

# Road Romp 2004

Day 6: Tuesday, 15 June 2004

## FOCK 2: Cacti and Diamondbacks

Tucson was pretty much a fly-by. The closest contact was a distant view of downtown from just off the first exit ramp for the city.

It wasn't the city that was the attraction here, after all. My distaste for cities in general has been documented already. It was the National Park that I was after.

Strangely, Saguaro NP is a split park, with half of it lying east of Tucson, and the other half well off to the northwest. I had no idea which one would be a better take, so I went with the northwest version. They probably both featured cactus, and this one was a bit more on the way to Phoenix.

But Tucson was "first base" on the Little Feat baseball diamond. In 1971, that band came out with *Willin'*, a song about the life of truck-drivin' smugglers in the southwest, in which they sang the lyrics, "And I been from Tucson to Tucumcari, Tehachapi to Tonopah / I've driven every kind of rig that's ever been made / Driven the back roads so I wouldn't get weighed..." Well, here was Tucson. A little map study showed me that Tucumcari lay on my homeward-bound route in northeastern New Mexico, and it clicked with me that Tehachapi was the pass in California where I had seen the Fabulous Fans in 2000, and that would be on my route to the central California parks. That was three of the four. At the time, I could not figure out what the fourth one was. I played it over and over again and again. No frigging idea. Oh, well, I figured, the Internet would tell me when I got to my next hotel room.

Saguaro NP West was not the most spectacular National Park I've ever been to, but it was interesting in its own way. It was an excellent display of the extreme vegetation that survives in a desert environment. There was a veritable forest of Saguaro cactus there, many of which were twenty to thirty feet tall. They grow straight up, and have a few branches, which eventually grow straight up as well. They are the classic desert plantlife.



They have flowers on the tips of their arms, and they obviously can survive on very little water.

But the most interesting thing about them, and about some of the other vegetation on display in the park, is that they have a kind of natural defense mechanism that wards off other plants. You will never see many of these cacti clustered together because their root systems emit a type of toxin that will kill any other roots that try to squirm into their immediate area. It's their way of making sure that they get their share of what little water and soil nutrients are there. Pretty clever, those cacti.



But it was in the parking lot of the SNP Visitor Center that yet another problem reared its ugly head. Moby had a fever. I had been fidgeting with the ceiling, trying to stop the damn rattling noise, and I had been running the AC while parked. After a while, the AC didn't seem as cool as it should've been. I looked at the temperature gauge, and the needle was way up at the edge of the "H" range. This would not do. There was still way too much desert left to cover to have to be dealing with an overheating issue.

Rattle be damned, I quickly buttoned up the ceiling and got moving. Once on the open road, the needle dropped back into the comfort zone, the AC felt a bit more normal, and I unclenched a little bit. The ride up to Phoenix went well, but once the city limit was breached, things got touchy.

Moby's temp was hunky-dory when he was breathing 70 MPH air, but when all the working class of Phoenix flushed out of their offices and took to I-10 for their rides home, the speed dropped and dropped till we were crawling. I nervously watched the needle eke higher. Momentary breaks would get us moving fast enough to make the needle think twice, but the inevitable next clog would send it climbing again.

An irony that was hard to equivocate, however, was the mood music. Like I said, sometimes music speaks to me. But this time, Phoenix radio station 103.1 KCDC-FM (actually in Florence) was putting up tunes that the road gods had to have sent to balance out the stresses of Moby's woes. *And You And I*, one of my all-time favorite songs by Yes came on, bringing at least part of my mind back to the 70's and all the people and ways of my life back then. The very next song was Bruce Springsteen's *I'm On Fire*. They played *Perpetual Change*, also by Yes, later on. Those two Yes tunes, on one station, in the same day, would have been unbelievable in the 70's, let alone now.

I needed to get to Exit 196 for 7<sup>th</sup> Street, which, I remembered from the SW03 trip, would take me down by America West Arena and BankOne Ballpark. The latter, of course, was key because The Plan for tonight revolved around the 6:05 p.m. baseball game between the Arizona Diamondbacks and the New York Yank-Me's.

The needle was scratching the danger zone line as I steered off I-10 and down the exit ramp. Traffic there was incredibly light and cooperative. All the traffic lights were green. I was focused and hit every turn without any bad guesses. I barely stopped to grab the ticket at the parking garage, and spiraled up to the fourth level without so much as a pause. A spot in the northeast corner waved at me and I roared the Mobe right into it. The tires had barely stopped turning before I had the engine shut off and the keys in hand.

