

# Bryce and Zion 2004

May 26

We had been planning this trip for some time and it was finally time to go - we were all excited. There were 7 of us - me along with Matt Vargas, Amy Ho, Leo and Jenifer Wong, John Keen, and Harry Chou. We started the trip by flying into Las Vegas and renting a minivan. Thanks to Amy we had a nice new white Dodge Grand Caravan waiting for us near the airport.

We headed over to the Treasure Island resort - we had 2 adjoining rooms for the first night. We would set out for Utah the following morning. A couple of us had never been to Vegas before and decided to check out the town a little. The pirate show at Treasure Island, the volcano at the Mirage, and the fountain show and gardens at the Bellagio were all highlights. Nice view from our room on the 26th floor too!

May 27

We started out the next morning - after filling our tummies with a great breakfast buffet. We checked out and hit the road - up the 15 and over on 9 to Zion. As we were driving through the rest of the strip in Vegas, past the roller coasters around the hotels and the Stratosphere tower, the scenery changed to the arid scrub-brush deserts in NV to extensive fields of Joshua trees and some canyons in AZ and UT. We did a little detour through Harmons in St. George where we filled up on our groceries. We finally entered Springdale in about 3 hours - just outside Zion. We checked into our beautiful house there - we thought it would be just a small cabin, but they actually arranged a whole house for the 7 of us, complete with kitchen, living room and 2 bedrooms!

We caught the shuttle to the park entrance and visitor center and then headed into the park - we wanted to get a glimpse of the park the first day and do a hike the next day. We picked up an 8th person - Andrea, visiting from Las Vegas - making a great travel companion for the day. We hit the trail to the Emerald pools - a feature of the park. Crossing the Virgin river, passing beaver-cut cottonwoods in the flood plain of the river, we headed up the trail. The prickly pears were nearing full bloom - the soft magenta flowers in stark contrast to the prickly green cactus. There were actually 3 Emerald pools - the upper pool at the end of a deep canyon with sheer walls. The air was full of the sound of thousands of croaking frogs - it was their mating season! We watched and listened to the pairs of frogs doing their stuff while enjoying the reflection of the sheer red canyon walls in the still water. The middle pool was also full of frogs and overlooked a sheer drop to the lower pool. We weaved our way through a couple narrow slots between the red rocks down to the lower pool, where the water had carved an extensive grotto back into the rock. Two waterfalls were streaming down from the ledge high above, while hanging gardens clung to the rock.

We continued on the bus over to the Weeping Rock - another grotto carved out by water filtering through the rock - sometimes taking over 4000 years! Some of the oldest water in the world! The grotto was also lined with extensive flowers and hanging gardens including monkeyflowers, columbine, and shooting stars. Two large mule deer greeted us on the way back - peacefully grazing in the grass, seemingly oblivious to our presence.

Dinner at the Thai restaurant by the visitor center - interesting you'd find a Thai place there - the waiter was Thai but the chef was white - the food was okay but filled our empty stomachs. Ice cream

afterward hit the spot.

May 28

Breakfast at the house - a real breakfast with cereal, milk, and yogurt. Jenifer was so nice to prepare bagel sandwiches for all of us for the hike. We had a longer hike planned for today - we were debating to hike to Angel's landing, but the Observation point won out - it was actually even higher than Angel's landing, and the scenery was quite varied. We headed on the bus over to the Weeping rock once again, this time taking the trail up the mountain. We immediately started switchbacking up the steep cliffs. The trail itself was a masterpiece of the Civilian Conservation Corps - one of the many public organizations built during the depression era to give work to people. And they did an amazing job too!

One of the highlights of the hike was Echo canyon - a narrow and windy slot canyon. When we first saw it, it really tantalized us into trying to find a way in. Unfortunately, we could only go in a little way, where a choke boulder and deep pool prevented easy progress any further. Fortunately, there was a way down from the other side, and I actually reached the large boulder and pool from the other side! The canyon was quite narrow and deep and just kept drawing you in - what was just around the next corner? The rock walls glowed with an orange hue in the sunlight - there were so many twists and the mystery seemed to deepen with each turn.

Back on the trail, passing many more blooming prickly pears on our way up the canyon. Vivid layering in the rocks and cross bedding patterns were all around - we imagined how the rocks were formed by ancient sand dunes and as the wind shifted, it would deposit the sand into the layers at different angles.

