



On The Road With Jim
Presents

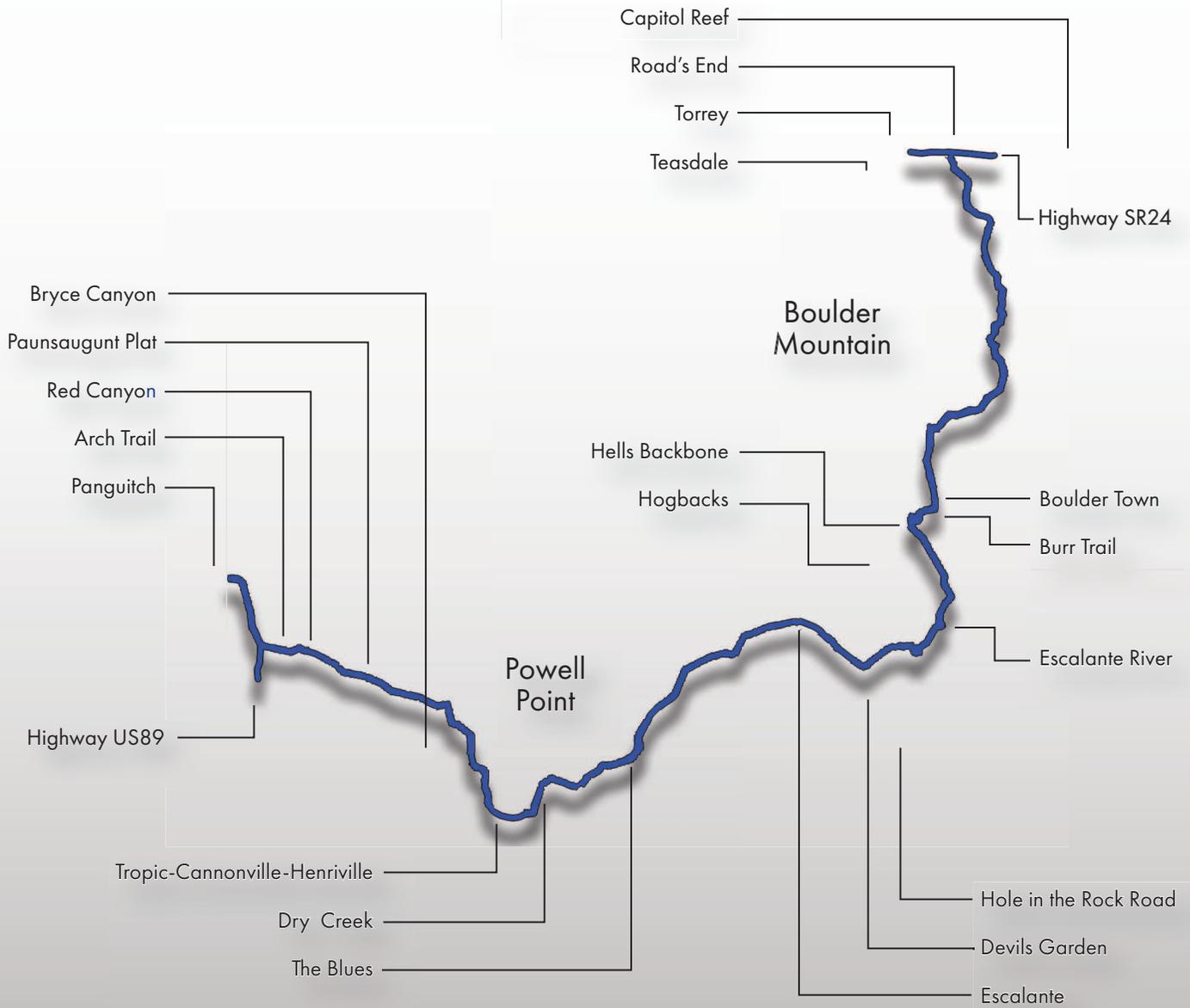
Utah State Route 12

A Journey Through Time Scenic Byway

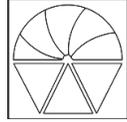
A Jim Witkowski Monograph
Grand Staircase—Escalante National Monument

Utah's State Route 12

A Journey Through Time Scenic Byway



122 Miles in length—250 Million Years in making



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Utah State Route 12



A Journey Through Time Scenic Byway

A Jim Witkowski Monograph

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Preface

Over the years, I've had many hobbies. Some were fads and some that lasted longer. There are two loves that have defined my entire adult life: driving and photography. Every now and then, I even got paid for them, but not enough to support my addictions; much less my family. After retiring a couple of years ago, I discovered that I had time to focus energy on these pleasant distractions, and so I can make time to travel to different places on self-imposed photo assignments. The trips have evolved into monthly and annual schedules. Each month for my blog, I take day-trips (sometimes overnight) to new locations and talk about the photos I captured there. Each year, Queen Anne—my wife—and I travel out of State for a month then, in addition to reports in my blog, I produce a book and this magazine.

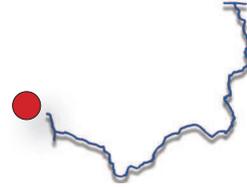
My introduction to the Grand Staircase was a Lee's Ferry fishing trip. It only took that one visit to win me over. While wading in the frigid waters below Glen Canyon Dam, I was in awe of the Vermilion Cliffs rising 3000 feet above the Colorado River, and I knew that this area would become an essential part of my life. It was my crack, I wanted more. Later, I got a chance to explore Lake Powell and its tributary arms. We went so far north into Utah that I thought Salt Lake City must surely be around the next bend. I wanted more.

In 1996, President Bill Clinton set aside 1.8 million acres for protection as a national monument. The proclamation was controversial, especially in Utah, because they weren't consulted. People worldwide wondered why a place so remote and rugged needed protection. But the new monument brought new

tourists. People were curious, and the Staircase became a Southern Utah destination. Most of this area is inaccessible except by foot or jeep, so it takes a serious commitment to explore it. There is only one all-weather road that bisects the monument, and that's Utah's State Route 12—also called A Journey Through Time Scenic Byway.

The physical geography of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is unlike any place on Earth. This landscape has been seabeds and mountain tops. It's been covered by volcanoes and eroded by water. When massive fires aren't burning in California, the air is clean, dry, and you can see forever. It's a high desert climate and a place to get away from noisy cities on the coasts. In other words, it's perfect for photography. You could spend a lifetime photographing the changing light—rich in color, contrast, distinctive shapes, and textures. Before you make that commitment, Utah's State Route 12 is a 122-mile road that offers a sample of what's waiting for you.

I'd like to give a big thank you to the people that have helped with this project. Charles Holcombe helped me keep my words and commas in order. Queen Anne—my patient wife—accompanied me on my excursions and bandaged my wounds when needed. She also reviewed my drafts to insure they made sense. Brooks Jensen offered valuable layout and design advice. Last but not least, all of the rangers and volunteers staffing visitor's centers and answered my endless questions about what I was seeing, I offer a heartfelt thanks.



Panguitch

A photographer on a long-term assignment needs to set up a base camp; a place to eat, rest and restock supplies. It should provide a communication structure to provide access to the outside world. If you're stuck in camp for a couple of days, it should be tolerable if not pleasant. Most importantly, it should be located close to your working project. For those reasons, we chose Panguitch as our home while we were shooting the State Route 12 project.

Panguitch is the largest town and county seat of Garfield County. It's located in southern Utah on US 89 along the Sevier River in the valley between two of Utah's high plateaus: the Markagunt to the west and the Paunsaugunt on its east flank. At an elevation of 6600 feet, it offered balmy days and cool August evenings. Only six miles from the western terminus of SR 12, we had easy access to the highway.

In the Piute language, Panguitch means Big Fish, and I suppose if you had the time, you could see how accurate the name is. There are plenty of lakes and streams in each direction that offers a place to fish, but the biggest reason that tourists visit the town is the nearby national parks—Bryce and Zion—and the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The visitors have a choice of motels and restaurants, at a better value than the ones nearer the park entrances. There's a direct correlation