Moby needed some serious chill time, and I was in the mood for some too. A lot of sagebrush had passed these eyes since the last blast of urban life. Phoenix and San Antonio are separated by 1300 miles of thirsty earth, most of which is unpopulated. Though I prefer the peace of nature to the clamor of cities on my ramacks, a baseball game in a nice modern stadium did have quite an appeal.



Fenway Park (Boston Red Sox), Yankee Stadium (New York Yank-me's), Comiskey Park (Chicago White Sox), Wrigley Field (Chicago Cubs), Camden Yards (Baltimore Orioles), Expos Stadium (Montreal Expos), Skydome (Toronto Blue Jays), Pro Player Park (Florida Mahhlins), Fulton County Stadium (Atlanta Braves), and 3Com Park (San Francisco Giants) would now be joined by BankOne Ballpark (Arizona Diamondbacks) on the esteemed list of Major League Baseball Parks That I Have Seen A Game In (MLBPTIHSAGI). That's eleven (11) parks, if you're scoring at home. Nowhere close to the list of avid MLB chasers, but I think it's above average.

Anyway, it was a gorgeous mid-June evening in Phoenix. It was hot and dry and the blue was sky. I was knockin' back a cold Alien Amber, stretched out long and lanky in a reclined captain's chair in Moby's mid-section, enjoyin' the view of downtown Phoenix in the chilly high-altitude air of the fourth floor with the side doors wide open and the tunes blowin'. Those unwanted road stresses were done for the time being. The game was what mattered. All else could be packed up into little Tupperware containers and stored in a cool, dry place for later use. Ahhhhhh....

Totally unwound by my extraterrestrial beverage, I thought that maybe buying a ticket for the game would be a good idea. I would procure my very own ducat then go walkabout to find a pre-game saucery. So, I donned my best Hawaiian shirt, and my classic black leather cowboy hat, and headed off for the Box Office.

Box Office? Why go there? I didn't need a box. I was not going to a boxing match. I was not looking for a box seat. But I went there anyway; it's just what you do.

The first four windows were open for the general public. There were two windows on the far end that were just for Special People. They were labeled something else, of course: "Will Call" or "Reserved Claim" or some such malarkey. The skinny of it was, though, that those windows were for Special People, and I, being just an Ordinary Person would not be served there. Fine. Special up on my beehind, thank you, please. So I went into one of the four Ordinary People lines, and felt right at home.



There was one other kinda no-man's-land window there too. It had no line at all. It seemed to be repulsing people. A couple of Ordinary People went up to it, did that half-bent crouch so they could communicate to the ticket troll within, and then shook their heads and walked back to stand in line at one of the ordinary Ordinary People windows.

There was an elderly man in a ballpark staff uniform that had been standing near that window. He got his gumption up and approached me. I was wary, but willing to listen. "Are you going to the game tonight?" he asked.

Well, this was about the dumbest question ever. It was as bad as the day I was standing over the lawnmower, in the middle of the lawn, drenched in sweat, with grass clippings stuck all over me, when Ben and Zack happened to stop in traffic on the street right next to my yard. Zack leaned out the window and said in a casual howyadoin way, "Hey, Rick. Cuttin' the grass?"

I was stumped. No wiseass answer would come. There should have been a stream of them tumbling over one another out my mouth. But the question was just too dumb. I paused for a second then shook my head and laughed. It was all I could do.



This time, though, a million snappy retorts sprinted through my head, and I was ready to let fly. But he was a kindly old dude, so I simply allowed a friendly chuckle and said, "Oh, is there a game tonight?"

He had a little chuckle at his own role in that inane dialogue, and said, "Are you after good seats, or do you care where you sit?"

"I just want to get in the park," I said, "I couldn't really give a hoot about this game, other than hating the Yank-me's."

He gave me a you're-my-man look, put his hand on my elbow, as old guys always seem to do, and motioned to the no-man's-land window. "There," he said, "you can get a \$1 ticket to the game. We give out 300 of them every home game. Some radio station thing." He left out the "gall durn's" and "dagnabbit's," but I heard them in his twangy voice.

Well, I figured, if you can't get to the Remotest Seat with a \$1 ticket, then there is no hope for the world. I knew from past experience that I would spend most of the game gravitating away from the field of play, so I might as well start there too. I thanked him, gave him a good-job-Pops pat on the shoulder and went straightaway to get my buck tick.

