

Utah trip, December 28, 2005 - January 9, 2006
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(Note: This trip is as I wrote it, with only spelling corrected. Grammar is out when you're writing a road trip report as you go.)

December 28, 2005 Wednesday

Left home at noon, mileage 22,550. Drove up to Vegas...Since I left at noon, I didn't get up there until well after sunset. Called Lance to see if I could recall where the steak and lobster was served cheap but he didn't recall. After a little driving around, I found the steak and shrimp at Frontier, one of the older casinos. I wanted lobster for some stupid reason so I wandered around to the Rio for the World Buffet. Nice idea but with an hour and a half wait and I was hungry then, I was starting to regret passing up the Frontier.

Hell bent on lobster, Outback steak house beacons and got my business. Definitely not cheap as Frontier but I got my meal. Next time, don't want to be all hung on something, just take them as they come. I've never really done it that way and now I know why.

After a pleasant meal, I was pretty darned tired, not having slept well the night before. Real tired, having trouble keeping my eyes open. I wanted to make St. George in Utah but at 1.5 hours away, that wasn't going to happen. Made it to Casa Blanca (?) Casino about 1/2 hour north of Las Vegas, just before the gorge. Nearly falling asleep at the wheel twice made me get off the road, pull into the parking lot and hit the sack. I was so tired, I didn't even bother trying to get a room at the casino. The Palms by Rio wanted \$80 so I wasn't too hot on that. Probably a mistake again. Sleep finally! At 10pm, Set the alarm for 5:30am.

Tough time getting to sleep oddly. Had a nightmare that I was falling asleep at the wheel and thrashed around to wake myself up. Yes, I was at the wheel asleep but in a parking lot.

December 29, 2005 Thursday

Got my tired self up and immediately going down the gorge to St. George and Denny's for breakfast. Happily, I enjoyed the beautiful pink cloud sunrise from inside rather than out on some vista. So, I headed north, bypassed Zion because I've been there before and took my first turn off at Kolab Canyon, the north part. Still want to get to the Zion portion one day...

Kolab canyon turn off north of Cedar city is either an early morning, pretty cloud sunrise spot where the clouds above are just getting morning sun or an afternoon spot because the canyon predominantly faces west.

I drove directly to the top but took note of the various locations to stop. The top has a nice vista of the entire canyon but there was a sign and a tree in the way. No problem. I backed the truck onto the sidewalk up against the railing and tossed the tripod onto the truck bed. Wanted to make sure and get the shots done before some enforcement appeared. They wouldn't take kindly to my parking on their sidewalk.

Got some nice shots of the view but wished to have been there 2 hours before - the clouds would've been pink and balanced against the foreground. Sunset would've been good, too. But, I made something out of what I had and moved on.

Picked up a brochure for Bryce at the Kolab visitors center and gave Bryce a call. Thank goodness because apparently the 2 highways across to the 89 were really bad, so I went the lady's suggestion of going all the way up to the 20 and cutting over. It worked very well and the drive was quick and painless.

Stopped at Bear Valley junction and checked out the abandoned store. It's amazing how out west all these places are created with blood and sweat and then one day they're abandoned. Nothing too interesting inside now but at one time I'm sure there was.

Tore on down to Panguitch and had lunch at a diner across the street from the Cowboy cafe which was closed. Nice little patty melt but at \$6.50, a bit on the expensive side. The balance to that was I picked up a place mat that gave a bundle of information on the SR-12, one of the American scenic byways, a special designation. Armed with that, I was off on a more in depth exploration.

Got to Red Canyon pretty quick after that and began exploring up the area on the trail just before the Red Canyon visitors center. Being closed, I couldn't snoop around but it was probably better because the day was wearing on and I wanted to hit Bryce well before sunset. So, off to Bryce.

Bryce must be a big destination because the entrance fee is \$20. Thank goodness for my parks pass. Checked out the Visitor's center museum and they had an excellent video on the area. Bought it for dad, even. I never buy those Drove on down to the end of the road, Rainbow Point. Not very interesting, the Grand Canyon is better. The area around Bryce amphitheater, near Sunrise and Sunset points is the reason the park exists. Naturally, the park speed limit is a paltry 35 and there were rangers everywhere pulling people over. Be warned.

