

## Bryce / Zion September 26-30, 2013



*Bryce Canyon National Park*

I had been to Bryce and Zion national parks several times in the last couple years, and I knew it was an area that Nisha would really appreciate. In fact, she had found a website recently of the 20 "best hikes" in America, and 2 of the hikes were in Zion national park - right where we were thinking of going! And since recently, both of us had signed up for Southwest credit cards, we had enough points between us for both of us to fly free to Las Vegas! Rental cars were fairly cheap out of Las Vegas, so we should be able to get a good bang for our buck.

Las Vegas was merely a jumping off point - neither of us had any interest in the revelry and greed of the chiming slot machines and poker tables that Vegas is known for. As soon as the rental car was picked up at McCarran airport, we started driving NE on our way to the Navajo sandstone wonderland in southern Utah.

A passing storm had just blowing through and the sky was still full of dark clouds on the backside of the cold front. Snow had blanketed much of the Sierra north of McGee canyon and the Little Lakes valley. (I had planned a Yosemite hiking trip the previous weekend, which would have been snowed out, but managed to pre-pona it a couple days due to my un-foreseen change in my work situation! I ended up hiking in beautiful summer-like conditions just before the snow.) After 2 years of bitter drought, we were waiting for a break from nature to slack our thirst for a bit.

The backside of the front brought clear skies and some breezy cold temperatures - although the desert outside looked hot, fleeces and hats were required! Passing through Zion National Park, we reached the first of several tunnels built in the 1930's allowing passage to the valleys to the east. The first tunnel was an engineering marvel - about a mile long tunnel carved through solid rock. The rock cliffs were unrelenting, hemming us in on all sides - the tunnel was the only option to avoid a long detour to get out of the canyon.

When we got close to the tunnel, we suddenly came upon a traffic jam. Hmmm - maybe people were out to take pictures? But seeing the traffic wasn't moving for 5 or even 10 minutes, I started to wonder. Looking ahead we saw the rangers had blocked off our lane. Soon afterward a large RV and some other large trucks started coming through the other way. They had made the tunnel one-way to allow large vehicles to proceed (for an extra \$15 fee) without having to worry about clipping another vehicle in the narrow tunnel. It became our turn and we headed on our way.



*Tunnel in Zion National park*

We were staying in Mt Carmel Junction situated between Zion and Bryce. Our familiar Best Western abode would be our home for the next 4 days. Home-cooked Tasty Bite Indian meals heated in the microwave made for a homely dinner as we could kick up our feet and relax after a day of travel. We perused the maps and decided on a hike in Zion the next day - our packs were all set.

### **September 27**

The weather forecast was for pretty chilly conditions during the beginning of our trip, then warming up with the hottest day being the last day. Based on that, we decided to hike at Angel's landing (a steep trail) during the cooler weather and to hike the Narrows (very shady, hiking in water) during the hotter weather.

Frost lined the cars in the parking lot in Carmel Junction as we loaded our car to drive back up to Zion National Park. The temperature went from a chilly 31 degrees to about 26 degrees before the warming sun came over the horizon. We decided to give ourselves a bit of an earlier start for the day - even though we were 1 hour jet-lagged and we were used to getting up around 8:00 while not on vacation, we had been up since 6:00 on this vacation (actually 5:00 PST) - we were eager to get out there! The Subway right across the street from our hotel had just opened, so we managed to grab some fresh sandwiches to go - the bars could wait for another hike! Subway was Nisha's favorite, and whenever she sees one, she's reminded of being on vacation! Andean pan flute music from a CD I got in Peru was playing - getting us in the mood for being out in nature.

As the sun crested over the mountains near Checkerboard Mesa on the east side of Zion national park, it illuminated a fairyland of banded sandstone domes, towers and mesas, beckoning a bit of exploration. I was reminded of scenes from a hike to the Guardian Angels in the Kolob canyon section of Zion - the heavenly shapes of countless smooth slickrock domes invited a morning ramble. Several free-standing towers, 15-20 feet high, of layered sandstone appeared broken off of some larger formation, or perhaps the last surviving remnant of an entire plateau that existed eons ago.



*Pinnacle in the east side of Zion*

Driving into the park, we revisited the tunnel to re-enter the main Virgin River canyon - however, instead of a traffic jam, we passed right through. At the visitor center, we got the scoop on the weather, river and canyon conditions and expectations of the trails for the next couple days. All was clear and we got on the shuttle bus to the Grotto station. Zion is a very eco-conscious park - the visitor center was heated by solar and was cooled by a large evaporative cooler that ran right through the building. Biodiesel buses ran cleanly - much of our fast-food waste was their fuel!

It was about 2.5 miles to the top of Angel's Landing - one of the premier hikes in the entire park. Although it was a weekday (Friday), the bus was packed with eager hikers. Amazingly, the trail was paved the entire way from the bottom to Scout's lookout (a plateau just before the famous cable stretch 1/4 mile from the top). CCC workers in the 1930's had built a trail, sometimes carving tunnels and large grooves right into the side of cliffs to allow people to walk up to the top of a 1000 ft sheer cliff in tennis shoes.

