

THE DEATH VALLEY ICE AND SNOW TOUR

Or

THIRTY FIVE HUNDRED MILES AND NO ELK

For some time I have wanted to ride out to Death Valley and see the famed Race Track, this is the place where fairly large rocks slide around with no human or otherwise helping hand. This would be a BMW trip as the Race Track is 26 miles down a rough rock/dirt road. This would also mean I would be going by myself as Bobbe is not real fond of the back of the BMW and while she will do dirt roads this looked to be a bit past a dirt road. As things turned out, between the two of us she may be the more intelligent.

I wanted to ride out around the first of December but some of that pesky work kept getting in the way. So I drove all over Texas, several times, and parts of New Mexico. In between trips I put a new rear tire on the BMW, changed the oil and generally checked it over. Finally, the work was done, Christmas had come and gone and it was time to go. That is after waiting for a snow storm to blow through.

Finally, on December 29th it was time to leave. Due the recent moisture and cold temperatures I waited until the sun was well up and then headed west. It was a little cool when I left, around 20 degrees in the city and falling as I headed west. I saw temperature in the teens as I went across Western Oklahoma. I was in all the electric gear so I was comfortable. After a stop for coffee in Elk City I headed off on Hwy 152.



As normal I did not have a daily destination in mind, but just a direction. I was crossing the Texas Panhandle and I pretty much have done most of the roads out there. I did find a new one just a little west of Borger. Borger is an oil field town and has been for a lot of years. This was on a corner and is one of the more interesting Christmas Displays I have ever seen. The pumping unit is a nice touch. I have stayed in the motel behind the display. It is not all that bad a motel considering where it is.

Just a little past Stinnett I turned south on a county road. According to the map it was to let me cross the panhandle and pick up Hwy 54 a little NE of Tucumcari. It turned out to be a nice low traffic road and got me to where I wanted to go.

As I rode through Tucumcari the temperature edged into the 40s and for a brief period got up to 47, I turned off the electricity and rode on. The road from Tucumcari to Las Vegas is not a busy road. It goes through some pretty empty land with no existing towns between the two cities. About two thirds of the

way towards Las Vegas the road climbs up a mesa. At the foot of that mesa is a shrine. According to what is painted on the rocks it is a shrine to the Virgin Mary and apparently a very well used one. The photo takes a little looking at, but if you look you will see that it is about a 40' rosary. It was one of several displays at the site.



I have passed this site several times and it is interesting to me for several reasons. First, it is out in the middle of nowhere with no towns large or small anywhere close. This is clearly a

Catholic shrine and there are no Catholic Churches closer than Las Vegas or Tucumcari as far as I know. Also, there are a couple of rock and concrete buildings at the site that were constructed at considerable effort and expense by, most likely, several someones and someone owns the land on which this is constructed. Who and why it exists I do not know, but it is interesting.

After that, it was on down the road. As mentioned above, after the shrine the road climbed up a mesa. It was getting late, the wind picking up and the temperature going down. So, I turned the electricity back on and rode on. It gets dark early this time of year, combine the approaching darkness with the wind and falling temperature your mind tells you it is time to find cover for the night, even though I was not cold. When you travel this time of year motels are seldom crowded so I had no problem finding a decent motel in Las Vegas and calling it a day.

The next morning it was overcast and cool. Even though the motel was decent, their idea of a continental breakfast was the usual joke. I like to make a few miles before stopping for breakfast so I suited up and rode on. The temperature was dipping into the teens as I went through Santa Fe and headed north. I wanted to ride into Chaco Canyon and get some photos and had found a road that would get me there without having to ride through Albuquerque. I kept looking for a place for breakfast but never found anything interesting until I came to Abiquiu. Abiquiu is in the area where the artsy folks like to go paint and shoot photos. There is a gas station/hardware store/restaurant/general meeting place along side the road. I stopped for a cup of coffee and a very good, and large, sausage and cheese croissant.

After that it was a short distance to where I headed west on highway 96 so I could pick up 550 and ride by Chaco and north to Bloomfield and parts west. Highway 96 was a very nice road, except for the snow and ice that covered parts of the road. However there was little traffic so it was not a problem. It was still very overcast and not clearing as I headed north on 550. With the overcast I was not going to get very good photos of Chaco so I rode on by. I also wanted to get some photos of Shiprock and Canyon De

Chelly but I decided they would have the same problem as Chaco and I decided to bypass them and return another time.

