
Stop 22. Zion Canyon

Arrival datetime: Tuesday, May 7, 4:00PM
Sites visited: Zion Canyon National Park
Accommodations: Zion Lodge
States traveled: Utah

We passed the same striking Red Canyon on the way out of Bryce that had so impressed us on the way in. But its foreshadow effect had been supplanted by the real thing and the hoodoos seemed few and far between. We stopped at a rock shop and bought some souvenirs of red and white rock. Though there were some plateaus in the distance, the drive between Bryce and Zion hinted no more of the grandiose canyons. The hills were low and covered with small brush. The wealth of vegetation meant to us that it cannot be called desert, but the land did not look hospitable.

Entering Zion, the first thing we noticed was the road. It was red. Red dirt lined it on either side. We could not tell whether the dirt had spilled over onto macadam and colored it, or whether the local construction crews had somehow incorporated some of the local rock into their road building materials.

We stopped at our first chance to hike, a one-mile roundtrip to an overlook of the "Lower Canyon." Steep steps led from the road to a dusty red trail. The trail hugged a cliff wall on one side and offered handrails against the cliff drop on the other. Here and there a clearing offered examples of desert plants that corresponded to drawings in the pamphlet for which we had paid 50 cents at the

start. The trail passed a grotto, a cavernous clearing in the cliff wall that our pamphlet said was formed by water seeping through the sandstone and encountering slate. The slate kept the water from proceeding down, so it proceeded out to the cliff wall, taking the sandstone with it and forming a steady stream of water to support ferns and flowers.

At the top of the trail was a V-shaped view of the road into Zion. We were only mildly distracted by a family eating lunch and letting a three year old get dangerously close to the edge. The V-shaped view at Zion framed sheer cliff faces at many angles. As we entered the Canyon from the East, the cliffs were mostly white, with rust reds and yellow highlights. Looking west from the overlook, the first few thousand feet of all the cliffs were dark rusty red. If cliffs were higher than that, the tops were white. A few cliffs were so high as to merit another layer of color on top of the white, a deep brownish red. The tops of all types of cliffs were dotted with very straight trees. Each branch was outlined against the sky. That this was the view from so great a distance implied that the trees were very tall, with branches that were very thick, though very far apart.



View of the road into Zion from the East .

Some of the cliffs were square at the top. Some rounded into cone shapes. Some jutted skyward in uneven triangular ridges. It was easy to imagine this sharp-looking sandstone piercing the earth surface from beneath layers of the limestone we had seen at Bryce. Rugged, randomly chiseled cuts in the surface and loose rock scattered by the side of the highway made us realize the chiseling was in progress.

The colors did not flow smoothly into each other down gentle slopes as in the limestone at Bryce. The sides of the Zion cliffs were chipped and flaky. Horizontal color changes were clearly defined in the rock layers and in sharp contrast to the layer below. Long strips of vertical color seeped down the flatter surfaces of the cliffs, as in the bold brushstrokes of modern art. These were

both dark and light, white and black, the shades in between from light gray to an intense dark midnight blue.

The red road actually went through some of the cliffs. Several hundred feet of tunnels allowed us to see the cliffs from the inside out. The chiseling on the inside seemed no different than the chiseling on the outside. The arc shape of the tunnel was repeated here and there on external cliff walls.

We went to the Visitors Center and got a copy of the schedule of Ranger programs. We also needed a special permit to drive into the park as far as the lodge. Staying at the Zion Lodge allowed us on the road that was mostly occupied by shuttle buses. We tried to stop at a series of three of the jutting type of cliffs named for Isaiah and his two sons, the Court of the Patriarchs, but there were no parking spaces. We stopped in the shuttle bus stop, but a driver warned us away, saying we would be towed and fined. So Michael waited in the car while Jennifer ran up to the Overlook, took a picture, and decided whether it was worth coming back on the bus after getting to the lodge.

The lodge was set deep in a lush green valley. There was even grass on the ground, the first we'd seen since the Natchez Trace. Little white puffs of cottony fluff floated everywhere, catching and reflecting sunlight or fading into the shadows. The white fluff clumped in the corners of the sidewalks and danced across the lawn. We later found out it was cotton from the cottonwood trees, which were superabundant in the valley.

We hiked to Emerald Pools, a half-mile trail to a cavernous clearing under a cliff as in our Lower Canyon hike. But rather than a trickle of drops along the wall, real waterfalls flowed steadily from the top of grottos. Ferns grew out from the cliff walls.

