



MarkHitsTheRoad

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Utah Social Distancing Road Trip (U20A)

The COVID-19 pandemic threw most of my 2020 travel plans out the window. Fortunately to-date that's been its only significant impact on me, so I have no room to complain, as the pandemic has created a lot of hardship and loss for a lot of other people.

Still, when travel restrictions started easing up, I was anxious to hit the road a bit. Not too anxious, though, as I have some major pre-existing conditions that could lead to severe complications should I get infected.

I had missed my annual April trip to Utah and the Four Corners region, so I thought I'd target Utah. Only I decided to skip my regular stays in Page, Arizona and Blanding, Utah. Both towns are near the Navajo Nation, which has been hit especially hard by the pandemic.

I decided to split my stays between Kanab and Green River, Utah, a pair of small towns in counties with few cases, all recovered at the time. I brought my own cleaning supplies for the hotel rooms, and there was no dining out. All my hiking and sightseeing plans while staying in those towns would take me to places off pavement where I expected to encounter few if any people.

For the most part I was successful. A night of heavy rain kept me on pavement one day, and I was dumbfounded by how many of the people I did see weren't social distancing and weren't wearing masks. They were excited that things were opening up, I suppose, but the news was reporting that Utah was starting to see a spike in COVID-19 cases since the state started opening up.

It's a strange way to road trip, and Green River surprisingly has two really great restaurants and a solid breakfast diner that I missed dining at this time. Still, I got to see a lot of great destinations on this trip that were new to me, and I had a few especially top-notch days of exploration.



My first destination was a return visit to Pahreah Ghost Town Day Use Area. Only this time I took a round-trip 10-mile hike upstream along the upper Paria River to Kitchen Canyon to see a petroglyph panel. Here the colorful clay layers at Pahreah come into view.



Scenery along the hike. The river level was low, and I didn't come across any quicksand, making for mostly easy hiking.



I was looking for a small petroglyph panel on a very large expanse of sandstone at the mouth of Kitchen Canyon. And it wasn't where someone's photo of the bluff with a helpful arrow said it was. After a half hour of looking, I gave up and hiked back. At least it was a pretty hike.



The next day I hiked along the Paria River in an area south of the Paria Box, where the river cuts through the Cockscomb monocline. By early afternoon, what little water that had been trickling through the river disappeared.

For my third day, it was 140 miles of dirt, gravel, clay and sand roads south of the Kaibab-Paiute Indian Reservation in northern Arizona, a 120-mile round trip to the Grand Canyon's Tuweep Area and 20 miles for a side trip to see some sites at the east end of Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument.



One of my Parashant stops was at Nampaweap Rock Art Site, where a short hike led to one of the largest concentrations of petroglyphs in the Arizona Strip (the area of Arizona north of the Grand Canyon).



Nearby was what little was left of a Mormon pioneer sawmill site. It was here that they cut more than a million board feet of lumber that they then hauled over 75 miles to St. George, Utah in the 1870s to build the Mormon Temple and other structures there.



My interest in the sawmill had more to do with some of my maps indicating there was an ancient ruins site nearby. There were no signs for it at the site, but I wandered around the woods near the mill site for a bit until I came across the Uinkaret Pueblo Ruins, shown here.



From there I headed towards a remote section of Grand Canyon National Park, passing through the Uinkaret Volcanic Field along the way. Here's a view of the extinct volcano Vulcan's Throne, which sits on the edge of the Grand Canyon (north rim).



The Grand Canyon is just coming into view.

The 120-mile round trip drive from the highway on unpaved roads (impassable when wet) coupled with the fact that the last few miles REQUIRE a high-clearance vehicle means that very few people visit the Tuweap Area of Grand Canyon National Park – 20 people a day is considered a busy day. The entrance ranger assured me that I had the place to myself when I visited.

My Jeep would have gotten me to the highlight of the Tuweap Area – Toroweap Overlook – but I was so focused on the rough road that I was missing the scenery I came to see, so about halfway through those last few miles, I found a place to park and hiked the rest of the way.

The vast majority of Grand Canyon visitors hit the South Rim Visitor Area, and most of the rest hit the North Rim Visitor Area. Those two areas are across from each other at one of the widest points in the Grand Canyon. The width and the colorful views are well worth seeing (especially from the North Rim, IMO), but there aren't that many views of the Colorado River. Glimpses, really, for the most part.

