



# MarkHitsTheRoad

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## Utah Road Trip (U21A)

After moving to Las Vegas, I got into a pattern of taking extended road trips to Utah every April. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the schedule last year, and when I did finally get the spring Utah trip in last year, it was scaled back to places with low infection rates.

This April, I headed back up to Utah, my sixth pandemic era road trip. There are still formerly routine stops that I skip due to infection rates, and these trips have been shorter for a couple reasons. I'm still avoiding eat-in restaurants so dining options are boring, and after breaking a bone in my foot on the first of these trips, I've had foot problems ever since that have limited my hiking to almost no true hikes.

I did make a handful of short hikes on this trip, though. I ended up with sore feet but no lingering aftereffects, including the day that my pair of hikes added up to about six miles, the most I've walked in a day since last June. Progress, I hope, even though I did cut one hike short due to soreness.

Some places I visited were repeats, but most were new to me – including the remote Cathedral Valley area of Capitol Reef National Park, one of the reasons why I wanted to get a Jeep. And most places I had to myself when I visited, making social distancing easy.

I drove up to Kanab, Utah, my base for the first few days of my trip, on a Sunday, getting there by mid-afternoon. I try to have some sightseeing planned in the area for when I get there as there's no point in sitting in the hotel on a nice afternoon.

A few years back, my mid-afternoon destination was the Ryan Ghost Town in northern Arizona. It turned out that there wasn't anything to see at Ryan, but I saw a sign for Gunsight Point, which I looked up later and decided it was worth a future visit. On a subsequent trip to Kanab, I headed out to Gunsight Point, which sits above the place where Snake Gulch Canyon meets Kanab Creek Canyon. Kanab Creek Canyon then heads south into the Grand Canyon. Great views!

I saw a road past Ryan on the map that ended at the upstream end of Snake Gulch Canyon. I figured it might provide me some views of that part of the canyon. So, I thought I'd check that out on this trip.



Recall from that earlier trip... Snake Gulch Canyon enters Kanab Creek Canyon from the lower left, about 10-15 miles north of where Kanab Creek Canyon meets the Grand Canyon.



But instead of a canyon overlook, I found that the road enters the canyon. It didn't stop at a canyon rim but rather at the boundary of the roadless Kanab Creek Wilderness Area. I found that a 12-mile round trip hiking trail continues through the canyon, and it is lined with numerous rock art panels, primarily from the Basketweaver Culture, which dates back 1200-3500 years ago.

If my foot wasn't still an issue, I would have changed my plans and made this hike during my Kanab stay as the weather was perfect for hiking. Instead, like Gunsight Point a couple years ago, I added it to my "to do" list for future visits to the region.



There was a rock art panel along the road that featured both pictographs and petroglyphs, but it was badly weathered and vandalized.



This was to be a loop drive, but a forest fire was burning in the area, and part of my planned loop was closed due to firefighting, so instead it was an out-and-back sightseeing drive.



On my way to Kanab, I stopped at the Apple Dumpling UFO Docking and Teleportation Center. I really needed to use the teleportation facility, but...



... I was concerned that the Little Green Can that greeted me wasn't wearing a mask. Must stay safe!



For my first day, I hiked and explored the area along the Paria River at the Cockscomb anticline, a usual stop in the area and an easy hike for testing out my foot.



I started my second day with a scenic drive through the upper part of Kanab Creek Canyon. A planned petroglyph hike was blocked with new fences and No Trespassing signs, and I decided not to do a three-mile round trip hike through the sand to Hidden Lake, an underground “lake” in the area, saving that for a future trip.



I did make the short hike along a sandy trail to Sand Dune Arch.



A lot of sand accumulates in the region because of how some nearby mountains funnel the wind through a nearby gap. That results in one of the largest dune fields on the Colorado Plateau. Part of it is preserved as Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park. The nearby Vermillion Cliffs contribute to the color of the sand, but sun vs. clouds and angle of viewing seem to have a much bigger impact, especially for my camera.



Parts of the park are open to off-road vehicles, but in this vehicle-free area, visitors can go sand-skiing and sand-boarding.



I took a back route south to Arizona that I hadn't been on before. Along the way, I found out about a nearby dinosaur tracksite, but I'd need a bigger Jeep to get to it. So, I just enjoyed the scenery.



With a chunk of the day left over, I decided to take Johnson Canyon Road and Skutumpah Road to some Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument back country. I surprised myself when I spotted a petroglyph panel that I must have driven by a half dozen times before. It is badly vandalized and marked over, and the style suggests that it is probably historic (likely Paiute) than pre-historic.



