

## Utah road trip Thanksgiving 2009



### Introduction

I originally saw there was a trip to the UT canyon country with the Stanford Outing Club – going to the heart of some of the most interesting desert scenery in the American southwest. It was organized by “V” (his full Indian name has between 15-20 letters on both his first and last name) – one of the outspoken leaders of the club, and soon after I expressed interest. However, after not hearing anything back in a couple days, I started to wonder what was going on – turned out the trip was full (apparently filled in 1 hour or something crazy like that!).

However, a few days later, we were having a Thanksgiving lunch at our company and an email buzzed from another leader, Lothar Langer, who was planning another UT trip, following in “V”'s footsteps. But his trip was going to be a driving trip (saving \$350 in plane tickets and a bit of hassle) – we'd have 1 less day, but still about 2 ½ full days of exploring the wonderful canyon country. I expressed interest, and at the end of the lunch, another email buzzed in saying I was in... I was pretty excited indeed.

Since my family is on the east coast and I was already planning a 2-week trip to visit for Christmas, I had been excited about doing something different for Thanksgiving. I had originally made tentative plans to hang out in Vegas with some college buddies over Thanksgiving – but changed my mind when some other things came up and the planning would have been kind of awkward. Ironically, we were probably going to pass right past Vegas on the I-15 – I could probably wave to my buddies from across the freeway! Funny how things work out in unexpected ways.

## Wednesday

Lothar got us a rental car – a Dodge Journey, for our journey to the wild southwest for a few days. I was psyched to get rolling. Sam Flores was also with us and we got the gear loaded and hit the road. We managed to beat some of the traffic getting out of the Bay Area and we were hoping to get as far as we could before camping for the night.

It was to be a fairly low-budget trip – camping each night and cooking our own meals. That sounded good – the weather was supposed to be pretty good for much of the trip – a little cool at night with maybe a slight chance of showers one night (but it was doubtful it would rain much in the desert anyway, so we'd probably be fine).

We ended up getting to Bakersfield around 11:00 – a little later than hoped for originally. It would be about another 1.5 hours to Barstow where we had thought about camping. However, just off the 99 we saw some motel for \$49, then another one for \$44 and then \$39... didn't look like too bad of an area, and for about \$40-\$50, that would only be about \$15 a person... we decided to screw the camping – we found a room and quickly settled in for the night!

## Thursday

We figured today was going to be mostly a driving day – at least we had made it to Bakersfield the first day, so we'd have a little time to look around on our way toward Escalante. We'd probably reach there around 6 or 7 if we drove straight through. We climbed out of smoggy Bakersfield and the sky changed from a milky grayish color to a brilliant blue by the time we reached about 2000 feet. The sky would be a dazzling blue in the desert and we were ready for the clean fresh air ahead of us.

It was Thanksgiving and also my mom's birthday and she was pleasantly surprised to hear from me as we trekked our way through Barstow. We had lived not far from Barstow when I was growing up and describing the sights made her feel a bit nostalgic. I wonder how many of these places I had been to when I was just 2 years old, but neither of us remembered...

I had been chatting with my mom about Valley of Fire, which she had looked up on her laptop at home and found quite fascinating. I mentioned it to Sam & Lothar and they thought it would be cool to see a couple things along the way to Escalante as well. We'd be there around lunchtime and even if we spent a couple hours, we'd still get to Escalante at a decent time. We decided to go for it. It would be a nice way to break up the drive and a nice warm-up for the anticipated wonders that lay ahead in UT.

Valley of Fire appeared rather suddenly as we took a lonely desert road off the main corridor of I-15. I had some doubts about what was there and if it was worth visiting. The desert all around was fairly bleak and desolate - seemingly anything would have been interesting by comparison. As we neared the entrance, however, we passed through a winding canyon and there appeared an "island" of brilliant red rock!

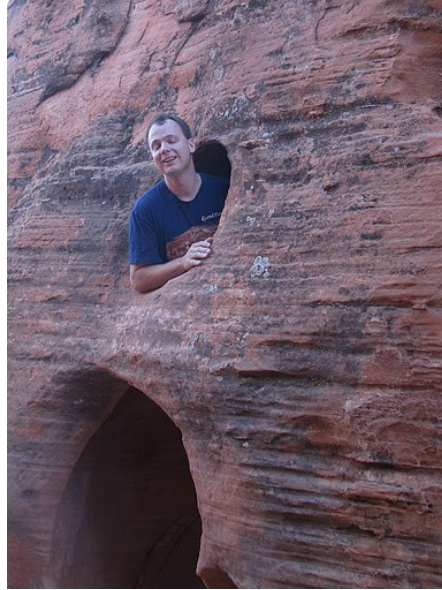
The rocks seemed so out of place, forming bizarre "beehive" shaped pinnacles, full of twisting tunnels and domes and narrow canyons. Judging by the amount of traffic on the freeway, it's

amazing how many people drove right by and probably have never heard of or had any interest in seeing the wonderland that lay just a few miles away. Or how many people went straight to the jingling slot machines and bypassed the natural wonders that lay right on the outskirts of Vegas.



I was a bit surprised to see quite a few people around playing on the rocks on Thanksgiving Day – a time that Americans are home with their families. Most of the people were international – Indian and Asians and many others. Lothar was from Germany and Sam was from Mexico (and me being from Bermuda, all of us were from outside the US).

