

MYSTERY TOUR 2010

When we were on a tour of the Southern US a couple of years ago, our tour manager, Chris told us of the mystery tours offered by the same tour company, AFC Tours. We were looking for somewhere to go between our July European cruises and our December Panama Canal Cruise. We came across a 5 day mystery tour in early October that was perfect.

It featured 4 nights at a hotel and no flight longer than 4 hours and no passport needed. We would not know where we would be going until our documents arrived. Well the documents arrived, and all it said was you leave on Delta Airlines at 7 AM (shudder).

I went to the Delta Airlines website to check in and get our boarding passes. I also paid the \$23 for our one suitcase. There was a note that at baggage check in they were going to weigh and measure our luggage!

If the baggage was overweight or oversize, there was an extra \$100 charge!!!!

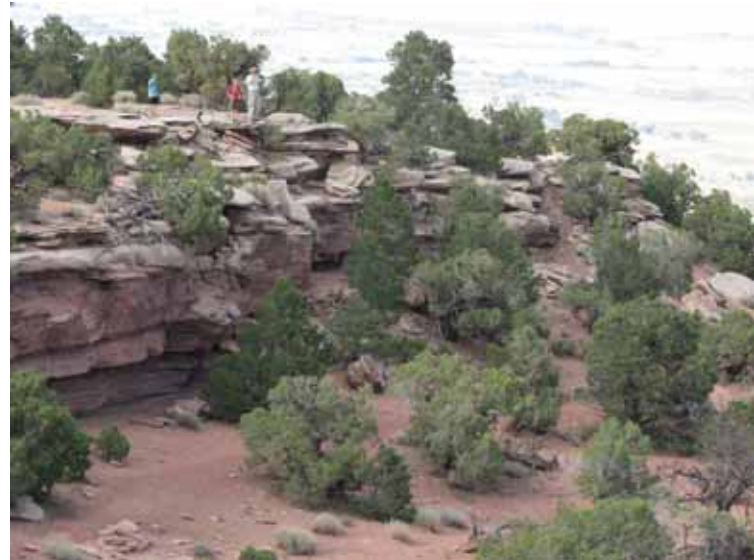
We got up at the ungodly hour of 4AM for the one hour drive to the airport. It is a small price to pay for living in Paradise, as I call it.

The drive to the airport was very stressful, as the first 28 miles was on a 4 lane unlit highway and it was foggy. Once we hit the freeway, however we were OK.

We arrived in Grand Junction, Colorado and were met by our Trip Director, Chris McCool. He was also our director on our Southern Splendor Tour, and we really enjoyed his personality and enthusiasm. He had us dropped off at our hotel to await the arrival of a later group.

COLORADO NATIONAL MONUMENT

When everyone had arrived, we were taken to a National Monument called the Colorado National Monument. We had never heard of it, but it was absolutely magnificent!! The monument encompasses 32 square miles of up and down terrain. A man named John Otto tirelessly worked to have it declared a National Monument. He built miles of trails so others could appreciate the beauty.



We had visited the Grand Canyon, but standing on the South Rim, you had to look down at the various formations and could not really appreciate the sights. In this monument, at times it felt that you were in the Grand Canyon, but at the bottom rather than the top.

We were told that the Colorado River was originally called the Grand River until the early 1900's when its name was changed. It now made more sense as to why the Grand Canyon was called that, and especially why Grand Junction was named. The name "Grand" refers to the historical upper Colorado River until renamed in 1921, and the word "Junction" is from the joining of the Colorado and Gunnison rivers.

One of the highlights was the view of Independence Monument, a rock spire that John Otto actually climbed 4 times and placed an American flag at its top each time.

Some folks thought he was crazy. He lived alone out in the wild and desolate canyon country southwest of Grand Junction. He loved the land so much the he campaigned tirelessly for it to be set aside as a national park.

The area was established as Colorado National Monument on May 24, 1911. Otto was hired as the first park ranger, drawing a salary of \$1 per month. For the next 16 years, he continued building and maintaining trails while living in a tent in the park.



GLENWOOD SPRINGS

The next morning we were taken to Glenwood Springs, home of the Hot Springs Spa. The largest natural hot springs pool in the world exists beside the highway. Visitors can soak in the therapy pool (104 degrees) or swim in the huge 90-93 degree swimming pool or play in the small children's pool. The water is full of salty minerals. The Hot Springs Pool is the marquee attraction in Glenwood Springs. Many years ago, when I was skiing at Aspen, we drove past the spa and I would have loved to enjoy it then after a week of skiing. We had a choice of looking around the town or soaking in the hot springs. Surprisingly, only 17 of our group of 48 opted for the hot springs. We soaked and enjoyed the warm water for about 2 hours, but by that time my fingers looked like prunes!