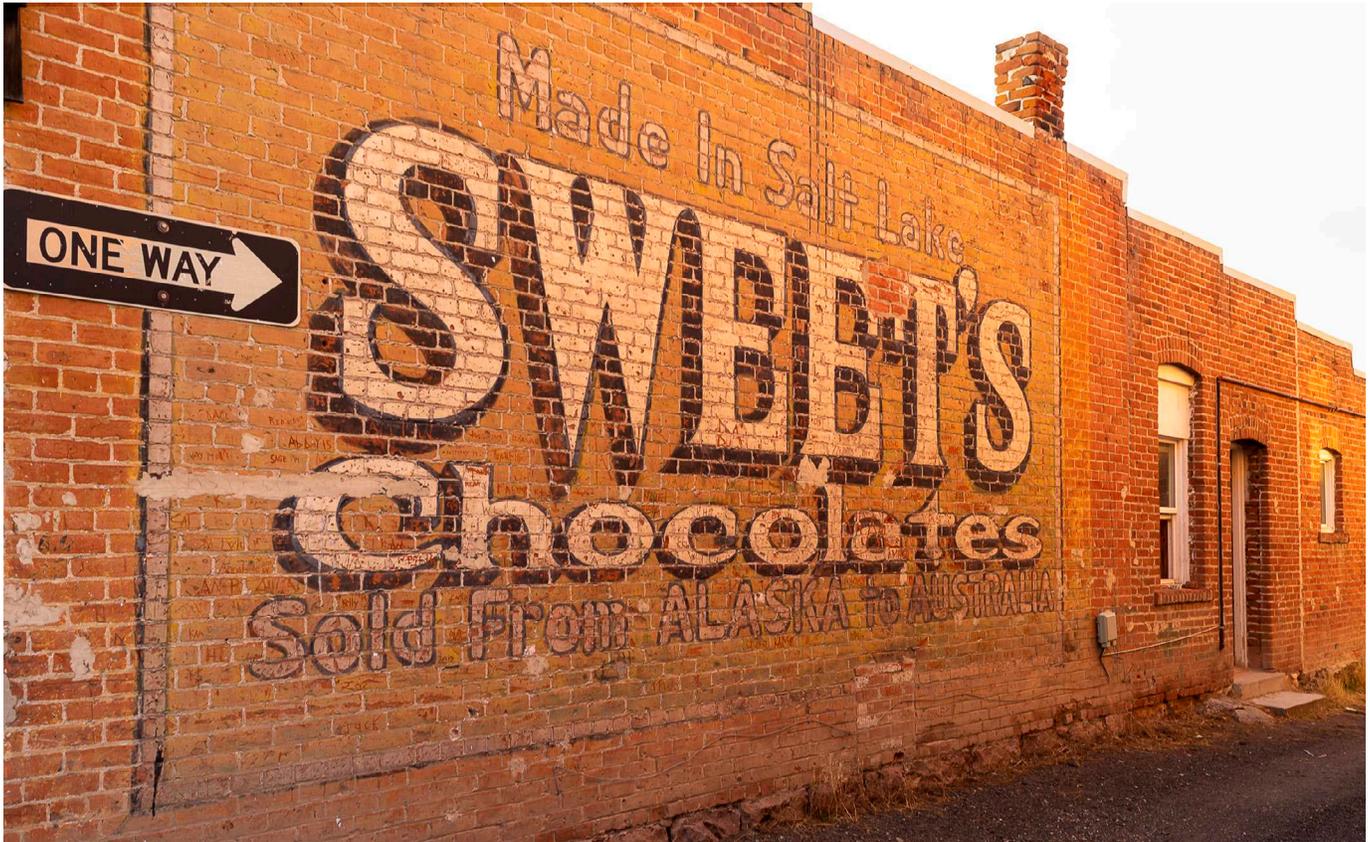
between the distance to the park boundary and the price of a motel room.

The high altitude that makes Panguitch pleasant in summer is a liability when the season's change. During the first winter that the colonists settled in the valley, they planted wheat crops, but because snow came early, the grain didn't mature. With starvation and death facing them, the townspeople sent men off to get food from nearby towns.

The first rescue team went north and couldn't get through the deep snow. The second party of seven men started out on a mountain trail to Parowan—a town 45 miles to the west. As the drifts got more profound, they abandoned their wagon and continued on foot, but without snowshoes, they tired quickly in the waist-high powder. The men just about gave up in defeat, they gathered and prayed on top of a bedroll quilt. When they realized the quilt prevented them from sinking, they got the inspiration to make a path from their quilts. As they moved forward, the last man brought the back blanket to the front, and the quilt-walking got them to help and then back again with enough flour to survive winter. Panguitch celebrates the desperate struggle with nature with a large memorial along Main Street, and they throw a Quilt-Walking Festival each June.



Canyon Lodge—There are few mid-century motels like Canyon Lodge in Panguitch that look well kept, clean, and would be a great place to set up a base-camp however, they have a No Vacancy sign lit while their parking lot is empty. Fortunately, there are other accommodations in town that welcome guests.



Sweet's Chocolates—This marvelous and original wall sign is in an alley off US 89. From the artwork style, I suspect that this sign is the depression era. Sweet's candy was founded in 1892 and moved from Portland to Salt Lake City in 1900. They have a Web presence so you can order their candy online.



Panguitch Inn—The town has a small historic district located at Main and Central which includes this building—its only hotel. A pair of guests takes in the sunset while enjoying a game of backgammon and a cup of espresso



Arch Trail

Loose Canyon is the first photography stop along the Utah State Route 12, and the turnoff is only a couple of miles east its junction with US 89. After passing the cluster of businesses lining each side of the highway, there is a highway sign for the Loose and Castro Canyons road. On the dirt road, you'll come to the Loose Canyon Trailhead parking lot in less than a mile. Once there, you can access two trails. The longer is the Loose Canyon Trail which follows the wash up the mountain and eventually connects with the Castro Canyon Trail. The two tracks can be combined into a long loop which—unless you're traveling by horse—requires camping overnight.

The shorter hike is the Arch Trail whose trailhead is across the wash just north of the parking area. Although there's a sign pointing the way, the trailhead is hidden behind a bend of the wash's side-flow. Unlike National Park trails, it's not broad or well maintained, so you'll need to pay attention. But most likely, you'll have the path to yourself. Once

you start the half-mile trail, it only gets tricky in a couple of spots: at the arch and at the top of the ridge. There's a climb of a couple hundred feet, but there are rickety stairs to help get you up the trail's steeper parts.

If you want to get to the arch and hoodoos right away, the counter-clockwise direction is the way to go. In this direction, Arch trail follows a creek-bed until a low waterfall that has been reinforced with concrete. The arch is ten yards further upstream on the left, but to continue on the hike, you'll need to backtrack to the falls, where you'll see the trail going up to the ridge on the creek's other side.

Continue up the hill to where the Hoodoos await along the ridgeline. After that, it's a short way to the summit table where there's a great view of the Sevier River Basin below and the Markagunt Plateau in the west. The round trip can be made in less than an hour so a late afternoon start will give you good shooting light.



Hoodoo Windows—As the trail nears its summit, it passes next to a set of hoodoos that look like Middle Eastern turrets. Their proximity allows a photographer the opportunity to try different perspectives and pose models on, in, and around the windows.



Jawbone Arch—This arch isn't named on any maps that I searched, so I called it Jawbone Arch because it resembles one. The Arch Trail gets its name from this natural bridge. Since it's at the bottom of the trail, you can quickly reach it if you hike the loop in a counter-clockwise direction.



View From The Top—When you reach the Arch Trail summit, your reward is a grand view of the Seiver River Basin below and the Markaugunt Plateau in the west. Unlike this shot with California fire smoke filling the air, on a clear day, you can see the white cliffs of Zion Canyon along the southern horizon.



Red Canyon

Mother Nature is ruthless. It's not that she has a vendetta against humans; after all, we're a part of nature too. We have a place in her scheme of things, but to her, we're little more than ants crossing her sidewalk and stepping—or not stepping—on us doesn't cross her mind. She has more important things to worry about. It's our responsibility to stay out of her way.

We hiked in Red Canyon for a couple of days—it's an eroded amphitheater on the Paunsaugunt Plateau's west flank. Red Canyon isn't an official national or state park, but because it's in the Dixie National Forest, the Department of Agriculture maintains a visitor center there. It's Bryce Canyon's foyer. Like Bryce Canyon, it has hoodoos, but they are slightly redder than at Bryce. Many tourists think that they're in the national park already, and stop to gawk and take pictures of the pair of tunnels carved through the red rock sandstone.

The Forest Service maintains trails that meander through Red Canyon's pinnacles, and on our visit, Anne and I stopped at the center to select a path that was suitable for an old couple like us. "Oh the trails have all been wiped out by the big thunderstorm we had last week," the ranger told us. Well, she wasn't a ranger but had a yellow uniform on, and she sat behind the information counter. The storm that she referred to happened in the early morning and dumped 1.75 inches in 20 minutes resulting in flash floods that covered the parking lot, ripped apart the bike path, and part of the road. The rushing water threatened to damage the visitor center and restrooms, but fortunately, the runoff didn't get that high. When we drove in, the parking lot

was stained red from the freshly scraped off mud, so we missed the biggest mess all because we decided to stop for breakfast.

With persistence, we asked our ranger what options remained to hike among the rocks and take some photographs. She finally relented and provided us with a trail map. "This is the Pink Cliffs trail. It's mostly intact on the east side, but people are getting lost in the west loop. If you have trouble following the trail, turn around and retrace your steps." With that Anne and I set off for a short half-mile hike among the hoodoos.

Following the trail wasn't our problem. We had trouble finding the beginning. We walked across the parking lot to the trailhead sign and saw the flood's massive debris field. We made a couple of false starts and started up some false paths—including one on the debris field.

Anne discovered the trail, and she called for me to come down and join her. When I met up with her, we started our hike. The path was washed out in places, but once you understood what you were looking for, you could quickly pick out the route. We spent an hour hiking with me happily snapping pictures and Anne grumbling the whole time. We even successfully managed to navigate the dreaded west side.

I had to return the next day because I found out that I had forgotten to put a memory card into my camera. I retraced my steps and snapped all the photos I recalled from our first hike. Unsurprisingly, following the trail was much simpler the second day.



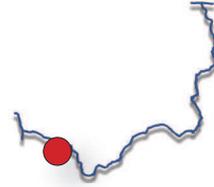
Fins and Hoodoos—The life of a hoodoo begins at the ridge of a plateau. As water runs off the plateau, it cuts the plateau's edge into fins. Then as rain wears down the fins, it breaks them into individual blocks called Hoodoos. Here in small-scale, we see the pattern of erosion happening along the trail.



Pyramids—Not all sandstone erosion results in hoodoos. If a capstone doesn't protect the underlining layer, the sandstone dissolves into a pile like this pyramid-shaped fin. Although they're still interesting, they don't draw the attention that hoodoos like Salt and Pepper do.



Spiral Log and Manzanita—The red-barked manzanita grow as an abundant ground cover at higher elevations in the West. This little evergreen shrub is growing on a tallis slope and has prevented a juniper log from rolling further down the hill.



