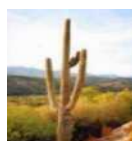


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Southwest USA in ten days

Have you tried the phone box trick? You know - the one where 30 students hijack a telephone kiosk and all try to squeeze in at the same time. No? Neither have I, but I *have* tried the tourist equivalent - pick a destination on the other side of the world where it is so stuffed with unmissable sights that you just *have* to rush round and see them all. I did that in Arizona. For even better measure, I did it in Nevada and Utah on the same trip. These are vast areas and have far more mouth-watering tourist attractions than any one region deserves. But, what can you do when you're not sure whether you'll get the chance to go again?

Arizona is Big (the word needs a capital). The night skies reach to eternity and beyond, while highways stretch towards a horizon that never comes. Start the car, take it up to a decent speed, set the cruise control and just sit there. Scenery coasts past, mile after mile, while you shuffle your feet around the floor and lightly hold the steering wheel to keep the car moving straight. Dead straight. There is no record of Roman occupation in this part of the world, but I wondered whether their road builders might have been sent here on secondment.



My first introduction to the state was **Phoenix**, where we landed on a hot January day after a delayed flight out of Denver. Notice the words "hot" and "January", which never go together in an British context. Phoenicians wouldn't have called it hot - they can live in the 100s - but anything above 70°F is hot in my language. No offence to the locals, but I wish they'd be quieter at during the night; no doubt it is a wonderful place but I slept better elsewhere. Phoenix is a major city - large in population, but very big in land area (it takes forever to drive out of town). We collected a hire car and drove north on Interstate 17 to find out how much the climate can vary in a single car journey. The roadside view at the Phoenix end of the journey was dominated by Saguaro cactus - the ones from the wild-west films, with thick straight trunk and arms raised as if to direct the traffic. As the road climbed higher the Saguaro gave way to Prickly Pear - the cactuses with spiky leaf-like appendages in the shape of flattened spoons. Further ascent brought us beyond their range, until we were well above the highest point we have anywhere back in comfortable, mild Great Britain. The road was at 6,000 feet above sea level before we turned off to drive through the mountains past Prescott to Jerome and Sedona.

We scarcely stopped in **Prescott** - even at the pace we were going we couldn't squeeze everything into one trip. **Jerome** left a stronger impression, first of the astonishing distant view of the pink cliffs of **Sedona** (our objective for the night) then of the township itself. **Jerome** has a mining museum - reasonable enough in a former mining town - but it also boasts an extravagance of art, antique, craft and gift shops (I compromised and bought a piece of rock!). **Jerome** was a ghost town, once its rich copper seams had been worked out; then its empty buildings were discovered and taken over by increasing numbers of artists who found the location inspiring and the prices

affordable. They must have liked long views, because that is Jerome's strongest advantage. It stands high above the valley of red rocks presenting amazing sunsets, dry weather most of the year, and improbably suspended buildings. Many of the houses have street level entrances, but back doors two storeys lower. The former jail is said to have slithered 200 feet down the hill over time. We trod carefully and tried not to do the same.

Sedona is the true capital of Red Rock country, and I fell in love with it instantly. The town is strung out along highway 179/89A and surrounded by huge peaks of stunningly beautiful pink and red rock, with the occasional dash of cream. It makes an entrancing backdrop to the hotel (almost any of the hotels). Ours had a veranda from which we could have sat out to enjoy this incredible view, if only it hadn't been January. Yes, January does mean cold in these mountains, and it's hard to believe that we were baking in Phoenix just an afternoon's drive earlier. The cold was bearable, but consistent enough to keep snow frozen where it lay. Summer temperatures rise much higher, but never as high as the lower lying regions of Southern Arizona, so it is not surprising that so many Americans are staking their claim on Sedona real estate to set up their retirement homes. It is a fast growing town and well provided with hotels and restaurants. We dined on Thai food, went to bed early and resolved to get up to see the sun rise over the red rocks next morning.

