
Stop 19. Moab

Arrival datetime: Wednesday, May 1, 5:30PM
Sites visited: Arches National Park, Canyonlands National Park
Accommodations: Gonzo Inn
States traveled: Arizona, Utah

We retraced our steps for about 100 miles on 191 in Arizona, seeing the same beautiful rust-colored formations we had seen on the way down to Canyon De Chelly. Once in Utah, the most unusual of these had names displayed on road signs. We first passed Church Rock. It looked like a sand and rust-colored beehive. Michael immediately recognized that this was the sketch on the Utah State highway signs.



Church Rock.

Next, we passed Wilson Arch. It was a window in a 10-foot solid wall of sandstone that was 30-40 feet high, and more than twice as long. It was about 300 yards from the road, and a very steep hike led to it. Very excited to be in Arch country, Jennifer scrambled right up to the base without stopping. Michael followed and we were both out of breath but in awe

of the view of dusty sand, rust, and still very green landscape framed by the arch on either side. Snow covered mountains in the distance added to the aura of wonder created by the sandstone formations.



Jennifer under Wilson Arch.

The views on the drive were just teasers leading up to the views at Arches National Park. The quantity and aesthetic quality of the arches at the park far surpassed any expectation set by the drive. The Wilson arch was sturdy, thick, and isolated. The surrounding landscape sported occasional rectangular rust-colored cliffs and distance mountain views. The arches at Arches National Park were scattered throughout patches of ridges of varying thickness. Startling white stark tips of mountains glittered on the horizon, below them, rich green foliage and brocades of purple and blue.

Various pamphlets and signs explained that the ridges were horizontal layers of sandstone and salt, and the mountains themselves were once under these sandstone layers. The topmost layers of the sandstone had been tipped to the side by geologic forces and pounded by wind and water. These natural forces exposed the mountains. In the sandstone and salt that remained in the valleys, much of the salt had eroded away, leaving the sandstone in horizontal stretches, separated by as much as 1000 feet where salt used to be. Continuing erosion by wind and water created indentations in the rock, and many middle pieces fell away to create arches. Eventually, the top of the arch would fall as well, leaving the standing columns with which we had already become quite familiar from our drive through Arizona.

Short hikes leading to viewpoints and arch bases all featured rocks in various stages of erosion. Many had patterns of lighter browns, grays, and whites, making it easy to see where the potential for erosion lay in the layers that still stood solid. Long-standing formations were darkened with mineral stains left from water runoff. This allowed us to easily pick out places where huge slabs and boulders had fallen from arch sides

or split off standing columns. From the deep cracks and precariously balanced slabs, it was also easy to see where the next piece was likely to fall.

We took pictures of the arches and various views of the mountains, and former or future arches that framed them, or were framed by them. We hiked through formations called the North and South Windows, the Turret Arch, the Landscape Arch, the Tunnel Arch, the Pine Tree Arch and the Delicate Arch.

Many of the names were self-explanatory. But we later learned that the Landscape Arch had originally been called the Delicate Arch and visa versa, until a mistake on a map by the U.S. Geological Survey stuck. This made sense as Landscape Arch was extremely delicate and Delicate Arch looks like a lawn ornament.

We had dinner in the house of a former Uranium miner, converted to a restaurant that overlooked Moab. Then menu was good, though all the dishes were salty, again a case of a good chef designing the menu and a poor executioner. The great view compensated.



Delicate Arch.



Arches National Park: North and South Windows.



Landscape Arch.

The next day, we were up at 7:00AM for a combination mountain bike, Colorado River boat tour. We were to be driven to Canyonlands National Park, then we would bike down a canyon trail that was advertised to be “excellent for a person

with average mountain biking ability.” Next, we would be met with lunch at the bottom and picked up by a jet boat that would take us on a geology and history tour of the Colorado River. It was a 20-mile downhill bike ride and we wondered why they made us leave so early, but we figured that they had to assume people were in very bad shape and may be unable to keep up a 5 mph average. We expected to do at least 10.

We were late and Michael and the driver, Mike, fussed over getting our rented bikes in a trailer. For the third time since she confirmed the reservation the previous day, Jennifer asked at the office whether they were confident that the water level of the river was high enough to make the jet



Canyonlands National Park: View of the long ride down Shafer Canyon.

boat trip feasible. She was reassured that it was.

Though it was slightly out of our way to the trailhead, we asked the driver to stop at the Canyonlands Visitor Center so we could get a Park map. We went to the rest room. We started down Shafer Trail Road at about 8:45AM.