Paunsaugunt Plateau

It's five-miles up a gentle grade through Red Canyon before SR 12 reaches the flats on top of Paunsaugunt Plateau. It's the top tread of the Escalante Grand Staircase. You're greeted with a panoramic sky. The highway straightens, the land is flat, and only a few extinct lava flows interrupt the distant horizon. In the east, Table Cliff Plateau—with its pink creamsicle cliffs—rise another three thousand feet making it the dominant feature in the staircase. Its height, shape, and distinctive color become a useful reference in the monument, and why John Wesley Powell used it during his survey expeditions down the Colorado River.

There are no trees and little color up here, only miles of blue-green knee-high sage. Distant knolls to the south are the only hint that the pink limestone is hidden under the vegetation. The Paunsaugunt was once a block of seabed 10 miles wide and 25 miles long that was thrust into the air 20 million years ago as part of the Colorado Plateau uplift. Faults along its east and west flanks separate the blocks into a north/south orientation. The alternating pattern of mountains and basins continues

west across Nevada including the Basin And Range National Monument near the famous Area 51 town of Rachael.

The Paunsaugunt gets an average of 200 inches of snow each year. That's enough for the sage, but the thick forests found elsewhere need more. The Paunsaugunt is in the rain shadow of the Markagunt Plateau—its western sister across the Sevier River Basin. As winter storms cross southern Utah, the taller Markagunt wrings-out a more significant share of moisture for itself. It's not until the clouds are forced higher and further east that enough snow and rain falls to support vast forests. Because the land is flat and sandy, the precipitation that isn't absorbed by the soil runs off the plateau's edges creating spectacular areas like Red and Bryce Canyons. Midway across the plateau, there's a sign marking a summit of 7800 feet, but it doesn't tell you that it's also the Great Basin Divide. Runoff to the west of this point flows into the Sevier River drainage and winds up in Salt Lake, while the eastern half drains into the Pariah River system, and travels downstream into the mighty Colorado River at Lee's Ferry.



Paunsaugunt Clouds—During the summer monsoons, clouds form first over the plateaus before winds move them over the valleys. In this case, a late afternoon sun highlights a Seiver River Valley grass field as storms begin to build above the Paunsaugunt.



Cattle Grazing— Most of the Paunsaugunt is an open range, so ranchers let their stock roam freely to graze on the sparse grasses that grow between sage bush, just as this pair of cattle are doing in the foreground with Flat-Top mountain in the background on the western horizon.



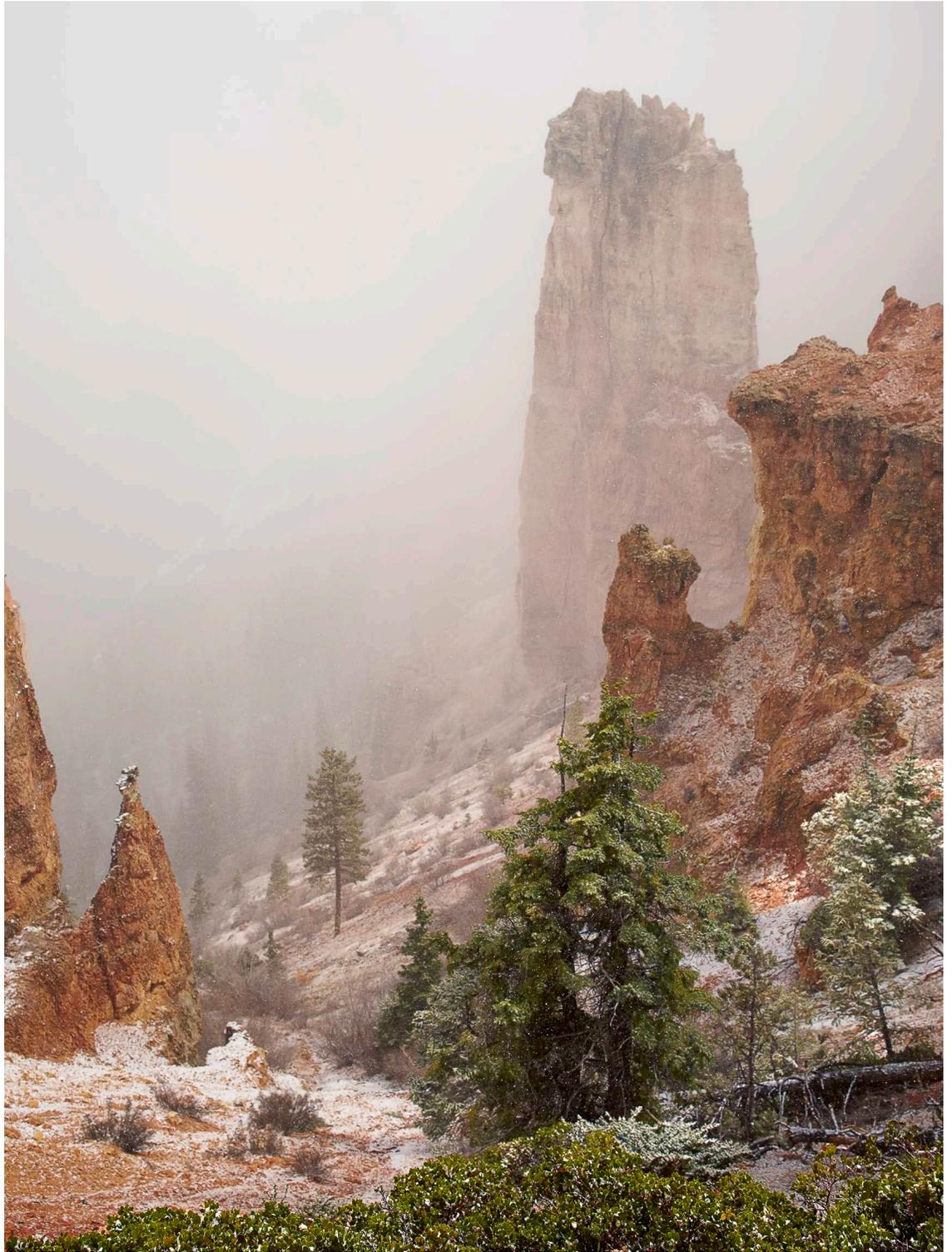
Line Shed—In the summer monsoon season, the afternoon storms can be gullywashers as this one did. It dumped enough rain during the next hour that the runoff tore up trails and roads that border the national park. This old line shed couldn't protect us from the deluge.



Navajo Exit—As you near the top of the switchbacks climbing up Navajo Trail, you begin to emerge above the hoodoo tops, and the horizon opens. The feeling that you get is like breaking the water's surface after a dive.



Claron Layer—The top stair in the Escalante Grand Staircase is the Claron Layer, or Pink Cliffs, as seen here looking south from Rainbow Point. The pinkish layer is limestone and was formed in Claron Lake - an ancient freshwater lake that covered parts of Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming.



Sunset Point Snow—Bryce Canyon in winter is a different experience. It's less crowded, and the fog-shrouded views have an atmosphere of mystery. Hoodoos appear and vanish within minutes. The trails are ice covered and hiking them requires extra caution.



Tropic-Cannonville-Henrieville

After traversing 10 flat miles on top of the Paunsaugunt Plateau, and shortly after passing State Route 63 - The Bryce Canyon turnoff - State Route 12 begins a 1500 foot descent into the Paria River Basin. Along the way, the road cuts through the park's north-east corner. There's a parking area where you can stop, hike, and photograph ridges and hoodoos.

At the grade's bottom, the road flattens and runs through farmland and in quick succession, three small communities. For the next nine miles, the speed limit signs change from 60mph to 40mph and back as you pass through each of the towns.

Tropic is the first municipality along the way. It's also the largest and has the most facilities for travelers and because of that; many tourists choose to stay overnight here instead of Panguitch or Bryce City. Tropic is also home to the last restaurants along this road section. The next place to stop for a bite to eat is in Escalante - an hour up the road. If you want to ride a horse or rent an ATV, there are places here that will accommodate you.

Four more miles is Cannonville which has a gas station, motel, and KOA campground. Cannonville's Main Street is the route to Kodachrome Basin State Park (and eventually Cottonwood Canyon). At Main and Center streets, be sure to stop at the BLM Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument Visitor Center for maps and information. I always enjoy looking at the 3D relief map that they have on

display in the center of the hall.

Another four more miles and just past the flag-topped butte is Henrieville where there's a post office. It's the only commerce in town. Other than stamps, there isn't anything to buy here. It's a true bedroom community, but with some patience, you can discover its rural charm. You might find an interesting picture or two while exploring its quiet streets.

When you reach the valley bottom, you'll notice that you've dropped below the Pink Cliffs and the color of the sandstone walls is a yellow-gray. This is the Tropic Layer—or Gray Cliffs—the second step down the Grand Staircase. Geologist named this layer after the town. The sandstone here is made from shale and sandstone deposited on a seabed during the Cretaceous Era about 130 million years ago. There are several deposit layers within the Gray Cliffs with the Tropic Shale at the bottom. Although the colors in this layer aren't as dramatic as the pink, white or vermilion steps, it changes as you travel.

It's also worth pointing out that between Cannonville and Henrieville, you cross a bridge over the Paria River. Most of the time the river is barely a creek, but it is the agent that has etched the Bryce Canyon amphitheater from the Paunsaugunt's east side. The little stream starts on the surrounding slopes and flows into the Colorado River at Lee's Ferry-95 miles away.



Flag Butte—Midway between Cannonville and Henrieville, is Monument Butte. Although it's not visible in this photo, someone has erected a flagpole on the very top. On the pole, a U.S. flag flutters in the wind which can be seen from either town.