Toroweap Overlook is located at one of the canyon's narrowest points. It also puts you right above the Colorado River. You can look almost straight down to see the Colorado River 3000 feet below you, about double the height (to the tip top) of the Empire State Building's spire. Some years ago, I hiked down from the South Rim to Plateau Point, where I could look almost straight down to the Colorado River, but that was only a 1300-foot view down.



Looking east (upstream) at the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon



Looking down at the Colorado River, 3000 feet below



Looking west (downstream). This is the Lava Falls area. Lava from long ago Vulcan's Throne eruptions can be seen on the slope to the right of the river. There's actually a hiking trail there that leads down to the river and back – about 3-4 miles round trip with a 2540-foot drop (and then the climb back up), sharp lava rocks, loose scree and the highest fatality rate of any hiking trail in the park. Note the small volcano cinder cone on the south (left) rim above the river. That's marks the south end of the Uinkaret Volcanic Field. Only a small bit of Vulcan's Throne is visible on the north rim in this picture.



The rapid is Lava Fall Rapid, caused by volcanic debris. It's the longest rapid along the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon, although it doesn't look like much from a mile away and 3000 feet down.

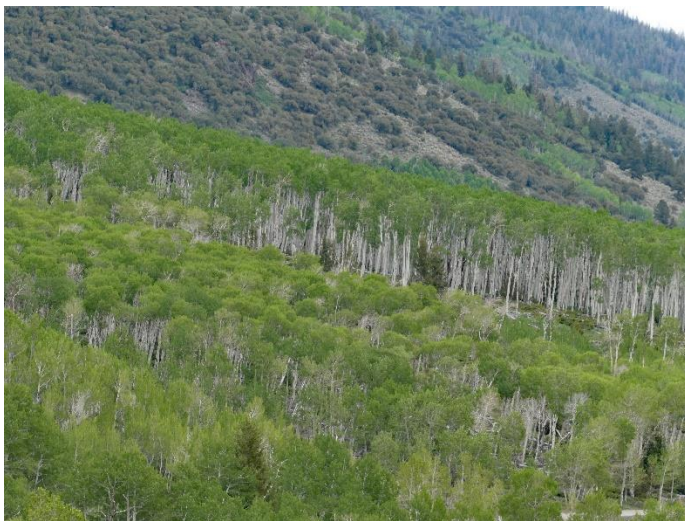


Another view of Vulcan's Throne, the extinct volcano that sits on the edge/north rim of the Grand Canyon.



The next day I headed north to Green River, a town I start using some years ago as a much cheaper, far less crowded alternative to Moab. As much as I love Moab for its access to Arches National Park (my favorite national park), the park has become so overrun with tourists in recent years that I don't enjoy visiting it anymore.

Along the way I stopped at the boyhood home of Robert Leroy Parker, better known as outlaw Butch Cassidy.



A couple years ago lingering snow prevented me from completing the Fish Lake Scenic Byway. On that trip I discovered that I was passing through the Pando Aspen Clone, a large grove of genetically identical quaking aspen trees that share the same root system. The roots are 80,000 years old, making it one of the oldest known living organisms, and at 6 million kilograms it's the heaviest known living organism.

This visit I got to see the trees with their leaves. And I completed the byway. Now I just need to get here in the early fall sometime when their leaves are a dazzling golden yellow.



For my first day of sightseeing out of Green River, I headed for Cow Dung Road, west of Hanksville. I hate to disappoint you, but I didn't see any actual cow dung anywhere along Cow Dung Road. But I did get this distant view of Factory Butte.



I also came across the Mars Society's Mars Desert Research Station, a facility designed to give researchers the opportunity to experience a simulation of what it would be like to live and work on Mars for a few weeks to a few months.

The surrounding landscape looks less like the Red Planet and more like the Morrison Formation (and, no, that's not a reference to The Doors, a different Morrison formation).



The Morrison Formation is an extensive layer of Upper Jurassic sedimentary rock found in many places throughout the west. It is the richest source of dinosaur fossils in North America.

A few miles past the Mars Desert Research Station is the Hanksville-Burpee Dinosaur Quarry, a dinosaur fossil excavation site that's about 600 feet long and 150 feet wide.