Immediately, we recognized that the ride would not be easy. The 20-30 degree downhill slope was less than 10 feet wide in some places and was carved out of a cliff that dropped thousands of feet to the canyon floor below. It was littered with rocks from three inches to a foot long in various shapes and sharp edges. The only other time we had been on mountain bikes was in Block Island, RI, where the only hazard had been an occasional dirt road with deep ruts and potholes.

We stopped a lot to take pictures of the valley. The La Sal Mountains in the distance topped a rainbow view of endless ridges. They were layers with many more colors than we had previously seen in sandy cliffs. In addition to rust, gray, sand, and white, there was magenta, deep gold, pink, rose, moss green, dark purple, and orange. Dark green bushes were strewn on the valley floors and climbed up the sloping bases of the cliffs. From some spots, we could also see the mud green of the river at the canyon floor.

We made extremely slow progress but persevered, learned to trust our breaks, and tried to navigate slowly enough so that a fall would not be life threatening. Where the slope was over 25 degrees or so, we walked. For a short time, we thought that the rocks and ruts might actually continue for the entire trail, and



Michael rests on the rugged trail.

fear set in. Then we were comforted by a view in the distance of a flat road and by the map showing that the flat appeared to continue until we were just 3-4 miles from end, where another downhill led to the river, at Lathrop Canyon.



Looking down Shafer Canyon.

We were cognizant of our 5 mph target, so we tried to coast when we could. It was on one of these efforts that Jennifer fell. A short while later, Michael fell. Jennifer had a black and blue calf. Michael had a

scraped elbow. We walked most of the rest of the way down Shafer Canyon.

The flat turned out to have a lot of long uphill slopes. We proceeded slowly and carefully, as the trail was still littered with rocks. We got good at hopping off the bike, walking through dangerous stretches, then hopping back on. We drank a lot of water. We stopped a lot to take pictures. We once walked toward a sign that promised an overlook of the Colorado River, but it turned out to be too far away to walk and we did not want to bike ride any further than we had to.

We stopped at an overlook for Musselman Arch. Jennifer saw a window arch about a quarter mile away and went to the very edge of the cliff to get a closer picture of it. Michael kept warning her away from the edge of the cliff, and got close enough himself to see a 2 foot wide, 20 or 30 foot long bridge separated from the side of the cliff by 4 or 5 feet. Jennifer was on one edge of it. Michael realized that Jennifer was actually standing on the edge of Musselman Arch. It was not in the distance but under our feet.

Jennifer checked the maps and discovered that at our current speed, we were in serious danger of missing our 1:30PM boat. We had not brought any food and worried that lunch would be a problem if we had to find alternative means up the trail. We rode as fast as we could along the relatively flat dirt road of the White Rim Trail. At the beginning, the trail was mostly flat, and its hazards were easily avoidable. There were long stretches of flat rock with ridges that raised or lowered the trail by 2-8 inches, and we soared over them. We lifted ourselves off our seats and stood on our pedals over the roughest



Michael fixes Jennifer's chain.

of rock, and made up a lot of time. We started to feel very confident.

Then Jennifer's chain came off. Michael was so far away she had to shout "STOP" at the top of her lungs to get his attention. He came back even faster than he had gone out. He turned over the bike and had the chain back on in a few minutes. But Jennifer was afraid of shifting from then on and it cost some time on the uphills.

Then the trail again became a 10-foot ledge cut into a 1000-foot cliff. We still had to stop and walk on the very steep parts, but there were fewer of them. The views were still magnificent. Though there were no signs, we figured the rock

formations had to be named. One looked like the Parthenon, another like a Courthouse. We took pictures when we stopped, and tried not to think about how late we were.

The next road mark was the top of Lathrop Canyon. We reached it at 12:40PM and headed straight in. A sign had said it was 4 miles to the river. We made a valiant effort to coast over the huge jagged rocks, but first 200 yards were completely impassable. We walked our bikes as fast as we could, knowing it was not 4 mph. We then skittered over pebbly and sandy surfaces where the pebbles could be 5 inches in diameter and the sand could be four inches deep, but we stayed on our bikes. Cottonwood

trees and other low-lying vegetation appeared. We had reached the bottom of the canyon and could smell the river. Then the thickness of the sand increased and stopped our tires. Michael fell. But at least the surface was sand and not as hard or scary as the ledge had been above. We repeated the routine we had learned on the ledge, hopping off when we had to and hopping back on.

After 10 minutes of plowing hard through sand, Jennifer realized that Michael was very far behind her. She stopped and he did not catch up. After a full minute of drinking water and worrying, she started walking back through the sand. She saw him up a slope a quarter mile back, still upright. She decided that her lighter bike and frame was easier to plow through the sand, and she had just better get to the boat and let them know that Michael was right behind her.

