Dirty Devil River (Utah)
April 12-18, 2014

Introduction

This is a trip infused with incredible springtime beauty! Normally staid cacti are flamboyant with yellow and pink flowers. Every plant that blooms in the April desert joins the cacti in celebrating springtime rains. Waterfalls gush over canyon walls and streams twirl and dance. Beauty is serendipitous in the “dirty” lunar eclipse. Beauty is glacial as wind, water, and geologic thrust slowly shape the Dirty Devil River and its side canyons out of the exposed Chinle and Moenkopi formations. In their depth and expanse, the canyon system mimics the grandeur of the Grand Canyon. The overland trek through vast stretches of slickrock is new and spectacular. And beauty
is riotous in the life surrounding isolated pockets of water; beauty made more poignant because of the barrenness not ten feet away. Beauty is our constant companion.

* Dan had to leave on the 2nd day.

We arrive in Hanksville around 5:30; after the usual 15-17 hour journey from driveway to destination. Burr Point, our trailhead, is two hours south. In deference to our age and our improved financial situation, we now spend the first night in a hotel. We stay at Whispering Sands, the only decent motel in Hanksville. “Decent” is a very low bar in these parts. Hanksville’s motto is “an oasis in the desert” because it sits at the confluence of the Muddy River, the Fremont River, and the Dirty Devil River. But even the abundance of water could never raise its population above 250. There is nothing beautiful about hardscrabble living in the deserts of Utah. Its claim to fame is that Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid left Robbers Roost to resupply here. The two motels and three restaurants owe their existence to being a short distance from Capital Reef National Park, Canyonlands National Park, and Goblin State Park. Whispering Sands hung out the “No Vacancy” sign around 8:00 p.m. and is populated by ATV riders and other outdoor enthusiasts. We perform our duffle shuffle and each person gets approximately seven pounds of community gear. My pack weighs in at 38 pounds with two liters of water; I’m happy with that. This is the first time I weigh in under 40 pounds with water. We walk across the street to Blondie’s where I had a Philly Cheese Steak. We are in bed by 9:00.

**Day One (3 Miles)**

Before first light, I leave the room and walk the quiet streets of Hanksville. Desert mornings are amazing. The last and brightest stars still sparkle overhead; remnant of the night’s teeming heavenly hosts. The vastness of the night sky is felt in the absolute stillness and quiet. There is no “here” or “there” in stillness, only “everywhere”. Wind creates a barrier, a reminder that I and objects are separated. The complete absence of motion removes barriers and the bluffs, outlined in the creeping light of the eastern sky, and I are one.

Finally everyone is awake and we load all our hiking gear into one Suburban and all our end-of-hike gear into the second Suburban. When searching for a larger rental vehicle, we stumbled on
a deal where two Suburbs were $50 cheaper than the one mid-size SUV we had originally rented! Our conundrum of whether to find a shuttle service or a loop hike was solved. The end-of-hike Suburban we drive to Angel Point; a 40-minute drive out of Hanksville. A well-signed sandy road makes the dusk trip uneventful. A sharp right turn with deep sand makes us thankful we drive a four-wheel drive vehicle. A regular vehicle would have been hopelessly mired in the sand. On the way back from the drop off, we stop at Stan’s for breakfast – big mistake. The buffet is minimal and the milk is curdled. By 7:00, we are back on Highway 95 heading south for Burr Point. We locate the turnoff 15.6 miles out of Hanksville, and, true to form, immediately get lost. Finding the trailhead is always the hardest part of most trips, but this is epic!