Fossils of several species of dinosaurs have been found there, mostly long-neck sauropods as well as the theropod Allosaurus and ornithomimid Dryosaurus.

It's a relatively young quarry – the site was discovered in 2008. There are no visitor facilities or signs along the nearest highway directing you to it (or to Mars, for that matter). But you can wander the site on your own, which I did.

I spotted these dinosaur bone fossils, a couple possible dinosaur bone fossil impressions and what looked to me to be a theropod track.



So here I went expecting to see cow dung, and instead I found Mars, dinosaurs and colorful Morrison Formation scenery. You never know what some of these back roads may lead you to.



Further west, I took another unpaved road, this time Caineville Wash Road. North Caineville Reef is a monocline, a tear in the earth's crust that tilts upward, exposing rock layers, some of which erode away faster than others. Here Caineville Wash fills the gap where some layers have eroded out of view.



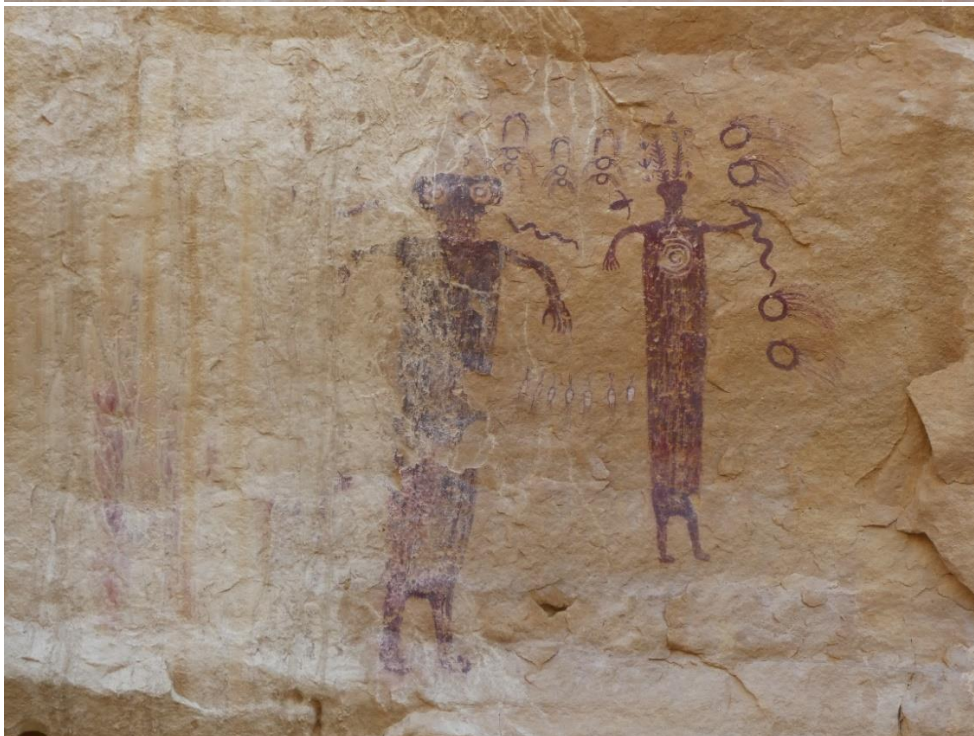
Further along, the road becomes Cathedral Road, and leads to the remote Cathedral Valley area of Capitol Reef National Park. I didn't go that far. But here's a view towards Capitol Reef and the distant Aquarius Plateau, the highest uplift plateau in North America, and the top step in Utah's Grand Staircase, a series of plateau steps that head south towards the north rim of the Grand Canyon.



The next day I explored part of the San Rafael Swell, a large (40 miles by 75 miles) anticline (bulge) in the earth's crust that straddles I-70. The edges have reefs like the San Rafael Reef on its east edge. Much of the middle has eroded away to a plains area cut through by impressive canyons. In the picture, San Rafael Reef catches the morning sun.



I first targeted the Head of Sinbad area, where I saw these Barrier Canyon style pictographs at Locomotive Point.



Nearby Head of Sinbad Barrier Canyon style panels. Arms and legs often don't appear on Barrier Canyon humanoids unless they're being used for something, such as holding snakes. The Hopi have a Snake Dance, and some have used this and the snakes that often appear in Barrier Canyon pictographs to make a connection between the modern Hopi and ancient Barrier Canyon cultures.



