

Around Page, Arizona and Southeastern Utah (U17A Part 1)

For a two-week hiking and sightseeing trip centered on Utah and the Colorado Plateau area, I began with repeat stays in Page, Arizona and Monticello, Utah before hitting Arches National Park at Moab, Utah. Although the roads and towns are regulars from past trips, at each stop I visited places that were either new to me or that I hadn't covered or hiked in a number of years – some even as long as 24 years. These covered a little less than half of the trip.

I thought I'd make the drive Las Vegas to Page in a day, taking a northern Arizona route rather than the Zion National Park route that I took last year. The route follows the Vermilion Cliffs, one of the plateau "steps" that make up the geological "Grand Staircase" of southern Utah and northern Arizona.

One of my stops along the drive to Page was at the LeFevre Overlook on the Kaibab Plateau that features a decent view of part of the Grand Staircase.



The distant Pink Cliffs (home to Bryce Canyon), the Gray Cliffs (hard to see in this picture), the White Cliffs (home to Zion National Park), the Vermilion Cliffs and finally the Chocolate Cliffs (the line in the cloud shadow across the middle of the picture).

With only a few minor photo stops and lunch along the way, I reached northern Arizona's House Rock Valley and Vermilion Cliffs National Monument early enough in the afternoon that I decided to take the dirt/gravel House Rock Valley Road north to Utah's Highway 89 and then head onto Page from there.

It's a slow but pretty drive as it passes the Vermilion Cliffs, Coyote Buttes and the south end of the Cockscomb, a colorful, rugged tear in the earth's crust that's part of the East Kaibab Monocline. As I took some hikes and photos along this route last year, I chose to repeat the route mostly just for the pretty drive. But I did have one stop in mind – if I could find it. The West Bench Pueblo Ruins.



These ruins don't look like much. A lot of unexcavated and limited excavated ruins look like this, collecting dirt and dust over the centuries as nature takes its toll. Some of the ruins at some sites have been restored or rebuilt by archaeologists (real or in some tragic instances amateurs), and thus are more photogenic. Some more protected sites are naturally more intact.



At more easily accessible, on the beaten path sites, it's hard to find evidence left behind by those who once lived there, as sites often have been picked over by scientists, tourists and vandals. But pottery fragments dating back about 900 years are easily spotted on the ground here.



Some no doubt well-intended visitors placed pottery fragments they found on this large sandstone slab, which does make it easier to see some of the variety in the pottery. But that's an archaeological site no-no. The location of an artifact provides context, and context provides clues. It's easier to identify multiple pieces of the same piece of pottery if you know the location, and the location relative to the ruins can help determine the original shape and function of the piece.

The rest of the drive to Page was quite pretty but covered scenery I've seen a number of times now.

On Sunday I headed for the Lee's Ferry area of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, along the Colorado River in northern Arizona. I visited a handful of sites while here, including checking out a couple historic districts and taking three hikes. It's one of the few areas along the Colorado River in canyon country where the river was fairly easily accessible for crossing, thus the ferry crossing.



Marble Canyon, looking upstream from the Navajo Bridge. The bridges at Navajo Bridge provide the first bridge crossing of the Colorado River for 600 miles upstream from Hoover Dam. Marble Canyon is actually part of Grand Canyon National Park, which follows Marble Canyon just a bit further north to where the Paria River flows into the Colorado. The land above the rim to the left is part of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. The land above the rim to the right is part of the Navajo Nation.



A balanced rock, along Lee's Ferry Road.



View downstream of the Colorado River from the Lee's Ferry Historic District. The Vermilion Cliffs are on the right.



View of the Colorado River upstream where it exits the south end of Glen Canyon. The odd thing sticking out of the water in the lower center is part of an old steamship that was brought here as part of an ultimately unsuccessful effort to help navigate this stretch of river.

The ferry crossing here helped connect much of Arizona and southeast Utah to the Arizona Strip and much of Utah. It was a popular crossing point for Mormons from southeast Utah heading to the temple in St. George, Utah in order to marry – the historic “Honeymoon Trail”.