How hard can it be, we think? Steve Allen’s guide book provides ten waypoints within a ten mile stretch of road. In 1.6 miles, the book states, you’ll see a spigot on the left. We see no spigot. But we travel on. “At mile marker 2.1, view Poison Spring Canyon on the right”, the book continues. Well, it could be Poison Spring Canyon, but we’re not sure. Again, we press on, paying more and more attention to every detail. And the big aggravation is that the Suburban’s odometer doesn’t have tenths of a mile! So I’m estimating the distances between waypoints. At 3.5 miles, Allen assures us, there will be a corral on the right. No corral, but there’s a corral on the left a short distance further. Now the onboard compass is reading NE and we’re suppose to be bearing mostly SE. Steve unfolds the map and Dan activates his Garmin GPS. “We’re on the wrong road”, someone says. “No”, says another, “we can’t be. It’s the only one out here! Let’s go a bit further”. But now we’re so confused that we’re not sure if what we spy is a waypoint or not. “Four hundred yards off the main road”, Scott recalls, “there was a fork. We took the left fork, maybe the right fork’s the right one.” Thirty frustrating minutes and we’re back at the paved road; one hour wasted. Cows gaze at us from a scruffy pasture, surely bemused by our antics. With renewed hope, we take the right fork. And, low and behold, a spigot appears on the left at exactly 1.6 miles! Our celebration is brief, however, because the road ends. We get out and scout around. At one time the road continued, but it was long ago washed away. We retrace our route back to the fork again and take the left fork, our original track. Knowing we have no choice, we stay on the road and end up at Burr Point. Actually we almost do a “Thelma and Louise”. The color of the
road and the distant cliffs are identical in the soft morning light and the end of the road comes up very suddenly!

A steady gale force wind buffets us as we prepare our packs. I discover I lost nearly an entire liter of water because my Nalgene lid is not tight, but Scott has extra water. We shoulder our packs at 9:40 and with the wind clawing our backs we spend a few minutes surveying our temporary home.

I am surprised and amazed by the beauty and grandeur before us. Sams Mesa Box Canyon and Twin Corral Canyon snake away to the east. Twelve hundred feet below us, the Dirty Devil River incises the Chinle plateau. The Chinle plateau is sage green because of vegetation. Beneath the Chinle are the vertical dark red cliffs of Wingate Sandstone. Like the “Red Wall” in Grand Canyon, access to the floor of the canyon is only through rare breaks in this wall. A narrow plateau separates the Kayenta Formation from the Wingate; our trail is on that plateau. The geological formations, the openness, the deep canyons, and the colors remind me of Grand Canyon, even though the depth is only a quarter. Our vantage point is higher than the eastern landscape, so the horizon extends for thirty or more miles. If we knew what we were looking for, we might be able to see The Maze of Canyonlands. Beyond the near cliffs, the green terrain undulates, the
smoothness interrupted by domes, mesas, and tiny scars until the details are lost in the morning haze. Its time to leave the rim and walk through time.

We slide down a fifty foot sand dune and arrive on gently sloping Navajo Sandstone slickrock. Slickrock reminds me of elephant hide; dry and wrinkly and tough. For over an hour, we follow cairns as we descend slowly toward the Kayenta cliffs and the steep abyss. This is an easy and enjoyable ramble, even if we occasionally lose sight of the next cairn. We leave the Navajo slickrock behind as we enter the Kayenta Formation at our first Class 4 down climb. This is a two-tiered descent with a ten-foot stepped ledge followed by a larger twenty-five foot plunge.
We stand on the rim plotting our route as clouds thicken overhead. Steve leads the way and we lower packs to him and toss down hiking poles as he guides us down. The route is a series of four or five foot vertical drops with a narrow ledge at the bottom of each segment. Some navigate the vertical drop on their butts and others face the cliff, using hand and boot friction to manage a controlled fall. We are all at the bottom in thirty minutes or so. For the rest of the day, we walk the plateau, descending gradually, and following the contour of the side canyons. From a distance, the plateau, on the other side of the side canyons, appears much too steep and narrow. But as we approach, the path becomes a wide avenue. One or two spots involve scrambling over boulder fields with a bit of exposure, but nothing scary enough to get the heart pumping or the adrenaline flowing.

