



# MarkHitsTheRoad

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## Southeast Utah and the Four Corners Area Road Trip (U19A-1)

It was time for my annual spring trip to southeast Utah and the Four Corners region. Although I had a few repeats planned, I came up with a number of new-to-me destinations for this trip, including one that I had to cancel on a couple past trips. Rainy weather, especially during my time in Green River, Utah, messed up some of my plans, but I came up with some interesting alternatives for those days.

My first stop was Page, Arizona on the Arizona-Utah border for three full days.

Most of my planned destinations on the Utah side of the border used to be part of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. But in late 2017 President Trump shrank GSE by 47% and the recently created Bears Ears National Monument by 85%. Many of the areas cut from GSE had expired or suspended oil & gas leases, so I can understand his rationale even though I don't agree with the cuts. But several of the areas that were cut are still designated as wilderness or wilderness study areas where any such development is still banned (it takes congressional action, not a presidential order, to change that). So I'm puzzled by the decision for those areas.

In any event, at least for now one can still get a great outdoors experience in the areas cut out of those national monuments.

My biggest hikes were along the Paria River, both north and south of Highway 89. White House Trail – which follows the Paria south of the river – eventually leads into Buckskin Gulch and Paria Canyon in the Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness Area, if you want to hike that far. I hiked part of this trail a few years ago, but got such bad blisters they messed up hiking plans for the rest of the trip. I took a longer hike this time, entering the wilderness area, and returned with no blisters.

The trail crosses the Paria River several times, so you will get your feet wet hiking here.



Near the start/end of my out and back hike



I'm about make another of several crossings of the Paria River along White House Trail.



Along the White House Trail and lots of other places in southeast Utah, where you see this type of cross-hatching pattern in the eroded sandstone, you're usually seeing evidence of ancient, petrified sand dunes that date back to the early Jurassic period.



A minor drainage over time has sculpted and smoothed this sandstone.



Eagle Sink is a fairly large sinkhole. It's a bit out of the way, and not on most of my maps – and for most vehicles it's best to walk the last stretch to get to the sinkhole.



I've driven past this nondescript gate several times over the years. Nothing on the highway or most of my maps indicates that this leads to a short hike and petroglyph site – Catstair Canyon. It helps to get lots of detailed maps to find places most people haven't heard of.



Entrance to the canyon



A number of petroglyphs and some pictographs can be found just inside the canyon on the left.



There is also a rock overhang that I suspected may have been used as a shelter given the soot residue on the ceiling. But there was also evidence of recent fires there. So I looked for other clues.



In addition to the petroglyphs and pictographs, I found these near the shelter opening. The natives would have ground seeds or pods here. If they were preparing food here, then it was probably a shelter.



Color along the highway. Things were noticeably greener than I'm used to seeing around here, but the area had a relatively wet winter/spring.



I liked the look of the late day sun on the landscape at Toadstools Trail, so I decided to hike part of the trail until the clouds rolled in.



Hiking the Toadstool Trail. I first hiked here several years ago when I wondered why a couple cars were parked in a then-unmarked area. Since then they've spruced up the parking area a bit and put up a big sign – now there are usually 15-20 cars here whenever I pass by.



Some of the toadstool formations.



For my day on the Arizona side of the border I started with a photo stop at a highway overlook on the Navajo Reservation. In the distance is the Kaibab Plateau, home of the north rim of Grand Canyon National Park.



Navajo Bridge with the Vermilion Cliffs in the background. Glen Canyon Dam, Hoover Dam and Navajo Bridge are the only three places where you can drive across the Colorado River in Arizona.

My next stop was Grand Canyon National Park, where I hiked all the way down to the Colorado River and back.



I did it at this spot, just a few miles upstream from Navajo Bridge in the Lee's Ferry area. I'm standing just outside Grand Canyon National Park, and that's the Colorado River.

The Lee's Ferry area is one of the few areas where wagons, horses and walkers could relatively easily reach the waters of the Colorado River, so a ferry service had been established here. The Lee's Ferry area is mostly part of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

So how is this Grand Canyon National Park. Saying "National Park" is key as this isn't the Grand Canyon. It's the upstream end of Marble Canyon. But Grand Canyon National Park follows the Colorado River upstream through Marble Canyon to the mouth of the Paria River. Land above the rim to the east is Navajo land. A lot of the land above the rim to the west is in the national recreation area.

