

Canyonlands Trip, September 2017. Blog 2

Our first Post last Friday took us through our final day in Denver before starting west again to the Colorado National Monument and then the canyons of Utah and Arizona.

As we left Denver we visited the Red Rock Amphitheater just a few miles west. This is an enormous 8000+ seat auditorium set in the hillside in a natural amphitheater. It hosts outdoor concerts several times a week in the season but, as we were there on a Saturday morning the steep stairs and seating were being used by fitness fanatics of all ages. Some were running along the length of the curved seating rows, others were doing push-ups on the seats and still others were running or jumping up the stairs and seats. At any altitude this looked like hard work but at 7000 feet we could only imagine the difficulty.

From the Red Rocks area we drove along I-70 West as far as Vail where we stopped for about 1 ½ hours to walk along the well-manicured streets with their expensive hotels, boutiques and restaurants— all with the



backdrop of the ski slopes that have made this a major winter attraction. Judging by the people out today, it also does a pretty good trade in the summer season.

From Vail we followed I-70 West again as far as our destination of Grand Junction. All along the route there was magnificent scenery. Obviously the high peaks of the Rockies were almost always present but there were several times when the road snaked through deep canyons with very high walls that tended to obscure the broader view. These areas were perhaps the most impressive, especially when driving, and provided us with views of some amazing rock formations and cutaways of the strata. For many miles we were driving alongside the Colorado River which seemed to be moving at quite a pace— certainly sufficient to have enticed dozens of rafters into its waters.

So, it was a fantastic 250 mile drive through essentially the whole width of the Rockies. Unfortunately, there were few places where one could stop for photo shoots and we have almost given up on trying to capture scenery through the car window while traveling at 70MPH, so we have very few photographs from the journey. The weather today was extremely cooperative— pleasant for walking at our stop in Vail and blue skies throughout which raised the temperature into the 90s at the lower elevations.

On Sunday we spent the entire day at the Colorado National Monument which sits just to the south of Grand Junction.

The National Monument is seen from many overlooks along a 30 mile drive through the park. This road was

built in the 1930s as part of Roosevelt's employment efforts in the post-depression era and is a major engineering achievement in itself. However, it is the stunning scenery that makes this area such a big attraction and we spent six hours taking in the strange rock formations and the amazing color palette that they employ.

We stopped early at the Visitor Center where there were a number of interesting and informative exhibits as well as short video presentations on the history of the Monument and its geological changes over the past 300 million years. I could not do justice to the detail presented on the effects of wind and water erosion, major terrain uplifts and shifts and the three or four times the area was covered by oceans and lakes. Suffice it to say that the formations which attracted us today have been a long time in the making, have involved many different events – and are still ongoing. In VERY simple terms, deposits of various densities and hardness (and color) have built up, been lifted as the Rocky Mountains formed, been eroded by wind and water and, in many areas, have fallen away to leave the canyons and monuments that we see today.

Many of the formation have been given names as a result of their current shape ("coke ovens", "praying hands", etc) or commemoration of people and events of the past ("Independence Monument", Wedding



Monument"). The Wedding Monument, for example, is the place where John Otto (the "father of the park") was married. Unfortunately the marriage didn't last (she couldn't take the outdoor life) but his legacy is commemorated here and in other areas of the Monument. The named formations are clearly identifiable – especially when seen with the aid of an explanatory information board and a prominent overlook on or near the road.

With or without names, the overall view from the 6000 + feet altitude of the canyon rim is amazing and almost impossible to describe or even capture on film. Every conceivable shape seems to be covered by the towering irregularly shaped pillars or vertical cliff faces polished smooth, and virtually all pastel shades between white and black are visible. All this clings to or stands within a deep canyon which rises sharply from the vast Grand Valley that houses the town of Grand Junction and contains both the Colorado and Gunnison Rivers.

On Monday we left Grand Junction on I-70 West across the Utah line before turning south at Cisco. This route took us essentially along the Colorado River as it carved yet another canyon, making for some more spectacular scenery and huge rock cliffs. Towards Moab we were running essentially along the eastern edge of the Arches National Monument, our destination for today.

