

Salt Lake to Salt Lake
Magnificent Mountain and Canyon Scenery



September 2020

Bob and Molly Hillery

Western States Drive, September 2020

This was our third trip out west this summer and on this occasion we drove from Salt Lake City through Utah (to Zion), Colorado (Durango), New Mexico (Santa Fe), Colorado again (Colorado Springs, Black Canyon and Colorado National Monument) - and back to Salt Lake City

Sunday September 6

We left home at 7pm, had an excellent meal at The Capital Grille, and then drove to the airport Marriott for the night.

Monday September 7

We were up soon after 6am and got the 6:45 shuttle to the airport where we were quickly through Security and had time for a coffee before boarding our flight to Salt Lake City. It was a smooth and uneventful flight with the usual breakfast “box”, and we landed in Salt Lake on time around 10:30. We quickly got our rental car and were soon on the road south around the city towards Provo. This stretch of Interstate was busy and poor line markings through heavy construction made it a dangerous journey, so we were glad when we got off and joined US89. We took this road virtually all the way to Zion National Park, making only one McDonalds stop for lunch.

Route 89 is a two-lane highway most of its length, but the usual speed limit is 65 so traffic generally moves well. There are dozens of small towns and villages – where the speed limit drops to 30 or so – but the driving is much more pleasant than the expressway. Our one stop was in Ephraim where we had a great view of the magnificent Manti LDS Temple. It is an enormous building and based on our quick look from the road perhaps more impressive than the one in Salt Lake City.

The scenery along the way was fantastic – mountains, vast flat farmland, giant rock formations – and just got better as we drove south. The final twenty miles into Zion are amazing as the road winds down to the canyon floor alongside beautiful pastel shades of rock towering on both sides. Although we have traveled this road many times it still is an amazing drive, not least of which is through a one-mile long tunnel cut through the mountain.

We arrived in Springdale (adjacent to the Park) and checked in at the Springhill Suites about 5:30 after a 330-mile drive from Salt Lake.

We were unable to get shuttle tickets for the canyon drive tomorrow, so we are planning to walk into the Park and see how far we feel like hiking!

We had a great dinner at Kings Landing, about ½ mile from the hotel. We had a table on the patio outside with absolutely fantastic views of the canyon walls.



Tuesday September 8

After breakfast, we drove to the Park Visitor Center and parked. Here Molly was to stay – with the Visitor Center, Ranger talks and a book for company – while I did my walk in the park.

I walked first to the Museum (closed) [1.7 miles], and then along the main canyon road to the Zion Lodge – another 2.7 miles.

From the lodge, I walked the Grotto Trail (0.5 miles) and the Lower Emerald Pool Trail (2.5), before walking back to the Visitor Center.



I was gone just about 5 hours (and Molly was still there when I returned!) and covered just a little short of 12 miles. The scenery was amazing for the entire walk and the loop around the pools (essentially dry at this time of year) was fairly strenuous but very pleasant. It was only on these trails that I met other walkers – the rest of the time there were very few walkers, lots of cyclists and shuttle buses. It was a great day out and we concluded it with a coffee outside a busy coffee shop – again with



views of the canyon walls.

We ate at Kings Landing again tonight; another great meal but we were thankful for the heaters as the temperature had dropped into the fifties.

Wednesday September 9

We checked out about 8:30 and drove to the nearby breakfast shop again. We had a short wait for an inside table but felt that outdoors – even with the heaters – would still be a little chilly with temperatures barely into the fifties.

After breakfast we left the Park and headed back to US Route 89 at which point we turned south towards the Arizona border. We stopped just inside the new state at the Glen Canyon Dam.



The visitor center was closed but we were able to walk to the overlook and view the huge facility.





After that we left US 89 and turned east on Arizona 98 and then US 106 for the balance of the 350 miles to Durango.