At the top of the cliff, the trail entered Refrigerator canyon - and like its name indicated, it was rather chilly. My fleece was zipped back up as we proceeded through the narrow canyon. The mouth of the canyon was about 4 feet wide just below the trail, emptying out in a sheer drop far below. In places, water had filtered through the layered rock, seeping out when a softer layer came upon a harder, impermeable layer. Rows of small caves lined one wall of the canyon. A little further along, a large opening appeared on the right wall - scuff marks on the sandstone from curious explorers in the past piqued my interest. Laying my pack down and saying "Hey Nisha hang tight - I'll be right back", I scampered up into the opening. The cave entrance was about 6 feet in diameter, maybe 8 feet above the trail. Nisha looking up in her curiosity made a perfect photo, being framed by the cave entrance while a warm orange glow from indirect sunlight hitting the red rocks shone around her.

A 25-foot slot canyon opened at the back of the cave, inclined at about a 20-degree angle. Scampering through the slot canyon, I found myself perched at the edge of a cliff, maybe 30 feet above the trail. Nisha was directly below me - I heard a faint "How did you get up there?" I could brag in my photos that I climbed up the sheer cliff, but in reality I had weaved through the cave and slot canyon instead!



*Cave and slot canyon in Refrigerator canyon*

Exiting Refrigerator Canyon, the trail proceeded up a flurry of narrow switchbacks, wiggling up a steep slope to gain the top of a plateau. These were the famous "Walter's Wiggles". Stonework buttressing on each switchback reminded me of the Inca stones in Machu Picchu in Peru - many hours of hard work had gone into building the trail!

The top of the wiggles brought us to an open plaza of flat sandstone slabs - dozens of people were milling about, taking pictures and reading. I would have thought this was the top, except we hadn't done any cables or "scary" sections yet! I realized later, most of the people were either women, older people or slightly less-adventurous folks who decided to call it good at this point. The demographic of people at the summit was quite different than the people at Scout's lookout!

I wasn't about to call it good just yet, however - just ahead to the right was a small trail by a warning sign that people had fallen off the cables and died... Danger signs are generally an indicator of something interesting to be found, as long as you were careful and responsible. A bunch of chains hanging from the rocks were visible a bit further ahead.

Nisha and I enjoyed a good snack before she sent me on my way. "Hang tight - I'll be right back" were my words as I left her with a book and a map of Zion Park. I felt a bit guilty leaving her for what I expected to be up to an hour (the trail was only 1/4 mile each way to the summit, but with the Disneyland-like crowds of people waiting on stretches of the chains, I couldn't guarantee anything). Luckily the going was rather smooth and I reached in good time.

The chains had worn deep grooves in the soft sandstone from repeated banging back and forth - making for easy railings in places. Hanging tight with one hand and camera in the other (with the strap firmly around my wrist) I managed to click some dizzying photos of 1000-foot cliffs on both sides of a catwalk perhaps 3-4 feet wide. Maintaining 3 points of contact at all times, I proceeded forward slowly. Some friends had recently climbed the East Arête of Mt Humphreys in the Sierras a couple weeks ago with thousands of feet of air on both sides of a ridge barely 12 inches wide, and I was reminded of sections of the knife-edge arête they climbed. At least my climb had chains firmly in place - there are no such chains on Mt Humphreys!



*Chains on Angel's landing*

The summit view was spectacular - if you could ignore the 50 or so heads that would be in your way, you have a perfect panoramic view of the Virgin River canyon. The wind was nearly calm, a far cry from the weather just a couple days ago, 50 mph winds and even some snow showers from an early season storm (which we had seen blanket the Sierra on our plane flight from San Jose). The view upstream led up to the Temple of Sinawava and the entrance of the famous Narrows, and downstream led to the Watchman and the entrance of Zion national park. I managed to get some wonderful panorama photos on my phone (got to love that feature on the iPhone), though I couldn't immediately post them to Facebook - no signal - bummer. The updates would have to wait.



*Panoramic view from the top*

Nisha was visible far below at the base of the cables through the binoculars. She seemed to be enjoying herself, reading and making notes of something. I scampered back down the cables - people were still busily going up so we had to take turns. I was back pretty quick - eager to tell her of my adventure and show pictures I had just taken. She had been reading the Zion park brochure and in the hour that I had been gone, planned the rest of the day, and planned hikes for another whole day in Zion (we'd be going back tomorrow or the next day). Cool - divide & conquer - she did the planning while I did the hike I wanted (and she didn't care for!) We enjoyed our Subway sandwiches and relaxed in the sun for a few minutes while the chipmunks danced and stood upright on their hind legs wondering if they could be photogenic enough they could score a morsel of our sandwiches.

The hike back down was rather quick - downhill and without the few side trips as on the way up. We made good time and decided to check out the Emerald pools nearby. Thanks Nisha for reading through the map and hike suggestions while I was at Angel's landing! With the shuttle system in Zion, we didn't have to worry about getting back to our car - we could do a through-trip and come out a different way and just board the bus at the next stop. In CA, we've gotten so used to having the independence of our cars to drive everywhere, so the dependence on the shuttle was a bit disconcerting at first, but seeing its advantages in the end made us appreciate the freedom we could experience without our car for a while.

At the mouth of the signature Heaps Canyon in Zion (a technical but highly rewarding slot canyon) are the

Emerald Pools. Seeps in the rock had formed a tremendous overhang, laced with ferns and hanging gardens. We just visited the lower Emerald Pool - after the steep hike to Angels Landing, just one of the pools was enough! A refreshing shower of rain from the ledge above cooled us off - although it was below freezing in the morning, by now we were sweating! Frogs croaked in the emerald waters just below the misty waterfall.



