

Four Corners Region—Trailing the Ancients ©
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The Four Corners region means different things to different people. To Terry Tempest Williams it is Navajoland, where every conversation, every sigh uttered by the “long-time-ago people” circulates around you. To Edward Abbey, the ancient canyon art of this region was the first world language that represented images ranging from the crude and simple to the elegant and sophisticated.

To me, it was a headache to sort through what the Four Corners meant to different people. OK, so my definition is a bit of a downer. But in my non-prolific defense it was overwhelming to determine which archaeological sites, modern communities and Indian lands to cover in an area that smacks of a primeval and intangible world

My friend John and I turned to the Visitor’s Center in Monticello for the inside scoop on following in the footsteps of the Ancients. Little did I know those ancients would be by way of the local geriatric ward. A sweet grandma greeted me at the main desk. Haltingly, I asked her if she could help me find some backcountry routes in the region.

“Of course, sweetie,” she replied. “If I can’t help, then Herbert can.” OK, I didn’t exactly capture the name of the ancient, sun-worn man she pointed to at the end of the counter. But if any man looked like a Herbert, he did. It took mere seconds to confirm that they would not be good resources. They loaded me up with brochures and John and I headed to the BLM Ranger’s station a couple of blocks away for the real scoop.

We came away with concrete plans. We would start at the Edge of the Cedars Museum and State Park and cut over to Cedar Mesa and Grand Gulch. From there, we would hit Valley of the Gods, Monument Valley, and then Canyon de Chelly in Arizona. Our final pinnacle experience of the lopsided loop would be to stand on the Four Corners marker to symbolize the end of our own Trail of the Ancients.

Edge of the Cedars Museum and State Park

We headed south on U.S. 191 to the Edge of the Cedars Museum and State Park in Blanding. For \$1, we were introduced to the largest collection of Anasazi (pre-historic Puebloan) pottery in the Four Corners region. Located on the site of an ancient ruin, the museum has a collection of archeological treasures from the Ancient Pueblo Indian, Navajo and Ute Indian cultures that includes pottery and a ceremonial kiva, home to the Anasazi between A.D. 825 to 1220.

A sun marker stood just beyond the ruin. The Anasazi used this solar sculpture to calendar when to plant and harvest crops, connecting them with solar, plant life and ceremonial cycles. John moved in for a closer look as I stood back to analyze the dance of shadow and light. I gave up after two minutes of intense scrutiny and resolved there was a very good reason why I live in the 21st century when all connections with time are made with my trusty calendar and digital watch.

My favorite part of the Edge of the Cedars was the Observation Tower. This circular room's expansive windows traced many of the Four Corner's ranges, starting with Sleeping Ute Mountain and extending to New Mexico's famous Shiprock and Utah's Grand Gulch Plateau. Sometimes called Cedar Mesa, this 1,000-square-mile recreation area includes many archeological sites and was next on our agenda. The Abajo Mountains rounded out our view in the semi-circular tower.

Grand Gulch Primitive Area

I was eager to explore the Grand Gulch Primitive Area, one of the premier backpacking areas in Southern Utah. A friend had raved about an unparalleled 22-mile backpacking trip from Kane Gulch to Bullet Canyon, which winds through ancient ruins. John and I stopped at the Kane Gulch Ranger Station to get the '411' and permits. If the building was any indication, we were in for a primitive experience—the station was in a condemned trailer transported from Hovenweep National Monument.

The gal on duty gave me a detailed play-by-play of Cedar Mesa, home to numerous rock art panels and prehistoric ruins. Ancestral Puebloans inhabited the canyons and mesa tops between 700 and 2,000 years ago, and many of their dwellings remain in tact and fragile. For this reason, permits are limited and required for all overnight and day trips.

She tipped me off on an area outside of the Gulch in Cedar Mesa: Mule Canyon. I was immediately attracted by her description of this 10-mile roundtrip hike. Two fairly easy hiking areas are found in the north and south forks of Mule Canyon, which cut through sheer sandstone walls and ponderosa pine. But the true appeal of this trail is that it contains the highest concentration of ruins found anywhere on the plateau—more than one ruin per mile. We were sold.

Mule Canyon

We arose to the predawn colors of the desert and watched as pink, magenta, silver and purple shafts of light enticed the sun over the horizon. We were on the trail by 8 a.m.

John portentously wore his new trekking hat that his friends allegedly bought in Nepal. He bore a strong resemblance to Paddington Bear but I decided I'd have more fun with exploiting the Nepalese claim and asked if this meant he was Sherpa for the day. He was not amused. But when I pointed to his CamelBak—"the Sherpa"—he resigned himself to his station of servitude.

As we hiked, the canyon deepened and eroded alcoves lined the cliffs. The majority of cultural sites were on the south-facing slopes among typical high desert vegetation. The north-facing slopes were verdant with Douglas fir and ponderosa pine that spilled down from the Abajo range.

We had hiked about 0.75 mile when Sherpa John suddenly stopped. “Do you think that could be something up there?” he breathlessly asked. I gazed at the sandstone wall shrouded by ponderosa pine. What could his stealth Sherpa instincts be telling him? But then I looked at the ground—a giant arrow had been traced in the sand, pointing to the wall. So much for instinct. His sighting did not amount to anything, but he pulled through about 1.2 miles up the canyon where he discovered the first of a string of Anasazi ruins.

