

Las Vegas / Grand Canyon trip New Year's 2008



Ray and I with one of the Hualapai Indians at the Grand Canyon Skywalk

After a busy trip back home for the holidays, I was looking forward to spending a few days in the desert during the 4 day weekend over New Year's. Road tripping through the desert has always been a great way to see interesting parts of the country, as well as providing time to cleanse my mind. Seeing nature in its raw form and unspoiled landscapes gives an appreciation beyond our everyday climate-controlled world, where God's presence suddenly becomes more real.

It would be a dramatic change from the hustle and bustle of the holidays – it was a nice time back home with family, though a very busy one while helping take care of 3 kids while my sister-in-law Lana was on crutches and Mom was dealing with her neuralgia in her foot and Dad was going through his radiation treatments for prostate cancer. And I was scheduled for a surgery in about 2 weeks – a lot was going on in my family.

It sounded like the weather was supposed to be clearing up - just in time for our trip. I remember as I was landing in SFO the night before the trip from the east coast, watching the snow flying past the window even as we were quite close to SFO. The weather report was for snow down to 2000 feet during the winter storm. I was keeping my fingers crossed.

Ray's close friend Brian had moved to Las Vegas fairly recently. I know he had been looking forward to being able to visit him and his family sometime. It was very interesting when Brian took

us on a private tour of Varian and how the medical devices were built and tested. Also knowing that my dad might actually be using one of those very same machines for his radiation treatments gave me respect for Brian's work. I had also heard recently that a new "skywalk" had been built - a glass walkway that extends about 70 feet over the Grand Canyon 4000 feet above the Colorado River.

Brian had been very busy with work and he was originally planning on attending a wedding over New Years. Plus I anticipated possibly a busy time with my work. We had recently moved to a maintenance release system where a new release is shipped every month, and with New Year's being at the end of the December billing month, I might be responsible if there were any issues on our database. Fortunately, these mountains of worry and doubt were pushed out of the way at the last minute before the trip, and after wrapping up several hours of solid meetings Friday morning at work, we got on our way around 3:00.

Traffic wasn't too bad on 101 getting down to 152, but we hit the usual jam at the 156 interchange (can't wait until that construction is done and they have a real exit ramp instead of that stupid stop sign, which has been known to stop traffic for a couple hours even on normal non-holiday weekends!). Up and over the Pacheco pass and we decided to stop for a bit at the San Luis reservoir to enjoy some of the sunset colors. The clouds of the storm that had just passed were thinning, and some reds and oranges were breaking through. It was a good way to also test out my new camera - I had just gotten a new A720 IS camera for Christmas with a 2GB SD card (to replace the old beat-up one - my old A95 had cracks on the screen, dirt on the CCD sensor, a stuck lens (sometimes random gears would grind), and it was getting exceedingly difficult to open the flip screen).



It was a fairly uneventful ride down the I-5 to 46 to 99 to Bakersfield. We found a decent deal for about \$40 for a hotel room for the night - it was nice to break up the drive and then have the next day to drive the rest of the way to Vegas and enjoy some of the sights along the way.

Saturday

We got up fairly early and enjoyed an "extended continental breakfast" in the lobby - fresh you-make-it-yourself Belgian waffles and pastries and coffee. I also got to check the road and weather conditions online - they said the snow was down to about 5000 feet, and the pass was just under that, so we should be OK. The sun was breaking through some low clouds and it looked promising to be a nice day - the forecast was a little iffy for later in the day. But by then we would be east of the Sierra and in the desert.

We hit the road, taking the more scenic 178 toward Lake Isabella. The lake was quite low - after what was probably a record dry year. But it was quite scenic - with mountain peaks poking through a band of low clouds, all reflected in the still water of the lake. It was colder than I expected when we got out - it looked much warmer in the sun than it really was, and we had just climbed several thousand feet.



Just east of Lake Isabella started the Joshua trees - quite a strange sight to one unfamiliar with the signature plant of the Mojave. Ray and I took turns getting pictures between the branches of the strange "trees", being careful to avoid the prickly spines of the "leaves" - Ray was so eager to make sure we got pictures of everything - he didn't want to miss a moment!

There was just a slight dusting near the 5000 ft pass on highway 178 before we started heading back down toward 14 near the desert city of Ridgecrest. It was interesting knowing I had grown up for a couple years in China Lake when my dad was stationed there at the naval weapons center. I was only about 2 so I don't remember a thing, but it was weird knowing we were probably only a couple miles away. Of course the base is off-limits to civilians, further making me wonder if the old house was still there and how things have changed in the last almost 30 years.

Instead of heading straight to Vegas, we took a bit more scenic route, planning on visiting a couple out-of-the way places like Red Rock canyon and Fossil Falls. They weren't too far out of the way for us, since we were in the vicinity, but neither would probably be a destination in itself. That's the fun part of road trips - making some of the little side trips and visiting hidden gems along the way. I had heard about Fossil Falls from a friend just a couple months back, and coincidentally, we were going to be passing right nearby. My friend was interested in geology and so am I and when I looked up the place online, I became even more intrigued.