We only had a few hours, but I figured we should make the most out of it, exploring the canyons, playing on the rocks, visiting the petrified logs, and seeing the petroglyphs. The main thing we went to see was called the Petroglyph canyon – I figured by the name it had to be interesting. We enjoyed sandwiches in one of the sunny bends of the canyon. The walls of many of the canyons were full of a swiss-cheese like pattern of holes and tunnels, making for an interesting jungle-gym. You could disappear in one hole and pretend to hide, then re-emerge from a hole on the other side and surprise your friends!



I wonder what life would have been like thousands of years ago when the Indians called those canyons home. Now we see them as a place of recreation and a way to stretch our imagination. Seeing the petroglyphs you could see the elements of the culture that was important – hunting, the sun, weather, and various tribal dances. There was definitely a simpler way of life back then when humans lived in harmony with nature. It was like a time capsule - I wonder if we knew we were going to pass on and we wanted to leave markings for generations thousands of years later to see, what we would put. I saw a bunch of people puzzling through the petroglyphs and saw an “atlatl” – an ancient hunting weapon. I mentioned what it was and people were quite interested. You could tell the highest values of the society were in hunting and gathering. But that’s all I knew. I started having fun and started making up stories of what some of the shapes meant – here was a ram, then there was a calculator, then an alien spaceship... it took a moment for people to realize I was just kidding! Actually very few petroglyphs are even partially decoded – the meanings were very poorly understood. Besides, the “language” of petroglyphs is hardly a “unified language” where the same symbol means the same thing in different places. We take for granted that most of our language has a fixed meaning, but with many tribes isolated by the rugged desert, long distance communication was not very common.



We made our way down toward the end of the “petroglyph canyon”, where the canyon made an abrupt left turn and quickly narrowed down – the canyon that was once probably 50 feet wide quickly narrowed to just a few feet. Immense flash floods must have swirled along the canyon through the centuries. Today, it was dry and sandy – you could only imagine what it must be like with torrents of water flowing down.

The trail officially ended where the canyon narrowed down, as it immediately dropped down about an 8-foot pour-off into a giant plunge-pool, then another 5-6 foot pour-off, then a 30-foot waterfall. It was bone-dry when we were there and the plunge-pools were partially filled with dry sand dunes. A rocky use trail went around these plunge pools to the base of the 30-foot dryfalls and to some further canyons. It would have been easy to spend the whole afternoon exploring the geologic wonders that lay beyond, but we wanted to get to Escalante eventually... Besides, that was the purpose of the whole trip to begin with!

Back at the top of the plunge pools, I took a peek down into the first drop – a circular chasm maybe 12 feet in diameter made of smooth red sandstone polished though repeated violent floodwaters. Some people were also exploring nearby and I decided to slide down the smooth chute and drop a few feet into the sand dune. Beyond the large plunge pool was another slightly smaller one, and beyond that was the top of the 30-foot falls (which I didn’t dare try to slide down!). The 2 plunge pools made an interesting place for experiments with my camera – how to capture the undulating curves of the rippling sandstone in the most creative way?



It was getting late and we figured we'd start heading back. However, even though it was easy to hop down the first 8-foot pour-off, it wasn't quite as easy to get back up. The smooth rock was completely lacking of holds, with any roughness polished off many years ago by water. It looked like a 1-way trip! There may have been a way to climb out from the side, involving possible dicey holds and more exposure than I wanted to deal with. Luckily someone was at the lip of the drop extending a hand and with a firm pull, lifted me back up where I could grab the top and climb out.

On the hike back I realized I could have been in quite a predicament! But soon, we were on our way back to the car, making our way to Kodachrome point – a multicolored landscape with jumbled rockpiles extending to the horizon. Photographers with cameras of all shapes and sizes had converged to capture the scenery in whatever way possible – from cell phones, to cheap single-use plastic cameras, to point & shoot cameras, and someone had what appeared to be a telescope mounted on a camera – the lens alone must have been a couple thousand dollars!

I was fidgeting with my camera a bit – a couple weeks ago I had dropped it in the dirt on a hike. After I thought I had wiped all of the dirt off, I turned it off, but the retracting lens pulled a couple small fibers of dirt inside, which then were immediately statically attracted to the CCD sensor inside the camera. So now, every picture I took, especially those with a clear blue sky, had a tell-tale pattern of hairs and specks of dirt. Changing the zoom didn't have any effect and cleaning the lens made no difference – the dirt was on the sensor itself. Cleaning the sensor would involve ripping the entire camera open, retrieving all the tiny springs and nuts that would jump out the instant the camera was opened, very carefully swabbing the dirt off the sensor, and somehow getting it all back together in one piece. Forget it! Repair would have probably been a minimum of \$150 (with shipping, labor costs and stuff) – not to mention being without a

camera for a couple weeks. It'd just be easier to get a new camera (electronics aren't meant to be repaired anymore these days anyway, right?)

At least when I got home I could photoshop the hairs out – it couldn't be that hard, right? However, I probably took 20 pictures at Kodachrome point and many dozens more during the day (and we hadn't even gotten to UT yet!) Those hairs would take a bit of tedious work after all. Oh well – maybe if I was really good, Santa would bring a new one for Christmas...



We were soon on our way north on I-15 and then heading straight toward a wall of imposing mountains ahead of us. I saw on my iPhone GPS that somehow we were going straight through and not looping around the mountains – interesting. Turned out the road went through the Virgin River canyon in a small corner of AZ just before we hit UT. The golden light of the setting sun was gleaming off the walls of the canyon as we drove through – the river cut a perfect pass through the mountains to allow a major freeway to pass through the narrow canyon.