*Falls and overhang by Lower Emerald pool*

Rockfall was evident by the sizes of boulders littering the trail. In fact, just 50 feet ahead was a rather fresh rockfall that was even still blocking part of the trail. Large ominous cracks in the rocks high above our heads indicated warnings that perhaps more was yet to fall soon. There had been a storm in the last few days (the clouds on our drive the previous day were the tail of it), so maybe it even fell overnight! Some of the large rocks had actually broken through the handrail on one side of the trail! The trail continued clear on the other side of the rockfall, so we ducked our heads and walked quickly over the jumbled rocks. We would find out 2 days later this trail would be closed - apparently there was more rockfall and the trail was deemed too dangerous to keep open. I'm glad we walked past the rockfall quickly.

It was a short trail back to the Virgin River where we walked along the banks for a short stretch, cooling ourselves in the refreshing water. Dousing my hat, I let the cool water flow over my face. The current appeared calm, far below its average running flow - we had talked about hiking the Narrows later in our trip, and the slow current looked promising for a manageable hike through the river into the canyon.

Nearby was the famous Court of the Patriarchs, 3 summits named after Abraham, Isaac and Jacob from the Old Testament - these names were fitting in the Mormon influenced state of Utah. Although I'm not a believer in the Mormon doctrine, I was reminded about how nature can lead us into worship of God our creator. Periods of recreation (re-creation) are vital in keeping my faith alive and helping me to renew my relationship with Jesus.



*Court of the Patriarchs*

I'm so glad Nisha and I got to enjoy this hike together - this trip was like a second honeymoon for us. We had both been so busy with work (me until recently), finances, insurance, selling a house, and building our lives after marriage that we needed some quality time outdoors and with each other with all our worries set aside to let ourselves be refreshed. I had worried a little before this trip how Nisha would feel if I got carried away with ambition on some of the hikes (such as Angel's landing) that she might feel my ambition was more important than our relationship. But she totally affirmed my decision to pursue my ambition and she could enjoy the time by herself and not feel put-off in any way.

The Zion Lodge was just one shuttle stop away, and we decided to check out their menu. We had found on trips to national parks in the past, we had always enjoyed the food in the main lodge (like the Ahwahnee in Yosemite and the Crater Lake lodge). A peek of the menu showed the prices to be reasonable and they had enough vegetarian options to make the meal enjoyable for her as well. The candle was lit, the drinks were poured and we enjoyed a romantic dinner with a view of the sunset over the meadows and red rocks overhead. Rich chocolate cake and tea capped off a perfect meal.



*Dinner at Zion Lodge*

Back at the visitor center, we caught a beautiful view of the sweeping span of Crawford Arch overhead and the reddish alpenglow on the Watchman near the mouth of Zion Canyon. 45 minutes later we were back at the Best Western in Carmel Junction (no traffic jam through the tunnel this time). We decided to check out Bryce park the next day and revisit Zion the following day to mix things up a bit. Checking trails and

conditions on my iPad in the room, we had our day figured out. Unfortunately it looked like my favorite trail from my previous trip - the Navajo loop from Sunset point - was closed due to a rockslide. After being humbled with seeing the rockfall at the Emerald Pools, we took the closure rather seriously. But there were bound to be many others that should be good, so we hoped we wouldn't be disappointed. We got to bed early after a long day in Zion with sweet dreams of canyons, rivers and paradise in the red rock country.

### **September 28**

We enjoyed a wonderful pancake breakfast right by our hotel in the morning - we had quite an appetite! We knew the hikes in Bryce were a bit shorter and easier than Zion, so there was no pressure. This was to be a sort of "rest day" before what we decided to be a big day in Zion the next day hiking the Narrows. I had been to Bryce a couple times in the past, but Nisha hadn't been to either park. My favorite hike was the "Wall Street" portion of the Navajo loop, but I was dismayed to see it was marked as closed on the park's web sites. We figured we'd get to the visitor center and ask for suggestions.

Red Canyon, a "warm-up" for Bryce Canyon was right on the way. Formed from the same eroded sandstone as the more famous park, the formations are similar but on a smaller scale. A small loop traversed through the park, allowing me to get some practice photos on the way.

I also saw a portion of the park on the map I had missed on my previous trip - the Mossy Cave trail to a cave and waterfall. I hadn't heard of these features, and they were just past the main entrance. I wasn't quite sure where we were going as we followed the curvy bends of highway 12. Fortunately just ahead on the right was a small parking lot and some trailhead signs - the beginning of the Mossy Cave trail - whew!



*Hoodoos and waterfall*

The trail was fairly short, but packed several wonderful features. A row of towering hoodoos on the right foreshadowed what was to come in the main part of Bryce canyon. Following a creek, we saw a beautiful falls just ahead. Although the falls weren't particularly high - maybe only 15 feet or so, they were in the middle of a moonscape of bright orange rocks, cliffs and castles high above. A steep use trail crossed the creek above the falls, leading through some windows in the cliffs - another guy on the trail ahead of us was



already heading up the use trail. I followed him, taking turns posing for photos framed within the irregular rocky shapes of the windows.

Back on the main trail, Nisha and I headed to the cave - it was a large overhang, maybe 50 feet wide and 30 feet deep. Seeps in the back wall had eroded this large cavern over millennia, gradually deepening the opening. The amphitheater of rock amplified our voices - next time we'd have to bring a quartet to ring some chords inside! In wintertime, the cave is supposedly filled with gleaming columns of clear ice as the water from the seeps drips and freezes.