Got to Sunset point and set up some shots, nothing stunning but nice. Met another HP early retirement refuge. They must've paid them 3 years wages from what I could gather. Dang! That must be nice. We talked shop a bunch. He's one of those guys who's got the top Canon gear and has bought and sold a bunch. Crazy!

We were both frozen so he took his leave. I warmed up, changed gear and shot some starlight shots with the trees lit by a bank of flashes. I don't think they were great but it's something different.

Had to decide what to do and I didn't eat, plus the need of a shower. So, drove to the park entrance and found Ruby's Inn for \$44, got them down to \$40. The place was actually pretty busy and come to find out that during the April-October season, the place books up 3 months in advance. Ay yah! That's ridiculous and they have 600+ rooms. Plus the surrounding places book. Wow. Good thing I'm winter traveling and even then it's decently full. Bunch of foreigners around, both Asian and European.

Got to dinner at 7:30pm and it's a good thing because they stop serving at 8:30pm. I had a tiny wait. This place must suck in the summer. There's a park shuttle so you know it sucks. Am now by the nice fireplace enjoying the evening before heading to bed and getting up for an early freeze fest for sunrise at Sunrise Point. It's 28 degrees F now and will be 17 or so in the morning, with wind chill about 0. Ugh.

December 30, 2005 Friday

Got up at 5am and it was 18 degrees F. Not too bad an estimate. It stayed that temperature the entire time. Unfortunately, the overhead cloud cover is thick so there wasn't any sun to work with after the initial rise on the hoodoos. Packed it up, headed off to check out and for breakfast at Ruby's Inn.

Debated for quite a while about taking one of the plane or helicopter rides around the area. The copter doesn't run during the off season so the suggestion was to do the Monument Valley tour. I wanted to get breakfast to think about it and naturally the flight guy wasn't there when I returned and no one seemed to know where he was. That's what I get for thinking.

Headed out for Tropic and toward Kodachrome Basin State Park and Governor double arches. I

chose to go to the arches first because it's an 11 mile dirt road ride and I haven't taken the truck in the dirt once this trip yet. The drive was very easy, though I can see when it's wet that the clay top would become completely impassible.

Got to the arches in no time at 40mph and proceeded to explore around. I was hoping to catch an arch in an arch view but they're side by side, making that vision impossible. After some shooting, I decided that wasn't good enough and that there had to be a way up the back of the mountain. Heading around to the back, I found a way up and proceeded.

The walk up was quite easy, especially once I found the trail. Maybe 5 minutes up. This way allowed a completely different perspective of the arches, encompassing the surrounding landscape rather than the sky. It was scary to be hopping around on the sandstone 60 feet up a drainage chute. Just had to be careful in my jumping over to the smaller arch to get a self photo. Didn't want to become a casualty.

Tore back along the dirt road and headed for Kodachrome since the day was wearing on and I wanted to see much more. Since Kodachrome is a state park, the old handy national parks pass doesn't work so you have to shell out \$5.

Sadly, I wasn't very impressed with the driving tour. You really don't see too much driving around - this place requires hiking. Perhaps several hours of it. Unfortunately it was getting late enough that I didn't want to spend the rest of the day hiking in a place that didn't catch my fancy. The ancient towers of geysers would've been interesting to see but not when compared against some of the other big stuff in the area. Disappointment befell me but I had to remember that not everything can be Bryce, Zion or the Grand Canyon. That's why this place is a state park.

Taking my leave, I returned to Cannonville and along the way caught photos of a barn against the eroding cliffs, similar to the barn in Jackson against the Tetons.

At Canonville, I bought lunch at the general store and called via payphone the airplane guys at Ruby's Inn, hoping they'd be there. My cell phone isn't hardly working at all here so it's the payphone experience.

Got a hold of the airplane guys and set up a flight for tomorrow morning, 9:30am, to Monument Valley since there's no way I'm driving that far out just to see that. Very excited, I realized I'll need a place to stay that's close so I called Ruby's Inn right back and made a reservation so I didn't get screwed out of that by "doing it later". Too many of those mistakes. Now I'm excited! By this time it's about 2:30pm in the afternoon, so I decide to head toward the next location so I can blow past it tomorrow. The petrified forest of Escalante was another state park, smaller but perhaps more interesting. Unfortunately, by the time I got there it was near sunset and I wasn't too hot on marching around in the dark, trying to find petrified wood.

