

Colorado, Arizona and Utah, May and June 2012

When it came to holidays we have always been very independent, Package holidays, cruises and indeed any sort of group holiday are not for us. Until recently we would either take our own car abroad or book a flight and a hire car. We would take a Rough Guide or similar travel book and with an idea of where we wanted to go, we were on our way. It is now 5 years since we did probably our best holiday ever and certainly our best American road trip, so memorable that five years on I can still remember every day of that three week trip. As I said, in past years we have organised our holiday by just booking a flight and arranging car hire before setting off into the unknown. On this holiday we went with a rough idea of where we wanted to visit and then left it to Claire at Travel a la Carte in Uttoxeter to book our motels along the way.

It started with the usual long British Airways transatlantic flight arriving in Denver, Colorado in the evening. We found the car hire company, selected 'any car from that row sir' and we were on our way to find our hotel for the night. Now there is something about leaving airports especially as you are suddenly on the wrong side of the road in a strange car in a strange location and, by now, in the dark. Anyway we have our satnav so no problem and in any case our hotel was down the road in Denver. Down the road turned out to be over 10 miles and as we approached the centre of the city the traffic around us increased. Suddenly we came to a junction where the road split left and right and although the Satnav talked to us we were already in the wrong lane so we had to go right when we should have gone left. Oh well, the usual start to our holiday and after another 30 minutes of instructions from the irritating American Satnav woman we arrived at our overnight stay.

The next morning our holiday really started. We had a plan. On the days that we would be travelling the idea was to make an early start, not later than 7-00am, drive for about an hour and a half, stop for breakfast before driving on to our next destination. We also tried to restrict each journey to a maximum 150 miles which, with one or two exceptions we managed to achieve. That meant that we would be at our next stop by lunchtime at the latest.

Salida

Our first stop was Salida just over 140 miles from Denver. The only reason for spending a day there was that it was about half way to our first main destination, Durango. This time that irritating American woman guided us out of Denver and up into a lovely mountain area where we stopped for breakfast. Now this was our fourth American road trip and by now we should have known better. After our long previous day and with no breakfast in Denver we were naturally hungry and decided to order two full breakfasts. Not a good idea. There was enough food to fill us for a week. The good news was that it taught us a lesson and for the rest of the holiday it was cereal or porridge and fruit washed down with a strong coffee.



We knew nothing about Salida except that we were staying at a local Motel for the night. It turned out to be a lovely day. As we entered the small town we spotted an event of some sort with lots of people around. It was a children's football tournament (or soccer as the American's call it) for all ages from 6 to 16. There were stalls and we bought some homemade cake from 3 boys. It was lovely to see so many Mum's, Dad's and children enjoying themselves and as we watched the kids, we also chatted to the parents.



The day got even better when, in the late afternoon, the streets in the centre of the town were closed so that the children could race round on their bikes. Again they were split up into age groups and raced around the town streets, along by the river and back through the local park to the starting point.



We found out that the football and the bike racing were annual events to raise money for the local hospital. Although Salida has no particular claim to fame it was a great to spend the first day of our holiday in real small town America.

Durango

Up at 6-30am and on the road at 7-00am to our next destination, Durango. We climbed up to over 9000ft and then hit this road. We drove for 50 gently undulating miles and apart from 2 curves the road was straight, straight and straight again. There was a house of some sort

about every couple of miles and in those 50 miles we saw less than 20 other vehicles. The landscape reminded us of that Clint Eastwood film 'High Plains Drifter' and it was at this point in our journey I was first reminded of all those Western films we watched and enjoyed as kids. It would be a recurring theme throughout the holiday. Every Saturday morning we queued at the Broadway cinema with our sixpence in our pockets to watch the Movietone News, Flash Gordon and, of course the Western film where the cowboys always killed the Indians but with not a speck of blood in sight. Our favourite was Hopalong Cassidy. We never heard any of the dialogue as the hundreds of kids in the cinema talked all through it. The only time they were quiet was when the Cowboys were shooting the Indians and the Indians were shooting back with their bows and arrows.

At the end of 50 miles we came to Del Norte on the Rio Grande river. Time for breakfast and as we turned onto Main Street we spotted Boogies Diner. Wow, that is a must for breakfast today, just need to get our leather trousers, spurs, gun and holster out of the boot and we would be fine. We walked in and in classic Western style the room when quiet and we were met with 20 pairs of eyes. They thought we had come from the Moon and we thought that they were on the set of a 1930s Western film- you know even the women looked like the men. The only person missing was Clint, he was still riding the high plains.

We followed our new breakfast regime of cereal, porridge and fruit washed down with coffee and, as we had found on previous American road trips, the 2 very friendly waitresses wanted to know which planet we were from and how we had got there. 'We just love your accent'. After 10 minutes eating and 20 minutes talking we put the leather trousers, spurs, gun and holster back in the boot and 'headed out of town' down the Rio Grande valley.



