

# Your Best Trip Ever!

## Chapter 7

Western Odyssey #6, February, 2015

### “This Time, It’s Personal”

#### **Preparations**

And he’s back! When we last spoke, my family had just completed our abbreviated western trip to Utah in August, 2014, and the school year was about to begin. I was still working on the book and interviewing for a new job. My oldest son was on his way back to school in Florida, and my younger son was beginning his senior year in high school. He had decided to use his tremendous talents and pursue Musical Theater in college, so he worked very hard to schedule auditions during his senior year at a dozen schools throughout the Midwest and Northeast. He was also a goaltender for a strong U18 traveling ice hockey team as well as his high school club. Each of these would lead to a lot of regional travel during the school year. While I did not really have more “big trip” planning in mind for the foreseeable future, I was looking forward to having many fun weekends at colleges and hockey rinks.

The fall of 2014 was filled with hockey games, interviews, travel, auditions, and the continuing project of writing “Your Best Trip Ever!” My older son was offered the opportunity to work for a defense contractor that included a six month deployment to Afghanistan. He decided to take off the Winter and Fall 2015 semesters to pursue the position. He started training in Arizona in December and would deploy in early 2015. My younger son was in goal on the ice seemingly every night, and my wife and I did a lot of laundry. A couple of early college auditions in Pittsburgh and Cincinnati kept us on the move, and before we knew it, it was a new year.

January and February of 2015 were a lot of fun. We went to auditions at schools in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Boston, and New York City. We went to hockey tournaments in New Jersey and Sarnia, Canada, where my son kept his Silver Sticks undefeated streak alive with a win and a tie. In New York City, we attended auditions for Pace, Ithaca, and New York University. We were finishing at NYU as “Snowmageddon” was rolling in. They were forecasting multiple feet of snow along the east coast, and we got out of town as it was getting pretty nasty. New York did not get hit with as much snow as expected, but Boston got dumped on. Fortunately for us, our Boston audition trip was several weeks earlier in January, and the weather was very agreeable. It was in Boston that we experienced a raucous time in the hotel bar as we watched the Patriots play the Ravens in a playoff game. It was a blast, and luckily my taunts toward the only person in the bar wearing a Ravens jersey caused no major issues. The trip back on Sunday was about 9 hours, but I made an executive decision to partake in one additional tourist activity. I mapped out the route to the Harpoon Brewery on the waterfront in Boston, and we departed from the hotel on my quest. The streets in Boston are not like the straight and square streets in Detroit, so yes, I got lost. Yes, the GPS audio let me know it multiple times. Yes, there was some yelling in the car. Yes, I finally got us there. We could not stay long, and I could only have approximately one beer, but this was definitely worth the trip. We ascended the steps to the Great Room, and it presented us with multiple things to

experience. People were lined up along the bar and gathering for brewery tours, and we sat down at one of the long picnic tables. We ordered their homemade beer pretzels and drinks, mine being my now-favorite beer, Harpoon IPA. The beer was fantastic, and the pretzels were some of the best we have ever tasted. We topped off our brief visit with a purchase from their gift shop, and we made our way to the car. Harpoon's motto is "Love Beer, Love Life," and I vowed to return to the brewery some day while secretly hoping BOCO would pick my son for their musical theatre program.

Sometimes the stars align and things come together to create an unexpected tapestry of events that provide wonderful opportunities. It was in the second half of February, and my older son was finishing the training in Tucson for his assignment in the Middle East. He was flying home from Arizona for a quick visit before flying overseas. I had just finished the book, and it was to be released within weeks. My younger son had no consequential hockey games and one local audition that my wife could attend with him. I had also accepted a job with a large food company, and I had a few weeks before I started in March. What to do, what to do? I needed a reason to write a new chapter, so I fast tracked a trip plan to visit many of the places we had missed in the past and to see others from a new perspective – in Winter and the snow. I would be traveling alone, so this time it would be personal. Las Vegas would be the travel focal point, and I would hit as many National Parks and Monuments as possible. I would minimize the lodging expenses and concentrate on experiencing nature in some of the most beautiful places in the country.

Step one was choosing when I would go. This was easy. The last full week of February was my son's short vacation before going overseas, and Thursday the 19th was his last day of work. I would fly from Pittsburgh to Las Vegas that day. We would spend a few days together, and I would travel alone the following week after he flew back to Pennsylvania from Vegas on Sunday. I would fly back late the following Thursday, February 26th.

Step two was figuring out how I would get there. Again, this was easy. I had enough miles to purchase flights to and from Las Vegas, so I reserved my seats on January 30th. Regardless whether you have travel miles built up, Las Vegas is generally an affordable flying destination from nearly anywhere in the country.

Step three was determining where to visit and on what days. After landing in Las Vegas, I would head to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon Thursday night alone. I would camp out in my car that night, sightsee and hike Friday, and rendezvous with my son in Kingman, Arizona, as he traveled back from Tucson to Vegas alongside me. Our plan was to visit Death Valley National Park on Saturday, since it was my son's in-flight health scare that caused us to bypass that park in 2012. We would have dinner with my cousin and her family Saturday night in Vegas, and my son would fly out Sunday morning. I would then trek to Utah, planning stops in Zion National Park, Bryce Canyon National Park, and Capitol Reef National Park on my way to Canyonlands and Arches National Parks outside Moab, Utah. I would head south out of Moab Tuesday, check out the Canyonlands Needles section, and head to Cortez, Colorado. Mesa Verde National Park is just east of Cortez, and the cliff dwellings would be something new and exciting for me. This would be take up my Wednesday morning, and I would then travel to Page, Arizona, stopping at Four Corners and Monument Valley on the way. Thursday morning I would hike out to Horseshoe Bend on the Colorado River, drive highway 9 past Zion in southern Utah, and head southwest to Vegas. I would have dinner with my cousin's family again and fly out on the redeye late that night. **So the trip destinations were set: Grand Canyon South Rim, Death Valley, Zion, Bryce Canyon, Capitol Reef, Canyonlands, Arches, Mesa Verde, Four Corners, Monument Valley, Horseshoe Bend, and Las Vegas.** This was going to be a great trip, certainly one of the best ever.

