

Coolo California

Fock 1: Desert Driving and Freaking Fans

Well, like I said, Blue Man and I left the LV area, Land of No Green, and our next goal was large and blue: the Pacific Ocean. Quite a bit of desert had to be crossed first, of course, and some intriguing California interior. The Golden State is one big-ass place though, and you can do lots and lots of driving.



As I-15 reaches out for California, it lifts you higher, as in a symbolic ascension from the depths of sin to the high and holy mountaintop. Yeah, it's just from the flat desert floor to the crest of the southern tail of the Sierra Nevada, but sometimes the poet in me just rears up and *proclaims*. You should hear some the foolishness that gets spouted into the recorder. Or the stupid, histrionic announcements and blatantly overacted speeches that get bellowed at the invisible audience of road

spirits: *And we're at 5000 feet and climbing, Captain! We're going for the summit! The air is thin! Can't... breathe... Must... go... on...* and other such melodramatic malarkey.

It gets pretty dumb sometimes, and that moronic melodrama was not limited to the solo ramacks like RR2K. At any given moment along any given highway, as driver or passenger, I would suddenly blurt such nonsense, pouring it out with conviction and zeal. It's foolish, but foolish is good for the soul sometimes. That maturity thing never really appealed to me: serious bordering on somber. Veggie dip and wine never replaced cheese curls and beer. Slacks and a polo shirt never seemed as real and true as jeans and a T, even on the golf course. When dumb, wiseass, or silly outbursts stop coming from me, check my pulse.

So, with Las Vegas gone from the rearview mirror, and the sun beginning its downward slide, Blue Man and I started the climb. There is nothing tricky about this ride. There are no snaky switchbacks to ease the grade; I-15 goes straight up the hill for miles. The roadside signs inform you of your progress as you ascend from 2800 up to 4800 feet. BM wanted Overdrive gear, and I complied. He gobbled up the mountain like a Lab chowing Purina.

And as straight as the upward roadway was, the other side is just as true. The engineers definitely did not screw around with this one. There was nothing in the way in any direction, and nobody saw any reason to add an inch to the route, so they just set down a plumb line and laid the road. As we began the long roll down the California side, there was a sign posted beside the highway: "Watch Downhill Speed." Hmmm, 88 and rising. Maybe we *could* rein the beast in just a tad, I reckon.

It took 12 days and more than 5000 miles to reach California from New York. The state motto is *Eureka*, which means "I have found it!" That's most likely an allusion to the 1849 Gold Rush, which led to the nickname The Golden State, but for me it was appropriate in the sense of finally finding California ground under my wheels.

More people live in California – more than 35 million -- than in any other State. Texas' 21 million is a distant second. Only 33 countries worldwide have more people. Canada has 2.6 million fewer residents than California.

California is the third largest state, though it's more than 100,000 square miles smaller than The Lone Star State, and it is only 3/11ths (27%) the size of Alaska. Montana is almost as big. California is smaller than Sweden, and barely bigger than Paraguay. Didn't know Paraguay was that big, didja?

Cali is a land of magnificent coast, thriving metropolises, and gorgeous National Parks that boast ponderously large trees and majestic rock formations. But first for BM and me, it was a land of dry, hot, empty desert.

The Mojave sprawls out for well over 100 miles from the Nevada border to the first recognizable "city", Barstow. Along the way, there are only a few pit stops: little crossroads or roadside clusters where travelers can address their needs.

I took a break and pulled off I-15 and into one the map called Baker. Its only real road ran parallel to the highway, and only a furlong or so to the right of it. A quarter-mile row of about a dozen small square buildings made up Baker. Nothing about that really struck me until I walked into the convenient store to grab a Coke and get some more ice to throw on the beers in my cooler. I was feeling loose and good, wearing my favorite tie-dyed shirt and comfy shorts, and humming and bouncing as I picked out my goodies, so carefree and unencumbered in my I-am-in-a-desert-not-in-a-snowdrift state of mind, with warm sunshine and three more hours of good tunes and empty roads and goddamn desolate scenery to savor...