But this spot is called Paria Beach, a stabilized sandbar along the Colorado River just south of the mouth of the Paria River. It's the easiest place in Grand Canyon National Park to walk from the park boundary all the way down to the Colorado River and back.



Looking upstream at the Colorado River from Paria Beach. The Paria River's waters were pretty cloudy along the White House Trail hike, which explains the yellow water here. The Colorado River used to carry a lot of sediment, making it reddish back in the day. But Glen Canyon Dam slows down the river's flow so much that the sediment it's carrying settles to the bottom of Lake Powell. So the Colorado River's water is now pretty clear before it reaches the Paria River.



The Colorado River – and Grand Canyon National Park – in Marble Canyon, looking upstream from Navajo Bridge.



The Colorado River at Lee's Ferry. Partial-day rafting trips that start near Page just below Glen Canyon Dam end here. Multiday rafting trips through the Grand Canyon start here.

The "Honeymoon Trail" crossed here. Mormons should marry in an LDS temple, but in the early years of Mormon settlement in southeast Utah there wasn't a temple nearby. So couples headed for St. George to marry, crossing the Colorado River at Lee's Ferry, following the Honeymoon Trail.

Those are the Vermilion Cliffs in the background.



I stopped at an arbitrarily chosen parking area along Highway 89A to get some pictures of the Vermilion Cliffs and discovered that I was at an unmarked trailhead. So I followed the trail up to the face of the cliffs. I'd discover that it led to the abandoned Sun Valley Uranium Mine.



Sunny skies clouded over by the time I reached the LeFevre Overlook. It provides a nice view of several of the plateaus that make up “the Grand Staircase”. But just once I’d like to see this view on a sunny day. The Pink Cliffs, home to Bryce Canyon, are the top layer shown here.



I made good time on my drive from Page, AZ to my next stop, Blanding, Utah. Along the way I stopped at the Goulding's Trading Post site in Monument Valley on the Navajo Nation Reservation.

Harry and Leona ("Mike") Goulding bought the site when the Paiute Indian Reservation relocated from here, and opened a trading post with living quarters on the second floor. In addition to trading with the locals, they promoted Monument Valley tourism, and in the Great Depression they went to Hollywood to promote the area for movie production. They built a lodge at the site to accommodate tourists and movie crews.



Goulding's Lodge continues to operate today. The trading post has been converted into a museum.

Why'd they select this spot? Probably for this view of Monument Valley from the front of the trading post.



Just north of Navajo Nation is this rock formation, Mexican Hat. I always make a photo stop here, both for the formation itself and the backdrop eroded by the San Juan River.



As I still had plenty of time I decided to follow the clay/dirt road along the west face of Comb Ridge, a favorite colorful drive.

Comb Ridge is an 80-mile monocline – basically a tear in the Earth’s crust where the west face is tilted up, revealing colorful layers of rock. It starts in the Abajo Mountains to the north and ends in northeast Arizona. This part of Comb Ridge remains in the much-reduced Bears Ears National Monument.



My plans hit a snag when I found that a usually dry wash that crosses the road was filled with running water. Instead of completely abandoning my plans, I backtracked a bit to a side road that I’ve long been curious about. Although I originally planned to take only about five miles of that road, I instead covered its entire length as it exited Bears Ears and head up onto and across the remote Cedar Mesa area over to Highway 261.

The route was rough in places, but it featured some terrific views, including this one of Comb Ridge and the Abajo Mountains. However, I could see that there was rain moving into the area, which can be a problem when driving on remote dirt and clay roads.



A view of the Bears Ears mesas from my Cedar Mesa drive.



The backside (east side) of Comb Ridge is less colorful as we primarily see the top layer of sandstone. It was the target for the three hikes I took on my first day based in Blanding. None of the trailheads were signed as such – I had to track mileage from the main highway and rely on trail descriptions and photos from previous hikers to determine whether I had found the correct trails.