Step four was determining where we were going to stay. Since I would be traveling alone most of the trip, I originally planned to skip several nights at hotels, figuring I could sleep in my car without smelling too bad or offending too many people. That way I could blend in with any wildlife I encountered. I wanted to stay on the Strip in Vegas with my son for the two nights we would be together, so I picked the Riviera in the northern section of the Strip for Friday and Saturday. Monday I booked the Motel 6 in Moab, and I chose the Super 8 in Page for Wednesday. All hotels were booked through an online hotel booking site, helping me to work toward free night rewards.

Step five was adding tours and additional activities on to the location visits. This would basically be a park driving and hiking trip, so I did not book any special tours or activities prior to going. I figured that crowds would be light, so if anything really interesting presented itself, I would play it spontaneously.

Step six was choosing certain meals to get a little fancy with. Again, I made no prior reservations, but I did plan to hit as many brewpubs as possible.

Step seven was choosing what vehicle we would drive around in. The trip would take me nearly 3,000 miles, so I decided to go with a smaller front wheel drive sedan, hoping the road conditions would not present any major issues.

Step eight was making sure we had the right supplies, gear, eyewear, and clothing. My trusty Merrell shoes, sunglasses, and electronics were all ready to go. Since this trip would be my first big adventure in the Winter, I stocked up on warm socks, pants, and sweatshirts.

Step nine was budgeting for the Great Western Odyssey. I hastily put together a budget based on hotel stays, car rental, gas, food, and an annual National Park pass. The grid below shows what I planned for each day, with the orange highlighted fields showing what was changed or added on the fly. My initial budget for hotels, a car, gas, and food was about \$1,300, but the added hotels brought that up to about \$1,500.

## BUDGET

Hotel		Riviera	Riviera	Best Western	Motel 6
Cost		89	89	102	45
Loc	Vegas, Arizona	Arizona, Vegas	Vegas	Vegas, Utah	Utah
Date	02/19/2015	02/20/2015	02/21/2015	02/22/2015	02/23/2015
Hotel		x	x	x	x
Day	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon
Destination	Grand Canyon	Vegas	Death Valley	Son flies out @ 12	Moab, UT
	Drive to Tucson	Sedona	Vegas	Drive to Utah	SB-12
	Stay with Son	Son	Son, Cousins	Zion	Capitol Reef
	Arrive 6:00 pm			Bryce Canyon	Canyonlands N
				SB-12, Capitol Reef	

Hotel	Best Western	Super 8	
Cost	94	58	
Loc	Utah, Colorado	CO, UT, AZ	Fly Home
Date	02/24/2015	02/25/2015	02/26/2015
Hotel	x	x	
Day	Tue	Wed	Thu
Destination	Cortez, CO	Page, AZ	Get to Vegas by 3:30 pm
	Arches - Delicate Arch	Mesa Verde	Horseshoe Bend (Page)
	Canyonlands S	Four Corners	Cousins
		Monument Valley	Depart 11:30 pm

## **The Trip!!**

The quick preparations led me to February 19th and my flight to Las Vegas. I parked in the extended stay lot at Pittsburgh airport, and I landed at my final destination around 5:00 pm. It was dusk, and I picked up my rental car, a Toyota Camry. The original plan was to drive out highway 93 through Henderson and into Arizona. I would head east on I-40 near Kingman, Arizona, and take highway 64 north to the Grand Canyon South Rim. I planned to camp out in my car for the night and sight see early Friday. I would drive back to Vegas and meet my son on the way around Kingman, as he would be driving up from Tucson. We had been to the Grand Canyon in 2008, but not to the more populated South Rim. I was looking forward to seeing the canyon, but the plan changed. My son would fly home from Vegas but decided to leave his car in Tucson. He would take my car home from the Pittsburgh airport. So instead of heading to the Grand Canyon, I left Vegas and drove the 410 miles to Tucson that night. Since I had not reserved a room anywhere, this was an easy change to make on the fly. Aside from the bright lights of Phoenix, most of the drive was in near total darkness. It was eerie, but it went fast. I met my son at his hotel around midnight, and we slept. Friday morning was warm and sunny, and we went to his office at the airport. We saw some really cool vintage WWII planes parked on the runway, and there were large cacti growing in spots around the airport. He got squared away with his boss, and then we headed north. We saw many uniquely shaped cacti in the distance, and we went through a National Forest that had almost no trees in it. Near Phoenix, instead of heading northwest on highway 60, we continued north on I-17, taking highway 179 to 89A, stopping in Sedona. I know numerous people who have been here, and they marveled at its beauty. This is a destination worthy of multiple days, but we were just passing through. Still, I wanted to see the orange rock formations that make this place a popular and spectacular experience. We stopped at a state park to get a small experience of Sedona, but there was a small charge to get in, so we skipped it to save time. About 16 miles northwest of Sedona, we stopped at mountain overlook at the top of a winding road, 6,420 feet up. We stayed for a short time, and the view was very pretty. We then drove north toward Flagstaff, eventually turning west on I-40. We had been ascending much of the time, the temperature was dropping, and there was noticeable snow in the mountains at this high elevation. After a while, we came to Kingman and continued northwest on highway 93 into Nevada, stopping along Lake Mead at Hoover Dam. We drove across the dam and got out above it. We stretched and took some pictures. I had toured the dam years ago, and it was definitely worth the time. The whole site is awesome to see in person, and it is a great perspective when



