

Road Ramp 2004

Day 7: Wednesday, 16 June 2004

FOCK 2: Joshua Tree and the Mojave

JTNP is the point where two desert environments meet, which is partly what makes it special. A ridge that runs diagonally from NE to SW naturally divides the park: the low desert lies to the south and east, and the high desert (over 3000') is in the north and west.

The low half, the Colorado Desert, is decidedly less than scenic. You can spew all the "subtle beauty" bullshit in the world at me, but you'll never get me to put green dots on this road. It's a tad interesting, I'll concede, but it's more ugly than beautiful. For the first 15 miles the only things of note were rock piles. Yup, piles of rocks. And I don't mean hills that happened to be rocky. These were piles of rocks. No dirt, no grass, nothing between them but smaller rocks. And they were all over the place! Some were downright huge, maybe 40' tall, but most were modest, 10-20' tall mounds.



Maybe primitive imbeciles piled them there for no reason. They look like they were constructed deliberately, since they are piled quite neatly. Maybe mastodons are buried under them. Maybe glaciers just shit them out, I don't know, but they sure were weird. And they were extra weird for being the pre-eminent attraction of that part of the Park.



As we were about to rise out of Pinto Basin and make the long climb up to the higher plain of the Mojave Desert, an oasis of odd flora suddenly appeared. Cholla Cactus Garden, it's called. Strange, tufted cacti are clustered here, but nowhere else that I saw. It was like they all migrated to this spot for religious freedom or something. They were the Mormons of the cactus world, I guess

Anyhow, I thought the south half of JTNP pretty much sucked. Maybe if Moby wasn't burning up with fever, I might have thought differently, but as it was, the landscape was not brightening my mood. The engine temperature needle was pushing high; it would remain steady if I kept driving, but if I slowed or stopped to take pictures, it quickly rose. This gave my pass through Joshua Tree a misplaced sense of haste. It was like I had to get to L.A. or something. There was no leisure in my ride; there was a weird urgency. And since I had shut off the AC and had the windows down, letting the hot desert air swirl around me, I wasn't as comfy-cozy-carefree as I would have liked to be.

Yes, I daresay I was a tad peeved, I confess. When I planned this ramack, I had eagerly placed JTNP as one of the focal points. It was a place I definitely wanted to see. I had endured three days of arid environment to get here, and now it was nothing but a bunch of glacier shit and some fluffy Mormon cacti. Bah.

But then Moby crested the pass between the Hexie Mountains and the Pinto Mountains, and emerged with a big sigh onto the Mojave plain. What a change!

The north half of Park immediately offered us a **brand new road**. It looked like it had been poured and painted yesterday. Yeahhhh!! A new road to Moby is like a cooler full of ice-cold beers to me. He was lovin' it.

But, even better than that, Joshua Trees abounded. There really were hundreds, maybe even thousands of them. They went on for miles, and mingled in among them were rounded, slightly reddish boulders, just like you might expect to see in Utah. Very nice twice!

Joshua Trees seemed to max out at about 15 feet tall, their branches have tight fists of small palms on the ends, and their bark is almost fur-like.

I'm told they also have "aggressive" root systems that actually destroy any other roots that invade their space, just like the saguaro cacti did/do.

It was very cool driving through this part of the Park. I had to appreciate the fact that I had seen the suckier half first. If I had seen this half and then been dealt the letdown of descending into the nether half, I would have been miffed.

I couldn't linger or explore, though. The trees were cool, but I didn't relish the thought of looking at them during a steaming, hood-up, roadside sit-down. I penciled in a Next Time.

The park exit dumped me out in the town of Joshua Tree. I wouldn't say that a lot of people live out here, but there are a lot more than I expected, and I was rather puzzled about what they all do for a living. A certain amount of them, of course, are town support and are only here because the town is. But what plopped the first batch here anyway? What made this town go in the first place?



I bought anti-freeze, poured almost two gallons of it down Moby's throat, and watched with relief as his temp gauge slowly dropped in the ensuing miles. I guess I should call the stuff "coolant" since I wasn't too worried about my engine freezing up, but that's my northern upbringing showing.

Leaving Joshua Tree, I turned onto what would be one of the best roads of the trip: CA Highway 247. On the Rand, it was a thin red line that passed through just one tiny dot of a town in 69 miles. It was the most direct route to where I was headed, and it looked like would be all mine.

It was. This was one **empty** road. For an hour, Moby just sailed along through a wide, dry, flat, uninhabited, unvegetated valley. Halfway through, there was the puny town of Lucerne Valley, which claimed a population of 1300. My ass. They couldn't have meant people.

Mice maybe. There was little more in Lucerne Valley than a mobile home and a chapel. People must come from miles around to use that chapel, because they certainly don't come from yards around. What the hell do these people do??? They're not growing anything. They're not grazing anything. This is definitely not a resort. What do they do???????

Maybe they commute the 17 miles west to Apple Valley, but what the hell do they do there? Or maybe they are all just eccentric, independently wealthy, reclusive misanthropes who live in hidden underground bunkers, but have to be counted in the census, and need to go to chapel on Sunday. Yeah, I'm sure that's it.



