



Ed and Paula's

Mostly

Excellent Adventure in the Four Corners Area

Sketch and article by Ed Berg

Friday, March 24:

Loaded Old TanVanity with tons of gear, put two tandem kayaks on the roof, and drove to Durango to meet daughter Anne. Soaked in the nearly-next-door hot-springs, and spent the night on the floor at her place.

Saturday, March 25:

Full of good cheer and breakfast burritos, the three of us drove south and west into Arizona heading for Canyon de Chelly, the spiritual heart of the Navajo Nation. "de Chelly" is the Spanish transliteration of the Navajo "Tsyi", meaning a place in the rock. And places in the rock are indeed good places to find canyons! We were intending to spend one night there, then drive further south to the Painted Desert. I chose to try an unpaved-shortcut over the Chuska Mountains to save 60 miles of driving. It looked like a pretty good decision because new pavement extended over the pass and down the west side a little way, and Vanity had been over a lot of rough ground before.

I wasn't prepared for snowmelt, however, and the resultant one-to-two feet of soupy mud nailed me. I got us completely mired up to the doorsills. After a half hour of trying to get some traction by stuffing pieces of straw bales under the wheels (just a wee bit cold, wet and muddy), a Navajo man in a big 4-wheel drive pickup came by and helped us out. It took over two hours of him pushing from front, then rear, to do it, and by the time we got out, the front headlights and turn signals were smashed out, the right rear fender was mashed in, and the front bumper was crushed. Both vehicles were covered in mud over the

roofs, and we were all mud covered up to the knees and elbows.

I'm not sure we would have had to spend the night, but our rescuer didn't have his tow chain because he never expected to see anyone on that pass at this time of year. When I told him I couldn't thank him enough, he just said, "Just take it from one friend to another - there aren't too many of them around." He never remotely looked like he expected any kind of payment.

We limped down the mountain into the little town of Chinle, got gas, spent 8 dollars at the car wash, then drove out into the Canyon de Chelly park. We looked over the public campground, and decided to drive out to the end of the road at the rim of the canyon to watch the sunset before returning to pitch camp. This turned into one of our loveliest experiences.

Almost at the end of the road was a private campground, which means Navajo-owned, since everything in the whole region is within the Navajo Nation. It was spacious, orderly, and simple, and the white-painted plywood shack which was the office, was covered with words like "Woshtee" (welcome), "Hot coffee, mocha, espresso" (a sure sign of civilized life), "soda pop", "No Alcoholic Beverages". We signed up for one night.

The owner, Howard Smith, has the jet-black eyes, Roman nose and angular, narrow, ascetic features of a pure Athabascan Navajo lineage. His long hair was tied back with a string, and there was the tiniest hint of a smile lingering at the corners of his mouth. It took awhile to get accustomed to his Navajo/English dialect, but underneath the simple exterior was the

most hospitable spirit, the most generous good will, and a VERY DRY wit. After we set up the tents and cooked supper, we went over to his campfire and chatted for more than two hours while he shared his people's Creation Stories.

Sunday, March 26:

We opted to spend the 60 bucks apiece for a full-day guided tour of the Canyon. No one is allowed in this lovely place without a Navajo guide, as the whole place is special to them, and there are many sacred sites. There are also many places where the Navajos suffered and died at the hands of the European Invaders, both Spanish and English, over three centuries.

At camp that night, Howard joined us at our campfire. We don't know his true, Navajo, name; it isn't shared with beliganas (whites). "Smith" was taken from his great-grandfather, who was a blacksmith. He uses "Howard" because he can joke about it, saying HOW! with his hand held up, cigar-store Indian fashion. Howard spent most of his younger years with his grandfather, herding sheep in the traditional life, on the same land we were camped on. After Grandfather's death, Howard continued his education, learned the boilermaker's trade, and returned years later (I think he might be my age) to share his culture with the European Invaders.

Monday, March 27:

We awoke to the sound of Howard's boombox playing Carlos Nakai's flute music over the junipers. Carlos is the most famous of the Navajo flutists, being the son of the ex-Chairman of the Nation.

Carlos's mother is Ute, and the Utes are the traditional enemies of the Navajo. It is the ironic fact of life that the modern Navajo is caught between two unsustainable cultures: the traditional Navajo culture, lifestyle, and value system can't compete with televised commerciality. The American material possession-based value system can't be realized by anyone living on the Reservation, and won't last very much longer anyway, given its current rate of natural resource abuse.

I wandered over to the office for some industrial-strength coffee, and started talking about flutes. Howard had one, but sold it and hadn't been able to replace it for some time. He turned me loose on his firewood pile, where I found a beautiful log, long enough for a flute, thick enough to split out enough for three or four flutes, straight-grained and dense and aromatic.

I really look forward to turning this wood, coming from Howard's own land, from the Juniper used for centuries by his people for so many things.

After leaving Howard's campground, we spent the morning in Chinle getting the van looked over. It was driveable, but without headlights.

We drove north into Bluff, Utah, a town on the San Juan River, with the world's highest per-capita density of geologists, due to its location on the border of the productive Paradox Basin, and in the desert country with so much geology exposed naked all around.

