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Relatives Road Trip, Arches and Canyonlands (R18A-2)

For my drive back to Las Vegas from visiting my relatives in the Midwest, I took a route that would bring me through the Moab-Green River area of Utah so that I could spend a few October days visiting some favorite destinations in the area, including Arches National Park and the Island in the Sky Unit of Canyonlands National Park.

I like both parks a lot – Arches is in fact my favorite national park. But Arches has become so popular that parking there is like the mall for Black Friday shopping, and the well-known trails are often overcrowded. I figured that things would ease up by mid-October, especially for a mid-week visit.

Unfortunately I was wrong. And I also found that Arches' overcrowding has spread to nearby Island in the Sky. This has a lot to do with why I've been spending more and more time these last few years looking for interesting yet off the beaten path destinations across the Southwest than returning to the regions famous national parks.

I had great weather the day I got out there. But it was drizzling on and off my second day, and we had downpours my third day, wiping out that day's plans completely – the sand and clay backroads I was planning to hit become impassable when wet.



Heading east on I-70 out of Colorado into Utah, I took the exit for State Highway 128, which soon follows the Colorado River en route to Moab. At some point along the way the Colorado becomes the southeastern border of Arches National Park.



View of the silhouette of Fisher Towers, with the La Sal Mountains in the distance



One of the first stops along Arches Scenic Drive in Arches National Park is Park Avenue, its sandstone fins reminiscent of the New York City skyline. Because my visits to Arches usually start in the morning, I'm used to seeing this view in the shadows. But it was early afternoon so they were well lit for me.



The Three Gossips and Sheep Rock



A field of petrified sand dunes, now Navajo Sandstone, with the La Sal Mountains in the distance

For a stretch Arches Scenic Drive follows a large sandstone outcropping called the Great Wall. There are a handful of arches in the Great Wall. During my several visits to Arches over the years I've seen a couple hundred arches including all the highlighted ones as well as several of the more obscure and off-the-beaten-path ones.

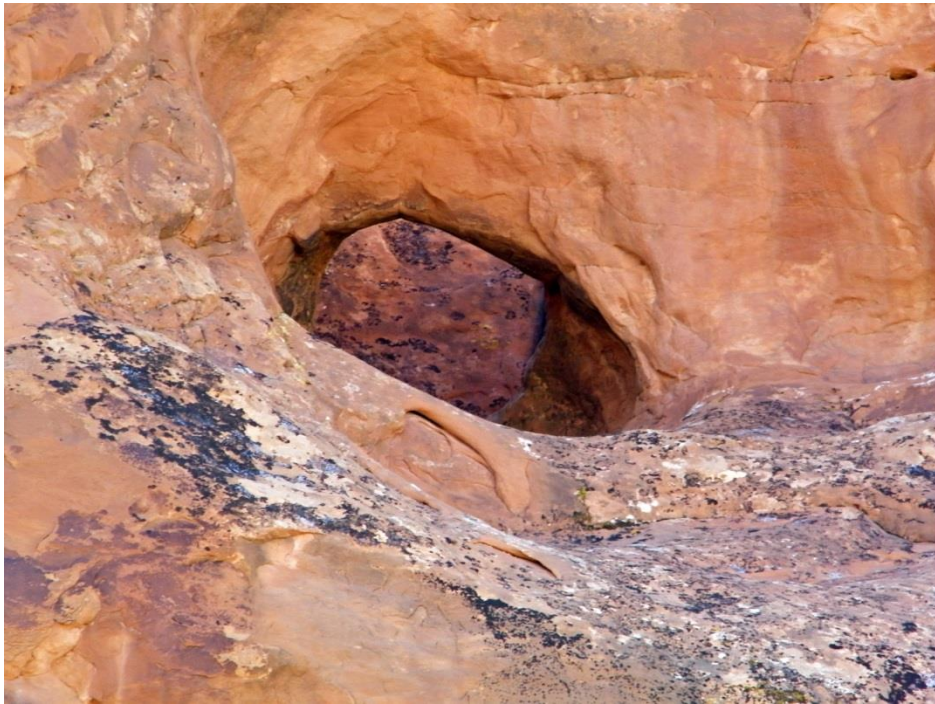
One that has eluded me since I first started looking for it back in 2011 is Arch of Motion, a 10'x25' arch. It's somewhere in the Great Wall, but it can be hard to see because from most angles one sees a wall of sandstone through it. Time of day also makes a big difference – it's best to look for it in morning light.