With ticket acquired, I didn't have to walk very far to find a watering hole. As I headed west (I couldn't break that flow, I guess), the very first door on my left – entering into the stadium complex – was labeled "T.G.I.Friday's." I cocked my head to the right a little bit, for no reason that I could think of, and decided that this would be worth a go.

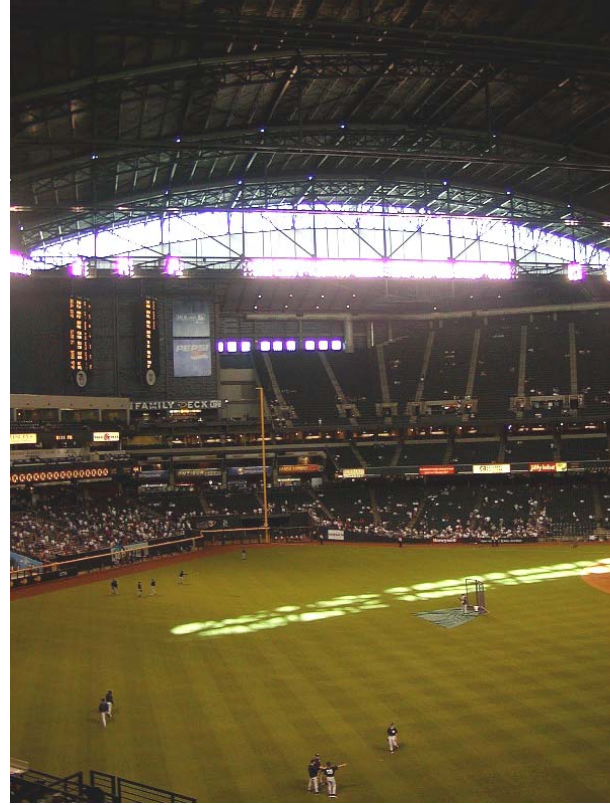
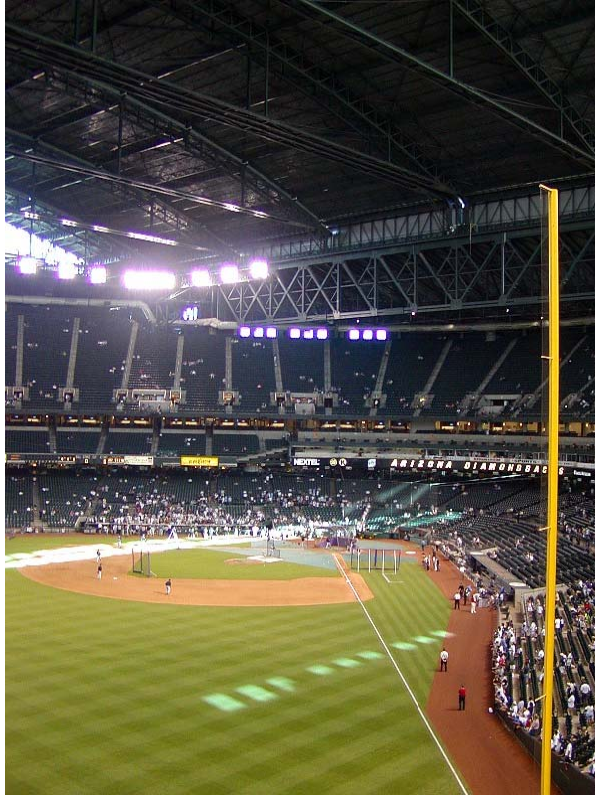
It took an elevator ride to reach it, and the place was damn crowded, which should not have been a surprise. And LOUD. Figures, with so many obnoxious Yank-me fans in there. There were way too many of them. Someone at the door should have been limiting their entry: let the rest of us in, but only so many Yank-ma fans at a time. On several occasions, I've noticed that New Yorkers in general – and I mean NYC dwellers, not the good folk of the Adirondacks and Finger Lakes, etc. – tend to feel that they own the freaking road, room, bar, store, and/or world. They have an I'm-from-NYC-so-the-hell-with-the-rest-of-you-little-putzes attitude about them. Their city is big, so therefore, they feel they deserve big treatment. Yank me.



Soon, the crowd around the bar was starting to get on my nerves. The Brooklyn accents were grating, and the laughs were too loud, and the elbows were usurping way too much bar space. So I retreated to the far end of the room, which was very cool indeed. The restaurant section was long and wide and sat behind a wall of tall windows that overlooked left field. There was even an outdoor balcony section so you could hang

out and hear the sounds of the park instead of the obnoxious of the New Squawkers. Thither I went to drink my beer in peace and snap a few pix.