Sunrise in **Sedona** is an enriching experience. The best view (short of a hot air balloon) can be seen from Airport Mesa ('mesa' is Spanish for table, which tells you the shape of this hill). It gives a commanding view of the town, some of the massive red rocks and a panorama reaching back to Jerome's dark hills. A garish balloon added extra colour to this multi-chromatic scene, but did nothing to raise the temperature at that early hour. We watched the sun come up, enjoying each change in the magical display of light and colour, until our shivers became uncontrollable and we rushed to end our early adventure with a hot breakfast. The Coffee Pot restaurant (named after for a nearby red-rock formation that bears a remarkable likeness to a traditional coffee pot) offered a choice of 101 omelettes, though variety mattered less to us at that point than the fact that they were hot.



"Red Rock Drive" is a well-marked route that proved well worth the time it took. The drive leads to a particularly impressive rock formation and a car park from which you can follow a trail alongside a small river. The sun had dispelled the early cold, making the walk pleasant and bringing out some of the wildlife. The scene was beautiful in winter and must be idyllic in spring. Some of the pools glowed emerald green due to the effects of a brilliant species of cottonweed.

Sedona is a long town and stretches up into the lower end of Oak Creek Canyon, a "must see" element of the local scenic attractions. It is a dramatic, steep-sided, wooded gorge, which begins among the pink rocks and climbs up to the whiter geology of higher strata. As we drove through it patches of snow and ice enhanced the effect. Highway 89A, which runs through the canyon, is a principle route to **Flagstaff** so enjoying the views of Oak Creek Canyon involved no diversion or loss of time on our journey (apart from a worthwhile pause at a scenic overlook at a pullout near the head of the gorge). In our frantic tour of the American South-West we scored **Sedona** highly enough to stay there two nights. Compliments indeed.

Flagstaff is a meeting point for several major routes and a suitable centre for exploring the area. We passed through it several times during this trip, but took advantage of a special opportunity during our first visit, which happened to be on a Friday. The University of Northern Arizona stands in the centre of the town and their astronomical society holds Open Evenings at the University Observatory from 7.30 on Friday nights. Viewing through their 14" telescope, we were saw Saturn's rings and Jupiter's moons, the Crab Nebula, the Orion Nebula, the M7 and M21 galaxies, Sirius and the 7 (or 8) stars of the Pleiades. They were a long way from Arizona, but few observatories grant such privileged access to the general public (and without prior booking). Arizona skies are so clear that you can see amazing starscapes without a telescope but, if you are interested, a Friday night visit to the university is worth the effort.



Walnut Canyon was another unexpected pleasure that we slipped in to the earlier part of a very full day. It is a striking geological feature in its own right but in the words of one of the trailside notices, "*800 years ago the cliffs of Walnut Canyon echoed with the shouts and songs of a thriving Indian community*". Walnut is a key archaeological site, once home to the Sinagua people (estimated AD 1120-1400). Cliff dwellings nestle into low caves alongside the waymarked trails, but these are not just empty rooms.

Fingerprints can be seen in the clay plaster where the builders handled it eight centuries ago; walls are still smoke blackened from ancient cooking fires. The canyon contains about 300 rooms and archaeologists have found evidence of farming on both rims of the canyon. However, the dwellings are quite low and it is easy to see why the experts estimate the maximum height of these people to have been about 5 feet 6 inches. Walnut Canyon is managed as a National Monument, but it is worth the admission charge of \$4.00.



Before taking leave of the Flagstaff area, we headed north to see the famous wild-west scenery of **Monument Valley**. It may not have been the most logical route plan, but we had never seen this incredible feature - so we squeezed it into the schedule. Whether you have been there or not, it is certain that you would recognise the wind carved buttes that stand improbably out of this otherwise flat plain. John Wayne and other Hollywood legends wove in and out around these inverted lampshades, which stand as a trademark symbol for the American west. Yes, they have been hyped mercilessly, but they worth a visit. 'Monument' gave our jaws a chance to practise dropping before they fell off our faces completely at the sight of the Grand Canyon!

Monument Valley is close to **Kayenta**, a small settlement, but one that is blessed with an unusual Burger King. The BK franchise in this town is held by a Navaho whose father was one of the "[Code Talkers](#)" used in the Second World War by the US military to handle communications in ways inaccessible to the Japanese. The restaurant has displays explaining the special role played by these native Americans, using the Navaho language (with appropriately invented technology words) to speak in "code" and outwit the enemy. If you are not a fan of 'Big Whoppers' find some other reason to stop by and learn about this fascinating episode from 20th century history.

