

The Great Basin – A Region of Surprising Beauty and Fascinating History

As is my tradition following the conference I took two weeks to visit a part of this country I'm not very familiar with and this year I chose to spend that time driving around the Great Basin, which for those of you who didn't do so well in geography, is comprised of portions of Utah, Nevada, Idaho, and Oregon where all of the rivers and streams drain inland and have no outlet to the sea. I packed my Jeep and headed north on Interstate 15 over Cajon Pass which is the main line for the Union Pacific and BNSF freight trains heading east from the harbors of Los Angeles and Long Beach hauling everything from cars and computers to fruit and vegetables.



Union Pacific freight train – Cajon Summit

The traffic on the freeway was heavy as most people were heading to Las Vegas, so when I turned off I-15 at Barstow and on to I-40 the driving became a lot easier and I could relax now, feeling much more like I was really on vacation. Interstate 40 parallels the historic Route 66 and there are many places where one can take a short detour to still drive the classic old road.



Crossing the Mojave Desert

It was a long drive across the heart of the Mojave Desert in blistering heat that reached 115 degrees in Needles as I crossed the mighty Colorado River and headed for Kingman, Arizona. Just beyond the Arizona border one couldn't miss a large sign advertising the "Roadkill 66 Café" in Kingman. Crossing the northern Arizona desert, I saw many mile long freight trains stretched out end to end as if one long line. Soon I was climbing into the Pinyon Pine and Juniper forest above 5000 feet elevation and a welcome cooling trend from the heat of the desert below. At the base of the White Mountains near Williams, Arizona the highway entered the Kaibab National Forest with its beautiful tall Ponderosa Pines and lovely green meadows. I took the exit for Williams and found the *Grand Canyon Railroad Hotel* near the old Santa Fe Railroad Station and only two blocks from the historic Route 66 in the center of town. After checking in I took a stroll around the old railroad depot and got some photos of the old Santa Fe steam locomotive No. 928 that once hauled freight and passengers from the main line in Williams to the south rim of the Grand Canyon but was retired from service in 1964. Nearby were some beautifully refurbished Santa Fe railroad passenger cars, including several dome observation cars that are now used on the Grand Canyon Railroad. A local family bought the track and the rolling stock from the Santa Fe Railroad after the line had been abandoned in the late 1940's. As the sun

was setting over the White Mountains the massive thunderstorm clouds began to take on a gorgeous pink and orange glow which contrasted with the deep blue sky above.



Grand Canyon Railroad – Williams, Arizona



Thunderstorm – Williams, Arizona

For dinner I went to *Spencer's Pub* in the hotel for a cold pint of locally brewed "Grand Canyon Pale Ale" and a delicious BBQ chicken pizza. *Spencer's* featured a majestic, solid oak bar that was originally made for the "Lion's Den" pub in Shepherd's Bush in west London around 1886 and ended up in an antique shop in New Orleans before being purchased by the family that operates the Grand Canyon Railroad. After dinner I walked over to Main Street (old Route 66) and found the Grand Canyon Brewery for another Pale Ale. As I headed back to the hotel, I heard some really good music coming from a Mexican restaurant named "Jose MacGuillicuddy's" where a musician named Calvin Kristofferson was playing his original compositions as well as songs by artists such as Willy Nelson, Johnny Cash and even the Beatles. Before leaving I bought his one and only CD. The next morning, I walked around the old town of Williams along Route 66 and took photos of the small shops that all trace their origin to the time when Route 66 was known as the "Mother Road" by everyone travelling from LA to Chicago.



There's even an historical monument on one corner of Main Street that recalls the place where the last traffic light existed between LA and Chicago before Interstate Highway 40 was finally completed. As the Grand Canyon train pulled into the station, a "wild west" show was presented to get all the passengers in the spirit of the time. At 9:15am sharp the conductor yelled "All Aboard" and we were greeted by our car attendant named Jack who was a very funny and gracious server throughout our trip to the Grand Canyon. I was seated at the rear of the train in the Parlor Car that had been carefully refurbished in the grand style of the 1950's when train travel reached its height in luxury, including an open vestibule platform where one could stand outside and have a wonderful view of the scenery passing by.



Parlor Car – Grand Canyon Railroad

I spent a great deal of time outside on the vestibule during the two-and-a-half-hour journey as the train made its way through Ponderosa Pine forests, grasslands, and desert before reaching the original Santa Fe railroad station at the south rim. Jack was very friendly and obviously loved his job as he gave us the "safety briefing" and his five good reasons for starting the day with a drink from his bar. There was also a complimentary continental breakfast on board. At one point as the train rolled along through the grasslands, a Pronghorn Antelope suddenly started running behind the train, almost as if he was racing us, and he was doing a good job keeping up with the train traveling at 40mph.



View from the vestibule at the rear of the train

Soon we arrived at the south rim of the Grand Canyon, and I took a long walk of several miles along the Rim Trail that clings to the edge of the canyon and affords some of the most spectacular views. No matter how many times one may see the canyon it never fails to inspire awe and wonder. Then I headed back to the El Tovar Lodge for lunch in the old dining room where Leslie and I spent some time many years ago.



