

ROAD ROMP 2004

Day 5: Monday, 14 June 2004

FOCK 3: Rippling Gypsum

The ride to WSNM was largely downhill. The comfortable temperatures of the high ground were nothing but a memory, as the thermometer in Tularosa – about halfway to WSNM, and still about 4000' of elevation – was 107° at 6:15 pm.

A little while later, right around the town of Alamogordo, there was a yellow diamond road sign that said, "GUSTY WINDS MAY EXIST." What kind of bushwa is that? Of course gusty winds exist! This isn't like GOD MAY EXIST. Everyone has experienced a gusty wind at some point in his/her life. What is this existential claptrap about? Is there a lack of scientific evidence regarding gusty winds? Could they ask, like, ohhh, The Weather Channel about the subject?

While I was juggling those idiotic ponderings that the innocent sign had triggered, my attention, fortunately, was diverted to a roadside pasture, where a horse was galloping. The man on its back wore a cowboy hat, and seemed to be really digging the ride. He could easily have been riding what I usually see in such a circumstance: a dirt bike, or an ATV. But this ATV was alive and running free. It looked much better. Strange that after all these miles of southwestern driving, that was the first galloping horse that I saw.

The transmission had been behaving itself reasonably well, but Moby had developed a new malady that was driving me nutty. Something inside the ceiling just over the driver's seat was rattling horribly. It was a loud tapping, rapping, tapping, rapping that had no discernible pattern to it. On some bumpy roads, it would be quiet, but on some smooth highways, it would tattattattattattattattattattatt to beat the band. Ignoring it wasn't easy. Did you ever *try* to not think about something? It doesn't work; you're constantly reminding yourself what you're not thinking about.

Another thing besides van woes and hot temps had been consistent across the south: the Spanish language. Some billboards, some radio stations, and some dialogues at various stops were in Spanish. But while the Spanish in Florida was Cuban, from Louisiana on west, it was Mexican.

White Sands National Monument happens to sit adjacent to White Sands Missile Range, which is billed as "The Birthplace of America's Missile and Space Industry." It is a government facility where, I presume, things blow up from time to time. Large signs were posted on the highway: WHEN FLASHING EXPECT ONE HOUR DELAY. I was damn glad it wasn't flashing; my daylight was waning. How much would that suck, huh? An *hour*? And I'm sure it's not like you could see any of the tests or anything either. It would be kind of cool, though, if you could. I mean, if they're going to make you wait an hour, maybe they could give you front row seats to some big bammin' blowups.

Luckily, there was no delay (they happen twice a week, on average, and often last up to *two*



hours, I would learn later), and I proceeded down to WSNM, where my NP Pass saved me the stiff \$3.00 entry fee.

The road into the park was nothing special for a couple of miles. Finally, a tall dune flanked the left side of the road. A faint white cloud seemed to be rising from beyond it – almost like mist rising from the base of a waterfall, and blowing from the southwest. The sand was white, but there was a pretty good amount of grass growing here and there on it. I pulled to the side, where another car was, and climbed up to have a look-see.

The view was good, with green-spotted dunes extending off for miles, but I could tell that much better views were ahead. Man, was I right!

As is the case with most places, the photos of White Sands don't do it justice. They do capture part of the feeling of the place, but the whites in the photos just aren't as brilliantly white as they were in person. And you can't feel how soft the sand was under your feet, or how much you sank in as you tried to walk up the side of a dune. And, most of all, you don't get the effect of turning 360° and seeing nothing but pure white sand.

Just a short ride down the only park road, Moby and I were transported again, but not in time this time: to another place. In a swift change, the pavement ended and the road became natural earth. Normally, you'd picture brown dirt with some gray rocks, but here,



natural earth is bright white sand. It had been packed by heavy equipment, and the roadsides were banked by the throw-offs from the plows that clear the road every morning of the sand that had drifted onto it at night. The effect was very unexpected for this 100° area: it was winter! High, white, smooth, drifted banks on each side, plowed road, scraped white road surface – where else but in a winter scene do you get that?

When I pulled into one of the large parking areas at the Heart Of The Sands area, the effect was magnified. First, the cleared lot gave the appearance of a frozen lake, with the natural wood restroom building looking like an ice-fishing shack. Secondly, there were children sledding! About twenty kids were sliding down the biggest dunes on colorful plastic dish-sleds or slabs of cardboard. A couple of them were even snowboarding. The ones I saw weren't going very fast, though; sand doesn't have quite same Slide Coefficient as snow and ice do. Their parents watched with amusement from the top, as the kiddies slid down then trudged back up. The kids, though, were barefoot and in shorts, and some of the dads were shirtless; that's about the only thing that betrayed the wintry ambiance.