**Hoover Dam**



you walk across the dam. The water level was lower than I remember, likely due to the recent drought conditions. Since it was nearing dusk, we headed to Vegas, completing our trip of over 500 miles that day. We got to the Riviera Hotel on the Strip and checked in. This hotel was obviously a jewel of the Strip - 40 years ago. By now, it was way past its prime. It was no wonder they would be closing it in a few months and imploding it not long after. We walked around and headed down the Strip to the Wynn hotel. This relatively new resort was beautiful inside, and we played some video poker and checked out the place. We eventually walked back to Riviera, which was still a dump. Fortunately, my son had turned 21 a month earlier, so we shared a few beers and went to sleep. Saturday would be the first National Park visit of the trip.

Before the trip, I had downloaded a map of routes from Las Vegas to Death Valley from the National Park Web site as part of my document preparation work. That Saturday morning, we made our way south of Vegas to highway 160. It was a beautiful day, and the sun was starting to light up the scenery. We drove west into the mountains on our way toward Pahrump, Nevada. After a quick stop, we turned west on Bell Vista Road, driving 30 miles to Death Valley Junction. A brief jaunt on CA highway 127 – about 300 feet – brought us to CA highway 190, one of the main roads into Death Valley National Park. As is often the case in the off season, there were no active ranger stations that day. We entered the boundaries of the park and stopped at a self-pay station, but the machine was not working. We kept moving. To be fair, I was planning to purchase a National Park Service annual pass, so we technically were obeying the rules. On our left was the Dante's View road. This thirteen mile out and back road is a rising, winding ride to an overlook 5,400 feet above sea level. Like many other areas in the park, vehicles over 25 feet are not allowed on this road. We got out of the car at the parking area and did a little hiking and rock climbing. We had a gorgeous view of a large expanse of the valley over a mile below us, and we could see mountain ranges and sections of Badwater Road. You can enjoy



**Dante's View – Death Valley**

a climb up to a higher peak on your right or a jaunt on the rocky overhangs to the left. We made our way back to CA 190 and turned toward the Furnace Creek area. We drove through some really interesting rock formations, and stopped at the Furnace Creek Resort. This was the place where we were going to stay in 2012 when my son's in-flight health scare

forced us to miss our original flight to Vegas, thus causing us to forego Death Valley National Park. The resort is billed as an oasis in the middle of a desert at the lowest point in the United States. We entered the Inn and had lunch, where I enjoyed a New Belgium Ranger IPA with my meal. As I have said before, I will definitely stay at Furnace Creek when I am able to spend more time in Death Valley. It is a fantastic location.

I would have liked to go up to the Scotty's Castle and Racetrack sections of the park, but we did not have enough time. Scotty's Castle is a grand structure that takes you back in time to the 1920's and 1930's. The Racetrack is a dry lake bed where hundreds of rocks of varied sizes mysteriously move across the surface, leaving trails behind them. The scientific theories behind this phenomenon are quite interesting. It takes over three hours to get there from Furnace Creek. The road to the Racetrack is extremely rough, and most vehicles would risk breaking down on the way. Interestingly, Scotty's Castle suffered massive flash flooding damage in October of 2015, and it is projected to be closed until 2019. We headed north from the resort on CA 190, and we stopped for a hike at the Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes. Generally, when I think of a desert, I think of sand. However, much of Death Valley is rocky or salty terrain with scattered extreme weather plants growing. Well, these dunes were definitely sandy. Mesquite Flats was like a big sandbox in the middle of nowhere. The tan sand and the scattered greenery made for a cool contrast in the midday sun. You can see the surrounding mountains in the distance beyond the dunes, and there are sand hills, sand mountains, and valleys extending for long stretches. It was around 80 degrees, and the hike in the sand was great.



### **Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes – Death Valley**

I still want to come here in the summer when the temperature is near 130 degrees, but this day was beautiful.

We had planned to meet my cousin and her family in Las Vegas for dinner, so we could not stay too long at the dunes. We backtracked down CA 190 toward the resort, stopping to take pictures with the "Elevation Sea Level" sign. We continued past the resort onto Badwater Road. In between the resort and Badwater Basin, there are a number of turnouts that take you to some nice sites, like Artists Drive, Devils Golf Course, and Natural Bridge. We tried to drive up to the last one, but the side roads were way too rough for my trusty Camry to get very far. We eventually made our way



to the parking area at Badwater Basin and got out to explore. We hiked out a half mile or so and took a bunch of pictures. There is stagnant water and rough, salty mounds of dirt all around you as you stand at the lowest point in the United States. There is also a long swath of salty ground that is smoothed from people walking on it. It looks like you are walking on a big patch of snow, and it stretches for a long distance. We looked up at the mountainside behind us and checked out the sign marking where sea level was, about 280 feet above us. We spent some time here marveling at the sights and smells of the low lands. To the west of us we could see mountain peaks ranging from 8,000-11,000 feet high, some even sporting a little snow at the top. After we left the basin, we made our way south along Badwater Road,



### **Badwater Basin – Death Valley**

eventually circling east back toward Pahrump and then back to Las Vegas. There is a lot to do and see in Death Valley, but we got an awesome taste of the ecosystems and sights of one of the hottest and lowest places on earth.

