



The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

RICK'S ROADS

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What



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Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah



From Salt Lake City, there are some beautiful options. Head west, and you're up into the scenic roads through the Uinta Mountains. Aim south, and you're headed towards the really nice city of Provo (and BYU) and towards the famous National Parks of southern Utah beyond. Go north, and you're angling towards Grand Tetons and Yellowstone. All of those are scenic feasts.

But when you look west, you see a flat and empty hundred-plus miles. There's that big salty lake, first of all. The main body of Great Salt Lake will be on your right for about 30 miles. It is an ugly gray from the thick saline content. I-70 is like a causeway in stretches, with water extending on the south side of the raised roadway as well.

The first time I saw Great Salt Lake was in 1984, when Richie and I were doing a cross-county gallop from Boston to L.A. in my first Dodge Conversion Van. We stayed in SLC overnight and he was still pretty much passed out on the bed in back when I woke up and decided to hit the road.

The winter of '83-'84 had had record snowfall and that translated into record snow melts. The Uintas and the western Rockies drained more water into GSL than the basin could hold, and that overwashed the Interstate. This happened months before we got there, and the recovery was still going full bore.

The normal 4-lane, divided highway (2 lanes each way) had been replaced by a pile of dirt 10 feet high, 30 feet wide, and **30 miles** long, and topped with a hastily-laid strip of 2-lane asphalt. A hundred yards or so to the north, a duplicate pile was being

constructed. A line of dump trucks as far as I could see was driving to the end, unloading, and driving back. It was an amazing site to behold.

“Richie, check this out!” I shouted with zeal.

He grudgingly raised his hungover head, took a glance out the window, grunted “cool” and went back into his coma. I told him about it later.

And that’s pretty much what some sections of I-70 still look like. It’s been 40 years (OMG, 40 years?), though, so I’m sure improvements have been made. At the very least, I-70 was now parallel causeways instead of one shared roadbed.



I also came through here a few other times. In 1985, with Alf, we actually went for a swim in GSL, under the guise of “buoyancy testing.” We wanted to see if it was true that the high salinity meant that you could bob like a cork without treading water to stay afloat. As I recall, we decided it was indeed true, but the memory of that is overshadowed by the memory of how *totally gross* we felt as we got out of the lake. I mean, yuccck. Sticky, crusty, hot. Ugh. It wasn’t polluted or anything; it just felt nothing like your typical lake water.

So, of course, I had to do it again two years later with Wheels, who insisted that he needed to be in that lake. Not only was it no better; it was much worse. There had been an active bathhouse and dock the first time, but the lake had receded so far this time that we had to sneak through a wire fence, walk through ankle-deep mud for a hundred yards or so, then wade through sippy, soupy muck for another 100 yards or more just to get chest deep in that disgusting water.

Thus, there was NO such allure this time. The lake must have had a good melt in the Spring of 2022, because it was filled right up to the north side of the northern causeway, filled with water between the causeways, and filled well to the south of the eastbound lanes.



What I had not anticipated this time, though, was the overcast sky. I had expected blinding July sun from above, hotly reflected by the water and by the salty desert around it. The

gray sky changed the complexion of everything. I could have easily been convinced that it would actually be cold outside the van.

About 80 miles west of SLC, you reach the Bonneville Salt Flats, which contains the Bonneville Speedway, the pancake-flat, saltpan on which the official Land Speed Record is set.

I approached it from the east, of course, and the entrance to the Speedway itself is at the west end. But from this side, you still get to see the wide expanse of flat white ground. It comes right up to the shoulder of the road. There is even a rest area, a paved parking lot around a restroom building, with some vending machines. There are no fences, so people can just wander out onto the saltpan and see what it is like.



Not only are fences lacking, but so are curbs. They have made it very easy to drive your vehicle out onto the salt as well. A few dozen people were scattered here and there on the plain. I surmised that there would be far fewer if the sun had been out full force. And there were a couple of small cars out there too.

I was wary, though, because, in the few miles that preceded this rest area, there were several spots just off the roadside where deep tire tracks made it obvious that someone had tried to drive off the asphalt and onto the salt only to get stuck in the soggy, salty slime. But seeing the small cars out on it made me rethink the possibility.

I walked out a few hundred feet and was impressed with how solid (and not soggy) the ground was. When I saw a one of the cars do a little carefree wheeling and zooming well out on the pan, I thought, "Hell, Blue Maxx can handle this!"

BM seemed willing to go play out there, so we rolled across the sidewalk, down the sloped asphalt and onto the saltpan. It was great! So flat and so smooth! I took BM well out away from the rest area. After a bit, I set up my tripod and took a few pics of my noble steed and me.



Well, at this point I was feeling like King Shit, out here on the world-famous saltpan with Blue Maxx. Definitely a high point of the journey so far.