Escalante State Park has an interesting feature that allows handicapped people to walk a short paved path with some petrified wood set around it so the feel for it can be had. Fascinating idea! That's was all that I needed. As a substitute for fun, I found the lake in the park to be partially covered in ice.

All I could see was being on the ice, falling through and becoming a Utah-cicle. Instead, I tested various sized rocks tossed appropriately to punch through the ice. Amazingly, it was quite resilient and withstood some impressive impacts from 20 pound rocks thrown as high as I could. Fun, wrecking crew! Skidded rocks across the surface of the ice clad lake and was fascinated by the sound it made, somewhat like a taught steel cable hit by a hammer but with a wider sound. Ice tossed across the surface skidded an amazing distance. Tried to video samples of what was going on.

Getting dark, it was time to head all the way back to Bryce to get my room, grab dinner and

prepare for tomorrow. Charged and backed up all the camera gear and headed off for a pork chop dinner, quite tasty. Now am sitting in the lodge by the fire typing this missive, waiting for the night to wear on before heading to bed. For the initial misgivings of this trip, it's been quite enjoyable thus far. Now I just need to wire the iPod to the truck stereo...

December 31, 2005 Saturday

This should be a fun New Years Eve. Got a plane ride over Monument Valley planned and then head out of the Bryce area and explore more of the state route (SR)-12. Fell asleep in front of the fireplace for an hour in Ruby's Inn at Bryce. Pretty darned funny. Ran over to my room and did a last on the photo equipment before clocking out.

Woke up around 6:45am, just enough time to get everything together, wander around a bit and get to the airport. Didn't want to waste an hour with breakfast at the restaurant so I picked up a Danish from the general store just to have something in my stomach when flying, especially since it's a windy day today. Time wasn't passing very fast and I hadn't gotten a picture of Thor's hammer at Aquacanyon viewpoint, so I headed into the park.

It was windy, cold and gray outside by the time I arrived at the overlook. I took a photo anyway just because I didn't drive all around just for nothing and headed back, stopped at Rainbow Arch overlook, took another gray shot and tore back to the park entrance. If I'd obeyed the speed limit, it would've taken just over an hour to do that short run. 35MPH is darned slow. I did see a deer at the last second to remind me why you don't drive too fast through there. Tore over to the airport with about twenty minutes to spare.

Apparently a mother and son signed up for the morning flight, so I had company, Kathy and her son Chris. Just as well, someone else to chat with. We packed into the Cessna 206 Wagon and we were off. Lance was the pilot out of the Ruby's Inn establishment that guy had 1000's of hours of flight time - he had captain's epaulets (4 bars). We were up in the air in no time under gray skies and got bounced around a little but not too bad initially.

We cut over Bryce and over an undulating fault line that actually curves east-west rather than north-south. Saw Kodachrome park from the air. Much more interesting from this perspective and understood that to really see the park, you do have to hike around it. Or fly over it. Then on to Great smoking mountain which is a large underground coal mass that caught fire about a hundred years ago, probably due to lightning strikes. You could actually see the sink holes from where the coal had burned out enough underground for it not to support the rock above it. You could actually drive there from in-between Boulder and Escalante, a mere 57 mile one-way dirt road drive. Quite fascinating but that's a half day trip, maybe next time.

The far mountain to the north near Boulder has two fascinating features - it has the largest aspen grove in the world, an unbelievable amount of acreage and it has a tree line above 11,300'. Most other places have a tree-line right around 10,000'. Lance wasn't sure why that was but it's certainly remarkable. I needed a recorder to get down all the fascinating things Lance related.

One part of Lake Powell had an amazing feat of engineering - Brigham Young had ordered some of his colonists to cross the lake and river, setting up a town beyond it. However, they had to build an access road down to the lake from the high bluffs above. It took a YEAR to complete. The bee hive state indeed! We passed over Rainbow Arch, a huge bridge only accessible by air or water. Or perhaps a very long walk. Only by flying there can you appreciate the remoteness of the location. On to Monument Valley.