We got back to the Riviera and prepared to meet my cousin and her family for dinner. We decided to eat at the Hard Rock Café, which was near the other end of the Strip from us. We had a great time talking, reminiscing, and watching their two young children show off for us. We decided to walk back to the Riviera from there, and I continue to question this decision to this day. Everything looks so close as you walk the Strip, but it really is not. I learned the importance of wearing the correct shoes, regardless of where you are walking. We stopped at the Bellagio for the water show, and we wandered around Caesar's Palace. We finally made it to the Riviera with my feet blistered and in pain, and I had not even started my trail hiking for the week. We relaxed and got ready for the Sunday separation. The Riviera was still a dump.

Late Sunday morning I dropped off my son at the airport, and after one flight delay, I decided to wait around for a while to make sure his plane got in the air. I stopped at Winchell's Donuts on the Strip across from the Luxor for a treat. All I can say is "yum." After he was airborne, I headed up I-15 northeast through the Nevada desert toward Utah. As has been the case numerous times in the past, I had the pleasure of driving through the Virgin River Valley in the northwest tip of Arizona. The weather was getting drizzly and colder, but I video-taped the drive. I do not recommend that you do this, but it did produce some awesome views of a fantastic winding mountainous drive. I crossed into Utah



and passed through one of my favorite towns, St. George, eventually turning on highway 9 toward Hurricane and Zion National Park. I went through the fun little town of Springdale and into Zion. At the entrance, I bought a National Park Annual Pass. Since each National Park is between \$20-30 for a week's access and I was going to visit seven or eight parks, this was a very good deal, even for this week alone. I drove up to the Zion Park Lodge and went in. We had stayed here a couple of times, but it was different with virtually no one around. I wandered around a little and bought some trail mix in the gift shop. I want to spend more time in Zion in the winter, but that was not the focus this day. My ultimate destination was Canyonlands National Park outside of Moab, and I had a long way to go. I then drove out the main park road, stopping at one of the shuttle bus stop locations. I hiked down to the Virgin River and walked the banks for a short time. The river's flowing water was quite pretty, giving me a different perspective than my three earlier summer visits to Zion. It was early afternoon, but it felt much later because of the dreary skies. I then made my way east on highway 9, going through switchbacks and the Zion-Mt. Carmel Tunnel. I video-taped parts of this drive, but the switchbacks definitely require your full attention, particularly when the weather is getting dicey. As I exited the tunnel, it was late afternoon, and the rain was changing to sleet and snow. There was not much accumulation yet, but it was



### Highway 9 - Zion

coming soon. It was still a beautiful drive through the picturesque southeastern section of the park. Even with gray skies overhead, there were many colors to appreciate. The previous summer my son was in a musical called "Children of Eden," and his solo song was "Lost in the Wilderness." This, along with many other show tunes, was available on the music service on my phone. Cell service was spotty through much of Utah with silence being the norm, but this song came on as I was alone heading east out of Zion in the snow. I thought it was funny and appropriate. I sang along, but I could not quite match my son's amazing voice. After a short time, I turned north on highway 89 toward Scenic Byway 12 and Bryce Canyon National Park.



We have been to Bryce Canyon multiple times in the summer, and it is a beautiful park filled with geological wonders and great hiking trails. However, I had seen many Internet pictures of the sandstone hoodoos covered with snow, and to experience this sight was my goal for that stop. My original plan was a brief visit to Bryce Canyon and then a drive through the night toward Canyonlands and Moab. Fortunately, I came to my senses and changed that plan. After turning east on Scenic Byway 12, I went through beautiful Red Rock Canyon. It was late afternoon, overcast, and light snow was falling. I turned south on highway 63, the main road toward Bryce Canyon National Park, and I passed through the unmanned entrance. The snow was pretty deep, but the roads were plowed. However, the park road was closed before I could get to the Lodge parking area, so I turned in to the Sunrise/Sunset Points area. I got out and trudged through deep snow drifts onto a trail toward the canyon rim. I really wanted to see the contrast of the white snow on the orange hoodoos. I got to the rim, and it was awesome. It was still overcast and snowing lightly, and I came across a group of Chinese people cheering and celebrating as they stood at the lookout above the canyon. I could not understand them, but one young girl spoke English, and she asked me to take their picture panoramically with their camera. An older man also took a picture with me, as I had now become their good friend, together enjoying the beauty below from an elevation of 8,000 feet. I walked the rim a short distance to the familiar Navajo Loop trail entrance, gazing down into



### **Bryce Canyon Hoodoos**

the canyon below. The snow was coming down much harder, so I slowly hiked back to my car, taking in the awesome sights as I walked. I made my way out of the park, stopping my car to talk to a bunch of deer playing in the snow on the side of the road. They paid little attention to me, frolicking around the frosty evergreen trees. I took pictures of them and continued on. As darkness fell, I decided I should stay the night. North of the park, the Best Western in Bryce Canyon City was always crowded when we visited here. Today, there were only a few guests, so I booked a room. It is a really nice place, and it is across from Ruby's Inn General Store. This would be my source for dinner, which included the purchase of a tasty Publican Pale Ale from Utah's Shades of Pale Brewery. I settled in to watch *The Walking Dead*. I felt



weird for a while, as my heart rate was racing due to the altitude. Fortunately I lived, and I eventually settled down and rested up for the next day's adventures.

