

SOUTH WEST ADVENTURE CARAVAN

After four years of Airstreaming, three WBCCI caravans, some 45 states visited, and some 50,000 miles trailer travel, I look back and think about the moments which make for the most impressive and memorable time on the road. No doubt that a very first time caravan experience will be exciting, and added to the sheer awesome beauty and uniqueness of the four states of Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico, this is a stellar moment in Airstream travel. To cap it all the experience and knowledge of our caravan leaders, Jay & Elna Thompson with Phil & Margie Glassey, made this caravan a stunning lifetime experience!



Map of the NPS sites visited on the SWA Caravan.

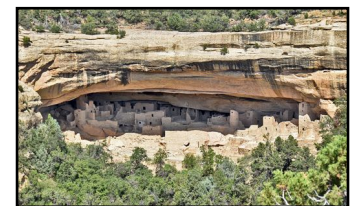
Some basic caravan logistics bear thinking about: 30 Airstreams, 52 days, 14 campgrounds with 3 dry camping for 10 nights, 40 days at over 5,000 ft breathtaking altitude, 500 miles towed itinerary with 1,600 miles on our truck, 8 National Parks, 13 National Monuments or Historic sites, and several State Parks. Activities were numerous and varied - steam railway, fly fishing, hot air balloon ride, rafting the Colorado, great dinners and shows, and the ultimate dream spectacle the - world famous Albuquerque Balloon fiesta. From Durango to Santa Fe, this was a concentrated and highly active caravan, making it a thrilling experience every step of the journey!

One way to become integrated into the spirit of the caravan is to volunteer for a role. Bob Martel, Carol Dion and I formed the photography group and curated the collective imagery for the caravan. After a few days of observing which travelers seemed to be competent with a camera, we solicited their best photos via USB drive and built a visual record of the caravan to be presented at the final banquet with copies to be shared with all participants. At the same time, we created a FaceBook group for the caravan and encouraged folks to submit their part of the story. The caravan's journey on Facebook as seen through over half the Airstreamers pairs of eyes is viewable at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/725843230889240/> and provides a permanent visual and commentary archive of our journey.

Without a shadow of doubt the lasting memory from this caravan is the succession of National Parks. Since most of us were holders of America the Beautiful (Golden Age) passes, entry fees were nil. Starting from our dry campground within the Mesa Verde park, we explored the cliff dwellings and crawled through tunnels, scrambled up ladders, and pondered the fate of the Anasazi Indian population that suddenly disappeared 700 years ago. Next on our voyage of discovery we were treated to the natural erosion that created red rock arches, windows and bridges - the difference is how they were formed. Bridges that span a canyon are created by a stream or river erosion. Arches and windows are created by rock weakness coupled with wind and rain erosion, arches being more common at ground level like a doorway and windows higher up above ground level.



Owachomo Natural Bridge NP spans 180 ft near Bluff, Utah.



Cliff dwellings pueblos in the Mesa Verde NP were evacuated by 1300 AD.

We moved on to the three National Park gems, Bryce Canyon, Zion and Grand Canyon. Bryce is a giant natural amphitheater with a unique freeze-thaw geological erosion creating hoodoos, the most distinctive ones have names like Thor's Hammer,

the Sentinel, Sinking Ship and Queen Victoria. This is a terrific setting for a half-day mule ride twisting and turning on narrow cliff edge trails. Zion is extra popular with young hikers and can get very crowded. We caught the park shuttle up the canyon past The Sentinel and the Great White Throne to the Riverwalk and the Narrows, splashed in the Virgin River, then dropped back to the Emerald Pools trail for a scenic hike down the valley. Later that day on my birthday we checked out the Zion Lodge for an open-air dinner on the terrace. The next stop at the North Rim dry campground in the forest was impressive, as was the view from the lodge and the venison dinner in the lodge. The difficult and lengthy road access to the North Rim reduces the influx of casual tourists making this a much more peaceful and inspirational visit. Walking the canyon rim trails at sunset with a 10 mile wide and one mile deep perspective is perhaps one of the most rewarding moments of our journey and perhaps in life!



Spectacular dining in the Grand Canyon north rim lodge.



Durango to Silverton steam railway makes its way up the Animas River valley through the San Juan National Forest.

Amongst the many memorable activities the caravan organized was a live steam coal burning narrow gauge railway trip from Durango to the mining boomtown of Silverton, about a four hour ride and 3,000 ft increase in elevation through impossible terrain, over canyons, past waterfalls, lurching through tunnels in an old world railroad coach. After lunch in a historic mining town bar we returned to Durango along the scenic Million Dollar Skyway admiring the high peak vistas in the comfort of a motor coach that completed a spectacular day in the Rockies.

Page Arizona campground at Wahweap, on an unprecedented low water level Lake Powell, was base for several awesome excursions. We were bused to a landing through a high security tunnel to the massive Glen Canyon power station to board



Glen Canyon hydroelectric dam retains Lake Powell providing a huge man-made lake to explore on cruises.



Rafting the Colorado River on large 20-passenger inflatables down to Horseshoe Bend.