My route climbs the White Cliffs and provides views of the Pink Cliffs, both “steps” in the Grand Staircase.



On the drive from Kanab to Green River, my base for the remainder of my trip, I stopped at Capitol Reef National Park and took its Scenic Drive again. Capitol Reef is a monocline, basically a sharp fold – the 100-mile-long Waterpocket Fold – in the earth’s crust where the west-facing side has eroded away, exposing colorful layers of rock. The Scenic Drive follows the base of the west-facing side, and looks especially good with the afternoon sun.



The mountain in the distant left is the Aquarius Plateau, the highest “step” in the “Grand Staircase” series of plateaus.



At the start of the Scenic Drive is this barn at the ghost town of Fruita. It is reportedly the most photographed barn in the state of Utah. But someone in their infinite wisdom decided to add a parking lot across the street to the right, which severely limits the angle where you can photograph the rustic barn in a beautiful setting without getting a bunch of SUVs and RVs in the picture.

For my first day in Green River, I explored the northeast portion of the San Rafael Swell, a Delaware-size anticline (bulge in the layers of the earth) that I started exploring in 2017. My first stop was at the Spirit Arch Trail, a two-mile hike in a San Rafael Reef canyon to a double arch and some limited rock art.



It's hard to tell that Spirit Arch is actually a double arch when I couldn't find an angle to get blue sky to show through both openings.



One of two minor petroglyph panels along the trail.

My foot survived the hike. I then headed for the interior part of the Swell, making a couple repeat stops at places I first saw in 2017.



It was a crowded spring break Sunday when I stopped at the Buckhorn Draw Pictograph Panels of Barrier Canyon pictographs in 2017. I had it to myself this visit. It is an impressive set of 2000-year-old panels.



I also returned to the Wedge Overlook, which has views of the 1000-foot deep Little Grand Canyon of the San Rafael River. Much like the Colorado River in the big Grand Canyon, the San Rafael River has always been about the same width as it is today, but the way sandstone erodes over time can result in such broad canyons.



One of my new-to-me stops was at this tracksite, which features a lone theropod track (that someone filled with water, I assume to make it photograph better). I tried imagining an allosaurus hopping around on one foot just for fun.



I checked out the views of the heart of the Swell from atop Cedar Mountain. The views weren't as impressive as those from The Wedge, but you don't know that until you check them out, and they're still well-worth viewing.



I then took the scenic Green River Cutoff Road east out of the Swell. Among the views is this one of Cedar Mountain.



Scenery along the Cutoff Road.

I've wanted to visit Capital Reef's remote Cathedral Valley ever since I first visited Capital Reef back in 1994. But decent clearance and 4WD is strongly recommended. I got the Jeep after I retired to get me to places like this. I'm not sure why it took me five years to finally get to Cathedral Valley, but I've been getting to a lot of remote areas with the Jeep.



The first few miles of the route I took follows North Caineville Reef, another monocline. I've driven about five miles of this before, and enjoy the colorful Morrison Formation scenery. The Morrison Formation is found up and down the western U.S. It dates back to the late Jurassic period, and is a rich source of dinosaur fossils.



Some Cathedral Valley scenery



The Temple of the Sun and the smaller (albeit not as small as it looks here) and more distant Temple of the Moon “cathedrals” in the Lower Cathedral Valley area of Capitol Reef National Park.



But the real highlight at this stop is Glass Mountain. More of a mound really. Well, technically a plug. There’s a lot of gypsum in the soil here, and the plug consists of large selenite gypsum crystals that migrated upward through cracks in the sedimentary rock layers, some of which have since eroded away, exposing part of the plug.



Selenite gypsum crystals that make up Glass Mountain





Basalt dikes, basically the result of molten magma that squeezed up through cracks in the sedimentary rocks layers above it. Basalt erodes away more slowly than the sedimentary rock does.



The opposite of Glass Mountain. The Gypsum Sinkhole resulted when a gypsum plug was dissolved by groundwater before the surrounding sedimentary rock eroded away. The sedimentary rock that the plug once supported has collapsed, leaving a sinkhole 50 feet across and 200 feet deep.



“Cathedrals” in Upper Cathedral Valley



The upper end of Cathedral Valley

The next day, I took a pair of rock art hikes in the Molen Reef area at the west end of San Rafael Swell. The two hikes added up to about six miles of hiking, easily the most hiking I’ve done in a day since my foot injury last summer, although under normal circumstances it wouldn’t count as much hiking.