Bryce is a relatively small park, and cars are allowed inside, making parking an adventure inside the main part of the park. We wanted to get to Sunset point (or Sunrise point wherever we could find parking). At the visitor center, the rangers warned us that parking would be "difficult" and free shuttle buses were recommended. Although the buses in Zion were great, we missed the car and decided to give parking a go - it took a lot to change old engrained habits. Luckily for us though, we found out that the Sunset trail had just been re-opened and the rockslide cleared - whew! Luck remained with us - at Sunset point, we managed to squeak our way into a spot along the side of the parking lot - thanks Nisha for helping guide me as I made a 7-point turn to wiggle my way into the spot!

Bryce is one of the highest elevation parks in the Grand Staircase. Reaching from the base of the Grand Canyon, through the Vermillion Cliffs, up to Zion Canyon, and up to Bryce Canyon, the landscape steps up almost 10,000 feet from the deserts in Arizona and southern UT to the cedar forested upper slopes and even above the tree-line at Brian Head north of Cedar Breaks. The main spine of Bryce Canyon lies at a continental divide - water flows eastward on one side into the Colorado River basin and water flows westward on the other side into the Great Basin (which doesn't flow to any ocean).



*Sunset Point*

The loop is only about 1.5 miles, but packed in some of the best that Bryce had to offer. Thor's hammer, Wall Street, and deep canyons graced the views along the loop. The trail was quite well graded - sneakers were adequate. It was nice to leave the heavy hiking boots in the car for a change! As the sunlight reflected off the bright orange layers of the Claron formation of sandstone, the rock lit up with an ethereal glow.

Tunnels cut along the way allowed for easy passage down a switch backing trail past the signature hoodoo that is Thor's hammer. A triplet-set of 3 hoodoos just to the right of Thor's hammer graced the skyline. I managed to still have my shirt from my previous visit around 8 years ago - the formations were still there! A lot has happened for us in the last 8 years (heck, even the last 8 months since our wedding!), but that is a blink of the eye in geologic time...

Caves and side canyons abounded in the soft sandstone as water seeped down through natural weaknesses in the rock, creating openings waiting to be explored. Douglas fir trees even managed to find a foot-hold and grow in the most inhospitable places where light rarely penetrated to the bottom of the canyon. Perhaps with the narrow canyons providing a shelter from the wind and abundant minerals in the soil, the trees were able to thrive, even growing to hundred years old and several feet in diameter.



*Views along the Navajo trail*

Nisha and I took turns looking for interesting pictures - framed by cave openings, natural bridges, tunnels and narrow canyons. The light changed every moment! Bryce Canyon is a photographer's paradise. My finger was starting to cramp from hitting the shutter button as I played with different f-stops for exposure bracketing, high dynamic range (HDR), and panoramic shots. I would have my work cut out when we got home to sort through everything!

We were excited the Navajo trail was re-opened - it is a tribute to the CCC where workers during the Great Depression found work by building trails all through the national parks in the most difficult places. A ladder of switchbacks similar to Walter's Wiggles got us up 700 feet from the bottom of the canyon back to the rim. Some of the walls appeared to have freshly broken-off pieces of rock, and a Bobcat still sitting near the bottom had been in use recently to clear away rocks from the trail - thanks all for your hard work!

The view through a tunnel back near the rim revealed an ocean of spires and hoodoos. Alternating harder and softer layers of rock had caused many hoodoos to break at the same height, forming a maze of cliffs all about the same height with dark spaces between them. One could wander around for hours, but the Navajo loop gave us a good taste of what there was.

Although it was getting late and we were a bit tired, we were so excited about being in Bryce that we tacked on another loop - the Queen's Garden trail. Most of the trail was pretty easy and open, allowing for a nice walk. The hoodoos were fairly similar to those earlier, but a particular one called the Queen resembled a noble figure seated on her throne, wearing a crown. A song had been going through my head a while earlier - from "In Old Shanty Town" - "there's a queen waiting there, in her silvery crown, in old shanty, in old shanty town". This was Nisha's favorite song I had sung with Voices in Harmony back in 2008, which had won us a bronze medal in Nashville. We were re-visiting the song to polish it and get it back in our repertoire. I had originally associated the song with Drawbridge (a ghost town outside San Jose

we visited right after we met), but now had a completely independent association for it, layering another whole set of memories on a wonderful experience from the past.



*Queen's Garden*

The sun was getting low after our hike, but since we had our car (opted out of the shuttle bus), we visited Paria viewpoint, Bryce Point, and the large natural arch further south. Scattered bits of low sunlight lit up the hoodoos below us with the background remaining in shadow, creating ghostly rocky shapes that would appear to come alive once the sun went down.

We were leaving the park just around sunset before anything spooky started to happen - the sky lit up with a golden hue as the sun sunk low in the cloudless sky. The drive back seemed quite a bit shorter than the drive out to Bryce - thank goodness since we were both quite hungry at this point. We hadn't eaten much lunch on the trail since just had Subway the previous lunch and would have been OK with just some bars. Except when we were on the trail, neither of us felt like eating many bars and we were too engrossed with the views anyway. We still had some Tasty Bites Indian food which was cheap and quite easy to heat up back in our room - that sufficed for a tasty dinner.