We then walked across the street to enjoy lunch at the historic Hotel Colorado. In 1893, Hotel Colorado arrived on the scene during a thrilling time in the history of America's West. With its European fashioned spa, the resort surfaced onto a land of prosperity; to serve the wealthy, to house the ailing, and to offer a playground to society's elite. Both Presidents Taft and Teddy Roosevelt were guests at the hotel during its heyday.

There is a beautiful patio with a fountain that was enclosed by the two wings of the hotel.



MAROON BELLS

As it was a mystery tour, we were kept in the dark as to our destination. However, I had brought a Colorado road map with me and could get an idea of where we were heading. It appeared we were going to the town of Aspen. Much to my surprise, we turned off the main road and headed up a canyon. The scenery was fantastic! The aspen trees were a brilliant yellow, but we were about a week too late to get the full impact.

We drove up the Maroon Valley into the White River National Forest. It is a glacial valley surrounded by 14,000 foot peaks. The Maroon Bells were given that name by explorers because of their red color and their

distinctive bell shape. I had seen them from afar when I skied in Aspen, but this was really up close and personal. Also, at that time they were covered in snow, hiding their distinctive color.



In front of us was a beautiful lake called Maroon Lake, with the Maroon bells in the background.



ASPEN

From the Maroon Bells, we did drive into the town of Aspen, and parked on one side of a park away from the main street. There was not much to see, but Kathy wanted to have a magnet showing the Maroon Bells. At the end of the street was an information booth, and I asked the lady where the best place to find the magnets was. She gave me the name of a shop down the street, and as I turned to go, half the people on the bus were behind me. I told them where I was going, and headed there with the group following me. I did get a really nice one, and jokingly told the shopkeeper I should get a discount because of the business I had brought in.

BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON

The next morning we headed out for another mystery destination. We ended up at another National Monument neither of us had known, called the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. In 1999 Congress finally made it a National Park. Geologist Walter Hansen wrote, "Some are longer, some are deeper, some are narrower, but no other canyon in North America combines the depth, narrowness, sheerness and somber countenance of this canyon.

In just 48 miles the Gunnison River loses more elevation than the 1,500 mile Mississippi River from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. The power of this fast falling river enables it to erode the tough rock.

The following pictures show the narrowness of the canyon and a close up of the river at the bottom of the canyon.

Also, erosion has left all manner of formations, such as the spire in the pictures below.



OURAY

After visiting the park, we were taken to the town of Ouray. Situated in a river valley at 7,792 ft. in the heart of the Rocky Mountains lies the spectacular mountain town of Ouray eloquently nicknamed the Switzerland of America. Ouray officially began in 1876 with the eager stroke of the prospector's pick. However, the future brought with it those simply inspired by its beauty. Because of Ouray's majestic peaks, cascading waterfalls, natural hot springs, and the famous Million Dollar Highway, modern visitors flock to Ouray as much for its beauty as the miners of the past did for the riches they hoped to find.

We were taken on a quick tour of the main street to look for restaurants, and I zeroed in on a brewpub. I really enjoy tasting local microbrew products, as you normally cannot get them in California. We sat up on the open air third floor of the restaurant, and enjoyed the spectacular views.

We both ordered muffalettas, which is a great sandwich normally well known in New Orleans. I had never had one, but Kathy had, and she said it was not as good as the ones she had in New Orleans. I asked her if she would make one when we got home, and she agreed. The secret of a good muffaletta is the olive tapenade. Ideally you want to make the sandwich an hour or two before eating it so the juices from the olive mix can soak into the bread



BOX CANYON FALLS PARK

After lunch, we were taken to a park called Box Canyon Falls Park. The park is Ouray's natural wonder—formed when the rushing waters of Canyon Creek eroded a deep and narrow boxed canyon through fault weakened limestone. Unfortunately, at this time of year it is too late for the rain and too early for the snowmelt, so the falls were not really spectacular. I saw a beautiful cabin in the distance and got a couple of pictures of it. Shortly after that, Kathy came up to me and said she had found a place she wanted. I showed her the pictures and said, "Do you mean this one?" She laughed, and said, "That's it".



We walked down a series of stairs to see the falls, but most of it was hidden around a corner in the canyon. I can imagine what it would have sounded like in full flow; a deafening roar as the water shot down the narrow slot.



After looking at the falls, which were sort of disappointing, I saw that I could also take the short but steep hike to the bridge above the falls which entailed a 200 foot climb.



