

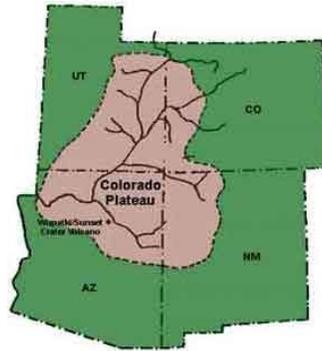
Howdy, howdy, howdy ...

10/4/2016

It's those pesky Craigs again (Bruce, Kathy, and, this year, daughter Julie who lives in Santa Fe, NM) along with their annual illustrated travelogue – via e-mail so as to be easily tossed if unwanted by simply hitting the DEL key (done by no more than 50% of our correspondents!).

Our goal this year was modest and completely domestic – spend about a week visiting several of the National Parks in southern Utah that we have never quite made it to. Over the years we have passed back and forth through Utah on our way to various other places and in the process have seen a lot of the National Park system in the state of Utah -- but not quite all of it!

Southern Utah is a part of the geologically “uplifted” Colorado Plateau which straddles the “four corners” area of Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico



This “uplift” has been dated back as far as 25 million years ago and features many “folds” and “faults” which have been eroded away ever since by rivers, floods, and heavy thunderstorms. Today the entire area is basically a vast high desert (varying from 4,000 to 10,000 feet altitude) and is full of spectacular formations. Some of the best known parks are Zion, Bryce, Canyonlands, Capitol Reef, and Arches – referred to by the Utah tourist bureau as the “Mighty Five,” but also accompanied by Grand Staircase Escalante and Cedar Breaks, along with the cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde tucked over in the high plateau country of southwestern Colorado right across the border from Utah. We attempted to cover this expanse in a more or less single loop ...



Our route from San Francisco through California, Nevada, Utah to Western Colorado and back ...

And so we set off on what turned out to be an eight-day tour – Thursday to Thursday ...

Thursday, Sept 15 – Drove from Skylonda (our home just south of San Francisco) to Yosemite Park high country (Tioga Pass and Tuolumne Meadows area) then down to Highway 395 on the Eastern side of the Sierras to Mammoth Mountain ski area, Devils Postpile National Monument, and bristlecone pine trees – purportedly up to 5,000 years old!



Lake Tenaya in Yosemite High Country



Half Dome in Yosemite Valley in the Distance!

Friday, Sept 16 – Drove from Mammoth across Nevada into Utah and Cedar City, where we met daughter Julie and her incredibly tough Toyota “FJ Cruiser” off-road-capable vehicle (as opposed to our modest little compact Honda “Fit”). Lots of dirt roads and off-roading in this area!



Devils Postpile National Monument (Mammoth)



Cedar Breaks National Monument (Utah)

Devils Postpile, just down the road from the Mammoth Mountain Ski Resort, is a fantastic rock formation of “columnar basalt,” the columns being hexagonal in cross-section and marvelously symmetrical (reminiscent of the Giant’s Causeway in Northern Ireland for ex-pats such as ourselves who have family names like Foy and Dougherty in our backgrounds!).

Cedar Breaks National Monument contains large stands of juniper trees which were misidentified by early explorers as cedar trees, but what the heck -- you’ve gotta look close to tell the difference!

Saturday, Sept 17 – Drove to and visited Bryce Canyon National Park (multiple stopping places, best of which was Navajo Loop Trail, descending directly down into the canyon). Drove to Brian Head (ski area) and stayed overnight at the unexpectedly luxurious Grand Lodge at off-season rates – a real treat after a hot and dusty day (and a killer giant hot tub!).



Navajo Loop Trail in Bryce National Park

Sunday, Sept 18 – Drove from Brian Head back to Cedar Breaks for a second look at that undeservedly little-known but spectacular area, then to Grand Staircase-Escalante National Park where we visited one of the remote “slot canyons.” Slot canyons are narrow, deep fissures dug into the rocks by water over long periods of time and can be unexpectedly claustrophobic ...



