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Destination: Secrets of the Four Corners/Colorado Plateau Region

In recent years, some of my favorite destinations in the Four Corners/Colorado Plateau region – northern Arizona, western Colorado, northwestern New Mexico and southeastern Utah – have become so popular with the selfie and bucket list crowds that they’re often overrun with tourists, and decidedly less enjoyable to visit if you prefer a less parking lot and more solitary and natural experience.

One of the things I’ve done as a result in my own explorations of the region is to seek out places that are well-off the beaten path. Not completely unknown of course or too difficult to access – I had to be able to find them myself, after all. But I looked for interesting places generally not marked on more common maps nor featured in most general tourism brochures. And for the most part, I’ve had each of these places to myself when I got to them.

For this destination report, I’ve picked a dozen of my favorite “secret” places for your consideration, organized as sort of a virtual road trip. I also mention some of the less-than-secret destinations you might want to stop at along the way.

There’s a mix of geology, archaeology, paleontology and short hike sites here. Many can be reached with a standard car, although in some instances you’d be better off with 4WD, high clearance or both. Be prepared for some hiking at some of these places, with many of the hikes being reasonably short and easy. At some of these spots, the amount of hiking is entirely up to you.

And it goes without saying that it’s always a good idea to bring food, water and a decent spare tire when you explore remote areas. Bring paper maps and Google satellite image printouts with you, too, as cell phone reception can be pretty spotty at best.

Bloomfield, New Mexico – Defensive Sites of the Dinétah

I was staying in Bloomfield with plans to visit Chaco Culture National Historic Park when I first heard about the area's Defensive Sites of the Dinétah. Although I didn't have time to check them out on that visit, I returned the following year with more detailed information and maps.

The Dinétah region is the traditional homeland of the Navajo and home to Navajo creation traditions. Dinétah broadly covers the Four Corners region, but its heart is in the area in and around Largo Canyon in northwest New Mexico.

From the late 1600s to mid-1700s, the Navajo clashed with the Utes and Comanches. During that time, the Navajo built hundreds of defensive "pueblitos" (small pueblos) across the Dinétah region. The ruins of many of those pueblitos as well as petroglyph sites and Ancestral Puebloan sites survive in the area.

The Crow Canyon Archaeological District is a good place to start. It features the ruins of a pueblito as well as several impressive petroglyph panels, some reached by a short hike. There are about a half dozen other related sites in the area, managed by the Bureau of Land Management and thus accessible to the public (some for the 4WD/decent clearance-driving with some hiking public, anyway).



Crow Canyon pueblito ruins



Petroglyphs in the Crow Canyon Archeological District



Largo School pueblito ruins



A short hike at nearby Simon Canyon Recreation Area leads to this pueblito ruins in outstanding condition.

Worth noting... Many of the surviving pueblitos in the region are on Navajo Nation tribal lands. Make sure you check with Navajo Nation authorities concerning access permission, permits and guide requirements before seeking them out on your own, as reservation visitors are subject to tribal laws.

Also in the Bloomfield area are the Aztec Arches, Aztec National Monument, Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness Area, and my favorite ruins site – Chaco Culture National Historical Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Outcrop Arch (left); inside the restored Great Kiva at Aztec National Monument (center); Kin Kletso ruins viewed from Chaco Culture National Historical Park's Pueblo Alto trail (right)

Blanding, Utah – Comb Ridge Ruins and Rock Art at Bears Ears

For our next couple destinations, we head to Blanding, Utah. Along my favorite route from Bloomfield to Blanding are a number of Ancestral Puebloan ruins sites associated with Canyons of the Ancients National Monument, in the southwest corner of Colorado, and Hovenweep National Monument, with a handful of sites scattered across southeast Utah and southwest Colorado.



One of a handful of ruins sites I came across while hiking in the south end of Canyon of the Ancient's Sand Canyon (left); Canyon of the Ancient's Painted Hands Pueblo ruins (right)

Hovenweep National Monument is a great park. Its main area, the Square Tower Group, features a number of ruins lining both sides of a box canyon. But this area is popular enough that you'll have trouble keeping some middle-aged lady in a bright pink outfit out of your photos that try to capture the sense of history of these ruins. Fortunately, there are a number of smaller, remote ruins sites in the region that are also part of the park – I've always had those sites to myself when I've visited them.



Hovenweep Castle ruins are among almost 30 ruins at the park's Square Tower Group headquarters (left); Hovenweep's remote Cutthroat Castle Group ruins (right)

There is some interesting geology in this area, too. Perhaps the best known of these sites is Monument Valley, which straddles the Utah-Arizona border along Highway 163. You can get several nice views of it from the highway, best with the afternoon sun, but if you really want to explore it, you should visit Monument Valley Tribal Park, a Navajo Nation tribal park.

