
Stop 49. Dinosaur National Monument

Arrival datetime: Tuesday, July 9, 8:00PM
Sites visited: Dinosaur National Monument
Accommodations: The Landmark Inn
States traveled: Wyoming, Utah, Colorado

One of the other Jenny Lake Lodge guests had told us that the most scenic hike in the park was Cascades Canyon. We had gotten close on our horseback ride to Hidden Falls. The Canyon was just over the ridge from the falls. It was possible to cut two miles of the hike either way by driving to the Visitor Center and taking a boat across the Lake. This also minimized the amount of time one would have to walk on a trail shared with horses. Though it was long for a driving morning, we could not resist the description.

Due to Jennifer's answering work email, we got out a bit late and found that each boat took only 20 people, first come, first served. We had to wait through two boats, over twenty minutes, to make the ten minute journey. The views of the mountain from the middle of Jenny Lake were worth the wait. Lush green trees lined the lake and rose a few hundred feet, then the granite snow-dusted mountain peaks loomed for another thousand feet above the treeline.

Once off the boat, we took the trail on the north side of the slope going up to Hidden Falls. It said "horse trail" but we knew it was not the trail our horses had taken. We saw little evidence of horses,

no actual horses, and no actual people either. This surprised us, given the numbers of people on the boat. We had simply taken the least traveled path. Once at the top, we ran into people who had hiked directly passed Hidden Falls on their way into the Canyon.



View from Cascade Canyon Hike.

The Canyon was beautiful. Tall rugged peaks of multiple colors popped through the trees, dark reds, browns, tans, and whites. None had trees, just a bit of snow here and there. We walked on a dirt path, first along a cascading stream at the base of marble and quartzite rockslides. We even saw some huge shiny boulders with specs that looked like fools gold. The rushing water ended at a four-foot waterfall. The water above was calm and green, reflecting the trees and tall grasses around it. We continued

on a dirt path through the trees until it was time to turn around.

The boat captain had said that at 2:00PM the crowds started to form and we may have to wait a half hour to return, so we turned around at 12:30. We hiked the populated way down, as we wanted to pass by Hidden Falls again and Inspiration Point for the first time. Inspiration Point was an outcropping of red rock overlooking Jenny Lake. The rocks under our feet were themselves a great view. The view from the Point was a small representative subset of that from Signal Mountain, lakes, plains, and both close and distant peaks.

We waited another half hour for the boat ride back, then on the road again. We stopped in Jackson Hole for lunch. It was a typical touristy ski town. We rode on to Vernal Utah. While still in Wyoming, we saw farms that appeared to be raising antelope and large birds like ostriches. Then it was obvious we were back in Utah. The red rock and buttes made us think immediately of the southwest. However, there were no very high rugged

mountains, just a few large hills. Also, there were big rivers and dams.

Approaching Flaming Gorge, there were a few half-mile sections of road where all the landscape looked recently burned. Charred trees flaked ash. Throughout our trip, western forest fires had been in the news, but this was the first time we had been so close. We rose in elevation, and the evidence of fire receded. We were high enough in elevation to descend along a road that had 10 180° switchbacks. We descended into a red valley with strip mines leveling the horizontally painted cliffs and a big body of water at the base.

We checked into the Bed and Breakfast recommended by the rafting company we had booked the previous day, the Landmark Inn. We took the hostess' recommendation for a restaurant for dinner, The Curry Inn. It looked like my Grandmother's house in Pennsylvania, filled with antiques with northeastern touches. We figured some pioneer had been homesick. When we got back to the Landmark, we checked voice mail and found our rafting trip had been cancelled due to fires in the area.



Descending into Vernal, Utah.

Our Landmark Inn hostess told us that the launch point into Flaming Gorge had been closed due to fire but was due to reopen that day. We decided not to try to pursue rafting but instead headed to Dinosaur National Monument, where we had intended to go the next day anyway. We had heard that there was a museum in Vernal where an actual dinosaur dig was on display. It turned out to be at the monument as well. Apparently, they had gotten so many of the same bones from this one dig site that they decided that they were not advancing science to continue. So they closed the site, built a building around it, and made it a Visitor Center for the National Monument.

At the Visitor Center, we stumbled upon a class for teachers given by a Ranger. We learned that the dinosaurs and other animals of the period had died of many things, natural causes, predators, broken legs, etc. Their bones had naturally lain where they fell. Then a big flood came through the area and whisked away all the bones, dropping them in a deep part of a riverbed. There they were covered with sediment and preserved. This happened several times in this area, then the earth uplifted because of pressure from surrounding faults. That is why there are so many varieties of fossils here. One of the teachers fell asleep. The Ranger did a stomping dance with his feet at the end of the lecture to wake her up.

The wall of fossils in the Visitor Center was full of bones, looking like clay relief artwork. There was a nice guide that explained what they all were. But the dinosaur names were in Latin and we had never studied dinosaurs anyway. So we were much more impressed with the full

skeletons and related exhibits, like, “What color were the dinosaurs?” Much was hypothesis, but entertaining and fact-based nevertheless.

Dinosaur National Monument is on a geological plain where the Green River meets the Yampa River. The Yampa River is the only undamed tributary of the Colorado. The Green River cuts through the Uinta Mountains. Rather than wind around in a valley, it actually split the hard layer of sandstone that formed the top dome of a mountain. Apparently, the river was not there before the mountain uplifted, so why this river cuts a mountain in two is a geologic mystery.

