

## Spring Break in the Four Corners Region (U18A Part 1)

I like getting back to the Four Corners region regularly. Although I have a lot of favorite destinations in the area, I do try to find something new each time. This time I did have some repeats, but most of my destinations were first time visits. Ruins sites, petroglyphs and pictographs, and interesting geological sites dominated my sightseeing, which included 34 hikes in the first 16 days of my 17-day trip.



I drove to Page, Arizona my first day, but along the way I stopped at the Pahreah Ghost Town site. I've been to the ghost town's cemetery with each past visit, but hadn't crossed the river to visit the ghost town's surviving ruins before.



After exploring the townsite, I hiked along the Paria River for a while.

The next day I hiked sites along the Paria in the Cottonwood Canyon area. Much of this area used to be included in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument before President Trump ordered the reduction of the longtime monument's borders.



This spot along the Paria appears to be a bit muddy but otherwise pretty tame, but you're looking at quicksand that's at least four feet deep according to the walking stick I was using.



Smoky Mountain Scenic Backway is a rough road that connects the Page, Arizona area near Big Water, Utah with Escalante, Utah.

At the south end it follows the north side of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area's Lake Powell. After finishing up with my hike, I drove a stretch in this area before heading down a side wash to explore the area further.

These pictures are from my drive along Smoky Mountain Road.





The side road that I took towards the lake follows a wash (top) before opening up near Lake Powell's north shore (bottom). But from this point I could see rain showers moving into the area. And one doesn't want to be driving through a wash or driving along Smoky Mountain Road's clay and dirt surface should a shower hit. So I turned around at this point.



Day 3 was more of a sightseeing day than a hiking day, but I did get a few short hikes in. As many times as I've gone to Page, I've rarely explored Glen Canyon National Recreation Area sites, so that was today's focus.

A handful of short slot canyons can be found along Highway 89 that lead towards Lake Powell. Some of my short hikes were used to see whether there were places to enter the slots.



The Wahweap Overlook has great views in all directions including this one of the Glen Canyon Dam that creates Lake Powell. Page, Arizona is in the near distance, with the Navajo Nation just beyond Page.



Sandstone is sufficiently porous that it actually retains water. If the sandstone sits on less porous rock, when the water sinks down to that layer it may find a place to seep out. If a seep is reasonably protected from quick evaporation, plants will take advantage of the available water. A short hiking trail leads to this spot, the Hanging Garden near Page.



The Buckskin Gulch trail leads to slot canyons along Buckskin Gulch and the Paria River in the Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness area. I hiked a short stretch of this trail a couple years back with blisters. I took a longer hike this time, but turned around when I reached a canyon filled with water and mud from rain earlier in the week. I'll have to hike it again, although next time wearing trashable shoes suitable for wet canyon floors.



Along the Buckskin Gulch Trail.



After that hike I decided to take the House Rock Valley Rd/Highway 89A route back to Page. Just after I crossed the Arizona border I saw new signage for the Maze Rock Art Site Trailhead. Intrigued, I stopped and took a hike up a cliff face, then across a plain and then part way up a second cliff face to some petroglyph panels. One of the petroglyphs, above, gives this rock art site its name.



The less famous west-facing side of Coyote Buttes along House Rock Valley Road.

After Page, I headed east to spend a few nights in Bloomfield, New Mexico. I stayed there on last year's New Mexico trip to visit area ruins sites (Aztec, Salmon) and to check out the Bisti/De-Nah-Zin Wilderness Area. While I was there I found out about the Aztec Arches located in various canyons around the town of Aztec. So I knew then I'd come back to check them out.



Shiprock, on Navajo Nation lands in northeast New Mexico, is the remnant of a volcano that rises almost 1600 feet above the surrounding land. It is visible from several miles away. Shiprock is sacred to the Navajo; non-Navajo should stay at least three miles away.



Outcrop Arch, of the Aztec Arches



Petroglyph Arch, another one of the Aztec Arches. It gets its name from the handful of petroglyphs near its base.



One of the petroglyphs below Petroglyph Arch.



It appears to me that Arch Rock is actually a natural bridge. A natural bridge is generally created by flowing water such as a river or temporary wash flow, whereas an arch is created through weathering, cracking and other means of erosion.

The other local feature I learned about during last year's visit to Bloomfield was the "Defensive Sites of Dinétah". The Dinétah region is the traditional homeland of the Navajo and home to Navajo creation traditions. Dinétah broadly covers the Four Corners region, but its heart is in the area in and around Largo Canyon in northwest New Mexico.

In the late 1600s-mid 1700s, the Navajo clashed with the Utes and Comanches. During that time, the Navajo built hundreds of defensive "pueblitos" (small pueblos) across the Dinétah region. The ruins of many of those pueblitos as well as petroglyph sites and Ancestral Puebloan sites survive in the area. However, only a handful of pueblito ruins sites are located on Bureau of Land Management lands and thus accessible to the public (usually 4WD/decent clearance-driving with some hiking public, anyway).

I visited some of those sites starting with those in the Crow Canyon Archaeological District.



A petroglyph panel at the Crow Canyon district.