Just as the flight director said, the weather over Monument Valley was almost pristine with just a few clouds hanging around to make things interesting. You run into structures name after what they look like, in order than I can recall - Train Car, (someone's) tomb, Three Sisters, Totem Pole which climbers climb and must be brought to by an Indian guide, the Castle, a different, dark

structure rather than red, the best trading post (name?) in the southwest on the Navajo land, the Navajo school up against a bluff, and several others I'll recall later.

Unfortunately, we hit some bumpy air and the cockpit was a little warm, so Kathy, who had flown relief missions in The Democratic Republic of Congo in the same type of plane, ended up not feeling well at all. Nothing like being next to someone losing breakfast while you're trying to enjoy the scenery. Her son did fine but she just had a bad combination of something. Poor lady. She recovered after a bit and everything was okay.

After several passes around the valley, we began our trip back to Bryce airport. The cloud cover just out of Monument valley was hovering around 10,000' so we got a closer look at the ground. I can now appreciate flying rather than driving to see Monument Valley. That place is ridiculously huge, akin to Death Valley big. Plus there were many dirt roads you'd have to drive to see many things and some you couldn't even drive to. Flying was definitely the best option to see Monument valley because you get to enjoy the scenery from a different perspective and you got to see it all, in 360, in a short while. Highly recommended!

Heading in toward Bryce Canyon, we ran into some really rough air and it took poor Kathy out. For a moment I thought her shoes had landed in the bag she was hurling so badly. No recovery for your grace with that one. It was fun landing at the airport because there was such a left-to-right cross wind that the pilot lined up to the left of the runway and drifted straight in with the slide of the wind already compensated for. He really did know what he was doing because it was effortless. Tipped Lance \$20 for his effort, the plane ride costing \$265, not too bad. Took my leave of Chris and poor Kathy at 12:30pm.

Tore out of there and fueled up at Ruby's Inn for \$2.19/gallon. Seems the price in this part of Utah is almost exactly the same. Headed north on SR-12, blowing past things I'd seen yesterday and on to more interesting things.

Stopped at a few interesting overlooks and such but nothing was exciting until Escalante and then only to see an old cabin. Each town in this part of Utah is spaced about one every thirty miles, designed to be a one day horse ride, according to Lance. Makes sense back in the day.

Tried to send a New Years wish to everyone back home but the cel signal just wouldn't connect through. Crap! I found the turn-off for Hell's backbone around 3pm and headed out toward it. It's about 14 miles off the main road and not too bad to get to. It was actually worth the drive to see the construction of that old road through some unbelievably rough country. The bridge is perched up on a high hill, straddling to crevasses leading to deep gorges and stunning valleys. I even walked under the bridge and looked at the old bridge work. Kind of scary walking on it next to 100' drops on either side. Getting my fill of that, it was time to get going as the day was wearing on.

Made it to Boulder, hoping for a place for dinner. Nothing will be open until March for that sort of thing. The lady at the gas station I arrived at 5 minutes before closing related that I'd have to travel to Torrey to find anything to eat or a place to stay. And it was over Boulder mountain, it was getting late and I'd better get going.

Got about half way up and it started snowing on the mountain while darkness fell. Not too badly but enough to make things interesting. Got down to the town of Torrey right around 6:30pm, just in time to make it to the Wonderland Inn for dinner and a place to stay. Room - \$40 and a great trout dinner, \$14.

Heading out to the Patio, some place just outside of town to see if there's anything interesting going on for New Year's Eve.

The Patio was probably the only place in Wayne county that had anything accessible and vaguely

exciting going on. Met Lorian, Mark and Beth who kept me entertained for the evening. After seeing how thrilling the place wasn't, I'm once again glad I don't live in a small town at this stage in my life. It was entertaining enough, though a stupid drunk cowboy found it necessary to come over to us and play quarters. Geeze, they're all the same. You don't need a college reason to drink on New Year's Eve. Fortunately, DD cowboy was pretty far gone already so it didn't take but a couple rounds before he crawled back to the table where his wife was. Apparently, watching the New Years ball drop in Manhattan is the defining event all across the country. Had maybe four light beers, unlike the barkeep and the rest of the people there.

After a tiny bit of dancing, we all headed over to Lorain's house in Bicknell, a hotbed of excitement. We suffered through the movie Ghost Ship which left everyone except me sleeping and once the movie was over, they all woke up and sat there with some thin conversation. It appeared that they all wanted to stay up 'till dawn, but I'd already paid for my room at the Wonderland Inn, so I bid them adieu at 4am. Gah. With the big blow and snowstorm that ripped through that night, the roads were quite icy so it was a 4wd all the way back. Didn't want to end up in a ditch when I was practically asleep. Got to the room and crashed out until 8am. Whoa, going to pay for that one.

