

advertisement

BCLiving^(v)

TRAVEL (/TRAVEL) > U.S. (/TRAVEL/US)

(http://pubads.g.doubleclick.net/gampad/jump?iu=/1054669/BCL_CatSpon_300x40&sz=300x40&t=URL_Domain%3Dwww.bcliving.ca%26Source%3Dtravel%2Fus&c=1295712036)

Hunting for Hoodoos in Canyon Country

John Thomson (/john-thomson) | 10/04/2012



IMAGE BY: John Thomson
On the edge of the world at the Grand Canyon

See nature as sculptor in the peaks, valleys and pinnacles of Utah and Arizona's canyons

Arizona bound; we landed at McCarran International Airport outside Las Vegas. After a spirited round of self-indulgence including shows, Siegfried and Roy's zoo and a mock sea battle outside our hotel Treasure Island, we rented a car to continue our commune with nature.

We were doing it for the kids, we told ourselves, but in truth Mom and Dad needed a rest from the sensory overload of Las Vegas, too. After all, what could be more calming than looking at rock formations and fissures in the ground. We started with the granddaddy of them all, Arizona's Grand Canyon.

The Grand Canyon from Above and Below



(/business-profiles/ra-energy)

Ra Energy (/Business-Profiles/Ra-Energy)

PROMOTED CONTENT

advertisement

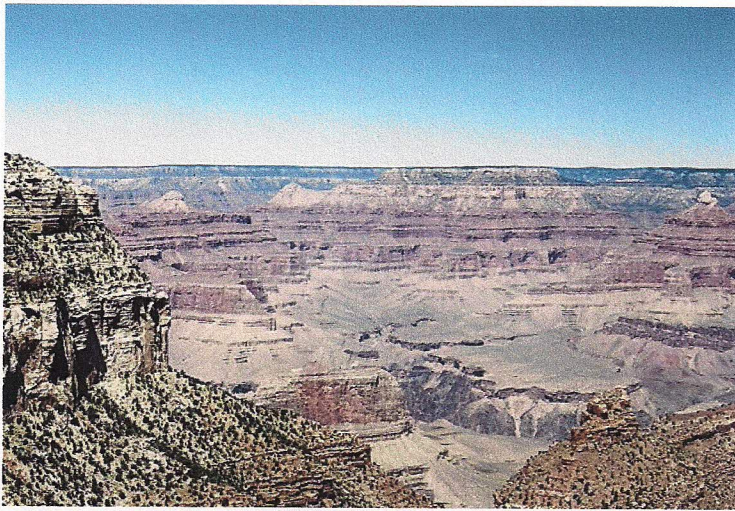


(/the-okanagan-beyond-wine-tasting)

The Okanagan: Beyond Wine Tasting (/The-Okanagan-Beyond-Wine-Tasting)

PROMOTED CONTENT

advertisement



The Grand Canyon's breathtaking view from above (Image: John Thomson)

I first saw the [Grand Canyon \(http://www.nps.gov/grca/index.htm\)](http://www.nps.gov/grca/index.htm) from an airplane – I was flying alone from Toronto at the time – and the view was breathtaking. The Colorado Plateau looked like an unbroken tabletop from the air when suddenly and inexplicitly the tabletop split in two as if cleaved with an axe. The top view emphasized its size – 446 kilometres long and up to 29 kilometres wide.

Once at ground level, the depth of the canyon, over 1,000 metres in spots, is overwhelming. The Colorado River, which carved out the chasm millions of years ago, trickles along the canyon floor barely visible from the viewing stations hundreds of metres above.

Riding the Rails to the Grand Canyon



Poised at the lip of the canyon, looking down (Image: John Thomson)

We parked the car in Williams, Arizona, and took a tourist train, the [Grand Canyon Railway \(http://www.thetrain.com/\)](http://www.thetrain.com/), north to the park's south rim. The scenery was unspectacular, the trip uneventful.

Suddenly, five swarthy desperados ran into our coach and demanded wallets and jewellery. We found ourselves in the middle of an old-time western movie complete with bandits and six-shooters. The show was breezy, cheesy and the kids loved it.

Arriving at the Canyon was almost anti-climatic. The train dropped us at Canyon Depot and from there it was a short walk to the main entrance. The park was swamped but the view was spectacular.



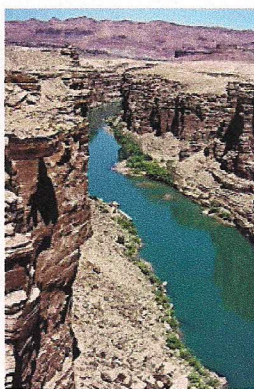
(/tourism-tofino-feast-tofino-2014)

Tourism Tofino (/Tourism-Tofino-Feast-Tofino-2014)

