



# MarkHitsTheRoad

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## Colorful Colorado Road Trip (C25A)

For this trip, I targeted southwest Colorado and Albuquerque, New Mexico to see some sites that I missed on past trips, and a few others that I hadn't seen in a long time. Although it was a good trip, a wildfire and the bubonic plague impacted my itinerary.

It's about 500 miles from home to Cortez, Colorado, so I figured I'd get a head start on the drive by heading up to St. George, Utah for the first night to break up the drive. Once there, I made a return visit to the St. George Dinosaur Discovery Site at Johnson Farm, a museum built over a dinosaur tracksite on the edge of an ancient lake. I saw it back in 2019, but I had a better camera for indoor photos this time.



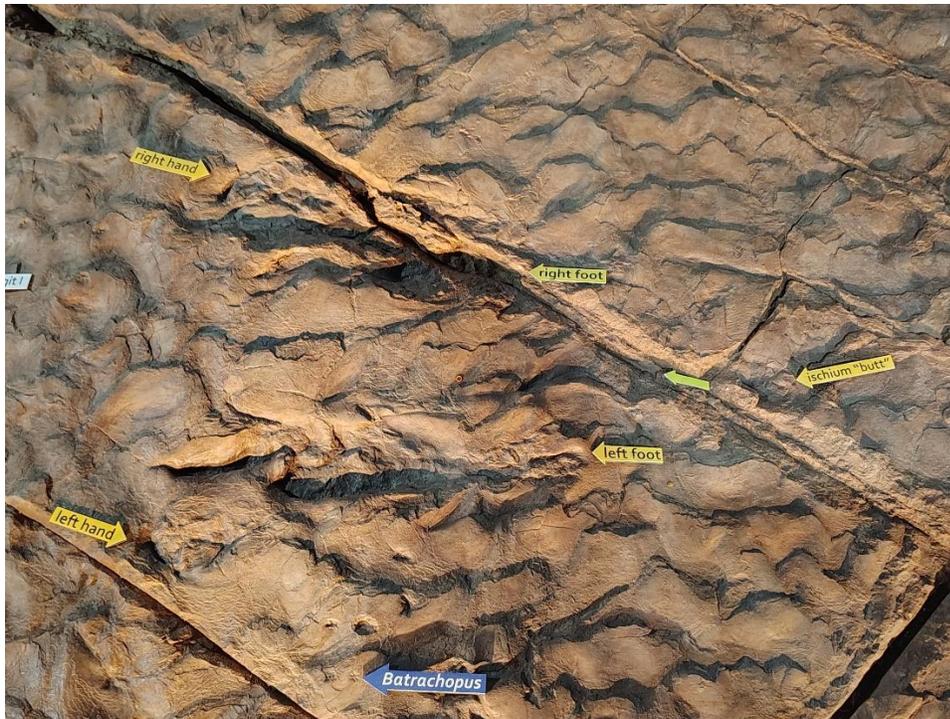
The largest single block dinosaur trackway ever collected.



Rare dinosaur swim tracks. Their claws scraped the bottom of a lake as they swam in shallow water.



The baby dinosaur track pictured here is only about the size of a quarter. The three-toed track meant that it was a theropod, and most theropods were meat-eaters. But a cute baby theropod would probably tear only very small bits of flesh from you at that size.



These trace fossils (tracks and other imprints) were created by a dinosaur that sat down for a bit. We see impressions left by its feet and its much smaller hands. Even its butt made a small impression that has survived for millions of years.

After I finished at the museum, I still had some time to fill, so I returned to a petroglyph site south of St. George, just across the border in Arizona. But it was the hottest day of the year, with temperatures over 112 degrees, so I gave up on the hike after covering only half the trail.



I passed Santa as I was returning St. George from the rock art site. The heat didn't seem to bother him as much as it did me.

Cortez is located in the southwest corner of Colorado, just north of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe Reservation. Canyons of the Ancients National Monument is just to the west, and features the highest concentration of Ancestral Puebloan archaeological sites in the country (more than 8,500 distinct structures identified, and an estimated 30,000 overall). I returned to a handful of sites there, some of which I hadn't been to in a decade or two.