...until I looked at the poooooor girl behind the counter. About 17, medium build, nice but not overly nice face, long straight blondish hair, very little makeup, wearing sneakers and jean shorts with her company shirt. She must have been watching me the whole time, since I was the ONLY one in there, and the look on her face said so many things: *this place sucks...take me with you...this place Sucks...you handsome stud you... this place SUCKS...I want to go where there is life... this place SUCKS! ...do me right here on the counter... THIS PLACE SUCKS!!... PLEEEEEEEASE GET ME THE HELL OUT OF HERE!!!!!!!!!!!!*

I mean, what *is* life like, living in a "population 650" town (especially when that "650" is spread out over 200 square miles)?? She rang up my stuff, looking at me tonguingly most of the time. ["Tonguingly" is a great word, isn't it?] I gave her a hang-in-there-kiddo smile, got back into Blue Man, zoomed off into the dusty desert, and didn't think about her till just now. She's most likely a mom by now. She looked awfully ready to jump the bones of the next trucker who stopped in.



Baker makes two proud claims: (1) it is the Gateway to Death Valley, and (2) it has The World's Tallest Thermometer. Of the former, I'm not sure how proud a boast it is to have the word "Death" in it so prominently. Of the latter, well, I estimate about 60-70 feet, with room to top the World Record for Hottest Temperature Ever Recorded: 136 degrees, at El Azizia, Libya, in 1992. The North American record is a cool 134 degrees, set in Death Valley CA, in 1913. But, as you know, it's a dry heat.

When BM and I arrived in 2000, the thermometer, which really was in the shape of a tall tube of red mercury against a lined and numbered background board – though that would be one shitload of mercury in that tube, so the shape is just for effect – read 115°. The attraction has been modified somewhat in recent years, with the digital readouts instead of a climbing red ribbon, broadly beaming out the current temperature.

My mind often drifted to the settlers as I drove across the southwest's desert terrain. Maybe it was the tour of The Museum of Westward Expansion in St. Louis back in April that had triggered my appreciation for those very brave (or foolish) souls, but from Little Rock westward, I kept finding myself imagining what their arduous journey was like. In my air-conditioned, cushy-chaired, music-filled vehicle, I was covering in an hour what a covered wagon might have needed weeks to cross.

According to one marker I saw in a particularly mountainous area, westering wagon trains were often reduced to little more than a mile a day. And even when the ground level cooperated, they were still totally exposed to brutal heat, or rain, or snow, and savages of all skin colors.

As I drove across the Mojave, I kept marveling at the persistence of those intrepid folks. But what the hell could they do?? Each rise they climbed held promise that maybe their horrible journey was near an end, and yet crest after crest revealed only more stark and hostile land to be crossed. They couldn't stop, because there was no water to be had, and the land was worthless for growing or grazing: they had to just keep going on and on for weeks and months across hundreds of miles of scorched earth. God, that must have **sucked!!!**

And then, as a reward for making it all the way across the Utah and Nevada deserts, they came to Death Valley. What a freaking cheerful day **that** must have been! Oh yay.

I am damn glad I was born when I was. I even get aggravated when I have to break Cruise Control to pass a creeper.

On the map, I noticed a town with a very appropriate name: Dunmavin. It was just west of Death Valley, and butt-up against the sharply rising Sierras. It's pretty easy to picture the settlers, with the scorch and thirst of that brutal desert finally behind them, and now the steep climb up the jagged mountains just ahead. "Nope," they must have decided, "We are **done movin'** and that's that!"