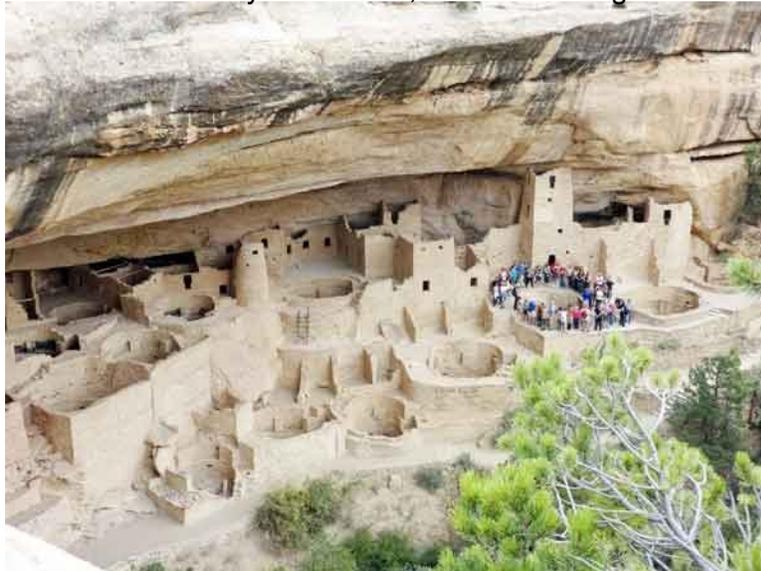
Peekaboo Canyon (but not Spooky Canyon, a nearby more advanced exercise in “Canyoning”!)

Monday, Sept 19 – Long, but spectacular, drive from Escalante to Cortez via the tiny desert towns of Boulder, Grover, Torrey, Fruita, Caineville, Hanksville, Hite, Fry Canyon, Blanding, Monticello, Dove Creek, Cahone, Pleasant View, and Lewis (each with a population of a couple hundred souls!), basically swinging south of Capitol Reef and Canyonlands through the Lake Powell/ Colorado River area north of Glen Canyon Dam. We had just enough time in the late afternoon for a quick survey visit of the Spruce Tree House area at Mesa Verde (a collection of pueblo-style cave dwellings inhabited for several hundred years before the inhabitants inexplicably left circa 1300 AD).



Spruce Tree House in Mesa Verde, Colorado

Tuesday, Sept 20 – Visited Mesa Verde in much more detail, including Balcony House and Cliff Palace, the two most well-preserved sites. Mesa Verde is located in a very remote area, and one must really want to visit it to go to the trouble of getting there (over the course of time, we've never met anyone who has actually been there, one of the things that drew us in that direction!).



Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde, Colorado

(Tuesday afternoon we drove from Durango to Grand Junction, passing through spectacular passes full of aspen trees in full fall color, but were so blown away we forgot to take a picture! Our bad ...)

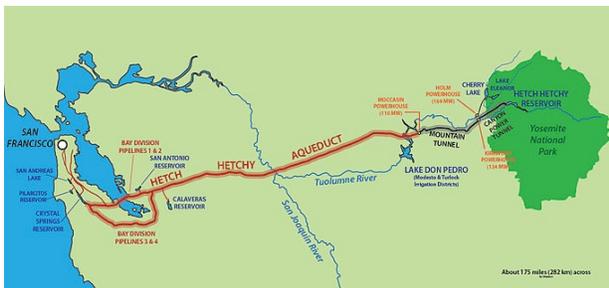
Wednesday, Sept 21 – Drove from Grand Junction, Colorado to Fallon, Nevada, stopping at Green River, then at Delta (both in Utah). We first went through Delta back in the early 1990s on the way to Denver and have been fascinated by it ever since – a perfectly normal little American town plopped down in the middle of the arid desert where an actual “delta” is formed from a small mountain river, giving the residents the gift of water – a rarity in these parts. We then launched ourselves onto Nevada Highway 50, the “loneliest road in the US” at 256.9 miles from Ely to Fallon



Highway 50 – “The Loneliest Road” with a car appearing once every few minutes!

Thursday, Sept 22 – Drove from Fallon, Nevada through Carson City, down the Eastern side of the Sierras on Hwy 395 (the rarely visited and relatively treeless side of the Sierras) and over Tioga Pass to Hetch Hetchy. The name “Hetch Hetchy” comes from the Miwok Indian word “hatchhatchie” (or “hetchetci”) which means “edible grasses” or “magpie” (take your pick!) and is an 8-mile-long canyon eerily similar to the better-known Yosemite Valley to the south. It was converted into a reservoir+dam in the 1920s and now serves as the chief source of water and power for most of the San Francisco peninsula (piped and cabled across the width of California!) – a very controversial project vigorously opposed by John Muir and which many would still like to tear down, but for which no practical replacement seems to exist ...

Hetch Hetchy Dam and (8-mile long!) Reservoir in remote Yosemite wilderness



And, finally, the trip back to the San Francisco Bay Area and home after about 4000 quick miles ...



Western sunset promising Nirvana as we blessedly crawl out of the Nevada desert ...

Home again, home again, jiggy jig ...



Our little Skylonda home in Winter with snow + redwoods + a fire from our woodburning stove!
(In the Santa Cruz mountains just south of San Francisco)

Cheers to all, as always, Bruce and Kathy Craig (plus Julie Craig from Santa Fe!)