Almost to the top - the trees mostly changed to juniper and pinyon - the vegetation had to be able to withstand windy and much more rugged weather. In fact, in the distance we could see evidence of a storm. They said an unusual winter storm was bound for northern Utah - we would get the southern most traces of it in Zion. Graceful lenticular saucers hovered over the mountains and the wind started picking up - we knew some weather was on its way. They were actually predicting snow in Bryce that night.

The view was amazing at the top - you could see the whole Zion canyon. Even on Angel's landing the people looked like little ants. Some were still working up the precarious cables up the narrow spine with 1000 foot dropoffs on both sides (a couple of us didn't exactly care for heights, so we decided against that hike). We also had a fortuitous encounter with another explorer at the observation point who knew some other sights to see around Bryce and Zion - some off the beaten trail. She pointed us to Bull Valley Gorge and Willis Creek - some nice slot canyons nearby Bryce (which we would visit later).

We started back down the trail - taking a short detour through Hidden canyon. Watch out for hundreds of fuzzy caterpillars! Again the trail itself was a masterpiece - some parts with stairs and narrow ledges and chains to provide some security with 500 foot dropoffs. Beautiful red rocks, a couple arches and a cool narrow canyon greeted us there.

A couple of people were tired and decided to head back (and ended up preparing dinner for us!), while me and John and Harry headed over to the Riverside walk. We started on the trail, passing grottos (even some with flowstone, popcorn and small stalactites), hanging gardens, and steep canyon

walls as they started closing in. And then the most amazing thing happened - I was taking a picture when I feel a hand on my shoulder and it was Ram! (Ram went with us on the Yellowstone trip a few years ago, but declined on this trip since he and his wife had their own plans... turns out their "own plans" were also Bryce and Zion!).

We continued up the narrows a little further - the walls got steeper and taller and closer together, and the river became the trail. The narrows extends for many miles - we were just in for a look. It's hard to turn around in a canyon - especially when it gets more interesting with every twist! But the water was getting deeper (and it was cold!), and we were getting hungry. We got back to our house for dinner - the girls had graciously cooked for us while we were still hiking - the pasta was so good!

It was great to sit and relax at the house after a brief visit to the Fatali gallery (he's like an Ansel Adams of color) and a soothing swim in the pool watching the final beams of sunset hitting the rock walls all around us.

May 29

We were off to go see Bryce today - it had actually rained a bit overnight - the winter storm had given us a little weather overnight, but it was already cleared up by the morning. Only problem is my shoes were left outside last night to dry after getting soaked in the narrows - whoops! But no strenuous hike today so I shouldn't really need them.

Back in the van, checking out of the house (it was hard to leave!), and on the road east and north to Bryce. We passed through the 1.1 mile long tunnel (one of longest tunnels in the world carved from solid rock) and headed east, past Checkerboard Mesa, then up 89 north. The clouds thickened and we hit a bit of drizzle - not sure if it was still going to rain (or snow? - it was snowing in the mountains in front of us!) We passed Red Rock canyon - like a miniature Bryce Canyon just off the road. It was beautiful but the cold wind kept us from going outside too long...

We checked into our place at Bryce Canyon Resort - and a little adventure started. They erased our reservation - we had a cabin booked that was supposed to sleep all 7 of us, but they downgraded our reservation (without telling us beforehand) to a single room with 2 beds. hmmm... gonna be tight! Apparently there were some management issues... With some fortuitous coincidences and last-minute cancellations though, we ended up with a cabin and an extra room - giving us a second bathroom (which we would have really needed anyway), and less cramped living quarters. Actually turned out for the best anyway - except for the walk between the room and the cabin (and some extra cost).

Fortunately the weather was clearing and the clouds were breaking, and we headed down to Rainbow point in Bryce, at the end of the road. This is the highest point in the park, where scrubby bristlecone pines grow by the windy cliff-edges. They look mostly dead, but are still alive, persevering through the elements for over 1700 years (not quite as old as the oldest in CA at 4000 years, but still pretty impressive).

We didn't realize how much colder it would be in Bryce (it was about 3000 feet higher elevation) - we scrambled to find our warmer clothes. Bryce canyon is actually the next "step" in the grand "staircase". It starts with the north rim of the Grand Canyon, which forms the base of Zion - then the top of Zion forms the base of Bryce Canyon - finally the top of Bryce forms the base of Cedar Breaks (which we would visit later).