Tomorrow was to be the most anticipated hike of the trip - the Zion Narrows. We wanted to get our backpacks ready the night before and make sure everything was ready. Nisha can never pack too many plastic bags on trips - I had to give her credit since we would be using almost all of them in preparation for a decent length hike in the water the next day. I didn't want to take any chances of cameras, phones, watches or anything getting damaged, since water, sand, rocks and electronics don't mix very well...

### **September 29**

I slept pretty well last night - even though I was excited about the Narrows, I was pretty tired from the previous day. I was happy to be refreshed. A peek out the window revealed clear skies once again - I always feared the worst when anticipating a big day so I was relieved, even though I knew the forecast was supposed to be good.

I hadn't thought to bring hiking poles, which were recommended for navigating the slippery wet rocks in the canyon going up the Narrows. I had remembered seeing people leaving sticks at the trailhead on a previous trip so I wasn't too worried. However on second thought, I had seen many sticks for sale at the various gift shops and wondered if it would be worth picking one up. We were stopping by a shop anyway to pick up some fruit, juice and stuff for breakfast, so when we saw they had nice hiking sticks for sale (and we had a 10% coupon!), I picked one up.

We made our Zion commute once again, passing through the Checkerboard mesa area and tunnels leading into the main park. Packs were ready and boots were laced up as we boarded the shuttle to the last stop this

time - the Temple of Sinawava. A couple climbers on the Moonlight Goddess on the way were just waking up on their portaledge 500 feet above the valley floor - the 5.9 climb of the 1000 ft route normally takes two days and is considered one of the finest climbs in the US.

Zion felt much more of a "sporty" park than Bryce. Generally, the features in Bryce were easy and could be accessed on trails with tennis shoes. But Zion had cliffs to be rock climbed, canyons to be descended (many requiring ropes and wetsuits), cables to be ascended, slickrock domes to friction climb, and subway passages requiring special permits and rappels to run a trip through. A wrong bit of navigation in Heap's Canyon was deadly for some canyoneers a few years ago, and stories in the Zion newsletter warned about accidents in some of the other canyons, caused by flash floods, hypothermia, "rappelling accidents" (they weren't specific), and falls, resulting in people having to be carried or floated down canyons in litters. Objective hazards were everywhere, requiring planning and care.

The weather forecast over the entire Colorado plateau was for sunny skies and warmer temperatures. The flow through the Narrows was a low 40 or so CFS, so the travel should be pretty easy without danger of flash flooding. The water was a chilly 50 degrees, so an extra pair of wool socks and a fleece / hat were recommended. The sign at the trailhead said "flash flooding NOT EXPECTED today" - although we didn't expect it, it was reassuring that it was still all clear for entering the Narrows!

The first mile of the trail was an easy riverside walk - paved with beautiful flowers lining the gravelly sides of the river. It was still fairly early and chilly in the shady canyon - only a few others on the trail were ahead of us. Generally the folks with long hiking sticks were entering the water, and those without sticks were just going to the end of the paved trail and back.



*Along the Riverside walk*

Nisha and I reached the end of the official trail which ended in a stone patio with some benches overlooking the river. We could see the people going on, upstream through the current up the canyon. Again, the demographic was a bit different - those who braved the chilly canyon versus those who called it good reaching the end of the Riverside walk. I would leave Nisha at the end of the paved trail and I went on, planning on reaching Orderville Canyon about 1.5 miles further upstream in the canyon. Figuring I could go 1 mile / hour through the shallow water, I figured it would take 3 hours at most. I would set a turn-around time 1.5 hrs from now in case the hike was harder and I was unable to reach Orderville canyon.

I left Nisha most of what was in my pack - dry shoes, a change of clothes, a book and our lunches, so I only carried what I needed in a small pack - some bars, a couple liters of water, 2 cameras (in case one failed), an extra battery, and an extra coat in case I got cold. I was excited and had dreamed of this day for a long time to wander through the Zion Narrows. It was bittersweet not having Nisha there to share the experience with, but I was relieved that she was cool with me going on by myself for a bit (as on Angel's

landing) - it made a good compromise.

It turned out there were dozens of spare hiking sticks left at the trailhead - I could have just borrowed one - oh well. But it was fun having my own (and I would end up taking it home, checking it as an extra piece of "luggage" on Southwest which has free bags, and keeping it for the memories). Many people had also rented packages of gear for the Narrows - wetsuit shorties, boots and hiking sticks. I thought that might have been a bit overkill, I ended up being just fine with regular hiking boots and my hiking stick.

The water was quite chilly the first time it soaked through my boots, but once my feet turned numb, I hardly noticed anymore. A guy in front of me had an expensive-looking SLR camera and heavy tripod - we chatted as we hiked up together to appreciate some of the views. His tripod served as a hiking stick, and we negotiated several gravelly bars as we started to enter the deeper part of the canyon. He put his stuff down on a sandbar and started to set up his tripod - I knew he would be a while, so I snapped a picture with my point-and-shoot camera and headed on.

About 1/2 my pictures would end up being blurry - the light in the canyon required 1/4 second or longer exposures to capture the richness of the colors and textures of the rocks. It wasn't until on my way back did I think of using my hiking stick as a monopod there I could set my camera on top to stabilize it for clearer pictures. I had seen so many pictures of the Narrows so my expectations were high. But I also wanted to try to capture some unique perspectives that weren't repeated by hundreds of people in the past. It's the unusual poses that captured the memories and made the experience more real.