Grand Canyon railroad station



View from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon

Before boarding the train for the return trip to Williams we were fortunate to see a performance of two Hopi dancers doing a traditional ritual harvest dance in full costume. On the way back to Williams Jack kept us entertained with his stories and “happy hour” at his bar, along with complimentary Champagne and appetizers. Suddenly we spotted several men on horses riding alongside the train and Jack informed us they were intent on robbing the passengers. The train slowed to a stop, the masked bandits boarded and proceeded to ask for “donations” to the local charity! Soon the Sheriff arrived, rounded up the robbers, and carted them off to jail. It was all in good fun and everyone had a great time, especially when the Sheriff invited the robbers to a “necktie party”, to which one of the robbers responded “Oh, I didn’t know it would be a formal affair”. As I was leaving the train in Williams, I overheard an older couple from Delaware say, “we get along better in the car on vacation than we do at home”. That evening, back in Williams I had a cold pint of Grand Canyon Pale Ale at Spencer’s Bar and then a fabulous dinner of BBQ baby back ribs at Jose MacGuillicuddy’s while I listened to the songs of Calvin Kristofferson. The following morning, I drove to Flagstaff through the beautiful Ponderosa Pine forest with views of the San Francisco Peaks in the distance and ended up making a wrong turn that took me up into the mountains where I discovered the fascinating Pioneer Museum featuring an exhibit of the old “Southwest Lumber Company” logging railroad.



Ponderosa Pine forest near Flagstaff, Arizona

Driving northeast from Flagstaff, the landscape slowly changed from Ponderosa Pine forest to grassland, and to desert as the elevation dropped significantly. Passing through Tuba City I noticed a new museum dedicated to the history

and culture of the Navajo people on whose land I was now travelling. Just outside of town was a large billboard advertising the “View Hotel” in Monument Valley and it looked like the ideal place to spend the night, so I got out my cell phone, called the hotel, and was able to book one of the last rooms they had available. As it turned out the hotel was perched atop a high ridge overlooking the valley and my room was on the top floor with a balcony that afforded me a spectacular view of the entire Monument Valley. It was like a scene straight out of a classic Hollywood western movie! The hotel is so well designed to integrate with the natural landscape that it’s difficult to see it from the valley below, which is a credit to the environmental commitment of the Navajo Nation. As the evening approached, I sat on my balcony and watched the huge storms pass over the valley in a spectacular display of thunder and lightning. A little while later the sun broke free and the valley was bathed in the soft afterglow of the sunset, and suddenly a beautiful rainbow appeared for a brief moment which I was fortunate enough to capture on film.

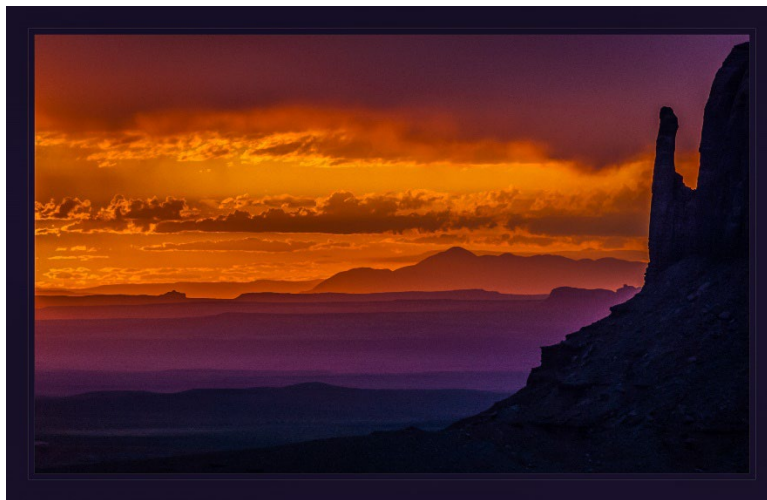


The “View Hotel”



Rainbow in Monument Valley

Then I headed for the restaurant for a traditional Navajo meal of “Green Chili Stew” and “Navajo Fry Bread” which was delicious. When I finished the stew, I had the rest of the Fry Bread with some of the local cactus honey and it was a fantastic way to end dinner as I looked out over the valley now shining under a full moon. Back on my balcony, as the skies had cleared, I had an incredible view of millions of stars and the Milky Way galaxy – this had to be the best view I’ve ever had from a hotel room!



Sunrise over Monument Valley

Although there was a wonderful sunrise over the valley, the next morning did not begin well at all as I started up my Jeep and discovered fuel gushing out from under the hood just a few miles down the road from the hotel. Once I opened the hood it was clear that I was going nowhere until it was repaired, but the closest town was over 20 miles away and there was no cell phone service in this remote corner of Arizona. So, I started walking back to the hotel and luckily one of the locals from the Navajo tribe offered me a ride. (none of the tourists bothered to stop) It took some time to contact AAA and verify my membership, but once that was done, I was told a tow truck would be arriving in a couple of hours since the closest service was 90 miles away. As it ended up the tow truck took me to the small town of Kayenta just 20 miles away and the local mechanic, Dennis, fixed the problem in 5 minutes with a new gasket in the

fuel injection line for \$20.00 but I had now lost more than 5 hours of the day. Back on the road I headed for Natural Bridges National Monument where there are three of the largest natural stone bridges in the world.



Natural Bridges National Monument - Utah

The area is an amazing geological phenomenon that was made even more dramatic by the heavy thunderstorms overhead. Driving north on highway 261 I came upon an ominous sign that read “not recommended for trucks, RV, bus, or vehicles towing trailers – 5mph switchbacks, 10% grade, unpaved road 22 miles ahead”! But as far as I could see at this point the road was flat and paved, so I wondered what I would find ahead of me. Well, 20 minutes later I came to the base of an escarpment of sheer cliffs over 1500 feet high known as Cedar Mesa. It was here that the road became nothing more than a rough dirt track that climbed up the side of the cliffs in a series of very steep switchbacks, and 5mph was pushing the limit! Turns out this portion of highway 261 is an old mining road known as the “Moki Dugout” because it was literally carved out of the side of the cliffs. Once I reached the top of Cedar Mesa the landscape was one of beautiful rolling hills covered with Pinyon Pine and Juniper and the view looking back to the south was incredible.