PROMOTED CONTENT

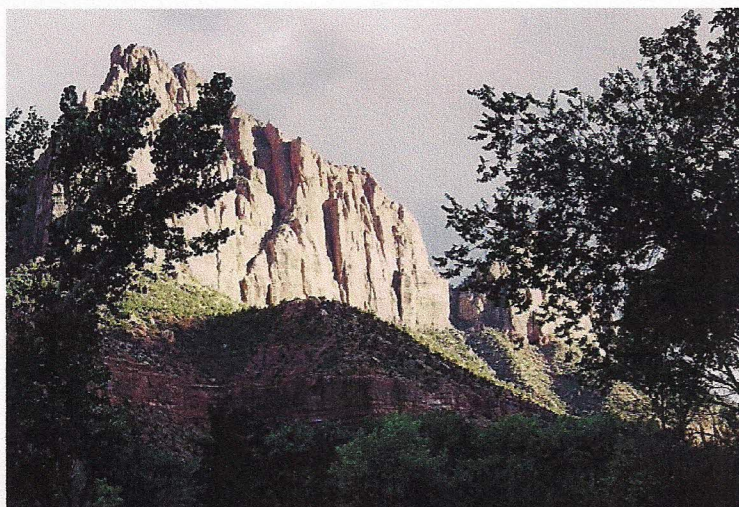
We could have taken a donkey ride or a helicopter ride or hiked to the canyon floor like my friends did a few years earlier – an all-day descent followed by a chilly overnight stay and a gruelling scramble topside – but we opted for the more traditional vantage point, poised at the lip of the canyon overlooking its maw.

We were too far away to take advantage of the [Canyon Skywalk](http://www.grandcanyonwest.com/) (<http://www.grandcanyonwest.com/>), a glass-floored horseshoe-shaped viewing platform at the western edge of the Canyon. It sounded great, staring at a 240-metre vertical drop through a glass floor suspended in air, but we were also told it was expensive and hard to get to.



The Railway took us back to Williams - no train robbers this time - where we stayed the night in the Railway hotel. The following morning we followed Highway 89 north to Utah and stopped at Zion National Park for a different perspective on canyon life.

Zion National Park: Utah's Largest and Most Diverse Park



There are 100 species of plants in Zion Canyon alone (Image: John Thomson)

When we were at the Grand Canyon we were looking down into a chasm. At [Zion National Park](http://www.nps.gov/zion/index.htm) (<http://www.nps.gov/zion/index.htm>) we were looking up. In fact we were on the canyon floor.

Massive sandstone cliffs with exotic names towered above. The Court of the Patriarchs, for instance, are three identical peaks named after the giants of the Old Testament, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Temple of Sinawava is named after its vertical walls and Weeping Rock actually weeps thanks to mismatching strata that allows water to seep between the cracks.

The Main Canyon is the busiest and most popular section of the park, but since cars are banned on this particular drive from May to the end of October (otherwise it's gridlock), we took a 90-minute shuttle from the Visitor Centre. It was early evening and the floor of the canyon was teeming with life. Chipmunks and squirrels scurried about. We also saw a deer.

Zion, we were told, has the greatest biodiversity of all the parks; there are 100 species of [plants in Zion Canyon](http://www.zionnational-park.com/zflora.htm) (<http://www.zionnational-park.com/zflora.htm>) alone and the roadside was brimming with herbs, ferns and grasses. A common plant in these parts, the Moon lily, blooms in evening, and by nightfall the path was lined with its white flowers.

Zion is a hiker's paradise with dozens of trails to choose from. Mountain biking, either alone or as part of a tour, is also available. Horseback riding and 4-wheel back country tours are also popular.

Finding Hoodoos in Bryce Canyon



Bryce Canyon is filled with hoodoos - colourful pinnacles created by wind and water erosion (Image: John Thomson)

From Zion we headed northeast into [Bryce Canyon National Park](http://www.nps.gov/brca/index.htm) (<http://www.nps.gov/brca/index.htm>). Bryce really isn't a canyon but an amphitheatre created by upstream erosion along the eastern side of the plateau.

Compared to its neighbours, Zion and the Grand Canyon, Bryce receives relatively few visitors but the trip was worth it. The park was full of tall, colourful pinnacles called hoodoos, created when wind and water eat away at the softer rock leaving a harder, thinner column. We had seen hoodoos in Alberta but nothing like this. Nowhere are hoodoos more abundant than at Bryce National Park. They literally filled the amphitheatre.

Peering into the bowl, we marvelled at the many shades of red, orange and white glistening in the setting sun. A final look at nature's monuments, we thought to ourselves, before returning to Vegas and its own man-made monuments. Bryce was a fitting conclusion to canyon country and a testament to the dynamic sculpting power of erosion.

John Thomson (/john-thomson), Contributor

Vancouver writer John Thomson specializes in architectural issues, urban design and travel. He writes for broadcast, print and the Web.

TAGS // [US Travel \(/Tags/Us-Travel\)](#), [Holiday Trip \(/Tags/Holiday-Trip\)](#), [Grand Canyon \(/Tags/Grand-Canyon\)](#), [Spectacular Scenery \(/Tags/Spectacular-Scenery\)](#), [Vintage Railway \(/Tags/Vintage-Railway\)](#), [Colorado River \(/Tags/Colorado-River\)](#), [Utah \(/Tags/Utah\)](#)
