

Grand Circle Trip May 10-19, 2006 – Travel Notes

Items in *italics* were possibilities that didn't happen, for one reason or another.

Wednesday, May 10: Las Vegas

Probably the biggest challenge of the trip was getting together at the airport the first day. Actually, it wasn't too bad, it just took a while. As it turned out, Aunt Miriam's flight was delayed (Dave said there was bad weather in Texas that could have impacted them) so she and Mom arrived about the same time, 35-45 minutes after me. Considering I was watching for Mom (she had called me to let me know she was in), it was pretty bad that I was staring off into space when she walked up to me! Shortly we got together with Aunt Miriam and had our luggage, and then it was off to rent the car.

I'm used to renting from Avis and National, where I basically get to pick my car and go. I'd reserved a car with Hertz because they had a "luxury" upgrade deal that sounded like it would be more room and more comfortable – a Crown Vic-size car. Well...besides having to wait in line for one of 2-3 very busy employees, they didn't have the car I wanted. So, I accepted a \$5/day upgrade to a minivan...and found that (a) it had a broken taillight and (b) the "door open" light wouldn't go off, even when an employee helped me. I really didn't want a minivan anyway, so it was back to the desk where they got me a Camry instead, and knocked off enough on the price so it turned out to be about the same as the Avis rate for the same-size car. I'm not happy with Hertz but at least they worked to make it right.

So, after all that fun, the next challenge was to get checked in to the Luxor. There was a long line there too...and then a LOOOONG walk across the casino to get to the "inclinator" to our room on the 12th floor of the pyramid. It was fun to stay in the pyramid and have a slanted wall; the Egyptian décor was amusing; "inclinators" were an interesting concept – the change in motion was largely unnoticeable but I did occasionally realize they weren't going straight up.

I knew there was a lot to see in Las Vegas and we wouldn't see very much of it – just too much walking required and not enough time anyway.

- Bellagio Hotel & Casino – we saw the dancing waters only briefly from the street, during the day and at night. I'd really like to see it when I'm not driving! We went to the Bellagio the last morning of the trip to see if we could park and walk back to the fountain area; to do so required going through the (huge) casino, so we gave up on it.
- Fremont Street light show (Fremont Street Experience) – it was interesting to see a movie screen several blocks long, but the movie was only about 5-10 minutes long. I guess they want to get you there and then get you into the casinos.

- The Garden Court Buffet at the Main Street Station Hotel & Casino was OK, not as good as the guidebook made it sound even if it was relatively inexpensive (~\$11 for dinner)

Thursday, May 11: Las Vegas to Zion National Park ~172 miles

- I-15: Virgin River Gorge, “some of the most dramatic 8 miles or so of interstate driving in America” – Very impressive; more so on the return trip, but I didn’t try to stop on the way back to take more pictures.
- Lunch at the Kaleidoscope Café, just off I-15 at Utah Rt. 9 – slow service but good sandwich and salads; beautiful roses on the parkway outside
- Kolob Reservoir Road (from Virgin) – paved at least 22 miles to Lava Point, exceptional views of w. side of Zion – We drove the first part, up to the point where the road leaves Zion National Park for the first time. It was a nice start to the trip and probably let us see more of Zion from the car than we could once we got into the valley.
- *Smithsonian Butte Scenic Byway*
Start at Bridge Road in Rockville. ~1 hour round trip (~9 miles one way) – We skipped this due to time, also due to some concerns I had about the road quality. We made up for skipping this gravel/dirt road later...
- **Zion National Park**
 - ✓ Temple of Sinawava – best in early afternoon
 - ✓ Great White Throne – best mid-afternoon
 - Saw both of these mid-to-late afternoon from the bus; some photos; didn’t get the best time for either one
 - ✓ Riverside Walk: ~2 miles round trip, ~2 hours (late morning is best for photography, but we were able to be there in the late afternoon) – at end of Scenic Drive – didn’t walk all of this, maybe spent 45 minutes; very pretty place. The “hanging gardens” and just the general lush vegetation around the Virgin River are quite impressive. The Zion Valley is really an oasis in the desert!
 - ✓ Emerald Pools Trail - 1-3 hours from lodge – Mom and I both went to the Lower Emerald Pool early Friday morning; I went on up to the Middle Pool. Photos tell the story – well worth the hike. I think the hike to the Middle Pool and back took me about 2 hours, including a long photography break at the lower pool.
 - ✓ *Weeping Rock Trail – ½ mile round trip – Skipped this one*
- Dinner at the Pioneer Restaurant in Springdale - very good, including homemade pies
- It was great to stay in the park at Zion. The rooms at all three lodges we stayed at were pretty basic, but plenty for our needs. Being able to walk around the lawn area at the lodge in the evening and going out on the trails early in the morning was a lot better than having to leave and stay in Springdale; however, at least at Zion there are plenty of nearby accommodations and it isn’t too far from the park entrance to the “good stuff”.