Heading north on 14 and then along 395, we passed the town of Little Lake and Coso, and there was a small sign indicating a right turn to go to Fossil Falls. We parked in the dirt parking lot - only one other car was in the large gravel lot. The trail was obvious and we started exploring. Fossil Falls used to be a roaring waterfall down a basalt escarpment during the last ice age - it was interesting to try to imagine the Sierra and the Owens valley full of ice and rushing melt water

flowing down the lava field. The hard and black and angular basalt lava was sculpted smooth by the gravelly glacial melt water thousands of years ago. In many places, water swirled and drilled deep potholes in the solid rock. The potholes kept getting larger and sometimes one pothole would join with a neighboring pothole forming a tunnel. Fossil Falls had turned into an immense playground of tunnels and caverns and slot canyons to explore around - we easily spent a couple hours there. It was cool knowing the geology and history of the place, which added an interesting dimension.

I found it so interesting to find this off-the-beaten-path place and see some more of nature's raw beauty. A "postcard spot" can often feel a bit artificial - Fossil Falls was a lot more intimate of a setting - requiring visitors to spend some time to experience the place instead of take a few snapshots and move on. I had to take extra care to make sure I didn't beat up my brand new camera on the unforgiving rocks, but around every corner seemed to be some other strange sight to explore. It was harder than you'd think to find a perfect "photo spot" - I felt like the place had to be "experienced" - it couldn't be captured with a couple of postcard snapshots. It was nice not having to really worry about a schedule - you'd never anticipate where you'd want to spend your time.



We hit the road, heading south toward Red Rock Canyon state park just off 14. I had actually passed by the place on my way back from Death Valley years ago, but it was getting dark and we didn't have time to make a stop. This time, we'd have as much time as we wanted! On the way there, it was mostly open and flat desert, and it wasn't obvious there was some interesting rock formations coming up - but that was part of the excitement about going. I made sure on the map we hadn't missed it, and soon after, seemingly out of nowhere came these odd-looking rock formations. Journeying through hundreds of miles of open desert gives you quite an appreciation for these "jewels" that come unexpectedly.

One of Ray's hobbies is working with pipe organs, and the flutings in the mudstone made the cliffs like really tall organ pipes! We enjoyed lunch at some of the picnic tables by the visitor center - with some of Ray's signature PB&J sandwiches and bananas. It's nice having your own lunch - much better than McDonalds and more fun too.

We decided to check out some of the formations all around us - it was hard to even figure out where to start! We got some tips from the visitor center - didn't want to think we knew the best places and later realize we missed the best part. The rocks were like layers in a wedding cake - alternating hard, mostly horizontal reddish layers and thicker but softer lighter layers. I remember as a kid it was fun to tunnel through the softer layers of a piece of cake and eat the other layers separately - it looked like at Red Rock Canyon you could also tunnel through the softer layers and make a pretty cool fort inside!

Across the highway was another section of interesting rock formations - these "organ pipes" were even taller. I was joking with Ray that the E-flat was out of tune and he'd have to climb up and fix it! Between the pipes were very tall and fairly deep slot canyons - probably about 3 feet wide and 25 feet deep with vertical walls at least 100 feet high. We took turns taking silhouette shots of each other in the opening - our dark shadow being dwarfed by the immense flutings in the rock. A scattered forest of Joshua trees littered the hillside, providing an interesting contrast of the green pointed needles in front of the smooth vertical orange and white layers of the "wedding cake".



We hit the road again, heading south on 14 toward 58, when on the way we noticed an interesting sight toward the mountains - the weak storm that was predicted was passing through and the clouds were getting bunched up against the Sierra crest, causing the clouds to form a waterfall pattern as they flowed over the peaks. We pulled off on a dirt road heading up toward the mountains - one of our little side trips (which often end up being highlights of the trip). The road kept going and going higher toward the mountains and we got a better look at the snow capped peaks high above. As we headed uphill, we noticed the signature Joshua trees starting to appear once again - the strange plants seemed so out of place. The place kind of reminded me of scenes from Antarctica where the otherwise very barren ice fields are dotted with penguins - one of the signature species of the Antarctic. And it makes you kind of wonder - why are they there and how do they survive? They didn't seem to belong there, but yet they thrived there. It was like the divine Creator was just having some fun.



We were running a bit low on gas and we started looking for where the next town might be - I knew there would be gas in Barstow, but didn't want to push it. After what seemed to be an eternity we stumbled upon a no-name town called Boron, one of those hole in the wall places you'd miss if you blinked. There was a sign indicating gas, so we existed and turned onto Main Street at the town's only stoplight. Finally near the end of town was a small service station / convenience store / brake repair shop / tire shop that happened to have a couple old rusty gas pumps. A couple young ladies came out and filled 'er up for us - full service! They seemed to be out of a long forgotten era of small towns and friendly service and hospitality that has been lost with the onset of Costcos, WalMarts, and fast food. A place where people took their time and didn't feel the rush of having to go right to the next thing. I felt we were driving through Radiator Springs from "Cars" - I swear "Mater" the tow truck worked at that service station!

