



MarkHitsTheRoad

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New Mexico Ruins Explorations (M17A)

I spent two weeks exploring northwestern New Mexico and adjacent areas in Arizona, Colorado and Utah. Much of this trip was focused on visiting ruins sites, many associated with Chacoan and, later, Mesa Verdean cultures. All in all I saw or explored about three dozen ruins sites as well as two of New Mexico's pueblos.

Of course, my vacation wasn't all in ruins. I took a couple dozen generally shorter hikes, saw countless petroglyphs, and explored a number of geological features. Museums, scenic overlooks, Route 66 stops and some nightlife rounded out the trip.

July is the start of monsoon season. Late afternoon thunderstorms were a daily occurrence except for my last two days scheduled for sightseeing – those days I had widespread all day rain. A bummer of a way to end the trip as it eliminated my planned hiking in the Page, Arizona area.



The lyrics to the song Route 66 list a number of towns from east to west, but include the line, "...Flagstaff, Arizona, Don't forget Winona..." Well, they must have originally forgotten Winona, because if you're traveling from east to west and have reached Flagstaff, you're already past Winona. Well, I didn't forget Winona. But there wasn't much to see there.



I spent my first night in Winslow, Arizona, another town along Route 66. It's not mentioned in the song Route 66, but it is featured in a song by The Eagles, Take It Easy. The song includes the line, "Well, I'm standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona and such a fine sight to see. It's a girl, my Lord, in a flatbed Ford slowin' down to take a look at me." The city created Standin' On A Corner Park, pictured, and includes a red flatbed Ford. I first stood on this corner in 2009. Since then they added a statue of song co-writer Glen Frey, who died last year.



When you're out in the desert, if you think you're being watched you probably are. A jackrabbit and collared lizard were among those watching me as I visited Arizona's Homolovi State Park just outside of Winslow.



Homolovi State Park features two primary Ancestral Puebloan ruins sites, both believed to be tied to ancestors of the modern Hopi tribe, whose reservation is just to the north.



This is the view from one of the overlooks at Painted Desert County Park, a neglected county park northeast of Winslow. Put this landscape in any eastern state, and it would be a state park or national monument. Here it's just one colorful corner of the Painted Desert.



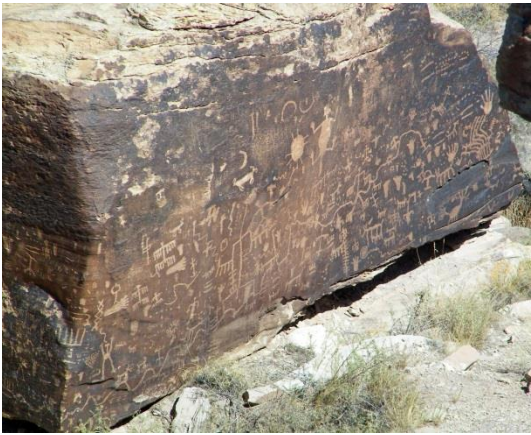
More Route 66 roadside kitsch, these both in Holbrook, Arizona. The upper picture is the Wigwam Motel – Have You Slept In A Wigwam Lately? Many of the motel’s rooms are concrete, air-conditioned wigwams. Classic cars are also parked around the parking lot.

The lower picture features the dinosaurs that guard the Rainbow Rock Shop.

From Holbrook I headed to the south entrance of Petrified Forest National Park, then took the park road north through the park. The park features a huge concentration of petrified logs. Also hiking trails, a scenic drive, colorful Painted Desert scenery, petroglyphs and Ancestral Puebloan ruins.



Petrified logs at the Crystal Forest



Newspaper Rock petroglyphs



The 100-room Puerco Pueblo Ancestral Puebloan ruins

From there I headed north to Ganado to see Hubbell Trading Post National Historic Site, but road construction made it inaccessible. So I continued on towards a ruins site near Canyon de Chelly National Monument, in the heart of the Navajo Nation, only to find that it was closed to visitors for construction. I'd been to Canyon de Chelly a couple times before, but I had a hotel reservation in nearby Chinle for the night, so I took the overlook tour of the canyon to fill the rest of the day.