Utah Highway 261 – “Moki Dugout”



View of southern Utah from the top of Cedar Mesa

Later, further north I ran into some very strong thunderstorms before pulling into the city of Moab as the sun broke through to highlight the gorgeous red sandstone cliffs surrounding the town. I checked into the River Canyon Lodge and then found a nice place for dinner called Eddie McStiff’s where I ordered a delicious prime rib and a cold pint of local Utah Pale Ale. (Utah law requires you order food to be served any alcohol) As I returned to the River Canyon Lodge for the night, a small group of tourists from France were arriving on board their Harleys as part of a cross-country motorcycle expedition. The next morning, I drove to Arches National Park just northwest of Moab under beautiful sunny skies that brought out the brilliant red and orange colors of the spectacular rock formations. As I hiked among some of the most famous of the formations I was overwhelmed by the size and beauty of them and I remember thinking that it’s one thing to see them in a travel brochure, but the reality is far beyond words.



The "Cathedral Rocks" – Arches National Park



"Delicate Arch"

From Arches I headed southwest to Canyonlands National Park, a high plateau and maze of deep canyons formed as the Green River flows into the Colorado River. The view of the rivers meeting from the top of the plateau at "Grand View Overlook" was stunning, and especially so with all the thunderstorms in the area. From the overlook the summit of the San Francisco Peaks north of Flagstaff were visible more than 100 miles away.



Canyonlands National Park – and the Green River

Leaving Canyonlands National Park I travelled north to the small town of Green River, so named because it spans the river at one of the few places where a bridge could be built successfully. Here I found a nice room at the *River Terrace Motel* on the banks of the river and surrounded by huge old Cottonwood trees that shaded a lovely stone terrace overlooking the river.



Overlooking the Green River

That evening, I had a great dinner at the *Tamarisk Restaurant* next to the motel where I enjoyed charcoal grilled chicken breast topped with melted Monterey Jack cheese, fresh tomato, avocado, and Hollandaise sauce, together with huge crispy onion rings and baked potato. The cold glass of local Cutthroat Pale Ale went very well with dinner. After dinner I sat on my hotel room balcony and watched the bats swooping around the parking lot lights catching insects as people drove in to the motel and KOA campground across the way, totally unaware of the bats. I believe the bats preferred it that way too! After a hearty breakfast at the hotel the next morning, I headed west on I-70 to the junction with highway 24 south to Hanksville and along the way there were great views of the 11,000-foot Henry Mountains in the distance. From Hanksville the highway followed the Fremont River to the abandoned Mormon farming community of “Fruita” where old apple and pear orchards are still tended for their fruit that is free for the picking. Just west of the old town is Capitol Reef National Monument with an amazing geologic story of the rise of an ancient sea more than 65 million years ago that deposited huge numbers of sea creatures in a reef more than 100 miles long and now exposed in beautiful red and orange rock formations. The Park Ranger at the Visitor Center told us the fascinating history of the area, both geology and the culture.



Capitol Reef National Monument

Leaving Capitol Reef I turned on to highway 12 and proceeded to climb up through the Dixie National Forest and the thick Ponderosa Pine forest to the top of Boulder Mountain, a long ridge at 9600 feet elevation stretching for more than 20 miles before descending to the small town of Boulder in a rich framing valley along the Escalante River. Here also is the archeological site of an ancient settlement of the Anastazi people who lived here a thousand years ago. Beyond Boulder the highway traversed a sharp, narrow “hogback” ridge, sometimes barely wide enough for the width of the road where the steep slopes of the canyons on either side dropped 800 to 1000 feet straight down. Definitely not a road for anyone with a fear of heights!



Top of Boulder Mountain - Dixie National Forest

Soon I came to the bottom of the Escalante Canyon and the Calf Creek Recreation Area where I hiked up to the head of the canyon to see the Escalante Falls. The 12-mile roundtrip was brutal in the 100-degree heat along the sandy trail, but when I finally reached the 128 ft high falls it was all worth the effort.



Escalante Canyon

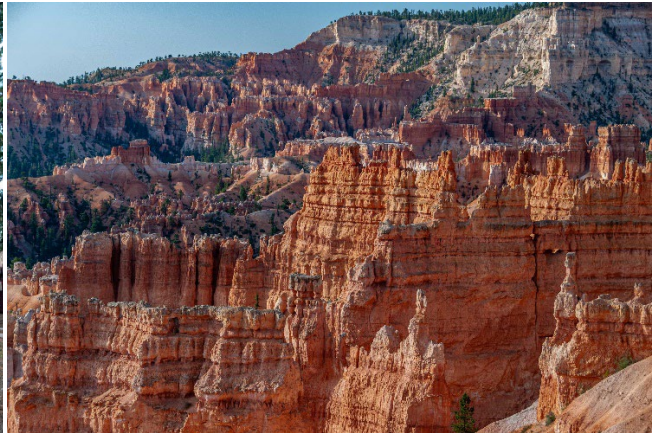


Calf Creek Falls

Leaving Escalante I continued on highway 12 past the Vermillion Cliffs to the entrance of Bryce Canyon National Park. It was now early in the evening, and I was debating whether to try to stay at the Bryce Canyon Lodge, which my guidebook said must be reserved months in advance or drive on to Cedar City more than 3 hours away. I decided to go for the lodge and was lucky enough to get a small cabin amongst the lovely Ponderosa Pine forest less than 100 yards from the rim of the canyon. After photographing a beautiful sunset over the canyon, I had dinner in the old lodge which was built in the early 1920's not long after the canyon was discovered by local ranchers. The restaurant served a large portion of cornbread crusted chicken breast topped with sautéed country ham and succotash and it was absolutely delicious. After a very peaceful night's sleep with the wind softly whispering in the tall pine trees, I had a hearty breakfast of eggs and bacon and then headed down the park road to Rainbow Point where at 9600-foot elevation one can see almost all of southern Utah and northern Arizona, including part of the Grand Canyon. It was really a spectacular view, made even more so with the beautiful, almost translucent, pink rock formations known as "hoodoos".



