



Blog Post #6: NEW MEXICO-part 1

Greetings from the Land of Enchantment (Part 1)!

A Twist in the Road... As I write this missive, the evening finds me reflecting on the turn of events that led to an extended “stopover” in Albuquerque. While waiting on my blue plate special – and my dining companions – I’m enjoying the cool comfort of a classic chocolate shake at the retro-themed 66 Diner on Central Avenue. A welcome bit of calm after the unexpectedly action-packed couple of days we experienced in eastern New Mexico.

Heading west from Amarillo, the strategy for our New Mexico portion of the journey was simple: take a leisurely pace on the road so we could fully experience areas of New Mexico that, admittedly, we both didn’t know well. Our first stop after leaving Texas was the historic agricultural community of San Jon. It seemed that the time was right to see the home of high school sports teams we’d heard about on the weekend newscasts over years. After making our rounds of the building relics that once thrived along old highway 66 – and breaking out our Thermos of fresh coffee (a vintage container that Emily gave to TJ as a token of our trip... be it noted that each pour from this talisman has been unfailingly hot and flavorful!) – TJ received an urgent text from his business partner in L.A. They’d been chasing a very lucrative international web design and marketing account for more than a year, and their persistence had finally paid off. The client had agreed to terms and signed the contract, but in doing so stipulated a very aggressive timetable for getting the account up and going. Meetings were imminent and required TJ’s presence...*now* if not sooner. As we left San Jon and headed for Tucumcari, I took the wheel while TJ texted and phoned contacts (where he had cell service...) trying to figure out his next moves. It was safe to say that the party was over, and it was time to turn out the fanciful neon lights.

Putting the “T” in Tourist. Even though we were facing a detour that exceeded any of the road work or re-routing we’d encountered since leaving Chicago, TJ insisted that we remain true to our mission, and maximize the miles leading up to Albuquerque. First on the itinerary was an overnight stop in Tucumcari – which introduced us to the Blue Swallow Motel. TJ had seen it featured in a number of magazines and travel guides as an authentic taste of historic Route 66 motor inns. Once you see photos of the bright neon sign bearing the motel’s name sake, who could make another choice for the night? Luckily we were able to check in early – TJ immediately set up an impromptu work space and tapped into the motel’s WIFI. After making sure he was provisioned for the afternoon with appropriate levels of beverages and snacks, I set out to investigate a number of sites recommended by The Blue Swallow innkeepers as must-see local spots. Leading off my impromptu tour was the Tucumcari Historical Museum.

Occupying a three-floor 1903 school house, the museum showcases exemplars of local and cultural history – continuing the building’s educational role in the community. My camera couldn’t resist a one-of-a-kind tribute to Tucumcari – the sculptural Route 66 Roadside Attraction at the Convention Center. This mighty work is a visually engaging riff on tail fins and tires and all the sweet rides that have driven this roadway over the years. At three stories tall, it’s an impressive commemoration of the area’s roadside heritage and history. The most unexpected treasure of this meander was the Mesalands Community College Dinosaur Museum. This site features the world’s largest collection of full-scale bronze dinosaur skeletons, all cast at a local foundry. Talk about history living large! When I returned to the motel, TJ was in the lobby sending a fax, and exchanging car collecting tips and boasts with the desk clerk. Over dinner at Del’s Restaurant, TJ ran down the timetable he’d devised to push forward on his work. Amidst the details, we both relished our New Mexican entrees – the first chile we’d had in weeks! Established 1956, Del’s continues to make famished travelers (and locals) feel at home. You can’t miss this hospitable spot from the road – look for the big steer atop the large red sign, and the ornamental neon lighting up the building’s eaves.

An early start the next day ensured that we would make it to Albuquerque in time for TJ to pull a few logistical loose ends together, and be on his way the following morning. At this point the most compelling unknown wasn’t the fate of our road trip (game over, apparently) – but how the Mustang would get to L.A. TJ remained resolute to complete trip with the car, so was thinking about storing it until he could return and pick it up. Not surprisingly, we spent 45 minutes discussing the dimensions and security of my garage – as well as those of numerous mutual friends in Albuquerque. Even with this question mark lurking on the horizon, TJ reiterated wanting to make the most of what suddenly seemed to be his last day on the road. Driving west of Tucumcari, we admired the bluffs of the Llano Estacado – the Staked Plains – and took a bit of time to see the ghost service stations at Newkirk and Montoya. The centerpiece of our morning was a detour into Santa Rosa, the “City of Natural Lakes”. Tempting as it was to dive in, we instead enjoyed an above-ground view of the city’s phenomenal Blue Hole. Earnest scuba divers were taking the plunge into waters that reach a depth of 80’, and keep to a constant temperature of 64 degrees. Amazing to discover that even in this arid plains locale, the Blue Hole is comparable to 100’ of ocean depth. Although we had to miss the show of night lights, we were sure to catch a daytime glimpse of notable neon signs dispersed throughout the town, including sites such as the Sun ‘n Sand Motel and the Comet II Restaurant. We also visited the “Bless Me Ultima” Rudolfo Anaya Landscape Park – where a variety of birds were making the most of its fountain and sculpture. We imagined how cool it would be to attend a reading by Mr. Anaya in the park commemorating his masterful work. For lunch we enjoyed a taste of home (e.g. chile) at Joseph’s Bar and Grill, which remembers the legendary Club Café (complete with the revered “Fat Man” sign). Having stoked up on chile verde y rojo, we knew we’d be good to go until we could enjoy our platos favoritos in ABQ. And once back on the highway, we were careful to find the railroad bridge west of town used in John Ford’s “*The Grapes of Wrath*”. It’s the vantage point from which Tom Joad (Henry Fonda) watches a freight train cross the Pecos River at sunset.

