

Spring Utah Hiking Road Trip (U24A-2)

South Central Utah Sites near Moab, Green River and Escalante, Utah

In the past, my main reason for going to Moab, Utah was to visit Arches National Park, but both the park and town have become seriously overrun with tourists because Utah heavily promotes its five national parks, and Moab is also home to thriving off-road biking and Jeep communities. But I learned about the Moab Museum, which suggested that it has some archaeological and paleontological artifacts among its exhibits. So, that was my first target after leaving the Blanding area.



Although the museum is nice, it is also small. Very small. As a result, it has a little bit about a lot of things – dinosaurs, other fossils, Native American artifacts, Moab history, uranium mining, a local Japanese-American internment camp from WWII, local geology, the area national parks, etc. – but so little that it didn't have much interesting to say about any of it.

Because I haven't been spending time in Moab in recent years, I haven't been to nearby Castle Valley since 2016. But this time I passed through it en route to the Bull Canyon Overlook.



I made a quick photo stop at Castleton Tower (right) and the Priest and Nuns (left), but I have better photos of this from past trips.



The cliffs of Bull Canyon Overlook feature some excellent views a thousand feet down in to Bull Canyon, which would make this a nice stop just for that. But, I was drawn here for other reasons.



Dinosaur trackways. A dinosaur trackway is a sequence of two or more tracks made by the same dinosaur. There are a handful of trackways on the exposed rock surfaces at Bull Canyon Overlook, including this one that looks like the dinosaur walked off the edge of the cliff. There were in fact two trackways that headed to the cliff's edge, but only one set that returned.

Was it murder? The three distinct toes tell us that these were theropods, and most theropods were meat-eating dinosaurs, so a theropod would have been more likely to kill and eat another dinosaur than lure it off the edge of a cliff.

And more importantly, these tracks were made in sand that was barely above sea level along the coast of an ancient inland sea. Long after these dinosaurs were gone, this area was uplifted to its present-day 8500 feet elevation, and Bull Canyon was carved even later.





I made a second dinosaur-related stop, this one at the Copper Ridge Dinosaur Tracksite. Here is a trackway made by a sauropod (think brontosaurus, but more likely a Camarasaurus or Diplodocus, based on fossils found in the area). These in fact were the first sauropod tracks to be discovered in Utah. They're also interesting because they show that the dinosaur made a rather sudden right turn.



This nearby trackway was made by a theropod – possibly an Allosaur – in need of a manicure, although all but the first track are pretty severely weathered at this point.

By assuming that animals behaved in ways back then that are similar to how animals behave today, tracks and trackways can be used to suggest the size of the animal, whether it was walking or running, how fast it was moving, and – in the case of this theropod – that it was limping.

As I left Blanding, I noticed that a tire seemed to be a bit lower on air than it had been, and when I got up the next morning in Green River, Utah, I decided I'd better get it checked. I carry two spare tires on these trips because of how rough some of the back country roads can be, but figured I'd be proactive. Turns out it was the valve stem, so I got that replaced. Wanting to make sure that was the only problem, I stuck with a more pavement-oriented itinerary for the day.

My first stop was a return to the Intestine Man pictograph panel that I first saw a couple years ago. I wasn't hiking much on that trip, so my pictures were taken using zoom from the highway. I got a lot closer with a short hike, and ended up with some better pictures of it this time.



Those aren't necessarily meant to be intestines in the figure's torso, but it's as descriptive a name as any. What is really impressive with this pictograph is the extensive use of fine lines in the drawing, a level of detail I usually don't see in pictographs.

Next, I headed for the Island in the Sky District of Canyonlands National Park. I was there a couple years ago when I took the Shafer Canyon Road, but like Arches National Park, the overlook areas have become severely crowded. I'm guessing that this district will soon require reservations like Arches now does.



E.g., during past visits, I'd stop for the short hike to Mesa Arch for the classic view through it of Washerwoman Arch (picture from 2007). Each time, I had the arch to myself. But as I drove past its parking area en route to my first target, not only was the parking lot full, but lots of cars were lining the road. I'm not sure how anyone would get the classic photo without having a bunch of the selfie and Instagrammer folks in the way. But then, I suspect that most of those people are more interested in getting pictures of themselves than of what they traveled all that way to see.



My first target was the Green River Overlook, as I only have somewhat overcast day photos from there. There's a road down there that you can see in places – the White Rim Road – that I plan to take someday. Far fewer tourists head down there than hang out at the overlooks.