We spent the rest of the hike perched on the sandstone walls exploring the various alcoves. We crawled into the ancient settlements and marveled at the fallen masonry of the dwellings. Shards of pottery, worn but still proof of the artistic refinement of the ancients, were strewn around the rooms and organized on rocks by other hikers.

The desert sun had shifted by the time we made our way out of the canyon, the colors, textures and shadows of our surroundings changing with the angle and intensity of the sunlight. Mule Canyon had come to light—and life—before our eyes.

Monument Valley

We then followed U.S. 261 through Grand Gulch until we reached the Moki Dugway overlook where we gazed down upon the Valley of the Gods and Monument Valley’s compendium of silhouetted buttes. We descended three miles on the graded gravel road and then explored the 16-mile loop through the Valley of the Gods—often called a miniature Monument Valley. The rock/clay surface road was a roller-coaster ride through a sandstone museum that included Castle Butte, Rooster Butte, Battleship Rock and Setting Hen Butte.

And then it was onto Monument Valley—land of the American West, and backdrop of hundreds of western movies and magazine ads. Where a simple image, the silhouette of a monolith held sacred for the Navajos, is enough to make us dream of infinite possibilities and empty spaces. The Navajo Nation Council designated Monument Valley as the first tribally-owned-and-operated park on July 11, 1958. More than 140 habitation sites have been found on the 17.6 million acre Navajo Reservation that straddles the Utah-Arizona border.

I was initially disappointed with how tightly the Navajo Nation regulates the valley. There is no hiking allowed off the 17-mile road unless you have a guide. We passed on shelling out \$30 for a 2-hour tour, bought a \$2 brochure and set out to explore the valley on our own terms as best we could.

The first monoliths we encountered were the famous Mittens, which according to Navajo legend were once deities who lived upon Mother Earth in the beginning of time. As we drove, the subliminal imagery of the monoliths, spires, buttes, mesas, canyons and sand dunes invoked a powerful associative reflex, and the distinction between reality and illusion became blurred.

We continued along the rectilinear ribbon of the road until we encountered one such mirage of the ancients. OK, maybe it was only a burro but for a moment I was transported back in time. John insisted we stop for a picture and I rolled my eyes at his hypocrisy. He generally mocks tacky tourists who take pictures of animals in the wild and then get attacked.

And then a Machiavellian plan unfolded. As he made his way back, I deviously exclaimed, “The burro is attacking!” Instinctively, John raced back to the Jeep to find me laughing hysterically. In his defense, he weakly said, “I thought I heard him running.” My query, “Do burros RUN?” did not lessen the pain. He will not be stopping to photograph wild and ferocious burros anytime soon, I’m sure.

Canyon de Chelly

We were intoxicated with the sights and smells of the labyrinth called Canyon de Chelly from the moment we arrived in Arizona’s northeastern desert haven—from the pungent scent of the vegetation, to the purity of the dust and the lucidity of the air.

Canyon de Chelly (pronounced d’SHAY) is really several canyons that rise as high as 1,000 feet above the floor, overshadowing the streams, cottonwoods and small farms below. The Canyon de Chelly National Monument was established in 1931 to preserve the land where people have lived for nearly 5,000 years—longer than anyone has lived uninterrupted anywhere on the Colorado Plateau. Embracing nearly 84,000 acres within the Navajo Reservation, the monument is administered by the National Park Service but belongs to the Navajo people.

Backcountry camping was out of the question in Navajoland so we stayed at the Cottonwood Campground, which was free of charge. We stopped at the Visitor’s Center in the morning and learned the rules and regulations were similar to Monument Valley. With the exception of one designated trail, we were not allowed to hike unless we were on a tour or with a Navajo guide. The tours cost \$40 for a half day, or \$15 per hour with a private guide, with a minimum of three hours. We opted to explore the south and north rim drives on our own, which took in famous ruins such as the Mummy Cave and the Sliding House.

The highlight of Canyon de Chelly was the 2.5-mile roundtrip hike to the White House ruin. We followed the trail along the rim for about 1,000 feet before descending steeply into a canyon that had been polished by eons of sandpaper winds.

The White House was like an apparition floating in the cliffs. Built and occupied centuries ago by ancient Puebloan people, it is named for a long wall in the upper dwelling that is covered with white plaster. At its zenith, the village housed about 100 men, women and children in 60 rooms. The pottery shards surrounding it testified to the leavings of an ancient civilization.

I could not wait to document the ruin on paper and film. Until I realized I had forgotten my notebook. And then my camera malfunctioned. Regardless, we were in good spirits when we finally made the steep ascent back to asphalt and civilization and prepared for the final leg of our Trail of the Ancients.

Four Corners Monument

The sprint to the Trail of the Ancients finish line had a few speed bumps. Our final stop was at the Four Corners Monument, the only place in the United States where four states and two Indian nations share borders. Established in 1912, this monument was to be the capstone of our Four Corners tour.

I had envisioned our crowning moment. The desert sun would blaze down upon us. We'd explore the Visitor's Center and small jewelry shops on the perimeter of the monument before planting ourselves on the marker. And we would smile like tacky tourists as photographs were taken to document the experience for posterity.

Of course, that was the illusion. Reality was that we got caught in a blinding sandstorm. We skipped the booths and made a mad dash to the marker where we stood for a good five seconds. And pictures? Get real. Don't forget the broken camera.

Total elapsed time at the monument: five minutes. The total elapsed time of finally hearing the silence of a region that many revere as sacred: timeless.

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