Just north of the reservation along Highway 163 is a small but interesting formation, Mexican Hat, named for its resemblance to a sombrero perched on a rock. And nearby is the Valley of the Gods, where a 17-mile dirt and gravel road leads you past a number of red rock formations.



Artists Point in the Navajo Nation's Monument Valley Tribal Park (left); Mexican Hat (center); Valley of the Gods (right)

I've long been taken with the colorful west-facing side of the Comb Ridge monocline, accessed from Highway 163 northeast of Valley of the Gods, and I've found a couple minor archaeological sites along its base.



West face of the Comb Ridge monocline

But I've learned about a number of much more interesting archaeological sites along the monocline's less colorful east side, now part of Bears Ears National Monument. To date I've been to four ruins and rock art sites towards the south end of the east side of the monocline, and a 3-track dinosaur trackway at the north end. I'm still exploring this area.

Finding many of the archeological sites here can be a bit challenging as the Bureau of Land Management reportedly has kept them unsigned to limit visitation and the often-resulting damage and vandalism. Even with mileage information provided by some sources to use with your odometer, there are enough hiking and cattle trails in the area that you may not know for sure that you've stopped at the right trail until you reach the ruins and rock art.



Ancestral Puebloan ruins at Monarch Cave



The Double Stack Ancestral Puebloan ruins site



One of two rare wickiups I found in the area

A wickiup is the frame of an old hut. Because of how they were constructed and centuries of exposure to the elements, wickiup ruins are extremely fragile, making them among the rarest types of ruins found in the Southwest. Please don't touch, and please keep out.



Petroglyphs at the Wolfman Panel (left); pictographs at Double Stack (center); pottery shards at Monarch Cave (right)



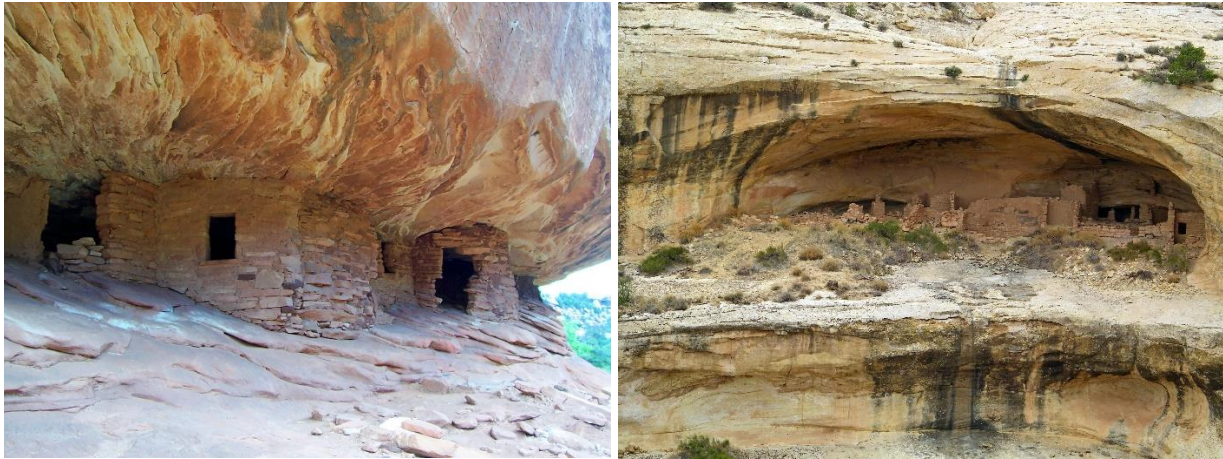
View from atop Comb Ridge towards the Procession Panel of petroglyphs

My hike to the Procession Panel of petroglyphs got off to a good start. I was on the right unmarked trail. But at an expanse of bare sandstone I didn't see the next cairn. I looked around, and eventually found a sandy patch with footprints, so I figured that was the trail and I continued on my way. Petroglyphs along the way gave me additional confidence that I was on the right path, and the views from the top were great. But I didn't find the Procession Panel when I reached the top of Comb Ridge. Well, I sort of did. The red arrow is pointing to it.

Sometimes I have a great place all to myself for all the wrong reasons.

Blanding, Utah – Cave Towers at Mule Canyon

There are a number of interesting archeological sites and hiking trails as well as Natural Bridges National Monument along Highway 95 west of Blanding, and I've been to several of them over the years.



When the sun hits this site just right, the patterns in the sandstone above House on Fire ruins along the South Fork of Mule Canyon look like flames (left); Butler Wash ruins (right)

I don't remember how I first heard of Cave Towers at Mule Canyon, but I'm glad that I made note of it when I did and then found out how to find it. It is generally described as a site where there are the ruins of seven stone structures located around the head of a side canyon to Mule Canyon.

