

ROAD ROMP 2004

Day 1, June 10, 2004

Fock 1: The State of South Florida

Road Romp 2004 took a while to get going. Other ramacks had zillied through the midsection of the U.S. – Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska, or Kentucky, Missouri, and Kansas – but those were all launched from the Northeast. This one – the first to start from Florida -- would explore the Deep South, traveling along I-10 for more than 2000 miles, and delving deep into the great deserts of the Southwest. I dunno; just thought it'd be a coolo route to try.

It took 922 miles just to leave Florida. But, when your starting point is 120 miles out in the ocean, and it takes almost three hours just to reach the mainland, I guess you're kinda doomed to long trips.

Everyone down here always uses the term "South Florida." They are very particular about it too. All the news channels specify "South Florida's News" and "What's happening in South Florida," and all that crap. It might as well be a separate state, just like Virginia and West Goddamn Virginia. I think it would be like that too – Florida and South Florida -- because I never hear anyone refer to "North Florida." Sometimes I do hear "Central Florida," but I think that's just wannabe thinking by the Orlandots and Tampons who envy our pseudo statehood.

The boundary between North and South is pretty clear, though: it's pretty much a straight line east from Tampa to Melbourne or so. South of that line, the vegetation becomes more tropical, the terrain flattens out even more, and the temperatures always seem to stay warmer. North of that line, they can feel the 40's and even the 30's in winter, deciduous trees are taller and cast good cool shade, and rolling hills give variety to the landscape. *And* there are actually meaningful towns that are *not* on the coast.

I noticed this change as I drove north up I-75 on my second day. My mind was just wandering, the way it always do, and it suddenly occurred to me that cruise control was making this roaring sound, and that Moby – that's the van (explanation later) -- was starting to surge and lurch to find an overdrive gear. "WTF is this??" I thought. Then I realized I was climbing a fairly large slope. A hill! Jayzus H. Keeryst, I hadn't driven up a real hill in quite a while. You just don't see any of those in South Florida; it's a very level state. It kinda woke me up.

It also kinda reminded me that the transmission repair that I had had done a month ago hadn't worked after all. That surging and lurching had been an issue on my last trip to Leesburg, so I brought Moby to my trusty repair shop, and they made their best guess about ungumming and flushing and yada yada foonbag, and gave it a shot. Trouble was, they had no way to test it out to see if their guess was right. The only times it misbehaved was either while going faster than 65 MPH, or while climbing a long rise, or both, and none of those conditions can be duplicated anywhere in the Keys. The mechanics would have had to take it on a 250-mile test drive just to find some fast open highway, and they weren't about to do that.

Hence, we agreed to use the Power Of Positive Thinking, and **will** the transmission into good working order. They still charged me, of course. I pretty much forgot all about it until that damned hill.

It made me mighty wary, too, I'll tell ya: if Moby was going to cough and choke on a Florida hill, WTF was he gonna do on the 10,000 footers around Yosemite?? Oh well, I figured, I'd worry about it then, not now. For the time being, Moby and I agreed on Modified Cruise Control. He would take the helm on level or downward roads, and I would try to remember to take the pedal back when the ground rose. I would flick off CC, ease my foot onto the accelerator, push it just to the edge of the SLP (Surge and Lurch Point) and hold it there. Initially, we found ourselves slowing down markedly before finally

cresting hills, but with a little practice, we actually got so we could coax that recalcitrant tranny into gaining speed near the hilltops.

It required focus, though, which was a pain. I had been hoping for a focus-free fortnight, Phil.

Anyway, Moby is the 1996 Dodge Ram Conversion Van that I bought from AutoTrader.com in August of 2003. Blue Man gave up the ghost on my way up to Pompano Beach to look at this potential successor – I was not going up with the intention of buying anything – and that pretty much forced the issue. The plan was that I would check out the Dodge, and if I liked it, I'd plop down a deposit, take BM home to clean him out and then return in a week to make the trade. But when BM's exhaust system disintegrated in the last half-hour of the six-hour drive, and I went chugging into the dealership like Rommel in a Tiger tank, it became pretty obvious that the Chevy had made its final trip. I don't think it helped the trade-in value either.



Fortunately, the Dodge was cherry. I mean, this van is gorgeous. Polished wooden interior, leather seats all 'round, big picture windows, ceiling-mounted TV and VCP, six-speaker stereo, front and rear AC, translucent shades, and Satellite-of-Love-style accent lighting. The outside was pristine: bright white, with stylish striping, chrome wheels, and a tall, sweeping high-top that pretty rules out the use of any parking garage. The tires were brand new, and the engine was so clean, you could eat it.



And it's a DODGE RAM! I am back in my element, thank you please. Blue Man did OK for me, but this RAM belongs in a Dodge van.

Naming the new van took time, though. I actually came up with Moby almost right away, but I put the name on the back burner, waiting for the van to tell me what its name really was.

Having just had Blue Man, I didn't want to call it White Man. That would be a little Ku Kluxish.

But it was big and tall, and I've often referred to my nights of snoozing on my vans' beds as "sleeping in the Belly o' th' Whale," so the term Great White came to mind. Cool. But that could be a shark too. It's not angry enough to be a shark, I decided, so I went with The Great White Whale, Moby Dick.

Call me Ishmael, baby.

But he's not Moby Dick; he's just Moby. He's a good Moby too. See, it's almost like Moby is short for Mobile Headquarters or something too, which might be a bonus, of sorts. Maybe.

Anywaaaaaay, like I said, it took 922 miles just to cross the first state line (not including the border between North Florida and South Florida). The first night ended after 447 miles, at a Rest Area near Wesley Chapel, just north of Tampa.

Opening night is always just a little bit of a chore on a ramack. There is zeal about being underway and all, but the initial roads are always so damn familiar. That's why I always leave at night. Get out of work, pack the last items, grab some food and ice, and hit the road, Jack. No heavy daytime traffic to slog the early pace, and no regrets about scenery lost to darkness.

Scenery almost stops being scenery when you see it every day. My current commute to work, along the south coast of Key West, looking across the flat Atlantic to the morning sunrise, is beautiful. I envy me for having it. If you gotta go to work, this is the way to do it! And I resolved early on that I would never take that route for granted, that I would make it a point each and every day to appreciate that view. Most days, I do. I have to admit, though, that there have been some days when my wandering mind just skimmed over that water without even seeing it.

What would happen if you worked at a place like Yosemite, or the Grand Canyon, or Arches National Park? Would there come a point when you would yah-yah-whatever your morning drive to work, and when you couldn't get out of there fast enough? I'm that happens wherever you work. It is work, after all.