On our way back from the bristlecones, we hit some of the viewpoints along the way - seeing large arches, multicolored hoodoos, and sweeping vistas. The weather had cleared pretty nicely - just a few puffy clouds to break the otherwise monotonous blue sky. We headed back to Bryce Point and did a nice loop hike on the Peakaboo trail - about a 5.2 mile loop through the hoodoos and to the base of the canyon. Many small windows and arches to play peakaboo with.

It felt like we were on another planet - brilliant red, orange and gold rocks and hoodoos all around us and the trail threaded its way through. Brilliant blue stellar's jays like those in Yosemite and tall firs lined the trail. A couple lingering snow patches (and our shortness of breath) reminded us of our elevation. Many of the hoodoos had arches and windows - some of them quite large. Many also had small caves hidden underneath where the softer rock had eroded under harder rock.

Dinner at the pizza place at Ruby's Inn was good - something about the hiking made me crave pizza and salty food! A few of us lingered around to shop for rocks and souvenirs while others went grocery shopping - great teamwork! I couldn't quite afford the \$7500 slabs of petrified wood (like the one a guy bought for his coffee table to be shipped to Germany), but the small sandstone arches and banded calcite were pretty enough. Our ride showed up promptly at 9:30 (thanks Matt V!), and we headed back to our rooms for some needed sleep!

May 30

It was a beautiful morning - clear skies, but still pretty chilly. Some of us had to bundle up a bit more overnight - none of us really quite figured out how those thermostats work on the heaters. Fortunately my shoes were dry - we planned on visiting some slot canyons through the directions that John collected from the girl at Zion earlier. We had our usual breakfast of cereal, yogurt, OJ, and fruit, and Jenifer prepared her signature bagel sandwiches for us again!

We had talked about visiting the Grand Canyon or Arches for today - but unfortunately Arches was about 5 hours away, and the Grand Canyon was also about 3 hours. There was also plenty of interesting stuff locally to see too. We'll have to save those for the next trip!

We headed out for our little adventure to the slot canyon - following John's directions taken from the lady at Zion scribbled on a little note card. We headed back to highway 12 and over near Cannonville where we looked for Kodachrome Basin road. We never found it, but Main St took us to Kodachrome state park. After asking for directions to no avail, we headed down Main St, looking for a dirt road after 2.8 mi taking us to Bull Gorge canyon.

The directions were pretty accurate, and we headed down the dirt road - testing the handling of our rented white (soon to turn brown) Dodge Caravan. Things were going just fine and I was nodding off a little when we suddenly hit the brakes because of a farmer trailer parked in the middle of the road. And it wasn't moving very much. Hmmm - going to be a long day... And just a little further down the road - we saw a blast from the past - like in the old west of the 1800's - a bunch of cowboys on horses driving at least 100 cows! And of course they were on the same road that we're trying to take, and moving a whopping 1/2 mile per hour!

At least we could read the information booth - apparently we had just entered the Escalante Grand Staircase national monument - a wide area with many interesting geology, canyons, and great scenery. However, most access is limited by rough 4WD roads (and we weren't about to test our minivan there!) After retrieving and returning a lost walkie-talkie to one of the cowboys (they're going high-

tech), they did us a favor by allowing us a way to pass through the herd of marauding cows - we just had to follow one of their vehicles as we sped through the herd. We got a close-up view of the foot long racks of horns skimming the side of our van as we pass - we wondered what it'll be like when we had to head back...

Well the rest of the drive was uneventful and we proceed the rest of the 8 miles to Bull Valley gorge. A narrow bridge spans the even narrower 3 foot canyon and we look down with wonder at the smooth and sculpted canyon below us. If only we had a ladder or rope to get down... but we see a trail paralleling the canyon, and a register - and thanks to John's impeccable note-taking, he gives us the directions. We proceed down the trail, peeking over at the canyon every once in a while - seeing if it is getting shallower so we can enter. Finally, eureka, it's only a few feet deep and we can walk in.

It was like a photographer's dream - different shades of light bouncing off the smooth layered rock. The canyon keeps beckoning us to go further - what is around the next bend? It keeps winding and getting deeper as we descend drops formed by choke boulders. Some of the drops are 10-12 feet, most near the beginning - we tried to imagine the power of the water pushing those size rocks. Fortunately the drops were all rigged with sturdy logs that we could descend - no ropes were necessary, which was good since we didn't bring one and it would have been a shame to turn back right away (and face the cows again!)

