

Canyonlands Trip, September 2017. Blog 3

Yesterday (Saturday September 23) we said goodbye to our friends Keith and Zena as they left San Francisco for England after our three week trip in the Western States.

Last Sunday we left the Grand Canyon and set off on a four hour drive to Las Vegas; at least it would have been four or so had we simply followed the most direct route. However, once on Interstate 40 heading west we were also on US Route 66 and kept seeing signs for the old Historic Route. Needless to say, we couldn't simply pass this by so we left the Interstate and followed the much quieter, and more interesting, Route 66. There were a number of reminders of the heyday of this historic road west along the way – old gas stations, signs, a few 50's cars – but the most obvious dedication to days gone by was in the town of Seligman. Here there were a number of stores still showing their fifties "charm" and each had several cars (including a pickup trucks and police car) to take us right back 60 or 70 years.



At the town of Kingman we left Route 66 and headed in a northwesterly direction on Route 93 towards the Nevada border. Our immediate destination was, of course, the 1930s engineering marvel of Hoover Dam. Since our first visit here in the 80s the whole landscape has been changed by the introduction of a new road across the canyon and by a myriad of access roads allowing visitors to get close to the dam. Much of this was precipitated by the events of 9/11 as there was real concern about security as thousands of cars passed on top of this huge dam – by the only road possible at that time.

Now, there is a Visitor Center with a huge car park on the Nevada side and we were able to spend time watching an informative movie as well as looking down the 700 feet wall of the dam. We walked part way on the old road (cars are still allowed but must pass through a security check and traffic is now minimal) and again looked over the dam to the west and to Lake Mead (formed after the dam was created) to the east. Lake Mead is



now a huge (largest man-made in the US) waterway which provides recreational facilities for thousands. Although the water level has recovered some from the droughts of recent years, it appeared to us to be at a very low point today. Walking around in the 95F heat (actually not bad for Boulder!) it is easy to feel the desert conditions that this visionary project between the Wars was designed to ameliorate, and provide water and electricity to many southwestern states.

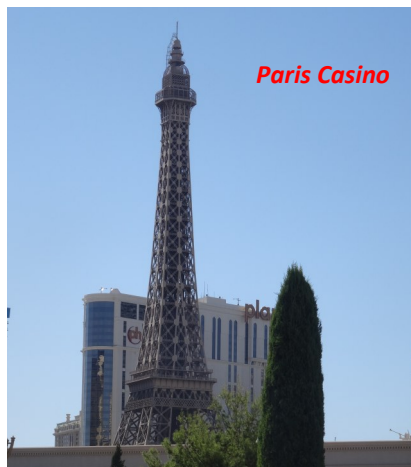
From Boulder, we drove directly to our hotel just off the Strip in Las Vegas. It was 99F by this time. In the evening we took a drive along the Strip to see the brightly lit casinos and then to dinner at the Top of the World restaurant. This revolving restaurant is 800 feet up The Stratosphere, a Space Needle type structure with casino and shops on the lower floors and all forms of entertainment on (and “off”) the higher levels. After a very nice meal we went up three more floors to the open deck where we could watch customers pay to have themselves thrown over the edge of the tower In all kinds of ways: “bungee jump”, a strange mini coaster, a swinging chair (on an arm from the tower!) and other methods designed to give you a heart attack. Just watching was almost too much.

So, in one day we went from the amazing natural wonder of the 6 million year old Grand Canyon, even today with minimal evidence of man’s presence, to a 100 year old skyscraper town entirely man-made—a a glitzy entertainment center in the desert. It is difficult to imagine a starker contrast. Each has its place in today’s world but there is little doubt as to where our preference lay.

On Monday morning we drove to Caesar’s Palace casino and spent a couple of hours watching the punters and having a coffee (and, in the case of Keith and Zena, gambling away \$1). We then drove south on the Strip and picked up Interstate 15 at the edge of the city.



Caesar's Palace



Harrah's

We drove without a break until we reached Calico Ghost Town, an abandoned silver mining town on a steep hillside that had mined over \$80M worth of the precious metal in the late 1800s. The town has been reconstructed and there are shops and exhibits inside most of the buildings—from town hall to saloon to fire station. It’s a fascinating place to walk and imagine the town as it was when dozens, if not hundreds, of miners and support staff lived in this tight community.