The road was generally two-lane but reasonably fast and the scenery was magnificent once again. Every imaginable rock formation – mountains, mesas, buttes – in a number of colors but predominantly red and gray/ochre. Sometimes these were as much as ten miles away across dry grass land, sometimes less than a mile from the road, and sometimes we drove “within” and got close-up looks. The shapes, too, were of every variety and many could be imagined as carved statues; many very beautiful, some almost grotesque – but all interesting.

We ran into rain and low temperatures (41F was the lowest) and the clouds masked the views for about two hours, an hour of which we spent in a parking area and took a nap! As we crossed into New Mexico (for about a mile) and then into Colorado, the weather improved some and for the last hour to Durango there were breaks in the clouds and some sunshine. The scenery changed also to the more “conventional” mountains of the Rockies and a number were covered in what we assume was a new blanket of snow.

It was 6pm when we arrived at our hotel on the outskirts of Durango. We were soon settled in and made a dinner reservation for later.

We dined at Eolus, a restaurant on Main St, Downtown. It was a very good meal and excellent service – complete with grappa!

Thursday September 10

We got started a little late (Bob had an upset stomach) but left late morning for the Mesa Verde National Monument. About 40 miles west of Durango. There had been snow overnight and there was still quite a bit alongside the road to Mesa Verde.

This was a new park for us and we were expecting it to be somewhat similar to the Bandelier Park in New Mexico as it had been home to cliff dwelling pueblo Indians. In some respects, there were similarities (both were habitations built into or on mesa walls) but there were a number of significant differences.



Mesa Verde National Monument

In Mesa Verde (a mesa that reaches a height of almost 9000 feet) the earliest dwellings were almost 1500 years old and, as far as we could gather, were simply caves in the cliff side, perhaps with some simple modifications



for access and cover.

However, after several centuries, the Indians moved further up the mesa and began to build pit homes (just dugouts with a roof at first) and then pits that were stone-lined, and finally stone-built homes and other buildings above ground. They farmed the land on top of the mesa and had a thriving community with dozens (hundreds) of villages. These homes (some part underground, some with above ground rooms) were very similar to many we have seen in other parts of the world – although, here, they were only about one thousand years old, versus many we have seen that were built as much as 9000 years ago.



They were close-packed, with passageways and entrances between many, mostly round, dwellings. They had learned to dress the stone and finish the insides in much the same way as those we have seen in Cyprus and Scotland, for example.

About 1000AD, for reasons unknown, the Mesa Verde Indians decided to “go back to their roots” and live once again on the mesa walls. The differ-



ence was that they now used their building skills to manufacture some amazing structures in stone that in many cases seem to just cling to the vertical surfaces. It appears that they still farmed on the soil on top of the mesa, so their morning commute was by way of hand and foot holes cut in the walls.

We could view the more impressive towers and multi-room/multi building structures from a distant vantage point, but the engineering skills were obvious and some of the collections seemed to have significant architectural beauty also. At least that's what one felt until it is realized that these were built about the same time as some of the most significant European cathedrals which – other than being built on flat land versus a cliff wall – seemed to be so much more advanced in design and beauty. An archeological historian might see things a little differently!

The almost four hour visit was extremely interesting and despite being a little cool (in the forties most of the day), we didn't get rained on and there was no more snow on the ground after the covering we had seen on the drive to the park.

Tonight we ate at Seasons, Downtown, just across the street from where we ate last night and had another very good meal at a leisurely pace.

Friday September 11

We checked out of the Fairfield and went for breakfast at Denny's downtown. We then set off on our drive to Santa Fe, leaving Colorado on US 550 and entering New Mexico after about 25 miles. Leaving the mountains of Durango behind us to the north we were soon driving along a fast, high desert road with very few elevations above us except the occasional mesa. This continued until we arrived in the town of Aztec, where we saw signs for the Aztec National Monument. We were somewhat intrigued because we hadn't realized that the Aztecs had ventured this far north – and it turns out that they hadn't! This ancient ruin had been mis-named by the Spanish and the dwellings here were more of the Pueblo Indians that we had seen at Mesa Verde.