View of Canyon de Chelly and its Spider Rock spires from the Spider Rock Overlook.



View of Canyon de Chelly from the Tsegi Overlook. The park service manages several overlooks above the canyon, but the canyon floor is Navajo tribal land. For the most part, visitors must be accompanied by a Navajo guide to tour the canyon floor.



One exception is the White House ruins, one of a number of Ancestral Puebloan ruins sites on the canyon floor or located in alcoves above the floor. A hiking trail leads from the White House Overlook on the canyon's south rim down to these ruins and back up.



Window Rock arch at Window Rock Navajo Tribal Park. In addition to the park I visited the Navajo Nation Museum in the town of Window Rock, the Navajo Nation's capital.



At Gallup, New Mexico I checked out some more Route 66 kitsch as well as the famous El Rancho Hotel. The hotel served as film production headquarters for a number of Westerns, and also served as a temporary home for numerous Hollywood stars who worked on those movies.



After leaving Gallup I visited two obscure ruins sites. Casamero Pueblo ruins, shown here, was associated with the Chacoan culture centered to the north.



Several miles to the south lie the Dittert ruins. Dittert is believed to be a Chacoan outlier site, but there is evidence of both earlier and later occupation at the site. From the parking area at the end of a dirt road, the ruins are located about a quarter mile to the northeast, but there is no trail leading to them. I scanned the horizon and saw what I (correctly, it turned out) thought looked like a ruins rubble pile tucked among the junipers. But I soon came upon a wash with vertical walls more than 10 feet deep.

To get to the other side I decided to rely on cow-sourcing, tapping into the wisdom of the cows.

Okay, so most cows really aren't all that wise. But they are hungry. And cows grazing on one side of the wash will recognize good grazing on the other side of the wash. If there's a way across the wash they'll find it. So I followed a cattle trail east along the edge of the wash until I came upon a second cattle trail, one that crossed the wash at a reasonable slope (made more reasonable from frequent cattle use). That put me due south of the ruins site with an easy hike to reach them.

We rugged outdoors types learn tricks like cow-sourcing as we engage with the environment.



Speaking of engagement, personalization has come to hiking. I find that I'm more likely to engage with "Mark"ed trails.



La Ventana Arch, just outside El Malpais National Monument.



El Malpais National Monument protects a wide expanse of geologically recent lava flows, cinder cones, lava tubes and other volcanic features. Before heading to Grants, New Mexico to check into my hotel for two nights, I hiked the park's Lava Falls Trail.

I used Grants as my base for a day trip up to Chaco Culture National Historic Park (also a UNESCO World Heritage Site). For 250 years ending about 1150 AD, Chaco was a major Ancestral Puebloan cultural center and the hub of a number of Puebloan communities across the Four Corners region. They built 15 major complexes, some of whose “great houses” remained the largest buildings in North America until well into the 1800s. Chacoan culture fell apart in the 1100s due to extended drought and a suspected collapse of some social institutions. Some Hopi and members of several modern New Mexican pueblo tribes are descendants of those who abandoned the Chaco Canyon site.

This was my third trip to Chaco, my favorite Ancestral Puebloan site. I revisited some favorite ruins sites and visited others parts of the park that were new to me. I’ve still got a couple more hikes to take there, so I’ll return in the next couple years.



Pueblo Bonita is a major highlight of the park. The largest of the great houses, it at one time was four to five stories tall and included as many as 800 rooms. It is estimated that nearly 30,000 man hours were used to build the nearby 500-room Chetro Ketl great house, which used the wood from about 5000 trees and included an estimated 50,000,000 stone blocks. (At various ruins sites I visited, it was often reported that the builders brought in stones and trees from 3 to as many as 50 miles away. All without wheels, horses or UPS.)



Kin Kletso ruins, along the Peñasco Blanco Trail.



This crevice in the mesa wall near Kin Kletso is actually the start/end of the Pueblo Alto trail, which leads to the top of the mesa and then on to some ruins sites and other archaeological sites as well as to some terrific views of sites in the canyon below.