That settled I gassed up and headed across northern Arizona intending to stop in Page for the night. I have been through this area many times over the years. It is beautiful in a stark way. But, up until now I had never seen it covered with snow.



The amount of snow was never great and the roads were for the most part clear and dry, but it did give things a different look.

It never did clear off, but later in the day, as the photo shows, there were breaks in the overcast, but it didn't do much for the temperature.

Given the temperature and the moisture that had fallen I was very reluctant to travel after dark. I can usually deal with ice and snow if I can see it. With that in mind I called it an early day in Page and went to the Dam Bar and Grill for a nice meal and almost a nice drink. It seems

they use Pepsi products at the bar. From my point of view Pepsi and Jack Daniels is not the same as Coke and Jack Daniels. I settled for a beer and called it good.

This is the view I saw when I woke up the next morning and looked to the northwest. The problem was I wanted to go south then west through Lee's Ferry, across the mesa and hopefully to the north rim of the Grand Canyon. When I headed south there was nothing ahead but clouds and as the road rose the temperature fell. About 10 miles south of Page the temperature was 16, snow was falling and there was ice on the road. Looking over my shoulder at that clear sky to the NW I decided that Kanab would be a nice place to visit and turned around.

I would still have to go up and over the mesa but the storm I was running into had already passed there so I figured I



would be ok.

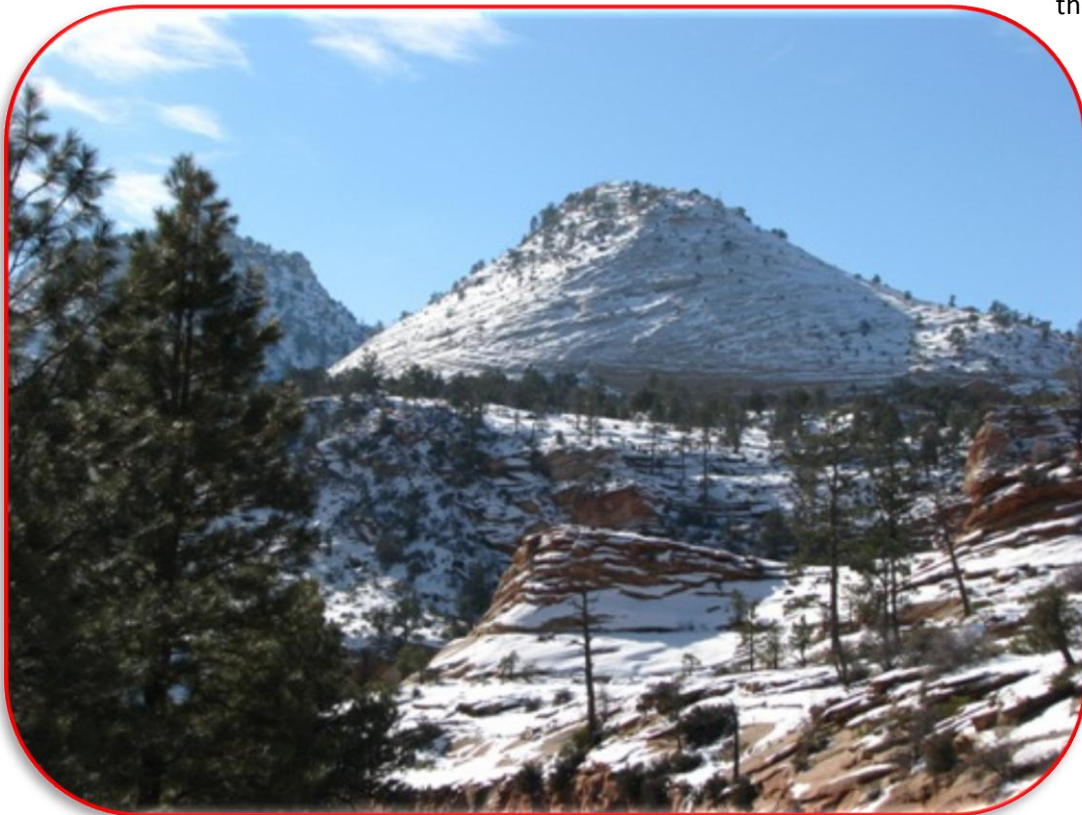
Back when Clinton was president and molester in chief he created the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument across southern Utah. This was the country I was riding through. There are all sorts of trails leading off of the highway going to different places in the back country. All of them have signs at the trail head explaining all about how it is not a good idea to go there unprepared. Well, here I was on the BMW

knobby tires and all, so off I went towards Cottonwood Canyon, only 10 or so miles back in the bushes. It turned out to be an interesting ride. I stopped when I came to a part that was frozen mud and water. I don't really mind getting wet and muddy but not at 20 degrees. With age it seems I might be learning something.