January 1, 2006 Sunday

Gathered my gear and convinced a family from South Africa that they didn't need to put on snow chains to drive 200 yards on quickly melting ice to make it to the road. Headed for Capitol Reef National Park.

Capitol Reef NP was quite a fun place, too bad I'd "partied" most of the night and missed the morning light. Drove into the park and enjoyed the spectacular views. At sunrise or sunset, this place has to be awesome. Didn't shoot that many shots because I didn't have a lot of time to hike up the various trails.

Did get to the pioneer register, a place in the sandstone in the Capitol Gorge at the drivable end of the park. Quite fascinating to see all the names scribed into the wall from as early as 1888 (?). Also did the short hike to the Capitol Tanks, huge depressions in a sandstone wash where water collected. Unfortunately the biggest one was covered in over 10" of ice, so I couldn't ascertain how deep it was. Tried to break through the ice but to no avail. Got back to the truck, drove along and took a few scenic grab shots on the way out.

Drove a short distance east to the Petroglyphs along SR-24 and shot those with greater satisfaction. Used the polarizer to cut the glare off the rock and got some excellent shots with the 80-400. At least at the allowable distance - you couldn't get closer to them without being busted.

Headed on to Hanksville, a nothing place at the junction of SR-24 and SR-95 where I had dinner and refueled. This far out, you don't skip fueling when you have the chance, even to top off.

Got to the Hite town overlook on SR-95 where I slept for the night in the truck. The tent might have been more comfortable but with a stiff wind blowing, maybe not. Didn't want to get blown off the cliff there. The town of Hite was a former uranium boom town, now merely a storage and refuel station for the Colorado.

January 2, 2006 Monday

Got up at the crack of dawn and took some snaps of the Dirty Devil and Colorado River bridges and had a fun time throwing rocks.

Finally made it to Natural Bridges National Monument around noon and poked around. I filled up my water jugs at the drinking water pipe but I think the water was contaminated because I spent several times trying to toss my shoes out my mouth. Not fun. Went to see all three bridges

anyway. Made for slow going but with the mean overhead light with a thin veil of clouds, I knew I wasn't going to get any Pulitzers on this one.

Dumped my water, tried out the bottled version and a can of Hansen's and seem to be fine. Hopefully this isn't something too serious because I'm a long way from anything without health insurance.

Drove through and stayed at Monticello at the Day's Inn. Did pick up a grilled cheese sandwich at Blanding and it didn't seem to bother me too much. Caught the last sunrays of the day in a cemetery - that's where the light was hitting.

Couldn't get warm at all in my room, even with the heat on full blast and the heat lamp in the bathroom on. Grabbed the blanket off the other bed and tossed it on me. Pretty much shivered for 6 hours - went to bed at 7pm. Finally fell asleep and woke up at 4am pukingly hot. Nothing like the effects of picking up some nasty little bug. Thrashed around for a while and finally was able to get some orange juice and a bagel at the continental breakfast to get my energy level back up. Don't want to get too weak, otherwise this gets even worse.

January 3, 2006

After a miserable night's sleep and a slow power up in the morning, I headed off for Canyonlands National Park. This place is remote! You have to drive about 30 miles off SR-191 to get into the park. In fact, the park ranger said some people just give up and turn around because they think they've gone too far.

The sunset was pedestrian at best so I took my obligatory grab shots and got out of there. The ranger had warned me that going out the park road at night was treacherous due to range cattle and grazing deer. She was right - I came across no less than 20 deer grazing right along the road. Why do they choose to do that? And then bound across the road at the last second? Dumb deer.

Got up to Moab a short time later and found a Super-8 for \$35 with the secret cost-cutting code phrase and had dinner at the only diner open in town in south Moab. A great roast beef dinner, almost like home. Stayed there for quite a while because I wasn't interested in going to my motel room and staring at the wall pondering what I'm going to do after I hit Arches and Canyonlands-Isle in the sky over the next two days. That'll put me to Thursday, Jan 5. I have to be home by Sunday. What do I do for 3 days? I'll have burned up the major national parks in the state? There are some national monuments but not necessarily big enough to justify tearing around to them. Having the ability to do this is grand and it's special to have the problem of deciding such things. It's good to take time out each year to pursue the solitude of the road.