Monday morning I checked out and headed onto Scenic Byway 12 toward Capitol Reef National Park. It was snowing steadily with substantial amounts on ground, but the roads were remarkably clear. I saw very few other vehicles on the road, and I have to commend the Utah road crews for the conditions on SB12. As I enjoyed in reverse the road we had driven in 2008, I encountered a lot of snow at varying heights. I made several stops at turnouts I recognized from that summer seven years prior, and I tried to recreate some of the pictures we took back then. One of the stops I made was at a section where there are steep drop-offs on both sides of road. This location was very tough for me to drive through back then because it was sunny, and I could see over the edges. The snow and clouds obscured the view this time around, so I psychologically had no issues plodding through. I even got out of my car, checking out the long drops on either side of the road as snow swirled around me. After passing through sections of the Dixie National Forest and the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, I crossed over the summit at 9,600 feet. Snow can be such a bother, but experiencing it in such beautiful natural settings is inspiring and enjoyable, especially if the roads have been plowed. Near Torrey, Utah, I turned east on highway 24. I stopped in Capitol Reef a few times, taking in the beauty and taking pictures of the serene landscape, sans other humans. The weather made for excellent pictures, as the white snow



### **Capitol Reef National Park**

outlined the many contours of the mountains and rock faces. I stopped the car multiple times to talk to and take pictures of some of the free range cows I encountered roaming near the road. I stopped at scenic turnouts and in the middle of the road when no one else was to be found, and I absorbed the beauty of the snow-covered bushes, trees, rocks, hills, and shapes. Heading north past Hanksville on highway 24 brought clearer weather and a reduction of snow. I encountered a few cars, and I could see the snowy conditions behind me in my mirrors. I finally got to I-70, turning east toward highway 191.



It was mid-afternoon when I turned south toward Canyonlands. There are three sections that comprise this huge park, and the Island in the Sky is the best known and most traveled. About halfway between I-70 and Moab is highway 313, the park entrance road. It was not snowing yet, but there was quite a bit on the ground. I ascended through switchbacks, hills, and flatlands, traveling the twenty miles to the visitor's center. Amazingly though my phone had been mostly silent through central Utah, the song "Lost in the Wilderness" came on again, nearly twenty-four hours since the last time it played. It was late afternoon and I was in the wilderness, so I attempted to sing along again. As I passed the deserted visitor's center, I decided to head immediately to the end of the road and the Grand View Point Overlook. It was starting to snow again, and the clouds and fog were reducing visibility. I disembarked at the 6,080 feet level, and I hiked through snow, rocks, and bushes to the scenic overlook trail. I was socked in with clouds and snow, so I could not see very far into the distance. I could make out amazing rock formations, varying levels of terrain, and beautiful snow covered sandstone below me. I was alone, gazing through the snow out over the vast expanse, and it was a fabulous feeling. There are multiple trails here that are very enticing, but after a brief walk I headed back to the car. Hopefully next time I will get to do more hiking. I drove north and turned left at the fork in the road with the Aztec Butte barely visible in the distance in front of me. It was five miles out to Upheaval Dome, and I wanted to see this incredible natural phenomenon. There are trails all around this huge crater, and I hiked the short distance to the first overlook. Scientists have opined that this may be the remnant of a salt dome uplift or even a meteorite impact crater. It reminded me of the lava dome in the mouth of the Mount St. Helens volcano, and the snow outlined the formation, providing a colorful image under the gray sky. It was getting late, and I wanted to get to Moab, so I headed back to the main park road and turned left toward the exit. I drove right past the Mesa Arch sign and almost forgot to stop. Fortunately, I remembered one of the main reasons I came to this park. We had missed a number of opportunities to come to Canyonlands, and after seeing so many pictures of Mesa Arch on the Internet, I knew I had to experience it. I am so glad I did. This was a longer hike through snow and rocks, ascending somewhat on the way to the arch. I saw a couple of people along the



**Mesa Arch - Canyonlands**

way, but much of the snow was untrampled. Most of the pictures I have seen of this iconic pothole arch are at sunrise, with the sun causing the underside of the rock span to glow bright orange. I did not see sunrise or any sun at all, but the view was incredible. Through the arch hole I could see mountains, canyons, sandstone spires, and a sheer drop off directly on the other side of the opening. There were icicles hanging from arch, along with pock marks, snow, and scraggly brush. I marveled at the site and the solitude, happy that I did not miss this natural wonder. I took many pictures from different viewpoints and breathed in the frosty air. You can hike near the arch and the mild climbs around it, but always be aware of that drop off. Eventually I trekked back to the car to start my thirty mile drive to Moab, stopping briefly to take a few pictures of Shafer Canyon. It was dark when I checked in to the Motel 6, just past the Arches National Park entrance on highway 191. The only place for dinner in Moab for me was the Moab Brewery. I enjoyed a Johnny's IPA for the amazing winter price of \$2.75 a pint, and their patty melt was fantastic. The other memorable part of the dinner was their scrumptious warm jalapeno cornbread. I do not usually use that word, but it fits here perfectly. On the way out, I talked to manager about the brewery being mentioned in my book, and I bought a stylish Dead Horse Ale shirt. I suspect I will come back here.

On Tuesday morning I checked out and drove a short distance up 191 to Arches, crossing the bridge over the Colorado River. It was clear and sunny, and I wished I would have gone to Mesa Arch to see the sunrise. Oh well. Maybe next time. After a stop at the Arches entrance, I drove the winding uphill road into the body of the park. My main goal for the day was to hike to the Delicate Arch, but I wanted to see some of the other fantastic formations along the way. I stopped briefly at the Park Avenue viewpoint, and I marveled as I passed The Organ, the Courthouse Towers, and the Tower of Babel, among others. I gazed east at the La Sal mountains, noticing the snowy peaks in the bright sunshine. Along the route, I spied many huge rocks balancing at the top of large formations, looking like they could tumble down at any time. I then drove to Windows section, which is just past the Garden of Eden and Double Arch. I first hiked over to



**Turret Arch - Arches**



the Turret Arch just west of the Windows. This area looks like a fort of some kind, and the various portals of different sizes make for a great photo spot. I then walked over to the Windows. The North and South Windows are huge openings you can climb through, and I made my way around the South Window to the back side of the two massive holes. The temperature was only in the 50s, but the intense sun made it feel much warmer. Most of the snow was melted except for the shaded and sloped areas. I was much closer to the La Sal mountains at this point. I took in some gorgeous vistas of the snowy mountains in the distance with sandstone sculptures all over the foreground.