Shortly after Cottonwood canyon the road started rising and the snow started appearing on the road until there were only two tracks on each side. I was not really worried as it was melting so I just slowed down and rode carefully. When I pulled into Kanab snow was pretty much all over the road so I paused for a map read and a cup of coffee. At this point road options were getting slim. If I went south and the west I was sure the snow would get worse, so it was by default north and then west through Zion. As I pulled up to the entrance of Zion once again the lifetime pass paid for itself. The ranger told me that it had been a while since he had seen a motorcycle and to watch the roads. Good advice it turned out.

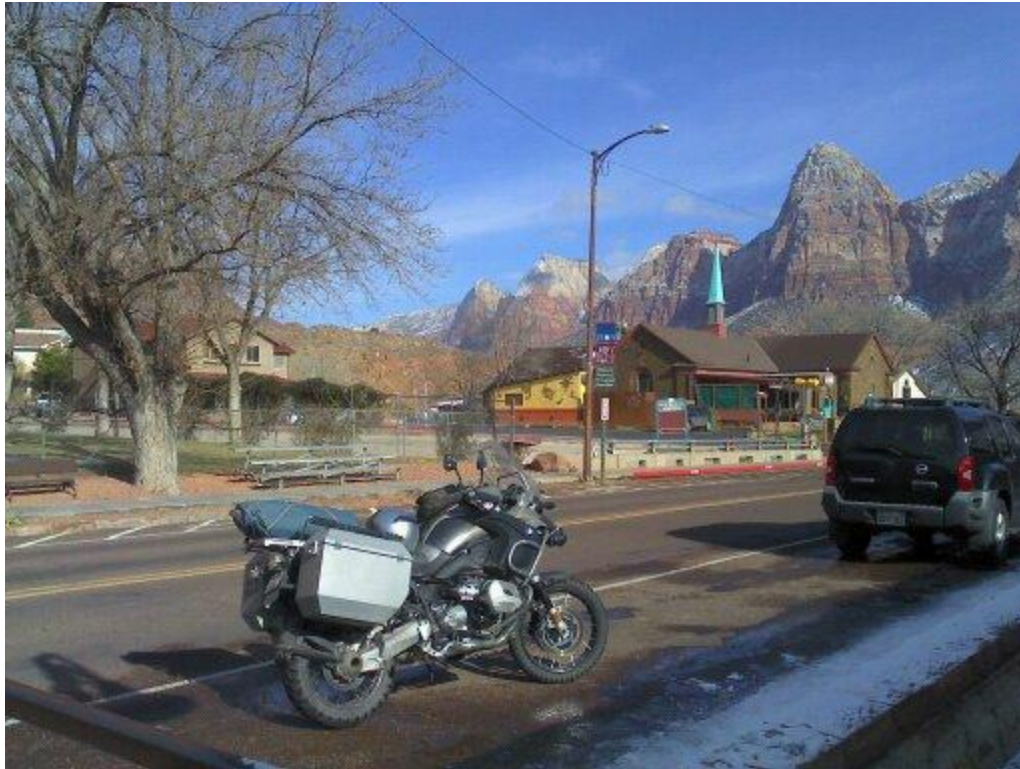
The road into Zion from the east goes down a canyon and at times it gets fairly narrow. Where the sun hit the road it was clear but wet. Where there was no sun it was snow packed, but they had spread cinders on it so if I went slowly it went ok.

But, it was worth it. This is a spectacular photo but it does not do justice to the scenes. As you can see,



the sun was out and everywhere you looked the views were fantastic. I had seen Zion before but never like this. There is a tunnel about a mile or so long you ride through to get down into lower Zion. In years past there were pull outs in the tunnel where they

had cut through the rock and you could pull over to see the views and was really neat. No more, they have blocked them off and they are now complete with signs warning you not to stop. Exiting the tunnel the canyon is very narrow and the road steep and totally covered with snow. I went very slowly and when I saw a vehicle in my mirror I pulled over and waved them buy. The BMW did very well and I sure was glad I was not on the Honda. After leaving the park I took a break for lunch in Wildcat Willey's and then headed towards Las Vegas, Nevada this time.



This was the view from Wildcat Willey's and, in my opinion, one of the best photos from the trip. Unfortunately I took it with my phone and it is too small to blow up very big.