The pump here once pumped water from the Paria River into a reservoir for use at the Lonely Dell Ranch, a historic ranch at Lee’s Ferry.



Hikers can follow the Paria River through Vermilion Cliffs National Monument and the Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness, a multi-day hike that passes through rugged land and impressive slot canyons. I've only nibbled around the edges of this area as I only do day hiking or shorter hikes. This is the downstream end of that hike.



My last stop of the day was a hike through part of Lower Cathedral Wash. It's not very long as it heads towards the Colorado River, but it gets increasingly rugged the further you go, including up and down climbing of as much as 30 feet, which isn't something I'll do as a solo hiker.



On the drive back to Page, I stopped at a parking area near a bridge labeled Waterholes Canyon. The bridge crosses this slot canyon – see the sandy trail at the bottom, center right. As this is on Navajo Nation lands, a Tribal Office permit is required to explore parts of the canyon (other parts are only open to escorted tours).

Slot canyons such as this are somewhat common in the rugged sandstone landscape surrounding a number of parts of Glen Canyon and Lake Powell.



On Monday I headed for the Cottonwood Road area of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. I drove the whole 42-mile dirt road back in 2000 as it follows another segment of The Cockscomb. But I had a specific destination in mind today, the Paria Box Trailhead.

The Paria River has cut a canyon through the Cockscomb on its way south towards Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness. Last year I hiked part of that canyon from the old Paria ghost town site upstream from here. This time I followed the river upstream to reach my turnaround point from last year's hike.



Paria Box Hike. The trail crosses the river several times as you head upstream. After this hike I found a point along the river further south to finish the day with more hiking along the river and some fun with pockets of quicksand I found along the way.

On Tuesday I relocated to Monticello, Utah, making some repeat stops along the way.



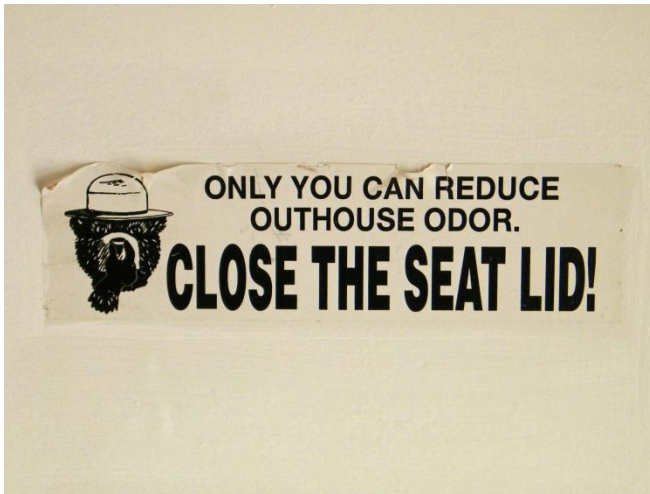
At Utah's Gooseneck State Park I hiked out a bit further west than the viewpoints in order to get some different views of the goosenecks of the San Juan River. The river meandered across a plain as the Colorado Plateau began its slow uplift and the river began carving these canyons along its meandering path. A faster uplift or faster river would have resulted in a much straighter canyon here.



Blanding's Edge of the Cedar State Park preserves an Ancestral Pueblo ruins site and is home to a museum that features a number of artifacts, many of which were found at this site.



Just south of Blanding are these Ancestral Pueblo ruins called Five Kiva Pueblo, a ruins site that mostly survives in its natural state. Several small ruins are located nearby and further up the canyon.



Spotted inside an outhouse. I guess Smoky gets concerned about more than forest fires.

One reason for returning to Monticello was to position myself for a return to Canyonlands National Park's Needles District. I got back there in 2011 for the first time in 11 years and hiked all the easy trails along the park roads. I returned to Monticello in 2016 so I could take a more substantive hike at Canyonlands, but rain forced a change of plans. Great weather this time, so I got my hike in, hiking out to the Chesler Park area and back, a hike I first took 20 years ago. I'll hike it again in 20 years.



View of some formations along the trail out to Chesler Park. In the distance is the mesa that's home to Grand View Point in Canyonlands' Island in the Sky District.



Some of the sandstone “needles” along the trail.