We were treated to a beautiful sunset on our way up I-15 toward Las Vegas. I felt like we had to make a brief detour to stop and look for a good photo opportunity - we found a turnoff toward an archaeological site where remnants of "early man" were discovered. We saw a bunch of archaeological sites where they had been digging and there was a bunch of history in the visitor center. Unfortunately, they were just closing, so we pretty much ended up just using the restrooms and getting a couple quick pictures from the parking lot. The sunset was nice but not real striking. When I stepped out of the restroom, I heard an unsettling cracking sound - I wasn't sure where it came from but it seemed to be from near the door of the restroom. I looked on the ground and saw my brand new camera lying on the ground - oh no! I can't believe I dropped it already! And we hadn't even gotten to Vegas and the Grand Canyon yet! I picked it up very carefully expecting to see the screen shattered and pieces on the ground - but fortunately it had fallen on the edge away from the screen and it appeared nothing was damaged. I carefully tried to turn it on, and it made the little jingle indicating it was on. I went to take a picture and noticed it was mostly black except for a diagonal slit across the frame - hmmm that couldn't be good. But I noticed on the lens it was just the shutters of the lens cap that hadn't quite opened all the way. I flicked some dust off the cap and it opened the rest of the way - I think the only damage ended up being a bit of dirt in the lens - which I cleaned with my shirt - whew! The camera was OK.

We got back on the freeway and noticed the colors of the sunset had changed dramatically - actually it was quite a bit more intense a little while AFTER the sun went down - a layer of mid-level clouds were lit up bright orange and red. Hmmm - time to find another pull-out to get a picture - the

sunset was behind us and it was hard to get a shot while we were driving... and you couldn't exactly pull off to the shoulder of I-15. So we took the next exit and found an empty street and managed some decent shots. One of Ray's favorite subjects of photos is sunsets and someday he wants to be able to collect pictures of all different types of sunsets in different areas. I've always enjoyed sunsets as well, and it was like nature's way of saying "Amen" at the end of a day.



We hit the home stretch on 15 to 215 up to Brian's place in Vegas. After clearing up some ambiguity in the directions (there are 2 "Hualapai way"s that don't connect, for example), I was still on my cell phone looking for his place when I saw someone on a cell phone out by the front gate wondering where I was. That was Brian! We had made it!

Their wonderful hospitality started with a pasta dinner for all of us - a nice treat after a bit of driving. He has a nice family - and his kids were great! Devin is 7 and seems to be the perfect age to have fun, and Dylan is 2. It was a full night of games, watching videos of casinos imploding, and Wii bowling and baseball after dinner!

Sunday

We got up pretty early for our big trip to the Grand Canyon - we were all really looking forward to it. It was a beautiful sunrise with crystal clear desert skies - the omnipresent lights of the strip seemed to fade as the sunrise grew brighter - the night was drawing to a close.

We were shortly at the Hoover Dam, and felt we had to pause to appreciate one of the largest structures that man has ever made. The dam was built back in 1935, and at the time, it was both the world's largest electric power producing facility and the world's largest concrete structure. There was another man-made wonder also being built in the same area. The supports of the new Mike O'Callaghan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge (to be completed in 2010) were partially in place - to support what will be one of the world's highest steel arch bridges. With the road 840 feet above the river, the 1080 foot main span will be quite impressive. Also, of course, the 4 lane bridge will make traffic much faster, cutting many of the curves in the existing highway as it follows the

contours of the land. Huge sections of the land had been blasted or filled in to provide a straight path for highway 93 as traffic passes back and forth from AZ to NV - the entire project is estimated to cost \$235 million and won't be completed until at least 2010 (the collapse of 4 cranes by high winds in 2006 delayed the project 2 years)



I was starting to doze along our way but it was hard to sleep with the excitement and anticipation of the day. Devin brought his Rubik's cube and kept asking if I could solve it. So of course we took turns playing with it - he'd mess it up and I'd try to get it back together, so that kept my mind awake as we drove through the desert. We finally turned off the main highway and started taking smaller and rougher roads until the final 10 mile stretch - a somewhat wash boarded gravel road.

We were soon enveloped in a great forest of 900 year old Joshua trees amidst enormous "castles" of sandstone - a very picturesque setting. A light dusting of snow covered the ground in the shadows of the trees - we were up at about 5000 feet. The desert scenery was quite stark but also striking - it kind of felt like journeying through the wilderness. I'm often reminded of how there is a joy in the journey to get somewhere - and how often that is the most memorable part. Seeing postcard pictures of a beautiful place almost seems a bit artificial - it takes on a whole new reality when you drive there yourself and see how special it actually is.

