



Utah Sightseeing Road Trip (U20B)

With the COVID-19 pandemic easing up for a bit for a while late last spring, I took a decent road trip up into Utah, staying in a couple low-infection rate counties and spending my days appropriately social distancing by exploring a number of great out of the way sites that I usually had to myself.

I also apparently cracked a bone in my foot on my last hike on that trip, something I didn't verify until a couple weeks after I got home. I thought I aggravated arch issues (the cracked bone was in my arch). But that kept me off my feet and in a medical boot until mid-August. Although I can now walk on it, I can't go hiking on it yet.

But after being stuck at home all summer, I needed to get some outdoor time. So, I planned another Utah trip, a couple days shorter than the last one, but I stayed in the same towns and same hotels, and I still spent my days exploring out of the way sites that I usually had to myself – although these had to be along or fairly close to roads as I couldn't hike out to see them. At least with a Jeep, I get to define "roads" fairly broadly.



I got to Kanab early, so I checked out more sites along nearby Johnson Canyon Road, including the Nephi Pasture area, with its sand-covered road and White Cliffs backdrop.



It would have been nice to hike along the Paria at the base of the Cockscomb monocline this time as the river had completely dried out. The Southwest has been exceptionally dry this summer.



The folks on HGTV would probably like this scenery along Smoky Mountain Road Scenic Backway in this remote corner of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. There's the nice neutral grey background that makes splashes of colorful grasses and weeds really pop!



Who says you can't combine both greys and beiges as your neutral backgrounds?



That said, I generally prefer beiges as my primary background color. It goes with just about all other colors.

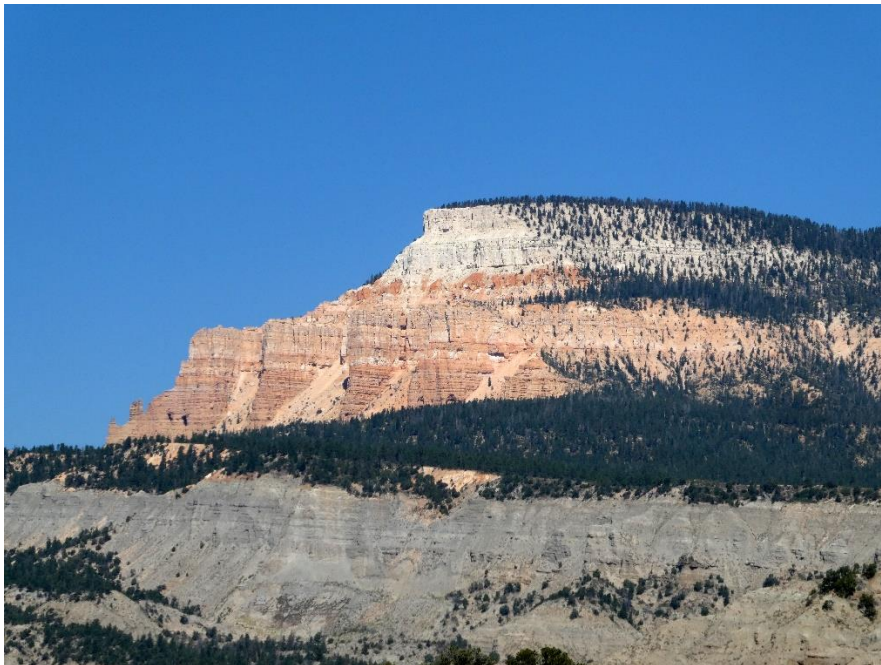
I finished up the scenic backway a bit earlier than I expected, so on my way back to Kanab, I made a repeat stop at Paria where I took a short hike, er, walk in this colorful clay valley.



Last May I took a 10-mile hike along the Paria starting about where this wash meets the river.



My drive from Kanab to Green River passed through a corner of Bryce Canyon National Park, but I skipped stopping at the park this time. You can see some of Bryce's amphitheatres in the distance.



Highway 12's Powell Point is named for John Wesley Powell, who led some expeditions to map this part of the country. The grey rock layer under the more colorful Claron Formation has been a rich source of dinosaur fossils. The Claron Formation is also what you see at Bryce Canyon.



There are a couple Fremont culture ruins visible from Highway 12 along the bottom (left of center, right) of this alcove.



I love the views from Highway 12's Head of the Rocks Overlook. This is one of my favorite scenic drives.



Highway 12 crosses the Hogback. The curves make it easier to see the steep drop-offs found on both sides of the road from a number of different angles.



One of the views from the Hogback, from just across the street from where I took the above picture.