Jan 4, 2006 Wed

Arches National Park

Drove into Arches NP around 6am to head for a sunrise at Delicate Arch. Since none of the facilities were open, I was able to tear through there pretty quick and get down to the parking area in a relatively short time. By the time I got there, however, the only potential interesting point of sunlight was happening while I was still at the base of the 1.5 mile climb up to the arch. Ah well, I just jogged the flat parts and slogged up the slickrock (flat sandstone) as quickly as possible, making a sweating mess out of my clothes even though it was around 35 deg F.

Seeing the Delicate Arch live the first time was like seeing the Great Wall of China for the first time. You've seen photos and video of it so many times but there's nothing like actually standing there and looking at it. And actually, it was more awe striking to see the arch than the Grand Canyon. Don't know why other than the Delicate Arch is a singular object.

Unfortunately, the sunrise was disappointing. With lower lying clouds obscuring the vaguely colorful upper level Cirrus, there really wasn't much going on. So, not having come all that way not to do something about it, I wandered around, played under the arch and generally made do with what I had. I could see some interesting ideas with a bunch of flashheads at night but that's for another day with a different set of wireless equipment. I have the vision, just need the execution.

Stayed for several hours at the arch playing around and then headed down just as the first families were coming up.

Realizing it was nearly noon by the time I got back to the truck, it was time for lunch and some general relaxing in the cool air and warm sun. After 5 minutes of that, I was back on the road through the park, headed for Sandstone arch and Devil's Garden. Both places are quite impressive with huge sandstone monoliths rising out of the ground like they were driven up by some unseen, evil force. The force is really unseen but erosion isn't likely all that evil. Did the hike to Landscape arch, one of the largest arches in the world. In 1991, a 180 ton piece fell away from the arch, caught in a photograph. Quite stunning! From thence forth, people have not been allowed under that particular arch for obvious reasons.

You can actually go on quite a significant hike around the Devil's Garden and take in quite a few arches and the wonderful scenery. However, my time did not allow for a half day hike around the area, so I settled for Landscape and Pine tree arches.

Not wanting to miss some of the other features around the park before sunset, I headed over to Balanced rock. That thing is incredibly huge, maybe 20 feet tall perched on a rather crumbly looking pile of sandstone. That one falling would be quite impressive to capture.

Not wishing to miss the big to-do at sunset over at Delicate arch, I drove back over there to head up for a second time today. There were plenty of high-altitude ice crystals in the air but I had thin hopes that anything interesting would come of them for a sunset.

Met a German student and photographer, Thomas, on the way up and we swapped adventure stories up Mt. Whitney (he did it in two day - wuss) and all sorts of travels around the southwest. He's working on a PhD in biology and did a six month research stint at UCSD. He was well conversant in photography so there was no lack of conversation on the way up. He could haul pretty well, too. Riding your bike around La Jolla every day will do that for you.

We ended up there with 5 other photographers with varying levels of equipment, trying to capture the same unoriginal views. I was very happy to have had the arch all to myself that morning for several hours. It was fun chatting with people anyway about their experiences. Sadly, nothing materialized out of the atmosphere except for the slightest cast of yellow so it was back down the hillside.

By the time Thomas and I reached our vehicles, it was completely dark. Nothing like wandering down a hill when you can't see where you're going. We bid each other adieu as we both needed to get grub in Moab before everything closed.

Not smelling too good from a heavy day of hiking around Arches NP, I raced over to my Motel 8 and shower up before heading out. Being desperately hungry, there were only two or three places in town that would serve a half decent meal. Ironically, I ended up in the same restaurant as Thomas. Haha! Nothing like a small town. The dinner was passable at the steak place and I headed back to the hotel to do some laundry since I nuked the last clean set of clothing I had with dust and sweat. When you can smell your own, you know it's bad.

Jan 5, 2006 Thursday

Got up fairly late, deciding what to do. Hit up Denny's for the standard Grand Slam breakfast and then chose to head over to Isle in the Sky district of Canyonlands NP.