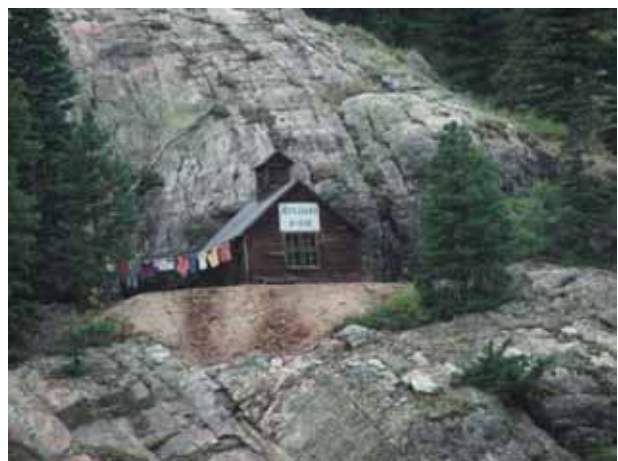
RED MOUNTAIN PASS

After leaving the park, we took the highway towards Silverton. It was explained that it was only 23 miles to Silverton, as the crow flies, but not by road. The highway was called the Million Dollar Highway, because of lot of the fill was low grade ore from the mines, and there have been a million dollars worth of gold and silver in it, but it was uneconomical to extract it.

We drove up to Red mountain Pass, which was at 12,118 foot elevation, but getting there involved a number of switchbacks and hairpin turns. The area is called the Red Mountains because of the iron oxide which gives the reddish color.



There was an abandoned mine there, but on the way back; we saw a funny building upon the hill. It had a sign that read, "Antiques 9 -5:30", but I have no idea how you would get up to it!



FISHER TOWERS

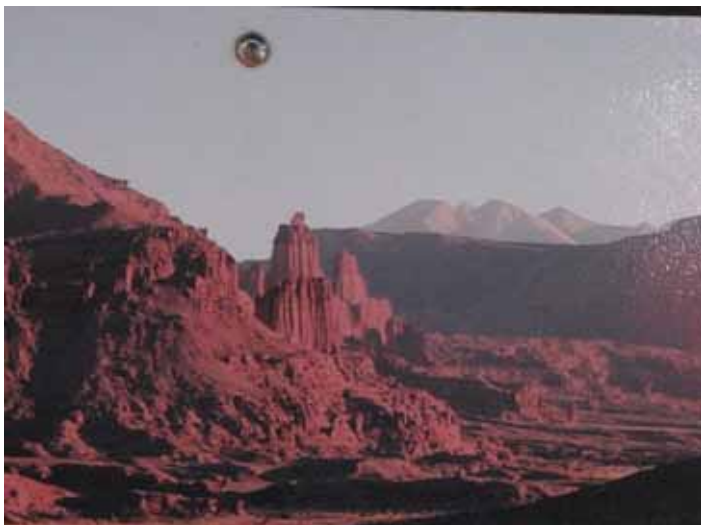
The next morning we headed out to Highway 128, which is designated as a scenic highway. We turned off to go up a gravel road called Fisher Towers Road, and ended up at a small campground. You can imagine the stir caused by our big bus showing up in the parking lot.



Administered by the Bureau of Land Management, Fisher Towers Recreation Site is a popular destination for hikers and rock climbers. Fisher Towers contains layers of sedimentary rock in various shades of red-brown, red-purple, and maroon. The colors are a result of varying amounts of hematite (an iron oxide). At Fisher Towers, erosion continues to sculpt the towers, spires, and pedestals. The sandstone, more resistant to erosion than the softer underlying layers of the rock, protects and preserves the soft rock underneath, creating these rock pedestals. The picture on the right has the Colorado River in the background.



The picture on the left has its own mystery. It looked like a flying saucer to all of us, and it never showed up in subsequent pictures. The lens was clean, so who knows what it was.



ARCHES NATIONAL PARK

From Fisher Towers we got back on to Highway 128 and headed for Moab, Utah. We picked up our box lunches, and headed to Arches National Park. The drive through the park was spectacular. There are over 2000 cataloged arches ranging in size from 3 feet to the longest, Landscape Arch, which is 306 feet from base to base. New arches are formed and old ones destroyed by erosion and weathering. These processes normally work very slowly, but in 1991 a slab 60 feet long, 11 feet wide, and 4 feet thick fell from the underside of Landscape Arch.

On our way to the picnic grounds, we passed by Balanced Rock and a series of fins of rock. Some of these fins will eventually erode away to form more arches.



After lunch, we were supposed to meet at the Devil's Garden trailhead to see Landscape Arch. I took off early because I wanted to see two more arches beyond Landscape Arch. I figured I walked faster than most of the other folks, so I could get to the other arches and meet the rest of the group on the way back. **WRONG!** Apparently after I left, the departure time was moved up, so I missed the group.



