

Grand Gulch, 2016

It could not have been a more perfect day to drive to Utah. Once we pass the exit for Leadville, we are on a stretch of road we have not driven in one year. By the time we cross over into Utah, we are singing, "Home on the Range." What is it about all this open space that makes us feel so happy inside?

We stop in Moab to deliver some of John's note cards to the Back of Beyond Book Store. Then we indulge in a bit of shopping to get John a better sunhat and I take advantage of 40% off on a magenta sports top. After a dinner on the patio at Peace Tree Cafe, we drive to Monticello.

We blissfully wander the streets of Monticello after installing ourselves in our motel room. John spots an old garage that has a bunch of metal signs and license plates on it and stops for a photograph. The golden angel on top of the Mormon Temple glows in the early evening light as we look at the new wind farm that has been installed since our last visit.

Playfully, I enter the iron "jail" in the park for John to take a shot of me. In the dusk, combined with the fact that I am still wearing sunglasses, I do not see the bar blocking my exit and smash into it full force. I feel as stunned as a buffalo who has been hit with a bat. I ice it as soon as I return to our room. A huge bruise is blooming and in the morning, I have a florid black eye.



Still, we continue forward. I pack some ice in my insulated cup. We drive to Kane Gulch to pick up our backpacking permit and we wend our way through a series of dirt roads that finally brings us to the Government Trail.

There is always a shock when one puts on the backpack. Since our first three miles are across a mesa, we are not too concerned. Somewhere in the first mile, I have to ask John to take the salami and the cheese to reduce my weight! About two miles in, we



meet a couple backpacking out of the Gulch. It turns out they are from Lakewood, just outside of Denver! We stop to chat and notice they both have the more modern sausage shaped packs and are carrying a lot less than we are!

We finally get to the rim of the sandstone canyon and stop for lunch. What a relief to remove our packs and restore ourselves with slices of peppered salami



and pecorino romano on asiago bagels. From here, with binoculars, we get a great view of the ruin on Polly's Island. One building remains, with three rooms. The "doors," a rarity, are tilted on the ground in front of the ruin. We can see the walls of another 3-room building that has since collapsed.

Soon it is time to start our descent. This is particularly tricky due to the lack of balance we feel carrying the weight of our packs. The steep, rocky trail requires careful footing.

Eventually, we get to the bottom of the canyon. We are not too far now from the area where we have read there is a campsite amidst the cottonwoods. We climb a short, uphill trail from the river bottom and we are there! Now we get to set up our tent and create the architecture that will be home for the next three nights.



I hear a strange sound, something rustling in the leaves. It turns out to be a red-breasted bird that has blue top feathers with a white pattern on them and a black head. It looks like it is hopping up and down on the leaves. There are two of them, in separate locations, singing out to one another. One comes right into the campsite area. We also have some resident lizards of different sizes that scamper across the log that is our sitting bench. Clearly, they are comfortable

with campers.

After making our first freeze-dried dinner in our new MSR whisperlite stove, we head out for an excursion. The couple we met has told us about a ruin and we navigate thick shrubbery and emerge into a grassy meadow, full of barrel cactus and yuccas. We find the ruin, which has two granaries, lots of pottery shards and hand prints on the walls.

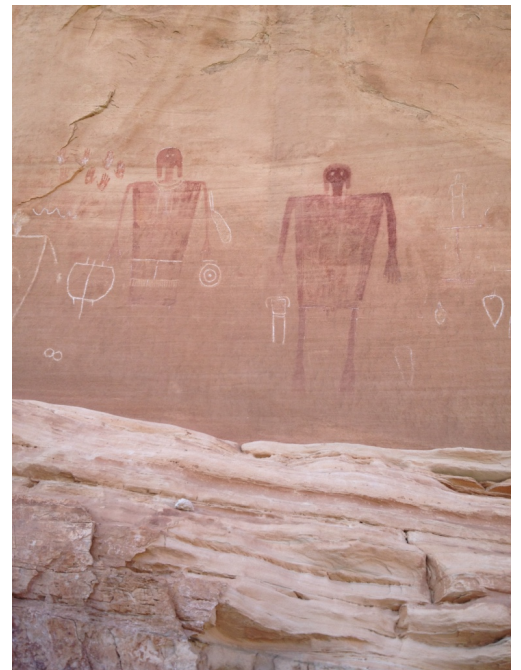


That night, the air fills with the sound of frogs, presumably engaged in some kind of mating call, since there are two distinct tones, answering one another. Stars light the sky.