The land around the rivers was beautiful. Plateaus were topped with green meadows. Sheer cliff faces fell beneath them, horizontally lined with both fat and thin stripes of reds, yellows, and oranges, and dotted with light green sagebrush and dark green juniper and pignola trees. The colors encompassed all hues, pastel to deep blood reds and browns. Some of these ridges were steps, narrowing the gap between the canyon walls until they fell into shadows or onto green rivers. In the distance, blue mountains or pink and green stained petrified sand dunes sloped into the horizon. We took a short nature walk along one of the rivers, admiring the smooth rounded rock of all sizes and colors, whites, yellows, pinks, oranges, purples, blues, greens, and grays. We then headed out on a scenic drive to the Colorado side of the park

We stopped at the Visitors Center on the Colorado side to see the 12-minute video. We learned that the rock exposed in this area spanned a billion years of



View from Harpers Drive picnic area.

geologic time. That accounted for us being able to recognize rocks from virtually every other area we had ever been to. It also mentioned that the pebbles we had seen at the river bottoms were also on the mountaintops. This was another geologic mystery.

We had brought lunch and stopped at the first picnic area on Harpers Corner scenic drive. It was about 98° but there was a cool breeze in the shade. Perhaps not surprisingly, we were the only people in the picnic area the entire time. We enjoyed a solitary quarter mile hike on a peninsula of a plateau. We sat on a bench and ate gazing on the wide expanse of quiet plateaus and canyons.

We stopped at all the overlooks on the scenic drive except for one. There was a fire truck, and ambulance, a helicopter, and a pickup truck in the parking lot, but the entrance to the lot was barred by red cones. We figured someone had fallen off a cliff and there was a rescue operation in pace. At the next overlook, we came upon a Forest Service Ranger stranded by a flat tire. He said that all those



Echo Park overlook.

emergency workers were there making sure all the fires were out. Though nothing was burning wildly, roots could continue to burn long after surface burns were done. The burned roots make the tree fall and could scatter the flames. A firefighter from Oregon had died last week from such a falling tree. We were glad we had not tried to get close to see what was going on.

The scenic drive ended at a mile hike to an overlook that one of our guides said, “gave unsurpassed views.” Another was even more laudatory, “Very spectacular, a sight to behold.” Both were correct. The



Echo Park from the Harpers Corner Trail.

180° panorama overlooked the Green River to the West and the Yampa River to the East. The rivers merged behind a peninsula of a plateau cut into the cliffs by the Green River. The land surrounding the Green River under the cliffs was called Island Park. The land surrounding the Yampa River under the cliffs was called Echo Park. A road sign had told us that, in Colorado, they use the word “Park” as other places would use the word “valley” or “canyon.”

The unusual geologic features in this region certainly merited its own geologic nomenclature. Along the trail, we saw the geologic mystery of the round flat river-stones on the top of the ridge. Remembering our lecture on the progress

of glaciers from Big Bob at the rock shop in Nevada, we decided we agreed with him. The glaciers must have deposited these smooth round rocks on top of the mountains, and somehow allowed the river to cut through them as well.

The views both near and far made us glad we had braved the heat. But it was over 100° by then and it was getting hard to keep even a normal hiking pace. We walked slowly and stopped on a bench to rest on the way back. It was so quiet we heard the wind in the wings of a turkey vulture that swooped twenty feet over our heads.

Back in Vernal, we took in a local Rodeo. We saw parts of an opening show of flag

waving and formation riding while we were getting some food. We got a cheeseburger a hotdog, fries, and two beers for \$9. The actual rodeo included bareback riding, steer wrestling, calf roping, a clown narrating horse tricks, saddle bronco, barrel racing, and steer roping. That is, we saw a lot of cowboys riding bronco style and wrestling animals to the ground, and a few cowgirls racing horses around barrels.



Rodeo calf roping (this cowboy got a score!)

The number of “no scores” on the animal wrestling side surprised us. In these cases the cowboy had not even gotten the lasso out on time or missed, so that the animal just ran away from him and he could not catch up. In a field of roughly a dozen contestants for each event, some got third place by default. Moreover, we were not looking at amateurs, but many of the contestants were introduced as last year’s world champions. Our program said these world champions win so many rodeos per year that they make over a hundred thousand dollars. We decided rodeo must be a dying art.

Breakfast at the Landmark Inn turned out to be very entertaining. We were joined by a traveling health care official who had

been one of over 35,000 volunteers at the Salt Lake City Olympics. Her role was to something to do with making sure sets were properly prepared for entertainers. She told us stories of other jobs, like the volunteers who followed the horses around with pooper-scoopers to make sure that a skater did not inadvertently get dirty or worse yet, have an accident. She told us about the ceiling sheet rock installers who were solicited for the bird scenes because they were already extremely comfortable walking around on stilts.

She told us about the perks the volunteers got, though we got the impression that none were necessary. It was clear that participation itself was its own reward. They were allowed to attend some medal ceremonies for free. They were allowed to keep their costumes. She said how proud everyone was of their costumes, even men who had distained putting on tights eventually marveled at their on-camera appearance. She was especially happy hers had been a very warm and expensive ski outfit that boasted the Olympic logo.

They had practiced for hours and hours for the opening and closing ceremonies, receiving instructions from a disembodied director’s voice that seemed to be coming from the ceiling. Even so, on the day of the event, she found she could not get from her starting place to her next cue because she ended up on the wrong side of the procession of athletes into the stadium. She found an alternate route under the stadium and inadvertently ran into the presidential limousine and was chastised by secret service agents for being in a restricted area.

The best part of the ceremony for the volunteers had been when the flag was raised. The flagpole had never worked in practice, not even during the final dress rehearsal. She said that all 37,000 volunteers had held their breath. The woman, we never did catch her name,

was full of praise for the Olympics overall coordinator, Mitt Romney. He had sent personal thank you notes to all of the volunteers, with beautiful glossy pictures. She was sure he would be the next Governor of Utah.

Miles traveled:	476
Departure datetime:	Thursday, July 11, 8:30AM
Departure weather:	80° Sunny