
Stop 18. Canyon De Chelly

Arrival datetime: Monday, April 29, 5:30PM
Sites visited: Ship Rock, Four Corners National Monument, Canyon De Chelly National Monument
Accommodations: Thunderbird Lodge
States traveled: New Mexico, Arizona

On the way out of town we stopped at a liquor store to buy Gruet Champagne. Our tour guide the day before had said it was a local brand but an international award-winner. Once on the highway, we found that the local custom is that the car coming onto the highway does not care if there are any cars already on the highway, so we have to stay in the left lane. We took El Camino Real National Scenic byway north to Ship Rock. Our guide from the previous day had told us not to take this route, that Ship Rock and the Four Corners monument would not be worth the extra miles, but we looked at the map and the amount of time we had at Canyon De Chelly and did it anyway.

It turned out our guide was probably right, but we had to have the experience. There was no sign or activity to highlight Ship Rock. We passed the town of Ship Rock and saw the actual rock in the distance. But no road sign showed us the way there. The foreground vegetation was mostly dusty farmland as we approached it. Ship Rock itself was a homogeneously colored rust rock formation with one long high cliff on the left, followed by two very high peaks jutting hundreds of feet straight up from the desert floor, with several distinct

lower peaks trailing off to the dry grass on the desert floor. We finally pulled off the highway onto a dirt road that appeared to head in the right direction. We passed small ranch-style, prefabricated houses here and there. We got close enough to get a picture of Ship Rock that was clear of telephone and electric lines, about three miles off the highway. Then we headed back.



Our closest view of ShipRock.

Four Corners, in contrast, has road signs from 150 miles away. The monument itself is a concrete slab with metal inlays

showing the spot where the states meet, and the seal of each state in its corresponding quadrant. A small platform overlooked the monument so one could get a photo that contained the whole slab. That was the extent of the Four Corners Monument that is maintained by the Bureau of Land Management. There was no park literature, no booklets on the geology, wildlife, or trees, much less a nature walk. The only information we got on the site was on the monument itself, where plaques hinted at a story of the border disputes between the states that had made the very prominent marker a necessity.

The Navajos run the visitor site. Our National Park Service Pass did not get us in, we paid \$2 a person at a sagging 4x4 shed of a guard station. From there, we drove a few hundred yards to what looked like a flea market. Lean-tos encircled the concrete monument. Card tables, benches, or blankets within them displayed turquoise and silver, stone beads, pottery, knickknacks and various types of weaving. Jennifer went to the bathroom that turned out to be 2 Porto Potties filled almost to the top with human waste. It was so smelly she came out before finishing zipping her fly. The Visitors Center was just another jewelry vendor. We were disgusted and purposely boycotted the vendors. We figured that with all the money from the casinos they could figure out how to get plumbing into the monument site. From the number of tourists there, it seemed they could pay for the septic system and plumbing with just a few weeks worth of visitors' fees.

On the positive side of taking the long route, the whole drive was very scenic. We started out with desert in the



Four Corners National Monument, the point where Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona meet.

foreground and low-lying mesas in the distance. The desert floor was sparsely covered with low green vegetation that grew blurrier with distance as it blended into the base of the mountains. Then we saw sandy buttes of assorted shapes and size, the erosion obvious in the horizontal stripes of different brown and orange colors. Each horizontal stripe was of a different color brown and would jut out from the cliff face or be recessed, adding a spatial and shadow dimension to the color. The last stripe would end in the same blur of green vegetation as the distant mountains.

With a couple of striking exceptions, the buttes became more rounded and more uniformly rust colored as we continued toward Canyon De Chelly. We also saw a williwaw, a tornado-like mist of sand about 40 feet high, twirling vertically, and moving very deliberately across the valley at about 5 mph. We stopped a lot to take pictures. At one such stop, a man came up to us and in broken English asked us for a ride to the next town. Michael was about to say, no, our car is full. But Jennifer saw a truck with a woman and child in it, so decided it was safe enough

and made space for the man to sit in the back seat. The man was a welder who traveled from town to town working at nuclear power plants. He was home visiting his mother in the poorest little desert town we could imagine. It was two miles off the highway, but looked like a third world country. We dropped him at a gas station, telling him we needed gas ourselves anyway.

We arrived at Canyon De Chelly too late for the Visitors Center but walked the nature trail. We were by now educated enough to name many of the plants even without the guidebook: yucca, juniper, and prickly-pear cactus.... We were a bit concerned that we had taken an out of the way route to visit this place that was popular for cliff dwellings and we had seen our share of Anasazi cliff dwellings already. Though the literature on Gila Cliff Dwellings only conjectured that the occupants might have been Anasazi, we had seen enough to doubt that any researcher would be able to tell the difference. We certainly could not.