Thanks Brian for all the driving - it was cool that his company was covering the gas and everything! Since he often has to travel for work - sometimes making 3-hr trips to fix various Varian machines, the company covers all the car expenses. Unfortunately a bit to our dismay, as it started getting lighter outside, we saw some odd patterns in the hood of the car - when we looked more carefully, they appeared to be wide brush strokes of a vandal's spray paint can. When we figured out the message, it looked like M and 3 and an upside down J - spelled "JEW" if you faced the front of the car. Hmm - apparently somebody mixed up Brian's white Titan truck with that of a Jew (Brian was certainly not Jewish...) It was a bit disturbing to discover there were vandals in the quiet neighborhood where Brian lived (probably 15 miles from the strip). It was a stark reminder of how the Jews are still persecuted to this day (of course that hasn't changed for thousands of years), but to see it right in front of us... I wonder if we had discovered the hate crime before we left if we would have even gone to the Grand Canyon... at least at this point we wouldn't let it spoil the rest of the day - we'd deal with it later.

We finally arrived at Grand Canyon West - the terminal where people board helicopters for scenic flights through the Grand Canyon - you can even take a helicopter 3600 feet down to the Colorado River far below, get on a boat and go on the river itself for a while, then take another helicopter back up! It sounded tempting, but the \$200 price was a bit steep for us. We got our tickets for a day at the visitor center. Nothing is cheap on tribal Indian land - it was about \$25 just to enter the land. Then another \$25 to go on the skywalk. For \$75 total, you got a package tour including the

skywalk, seeing some tribal costumes and dances, a bus tour to a couple different viewpoints, and a "frontier land" old western cowboy town, including a wagon ride to one of the viewpoints.

The skywalk was quite impressive - a glass archway extending some 70 feet out from the cliffs of the canyon with stunning views of the Colorado River almost 4000 feet below. Although the cliffs aren't 4000 feet straight to the river below, they are probably still about 1000 feet straight down, quite a daunting view. It seemed pretty unreal going out there on the glass walkway - you weren't allowed to take any personal belongings (they said because you might accidentally drop your camera, but of course they want to sell you pictures that you would otherwise take yourself). Also you had to wear special slippers over your shoes so you don't scuff the glass. Even though the glass was probably 5 layers thick (several inches total), and they said the walkway could support a fully loaded Boeing 747 jumbo jet, bodily instincts set in and immediately say it's not safe. A 500 lb fat guy could easily jump up and down in the middle of the walkway and it would only sway a couple millimeters.

Two thick steel support beams held the outside of the walkway and the railings and floor were glass. It was interesting to see almost everyone walking over the beams - as if they were afraid of falling. We then dared each other to see who would be first to jump in the middle of the walkway. One guy we were talking with had been to New Zealand and one of the famous attractions in Queenstown is bungee jumping over the Kawarau River. Then we started talking about skydiving and how I had gone to Monterey and jumped out of a plane at 15000 feet. I couldn't help imagining the feeling of jumping out the door of the plane into the rushing wind and void of space below when I made the brave 1 foot hop from over the beam of the skywalk to the middle of the glass panel.

We were smart to get there fairly early before it got too crowded - there were lines of people to go out there later in the day. I also felt we were a bit lucky to have perfect weather - almost no wind and it was pretty warm - a bit nicer than dealing with the sleet and freezing rain back on the east coast!



We were treated to lunch at the Guano point - a narrow neck of land sticking probably 1000 feet from the rim of the canyon. The point was named after a line was rigged to a bat cave on the far side of the canyon wall with a cable car. Guano was mined from that cave and hauled up to Guano point. It was such a beautiful day and I had developed an itchy trigger finger on my camera. I had both my brand new point and shoot as well as my digital SLR camera - I don't take the SLR that often because of its size and annoyance of having to carry everything, but I figured for the Grand Canyon it was worth it.

I had reached the pinnacle of Guano Point - offering a perfect 360 degree panoramic view when I realized I hadn't actually even used my good SLR camera yet - I was so used to the point and shoot. The lens was still sticking a bit from the near catastrophe the night before, but it wasn't as bad. But it suddenly dawned on me that perhaps a bigger camera catastrophe was about to happen - when we had lunch at the picnic area earlier, we had set the SLR camera bag down and left it. I asked Ray if he had my camera, and Ray asked Brian and Devin, and Brian asked me who had it... oh no! We must have left it at the picnic area - I'm sure by now somebody would have picked it up - it was probably lost! Brian ran back to the picnic area - probably 1/4 mile or so, and by the time I had come to grips with the loss of my good camera, I saw Brian running back with it! Whew! It was still where we had left it!

I had to go back up to the point and re-take a bunch of pictures with the good camera - since I had different filters and a telephoto lens - it would be a shame to go all the way to the Grand Canyon and not even use it! The polarizer filter made the colors and depth stand out so well - I'm really glad we had it!

We decided to also visit an old western mockup town - it was like a cowboy town from Disneyland complete with mock gunfights, cowboys showing their lassoing skills, and an old saloon where we took turns "holding up" the bartender using Ray's hat like a ski mask. Then I was "most wanted" for 25 cents! We were treated to a wagon ride out toward Quarter master point - a peaceful way to wrap up the day.