The site is located on Highway 95 west of Blanding and Comb Ridge, and just a short distance east of the Mule Canyon Kiva site. There were no signs for it along the highway. The unmarked gate on the south side of the highway might deter some visitors, but just remember to close the gate behind you. A modestly rough road leads to a parking area and information marker. A much rougher road continues on, but I recommend walking the half mile to the head of the canyon.



The gate is on the south side of the highway (left); this side canyon of Mule Canyon barely warrants a mention on most maps, and yet it is rather impressive in its own right, as is Mule Canyon in the distance (right)

If you've hiked to ruins sites along either the South Fork or North Fork of Mule Canyon on the north side of the highway, you will be especially impressed by the view of Mule Canyon in the distance, and how large and deep it got in just a few miles.

The seven sites scattered around the rim of the canyon are in varying states of ruin. Dating back to about 1250AD, it is believed that some of these Ancestral Puebloan ruins were towers and others were above-ground kivas. None of the ruins at Cave Towers have been stabilized, so they are especially fragile. Please view them from an appropriate distance as you explore the site.



Two of the ruins at Cave Towers

Admittedly, the ruins here may not be as photogenic as those found at Hovenweep's Square Tower Group, but it turns out that there is a lot more to the site, something left out of many of the information sources I've found on Cave Towers.

From the head of the canyon, I noticed what looked like a distant granary ruins site along the west side of the canyon. So, I walked along the west side rim for a bit hoping to get a better view of it.

Although I did confirm what I saw, my walk gave me great views of the east side of the canyon. I ended up spotting ten ruins sites built along the ledges and crevices of the east side of the canyon, these in addition to the seven ruins at the head of the canyon and the granary on the canyon's west side.

Because my discoveries already prompted me to spend a lot more time here than planned, I didn't have time to walk along the east rim to see if there were more ruins along the west side of the canyon. But that just gives me a good reason to go back.



Some of the ruins along the east side of the canyon

Moab, Utah – Cache Valley Blues beyond Arches National Park

As you head north on Highway 191/163 from Blanding to Moab, Utah and our next stop at Arches National Park, consider stops at Church Rock, Newspaper Rock, Canyonlands National Park's Needles District, Wilson Arch, and the Needles and Anticline Overlooks.



Church Rock (left); Newspaper Rock petroglyphs (center). Canyonlands Needles District (right)



The Anticline Overlook features outstanding views of the Kane Creek Anticline, a large bulge in the earth where much of the center has eroded away over time. On the far side of the Colorado River, you can see the anticline's arc comprised of layers of rock that have yet to erode away.

Arches National Park, just north of Moab, is my favorite national park, but it's become so overcrowded that it's unpleasant for me to visit (it's still well-worth visiting, to be sure, if you've never been there before). The park's colorful sandstone has been eroded into a variety of shapes, towers, and the highest concentration of arches in the world.



I had Delicate Arch to myself for 45 minutes my first visit there back in 1991, and even enjoyed some quality alone time with the arch when I hiked to it in 2004 (left); catching the sunset light on the rocks in the Devils Garden area (right)

If you want to get away from the crowds in the park nowadays, your best bet is to head out to the Klondikes, Eye of the Whale Arch or Ring Arch, or hike along Courthouse Wash. And I accidentally stumbled on another place worth checking out, just outside the park's Delicate Arch Viewpoint area.

Cache Valley is the result of a collapsed anticline. The eroded valley has a jumble of types of rock, including some bluish-greenish-grey rock in the mix. Glauconite, I believe, an iron-rich clay layer that may have originated as ocean deposits.

During one visit to the park, I wondered what I might find along the 4WD road that leaves the Delicate Arch Viewpoint parking area. I hiked it a short distance to the park boundary and then beyond for a while before turning back. As I neared the park boundary on my return, I noticed a faint trail that led to a small rise off to the side. Cattle trail? Past hikers? Curious, I checked it out.

I found myself looking at a small valley full of bluish-greenish-grey rock, quite a contrast to the red, orange and buff features that define much of Arches National Park. The site is only a few acres, but it was so unexpected that I spent more than an hour there looking around and taking pictures.





This colorful Cache Valley outcropping along the main park road certainly hints of blue-green stone in the area, but it was an accident of erosion that left behind such a large expanse of it along the 4WD road.

I've hiked back out to what I call "Blue Valley" (I'm not aware if it actually has a name) a couple more times since I first "discovered" this spot. I've had it to myself all three times I've been here.

There is a lot to see in the Moab, Utah area in addition to Arches National Park, more than enough to fill several days, including Canyonlands National Park's Island in the Sky District, Dead Horse Point State Park, sites and trailheads along the Colorado River both upstream and downstream, Fisher Towers, Castle Valley, the LaSal Mountain Loop, the Corona Arch trail, and a lot of OHV and mountain bike trails.