I hiked the Pueblo Alto trail last time I was here. I took this picture of Kin Kletso from the top of the mesa on that hike.



Casa Chiquita ruins along the Peñasco Blanco Trail.



Keep your eyes open for petroglyphs when you're hiking here.



Some petroglyph panels along the Peñasco Blanco Trail are more easily spotted.



Pueblo del Arroyo ruins



Casa Rinconada ruins site. It's the last major ruins site along the loop road through Chaco Canyon, and I've given it the short shrift on past visits as monsoon clouds were building up each time by the time I got there. The clouds were coming in when I got there this time, too, but I took the hike through the area. Chaco is reached by long dirt roads that can be impassable when wet, so you do have to pay attention to the skies when you visit during monsoon season.



There are four outlier sites that are part of the park, two of which are closed to the public and one at the end of a 9-mile rugged dirt road. But I did check out Pueblo Pintado as a monsoon storm was closing in.



From Grants I headed to Albuquerque. I made my third stop at Petroglyph National Monument, a volcanic landscape just west of the city that features at least 24,000 known petroglyphs. This time I hiked the Piedras Marcadas trail.



After lunch I toured the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. I then checked out Albuquerque's Old Town area, including the San Felipe de Neri Church – the congregation dates back to the early 1700s, but the current structure was built in 1793.

I had planned to follow that with checking out the Route 66 kitsch along Central Avenue, but almost the entire length of Central Avenue through the city was under construction, so I'll save that for later. I'd head to Taos starting the following morning.



I started the next morning with a hike at Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument. Pictured are some of the eroded tent-shaped hoodoos as well as along a trail through the park's slot canyon. A deep layer of volcanic pumice and tuff from eruptions 5 million years ago has been eroded into these shapes and the slot canyon.



The Veterans Memorial Scenic Overlook at Kasha-Katuwe features this view of a bigger canyon carved into the tuff.



Puye Cliff Dwellings on the Santa Clara Pueblo are found along and on top of a tuff mesa. This was a return visit for me – Puye was the first cliff dwellings site I ever visited, way back in 1991.



The Ancestral Puebloans carved rooms into the soft rock. They also built rooms in front of these. In the upper right you can see a series of holes in the rock that were used to support log beams that became the ceilings and floors of these constructed rooms. Most of the constructed rooms are now gone from the face of the cliff, but there are a number on top of the mesa.



Poshuouinge is a ruins site that only archaeology junkies can really appreciate. You can see the outlines of what had been about 700 ground floor rooms (the pueblo is believed to have been 2-3 stories high in many places). Alas, unlike stone pueblos, those made of adobe generally melt away over the centuries. My car was parked along the highway in the valley. Hiking up to the mesa level near the ruins didn't show much, so I took a trail to a hilltop observation point which helped me get some understanding of the magnitude of the site. (Sadly I recently found out there is a similar site just three miles from Poshuouinge that I wasn't aware of at the time, and thus missed it on this trip.)



The Rio Grande River canyon, as seen from the highway as I'm approaching Taos, my base for the next couple days.