Now if you are into huntin', shootin', fishin' and raftin' this was the place for you. We passed miles of log cabins on wonderful campsites, and at one point, climbed to almost 13,000 ft through a ski resort with even a little snow still around, at least enough for a couple of snowballs. By midday and with another 200 miles on the clock we had reached our destination Durango.



We knew three things about Durango, firstly that today was the annual Food and Drink festival, that it was the home of the iconic Durango to Silverton railway and that another of our childhood cowboy favourites The Durango Kid came from here. The fact that the weather was hot and sunny goes without saying, the whole holiday was hot and sunny. The centre of the town was pedestrianised for the festival. They had a token system to gain access to the festival, one token was a dollar and you used the tokens to buy food, drink and other goodies from the one hundred plus stalls along the main and surrounding streets. Armed with

our tokens set off to find food and drink.



Apparently Durango is home to five breweries so they were all represented and the choice of food was amazing. As we walked the streets the sounds changed with street entertainers and bands every few yards. What immediately became apparent was that this was a wonderful family occasion with what seemed like the whole of Durango taking part. There was hardly any visible security presence as everyone chatted and danced their way through the afternoon. As always people were alerted by our accent and we made many new 'friends'.

We felt very lucky to have experienced typical American summer events in the first two days of our holiday.



The next day was the first pre booked highlight of our holiday, a trip on the Durango to Silverton railway. We arrived at 7-00am to be met at the station by a 'greeter'. They were volunteers who met the passengers each morning to chat, inform and to make sure that we enjoyed our day. Our greeter was in his 80s, a lovely man who obviously loved meeting people from all over the world. The Durango to Silverton railway was

built in the 1890s to bring silver ore from Silverton to the foundries in Durango.



The wonderful steam railroad climbs almost 3000ft along the 48 mile journey through stunning scenery. Incredibly it was built in 8 months. Now that the mines have long since closed the railroad is one of the must do train journeys in the US. In the winter months they run one train each day and two trains in the summer. We were on the first train of the day. When booking your seats you have the choice of closed or open carriages. As we anticipated that the weather would be good we chose an open carriage to take full advantage of the scenery and, of course, the photo opportunities.

The first highlight as the train starts it's journey through Durango is that wonderful, unique train whistle sound. You really know that you have just started one of the most memorable train journeys in America. After leaving Durango the train travels along a fairly flat plain before starting the long climb to Silverton following the river up a spectacular valley. The line criss crosses the river and on a couple of the bridges the train stops to release steam before stopping at another halt to take on water. We were amazed that the railway was built nearly 120 years ago with little of today's mechanical equipment.



After almost 3 hours we pull into Silverton and we are again back into the Saturday morning cowboy world of our childhood. Silverton is almost 10,000ft above sea level and even in the May heat we can see snow on



the mountain tops.



With no station or platforms the train stops next to the wide dirt main street. Now there is no silver mining the town relies mainly on tourism and, of course, the trains from Durango. Among the Main Street building mainly dating back to the 1800s was the Lazy Lady Saloon. In a long forgotten Western film made in Silverton in the 1940s the saloon was a main location in the film. To entertain the miners the saloon had 6 dancers, one of whom went on to become a Hollywood legend - Norma Jeane Mortenson or Marilyn Monroe to you and me. Having soaked up the atmosphere of this old mining town it was soon time for the train whistle to tell us it was time for our return trip to Durango. A wonderful day.

Four Corners, Kayenta and Monument Valley

The usual early start the next morning took us to our next destination just over 160 miles away, Kayenta. The first thing we noticed about this part of the journey was the gradual change in the landscape from the lush green valleys and forested mountains to the arid and dryness of the desert. The other dramatic change was that we were entering the Navajo Nation Reservation.

The Navajo Nation extends into parts of Arizona, Utah and New Mexico covering 27,000 square miles with a population of over 250,000 native Americans. It is the largest of the native American reservations in the the US. Since the 1923s it has had its own Government and is a semi-autonomous territory.

As we drove towards Kayenta the road took up a long slope to a crossroads. We drove through the crossroads to then suddenly realise that if we had turned right off our main route it would take us to an important Navajo monument. We had arrived at 4 Corners, the only place in America where 4 states meet Colorado, Arizona, Utah and New Mexico.



The point was originally marked in 1912 with a cement pad but now, although the location is very remote there is now a circular monument with a visitor centre and a number of Navajo artisans. We were now in the hot midday sun surrounded by a desolate arid landscape and we had crossed from Colorado into Arizona. By mid afternoon we reached our next Motel in Kayenta. As we explored the small town of just over 5000 inhabitants the first thing we noticed was that the people had changed from immigrant American to native American Indians of the Navajo tribe and secondly that the road passing through the town was the widest we had seen with hardly any traffic on it.



It must have been 30 yards across with no marked crossing points but you hardly had to look both ways before strolling across.