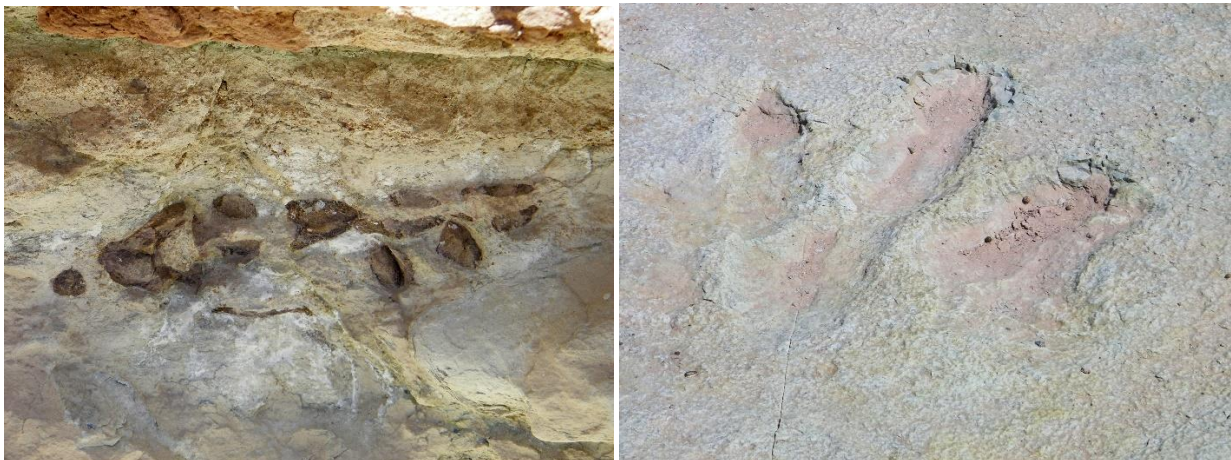
The since-collapsed Cobra formation along the Fisher Towers Trail (left); Castleton Tower and the Priest and Nuns in Castle Valley (center); Grand View Point view at Canyonlands National Park (right)

Moab, Utah – Sego Canyon

Now we head north from Arches on Highway 191/163 towards I-70 and our next stop at Sego Canyon. You might want to stop at one or more of the dinosaur-related sites along the way, including Willow Springs, Copper Ridge, the Dinosaur Stomping Grounds and Mill Canyon.



Theropod track at Willow Springs Dinosaur Trackway (left); saurpoid trackway at Copper Ridge (right)



Saurpoid tail bone fossils along the Dinosaur Trail Hike at Mill Canyon (left); ornithopod track at the Mill Canyon dinosaur trackway (right)

Sego Canyon, on the north side of I-70 east of the Highway 191/153 interchange, is one of a number of canyons that head into the Book Cliffs. Not far into the canyon you'll find large rock art panels that represent three different cultures, Barrier Canyon, Fremont and Historic Ute. The road into the canyon also leads to the ruins of Sego Ghost Town, a one-time coal mining town.



Barrier Canyon culture pictographs



Fremont culture petroglyphs



Historic Ute pictographs



Sego Ghost Town ruins

Vernal, Utah – Fantasy Canyon

Now we head to Vernal, Utah for a pair of destinations. Drive east on I-40 into Colorado and then north on Highway 139 towards Rangely. This route passes through Canyon Pintado National Historical District, which features several rock art and ruins sites along a fifteen-mile stretch of this route, most of which are easily accessed from the highway (Canyon Pintado was actually a candidate for this list).



A rock overhang at Canyon Pintado's Four Mile Draw protects the Sun Dagger pictographs, but it also works with them as a sort of calendar, with shadow patterns it casts intersecting with the circles at the solstices (left); the Guardian pictograph welcomes visitors to the Waving Hands Site (right)

While in the Vernal area, visit Dinosaur National Monument. It is the site of a major dinosaur fossil quarry, it is home to some ruins and rock art sites, and its geology provides some beautiful scenery for hiking and views of the canyons carved by the Yampa and Green Rivers.



Dinosaur National Monument's fossil quarry (left); view of Split Mountain from the Desert Voices trail (right)

About 27 miles south of Vernal, Utah is our first area destination, Fantasy Canyon. When I headed there, the route wasn't well-marked, and I shared the roads with a number of trucks servicing the region's oil and gas industry, so I advise having a good map so you can drive as purposefully as those truck drivers do.

Fantasy Canyon itself is small – only about 20 feet deep and 200 feet long. Loose sands, silts and clays were deposited here 38-50 million years ago and formed into sandstones and shales. Siltstones and shales eroded faster than the quartzose sandstone, leaving behind the fantastical shapes that we see today. There is no other site quite like this anywhere else in the world. Don't touch or climb on the formations. Although the formations have been eroding into shape over millions of years, they are especially fragile.



The Flying Witch

The Flying Witch gets its name because it resembles a witch hunched down on her broomstick.