Nevertheless, the Monument proved to be a very interesting stop, where we wandered amongst the (reconstructed) ruins of stone-built buildings very similar to those of the later period we had seen at Mesa Verde. Once again, it was educational to see the round kivas (communal meeting places) and the other stone buildings of the 1000 to 1300 AD period.

Aztec National Monument

From Aztec we drove another 90 miles to Cuba, where we stopped for a McDonalds lunch before turning east towards Los Alamos. This road was marked as unpaved for about ten miles and indeed it turned out to be quite an adventure. After climbing for about five miles on a sometimes deep-mud track where we could easily have bogged down, we reached a broad pull-off. Here there was a 4X4 pickup parked (we had seen no other traffic to this point) and we asked the driver about the remainder of the road.

He said that we were at the top (in fact at the Continental Divide – but this we found to be inaccurate) and the next five to seven miles were steeply downhill but less muddy than the road we had climbed. However, it was deeply rutted in spots and there were a number of fallen Aspens that almost spanned the road! He thought we could make it!

So, on we went and found out that our new friend had been correct, but we eventually emerged onto a paved road and had made it over the pass. From there it was a smooth 40 mile drive to Los Alamos and then another hour or so down the mesa to our hotel in Santa Fe. We arrived about 5pm after an interesting day.

We spent some time making “field changes” to our remaining itinerary as well as a dinner reservation and then cleaned up for the evening. Tonight, we ate at La Boca, a Tapas restaurant we had enjoyed two years ago and had an excellent meal. We were not surprised that we had visited here twice when we were last in Santa Fe in 2018.

Saturday September 12

We ate at iHOP next door to the hotel and then drove into Santa Fe to start our walking tour. We had downloaded the app which gave directions and a brief description of the sites along the route. We chose the tour that included the civic and church buildings of the city, including the cathedral and the Capitol. It was billed as a 4.5 mile walk but we missed out a couple of stops and covered about 3 miles. We ended with a coffee, sitting outside opposite the Hotel Loretto.

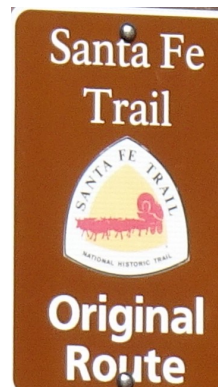


It



The Plaza and Capitol, Santa Fe





Fine Churches and Old Buildings,

Santa Fe

It was an interesting walk (we do not recall having seen the Capitol previously) and the weather was perfect; almost 70F and sunny.

We concluded our visit by taking a 15 mile drive to Lake Peak, a 10,000 feet high mountain just out of town. It was a steep, twisting road through dense pine forest and there was a somewhat hazy, but vast view from the top. We returned to the hotel about 4pm and went for dinner in town at 8.

Tonight we ate at a very fine Italian restaurant (Sassela). It looked like a large home on a secluded street a few blocks from the Plaza. The meal and service were very good and, in the best Italian style, we were there just about two hours.

Sunday September 13

We checked out, had breakfast at iHOP and then started our drive north into Colorado once more. Our first (essentially only) stop was at the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge, a 600 feet high span across the river, and the tallest bridge on the US Highway System when it was built in 1965. We were there about an hour – long enough to walk across and back – and then continued east towards Taos. We skirted that city and turned north across high desert (7000 feet +) until we saw the mountains of southern Colorado (some reaching 14,000 feet).



Rio Grande Gorge Bridge

It was a very pleasant drive and included a 9000 feet high road pass (where we stopped for a short rest) before we came to Interstate 25 for the remaining 80 miles to Colorado Springs.

Tonight, we ate at the Melting Pot in town. Unfortunately, the experience wasn't as good as usual; unusually poor service. Still, the food was generally good.