Open Gate—Cattle ranching is extensive in the Paria River Basin. It's common to see livestock grazing in the landscape, but ranchers need to supplement the poor food the cattle eat on the range. Where the land is wide and flat enough, ranchers irrigate and grow hay or alfalfa as supplemental food.



Gray Barn—An ancient apple tree is waiting for warmer weather to bloom. It has been producing fruit for years as it stood for years behind an old gray shed—or perhaps it's a small barn.



Kodachrome Basin

A trip along State Route 12 is not complete without a side trip to Kodachrome Basin State Park. When the National Geographic magazine visited the area for a story in 1948, they called the area Kodachrome Flat. When Utah made it a state park in 1962, they changed the name to Chimney Rock to avoid copyright infringement, but with Kodak's blessing changed the name again a couple years later. The reserve is few miles south of Cannonville. Main Street becomes Kodachrome Basin outside of town, and the trail runs south among cattle pastures to where the pavement ends. At the visitor's center, you pay a reasonable entrance fee that's good for day use; camping fees are extra.

We have visited and photographed Kodachrome Basin several times, and we believe it has the best campgrounds in Utah. They have hot water, showers, flush toilets, and in winter they're heated. All the roads are paved within the park; even in the campgrounds. Because they're so popular, the campground is often full, so you should reserve one online if you want to save a spot. Kodachrome is also three-thousand feet below Bryce, so it doesn't

suffer the bitter cold in winter, but the temperature often cracks the century mark in summer.

Surrounding the park are tri-colored cliffs—red Entrada Sandstone, white Navajo Sandstone, and the gray Tropic Layer—the colors commonly found along the Skutumpah Terrace - the flat area on top of the White Cliffs.

Unique to Kodachrome Basin is its sand pipes. It's thought that millions of years ago, this area was like Yellowstone with geysers and hot springs and as the basin sank into a shallow sea, layers of sand covered it. The geyser's immense pressure forced steam and gas into fractures in the hardening sandstone, and created vents to relieve that pressure. The calcium-rich fountains coated these vents with a hard ring of conglomerate material. As the Colorado plateau rose, rivers cut into the soft sandstone leaving the harder stone pipes behind. Over sixty pipes are in the park for you to find and photograph (hmm, sounds like a book idea). The one pictured in this chapter stands like a monument over the campgrounds.



Wiggler Bench—The low uplift of Entrada and Carmel sandstone is south of Kodachrome Basin along Cottonwood Canyon Road. Wiggler Wash bisects the bench. It's a usually dry stream originating on Canaan Peak that got its name for its crooked course.



Kodachrome Layers— Near the park’s campgrounds, there’s a wall and ledge that clearly shows the sandstone layering found in the park. On the bottom is the red Entrada Sandstone. Above that is the white Morrison Formation. Finally, the top layer is Tropic Shale and has the grayish-yellow color.



Sand Pipe—Unique to Kodachrome Basin are its sand pipes. They're thought to be geyser vents formed at the bottom of an ancient seabed. The park has over sixty of them in various sizes, and this larger specimen is on a shelf overlooking the campgrounds.



Dry Creek

SR 12 reaches a low point when the highway crosses the Paria River Bridge at Cannonville, then it begins to climb again. The stretch from Henrieville to The Blues Overlook rises 1500 feet. It's a gradual climb until the last three miles when the road narrows, and it starts up the 12 percent grade at Paria Hollow. The slope is one of the spots where driving an RV becomes a job. It's this section that you really must pay attention to driving, but the scenery around you compels you to stop and gawk.

For five miles east of Henrieville, the road heads north-east and runs parallel to Dry Creek. On each side of the highway are gray Tropic Layer benches. Maps don't name the formations on the roads' east flank, but across the valley to the west is Coal Bench. On either side, outcrops of white Navajo Sandstone pop out of the gray Tropic Layer. As the road gains elevation, the white sandstone begins to disappear.

After that valley, the road turns east for a couple of miles and over a low divide before heading north-east again when it reaches Henrieville Creek. It's not a sharp dramatic curve that you notice. It's more of a course correction. There isn't a spectacular change to alert you, but a keen eye will see the rocks have changed color. They have a noticeable yellow cast that's almost golden in the warm rays of late afternoon. The color change is because this is another

strata that make up the Gray Cliffs - the Kaiparowits Formation.

There's a second milestone that happens in the low pass. Here is the boundary between the national monument's Grand Staircase Region and its middle area— The Kaiparowitz Region. This region stretches to the community of Escalante where its eastern border is the Kaiparowitz Plateau's Straight Cliffs. East of there is the monument's Escalante Canyon Region, the third management area.

As the road follows Henrieville Creek, the canyon walls close in and rise higher obscuring the distant horizon. There's a curved yellow wall on the creek's east side that rises vertically from the creek bed a couple hundred feet into the sky. When it's struck by the late afternoon sun, it has a golden glow that would be a good photo subject if it weren't for the power lines.

It's not long before the canyon opens and you reach a strangely bluish colored amphitheater with Powell Point looming above it. It's hard to keep your mind on the road because there's so much to look at. If you want a photograph, find a place to park now or wait until you get to the hilltop viewpoint. There's no room to stop in between, and you'll need to mind the road.



Point of Light—Summer monsoon clouds darken the sky over Dry Creek and threaten rain, but a single light ray shines through a cloud-break and throws a spotlight on a white sandstone butte at Jimmie Canyon



Coal Bench—After the summer afternoon thundershowers have spent their fury, the remaining clouds begin to break apart and the evening sun shines on the tops of Coal Bench.



Dry Creek Outcrops—After the sun is down, the Entrada Sandstone outcrops seem to glow in the twilight. The aroma of damp sage lingers in the cool, humid, and still air.



The Blues

SR 12 climbs up a 12% grade and reaches a 7000 ft summit at milepost 42, where there is a viewpoint pull out. A stop here is a must for two reasons. First, it's an excellent place to get out and stretch your legs if you haven't already done that, and secondly, this is a great photo opportunity. If you're traveling east, you can pull a trailer off on the right shoulder; otherwise, there are several parking spaces across the street. The viewpoint has a pit-toilet here, but there are no other amenities. The reason for this roadside stop is that Powell Point is only four miles away—the closest that the highway gets to it—and below it are The Blues Badlands.

Powell Point is the south end of Table Cliff Mesa, and it's over 10,188 feet above sea level. A layer of white (Wasatch Limestone Formation) tops the distinctive pink (Claron Formation) cliffs. It's so visible throughout southern Utah and northern Arizona that John Wesley Powell used it as a reference point when he explored and surveyed the Colorado River. That's the origin of its name. Imagine, dragging survey equipment out of the Grand Canyon each night so you could find out where you were.

Powell Point is the rounded two-tone lump on the south end of Table Cliff Mesa. It looks like a colorful interpretation of Yosemite's Half Dome, but the similarity ends there. Half Dome is a balloon of slow-cooled lava that has floated to Earth's surface -

an intrusion, while the pink and white cliffs formed at the bottom of an ancient lake. Table Cliff Mesa and the Paunsaugunt Plateau were together and created at the same time as evidenced by color and soil composition, but seismic activity along the Paria River Fault ripped them apart and thrust Table Cliff further into the air.

The Blues is one of the thin sedimentary layers that make up the Kaiparowits Formation, and this is the only place along the highway where you can see it up close. The green-gray shale is seabed deposits from the Cretaceous Era and contains an extensive catalog of fossils. If you have a four-wheel drive rugged enough to drive up to and explore on top of the Kaiparowits Plateau, you'll find that outcrops of this layer are common, and paleontologists have discovered some exciting new fossils buried in them. The soil is relatively soft when it loses its capstone and becomes exposed to the weather, and it erodes easily; similar to the Chinle Shale deposits in Arizona's Painted Desert.

Every time I stop here, it's a different picture. In winter the table is snow covered, and during summer it's often obscured by thunderclouds and rain. A photograph from here is almost always a keeper. Just walk to the other side of the overhead power lines. I'd advise against trying to walk on the soil as it easily crumbles..



Fallen Capstone—As long as a layer of capstone protects it, the soft shale-laden sediment remains undisturbed. When wind and rain undermine the harder stone, they collapse and—on a geological timescale—the thin blue layer erodes quickly.





The Blues—This heavily eroded layer of Kaiparowits formation got its unusual color from shale sediments deposited on a Cretaceous-era seabed. It contains one of the most diverse fossil collections in the west and is a frequent outcrop on the Kaiparowits plateau. Powell Point is the cherry that tops this ice cream sundae.



Escalante

From The Blues summit, SR 12 follows Upper Valley Creek down a long gentle grade with yellow Kaiparowits Formation cliffs on either side of the road. It's only 18 miles to the little town of Escalante, which by all rights, should be a ghost town. Since the 1870s, when Mormons established the town in what was called Potato Valley, the only industry was ranching and farming. They hoped that there would be a longer growing season because it's elevation is lower than Panguitch, but the summers weren't much longer and the pioneers were raising more kids than crops. Because of its remote location, the town's population has always remained less than a thousand, and in the 40s when the WPA completed road projects combined with the onset of World War II, 30% of its population abandoned Escalante to find work elsewhere.

The name—Escalante—was suggested by John Wesley Powell to honor the leader of the Franciscan Priests, who searched for a new route to link the San Francisco missions and Santa Fe. The Fathers failed in their attempt and eventually returned to New Mexico.

The first thing you'll notice upon arrival is that there are a lot of empty brick homes in town. When pioneers first settled the community, many of the

original buildings were built using local bricks, and as a result, they're still standing. They're in remarkably good shape considering that they've sat empty and neglected for half a century. At the town's visitor center, you can pick up a walking-tour brochure and explore the communities' historic district and learn about the families that settled the town.