Vernal, Utah – McConkie Ranch Rock Art

There are a number of good rock art sites in the Vernal, Utah area, including a handful of sites at Dinosaur National Monument. But my favorite of the Vernal area rock art sites is located on private property northwest of Vernal at McConkie Ranch. It is one of the richest, most impressive rock art sites that I've come across.

These are the Dry Fork Canyon petroglyphs and pictographs, panels that cover more than 200 feet of cliff face. The rock art is believed to be those of the Fremont culture and date back 800 to 2000 years.

Hiking trails along the base of the cliff provide reasonably easy access to the rock art, although it is steep in some places.

Because this rock art site is on private property, please leave a donation to help the owners maintain the site and its access facilities, and keep a respectful distance from nearby homes.



Bigfoot, featured on this McConkie Ranch panel, is one of my favorite petroglyphs anywhere. Make sure you take the trail to the end so you don't miss this panel.



This McConkie Ranch petroglyph is more typical of Fremont culture figures I've seen elsewhere.

There are a number of additional rock art sites in the region, including McKee Springs and Jones Hole. Nearby Red Fleet State Park features a trail to a good dinosaur trackway.

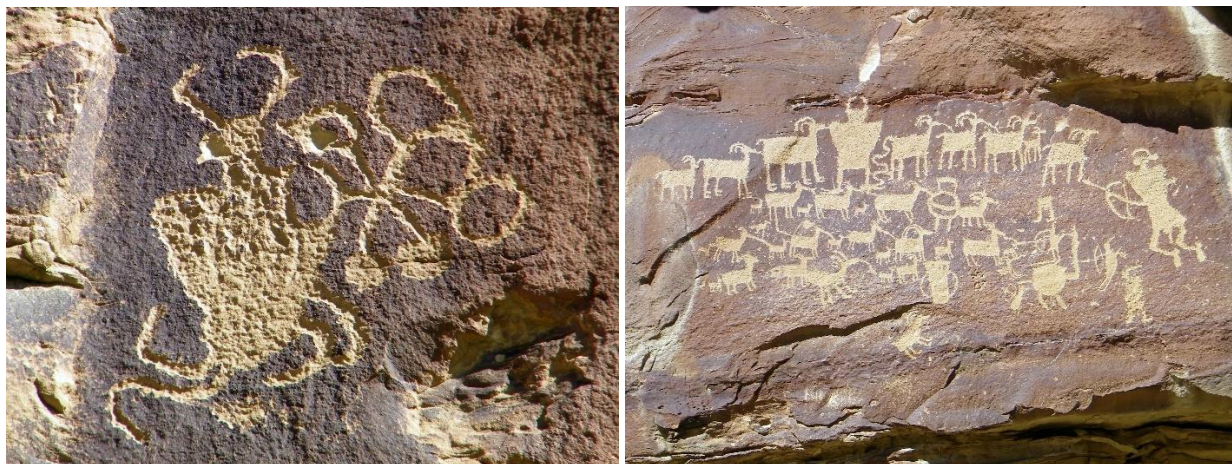


McKee Springs petroglyphs (left); dinosaur trackway at Red Fleet State Park (right)

Although the Red Fleet trackway is close as the crow flies to the fossil quarry at Dinosaur National Monument, it's actually about 50 million years older. This trackway is believed to have been formed at a muddy lake or oasis surrounded by an ancient dune field.

Green River, Utah – San Rafael Reef

For our next two destinations, we head south on Highway 191 to Green River, Utah. Along the way I recommend checking out Nine Mile Canyon. Nine Mile Canyon is nicknamed “the world’s longest art gallery”, because rock art can be found at numerous locations along its 46-mile length, culminating in its Great Hunt petroglyph panel. You’ll also find a scattering of ancient ruins, early pioneer cabins, and geological formations that include natural arches and balanced rocks.



One of my favorite petroglyphs along Nine Mile Canyon (left); Nine Mile Canyon’s Great Hunt petroglyph panel (right)

The Utah State University Eastern Prehistoric Museum in Price, Utah is also worth checking out as you make your way to Green River.

Green River is a useful base for exploring our next pair of destinations, both in the San Rafael Swell. The San Rafael Swell is a large anticline, like the Kane Creek Anticline shown earlier, except it is massive – 40 miles by 75 miles. Like the Kane Creek Anticline, much of its center has been eroded down, leaving behind a number of canyons, outcroppings, plains and ridges, including San Rafael Reef that marks its eastern edge and Molen Reef along its western edge.

The swell straddles I-70, but at this writing it isn’t well signed. Although it is mostly BLM-managed public lands, it was only a couple years ago that San Rafael Swell Recreation Area was officially established. Other than generally unpaved roads and some outhouses, facilities are rare. There is no visitor center, and there are no services at all along more than 100 miles of I-70 between Green River and Salina to the west. Having food, water, spare tires and a full tank of gas when setting off to explore the swell is a good idea (cell phones are unreliable here).