They had found a place with water and a nice view, which was more than they could say for the previous several months of their arduous journey, and they just said enough was enough. The water just to their north was Owens Lake, which is now dry, having been effectively stolen to create the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

Like I said, I can peruse maps for a long time and get a big kick out of them. Many odd names can be found around the USA: Climax (IN), Hot Water (MS), Yellow Water (FL), Knob Lick (MO), Dick (CO), Cumming (GA), Intercourse (AL and PA), Oral (SD), Camel Hump (WY), Why (AZ), Hell (MI), Nowhere (OK), Poop Creek (OR), Blue Ball (OH), and Horneytown (NC) are just a few.

We abandoned the Interstate at Barstow, steering well north of L.A., and angled for Bakersfield. As Blue Man and I traversed the remaining desert, there were many interesting sights nestled here and there within the void.

First was the tiny crossroads town of Four Corners, not to be confused with the tourist-snaring Four Corners area where Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico meet at one common spot. I suppose the town was called that because that is all it consisted of. Highway 58, which I was on, crossed Highway 395 in your classic 90-degree four-way intersection. With a modest gas station, and a couple of small run-down domiciles and a few closed-down business attempts, Four Corners looked like just a tiny ghost town to me – a perfect home for tiny ghosts.

What was weird was that electric power towers were **everywhere!** You *could* say that they were ubiquitous. You could. Hundreds of them could be seen webbing off in all directions. Big ones too, like the kind you see spreading away from Niagara Falls or Hoover Dam. But there was no major hydropower supply here: this was the western end of the Mojave Desert, for cryin' out loud. The terrain was getting less harsh, but it was still flat and dry, with the small, caked and cracked riverbeds looking more like ancient erosions than seasonal water sources.

Now, what the heck does the phrase "for cryin' out loud" mean, anyway? Exactly what is cried out loud, to whom, and why? And is it crying as in baby-cry, or crying as in town-crier-cry? For crying out loud. What about sobbing silently? Or whispering discreetly? Or simpering coyly? Or even wailing hysterically? Wouldn't wailing hysterically be even more emphatic than crying out loud? Come to think of it, wouldn't "Goddamnit!" be even more to the point? "...this was the western end of the Mojave Desert, Goddamnit!" Yeah, that works about the same.

But "Goddamnit" puts the whole sentence into the Cuss category, which makes it inappropriate for children and several Catholics. So, if you use "for crying' out loud," you dodge that bullet. Or just a simple, emphatic, "damn it!"

Pass the salt, is much more effective when it's *Pass the salt, damn it!* You'll probably get your damn salt a lot quicker, though you might not get a damn smile with it.

Thennnnnnnnnn, with Four Corners (the California town, not the... well, you know) becoming just an insignificant smudge on the eastern horizon, I saw it: the biggest sea of solar panels that these glazies have ever viddied (all my droogies will understand what that means). Off to the north of Highway 58, covering the area of a decent-sized shopping mall, or a large high school campus, lay hundreds, maybe thousands of solar panels, lazily soaking up the late-afternoon desert rays, and processing them into power to zoom off from tower to tower to lord-knows-where.

I had to wonder, *why here*, specifically? And why only that many? Why not more? And more and more and more? There was still plenty of room. Maybe they'll keep adding more. They should, given their current problems – ooh, again, no pun intended, sorry.

To be honest though, I don't really give a shit whether they add more or not, or where the power all goes. It was just a curious sight to see.

Actually, I forgot all about it until just now. I was going to write about the Fabulous Fans of Tehachapi Pass.

Just past the western edge of the small crossroads town of Mojave, which lies about 40 miles west of Four Corners (the California town, not...yeah) there was a very curious sight. Well, many, really: fans. BIG freakin' fans! Might've been 1000 of them. All on identical white 100-foot-tall towers with very wide, white, three-bladed fans. All of them were facing west and spinning at various speeds, mostly *fast*. They formed a curious fence on the ridge as the road turned due west out of town.