Thus far, it's been pretty rewarding to wander around this place. Quite interesting overlooks and such. This district isn't quite as extensive as the Needles district but is much more accessible. The Maze district is said to be virtually inaccessible, only by foot, boat and 4x4, maybe. Unfortunately I'm doing all my photography here in mid-daylight, so the shots aren't all that great. Plus many of the views are backlit during the day, causing a very hazy, backscattered view of the scenery. A little polarizer action helped cut through some of the haze but without a panoramic camera, getting the spectacular views is somewhat difficult.

It's been the plan throughout this section of the park to just take a single shot and enjoy the scenery. Also, with the huge selection of cliffs around, there have been ample rock throwing opportunities, something you can't get at home like this. Strangely, this section of the park is very deceiving because you feel as though you're driving through a grassy savannah with a few sandstone outcroppings when in fact you're driving on a massive mesa in between the Colorado and Green rivers. The area is big enough that many times you don't even realize where you are in the grander perspective. Until, that is, you drive right up to edge of a 1000+ foot drop cliff. Then you remember that you're in Canyonlands NP.

Now I've got to decide what to do here. It's about 3pm on Thursday and I don't want to make the drive past Las Vegas on Sunday because I'll end up suffering in the weekend return traffic. Something I'm not interested in doing after spending so much time in solitude where I could go lay in a random road for a hour and not worry about getting run over. That just ruins the feeling of the trip. Since I've fairly exhausted the national parks on this side of the state, I'm going to pour over the maps to see if there's something in the region within reason that can keep me entertained for another day. It would be fun to head up to Jackson, WY to visit for a couple of days but I have to get back to work to earn some money to pay for all these crazy ventures. Advantage of being a contractor - cut out when I want. Disadvantage - I don't get paid when I cut out. Plus I don't want to drive around in freezing snow and risk getting stuck there a couple days.

I'm sure something interesting will come up, it always does. Sure enough, after seeking out the map for a bit, something interesting did come up! The only national park located in Nevada is Great Basin NP. I don't know anything about it but getting over there and exploring a little bit will pretty much eat up my last Friday so I don't have to wander the desert just because.

Stayed in the Motel 8 in Salina, UT. Chose that place over the \$1 cheaper Best Western because the desk clerk was nicer. Nothing much going on this town other than being a trucker stop on the I-70 in between the Grand Junction, CO and the I-15. Good enough. Plus there's a Denny's next door so I get a decent breakfast cheap.

Jan 6, 2006 Friday

Got up at 5am to get going over to Nevada as it's still quite a drive over there, maybe 100 miles. Snagged my standard OJ and Original Grand Slam (printed in tiny font at the bottom of their menu - the cheapest full meal), packed up and headed out. Crossed over the rest of Utah on US 50/6, a long and quite uninteresting drive across a desert section. The far mountains beamed and were interesting enough to keep you going.

Just around Delta, UT, I ran into the strangest sight. A raven and bald eagle were sitting in the middle of the road having a conversation. There didn't appear to be any dead rabbits laying around for them to feast on (bald eagles are opportunistic scavengers, you know) so I'm not sure what they were there for. I didn't realize the larger bird was a bald eagle until my horn honking got them out of the way of my truck; they both took off and I saw the tell-tale black body with white fantail and white head. This sighting was confirmed by one of the park rangers because

she said one of her naturalist friends noted that bald eagles have been sighted in the area rather recently. Strange! Also saw two golden eagles - man, those things are huge. One of them had a massive stick nest in a craggy tree right next to the road and its owner was sitting on a mere fencepost, waiting to feast on the dead rabbit laying next to the road.

Finally hit the exciting Border Inn and gas station on the Utah/Nevada state line. Naturally the gas station was in Nevada because people were smoking inside and there were several slot machines. Somehow I doubt those pay out very well or get much use. A short drive later, I arrived at Great Basin NP.

The first and newer visitors center is right at the edge of the park outside of Baker. Found out the most interesting feature of the park is Lehman cave, a nice example of the park's 50+ caves, 2 just discovered in 2004. For \$10 and being off-season, I received my own private tour of the cave, the whole 90-minute walk through. It was nice not having a bunch of other people there trying to touch stuff and being generally stupid. Was able to get a chance and go see another room or two that is normally blocked off. Quite fascinating, especially the shield formations. My guide, Erin, said that they're exceedingly rare and don't occur in too many places. This particular cave was covered in them, including it's most famously photographed formation, a shield structure. It kind of looks like a melting drum kettle. The tour was enjoyable and worthwhile. You actually can get winded up here because the elevation of the cave is 6,000', high enough to get your attention.