Since the Grand Staircase was declared a national monument by President Bill Clinton in 1996, records show that more than half a million people visit the town - each year. Along Main Street, new businesses compete for every dime of tourist money. There are ATV rentals, restaurants, motels, and RV Parks to accommodate the Boomer generation.

Escalante is a good base for exploring the national monument's east side because there are plenty of things to see and do. The Park Service recently built a new Grand Staircase-Escalante Visitor Center at the edge of town. A mile west of town is the Escalante Petrified Forest State Park which offers a campground, stocked lake, and a day hike on a trail going up the mesa and then loops through fossilized trees. You can rent a jeep or ATV in town and explore Hole in the Rock Road which takes a day at least.



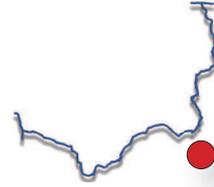
Peoples Exchange—Built in the 1900s, the Peoples Exchange is the only commercial building in the Escalante Historical District. It housed a dry goods store that sold supplies to townspeople. It was the Amazon of its day.



Escalante Brick House—When Mormon Pioneers settled Escalante in the late 1800s, they built 50 brick buildings, and many of them are still standing. This historic home is located along the main highway and is an excellent example of Escalante’s Historic District.



Barn and Rail Fence—Located off Main Street, this large barn is still in use. At one time traveling the backcountry meant riding a horse and camping under the stars, but now most people prefer four-wheel-drive vehicles.



Devils Garden

From Escalante, SR 12 skirts the Escalante Mountain Range by heading south-east for five miles before making a long turn and heading north-east. The road's bend is also the junction with Hole In The Rock Road, and there's a viewpoint that's worthy of a stop. From there you can see the colored bands of the Straight Cliffs that make up the east flank of the Kaiparowits Plateau. The dirt road and cliffs run south in a near perfect line as far as you can see. Both of them continue beyond the horizon all the way to Lake Powell.

The road provides access to many geologic wonders hidden along its length. I'll discuss more of them in the next chapter, but it's only twelve miles to the first one - Devil's Garden. The trail gets rough and treacherous the further along, but the first dozen miles are wide and regularly graded.

There are always washboard sections, but with caution, it's navigable with any vehicle that's higher than a Lamborghini. After saying that, I mean it's true during dry weather. When it's wet, the road is impassible.

After driving washboards for twelve miles, you'll see a sign for the turn-off. Don't be disappointed when

you don't see anything from the highway. You have to cross a low ridge to enter the parking area. Once you're out of the car, you'll see a square mile packed with hoodoos, goblins, and arches. There's an informal trail that meanders around and through the sandstone structures, but you're free to improvise. The deep sand can make it difficult to make progress. If you're the Griswolds, you can see everything in ten minutes then leave. Don't do that. Spend some time and photograph the hoodoos in the changing light. There's a pit toilet and picnic area if you brought a lunch, but there's no water, camping, or other concessions in the park.

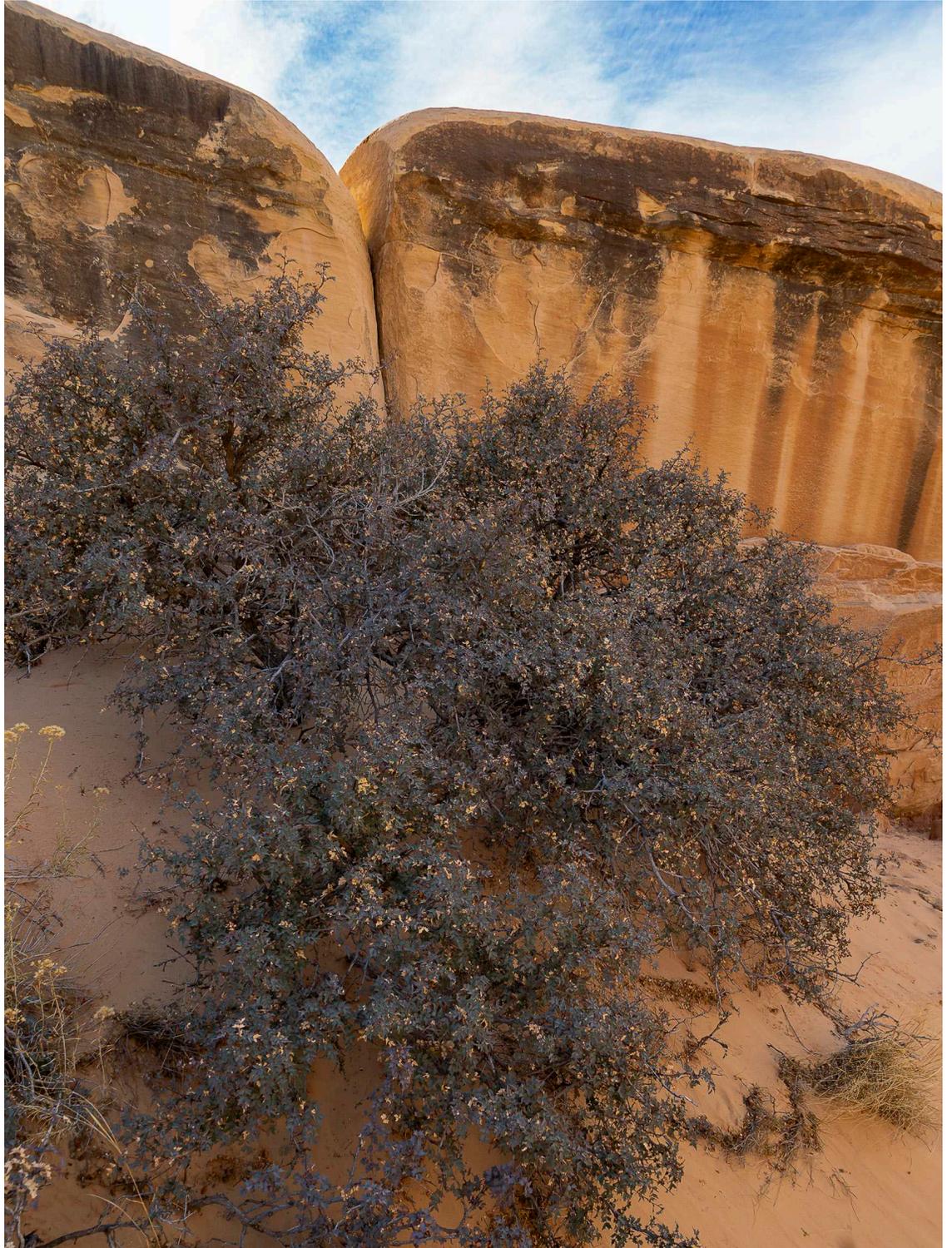
I like having the freedom to get up close with these Jurassic Era rock formations, but I'm sad that others feel the need to deface them. I get annoyed when I have to shoot around graffiti. I struggle with the concept of making-your-mark in nature. I go out of my way to photograph pictographs and petroglyphs, which in reality is the same thing. But these days, we have better ways to be remembered, so I subscribe to the words of Aliyyah Eniath, "Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time."



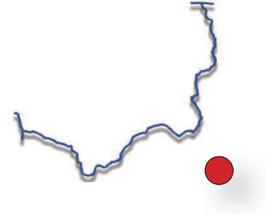
Metate Arch—There are a couple of arches at Devils Gardens. They named this one Metate Arch because it resembles the flat stone that Native Americans use to grind corn. The footprints in the sand are unfortunate, but the wind erases them each night.



The Maji—This grouping of hoodoos would fit in on someone's lawn as a Christmas display. They resemble the caravan of the Three Kings bearing gifts for baby Jesus. The lead figures look like they're wearing a keffiyeh and are guiding camels through the desert.



Red Bush—A desert bush grows from the base of sandstone blocks. The draping of its branches mimics the dark streaking—called varnishing—down the rocks. My landscaper wishes she could make an arrangement this well.



Hole In The Rock Road

In the later decades of the 19th Century, Mormon leaders were worried about the south-east corner of Utah. That part of the state was isolated from Salt Lake City because of the deep canyons along the Colorado River. They believed that if they didn't have disciples in the Bluff area, it would become a safe haven for outlaws, hostile Indians, and gentiles. So they organized a body of faithful to establish a colony along the San Juan River. After their commands were put to order, the next step was getting them there.

Everyone knew Jesuit priests from Santa Fe and Powell's expeditions visited Potato Valley, so they decided this would be the most expedient route. As they traveled parallel to the Straight Cliffs of the Kaiparowits, they sent scouts who searched for an easy way to get wagons down to and across the river. The daily reports must have been discouraging as the only possible way they found was through a rock fracture and then down an incline of 45°. For months, the party toiled to build a trail by blasting the gap wider, creating ramps with the rubble, and constructing a wooden causeway near the bottom. Eventually, they managed to lower 250 people, 80 wagons, and 1000 cattle down to the Colorado.

When dry, it's possible to drive the fifty-five miles to the hole. The first dozen miles are wide and well graded. With a little caution, a sedan can make it. From that point, you need more ground clearance. Beyond 40 Mile Ridge you should have four-wheel-drive, and for the last five miles, it's either an ATV or get out and walk.

At the hole, you can see where the wagons gouged

scars in the rock as they were lowered with their wheels bound. Even though they blasted the gap open, it's still very narrow. If you're fit and have the stamina, you can hike down to Lake Powell—and back up again. It's really more of a rock scramble. On the lower section, you'll see the remains of post holes dug for timber support.