Much like the Colorado National Monument, Arches has seen made changes over the millennia and has at times been a flat plain, water covered (or at least lashed with heavy rainfalls) and cracked by frosts, but the main features that attract us today have formed as a result of erosion. The Visitor Center movie made a point that this is an ongoing process and the scenery is always changing – sometimes quite dramatically as in 2008 when one of the large arches collapsed. Most change is imperceptible to the tourist, however, and so we viewed a snapshot in time that may or may not look similar the next time we come.

Most of the more spectacular rock formations have been given names based on the shapes, so we saw, for example, the Three Gossips (very obvious), the Organ (clear) and the Tower of Babel (not sure!). As in all parks in the west there were dozens of overlooks, some demanding a short hike to see the main features, others quite visible from the parking lot – or even from the car.



We spent the most time at an area called “Windows” at which there were several short trails to see a number of arches and tall columns. We all spent some

time on the walks near the parking lot but I wandered off a little and came across a “primitive trail” that was not easily followed and had some serious climbs and descents. It was indeed primitive and the only clues as to its path were a number of small rock cairns placed strategically on what was otherwise a trail almost indistinguishable from its surroundings.

I eventually made it back to the car and then Keith and I took another short stroll to see a rather amazing Double Arch.

Late in our visit we saw the Delicate Arch and a number of other named features before turning round and heading back to Moab. We reached our hotel soon after 5pm having spent a very pleasant, interesting and hot (90F+) day in a fascinating National Park.

On Tuesday we drove 300 miles to our next destination about 20 miles from Zion National Park. Our route took us north from Moab about 30 miles to join Interstate 70 where we turned west and stayed on that road for about 150 miles. The scenery was varied – from desert to deep canyons – and was particularly spectacular north of the Capitol Reef National Park. At US Route 89 we turned south and from here it was somewhat over 100 miles to our destination and the terrain became more green and fertile with lots of beef cattle and other farmland.

Mt Carmel, where we stayed for three nights, is a convenient jumping off point for both Zion and Bryce National Parks and we visited both during our stay.

Wednesday was our day in Zion National Park so we drove the 20 miles to Springdale (inside the park) and had breakfast. We then parked the car and took the town shuttle to the Visitor Center and then the Canyon Shuttle into the park proper. Zion is a north-south canyon approximately 7 miles long (at least for the easy access areas) and the shuttle bus makes a total of nine stops along the route. Walking trails run from each of the stops, some for several miles, others much shorter and many between the stops. Difficulty varies but is clearly marked in the park brochure.



We took the shuttle to the north end where the road ends but a paved trail continues for another mile alongside the Virgin River into the narrowest part of the canyon.

I recall on a previous visit being able to walk quite a distance in the river bed beyond the trail but today the water was flowing quite rapidly and continuing would have meant wading. We opted against that and re-

traced our steps along the trail.

We all made our way down the canyon over the next 4 hours or so, each setting our own pace and route. As it happened, we kept meeting up briefly and spent a few minutes together on the bus between stops. We all did some or part of the Weeping Rock Trail, a short but steep walk to a cliff face from which water splashed (today just a few drips, sometimes presumably a waterfall) and provided a small lush area in this desert scene.



Keith, Zena and I also took the 1 ½ mile Kayenta Trail which followed a narrow ridge to another overhanging cliff from which fell two waterfalls. The trail was sandy and rocky, steep in places but also had a lot of shade, which made for a very pleasant walk. Later, I walked the final 1 ½ miles to the Visitor Center where Molly was waiting. We had a cold drink sitting outside until Keith and Zena arrived having followed the last ¾ mile of the trail I had taken.

We all got back on the town bus and picked up the car for the journey back to the hotel. The road rises steeply from the canyon floor in a series of switchback curves, through a mile-long tunnel in the canyon wall and eventually emerges on to essentially level ground for the final few miles.

We arrived back at the hotel around 4:30, three of us to rest but a fourth to play a round of golf on the 9 hole course attached to the hotel. Keith was keen to see just how far he could hit the ball in the rarified atmosphere at 5200 feet. Apparently he didn't hit it as well as he thought he would as he was not inclined to share his score with us!

On Thursday we spent the day in Bryce Canyon National Park, about 60 miles north of our hotel. There had been some heavy rains overnight and the forecast was for more rain and thunderstorms for today but this was our only chance to visit Bryce, so off we went after breakfast at the hotel. It was partly cloudy as we drove north but there was no rain to speak of and we arrived at the Park around 11.