The retractable roof was closed. This struck me as a bit odd, given that it was absolutely beautiful out. I could see why they'd want to have a closable roof, with day games under a scorching 117° sun, but this was a lovely evening, with, obviously, no inclement weather imminent.



The game would be the first meeting between the D'Backs and the Yank-me's since Arizona, led by Curt Schilling and Randy Johnson, had triumphed over the Evil Empire in the 2001 World Series. Anticipation ran high, even though the D'Backs had not been lighting up the NL thus far.

The game would bear that out too, unfortunately. The Yank-me's scored early but not too often, and used a late surge to pull away to an easy win. The home team was putrid. Their only offense came from the bat of pinch hitter Andy Green, wearing #1, who made his first Major League hit count big-time by smacking a two-run dinger down the line in left to cut the deficit to 3-2 in the sixth. But that was it. Everyone else sucked.

But that was OK, apart from being aggravated by the gloating of the Yank-me fans. I wasn't there for the thrill of the game; I was there to enjoy the pastoral aspects of the event, and to add another stadium to the aforementioned list.



I had returned to Moby from Friday's before heading in to the actual game. Beer was cheaper in the van, and there were no New Yorkers to irritate me.

I hadn't been there very long, but when I got back to the ballpark, and went to find my seat, I noticed that things seemed quite a bit brighter. The roof had been opened! Nice!

Then I found my assigned seat, waaaaaay up in the right field upper deck, with the low and blinding sunlight squarely in

my eyes. I had my hat on, so I just pulled down the brim and mustered up my best Clint Eastwood look.

My seat was up there, for sure, but it was not the Remotest Seat. A quick reconnoiter located that coveted chair. It was one section to my right, and tucked up in the top corner. But it, like the three next to it, was taken. Someone else beat me to the punch. Fucker.

So, I sat there dwelling on it for a while, and trying to determine what would be the next best thing. The sun provided the answer.

As it sank lower and lower towards the western rim of the stadium, the bottom rows of my section slipped into shadow. When the sun was almost at my row, I decided it was time to go up. If I couldn't be in the Remotest Seat, I could damn well be in the last row and squeeze the pulp out of the last rays of sunshine.

I climbed the stands and enjoyed the setting sun for another inning or so. By the time it finally got down to its last hurrah, I had navigated to what would be the last seat in the sunlight: Section 302, Row 32, Seat 10. There was a short wall behind me, which I stood on top of, kinda dancin' away and diggin' the last rays. I hoped some TV camera would pick me up, and I'd be on SportsCenter, but I don't think that happened. Too bad; it would've been a cool shot.

If you go back about 10-11 paragraphs, you can see where I was in the right-hand photo. That last window on the right is where I was standing, right in that window frame.



There were some cool things about BankOne Ballpark, like the swimming pool behind the right field fence, for instance. And between innings, to get the crowd going, they showed a Cheers scene on the big screen: the one where Norm is tapping a pencil, which gets Sam drumming, and Woody clapping until the whole bar is chanting "We will, we will ROCK YOU!" It was a good effect.

But, if you know me, you know that there were a few things that kinda put a bug in my butt. For one, there were vendors roaming the stands with trays full of Krispy Kreme doughnuts. My God, have we come to this? Must we now have doughnuts at an evening event? Was the common hot dog not unhealthy enough? That really frosted my shorts.

But on a more individual and personal level, there was another vendor incident. This one involved beer, so you know it was dear to my heart.

At some point, before I moved way up to Row 32, I went down under the stands to purchase a cold, refreshing beverage. I had braced myself for the usual Bud, Miller Lite, Michelob Ultra crap, though I held hope that there may be some microbrew like there had been at the other newer parks I had been to, like Camden Yards and 3Com Park.

Well, as luck would have it, Fat Tire Amber Ale was available on tap. Serendipity, baby, sign me up.

But, as luck would also have it, the woman behind the counter was on her first day on the job. According to the menu sign, my "Big Cup" (about 24 ounces, so it was aptly named), should have been \$4.75, like other domestic bevs. When she rang up \$6.50 for an import, I had to call shenanigans on her. I pointed out that Fat Tire, being brewed just one state over, in Utah, hardly qualified as an import. Import meant that it crossed national borders, not merely state lines. I was half joking, but, at the same time, felt like I was being pinched.

Well, this flustered the living shit out of the fat, stupid wench. She actually said to me, "Well, I don't know how to void it, so why don't you just pay the higher price." Dumbass bitch.



