

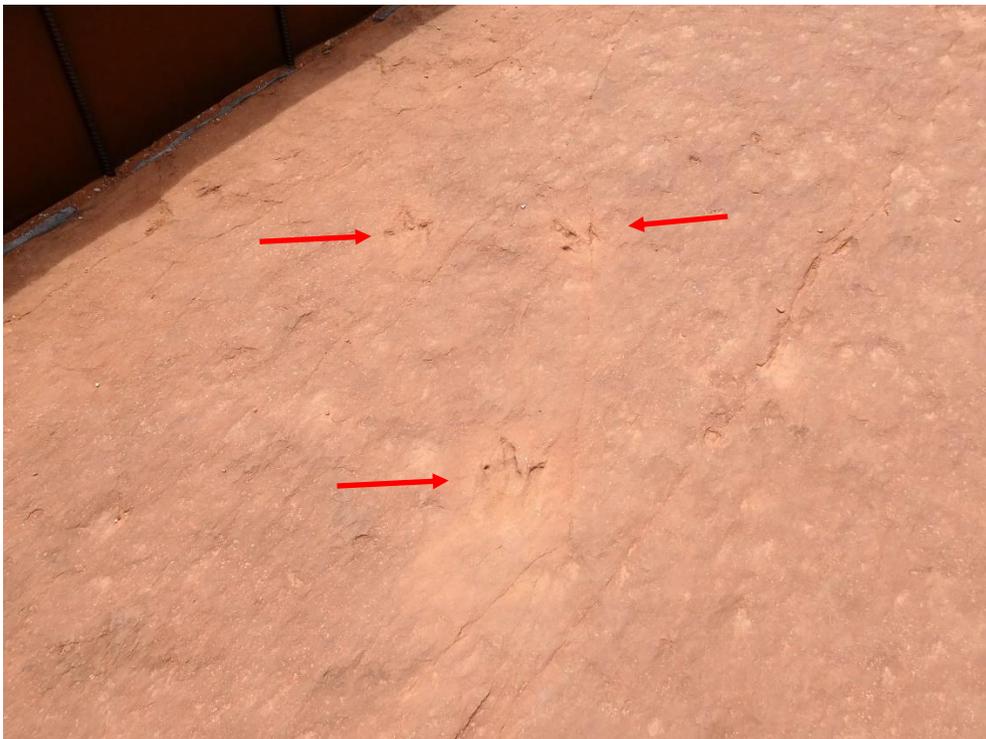
## The Vegas Region Day Trips Road Trip (G21A)

It's said that New Yorkers tend to never get around to visiting the Statue of Liberty – it's so convenient that they could do it any time, but “any time” just never seems to arrive.

Las Vegas is about a 2-hour drive from Mesquite, Nevada and St. George, Utah, two towns that I also pass through regularly on trips that take me up into Utah and back.

I've accumulated a list of places in that area to see – or see again, in some instances – that I've been meaning to do as day trips, but just never seem to get around to it. So, I decided to put together a road trip that covered a number of these targeted day trip sites near St. George and then Mesquite.

I drove up to St. George. Just before reaching town, I headed out to the Warner Valley area southeast of St. George. My first target was the Warner Valley Dinosaur Tracksite. A gravel-dirt road and then a short hike leads to the site.



*Some small theropod (three-toed) dinosaur tracks*



*A short dinosaur trackway*

There are over 400 tracks at the site, some forming 23 trackways (sequences of tracks made by the same dinosaur). They include three different kinds of theropod tracks – Eubrontes, Grallator and an unidentified type. These are track types, not dinosaur species. Scientists generally cannot tell what species of dinosaur made a specific track. However, if tracks are near dinosaur fossil finds in the same rock layer, then they can make reasonable guesses. In this case, paleontologists suggest that tracks at this site have been made by Megapnosaurus and Dilophosaurus dinosaurs. Keep your eyes peeled while you're out here alone in this remote location – they're both meat-eaters!

The road to the tracksite passes the ruins of small Fort Pearce. Mormon settlers built Fort Pearce in 1866 to provide some protection from the Navajo during the Black Hawk War. It protected trails that connected St. George in southwest Utah to colonies that the Mormons established in what is now southeastern Utah.



*Ruins of Fort Pearce*

My next destination was the rock art site at Little Black Mountain. It features a number of petroglyphs that date back hundreds to thousands of years, primarily from the Virgin River Culture of the Ancestral Puebloan and from Archaic Indian peoples.



*One of the rock art panels at Little Black Mountain*



*This is believed to represent a calendar. Given all the petroglyphs of male figures that surround this, and this may be an example of a prehistoric "beefcake" calendar.*



*The black coating on the rock is called “desert varnish”. Bacteria take manganese out of the rock or, more often, from dust that settles on the rock, oxidize it and effectively “cement” it to rock surfaces. Natives found it to be great for rock art – chip off the desert varnish, and the underlying rock color offers quite a contrast to the dark varnish. But if you look closely, you’ll see some petroglyphs here that are themselves the same color as the surrounding desert varnish. It takes thousands of years for a rock to develop a complete coat of manganese-rich desert varnish. For desert varnish to be that dark on the petroglyphs suggests that those petroglyphs were created thousands of years ago, old enough for a new coat of desert varnish to build up over them. Note the differences in styles of the petroglyphs, too.*

My next destination was in the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area.

