

## Sunday, 21 November 2010

### [Chillin' at Charla's, Brawley Cattle-Call Rodeo, Scary Salvation Mountain, Slab City, Veteran's Day & Thanksgiving in Los Angeles](#)



I spent a relaxing, fun-filled time at my fantastic friend Charla's place in the southern desert regions, near the Mexico border. Both Ranger Ted and I had several intriguing and slightly disturbing adventures.

We attended the Veteran's Day on November 11th (which is the equivalent of the UK's Remembrance Day, where everyone wears poppies to commemorate the deaths of soldiers who fought in world wars) and there was an unveiling of a new memorial in the town centre of Brawley - where Charla lives - and a fly-over by the British Royal Air Force. They have a training base nearby.

The Veteran's Day was slightly unique in that, after a sombre memorial service, there was a very loud cheer from the 300-strong crowd. I thought this was slightly inappropriate, until I realised it had nothing to do with cheering the death of war veterans but everything to do with the fact the town's American football team had won an important game the night before. They love their "football" over here.

This cheer was followed by the parading of the four "Cattle-Call Queens"; these are four lovely young ladies who have won the competition to be Rodeo Queens for the year. They didn't win this coveted faux-royalty title entirely on beauty, because this competition is based on horse-riding ability, rounding up cattle, lassoing animals and general "cowgirl" skills. Yee-ha! I was lucky enough to meet all the girls, with Ranger Ted, and we had our picture taken with them.



Of course, combining a memorial service with Cattle-Call Queens and football cheers is not something we'd do in England, but then that is the wonder of America. And, bizarrely, I think it's fantastic that this does happen; it's a mixture of dwelling on past sadness and celebrating happy future thoughts and events. I like that.

Now to the disturbing stuff.

Charla drove to an incredibly unique tourist attraction in these parts: Salvation Mountain. If you haven't heard of it, the place is like nothing else you've seen on planet Earth. It is a fifty-foot high, 150-foot wide rainbow-coloured hill proclaiming one man's slightly obsessive, slightly scary, but also quite incredible belief in God.



A very nice man named Leonard Knight, from Vermont, had "found Jesus" - whatever that means - when he was 35-years-old in 1967. After various adventures and travels, Leonard found himself visiting a desolate place called Slab City in Imperial County. Slab City is a town full of rundown trailers, gypsies, squatters, meth smokers, the mentally unhinged (which you usually become after doing too much meth) and what they call "snowbirds": people who travel down from their homes in the northern US states such as Alaska - and wandering Canadians too - to be in the southern Californian heat during the winter. Slab City used to be a World War II marine training base called Fort Dunlap, but now all that remains of it are the square concrete foundation slabs of the vanished buildings. Hence "Slab City".

Leonard found that he fit into this community very well and decided to promote his love of God by collecting junk, hay bales, trees and covering them in concrete, sand and clay to build a multi-coloured, twisted, beacon-like monument to Jesus.

My first thoughts on seeing the mound, with its huge red heart at its centre and the elevated word "GOD" at its top, were two-fold: 1) Wow, this is impressive! and 2) the guy who did this has had waaaaay too much desert sun.



Walking around Salvation Mountain, it was hard not to be awed by Leonard's one-man achievement. It is a living, breathing piece of outside art - one that is still growing as he adds to it - and a statement of his beliefs for the world to see. I'm all for that. Fantastic.

Except, then I got thinking: there must surely be some kind of psychologically unbalanced, religious-based psychosis involved in this too. No one without a certain amount of manic behaviour and delusional thought could accomplish this on their own. Yes, it is his calling and that's magnificent - and it should be celebrated for its uniqueness - but the "mountain" and indeed its religious message also needs to be seen within some kind of human context, i.e. Leonard's background and his state-of-mind.



In fact, without wishing to sound too negative, this kind of over-the-top "sermonising" of the message of God is what gives so many Christians a bad name. Religious euphoria is often commonly associated with schizophrenia and other types of mental illness and so Leonard's message of "God is Love" should be seen through a guarded eye. Religious euphoria is great for awhile, I've felt it, but it can lead to serious psychological damage and a misperception of the world. It can, indeed, lead to a total breakdown of how individuals view their own identity, due to them being so intensely "wrapped up" in the experience of praising God...whatever that is; they're so busy focusing on some exterior being providing them with love that they forget actually it is *them* that's showing *themselves* love. It is *themselves* who is taking action to make things happen in their lives. It has *nothing* to do with God.

At least, not in my opinion anyway.

But enough of this meaningful conjecture, let's continue on our journey.



After the visit to Slab City - and its underground drainage system where the local community crawls down a ladder to shower - we visited the local sand dunes, watching people drive at high-speed over the hills in their dune buggies. I didn't get to do this, sadly, but it looked like such cool fun.

Ranger Ted decided to hang off the "World's Tallest Flagpole" - a 184 feet tall pole with the Stars and Stripes flying at its top in Calipatria, Imperial Valley. Sadly, though, I think by "world" they mean "Imperial County in California" because the *actual* tallest flagpole in the world is 525 feet high - almost three times higher - and it's in Kijōng-dong, North Korea. Still, no matter, who's counting? And who, for that matter, is planning a visit to North Korea to check? Not me.

The next day Charla and I pretended to be cowboys (well, Charla was a *cowgirl* obviously) as we went to one of the few remaining all-American Cattle-Call rodeos in Brawley. There were feisty cowgirls riding two horses at once, bucking bronco men trying to stay on angry horses and bulls (I didn't know they tied up the bulls testicles really tight so they bucked!), little kids clutching onto running sheep, and a general air of oozing machismo and cowboy swaggeriness. Charla was kind enough to help me join in the cowboyiness of it all by buying me a decent Stetson. It was great fun.



For the next couple of days my visit to Imperial Valley consisted of hanging out with Charla's fantastic family and friends, going over to the lovely Vilma and Dave's house for some gorgeous homemade Mexican food, discovering the delicious icecream goodness of a chain called "Cold Stone" where they mix up the icecream you want in front of you on their ice-cold stone counters (a bit like a *Subway* for icecream - yummy!), pretending to be a cowboy, getting lots of dog hugs from Bugsy, going to a school to read children's stories to Brawley eighth graders (which I *loved* doing so much - especially when they said I talked like Harry Potter) and, of course, having lots of wonderful chats and laughs with lovely Charla and her bloke Travis.

And now, after a five-hour Greyhound bus trip where we were stopped by US Border patrol and "raided" for 30 minutes so they could take off some people and question them, I'm in Los Angeles once again. And for Thanksgiving this time, too. I've never been in the USA for Thanksgiving but, as the British are to blame for this, I might have to keep my head down.



I have several meetings lined up with people - such as a Disney producer - and I'm also going to catch up with some of my friends here too. But, as I have now totally run out of money, I have booked my flight home in two weeks time and so will be heading back to a cold England for Christmas and some brand new adventures in 2011.

To see my rodeo, parade, Salvation Mountain and other pictures click [here](#).