Monday September 14

We had breakfast at a Village Inn (Which we remember fondly from our camping trips out here 40 years ago!) and then went into the Garden of The Gods. This is a private park (with no entrance fee) and includes a short driving loop through some amazing pink and white rock formations. There are a number of walking trails along the route and we stopped to take in two of them. It was a beautiful morning and the scenery was magnificent – no wonder the park was busier than any we have visited so far on this trip.



***Garden of the
Gods***





We then stopped for a Starbucks lunch (sitting outside) before driving to the Pikes Peak Highway. We had been to the top of “America’s Mountain” (14,000 feet) many years ago on the cog railway. That is not running at the moment (renovation plus some Covid influence we suspect) so the only way up is by road!





It is an excellent road with a number of turnoffs and parking areas for taking pictures but, for the driver at least, it demands a good deal of concentration. Many stretches have no guard rail and there are dozens of hairpin bends – so plenty of opportunity for error. In addition, of course, the altitude plays a greater and greater part as you climb and both of us began to feel a little woozy and got headaches above about 10, 000 feet.

We stopped just short of the 13,000 feet level in a huge parking area. Here there was a shuttle to the summit that most visitors were obliged to take, presumably to avoid too much congestion. Again, we suspect a Covid influence, but our sticker would have allowed us to drive in our own car – presumably to avoid old folks in the shuttle bus. I certainly didn't want the confinement of the shuttle and we were both sufficiently woozy that we decided to turn around at this point. We were told that there was a snow shower at the top, so we missed that, but it was in the forties with a stiff breeze, so we got the full temperature effect.

It was a great drive – a little stressful on the way up, but more relaxing on the way down – and there were magnificent views throughout. We got back to the hotel around 4:30 after a great day out.

Tonight we had a great meal with excellent service in a quaint underground restaurant called The Rabbit Hole. Super.

Tuesday September 15

We checked out and went to a local iHOP for breakfast before heading west to Montrose, Colorado. After about 40 miles going south, we turned onto US Route 50 for the entire journey of about 250 miles – with just two slight detours. The scenery was fantastic all the way and we climbed to 11,300 feet at the Continental Divide, as well as over several other passes of over 8000 feet. We had traveled this stretch eastward in 2008 when we drove the western half

of US50 and it was just as spectacular heading west this time.

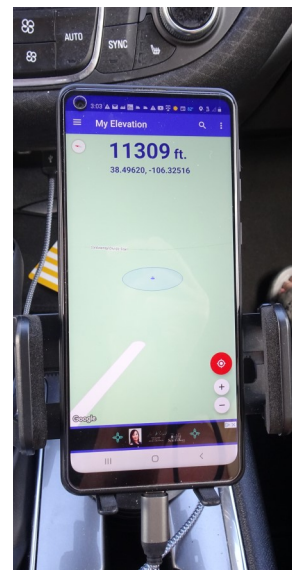
We took one 3-mile detour to drive the Skyline Drive, a narrow road on top of an 800 feet high mesa with essentially nothing but road – a steep drop-off on both sides. Quite exciting.



The other diversion from US50 was to visit the Royal Gorge Bridge, a 1000 feet high suspension bridge over the Arkansas River. It is a privately-run facility and very commercialized but, of course, has some spectacular views down to the river.

We took a gondola ride across the gorge and then I walked back across the wooden board bridge. Since our last visit, the bridge has been closed to vehicular traffic so we had to re-trace our steps to US50 to continue our day. It was another day of amazing scenery and included lots of snow-capped mountains = and we crossed back across the Continental Divide.



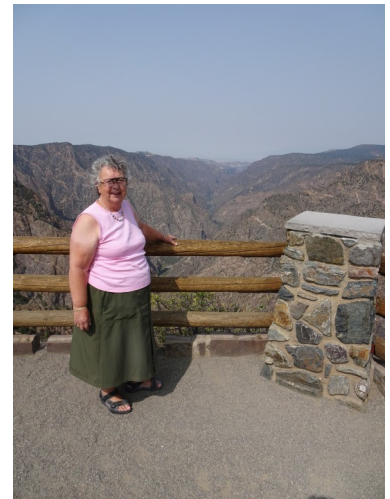


Tonight, we ate at a local restaurant which was very quiet but certainly adequate.