I headed for its Red Cliffs Recreation Area, where I took a short hike to a ruins site with three different cultures represented. Alas, it wasn’t an impressive site – too much restoration and fencing made it hard to get much of a sense of the site.



*A restored Basketweaver III Culture "cist", or burial chamber*

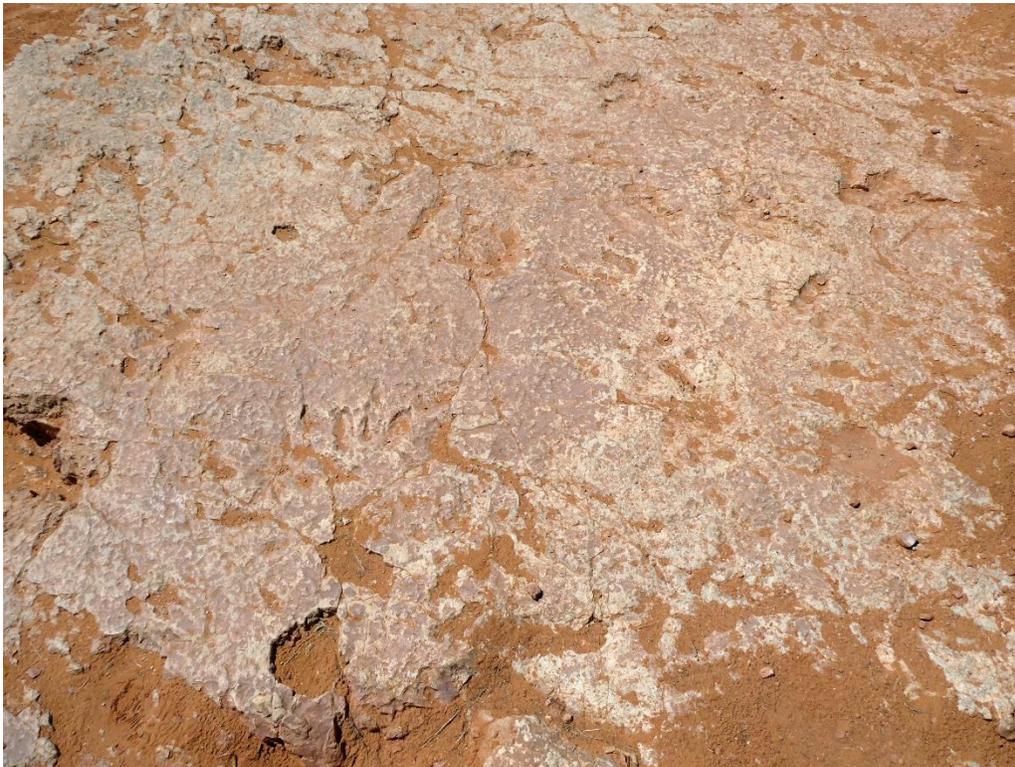


*On the route I took to hike back to the parking area, I came across a small dinosaur track site that wasn't on my map – an unexpected surprise.*

*This is a trackway made by a small dinosaur that long ago walked across a mudflat along the shore of a lake.*



*I did expect to find some dinosaur tracks along the Dino Cliffs trail. Here's a theropod trackway.*



*It looks like a bunch of lightweight dinosaurs held a Jurassic dance party here.*



*I'm not sure how the opening to this ant colony became so fortified. But if the ants built this themselves, we might be in trouble.*



*Moonflowers bloom at night with big showy white flowers. The flowers fade away with the heat of the next day.*



*The old Wells Fargo Express building in Leeds, Utah, is now home to a museum about the surrounding Silver Reef Ghost Town. Silver Reef was the only site in the U.S. where silver was discovered in sandstone.*



My next stop was a bit different. I headed to the Red Hills Desert Garden. The local water company created this to promote desert landscaping – replacing water-guzzling lawns with interesting and colorful desert plants. I've already got about 60 different species and varieties of interesting and colorful desert trees, shrubs and succulents in my yard, but I'm always on the lookout for more ideas.



*I'm not sure where I would add a Chaparral Sage to my yard, but I can add it to my files.*



*The garden had on display some slabs of sandstone with dinosaur tracks that were found in local construction. These tracks are what are called “dinosaur swim tracks”. When dinosaurs swam in shallow water, sometimes their claws scraped the bottom of the lake. Clearly this one was not a *Michaelplelpsosaurus*.*

Dinosaur tracks were preserved when shortly after they were made and sometimes dried out, some different type of sediment came in and buried them – sediment-laden water from thunderstorm run-off or a flood, perhaps, or ash settling from a volcanic eruption. Over time, more sediment built up, and then all of this was compressed into rock. Millions of years later, the rock is eroding. If the newer layer was a softer rock, it could erode away, exposing the dinosaur tracks, which someday will themselves erode away.