The rock art in Short Canyon was well up the canyon walls. Normally people scramble up to get a good look, but my foot wasn't ready for scrambling. But a camera with 30x optical zoom helps – assuming you see the rock art in the first place from that distance.



From a distance, I wasn't sure if that line was a pictograph or the outline of a slab of rock in the slow process of separating and breaking off. It wasn't until I was able to enlarge the picture on the computer that I could verify that it was indeed a pictograph. Of what, I haven't the foggiest idea. Note the red blotch to its upper right. Possibly once a small figure.



See the rock art? This is how Short Canyon rock art looked to me from the bottom of the canyon.



I zoomed in as much as I could, and then I severely cropped the resulting picture to get this image of the two pictograph figures you can see in the center. Now can you spot them in the previous photo? Think of it at “Where’s Waldo?” for rock art fans.



At Molen Seep I had to hike from the parking area to the end of the shallow canyon just to enter the canyon. Once down there I hiked back this direction in the canyon looking for rock art.



I spotted this faded panel pretty early on in my exploration of the canyon. Many of the red pictographs I've come across on this trip in the San Rafael Swell area are from the Barrier Canyon Culture and generally date back 1500 to 4000 years old, although they could be older. The remote locations, rock overhangs, and the good graces of visitors have protected them all this time. The petroglyphs in the Swell area are more likely Fremont Culture, which would make them about 700 to 2000 years old.



Some more of the pictographs that I found at Molen Seep.



There is a second arc to the right of the figure, but it has mostly weathered away at this point.



The “bug eyes” and lack of arms if the arms aren’t doing anything are common features of Barrier Canyon style pictographs.

Even in prehistoric times, UFOs were docking in what is now southern Utah, and space aliens were teleporting around the state so that Barrier Canyon culture people could paint their portraits.



This petroglyph panel features a lot of sandals. Perhaps this was the site of a prehistoric footwear store.



You might have to enlarge this to see the panels of snake-like petroglyphs.



On the way home I stopped at Mesa Butte to see if I would have any better luck than the map makers did when determining whether the formation there was a mesa or a butte. While there, I spotted this formation, where I thought the dark rock in the middle resembled a kitten. I'm guessing that the map makers who named Mesa Butte probably called this Puppy Kitten Rock.

For my last day of sightseeing, I took a 41-mile clay and gravel road off Highway 24 north of Hanksville to the Hans Flat Ranger Station, just inside the park boundary of a remote section of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. The station is a jumping off point for those who plan to explore that rugged canyon country, which includes the Maze District of Canyonlands National Park.

Beyond the station, you need more clearance, bigger and better tires, and two full-size spare tires if you plan to go much further. It's one of the most rugged areas you can find in the Lower 48 states. I was hoping to get some views of the canyon country that lies beyond the ranger station, but I wasn't going to venture further with just a Jeep Cherokee.





I did see the Maze once, back in 2000 when I was camping in the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park. I hiked out to the confluence of the Green and Colorado Rivers so that I could see it. Here's a glimpse of the Maze District to the right of the Colorado River.

A big storm was slowly approaching the region from the west. Although our day started with a lot of sun, it was extremely windy, 40-60 miles an hour, which you could really feel with all the loose sand in the area. But that also meant that I had to be mindful of sand piling up on the road in places.



This sand field was drifting across the road, which is just to the left.



I saw this sign as I was heading out towards Hans Flat. The Bureau of Land Management manages much of the land I explore in this region, and much of it is multi-use, with open range cattle grazing the most common shared use. The sign surprised me, as most people like me who target these more remote areas are used to sharing the land with grazing cattle, and understand that the cattle belong to someone. I even saw cowboys on horseback herding cattle a couple times on this trip.



Besides, everybody knows that you have to go to Wisconsin to find Cows Gone Wild!



I was hoping for better views of the canyon country beyond Hans Flat, and there are. But it takes more rugged vehicles and tires to drive much beyond the Hans Flat Ranger Station in this remote section of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. Here's part of Happy Canyon.



Millard Canyon is in the distance.



On the drive back to the motel, I decided to swing through the old Four Corners Mining Area. I saw a number of abandoned mines as well as signs that warned not only of the usual hazards of abandoned mines (falls, explosives) but also of radioactive materials.

My next stop was pretty amazing.



How's that for a cliffhanger ending!