Erin also mentioned that when she worked in Everglades NP, the best time was to go in February, as there are few tourists, the weather is warmer and the mosquitoes haven't come out yet, the most important consideration.. I'll have to look into that...

Now, I'm sitting all alone in a big national park at Upper Lehman Creek Campground writing some of my final notes while enjoying a Kern's nectar, goldfish and Mom's bread cake, all of which incidentally have kept me going for lunch for the past week and a half. Sadly, the only true statement any time, any place, is here, "And this, too, shall pass". I don't want to get stuck in Friday commute traffic in Las Vegas or Los Angeles but I'm not motivated to just wander around a park that's mostly closed. I could walk up the 8 miles to the top of Wheeler peak (11,000+) but that's likely a snowshoe trek and won't be completed in 4 hours, the time I have to sunset. I'll just enjoy the rushing of the creek nearby and ponder how spectacular this trip has been.

Strangely, I looked at the map and it doesn't seem like it would take this long to cover the seemingly short expanse of landscape. However, stopping at every park and reading most every sign, enjoying at least a day in each, hiking around, getting plane rides over Monument Valley and such will do just that. Plus driving in between places eats up a lot of time. There just isn't a lot in between towns and parks here except lots of road. Right now I'm at 1,800 miles traveled and I'll be well over 2,200 by the time I get home from here. Oh man, this was so worth it after I'd thought I'd never have enough to do in southeast Utah and now Nevada.

Ate a smoking lunch/dinner at Silver Cafe in Pioche, NV. NV is going to be the only state soon that allows smoking in eating establishments.

Continued heading down toward Las Vegas on SR-93, enjoying what I could see of the sunset. The opposing clouds looked good and pink, something I haven't seen in several days. Having the trade of not having any bad weather was fairly worth it. A little cloud cover is always more interesting but at the cost of rain or snow, that's debatable.

Got down to the I-15 and headed up to the Valley of Fire exit to decide what to do, stay in the area or just head home. While deciding, I couldn't resist buying some firecrackers since we can't do that at home. Not that I can fire them off legally but that's another matter. Even though one of the rangers at Great Basin NP suggested that Valley of Fire is supposed to be really pretty, I suspect that I've seen the best and it just won't stand up to justifying staying another day when

I'm only four hours from home.

This all makes sense until I tell you that I'm sitting completely stopped about 4 miles north of Jean, south of Vegas with a life-flight severity car crash just 200 yards ahead of me. I balance that against participating in the accident. Been here for about half an hour and all the sudden getting my clothes smoked up in Vegas or camping out in Valley of Fire doesn't seem like such a bad option. However, since I'm not going anywhere fast, those points are really moot. And I'm not going to turn around and drive 40 miles back north, either. So, I sit and wait for the unfortunate carnage to be cleaned up by the authorities. Hopefully all those people pull through but when you have a helicopter have to land on the freeway to scoop you up, it never looks good.

Finally rolled into home at 12:30am on Saturday, just about as I'd projected, even with the traffic delay in Vegas. Pretty uneventful drive though almost could have ran out of gas - I was down to a quarter tank by the time I hit Victorville but fortunately I looked down at my dash and headed over to a gas station. Did miss the 215 connector at the 60/91 interchange but that was rectified easily.

Jan 7, 2006 Saturday

Trip Epilogue

It was strange to come home, as though I'd been on another planet for some time and returned as though nothing had happened. That seems to be the case many times when I've returned. Can't exactly explain the feeling but there is something there.

I had concerns before going on the trip that there wouldn't be enough to do in Utah but in fact there was more than enough to keep me entertained for twice as long, seeing as I didn't go on any full day hikes, camp out or anything like that. Bryce alone could have consumed several more days and that was over a week ago. I am very blessed to be able to run off and do these things and I'm very appreciative for that.

It was quite entertaining to live off of Gatorade and Goldfish for 9 hours while driving. Return mileage: 25,027. Total trip distance: 2,477 miles.

END OF TRIP