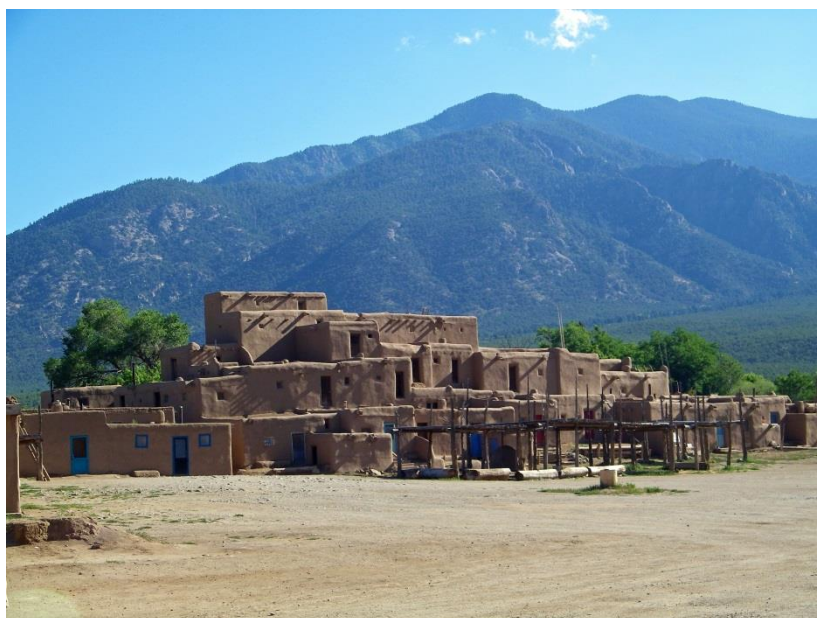


Like Albuquerque, Taos has an Old Town. Both are truly historical, but both today heavily cater to tourists. Not really my scene other than there are some spots of historical interest.



The San Francisco de Asis Mission Church in Rancho de Taos. It was completed in 1816, and represents a classic example of Spanish colonial mission church architecture.

New Mexico has 19 Indian Pueblos, technically reservations but Pueblo tribal lands are centered on communities where they have lived for hundreds (even 1000 years or more) of years. Taos Pueblo, located just north of the modern city of Taos, is one of the oldest continuously occupied communities in the US. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The North and South Pueblo structures at Taos Pueblo date back at least 500 years, with parts possibly dating back as much as 1000 years. Although some people still live in these buildings, there is no electricity or running water in these ancient communities.



North Pueblo in Taos Pueblo



San Geronimo de Taos Spanish Mission Church in Taos Pueblo



San Lorenzo de Picuris Spanish Mission Church at Picuris Pueblo, located to the south of Taos.



This is the El Cuartelejo ruins site near Scott City, Kansas, which I visited back in 2005. It is believed that in the late 1600s after the Spanish put down a revolt by the Puebloan tribes some members from both Taos Pueblo and Picuris Pueblo left Spanish territory and built a small pueblo in what is now Kansas. But the Indians left El Cuartelejo by 1706 and returned to the New Mexico pueblos.



The Rio Grande River in the Orillo Verde area of Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.



The Taos Plateau in northern New Mexico, much of which is now part of Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, is a large volcanic expanse that includes a thick layer of basalt and rhyolite, much like the Columbian Plateau in eastern Washington state. Over the eons, the Rio Grande River carved a deep canyon through the rock. Many of the canyons carved in the Columbian Plateau had vertical walls. These coulees were carved recently and quickly during the Ice Age Floods, so there hasn't been the time needed to erode more V-shaped canyons in the Columbian Plateau like those in the Taos Plateau. I took this picture of the Rio Grande River and its canyon during my hike along the La Vista Verde Trail.



In the Wild Rivers section of Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, the La Junta Overlook gives this view of the confluence of the Red River (left) and the Rio Grande.

The La Junta Trail leads from the overlook down to the confluence, a drop of 800 feet along the 1.2 mile trail. A sign at the trailhead reminds fishermen that they're limited to no more than four trout. Something to keep in mind when you're trying to decide whether the hike is worth it.



I finished my time in the Taos area by visiting some sites east of Taos, including taking the walking tour of historic Cimarron, New Mexico, once a stop along the Santa Fe Trail. One of its neighbors is the Boy Scouts' Philmont Scout Ranch.



The Palisades at Cimarron Canyon State Park.



Marine David Westphall was killed in Vietnam in 1968. His parents built this chapel to honor him and then other Americans killed during the Vietnam War. It would become the first memorial in the US that paid tribute to those who served in Vietnam, and now is at the heart of New Mexico's Vietnam Veterans Memorial State Park.

I made a couple ruins stops when I headed west from Taos to Bloomfield, New Mexico.



Posi-Ouinge Ruins, near Ojo Caliente. Like Poshuouinge, these ruins are mostly melted adobe at this point, which makes it hard for anyone who's not an archaeological junkie to really appreciate – especially after the hike to get here. The depression in the center left was once a ceremonial structure called a kiva.



The grounds of Posi-Ouinge were littered with pieces of broken pottery that date back to the site's occupation 500 year ago and more.