It was just getting dark as we headed up through UT – we turned east and passed a couple small towns as we thought about where to have dinner. However since it was Thanksgiving, most places were closed (except McDonalds and Del Taco), but who wanted to eat a Big Mac for Thanksgiving dinner? We thought about getting into camp and cooking dinner when we got in, but seeing the dusting of snow outside in the juniper and pine forest, we changed our minds when we realized it would be a chilly night! Looked like it might be a bummer of a Thanksgiving dinner, scarfing down junk food snacks at a gas station...

We pressed on and soon crossed into Bryce Canyon national park – the snow-frosted red rock pinnacles of nearby Red Canyon gleamed in the high-beam headlights. Soon, to our surprise we saw a small rustic looking restaurant to our left with OPEN in neon letters and there were a couple people inside the gift shop – looked like something to try out.

We were in luck – they were just getting ready to close, but they seated us at a table right by the fireplace! They only were serving one entrée left (the “Thanksgiving special” with turkey and mashed potatoes and the like) – but that was perfect, exactly what we wanted! It truly felt like a

thanksgiving dinner – we were quite thankful for the great food (quite a bit more than we could handle!) and rustic atmosphere. We had thought about trying to meet “V”’s group for dinner, but at this point, no cell reception was to be had – maybe we could meet for one of the later nights though. But we were having a great time ourselves – I wonder if they were eating freeze-dried camp food in the snow!

Just when I felt like we were going to have to give up our Thanksgiving dinner, it seemed like it was given back to us, beyond any of my expectations! Looking back, it may have seemed like a small thing, but I think it illustrated an interesting facet of God’s provision – when we are at our lowest point and move away from relying on ourselves, that’s when we’re finally free to trust in God and He is free to finally provide. Interesting how this happened for Thanksgiving dinner of all things – the symbolic meaning seemed so much greater for the celebration now.

One of my favorite songs by Matt Redman is “Blessed be Your Name” which has for one of the choruses:

*You give and take away  
You give and take away  
My heart will choose to say  
Lord, blessed be Your name*

Here I felt we should sing “You take away but give back, Blessed be your Name”!

After dinner, we drove the last hour or so and reached Escalante. We were thinking about where to turn in for the night, but when the warm lights of the Prospector Inn came up on our left, we decided to give it a go. Warm beds, TV, hot showers, and breakfast next door could not easily be turned down. So far, we were now 0 for 2 with nights camping...

## **Friday**

We were finally in the heart of the UT canyon country – I was really looking forward to this day. We had borrowed a book from the front desk highlighting some of the good hikes nearby, and many were in line with our plans and expectations. Devil’s Garden and the Dry Fork canyons were recommended – both sounded quite interesting.

We had a quick breakfast in our hotel room since we were eager to get out. We checked in at the ranger station nearby where they gave us some maps and tips on what to explore – they had a wonderful 3-D satellite map of the entire Grand Staircase area showing how the Colorado Plateau had been uplifted and sculpted over the eons. We checked for any note from “V” but there was none – perhaps they had their own agenda and meeting up wasn’t really a priority. Well, anyway we wanted to make the most of our couple days there. They also warned a couple of roads that were once fairly easily passable had become much rougher due to lack of funding for grading the roads and you enter at your own risk. But Hole in the Rock road (the first part of it) and the Burr trail were fine.

Soon we hit the Hole in the Rock road into the Grand Staircase - Escalante national monument. Here, centuries of erosion have exposed a staircase of rock layers in progressive steps for



several hundred miles. Meanwhile near the edges of these steps, deep canyons have been carved through eons of flash floods wearing through what started as small cracks in the rock.

Our first stop was Devil's Garden, a wonderland of multicolored rocks, pinnacles and hoodoos connected by natural arches, wave-like sandstone slickrock and mushroom like caprocks. Not sure why such a fascinating place was associated with the devil (it was like heaven, exploring the wonders of God's creation – not hell associated with the devil).



We could have easily spent hours climbing through the tunnels connecting the hoodoos, exploring the narrow canyons and experimenting with different lighting. The red and yellow rocks and bright blue sky easily saturated the colors in each camera frame. I managed in many shots to “hide” the hairs and specks so they weren’t visible (sometimes simply holding the camera upside-down did the trick).

A few miles further down the Hole in the Rock road was the turnoff for the Dry Fork narrows. We were greeted by some warnings at the trailhead –

- Make sure you don’t get trapped in a “prison” by jumping down a pour-off you can’t get back up (the picture showed a lone hapless hiker swimming in a pool where the walls were too steep to climb back up, and the story said someone was stranded for 8 days in a canyon...)
- Watch out for snakes. The information from the ranger station warned that “midget-faced rattlesnakes are often seen in the slots. Please don’t disturb the snakes”
- Make sure there are no thunderstorms anywhere in the vicinity – a storm 50 miles away can still send torrents of water down the canyon even if it’s bright and sunny outside. The Escalante River has quite an extensive watershed.

I had just scanned the warnings and heeded the warning about the “prisons” (the canyon yesterday could have been a “prison”), but it wasn’t until after we had gotten back to the trailhead and we were signing back in that I noticed the warnings about the snakes. Maybe that was just as well since otherwise I’m sure with every bend in the “spooky” spooky canyon / brimstone canyon I would have been expecting a rattlesnake to jump out (oh great...)

