

ROAD ROMP 2004

Day 10: Saturday, 19 June 2004

FOCK 3: Diggin' Death Valley

There were morons working in Furnace Creek Visitor Center. I had heard that federal budget cuts had impacted employee numbers and wages in National Parks across the country, but they must have really cut some corners when it came to training this pair.

I had looked around for a little bit, checking out the display about borax and all its uses, for instance. It was pretty cool stuff back in its prime, and still thrives in relative obscurity today. What does Borax do, you ask? Well, it cleans, deodorizes, disinfects, softens water, and repels cockroaches. It is used in fertilizers, enamel glazes, heat-resistant glass, and fiber glass. It's even been used as a flame retardant dropped from airplanes to fight oil fires. And it makes a hell of a welding flux, whatever that is. Best of all, perhaps, it is used in making slime – yes, slime! -- for kiddies to play with. Go Borax!

I guess the mining of borax was ample reason to endure this brutal environment. At least, it was good enough reason for the mine owners and the borax distributors. The miners themselves may have felt otherwise.

So, feeling pretty good about Death Valley, and knowing that I still had oodles of time to explore before getting to Vegas for the night, I sought out a couple more places to check out. The map showed a nearby spot called Zabriskie Point, which was supposed to give a good overview of the Valley. Well, that sounded like cool beans to me, so before heading there, I strolled up to the front desk to query the Rangers about it.

I should not have bothered. First of all, I stood there while they carried on their own conversation for a few more exchanges. They were a tall black man and a short blond woman – both mid-20's -- and their discussion had something to do with Las Vegas, so it wasn't like I was interrupting crucial park business.

When I didn't get discouraged and walk away, they turned to face me, not attempting to mask their peevage.

I began with a reasonably cheerful, "Hi" and was met with blank stares that said, *tell us what you want and go the fuck away*. So, I got to the point. "What's the elevation at Zabriskie Point?" I asked. "We're minus-190 here, so how much higher is it there? I'm just concerned because my van might overheat if it's too much of a climb."

"Oh, you can't drive there," was the woman's terse response.

"But I saw a road on the map..." I said, beginning to open my park map.

"Oh, the road will take you *up* there," she said, with a slight roll of her eyes, "but then you have to walk *to* it."

"How much of a walk?" I asked.

"I don't know. About a hundred feet." She was getting very impatient with my line of questioning. She never would hold up on trial.

"Oh, OK, I can handle that. How much higher is it than here?"

"Oh, you just go right in, and it's right there."

"OK, I figured that out. But what's the elevation?"

The man butted in. "Well, we have no way of telling you that."

That irked me. "Look, I said, **Everything** is labeled here: Stovepipe Wells is five feet; we're minus-190; Badwater is minus-282; there is even a Sea Level sign halfway up the ridge.

All I want to know is approximately how high Zabriskie Point is: Two feet? Two hundred feet? Two thousand feet? Just give me a ballpark.”

“We have no way of knowing that, *sir*,” he repeated, a little too sternly for my liking.

I gave them both a short glare, shook my head in disbelief, turned and half-coughed “douchebags,” as I walked away.

And I bet they muttered, “what a dickhead,” as soon as I was out the door.

Turns out that Zabriskie Point was not all that high, and did not give a sweeping overview of Death Valley. There were cool views, for sure, but not the grand vistas I had been hoping for. Still, it was the most pleasantly bizarre ground in DVNP.



It wasn't exactly teeming with life up there, but it wasn't as bleak as the nether lands. The ground had color to it. Much of it was that golden velour appearance that the central California hills had had. The rolling hills were carved with smooth rivulets and had no distinguishing surface features whatsoever. With just a small snapshot, you wouldn't be able to tell whether it was a few square yards or a few square miles that you were looking at.

The next stop was not virgin territory: The Devils Golf Course. The 1990 entourage had been here, and I was eager to revisit.

Devil's Golf Course is about as ironic a name as you will find in any National Park feature. It's like calling Yosemite's Glacier Point “A View of Hell.” You could never play golf here. You could never play anything here, except maybe chess. Moving at anything more than a slow walk is not feasible.



