deep, we could still see old logs and rocks way down on the lakebed with remarkable clarity.

The best part, though, was The Rock. Nature had placed a rock on the shore of Emerald Lake that was the perfect lounge chair. It was large enough to seat a man comfortably, had an almost ideal curve to its back, and was just high enough to let you dangle your legs weightlessly in the water. I clambered out of the bracing pool, and stretched out on the rock to let the sun evaporate the drops off me. Man, did I feel *clean*.

A minute later, I heard the familiar sound of *chhhich* and Bobby was handing me a cold real-Canadian Molson. Life was indeed good.

All volcanoed out for the time being, we resumed our ramack. It was getting towards suppertime, and we figured that we would just let supper find us; we would know the right place when we saw it.

As we rounded the bend in Route 70 and entered the town of Quincy, we saw the big red letters "PIZZA," and nodded in approval. The place was called The Pizza Factory, and when we saw their motto

Volcanoes had become a recurring theme in that 1990 trek, and we wriggled our way down Route 139 to 299, to 44, to 89, just digging the relaxing scenery and the light traffic, in pursuit of our fifth dormant eruptor. Mount Rainier and Mount St. Helens in Washington, and Crater Lake in Oregon had been the first three, Lava Beds was number four, and when we saw Lassen Volcanic National Park on the map, we were drawn to it like gravy to pot roast.

The Park gives excellent distant views of Mount Lassen, which blew its top back in 1915, blasting a huge mushroom cloud of ash seven



– We toss ‘em, they’re awesome – we knew we had found the right place. It was good stuff, and it hit the spot. (Of course, at that point, the spot was hard to miss.)

Quincy was small, with a population well under 2000, but it was nice. The buildings were in good shape, and the place looked damn pleasant. Something seemed a little weird, though, because even the cats used the crosswalk. We saw two of them walk a few feet down the sidewalk, step off the curb, cross the street on the painted markings, then continue down the opposite sidewalk. We thought it was noteworthy, so we made a note of it.

You just read it.

So, in 2000, as Blue Man rallied on up I-5, the clear view of Mount Shasta brought all that stuff to mind. The volcano hasn’t done any of that spitting up shit in several thousand years, and it hasn’t done a huge bango in about 300,000 years, so it didn’t seem all that threatening.

Just beyond the mountain, I-5’s signs began to advertise, “Weed, Next 3 Exits” and “Weed, Next Right.” It sure was tempting, but I had to assume it was a trick of some kind, and I wasn’t about to fall for that. Highway signage probably would have constituted entrapment, but I couldn’t be sure.

With Mt. Shasta shrinking in the mirror, we zoomed through Yreka, the last “big town” on the California map, and got fired up for Oregon.