After getting our packs ready and boots laced up, we immediately started down a steep trail into the slickrock canyon. At the bottom appeared to be a wide beach full of fine sand where it was unclear which way to go. We had planned to just go up Peek-a-boo and find our way over to Spooky and go back down, forming a loop. Apparently, Peek-a-boo is easier to go up and Spooky is easier down (and it’s pretty tough to do the loop in reverse).

According to the map, Peek-a-boo was right in front of us. Just to our left was an obvious slot canyon cut in the Entrada sandstone layer with a smooth sandy bottom, beckoning our exploration. We followed the trail of footprints in the sand.

The canyon was easy walking – smooth sandy bottom with tall vertical walls just a few feet apart. It was beautiful – the cross-bedded sandstone walls had been polished smooth from years of violent floods, with large rocks occasionally being hurtled down by the force of the water. A thick log was wedged about 40 feet above our heads at one point, proving the power of the occasional floods. The bright blue sky was occasionally visible above and where the sunlight reached down in the canyon gave the walls an ethereal warm orange glow. It was like a bit of paradise with every twist of the canyon revealing another wonder of nature.



After going in for probably 20 minutes, we still hadn’t found the “tough part” – which was supposedly why they said you should go up this canyon instead of down. Hmm – and a little further, the canyon started getting pretty shallow (even to just about 10 feet). Upon checking the map, it looks like we might have followed another canyon which was not even highlighted (turned out we made a wrong turn right at the beginning and went down a “boring” branch) – wow, it was so beautiful and we had even completely missed the “good part”!

I scrambled up the wall and hopped over to the flat desert at the rim – it was surprising how the otherwise mostly flat desert could conceal the marvel of the canyon. If you were just 20 feet away, you might not even be able to tell the slot canyon was so close!

We decided to turn around and head back toward the start in hopes of finding our original goal of Peek-a-boo and Spooky. After walking along the rim for a couple minutes (and Sam and Lothar were following just below me in the canyon), I realized I need to get back down in the canyon. However, 8-10 feet was pretty easy to climb up, but getting back down the smooth vertical sides of the canyon appeared rather formidable. Fortunately with a little help, Sam and Lothar helped lower me back down safely. The “prison” in this case was getting up something you couldn’t easily get back down!

Back at the wide “beach” at the entrance of the canyon, we explored around the sand dunes and found a little ways further a notch with an opening about 12 feet up. I think I saw it earlier but didn’t think much of it, but it turned out that was the entrance of Peek-a-boo! You had to climb about a 7-foot pour-off, then right after that a 5-foot drop. Fortunately with 3 people and passing packs, we managed the obstacles (though a couple attempts were required!)



Just above our heads were a series of arches (we called it the “hall of arches”) – sort of like out of a Gothic cathedral. Some of the arches were 10-20 feet above our heads, and some were just a few feet high (giving the option of climbing over or under) – it was fun to have one person go over and one under and get some interesting photos. One looked like I was emerging from a whirling vortex of sandstone (but with a crazy grin on my face and camera in hand).

Every few yards presented another bit of a challenge, some requiring help from each other. I had been pretty careful with my camera in the beginning (putting it away and protecting it when I didn’t have it out), but at this point I had it out constantly. I thunked the lens (just a little bit) a couple times on the rocks, but luckily didn’t cause any further damage – I should be more careful though! Maybe knowing the camera was already messed up a bit (with the hairs and dirt on the sensor), I felt like I could cut some corners with carefulness. I know I could have really

regretted it if I really broke it and ruined the pictures from the trip, but I didn't care at the moment – I was having too much fun.



The canyon started to get easier and the walls a bit shallower and soon we emerged in the open flat desert. The plan was to cut diagonally across about ½ mile of open desert until we would be funneled into the next canyon (Spooky). Along the way we found some nice rocks with an open view and enjoyed some chocolate, oranges and trail mix for lunch – a real treat indeed. Somehow, looking around me, I felt the canyon was all a dream and that it wasn't real. I had to flip back through my camera and see the pictures I had just taken a couple times...



We found a smattering of footprints that we followed for a bit but then disappeared, and then some more footprints that then disappeared. Hmmm – at this point, we were using dead reckoning (with our GPS) and we knew the other canyon had to be around somewhere. Our persistence was soon rewarded as we emerged in a wide wash, and looking downstream was the unmistakable opening of the rock into the spooky blackness.

Our navigation was correct and the blackness was indeed the entrance of Spooky canyon. For being just a short distance from Peek-a-boo, I was surprised how different the character of this canyon was. The diagonal bedding planes were interrupted by occasional harder rough layers which jut out, giving it a spooky and jagged appearance – in contrast to the warm glow of the smooth rocks of Peek-a-boo. A graceful arch then swooped overhead a little further in.



The canyon was narrower and deeper than Peek-a-boo, often being just a foot or two wide, which blocked most of the light from the sky above. A little ways in the canyon we heard voices of another group coming the other way – we hadn't seen many people all day and it was surprising to hear so many voices. Turned out there was an "interesting downclimb" about 15 feet down a breakdown pile. At this point, it looked like the canyon hit a dead end, but after hearing voices below and looking down through cracks in the rocks, I saw faces far below.