I have checked maps to identify its approximate location, and I have hiked off the road to explore the Great Wall's nooks and crannies looking for it on a few visits now, careful to stay on sandstone or in sandy washes to avoid damaging the area's cryptobiotic soil.

This time, armed with geo-coordinates that others have posted with pictures, related maps and Google Street View images I found an arch just about where I expected to find it.



The arch, from one of the limited angles that lets me see the sky through it



But from most angles it looks like this, making it hard to spot from any distance.

The problem is, this isn't Arch of Motion. ☹ I guess I'll have to try yet again.



If you need some balance in your life, you might want to check out Balanced Rock. Balanced Rock is 128 feet tall, and the balanced boulder is estimated to weigh 3600 tons.

The different types of sandstone in the park erode at different rate – a more erosion-resistant layer can protect the softer layers below it, creating balanced rocks, pillars and other assorted geological features.

At least for a while. A smaller balanced rock nearby, Chip Off The Old Block, collapsed in the winter of 1975-76.



Rock climbers are putting themselves to the test in the Garden of Eden area of Arches National Park.

Rock climbing, with restrictions, is allowed in some areas of the park. It is not permitted on any arch with an opening greater than three feet.



View of Turret Arch (left) with the La Sal Mountains in the distance



A closer look at Turret Arch and its neighboring arch in the Windows Area (a.k.a. Parking Lot Traffic Jam Central). Turret Arch is about 35 feet wide and 65 feet tall.



The North Window (left) and South Window Arches, a.k.a. the Spectacles. The North Window is 90 feet wide and 48 feet tall; the South Window is 115 feet wide and 55 feet tall.

Several years ago I was invited to a Halloween party. For my costume I dressed up as the State of Utah. I wore a red sweatshirt to represent the state's red rock country and decorated myself with an assortment of travel photos. For my mask I got a large panorama reprint of the Spectacles and cut out the openings in North and South Windows.

Certainly a better costume than the person who dressed up as Nebraska, if you ask me. I mean, seriously. Nebraska?



Double Arch in the Windows Area, the largest double arch in the world. The larger of the two is almost 150 feet wide and just over 100 feet tall.



View towards Fiery Furnace. The late day sun sometimes really brings out fire-like reds and golds in these rocks.



In the upper center of this picture is an end view of Arches' most famous feature. Delicate Arch has an opening that's 32 feet wide and 46 feet high. From the trailhead parking area it is a 1 ½ mile, one-way hike to Delicate Arch (a relatively easy uphill desert hike, but there's a stretch with freefall drop-offs on one side of the trail). It's a popular hike, although the hike does deter some visitors.

The first time I visited Arches, I hiked up to Delicate Arch. Someone was leaving just as I reached the arch, so I had the place all to myself for the next 45 minutes. Over the years I've hiked up there a handful of times. The last time I hiked to the arch, I found about 50-100 people already there. The crowds make it hard to get a great picture of Delicate Arch that doesn't include a lot of strangers milling about and taking selfies, so I don't hike up there anymore.



A couple pictures of Delicate Arch from my first visit to Arches National Park



For non-hikers there's a short flat walk from a parking lot to the Delicate Arch Viewpoint, which provides a distant view of the arch (and about 50 visitors this particular day). How distant? This is a cropped 15x optical zoom picture of the arch.



I use that parking area for a different reason. The Cache Valley 4x4 high clearance road leaves the parking area and dead ends somewhere outside the boundary of the park. Back in 2011 I was curious where it led, so I hiked along the road for a while. Just outside the park boundary I noticed a faint trail heading off to the side, so I decided to check it out. Just past a slight rise I entered a valley covered with blue-green rock. This trip I took my third hike out to this secret spot, enjoying the colorful landscape – with not another person in sight.



I made a point of sticking around the park until late in the day. One of my favorite places to be for a sunset is the stretch along the park road from Fiery Furnace to Devils Garden, not to watch the sun as it sets but because the late day sun can really bring out the color in the rock.

With about an hour to go before sunset I got this picture at Fiery Furnace, looking across Cache Valley towards the La Sal Mountains. The sandstone ridge just to the left of the La Sals sits above the Colorado River.



Skyline Arch, about 70 feet wide and more than 30 feet tall. A 1940 rockfall doubled the size of the opening.