But even plateaus are strenuous. Climbing in and out of small washes, done frequently, is tiring. Hiking across boulder fields is challenging and mentally taxing. And while the overall trajectory is down, lengthy ascents are common. Dan begins to struggle. During the slickrock descent, he takes up the rear. But that is to be expected, he has never descended on slickrock. But as the morning wears on, he slows noticeably. Peter hikes with him because it is his preference to hike in the rear. Just before our noon break, we scramble over boulders and ascend for ten minutes. Scott
and Steve arrive at the top ten or fifteen minutes after me, and we discuss Dan’s situation. Steve is concerned that Dan will not be able to complete the hike. I assure him that Dan is mentally tough and a lot like Peter: an “Energizer Bunny”. I also explain that he is fighting some sort of respiratory ailment he caught in China a few weeks before. But I am worried too, and feeling responsible for a possible aborted trip. Partially to avoid further discussion, I hike back down to intercept Dan and Peter. Thirty minutes back, I find them, and Dan is lying on a boulder, sweating hard. I know Steve is right. Dan is in good spirits but clearly exhausted. I shoulder his pack and hike back to Scott and Steve. Steve’s expression, when he sees me carrying Dan’s pack, speaks volumes. We eat lunch amid light rain and a hard wind. We are mid-way between rim and river. The river is now more than a gash, and has texture and features. The view to the east is confined to the river’s canyon system, the horizon stretching out to Canyonlands National Park is gone. Dan eats nothing and rest.

A short distance down the trail, but more than an hour later, we stop for a frank discussion. Steve begins the conversation. We have 400 more vertical feet to the river, he said, and if Dan gets sicker that’s 400 more feet we have to climb to get him out tomorrow. A light rain begins during our discussion, so we move to an overhang and continue. The decision is made to dry camp here, and hike Dan out tomorrow. We are left with two unknowns. What if Dan gets sicker? A healthy person can hike out in five hours, hours longer for a person with health issues. Second, what about water? We only have a total of five liters for the evening and the hike out. We discuss the possibility of two people hiking to the river to get water, but that is a four hour round trip. That will be our plan if Dan is sicker tomorrow and can’t hike out. But with only one liter each for a hard ascent, we will be severely dehydrated tomorrow.

The remainder of the afternoon and evening are spent hatching an exit plan. Peter suggests two people hike Dan out and the other two hike down to the river and wait for the rescuers to return. Steve opposes the plan because it split us up. The round-trip hike would take more than twelve hours, and the people at the river would have no idea what is happening. The final plan has us all hiking out, Dan delivering us to the second Suburban, and Dan heading for Salt Lake City in the second vehicle. Steve, Scott, Peter, and I would then carve out a five day loop. With that settled,
Steve prepares a “dry” dinner of sautéed tuna and chicken and Dan offers his freeze-dried berries. In the meantime, “Plan B” takes form as we pour over maps and the guide book. Even though we don’t have enough water, we still carefully measure eight ounces of water each for afternoon coffee. We are embarking on a dangerous journey – hours from water with a potentially incapacitated partner - but we are not about to make things worse by missing our coffee! We have an enjoyable evening lounging at the edge of a grand vista, watching the shadows climb up the eastern cliffs. The rain has stopped and the views and conversations are delightful.

**DAY TWO (5 Miles)**

Dan’s condition did not get worse and rain is imminent; both welcomed conditions! We pack quickly and begin our ascent in a heavy rain. Instantaneously, rivulets and small streams begin to form. Thirty minutes later, huge waterfalls plunge over the cliffs above us! Dozens of them all along the route provide us with a rare desert event. A firsthand look at the transformative power of water in the canyons is unforgettable. We are cold and the wind whips around us, but we are happy because we now have as much water as we need! We fill Nalgene bottles, drink until our stomachs hurt, then store two or three liters each for the ascent. One problem solved!
We still need to get Dan to the rim. He starts strong, but the ascent quickly takes its toll. At the Class 4 ascent, where the slickrock starts, he is done. We devise a plan where we leapfrog Dan’s pack out of the canyon, so he doesn’t have to carry it. The plan is too complicated to describe it writing (believe me, I tried several times!) Part of the plan has Scott walking with Dan, keeping his mind off the ascent by talking about real estate and home repairs. And so it went for several hours until we clambered up the steep sandy incline to our car. Second problem solved!

Which brings us to the third problem, which wasn’t a problem, but could have been. Every time we have done a non-loop route we hire a shuttle. And every time, we drop our car at the end and the shuttle drops us off at the start and leaves us carless. This time, the first time, we rented two vehicles, which means one was waiting for us when we emerged from this emergency! Had there not been a car waiting for us, there would have been ten sandy miles, six more hours, to the paved road. Third “problem” solved!