We usually found somewhere to eat out in the evening but decided that the motel restaurant looked good. Our friendly Navajo waitress informed us that the Navajo Nation was an alcohol free zone and that only soft drinks were available. At the end of the evening I asked her what happened if she and her friends wanted an alcoholic drink to which she replied with a smile 'we have ways'.

The next day Tuesday was the second highlight of our trip and the number one place on my bucket list - Monument Valley.



Until the 1930s it was a remote almost undiscovered place. A family called Goulding had moved down from Durango to build a ranch near the valley to provide employment for the native Americans. In 1937 Harry Goulding heard that the famous Hollywood film Director John Ford was planning an epic Western film Stagecoach. He took some photograph of Monument Valley and took them 650 miles to John Ford's office in Hollywood. For two days John Ford resisted his invitations to meet him and look at the photographs until, in desperation Harry Goulding pushed the photographs under his office door. John Ford saw the photographs and immediately decided that Monument Valley would be the location for the film.

The 1930s was a time of severe economic depression in America and the decision to make the film there provided much needed employment for the Navajo. All the equipment, film crew and the stars of the film had to be brought 650 miles from Hollywood with the final 100 miles from Tuba City on dirt roads. The film, released in 1938 and was a huge success and made a little known film star into a Hollywood legend - John Wayne.

Our journey from Kayenta to the valley was just 25 miles and again we had to make an early start as we had booked a trip into the valley with a small Navajo owned guide company. We meet Harry our Navajo guide at the Visitor Centre which turned out to be perfect as we rode on his small open truck with just one other very friendly couple who were on their honeymoon although they were not much younger than us.



It is possible to drive into the valley with your own car but only as far as Ford Point named after John Ford. The valley is regarded as sacred by the Navajo so to access the rest of the valley you have to go with a Navajo guide. That for us was fine as it gives employment for the Navajo and we get to know much more about life in the Navajo Nation.

From the visitor centre Harry took us to Ford Point where a Navajo horseman rides down for the benefit of the photographers amongst us.



There are now just nine families living in the valley where they live in Hogans, a traditional dwelling of the Navajo people with the front door facing East to welcome the rising sun for good wealth and fortune. They have no electricity or water (this is brought in with bowsers) and the children have a 50 mile daily round trip to school. They raise sheep and the women make those wonderful Navajo rugs, beautiful but being hand made, very expensive.



From Ford Point Harry took us into the sacred part of the valley with its wonderful rock formations and prehistoric images. We came to this overhanging rock face. We followed him into the overhang where he lay down with the four of us on either side.



Silence is a very important part of Navajo culture and we lay there in absolute silence with only the distant cry of the coyotes breaking the spell. Harry then told us this native love story before playing a lovely tune on a small flute. A really magical moment. After nearly 4 hours in the valley with Harry we were back at the visitor centre. Before leaving Harry we asked him what the Navajo thought about John Ford, bearing in mind that in the majority of Western films it was the Indians who were killed by the cowboys. After that first film Stagecoach John Ford went on to make another five films in Monument Valley and Harry went on to

explain that he was held in high esteem by the Navajo as he brought much needed employment and he paid them the same rate as he paid to the Hollywood crews and cowboys.

From there we drove for about 20 minutes to the Goulding Ranch.



The house has been preserved as it was in the 1930 with a small motel built nearby.



After a photo shoot with Dot and John Wayne we drove back to Monument Valley to watch the sun setting on this awe inspiring location with a dust storm thrown in for good measure. Then it was back to Kayenta at the end of a very special day.

Williams-Route66

Back on the road with another early start, we are today travelling 185 miles from Kayenta to Williams, a town on the legendary Route 66 - the mother road. We first stop at Tuba City for breakfast before later stopping at an Indian Trading Post for a short stop and a little retail therapy. A further 50 miles took us to the largest town we have seen since Denver, Flagstaff on Route 66 taking us to the small town of Williams and our base for the next 3 nights. Route 66 ran from Chicago to Los Angeles and was the main route for thousands of people emigrating to the west Coast in the 1930s to escape the depression years in the mid west with the prospect of a better life in the sunshine of California. In recent years the old road has been replaced by new roads and Williams was the last town to be bypassed.



It is a wonderful, over the top town full of Route 66 memorabilia for the tourists but also authentic filling stations and original buildings.



Its other claim to fame is that it is the place where the train leaves for the 80 mile journey to the South Rim of The Grand Canyon. In the evening as we were walking to a nearby restaurant we heard that there was to be a shootout in the Main Street. The main street was closed as three cowboys with guns were disputing the ownership of a box of gold in the middle of the road. Inevitably two of the cowboys were killed while the third man made off with the gold. Before you get too worried, it was all done for a local charity and you were invited to put your donation in the slot in the top of the gold box. Great fun.

The next morning, Saturday, was Memorial Day, a public holiday in America and another opportunity to close the main street through the town. This time it was a procession of vintage cars and, inevitably, cowboys making it an interesting and colourful occasion.