Cabin at Bryce Canyon Lodge



"Hoodoos" – Bryce Canyon National Park

From Bryce Canyon I drove through the Dixie National Forest and past some brilliant red sandstone formations that made up the Cedar Breaks National Monument and descended from the 10,000-foot summit to the valley floor at 5,000 feet before arriving in Cedar City, a major town in southern Utah. After doing a resupply, I headed north on highway 130 through vast grasslands and desert to Milford, a forgotten little town along the Union Pacific main line, where the old steam locomotives used to stop and stock up on coal and water for the long journey to Salt Lake City. But now the big diesel engines don't need to stop in Milford and all that remains are memories of the era of steam.



Cedar Breaks National Monument

Late in the afternoon I was headed northwest on highway 130 across a very dry and lonely part of western Utah over two mountain ranges and through a dust storm toward the Nevada border and Great Basin National Park. As I arrived in the little town of Baker, Nevada a strong thunderstorm struck with a torrential downpour, lightning and thunder which turned the whole area into a brief flood zone. Just a couple miles away the sun was shining, and the landscape was as dry as a bone – such is the capricious nature of weather in the desert.

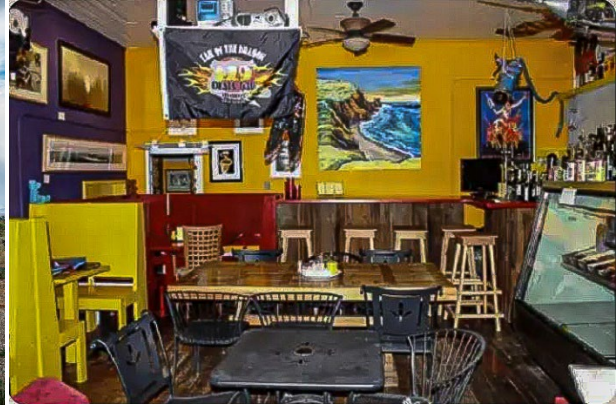


Thunderstorm in the Nevada desert

Looking at the map and seeing that the next nearest town was Ely more than 60 miles away, I decided to stay at the one and only motel in Baker, *Silver Jack's Inn*, which was pretty basic, but dry. Silver Jack also had a small eating establishment in town called the "Lectrolux Café", so named for the old Electrolux canister vacuum cleaner hanging from the ceiling as if it were some hippy form of a chandelier. The place looked like it had been a general store at one time in the past and it had 3 wooden booths, a large dining room table in the center and a sofa in the corner. The portions of homemade green chili stew and spicy chicken burrito were both huge and delicious. Silver Jack was a bit eccentric but definitely a good cook.



Silver Jack's Inn – Baker, Nevada



“Llectrolux Café”

That night I sat outside the motel room in the quiet warm evening with a slight breeze and millions of stars across the night sky. It's said that this area of the country has the cleanest air in the entire lower 48 and this night was clearly so. The next morning under beautiful clear skies I entered the Great Basin National Park and drove up the 18-mile-long Wheeler Peak Scenic Drive, a very steep 8% grade from 6,000 feet elevation at the Visitor Center to just over 10,000 feet at the base of Wheeler Peak (elevation 13,063 ft). Needless to say, the views looking north and east across the desert below were spectacular, almost like being in an airplane but with your feet on the ground.



Wheeler Peak (elevation 13,063 ft) – Great Basin National Park

From the end of the road, I hiked up the Bristlecone Pine – Glacier Trail through thick Spruce and Fir forest before it opened out into a large rocky basin at the foot of Wheeler Peak where the Bristlecone Pines grow in small stands at the very edge of the tree line. Not far from the main trail was a large grove of Bristlecone Pine trees that were more than 3,000 years old, their trunks had weathered to a brilliant red color that contrasted sharply with their deep green needles.



Bristlecone Pine



Wheeler Peak and snowfields

Further up the trail beyond the tree line were several permanent snowfields and surprisingly a small remnant of the alpine glacier that had carved the mountain peaks over 10,000 years ago. On my way back down the mountain I took a short detour to see two 10,000-foot-high alpine lakes that were formed as the old glaciers retreated. The entire area of forests, meadows, streams and lakes surrounding Wheeler Peak make it truly an ecological “island” in the great expanse of the western desert.



Alpine lake below Wheeler Peak

From Great Basin National Park, I drove north to the town of Ely which originated during the heyday of silver and gold mining in northeast Nevada and is now home to one of the largest working steam railroads in the country, the *Nevada Northern Railroad*. Being Sunday, it was closed so I decided to stay over until the next day in order to book a ride on the old steam train. Just a block south of the railroad depot I discovered the *Steptoe Valley Inn Bed & Breakfast*, a beautiful place that once was the main general store in town during the turn of the century. I checked into a lovely room with a balcony overlooking the Steptoe Valley and the peaks of the 11,000-foot-high Schell Creek Range.



Steptoe Valley Inn B&B – Ely, Nevada

Dinner that evening was a huge Elk burger at the Silver State Restaurant, a small diner downtown on Main street. Two guys in the booth next to me spent the entire time discussing the finer points of baling hay! I spent the rest of the evening sitting on the veranda at the Steptoe Valley Inn sipping a cold beer and enjoying the cool breeze coming down from the mountains. I woke up early the next morning to a fabulous breakfast of fresh cantaloupe, scrambled eggs, bacon, potatoes, and French toast that was made from fresh baked bread dipped in an egg and heavy cream batter with shredded orange peel and served with orange butter and maple syrup – a dish to die for! Then I headed down the street to the Railroad Depot, bought a ticket on the train and spent the next hour walking around the train yard exploring the old buildings where the locomotives are repaired, and railcars serviced. I was fortunate enough to be there when the crew moved No. 93, a 2-8-0 Baldwin steam locomotive built in 1923, out into the yard to load her tender with coal and water for the trip to the abandoned copper mining town of Ruth. Later, as I boarded the train, the conductor asked if anyone wanted to ride in the caboose and I naturally said yes, so I joined another guy as we were

escorted to the caboose and given the history of the old car. I sat topside and had a great view of the locomotive and the route ahead.