The floor was mostly sand and dried and cracked mud - it had been very dry for over a month and there was no rain in sight anywhere near where we were - flash flood danger was pretty much nonexistent. No stagnant pools or knee-deep mud to navigate (there often is, so we were lucky with our timing).

Then we saw it - the featured "attraction" to see - the buried circa 1950 Chevrolet pickup truck. The bridge where we parked was partially built on top of this buried truck and a bunch of logs and rocks pushed into the canyon. Apparently in 1954, someone had a little too much to drink and 3 people died in the accident. The bodies were recovered days later, but the truck was wedged quite tightly. Just a little further down the canyon was a mostly buried Suzuki motorcycle - not sure what the story is with that though.

The canyon kept going and going and going - apparently it goes over 10 miles - need a lot of Energizer batteries to make it all the way... Finally, John spotted some rock cairns built next to the trail and on our left the canyon wall gave way and became a talus slope where we could climb out. We were starting to think of how to get out of the canyon - since before the talus slope, the walls were pretty sheer and hundreds of feet high. We could always go back the way we came and ascend the logs back up the 10-12 foot drops, but it's always more fun and interesting to go back a different way.

The talus slope was quite a challenge - the loose rocks often gave way under our feet, but there was nothing technical. Thankfully I had my shoes this time! We were rewarded with lots of sparkly gypsum crystals near the top. It seemed we were in the middle of nowhere - just a bunch of junipers growing in the sandy ground, which was covered with cicada shells - apparently every 17 years, the cicadas come out to mate and they've recently shed their shells. Thanks to GPS, we found we were less than 1000 feet from the road, so we easily made a bee-line back to the car - we could have just followed the rim of the canyon, but the terrain was rough and the canyon was fairly windy.

We retrieved the rest of lunch from the car and found a nice tree to enjoy the meal. A bunch of other cars were there while we were out and there was a bit of traffic on the dirt road - apparently the

canyon is pretty popular with the locals. The drive back was uneventful though dirty since the dust had caked on the back of the car and around the wheels.

On the way back, we spotted another slot canyon - this one much more easily accessible from the road - some families with kids were wandering around in the canyon and the stream. This was Willis Creek canyon - another beautiful slot canyon - though not nearly as deep and long as the first one. But it was nice icing on the cake and there were no obstacles to deal with - just the shallow stream.

We decided to head back to Bryce and look around some more - Wall Street is one of the most popular hikes - and only 1/4 mile from the Sunset trailhead - so we decided to check it out. It took us down a series of switchbacks and a tunnel down into an amazing chamber of rock glowing orange and red in the late afternoon sun. Large fir trees grew in the narrow canyons. The hoodoos and arches and windows were all around us - there were 3 windows that looked like a face, so poking my head through the "mouth" and opening my own mouth made a comical picture. Amy "pushing" a large boulder to Matt V and saying "here, catch!" also made a nice picture. We ended up doing the whole 1.3 mi Navajo loop - we couldn't get enough of the otherworldly scenery in Bryce canyon.

We decided to end the day with a little stroll to Fairyland point - again with sweeping vistas of the Amphitheatre - the colorful banded rocks and hoodoos all around us. We stepped gingerly over the narrow trails and found a nice spot to hang out for a while. We took a break at the visitor center - it was like a museum and the video was quite informative. They had a great scale model of the canyons of southern Utah, where we could see the "grand staircase" with Bryce and Zion, down to the Grand Canyon. It was interesting too to hear how the Navajo Indians lived off the land for hundreds of years.

Dinner at the restaurant behind our resort was actually quite good - though the outside of the place hardly showed it. A nice swim in the bathtub temperature water in the covered pool while watching the sunset was a graceful way to end the day. The pool was like a hot tub with hot jets feeling great on our achy muscles.

May 31

It was a shame for this to be our last day already - we had so much fun on this trip. At least our flight wasn't until 6:30 so we didn't have to rush back. We checked out and hit the road fairly early. We were tired last night and went to bed early, and we were on the road by about 8:00. Instead of just going back the way we came, we opted for a scenic route - it was a "AAA scenic byway" and took us through Cedar Breaks national monument. We passed a couple sleepy towns on the way and started climbing the hills north and west of Bryce.