We spent the rest of the day exploring the town and indulging in more retail therapy.

Sedona

On Sunday we were back on the road on the short trip to Sedona. The road took us back to Flagstaff before going along the lovely Oak valley. Being a holiday weekend the valley, which is full of camp sites, was packed with families enjoying the glorious weather and all the outdoor activities the valley had to offer. As we entered Sedona we found ourselves in the only queue of traffic we encountered on our 2500 mile journey and that was for only 10 minutes.

Sedona is a desert town surrounded by red rock butts, steep canyon walls and forests, a lovely small town noted as a new age town with lots of new age shops, spas and art galleries.



No visit to the town would be complete without a trip up into the red rock mountain landscape.

We hired a driver and truck going about 2 miles along smooth tarmac roads before going off road along the mountain tracks. For the next one and a half hours we endured the most uncomfortable ride of our lives as we hung on the sides of the truck with no springs as it threw us around. The only respite was when our driver briefly stopped to explain the landscape and wildlife.



He was a very friendly man whose day job was as an estate agent but, as a result of the financial crash in 2008 found himself having to supplement his income throwing visitors around the red rocks of Sedona. Eventually we arrived back at the luxury of the tarmac road back into town.

With its spectacular scenery Sedona's other claim to fame is, yes you've guessed it, the Western film. In the middle of the town there is a small walk in Museum celebrating the many films made in the area. The names of these mostly long forgotten films celebrate the Western and Saturday mornings at the Broadway cinema including - Johnny Guitar (Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayden), Tall in the Saddle (John Wayne, Ward Bond and 'Gabbie' Hayes), Firecreek (James Stewart and Henry Fonda), Gun Fury (Rock Hudson and Lee Marvin), Desert Fury (Burt Lancaster) and one of my favourite films Starman with Jeff Bridges. Forgotten films, legendary movie stars, great memories.



Williams is 80 miles from the south rim of the Grand Canyon and, when we planned our holiday we had a choice, we could either drive to the Canyon or take the train. The only way to take in the real spectacle of the Canyon is to book a helicopter trip but going on the train would not give us time for that. As we had a long drive planned for the following day we elected to have a relaxing day on the train.



The train leaves each day at 9-00am but before that we all gathered for yet another shootout. This time there were 2 baddies and the Sheriff with a member of the audience co opted to help with the fun. A very enjoyable start to our day.



We arrived at the Grand Canyon at about midday at one of a number of visitor centres along the Canyon. A short walk took us to the path which runs along the edge of the rim. The scale and depth of the Canyon formed by the Colorado River over millions of years is awesome and it only served reinforce our opinion that the only way to get real experience is to take a trip down into the canyon or fly over and into it. Our decision to take the train rather than drive was at least vindicated when we heard that the helicopter trips had been cancelled that day because of the strength of the wind.



Along the rim we walked the almost three mile Trail of Time allowing us to experience the geological history of the canyon over the last two million years. It starts from today and gradually takes us back in time with examples the rocks formed at the various points in time to a much needed drinks pit stop at the other end.



A quick souvenir search and then it was back on the train back to Williams. On the way back the two gun slinging baddies and the Sheriff

boarded the train. The baddies robbed us of our money (for charity of course) chased by the sheriff.



On either side of the train track are huge ranches and I discovered that the sheriff was a retired ranch owner. He explained to us that the ranches could be up to 200,000 acres and, as most of it is arid one head of cattle needs about 100 acres to survive. Water for the cattle is provided in large water troughs with the troughs moved around to encourage the cattle to move to the best of the grass. The autumn is cattle round up time as the winter temperatures are in stark contrast to the summer.

Antelope Slot Canyon-Page

It was inevitable that somewhere along the way we would have a long day's drive and the next day we set off early on the 270 mile journey to Zion National Park. We planned to break our journey at Page with a prebooked visit to the Antelope Slot Canyon so we needed to do the 180 miles to Page by lunchtime. Page is a small, clean and modern town at the head of Lake Powell, the largest manmade lake in America fed by the Colorado River. There is a huge dam on the edge of the town built in the 1930s.