Steam locomotive No. 93



Nevada Northern Railroad Depot – Ely, Nevada

The journey took us up a steep grade west of Ely to the old Ruth cooper mine through two short tunnels – the heavy black smoke from the locomotive must have almost suffocated the folks who had chosen to sit in the open flat car! Throughout the trip we passed lots of old mining equipment and abandoned mining camps that started to give us a feeling for what the region must have looked like a hundred years ago.



Arriving back in Ely

Once back in town I drove south on a rough gravel road to *Ward Charcoal Kilns State Historical Park* where I discovered a dozen 30-foot-high grey brick domes that look like giant beehives with a small door at the base and a small opening at the top. They were in use for many years to produce charcoal from the surrounding forest during the height of the mining activity at the turn of the century. They were built by Italian masons over 130 years ago and are still in remarkable condition.



Ward Charcoal Kilns State Historical Park

From Ely I headed north on US 93 through the Steptoe Valley with the magnificent Ruby Mountains on one side and the Humboldt Mountain Range on the other toward the town of Elko, hub of northern Nevada. The valley has a surprisingly large number of green and fertile agricultural regions irrigated by the water from the nearby mountains trapped in small lakes on the valley floor. Nevada is certainly not one large barren desert for sure, and the weather has been very comfortable with daytime temperature in the low 90's and nighttime in the low 60's.



Steptoe Valley farmland and the Humboldt Mountains

Just outside of Elko is a monument to one of the many Pony Express way stations that formed the overland mail route from Kansas City to San Francisco in the mid 1800's. Thirty miles southeast of Elko, high up in the Ruby Mountains is the scenic Lamoille Canyon with its jagged peaks, permanent snowfields, and classic glacier carved valleys – almost like the Swiss Alps in Nevada! At the head of the canyon, I hiked up to a lovely alpine meadow covered with wildflowers in bloom below snowcapped peaks that made me feel like I was anywhere but in Nevada!



Lamoille Canyon – Ruby Mountains

Back in Elko I visited “Sherman Station”, a collection of old log cabins that formed the first permanent settlement in northern Nevada and a wealth of local history. Then I was on the road again headed north on highway 225 across a 6,000-foot-high plateau of sagebrush and Pinyon Pine toward the Idaho border and the Duck Valley Indian Reservation. Just south of the reservation is a high ridge separating the north fork of the Humboldt River from the head waters of the Owyhee River where I found the “Wild Horse” dam and a beautiful lake framed by the rugged mountains of the Humboldt Range.



Wild Horse Lake – Owyhee River

The highway dropped down into a steep narrow canyon following the twisting course of the Owyhee River for the next 10 miles before ending up at the small town of Owyhee, the headquarters of the Shoshone - Paiute tribes. As I crossed the border into Idaho and back into the Mountain Time Zone the landscape became gentler with rolling hills of sagebrush and valleys of short grass and occasional Cottonwood trees. I saw a road sign for the town of Grasmere 37 miles ahead, but later as I came over a small hill and saw the sign “entering Grasmere”, the only thing I could see were three dilapidated old wooden buildings, all abandoned with a crudely painted sign saying, “4 Sale”. From this point the nearest town to the north is Bruneau, Idaho 45 miles away and the town of Owyhee, Nevada 37 miles south, so why would anyone be interested in buying the “town” of Grasmere?



Town of Grasmere, Idaho (4 Sale)



Thunderstorm approaching Boise, Idaho

South of Mountain Home I crossed the mighty Snake River where there were huge expanses of deep green irrigated fields. Then it was on to Boise where I planned to stop for the night, but not before encountering a strong thunderstorm with a brief burst of heavy rain and wind. I managed to get a lovely room overlooking the Boise River at the DoubleTree Hotel near downtown and savored a delicious dinner of chargrilled Tilapia topped with shrimp and crab, along with a cold pint of Landshark Lager as I sat outside on the bank of the river. The next day I drove west to Nampa, the epicenter of Idaho potato processing, and then turned south on to county highway 45 and the little town of Murphy, population 78, the county seat of the largest county in Idaho, Owyhee County. The town had a small but fascinating museum filled with a lot of history and artifacts from the early days of mining and ranching in the county. The museum also confirmed the fascinating fact I suspected for so long, that the name of the county originated from the time when a small group of native Hawaiians came to work on some of the local ranches and to honor the Hawaiians, they named the county after them, but the ranchers didn't know how to spell Hawaii, so they spelled it just as it sounded to them. My goal for this day was to visit the old mining ghost town of Silver City which is one of the best-preserved ghost towns in all of Idaho. (in truth it is not really a ghost town since there are residents who live there during the short summer season) As I turned off the paved highway on to the gravel road the sign said, “Silver City 24 miles ahead – narrow winding road unsuitable for trucks, RVs, and anything towing a trailer”. Another sign nearby advised drivers that the road was closed from November to May because of snow, so that's why no one lives in Silver City the year round.



Road to Silver City – Owyhee Mountains



The sign needs no explanation

To my surprise the first 3 miles were paved with fresh oil and then the road quickly deteriorated into a very narrow twisting gravel/dirt track that climbed the steep mountains through heavy forest to a high ridge that afforded great views of the Owyhee Mountains. Then it suddenly dropped down into a very narrow canyon and pretty much became a one lane dirt road following the creek. The posted speed limit, whenever one came across one of the signs, was 10 – 15 mph and that was pushing it since it was almost impossible to see anyone coming the other way until you met them head on! After 10 miles of some of the worst roads I’ve ever driven, I came to a junction with a crudely painted signpost pointing the way to Silver City.