Dutchman Arch in the Head of Sinbad area of San Rafael Swell



I then headed for the Hondu area, a broad colorful canyon area which along with adjacent Reds Canyon appear to have been carved by Muddy Creek.



Hondu Arch is one of the highlights of Hondu.



Remains of the old Tomsich Butte uranium mine at Hondu



I took a different route to see part of Reds Canyon, passing Family Butte along the way



The Reds Canyon area of San Rafael Swell



If you were disappointed by the lack of cow dung along Cow Dung Road, then check out this cattle corral at Tan Seep in San Rafael Swell. The ground in the corral is littered with dung.



Temple Mountain, near San Rafael Reef along the southeast edge of San Rafael Swell



I stopped at this Barrier Canyon style pictograph panel once before where the road cuts through San Rafael Reef. This site was probably quite impressive before large pieces of sandstone flaked off.



Nearby is this panel that includes some faded red pictographs shaded by the overhang. In 1891 a cowboy named John added his name and self-portrait to the left, and a horse's head below the pictographs. Unfortunately, in 2020 some idiot named Kari etched her name and date right across some of the ancient pictographs. That's probably why a new fence kept me from getting closer to the rock art.



Heavy rain hit the area Friday night, which can create a mess of the unpaved back roads in the area. There's a lot of clay in the soil here, which can be especially slick when wet. Between that and water running through washes, and the backroads can become impassable. So, on Saturday I took a pavement drive, heading down to the Hite area of Glen Canyon National Park, where the Colorado River flows into Lake Powell.

Here's the Colorado River, looking downstream. In non-drought years, the upper reaches of Lake Powell would cover the grassy area.



Here I'm looking upstream, where the Dirty Devil River flows from the left into the Colorado River. The lake should be covering the grass here, but it wouldn't be much deeper than that, as there's the highway near the river's edge on the left side. Hard to make out in this picture is one of only three bridges in Utah that cross the Colorado River.



I'm standing on the Highway 95 bridge across the Colorado River to get this downstream view. I'm a lot closer to the river here than I was at Toroweap Overlook.



The highlight of my last day of sightseeing was exploring sites along Lower San Rafael Road, a 70-mile dirt, clay, sand and gravel route that crosses the San Rafael Desert from near Goblin Valley State Park to Green River. Most of the road was actually in pretty good shape considering the recent heavy rains.



This outcropping along the route reminded me of some of the scenery at nearby Hanksville and Goblin Valley.

A key reason for taking this road was that I wanted to check it out for future reference for hiking at Canyonland National Park's Horseshoe Canyon unit someday.



These are scenes from the trailhead at Horseshoe Canyon. Horseshoe Canyon is basically an 800-foot deep crack in the earth, wider than a typical slot canyon, but not wide by any standard, making it hard to see from here. A 7-mile round-trip hike leads to some of the best-preserved and most extensive Barrier Canyon style pictographs known (Horseshoe Canyon was originally known as Barrier Canyon). Its outstanding Great Gallery panel is 200 feet long and 15 feet high.



If that doesn't sound like the kind of hike you'd like to take, you can check out the outhouse at the trailhead. Someone has faithfully reproduced the canyon's famous pictograph panels on its walls.



Further north, the upper reaches of the canyons of the Green River come into view as it heads towards Canyonlands National Park and its confluence with the Colorado River.



Further north I stopped at the trailhead for Moonshine Wash. A hike up the wash leads to a slot canyon, but it was too late in the day for me to take that hike this time.



Moonshine Wash ends where it meets the San Rafael River, a year-round river that cuts through the San Rafael Swell en route to the Green River. In the Swell it carved the Little Grand Canyon, which is much more impressive than what you see here.



Here's some more Morrison Formation, as Fossil Point comes into view.



Boulders occasionally roll down Fossil Point, some revealing dinosaur bone fossils.



A lot of the “fossils” at Fossil Point are actually just fossil impressions like this one. More than a few visitors break off pieces of exposed dinosaur bone fossil at this unsupervised site, diminishing the experience for the rest of us.



The Book Cliffs come into view as I close in on the town of Green River and the end of my sightseeing for this trip. The Book Cliffs follow I-70/US 6 for about 250 miles across Colorado and Utah, the longest continuous escarpment in the world.