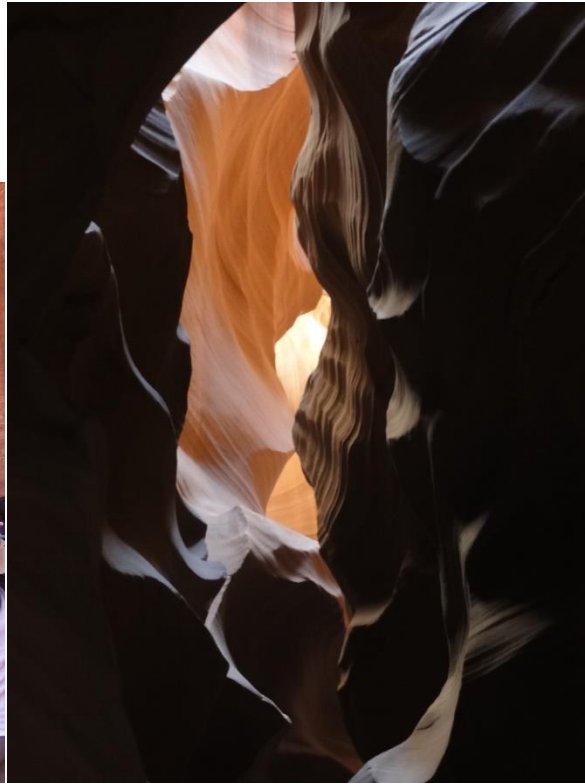
As we drove down one road we passed eight buildings, every one a church of a different denomination. The other thing we discovered as we searched for a light lunch was Subway. Of course we knew of Subway in England but had never thought to try it as we thought that it was a McDonalds, KFC type operation. We had a lovely freshly made sandwich of our choice with a drink in a clean cafe with, most importantly, air conditioning (very hot day). Just down the road was a filling station and the visitor centre for the Slot Canyon. We are still in the Navajo Nation as about 12 of us climbed onto an open truck for the drive to the Canyon.



Again, as in Sedona, we drove about 2 miles along smooth tarmac roads before descending into this desert valley. At this point our Navajo guide was driving through thick sand at what we thought was a breakneck speed saying that we must not stop. Apparently if we stopped the wheels would sink into the sand and we would not be able to start again. After about six miles of sand and clouds of dust behind our vehicle we arrived at the Antelope Slot Canyon.

The canyon is about 400 yards long with a width of between about 4 and 10 feet. It has been formed over millions of years by water flowing

through the rocks. It is an awesome must see experience and was one of the highlights of our holiday. The colours and atmosphere in the canyon changes throughout the day as the sun passes overhead.



The flash floods in the canyon happen mainly in August and September when a thunderstorm 50 miles north of the canyon can cause a 6 foot high torrent of water through the canyon. The Navajo have to keep a close eye on the weather at that time of the year to make sure the visitors are safe.



It was then back to the truck and another mad dash through the sand and dust back to the visitor centre where we were treated to a Navajo war dance between the petrol pumps of the filling station!.



Zion National Park

Back on the road, past the huge Lake Powell dam and out of Page for the rest of the drive to Springdale and Zion National Park. It was about 70 miles from Page to the next town Kanab in Utah and during that just over an hours driving we did not see a single habitable building. As it was by now late afternoon we were only able to drive through what looked like a lovely town especially as it is known as 'Little Hollywood' because of the many films made there including such classics as The Lone Ranger, Gunsmoke, El Dorado, Planet of the Apes and The Outlaw Josey Wales. The last 40 mile leg of today's drive took us into the wonderful Zion National Park passing at one point through what was 100 years ago, the longest tunnel (about 1 mile long) in America eventually pulling into Springdale, a small town at the entrance to the main part of the Park for a well earned evening meal and a two day stay.



The main part of the park is a car free area so it was a 5 minute drive down to the Visitor Centre to catch the hop on hop off bus through the spectacular park. May is an ideal time to visit the park as is not too busy but with enough people around to add to the atmosphere of the place with its river, trees, spectacular high cliffs and rock formations and overhanging waterfalls.



It was obvious that we needed at least a couple of days to immerse ourselves in its beauty. From the bus we followed the river valley walk to The Narrows.



From here groups of mainly young people, not ideal for old duffers like us, walk in the river through the narrow gorge. We talked to one young man who had walked down the river about 3 miles with the water level at times up to his knees. Obviously the river levels changes with the weather and the seasons and he had been through when the water level was chest high. We were pleased that we had not come dressed for the occasion.

In Springdale after our evening meal we did a little retail therapy to find souvenirs for Molly and James, our grandchildren. We found 2 items costing a very modest 2 Dollars each. The elderly lady in the shop asked us if we would like them gift wrapped and whether we would sign the visitors book. Four dollars, gift wrapped, visitors book!!!. We, of course, said yes to the gift wrapping and I signed the visitors book. As we chatted to the lady to confirm that we were from the UK, she told us that she was 84 years old, lived in Springdale with her daughter and that she worked in the shop for 10 months of the year. She told us that her husband had died two years earlier and that he had served in the American army in Europe in WW2. When he came home he asked her to marry him and she said 'OK'. He then said that he would like a large

family and again she said 'OK'. They had 14 children and 49 grandchildren, a great story from this lovely lady.

After another lovely day in the park, we were strolling through the town when we saw this attractive art shop. It was pretty obvious that we would not be taking any pictures with us but the young lady owner still engaged us in conversation. The usual questions came up, where had we come from and where were we going. We explained that our next destination the following day was Bryce Canyon and then on to Moab. She got a piece of paper and pen and said that instead of going on the Interstate roads from Bryce, that we should take the backroads route which she said was one of the most scenic routes in America. On the paper she wrote Cannonville, Escalante, Boulder, Hanksville, Green River and Moab.