Going deeper into the “What if” weeds: Had it not rained, each of us would have had one liter of water for an eleven-hour hike back to the paved road (from our camp). We would not have been in danger of death by dehydration, the temperature was too mild for that, but things would have been extremely unpleasant! But because it rained and because we had a car at the trailhead, the day was nothing more than an adventure. But it does illustrate how quickly a well-planned a trek can go terribly bad.

Are these fortunate events “God things“? Months before, we decided we didn’t want to hike ten miles back to the car from Angel Point to Burr Point, so we rented two vehicles. Was that divine intervention or simply an acknowledgement that the “moon walk” between the two points was going to be unbearably boring? However, the arrival of rain is a bit more difficult to explain away. On that Sunday morning, Hanksville, 35 miles as the crow flies, received no rain. Hite Ranger Station, 25 miles to the south received no rain. Hans Flat Ranger Station, 15 miles to the east did get two-tenths of an inch. So no rain, or little rain all around, yet we received a deluge. Does God choreograph these sorts of things for unprepared hikers? I doubt it.

This adventure with Dan made me aware of something: We have become oblivious to the difficulties and dangers of canyon hiking. For example, the four canyon experts tackled the Class
4 descent as if it were no big deal, even joking as we down-climbed. We scurried about on sloping ledges that were not more than three inches wide, expertly placing hands and feet in the proper places. We knew exactly the body position required for the next move. No one hesitated or froze. No one, that is, except Dan. Dan was uncertain and awkward, and it took considerable guidance and encouragement to get him down. But no wonder! We had foolishly taken an amateur on an expert hike! It took many years of canyon hiking to develop our sense of ease and surety. In the future, we must be careful who we invite.

We drive back to Hanksville, eat burgers and drink liters of water at Blondie’s, buy extra water at Hollow Mountain, and drive out to Angel Point. Again, the wind is blowing fiercely. We say “Good-bye” to Dan, and we are back under the rim three hours after emerging at Burr Point. The hike to the Dirty Devil is a well-cairned, slickrock hike. We camp near a beaver pond not more than 100 yards from the river. It isn’t a great campsite because it is surrounded by willows and sagebrush. Rain is again threatening, so we set up the rainfly and construct a lean-to with the tarp. Steve and I sleep under the tarp and Peter and Scott occupy the rainfly. No rain develops, and the tarp stays up under some heavy winds. Steve and I sleep with our backs to the wind, and our sleeping bags are thick with sand by morning.
**Day Three (8 Miles)**

We wake early and are on the trail by 8:15. The day begins calm and clear with a deep blue sky. The plan is to hike up Robbers Roost and day hike up-canyon. Peter prepares his amazing scrambled egg breakfast with peas wrapped in a tortilla. We hike upstream along the west bank of the Dirty Devil until the river curves and the shore narrows and ends at a cliff. Crossing was easy with a solid riverbed and only eight inches of water. The route was delightful as we walked the shoreline of the river. The Dirty Devil is nothing like the Escalante River; at least not in this section. The shoreline is wide and the benches are huge. Occasionally we wander into a box canyon and explore. We arrive at the mouth of Robbers Roost in three hours. Thirty minutes up canyon we enter the south fork and make our camp in the middle of its wide and sandy mouth. A cardinal rule is never sleep in a canyon stream bed. But since the stream bed is more than 100 feet from cliff to cliff, only a rain of biblical intensity could put us in danger. We load every container we carry with water at a large seep surrounded by tall grasses twenty minutes down canyon.

![Campsite](image)

After lunch, we hike up the south fork. It was beautiful enough, I guess. But it was tame – a wide open, flat, easy route. I am reminded how even spectacular things can become ordinary. Most people, if they were dropped into this canyon, would be spellbound by its grandeur. Instead, we
walk as if we are hiking along the Lake Michigan shoreline, talking and only occasionally looking at the towering cliffs. I guess that’s why we keep looking for more challenging and more spectacular hikes. We mostly talk about our kids and God.