The road out to the Needles District passes the Newspaper Rock BLM site, which features a panel with extensive petroglyphs in pre-Columbian and post-Columbian styles.



The main panel of petroglyphs at Newspaper Rock.

I've stopped at Newspaper Rock a number of times over the year. But I've discovered that smaller generally unmarked petroglyph panels line the canyon up and down from the Newspaper Rock site.



A petroglyph of Justin Timberrock, I think.

"I can't stop the feeling
So just dance, dance, dance
I can't stop the feeling
So just dance, dance, dance, come on"

For the drive back to Monticello, I took some forest service roads up into the Abajo Mountains, which featured some nice views.



Along the way I passed the Monticello Lake reservoir, which captures winter snowmelt runoff, providing the people of Monticello with a source of fresh water.

Thursday was a sightseeing drive day as I took highways 95 and 276 to different points along Glen Canyon's Lake Powell. I passed through the recently created Bears Ears National Monument, which protects thousands of ruins and petroglyphs sites, but didn't have stops planned that were specific to Bears Ears on this trip. The area is a target for next time, however.



The Bears Ears mesas.



Castle Ruins, along Highway 276 on the drive to the Halls Crossing area of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.



Glen Canyon's Lake Powell at Halls Crossing. Water levels at Lake Powell, like Lake Mead hundreds of miles down-river, are far lower than they should be because of a prolonged western drought.



Cheese Box Butte, along Highway 95.



I think this may have been a boat ramp at one point here at Hite, at the north end of Lake Powell. There actually was a lake here when I visited the site about 20 years ago. Today the lake here is little more than the confluence of the Colorado and Dirty Devil Rivers.



View from near the Highway 95 bridge across the Colorado River at what was the north end of Lake Powell. Much of that off-white rock was underwater the last time I was here. I believe that those are the Henry Mountains in the distance.

The Dirty Devil River also flows into the north end of what was Lake Powell. The Dirty Devil is a fairly short river, formed 80 miles to the north where the Muddy Creek and Fremont River come together near Hanksville. But it caught my eye after I moved to Las Vegas and got to see it from the air a few times.

Its canyon – 2000 feet deep in places – would probably be a national park if it were located in the eastern US, but here it's just another canyon.

Trivia – Butch Cassidy used some of the Dirty Devil's tributary canyons as hideouts.



Looking south, the Dirty Devil River from bottom center up towards upper center where it flows into the Colorado River and Lake Powell – from a 2016 flight.



Dirty Devil River, just upstream from where it meets the Colorado River and Lake Powell.



On the drive back to Monticello I stopped for this picture of the north end of Comb Ridge, another monocline, with the Abajo Mountains in the distance.



On the drive north to Moab I made my routine stop for a picture of Church Rock, with the La Sal Mountains in the background.

Normally I'd plan on staying in Moab, Utah for at least one night. It's home to Arches National Park, my favorite national park, and there are plenty of things to see in the region. But I was mostly planning to skip it on this trip in favor of the town of Green River.

Turned out that was probably a good thing. The city's annual "Jeep Safari" was going on, and the roads were clogged with back country Jeeps. Presumably the hotels would have been full, too. And due to some road construction, Arches National Park was going to be closed each evening, which would have eliminated my getting late day sun on the rocks pictures.

The nice thing about living much closer is that I'm now just a day's drive from Moab, so I don't have to stop there every time I go to Utah as I can get up there any time I want.

Still, I did fit in one stop at Arches, stopping along Highway 191 to hike up Courthouse Wash for a stretch, the only real canyon hike in the park, and the only trail in the park that I haven't hiked before. (I had planned on the hike for last year's visit but was hit with serious blisters early on that trip.) I only hiked partway up. I'll finish the wash from the other end during some future visit.



I didn't see nearly as many wildflowers in bloom on this trip as I did a month earlier on my southern California/southwest Arizona road trip. But these cacti flowers along my Courthouse Wash hike certainly caught my eye.



A short hike up the canyon wall at the mouth of Courthouse Wash leads to this pictograph panel. The pictographs once were brighter but the panel had to undergo some repair and restoration after vandals struck.