Without the people being there, it wasn't real clear how to go through – they appeared at just the right time! One by one we carefully managed our way down and re-entered a narrow part of the canyon. Here it was almost pitch-dark where the walls were probably just a foot apart. Occasional skylights gleamed above, pointing to the sunny world above. At one point, we had to let some people pass, and I found it easier just to chimney up one part maybe 5 feet or so and let people pass below instead of back-tracking to find a wider spot!

Proceeding through the canyon, we eventually reached the longed-for light at the end of the tunnel where the canyon abruptly ended back in a wide sandy beach – whew what a trip! I saw it was about 2:30 and we still had some energy to see what other canyons were nearby. The ranger mentioned Brimstone was a little further, but it was quite difficult and there were possibly large pools of water that may require wading (or even swimming!) I thought it would be cool to see and Sam and Lothar were game, so we were on our way.

We had to follow the main canyon for about ½ mile and then there would be a large breakdown obstacle (which may be impassible – but we had to have a look anyway – couldn't hurt). The main canyon seemed so boring now compared to the slots we were just in (though it was beautiful in itself!) To pass the time, we started playing baseball with some large tufts of tumbleweed using our hiking poles as bats!

We hit the obstacle, but enough sand had washed around it the time we were there, it was an easy downclimb. Maybe at different times of year, depending on how the rocks move during high water, the obstacle may be quite difficult. The canyon opened up and made a left turn, eventually funneling us into Brimstone canyon. In about ¼ mile, the 100 foot wide canyon narrowed to less than a foot across – imagine water that was just 6 inches deep would suddenly go to 50 feet deep with the canyon so narrow!

Sam was tired and hung out by the entrance as Lothar and I went in for a look. This canyon was even more spooky than the last one – probably 100 feet deep and so narrow that even going sideways was a challenge. One spot would probably be a “filter” for anyone weighing more than about 180-200 pounds. I fit through just fine, but I bet if we went after the holidays, I wouldn't be so sure any more...



A couple places along the way was clear evidence of deep pools of standing water – the high-water marks of debris formed lines along the wall a couple feet up. The canyon was bone-dry at the time (the summer monsoons were long over with and the winter rain and snow hadn't started yet), so it was the ideal time for exploration.

The canyon seemed to go in forever – an endless series of twists and bends leading further into the blackness. I almost wished I had a headlamp handy. What a crazy place – so inhospitable (you couldn't even sit down or turn your shoulders), so otherworldly (the deep reddish-purple walls were so smooth and scalloped by the water), and so fantastic (I wonder how many people get to experience such an environment)!

It was getting a bit late and we decided to turn back (the map indicated the canyon soon reached some impassible obstacles anyway), so I didn't have any regrets of missing anything. We met Sam who had been waiting and I showed him a video of going through the canyon – even though I was walking though quite slowly, the walls were so narrow that not knowing the scale it looked like we were flying through at like 60 mph!

It was just getting to be sunset as we hiked out of the canyon – some high clouds had moved in while we were in the canyon, and the last rays of the sunset hit the clouds from underneath, making it appear part of the sky was on fire – was so beautiful! However, as we were enjoying the show of the sunset, I felt a little cool breeze where I hadn't expected... I discovered a draft coming from the back of my pants – oops... apparently while slithering through the very narrow slot canyon, my pants had rubbed the rock so much that they wore completely through. A quick probe with my hand confirmed the mishap – just a few threads held the important parts of my pants together! Fortunately I had another pair handy and we were done hiking for the day – whew! The pants were old and needed to be replaced anyway, so this was the final use for them – they went straight to the trash.

Our original plan was to make dinner and camp in the backcountry, but once were back in the car and on the road again and seeing that town was just a few miles away, we decided to find a restaurant. A few places were closed since it was off-season, but we found a nice burger joint at the edge of Escalante. The juicy burgers, drinks and dessert afterward sure beat cooking freeze-dried camping food!

When we finished dinner, we had planned to head a few miles east of town and settle in a campground along Calf Creek. But when we realized the Prospector Inn was right on the way to the campground, we had a quick straw-poll vote to see who was interested in doing that instead. Checking the car thermometer – 38 degrees, the vote was unanimous for warm beds and hot showers in the morning!

## **Saturday**

We woke up fairly early – around 6:30, definitely earlier than we normally would in the Bay Area. I guess after a couple days being outdoors, we quickly adapted to just following the sun – waking up at dawn and going to bed early since there's not much else to do when it's dark. It almost seemed silly as engineers to wake up at 10 am and work then stay up until 2 am – no wonder why it's so easy to lose touch with what goes around us. As the native Americans lived in harmony with nature, it seemed like we were the antithesis of them, ignoring the pattern of the sun, living in a very artificial world, and controlling nature to fit our needs.

We enjoyed a nice breakfast at the restaurant right next door – hotcakes and sausage and coffee. We were currently 0 for 3 with the camping, but with no regrets... when we hit the road and drove by one of the creeks in the canyons near where we would have been camping and saw the ice lining the edges of the water, we felt our decision was rightly vindicated.

Heading out on UT-12 toward the Burr trail, the road went over a rocky pass which then took us to a wonderland of multicolored sandstone stretching in all directions. Far below, ahead of us,

you could just make out part of the Escalante river – I heard the road was scenic (given 10/10 for scenery and 1/10 for difficulty – seemed to be a no-brainer!), but now I could see first-hand what lay ahead. And we weren't even on the Burr trail yet! I tried to keep the wheel steady as it was my turn driving (sometimes it seemed hard to focus on the road when there was so much to see). The air was so clear we could see out to the Henry Mountains and even glimpse the 12,000 foot La Sal's over 100 miles away. As we drove, we admired how during the Great Depression how the CCC did so much work to build these roads in the first place!