Looking towards the west face of the Capitol Reef monocline with the Henry Mountains in the distance, as seen from Highway 12's Larb Hollow Overlook on the eastern slope of Boulder Mountain.



The same monocline, as seen from Highway 24 inside Capitol Reef National Park. I'd been to Capitol Reef a number of times over the years, so I really don't need more photos of the place, but I decided to stop at all the Highway 24 turnouts today.



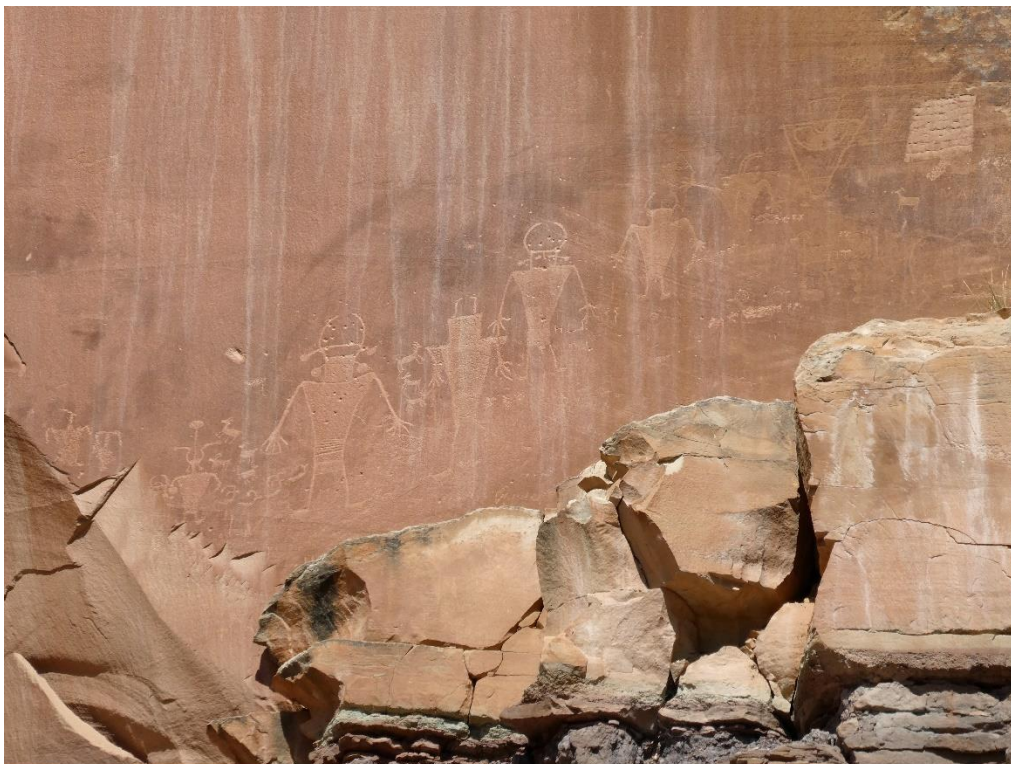
You get some sense of how Capitol Reef formed at this site. About 60 million years ago, continental pressure from west to east came to a head at an ancient fault deep underground here, causing about 9,000 feet of overlaying rock to slowly warp and fold above the fault (the sheer weight of the rock layers caused them to bend rather than break), resulting in some of the lands to the west of the fault rising more than 7,000 feet.

Layers of this rock eroded away, exposing the west-facing sides of Capitol Reef (and Caineville and North Caineville Reefs just to the east). To the west is Boulder Mountain, a.k.a. Aquarius Plateau, now the “top step” of the “Grand Staircase” sequence of plateau steps that lead to the north rim of the Grand Canyon.

In this picture, the red line marks a related fault line, where rock layers to the right are 165 feet higher than corresponding layers on the left.



The Castle stands above the park's visitor center.



A cluster of Fremont culture petroglyph panels is easily accessible from the main road through the park.



Navajo Dome, an eroded sandstone formation in the midst of Capital Reef



The east-facing "backside" of Capitol Reef. The hard Navajo sandstone that characterizes the east-facing slope of Capitol Reef resists erosion, providing some protection to the colorful rock layers beneath that are visible from the west. But erosion has won out in places, creating a number of canyons that cut through the reef. We see the same thing on San Rafael Reef to the north, although that reef isn't a monocline but rather marks the eastern edge of an anticline.



One of my goals for this trip was to explore North Caineville Reef some more in the area behind Factory Butte (Factory Butte Special Recreation Management Area). Here's a view of the hard cap-rock top layers of North Caineville Reef from the east side.