Before driving up to the mining town, we first had lunch at Peggy Sue's diner, a fifties-style café with memorabilia from the time as well as music of the era. Again, it was just stop on the road but provided another peak at Americana for our friends.



We had an overnight stop in Bakersfield, California and then set out for what was scheduled as a short drive to Atascadero, quite close to the coast. However, after perhaps 40 miles when we stopped for a coffee break we visited the Information Center in a small town called Taft and were given information and a map for the Corrizo Plains National Monument. None of us had ever heard of it but the brochure made it sound interesting, if for no other reason than the fact that its main road followed alongside the San Andreas Fault! Hence there are a number of perturbations in the terrain, not only from fault activity but as

a result of water runoff from the nearby San Joaquin Mountains.

These rivers (all dry at this time of year) take a sharp turn as they reach the plain and eventually end in the Soda Lake, which once again was dry, but which has a high salinity. The lake was formed by activity along the fault that essentially cut off the streams and rivers from the north. Hence, no water now flows from the lake, making it a smaller version of the Great Basin which covers parts of several Southwestern States.

It was a 50 mile drive across the park, much of it unpaved road, but a fascinating place to spend a few hours. Apparently the area is alive with color in the springtime with plants, flowers and ground cover in many colors, so perhaps a return visit is in order.

On Tuesday we spent the night near Morro Bay in readiness for a Wednesday drive up the Pacific coast. We had planned (as we always do with foreign guests) to drive up California Route 1 which runs along the coast all the way to Monterey. It is a beautiful drive and compares in a number of ways to the Great Ocean Road in Southern Australia. Unfortunately, there had been a huge landslide along the route earlier in the summer and we weren't sure just how far we could get or whether the route might be open all the way. A quick check suggested that there was an area still closed (and likely to be for some time) but we guessed that there would be adequate signage to direct us to any detours or alternatives.

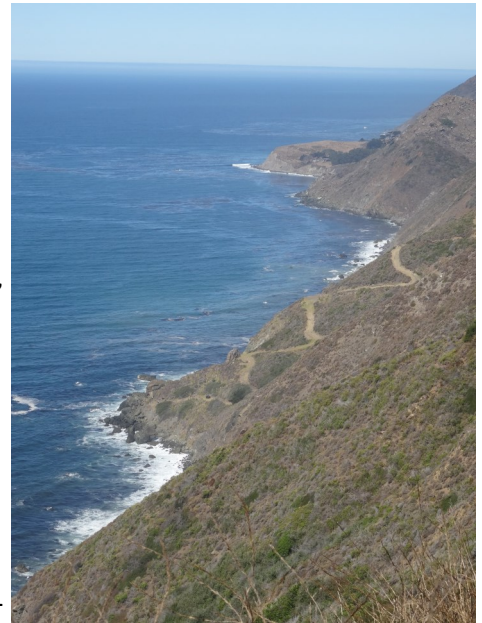
As it turned out, there is still a long stretch in Monterey County that is not only closed but has no viable alternative route. Consequently, we drove north to a point just across the county line where all traffic was to turn and return to Cambria – not too far north of our starting point. So, we traveled perhaps 40 miles north and had to return to take a cut across the mountains to Route 101.

We did see the elephant seal colony at one overlook and got



glimpses of the Pacific from some high points as well as at sea level but, unfortunately, we couldn't drive along the most scenic stretch of the road. Once again our friends were very sanguine about the loss, much as they had been during the hailstorm in Bryce Canyon.

Once on Route 101 we were still over 200 miles from San Francisco so we agreed that any further sightseeing would get us into town very late, so we drove essentially straight to our hotel. As it turned out this was a good move as the traffic was heavy in parts and it took us until after 6:30 to reach our hotel. The saving grace was that we all got to see (for the first time, even for Molly and I) the lush farmland of the Central Valley with its lettuce, cabbage and other vegetables and many vineyards. We always think of the Napa and Sonoma Valleys as the wine country in California but the valley south of San Francisco (all the way from Bakersfield) has hundreds of acres of vineyards and many wineries.