We decided to take a short side-trip toward Calf Creek Falls – Sam had mentioned it would be cool to see at least one of the waterfalls along the trip, and I was up for it too. Hearing about the falls, it sounded like a desert gem tucked away in an oasis of life and greenery amidst an expansive sea of open rock.

The trailhead would have been easy to miss, but thanks to the ranger's detailed map, we found it easily (you had to drive to a specific mile marker, then look for the "black and white strangely painted rock" and turn there). We found it easily and hit the trail descending some steep layered Navajo sandstone.

The layers in some of the rock seemed completely bizarre – probably formed from ripples in ancient sand dunes, with multicolored hues and waves on several different scales.

Just around the corner, we could start to hear the rushing of water. It looked so dry it was surprising to hear the refreshing sound of flowing water, but it was unmistakable. A little ways down the canyon there appeared to be an enormous tunnel – maybe 40 feet wide and 100 feet deep, as if it were blasted open. But it turned out to be formed very gradually throughout the centuries of water seeping through layers in the rock, slowly peeling, grain by grain, bits of sand off and down a small stream.

A ways to the right of the tunnel was the 100-foot overhanging falls – actually the upper part of Calf Creek falls (the lower falls were several miles downstream, which we didn't visit). The minerals in the water stained the red rock with a palette of all different shades, interrupted by



the occasional horizontal crack from which would emerge even more colors as water slowly seeped between the layers.



It was like a “garden of Eden” tucked away in an otherwise inhospitable landscape. Clear mineral water flowed down the falls into a nice pool – looked perfect for a swim except for the water was probably just a degree or two above freezing... bummer. I’d have to photoshop in myself swimming in the clear water afterward.

After hanging out by the falls, I went over to check out the tunnel. Lothar and Sam were hanging out taking photos, and it looked like the tunnel was just 50 yards away. I took off my shoes and hopped across the stream and found a deep aqua blue mineral pool hidden in front of the tunnel. It looked like a beautiful effervescent hot spring bubbling up from the ground, in an idyllic setting. I dipped my toe and checked the water just in case, and no luck, the water was pretty darn cold. Oh well.

Putting my shoes back on, I went up to the tunnel, a vast amphitheatre of streaked red rock, partly covered by hanging gardens of ferns, moss and algae. I called out to Sam and Lothar - but my voice echoed back to me in the deep cavern. I’d love to have had a barbershop quartet singing there, having our deep sounds resonating with the cavernous walls and ceiling all around. But Sam and Lothar couldn’t hear me – the tunnel was facing the wrong way. I had to stop and meditate for a moment and enjoy this wondrous work of creation.

I didn’t want to keep the other 2 waiting too long so I headed out and scampered down toward the creek. There appeared to be a short-cut through some bushes and past a small muddy-looking flat area. The mud didn’t look too bad so I took a quick step across and came to the stream where they were just around the corner. But to my surprise (and dismay), I realized my right foot was bare – whoops, my shoe just got sucked completely in the mud. I could just make

out the tops of the laces sticking out. I took off my other shoe (to avoid a second mishap) and wrestled the mud to retrieve the lost shoe.

Crossing the creek with my shoes off, I managed to get across before my feet were completely numbed by the freezing water. I wasn't wearing my hiking shoes since I didn't expect we'd be doing much of a hike – I thought we were just going an easy mile or 2 to the falls. But of course according to Murphy's law, I would have needed them. Actually yesterday, since the hiking was pretty much all just sand, sneakers would have been fine. I tried to scrape as much mud off as I could (at least the shoe wasn't wet. I didn't want to rinse the shoe in the freezing water since it would be not a fun hike back with a cold wet shoe).

As we scampered up the open slickrock slope back toward the car, I saw a chute formed by the churning water leading into a deep pothole right in the middle of the rock slab. We took turns "bowling" rocks down the chute and trying to score a hole-in-one in the pothole 100 feet down – we got to be silly and have fun for a while.

Back on the road, we headed up past the small town of Boulder (with the last gas station for quite a while, so we tanked up). A right turn took us down the Burr trail, a scenic byway from Boulder going into Capitol Reef national park. The trail was built by John Atlantic Burr in 1876 to move cattle between summer and winter ranges and to the market. We could spend days just exploring the canyons off the Burr trail – it went through the heart of some of the most magnificent canyon country in southern UT. It was interesting how the road followed the contours of the landscape, since it was built based on a cattle trail built during simpler days.

We stopped to explore "the Gulch" a canyon – I didn't really know what was there, but that was half the fun of exploring to see what you find. Several deep red-rock amphitheatres, small peek-a-boo arches and a couple pour-offs with frozen pools at the bottom greeted us as we wandered the maze of canyons. We could have spent hours exploring what lay beyond the next bend, but we wanted to eventually make it to Capitol Reef before it got too late.



The road turned and went through a fairly narrow stretch about 50 feet wide with the canyon being a couple hundred feet deep – it was amazing the road could even go through, but there it was! No wonder it was given 10/10 for scenery. A little ways on the left was a deep crack leading into a black void beyond. It was something to not be missed so we pulled over for a peek.