I got to the Cortez area early enough to add Yucca House National Monument to my plans. Yucca House is mostly unexcavated. The grounds have been mapped out, and an analysis of pottery sherds found on the surface has been conducted, but for the most part the site is being preserved for some time in the future when archaeological techniques are much more advanced than they are today. Archaeologists are a rather patient group in this regard.

In the above picture, we're looking across the West Complex. Evidence suggests that it was a large pueblo with as many as 600 rooms, 100 general kivas and a giant community kiva (kivas were sites for social gathering and sacred rituals).



Yucca House's Lower House ruins site was a smaller pueblo with about 8 rooms and a large kiva. Lower House was partially excavated, and one of its walls was partially reconstructed. The two areas were occupied between 1100AD and 1300AD, and were home to an estimated 13,000 people.

My first full day focused primarily on Canyons of the Ancients sites as well as Hovenweep National Monument's Goodman Point site. My first two stops were hikes through the unexcavated ruins at Goodman Point and Canyons of the Ancients' Sand Canyon Pueblo.

Goodman Point was occupied first from 200AD to 450AD, and then from 900AD to 1300AD, and was rebuilt a few times during those years. It was the largest and easternmost village among the Hovenweep sites.

Sand Canyon Pueblo was built between 1250AD and 1280AD, and was one of the largest pueblos of the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the Ancestral Puebloans began to abandon their settlements in this region.

(Some people still repeat the idea that the Ancestral Puebloans – or Anasazi, as they used to be called – “vanished”. But it has long been established that today's Hopi in Arizona and the 19 pueblo tribes in New Mexico are direct descendants of the Ancestral Puebloans.)



Unexcavated pueblo and village wall ruins at Goodman Point



Unexcavated great kiva ruins at Sand Canyon Pueblo

You'd think that the Instagram folks would be all over places like Yucca House, Goodman Point and Sand Canyon Pueblo. But nearby Mesa Verde's Cliff Palace cliff dwellings are a lot "prettier". I guess that when you are far less photogenic and twice the size, that just isn't very appealing for those folks. But seeing such sites helps a geek like me learn to "read" such sites, as it isn't unusual for me to come across unexcavated ruins sites in my explorations.

I then headed for the Canyons of the Ancients visitor center, which features a nice museum and a pair of excavated ruins sites.



Museum artifacts from Sand Canyon Pueblo



Tools and artifacts found in the area from the Paleo-Indian period that dates back 8500 years or more



When we see the walls of ancient pueblos and kivas, we usually just see blank stones. But kivas in particular often had decorated plaster walls, and some of those walls have survived. Above is a preserved section of a kiva's plastered wall and a photo of a second plastered wall.



Partially restored Escalante Pueblo at the visitor center museum



Four of the kivas discovered at Lowry Pueblo had decorated plaster walls that have been removed and preserved.

I've been to Mesa Verde National Park, just east of Cortez, three times in the past, including my last trip a couple months ago. But each time, the Wetherill Mesa portion of the park was closed (I found out that it is only open during summer months). And for my last visit, I skipped a pair of sites in my otherwise comprehensive exploration of surface sites in the main section of the park. One key motivator for this trip was to pick up those sites as well as visit Wetherill Mesa.

You can drive to most sites in the main section of the park. On Wetherill Mesa, you park the car and hike to the ruins sites, with some hikes being several miles, so I wasn't able to see them all. But I did get a nice sampling.



Pithouses dating back to the Basketmaker culture, about 650AD, were the oldest permanent homes built on Wetherill Mesa. This was a two-room pithouse with an antechamber for storage.



This was the foundation of a new type of architecture that emerged around 750AD, consisting of contiguous one-story rooms. A village existed at this site for about 200 years.



Wetherill Mesa's Badger House site was a community that featured overlapping walls as the community was rebuilt over its nearly 400 years' existence. It also featured a tower connected to this kiva by an underground tunnel, a feature also found at other Mesa Verde tower sites.



The road leaving Wetherill Mesa follows Long Canyon. I thought I saw a ruins across the canyon, so I pulled over and took a look. There were actually four minor ruins visible at this stop.



The Soda Canyon Overlook trail leads to three overlooks, including one that features a nice view of Balcony House, one of Mesa Verde's bigger cliff dwelling sites accessible only via guided tour. I've been to a few of those on past visits, but my medical boots wouldn't let me climb the required ladders now. I was hoping to see some more minor ruins on the Soda Canyon walls, but the sun was at the wrong angle for looking, so I only spotted one on this hike.