Jennifer made the rendezvous point at 1:28PM. There was a group of 10-12 people milling about two jeep touring cars. She let her bike fall on a tree next to them and approached a guide she had seen in the tour office in the morning. "Where's the boat?" she asked.

"The boat got stuck. It is not coming. You'll be driving back."

Jennifer took this in. She looked around. It was a clearing the size of a basketball court, with what looked like a camping area to one side, picnic tables on the other. Set back in the brush was a pit toilet. The clearing was framed by cottonwood trees, and a few types of pretty bushes, one with purple flowers. A few cottonwood trees shaded the picnic tables. There was nothing on the picnic tables. "Where's

lunch?" she asked. The guide looked exasperated.

"You were expecting lunch from Outback Tours?"

"Yes."

"Well, what time were you supposed to be down here?"

"The only thing I was told was to be here before 1:30 because that is when the boat left."

Jennifer suspected that lunch was already cleaned up and put away and he did not feel like getting it back out. The guide looked at his watch, grudgingly admitting, "It's 1:30."

"How long will it take to drive us back?"

"Two hours."

"We have to have lunch."

The guide walked away toward a path that Jennifer saw led to the river. She looked up the path opposite the clearing, for that was where she had come in and she hoped to see Michael. He was not there. She took a few steps after the guide. She saw a boat on the water. "What boat is that?" she asked.

"Not ours," the guide answered.

Jennifer stood in the middle of the clearing, looking up one path for Michael and the other for the guide. Just as she saw Michael's bike emerge on one, the guide beckoned her down the other.

"Where's the boat?" Michael called.

"No boat and no lunch," Jennifer replied, "Put your bike on a tree, the guide is

beckoning us down here.” She headed down the path.

The guide pointed to a cooler on the 20-foot flat-bottomed, shaded powerboat pulled up on the muddy riverbank. With cryptic, taciturn conversation, we were given to believe that the food in the cooler was on its way to the “stuck” boat, which had no passengers, just crew left on it, so we may as well eat some of the food, and could take what we wanted. But we had to do it fast because the boat was leaving. Jennifer shouted for Michael and dove into the cooler. She first got out bread, but there were no cold cuts or anything else in the cooler but a guacamole and bean salad. She found some wraps, and as there were no utensils in evidence, used her hands to turn the salad into a few cold veggie burritos. We took them up to the picnic area. The guide told us that a car was being sent for us and the party in the two jeeps took off, leaving us alone.

We ate our lunch and popped some ibuprofen. We went to the river and took some pictures. Our first visitors were three mountain bikers who had biked down from a campsite. They were very experienced bikers, men in their thirties in great shape, had all the best gear, yet one of them admitted to Michael that he had bitten off more than he could chew with the Lathrop Canyon trail and was very worried about the trip back up. That made us feel better about our performance and made us all the more annoyed at the tour company for misleading with the “excellent for a person with average mountain biking ability” line.

After another hour or so, we heard a motor, but it was a motorcycle. The motorcycle man walked down to the river. We expressed our amazement that he got his bike down the trail. He said at least he had power, that for him, it was all in the balance. He saw our bikes and warned us that he had just seen three mountain bikers heading uphill with their bikes on their backs. We admitted that we were being driven up.



We eat lunch and wait for our ride back up.

Two more motorcyclists followed. They chatted for a bit about how rough the trail was and how dangerous it had been. They looked at the water. Then they wished us luck and headed back up, staggering their reentry to the trail. After the first one left, the second interpreted his gunning motor noises in the distance as a sign that he had gone over. Their motors teased us for another twenty minutes as they tried to get up the canyon and we strained for the sound of a jeep.

A few rafters and kayakers arrived by way of the river to use the pit toilet. How they knew how to find the clearing was not obvious to us, as there seemed to be no sign from the water. They did not chat, except to refuse Jennifer’s offer to trade the bikes for the kayaks.

It was after 3:30PM. The guide had said it would take two hours to drive up. But he said nothing of when the transport had left or how long it would take them to drive down. We had figured if it takes two hours to drive up, it had to take less to drive down. So we had thought to have transportation by 3:00PM at the latest, maybe 3:30. Between 3 and 3:30PM, Jennifer changed to some long pants she had with her. We surveyed the contents of our knapsacks to see how much longer we could survive. We had only a cup of water left. We had both brought sweatshirts and long pants, but no food. And even if we survived the night, there was no way we would be strong enough on one cup of water and empty stomachs to make the 20 mile journey back up in one day.

