

The Wild West

by Nia M. Sherony

Two years ago, I took a memorable trip out West with my family (Mom, Dad, little brother and sister, grandparents, granduncle). We started near Surprise, Arizona and ended up in Las Vegas. Along the way we stopped at the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon and Zion National Park. I loved them all -- but what astounded me was how much more there was to the West than just these three famous parks. There were incredible geological sights everywhere! My favorite thing about the trip was how different the entire landscape was from the East Coast where I have lived for so much of my life.



Slide 1: This is a shot of my siblings and I (Brynna, Me, Derek) on the trip. In the background, you can see Bell Rock in Sedona, Arizona. Close-up in the next image.



Slide 2: Close-up of my younger brother with Bell Rock. This was one of the first sights on our journey. Composed of layers of red sandstone, Bell Rock stands nearly 5,000 feet tall.



Slide 3: This is a shot of picnickers at Crescent Moon Ranch. If you were to look up, you would be able to see the Cathedral Rock formation in the background. The water is actually very clear in Oak Creek because the creek is carved from red sandstone – a comparably hard rock that is difficult to weather. Two young people asked if I wanted to jump in the water and go for a swim with them, but I forgot my swimsuit! This is something I will not forget next time... Also, one reason the water in this image might be a bit muddy is because of the small dam pictured above, trapping sediments.



Slide 4: This is the Chapel of the Holy Cross, better known as the "Cathedral Rock Church," a tiny church built right into this rock formation. Built in the 1950s, the entire front of the church is a window, looking out in an incredible view of the surrounding scenery. We found out the hard way that they don't actually have Mass there anymore.



Slide 5: Welcome to sunset Crater and the surrounding cinder hills. Sunset Crater is a cinder cone volcano, the most common type, and it erupted about 900 years ago. You can see the dip in the top of the volcano. The eruption literally blew the top of the volcano off!



Slides 6 and 7: In the top image, nearby igneous lava flows close to the volcano. In the bottom image, “cinders” which erupted from the volcano. The ground was literally covered with these -- like a sort of natural gravel -- low density chunks of igneous rock with trapped air bubbles hidden inside. These fragments were spewed as liquid from the volcano and froze upon contact with the air.

My younger brother, Derek, had wanted to take some of the cinders with him, but my grandfather told him it was bad luck to remove nature. Derek was perturbed enough to leave his rocks behind.



Slide 8: This shot was taken inside Bryce Canyon. The most incredible thing in Bryce Canyon were the hoodoos. Yes, that is their real name. These tall, thin columns of rock are formed when layers of soft rock are protected by layers of harder rock from weathering. Weathering typically takes place via acidic rainwater and freezing (also called freeze-thaw cycles). My sister, Brynna, and I were very surprised to find a number of tall trees at the bottom of the canyon, too. We felt like we were walking through the setting in “The Land Before Time.”



Slide 9: Yes, we are in the hot West, but let’s not forget that some of the warmest places used to be icy. The stripy, zig-zaggy pattern on the mountain on the right side were carved by glaciers many years ago.

In Conclusion...

I had a lot of fun on my trip out West. Not only was it great family time, but I learned so much geologically and culturally about the land between the coasts. The whole time, I kept a journal and took several hundred pictures (not to mention all the pictures my relatives took -- my grandpa is a passionate birder and my granduncle just loves photography).

You will notice that I did not include a lot of images from the Grand Canyon, Bryce or Zion. I have those, too, but I wanted to show how much you can see in the world, just by driving along a road or stopping for a picnic. From the astounding road-cuts and beautiful mountains of Central Pennsylvania to the breathtaking canyons and rock formations of Arizona, the world really is my oyster, and there is so much more I want to see.

Thanks for the opportunity to make this V-Trip. I had a good time looking back at my photographs and picking which ones to use. I hope you caught the fun mood of the trip from some of the pictures, but I also hope looking at some of my experiences was neat for you, just hearing you talk so passionately about the natural world is a lot of fun for me as a student.