Following our long, but worthwhile, diversion we journey back through Flagstaff and on to **Kingman**. Scenically and historically, this is not a town to shout about, but its position on Interstate 40 makes it an unavoidable route marker on the journey to Nevada, and it happens to have a wide choice of good hotels. We spent a pleasant night at a very reasonably priced, but quality motel, then continued our journey without stopping to inspect the town. Kingman, lies in the path of the old Route 66 (remember the songs?) but the old road takes a very interesting turn just out of town to head off into "them thar hills" where the miners prospected in hope in the pre-Hollywood days of legend. We headed across the desert road, marvelling at the weird contortions of the Joshua trees that spread out on every side (Joshua trees are Yuccas that have gone to extremes). The road takes some alarming twists and turns through the hills, but leads eventually to a sight to make you rub your eyes and pinch yourself... the swinging tavern doors and overhung upper floors of an authentic old west town. **Oatman** was a mining centre, then almost became a ghost town before Hollywood and the tourists discovered it. Most of the buildings are authentic, though there is a section at the lower end of the main street where facades stand in a line with no substance behind them to make the buildings useful, other than for effect. The uses of the real buildings, however, have changed considerably from their earlier role as taverns, trading posts, assay offices and the general paraphernalia of a Wild West town. These days they serve ices creams, photographic films, rocks and pieces of petrified wood, bric-a-brac and trinkets. A special feature of the area is the wandering burros - wild donkeys descended from drought tolerant animals, which the miners imported specially from Spain's Andalucia region but abandoned when the mines ran out. They look like pets, but the many warning signs should be heeded. Burros may react with a truly untamed bite or a violently feral kick if they take exception to whatever you are doing... just stand back and take a respectful photo. Oatman deserved a longer stay, but our ever-furious schedule pushed us on to cross more of the desert, narrowly missing a Roadrunner along the way (yes they are real birds!).

Our next objective was the **Hoover Dam**, a truly massive lump of concrete that turns the wild and erratic Colorado River into the placid and well-ordered **Lake Mead**. The dam carries Interstate 40 from Arizona across to neighbouring Nevada, with a prominent clock reminding travellers to put their watches back one hour as they cross into the Pacific time zone. Every aspect of this structure is expressed in superlatives. It contains enough concrete to build a road right across the USA and retains enough water to drown the whole of Arizona several inches deep. It produces enough electricity to run several cities and hosts sufficient visitors to pay its own running costs and subsidise several other national hydro schemes. Most surprising of all, it was completed before schedule and within budget (how many government-sponsored projects can make that boast?). The tour through the bowels of the dam is interesting, though somewhat overpriced at \$10 a head - but why should they worry when the tourists keep flocking through? We flocked with the rest, pausing only to groan about the illogical security rules, which don't allow handbags or camera cases but will let you in happily with both or either if you conceal them in your pocket or under your sweater (yes, they actually told us to do that!) Are bombs any less of a problem when you can't see them?



Keeping up the frantic pace of our tour, we moved on to see another kind of madness at **Las Vegas**. This extravagant city dominates the scene for miles around, especially at night when its lights beam out into the desert sky making 'light pollution' an understatement. Activity centres on **The Strip**, although casinos can be found downtown and at various locations around the city and in outlying towns. For non-gamblers like myself, The Strip is the place to go, just to wander along and ogle at the extraordinary display of hype and over-indulgence. Nowhere in the world displays such exuberant excess and does it with such professional aplomb. This town knows how to entertain, and much of it is free - does that surprise you?

We only had one evening to sample its delights, so simply drifted with the crowds along the pavement (OK, sidewalk) enjoying the free shows put on by some of the major hotels. **Mirage** is fronted by a tropical sea with a forest of palm trees, but adds to the excitement by staging a volcanic eruption every fifteen minutes. Smoke and steam billow out of one of the rock hills and flames reach upwards as the explosions ring out. It is called street entertainment. Another kind of entertainment is available inside, but the **Cirque du Soleil** is by no means free. I'm told that the world-class acrobatic displays of this circus without animals are well worth the price, but it didn't fit into our schedule.