On Thursday we had a scheduled trip to Alcatraz. We caught the 9:30 ferry to Alcatraz Island on a beautiful sunny day and had great views of the Bay, the city and the Golden Gate Bridge before reaching the island prison.

The tour included a video presentation on the history of the fort, military prison, Federal Prison (and many of its famous inmates), a 1969 occupation by Native Americans and finally to the present day National Monument. In addition, the rangers pointed out many walks, viewpoints and points of interest on the island in



addition to the main prison buildings. The highlight, however, was an audio guide that was used on a walking tour of the cells, the officers' control room, the library and dining room – each brought to life by appropriate sounds and the narration of prisoners and guards. The story of a foiled escape in which both prisoners and guards were killed and the unsolved mystery of three escapees who have not been found were covered in significant detail in both sound and

pictures.

All the cell block and the isolation areas were part of the tour and the voices of officers and inmates described the life of prisoners over the 30 years that the island was a Federal Penitentiary. At least in the early days it was a pretty miserable existence for anyone unfortunate enough to spend time inside (Al Capone, the “Birdman” and many others) and even in its final years as a prison (when radios were introduced, for example) it wasn’t much better. All amenities (in addition to a bed, food and medical attention) were regarded as privileges to be earned and the brief periods of outdoor recreation were special treats.

For the officers and their families, however, life on the island was presented as that of a rather idyllic small town with nice homes, gardens and great views across the water. Children went to school in San Francisco and returned to their island home daily with only rare sightings of prisoners and plenty of social activities. The whole presentation was extremely well done and the 3 hours that Molly and I spent there were very interesting and educational. Keith and Zena followed a different schedule to us and spent more time there on the island and followed it with a cable car ride in the afternoon.

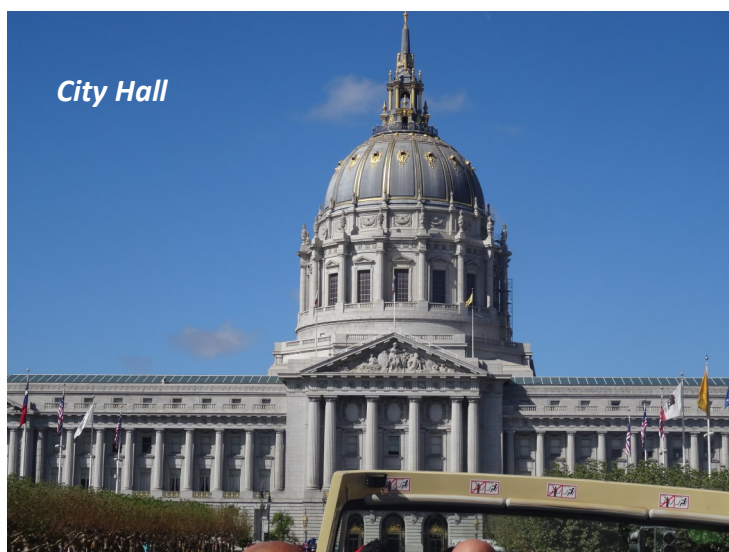
On our last full day in San Francisco (Friday) we used the Hop On/Hop Off bus to get an overview of the entire city. We went almost all the way round the city center, along Market Street, through the civic center, past a section of Golden Gate Park and then crossed the Golden Gate Bridge. The commentator was excellent (Irish) and he made it a very informative and amusing ride.



We got off the bus here and Keith, Zena and I walked across the bridge and back. It was another beautiful day and pleasantly warm even on the windiest sections of the bridge. Keith and Zena continued to the south end and had coffee before continuing their trip around town while I met up again with Molly. We took the bus to Chinatown, had lunch sitting outside at a very nice French restaurant and then strolled through the shops. We left Chinatown to

catch the bus back to the hotel.

So, our three weeks with friends traveling almost 3500 miles in five southwestern states have come to an end. We have seen many interesting places, had generally good weather and a fun experience. We hope you have enjoyed our blogs. Bob and Molly



City Hall