Early in my hike to Double Stack Ruins I came across this wickiup. It is the frame of an old hut. These are one of the rarest types of ruins found in the Southwest as they're obviously pretty fragile. There is a second wickiup further up the trail, but nature has grown through it, helping to hide it in plain sight.

If this trail were popular with casual hikers, the wickiups probably wouldn't last very long, given how I see people treat other ruins sites and petroglyphs.



The lower ruins at Double Stack Ruins site



I saw some old burrs pressed into the mortar of these ruins, something that I don't recall seeing at any other ruins site. I assume that they were added for decorative purpose, the way I've seen tiny stones used at other ruins sites.



Some ancient pottery shards on display at Double Stack Ruins site



Handprint pictographs at Double Stack Ruins site



My second hike targeted the “Procession Panel” petroglyphs site near the top of Comb Ridge. Again the trailhead was unmarked, but I kept an eye out for fresh footprints in the dirt stretches, widely spaced cairns on the sandstone, and scenes that matched photos and descriptions of the trail that someone had posted online, such as a photo that showed my destination (marked by the red arrow).

But even to get to this point I first had to cross two deep (but fortunately dry) washes, the first filled with a tangle of shrubs and cottonwood trees, the second apparently popular with very regular cows.



Do you see the cairns? Neither did I. So I had to look around a bit to find a sandy stretch with fresh footprints to make sure I was sticking to the described trail.



I'm near the top of Comb Ridge here. I'm parked just past the washes, marked by the arrow. It's not a terribly long hike to get up to this point, but once past the washes it is relentlessly uphill. Good thing I'm still in my youth.

I passed a number of interesting petroglyph panels along the way.



I also was treated to a great view looking out across the Cedar Mesa area that I drove across yesterday. Those slight blips on the far horizon just left of center are the Bears Ears mesas.

Probably the only thing that would have made this hike any better was...



...if I was standing over there at the Procession Panel. On the way back down, I referred to the hike description I had to figure out where I likely missed my turn. Whoever prepared the description apparently wasn't aware that the trail divided at that point. So when I found those fresh footprints in the sand, I didn't realize I needed to look for a second option. Oh well.



So I scampered over there to get this picture of the panel.

What? You think I took this using my camera's 15x optical zoom? You're probably part of the fake media.

The highlight of this panel is three lines (processions) featuring a total of 179 small human-like figures converging on a circle. I can barely make it out when I enlarge this picture, though, so I guess I'll have to redo the Procession Panel hike on some future trip.



My third hike along Comb Ridge took me to the Monarch Cave ruins site, which features a rather impressive ruins structure and some nearby minor ruins.



Note the soot pattern above this small ruins. Its shape suggests where walls used to be.



A ruins fragment and some pictographs.



More pictographs at the Monarch Cave site



Pottery shards and corn cobs found at the Monarch Cave site



Grinding holes (for grinding seeds or pods)



For my last full day at Blanding I headed for the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park where I repeated a couple favorite hikes, including the Slickrock Trail that features views of many of the parks highlights, such as the needles formations shown here.



Looking across a canyon towards the Grand View Point area and Junction Butte of Canyonlands's Island in the Sky District



At Squaw Flats I set out for a large colorful sandstone outcropping that I had explored a bit back in 2011. I wanted to explore it some more this time. A small tree gives a little pop of green against the red and white sandstone.



Here's that same tree back in 2011. It's certainly grown a lot over the last eight years. This was actually one of my favorite pictures from the 2011 trip, so I kept an eye out for the tree during this year's visit.



As I was returning to Blanding I stopped at Church Rock for an afternoon light picture (most of my pictures of Church Rock have been taken in the morning). This has been a favorite photo stop since my first trip out here back in 1991 – Church Rock was one of the first tastes of what I'd soon find in the Moab area on that trip.



As I left Blanding the next morning, I paid a short visit to the Alkali Ridge area where my map said I'd find some historical marker (the map was wrong). It was the site of some extensive ruins archaeology several decades ago. But many of the ruins were since reburied for preservation (routine practice), and were on fenced off private property. But I did get a nice parting photo of the Abajo Mountains.