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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Petrified Forest National Park, eastern Arizona



So, after a beautiful morning cruise through Monument Valley, Blue Maxx and I turned south. There was a spot on the map that I somehow kept missing on every trip out thisaway: Meteor Crater.



The ride to get to it was about what I expected -- empty desert, *almost four hours of it!* – but there were two things that deserve mention. One was the signage along the long entrance road into the Meteor Crater compound: clever quips like, "4 Miles To Impact", and "Speed Limit: Cars 25 MPH, Meteors 26,000 MPH".

The second noteworthy thing did not appear until after I decided **not** to see Meteor Crater.

Yes, I know, I *did* just drive the long entrance road (see previous paragraph), and I *did* park in the parking lot, and I *did* go inside the big, new Visitor Center. What I did ***not*** do was pay the requested *$27 fee* (which included the senior discount).

Are you freaking kidding me?? $27 to stand on a platform and look at a big, ugly hole in the desert? After a summer of amazing National Park scenery – Glacier, Yellowstone, Yosemite, Crater Lake, and such – that cost me exactly *ZERO* dollars, I'm expected to fork over the price of a burger and two beers just to look at a featureless crater??

No, thank you, please (it only makes me sneeze). I moved onward. And that's where Deservable Mention #2 comes in: Winslow, Arizona, specifically, "the corner" of the famous Route 66 and West Kinsley Avenue.



Commemorating the line in the Eagles' 1972 hit *Take it Easy*, the town recreated the scene spelled out in the lyrics:

Standin' on the corner in Winslow, Arizona
Such a fine sight to see
It's a girl, my lord, in a flatbed Ford
Slowin' down to take a look at me…

It's quite well done, complete with bronze statues, appropriate street signage, and painted windows depicting a girl in the Ford (the real flatbed cab is empty), a couple upstairs about to get it on, and an eagle. What's extra cool is the intersection itself:



It was a great spot, but just a short stop. Petrified Forest NP was still an hour away.

I had been to PFNP before, but it was way back in 1987. I was confident that the petrified trees now would be pretty much the same as then, but this time I was armed with a much better camera, with almost infinite "film" (and I used plenty of it).

In that first visit, my co-traveler Alf and I pretty much stayed in Max (the original Max, the 1987 Dodge Conversion Van) as we briefly checked out the southern part of the park. It was scorchingly hot out, so if we stepped out to snap a picture – one of the precious 36 in a roll – we were back in the AC in almost no time.

As such, that was a bad visit. It counted as National Park #8 for me, so I was all too happy to check it off, but it was still lame.

Today, Blue Maxx and I arrived in mid-afternoon, resolved to do a much more through exploration. We started at the eastern end, at the Painted Desert.



This was virgin turf. Alf and I never made it to this part of the park, which lies north of I-40. It is the smaller section by far, but easily the most colorful.









There were hiking trails down in among those strange mounds, but I had a lot of park yet to discover and limited hours of sunlight to do it in, so on we drove.



This northern section does have areas of petrified wood, but not as many as the southern section does. I stopped at almost every turnout and took way too many rock pix, including a ton of close-ups. My thinking was that I'd see the details better when I zoomed in on a photo, than I would right there at the rock.













Some of the large fragments lay as long, broken trunks (left), while others were isolated, or spread out across the field, like grazing cattle. Petrified cows? Maybe. Amazing colors!



It would have made much more sense, given my ultimate easterly heading, to have started my PFNP experience at the western end, off US-180, a little east of the historic Route 66 town of Holbrook (that's what Alf and I had done), and made the park visit a mere parallel sidetrack to my general route. But now, I had to whirl about when I reached that west end gate and retrace my tracks back up the full 28-mile length of the aptly-named Main Park Road.

That wasn't all bad, though, because the sun was now at my back, and some of those crazy badlandish mounds looked so much better.





In fact, with clouds stepping aside, and the sun at such a dramatic angle, the return pass-through at Painted Desert was even more dazzling.





And that would end up being the penultimate National Park of RoadMode2026.

Blue Maxx and I rolled on into New Mexico under cover of dusk and immediately lost an hour of our lives doing so. Now, AZ and NM are both in the Mountain Time Zone (MTZ), but AZ does not observe Daylight Saving Time (except for the Native American lands in northeast AZ, which do), so they are an hour apart during the DST months, but the same time during the winter half of the year.



During DST, AZ keeps the same time as CA, which is in the PTZ. That's gotta be freaking confusing.

So, in AZ, I don't even try to change my watch. Wherever I am, it's just plain old Rick Time, and let everyone deal with that. =)