My other target was the Aztec Butte hiking trail. It features two buttes, including Aztec Butte (pictured) and a smaller second one, each with a small ruins site at the top. My boots wouldn't let me get to the tops of these, but I've been up each one before, it was a pretty day for a hike, and there were some side trails I could explore. I wasn't terribly surprised to find a full parking lot, but fortunately someone pulled out just as I arrived.



I got some great views of Trail Canyon, which isn't one of the featured canyons of Canyonlands National Park. As busy as the main hiking trail was, I enjoyed quite a bit of solitude because of my side trail excursions.



After the hike, I decided to go somewhere less crowded, so I left Canyonlands and headed for Segoo Canyon, stopping for refreshments at Jackass Joe's UFO Jerky at the junction with the interstate.



They sell a lot more than jerky, including an assortment of novelty candy. I figured that poop emoji-shaped candy and "Cell Sours" were newer ones. But Bob Ross Flavor Palettes? The name Bob Ross rang a bell, so I googled him. He once hosted a painting show on PBS before he died in 1995. I decided to skip the Flavor Palettes.

Sego Canyon is home to a handful of rock art panels, a mix of Fremont petroglyphs, and Barrier Canyon and historic Ute pictographs, which makes it easy to compare and contrast the styles.



Barrier Canyon pictographs (red) and Fremont petroglyphs



The Barrier Canyon pictographs are estimated to be about 2000 years old. Barrier Canyon figures usually don't have arms unless they're holding something, often snakes. The Hopi believe they're descendants of the Barrier Canyon people in part because the Hopi have a traditional snake dance.

Confident with my tire repair, the next day I headed for the backcountry behind Factory Butte, west of Hanksville. I had heard about the Moonscape Overlook and wanted to check it out.



The Moonscape Overlook gives great views of an area called Blue Valley. This plantless, grey expanse looks a bit blue-ish in certain early morning and late day light. The more colorful landscape surrounding the Mars Desert Research Station is about five miles that way as the crow, well, rocket flies.



There's more color looking northwest towards the North Caineville Reef (another monocline) and the gap where Muddy Creek flows out of the San Rafael Swell's Hidden Splendor area.



Back in 2020, I thought I'd head for the remote Salt Wash area behind North Caineville Reef for some hiking. Truly a great place for social distancing in the middle of the pandemic. Unfortunately, I had to turn around when I encountered a place where the road had been washed out. I finally made it back there on this trip for a nice bit of hiking.



The start of my hike



I passed between these pops of color as I made my way through a gap in North Caineville Reef.



The clouds started casting annoying shadows, but from here I can see the top end of Muddy Creek Gorge, a reportedly nifty 8+ mile hike (or float during certain times of the year) between the Hidden Splendor area of San Rafael Swell and the Wild Horse Road crossing. The Hidden Splendor area is one part of San Rafael Swell that I haven't checked out yet.

After today's hike, this is definitely an area I'd like to revisit and explore further.

The next morning, the repaired tire was low on air again. This time, it was a very small puncture. I have had more flat tires repaired or replaced while staying in Green River, but the backroads in this area can be pretty rugged, which is why carrying two spare tires is recommended.

After getting the tire patched, I headed into San Rafael Swell to try to get to the Cottonwood Wash hiking area from the north. This after a washout prevented me from getting there from the south last year. But as I reached Big Hole Wash, I found a section of the road that was more like a staircase than a road, and I could see that the day's weather forecast of a 15% chance of rain was moving in. So, I decided to take a short hike at Big Hole Wash (I'd find out that night that a slightly longer hike would have taken me to some petroglyphs) until the incoming clouds obscured the sun.



Hiking at Big Hole Wash

On my way back to the interstate, I stopped at a Rock Art Site in Buckhorn Draw. I've been at the parking area a couple times, but wasn't able to see the rock art, not even in photos taken with 50x optical zoom. But this time, I took the short hike up to the rock art site.



There are a number of Fremont petroglyphs as well as some black pictographs at this site, although it appears that someone traced a number of the petroglyphs with white chalk. That can make them easier to see in photos, but it's destructive to the rock art, and thus legally banned.

Buckhorn Draw is also home to an outstanding Barrier Canyon pictograph panel about 130 feet long, but I've stopped there and photographed it multiple times. With my late start to the day due to the tire, I skipped it this time.

This ended my Green River stay. I headed for Escalante for a couple days, making one stop at Capitol Reef National Park for a short hike and some photo stops along Highway 12 along the way.



Capitol Reef has become another too-popular Utah national park. All of the parking areas I passed were overflowing except for Panorama Point and the nearby Goosenecks Overlook. It had been 17 years since I checked out the views at Goosenecks, so that's where I stopped for some photos, including this one of the west end of Capitol Reef National Park.



