

Trip report—Southwest Desert Family Tour 2018

It started with a plan to show the kids the Southwest USA, a place where both Jeni and I have strong ties—the landscape and the opportunity for adventure.

I was hatching a plan, a collection of top desert experiences based on the many years I had spent exploring the southwest in past decades, but also adventures reasonable with kids—the big challenge—many of my memories are of the epics, running out of water on a 3-day hike, frustrated to find only dry pools where water was expected; the big all-day first ascent climbs of isolated spires; the amazing ruins discovered but remembered also the epic freezing cold nights after getting hopelessly lost on the convoluted paths through the geologic cliff layers searching for the entry maze to these wondrous places.

Like the spectacular Cassiopeia, which appeared brightly each night in the late night Northern sky (missing in our antipodal Tasmanian home), I imagined a large east facing “W” zigzagging through the Colorado Plateau, from East to West to East, and back again to hit some of the “top 10” remote and isolated spots I had discovered and visited in my youth.



First stop, a few days in Pagosa Springs, to visit our former home and friends, and Rowen's first whitewater in a double inflatable kayak. Our road trip began properly onto the Colorado Plateau heading southwest with our first stop to test out the Subaru on some rough dirt roads and to gaze up close at Shiprock, bringing back memories of my climb of all three summits with Walt Shipley in the 1980's. We camped our first night at Spider Rock—the rim camp still run by Howard, and access to two trails, one right by camp. At a viewpoint, we met a Navajo seller, who offered some simple modern rock paintings and etchings, with good explanations of the Anasazi symbols—the spiral of life, the bighorns, and others.



We started with the new May Moon, the thin waxing sliver starting to show, sun and moon setting together at dusk. Rowen and I slept under the stars, and two weeks later, our last camp had the most spectacular full moon rise ever. But I get ahead. At the Spider Rock camp, I was reminded of life on the Rez. A coyote nearing the hoguns set off a cacophony of barking dogs, each triggering more dogs as the periphery of sound grew. About 3am in the dark of the night was only when things settle down. The stars were bright and slowing turning.

We spent a day hiking down to the canyon bottom to see the White House Ruins, Remi's biggest hike yet, and spent a lovely morning/afternoon sitting under a cottonwood tree in deep shade, with a view to the ruins just above. We also bought our first Navajo jewelry, from sellers we were able to have some leisurely chats in this wonderful spot far from the road.



Our desert timings were already getting better,

and found some well-placed deep afternoon shade on the long hike back up to the rim, with the kids stellar in learning to “camel up” (drink 10-15 deep glugs of water without taking a breath) before a big hike. It was hot and the desert here is quite distinct in terms of sun shade and water as the Australian Desert which had been the kids only prior experience.

Next stop was Hopi Lands, where I sought to reconnect with my Hopi friend Cliff, whom I had travelled down the Colorado River for a month 20 years before, and helped gather sacred materials by means of my climbing abilities. The Hopis alternatively called me “Coyote” when I was leading a tricky canyon hike or playing games in camp, and occasionally “Bear” when I was invited into their gatherings and quests. After a tour of Walpi on the First Mesa, we stayed in the Hopi Lodge at the bottom of the Second Mesa for a hotel experience, where we were the only non-Hopi in the dining room. People were coming to the Third Mesa dance which began the next day.

On Saturday morning, we stopped at Cliff’s house and greeted as if no time had passed, and learned he had been up all night with some of the dancers. He invited us to his sister’s house on the plaza and ringside seats for the Sheep dance, which had just started. All morning the 50 or so dancers danced rhythmically in step in the warming day and we were all entranced, especially Remi. At noon, the clowns arrived, this time making their entrance by lowering off the roof with climbing harnesses. Each clown descended to the plaza with great showmanship, volunteers jerking them up and down many times on the way down. One of them had a deep slice on his shoulder from the adobe plaster of the wall as he bounced and jackknifed his way down to the plaza. Soon the five clowns were careening around the plaza as a gang, disrupting the dancers, swearing loudly, lots of penis jokes, rudely grabbing water and food from little children, as people laughed with increasing discomfort.