Now it was time to focus on my main objective. I headed up the park road past Panorama Point to the Delicate Arch turnoff. The parking area is just before the Wolfe Ranch, a small cabin built around 1900 near the intersection of at least four washes. There were not many people there, and I started on the trail toward Delicate Arch. I passed the cabin and crossed the bridge toward some mild switchbacks that took me to the slick rock sandstone that would lead me to the prize. It is about one and a half miles to Delicate Arch, and the route gradually rises about 500 feet. I have read that the hike has a skill rating of easy and is well marked by a series of rock stacks, or cairns. I assume that during busy times, the steady flow of hikers will lead you right to the arch. Today I was alone, and of course, I got lost. As I ascended the slick rock, I walked a straight path that took me south of Delicate Arch. When I finally got to an opening where I thought it was, I stared down into a deep hole that humans generally avoid. It was beautiful, and the hike was energizing, but I missed the mark. I backtracked and turned in toward another opening after a short time. You guessed it – wrong again. I was not worried, for I knew it was around here somewhere. The third time was a charm, and I finally found it. I still was not on the normal path, and I had to cross a narrow bridge to get to the thicker of the two arch bases. There were drop-offs on either side, and the wrong shoes could have slipped me into the abyss. I made my way across and ended up right



**Delicate Arch - Arches**



at the base of the arch. It was a little harrowing, but I was finally able to see and touch Delicate Arch. I hiked around, did some rock climbing, and took many pictures. This is a fantastic sight, and it is one of the main symbols of Utah's beauty. I spied where people were coming and going, and I was able to find the main trail to get back to the ranch. I stopped briefly to climb to the Frame Arch, a hole in the massive wall separating the trail ledge and Delicate Arch. I was able to look through and enjoy another perspective of this wonderful landmark. I made my way down the slick rock and back to the car. I drove back to the park entrance, stopping occasionally to take pictures of the myriad natural formations.

I got on 191 south toward Cortez, Colorado. Before turning eastward into Colorado, I took Utah highway 211 into the Needles section of Canyonlands. It was about 30 miles to the visitor's center, and the road was clear. There was snow on some of the ground, and I met many free range cows along the way on the road. They paid little attention to me, and they left numerous obstacles in the road. I was not planning to do any substantial hiking, but I made a few stops to take pictures and take in the shapes, contours, and colors. I stopped to view the Wooden Shoe Arch. This unique sandstone formation looks like a big shoe. The drive was very pretty, and the brilliant sunshine and absence of people made it a joy to take in. There are many enticing trails in the Needles section that will likely lure me back here in the future. I eventually turned around and headed back toward highway 191. Of course, on my way toward the exit, "Lost in



### **Canyonlands Needles Section**

the Wilderness" came on my phone again. It had become my daily theme song out here in the wilderness. After a short time, I turned southeast on highway 491 near Monticello on my way to Colorado. I passed the road to Hovenweep National Monument and its 800 year old villages as the sun was going down behind me. The road was clear, but there was a lot of snow on the surrounding ground. The mountains ahead of me in distance to the east were picturesque as twilight took over. I got to Cortez, Colorado, and though I originally had no room, I decided to book a night at the Best



Western. There are numerous lodging facilities in Cortez, and it is easier to book one last minute in the middle of winter. I did a little sleuthing for a good micro brewery, and I found one – the Main Street Brewery. The food was quite good, and I enjoyed their Mesa Cerveza IPA, a very tasty India Pale Ale. I did a little shopping in their gift shop, and I found a shirt with their motto “Avoid heart attacks, drink beer” on the front and one of the greatest logos I have ever seen on the back. I will definitely go back there the next time I am in Cortez. I settled in for the night.

Wednesday was a travel day with multiple stops planned. I had breakfast at the motel, and I stopped to talk to a nice couple from Minnesota. My book had just been published, and I proudly told them about it, dropping some names of the many places we have visited over the years. They were heading east through southern Colorado, and I told them I was on my way to Mesa Verde National Park, about fifteen minutes east of Cortez. It was clear and cold, and a good amount of snow was on the ground. I was not in a major hurry, but I should have done more homework on the park. I got to Mesa Verde and checked out visitor center. I found out that the Spruce Tree House was the only dwelling open for touring in the winter, and it was about twenty miles into the park. I took the winding, rising park road which fortunately was plowed. There are sections of the road where you are not allowed to stop your vehicle due to the steep mountainsides and the snow. I stopped at the Montezuma Valley overlook, and a few cars sped past me as I continued on my way. I did not realize the tour was starting very soon, but I got there just in time. Even in the winter when the Step House, Long House, Balcony House, and Cliff Palace dwellings are closed, Mesa Verde has a full time ranger. He would be our guide for the Spruce Tree House. We hiked down some steep switchbacks and circled around the deep ravine to get to the brick enclosure. I met the Minnesota people, some Australians, and a guy from Boston in my group.