At a quick glance, they are disquieting, almost like a phalanx of alien war machines cresting the hill, and about to swoop down on the valley. Then you just keep noticing more of them. Another row over there. Yet another sitting atop that other ridge. Single file, very modern and dignified, they sit on

otherwise bare grassy hills. Towering white metal poles rising up from the greening grass that signifies the welcome end of desert territory, and the beginning of California's fertile farmlands. And all silhouetted against the late afternoon sky as I headed west out of town.



And west was *definitely* the way to be headed, since the eastbound lane of

Highway 58 was clogged solid by one lonnng-ass bumper-to-bumper line of eighteen-wheelers. The line went on for close to two miles, and had to be almost 200 rigs long, and quite a few of those were the two-trailer tandem boppers. Those things must be a *bitch* to back up and park! I've always marveled at truckers' ability to maneuver their articulated lorries in tight spaces anyway.

So many times in Boston – which is even a *car* driver's nightmare – I've seen 18-wheelers negotiate turns that I thought were hopeless, twisting that cab 90-degrees to the trailer, then slipping those rear wheels just an inch from the curb (OK, sometimes they just go up and over the curb, but they always seem to know which curb they can get away with). And often they had to put up with the all-too-typical Bostonian driver's *screw-you-I-don't-back-up-for-anybody* attitude that made those labyrinthal inner-city streets even worse.

Sure, there was the occasional illiterate who would jam his 13'0" tall trailer under the 11'9" bridges on Storrow Drive, thus snarling Beantown motorists for miles and hours, but most of the time, truckers do a pretty goddamn slick job in cities.

Besides, a little low-bridge could happen to anyone. Just ask Dash: he squashed a plain white box truck that was on loan from Cliff's company. Oh, yes, and even as my "Life Long" lists become more meaningful with the accrual of more and more life experience, this incident still rides waaaaay high up on my "Stepped In Shit But Came Out Smelling Like A Rose" list.

Dash was moving out of his South Norwood apartment – the same second story flat that I had broken into in broad daylight (with Dash's OK) to get a baggie of some very necessary "travel supplies" (nudge, nudge) on the day I set out on RAMtour86. Following Dash's invasion plan, I stealthily ascended the back steps, and approached the unlocked bathroom window on the second floor landing. It was to be a surgical strike: I would be in and out in 20 seconds. Not a step would be wasted (though I would be soon, wink wink). I didn't even slow myself down by closing the bathroom window or screen behind me when I entered.

I bee-lined for the stereo, reached behind the cassette deck, retrieved the coveted pouch, and, clutching it tightly, I strode purposefully back to Dash's bathroom. A thank-you note seemed in order, but I figured he'd appreciate such sentiments on the back of a Grand Canyon postcard more than some hastily scrawled note left on his cribbage board. There was no time now. The raid was just about done.

I got to the bathroom, and to my horror, I heard a noise on the landing just outside the window. Sure, Dash was at work, but that didn't mean that his *neighbor* was. The guy who lived across the hall had decided that this July weekday lunchtime would be the perfect time to stretch out the chaise lounge on the landing and catch some good ol' summertime rays. He had the chair, the Coppertone, a cold Bud, and a radio. He was hunkering down for a good long stint.

Meanwhile, of course, I'm standing in Dave's bathtub, frantically seeking options. At no time had we discussed a contingency plan for people being around. As far as I knew, Dash didn't know the guy at all – perhaps he had even once said disparaging things about him, I couldn't remember. Maybe he was even an off-duty cop or something; though this neighborhood was no prize, so I doubted that. What I didn't doubt was that this guy had both my exits covered. He had parked his lounge right in front of the doorway that looked straight down the hall at the apartment door, so he'd see and hear me if I tried to exit that way. Plus, that would have left the bathroom window wide open, inviting pillaging.

And, somehow, I didn't think clambering out the window would be a grand idea either. Stepping out, pulling down the window behind me, and grunting a casual "hey, guy" as I strolled on past him to the stairs just didn't seem like it would fly. I figured he'd either call the cops, or use the Pillagers Entrance himself.