When approaching the swell from Green River, arguably its most distinctive feature is the San Rafael Reef, a ridge of tilted sandstone rock layers that give you some idea of the anticline’s magnitude before much of its center bulge eroded away. Erosion has created a number of canyons that cut through part or all of the reef. Many of these are now hike-able, and a number of these are marked with petroglyph and pictograph panels. Some are more easily accessed than others, but you can take your pick and have a nice quiet hike (other than Little Wild Horse Canyon, which draws crowds).



The tilted rock layers of San Rafael Reef

The reef's buff-colored Navajo sandstone layer didn't erode away like the layers above it. The sandstone layer in turn protected the more colorful rock layers below it. You can see those more colorful layers in the middle of and on the west-facing side of the reef in places like Crack Canyon and Chute Canyon.

Structurally, San Rafael Reef will remind regional travelers of Capitol Reef and Caineville Reef not far to the southwest, and Comb Ridge and the Cockscomb in southern Utah, but those were created at monoclines, whereas San Rafael Swell is at the edge of an anticline, a distinction probably of more interest to geologists than to casual observers.



Pictographs at Black Dragon Canyon



Hiking in Crack Canyon



Petroglyphs at Three Fingers Canyon



Hiking in Chute Canyon



Hiking Ding and Dang Canyons



The Temple Mountain Wash pictograph panel

Green River, Utah – Rochester Rock Art Panel

Molen Reef on the west side of San Rafael Swell doesn't look nearly as dramatic as San Rafael Reef does. But like San Rafael Reef, the area is home to a number of rock art sites, including one of my favorites, the Rochester Rock Art Panel.

It's a bit of a drive to get there from Green River, but you can make a day of it by visiting some other San Rafael Swell sites on the way there or back.

One fairly popular stop is Buckhorn Draw, where you can see its large rock art panel of mostly Barrier Canyon culture pictographs, although there are some Fremont culture petroglyphs here as well.

The San Rafael River doesn't look like much where Highway 24 crosses it south of I-70, but it has carved a big canyon in the heart of San Rafael Swell, nicknamed the "Little Grand Canyon of the San Rafael". The Wedge Overlook provides a great view of the canyon.



Buckhorn Draw pictographs (left); the San Rafael River and the "Little Grand Canyon of the San Rafael" (right)

Towards the northwest end of San Rafael Swell is the Cleveland-Lloyd Dinosaur Quarry, the heart of the recently created Jurassic National Monument. The site is home to the densest concentration of Jurassic period dinosaur fossils. More than 15,000 bones have been excavated here so far, some of which are on display at the Utah State University Eastern Prehistoric Museum, which I mentioned earlier.

Because of the variety of species represented and how their bones are intermingled, scientists speculate that the site was once a "predator trap", an area where thick mud trapped dinosaurs who came to the site for water. The trapped dinosaurs drew attention from predator species including a number of allosaurs, many of which then became trapped themselves. (You'll find an excellent example of a predator trap at the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles.)

An active dinosaur fossil quarry and hiking trails are among Jurassic National Monument's features.



A protected dinosaur quarry at Jurassic National Monument

The Rochester Rock Art Panel, a few miles east of Emory, Utah, is a large panel that contains numerous petroglyphs, including those representing both Fremont culture and historic native styles, although there are some examples from early settlers (and, unfortunately, graffiti), too.



A short hike leads to the panel, which has just come into view



The Rochester Rock Art Panel



Rochester panel petroglyphs (left and right)

Hanksville, Utah – Dirty Devil River Canyon

It's only about 60 miles from Green River to Hanksville, Utah, site of our next destination. Along the way, I suggest stopping at Goblin Valley State Park. Goblin Valley is home to thousands of hoodoos, carved sandstone columns where a harder rock layer protected softer sandstone below it from eroding.



One of the “goblins” that welcomes hikers exploring Goblin Valley (left); south of Hanksville is the Little Egypt Geologic Site, a poor man's version of Goblin Valley, much smaller than Goblin Valley but it's free and there are far fewer visitors (right)

The Dirty Devil River forms just north of Hanksville where the Fremont River and Muddy Creek merge. It admittedly doesn't look at all impressive here. It's a bit more impressive 80 miles to the south where the Dirty Devil River empties into the Colorado River at Glen Canyon National Recreation Area's Lake Powell – but not a Wow! stop.



Muddy Creek and the Fremont River meet to form the Dirty Devil River, with the Henry Mountains in the distance (left); the Dirty Devil River nears the end of its course at the Colorado River (right)

The Dirty Devil really caught my eye when I saw it from an airplane window. No ordinary river, the Dirty Devil has carved a wide canyon that is as much as 2000 feet deep along its route through Wayne and Garfield Counties. If this canyon were located in the East, it would probably be the heart of a National Park System unit, but the canyon generally gets little to no mention on most maps.