It was about 4:00 and we were back on the road again - through the ancient Joshua tree forest and the "castles" back to the highway. It was getting to be near sunset when we pulled out on a road near the Lake Mead scenic area to try to get a good shot of the sunset. The sky didn't have many clouds - just a few contrails that lit up with vivid orange and red hues against a pale blue background. I decided to hike up one of the buttes for a better view (plus it looked like a lot of fun!). It was quite a lonely and stark beauty - isolated buttes with volcanic cap rocks dotted the landscape. It was a steep hike up the side of the butte and about a 20 foot rock climb up the

columnar basalt to the top - some previous hikers had left their marks with rock cairns. It was a bit tougher hike than I anticipated - even though I was only out there for about 10-15 minutes, I was a bit winded when I got back to the car (some of my first real exercise after too many holiday cookies and treats!)

Back on the road, me and Devin were playing with a Rubik's cube to pass the time - I had learned how to solve it years ago, but the memory had become a bit dusty after so many years. Devin kept messing it up, first a little bit ("level 1"), then I'd solve it, then he'd mess it up a little more ("level 2"), then I'd solve it again, and so on. He swore I could never solve level 100, but actually, it doesn't matter how much more he'd mess it up, the algorithm to solve it was actually the same! (but of course I pretended it wasn't!)

I was just nodding off to sleep when Brian hit the brakes and suddenly we were stuck in a dead-stop traffic jam! Hmmm - out in the middle of nowhere - what could it be? It wasn't even moving either... People were actually getting out of their cars to have a better look - except there was nothing to see except endless line of tail lights. Devin and I got out to have a look (but my main purpose was to go to the bushes to use the bathroom!) But when I hiked back up to the hill toward the car, the traffic was moving! And we saw Brian drive by - we waved and yelled Wait! But he kept on moving - I wonder if he even saw us... fortunately he was able to pull out a ways up on the shoulder and we ran up and got back in!

The trip from Vegas to Grand Canyon west is normally 2.5 hours driving time, but it ended up being 3.5 hours each way. (2.5 hours with no traffic getting there, but we lost an hour due to the time change), and 2.5 hours plus 2 hours stuck in traffic minus an hour time change getting back!)

Fortunately, Brian's wife held dinner for us and we wolfed down a pasta dinner, and we resumed our video games and Wii and watching comedy. Devin's little brother was playing with his "Cars" toys - we actually experienced many themes from Cars already on the trip - how so many interesting things are just a bit off the main highway, if you're willing to take a short detour to see something. I felt a bit ambivalent about the huge new bridge over the Colorado river by the Hoover dam - seeing how the land had to be altered so much to accommodate the straighter path and probably many people would then miss the experience of winding through the scenic canyons, but the traffic would flow so much better!). And of course another theme from "Cars" was filling up gas in that no-name town the day before!

Monday

Brian was on-call for work today since it was a business day. I took the day off but also was sort of on-call, since it was getting up to our billing close at Tellme. Unfortunately that meant he couldn't join us - so we'd have to fill him in later. He had already been to Red Rock Canyon (where we had planned to go), so he didn't feel too bad.

It was fun browsing the maps (thanks Ray for getting the great AAA maps) - we decided to visit Red Rock canyon (the NV one, we had already been to the CA one!), and get up to Mt Charleston and maybe check out some other side places nearby when we ran across them. It is interesting that the bustling strip of Las Vegas is only about 20 miles away from some very interesting rock formations and outstanding textbook examples of geology.



We headed back south and west over to the Red Rock canyon state park - it was like a wonderland of rock formations - red and white banded sandstone polished by the weather into all different interesting shapes. I managed to get Ray to go at least part way up - he's always up for a little "adventure" like the time we went hiking in the Mokelumne wilderness and he managed to go off-trail around the backside of Fourth of July peak. During the adventure, it sometimes seemed like "why are we doing this" to "I don't think I can do this", but afterward we felt like "wow - I can't believe I did that - and I really liked it!"

Red rock Canyon was a place that needed to be experienced - sort of like Fossil Falls. You couldn't really capture the essence of the experience in photographs. It was a very three-dimensional environment - requiring scrambles up steep slabs of slickrock, chimneying through cracks and carefully sliding down smooth and polished rock to discover the hidden surprises - a cave of banded rock with the sunlight casting a warm glow inside, a frozen-over vernal pool at the top of a rock pile, and a half-frozen sparkling stream flowing across an interesting pattern of cross-bedded bands of red and white. We sit for a few minutes watching some rock climbers clinging to an overhanging ledge high above us, as if posing for the cover of Outdoor magazine. We watched a couple horses wandering by a spring-fed stream.



We stopped at several of the viewpoints along the loop road, wishing we had more time for each one. At first I thought we could probably see most of the sights in an hour or two, but after 3 hours, we had only visited the first 2 viewpoints. A new surprise always awaited us - it was tricky to "budget the time" - which areas were worth spending more time at? At least, knowing the place is just outside Vegas, we could always come back!

One of my favorites was the Calico rocks - a jumble of polished sandstone complete with narrow slot canyons, arches, smooth banded sandstone, and a lake at the bottom of the canyon reflecting the smooth walls as like a mirror. The more we explored, the deeper we wanted to go. The clock was always ticking and the winter days were short - we just wished we could put "time in a bottle" and hold the moment forever.