Stardust, a neighbouring hotel, doesn't try too hard to compete with its neighbours' displays, but contents itself with a multicoloured laser show, sending beams high into the sky; but you don't need to go anywhere near the hotel to see it.



It is necessary to brave the crowds in front of **Treasure Island** if you want to see the pirate battle they re-enact once every ninety minutes. The acting is ham and the plot is ridiculous. However, the staging and effects make the noisy mock battle between Hispaniola and Britannica a sight to be seen, from the first ranting of the Spaniard pirates to the both-ways fire and explosions and the sinking of the pompous Brits (yes, the ship actually sinks into the water). It takes a while for the crowd to disperse after the show, so don't expect to get away quickly.



Our walking route took us past the world famous **Caesars Palace**, where toga clad waiters serve in the restaurant, and **Venice**, with its own San Marco, Bridge of Sighs, canals (including the Grand Canal) and gondolas. Further down the street we could see the Eiffel Tower marking the point where **Paris** meets Nevada! The Strip is too long to walk end-to-end in a single evening and still take in the sights. We only made it as far as the \$3,000 a night Italian marvel of **Belaggio**, where we had noticed an unmissable display as we drove along The Strip on our way into town. This hotel brings class to the area with a superbly choreographed fountain display timed to fit a music programme that changes every fifteen minutes. We watched three of the programmes and could happily have seen more, but it was getting cold. People sneer at **Las Vegas**, but it scours the depths of bad taste so impressively that it is worth a visit just to gaze in amazement.

We enjoyed a comfortable night in the Hilton hotel (you can get good deals in major hotels if you choose the right night) then headed out past Boulder City to take road south along the Colorado valley, past the Parker Dam to **Lake Havasu City**. This involved a short stretch of driving in Californian territory (at least we can say we've been there) and took us to the incongruous sight of **London Bridge** surrounded by palm trees. This famous old City of London landmark still bears the corporation badges, but has replaced the Thames with an artificial extension of Lake Havasu and a palm fringed beach. This town is reckoned to be one of the most visited places in Arizona - I can't think why, but it was amusing to see this familiar old friend in such an unusual location. Last time I saw the bridge it must have been fog-bound (wasn't it always?) so its 1967 relocation hasn't done it any harm. Robert P McCulloch, the entrepreneur who bought and moved it, was the butt of many jokes at the time, but the explosive growth and prosperity of Lake Havasu City as a centre for retirement and tourism seems to have proved his judgement right.



Special circumstances of our tear round South West USA took us in an illogical loop from Lake Havasu through the desert to Phoenix and back up to Flagstaff. Don't try driving such distances at home... but do take whatever chance you have to visit the **Grand Canyon**. Our visit coincided with the arrival of President Clinton, who came to open a new 'National Monument near the Canyon. Apart from a few protestors on the street in Tusayan and police lurking in all kinds of strange locations, his presence did not affect our visit. The entry fee \$20 per vehicle gives access to the National Park area for up to seven days, which is quite a good deal for such a huge area. Few people stay seven days because the main activity is driving from viewpoint to viewpoint and peering down into the abyss. If Dante could have seen this great gash in the earth's surface his "Inferno" would have become even more terrifying. We took our first look at Mather Point, first stop on the **West Rim Drive**, where the canyon width rim to rim is about 10 miles and the river is 5,000 feet below. We could only just see the Colorado River from that point and it was too far away to give any impression that it might be a mighty river. It is, and so is the canyon it runs through. After looking across from Yavapai Point, Trailview Overlook, Mahavi Point and the Abyss, we stopped at Hermits Rest. I overheard someone comment that the view from the end of that trail was not quite as spectacular and responded, "I have yet to see anything here that is not spectacular". Cries of "Here, here!" from other tourists within earshot confirmed the general approval for a not-to-be-missed tourist sight. If you go in the warmer months you will not be allowed to drive yourself along the West Rim, but will have to use the Park's shuttle buses.