Mystery Falls was just ahead on the right - a cascading waterfall that tumbled down a large side canyon high overhead. A rappel through-trip of Mystery Canyon was a classic adventure in Zion - canyoneers would finish the trip by rappelling down Mystery falls and ending up in the main Zion narrows. Hanging gardens and striped patterns on the rocks surrounded the falls.

Two people were taking a break just ahead - I joined them, recounting our adventures of our trips so far. They were brother and sister, hoping to make it up to Orderville canyon as well, then see if they could turn around quickly, take the bus to the Grotto, hike Angel's landing and get back before dark, then drive to Moab overnight to meet a whitewater rafting group to start a 4-day trip down Cataract Canyon! Whew - talk about packing it in! We took turns getting pictures of each other, climbing boulders in the river and posing for some "king of the world" shots.



*Overhanging wall*

The water was pretty low and often sandbars had formed in the river, allowing for easy hiking upstream. We were only about 1 hour in and had already reached Orderville canyon. I knew the hike out would only be about 30 minutes, since 1 hour was with many photo stops and wading upstream against the current. We decided to give Orderville a go.



*Entrance to Orderville Canyon*

Turning right into the side canyon, we soon came across a large chockstone that had caused a large pool to form just below it. I think many groups just take a quick look down the canyon, since passing the chockstone required a swim and a tricky climb. But we were all feeling adventurous today. Laying packs down and taking off our shirts (didn't want to get them wet!), we started swimming across the pool. He made it over first, then gave me a hand to help me get over it as well. His sister stayed back, but she managed to pass us our cameras across the pool - thanks!

The water in the side canyon was very shallow and we could almost run down the canyon! I knew it didn't go for more than 1/2 mile or so and it ended in a waterfall (technical gear required to climb it), but the narrow winding slot piqued our curiosity. About 6-8 feet wide and maybe 500 feet deep, the sinuous passage beckoned exploration as we tromped our way through. Having passed the chockstone, we felt we were in a seldom-visited part of the park and in true wilderness while the rest of the crowds had passed by.

Not wanting to keep his sister waiting too long, he decided to call it good and turn around at the next corner. I followed - I didn't want to be late and keep Nisha waiting too long either. I'm glad his sister was watching our packs. Back at the confluence, his sister passed the cameras back and we could put our dry shirts back on and re-collect our packs to head out. I still had about 15 minutes until my 1.5 hr turn-around time and I was still excited and didn't want to "waste" any of the time we had agreed on. Since the canyon turned out to be easier than I thought, I enjoyed some of the bonuses I could get.

I said bye as they headed back downstream and I headed upstream. Some others with me said the best part was just a few minutes ahead - "Wall Street" was about 20 feet wide and 1500 feet deep at that point. It was fitting that "Wall Street" was the best part of Bryce the previous day and here I was again at another "Wall Street". (and over Christmas, Nisha and I made a trip to NY to visit some friends, so we got to see another "Wall Street" - the real one!)

The fluted sides of the canyon at Wall Street attested to the crazy floods and rushing torrents of water that filled the canyon during the wet seasons of spring snowmelt and summer monsoonal thunderstorms. We were in the canyon at probably the driest time of year. The thunderstorms had passed (though the later summer was unusually rainy this year) and the snow hadn't started yet, and the weather was still warm, so we had about as optimal conditions as you could have. But that was far from what could be taken for granted. Logs, some probably 22 inches in diameter, lay scattered in places along the sandbars, a testimony of the force of water that flows and sculpts the canyon.

A song was going through my head in this part of the Zion Narrows - sections of one of my favorite acappella arrangements of "I'm Bound for the Promised Land" with its rich harmonies filled my head.

Being in the heart of Zion National Park in one of the finest displays of God's creation, I couldn't help but worship God in His wonderful nature. There must be a reason the park was called "Zion" - I felt I was in the Promised Land! But I also knew "all these things become shadows in the light of You" (from another of my favorite songs - "When I Look Into Your Holiness"). The real Zion in heaven will be even so much greater than the Zion on earth!

It was getting near the turn-around time, and I decided to call it good in a deep stretch of canyon where it made a curving bend. I managed to get a panoramic on my phone showing downstream on one side and upstream on the other - the spooky depths revealed on both sides. Nobody else was there for this stretch - even though it was only a little past Orderville, few people continued further.



*Downstream and upstream*

After a bar and some water, I started heading back down. Wading with the current, my progress was perhaps 50% faster going down than up. I was soon back at Orderville canyon where scores of other adventurers joined the throng of people exploring the magnificent canyon. Although I had the canyon to myself for just a few moments, I relished that thought when I started hitting the crowds on the way back!

A large alcove had formed on one side of the river, opening about 5 feet above the river. It looked climbable but tricky to negotiate the smooth rock. After a couple unsuccessful attempts, I realized by stacking some rocks at the base and vaulting up on my sturdy hiking pole I could get up it. A unique perspective of the crowds below in the river from 10 feet up in a smooth chamber formed by swirling water when the river used to be higher. The ceiling of the chamber opened to the dazzling sky high above.

Back in the river, I came upon more familiar landmarks. Since the sun was higher now, the lighting had changed significantly, requiring me to re-take so many pictures! Although the lighting was better, there were also many more people, so often the shots had a bit of Disneyland-like quality, containing hordes of people. Sadly the canyon felt a bit artificial being over-run with tourists - I wondered if I could photoshop them out when I got home...