Hole in the Rock road is also the gateway to other cool things to see. Every ten miles or so, there are side trails to explore, but because the sand is deep, you'll need an appropriate vehicle. The list of places includes Dance Hall Rock, Coyote Gulch, Spooky and Peek-a-Boo slot canyons, Egypt, and Chimney Rock. Also along the way is Left Hand Collet Road—one of the few roads that go on top of the Kaiparowits Plateau.

The basin east of the Straight Cliffs has a lot of secret places waiting for you to explore, but it's a rugged and dangerous place to travel alone. It even has a ghost. Everett Ruess was a California poet and artist who—at the age of 20—came here for inspiration. For three years he traveled the southwest alone on horseback and pack mules, so he was well seasoned. On November 20, 1934, he set off with two pack mules down Hole in the Rock road and was never seen again. After three months, a search party found his mules in Davis Gulch, but none of his supplies. In 2009, searchers found a body buried 60 miles south on the Navajo Reservation, but DNA testing and dental records proved that it wasn't Everett. His disappearance is still a mystery, so venture out and discover the secret places here, but take caution or Everett may be an unwelcome guest at your next campfire.



Coyote Gulch Approach—After two miles of hiking through deep sand and on slickrock, the top of a cave is the only indicator that the 300-foot drop into Coyote Gulch is just yards away.



Fortymile Sunrise—The sun rises and paints the clouds red over Fortymile Ridge. Only a soft breeze disturbs the cool sage-scented air.



Straight Cliffs—The dappled morning light on the Straight Cliffs accentuate the multiple layers of sediment that make up the Kaiparowits Formation. The cliffs run north-south for fifty miles in a near perfect straight line.



Escalante River Canyon

After a trip down Hole in the Rock Road, let's return to its beginning at the junction with State Route 12. At 5740 feet above sea level, the intersection is SR 12's lowest elevation, and from here, the highway heads northish to Boulder Town. The WPA built this section of the road and opened it in 1941. Before that, you could only get between Escalante and Boulder via Hell's Backbone Road—which we'll cover in a couple of chapters. If you have acrophobia, either route will freak you out. The terrain ahead is unique and terrifyingly beautiful, so cinch your seat belt.

Past the intersection, the highway starts normal enough, gaining 600 feet as it climbs on top of a wide area appropriately called Big Flat. The road is straight, and with the low sage, you can easily see the Escalante Mountains and Aquarius Plateau on the north horizon. Five miles after reaching Big Flat, the speed limit drops, and there's a highway sign cautioning a slow 30 mph curve ahead. It's not kidding. The curve itself isn't dangerous—it's the view as you turn the corner that demands that you slow down. George Lucas couldn't have staged it better. You reach the edge of the flats just as you round the corner revealing a vast display of Navajo Sandstone mounds as the road descends into the Escalante River Canyon. Fortunately, there are viewpoints where you can stop and absorb the splendor.

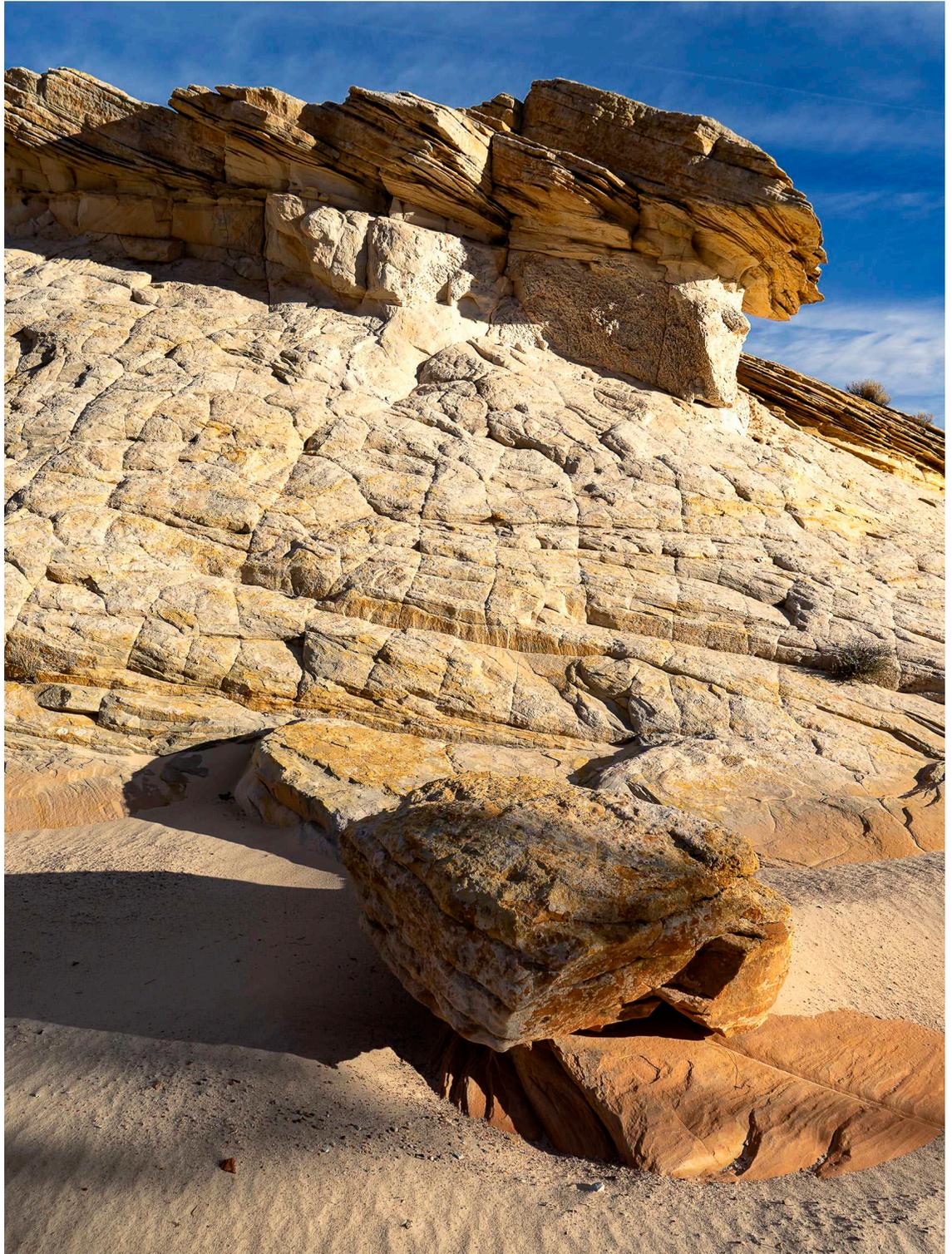
These are petrified dunes, and 150 million years ago they stretched from Wyoming to Nevada. In the Jurassic Era, they sunk to the bottom of a shallow sea. As time passed, other sediments piled on top of

them and compressed them into sandstone. Rivers have eroded the Kaiparowits capstone away leaving the white dunes resembling their original form. With imagination, you can sense what this area was like during the Jurassic era.

SR 12 drops a thousand feet to the Escalante River Bridge in two steps. The first is to a shelf below the mesa and the second is onto the bridge crossing. The road is well marked through here, which is good because the scenery is distracting. There are several opportunities along here where you can stop and take close-up photographs of the fractured dunes and the gleaming white sand deposited between them.

There's a second viewpoint and coffee house, just before the road drops to the river. The lower turnout is a great place to stop if you have binoculars. Across the river and above the private residence, there is a cave in the red-wall cliffs, and in it, the 100 Hands pictograph panel is painted on the cave wall. Some have claimed that this is the best view of the pictograph.

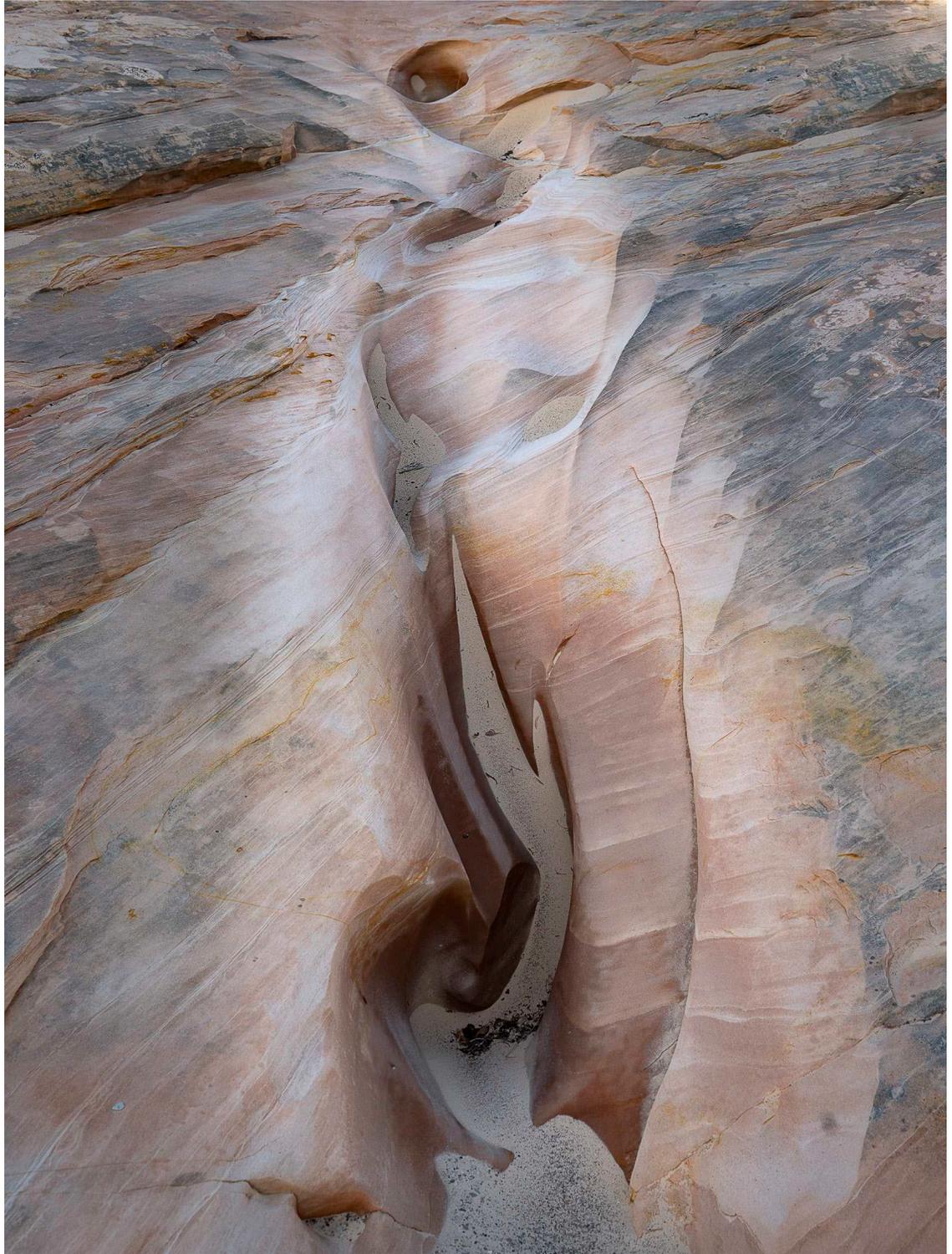
The Escalante Trailhead parking area is on the north side of the bridge. If you have time to kill, there is a short but steep trail up to the cave, or you choose to hike the Escalante Trail 15 miles back into town. If you do that, it requires wading the river in several places. If that's too far, the Escalante Natural Bridge is three miles upstream. If you crave even more adventure, then follow the trail downstream for 70 miles, and you'll emerge at Lake Powell.