Friday, May 12: Zion to Bryce ~85 miles

- We had breakfast at the lodge – this particular lodge only offered a buffet. As it included coffee and juice, \$9 apiece wasn't bad, but the food was pretty average.
- **Zion National Park**
 - ✓ *Towers of the Virgin at sunrise – according to my photography book, the view from right behind Zion Museum is the “most beautiful panorama at sunrise in Zion”, need grad ND – I skipped this as long as I was already in the park at the lodge; it was a good plan, since I really enjoyed the hike to the Emerald Pools*
 - ✓ Court of the Patriarchs – best [for photography] sunrise to mid-morning – very nice when I went there 9:30ish
- Rt. 9 Scenic Drive through the eastern part of Zion National Park – Wow, what a road this is! The view from the switchbacks and traveling through the first, VERY LONG tunnel is pretty amazing. I don't think I've ever been in a tunnel with windows (just openings in the rock) before.
 - ✓ Canyon Overlook Trail: East of Zion Canyon (just east of westernmost tunnel), ~1 hour, 1 mile round trip – I'm very glad I knew where the trailhead was for this, or I wouldn't have been prepared to pull into the parking area after we got through the tunnel. It was an excellent hike though as an “easy” hike it was FAR less easy than the paved trail to the Lower Emerald Pool.
 - ✓ Checkerboard Mesa – bizarre cross-pattern of ridges in the rock
- Lunch at the restaurant at the Best Western Motel at the intersection of Rt. 9 and Rt. 89 – The food was good, watching the hummingbirds at the feeders outside was even better.
- Rt. 12 Scenic Drive (guidebook advice: don't start this before noon, so you aren't driving into the sun) – “perhaps the best scenery from the car of any drive in the entire country” – after driving Rt. 12 from Rt. 89 to its northeastern end at Torrey, I have to agree with this superlative. Rt. 12 has amazing scenery all along.
- Red Canyon State Park (Pink Ledges Trail, by Visitor Center, ~20 mins) – a place mentioned in one of my photography books, and one where I was really glad we stopped. The 20 minute hike involved a good bit of climbing but really did take about 20 minutes, WITH pictures, and was very scenic.
- East Fork of Sevier Scenic Backway (Forest Road 087) on right at crossing of E. fork of the Sevier. 30 mile backway – drive part of it. (2 lane road to the reservoir, ~8 miles) – We drove the first few miles and didn't find it interesting at all, so we went back to the main road and headed on to Bryce.
- **Bryce Canyon National Park**
 - All the overlooks are to the east of the park road; to avoid making left turns across traffic, drive all the way to the end (south) then stop on the way back. Can't see much from the road – have to get out and look!
 - ✓ Fairyland Overlook – on left 1 mile off main road, **before** fee station, often missed by visitors – No wonder either, we discovered there isn't a sign for Fairyland Overlook when you're entering the park! We stopped there on our way out, though, and were glad we did – it is very

impressive. *Follow the first 1500 feet of the Fairyland Trail to promontory to left of viewpoint – by the time we got there, it was time to move on so I didn't go for this walk; this was photographic advice anyway and we were there at noon.*

- ✓ Sunset Point – near lodge – nice place to watch the sunset with a lot of other people with cameras. Setting up with a DSLR on a tripod is a conversation starter!
- ✓ Sunrise Point – near lodge – a popular place in the morning; I also went there to see the scenery after moonrise.
- ✓ Yovimpai Point – see the full Grand Staircase to the south – I went there (a short trail from Rainbow Point) but it was pretty hazy
- ✓ *Sunset Point to Inspiration Point ~20 minutes – didn't do this*
- ✓ *Navajo Trail from Sunset Point, into canyon, back up to Sunrise Point by Queen's Garden Trail ~2 hours– didn't do this; took a short hike along the Rim Trail past Sunrise Point in the morning; that and the mule ride were enough.*
- ✓ **See Bryce Canyon with the (almost) full moon!** – I was glad the guidebooks mentioned this; mostly it wasn't really a great photo opportunity but it was quite different being out there at night. I did get a couple of neat pictures.

If we had gone out to each, we probably would have wound up at Ruby's Inn Canyon Diner (near park entrance); as it was, we ate crackers and trail mix and called it a day. The room we had at the Bryce Canyon Lodge reminded me a lot of the ones at Zion, with a small outdoor "balcony"/sitting area (ours was on the ground floor). The lodge consisted of several buildings spread around maybe 100 yards from the Rim Trail.