Sunset is getting closer.



Just a couple minutes before the sun slipped below the horizon

It was drizzling the next day, not the sky conditions I wanted for a photo trip to the Island in the Sky unit of Canyonlands National Park. I took the photo trip anyway, as I hadn't been to Island in the Sky for several years. It's mostly a place for views rather than for hiking, as Island in the Sky is a large mesa that sits above the confluence of the Colorado and Green Rivers and the canyons that they carved.



I stopped along the road to Canyonlands for this picture of Merrimac (left) and Monitor (right) Buttes.



The road also features views of the Behind the Rocks, an area of sandstone rock fins, arches and spires outside of Arches National Park. I haven't explored much of that area yet.



Canyonlands wasn't established until the 1960s. For a time following World War II there was a lot of uranium prospecting in the area. This led to the creation of some roads to serve the area, including this one that leads down into the canyon to White Rim Road. I'd like to head down there someday.



A relative traffic jam on the road leading down into the canyons



Cleopatra's Chair sits above the Green River



Above the Green River. A thick layer of white-ish sandstone (streaked with dark "desert varnish") was laid down by ancient oceans. It is particularly resistant to erosion, thus creating a "white rim" along the edge of deeper canyons. The roadway heading up the left side of the picture is the White Rim Road.



The Aztec Butte trail leads to a couple ruins sites, although nothing here is related to the Aztecs.



The White Rim sits above the Green River here. Across the Green River is the park's remote Maze Unit, accessible via 4WD dirt roads off of State Highway 24.



A short hike leads to the rim of Upheaval Dome. Scientists have speculated that this was either the site of a meteor strike or a collapsed salt dome, with evidence now leaning toward a meteor crater.



I took this picture of Upheaval Dome while flying to New York a couple years ago.



Candlestick Tower



The White Rim surrounds Buck Canyon.



Views looking south and southeast from the Grand View Point Overlook above the confluence of the Colorado and Green Rivers

Said Captain John N. Macomb of this area when exploring it in 1859, "I cannot conceive of a more worthless and impracticable region than the one we now find ourselves in."



Fall color at Canyonlands



A raven keeps an eye on an Island in the Sky picnic area



These dark clumps are cryptobiotic soil, common to the region. These are living communities of fungi, lichens and bacteria that serve to stabilize the surface soil, keeping it from blowing away. Hikers who leave established trails should stick to rock outcroppings and washes in order to avoid stepping on it, as it can take several years for the communities to reestablish themselves.



The moss was green today thanks to the on and off drizzle. It turns black during dry periods, but it greens up quickly when water is available. You can pour a bit of canteen water on black moss and watch it start greening up in minutes.



“Potholes” erode into sandstone surfaces and collect blowing dirt, eggs and – when it rains – water. The water activates eggs, so it’s not unusual to find tadpoles or shrimp swimming in them. Some pothole residents must complete their whole lifecycle before the pothole dries out. Wet or dry, visitors should stay out of the potholes to avoid contaminating them.

I couldn’t begin to tell you about all the outhouses I’ve used over the years (I bet you’re as relieved as I was). But I can say with certainty that I’ve never needed instructions on how to use them. So I was pretty surprised to find these instructions in an Island in the Sky outhouse:



It makes me appreciate all the more the approach my parents put in to potty training their kids.



A rest area north of Moab along I-70 features this view east of the Book Cliffs. The Book Cliffs span more than 200 miles from western Colorado west to Price, Utah, making it the longest continuous escarpment in the world.



Looking to the southeast, I believe that these curved rock layers are part of the Salt Valley anticline.



The town of Green River, Utah is famous for its melons, including this one, which some claim is the largest watermelon in the world.



As a pouring rain day activity, I finally visited the John Wesley Powell River History Museum in Green River. Powell led a small group that started with four wooden boats on an exploration and mapping expedition down the Green and Colorado Rivers through what are now Canyonlands National Park, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area and Grand Canyon National Park. The museum is much better than most small town museums, a real museum and not merely a collection.



It was still raining heavily when I finished up at the museum. With my day's sightseeing plans canceled I decided to kill some time by driving down to Hanksville and back. Here's a view west looking towards the area where I-70 passes through the San Rafael Reef, the western edge of the San Rafael Swell.



The headwaters of the Dirty Devil River at Hanksville, just below the confluence of the Fremont River and Muddy Creek