

Off-season hiking in the Southwest

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With snow still clinging to most of Central Oregon's high-country trails, my wife and I headed to the Southwest on a three-week road trip. Not only did we find warm, (mostly) sunny skies and snow-free trails, but we missed some pretty rotten weather here in Sisters.

The hikes I'm highlighting here are fairly easy day-hikes that can generally be accomplished in a couple of hours, but upgrade these park visits to far more than a simple drive-through. Truth be told, my wife doesn't exactly share my enthusiasm for hiking; but she's still a pretty good sport about it. At home, when my usual hiking buddy can't make it, my wife sometimes fills in. So, she's no stranger to the hiking world; but, when she's along, I usually try to select hikes that will make her willing to hike with me again.

St. George, Utah, was our first extended stop and proved to be a good base from which to explore the area. Bryce Canyon National Park was the site of our first real hike; and it was actually a pretty tough one. At a little under three miles, I strongly recommend combining the Queen's Garden and Navajo Loop Trails at Bryce Canyon.

We'd visited Bryce Canyon before; but, until you've hiked down among the canyon's hoodoos, you haven't really seen Bryce Canyon. Normally three miles would be no big deal, but this hike's drawback is the 600-foot-plus climb back out the canyon!

The next day, the "basic" hike at Zion National Park was little more than a stroll: a two-mile round trip on a mostly flat, paved trail. The last time I was there, I went much farther up into The Narrows, but that part of the park was closed due to high water. The Narrows is a very narrow, colorful, scenic slot canyon with walls that sometimes close in to obscure the sky. Always be careful to heed park warnings about travel closures. It seems

that hardly a year goes by without the deaths at Zion of people who are caught in flash floods.

The longest stop on our trip was a week-long stay at Sedona, Arizona, which we typically visit each year. The hiking opportunities in Sedona are almost endless, and we've logged quite a few Sedona trail miles over the years. Still, we always find something new to explore. It's difficult to feature only one Sedona hike, but Devil's Bridge was a new one for me.

I hiked this 4.5-mile trip with a Sedona friend. Since I had another hiking partner, my wife opted out, especially since this one involved some vertical exposure and a bit of hand-over-hand climbing. Devil's Bridge is a picturesque arch of sandstone, tucked away among the many other scenic wonders of Sedona. My friend took me on a route that made it seem like there was no one else around — until we actually approached the bridge, where we encountered a fair number of other hikers.

This was a great hike, which couldn't be complete without venturing out onto the bridge itself. However, if you don't like heights — or suffer from vertigo — I don't recommend this stunt.

In addition to hiking, Sedona offers great dining, shopping and lots of other fun things to do. We already have our reservation for next year. After our week was up, we bid farewell to Sedona; and

our next stop was Canyon de Chelly National Monument on our way to Santa Fe, New Mexico. At Canyon de Chelly, the walks were scarcely more than a few hundred yards to scenic viewpoints. So, that doesn't really qualify for a hiking column; but it was our first visit there, and it was certainly worthwhile.

We stayed four days in Santa Fe and found two excellent hiking opportunities at nearby national monuments we had never even heard of before. The first was Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument, where we saw rock formations unlike any others we've seen. An easy half-mile trail provides plenty of closeup views, but I recommend utilizing more of the approximately three miles of available trails.

We took a 1.7-mile loop trail through the unusual rock formations that were formed from volcanic tuff that was originally more than 1,000 feet thick. Boulders strewn atop the easily eroded soft tuff provided enough protective shelter from the elements that the tuff beneath each boulder eroded into conical hoodoos resembling teepees and castle turrets. Some of the formations still have their protective cap rocks; and others have lost theirs, condemning them to more rapid erosion in the geological near-term.

Another highlight was a mile-long spur trail through an extremely narrow slot canyon, so narrow, in fact, that — at



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Hikers descend into Bryce Canyon, Utah, on the Queen's Garden Trail.

many places — it is only wide enough for one person to pass through at a time. Although dry most of the time, the canyon is as deep as 600 feet and can be subject to the flash flooding that created it.

Another unheralded highlight we discovered in the Santa Fe area is Bandelier National Monument. Nearly 1,000 feet below the New Mexican high desert, El Rito de los Frijoles (Frijoles Creek) flows through an oasis in a deep cleft in the earth. The canyon walls are made up of tuff like that at Tent Rocks, but this tuff is pockmarked with Swiss-cheese-like holes.

Centuries ago, the ancestors of today's pueblo people began taking advantage of the holes in the cliffs by enlarging them to create shelter. To view the park, and many of these ancient dwellings, there is a loop trail of only a mile and a quarter, with an additional half-mile trail (each way) to a large cliff/cave dwelling. The catch here is that, in addition

to the 2.5-mile hike, there is a 140-foot near-vertical climb up a cliff on four wooden ladders similar to those used by the original inhabitants!

We started this hike in the rain, with lightning flashing. A thousand feet below the canyon rims, however, we weren't too worried. At one point, however, rain and hail came down in such a deluge that we sought shelter in one of the ancient habitations — excellent shelter, just as it was hundreds of years ago.

We visited many other sites, but those I've mentioned here are truly exceptional and deserve your attention the next time you travel the Southwest. Even though we spent three weeks and 4,450 miles on the road, there was still a heck of a lot that we weren't able to do. It's astonishing just how much there is to see in this part of the country and how many places there are to enjoy — especially if you are willing to get out of the car and spend a little time on foot.

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