

Monumental Sights in Grand Staircase/Escalante, Utah, & northernmost Arizona.

by Herb Windolf

At the end of April 2008 our group of ten, including our two guides (Nigel, a friend of mine, and his associate, Pete) drove us in two sturdy SUVs north on Hwy 89 from Prescott, AZ, to Page, by Lake Powell. Continuing on 89 toward Kanab, UT, we soon branched off north again, onto a 50 mile long gravel road through Cottonwood Canyon, along the Paria River, a few generations ago a major thoroughfare for traveling Mormons.

A little side trip on a breakneck dirt road took us to an overlook of the fantastically colored rock formations along part of this canyon valley, called Cockscomb because of its tilted strata with an undulating top. Then, a short walk on the main road's left side and we entered a most interesting slot canyon, one could easily miss, not knowing it was there – which I did on an earlier trip without a guide! Close to the road's end, we veered east for a mile to view Grosvenor Arch. At last, we arrived in the small town of Escalante, where we stayed in a motel for three nights. And why not – enjoy the comforts of life together with the sights!

Now, before getting to these sights the next day, we had to eat – and drink, the latter, concerning certain libations, being at times difficult in the State of Utah! Well, there was the 'Cowboy Blues', the only restaurant in town where we could find both good food and alcoholic drinks. And behold, from a brewery in Salt Lake City, the place had available what was branded "Polygamy Porter", it's label depicting a man surrounded by several women with a small inscription below reading: 'Why have only one'. So much for tolerance!

We were now in Escalante country. One of Bill Clinton's last act as president was to declare the Escalante area a National Monument, and it was well worth it. It is now called 'Grand Staircase/Escalante', the staircase alluding to some of its 'stepped' rock formations.

A longish drive brought us to the trail head to Spooky Gulch. Scrambling down red slick rock (sandstone) and plodding through sandy washes, we arrived at Spooky. And spooky it was! This slot canyon became ever 'slottier' as one penetrated, until I found my torso squeezed front and back. Having some slight claustrophobia, I decided to discontinue with further exploration, since I didn't care to become stuck, only to be washed out by the next flash-flood. Our other nine intrepid explorers made it through, with a couple of the men having their shirt and pant's pocket ripped – I still don't understand how some of the women made it. Maybe, it should be noted that, with the exception of Kirsten, Ed and Pete, everyone else was in excess of 65 years old.

Well, I ambled back to another interesting rock formation, a gulch called Peekaboo, which one must ascent almost vertically for about 15 feet with few hand holds. Anyway, there was a little shade from which I now observed other arrivals' attempts at getting up this cliff face. Not many did. Then a group of about 12 not-that-young-anymore-folks showed up. They spoke German. Just the other day, I had told our group, with all these Europeans clambering about in Escalante, never to

call any German-speaking folks 'German', with quite a few of them being Swiss and Austrian – somehow they don't care for that. Anyway, I forgot and was quickly corrected; they were Austrian. But you ought to have seen these characters: ten of them climbed Peekaboo like a herd of mountain goats – must be in their genes coming from Austria.

After Spooky and Peekaboo – wonderful names these – we headed along 'Hole-in-the-Rock-Road to see some (more than 6,000 year old) Dinosaur tracks on top of huge slick-rock formations, white sandstone this time. To get there, we had to pass plenty of sandy gullies complete filled with huge tumbleweeds, fortunately, none needed to be crossed.

Then came Devil's Garden to walk through, following another drive to get there. These wonderfully shaped, multihued sandstone formations are the remains of an eroded plateau. Three columnar sentries guard its entrance. The views from there and many other nearby places are truly stunning!

Our congenial group survived another evening at the Cowboy Blues. Several of us were either friends, relatives, or knew each other from a previous trip; there was my wife Ute, our daughter Kirsten, friends Zene, Vern and Kathee, as well as Ed and Flo, the latter being a very down-to-earth Mormon descendent of old John D. Lee of famous Lee's Ferry at the Colorado River.

Then, by next morning we drove out to the trail head to Lower Calf Creek Falls for a six mile back-and-forth hike through a box canyon with the beautiful falls at its very end. It received its name, Calf Creek, by Mormons who fenced off the upper end of the box canyon to raise their calves in this then well protected and watered enclosure. Its vertical cliffs with their desert varnish, a group of large Indian pictographs in the distance on one of the sandstone walls across the creek and the rich vegetation of this canyon truly made it a sanctuary in this otherwise harsh, but oh so beautiful land! The most pleasant falls, ever changing and glistening in their about 126 foot tumble make for a cool environment, but I wondered whether the plunge pool is deep enough for a swim. Its outflow, Calf Creek, burbling toward the Escalante River, is full of trout. At the trail head's campsite we munched our usual lunch consisting of Subway submarines; ah well, for three days and with so much beauty, one can survive on them – and evenings there was the Cowboy Blues!