Finally, I came up over a low rise and into the old town, looking much the same as it probably did a hundred years ago save for the few vehicles that were parked in front of some of the buildings. I was driving on what was obviously the main street, but it was nothing more than a dirt road with deep potholes filled with mud from the recent storms. I parked in front of the old *Idaho Hotel and Bar* in the center of town and proceeded to walk around among the old buildings and homes taking lots of photos. The building that was the best restored one in town was a beautiful whitewashed Victorian era public school house that now houses a historical museum. Several of the old wooden houses were being restored as well by people who take up summer residence here. Having walked throughout the town I ended up back at the *Idaho Hotel and Bar* where, from the interior of the place, I couldn’t determine if it was a museum or a working hotel and bar. (as it turned out, it was a working hotel and bar so if you stay there you are immersed in the history of the place)



Silver City, Idaho

Leaving Silver City I headed west toward Jordan Valley on the Oregon border, hoping this stretch of the road would be better, but no such luck, at least for the next 30 miles. It wasn't until I was nearing the Oregon border that the road came down out of the mountains into the beautiful Jordan Valley and became a paved road. I'm really glad I made the trip to Silver City, but I would think twice about doing it again! I made a resupply in the small town of Jordan Valley and then headed south on US 95 toward Winnemucca, Nevada and on the edge of town was a small sign that read "Next Gas 100 Miles"! It was a long 68-mile drive through endless sagebrush and grassland to Burns Junction which is just a place where two highways meet and nothing else. Further south near the small town of Rome I crossed the Owyhee River that irrigates most of southeastern Oregon and Northwestern Nevada, so it's a very important source of water for the region.

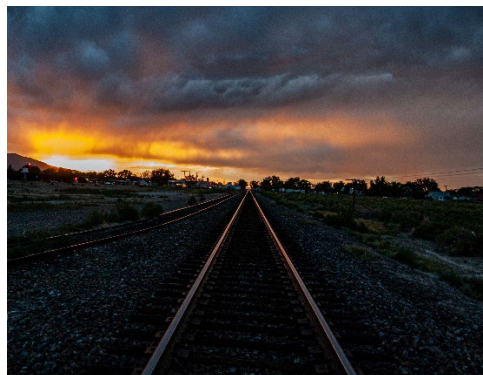


Jordan Valley, Oregon



On the way to Winnemucca, Nevada

Just south of Rome was a monument at the grave of Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, the son of Sacajawea and Trubant Charbonneau of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. I stopped at the Fort McDermitt Indian Reservation trading post on the Nevada border to get some provisions for the evening. Now I was back in the Pacific Time Zone and having gained an hour in my day. Just north of Winnemucca I encountered a huge road construction project that had traffic stopped in both directions for several miles. After about an hour of waiting we finally followed the pilot car for several miles of the construction zone, and I was absolutely amazed at what I saw. First, we encountered a monstrous machine chewing up the old asphalt pavement, then another monster that heated the old asphalt to a hot liquid which it deposited into a large hopper of the next machine which laid down the new asphalt pavement, or was it the "renovated" pavement? Several steam rollers and finishing tools prepped the road for its new life. It was definitely a fascinating process and worth the wait to see it in action. In another road construction zone on I-80, several miles of the four-lane freeway were reduced to a two-lane highway for roadwork, but I failed to see any construction work going on for the entire length of the "construction zone" – perhaps I was either before or after it and I had missed it in either case. Late in the afternoon I pulled into the small mining town of Battle Mountain after a very long and arduous climb over the 7,000-foot Emigrant Pass and found a nice room at the new Comfort Inn on the east side of the small town. The front desk clerk told me that the place to go for dinner in town was the "Owl Club" and I headed that way to get a cold beer and perhaps a meal. Unfortunately, it turned out to be just another loud, smoky run-down local bar so I had one beer and left. On the way back to the hotel I spotted "Mama's Pizza" and decided to give it a try. Mama had a fantastic herb and garlic chicken pizza that went well with a cold Pale Ale.



Sunset in Battle Mountain, Nevada

As evening came to this part of Nevada, I was rewarded with a beautiful sunset at the same time as a light shower gently fell upon sagebrush. Later, I found a quiet spot outside by the railroad tracks just below the hotel and watched the storm clouds move across the darkening sky. Suddenly a pair of large Barn Owls burst forth from a nearby building and I watched them take flight on their nightly hunting foray. In the quiet of the night, as the wind softly brushed my face, I watched the trail of lights in the distance as traffic moved constantly along I-80. Sometime later the quiet was broken by the haunting wail of an air horn from a big diesel locomotive approaching the town. I was sitting a mere 10 feet from the tracks as the heavy BNSF freight train roared past me at 60 mph! The sound of the train in the darkness and the rumble of the earth beneath me was thrilling! Trains really become living beings at moments like this. The next day I drove south on highway 278 through Pine Valley, a beautiful region of green hayfields surrounded by 10,000-foot mountains of the Sulphur Spring Range. As I crossed over Garden Pass at 7,000 feet elevation, I had a spectacular view of Diamond Valley and snowcapped Diamond Peak beyond. Soon I came to the junction with US 50, known as the “loneliest road in America”, and the historic old mining town of Eureka which had many beautifully restored brick and stone buildings from the 1870’s. I picked up a map of the old town and took a short walking tour to visit the historic sites that made this town the richest in all of Nevada, all be it for a very short time. The “Eureka Opera House” was a particularly stunning building and had been turned into a small historical museum.