The Dirty Devil River canyon leads from the bottom of the picture to near the top where the Dirty Devil River flows into the Colorado River at Lake Powell. Poison Spring Canyon leads to the Dirty Devil from the center right.



The Dirty Devil River from Burr Point Overlook

I checked it out from the Burr Point Overlook, one of a handful of canyon views that connect to Highway 95 via dirt and sand roads. A rather rough hiking trail there leads down into the canyon (remember that you have to hike back up), and I even saw an airstrip down there.

You can actually drive down to the river on a rough road through Poison Spring Canyon, where you can then (under the right conditions) ford the river and head up through Hatch Canyon on the other side, eventually returning to Highway 95 just east of the Dirty Devil River's confluence with the Colorado River. Decent clearance and 4WD are strongly recommended.

People do canoe or raft the length of the river starting near Hanksville, but check conditions as low water levels are common, as are flash floods especially during monsoon season, and once you start, you're down there for the duration. It has a number of Class I to Class III rapids.

And thanks to Muddy Creek, the water in the Dirty Devil is very salty – far too salty to drink. The river carries about 150,000 tons of salt annually.



Looking downstream at the Dirty Devil River from Burr Point Overlook

Escalante, Utah – Twenty Mile Wash Dinosaur Trackway

From Hanksville we head to our next stop near Escalante, Utah. Along the way, Highway 24 passes through Capitol Reef National Park, which features a lot of scenery and hiking centered on the Capitol Reef monocline.



Along Highway 24 as it cuts through Capitol Reef (left); the monocline's colorful west face from the park's scenic drive (right)

Then we head south on the Journey Through Time Scenic Byway (Highway 12). Scenic overlooks in Fish Lake National Forest and elsewhere, the ruins at Anasazi State Park in Boulder, a drive along the Burr Trail Scenic Backway, and the hike to Lower Calf Creek Falls are all good ways to break up this drive.



Long Canyon Overlook along the Burr Trail Road (left); Lower Calf Creek Falls (right)

Just north of Escalante is Hole-in-the-Rock Road, which leads to our next destination. Hole-in-the-Rock Road follows a historic Mormon pioneer route that was created when the Mormons sought to establish a new colony – today's Bluff – in what is now present-day southeast Utah. The pioneers blasted through the rock to build a still dangerously steep road down to the Colorado River, where they crossed over to southeast Utah.

Today there are several trailheads along the road, as well as the Devils Garden Outstanding Natural Area and Dancehall Rock Historic Site.



Devils Garden formation (left); historic Dance Hall Rock, where Mormon pioneers held dances while Hole-in-the-Rock was under construction (right)

And of course, our target, the Twenty Mile Wash Dinosaur Trackway, located along a dirt road just off Hole-in-the-Rock Road. There's an information marker at the parking area, but it didn't say where the tracks actually were. But a large rock outcropping was the same color as one near Moab that featured a trackway, so I correctly guessed that the trackway was on top of that. The climb up wasn't too bad because I got good traction on the sandstone.



The trackway site is on top of this outcropping (left); view from the top towards my car (arrow) in the parking area (right)

It was definitely worth it. This dinosaur trackway features more than 1000 tracks, by far more tracks than any other trackway I've been to, with a mix of both theropod and sauropod tracks. Many were grouped in trackways – sequences of tracks made by the same dinosaur.



A theropod track (left); possible tail drag marks (right)



A theropod trackway

Theropods were three-toed dinosaurs and were often carnivorous, especially early on in their evolution.



A long sauropod trackway, with samples taken from one of the tracks

Sauropods had pillar-like legs and long necks, and were generally plant eaters. Their tracks were harder to identify here, often looking like concentric circle-ish patterns on the rock. So, I looked for trackways of these, which typically appeared as left-right-left-right sequences of tracks.

Kanab, Utah – Toroweap Overlook at the Grand Canyon

For the last stop, head to Kanab, Utah, going south on Highway 12 and then south on Highway 89. This route passes several interesting stops, including two of Utah's famous (and often seriously crowded) national parks, Bryce National Park and Zion National Park. Like Arches, both are certainly worth seeing if you haven't been to them before, but after several visits over the years I generally now avoid them and their crowds.