We drove out to an overlook for sunset and were immediately relieved. We looked 600 feet down supposedly at cliff dwellings that we could not see. What we did see were rock formations in the form of tall cliffs and spiral-looking buttes. Chunks of deep pink rock on the canyon floor testified both to the strength of the rock walls and to the sand and water erosion that carved the canyon. In some cases, the chunks were obviously fallen from high cliffs above, where similar shaped gouges revealed lighter colors where the fallen rock had been. In other cases, the chunks were small buttes of their own right, standing only a hundred or so feet high.

Our tour the next day was on a four-wheel drive vehicle about 12 feet wide and 20 feet long. It was shaped like an army personnel carrier, but with no green canvas cover, instead with two levels of leaf springs that held a platform, seating 24, all facing front. Three of these vehicles with 15-18 people took off for an all day tour at 9:00AM. As the front was taken, we sat in the back, figuring to get unobstructed views. Bad choice, as there was no bad view on the platform and we were tossed sometimes 8 inches in the air as we navigated the wet sandy floor of Canyon De Chelly. The ruts in the sand were often a foot deep and we crossed several streams that were sometimes 3 feet deep. Winds gusted to thirty knots and shifted continuously, sand blasting straight into our faces one minute, and the next at our backs, and we used a blanket on our seat to shield our faces from the worst of the sandblasting. Relief came occasionally when we drove through awnings of cotton wood trees.

The pink rock we had seen at sunset was today a sandy brown. Our guide pointed out cliff dwellings here and there in recessed layers, but the main attraction was the geology itself. Some Canyon walls seemed scooped out like ice cream, some were sheer and flat, with thin slivers that broke from their surface, shattered in small piles of rubble at their feet.

Some of our rests stops were at places where there were cliff dwellings and also Navajo flea markets, about ten tables of various arts and crafts. Jennifer bought a smooth green arrow pendant for ten dollars. The Navajo wanted to demonstrate how the leather chain was



Anasazi (Navajo for "ancient enemy") ruins in Canyon De Chelly.

adjustable, but as Jennifer had no intention of wearing it on the strap it came with, we did not listen to the explanation. Again, some of the rest rooms were Porto Potties, though not in as bad condition as the one at four corners. The guide explained that the tour services at our Lodge maintained them. Those, we unlocked when we arrived and locked them when we left. The others, run by the Navajo, were outhouses. Again, the Casino money would come in handy here.

We traveled almost to the end of both legs of the Canyon, the Canyon De Muerto and Canyon De Chelly. We were surrounded by high walls, some of which jutted back into the canyon in sharp peaks, and some of which faded into the horizon. We saw the "Window," a natural arch high up in a

cliff. We saw a several rock columns several hundred feet high but only tens of feet in diameter. One of these had a cliff dwelling at its base. In this cliff dwelling, once lived a Hopi woman who taught the Navajo how to weave. For this they called her Spider, and so now the column is called Spider Rock.

With four breaks of 15-20 minutes and one 45 minute lunch stop in sandy gusts, the bumpy sandy ride continued from 9:20AM until 5:15PM. Both of us lost our baseball caps, but the guide had made it clear he did not stop for such nonsense. Jennifer's was just a plain white one, but Michael's was from Denali and he was upset at the missing sentimental value. To our great surprise, one of the guides on



The Window and Spider Rock.



another vehicle had picked it up for him. So we tipped him \$5.

At one point, one of the trailing vehicles got stuck in a stream, and our guide had to make a U-turn to go back and haul him out. But we were by then 5 minutes away and the trailing truck managed to pull itself out before we got there. It was coming forward on the jeep trail and we almost had a head on collision. The guides took an unscheduled break after that. We were glad to be back in our room, showering the sand out of our hair and raw faces. We were too tired to pursue our plan of looking for a decent restaurant. The brochure had called our

cafeteria “an excellent restaurant.” But the few made-to-order menu items were not better than the steam-table fare. We ordered safe, and our meal was perfectly edible.

We lingered in the morning while Jennifer answered lots of work email, until the Visitors Center opened in order to stopped there on our way out. It had lots of illustrations that gave us an appreciation for the cultures that had used the Canyon. We also picked up a canyon map and guide that would have been useful on the tour. Maybe it will help us remember where we were when we took the pictures.

Miles traveled: 394
Departure datetime: Wednesday, May 1, 9:40AM
Departure weather: 56° Sunny and Windy