Think, boy, think! I was imploring myself, when there came the sound of the phone ringing across the hall. It was in the wayback days before cell phones, so with a groaning "fuuuuccckk...", sunboy hefted his lazy carcass out of his chaise, and trudged inside. Like a shot, it was: left leg out, body out, right leg out, window down, screen down, and Exit Stage Left for the ramster.

If it was you who called at that moment, I thank you. ;)

So, uh, yeah. It was *that* apartment that Dash was moving out of the night he low-bridged the truck. He was originally going to go out and rent a truck, but Cliff offered to get one of the plain white 11-foot tall box trucks from the food brokerage company that he worked for – just borrow it from work, do the move, and have it back late at night. Nice and tidy, only Moose and Rocko down at the depot would even know it was gone.

Well, as oft happened in those days, Ban and Bash and I convened at Dash's early to kind of prepare ourselves mentally for the move. The preparation was nice and cold and tasted really good that early autumn night. After a while, we were good and prepared – and getting low on beer – and there was still no sign of Dash or Cliff. Troopers that we were, though, we just kept preparing, and we were downright silly when Cliff's Camaro pulled up, well over an hour late. But still no truck. Hmmm. Then, when Dash also stepped out of Cliff's car, we thought "Double Hmmm.."

They entered the pre-packed apartment slowly, with grim demeanor. We quickly became more subdued. Bash timidly asked, "Ummm, where's the truck?" Cliff closed his eyes and groaned. Dash did the talking, his words heavy and grim, "I drove it into a bridge." Cliff exhaled another shuddering groan. He was very much the picture of a man whose career stood poised on the brink of collapse. Clearly, he was foreseeing a very ugly conversation with his boss.

The bridge involved was a railroad overpass on a small perfect-short-cut street that Dash used every day to commute in his little riceburner. The ironically-named Short Street was narrow and lightly traveled, and it ducked several traffic signals, and much of the aggravating snarl of the Flats section of South Norwood.

Cliff followed in his own car as Dash drove the plain white 11-foot tall box truck through his backroads shortcut and down Short Street. I don't know if Cliff saw it coming or not. I don't think so. If he did, then he could only watch helplessly. And if he didn't, then he must have had to slam on his brakes.

Obviously, *Dash* never saw it coming.

Content with his shortcut, trying to make up lost time, his mind working out the strategies of the imminent move, and knowing that the three of us were already drinking all his beer (the requisite payment-in-advance for our services), Dash toiled the plain white 11-foot tall box truck confidently down Short Street, and right past the yellow diamond-shaped sign that tried to shout through the darkness at him: "Caution: 9'10" Clearance Ahead".

Oops.

Well, Dash's riceburner, being about four feet tall, never had an issue with this bridge, and being a newcomer to this whole trucker thing, it never crossed Dave's mind to have scouted out clearance heights on his route.

And there was no last-second realization and panic-pounce on the brake pedal either. He still had his foot on the gas when his head hit the windshield. Damn good thing the plain white 11-foot tall box truck had a lot of give at the top, or Dave would have gone right *through* the windshield.

The now-9'10"-tall plain white open-top box truck wedged itself very snugly under that black iron bridge, with its top foot or so scrunched back like a five-foot long accordion. The tires would end of requiring deflation to extricate the vehicle, and the police only seemed concerned about whether or not the bridge was damaged.

Well, Dash, apart from seeming headachy and remorseful, appeared to be OK. But Cliff was devastated. He had definitely Stepped In Shit. Still in his suit and tie, he cringed and sighed morosely as Dash spun the yarn for us. The overall mood had taken quite a downturn as well (noooo, really?), so we decided to disband our moving company for the night – x-rays for Dash's head were suggested – and we went our separate ways at about 8:30.

Two hours later, I gave Cliff a call. First of all, I wanted to make sure he was still alive. When the phone picked up, I got that answer. Secondly, I wanted to know if he had called his boss yet. When I heard his surprisingly chipper voice, I didn't know what to think.