DGC is a vast saltpan. It is acres and acres of sharp, jagged salt crystal formations that have been left behind by long-gone lakes. There is space between them to pick your way along, so you can wander out away from the small parking area and explore, but if you ever tripped and fell – which would be very easy to do – you'd be HFC (Hurting For Certain). Rumor has it that the crystals themselves make metallic cracking sounds as they expand and contract in the heat.



I do wish I had a ball, club and tee here, though. I had the place all to myself and could have sent a Maxfli soaring several hundred feet out among those crystals. That would be End Of Story for me, but it would set up a moment somewhere down the line – maybe three years, maybe three months, maybe three hours later – when somebody would be out pokin' around among the weird crystals and actually find a golf ball. Now that I think about it, I'll bet there are a lot of them out there. I can't be the only one whacked enough to have thought of that.

As it was, I stood out in the hot afternoon sun, getting baked, and enjoying a few minutes of total silence and solitude. Even the road, which was a half-mile from the parking area anyway, was empty as far as I could see.

The foothills to the east were quite strange. Like all the other hills, they were bare of vegetation, but these light colored mounds were decorated by swaths of brick red and bluish gray. It looked as if somebody had haphazardly spray painted some sand dunes.

By now, it was 3:00. I guessed that I was not gonna be outa there by 2:00 after all. No big whoop. The Las Vegas 51's baseball game had been on the Maybe List, but it was easily crossed off. I hate Vegas anyway, so I didn't mind getting there late. Spending less time in that city was fine by me. I wouldn't be meeting Nate the Great till late morning anyway.



Bad name for a baseball team, huh? The 51's. Named after Area 51. C'mon, you're in Vegas. Nobody connects that city with Area 51. Call yourselves the Dealers, or the Deuces, or the Chips. Or the Whores. Those names would all show a lot more civic pride.

Anyway, I still wasn't finished with Death Valley. The most featured attraction of all remained.



Badwater Basin is the lowest point in the United States. It sits 282 feet below sea level, yet is only 19 miles from Telescope Peak's 11,042' summit. Remarkably, this lowest point in the U.S. is less than 90 miles from the highest point in the U.S., the aforementioned Mount Whitney. How's that for dognoggin'?

Even more remarkably, there is an annual footrace that starts at Badwater and runs as far as the roads go up Mount Whitney, a total distance of 135 miles. These days, it's called the [Badwater Ultramarathon](#), and any would-be contestant has to meet rigorous qualifications to compete in it. It doesn't seem like sanity is one of them. The pavement heats

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up to almost 200° in the low ground – it takes almost 75 miles just to leave Death Valley National Park – and the route climbs 8640 feet. In 2000, Anatoli Kruglikov, from Russia, covered the distance in just 25 hours, 9 minutes, and 5 seconds. And how did you spend your day, dear?



But Badwater Basin itself is a mellow place. There is a big puddle there. And a lot of cracked mud. Legend has it that the name derives from an old prospector who tried in vain to get his mule to drink from it, but the mineral content was so high that it was just “bad water.”

In 1990, you could just walk right out and wallow in it if you wanted to. There was a sign there, but little else. Badwater is all dressed up now, to keep jamokes like me from

stomping all over it. There is a very nice new boardwalk, a big restrooms building, a paved parking lot, a concrete staircase, solid railings, a new Badwater sign, and even a new “Sea Level” sign perched, I assume, 282 feet up on the ridge behind the road. The old sign was

better, though: it was white and stood out a lot more noticeably against the tan background than the new **brown** one does. What genius made that decision? Let’s make green golf balls next, huh? I bet half the visitors here don’t even know the new sign is there.

A lot had happened in the 14 years since I was last here. I approved of most of it, though.

Death Valley is pretty damn amazing. It’s not a scenic wonderland, but it’s surprisingly diverse, and impressively harsh.

But it was time to move on. The park exit was 40 miles away, and Las Vegas was 100 miles beyond that. It was 3:20 now, so 6:00 seemed like a realistic goal.