Eureka, Nevada

Leaving Eureka I headed west on US 50 and stopped at the “Hickison Petroglyphs State Park” to view the ancient drawings on the rocks left by the inhabitants of this region more than a thousand years ago. As I was hiking along the rocky trail, I lost my footing and as I went to break my fall, I injured my left hand rather badly. I was able to stop the bleeding, but it was clear that I needed to have the wound seen to as soon as possible. At this point I was about 50 miles from Eureka and 20 miles from Austin, the next town on US 50, so I headed for Austin. The highway climbed steeply through the Toiyabe National Forest up to the 7500-foot summit of Austin Pass before descending equally as steep into the small town of Austin, another old mining community from the late 1800’s. It took only a couple of minutes to drive through the town and I couldn’t spot any sign of a medical facility or doctor’s office, so I inquired at the little county museum and found out to my dismay there were no medical facilities or personnel in the town, and furthermore, the doctor who visits the town from Eureka 65 miles away comes only on Wednesdays – today was Thursday! So now my options were to drive 65 miles back to Eureka or head 100 miles south to Tonopah. Not wanting to backtrack, I decided to drive to Tonopah. The trip took me through the beautiful “Big Smoky Valley” in the shadow of the mighty Toiyabe Mountain Range with some strong thunderstorms off in the distance. As soon as I reached Tonopah, I saw the Nye County Regional Medical Center and was able to have the doctor on duty take a look at my hand soon after. Luckily, he confirmed there were no broken bones, just a huge blood blister that would take a few days to heal. He asked me about my trip around Nevada and then told me of his cross-country trip with his two young daughters, having driven over 10,000 miles in a month on the road. Since it was nearing sundown, I decided to stay the night at the nearby “Tonopah Station”, a hotel, restaurant, service station, casino complex. The hotel had an extensive and fascinating collection of old antiques and mining memorabilia displayed throughout the place and I spent some time wandering around it like it was a museum. The next morning was clear and very chilly (45 degrees), and after a hearty breakfast at the Tonopah Station, I walked around the small town trying to find the Mining Museum in vain, but after an hour I realized the whole town was a mining museum since it sits on top of so many old gold and silver mine shafts.



“Nickname” of the High School



Tonopah Station



Old gold mine “headrig” – Tonopah, Nevada

From Tonopah I drove west on US 6 to Coaldale Junction, consisting simply of a motel, gas station, café and casino, all of which had been abandoned many years ago. Then I turned north on to US 95 toward the small town of Gabbs where I found a huge mining operation and ore processing facility. From there I saw the sign pointing the way to the “Berlin – Ichthyosaur State Park”, which was my next destination. The unpaved road led me 20 miles east over the 7,000-foot Sherman Pass and through the Toiyabe National Forest into a long valley and then up the mountain on the other side to the old mining ghost town of Berlin.



Sherman Pass – Toiyabe National Forest



Old gold mining ghost town of Berlin

Most of the original structures are still intact, as well as some of the old mining equipment like a couple of huge stamp mills and the steam boilers that powered the ore processing facility. I spent a couple of hours hiking around the site among the remains of the mill and the main hoist that mined several hundred tons of gold and silver from the

mountains until the early 1920's when the rich ore deposit ran out. The old wooden buildings had weathered to a beautiful golden color and the views across the valley below from the old town were incredible.



Ore processing building – Berlin, Nevada



Ichthyosaurus exhibit

Just above the old town was an exhibit of a rare, fossilized skeleton of an ancient ocean fish (Ichthyosaur) the size of a whale – really an amazing site to see in the middle of Nevada. I drove back to Gabbs and then north to the junction with US 50 where I stopped at the historic “MiddleGate Station” which was an important stop on the Pony Express route in the 1860's and is now an old west movie set and “biker bar”. As I stepped up to the bar and ordered a coffee to go, a long grey-haired biker stood next to me and ordered a huge burger and fries. He told me he was on a trip across the country following the route of the old Pony Express – I made the comment that riding a motorcycle had to be a lot more comfortable than a horse, to which he had to agree. My next stop along US 50 was the “Sand Mountain National Recreation Area”, a massive 500-foot-high sand dune at the base of a 10,000-foot mountain which had been turned into a recreation area for ATVs and motorbikes. It was pretty impressive watching the ATVs climbing up the steep slope of the huge dune, but the noise was deafening!

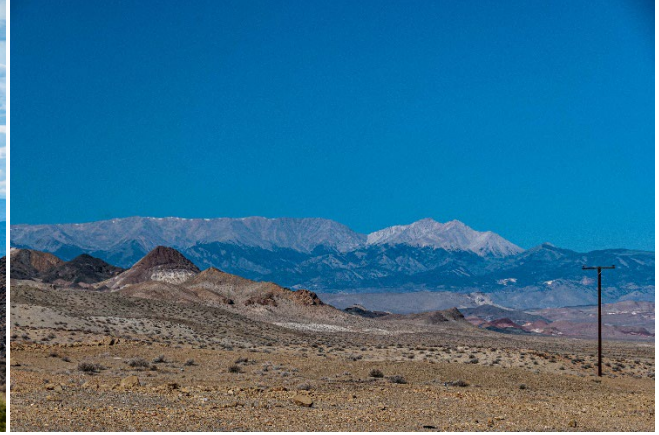


Sand Mountain National Recreation Area

Driving further west on US 50 toward Fallon and the big Naval Air Station located there I could see Navy fighter jets taking off and landing on the dry salt flats of Carson Lake. By this time the weather had changed to overcast skies, light rain, and strong winds from the northwest, so I headed south again on US 95 toward Walker Lake, a large body of fresh water left over as a small remnant of a huge ocean that covered most of northern Nevada thousands of years ago. South of Walker Lake I passed through the town of Hawthorne with its Army Depot and thousands of bunkers where all types of munitions are stored. It even has its own railroad to move munitions around the immense base that occupies several square miles of land. On the state highway map of Nevada there is a town named Basalt at the junction of US 95 and highway 360, but as I approached the junction there was no town in sight. However, this part of Nevada is well known for many old mining ghost towns, some of which had a population well over 15,000 people at one time, which is more than the population of 90% of Nevada's towns today. Very little, if anything remains of the saloons, hotels, and mills that once existed over a hundred years ago in most of those old towns, so it's no wonder that I could see no signs of Basalt, it's just that the mapmakers forgot to take it off the map.