It was a slot about 10 feet wide and several hundred feet deep, with sheer walls of red rock on both sides. A few cottonwood trees obscured the entrance, but just beyond, the mystery was revealed. Part of it belled out near the bottom forming an odd-shaped keyhole passage. I had to go up on the ledges and explore a bit – it was such an otherworldly place, so remote, but yet so accessible! I didn't think I climbed up that much but Sam and Lothar looked so small, dwarfed by the majesty of the massive walls all around. Again I was surprised how easy it was to go up something and how tricky it could be to climb back down – the narrow ledges I had climbed up seemed imperceptible now! But thanks to Lothar below he could see them and guide my feet down safely.



The entrance of the slot was pockmarked with a swiss-cheese pattern of holes and tunnels and caves – a seemingly endless jungle-gym of formations to play around on. I made sure I didn't go up something I wasn't confident down-climbing, but since many of the caves were interconnected, it was easy to climb up and emerge in a cave 15 or 20 feet up the cliff and look out! Sam saw me and was astonished how I got up there – at first I lied and said I just climbed the vertical cliff, but then explained that you could tunnel your way through the caves and get up there.



A few miles up the road, the rock formations changed to a much softer, brittle sandstone that formed a set of hoodoos, like a miniature Bryce canyon. The colors went from orange to red to purple, yellow and black – almost the whole spectrum was visible. And the stripes were repeated across the rock pinnacles like a grand work of classical architecture. Climbing to the top of one of the hoodoos (carefully stepping across a natural bridge) revealed a majestic view (plus it was fun to pose for a fun photo).

We enjoyed a nice lunch at a highpoint along the road, revealing endless red-rock canyons in both directions. A campsite with fire ring was just off the road, making a nice lunch spot. Trail mix with extra large chocolate chunks and salmon spread on pita bread definitely hit the spot.

From this point on, we realized that we'd have to keep driving in order to reach Capitol Reef – it was probably around 2:00 and we finished the last 10 or so miles, culminating in a wondrous set of gravel-road switchbacks descending the Waterpocket Fold to the base of Capitol Reef. Here we were literally hugging the steep walls of the cliffs – it was amazing how the road could have even been built in the first place. We had a grand view toward the wild canyon country that lay beyond.



This was the farthest point east we reached on our trip – it was getting late and we wanted to start making headway back before it got dark. Plus last time I checked the weather there was a chance of rain / snow in the evening. It was still mostly sunny with just some high clouds, but that would sure change quick as we started heading back west over the highlands.

Back in the canyon near the giant slot, we came up behind a vehicle driving very slowly – maybe they were just enjoying the view? But they were going really really slow, and we soon found out what happened. I could hear a distinct ratty whirr-whirr sound of the right rear tire and suddenly I saw a narrow strip of rubber peel and fling off to the side of the road. Whoa – that couldn't be good. The tire wasn't just a bit flat, it was completely shredded through, so bad that most of the rubber was off and flaps of rubber were banging around in the wheel well. The rim was even starting to scrape the road. Bummer – they were still 15 miles from the nearest town (Boulder), and there was no phone reception.



We got out to help and met the driver – turned out he was alone, a Japanese tourist who had rented the car and gone exploring. His spare tire was already blown and he didn't have a second spare. He was definitely scared and was desperately trying to get into town, even if that meant completely messing up the wheel and rim. With weather moving in (the sky was overcast by now), he didn't want to spend a cold snowy night out alone.

I mentioned earlier how we were in such a remote area, though quite accessible. But we quickly forget how remote it really is when you don't have easy means for travel. For hundreds of years people got around on foot or on horseback and would only cover 10-20 miles a day. Now, we take it for granted we can cover 500 miles in a day easily and have a warm bed waiting at the other end.

He declined a ride with us, so we took his name and number and license plate and drove to Boulder where we eked out a bar or 2 of signal to make a call for AAA on his behalf to give him a tow for the last 15 miles to get the tire fixed. We heard an hour or so later that he indeed did get picked up and was fine. He may have been stranded for just a couple hours, but it must have felt like an eternity to him!

Heading west back up toward the mountains, the sky started to darken and I wondered if it would start raining or snowing. The open desert gave way to junipers and pinyon pines, then to solid pines. I saw in our headlights the first few flakes of snow – wow it was indeed snowing. I hoped the road wouldn't get too bad since we had many miles to cover. By the time we reached Bryce Canyon, the road was getting a bit slushy with a couple inches of fresh snow. We were only going about 20 mph by now and I was really hoping we wouldn't get stuck and need a tow if we went off into a ditch somewhere. We didn't have chains (but we had an SUV so we had to be fine, right?)

Soon afterward, I was dismayed to hear the engine rev up and tires start spinning – we had about an 8% grade to go up and suddenly all our traction gave way. The Dodge "SUV" had no 4WD (which we just found out) and we could no longer make hardly any progress forward... Lothar was driving and carefully trying not to gun the engine, causing us to fishtail. It was

snowing quite heavily now and were relieved to see flashing yellow lights come up from behind us – a snowplow!

I thought we were saved – we could just follow the plow. But the plow just cleared the snow off the road, and there was still a layer of ice – that's what we were sliding on. There was only a little bit of traffic passing by, but we got help from an angel – a pickup came up behind us to check on us. They had a set of pusher pads in front and offered to give us a push to get up past the 8% grade. They were slowly pushing us up the hill and we were making slow headway – Lothar was very gently giving gas in tandem with the truck pushing us.