Bryce has a similar arrangement to Zion in that the principal way to see many of the favorite spots is to take the shuttle bus operated by the park authorities. In addition, one can drive the length of the park (about 18 miles) but parking may be limited on the first three miles covered by the shuttle. So, we parked near the Visitor Center and took the first bus to Bryce Point – the end of the line for the buses. This spot is at an elevation of about 8000 feet and is the start of the main Rim Trail, which eventually leads back to the Visitor Center.

Unlike Zion, the trails at Bryce are mainly above the canyon (although there are many that drop down to the

deep floor) and it was our intent to follow parts of the rim trails back to the car park. This would have been a total of about 5 miles of essentially level paths and there were a number of intermediate spots where we could quit or stop for a break to meet those not walking the whole length (or not at all). In addition, there were a number of trails that dropped into the canyon for those inclined to not only walk down, but also to climb up again – not always an easy task at this elevation.

We all took advantage of the beautiful overlook at Bryce Point and then set out on our various tasks. Molly was going to take the bus to the next stop (1.5 walking miles away), I was going to meet her there and decide what to do next, and Keith and Zena were going to follow the rim trail for as far as they felt inclined. We were all going to meet back at the Visitor Center at a pre-determined time for the drive home.



It was at this point that the weather intervened and quickly changed all our plans. As we parted, there were several bolts of lightning across the canyon and ominous rumbles of thunder. It was pretty obvious that there were heavy rain showers headed our way but it was impossi-

ble to tell just how rapidly they would reach us – but we soon found out! After about 10 to 20 minutes on the rim trail both Keith and Zena and I (separated by several hundred yards) decided independently (and unknown to the other party) that this path running along the highest point in the park was not the best place to be as the bolts of lightning became more intense – and approached more rapidly. Although we didn't know it, both parties decided to return to the bus stop and take at least a short ride on the shuttle, I by retracing my steps on the trail.

Having safely reached the shuttle stop, I took the bus to the next stop where I had planned a rendezvous with Molly – she having already left on the bus. I saw her sitting at the stop waiting for me, and we both got back on my bus and took it to the Lodge where we thought we would take shelter until the storm had passed. Little did we know!

As we drove the short distance to the lodge, not only did the heavens open but the rain quickly turned to sleet and then large hailstones. The noise on the bus roof was horrendous and the road surface was soon covered in about an inch of white hail. When we reached our stop at the lodge, we had to walk through the deposited hail with more lashing down and were lucky to get inside with relatively dry clothes.

The hail continued heavily for some time and the whole area was as white as a December day so we stayed put in the lodge. Mean-

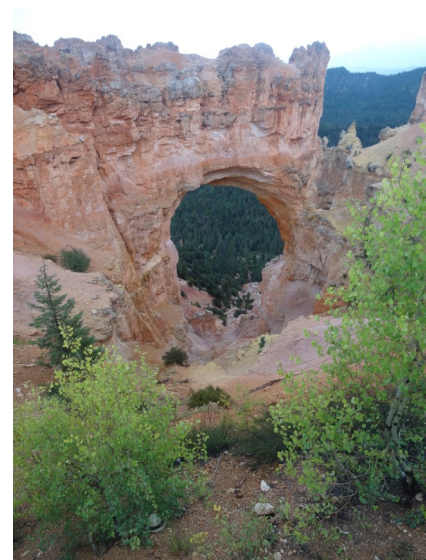
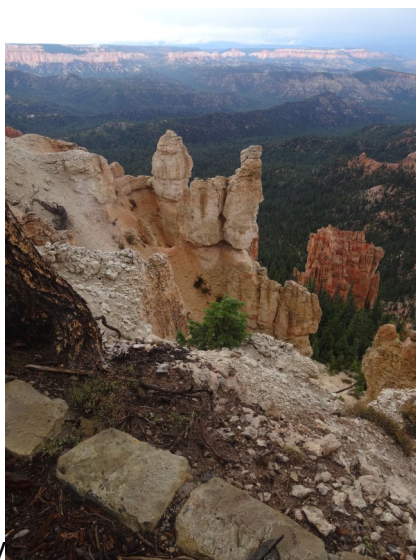
while, Zena and Keith had also left the trail, returned to the bus via the road and decided to take shelter at the Lodge! So, with a total absence of planning, but with intervention from the weather gods, we all met up



again to share stories – and wait for the weather to change.