Had she chuckled at my remark, I would have relented with good cheer and ponied up. I knew that a Fat Tire would not cost the same as a Bud, but if they're gonna post a sign, they have to live by what it says. And her blatantly ignorant reply just struck the wrong chord in this cowpoke, and I settled in for a tiff.

Trouble was, she had already handed me the beer, and I was already sipping it while she was struggling with the register. Her co-worker came over, and we went through the thing all over again. She was just as clueless and just as hostile. This would have made a good comedy skit, but nobody would have written in such moronic characters. A small line was starting to form behind me, but the register was so jammed now, that nobody could have been served anyway. I suggested to them that they try the next station over "because this might take a while."

The manager finally arrived on the scene to save the day. She was an efficient looking twat. She turned her magic key to clear the register, practically shoved Orca out of the way, and proclaimed, "\$5.75, please."

"Huh? WTF did that come from?" I asked, actually using the initials, and scanning at the posted prices, which listed no such thing. It actually was a suitable compromise, and if her demeanor had been less Nazi, I probably would have paid it.

"That's our Premium Domestic price," she said coldly, clearly not relishing our dialogue as much as I was.

"I don't see any 'Premium Domestic' on your sign," I said kindly, "Are you just making that up?" By now, my beer was half-finished. I toyed with the idea of putting it down on the counter and saying, "Never mind, I don't want it then," but that would have been over the top, even for me.

"NO, sir," she insisted, steam beginning to seep from under her collar.

"Well," I said with a friendly smile, somehow feeling justified in this stupid exchange, "I bought a domestic, and your sign says that should cost \$4.75. So here's \$5.00, and you can keep the change as a tip." I guess I figured I deserved the discount for the aggravation of having to put up with Orca and her barracuda cohorts. And I strolled off. I'm sure the manager just hit "void" and pocketed the finner as justification for her own aggravation. In fact, I'd be disappointed in her if she didn't.

Yeah, I know, I was being a dickhead, but WTF. Fix your sign, bitches.

I did not stay for the end of the game. I mean, I didn't give a rooster's rectum about the outcome, and the California border wasn't exactly coming to *me*, so it was off to Moby and off to some virgin territory on I-10 West .

I fairly impressed myself, in fact. I zipped out of the garage, and knew exactly what roads to take without even reading the signs. And I was in freaking Phoenix, dude. Damn good memory, I thought, from just one very short prior visit.

I-10W from Phoenix was new ground again. There were signs to Los Angeles. The highway was wide and surprisingly crowded. Again, I underestimated a city. With 1.3 million people, Phoenix is even bigger than San Antonio, ranking sixth in the US. It holds 24.2% of Arizona's population. Only New York City (41.8%), Anchorage (40.4%) and Honolulu (29.2%) house more of their states' residents. We've already discussed Phoenix's population growth. You should have those figures in your notes. And, yes, it will be on the test.

Anyhoo, it was about 9:30 Arizona non-daylight time, and those who had lingered in the city after work, or those who worked till 9:00, were headin' out to their suburban or rural homes. Hence, there was traffic, and its behavior was predominantly dumb, and it was irking

me. I had two gauges crying for attention – low gas and high temperature (wish I could have just reversed them) – so a gas station stop was in order. I needed ice anyway.

While I was filling up, topping off and loading up, that same radio station played *Avenging Annie*, followed by *Sugar Magnolia*, followed by *Learning To Fly*. It was like a Best of Rick's Misc's Day on Phoenix radio. Sweetness.

About twenty miles west of there, I passed through the town of Tonopah. This was 2<sup>nd</sup> base on the Little Feat Tour, though I didn't take notice of it, since I didn't know all the lyrics yet. I wouldn't find that out until after I got home, then checked the Rand to see if I had, indeed, hit for the cycle by going through here. Clearly, I was delighted to find that I had. It gave me a sense of accomplishment. The fact that it was unwitting and pointless accomplishment had no bearing on my feeling: accomplishment is accomplishment.

Right around Tonopah, a highway sign indicated that the California border was just 95 miles away. I looked at my clock. It was 10:33. If I could cover 95 miles in 87 minutes, I could be in The Golden State by midnight. The race was on!

There was absolutely no reason for this haste. Making it to CA by midnight was totally irrelevant and had no value. But it was a goal, a new quest, and I was *going* to do it! I was practically giddy at the prospect.

It would be an easy mark, too. A mere 66 MPH average would get it done, so it wasn't like Moby had to set any records along the way. But, you know, it was dead black dark out, I had just gone past the 3000-mile mark of the trip, with the last 1500 of that through empty desert, so any distraction or diversion that would keep me entertained and rockin' onward with enthusiasm was a good thing.