I bought a trail map at the trailhead, which was a wise decision, and saw there were side trails to Tunnel Arch and Pine Tree Arch. I made it to Landscape Arch without any problem, but in retrospect, instead of pressing further, I should have turned back to see the other arches on the way back. That way I would have not caused anyone any worry.

I climbed past Landscape Arch, and the terrain became much more difficult. At one point I had to scale a sloping face of rock that really slowed me down. By the time I got to the sign for Navaho Arch, I felt I was running out of time and had to head back.



I headed back to the trailhead, but did not see any of our group! However, I did spot Kathy, who was very worried about me. She was not aware that there was a constant stream of hikers, so that if I had a problem someone could have gone for help. It was really a lesson learned about staying with the group so as not to cause any problems.

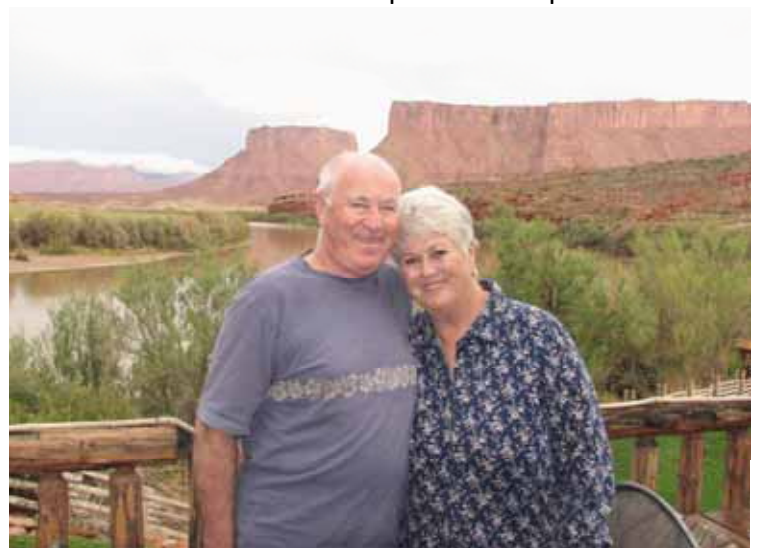
We got back on the bus and were taken to a view point to see Delicate Arch. It was quite far away, but with my telephoto I got a good picture of it. There were many people who had hikes up to it, and one can get an idea of its size by the person standing to the left of the right side of the arch.

We were then taken to view Double Arch, and at that point the heavens opened! Chris commented that he felt sorry for those folks up at Delicate Arch, as there was no shelter around it.



SORREL RIVER RANCH

We drove out of the park and stopped at the visitor center, then headed to Sorrel River Ranch for Dinner. It is a working ranch, but it is situated right along the Colorado River. The views from the patio were spectacular!



PALISADE

Unfortunately, today we have to head home. Since our flights were in the early afternoon, we were taken to around the area of a town named Palisade. The area is well known for peaches, and there are also some wineries there.

Our first stop was at a packing house where Kathy bought a cookbook put together by the locals. We then went to the Colorado Cellars Winery, which was founded in 1979. We were given the standard tour, and then allowed to taste some of the wines. They were quite nice, but with the cost of shipping them to California, they would have been more expensive than wines of equal quality that were available in California. They did have all kinds of wine related products and cookware, and I picked up a couple of interesting soup mixes. From there we went to the little town of Palisade, and bought some sandwiches for our flights home at a little bakery. Kathy found a little antique store and bought an antique handkerchief that was trimmed in tatting lace, like her grandmother used to make.

We were then taken to the airport, and said our goodbyes to the rest of the group. We think this was the best group trip we have been on, because everyone was very enthusiastic and had traveled with the tour company before.

Our flights home caused some momentary anxiety. We were scheduled to fly from Grand Junction to Phoenix, and connect in one hour with a flight to Burbank. Our first flight had some sort of a problem, and they were 30 minutes late! After we got airborne, I told the flight attendant of our concern. He asked what our flight number to Burbank was, and chuckled slightly.

It seems our aircraft was the same one we would have boarded in Phoenix, and we would even have the same flight attendant! We both breathed a sigh of relief, and we actually arrived on time in Burbank and even more miraculous, our bag did too!

We enjoyed the trip and the Tour Director so much that we immediately booked the October 2011 Mystery trip. We were taken to a number of parks that we never even knew about, and loved the scenery. With every breathtaking turn, we were reminded of the words to "America the Beautiful", and how fortunate we are to live in such a beautiful country. This trip was truly the "roads less traveled" and took us to places we never knew existed, thanks to having faith in a "mystery tour". AFC tours and Chris McCool did a fantastic job.

We are now home for about 2 months, when we go on a cruise that does a partial transit of the Panama Canal.
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