The Recapture Lodge has been a base for geologists, naturalists, river rafters, and lovers of the outdoors for twelve years now. Bluff residents and visitors often put on slide shows in the lobby in the evening. All you need is slides and something to say. The next time I'm out there, I need to call ahead to offer to do a presentation. You run into the most interesting people there- from U S Geological Survey staff to college students and professors doing field work, to river rats, to retired folks just enjoying the scenery.

We enjoyed a bath after three days of camping out with only the hosing we'd gotten at the car wash. We took a long hot-tub soak, a hike down along the River, and had supper at one of the two restaurants in town. Anne's boyfriend Curtis arrived at 7:00, we sat in on the slide show, and hit the sack early.

Tuesday, March 28:

After breakfast at the Lodge, we drove out to Hall's Crossing on Lake Powell, loaded up the kayaks and paddled off. For you kayakers, the boats were our 22' wooden homebuilt, and a rented Prijon

Odyssea 16' double with no rudder. I was concerned that our two neophyte paddlers would have difficulty in the wind and chop in this very short, flat-bottomed tandem. The Prijon actually handled the waves beautifully, but true to expectation, it wanted to head upwind pretty strongly.

Wednesday, March 29:

We camped two nights in Lake Canyon, a few miles south of Hall's Crossing, taking it easy and enjoying the good weather. We took a tour of the canyon as far as the water went, then hiked a couple of miles further in when the water got too shallow to paddle.

Thursday, March 30:

On Thursday morning we had a lazy get-up, then packed and paddled south again to Annie's Canyon on the west side of the main canyon. Since it was obviously pre-named for our daughter, it had to be beautiful! Spectacular vertical cliffs soaring out of the water, and a huge alcove in one side-arm. We all agreed it was the prototype canyonland canyon, and in three years of our own travels on the Lake, the most beautiful so far. BUT, derved near no place at all to take out, much less camp, so we left and paddled back to the east side of the main canyon.

All day long the weather had been deteriorating, with intermittent rain squalls and a building wind, so we camped at the first possible site. We took a hike above the alcove we were camped in, then cooked and ate and went to bed early, with strong winds blowing all night.

Friday, March 31:

In the morning it was too blustery to consider paddling so we declared a rest day. We hiked at mid-day in some spectacular slickrock landforms: plunge pools, alcoves with ponds in the bottoms, and cliffs we couldn't stand near the edge of because of the gusting wind blasts. And those wonderful little spherical gypsum balls that form in the upper parts of the Jurassic Wingate and Kayenta Formations! Any small depressions in the rocks were filled with them, sort of a ball-bearing desert pavement.

We got some power-napping done in the afternoon, had another early bedtime after igniting bunches of old tumbleweed for our own fireworks displays, up under the cliffs. I kept my mental fingers crossed for a calm morning passage back to Hall's Crossing, about ten miles upstream.

Saturday, April 1:

It seemed quite a bit calmer at dawn, so we got up early, loaded the boats and headed upstream. It being April Fools Day, the wind built steadily instead of

staying calm, but at least it was under sunny skies. By 10:00 AM, the winds were gusting above 15 mph, and where the main canyon ran parallel to the wind direction, some two-foot waves were building up. The really tricky places were where the canyon turned crosswind, and the waves reflected off the vertical walls, causing chaotic, steep chop.

It was worrisome, paddling with beginners, in long passages with absolutely no place to pull out in case of a capsized, but Anne and Curtis had no trouble in the Prijon, except for occasionally not being able to keep headed upwind. Paula and I were mentally rehearsing rescue maneuvers all the way back!

We ate lunch about two miles from the takeout, and paddled briefly in shelter before heading across the big bay between Bullfrog Marina and Hall's Crossing. Here the Lake had one last April Fool's move for us, and as we came around the point into the bay, the wind hit like a hammer. We slugged it out for 30 minutes, and found that the upside to rough weather is that you in fact are NOT unhappy for the tour to end!!

We loaded up and beat feet for Durango, good food and drink at Carver's Brewpub, and more of the hot springs. On the way, we noticed day-old snow as we got higher on the Plateau - apparently the remainder of the storm we sat out on the canyon two days before. We had to dodge the cops in town after supper, because we were still traveling without headlights. A hard morning of paddling, a longish drive, a big meal and a sit in the hot springs make for blood pressure in the low single digits. A long evening of talk was not in the cards.

Sunday, April 2:

We'd all crashed at Curtis's house in his housemates' beds, and awoke ready, willing and able to stuff down another huge meal at the Durango Diner before heading home to Denver.

We caught up with the storm at Fairplay, and it snowed steadily on us into town. The TanVanity made it, even severely wounded, and is now in the shop for mechanical, not cosmetic, repairs. I'm told we'll have to live with the leaky power steering and droopy bumper, but the rest is sound and readily, if not cheaply, fixed. Like us, she's showing ever more signs of roadwear and hard service. But life is for living, and vehicles are for getting us to places where we can get away from them!

The next time we do Lake Powell in March, I want to rent a houseboat and tow the kayaks for side-canyon trips! I **NEVER EVER** thought I'd say that!