I followed the road to Salt Wash through a gap in that cap-rock layer (that layer is the dark ridge to the left in this picture). Beneath the layer to the right, and exposed to its west, is some colorful Morrison Formation layers. This road should have taken me to that side, except a gully a few feet deep had eroded across the road at the red line. Vehicles with much bigger tires could cross it, but I was concerned that the gap in the road may have been just wide enough to catch my tires. I was 20 miles from the highway in a very low traffic area, so I decided not to chance it.



Backtracking a bit to Wild Horse Road, I could see the canyon where Muddy Creek has carved its way through North Caineville Reef where it exits the San Rafael Swell.



I took a different route back to the highway, West Factory Road. Like the road to Salt Wash earlier, it passes between layers of North Caineville Reef. Much of it actually traveled in a wash (here you can see the wash to the left), which proved to be somewhat rugged in a couple places. No eroded gap – just a couple sudden drops, one of which I was convinced was either going to damage the car or shred one of my new tires (with no room further down the wash to turn around, I had reached a point where there was no choice but to go forward after one of the drops). But the car and the tires survived just fine.

I suppose I should practice on more of those Starbucks drive-thru lanes like most SUV owners use their vehicles for before taking on some of these backroads.



The Chaffin Ranch Geyser is one of a couple cold water geysers in the desert south of the town of Green River, Utah. Both have manmade origins – attempts to drill for oil created the openings for both. There are pockets of carbon dioxide underground that mix with the groundwater, causing periodic eruptions not unlike opening a shaken bottle of pop. Eruptions are sporadic and impacted by groundwater levels, so they're less frequent in the fall after a dry summer like this one. Having seen an eruption at nearby Crystal Geyser a couple years ago, I gave up on waiting for this one after spending 45 minutes here.



San Rafael Swell is a Delaware-sized anticline west of the town of Green River. It's basically a large bulge in the Earth's surface where much of the raised middle has eroded down, although the middle is still much higher than the surrounding landscape. It is bounded by reefs, San Rafael Reef on the east side and the less impressive Molen Reef on the west side. Canyons have been carved through the reefs. Spotted Wolf Canyon, views from the east here, was as little as 8-feet wide before it was widened to accommodate I-70. I've hiked through of number of the reef's canyons in recent years; many are marked with petroglyphs and pictographs. I hoped to walk another one on this trip, but the trail was too rugged for my currently non-hiking feet. So next time.



This “walk” leads to a couple petroglyph and pictograph panels. This is in the same general Head of Sinbad area where I checked out some pictographs and an arch last June, albeit some miles further on sand and dirt roads.



The highlight here is the Lone Warrior pictograph. There doesn't seem to be a consensus on whether the dark blotches to its left are much more faded pictographs of animals or just natural discoloration of the rock.



Another couple miles deeper into the Swell is the Swasey Cabin. The Swasey brothers had a cattle operation here, and built this early in the 20th century as a shelter for cowboys. The rock formation just behind the cabin is the Broken Cross.



A short trail behind the cabin leads to this alcove where you can see grooves in one of the rocks. These sharpening grooves are the result of early Natives sharpening their tools here. You will find these sometimes at places that the Natives used as shelters.



There are a handful of rock art sites that I wanted to see in the Molen Reef area. I cancelled plans to stop there on my way home back in June due to the sore foot and unexpected snow flurries hitting the region. I dropped two of the sites from my plans for this trip, as both required hiking. But I did stop at “the Juggler” panel. There are two rock shelters and a couple very minor petroglyphs nearby at this site.



I had stopped at nearby Dry Wash Petroglyph Site a couple times in the past, but I more recently learned that there was also a dinosaur trackway at the site. Not one of the better trackways I’ve seen, but I like the fact that I’ve now seen enough dinosaur trackways that I can have opinions on their quality. There are several tracks just to the right of the line.



I took a scenic route back to Las Vegas, making a handful of minor stops, including this return to the Pando Aspen Clone (80,000-year-old root system has sprouted a large grove of genetically identical aspen trees), hoping to see the grove in its autumn colors. It was a little too early for that, but I did get sunny day pictures of the grove this time.



I took a scenic backway to Cedar Breaks and Parowan, which among other things passed through a volcanic field.



This route took me through a corner of Cedar Breaks National Monument. I had a great visit there just last year, so I hadn't planned to stop, but it was hard to resist when I approached the last of its overlooks.



South of the town of Green River looking west as the sun sets beyond San Rafael Reef and other formations.