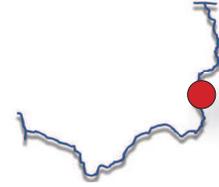
Slickrock Capstone and Sand—When erosion undermines the harder Kaiparowits layer, it fractures and breaks exposing more of the white Sandstone. As the wind blows, it picks up the loose sand and etches exposed sandstone perpetuating the erosion cycle.



Sand Dune Shelf—As the highway descends to the Escalante River, it drops off a white Navajo Sandstone mesa. Then it reaches a shelf that transitions to Entrada Sandstone—you’ve just traversed several million years of sediment in a half mile.



Miniature Slot Canyon—As rainwater rushes off the slickrock, it erodes the surface sandstone in the same patterns that you find in deep, narrow slot canyons. Perhaps in a million years, our descendants will enjoy exploring the larger version of this canyon.



The Hogbacks

After the Escalante River bridge crossing, State Route 12 climbs out of the canyon by following Calf Creek. The road follows the stream for a short while until the campgrounds turn-off. As a side note, you should make time to enjoy the three-mile hike to the falls. It cascades over the canyon's red wall 120 feet into a popular swimming hole. The trail is pretty level, and along its length, markers point out things of interest; including a couple of ancient Fremont granaries. To avoid the crowds, plan your visit in the middle of the week.

Meanwhile, back at the campgrounds turn-off, the highway climbs a 14% grade onto New Home Bench—better known as The Hogback. I suppose it's called that because when it reaches the top, it's like driving down the middle of a pig's back. Just like the ones on either side of you, you're driving on the crest of a dune, and at one part, it is so narrow that there are no shoulders. I'm a confident driver, but even I held my breath the first time that I drove it.

When we visited the Cannonville information center, the ranger told us a story of a woman that panicked at this spot. "She was alone and was so frightened that she stopped her car, and she got out to flagged down the people behind her. She convinced

one of them to drive her car to the other side.." Now that's a fear of heights. This narrow section is less than a mile, but as you drive, there's a sheer drop on either side. Soon the bench widens enough that there's shoulder again and there are several pull-outs for you to stop and take pictures.

In another mile, there's an area—off the road—for parking, and that's the trailhead for Upper Calf Creek Falls. The upper falls are shorter than the ones back down the road, but it has a pool and is far less crowded. The trail is only a mile long, but it's several hundred feet down a slope—which means it's a steep climb on the way back.

Toward the end of the Hogback section, you'll see the green meadows of Boulder town in the valley below. At the end of the Hogbacks, there's a wide spot and SR 12 makes a turn to the right, but if you look to the left, you'll see another road, a parking area, and a blue dumpster. This is another good place to stop because you can walk back to an overlook that has sweeping views of Boulder, the Aquarius Plateau, and the country beyond. Before we drive down into the village, let's take a side trip on this other road called Hell's Backbone. It was the original route between Escalante and Boulder before SR 12. It's even scarier.



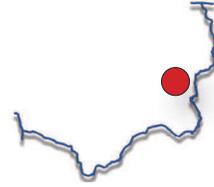
Dunes Storm Cell—An afternoon thunder cell moves from the Aquarius Plateau, east over the Hogbacks. From this viewpoint at the upper falls trailhead, you can see the canyon walls through which Calf Creek flows (lower right).



Hogback Sunrise—The sun has just cleared the horizon and casts warm highlights on the tops of the petrified dunes. From the Hogback's Boulder Creek—east—side, the petrified dunes extend north into Boulder Town. Boulder Mountain with its 11,000 foot flat summit is on the northern horizon.



Dunes Chaparral—Not all of the dunes are bare rock. Wherever soil accumulates, a variety of grasses and shrubs colonize it. This early morning shot of the dunes also shows Table Cliffs Plateau and Powell Point in the upper right.



Hell's Backbone

Traveling between Escalante and Boulder Town before 1930 was done on a mule trail. A road didn't exist. So when the Civilian Conservation Corps looked for projects that could put people to work, the community of Boulder asked for a highway. The government agency accepted their request, but instead of one road, they got two. The first to be completed was a dirt road along Pine Creek north from Escalante and across high ridge lines along Boulder Mountain's south face. The CCC finished it in 1933. The second version was the paved route that you just drove, and it wasn't completed until 1941. For the intervening eight years, all vehicle traffic to Boulder traveled on Hell's Backbone Road, and that's a frightening thought.

Hell's Backbone Road has been updated, so the first few miles from the Boulder Junction are paved. There's a power plant hidden back there and the company needed an all-weather road so employees could get to work.

The remainder all of the way to Escalante is dirt and gravel. It's a one lane trail with plenty of wide spots for traffic to pass. It's hard to ignore the change in vegetation as the track climbs the south face of the mountain. Juniper and pinion line the passage at first, then there's an area of deciduous trees, followed by stands of fir and pines. Mile after mile, the road winds higher: 7000, 8000, then 9000 feet until the trees stop, and there's a one-lane bridge with a sign that reads—Hell's Backbone.

The bridge was made initially with wooden timbers, but it's now concrete. Its guardrails are only knee-high making it a nightmare for someone with acrophobia to walk across. If you drop a penny, it will fall 1500 feet before it hits the rocks below. You look down at jagged granite canyons on either side. It's like staring into the jaws of a great white shark. The white gash in the mountain is appropriately named Box-Death Hollow because grazing cattle frequently lose their footing and plunge into the chasm. It's a wilderness area and crazy people regularly hike down the trails to camp along Pine Creek. There they can enjoy the private swimming holes and enjoy the solitude under the stars.

I've grown too old and cautious for hikes like that. I had a hard enough time photographing from the bridge. It felt like I was standing on the radio tower that tops the Empire State Building, and then covering my face with a camera. Actually, the building would be easier because it's 50 feet shorter. It was just the height that sped my heartbeat, I was bracing against a wind that tried to blow me from the bridge like a breadcrumb on a tablecloth.

At least I did better on this recent visit. The first time we traveled on Hell's Backbone, our timing was wrong. By the time we reached the bridge, the sun was down, and in the darkness, I wouldn't even get out of the car.



Box-Death Hollow Wilderness—A jagged gash on the south flank of Boulder Mountain that you can view via Hell's Backbone Road. The wilderness is drained by Pine Creek which is a tributary of the Escalante River. If you drop a penny from the bridge, it will bounce among the rocks 1500 feet below.



Aquarius Plateau From Bridge—The Aquarius Plateau rises over 11,000 feet above sea level, another 2500 feet higher than at the Hell's Backbone Bridge. The flat mountain is the northern third of the Aquarius Plateau, and fir and aspen trees cover its flanks.



Escalante Uplift—Along the lower reaches of Sand Creek, the sandstone has folded on end along the Pine Creek fault line. It's interesting to see layers of sediment almost 90° from horizontal.



Boulder Town

Imagine getting mail by Pony Express, but instead of the Post Office using riders on galloping horses, they depended on plodding pack mules instead. That's how Boulder Town got their mail until 1931. It was the last community in the contiguous United States that depended on pack animals to communicate with the outside world. They didn't have a choice; there were no roads. When you first visit this one-gas-pump town of 300 people, you may wonder if the road money was well spent. Selfishly, I say yes because the highway provides access to this beautiful, rugged country. I'm glad that I got to photograph it—even if Boulder never existed.

Mormon pioneers were tenacious about colonizing the territory of Utah—or Deseret as they initially called it. They settled any flat land that was wide enough to plow. That included Boulder Town. Wedged between Boulder Mountain and the Waterpocket Fold, settlers began homesteading along Boulder Creek in 1889.

There are several reasons to make a Boulder stop. The most obvious is a visit to the Anasazi State Park

Museum where you can spend time looking at the collections on display and watch a short film before stepping out back to take a self-guided tour of the partially restored pueblo ruins.