I made my usual Highway 12 stop at the Hogback. On the west side is the canyon that includes Calf Creek. I hiked a stretch of that back in 2017 to see some pictographs and Lower Calf Creek Falls.

I got to Escalante shortly after noon. After checking out the Bureau of Land Management visitor center there, I headed south on Smoky Mountain Road, a state scenic backway that ends not too far from where I took my White Valley/White Rocks hikes earlier in the trip.



I followed the road for several miles, but didn't see any rock art or ruins sites. I also stopped at the arbitrarily selected Dave Canyon for a hike.



Decisions, Decisions



When I got back to Escalante, I still had some time to kill before dinner, so I headed out on another scenic backway. When I came upon the trailhead for The Box hike into Box-Death Hollow Wilderness Area, I thought I'd check that out, hiking at least until I reached the actual "Box" canyon.



But I soon came upon a creek that I couldn't cross with the boots. Just as well, it turned out. Reading about the trail that evening, I found that it wasn't a question of whether but rather how much poison ivy one comes in contact with when hiking The Box trail.



I heard that Escalante's Potato Days can get pretty wild, but I was there just a few days too early, leaving on the 21st.

Curious, I looked it up. Archaeologists found evidence that wild potatoes were first cultivated in the Escalante area more than 7000 years ago.



Another photo for my collection of hotel bathroom oddities. In my Escalante hotel, the toilet paper was mounted on the wall more than three feet away from the toilet (left). When I get a fitted shirt, it has 35-36" sleeves, so I could reach it, but it was a stretch. My Dublin, Ireland hotel in 2010 still takes the prize for most inconvenient toilet paper placement in all my travels (right).



My reason for going to Escalante was that I wanted to hike at Dry Fork, several miles down the Hole-In-The-Rock Road. Dry Fork Narrows connects to Spooky Gulch and Peek-A-Boo Gulch slot canyons, both of which I hoped to see at least a bit.

I wouldn't be hiking the slot canyon loop, however. Spooky Gulch starts with a 12-foot climb and ends with a 7-foot drop. And along the way, there are points where Spooky is only 10 inches wide – the size of the gap between the legs of this sign conveniently placed at the trailhead. If you can't get comfortably through the gap, stay out of Spooky.

I have unusually big feet, so my medical boots are 13 inches long, obviously too big for me to comfortably hike through Spooky Gulch slot canyon.



Dry Fork gets narrow, but nothing like Spooky. But I had to get down there. Here the trail splits, one heading down into Dry Fork and one staying up along the rim. Unfortunately, a section of the trail down into Dry Fork was too steep for me and my unbending medical boots, so I ended up taking the rim hike instead.



I had a nice hike along the rim, but I really wanted to be down there.



This is the area where Dry Fork meets up with the entrances to Spooky Gulch and Peek-A-Boo Gulch slot canyons.

As I was nearing the end of my hike back, from the different perspective I saw an alternative route that would have gotten me down into Dry Fork. Unfortunately, it was too late for me to take advantage of it today, but I made note of it for future reference.



On the drive along Hole-In-The-Rock Road back to Escalante, I made a return visit to Devils Garden Outstanding Natural Area for a quick hike around some of the formations and hoodoos there.



Can hoodoos have beer bellies?



On my drive home, I stopped at a Bryce Canyon overlook at Ruby's Inn, outside of Bryce Canyon National Park. There I saw information on the Tropic Ditch, a hand-dug ditch used to divert water from the East Fork of the Sevier River down Bryce Canyon into the Paria River, done for irrigation reasons.



I also checked out the view of Bryce Canyon from Fairyland Point, which I usually have missed on past visits to the park because it is outside of the fee area, and the sign is only visible when leaving the park. I would have liked to check out more views, but as another over-crowded Utah national park, I know from my last visit that parking is hard to come by – heck, I waited 10 minutes just for a parking spot to open up at Fairyland Point.



My route took me through Red Canyon. I've made photo stops along the highway during some past visits, but this time I hiked one of its trails, my last hike of the trip. This put me at 30.4 miles of trail hiking for the trip. About what I used to hike on past pre-boots Utah trips.



My last sightseeing stop of the trip was the Moqui Museum of Ancient History, built into a sandstone cave near Kanab, Utah that had once house a bar and dance hall. It featured several Native American artifacts and dinosaur tracks collected on private lands in the area. However, it really was just a collection – there was almost no information provided about the individual pieces and their meaning. There was, however, a large gift shop.



The museum also featured a pair of photos of Thomas Chamberlain and many of his 40 sons and daughters. Having forty kids, I suppose, is one of the advantages of having six wives. Some of his descendants founded and owned the Moqui Museum.

And that was it for this trip.