*Many people in the Narrows here*

Another large keyhole-shaped grotto had formed across the river a bit further downstream, maybe 8 feet up the wall. Wading across the river and scampering up the gritty sandstone, I made it inside a passage about 20 feet deep. Formed by water seeping through a small crack in the rock, erosion had opened the massive grotto over the centuries. An interesting character joined me in the cave - a scruffy hippie dude who must have had a little too much time in the wilderness, telling me of some "cave 41" that he knew of and somebody died in there that he knew about. Hmmmm - I wasn't too interested to ask any more questions...



*Keyhole grotto*

I managed to make it all the way back to Nisha in less than an hour - I was about 1/2 hr earlier than she expected. Great! We had even more time to see some parts of Zion (she had researched the trails the first day waiting for me at Angel's landing). I was so happy to get my dry shoes and pants on again before having a light lunch right there - she had saved it for me - thanks! She enjoyed the solitude for a bit.



*Weeping Rock*

I warmed up nice on the last mile back out on the trail, now that the canyon had opened to the bright sun once again. We had a little extra time, so we took the shuttle to the Weeping Rock to check it out. A large overhang covered with hanging ferns and flowers opened to the main Zion Canyon straight ahead. I was



totally relaxed now at this point - our main "objectives" of the trip were done - Angel's landing and the Narrows, so everything else was bonus. We relished the cool shower of the misty waterfall coming from the Weeping Rock while watching rock climbers scale one of the cliffs on the opposite side of the canyon.

Back at the Zion Lodge, we celebrated with burgers and ice cream (we were still hungry!), picked up some souvenirs and T-shirts and soaked in the view a bit longer. We took turns passing the binoculars back and forth trying to spot the rock climbers across the valley again. Maybe we'd try rock climbing on another trip...

On our way out, we had originally planned to just get back to the motel and relax a bit, but after Nisha had spotted one more hiking trail (the Canyon Overlook trail), we decided to stop and give it a go. I was pretty tired, but she had been sitting a good part of the day, so she was eager to get out! The trailhead is right by the uphill exit of the main tunnel going out of the park by the bridge over Pine Creek. A peek over the bridge revealed a twisty slot canyon that would have to be explored later.

Heading up the steps, we started on the trail - about a mile each way to the edge of the canyon. An REI group was just leaving - they were on a tour of Bryce and Zion and from all across the US. For us, however, instead of paying hundreds of dollars to go on this tour, we went for free (I already had a national parks pass) and could explore everything on our own. The trail came to a large grotto overlooking the Pine Creek narrows far below. Unfortunately, this is as far as Nisha made it - the trail was narrow and the lack of railings seemed to suck her down into the twisty depths of the canyon below.

The twisty depths were indeed the Pine Creek narrows, one of the signature slot canyons of Zion. Requiring enough rope for a 100-foot rappel, wetsuits most of the year, and signing up early (the quota often sells out), the canyon is moderately technical. Featuring a drop into the Cathedral formed by several enormous potholes expanding and merging with each other, the canyon has some of the most photogenic views in the world consisting of a Swiss-cheese like maze of grottos, reflecting orange and yellow indirect light on the sculpted rocks above and rippling water below. I was enticed greatly in hearing about it and seeing it - through several years of vertical caving, I should have the gear and experience one would need to navigate the canyon. I would have to return someday.

Back on the trail, it was only another 1/4 mile or so to the canyon rim overlook. Although this was the final goal of the trail and the view was quite spectacular overlooking the lower Pine Creek canyon where it merged with the main Virgin river canyon, I couldn't stop thinking of the views down the curvy narrows of the Pine Creek slot canyon.



*Canyon View overlook and Pine Creek Narrows*

Meeting Nisha back at the grotto where she was waiting, we caught up and headed the short distance back to the car. I feel we had seen everything in the park now - no regrets that we had missed anything now. And to boot, just a little ways ahead of the car, we saw a bighorn sheep cross the road and scurry into the bushes below. He was too quick for a picture, but we both had a good look before he was gone.



*Ice cream domes and Checkerboard Mesa*

Remembering the ice cream over lunch, when we got to Checkerboard Mesa, we passed a couple slickrock domes on the left that looked like big scoops of candy-swirl ice cream. About 80 feet high with slopes about 30 degrees, they looked climbable. I took a short jaunt to look around. Small ledges about a foot apart made for solid footing as I made my way up the beautiful pink and white-banded cross-bedded layers of Navajo sandstone. Two caps, about 10 feet in diameter and 20 feet apart crowned the big mound of ice cream. The layers appeared as a topographic map, ending in clean concentric rings at the top and joined by a smooth saddle in between. Another bonus at the end of the day - I felt Zion just kept on delivering wonders, even after we thought we had seen it all!

A large herd of buffalo was roaming on the grasslands just outside Zion Park - I felt we were in the wild country of Montana. Back at Carmel Junction at our hotel, we could just relax for a bit - no more packs to get ready, no more hikes to plan - whew! Down at the hot tub outside our hotel, we chatted with some folks who were RV'ing for a month or so and seeing Zion, Bryce, the Grand Canyon, and so many other places. We swapped stories of our hikes and heard of their plans. I envied them that they had so much time to go and see so many wonderful places, since we had to leave the next day.