Bryce Canyon

The next day our drive from Springdale to Bryce was only a modest 80 miles so we had the opportunity to stop frequently to admire more scenic views and the amazing rock formations of Zion National Park.



Even with the leisurely drive and the breakfast stop we arrived at Bryce by lunchtime. We were booked in at Ruby's Inn and it seemed to us that

almost every other visitor was also staying there. It was an enormous Motel and probably the least favourite of the trip but it did have the advantage of being only just over a mile from the entrance to the National Park. After booking in we drove into this stunning park and what turned out to be Dot's favourite place on the whole trip. It is almost impossible to put into words the beautiful and ever changing rock formations and the beauty of the colours.



The whole vista has been formed by water and frost over millions of years. The Canyon is over 9000ft above sea level and so has almost 200 days of frost each year, something that we found difficult to comprehend as we enjoyed a day in the mid 80sF. The winter rain and snow is absorbed into the soft rocks and in the Spring when the temperature rises, the ice in the rocks which has expanded as it freezes, blows the face off the rocks so forming this myriad of shapes. As you gaze at the rock formations we, as probably many others have probably done, played a game. The idea was to look at the rocks and imagine real objects - houses, blocks of flats churches and, most interesting, people.



In the evening after our evening meal we wandered through the old western town built opposite our Motel. As with most of the National Parks they encourage the use of the tourist buses so we spent another day in the park. Although spectacular from the path at the top, like the Grand Canyon, the real experience is to walk down the paths into the canyon. Dot decided to stay at the top whilst I ventured down to experience the rock formations close up. With temperatures again in the mid 80sF and with the atmosphere rarefied due to the altitude even walking down was an effort, never mind the problem of the steep uphill climb to get up again. The obvious sensible decision is not to go too far down, which I did but, coming back I could not walk more than 20 yards before stopping to rest and return to normal breathing.



All the effort is well worth while but with the benefit of youth it is possible to do a lot more.

During the day, we met a lovely American couple on their way back from Phoenix, Arizona. They lived near to Chicago, had recently retired and were looking to buy a home in Phoenix to escape from the harsh Mid West winters. The local estate agent had shown them a couple of properties which they liked but had not committed to buy. He said it was no problem as he could show them hundreds of other empty properties in the area. Another devastating example of America's 2008 property crash.

Moab and Arches National Park

Back on the road the next morning with our usual early start we left Bryce for the 250 mile drive to Moab. As soon as we turned onto Byeway 12, as this scenic route was called, for Cannonville our American Sat Nav companion spent the next 40 miles telling us that we were on the wrong route and urging us to 'relocate'. She eventually got the message and we stopped for breakfast in Escalante already over 50 miles into our

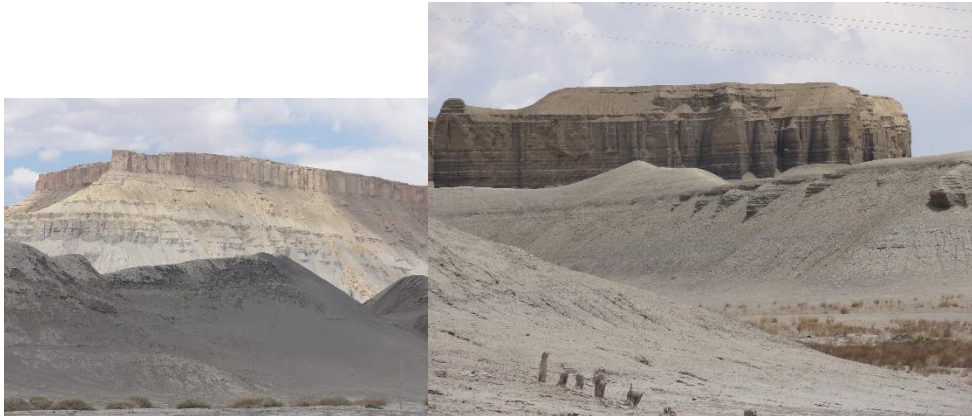
journey. Escalante was a small but lovely town which obviously was a busy centre in the height of the summer for rafting, climbing, caving and hunting. The modern, clean diner was run by two delightful ladies who to our amazement, although we thought we were in the middle of nowhere, had been to many places in the world. In answer to the inevitable question we told them that we were on our way to Moab. They then told us that in 20 minutes time we would be on the surface of the moon. We naturally found that hard to believe as much of the drive since we left Bryce had been through green forests and pastures. Being Saturday in Escalante it was car boot day but not a car boot sale as we know it in a field somewhere but all down the Main Street with cars parked at intervals with the stalls on the pavements or sidewalks as we should really call them.