**Spruce Tree House – Mesa Verde**

The ranger was part Native American, and he was very knowledgeable about the area and the Ancestral Pueblo people who lived here about 700 years ago. I took many pictures, and we were able to walk on some of the grounds, though



most were off limits. You can see the soot on the upper rock sections from centuries old fires. The brick structures with window and door openings were fascinating to see. Worship played a central role in the lives of the Pueblo people, and we were allowed to descend into a Kiva, or place of worship. The Spruce Tree House is the third largest but best preserved cliff dwelling in Mesa Verde. Interestingly, a late summer rock slide in 2015 prompted the indefinite closing of Spruce. Engineering studies continue into 2017, and the site is still closed. It is still a sight to behold in winter, but spring, summer, and fall will likely be the times you visit Mesa Verde to explore and learn about the other dwellings. If you have the same full time Ranger, you will be in good hands. It was around noon, and it was time for me to head west. I wound my way out of the beautiful snow covered park and headed back through Cortez on highway 160.

Highway 160 turns southwest as you leave Cortez, and this was my route to the World Famous Four Corners Monument. There was still snow on much of the ground, though it was not very deep. I got to Four Corners, a unique landmark of the Navajo Nation, and I paid the entrance fee to the amphitheater area. There is seating surrounding the spot of the four state intersection, and there are vendor booths around the perimeter. The booths were vacant this day, but it was a beautiful outside with a cool temperature. I knew I would not be here very long, but I wanted to experience the feeling of standing on four states at the same time. The state flags were flying overhead, and the recent snow had melted inside the grounds. There were not many people around, but there was a carload of annoying kids from Utah who spent a lot of time playing on the monument. This made it difficult for me to have much time on the grounds,



### Four Corners

but I did manage to get a few pictures. The kids acted like I probably would have when I was their age, but since I am slightly older, they were annoying. Oh well. I was able to stand in New Mexico for the first time, as I had never been in that beautiful state before. I made my way back through the snowy, muddy parking lot and headed on to my next destination – Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park. I continued west on highway 160 into Arizona. After a short time, I decided to loop counter clockwise to Monument Valley by turning north on highway 191, taking me back into Utah. This



would allow me to get on highway 163 at its northernmost point, and I would approach Monument Valley from above it on the map. As I wound southwest toward my destination, I passed through Mexican Hat, Utah, and its own symbolic Monument, the “Mexican Hat Rock.” It is a uniquely shaped rock that somehow balances on top of a small mesa-like mound of rocks. The snow on the ground again made for beautifully outlined rock contours and pretty color contrasts under the sunny blue sky. Since it was mid-afternoon, my theme song “Lost in the Wilderness” magically came on again as I crossed the San Juan River. My daily tradition catapulted me into the Navajo Nation, and I marveled at the view from the north of Monument Valley.



**Mexican Hat Rock**

I swung around and made my way onto the entrance road, paying the fee to drive all the way into Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park. The Navajo name for the area is Tse’Bii’Ndzigaii. I cannot pronounce it either. I made my way through the large parking lot and into the visitor center. From the grounds there, you can see the most recognizable and famous of the monuments, Merrick Butte and the East and West Mittens. These alone are worth the price of admission. On days that are dry, part of the park is open for visitors to drive through. It is a good introduction to the treasures here, but much of the park is off limits unless you purchase a guided tour from one of the Navajo tour companies. If you do choose to drive, you want to make sure your vehicle can handle rough terrain and is preferably a four wheel drive with high ground clearance. Earlier in the week, there was a big snow storm that blanketed the park with a lot of the white stuff. It was beautiful, and the milder temperatures and brilliant sun were working on melting some of it away. However, the park road was now closed to visitor vehicles. I had a few hours of daylight and wanted to see and learn more about the park, so I put my name on a list for the next guided tour. One other guy joined me in the Suburban with our Navajo guide. She was very knowledgeable and soft spoken. She piloted us over the rough roads, some rutted badly due to the snow melt runoff. The Suburban was pretty beat up, and I could feel every bump, but I was still able to take a lot of video as we drove. I told my fellow tourist that I had just published a book about places like this. He told me about a



bunch of places he recently visited that I had never heard of, so I stopped bragging. I thought maybe he should write a book. We passed “Elephant Butte” and “The Three Sisters” spires, stopping at “John Ford’s Point” overlook. I trudged through a foot of snow, realizing that I should not have worn light cream colored pants when orange dirt and melting snow are combined underfoot. We saw the “Praying Hands” and “Totem Pole” sculpted rocks, as well as a long formation our guide called “Snoopy” because it looked like Snoopy laying on his back on his doghouse. These many formations are remains of the ancient Colorado Plateau which has been worn away by wind and water, and the Navajos have descriptive names for all of them. They are up to 1000 feet high, and Monument Valley itself is about 5,500 feet above sea level. We saw mesas, buttes, spires, and arches, and we ended up at “The Cube.” This huge rock is balanced on a smaller rock, and it is shaped like a giant ice cube. I stood in front of it and was dwarfed by its size. We made it back



**West Mitten**

late in the afternoon, and I took some great pictures of the Mittens from the visitor center walkway. Again, the snow added color to the already beautiful shapes dotting the vast landscape in front of me. Mesas are the largest geological wonders in the valley, and they are like massive tables that have been left behind by worn away plateaus. As mesas erode and are no longer wider than their height, they become buttes, like the East and West Mittens. Spires are much thinner versions, and they are more like poles or towers, similar to the hoodoos in Bryce Canyon. Many of the locations in and around Monument Valley have been in films and commercials, and there are countless photographs available online, including on my web site, [www.ephelps.com](http://www.ephelps.com).