The weather did change – from sleet to hail to heavy rain, to heavier rain and hail and eventually (after maybe an hour?) to just a steady, cold rain. At this point we decided to cut our losses and get the shuttle back to the car. All trails had been closed to protect visitors so we were essentially left with two choices after we got back to our car: start the drive home or drive further in the park and stop at any overlooks of interest where we could do so without getting soaked immediately in the process. We opted for the latter – although more storms were clearly imminent and my phone received a flash flood alert for the area.

So, we drove to the southernmost point of the park (18 miles) and slowly worked our walk back to the exit, stopping at overlooks along the way. It is fortunate that this area of the park contains some of the most spectacular sites so we didn't feel too cheated by the inclement weather but we must admit that our stops were generally little more than photo shoots as the rain kept coming and the temperature dropped to 42F. We stopped at most overlooks and actually saw some amazing views of the colorful columns within the canyon, even getting a few good photographs along the way, but it certainly wasn't what we had expected or hoped for.



Keith and Zena were good sports about it, despite it being their first and possible only

visit to Bryce, and put it down to a good (unusual, unexpected, uncalled for???) experience. Obviously Molly had been here (in much more pleasant weather) on a number of occasions so our loss was not as critical but we felt badly for our friends who had traveled 5000 miles to see this magnificent part of the American Southwest.

We left the park and drove back south (and down in elevation by 4000 feet) to our hotel and the weather

just got better as we drove, to the point where it was 70F and sunny by the time we reached the hotel. Here we dried clothes as necessary, relaxed for a couple of hours and then spent another 2 ½ hours at dinner recapping the day and solving many of the world's problems over a very pleasant dinner (not to mention two liters of wine!)



On Friday morning (sunny and cool to start but later reached 80F) we had a very scenic drive south and then east as far as Lake Powell and the Glen Canyon, just over the Arizona border. We stopped here to view the mas-

sive dam on the Colorado River which provides water and electricity to four states to the south and west. There was a good informative video on the statistics of Lake Powell and the dam as well as on the ecological effects and methods being used to minimize the overall impact on the environment.

We continued south on US89 for another 50 miles to the small village of Cameron where we turned west on Arizona Route 64. The road climbed quite steeply to an elevation of 7000 feet plus as we entered the Grand Canyon National Park. We were soon at the Desert View overlook where Keith and Zena got their first view of the Canyon and the first of many “Wow” moments that we anticipate over the next 24 hours as we spend a full day on the South Rim.



We stopped briefly at two more overlooks and here we had the sun more to our backs so the lighting was just about perfect for photographs. We saw lots of turkey vultures and other birds of prey enjoying the late afternoon thermals gliding 5000 feet above the canyon floor.

We arrived at our hotel in Tusayan, just outside the Park on the south side about 5:30 Mountain Time (not Mountain Daylight Savings Time) so we had gained an hour at the crossing into Arizona.

On Saturday (today) we spent the whole time in the Grand Canyon National Park. It was a warm and sunny day with clear blue skies, ideal for walks along the canyon rim. Each of us did our own thing at our own pace; Molly and I meeting up from time to time and Zena and Keith likewise.

The most popular stretches of the South Rim are reachable by shuttle bus at this time of year but the service is excellent and there are no cars to worry about—and no parking problems at the overlooks. The buses stop many times at designated points and there are trails that run between all stops. These hug the rim, giving some fantastic views of the one mile deep canyon and occasional glimpses of the Colorado River, which created this huge natural wonder. There are, of course, more difficult trails that go down into the canyon for those with more time, ambition and stamina. The rim is at approximately 7000 feet so walking uphill for any length of time can be difficult for those not used to the altitude.

So, we all spent over six hours taking in the immense scenery and trying to learn a little about the geology and environment of this mammoth hole in the ground. It’s difficult to express just how awesome this National Park is, but perhaps a few pictures will give an idea of its size and shape.



Tomorrow we move on to Las Vegas and then up the California coast to San Francisco. More from there.