With sunset approaching we drove along to the **East Rim Drive**, setting our cameras back to work at Moran Point before continuing the drive. By the time we reached Lippan Point the Sun was low in the sky and the colours were changing. At this point you can see the river quite clearly with just visible in the distance below. Desert View, at the extreme end of the East Rim Drive was our objective for the sunset proper, with its Lookout Tower adding character to some of the pictures. But what more character did we need with such a mouth-watering panorama of colour and impressiveness? It was so good that we shortened our night's stay at the

Holiday Inn Express in Tusyan and got up early again to witness sunrise over the Canyon. Some people are just too committed!

Driving out from the East Rim on Highway 64 towards **Cameron** it is worth lingering along the way to see a scenic overview of the Little Colorado in its own canyon (which is also incredibly deep). When we gazed over the edge we could see the frozen river way below us, looking like a glass rope laid out along the canyon floor. Once we reached Interstate 89 we headed north towards **Page**, marvelling once again at the exposed geology spread out on all sides as we cruised a road that stretched ahead forever. Page would be our overnight stop the following day but, for now, we paused briefly to refuel the car and our stomachs, then crossed the Colorado on the bridge beside **Glen Canyon Dam** and continued northwards on Highway 89. Page is a sizeable town and could be a promising centre for local exploration. Glen Canyon dam holds back the Colorado to form **Lake Powell**, which locals claim has as much shoreline as the whole western seaboard of the USA. It is a popular watersports and boating area, and includes nearby delights such as **Antelope Canyon**, a deep 'slot canyon' where the rock walls close in over your head and the light glows strangely, reflecting the colours of the rock.

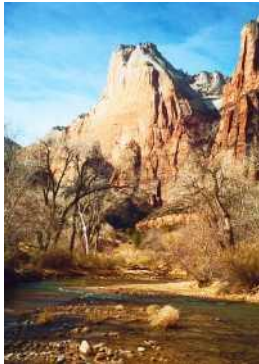
Crossing the **Painted Desert**, past the striking pink faced Echo Cliffs, we headed into **Utah** and on to **Kanab** (another popular centre for touring the area) and turned off onto Highway 12 towards Bryce. Our day had begun with sunrise over the Grand Canyon, so this journey was exceeding even our frenetic sightseeing standards. Nevertheless, we made time to pause at the roadside Rest Area near **Orderville** to read up about an interesting experiment in communal living by some early Mormons who came to this area. Communities always seem to break down after the first flush of enthusiasm and this one had been no exception.

After all that desert driving it was striking to notice the lush pastures of these water-endowed valleys. Settlements are smaller in South Utah, but richer in natural resources and much more frequent. However, the frozen condition of most of the lakes and rivers reminded us that we were still on high ground. Nothing yet warned us of what we would see when we turned right off Highway 12 on to Utah State Highway 63. In no time at all we were drinking up the startling colours of Red Canyon, which is but a precursor to the fantasy world that is **Bryce Canyon**.



At \$10 (good for 7 days) the entrance fee here is cheaper than some of the other National Park fees, but this is a place you can reasonably take in on a half-day visit. We stayed overnight at Ruby's Inn (who seem to own everything round Bryce Canyon) and saw most of the sights in the morning. There is enough space, views, forest and wildlife to occupy a longer visit, but we had only allowed time to sample the sights. We stayed one night and left Bryce before lunch on the following day. However, we were there in time to catch the sunset (appropriately enough) at Sunset View and were greeted by some deer walked as we drove out of the park as darkness closed in on us. We then repeated our act of rising early to view sunrise over the rocks at (of course) Sunrise Point. Not to skimp the visit too much, I followed the Queens Garden walking

trail down among the hoodoos, which was one amazing walk. Hoodoos is the name given to the frost-eroded pink and white striped spikes that reach aloft from the valley floor, lending a fairytale-like appearance to this colourful scene. The geology is fragile, consisting of sand and limestone that is under daily attack by freezing and thawing during most of the year. The fragility of the rocks translates into translucency as the sun comes up, throwing eye-grabbing light effects into every panorama. Although you can fit **Bryce Canyon** into a limited schedule, its unique geology and fantastical rock formations are forever memorable.