Plan B... or, the Magic 8 Ball Speaks. On our final approach into the Duke City, we made a quick stop for salty snacks and sweet fizzy drinks at Clines Corners. A familiar roadside diversion to generations of travelers, this highway oasis continues to purvey gas, food, and souvenirs under an eye-catching (and immense) red sign. Roy Cline's original gas station opened in Lucy, NM – and then moved two times before finding its home at the junction of US 285 and I-40. TJ used this stop as a chance to stock up on trip mementos and curios for friends and associates in L.A. Thinking this was the Route 66 version of hitting the newsstands and duty free shops at an airport, it occurred to me that within days TJ would be in Singapore or Hong Kong doing the same thing – munching on starchy wedges, looking for small tokens of adventure... and wondering if he'd make his flight. With bodies and minds back on Route 66 proper, we rolled on through Moriarity, Edgewood and Tijeras Canyon. Emerging from the western-most part of the canyon, we both were both excited to see Albuquerque and the Rio Grande Valley open up before us. No doubt about it – we were motoring into the rich pageant of life that is Central Avenue – a character in its own right, with a mix of culture, built environment and history without parallel. Although we had friends and accommodations waiting for us, our first order of business was dinner at the iconic Frontier Restaurant, on Central across from UNM. We found a window booth in the original dining room, and while TJ collected utensils after we ordered, I found a solution to his dilemma with the car. In the next booth sat a lean and lanky 6'2" figure with considerable gray in his short wavy hair. I couldn't resist interrupting his conversation and asking in a sardonic tone, "are you still working here?" The guy stood up, and with a sideways grin and mock sneer offered the rejoinder "...are you still eating here?" It was my college friend Seagram. Since his days as a short order cook at the Frontier, he'd gone on to culinary school, cooked in both high- and low-brow NY restaurants, managed concert tours for small indie bands, and now produced documentary and cable TV shows. Talk about a hip cat with nine lives. My hunch was pretty strong that he needed an angle for one of his upcoming adventures, and that TJ was just the source to supply the goods.

Viva la City Different! As it turned out, TJ was able to delay his departure by a day and in order to save some money. This reprieve bought some time for another day of meanders, for and scheming with Seagram. We decided to shoot the works and make a day trip to Santa Fe, once a bona fide stop along the Mother Road. Instead of driving (the Mustang was safely ensconced in a friend's garage), we took the Rail Runner north, and marveled not only at the scenery but also the orbs that surrounded us aloft – flying in the annual Balloon Fiesta. TJ had a number of family members he wanted to see in the City Different, and Seagram wanted to soak in the Plaza, catch up, and talk about future projects. He and I would do Albuquerque justice before we set off to on the final stage of what had become the Mustang's journey to its new home. By the time we pulled into the Depot station, the guys had thoroughly reviewed the needs of the car, the official delivery route, and how to respond to unexpected automotive scenarios. TJ's cousins met him, leaving Seagram and me to walk downtown. We tracked down brown "Pre-1937" road signs noting Santa Fe's early role along the Mother Road, before the alignment changed and went south. After touring La Fonda, the history and art

museums, and having a lively lunch at the famed Plaza Café, we met up with TJ at the Depot, and headed an hour south with commuters and tourists alike. Relishing some time to myself, I walked around Downtown after we disembarked from the train at the Alvarado station. The guys took off to deal with car and logistical issues, and I soaked in the rhythm and bustle of the city center. Walking up Central to the 66 Diner proved an invigorating departure from our front seat view of the road over the past few weeks. Psyched and stoked for the adventures we all had ahead, I dropped into a booth at the 66 in time to see the sun set over the West Mesa. The glowing sky of orange, purple and pink was a definite sign that good things were ahead.