During each break in the dance, the dancers passed out fresh food and candy, Remi somehow being given a whole basket of red licorice. Jeni collected a bounty of corn, zucchini, and other fresh vegetables which were staples for the coming weeks of camping. Then we went into the cool of Cliff's sister's house and feasted on endless bowls of good stews and baked goods.

Cliff presented Remi a White Bear Kachina, a beautiful hand carved version with feathers, and Rowen a toy bat and ball for the Hopi golf/hockey game played in the courtyard, both representing children coming of age (girls are given Hopi Kachinas each year). The Bear, representing strength and courage, was becoming a theme for the trip.

After a sad goodbye to Cliff (every visit to Hopi I feel like I just want to stay there), we drove west to the south rim of the Grand Canyon, and camped a few miles down an isolated road on the forest service land south of the rim. After a hike to Grandview Point the next day, where the views of the Grand Canyon are some of the best and as spectacular as ever, we headed to Flagstaff to visit Rob Noonan, who hosted us at his house and treated us to a restaurant breakfast the next morning.



After a night in Flagstaff, we drove to Lee's Ferry, to reminisce about the many times Jeni and I had begun incredible adventures when we were river guiding two-week Grand Canyon oar trips. Jeni actually got the same butterflies in her stomach driving to the put-in as if we were beginning a river trip, triggered by the familiar landscape during the descent to river's edge. As we drove over the new bridge, I thought of the time, 19 years prior, Dan Osman and I jumped the 400' rope jump off the old bridge, and where I almost lost my life as the wind pushed me and my Dano designed pilot chute (which I had recently sewn up)

toward the cliff, and thought again how senseless the pursuit of adrenaline and records that climbing was transitioning into at the time. This day, the put-in was an industrial zone, with several commercial and private trips getting rigged, big 30 passenger motor trips installing their boats with large trucks, cranes, and loud compressors. I made a mental note not to override prior memories at Lee's Ferry of tranquil moments after all was rigged and still awaiting the bus loads of clients, whom would be welcomed and invited in small groups onto our 18' rafts or paddle boat. This time, though, I inflated my 5' dime store ducky, and Remi and I glided with the current for a few minutes from the upper dock to the main put-in, avoiding the churning waters from the motorboat's 30hp outboards as they were tested in place.



Then off along highway 98, where I was once again mesmerised by the many unclimbed spires on that populated strip of Navajo land, and to Kayenta for a hotel stay, pool time and showers in prep for what was going to be an extended separation from civilization for the next part of the trip. The next morning we drove the Monument Valley loop, to see the Totem Pole and other spectacular spires. Having climbed over a dozen first ascents in the area in the 80's and 90's, I was reminded of the wild adventures: the 700' Bear, the remote Rooster



Rock, most of the Yei Bei Chei's, the Stagecoach, Organ Rock and the Teapot, and several of the buttes, with Dan Langmade, Jimmy Dunn, Glen Rink, Walt Shipley, Alan Humphreys, Dave Insley, and others—good memories. And of course the many repeats of classic routes like the Totem Pole and Agathla. At the Totem Pole lookout, once again strong reminders of the Bear as a friendly Navajo seller, perhaps after noticing a necklace catching my eye, encouraged me to buy a beautiful rainbow stone inset bear necklace, and again telling the story of bear's representation of courage and strength. I bought the bear and wore it for the rest of the trip up to Devil's Tower.

Climbing Mexican Hat with Rowen the next day was a special day. Mexican Hat is an improbable disk of rock, about 50' in diameter and about 5' thick, that balances on a pedestal only about 8' in diameter. The "Bandito Route" climbs a bolt ladder up over the smallest part of the overhang, and is intimidating as one steps out over the void, yet not very technical. Our ascent was spiced by the fact that as soon as we began, the darkening sky blew hard, ropes and slings flying about as I aided my way to the summit. Rowen did awesome coming up second despite the lack of communication in the gale winds, and we celebrated our first desert summit together. As soon as we summited, the winds stopped as suddenly as they began, only adding to the experience of satisfaction of our ascent.