I would have to come back for the Icebox canyon - one of the other stops on the loop road - the sign said it was a 5 mile roundtrip hike, but was supposedly one of the most interesting spots. The canyon narrows down and you have to negotiate a series of plunge pools from the stream. The canyon traps the cooler air, making it a great destination in the summer when it is over a 100 degrees outside. If we took the time, we would probably have to miss Mt Charleston, but since Ray hasn't been to the snow in 15 years, I figured we'd do it another time. Besides, the stream would probably be mostly frozen and negotiating the icy path may be a bit dicey.

We headed back into town to fill up - and also to see if Brian might be free from his on-call duty. But just as I was picking up my phone to call Brian, it started ringing... I dreaded seeing one of my coworkers names on the caller ID - since I knew it was around the billing close and we had just upgraded a major component of our system, there was a significant chance of a problem. Yep - the caller ID showed work... crap! I hope it wasn't too bad. They reported there was missing data on 2 days and we'd have to correct the problem manually. Hmm - since I didn't have my laptop, it would be hard (I had actually deliberately left it home since I was "on vacation" and I made that clear before I left). But fortunately after about 15 minutes at the gas station, I was able to probe

with the right questions and they were able to kick off some scripts to fix the data. Good I was off the hook for a while :-)

We headed back up on 95 north and then west toward Mt Charleston. It is interesting that there are snow covered mountains almost 12000 feet high just 30 minutes outside the city. Of course it was a very popular area, and there is even a very popular (though quite small by Sierra standards) ski resort on the north side of the mountain. Climbing up the mountain, the desert shrubs gave way to yuccas and Joshua trees, and up higher, they changed to junipers and eventually a pine forest. The pine trees were so lovely after we've been in the desert for even just a couple days.



The road headed up to just over 8000 feet and there was snow everywhere! Only about a foot deep, but it was a beautiful change of scenery from the dry and dusty desert. There were a few hiking trails nearby and we decided to walk a bit through the winter wonderland. The snow was packed pretty well so snowshoes weren't really necessary. We soon discovered near the beginning of the trail there was a line of kids with their sleds - anywhere from classic wooden toboggans to plastic runner sleds to garbage can lids to pieces of cardboard, whatever you could slide down the hill on. Unfortunately we wished we had been wearing crampons - where so many kids had sledded caused the snow to get so packed down it was like ice. Both Ray and I had to be quite careful and we both took a couple tumbles!

The sign said there was a waterfall just 1/4 mile to the right - I thought it would be a worthwhile sight to see how much ice there would be. I got on the trail and soon reached the falls. Ray was right behind me at one point, but a little later, I turned and he wasn't there. I figured we would just meet at the falls since it was very close. The trail went into a rather enchanting canyon as it narrowed and winded a bit and soon ended in about a 10 foot frozen pile of logs, followed by probably a 50 foot cliff. And along the cliff was an elegant frozen waterfall - seemingly oblivious to the passing of time.

An ice climber was there - solo - to check out the place and the quality of the ice. I don't think I'd ever try ice climbing (and especially not solo - I really enjoy seeing pictures and watching others do it though), but we talked for a bit while I waited for Ray to show up. In the end he ended up just

having a look and not attempting a climb since the ice was a little thin. He had his crampons, which instead for climbing, were definitely useful for negotiating the sledding runs that crossed the hiking trail! Ray ended up going just a little way on the trail, stopping to watch the sledders and kids playing in the snow - even Ray got to feel like a kid again - especially after not having seen snow in so many years!

Back near the trailhead again, my phone rang again - oh no! There was another problem at work with one of our contracts... but this one could wait until I got back so I could deal with it later. I felt a little ambivalent about going on a trip during a fairly critical billing close - I really wanted to go and I gave my manager plenty of lead time, but I knew there was always a chance of problems that we wouldn't find out until the last minute. At least since many other people were away on holidays, people were a bit more lenient.

I took Ray to the ski resort at Mt Charleston - he was quite fascinated seeing the skiers and snowboarders coming down the hill. For a fairly small place, it was pretty expensive - over \$50 for 2 lifts for a day! But it made a very nice retreat only 30 minutes from downtown Las Vegas. We decided to have lunch at one of the picnic areas by a campground up on the mountain. Rows of beautiful but probably quite expensive cabins littered the snow-covered mountainside, nestled among the pine trees. It was a scenic picnic area and we were being entertained by watching the flatlanders play with their sleds, and one lady got out of control on the run and made it all the way down to the gate at the bottom and she had to quickly duck under the metal bar of the gate - whew!



One thing both me and Ray were looking forward to on this trip was being treated to a Thanksgiving-like turkey dinner for New Years Eve. A great way to cap off a wonderful day. It had been a wonderful trip so far and I wished we could spend a whole week! We passed a bright pink Jeep on the way out - it said it was from "Pink Jeep Tours" - sounds like an interesting way to see the backcountry in the desert! They didn't even need to advertise - you just see the bright paint job and you become intrigued immediately!