My last ruins site in the park was Cedar Tree Tower, another tower connected to a kiva via an underground tunnel with nearby farm terrace ruins.

On my way out of the park, I stopped at the newer visitor center, but most of its artifacts were in a separate research area and not on display for park visitors to see.

Cortez itself has a couple small museums. At one, the person at the counter didn't think they were a museum, even though it says "Museum" on the outside of the building and on the brochure. But in reality, it was just a small collection of items and artifacts to look at when buying coffee.

The second had some artifacts found in the area, but focused primarily on the county's pioneer history.



Some of Montezuma County's pioneer history on display

This completed my Cortez stay. Next was a sightseeing drive through the San Juan Mountains of the southern Rockies with several planned and unplanned stops along the way. This included plans to return to Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. I've been there three times in the past, but always visiting just the south rim. This time, I planned to tour the more remote north rim sites.



Scenery along Highway 145 in the San Juan Mountains



Telluride, Colorado started as a silver – and later, gold – mining site that later became a famous ski town. During the summer, you can walk through its historic district, which includes much of the town, to shop, eat and drink, something far more people were doing than I would have expected on a weekday summer morning.



Arguably Highway 62's best known photo stop, especially in the fall when the quaking aspen leaves are a rich, shimmering gold.



Ouray, Colorado was another gold and silver mining area that evolved into a tourist draw full of shops, restaurants and bars, although not nearly as expensive as Telluride on the other side of one of the nearby mountains. It is now known as the “Switzerland of America” even though none of the restaurants I saw featured fondue on its menu.



I got to Montrose, Colorado, my target for the night, early enough that I had time to tour the Montrose County Historical Society's museum. It had some displays focused on Native American archaeological finds in the area, although the museum mostly focused on the area's pioneer history. An old McCormick-Deering tractor was displayed in its farm equipment exhibit. I had a nice conversation with the woman who volunteered there, as she was as much of a Native American rock art geek as I am, so we compared notes on a lot of sites, and I came away with a handful of suggested sites.

Conditions in this part of Colorado have been very dry these last few months. So, forest fire risks were high and strong fire restrictions were in place.



But that didn't prevent a number of large forest fires from starting. You may have heard of the fire at Grand Canyon National Park that wiped out the facilities on the Grand Canyon's North Rim, shutting it down for the season. Well, unfortunately the south rim of Black Canyon of the Gunnison was comparably hit, with 85% of that part of the park damaged. The north rim was fire-free, but the canyon is much narrower than the Grand Canyon, so between the smoke and the risk of sparks crossing the canyon, officials shut down the whole park. My Black Canyon plans would have to wait for another trip.

My plan for after finishing up at Black Canyon was to take Highway 149 south through the San Juan Mountains to South Fork. This remained my new plan, but now I had time to make several stops along the way.



Highway 50 east of Montrose passes south of Black Canyon of the Gunnison and then east through Curecanti National Recreation Area, where the dammed Gunnison River has created the Blue Mesa Reservoir, the largest lake in Colorado. Here, I'm looking across the lake towards the Dillon Pinnacles.



A branch of the Old Spanish Trail that connected Santa Fe, New Mexico to the Spanish missions of southern California once passed through this valley along Highway 149.

If you're looking for some tasty High Country cuisine, this is apparently the right place. During an 1874 blizzard, guide Alfred Packer took this route as he was leading a group of five men from Salt Lake City to the town of Gunnison. Although the trail was well worn, the blizzard hid the trail, and the group missed their turn here, becoming hopelessly lost in the San Juan Mountains. Packer emerged from the mountains alone, claiming that the rest of the party had left him behind.

A search party found the remains of the other five men a couple miles from Lake City, Colorado, then a mining camp. Each had been violently killed, and select cuts of meat had been removed and – they determined – consumed by Packer (animal scavengers would have been far less particular in what they ate), who also appeared to have the money they had been carrying with them. The cannibalism technically wasn't illegal, but the killings and theft were. Packer was eventually tried and convicted, but his life was spared due to a technicality.