The solitude was nice here, especially with the long and empty roads, but I was also kinda wishing that Nate were there already. He has enough intellectual curiosity that he would

also use his imagination regarding settlers and the hardships of their trek across these lands. Plus, we could have played golf together!

CA-178, the only available road south from the Furnace Creek morons, just seemed to go on and on. And I was going 70, far faster than any old wagon train. The mountains to my



left just looked like absolute killers: dark, rough, rocky, and totally forbidding. The highest of them, fittingly enough, was called Funeral Peak.

I was eager to leave DVNP so I could put the A/C

back on. Experiencing the desert air was proving a point, I guess. I could have turned it back on at any time, but that would have been like not finishing the climb to Vernal Falls.

Highway 178 led out of Death Valley, but the terrain did not change remarkably. Maybe it looked a tad less dead, but just a tad.

The sky was deep blue, and cloudless. Of course it was cloudless: clouds mean moisture, and there just wasn't any moisture for the air to suck up around these parts.

I was still in California at this point: the Golden State, the promised land of gold and fertility. I eagerly awaited Nevada – the Sagebrush State -- so I could see some **real** desolation.

But the sense of Big Change *was* in the air. This ramack was going to lose its solo aspect and become a team

effort. What was extra weird was that my prolonged route to Las Vegas was a hell of a lot more normal than Nate's was. He was coming from New Zealand after spending a month on a free-lance tour of that island country and Australia, and was supplementing it with a Grand Canyon hike and a cross-country drive instead of flying straight home to South Carolina.

My own plans had called for a roadtrip to Arizona, with a few days at Grand Canyon National Park.

We had coordinated this rendezvous way back in February. Knowing Nate's sense of adventure, I had contacted him in January as I was throwing together my own tentative plans. I hurled an IM at him, asking, "Hey, Fats, want to hike the Grand Canyon with me next June?" [Calling Nate "Fats" is like naming that saltpan Devil's Golf Course – he has about as much fat on him as a quarter pound hamburger. A lean one, at that.]

His response surprised me, "What dates?"

"I dunno. I'm somewhat flexible at this point. Somewhere between the 16th and 23rd?"

"That'd be perfect for me, man. I'm flying back from NZ on the 19th. I can change my last leg out of LA and go to LV instead of SC."



"Sweet. I can meet you at McCarran. Let's do it."

"OK, I think it's the 19th, but I'll get back to you with the exact date."

From there, I researched various hikes, tried in vain to get reservations at Phantom Ranch at the bottom of the Big Hole, and laid my itinerary out around a June 19th rendezvous and a 20th through 22nd GCNP experience.

Nate emailed me a few days later, clarifying that he would be leaving Auckland on the 19th, so I should meet him at McCarran Airport (where Serrano got the disks) at 11:20 a.m. on the 20th. I emailed back my confirmation, and tweaked my ramack plan accordingly.

It was a perfect fit. The extra day gave me just enough time to spend the full day at Yosemite, and make the extension through Joshua Tree, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon much more worthwhile. Throughout the trip, part of my concern with Moby's various maladies was that I would break down and be delayed for my appointment with the Fat Man.

I played it all through in my head as the Mobe and I departed DVNP. It was 4:07 pm, and the AC went back on. "I'm comin' to get ya, Nate!" I beamed, and chitced open another frosty Dog.

For the last hour, for no particular reason, I had counted vehicles. There wasn't much else to count, except maybe rocks. There had been three cars and two motorcycles. That's all. With such a totally barren landscape, **of course** the road was empty! Who would want to be out here!? Except someone like me. There is no reason to be here: no businesses, no homes, no Christmas Tree farms.

Then I saw a cloud. A tiny one. It looked really lost. Why and how does one such cloud even form?? Maybe a minute later, it was gone. Soon thereafter, though, two more appeared briefly, then splintered and disappeared. That's desert drama for you. I can't remember ever being so occupied by the fate of a few small clouds when I lived in Boston. When there is less to see, you see more.