Distances in the desert proved to be quite deceiving - as we started heading back down the mountain from about 8600 feet to about 2000 feet, it looked like we were only going a couple miles. In reality, it was about 20 miles. I could tell from the way my ears were popping on the way down and how the snow started thinning. A few patches still clung to the shadows of the Joshua trees at around 6000 feet, and it was mostly gone by 5000 feet. By about 3000 feet the Joshua trees were mostly gone and ahead was a huge playa - a dry lake bed. It was below freezing where we had lunch at the picnic area (my water started to freeze along the edges of the bottle) but was probably almost 70 degrees by the time we got back to highway 95!

Brian's wife had the turkey almost done and the fixing's were about ready by the time we got back to their place around 5:00. Turns out Brian's phone never rang all day, but with Murphy's law, it would have been ringing all day if he decided to head out with us (last time, he had to make a 3 hr trip to Utah to fix a Varian medical machine and the 3 hrs back home all in the same day... there were patients like my dad who were depending on these machines for radiation treatments). At least Brian got to deal with the police to file a report about the graffiti on the car.

The 6 of us were treated to a wonderful dinner - me, Ray, Brian and his wife and 2 kids, and their dog got to help clean the dishes! The food was delicious and the homey atmosphere made it even better. After dinner we pulled out some board games (Brian has tons of them), and I got the guitar out (after taking it all this way, we should at least play a little!). I played the guitar, Ray played Devin's toy piano (which was actually in tune), and we got to sing a few impromptu praise songs!

We thought of hitting the strip for New Years - we were only 15 minutes away (without traffic) - but after the hearty dinner, we decided just to stay home and watch it on TV (and maybe hear some fireworks popping outside at the same time). So we enjoyed some Wii baseball and tennis and some comedy for a couple hours until about 11:45, when we followed the countdown. It was actually quite amusing - the news station missed the actual last 10 seconds - they had cut to another story about 30 seconds before the new year, and maybe their watches were off a little, since when they cut back to see the "ball drop", it has already happened - they missed it! Oh well - I was pretty tired anyway and struggling just to stay up until 12:01.

Tuesday

We figured it'd be about a 9 hour drive back home, so if we left by 9 and spent 3 hours stopping and seeing places along the way, we'd be home by about 9:00. Not too bad. We got to enjoy a fairly leisurely breakfast - thanks Brian for making the bagels, scrambled eggs and coffee. I pulled out the map to look for some nearby things on the way. We were talking about roller coasters the night before, but after being entertained by a couple YouTube videos of people being stranded on broken roller coasters, we decided to forgo the idea of hitting the big roller coaster at the casino in Primm (which we passed on the way in).

A thought occurred to me, though - Since I was in the area last year on our Pisgah camping trip, I found out about an "interesting slot canyon" by Cave Mountain which they said was just off I-15. Since we'd be on that freeway on the way back, I decided to have a check. I asked to borrow Brian's laptop, and I quickly found a link about the slot canyon and found it to be called Afton slot canyon. I remembered passing an Afton road on the way up to Vegas and I figured that might be it. Turned out it was, and the slot canyon was just 10 minutes off the main freeway! I was intrigued by the description of the canyon being a "pitch dark slot" - hmmm - it might be worth a look.

The NV border was quite obvious as we trekked across the desert on I-15 toward Primm. Primm with its glittering casinos and roller coaster (which I was intrigued by, but we'd have to hit some other day) we visible from at least 10 miles away! Traffic was heavy but moving OK. But I was soon dismayed to see an "amber alert" sign saying "Heavy traffic going to CA, expect long delays".

Hmmm - I wondered how bad it would be... was there a bad accident? Was it just heavy holiday traffic? And it said "long delays", emphasizing "long"...

We didn't hit really any traffic until Afton road, where we followed the directions from the printout I had made earlier and they soon took us off the main freeway to a side street which soon turned into gravel. The directions indicated the distance was fairly short - I took the road pretty carefully - I really didn't want anything to happen to get us stranded while we're still 7 hours from home! The road stayed pretty good gravel until the directions indicated to cross Afton creek. I was looking for the bridge where we cross the creek, but it quickly occurred to me we were going to be driving through the creek - no bridge! I couldn't tell the depth of the water but I could see a couple rocks protruding through the muddy water. I figured we could just take it really slow and if it got too deep, we could still back up and abort the idea. Fortunately it didn't get too deep, though a couple loud thunks startled me a bit.



The gravel started to get pretty thick, and a minimum speed was required to make sure I didn't get stuck - o/w we would end up just going deeper into the gravel instead of forward! The directions said just to parallel the train tracks and the obvious opening of the canyon would be on the left - within a few minutes, we saw where the tracks went over a short bridge, and there we were - Afton canyon!

We grabbed our flashlights and camera and started headed up the canyon. Just as we started, a freight train was making its way following the base of the 100 foot cliffs in front of the canyon - what a shot, of the roaring train in front of the narrow entrance of the mysterious canyon. The train probably had at least 100 cars, mostly double-stacked, and its four engines were working at full steam pulling the enormous train on its cross-country journey.