Montgomery Pass – View of Eastern Sierra Nevada



Boundary Peak – White Mountains, Nevada

Continuing west on US highway 6, I came to the summit of Montgomery Pass (elevation 7200 ft) where I had a stunning view of Owens Valley and the Eastern Sierra Nevada mountains in California, as well as a magnificent view of the White Mountains and Boundary Peak, which at an elevation of 13,360 ft is the highest point in Nevada. As I stepped out of the Jeep to take some photos, I heard a loud knocking noise coming from the engine and once I raised the hood, I could see the power steering unit leaking fluid badly. At that point I had no choice but to continue driving down to Bishop, California about 50 miles away. Once I arrived in Bishop, I quickly stopped at the first business establishment, which happened to be a Starbucks coffee shop, to find out what options I had for repair facilities in town. They gave me the local phone directory and I spotted “Bob’s Auto Parts and Service” located at 1238 N. Main St. When I asked the young ladies behind the counter where it was located neither of them knew, so knowing that I was already on Main Street I asked them what the address of this Starbucks shop was. They still had no clue, although one of them said she would get her GPS – to which I replied, “don’t bother, I’ll just walk outside and look at the side of the building”! Luckily, I found out I was just a couple of blocks from Bob’s place, but when I arrived it was after 5:00pm and it was closed. However, there was a phone number for Bob’s 24-hour towing service, so I called it and was able to speak with him. After describing my situation, Bob said he could have his son work on it tomorrow morning though they don’t normally open on the weekend.



“Bob’s Auto Parts” – Bishop, California



Best Western Motel

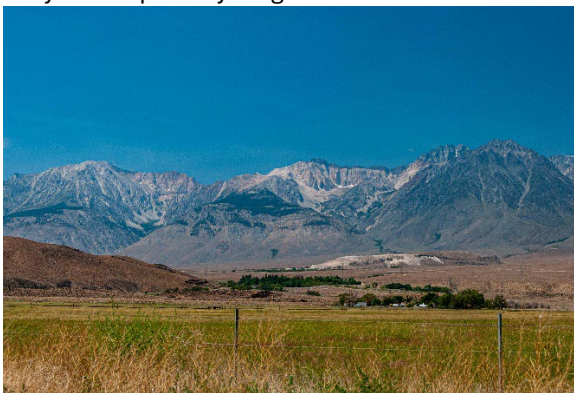
So, I grabbed some essentials from my bag, walked downtown and checked into the Best Western Motel, then searched for a good place to have dinner. The Sizzler Restaurant next door had a great combination dish of southwestern grilled chicken, grilled shrimp, and carne asada, along with a cold glass of Budweiser which helped ease the stress of the mechanical problem. Later I discovered the *Whiskey Creek Saloon* where I sat outside in the cool night air and had a pint of the local “Mammoth Pale Ale”. I was seated between a table with a young family from France who were in awe of the huge semi-trucks passing by on highway 395 and a table with a couple of young Germans assessing the quality of all the local brews, so it was an international night in Bishop. The following morning Bob’s son Mike met me at their shop and pulled my Jeep into the lot at the back, which also doubled as the local Police Impound area, so there were a lot of vehicles, boats, trailers and such parked all over the place. Mike started

working on my vehicle as it sat on a large cement slab under a huge old Oak tree, and when I asked him if he had a power steering unit in stock, he said he thought so, but he would have to check the inventory. Checking the inventory meant rummaging through the hundred or so junk cars at the back of the lot, but eventually Mike found a unit to replace mine. To make a long story short, after sitting for 3 hours under the shade of the old Oak tree in the middle of a “junkyard”, from where I had a gorgeous view of the Eastern Sierras, my Jeep was as good as new, and I was back on the road again.



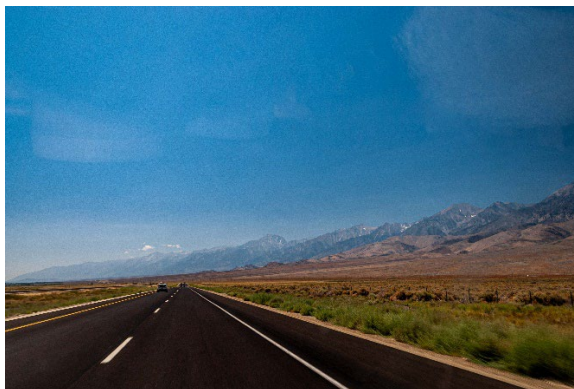
View of the Sierra Nevada Mountains from Bob's Auto Parts – Bishop, California

The drive south on US 395 afforded spectacular views of the 14,000-foot peaks of the Eastern Sierras under the clear blue skies, and the view of Mt Whitney was especially magnificent.



Mt Whitney

A few hours later as I came to the edge of the Mojave Desert near Ridgecrest, there was a massive traffic jam due to the repaving of 5 miles of road by CalTrans and we had to wait well over an hour before we could proceed. South of Ridgecrest, the old stretch of US 395 was just like a giant roller coaster as the road followed every contour of the land. It looked like the highway engineers had pointed their compass along a straight line to Barstow, scraped away the sagebrush, and laid down the asphalt! Further south of Barstow I got back on I-15 and joined the line of vehicles headed over Cajon Pass and down into the LA basin.



Highway 395 – Eastern Sierra Nevada

Even though I had spent two fantastic weeks and 3500 miles exploring the Great Basin, it felt good to be home again.

Map of the Great Basin