With about 30 miles left in AZ, Moby crested a rise, and a sea of lights appeared ahead. It looked like some massive bridge at the town of Quartzsite. A long line of cars was streaming across it and coming in my direction. Was this some river? A highway overpass? And, if so, over what? My curiosity was peaked.

But Quartzsite was not as spectacular up close. What I had seen turned out to be just a thin line of lights, but the way the road angled towards me made it look like freaking Vegas from a distance.

The thing that was really weird about this place, though, was that it was the junction of highways 95 and 95. 95 and 95. Now, that's gotta mess up some people. Arizona state highway 95 comes down straight from the north into Quartzsite and smacks dead on into US highway 95, which comes up from the south before bouncing off AZ-95 and piggybacking I-10 till it wanders north from the town of East Blythe, CA.

Neither of these two roads, of course, have anything to with I-95, along the east coast; this US- 95 is one of those old, leftover interstates, the ones with the white-and-black shield signs. Before the federal Interstate Highway Network was built -- with their snazzy red-white-and-blue emblems and their neat north-south-odd, east-west even numbering system -- any highway that crossed state lines was accurately termed an "interstate highway" and the maintenance was shared accordingly. The signage was never changed, so we have interstates and Interstates, which, of course, are usually just plain I's.

A long dark stretch came after the brief flurry of intrigue at Quartzsite, and very lengthy down slope gave Moby an easy ride to the border. The same could not be said for the truckers on the other side: there were many, and they had been climbing for miles. From where I sat, zooming by in the opposite direction, they looked like they were down to about 25 MPH. A few cars were flying by in the passing lane. And those poor trucking bastards had a few miles of steep climb left to conquer. They must dread that shit.

We hit the California border at 11:51. Nine minutes to spare. Whew.



Just inside the border, there was one of those damn agricultural Inspection Stations, so, unlike leaving Tahoe on RR2K, I consented to stop for this one. There was one lane for trucks, and three lanes for cars. However, there were no green arrows illuminated on those lanes, just red X's. The only lane open was the truck lane? How dumb is that?

So I weaseled my way into line among the big rigs and waited my turn. When I got to booth, though, the "inspector" had this exasperated look on his face, like "wrong line, douche, move along, get outa the way."

Naturally, when I had been next in line, some other inspector appeared, strolled into the last booth and turned a green arrow on. Probably just got outa the can. Screw them all anyway; I was plantless.

Ten miles into California, there was still no sign of any mile markers signs or speed limit signs. That was strannnge. Ten miles is long time to go without that kind of sign. I felt unguided, abandoned, adrift on an asphalt sea. Even the lone exit off the highway simply said, "Exit" on a temporary sign with no number at all, not even "Exit 1," and indication where it led to.

One of the few signs that *was* posted was a double-sign that seemed a bit amusing. The top, large, green sign read "STATE PRISON, NEXT EXIT." The smaller, yellow sign that hung below it read, "Don't pick up hitchhikers." Hmmm.

There had been a rest area in the final miles of Arizona, but I eschewed it in favor of reaching my westernmost state. The first California rest area was 27 miles inside the state line. I knew I could handle another 21 minutes of driving. The road was late-night empty, Moby was rollin' along happy, and the enthusiasm of reaching the border on time was still fresh.

Twenty-six miles later, however, there was a sign: REST AREA, 1 MILE – **CLOSED**.

What?? How the hell can you close a rest area? I mean, close the bathrooms if you have to, but the whole place??

But, sure enough, it was all gated and barreled and barricaded. A line of slumbering eighteen-wheelers extended along the shoulder for at least a half-mile west. This was definitely a fly in the ointment.

After another half-hour or so, that shoulder was starting to look pretty good to me. But a sign for an exit appeared: DESERT CENTER, 1 MILE. I had to laugh: talk about the middle of nowhere, this was the center of the desert.

Semi's lined both sides of this exit ramp, and both sides of SR-177 to boot. There was a large parking area filled tightly with the sleeping behemoths, and I squeezed Moby into a space under a small tree where no big rig had been able to fit.

At 12:45 a.m., after a 543-mile day, I crawled into the Belly o' th' Whale for another great night's sleep. You fall asleep pretty easily after a 500-mile day, I've found, and this night would not even require fans; the desert air was cool enough to use a sheet.

Road Romp '04 had covered 3197 miles so far, and still had a very long way to go.