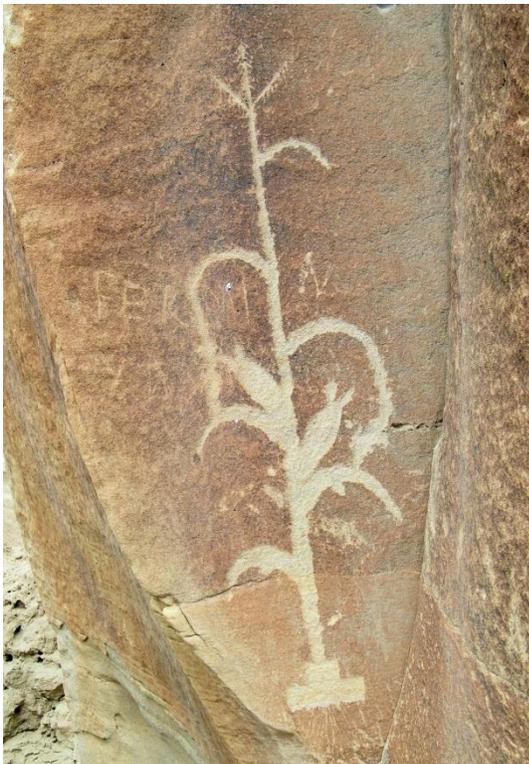
Petroglyphs at Crow Canyon's Big Warrior Panel.

This petroglyph either depicts a warrior carrying a shield, or it represents an early example of "fat shaming".



A male Navajo deity

The Navajo petroglyphs are relatively young compared to those by the Ancestral Pueblo, Fremont and earlier cultures, so it is more likely that their meanings are known.



A hike leads to the “44 Panel” collection of petroglyphs. It gets its name from the above petroglyphs – that they look like 4s is just coincidence.

The petroglyph to the left is a corn plant with ears growing out of a rain cloud.



Ruins of a pueblito on a rock (above) at Crow Canyon.

Ruins of a pueblito on a rock (below) above Simon Canyon. Although “ruins” is a bit tough of a word in this case as this pueblito is in great condition.



Just in case I finished up with the arches and pueblitos on my first two days in Bloomfield, I had backup plans to return to Chaco Culture National Historical Park (and UNESCO World Heritage Site), arguably my favorite ruins site. I hadn't hiked out to the Wijiji ruins site before, and I wanted to spend more time at the Casa Rinconada Ruins area.



One of a handful of minor ruins sites along the main road leading into Chaco from the north.



"Sun Dagger" petroglyphs on top of Fajada Butte served as a calendar of sorts, indicating the solstices and equinoxes. However, the top is not open to the general public.



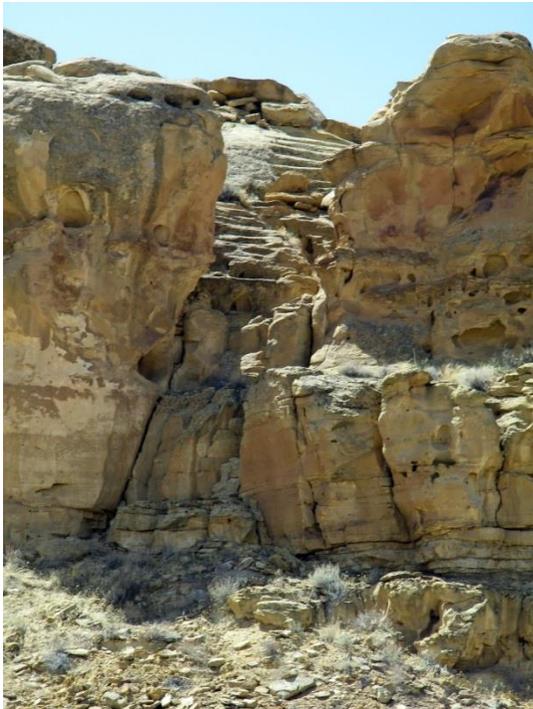
The Wijiji Ruins. It was a very windy day, so I often had to look down to keep sand from blowing into my eyes. But that also seemed to keep the tourists away – I had the hiking trail out to Wijiji and back to myself for the entire hike.



Some not so nearby pictographs. The brochure said these were just 300 feet away from the ruins. But the walk out there seemed so long that I counted my steps on the walk back. 420 steps. And no, I wasn't doing a penguin waddle. I save that for when I go hiking in Antarctica.



Stabilized ruins of a kiva (ceremonial structure) at the Casa Rinconada site, taken from the South Mesa Trail.



What's left of a Chacoan stairway. The Chacoans built roads that headed out to outlying communities. But instead of building roads around natural features, the Chacoans built straight roads, using ramps with stairs when necessary, such as where the steps climbed canyon walls, in order to keep their roads straight. A rock pile ramp below these steps is long gone.



On my way back to Bloomfield from Chaco I stopped at Bisti/De-Na-Zin to explore more of this landscape.

After three nights in Bloomfield it was time to head towards Utah. I planned on a route that cut across the southwest corner of Colorado so that I could check out some sites I learned about last year as well as to return to the Anasazi Heritage Center near Dolores, Colorado for the first time in a couple decades.

Canyons of the Ancients National Monument preserves more than 20,000 archaeological sites including about 6,000 structure ruins that line the canyons of southwest Colorado, the largest concentration of such sites in the United States. The 7.1-mile long (one way) trail through Sand Canyon lets visitors explore one small part of the monument. A number of archeological sites can be accessed via spur and side trails along the Sand Canyon Trail, and the largest ruins site in Colorado – Sand Canyon Pueblo – is located at the north end of the trail.

I hiked for a few miles starting at the south end of the trail and then drove around to the north end to explore Sand Canyon Pueblo ruins.



One of the cliff dwelling ruins sites I observed while hiking a Sand Canyon side trail.



Sand Canyon Pueblo once had 420 rooms and 90 ceremonial kivas. Although the site has been excavated, the ruins were not restored. Backfilling is an effective way to preserve ruins sites for future archaeological study, although a backfilled site generally isn't very photogenic.

After spending the day in southwest Colorado I headed for Utah where I spent the rest of my trip. My Utah explorations are covered in a separate trip summary.