I headed out of the park and briefly back into Utah, and then I turned south again on highway 163, making my way back into Arizona. At Kayenta, I turned west on highway 160. After a short time, I headed northwest on highway 98 toward Page, Arizona. It was dark when I got into town, and I got lost. Fortunately, it was not for long. I found the Super 8 hotel on Lake Powell boulevard and checked in. I had to stop at the Dam Bar and Grille, a restaurant we had visited



back in 2012. There I enjoyed a tasty Flagstaff IPA from Lumberyard Brewing Company out of Flagstaff, Arizona. It was a terrific hoppy way to top off a fun filled and awesome day spent in four states. I relaxed, ready to make my way toward home after an eventful week.

A short distance from the hotel was US highway 89, and a quick drive to the south got me to a geological wonder I wanted to see early Thursday morning. A couple other cars were in the parking area for Horseshoe Bend. This was a great place for a morning workout. I hiked a few hundred yards up the sandy trail from the lot. At the peak, there was a structure that described the Navajo sandstone and the river overlook, warning that any ledge could give way at any time. From there it was a several hundred yard hike down sandy trails and slick rock to the edge, which stretched a long way in each lateral direction. A massive sandstone formation forces the Colorado river to take a detour around it, creating a huge u-shaped horseshoe in the river. We rafted on this river back in 2008, and we actually beached at



### **Horseshoe Bend**

Horseshoe Bend part way through the excursion. I could see the beach, trails, and facilities hundreds of feet below me. It was cool and overcast, but the views were gorgeous. I hiked and climbed, always checking the stability of the edges. The river water was smooth. I met a nice couple from New York, and they took some pictures of me in front of Horseshoe Bend. I also encountered two German girls who were enjoying the sights. I could not understand what they were saying until one of them dropped her phone on the rocks, breaking it into pieces. She yelled a word in English that is not allowed on network television. I laughed and eventually made my way back up and down to my car. I had worked up a sweat before checking out and heading for Las Vegas. Any time you are near Page, Horseshoe Bend is well worth the visit and hike.



I left the hotel and headed north on highway 89, crossing the Glen Canyon dam and paralleling Lake Powell. The water level was lower than what I remembered. Soon I was back in Utah, heading west through Kanab on my way to Utah highway 9. I wanted to hit a park one last time, and this route led me back through the southern section of Zion National Park area as the clouds were dissipating. There was still some snow on the ground, particularly on the hillsides and in shadowed areas. I had enough time to make some brief stops and hike around the colorful rocks. I stopped at the



### **Checkerboard Mesa**

turnout for the Checkerboard Mesa and unloaded my recyclables in the available bin. I read the sign describing the horizontal and vertical lines etched into the mesa, and the picture on it had been taken after a snow storm, like what I was looking at just then. The snow really enhanced the lines, adding to the beauty. I stopped a few more times to hike a little and take pictures as the sky turned bright blue. The switchbacks were easier to navigate on this dry day, and I said goodbye again to one of my favorite parks. A drive through any part of Zion, regardless of how brief, always gives me something to appreciate. I made my way to I-15 and stopped at Einstein Bagels in St. George. Then it was the Virgin River gorge and the Nevada desert. I got to Las Vegas around 4:00, and I stopped to fill up the rental car before dropping it off. I wanted to take a souvenir home with me, and as luck would have it, there was still a pile of salt from Death Valley's Badwater Basin all over the floor of the car. I scooped some up into a small bottle, and I packed it away for safe keeping.

My flight home was a red eye at 11:30 pm with a layover in Chicago. I had made plans to have dinner with my cousin and her family. I dropped off the rental car at the airport, and they picked me up for dinner. There I enjoyed a Goose Island IPA before heading back to their house for a short visit. I would have loved to stay longer, but it was time to drive to the airport one last time. I said goodbye and made my way to the gate. After a long night, I arrived back at



the Pittsburgh airport, where my son picked me up on what turned out to be one of coldest days of year. The temperature was around zero, but the sun was shining. I did not mind, as I had plenty of stories to tell and pictures and videos to show.

### Summation

It was good to be home after a fantastic trip. Much of this route was where we were supposed to go in August, 2014, before that trip was cut short. Doing it in winter limited access to some park amenities, but it provided a great new perspective and experience. I drove over 2,700 miles through six states, much of it in the snow. Since I am a Michigander, I did not mind the snow, and I again must commend the road crews in Utah and Colorado. I visited seven National Parks along with numerous other awesome landmarks, and even in places I had been before, I experienced something new. Winter travel brings with it some limitations in availability and risks of closures, but it also offers flexibility in lodging and far smaller crowds. Solitude in places like these can give you a wonderful feeling of calm and respect for natural wonders. Everywhere I went left me wanting more, and this gives me many reasons to visit each place again, next time maybe with other people. I still need to get to the south rim of the Grand Canyon, and the sites I did not see in Death Valley, Zion, Bryce Canyon, Capitol Reef, Canyonlands, Arches, Mesa Verde, Monument Valley, Horseshoe Bend, and all the other places inspire me to plan for my return in the future. This, along with tasty beers like Ranger IPA, Publican Pale Ale, Johnny's IPA, Mesa Cerveza IPA, Lumberyard IPA, and Goose Island IPA, give me



### Two adventurers in Death Valley

wonderful memories and stories to share. This was one of my best trips ever, and it showed me that I could devise excellent adventures even when I have very little time to plan. My son would be heading to Afghanistan in a matter of days for his six-month deployment. This meant that he would be returning to the states in October and would be driving home from San Diego in November. Maybe I could make plans to drive back with him...



**The Author at Horseshoe Bend**