The ride south from St. George Utah on I-15 is a good ride (very much a rarity on an interstate) through the Virgin River

Gorge, highly recommended if you are in the area.

Clearing the canyon I headed south on the interstate towards Las Vegas and then northwest out of there. I had it all figured out that I would put up at a motel around Indian Springs and then the next day ride over into Death Valley. There was one slight problem; there are no motels in Indian Springs. In fact, there is not much of anything in Indian Springs which, considering there is an Air Base there, I found amazing. There was a billboard saying there was a Motel 6 sixty miles further along and since it was either that or back to Vegas, I headed towards Beatty. It was getting well past dark thirty when I pulled into Beatty and it turned out there are several motel choices as well as restaurants. I passed on the Motel 6 and checked into a decent looking one and then had a fairly decent meal and called it good.



The next morning, the first day in 2013 dawned clear and 20 degrees. I walked across the road to a nice breakfast at Mel's diner then loaded up and headed west into Death Valley. As I crossed the mountains and dropped down into Death Valley, the temperature headed up. This is an interesting sign, no ocean in sight.

I had headed west from Beatty to enter the park and this put me in about the middle. What I wanted to see was near the north end. It was an interesting ride up toward the north end of the park. All along you are riding on top of very large alluvial fans made up of rocks of all sizes that have washed down from the mountains over the many thousands of years.

The Race Track I wanted to see is a dry lake bed on the western side of the park. The story is that due to certain conditions that occur there fairly large rocks get blown around on the lake bed and leave tracks. These tracks have been photographed many times. The Race Track is also 26 miles off of the main roads, one of the reasons for the BMW.



The ride down to the Race Track was interesting and not overly difficult. It was mainly rough as it was just a track over the above mentioned alluvial fans. The views were interesting and like nothing we have around here. I did not

get to see the sliding rocks, due primarily to people. This place apparently gets lots of visitors and it suffers for it. The park service has dug a trench all around the dry lake to keep people off of it and it doesn't work. Very few rocks are on the lake bed and none had trails that I would not attribute to people. I guess you have to catch it at just the right time.



With that seen it was back down the 26 mile road, faster this time with a stop at Ubehebe Crater. Geologically this is yesterday as it is only around 2000 years old. It is a steam explosion crater. It seems there is a shallow hot rock under Death Valley. Water percolates down onto the rock and gets turned into steam. Pressure builds up until it finds an outlet and here it comes. There are several of these in the area. And, yes, it could happen again at any time.

When I got back to the paved road I headed south to Furnace Creek and the visitor's center. It was 65 degrees and with a good tail wind it was quite pleasant. I had stopped sometime back and pulled off the riding pants and most of the electric gear. The visitor's center was interesting. They had one of the parking spaces in the lot marked "green vehicle". As the bike gets pretty good gas mileage I pulled in.

It was getting late as I left the park, late being about 3:00. As I rode over the mountains out of Death Valley the temperature went down and the wind picked up. I climbed back into the gear when I gassed

up. I was planning to get to Kingman Arizona however as darkness had fully fallen by the time I got to Boulder City I called it good there.

The next morning I decided rather than going through Kingman I would just head south to Blythe and then on to Yuma. That stretch of country is some of the most desolate I have seen, and in my travels I have seen desolate. On the plus side, with a strong north wind I made good time. The surprise was when I turned east and entered Quartzite. I had come through Quartzite once before on some company business. Then it was late March and the place was deserted. Not so this time. The population of Canada and the northern tier of states have to be significantly reduced. They are all in Quartzite and as I later found out, other places further south, like Yuma. Most of them stay in RV Parks but a whole bunch just pick out a place in the desert and roll out the awning.

On south just a bit north of Yuma I found out that if you have water you can make the desert bloom. They irrigate out of what is left of the Colorado and grow veggies of all types, and lots of it. If I thought there were a lot of Snowbirds in Quartzite I found that was nothing compared to what is in Yuma. I found Mick and Kathy's trailer with no problem. We sat around most of the afternoon solving the world's problems. Later on we went out to a decent restaurant then back to the trailer for some more visiting. The weather forecast convinced me that taking the time to ride to the Sea of Cortez was not a good idea so the next morning I headed east for the Organ Pipe National Monument.