We were relieved when the steep grade lessened and we had enough traction to gain ground on our own. It turned out there was only that short stretch that we needed help, and we managed just fine the whole rest of the way. We were soon greeted with a sign indicating a pass at 7777 feet (interesting...) and then we saw a “downgrade ahead” sign indicating a truck going down a hill. Yay – we made it over the hill!

We soon found the same restaurant near the entrance of Bryce canyon that served us Thanksgiving dinner, and we patronized them yet again, enjoying a nice meal by the same warm fireplace as we watched the quiet flakes of snow swirling out the window. The steak dinner and dessert afterward was delicious.

We were going downhill now, but a new worry came about – what if we lost our traction and our brakes started sliding and we careened off the road? We tried to not think of that as Lothar carefully guided us down the hill, keeping us between the snow banks! The snow started to let up and then changed to rain and by then the road was just wet – whew, we made it.

According to the map, it was shorter to go through Zion national park and down to St George, but with the snow, we decided to go the longer (but faster route) through Panguitch and over UT-20. But UT-20 had to go over an even higher pass (near 8000 ft) so fresh worries of getting stuck in the snow emerged. But one of the truck drivers sitting at the bar in the restaurant said the road was “impeccably maintained” since it was a main truck route from I-15 to US-89.

We thought about staying overnight in Panguitch to deal with the snow in the morning, but when we saw virtually every motel and lodge was full, we pressed on. By Bear Valley Junction, it was dry as we made our left onto UT-20. About 10 minutes later, I saw a pass sign indicating 7920 feet lit by the moonlight ahead. Moonlight? Yeah, the sky was clear and the stars were glittering above. Apparently the storm tracked a bit south and we missed it completely here.

I took the wheel for the last couple hours down I-15 to St George – easy straight freeway, though it was still snowing heavily on some parts. But with enough traffic and trucks, the road was only wet. But by St George a few thousand feet lower in elevation, everything was dry again!

We found a motel for \$40 and crashed for the night. It was about 10:00 by now – later than we expected, but at least we were safe and there shouldn't be any more weather to deal with. They offered us a “newly renovated room” for an even cheaper price, and let us inspect it first to see if

it worked for us. But the “new renovation” involved fresh paint, which was just applied a day or 2 ago, with fumes so intense we had to decline the room!

We took a standard room instead and considered plans of what we wanted to do the last day on the way back. Plans went from visiting some hot springs near St George to doing a side trip through Death Valley to hitting the strip in Vegas for a while to visiting Tecopa hot springs. Sam got his laptop out and started Googling the routes for the different options – we’d think about it overnight and decide in the morning. We ended up not using our camping gear once on the whole trip, and hardly any of our camping food (all my freeze-dried dinners and camp stoves and fuel would wait for another trip!)

## **Sunday**

Turned out we scrapped all the options of side trips and decided to just head straight back – it would still be about 12 hours just heading straight (extra 4 for Death Valley, 2 for either hot springs or Vegas strip). We had seen so much wonderful scenery that it wasn’t too important. But it was still worth a vote. We enjoyed free breakfast at the motel with a visitor from Napa – it was fun to chat with “local bay area” folk in a remote area – he was coming back from Zion for a few days.

It was a fairly boring and uneventful drive on I-15 as we headed south (except for the beautiful stretch of the Virgin River narrows in the corner of AZ). Vegas came and went on the left and we were soon heading out of NV into CA. I was checking the traffic on my phone and saw a long red stretch just a few miles ahead. Hmm – looked like it had to be a bug in the mapping software – why would there be traffic in the middle of nowhere?

But Google was right, the traffic stopped, as if right on cue. Bumper to bumper all around – bumper. We crept forward for what seemed to be an hour right near the border. The giant casino and roller coaster at Primm inched closer as we sat in traffic. I had to charge my phone battery using Sam’s laptop since I forgot my charger cable – my battery went out completely after too many games and web surfing to pass the time.

We saw the freeway necked down a lane at the casino (a full lane was designated exit-only to let people get off for the casino). But being Sunday of the long weekend, everyone was just going straight. We were relieved to get moving again after being trapped in traffic seemingly for no reason! The rest of the trip was rather uneventful except for another large bottleneck in Barstow (which this time I trusted my phone and we found a dirt-road bypass around the city – one last taste of freedom of open road in the desert, which then connected us with 58.)

We enjoyed lunch at the Mad Greek restaurant in Baker (just across from the “world’s tallest thermometer”), and we finally got home by around 9:30, a full day of driving. It was good to relax a couple hours being home before hitting the grind at work the next morning!





Snow had glazed the Sierra with the storm from the previous day, reaching down to about 4000 feet. The windmills sprinkled the frosted hills by the pass at Tehachapi, and back in the central valley, the Sierra was visible from 99 north for quite some time. The winds had scrubbed out the smog in the air, giving us a rare view of the grandeur of the Sierra that is often obscured. A nice “amen” to a wonderful trip.

By the way, I’m glad we didn’t spend a couple hours on a side-trip near Vegas – turned out my college buddy who went to Vegas who I originally planned to go with, left 2 hours later than we did, and got back home at 3 am in the morning after being stuck for 8 hours in traffic with 2 small kids in the car! Whew – we’ll have to go back to the strip or to the hot springs some other day. Also I’m glad we made it to St George instead of staying in Panguitch – then it would have been a really long day on the road!

Thanks “V” for inspiring the trip and Sam & Lothar for coming and putting everything together. A wonderful experience with many great memories – I can’t wait for the next one.