Bryce Point at Bryce National Park (left); a natural bridge along the Bryce National Park scenic drive (right)



Along the Mt. Carmel Highway in Zion National Park (left); hiking the Virgin River Narrows in Zion National Park (left)



Petrified wood at Escalante Petrified Forest State Park on Highway 12 (left); Grosvenor Arch off Highway 12 on Cottonwood Road (center); Red Canyon on Highway 12 west of Bryce National Park (right)

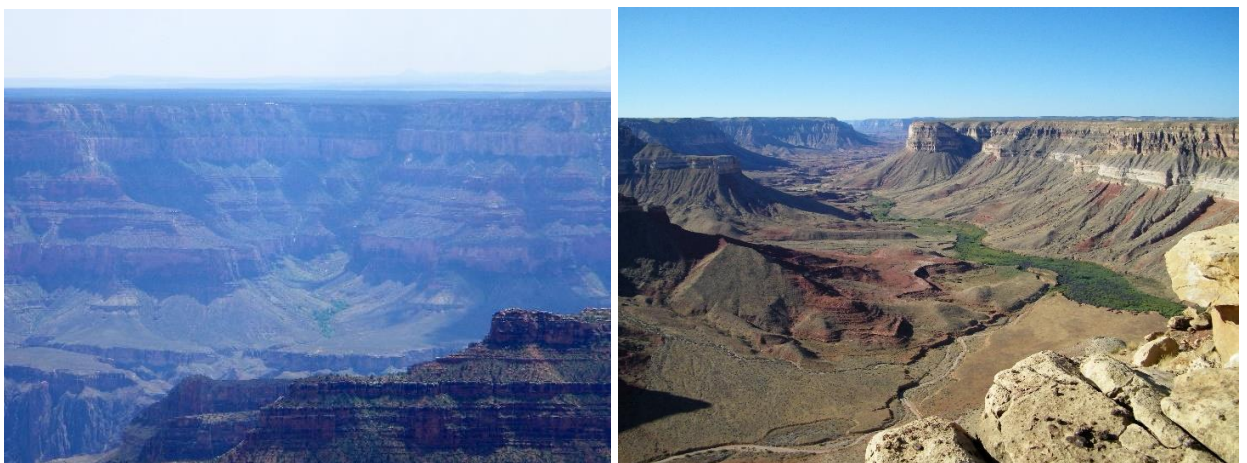
I started using Kanab, Utah as a sightseeing base as a cheaper, closer to home alternative to Page for some trips. Many of the sites I especially enjoy – the Paria River Valley, Buckskin Gulch, House Rock Valley Road, the Toadstools – are about as close to Kanab as they are to Page. And as Page is only 75 miles away, you can even do Page-area day trips to Lake Powell and Antelope Canyon, as well as to the main North Rim overlooks of Grand Canyon National Park out of Kanab. Unpaved roads heading south out of the Kanab area lead to Gunsight Point and Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument.



Entering the Paria River Valley near Pahreah Ghost Town (left); Upper Antelope Canyon, a slot canyon in the Navajo Nation's Lake Powell Tribal Park (center); petroglyphs at Nampaweap in Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument (right)



Horseshoe Bend on the Colorado River (left); along House Rock Valley Road (center); The Toadstool Trail (right)



Bright Angel Point Overlook on the Grand Canyon's North Rim – I once hiked down from the South Rim to Plateau Point, just below that grove of trees in the lower center of the picture (left); Gunsight Point view of Kane Creek as it heads south towards the Grand Canyon (right)

While most visitors to Grand Canyon National Park head for its South Rim overlooks, and most of the rest visit its North Rim overlooks, there are more remote Grand Canyon overlooks at other points, often accessed via lengthy dirt and gravel roads, where 4WD and high clearance is often required.

The Toroweap Overlook, found at a remote spot in the Tuweap area of the Grand Canyon's North Rim, is one of those overlooks. It's about 60 miles off the highway, but the unpaved road when dry is pretty good until you get to the last 2.7 miles. Along the way you pass through the Uinkaret Volcanic Field.



View from Toroweap Overlook looking east at the Grand Canyon and Colorado River

At the popular North and South Rim overlooks, you see the Grand Canyon at one of its widest points. Here at Toroweap you see the canyon at one of its narrowest points. And from 3000 feet up, you have one of the best views of the Colorado River from any of the canyon's overlooks.

There's also a very good chance that you'll have this place to yourself. Because of the long drive and the vehicle requirements for those last 2.7 miles, a day with 20 visitors is considered a busy day at Toroweap Overlook. Something to keep in mind if you're reading this surrounded by the crowds at the Grand Canyon South Rim's Mather Point visitor center.



View from Toroweap Overlook looking west at the Grand Canyon, the Colorado River and its Lava Falls Rapids, and the southernmost cinder cone of the Uinkaret Volcanic Field perched on the edge of the South Rim

And that's the end. From Kanab, you can return to your starting point. (Kanab is about 200 miles from Las Vegas or Flagstaff, 350 miles from Phoenix, and 470 miles from Albuquerque.)

I hope you enjoyed this virtual tour of some of my favorite secret destinations in the Four Corners region, and some not-so-secret suggestions for other places to see while you're exploring the region.

And if you've got some favorite secret destinations of your own in the area, you can tell me (mark@markhitstheroad.com). You know that you're just bursting to tell someone. 😊