Sure enough, after 20 minutes we climbed up a hill, turned a corner and spread out before us for as far as we could see was 'the surface of the moon'.



As we explained earlier, this was a backroad route with very few vehicles but still with lovely smooth wide roads. To admire the scenery we pulled into this layby or outtake as the Americans call them to find one other car with an English couple in it !. After about 30 miles of moonscape we dropped down into a lovely fertile valley with cattle ranches and arable farming before climbing again to the arid of the Capital Reef National Park. We had a brief stop at the Visitor Centre wishing that we could stay longer before travelling on to Hanksville and what we thought was going to be our lunch stop.

Before we got there we encountered Mesa Luna. an arid, dusty landscape completely devoid of vegetation but with, incredibly, two or three habitable dwellings. Getting out of the car to take a few photographs was like opening an oven door and stepping inside. It did not take me long to escape back into the air conditioned comfort of our car.



Three miles down the road at what we thought would be our lunch destination - Hanksville. As we drove down Main Street we thought Hicksville rather than Hanksville and that we would not even venture out of our car, never mind have lunch there. As we slowly drove through Dot noticed a large cloud of dust over the back of some properties. I suggested that it was probably being caused by an excavator on a building site. In the town, which incidentally has a population of just over 200, we had to make a left turn. As we turned the cloud of dust completely enveloped our car reducing visibility to about 10 yards and bringing us almost to a halt. The only thing I knew was that the road was straight and that there was nobody in front of us. Slowly the road began to rise and gradually the dust storm eased enough for us to leave the town. We imagined a daily dust storm judging by the dust deposits everywhere. That meant that our lunch was another 50 miles away at Green River. On the desolate desert road we following an open station wagon driven by a native American Indian with 2 young children rolling about in the back, health and safety gone mad.

We stopped at Green Valley, at least we thought it was because it said so. The reality was it was a place where two Interstate roads crossed in the middle of a hot desert with sand as far as you could see in any direction.



The only thing there was a couple of filling stations, dozens of those huge American trucks and the inevitable fast food joints including Subway where we retreated again from the heat for a sandwich and drink. The real Green River was 10 miles up the road but what is a mere 10 miles in what is that vast country America.

Finally, by late afternoon we pulled into our Motel in Moab with a reminder that it was one of the locations in that wonderful film *Thelma and Louise*.



As our motel was on the edge of the main part of town, we decided to walk in for our evening meal. We only did it once as the heat drained all

the energy out of us even though we found the shade as much as possible. We picked a restaurant mainly because it had shaded outdoor seating. We should have chosen a place with good food as we fought our way through a huge stomach busting mound of chicken something, trying to be British and not leave anything. Ok we could have asked for a doggy bag but the thought of facing it again in our Motel bedroom was too awful to contemplate.

Moab has Canyonlands on one side and The Arches National Park on the other. Time dictated that we had to choose one and, as we had already planned Arches and was the nearest to town, that was our destination for the day. The TV weather forecast for that day was for the temperature to hit 100F so we were slightly disappointed to see later that it only reached 99F!! Anyway, we made the usual fairly early start in the hope that we would avoid the peak of the heat in the afternoon. Arches National Park is another of those must see destinations with more than 2000 natural sandstone arches, the highest density of stone arches in the world and has the advantage of being mostly accessible by car.



The arches were formed over millions of years by wind erosion. It is a high desert area at between 5000 and 6000ft above sea level and with only 10 inches of rain a year.



As well as the arches there are many hugely impressive towers of sandstone. As with many of these unique locations, it has attracted filmmakers from the biblical epic of the 1960s *The Greatest Story ever Told* to the 1989 film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. We made a number of stops to photograph the arches and towers with one particular beautiful landscape called Park Lane.



With no possible connection to Park Lane in London, it was a lovely quiet place to take in the beauty. It was there that we saw a halo round the sun, a phenomenon caused by light interacting with ice crystals. We

were told by some American visitors that it was quite rare to see it so it was another wonderful memory to add to our data bank.



In the late afternoon we ventured into the outskirts of Canyonlands wishing we had more time before moving on but we had to move on the next morning.

Glenwood Springs

Today we had a 200 mile drive to Glenwood Springs, on the way leaving the spectacular state of Utah and back into Colorado. The road from Moab took us to the main Interstate highway from Salt Lake City to Denver, a two lane dual carriageway. All the days of driving up to this point had been full of interest and it came as a shock that we found ourselves bored by the 100 miles of desert scrub before reaching our breakfast destination Fruita. The only thing that was of any interest on that part of the journey were the prairie dogs that sat at the side of the road completely unfazed by the fact that we passed them at nearly 70 miles an hour. At one point I said the Dot that the nearest vehicle on the road was about a mile in front of us and as she looked in the rear view mirror realised that the next vehicle was about a mile behind. As I said this was a main Interstate Highway at about 10-00 in the morning.