Wednesday September 16

Today was our day in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. This is a huge facility on both sides of the Black Canyon which climbs almost vertically from the Gunnison River. The river is at 6500 feet and the rim is above 8000 feet. As we said when we last visited, it is not as massive as the Grand Canyon but is almost as impressive due to its vertical faces and relatively narrow width. The north and the south rims are only 50 to 100 feet apart in many places (less in some) so it is easy to see features across the canyon. On the other hand, there are no crossings of the canyon in the park, so it is an almost two hour drive from the main section of one rim to its partner on the opposite side.





We spent over three hours on the south side, stopping at several overlooks and taking a few short walks. At 8000 feet, however, “short” is a relative term as any exercise can get quite strenuous. We also took the 20-minute drive to the river while on the south side – a very steep descent on a paved road with lots of switchbacks.

We had to drive east along US50 for about 45 minutes to reach the road that climbed steeply to 9000 feet and from which there was a side road that led to the north rim. Time was getting short as we reached the turnoff, so we decided to head straight on to our destination of Grand Junction, still two hours away. The scenery was magnificent, however, so

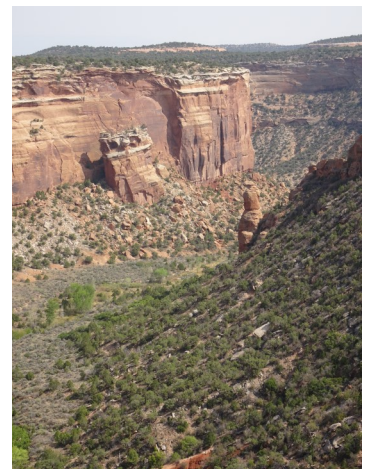
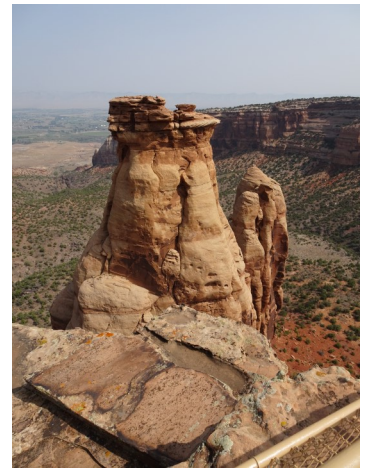
we didn’t feel that we had missed a lot by not actually getting to the rim.



We arrived in Grand Junction just before 5:30 and made reservations at a restaurant/winery about 10 minutes away. It was a very good meal with very attentive service.

Thursday September 17

Today was our day in the Colorado National Monument, the beautiful park just outside the city of Grand Junction. We spent five hours driving the 19-mile rim road and stopped at almost every overlook. We also took a number of short walks and a couple of slightly longer ones on the rim trail. As always, it was a very pleasant day with magnificent colored (mostly pink) rock scenery.





Colorado National Monument

....and a surprised cyclist!

Tonight we ate at a Mexican restaurant just a couple of blocks from the hotel and enjoyed the meal, service and ambiance.

Friday September 18

We checked out and had breakfast at the Village Inn again and were on the road before 10. We avoided expressways for the most part and headed north from just west of Grand Junction until we hit US40 at the Utah border. From there it was US40 to Park City and finally I-80 into Salt Lake City. It was another relatively easy drive (5 ½ hours) with magnificent scenery again. We went via two passes at 8000 feet and a third almost as high.

I had time for a short walk in Salt Lake and we finished our trip with dinner at Ruth's Chris.

Saturday September 19

We checked out and turned in the rental car at the (brand new) SLC Airport and had time for breakfast in the lounge before our 10am flight home.