Meandering back to camp, we alternate our rest spots between sun and shade. The sun is too intense, even though the temperature hovers around 60, and the shade is too cold. Scott adds clothes and naps in the shade. Peter strips to his shorts and basks in the sunshine. I find a mottled bit of shade that offers both sun and shade.

Over coffee, we debate hiking to No Mans canyon via the river tomorrow. We consider it with trepidation because vivid memories of last year’s Escalante River slog haunt us still. We wonder if the Dirty Devil pace would be similar to the half-mile an hour pace we set on the Escalante. But, our brief experience with the Dirty Devil today leads us to conclude it will be “tamer”. A careful measurement of the distance tells us we will have a nine mile journey - a long, but doable, day. So, No Mans Canyon will be tomorrow’s camp.

While sipping our coffee, we also discuss topographic contour lines, and a long friendly argument ensues. I mention this incident only because Peter championed the false argument! Peter, our nearly infallible map reader, is pitted against companions who frequently (especially myself) are topographically challenged. Here’s how the discussion began. Before our day hike up the canyon, Peter warned us that we would encounter a significant pour off fairly soon after leaving camp. But the floor continued to ascend ever so gradually and the pour off never materialized. Back at camp, Peter explained his thinking; a short way up the canyon, on the map, is a thick contour line spanning from cliff to cliff. (A thick contour line, on a topographic map, represents two hundred feet up or down since the last thick contour line.) But Peter interpreted the thick line as an abrupt 200 foot rise in the terrain, or a large pour off. The rest of us argued that it simply represented the location in the terrain that is 200 feet higher than the last thick contour line, and not an abrupt change in elevation. For the longest time, Peter mounted a defense worthy of Steve’s defense against GPC technology during the Royal Arch trip, but he eventually capitulated to the indisputable evidence of the terrain we had just walked through.
Peter draws the long straw so he gets to lighten his pack by cooking his dinner. The entrée this evening is Mango Curry Chicken with lentils. Later, Steve collects firewood and we sit around a very rare canyon campfire. I must admit, it is comforting. Especially since the temperature plummets as the sun slides behind the western wall of the canyon. As the fire dies and the embers glow an angry red, we spread our tarp under a clear, azure sky. But we return to the warm and welcoming embers and stay there until 8:30. We bury the embers under a mound of sand, slide into our cozy bags, and fall asleep observing the emerging stars and the spreading milky glow of the moon still hidden behind the greying cliffs. At 2:30, I wake to pee. Groggily I stand off the tarp, and observe that something is different about the lighting. Expecting the mercury-light intensity of a full moon, I notice my surroundings are darker than it should be. Everything is dusky and mysterious. I glance up and see a dirty, brown moon with a thin sliver of silver in the lower right edge. I missed a full lunar eclipse by fifteen minutes! I wake the gang and we watch the sliver become a scythe before I drift back to sleep. What a pleasant surprise.

Day Four (9 Miles)

The dawn temperature is in the lower 20s! A rime of frost covers everything in the still of the morning. Scott brought only a summer bag, perhaps rated down to 40, so he got very little sleep last night. My bag is comfortable down to around the upper 20s, if I wear my down vest. So, I slept reasonably well, but was chilly at times. Bottom line: Always subtract 5 to 10 degrees from
any NOAA forecast! Getting the body limber and warm takes longer than usual this morning! I throw my sleeping bag over Scott to give him a few minutes of warmth and briskly walk up canyon for fifteen minutes as I begin to thaw. The nine-mile hike to No Mans Canyon is along the river, and we decide to take the overland route coming back. Seven hours later, we are fifteen minutes up canyon in No Mans Canyon at a glorious campsite.

It takes a long time for the temperature to inch back into the 50s. The sun is behind cliffs, so we are in shadows most of the morning. I keep my fleece, wool cap, and gloves on until lunch. The hike is a combination of bench walking and river walking. The depth of the main channel rarely exceeds ten inches, so walking in the water is mostly easy. The center is always sandy and solid. The river bed close to the banks is another matter. Sandbars that looked solid quickly collapse and eat your leg up to the calf. Once or twice, I nearly left a sandal in a mucky maw. Five duckies share the river with us for a few hours. This is the party that was camped just south of the mouth of Robbers Root this morning. But the water is cold, and I don’t warm up until the rays of the sun consistently penetrate to the canyon floor around noon.