Making our way up the canyon, the walls quickly closed in and the light started to dim. The flat sandy bottom was easy walking on this dry afternoon, but you hear stories about flash floods that rip through the canyon that could suddenly fill the canyon with 50 feet of muddy rushing water. This might only happen once a year but over the centuries, the canyon has become quite deep, the sinuous passages blocking almost all the ambient sunlight from above.

As the walls pinched to within a couple feet of each other, the deepening darkness necessitated us turning on our flashlights to proceed. The floor started getting a bit rocky and there were a few "dryfalls" to negotiate. The canyon would suddenly seem to end in about a 5-10 foot wall, but the wall could be easily climbed by using the embedded rocks like a ladder. It was actually quite fun, and of course the canyon would keep drawing you in deeper as your curiosity continued to be piqued. Every so often it was fun to look directly up and you could occasionally see some light coming in, filtered through the passages at the top of the canyon. Around one of the corners, the passage opened up a few feet, and you could even see a peek of sunlight from the sky far above penetrating the depths of the canyon. We felt like explorers probing the depths on a foreign planet never seen before by the eyes of man (although the path was full of footprints and an occasional candy wrapper littered the trail). There was nobody else there when we were there (except for the people on the train that just roared by). I had a slight twinge of worry that if any part of the engine got wet with the water crossing earlier, I would have trouble getting the car started when we got back, but the enchantment of the canyon kept my mind distracted.



Deeper in the canyon, the walls continued to become more rugged and the dryfalls a bit higher. We finally came to a "room" where you could look up at the ethereal glow of the light above - it was

like being in a secret chamber of a thousand-year-old cathedral with the light of heaven penetrating. Just past the room was the highest dryfalls so far - about 20 feet. The description said it could be easily climbed, but a handline should be available. I didn't see the handline, so I thought maybe it was further in. Ray decided to stay at the bottom, holding his light to help light my path since it was hard to climb holding the light (thanks Ray!) At the top of the falls was a rope dangling from a higher dryfalls and another 20-30 foot length coiled at the bottom. The description recommended bringing your own rope since the existing rope was of "questionable quality" and I didn't feel like being the first to find out it was frayed at the top...

I decided not to go further (the directions indicated the falls was the end of the canyon and you'd emerge at the surface when you go up, plus Ray didn't go up), so I uncoiled the rope and instead used it to help me climb down (which is always harder than going up anyway, plus I saw the full length of the lower rope so I knew it was OK).

It was a great experience - finding a truly magnificent place, hearing about it from a local the previous year, that we could find it, and that both of us could really enjoy it! We got to read a couple psalms and pray a bit - Ray always enjoys having times of prayer on "mountaintop experiences" (even though this wasn't officially a mountaintop, it felt like one!)

The car started no problem - whew! And we made our way back, stopping for lunch at the picnic area by the campground. Ray prepared his signature peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and we had a nice lunch (tasted better than McDonalds, was cheaper, and more fun anyway!). It was a little easier going through the water on the way back, since I made it through earlier (and I don't think it rained during the last couple hours). I wondered later how often the crossing was possible, since it had been such a dry year, the creek must have been quite low, and yet I still felt it was barely passable in my car.

Back on I-15, we continued heading back home, and the thought from before occurred to me "expect long delays". Hmm - I hope it didn't get worse... but then again, maybe the accident got cleared up while we were in the canyon and traffic would be OK again. Luckily it turned out to be the latter, and we didn't really hit any traffic. It turned out we had a little more time after all, so we decided to make a short detour at the Calico ghost town. I had been there on the trip last year - it is quite well done, the buildings restored, and the experience of gunfights in the streets, hard drinks at the saloon, and long days in the mines were recreated.

We got to within 2 miles of Calico when the traffic halted to a dead-stop! Shoot - maybe this was the "heavy traffic"? But this was at least 150 miles after the warning earlier. After about a 30 minute delay, it was obvious what was causing it - agricultural inspection station! But we were quite a ways in to CA now - I didn't quite understand why they had the station where they did... I know there's one on the way back from Tahoe a ways into CA as well. The station was closed for the holiday, but traffic still pinched to go through.



Ray seemed to enjoy the ghost town as we toured the 100 year old buildings, the "bottle house", the fire station, complete with horse-driven carts and pumps to spray the water, the blacksmith shop, the dentist/barbershop (the barber was also the dentist, and the drill was operated with a foot treadle like a Singer sewing machine). We peeked our ways through some of the mine shafts - showing workers sweating through long hours in the dusty "glory hole", where silver was discovered, which would amount to millions of dollars today.

We caught our final sunset of the trip as we were crossing through Barstow - it was a grand finale, as the sky started to light up from horizon to horizon, as fiery tongues of red spread from upper clouds decks to lower ones in ever shifting orange and red hues. It looked like fire coming from heaven as if there was someone giving us a final "Amen" to our trip.



We made pretty much a bee-line back from there - heading back over the Tehachapi on 58, through Bakersfield, fast-food dinner in Wasco on 46 as we cut back over to 5, then crossing to the 101 on 152, and back home. We got home just before midnight - it was a wonderful 4 days in the desert. I knew I had some problems to deal with at work the next day, but I would be refreshed with a new state of mind for a new year.