If you're hankering' to ride a horse, there's a stable about a mile down the Burr Trail that can accommodate rides by the hour or day. The Boulder Mountain Guest Ranch can put you up for the night if you're looking for a place to sleep.

Then there's food, which for some reason there's a disproportionate number of great places to eat, for such a small town. Unfortunately for winter visitors, they're only open during the season - May through October. In winter, the restaurant staff work in the Wasatch ski resorts.

Queen Anne and I are addicted to the pies at the Burr Trail Grill. Yeah, yeah, yeah ... the burgers are great, the sandwiches are great, the fries are great, but these people know how to bake pies better than my grandma. When you come, plan your visit around lunch or dinner—and save room for dessert.



Retired Pumps—What do you do with old gas pumps? Turn them into yard-art. This matching pair can't be used in today's market because the manufacturer limited the price to 99 cents. The gas pumps—one regular and the other for ethyl—are on display at the Burr Trail Grill entrance.



Split Barn—The riding stable’s unusual barn design located a mile down the Burr trail. The large stable looks as if the Jolly Green Giant split it in two, like it was a Milkyway Bar.



Tractor Rakes—These large wheels when pulled behind a farm tractor, rake freshly cut grass into rows so it can be picked up by a hay bailer. It sure beats spending all day using a lawn rake.



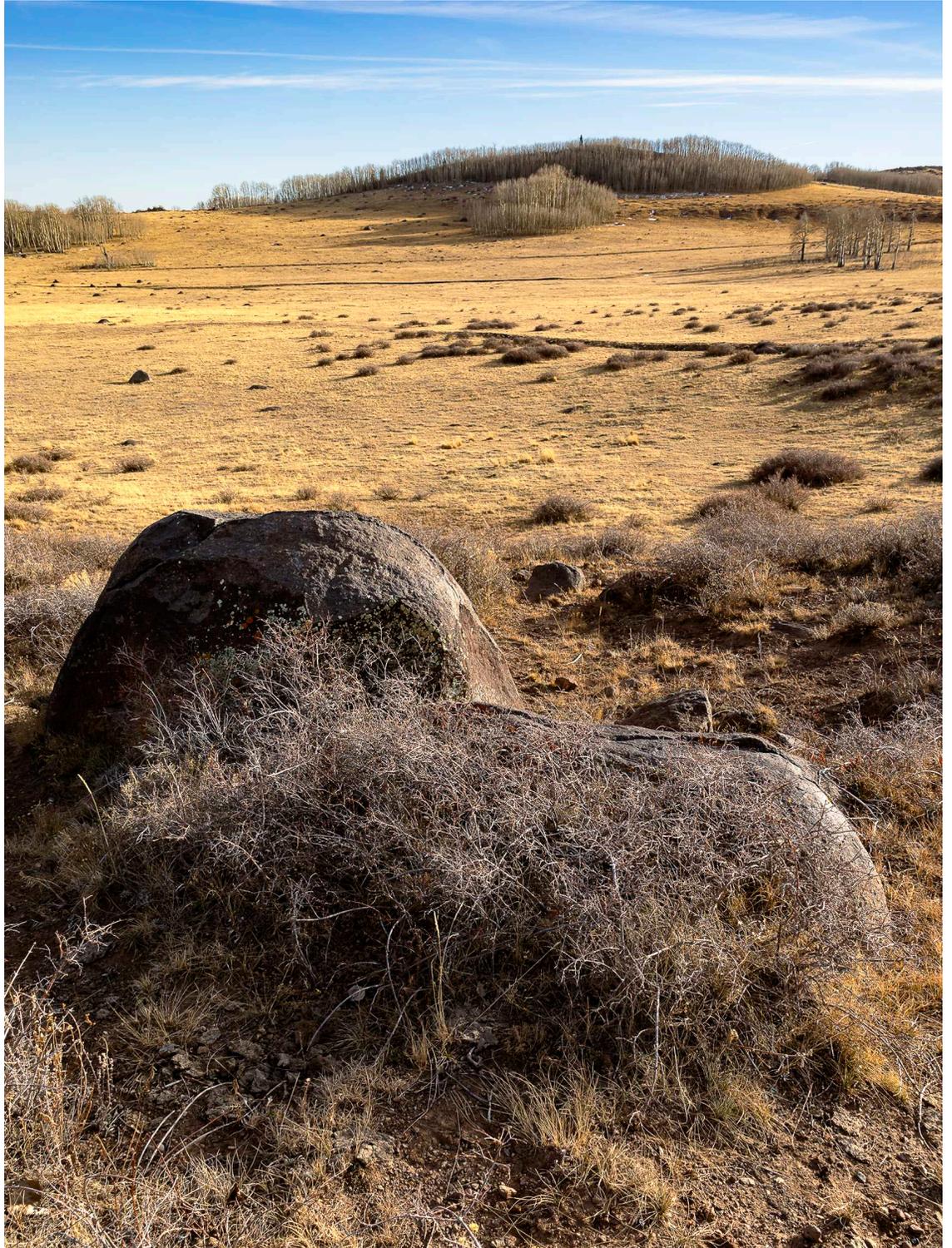
Sugarloaf—A four-hundred-foot petrified dune of Navajo Sandstone only a mile from town. The slick rock is easy to hike to the top. Although its surface isn't covered with soil, plants grow in the rock's checkered fractures where they find hidden nutrients and moisture.



Long Canyon Cottonwood—A mature cottonwood tree masks a side slot canyon in Long Canyon. A member of the Poplar family, cottonwoods thrive where water is plentiful. A healthy specimen like this one is a sign that water is just under the dry creek.



Grand Gulch—The Henry Mountains are on the far side of the Grand Gulch from the top of Burr Canyon. Because the Henry's are so remote, they were the last mountain range mapped by Caucasians. At this point in the road, you turn around or descend a thousand feet into the gulch.



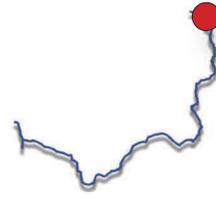
Erratics—Boulder Mountain is mostly flat because a glacier covered it during the ice age. As ice flowed down the sides, it dragged basalt boulders under the frozen river. When the ice retreated, some rocks piled into morains while others dropped out in fields. Geologists call these displaced boulders erratics.



Yellow Streak—Near the road’s summit, a stand of aspen make a yellow slash across the frame like a yellow comet. Their bright color contrasts with the flat glacially worn basalt boulders. Behind the twin moraines, the Henry Mountains don’t seem 30 miles away.



Red Patch—Aspen don't change color uniformly, some begin early while others wait a week or so. It depends on their microenvironment. Differences in soil moisture, sun exposure, and temperature variations affect the trees. In rare cases, soil minerals can make the leaves turn red, like a few in this patch.



The Road's End

Just because we've come to the east end of State Route 12 doesn't mean there's nothing left to see. Utah has plenty of rugged and beautiful country to photograph. After all, the town that we're stopped in—Torrey—is in the center of the Colorado Plateau, and you could spend days, weeks, or years exploring the plateau thoroughly. It includes an area of 130 thousand square miles, an area larger than any of the four states in which it's positioned. Photographing all of the Colorado Plateau could take a lifetime. Although as much as I'd like to take on that challenge, it's beyond the scope of this issue. But there are a couple of places close enough to the highway that I think they should be included in this article. Both locations are within ten miles of SR 12's terminus: one just 10 miles to the east, and the other is even closer on the west side.

If we turn right on Utah State Route 24, the Capitol Reef National Park visitor's center is only 10 miles east of the intersection. There you can do all the usual national park things; like get your NP Passport stamped, pick up free maps and information sheets, buy a tee shirt or a book in the gift shop, and

understand the lay of the land on the relief map. With a little more time, we could drive to Fruita, an early Mormon settlement on display inside the park. With luck, the bakery will have treats fresh from the oven that we can buy. We can drive down the park road and photograph the jagged cliffs along the Waterpocket Fold. There are plenty of other nooks and crannies to see and hike. On the way back into Torrey, be sure to stop at the highway viewpoints. Each of them has photo-worthy subjects.

The other nearby place of interest is in the other direction. It's the Fish Creek Cove rock art panel near Teasdale. They're pictographs attributed to the ancient Fremont Indians. To get there, we have to turn around and backtrack on SR 12 for 4 miles and then turn west on Teasdale Road. You'll drive toward the Cockscomb for less than a mile, and then turn south on Fish Creek Cove Road and park at the trailhead. The trail is less than a mile, and you can make the round trip in less than an hour. Look for the ruins in the cave. Among the drawings are three large pictures of headless elks, which are unique to this group of paintings



Freemont Juniper—I shot this lovely twisted juniper along State Route 24. It grows on a ledge overlooking the Freemont River. These trees are slow growing and are much older than their height would indicate. They can live for centuries, and some specimens are more than a thousand years old.



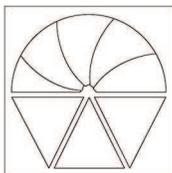
Freemont Goosenecks—On State Route 24, between the SR 12 intersection and the Capitol Reef National Park Visitor Center, there is a viewpoint overlooking the goosenecks on the Freemont River. The deep gorge in the red sandstone was cut by the Freemont as the Colorado Plateau rose..



Teasdale Cockscomb—Turn west on the Teasdale Road, and within a mile, you'll reach the cockscomb. It makes an interesting photo subject on its own, but if you turn south on Fish Creek Cove Road and then park at the trailhead, you can hike to see Fremont ruins and pictographs.



In memory of our friend—Chuck



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A photo tour of Utah's scenic highway through the Escalante Grand Staircase spanning 122 miles and 250 million years.