One goal of our stay at Zion was to hike Angel's Landing. In 1989, we had taken our first real vacation together. We had flown into Las Vegas and driven to the Lake Meade, Grand Canyon, Sunset Crater, the Petrified Forest, and Zion. We had made the attempt to hike Angel's Landing then. Michael made it to the top. Jennifer ended up waiting at Scout's Lookout. We knew this time would be different. Jennifer was in much better hiking shape (she never used to wear a backpack), and was intent on conquering her fear of heights.

First thing in the morning, we pursued our goal. The beginning was an easy stroll through sandy brush. The middle stretch was a series of switchbacks cut straight up the side of the cliff (called Walter's Wiggles for the Park manager who supervised the construction). This had been Jennifer's first point of failure on the previous attempt, and she made it through without serious pause. The first serious pause on this attempt came with the first chain. From Scout's Lookout on, the path was so steep and dangerous that the park service had installed two-inch thick chain link hand holds. These did not extend continuously for the remainder of the hike, but were interrupted in the "less dangerous" places, such as a 5 to 10 foot wide rocky stretch where footing was relatively easy but 1000-foot cliffs fell away on either side.

One of these breaks in the chain followed a chained-in 2-foot ledge, leaving a 3-foot stretch that required a hand over foot climb to the "easy" footing area. Jennifer stopped. We sat on a 1 cubic foot jagged pedestal and discussed how to turn around and get back. The way back seemed just as daunting.

It helped that Jennifer had already bought some postcards of Angel's Landing, intending to send one to her sister, who had made fun of her for not making it the last time. She also had promised herself a T-Shirt if she made it. She contemplated throwing out the postcard or sending it with no mention of whether or not she made it, but abandoned both ideas. After 10 minutes of internal debate, she felt much more comfortable on the ledge and was able to continue. She followed Michael and concentrated on his footsteps, not looking up or even from side to side. The way was slow and methodical by necessity. The trail was crowded and we often had to wait for others to pass a particularly narrow stretch before continuing.

We got to the top of the 2 ½ mile trail in 2 ½ hours. There was only one couple at the top. The man offered to take our picture. He said that the people leaving as they arrived had done the same for them. So we have a picture of us at the top, but he did not capture the depth of the view. Out to the side, the backdrop is just another red or white cliff. But looking down, there are layers of color in each of a hundred cliffs. Those to the south fanned out to an ever-expanding stretch of sky. Those to the north moved progressively closer together until you could no longer distinguish between them. At the base was the lush green valley with a winding



View along the hike to Emerald Pools.



Jennifer at the top of Angel's Landing Trail, view is to the south.

river glistening and weaving its way through the green cottonwood center. We could see our lodge, a few tiny brown rooftops peaking out through the cottonwood treetops.

We tried to capture it all with photos, knowing that the scene was impossible to convey in two dimensions. We broke out our lunch. We chose a lunch rock that was very large and stable. But after two bites, Jennifer realized that there was nothing in the view past her feet but the floor of the valley. She practically inhaled her sandwich, then announced that cookies and apples would have to wait, and waited for Michael to finish his sandwich so we could start down. Luckily, the way down was uneventful, another slow and deliberate step by step,

hand over chain, following in Michael's footsteps.

We got back just in time for a Ranger Geology Talk on the Zion Lodge Lawn. We sat on the grass in front of the Ranger's pedestal of diagrams. The Ranger was in training so the talk was not as good as the one at Bryce, but we got the general idea that the rock around Zion was sedimentary, one layer down and much harder than the upper layer of limestone at Bryce. Sand had been deposited by oceans and lakes. It hardened via a process called lithification. Then there were the continental shelves forcing uplift and the cliffs sprang up like ice cubes jumping out of a tray.



View of the Angel's Landing Trail.



View looking north from the top of Angel's Landing Trail.

We celebrated our successful hike with ice cream from the snack bar. We bought the T-Shirts that say “Angel’s Landing.” We sent the postcards. We got on the park shuttle and did a mile loop to yet another grotto, Weeping Rock. We rode the rest of the shuttle but did not get off. We rested till dinner and afterward, went to another Ranger talk at the Zion Lodge.

This talk featured a Ranger “emeritus” who was answering trivia questions as we came in. “What are the tiny orange birds with black heads?” “Why are the chipmunks so aggressive?” “Did I see a beaver damn in the river?” He answered all questions authoritatively, then began his talk, which was actually some audiotapes. One told the story of the discovery of the canyon by Mormon pioneers in the words of the mother of the first discoverer. Another quoted newspaper interviews of people who had been in Zion Canyon during a 1961 flash flood. The Ranger showed lots of pictures of the Canyon to illustrate the points the tapes were making about how people used the Canyon over the years. We came away with the general impression that it had always been a nice place to visit, but the weather is something not to be ignored.