A shallow inland sea once cut through Utah, resulting in lots of mud flats to capture dinosaur tracks. Flooding and ash deposits from regional mountain-building volcanic activity had plenty of opportunities in the region to bury some of these track sites, which they did. And now there are numerous dinosaur track sites throughout much of Utah – especially in the St. George area.

Pioneer Park is a city park that adjoins the garden. It's got some hiking trails and rock formations.



*Crack Canyon, a narrow slot canyon, in Pioneer Park. Some people can actually make it through there.*



*A pair of arches in Pioneer Park*



*Dixie Rock in Pioneer Park. People like to go to the top for its views of St. George. The web describes Dixie Rock as “stately”, which is probably why it reminded me of Wayne Manor.*

I dropped plans to return to Utah’s Snow Canyon State Park on this trip.

I headed south towards Mesquite, figuring I’d stop at a place in Virgin River Gorge along the way. But it was closed. So, I headed up into Beaver Dam Wash National Conservation Area in the remote SW corner of Utah, and then took the Mojave Desert Joshua Tree Road Scenic Backway for several miles off the highway.

Back there I came across the Woodbury Desert Study Area and a rock-climbing area. The Woodbury site was home to desert tortoises, but it was ravaged by fire several years ago. Scientists went in and planted a variety of the kinds of plants that the tortoises rely on using locally sourced seeds. Now they’re monitoring it to see how well the tortoise population responded to their restoration efforts.



*A Joshua tree in the Woodbury Desert Study Area. When you see Joshua trees, it is very likely that you're in the Mojave Desert.*



*I spent a full day at Gold Butte National Monument, just southeast of Mesquite. I've been there a couple times, but wanted to check out the rock art along Falling Man Trail. The road to Falling Man was severely rock-strewn the last couple times I was here, but it was clear that a rock plow had come through, so it wasn't too bad. Just before you reach First Rock, pictured, along the main road through Gold Butte, turn west, and then drive for about 2 miles to get to the Falling Man Trailhead.*



*The "Rabbit Ears" formation along Falling Man Trail*



*Some of the rock art along Falling Man Trail at Calvin's Rock*



*The Falling Man petroglyph, for which the trail was named, comes into view.*



*There's a somewhat better look at Falling Man. I got a 30x optical zoom camera for just such occasions. But the zoom feature on my camera has been acting up lately, and it gave out completely just in time for this hike. The megapixels allow for some cropping to get in closer, although not as much as I needed.*

Falling Man Trail leads to a number of additional rock art sites, but the trail is somewhat rougher starting at this point, with a lot of scrambling. With my foot/tendonitis still not fully recovered, I didn't want to push my foot too much with the hiking on this trip.

I took a lunch break at Whitney Pocket, and then took a short hike there, a repeat of past visits.



*I did come across an interesting arch-within-an-arch on this hike that I hadn't seen before.*



*The alternating rows of mountains and valleys across Nevada – the Basin & Range province – resulted when large blocks of the Earth's crust separated and tilted. Erosion from uplifted areas filled in deep valleys, creating today's landscape. In some places, the tilting was as much as 90 degrees. Here at Whitney Pocket, you see stripes of deposited layers that now are almost vertical.*

I hadn't planned on going to Gold Butte's Little Finland. The road follows washes for nine miles, with soft pockets of sand and gravel along much of the route, and big rocks I remembered from my last visit here. But with the road to Falling Man being somewhat improved since the monument was created a few years ago, I took a chance, and really didn't have any trouble with the road. But one good downpour could radically change road conditions.



The drive ends at this escarpment. I knew Little Finland was known for its sandstone formations, but because I hadn't planned to see it on this trip, I didn't bring any information about it with me (and don't tell me this is why I need to get a cellphone so I can look up things like this while I'm on the go, because you don't get cell signals in places like this).

I could see some of the formations along the edge of the escarpment – turns out that they're primarily on top of the escarpment. It would have taken a bit of a roundabout hike to get up there – climbing the cliff face was not an option.



*Many places I love exploring have no cell coverage (white). Just one more reason to love them. 😊*



*Little Finland formations along the edge of the escarpment*

The formations here remind me of those found at Fantasy Canyon (another cell signal-free area) south of Vernal, Utah.

I was actually struck by the palm trees here. According to the local Native Americans, palm trees were growing here before the coming of the white man.

I took the scenic route for my drive home. Valley of Fire State Park is my favorite Nevada state park, and I've been to most of its major attractions multiple times over the years. But I hadn't hiked the Mouse's Tank Trail through Petroglyph Canyon since 2007. It's an easy hike, and it gave me an excuse to check out a few favorite views in the park while I was there, and then head home through Lake Mead National Recreation Area.



*Petroglyphs along the Mouse's Tank Trail*



*Petroglyphs at the Mouse's Tank Picnic Area, across the street from the trailhead*



*Some Valley of Fire scenery*



*Fire Canyon at Valley of Fire State Park*



*Looking at Lake Mead from Stewart's Point. Water levels are way down – much of the land between me and the current shoreline would be under water if the lake were full. Across the lake is the southern part of Gold Butte National Monument.*



*Highway 167 through Lake Mead National Recreation Area provides a nice alternative to I-15 for traveling between Las Vegas and Valley of Fire State Park.*