It was around 50 in Yuma, when I crossed the next ridge it dropped to 32 and stayed there for quite some time. I turned right at Gila Bend, gassed up at Ajo, rode through Why on down to Lukeville on the border then

back to the visitor's center at the Monument. There are a lot of cacti in the area. This is part of the Sonoran Desert, the only place in the world where the Saguaros grow. And grow they do, in all shapes and sizes. The visitor's center was interesting. The part that I



always find hard to believe is that in times past they ran cows on this land. I saw a lot of plant life but very little that I thought a cow could eat. That had to be some tough beef.

I stopped off in Why for a little snack and then headed for Tucson. Along these roads getting stopped by the Border Patrol was a normal occurrence. Most of them had all sorts of cameras and x-ray equipment you had no choice but to ride past. I understand the reason and they do catch a lot of folks but they also miss a bunch. I had nothing to see in Tucson so I blew on threw and headed south on a nice back road toward Bisbee and Douglas. I was also climbing and it was cooling off. I came to an intersection and could see two A-10 Warthogs doing touch and go landings. It seems that I had come upon Ft. Huachuca. When I got to Sierra Vista the front had pretty much caught up with me and I called it good for the day.

The next day was interesting. It was cold but clear, the front had blown through during the night. As I rode through Bisbee there was a coating of snow on everything including the road where it was in shade. This is in a place where it does not usually snow. As I pulled into Douglas the snow was gone and it warmed up a bit. As a side note, Douglas is a booming place with new motels and businesses all over.

I had picked out a road that cut over to Columbus New Mexico. As I rode north out of Douglas and looked to the east it was pretty obvious going that way was not a good idea. It was snowing that way and in fact, the road I was on was getting pretty slick and snowy. Finally the road cleared up and at Apache I stopped and took a photo of the Geronimo Surrender Monument.



The surrender of Geronimo was the unofficial end of the Indian wars, he was the last one. The Army shipped him and a bunch of his people to several places around the country, finally ending up at Ft. Sill down at Lawton.

I stopped in a state visitor's center in Lordsburg and they told me that I-10 from Demining was closed as was the road to Alamogordo, and oh yea, that road to Columbus was also closed. On the way to Demining the temperature bounced around 32-34 with snow flurries and the road was sometimes wet, sometimes dry. At Demining I found the road open, it

had only been closed for a short while. By the time I got to Las Cruces the temperature hadn't changed much but I really couldn't tell if the road was wet or icy and didn't want to see the hard way. So I checked in early and went over to a very good restaurant and had a nice meal with a couple of Bohemia's.

Watching the news that night it seemed like I had made a wise decision. There was snow in El Paso and a whole bunch of other places that seldom get snow. Equally as interesting to me was that there were a couple of other fronts coming in after this one and neither of them promised good riding weather. I decided that it had been a good ride and it was time to head for the house and wait for better weather.

In the morning I was greeted with cold weather and freezing fog. As the road to Alamogordo is a high one I had decided to go to El Paso in order to hook up with Highway 54. I waited until after 9:00 to let the fog clear out only to find a few miles down the road it was not clearing. I went through parts of El Paso with about 50 yards of visibility and 15 degrees. As I headed north on 54 it cleared a bit but did not really clear until I was almost to Alamogordo. From there on it was totally clear, cold but clear. I headed east to Cloudcroft which is around 9000', the sky was clear and the road mostly was. That is a nice road.

I was heading to Turkey Texas. I stopped for fuel in Roswell and didn't get abducted that I know of. After that it was just roll it on down the road until I called it for the day in Dimmit. It turned out to be a good choice as there were no more motels for quite a few miles.

This is the Bob Wills Monument in Turkey Texas.

Bob was born in Grosbeck Tx he grew up at Turkey and is buried in Tulsa.

For those of you who don't know who Bob Wills was shame on you. A couple of his songs you might know are Faded Love and San Antonio Rose, among many others. The last time I was through here was around 1978. It hasn't changed much.

After Turkey there is not much else to say. I came into OKC along the back roads through Altus, Roosevelt, Gotebo, Apache, Binger and finally El Reno and on into OKC.



As I write this it seems that my decision to avoid the weather and head for home turned out to be a good idea. We had a couple of days of wet weather here but in the south and south west it would not have been fun on a bike.

So ends this latest leg of the endless ride. It was a lot of fun even with the weather. I saw some places I wanted to see and saw a bunch in a way I had not seen before. Not the least part is that all of the Elk are still safe.

I am already planning for the next ride to place or places unknown.

GRAY HAired MOTORCYCLE RIDERS DON'T GET THAT WAY FROM PURE LUCK.

The ride goes on forever.