However, they were worried about some kind of government shutdown that threatened to spoil part of their vacation - the shutdown could affect the national parks and close some of the services. I hadn't paid all that much attention to the TV and news since I hadn't been working, so a shutdown wasn't really on my radar. They were planning on visiting the north rim of the Grand Canyon, but a rockfall had closed some of the roads, snow was in the forecast, and a shutdown threatened to close the park altogether, so many forces would be against them. I wished them good luck.

Nisha and I had a good soak in the hot tub to soothe the sore muscles of 3 days of hiking, and afterward we had our final dinner. Tasty bites once again and leftovers - since we had a good lunch at the Zion Lodge and we didn't feel like taking so much food home, we wanted to finish up what we had. Plus we were hungry and it was fast, so we were satisfied.

### **September 30**

Alas it was our final day of our UT vacation. We weren't in too much of a hurry to leave though - our flight wasn't until late in the afternoon. After packing up, we headed back to the Zion Lodge (for the 3rd time now!) since they were supposed to serve a wonderful brunch. On the way, our shuttle bus driver expressed worries about the looming government shutdown - hmmm, it was sounding a bit more serious now. He was worried that even the very next day (Oct 1), he could be out of a job. The servers at the Zion Lodge also worried of the shutdown - they would lose a lot of business.

The brunch was excellent - pancakes, fruit, bacon and eggs, and pastries. Every meal was excellent! I wished we could stay longer, but we had to get back to reality soon. The trip was wonderful in every way. I had accidentally left my credit card in the folder when I paid for dinner a couple days ago, and after brunch I went down to the front desk and found out they still had my credit card! I just had to show my ID and they returned it - whew!



*Bighorn sheep*

On our way out of Zion, we spotted some bighorn sheep - this time, they were fairly still, just grazing a bit. We managed to get photos after all of the sheep - I wonder if these were the same ones we saw the previous night. Just as we were leaving the entrance gate and heading out to Springdale, I saw some officials getting a bunch of orange cones out. A sign was laying down - "Park closed due to government shutdown" - looks like we were just getting out before they were going to shut down the park at 11:59 pm that day!

I was dismayed that our government in Washington couldn't get their act together. Politics is a nasty game - amidst the power struggle and disagreements with the so-called Obamacare health care system, a lot is at stake. It seemed so unfair that the people would suffer. In the name of getting better health care, they were going to shut the parks, so instead of hiking and enjoying the outdoors, people would stay home, get fat on potato chips and watch TV.

There was surprisingly little traffic getting out of the park, and with the extra hour gained due to the time change getting back to Las Vegas, we were several hours early getting back to town. Although we could have spent the extra time in Zion or at the nearby Coral Pink sand dunes park, we wanted to get back to town to not risk being late for our flight. It was a bit anti-climactic to have the extra time in Las Vegas, but we figured while we were there, we should at least see something.

The Stratosphere tower is at the north end of the Las Vegas strip. The weather was beautiful, and knowing the tower would provide fantastic panoramic views over all of Las Vegas, we gave it a go. We had stopped near the base of the tower on the way up to Zion since there was a Subway sandwich place nearby (Nisha's favorite), so we parked near the tower (where parking is free and easy) and headed inside.

Inside was a massive culture shock! Hundreds of beeping, blinking, chiming machines promising good fortune surrounded us. It was about as artificial place as you could imagine - Vegas is in the middle of a desert and far from what would be a practical settlement. But in this day and age, water can be transported and buildings and attractions can be built anywhere, as long as there is money.



*Stratosphere tower and view*

Tickets to the top were a steep \$18, and add-on rides were \$5 - we thought for a moment and thought what the heck. I knew we might be going to Vegas next summer if my Voices In Harmony chorus managed to qualify (though a bit doubtful since we just got a new director and some new choruses had recently entered the picture). Since we were already there, we might as well do it. And if the add-on's were only \$5, it would be worth doing one at least. And a beer and pizza combo (after the ride) was only \$4. Nisha wasn't interested, but I should do something. There are 3 rides - the Big Shot, the X-Scream, and the Insanity. The X-Scream was a big teeter-totter 900 feet above the ground and the Insanity was a spinning ride of chairs suspended high above the ground. I picked the "Big Shot" - a 150-foot free-fall tower at the very top of the 900 ft high Stratosphere tower. 1000 feet above the ground, you have almost no reference of how high you are, but when the ride started accelerating downward (even pulling some negative gees), my stomach tied up in knots!

For \$100 you could do the "Sky Jump", a free-fall pseudo-base-jump where you would plummet all 900 feet to the ground in a mere 15 seconds. I figured we'd save the \$100 and go out for a nice dinner sometime instead. We watched probably a dozen folks making their jumps. From the tower, our panoramic view stretched all the way past the Las Vegas airport to the south, 11,500 ft Mt Charleston to the west and countless desert peaks to the north and east. The famous Gold and Silver pawn shop (from Pawn Stars) was about 1/2 mile to the north, and the Count's Kustoms (from Counting Cars) was about 1/2 mile to the southwest.

It was only a couple miles to the airport along the strip. Passing the volcanoes of the Mirage, the pirate

ship of Treasure Island, the Statue of Liberty of New York New York, the musical fountains of the Bellagio, and the MGM Grand (where VIH might be staying next summer) we said good-bye to the sin city of Las Vegas as we got ready to board our flight back to San Jose. The sun was just setting as we boarded our Southwest flight back home. A wonderful trip and I couldn't wait to go back!