Today, instead of punishing Alfred Packer, he'd probably end up competing against members of the ill-fated Donner Party in a cook-off on a Food Network reality TV show, perhaps called something like *If Cooks Could Kill*.



Today, you can celebrate Alfred Packer's legacy by dining at Lake City's Packer Saloon & Cannibal Grill. Perhaps enjoy a plate of ribs.



There isn't a lot else to downtown Lake City.



Lake City's Hinsdale County Museum is worth a visit. Focused mostly on pioneer history, among the items on display was this portable set of jail cells, which the manufacturer said was suitable for "women and the insane". Apparently, they thought that the two groups had something in common.



A thick cap of basalt columns covers the landscape where Highway 149 passed through The Gate. A couple calderas are nearby.



The Lake Fork of the Gunnison River cuts through the volcanic landscape.



About 850 years ago, water-saturated, earthen material slid down from Mesa Seco, traveling four miles into the valley below. The Slumgullion Earthflow dammed the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River, creating the second largest natural lake in Colorado. About 350 years ago, another portion of Mesa Seco began sliding down, riding on top of the earlier slide. This flow has covered 2 ½ miles and is still moving at about 20 feet per year.



I crossed Slumgullion Pass at 11,530 feet elevation, stopped for a view of Mount Baldy Cinco, and later took a short hike to see North Clear Creek Falls.



North Clear Creek Falls



There's a highway stop here at the headwaters of the Rio Grande River. Technically, the river starts on the north face of the distant peak, the Rio Grande Pyramid.



Both the Rio Grande River and Highway 149 pass through Wagon Wheel Gap just north of South Fork, Colorado, my destination for the night.

When I stayed in the Las Cruces, New Mexico area in 2023, I visited a museum there that exhibited Paleozoic Era (before the dinosaurs) trackways collected from nearby Prehistoric Trackways National Monument. They reported that most of the collected trackways were at the New Mexico Natural History and Science Museum in Albuquerque. But when I stopped at that museum in 2024, that particular exhibit was temporarily closed for refurbishing. South Fork put me just a few hours north of Albuquerque, so I figured my route home would go there so I could see the now refurbished exhibit. I also visited the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center while I was in town.



Unfortunately, the portion of the exhibit focused on dimetrodons and the dimetrodon trackway collected from Prehistoric Trackways National Monument was quite limited. Frankly, the small Las Cruces museum did a much better job in how it presented them.

Still, the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science does a very good job overall, and is well worth a visit.

Not so much the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. Its displays were rather high level (and not in that pander to kids while ignoring adult visitors that some museums do now), and there was a real lack of artifacts. I had been there years ago, but had forgotten how disappointed I was in it on that trip.



However, while I was there, a group of teens and young adults from Acoma Pueblo put on a performance of Native American dances, which was certainly worth seeing.



Camel Rock on the Tesuque Pueblo

From Albuquerque, the drive home pretty much follows I-40/Old Route 66 through Gallup, New Mexico, Flagstaff, Arizona (don't forget Winona), Kingman... and from Kingman north on Highway 93 to Vegas. I planned to stop at Painted Canyon Natural and Cultural Preserve northeast of Flagstaff, Arizona for some rock art hiking.

Most folks don't give it much thought, but the bubonic plague remains endemic in this part of the country. Recently, there was a large prairie dog die-off in the Townsend-Winona area, which the preserve borders on. Such die-offs are often a sign of a plague outbreak, and a person in the county died from the plague just before my trip. So, I decided to skip the hike this time.

Instead, I took in the fairly decent Mohave Museum of History and Arts in Kingman. It was probably the best of the small-town museums I visited on this trip, with a nice overview of the area's history dating back to Native American times.

But first you pass through their exhibit of portraits of presidents and their spouses, something the museum is very proud of.





From President Trump's first term. Melania looks like she just signed a more favorable pre-nup.



The paintings currently only go through President Biden. Second term Trump paintings are reportedly in progress.



One of several exhibits highlighting area mining towns.



Several local sports teams were featured, including a women's team known as the Goldiggers.



I don't recall hearing of fulgurite before, but that's what can get created when lightning strikes sand or dirt. Several pieces of fulgurite were on display.



Ranch life

Kingman also has a Route 66 museum, which I had seen before, so I skipped it this time.

From Kingman, it's only about two hours to get home.