Upper and Lower Antelope Canyon provided stunning

the Upper Antelope Canyon in Indian managed territory was beyond all expectations. Our cameras were ready for the extraordinary symphony of red rocks, indirect light and magic dust plus a few photographic filters to accentuate the imagery, unbelievably gorgeous photos we discovered later that day after we downloaded the amazing imagery we had captured! Next day we independently checked in to the Lower Antelope Canyon tour and marveled at the longer, deeper and single route traffic that enabled us to capture a differing "National Geographic" photographic memory of a unique geological marvel out of this world experience.

It just kept getting better and better as we lucked out and were assigned a pre-dawn flight with master balloonist Bill Lee, the New Mexico tourism advisor, and joined him in the basket of the "Spirit of New Mexico" hot air balloon for some close maneuvering over rock outcrops near Gallup and a flight to the

very large inflatable boats awaiting us on the Colorado River. For a leisurely two hours we navigated downstream through turbulent waters, landing on a beach and then doing a loop around Horseshoe Bend before returning to the dam. Serious fun! The next day the photographic highlight of the entire voyage was visiting the Antelope Canyons! I mention this in the plural since we visited three Antelope Canyons! First, on our cruise on Lake Powell, our captain navigated us down an ever-narrowing fluvial canyon where the ship's gunwales almost touched the red sandstone walls on either side of the boat. Our next visit to



Launching Spirit of New Mexico balloon which we rode over the sandstone hills around Gallup, NM.

red rock sandstone highlands beyond. What a trip: the roar of the burners, the fickle but subtle winds that changed directions at lower and higher altitudes, the peace and total quiet of a suspended flight with virtually no motion, and the unreal farming and rural native tribal landscapes below us!

Hot air balloons made for the grand finale of this caravan. How fortunate to be in the second row of dry camping Airstreams at the world famous Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta featuring hot air balloons from around the world, not just one day but three days. The best time to view the frenzy of balloonist preparation is pre-dawn at least an hour



Albuquerque Balloon Festival features over 500 balloons in a mass ascension.



Balloons ascend at dawn prior to sunrise and the hot air propane gas firings provide a blast of color in the dark sky.

before sunrise as volunteer teams set up their balloons. The roar of gas burners illuminates the night as the balloons lie horizontally. After multiple firings the balloons take shape and begin to rise to a normal vertical launch position. If you can imagine this launch process with 550 balloons and avid spectators freely wandering around amongst this organized chaos in twilight, then you have captured the essence of the fiesta! A select group of a dozen balloons takes off initially to test the winds aloft and act as forecasters for the mass ascension. Row by row balloons are given lift off authorization by the balloon air traffic controllers and the sight of dozens

of balloons of all shapes, sizes, and designs drifting together along with the staggered propane burner firings lighting up the pre dawn sky are just breath taking.

Several other memorable caravan moments are worth noting. A day fly-fishing at high elevation included training and being taken to lakes where we caught and released numerous trout. We really wanted to take them home with us to grill! A few days later a Navajo guided tour through Monument Valley encouraged us all to relax and "lie back on the rock" and contemplate the Big Hogan sky hole in the dome eroded in the cliff, and helped us understand Navajo language, customs, and ancient rituals. This was very much an existential experience in the stunning and beautiful scenery found nowhere else in the United States! Another afternoon was spent in the Gallup NM Indian Trading post surrounded by Navajo handcrafted carpets, silver and turquoise jewelry. We were treated to an in-depth history of the trading post and a detailed buyers guide to the rug collection including interpretation of the Navajo designs. Later it was commented that our Airstream group collectively spent well over \$20,000 in the Richardson Trading Post!



Classic and iconic Monument Valley is strictly Navajo territory.



The strange spaceship stone engravings at Petroglyph NP.

So much in our 52 day odyssey remains to be described and enthused about, but that's something that hopefully you will experience one day on your own South West Adventure whether it's on this caravan or via independent travel or with a few Airstream friends.

The beauty of the South West Adventure caravan is undoubtedly visiting the Crown Jewels of the National Park system with the added bonus of all the reservations and activities reserved for you ahead of the trip. All you have to do is turn up and drive! Kudos to our volunteer leaders Jay and Phil for the huge hour by hour planning and organization effort

that starts well over a year ahead of the actual journey!



The Zion Canyon Virgin River passes through the Narrows.

In retrospect, as newbies, this caravan brought us together with many other like-minded Airstream travelers. Over 7 weeks of joint activities we shared tasks, carpooled, enjoyed dinners, described our lives at GAM's (get acquainted meetings), hiked together, shared our ideas and genuinely bonded with many of our companions. We meet frequently with many Airstream couples from

this and other caravans and travel on trips to destinations we've chosen together. Being part of the South West Adventure satisfied a lot of our life goals!



Margaret & David Broad (WBCCI #2381) from Tappahannock Virginia, traveling 8 months of the year since July 2016 in their 2015 Flying Cloud 25 RB. We are ascending over New Mexico in the "Spirit of New Mexico" official balloon sponsored by the state of New Mexico. Their travel blog is at www.flyingcloud25.blogspot.com and David also publishes an Airstream improvement discussion at www.facebook.com/airstreamtweaks.