The small town of Fruita is another of those places that are a paradise for lovers of the outdoors with some quirky shops for the town's visitors to explore.

After breakfast and a short walk through the town and we were back on the road for the second half of our drive to Glenwood Springs which thankfully was much more scenic and interesting as we had the

Colorado River for company. The reason for choosing to stay the night at Glenwood Springs is that it was about half way to our final destination The Rocky Mountain National Park. Glenwood Springs was the largest place we had encountered since Flagstaff nearly two weeks earlier. We pulled into our hotel to be given the key to a Suite rather than just a room. Pity we were only staying for one night. As it was by now late afternoon we just had time to explore the main centre before our evening meal and the luxury of our Suite. One thing that we did discover was yet another connection to our Saturday mornings at the Broadway cinema was that Doc Holliday, the Wild West legend from the Gunfight at the OK Corral is buried there.

Estes Park and The Rocky Mountain National Park

The next morning and another 200 mile drive to our final holiday destination Estes Park in the Rocky Mountain National Park. The first part of our drive that day was probably the most spectacular of all. For about 50 miles we followed the Colorado River through the deep narrow gorge formed by the river. We were still on the Interstate road from Salt Lake City to Denver as it crisscrossed the river over a series of bridges with the carriageways dividing in places with one part going through a tunnel whilst the other two lanes clung to the side of the gorge.

One of the things that we loved as we travelled was the huge, and in many cases colourful, American trucks with the big Mac the favourite. They are obviously designed with the great distances in mind but as we travelled towards Denver even some of them struggled with a 10 mile continuous climb. As when we left Bryce Canyon we had a choice, we could either drive into Denver and then up to Estes Park or take the backroad into and through the Rocky Mountain Park. We chose the backroad and fortunately this time our American Sat Nav friend did not object. As we began our climb into the Rockies we passed through another Native American reservation the time the Arapaho whose land was traditionally in Colorado and Wyoming. Our climb took us to Grand Lake a winter ski town. Now to me there is nothing worse than a winter ski resort in the middle of a hot summer, nearly everything is closed and it seems that most have the population have mysteriously

disappeared. Thankfully Subway came to the rescue with a sandwich and drink and a friendly man to serve us.

The climb into the Rockies along the Trail Ridge Road took us to The Great Divide, not the rich and poor or the have and have nots but the geographical watershed that separates the rivers that flow West into the Pacific or East into the Arctic and Atlantic oceans. A small monument marks the spot on route 34, the highest major road in America.



Naturally , from there at around 12,000 ft it was nearly all downhill to the last destination on our holiday, Estes Park. The scenery is spectacular with its craggy peaks, forests and tundra so we had frequent stops on this generally quiet road although I can imagine it is much busier during the main summer holidays.

Estes Park is an attractive small town which many people use as a base for the Rocky Mountain National Park. Apparently when Pope John Paul II visited Denver, he asked to be taken to Estes Park to see the sights.



Like many Parks they have have a tourist bus system to discourage visitors from using cars. The next morning we took the bus into the Park. The first thing we noticed was that they were a lot of children on the bus and that two ladies who appeared to be their mothers were sat next to us. It appeared that the two young mothers each had 5 children, two each of their own and 3 adopted children. They were born next door to each other and had been lifelong friends. They had married two brothers and their family homes were next door to each other. The children were all between about 5 and 12 and the adopted children were of mixed race. Two lovely cheerful ladies with a remarkable story. We did wonder where the Dads were but happily they were on a different part of the crowded bus.

A short walk from any of the bus stops took us to quiet walks with small lakes and forest scenery around every corner. A lovely place to appreciate the beauty of nature with the Elk and Moose as our neighbours.



It is also apparently bear country but we were not fortunate enough to see one.

On the final day of our holiday we retraced our steps along the Trail Ridge Road to the Alpine visitor centre at 11,800ft the highest in America again stopping at every opportunity to appreciate and photograph the awesome beauty of the Park. At the visitor centre we were in what was left of the winter snow in stark contrast to the 2 weeks of the desert heat. It was a strange feeling as we walked across the car park that although it was windy, we were struggling to breath in the rarified atmosphere.

After three weeks of an amazing holiday it was an easy one hour drive to Denver Airport with that 10 hour flight back home.

Impressions

As I said at the beginning this was our fourth American road trip. As a tourist you obviously see the best of the country but the overwhelming impression is the friendliness of the people you meet along the way. "Have a nice day" might irritate you after a while but they really mean it. The English accent is always a winner and most people are intrigued to know where we came from or are eager to tell us about their trip to the UK (usually London). After the crowded roads of Britain, generally driving in America is easy and relaxing making the driving involved in this huge country a pleasure rather than a chore especially with Country and Western music playing on your car radio. We made this trip when we were both in our mid 70s but independent travel anywhere in the world gives you the opportunity to experience situations and meet people that organised group travel can never match.

Have a nice day.

Brian Mate