Eating there next to us every evening, was a German couple – truly – we met three times at the places we visited up there, which tells you – . He told me that, for a year, he had tried to obtain two permits from Germany via the Internet to get to The Wave at Coyote Buttes in northern Arizona; eventually, he had succeeded. Later in the year we were to also go there, as described below.

But that afternoon, after the Calf Creek walk, we drove yet Hell's Backbone Road right next to the Death Hollow Wilderness area, an about 50 mile long gravel road looping from Hwy 12 to an elevation of 8,000 ft to a lake still partly covered by ice and snow. Way up in the mountains, the road crosses a deep chasm of about 30 feet width. Nowadays, a modern concrete bridge crosses it, but it brought back memories. Once, about 14 years ago, when my wife and I drove this road and I, driving, arrived at its old rickety span of wood. I stopped and seriously considered driving back, not crossing it – that rickety it looked. But I gathered my courage and did!

While the ten of us were scrambling around this sight, I noticed that our daughter

Kirsten had climbed a small rock tower right next to the chasm. With my acrophobia, this gave me the creeps! My wife, too, can dangle her feet right next to a drop-off – not me! Thus I claimed that this daughter could not be my offspring – no way she could have my genes!

After that, our trip was nearing its end, except for the 72 mile Smoky Mountain Road of rough dirt and rock, returning through some wild and beautiful country to the Mormon settlement of Big Water near Lake Powell. It is called Smoky Mountain because of some smoldering underground coal seams, ignited eons ago by lightning. Along this road are sights just begging to be explored. One of the smaller ones we did was an ancient Indian granary where natives had protected their grain harvest from rodents. At the end, I was glad that Nigel had to drive the 1,500 foot descent down the steeply dropping gravel road from the plateau down to Big Water – and home. –

Once more, this time five, Nigel, our leader, my wife Ute, Kathee and Vern, having had the good fortune to obtain permits through an online lottery, we were headed north the beginning of November 2008 to see the 'Wave', one of many wonderful rock formations.

The four hour drive from Prescott, AZ, to west of Page took us that afternoon to Mushroom Valley where sandstone columns stood, about 6-10 feet in diameter and twice that in height, protected from erosion by harder, darker colored capstones, giving them the appearance of giant mushrooms.

From there we drove and hiked to nearby Skylight Arch, located on a long promontory extending from a plateau. This is a most peculiar arch in that it does not project up from the plateau, but is formed by a hole, opening toward the cliff face. Not knowing where it was, one could walk right past it.

The following day we drove to Coyote Buttes South, and over 24 miles of rough dirt road to Cottonwood Cove. A one mile hike took us to one of the most fantastic sandstone formations I have ever seen! Rising from flat sandy scrubland, covered by a profusion of beautiful, feathery sage, were at least a dozen sandstone buttes of petrified sand dunes. On one of them we counted at least twelve discontinuities, called cross-bedding, where deposits had been eroded, then new ones added in the course of millions of years. Most amazing were the differential colorations of the deposits, some in straight layers, others in the most convoluted swirls imaginable. Between two buttes, we clambered up a 40 degree incline to reach a small plateau behind the buttes where, again and again, we found the most wonderful small and large rock formations.

Then it was off to Poverty Flat, an old cattle ranch where we had our sack lunch, then walked across the property to look for Moqui Marbles, round or oval black sandstone balls from millimeters to several centimeters in size, with a 'shell' quite high in iron content.

Thereafter, another dirt road brought us to White Pocket, which, actually, is not a pocket, but a sandstone rise with interesting formations. A sharp wind drove me back early to our Toyota Land Cruiser.

Our evenings were spent at a Page motel with an aperitif before dinner, then in a restaurant. This part could definitely not be called 'roughing it'!

On the last day, the Wave beckoned! This absolutely fantastic sandstone formation is located in the Coyote Buttes North area, just south of the Arizona/Utah border between Page and Kanab, requiring a three mile hike from the trailhead. Along a wash, up a hill, down into another wash, and up once more, we overlooked the magnificent countryside the American Southwest is so richly endowed.

And now, from the ridge we were standing on, we had to traverse along mountain slopes, all too often at 30 degrees, up and down, occasionally clambering up on all fours, slogging through sandy depressions to the Wave, in the far distance.

We were the second party to arrive to find, what appeared to be, three heavy tripod-equipped Japanese photographers taking pictures with a female model.

The Wave is not very large, maybe all in all about 30-40 meters, compared to some of the other larger formations we saw, but it makes up for it by its regular wavy, differentially-colored, sandstone bands and huge, convoluted pocketing.

Little by little, other permit holders 'dribbled in' and, after we had explored the inside and outside of the Wave, we made our difficult way back to our vehicle. Interestingly enough, homeward-bound felt shorter than hiking in.

Then it was home to Prescott. And for April 2009 it looks like we will be off again to see more of the magnificent countryside of Arizona and Utah, guided by friend Nigel Reynolds. For more photos and trips see his web site: BumpyRoadAdventures.com