Still trying to get practice before the Grand Canyon, we had scheduled a morning horseback ride to the Three Patriarchs. Almost as soon as we started, our guide’s horse was spooked and bucked on him, but he stayed in control. He pointed out some mountain lion tracks, and explained that you almost never see a mountain lion, but the horses can tell when they are in the area. We froze, but he calmly continued riding and giving names to some of the flora

surrounding us. Manzanita was a bush with deep red branches and little green leaves. Blue sagebrush was a scraggly aqua colored bush that looked like tumbleweed. The prickly pear cactus here had big pink rose-like flowers on it. Small, straggly looking varieties of oak and maple made us feel right at home. Our guide, as all local people here, kept referring to the environment as desert, but given the lush vegetation and large oak and pine trees, plus the possibility of seeing a mountain lion, it did not look like desert to us at all.

However, we knew we were in drought conditions. After horseback riding, we took the shuttle to “Big Bend.” We had decided to hike along the river up to the point of the canyon where the walls come together with only the river between them. We had read it was possible to hike up the river and have nice views of narrow cliffs on either side. The trail started about four feet higher than the river.

Just before we started to hike along the river, Jennifer bent to retie her hiking boot. A full bottle of water slipped out of her backpack and plunged over the four-foot cliff directly into the river. The river was running in the opposite direction from our hike, taking our water bottle with it. Michael ran after it, but each time he tried to reach for it, it eluded his grasp. Jennifer tried to find a large branch to hand him, but he was getting too far down the river, so she had to stop and run to catch up. It became apparent that the water bottle was drifting out to the middle of the river so any serious attempt to retrieve it would have us walking in the river. Jennifer stopped to take off her boots. But by the time they

were off, the bottle was too far downstream for her to walk through the river to catch it. Michael continued to follow it from the shoreline while Jennifer tiptoed along the side, looking for an opportunity where the bottle might be held up by a rapid in order to let her wade out and retrieve it. When Michael was immersed in too much brush for Jennifer to follow barefoot, we had to end pursuit. We felt terrible about polluting the river, and hope that the bottle would be retrieved by a parched hiker who would appreciate the fresh water it held. Picking her way back to the trail, Jennifer stepped on a cactus. So Michael went all the way back to the bus stop, now over a half mile away, to retrieve her hiking boots.

Between Big Bend and the next bus stop, there was a waterfall called “The Menu,” because it was so beautiful the Lodge Dining room had once had a sketch of it on their menu. “The Menu” had two four to six foot high waterfalls in a cascade, dainty and sparkling. There was rich green moss, wildflowers, and a wooden platform overlook to ensure visitors received the best possible view.

Just prior to reaching the narrowest part of the canyon (called “The Narrows”), there was a paved mile hike to the starting point of the Narrows hike. Figuring we were in a drought, we thought we could avoid walking in actual water and wore our hiking boots rather than our sacrificial river-wading shoes. This was a mistake. The river filled the canyon from one wall to another and our hiking boots would have gotten soaked. So we contented ourselves with the paved hike.

Before dinner, we took some time to select photos and update the web page.

Even though the first page used watercolor versions of the photos, it was still getting very large and taking a long time for some of our less technically rich friends and relatives to load. So Jennifer redesigned the first page. Rather than a list of stops and accompanying small photos, it became a map of the continental United States. Numbers at the geographic location corresponding to each stop were links to the photos we had selected for display. As Jennifer did not normally design web pages, she asked a friend of hers who was a web master to check it out. He said he missed having the list of stops in order, so she added a list of links under the map. There were ten columns of six rows, and three and a half of the columns were already full.

In the evening, we saw another Ranger program at the Lodge. Again, it was a Ranger in training. She told of the “prehistory” of the canyon, which filled the gaps between the ice cube tray story and the story of the Canyon’s discovery by Mormon pioneers. Her delivery was generally dry, but her southern drawl provided some entertainment value. As she showed us prehistoric spearheads, she exclaimed, “Kin y’all imagine tryin’ to bring down a critter as big as a mastodon?”

We got out early to drive out of the East Canyon in the morning light, through the tunnels.

Miles traveled: 92
Departure datetime: Friday, May 10, 7:50AM
Departure weather: 58° Cloudy