That, and getting out of the air-conditioned van. It was after 7:30 p.m., and it was still hot as a summer afternoon in the desert. (Go figure.) But it was a good hot, especially after having those flashbacks to the tundra conditions of New England and upstate New York. It could have been 200° out and I would have been going, "ahhhhhh..."

Unlike the sands at Great Sand Dunes National Monument in Colorado, these dunes were not carried on the wind and dropped at the foot of a ridge. This fine white gypsum sand is what remains of an ancient lake. The lake, at the eastern base of the San Andres Mountains, was landlocked, and, with no rivers to drain it, just kinda sat there until all the water just up and evaporated in the hot sunshine. The sand duned up over the years as the wind dried it out

and played with it, forming Dome Dunes, Barchan Dunes, Transverse Dunes, and Parabolic Dunes. I'll spare you the differences, but they were all Cool Dunes.



There was some persistent plant life that survived out here, and they gave a little perspective to the dunes, which could have almost looked artificial without them. The Yucca is one of them. I know nothing about the Yucca plant; I just like the name. Yucca.



White Sands National Monument covers 275 square miles, which makes it more than a quarter of the size of Rhode Island, not that Rhode Island is all the freaking big, but still, this is a dune field we're talking about, damn it. The road brings visitors into the central area, but you could have quite a day of walking if you wanted. And, with landmarks sparse, and marked trails non-existent, you'd better bring a really good sense of direction with you.

I got out and wandered around the hoary slopes for a while. Foot travel really is welcome; paths can't be worn in this ground since the nighttime winds will erase all traces of this day's visitors. My walk took me quite deep into the dunes, and at one low point I was faced with the sight of a world that was nothing but sloping and rippling white sand, and clear bright blue sky.

At another point, I was cresting a dune and noticed a photographer set up on a dune or two over, with his tripodded camera angling onto the flat area where I was headed. Being a photo kinda guy myself, I backtracked with a little "sorry dude" wave, brushed my two footsteps smooth, and retreated out of shot. The little devil on my other shoulder was telling me to stay there and have just my hand above the rim, as if someone climbing out had dropped and died before reaching the top. From his distance, the photographer would never have seen it, but a close scrutiny of his photo would have shown it. Man, would he be pissed: the photo of a lifetime, which he had been waiting for hours to snap, ruined by a yuk-yuk jokester. I didn't do it.

I often do try to get in the background of photos. Not Nature shots, though, mainly because I would hate it if some jamoke suddenly showed up in one of my wicked neatoo cooloo scenery shots. But if you're pulling in a bunch of people to take a group shot, and I'm across the street behind them, or at the next table in a restaurant, I'll be giving a big smirk and discreet wave. Nothing gaudy, gross, or indecent – I won't flip you off in the background of your little girl's First Communion photo – but just enough so that, when you get your pictures back, you'll be showing them to all your friends, and suddenly somebody will laugh and say, "Hey, look at that douchebag across the street!" I'm never there to share that moment, which, I suppose, is a good thing. That makes it kind of like my Ramruns stickers: leave my mark and move on, never knowing who will chortle and who will mutter "WTF?"

There was a temptation to do a snow angel – OK, sand angel – on the smooth side of a dune before departing, but the thought of having sand in my shorts and hair (what little hair was left after my pre-trip buzzing) until my next shower nixed that idea.



The curtain was beginning to fall on yet another beautiful, sun-filled day in the desert, and I saddled up Moby and sallied onward. I envisioned WSNM as a being a pretty interesting place to be at night, but the Arizona border was still a good 200 miles away, and that was the target for tonight. Maybe Next Time, if the moon is full...

The sun slid behind the ragged wall of the San Andres Mountains as I coaxed Moby up the steepening incline. He bitched a bit, so I downshifted into D2 and that made him much happier. It was slower, but traffic was light, and a few minutes were nothing in the Grand Scheme of Things – i.e., Plan C. And the deep, reddish afterglow just past the top of the ridge was worth a brief roadside pause anyway. The air was so clean, and the wide valley below was already dark, except for one streak of reflected sky in a distant lake. At the moment, I could buy that Land Of Enchantment claim

(but it would have been a tough sell back among the desolate miles of nothing but sagebrush and dirt).



Moby had his breath back, I was getting thirsty (again), and the road was calling. New Mexico was just a warm-up, after all. The real good stuff was still a long way off. Southern Arizona would all be virgin territory, just as everything from Baton Rouge west had been.

We rejoined I-10 at the bustling city of Las Cruces – at least the hotels and shopping malls along the highway seemed bustling – and galloped on. When I reined in my steed at the first Arizona Rest Area, we had covered 2660 miles. Despite some stoppage time – Carlsbad Caverns, Roswell, Pub 48, and WSNM, 492 of it went under the wheels today. This ramack was gaining serious momentum.