The next day we set out for a day hike. What a relief to be free of the big packs! We head north down Grand Gulch, spotting granaries tucked into the ledges of the rock walls. With binoculars, I spot another ruin, and some amazing pictographs of deer and what looks like a large bug. Eventually, we get to our chosen destination: the Big Man rock art panel. It is every bit as spectacular as we imagined. Huge, red bodies are painted onto the smooth sandstone, with a variety of smaller symbols surrounding them. We take our time photographing them from different angles.

We head across the valley to the slick rock, spotting an alcove that also boasts ruins and rock art. We have our lunch there in the shade. Our plan to continue down the gulch to a natural arch is thwarted by thunder and rain.

It turns out to be a wise choice. Later, standing near our tent, we hear a loud whoosh. It is not wind—it is a flash flood. The creek coming down Polly's Canyon increases in depth and speed, flowing into Grand Gulch itself. Soon there are waves and the water has become a murky brown. We find a way to cross a fallen tree and walk alongside the river to take photos. John becomes his boyhood self, removing his lower pant legs and going out into the river with a stabilizing stick.





That night, we hear the sound of moving water instead of the slight trickle of the creek.

I can't believe it is our third day already! We set out to hike up Polly's Canyon. We do not see any other people all day long. First, we get to the natural arch that we have read about. Below, trees explode with lime green leaves, and the creek, which has now receded, has amazing mud patterns that reveal the tracks of all the creatures passing by. I see the shredded skin of a snake!

There are multiple pools and sandstone steps that lead us up the creek, taking us around the bend from the arch and into a whole new world of walls and alcoves.

We climb up one and find it is a dead end, with a steep pour over pool at the top. The next one proves to have the remains of walls. We stop to eat our lunch and then continue across on the slick rock at this upper level. We eventually reach a point where we can see the junction of the north and south forks of the canyon. Having passed a shady, sand bottomed spot, it calls me to take a nap, which I do, while John documents passing jet trails and the rocks overhead.



We are in the phase of third day magic that we have observed on every backpacking trip we have ever taken. We sleep more soundly in the tent that night. Around 4:00 a.m. I hear the hoo-hoo calls of the owl.

Our departure day arrives. There is a sadness to packing up the campsite. Our time of living simply outside is coming to an end. We say goodbye to our lizard and bird friends, the cottonwoods, the creek, the gulch.

Our packs are lighter since we've eaten most of our food. We climb up out of the canyon, stopping to note our rise and taking in final

views. Paintbrush in day glow red and barrel cactus in bloom dot the landscape.

Once again, we lunch on the rim. It is windy and cloudier today. Part way across the mesa, my upper back begins to spasm. John offers to take my sleeping bag and I take his rolled foams in exchange. We slog our way the remaining miles to the trailhead.



I feel sad seeing that I am not as strong as I used to be. It is clear that if we do another backpacking trip, we will have to pare down our weight and I will have to at least rent one of the modern packs from REI. My Hine Snowbridge from the 80's is an outdated design. We reflect on how the backpacking itself drained us compared to last year's car camping, when we then proceeded to go on 11 mile day hikes.

It seems like there is a lot of this sentiment lately—of accepting that we have changed, even though we are certainly fit and active.

The cooler beckons—there is an icy IPA for John and some iced tea for me. In a couple hours, we are installed in our room in Moab, with its fancy surfaces. It feels strange to sleep inside.

I think about the moments of the last four days, as I lie with a hot compress, trying to boost the fading of my black eye. These are our greatest possessions.

Linda Keller
4/17/16