Mid-afternoon we enter the mouth of No Mans Canyon. It is wide and overgrown with Coyote Brush, Mesquite, Rabbitbrush, and Dessert Willows. We rest in the puny shade of a Creosote Bush and pushed on into the canyon, looking for Allen’s “constructed cattle trail”.
Thirty minutes up canyon, we camp on a huge bench across from the exit route. A large seep fifty yards away offers plenty of clean water. I take a sponge bath far downstream before the sun disappears behind the cliff. Then we spread out the tarp and get some sun. Steve, who has an even harder time sitting still than I do, scrambles up the cattle trail and disappears around a bend. Even know where the cattle trail is, it is difficult to follow it up to the top. Obviously, this cattle trails have seen better days! I would give a cow a 30% chance of making it to the top today. Or, maybe cows were more nimble-footed back in 19th century!

We assemble the rain fly thinking it might keep Scott a bit warmer, but Steve, Peter, and I sleep on the tarp. The rest of the nights were considerably warmer than the night in Robbers Roost, and Scott was never bone-chilling cold again. We had coffee late, around 6:00, and then Peter cooks a great “comfort meal” of chicken, vegetables, mashed potatoes, and gravy around 7:00. We talk until 9:00 and climbed into our bags and watch the stars fade away as the moon rises. I wake to pee and notice the glorious and brilliant full moon is again ruling the sky. I scamper back into my bag, observe the Ansel-Adams texture of the cliffs, and let the warmth of the bag enveloped me once again. In a short time, I fall back into a restful sleep.
Day Five (6 Miles)

It is 20 degrees warmer than yesterday! We pack for a day hike up No Mans Canyon. We leave at 9:00 and return around 3:00. The North Fork is a beautiful canyon. We pass seeps and pools for the first hour. Thirty minutes up canyon, we are stopped by a six foot pour off with a large, deep pool at its base. The pool is easy to by-pass on the left. We hoist Steve and then the rest of us used his leg as an anchor to clamber up. The canyon floor is littered with boulders but the hiking is fairly easy. Two hours into the hike, the canyon widens and opens up and the rest of the hike is on slickrock. After a brief bit of sunshine early in the morning, the sky clouds up and threatens rain most of the day.
Our plan had been to hike the main fork of No Mans, and we thought we were in it, but we discovered later that we are in the North Fork. So, we re-read Steve Allen’s instruction again carefully knowing we are not in the right canyon. Allen writes:

The main fork of No Mans Canyon is easy to miss in all the underbrush. It comes in from the east at a fall that is ten feet above stream level. There is a large spring-fed pool at its base...To get into the canyon it is easiest to climb a cottonwood tree for the first ten feet.

After reading that, we don’t feel so bad about missing the junction; it’s a very obscure junction! Hiking up canyon that morning we had not seen a falls (pour off), a pool, or a cottonwood. But hiking down canyon in the afternoon, we carefully looked at landmarks through more informed eyes. On our left, we discovered a ten foot pour off, not a fall, and realized that that was the entrance to the main canyon. In my mind, a “fall” means a perpetual cascade of water. And a “pour off” implies a seasonal cascade of water. But there is no cottonwood anywhere in the vicinity. But the guide book was written more than fifteen years ago and the tree was probably
pushed over and dragged away during a spring flood. And the large pool of water was a depression with “fossilized” mud. So, missing the cues in the morning is understandable.

But, now, we had a quest: To find a way into the main fork! Steve and Peter spend considerable time and energy moving large logs over to the pour off, but nothing was big or safe enough. So, we hike down canyon looking for breaks in the cliff. In about 200 yards, we find a break and begin our ascent. Nearly invisible signs of human traffic tells us we are on the right route. The route is steep and we spy the main canyon below us. We down climb twelve feet using a gnarled tree for support. But at the rim we can’t find a safe descent. There may have been a route further up canyon, but we don’t investigate.