The next destination on our hurried tour of South West USA was **Zion National Park**. On the way, we stopped in Carmel to look at a rock shop, which had extensive outdoor displays of all kinds of rock types (quartz, pyrites, calcite and even some fossilised dinosaur eggs and dung). The shop was closed when we visited, but it was still possible to browse around the grounds taking in the delights of genuine samples displayed in the open - neither hyped nor imported. It is well worth pausing at this store for a few minutes on the journey along Highway 12.

To get to Zion you turn off at Carmel Junction onto Highway 9, which leads right through the park. We were in two minds about our visit, having cut short our stay in Bryce to pass through Zion Canyon. The guidebooks make a lot of Bryce, but understate Zion, a location that could fairly be described as ‘wonderful’. I guess that the mountainous rocks of the Canyon and the pretty scenes of the Virgin River valley are just too much to be captured by the medium of stills photography. Highway 9 runs through an impressive but unlit mile-long tunnel (built in 1933) then down a series of hairpin inclines leading into the canyon itself. However, the towering rocks are already impressive on the way to the tunnel. There are frequent roadside lay-bys for taking photos, and the criss-crossed face of the Checkerboard Mesa meets you within yards of the park entrance. Admission to **Zion National Park** costs \$20 per vehicle and (as with other National Parks) is good for seven days duration.



We didn't do justice to this beautiful place (I blame the weak publicity) but managed to fit in a short walk to see Weeping Rock, a slightly longer amble up the Lower Emerald Pool Trail, and several stops to inspect the course of the Virgin River. A notable feature that shows itself frequently in the Park is the blind arches, formed by rock falls where the weight of the rocks above creates strains that eventually crack and break away. But that is just one memorable sight in an area that could readily fill a week of hiking,

ambling, gazing and, of course, taking reels of photos. If you only have a short time, go anyway - why miss out on a place that is so strikingly pretty as Zion?

With sunset not quite upon us as we drove back to Page, we followed a whim and took the 14 mile diversion to see the **Coral Pink Sand Dunes** near Kanab. This is a small State Park that is worth visiting briefly but won't keep you busy for long. However, the dunes do make an extraordinary sight. Their name describes their visual effect, much more pink in the late afternoon light than I could capture in a photo. But you have to get close to experience the feel of the fine wind-blown sand and to see the wide range of tracks left by a variety of animals that pass this way when the humans aren't looking. The State Park admission fee is \$4.



After a night in **Page**, overlooking Glen Canyon Dam, we resumed our drive southwards and back to Flagstaff. One more objective for our trip was to pause at **Sunset Crater** to see what volcanoes were doing while King Harald was fighting for his life at the Battle of Hastings and the New World was not even a dream to Europeans. The surrounding area is a mass of dormant volcanoes, the most dominant of which is the **San Francisco Peaks** just north of Flagstaff. The last occasion those peaks erupted was around the time of the Norman conquest of England and their eruption was so violent that the original single volcano was blown apart (like Mount St Helens) to form the multiple peaks we can see today. Sunset Crater gave its most recent display a little later - in 1180 when it extruded the Bonito lava flow, which visitors can walk across today to make close contact with the extraordinary scenery. We climbed up the adjacent **Lennox Crater** before walking the lava trail. Sunset Crater itself is a mass of loose cinders, considered too unstable to allow public access, with a top layer of cinder that shines red in certain lights and earned it the 'Sunset' name. Nevertheless, you can get a pretty good idea of the violence of the past as you wander among the stark lifelessness that still marks the events of 900 years ago. It is not completely lifeless, but the trees and shrubs have fought a difficult battle to re-establish themselves in this waterless area after having been completely wiped out in the series of eruptions whose scars still dominate this landscape.

Our last day in the Southwest was slipping away from us and we had to press on, stopping only for lunch and to snatch photos of the Saguaro and Prickly Pear cacti which had caught our eye on our first day in Arizona. We had seen every major sight in the region within a mere ten days. Like students emerging from the telephone box, we had a sense of achievement, tempered by the sense that it would have been more comfortable if we hadn't squeezed so much in. Now we were back in hot, noisy Phoenix, packing our cases ready to carry our memories on the plane back home.

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