Apparently, filled with trepidation, he had made that dreaded phone call. At best, he figured, he'd have to pay for the truck, which was being driven by a non-trucker, non-employee, during non-business hours. Way too many "non's" in that scenario. At worst, he'd also be fired.

Turns out it was (c) none of the above. His boss actually got a chuckle out of it, after he had ascertained that Dash was OK. The trucks had been a quandary to his company lately, and this little accident would bring in more through insurance than they would have been able to get by selling the things. The shift-over to leasings was in the works, but how to dispose of these plain white box trucks had not been decided yet. Well, now one was taken care of.

Quite relieved, Cliff offered to borrow another truck the following night. His boss blandly declined.

So, when I called, Cliff was indeed Smelling Like A Rose. He was even inclined to bop on down to Lewis' and celebrate his turn of luck. Being a good friend, I was inclined to join him. Besides, nothing quashes that wussy Rose-Scent better than the smoky-greasy stench of Lewis' back in its pre-renovation cave days.

But there were no bridges for these 200 or so trucks to get stuck under out here in the town of Mojave, California. [Ha! You were wondering how I was going to bring that one back, weren't you?]

I filled up the gas tank in that town, and two things really stood out: that unending line of trucks in both directions, and the damn **wind!** Man, it was just a steady roar of about 30 MPH, and it was quite a bit cooler than you would expect in a town named after a desert. With my windows up and my tunes on (as always), I hadn't felt the effect. There had been yellow "Caution: High Wind Area" signs bleating at me on the road into town, but unless such winds are crosswinds that are trying to toss the van into the guardrail, they tend to be ignored, dismissed as no more than a petty annoyance. Don't tarnish the landscape with such ugly signage for a mere zephyr, I say.

Well this was no mere zephyr. It was fucking windy!

So, I'm standing at the gas pump, listening to Blue Man happily slurp down another 30-something gallons, kissing another \$52.50 farewell, getting stung by flying sand and debris, looking up at the rooftop flags tugging straight out from their poles, watching the propellers spinning madly atop the ridge, and I think: "Well, no wonder it's so windy with all those goddamn *FANS* blowing so hard!"

☺

But, seriously, it was good to see the alternative sources of energy being used there. Too bad those were the only significant attempts at either solar or wind power that I witnessed in the entire 10,000 mile ramack.

Really makes me wonder: how much energy does a solar panel produce? Can you do much more than cook a frozen pizza in your toaster oven on a day's worth of sun? How many would it take to become self-sufficient? The Ranger station at Natural Bridges National Monument in southeastern Utah was run by solar power, but they had a whole fenced-in yard of them, about the size of a basketball court. I guess that had to be their sole source, because they were in the middle of nowhere (which was tremendous). And what if you live in Rochester in the winter, and you see the sun a half-dozen times between Thanksgiving and the Vernal Equinox? Ultraviolet, smultaviolet, you can't possibly get as much energy through all that lake effect gray. Can you?

And what about wind? Does that juice have to be used right away, or does it store up in some Tupperware generator thingy? If you have a calm day, do you just go without TV, radio, computer, and electric dog washer?

I can't imagine they really are a practical source of energy. If they were, those puppies would be everywhere. There would be more fan-towers than trees, and enough solar panels to cover every remaining non-asphalt inch of the earth.

But I also can't imagine that modern technology can't come up with better and more powerful collectors that we could all benefit from. I'm sure it can be (or has been) done, but until the oil companies decide that they've squeezed every all-the-market-will-bear penny out of us poor petrol-dependent putzes, we ain't gonna see it.

Ahhh. So much for social commentary. My other digressions are far more entertaining and far less depressing, don't you agree? Well, I had to throw in *something* that had a little more depth, substance and meaning than my droning How-I-Spent-My-Summer-Vacation verbal slideshow here. Fucking moo.



The Golden State