At the pour off, nearly back at camp, Peter, Steve, and Scott decide to swim the pool. I’m not a big fan of cold water, so I watch. Steve and Scott take the plunge first, huffing, snorting, and hooting all the way down. Then Peter has the idea of jumping from a 25-foot overhang. After sanity triumphs, he moves down to a ten-foot ledge. However, that ledge isn’t sufficiently over the water, so he decides to move down to the edge of the pool to duplicate Scott and Steve’s plunge. Instead, he slips and slides into the water in a most undignified way, and he too huffed, snorted, and hooted as he swam to the other side!

Back at camp, Peter reads tomorrow’s overland description out loud as we sunbath. We have found that the details and nuances of a trail description are best understood when read orally. We have coffee and braise two salmon steaks, and I prepare my Mexican Corn Pie meal. But I think it’s time to retire that recipe because no one commented on it. While lounging around, Scott said, “Look, a scorpion!” It had the pale translucent look of a scorpion and it was the right size, but it was a Jerusalem Cricket. I move it fifty yards away.

**Day Six (7 Miles)**

Our final hike begins at 8:00 and ends back at the car around 5:30. It was a hard and hot hike but the scenery was spectacular. Allen’s description of the route is unambiguous and accurate; we never are unsure of where we are or where we need to go. Because we are hiking through a trackless desert, this is a good thing. The climb out of No Mans Canyon is a slog. The cow trail is
in better shape than it looks from the ground. There is no exposure. Arriving on the mesa, I am
struck by the quintessential vastness of this desertscape. My awareness of the harsh beauty
before me is accentuated by our isolation. There is no car to escape into in a few minutes. The
desert and I have a temporary agreement. I can sojourn into its fragile and rare treasures, if I am
respectful.

The Henry Mountains, 25 miles to the west, with their snow covered peaks offer a pleasant
diversion from the endless sand. The sandy trail ends in less than an hour, and then the slickrock
hiking begins. Miles and miles of beautiful undulating slickrock spread out in front of us. This
proved to be one of my finest hiking days in a long while. The terrain slopes and contours like a
mammoth skateboard park. Sand fills the bottom of large bowls giving the impression of nearly
empty bowls of corn grits. The surface is wrinkled like the skin of an elephant. The endless
horizon, the stunningly blue sky, and the barren chalky white slickrock create a surreal beauty;
like a landscape in a science fiction movie. Some climbs are Class 4, but sandstone is so rough
that the danger of slipping is rare. If the foot gets a foothold, no matter how tiny, it will hold.
Describing a particularly dicey scramble near the overlook of Saw Tooth Ridge, Allen writes “Let
the fun begin!” That one got the adrenalin flowing! During our morning break on a high point,
we see our vehicle on the other side of the incision hiding the Dirty Devil. Frequently, we see the
Dirty Devil four or five hundred feet below and are able to locate landmarks we hiked passed two days ago. This is a glorious walk in unbelievably beautiful country!
Lunch is a quarter mile from the Angel Trail and at the bottom of a 150-foot ascent. Steve tries his chimney skills in a small slot canyon but gets wet. During the hottest part of the day, we climb up to Angel Trail and then make our way down to the river. An hour after lunch, we arrive at the river but not without incident. Steve twisted his ankle and Peter is suffering from the intense heat. We splash water on our hats and shirts, but keep moving because there is no shade.

We cross the river and find shade in Angel Cove. We fill our water containers, rehydrate, and discuss what to do next. We decide that we will hike out instead of camp in the cove for these reasons. First the campsite is lousy because of overuse. Second, we aren’t sure in what condition Steve’s ankle will be in the morning. It could stiffen and swell overnight. Third, there is a large and loud party on the other side of the river. So we eat Scott’s freeze-dried dinner, drink coffee and continue hiking. Steve’s ankle is excruciating when it is hyper-extended while traversing slick rock mounds. But he stoically perseveres and two hours later we are back on the rim.

We drive to Torrey and stay at the Best Western. After showering, we drive to Café Diablo for a world-class meal. In Salt Lake City, the next day, we have another incredible meal at the Red Iguana.