From Lucerne Valley, 247 swung due north to Barstow. This stretch was even emptier, if that's possible. "This is as desert as you get," I commented into my Sony TCM-200DV. The only thing breaking the parched dirt on both sides were doughnut tracks made by Jeeps, dirt bikes, whatever. If had Chief, the SW03 rented Cherokee, instead of Moby, I would have spun a few myself. This is the dried-up bed of long-gone Lake Lucerne. It hasn't been wet here for quite some time.

At one point about a half-dozen camouflaged Hummers, filled with armed personnel in camouflaged helmets and gear in place, went cruisin' by heading south. I wasn't panicking. I lose touch with the outside world, but I think I would have somehow heard about an attack in the California desert. The Twenty-Nine Palms Marine Corps Base was not far away, so these armed guys were obviously just on the lam with stolen Hummers. No worries.

Big clouds appeared over the ridge to the west, near Sidewinder Mountain. It looked to be raining there, but it never crossed over to moisten this wasteland.

As 247 approached its terminus, we were faced with another long climb. The transmission was complaining as we rose past 3000' and 3500'. The cooling system began griping again by the time we hit 4000'. But when we topped out at 4148' and began the long slide down the backside of Ghost Mountain Pass into Barstow, all was well again.

Barstow got me back on familiar turf. Roadrage2000 had come through here, branching off I-15 from Las Vegas and angling for the coast at Murro Bay. Route 58 had been impressive then, with its lonesome crossroads of Four Corners, its sea of solar panels, its long backup of trucks in the town of Mojave, and the Fabulous Fans of Tehachapi Pass. I eagerly anticipated the revisit.

The Mojave River passes right by Barstow, but guess what: it was bone dry. What do you expect when you name a river after a desert. Next time, they should call it the Atlantic River.

I definitely should have expected it, having been here before, but this was a LOT of freaking desert! Back into sagebrush shit again. Man, I was getting tired of this.

Shortly after getting onto 58, there was a very large turnout beside the road. Maybe it had been used for construction equipment or something because you could have parked and turned some really large things in that area. Anyway, about 30 yards off the road, there was a yellow diamond sign that said simply, "END." End of what??? It wasn't at – or especially close to – the end of the turn-out area. There was **nothing** that appeared to end there. WTF??

Four Corners has changed a lot: there was a gift shop, restaurant, and much more. Maybe even a motel. Was it that thriving in '00?? Was I thinking of someplace else?

Farther west was the town of Boron: a borax mine could be seen to the north, just thriving in California desert. You just don't see too many borax mines these days, now, do you?

After a while, it occurred to me that I should have seen those thousands of solar panels by now. They took up acres of otherwise empty space four years ago! Could I actually have *missed* something that big among all this desolation? First, Four Corners was radically different, and now the solar panels weren't anywhere to be seen. WTF was going on?

I found out later that I had not been hallucinating. There really had been an experimental and, apparently, temporary solar energy project out here, but it had run its course and had been removed. Why, though? Was it not producing enough energy to cover its own expenses? Must've been. Sure looked like it would have kicked out some serious megawatts, though.

"I've seen just about enough desert to last me the rest of my life, I think," I commented to the recorder. "There is no Next Time for the deep southwest. It was an interesting one-time pass-through, but that is that. I feel very ready for trees and green and mountains. This has been too uninspiring, too unscenic, too goddamn NOTHING!!"

As we neared the town of Mojave, there were two good-sized road signs that said "END FREEWAY." Nothing changed. Not a damn thing. Nice signs though. I was all braced to go careening off into the sagebrush, but the road stayed the same and just kept on going.

Edwards Air Force Base, on the south side of 58, was teeming with activity. A couple of 727's and 707's stood near the hangars, and people could be seen grouped all around them and the buildings. Something was obviously up. I didn't know it at the time, but a private space flight – one of those quests for a \$10 million prize – would be launching from there two days later.

Moby was tooling along at Happy Speed. If I kept him between 66 and 75, both the tranny and o-heat problems seemed OK. Level ground helped a lot too.

More big changes in the four years since my last pass here: the whole highway was new, with new exits and bridges to Mojave and AFB. Trucks could now just zoom right past the town without that stupid two-mile-long backup. Four years was plenty of time to do it all, I guess, but it sure seemed weird.

One aspect that was the same, though, was the Fabulous Fans of Tehachapi Pass. This time, I got (and kept) some photos. There are 75 of the fans in the photo below, and that is not even 1/17th of the total number. They just dominate that whole ridge. At least these, unlike their stupid cousins in stupid Texas, were spinning and generating power. Anyway, I hope they were generating power, and weren't just some bizarre attempt at modern art. That would take away their Fabulosity, as far as I'm concerned.



Anyway, Tehachapi Pass was significant for more than just the fans. The 4060' summit looked down on fertile farmland. The earth was healthy and livable. There was good grazing and growing land.

THE DESERT WAS **FINALLY** DONE!! ALLE-FREAKING-LUJAH!!

[And, of course, Tehachapi was 3rd base in the Little Feat diamond (“... *Tucson to Tukumcari, Tehachapi to Tonapah...*”), which was nice.]