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DISCOVERY: THEN AND NOW

I FIRST CAME to the Slickrock Desert in 1983, together with a young wife and a two-year-old son in a rented recreational vehicle for a two-week trip. I was a veteran camper, but it was Nicki's first time on an extended road trip. We did the usual tourist spots—Grand Canyon, Arches, Canyonlands—staying in motels with civilized showers often enough to maintain family harmony.

I was no stranger to deserts, having grown up in Southern California with parents who were avid rockhounds. My earliest views were shaped by the Mojave and Sonoran deserts—flat, barren, monochromatic lands almost completely devoid of color, with little relief save for the occasional dry wash. On weekends we would head out in search of semi-precious stones—moss agates, fire agates, jasper, rhodonite, rhodochrosite, smoky quartz, amethyst, Apache tears, geodes, petrified wood, opal, ulexite, or any of a dozen other stones the local rock club was excited about at the moment. Our destinations were remote sites with names like Saddle Mountain, Old Woman Mountains, Marble Mountains, Cady Mountains, Red Rock Canyon, Last Chance Canyon, Afton Canyon, Wiley Wells, Devils Playground, Rosamond Dry Lake,

Amboy Crater, or *Zzyzx* (so named in 1944 by an industrious promoter to assure it would be the last entry in the telephone book). We would hunt for gems by day and sleep under the stars by night, serenaded by the mournful wails of coyotes and scouted by the occasional furtive fox. In the evenings we would build roaring campfires and grill steaks over the flames. Someone would invariably break out a mandolin or harmonica and we would sing the usual campfire songs. Life was good in the only deserts I knew.

Our trip to Utah was a wondrous experience. This was a desert unlike any I had ever seen. Where I was used to low plains of gravel stretching to the horizon, sparsely populated by a few hardy cactuses and interrupted occasionally by muddy brown hills, here were yawning chasms and towering buttes in a rainbow of colors. I realized for the first time the deserts I knew from my youth were lowly backwater deserts, the low-rent districts of the kind. This was like a visit to Metropolis, with as much to see as on a stroll down Broadway. The cactuses were still there like vagrants in the shadows, but they were overwhelmed by the mesas and the valleys—nature’s equivalent of skyscraper row. My eyes were as wide as a farmer’s son on his first visit to the big city.

Two weeks were hardly enough to absorb the sights, but with a career to manage and a family to raise, several years passed before I could return. In the interim my career took me on business trips to faraway cities on aircraft flying high above the beckoning landscape six miles below. From their windows I would gaze on convoluted layers of fantastic shapes and dream of when I could return.

Eventually I did. It started with surreptitious side journeys on business trips. When I traveled to Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, or Phoenix for meetings during the week, I would tack on an extra vacation day or two on either side, often saving the company money by flying on off days. By camping out on those days, I had no increased hotel expense. And I could sometimes upgrade my rental car to a 4-wheel-drive SUV through conversations that went something like this:

“Welcome, Mr. Hinch. Thanks for renting from Avertz Rental Cars again. It will be a little while before the micro-mini car your company reserved will be ready for you.”

“I’m in sort of a hurry to get to a meeting a fair drive away. I see that Jeep over there looks ready to go. Can I get that?”

“I’m sorry, that’s not included in your car class. You would have to pay extra for it.”

“That’s too bad. I’ve been thinking about buying a new Jeep just like that, and it would be great to test it out, but my company would never spring for the upgrade.”

“Hmmm. Let me see what I can do... Well, it looks like your car won’t be ready for another twenty minutes. You’re a good customer, so just this once I’ll go ahead and upgrade you at no charge. Please drive it carefully.”

“Of course, and thanks a lot. I’ll be sure to give you a great review in the survey your headquarters sends me.”

These side journeys could only touch the periphery of canyon country, but it was a start. Like an invading army, I attacked from multiple angles. A trip to Phoenix added an overnight stop at the Grand Canyon; Las Vegas included a day trip to Valley of Fire; Salt Lake a weekend in Moab. Such trips could offer only brief glimpses of what wonders lay beyond: hoodoo spires, twisted canyons, gaping arches, secret grottos, variegated layers of sedimentary rocks stretching for miles.

And more: an exotic oversized lizard—the Gila monster—prototype for the dinosaurs of 1950s horror movies, found only at the far west edge of the country. An occasional rattlesnake, content to lurk in the shadows but unafraid to deliver a stereophonic warning should you venture too close. Tarantulas, at times so numerous you could drive across their remains on the highway and seldom touch asphalt.

One morning I left my hotel well before dawn and set out in the dark. Driving on a lonely byway in predawn light I was jolted by a sudden movement in the road ahead. As I braked, two, then four, then eight 4-legged bodies rushed past. Bighorn sheep, as evidenced by the spiral horns arcing gracefully like corkscrews from their heads. By the time I could produce a camera they had bounded halfway up a nearby hill.

I needed more freedom to explore, so I bought a durable 4-wheel-drive Mitsubishi Montero (one of the best off-road 4x4 vehicles, sadly now extinct) and began excursions from California, either on my own or with like-minded photographers. As I explored, I came to realize slickrock

country is hardly a uniform landscape. The Grand Canyon is as different from Capitol Reef as New York is from New Orleans. A trip through the Escalante canyons traverses a different world from Bryce Canyon. There is much to discover, and even after nearly forty years I have not seen it all. Nowhere near all. But I have plans. It is good to have plans.