The black rocks actually have still-sharp edges, and were tools used as scrapers.



This was my fourth attempt to visit Chimney Rock National Monument in southwest Colorado. I got there too late in the day the first two times. Last year I got there on time but the road was closed for two weeks for construction. This time I got there in time for the Great Kiva Trail but too late for the Pueblo Trail, both located at upper elevations near the Chimney Rock formation.



Restored pit house and great kiva (far back) along the Great Kiva Trail.



Near Bloomfield – Aztec Ruins National Monument, which was a Chacoan era Ancestral Puebloan site that had nothing at all to do with the Aztecs.

The back wall of the pueblo aligns with both the summer solstice sunrise and the winter solstice sunset. Many Pueblo sitings, petroglyphs and pictographs through the Southwest align with astronomical features.



Aztec features a fully restored great kiva, including the color of the plastered walls.



The nearby Salmon Ruins (named for a pioneer family, not the fish). The red stones were deliberately colored through firing and arranged in this pattern – they align with astronomical features.



The flat stone at the bottom right of this Salmon pueblo room has two rocks on it, one black and one white. This is a re-creation of a rare intact altar found here, complete with the stones. An opening in the building allow sunlight and moonlight into the chamber. The rocks were illuminated during astronomical events (e.g., the white rock at the time of the summer solstice).



Hiking in the Bisti badlands at Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness Area south of Bloomfield.



Distant Angel Peak at the Angel Peak Scenic Area, also south of Bloomfield.



Monsoon storms that had been stalking me since I finished up my Bisti badlands hike were closing in on me at Angel Peak. Clouds blocked the sun not long after I took this picture, and rain followed soon after. I had a couple possible late additions to my sightseeing plans for the day, but I gave up on them at this point as dirt roads and monsoon rains are a bad combination. I'll have to save them for a future trip.



For the drive from Bloomfield to Kayenta, AZ, I headed up into SW Colorado and SE Utah for return visits to Yucca House, Lowry and several Hovenweep National Monument ruins sites, most of which I hadn't been back to since getting a digital camera.

Yucca House (left) is a huge but unexcavated ruins site. Archaeologists are a patient lot. A number of sites are deliberately left untouched or mostly untouched for decades as they recognize that archaeological techniques will improve over time. Nature's covering of soil and sand is a great way to preserve these sites.



I'd been back to Hovenweep Castle (left) at the Square Tower Group since switching to digital photography, but this was my first trip back to Hovenweep's Goodman Point, Holly Group, Horseshoe Group, Hackberry Group and Cajon Group sites since the 1990s.

Goodman Point remains unexcavated, and the other sites haven't changed much. But I've got a different perspective on them now than I did back when visiting ruins sites was mostly new to me.



The tower built atop a large rock is an especially interesting ruin at Holly Group (left).



After finishing up at Hovenweep I headed SW to Kayenta where I'd spend the night. I hadn't planned to stop once again for pictures as I passed through Monument Valley, but the fading light on the rock and the incoming monsoon clouds proved to be too tempting.



The next day I drove to Page, AZ. Overcast skies and rain put a damper on sightseeing plans, but I make a repeat stop at Navajo National Monument to check out its Betatakin Cliff Dwelling ruins. Although the park is surrounded by the Navajo Nation, the ruins are actually associated with Hopi ancestors.



The Elephant's Feet sandstone formation near Tonalea, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation.



The sun made an appearance when I reached Page, AZ, so I checked out the view of Glen Canyon Dam from an overlook on Scenic Drive before the clouds and rain returned.



I had two nights planned in Page so I could spend a day hiking on some nearby trails. But my Page day was a lot like this final trip picture of Lake Powell. I'd occasionally get teased with patches of blue sky during the day, but heavy rain and strong winds would soon move into any area I was at.

Although I woke to sunny skies the following morning, there was no point in extending the trip. The dirt roads I saw as I started my drive home were all soaked, many with standing water. With all the clay in the soil, most of these roads are impassable when wet, making my planned hiking trails off limits. And monsoon clouds were already building just to the north.

But it's only five hours from Las Vegas, so I guess I'll just have to come back when things dry out.