Eventually, though, I brought BM back to shore and up into the parking lot. As I pulled back onto the asphalt, I could see people gawking and gesturing like, *Hey, he drove out onto it! If he can, so can I, right?*

And as I sat there, texting the pic above to some friends, I saw quite a few cars drive past and out onto the salt.

At this point, too, I realized that I was pretty low on gas. It had been a long ride since SLC, and that gas gauge needle had dipped deep into the red zone. I meant to fill up in SLC, but blanked on it. The town of West Wendover, at the UT/NV state line was not far ahead, though, so I figured I'd be alright.

I had an *enough-frolic-let's-get-back-to-business* mindset as I pulled back out onto I-70W. Buuuuut, then I saw the sign. Just four miles short of the Nevada border, there was one last exit off the highway: "Bonneville Salt Flats International Raceway." Ohhhhhh, Maxxie, we *gotta* go have a look.

I expected there might be some small museum or something like that, so when the five-mile long roadway ended in an empty lot, which then just turned into the salt plain itself, I got itchy again. Sure, BM and I had driven on the Bonneville Salt Flat already, but this was the *Raceway*, where motorists have been zooming as fast as 622 MPH. Yeah, you read that right.



In 1960, Mickey Thompson became the first American to break the 400 barrier, hitting 406.6 MPH.

Then, just five years later, in 1965, Craig Breedlove, in his *Spirit of America – Sonic 1* was the first to break the **600** mark, cruising the measured mile at 600.610 MPH.

But in 1970, Gary Gabelich outdid him, clocking 622.407 MPH in his *Blue Flame*.

Well, if *Blue Flame* could do 622, *Blue Maxx* wanted to see what he could do. So, with nobody to tell me "no", I took BM out about two miles out onto the famous raceway. There had been a car or two just timidly driving around near the parking area, but I was all alone way out here. The flat salt extended for miles and miles beyond my chosen spot.

There was the remnant of an old black painted line, as well as some small cones and posts that served as mile markers. I could only imagine what a frying pan this would have been under the full assault of the summer sun.

As it turns out, the Raceway has seen some tough times in recent years. In 2014 and 2015, the famous Speed Week event had to be cancelled. The condition of much of the saltpan had been diminished by mud from rain runoff, seriously reducing the area suitable for racing, and salt mining had compromised a secondary racing area.



Even worse, the thickness of the salt has deteriorated from almost three feet to only two *inches* in some areas. Despite that, though, Speed Week has returned to the August calendar, along with several other annual events throughout the year.

I turned Blue Maxx around so we could roar back from whence we came. I got my video camera (my phone) ready and set out. In retrospect, I should have taken the time to pick out a measured mile, gotten a full head of steam, and timed myself for the distance, but, well, I just didn't think of it.

Instead, we started from zero, and accelerated. The unmarked salt and the size and emptiness and smoothness of the plain made it seem like we were barely moving. I called out the speedometer reading as we went: "60 ... 70... 80..." Part of me wanted to go to 100, but more of me wussed out. There was certainly no fear of crashing into anything, but practicality won out.

When you live in your van, you need to take extra good care of it; abusing it by "pushing the limits" is just asking for trouble. Also, with gas costing more than \$5 per gallon around these parts, wasting it at high speeds is folly ... especially, as I just remembered, when I had almost **none** left in my tank. Oooops!!



Content with our run, BM and I rolled on back to the lot, posed for a pic at the sign (see page 1), and reset our course for Nevada.

As luck would have it, though, there was a gas station before we ever got back to I-70. BM guzzled more than 24 gallons into his 25-gallon tank, so calling off the chase for 100 was probably a good idea.

Can you imagine running out of gas way out on that saltpan?? How STUPID would you feel? It would be about a six-mile walk (of shame) to this gas station to get a gallon, and then a six-mile walk back, carrying it. Even if my cell phone could get a signal out there, I might just prefer walking the 12 miles to calling AAA and having someone drive out here to bring me fuel. I just don't think I could handle the driver's laughter.

While Maxx chugged his petrol, I noticed all the salty residue on the fenders where the tires had kicked it backwards. I washed it off with my squeegee.

But then I got to thinking. Hmm. I got down on all fours to have a look at the undercarriage. Sure enough, it was **caked** with salt. From the front wheel wells all the way back to the rear bumper. I keep a three-foot-long dowel in my driver-door well (just in case, you know), so I used it to reach under and poke off as many of the salty chunks as I could, but one thing became obvious: I needed to find a car wash.

So, with a full tank of gas, and a new resolve, we got back onto the Interstate .. where the speed limit is, umm, 80.



Check out the full SmugMug photo album:
<https://rickmackenzie.smugmug.com/20220718-19-Northern-Utah>