The next visitors were two more mountain bikers. Again, we told our story. We must have seemed worried at this point because they offered to share their campground with us. They told us how to get there. As we chatted, a vehicle entered the clearing. It was a family of campers, come down to enjoy the river. The two mountain bikers strolled down to the river after them. One of them came back and told us that they had explained our plight, and the family had volunteered to take us and our bikes out of the canyon. We thanked them profusely.

Just as the mountain bikers were taking off, our transport arrived. It was the same 4-wheel drive, 9 person SUV that had taken us out in the morning, with the trailer. Michael and Mike (the driver) spent at least 15 minutes taking the wheels off the bikes and securing them to the trailer with padding and shock cords. We took off at about 4:15PM.

Mike admitted he had never driven the canyon before, but he was told that the car had. It seemed doubtful from the trouble we had getting out of Lanthrop canyon. The SUV was fine on the flat sand, but it shook and tilted as it attempted to ascend the narrow ledge of rocky, sandy trail. At one steep curve with jagged rock and 8 inch deep sand, we had to back up and make a second try. It was very clear that ascending the canyon would require not only the driver's skill, but a tangible quantity of luck as well. Michael's eyes darted from the cliff to the bikes and back. Jennifer tried to enjoy the views.

By the time we reached the top of Lathrop Canyon, the bikes had jumped their shock cords. Michael persuaded Mike to put them in the back of the SUV. He readily agreed and blamed the trailer idea on his boss at the tour company. We figured they had not wanted to get sand in the clean, cushiony, passenger portion of the vehicle.

From then on, Michael sat in the front to be as helpful as possible to Mike. We navigated the rocky plains easily, and soon we were on the White Rim Trail. In Lathrop Canyon, the drop off from the ledge trail had been a few hundred feet. On the White Rim, it was a few thousand. The views were just as gorgeous as they had been in the morning, perhaps even more so as the afternoon sun lit the rainbow cliffs and radiated the colors. Jennifer handed Michael the camera to take pictures. Mike offered to stop, but we did not want him even to pause. The SUV leaned from side to side as he carefully chose where to place his tires so as not to have one accidentally slip over the edge. The trail had actually been easier to navigate with a mountain bike,

which only required 5 inches of smooth trail. Jennifer had concentrated hard on the distant landscape so did not observe the moment when the danger was passed, but it was called to her attention when Michael and Mike simultaneously let out audible sighs of relief.



View from the SUV window.

We had a brief respite while Mike easily navigated downhill over what had been our tortuous, unrelenting uphill slope. Then we had more sheer cliffs as we ascended Shafer Canyon. The switchbacks did not have the turn span required for our luxury SUV with trailer. The driver often had to press one tire up the embankment to widen the trail. Jennifer moved from side to side in the back seat to put more weight on the mountain side of the vehicle.

By the time we hit the highway, we had bonded with Mike, the driver, as only those can who have together lived through a death-defying experience. It also helped that his name was really Michael. Though he was not a tour guide, he amused us with trivia and stories about the area. For example, he let us know that the deep purple rock we had been admiring was uranium ore. He told us that the locals called the La Sal

Mountains “storm catchers” because of the way the clouds sit on top of them. And of course, like every other guide we had, he let us know that we had “just missed” being here for something very beautiful. In this case, it was cactus flowers, which would blossom all over the desert within a week or so.

Jennifer told him that this was one of the few National Parks whose brochures did not carry warnings about running from beasts of prey like bears and mountain lions. National Park Rangers that expect you to see such animals always tell you never to run from them because it brings out their predator instincts and they think you are prey and chase you. Mountain bikers would look like prey in those parks so they come here where there are no bear or mountain lions. Mike laughed at this and told us a story of how the National Park Service had relocated bears that were a danger to humans from Yosemite to a ledge above the Green River not too far from where we were. He, as a rafting guide, took campers on trips down the river. When the weather gets dry, the bears come down to the river looking for water. The Park Service did nothing when it was first reported that they were creating a danger to unsuspecting rafters, but some River Guide professional organization had taken up the cause for them and had gotten the relocation program stopped.

We told him how one of the mountain bikers had called Moab “the mountain bike capital of the world.” He said there were a few towns in Colorado and California that would disagree with that. We arrived back in Moab at 6:30PM or so. We got a little over 60% of our tour fee refunded. We recharged the

ibuprofen, soaked in the hot tub at the Gonzo Inn, and ate quickly at the Moab Brewery, where the food was good, though all the dishes were still too spicy,

and cold air rushed in every time a waiter served people on the 40° patio. We went early to bed.

Miles traveled: 277
Departure datetime: Friday, May 3, 9:30AM
Departure weather: 62° Sunny