After our ascent of Mexican Hat, we all bathed naked in the San Juan river below, that is, until a river trip passed by scurrying us back to shore for our clothes (Jeni and Remi didn't mind staying naked submerged in the silty brown waters as the boats passed).

A quick stop at the Goosenecks then up the Moki Dugway, a gripping dirt road which finds a switchback path up to Cedar Mesa, where we planned to spend a few days exploring the canyons. We spent 3 nights at Cigarette Springs, exploring Road and Lime canyons. Rowen and I found a rarely visited ruin in an unnamed fork, complete with an exposed granary with thousands of corn cobs, and a Kiva with an intact roof. Rowen asked about going into the Kiva, but I reminded him about the stories Cliff had recently told us about the sanctity of Kivas and their place in the Hopi culture. He declined out of respect, and we retraced our steps finding our way back to the rim.



The next day all four of us visited the Citadel, a spectacular ruin perched under an overhang on an island of rock in between two forks of Road Canyon. I tied in with Remi for the many up and down climbs on the slickrock. We spent lots of time in the shade, feeling cozy in the isolation of the spot, and spending time

watching the changing light of the day. We left in the heat of the afternoon as a large outdoor school group was arriving on the scene, the only other people we saw during our Cedar Mesa adventures.

After packing camp and filling our 10 gallon water jugs with the crisp Cigarette Springs water, we had a travel day—Bridges National Monument, where amongst the crowds we somehow found an private pool below the Owachomo natural bridge to swim naked and boulder on the slickrock sides, and then to Halls Crossing on Lake Powell, where we took the ferry over to Bullfrog, and then up the spectacular Burr Trail to Boulder, where we camped on a bench on the rim

overlooking a canyon, a spot plentiful with signs of the past. Remi had an incredible eye, and found some intact arrowheads, and was quite content with discovering, but leaving finds where they lay.



After all our isolation, we hiked Calf Creek the next day on Memorial Day weekend—unlike most of our adventures to this point, Calf Creek is in every guidebook, and listed as one of the top 5 hikes in the Colorado Plateau (up to now, I had been using our sporadic internet to research places *not* to go, as things have changed in the past 20 years, and anything on the internet or in guidebooks was bound to be crowded). This day, we enjoyed, with a thousand other people, celebrating the desert and the spectacular pools at the Calf Creek falls. It was a big hike—about 8 miles round trip— for Remi in the hot sun, and I think she met and talked to just about everyone (especially those with dogs) along the trail and at the pools.



Then onto Hole in the Rock road, where after some helpful beta from Tim at the local outdoor shop, set up for Egypt 1, a slot canyon requiring a series of rappels and downclimbs, a fun day of exploring and sliding in the deep shaded slot canyon.



Having survived Memorial Day weekend, we next drove to Grover for a stay at the Flute motel, run by a crafty Mormon who makes Navajo type flutes and has a great shop of rocks and desert crafts, a big hit for the kids, then onto Capital Reef, where we did a short hike (Remi had 3 big blisters from the preceding days hikes).

Goblin Valley State Park was next, a wonderful day exploring among the hoodoos—this place was always a fun stopover, but with kids the fun is 10x—the best natural playground anywhere in the world. The next day we hiked Wild Horse canyon, another wonderful slot canyon.





I was hoping to climb Cleopatra's Chair with Rowen, and was poised to give our overloaded Subaru a final test, but was dissuaded from attempting the rough road by some folks who had just come from there, as well as the warnings of rough track in the normally understated Kelsey guide. We opted instead for the dirt track traversing the west side of Canyonlands, and found the best camp of our trip on Keg Mesa, a high Mesa with spectacular views of all of Canyonlands and the Island in the Sky to our east, and the San Rafael Swell to the west. We explored the six hole arch, and were blessed with an amazing sunset, followed by a full moon rise, where we could almost feel the Earth diving down in rotation below the moon.



END PART 1-next, Moab, Fruita, and Devils Tower.