The forests of tall pines were often broken by patches of aspen trees - the leaves were just starting to come out for the spring - they have a long and snowy winter at 10000 feet. Snow patches still lingered under the trees and at the edges of the meadows. We crested at over 10600 feet - I didn't realize we would go this high, but the GPS confirmed it. We headed down through the national monument and vistas on our right revealed a large amphitheatre of hoodoos similar to that in Bryce. Large snow patches still graced the north facing slopes and the shadows between the hoodoos.

Cedar Breaks is actually a misnomer - it should actually be "Juniper Breaks" - with the hardy juniper trees surviving the rough weather and cold winters - it goes below freezing 200 days of the year and it was below freezing last night. Bristlecone pines held their ground near the rim of the amphitheatre as it was slowly breaking away - their roots attest to the fact.

The ranger gave us a personalized geology explanation - Cedar Breaks is much smaller and more "personal" than Bryce Canyon and the rangers are happy to go out of their way. The amphitheatres are formed by the "due" process - deposition, uplift, and erosion. Sediment was deposited when much of southern Utah was a large freshwater lake (confirmed by fossils). Many faults lay beneath this lake and over time, the rocks were uplifted to over 11000 feet - Brian Head peak is about 11300 feet. Then, over time, the rocks have been eroded by wind, rain, and snow and ice. Ice forms in the cracks, and when it freezes, it expands, pushing the rocks apart. We could also clearly see faults in the rocks - where the rock had cracked and different layers of rock had dropped at least 50 feet.

The town of Cedar city - elevation 5900 feet was visible far away beyond the rows of multicolored hoodoos, and in the far distance, we could even see as far as 13063 foot Wheeler Peak in NV (part of Great Basin national park 150 mi away). Two days ago, the winter storm had blown through, resulting in zero visibility and dumping about 3 inches of fresh snow. Fortunately as it passed, it cleared the air, producing amazing visibility.

We continued on our way west on 14 through Cedar City and hit 15 south. The ranger earlier said Kolob Canyon in the edge of Zion national park was a worthwhile short detour from 15, so we decided to visit and shoot a few more pictures. John's national parks pass got some good use this trip - we easily made back the \$50 for it - visiting Zion, Bryce, Kolob Canyon, and Cedar Breaks.

We headed back the last couple hours back to Las Vegas - again stopping at Harmons in St. George for sushi, fried chicken, and sandwiches. We continued on 15, past some interesting mesas formed by a hard lava caprock over softer sandstone - often the vertical columnar joints of the basalt were quite visible. One of these mesas had its own neighborhood on top - a single steep road leading up to the "island in the sky".

As we neared Vegas, the skyline dominated the view as we crested the last pass down 15. We were a little early getting back to Vegas and decided to go over to the Hoover Dam for a look. We turned onto 515 south to the dam and immediately hit solid traffic - hopefully it wasn't just Memorial Day traffic. We hadn't really seen any traffic the whole trip. Fortunately it didn't set us back too bad and we kept moving. After navigating a security checkpoint and winding our way down Boulder canyon we could see Lake Mead and the line of cars heading across the dam.

We were checking our watches to make sure we weren't going to cut it tight getting back - fortunately we could park before the dam and we had about 1/2 hour to walk around. Actually that was plenty - the thermometer in the car had read 108 degrees! And since it was just 40 degrees a few hours ago (and 10000 feet higher), we had many layers to shed! The dam was quite impressive - built over 70 years ago. We were trying to imagine the amount of water pressure on the dam - the lake was at least 500 feet deep at the dam. We did the usual tourist stuff - getting pictures from the dam, seeing the flying figures and astronomical chart by the big flag, and seeing the visitor center. We didn't bother paying for a tour (we probably wouldn't have had time anyway) - but maybe next time. Also the amount of electrical lines coming from the turbines of the dam far below was astonishing.

It was time to start heading back - back up 93 and 515 to the Las Vegas airport, where we filled up the van one last time (only in Vegas - they have slot machines at the gas stations!) We dropped off the van and took the bus back to the airport. Unfortunately, Harry was unable to get on the same return flight as the rest of us, and a little security mishap with a forgotten pocketknife separated us for a bit - he took the next flight back to San Jose. We wandered through our last couple slot canyons in the airport - but this time they were canyons between the maze of slot machines in front of our gate - the one-

armed bandits trying to make us lose a couple more dollars before leaving.

It was a great trip and we're all eager to get back to Utah - maybe Arches and Canyonlands next time.

Actually right after getting back to San Jose, I had a dress rehearsal to attend for my choir group - and since it was near San Jose airport and went until 10 (we were back at 8), I was able to make it!