Saturday, May 13: Bryce to Torrey/Capitol Reef ~112 miles

~3 hours including stops

- Again, we had breakfast at the lodge; they had options other than the buffet, which suited us fine – I didn't want a huge breakfast before spending a morning on the trail.
- **Bryce Canyon National Park**
 - ✓ Be at Sunset Point or Sunrise Point at dawn! – I chose Sunrise Point, along with quite a few other people (some still in their pajamas/lounge pants). I also had a nice walk along the Rim Trail from Sunrise Point.
 - ✓ ½ day horseback (well, muleback for me, since I'm a novice) ride into Bryce Canyon including Peek-a-Boo Trail – this was a great way to see a lot of Bryce in about 3 hours 45 minutes. The Peek-a-Boo Trail was probably the nicest part – I was glad I didn't just go for the 2-hour ride down into the canyon and back. I was covered in dust when I got back – fortunately, it seemed as though only the outside of my camera needed cleaning.
- Rt. 12 Scenic Drive Bryce->Torrey, UT – lots of great overlooks to stop at en route, especially the 57 miles from Escalante to Torrey (part of this area is the **Grand Staircase/Escalante National Monument**). The route was amazingly

scenic; I didn't do well at capturing it in photographs (partly because of the time of day, early- to mid-afternoon). Notes from my "Scenic Drives in Utah" book plus a few from other sources:

- ✓ After Henrieville, pass "The Blues" – cliffs of colored clay
- ✓ "nothing for the next 30 miles except some of the finest, most unspoiled high desert scenery you will ever see from a paved road"
- ✓ 10 miles east of Escalante (descending into Escalante River Canyon), sign at overlook says you can see forever here on a clear day – we saw the sign but it was too hazy to see forever
- ✓ 14 miles east of Escalante, Boynton Overlook
- ✓ *4 miles further: Head of Rocks – missed this one*
- ✓ Hogback Ridge – drop-offs on both sides; there is an overlook there but of course that isn't at the narrowest point!
- ✓ 11 miles past Boulder, Homestead Overlook (close to the 9400-ft high pt of drive from Escalante to Torrey)
- ✓ 2 miles past Homestead – Steep Creek
- ✓ 8.5 miles past Homestead, Larb Hollow

We made it to Torrey in plenty of time to go to 5PM Mass at a very small church, St. Anthony of the Desert (capacity: about 25 – and it was full). I even had time for a much-needed shower and change of clothes beforehand! We had dinner after church at the nearby Capitol Reef Inn & Café - 360 West Main St., Torrey, (435-425-3271), which had good choices for both vegetarians and non-vegetarians (good desserts, too).

In Torrey we stayed at the Comfort Inn – Capitol Reef (435-425-3866). It was a very nice new motel – my only minor regret was that after paying a few dollars extra for a view, our room was behind the stairwell so the "view" was limited. It was a very impressive view of the west edge of Capitol Reef, though. We used Mom's AAA membership to get a discount on the room, and the price included an adequate breakfast.

- **Capitol Reef National Park**

- ✓ *At Panorama Point (see below), go 1 mile further south on dirt/gravel road, 1 mile round-trip foot trail to Sunset Point. Short trail to Goosenecks Overlook is here also – by the time we got to this part of the day, I was too tired to go hiking, so I didn't go looking for this. I knew we would see goosenecks later in the trip anyway.*

Sunday, May 14: Capitol Reef to Moab ~156 miles (base route), probably 200 miles the way we went.

It might have been ~3 hours from Capitol Reef to Moab if we'd gone there directly; as it was, it took about 5½ -6 hours after we left the Capitol Reef Scenic Drive. The side trips were WELL worth a little more time, and we got to Moab by 6PM which was plenty early enough.

- **Capitol Reef National Park**

- ✓ Panorama Point – 4 miles past west entrance of park, 0.15 mile south - Overlook for Capitol Reef before getting to the Scenic Drive and Visitors Center; good in morning (which it was)
- ✓ Capitol Reef Scenic Drive ~90 minutes + side trips; allow ½ day; this was about right for us.
 - Grand Valley Wash – “sort of like taking a Disneyland ride in your own car” – I’m not sure what Disney ride the author of that line was thinking of, but there were certainly surprising views around each bend.
 - Capitol Gorge – “It is hard to imagine a more unusual driving experience for a conventional vehicle” – again, maybe overstated but it was a fun drive and very, very scenic.
- ✓ *On Hwy 24 on left, shortly after Fruita Schoolhouse, easy 2 mile round trip (~1.5 hours) hike to Hickman Natural Bridge, “perhaps one of the best park walks in all of Utah.” – by the time we got to this point it was noon and I didn’t want to leave for a 1.5-hour hike – I opted to visit Goblin Valley instead. I’d like to do this hike on another trip (either early in the day or late in the afternoon)*
- Just after crossing the Fremont River at the Sleepy Hollow gas station/campground, look quickly to the right through a gap in the cliffs at the gray sand dunes. – We saw lots of gray sand, lots of maroon sand too.
- Gas station/convenience store built Anasazi-style in a sandstone wall in Hanksville just S. of intersection w/Hwy 95 – a tourist trap but a fun stretch break
- Goblin Valley State Park – 11 miles off Rt. 24, ~1 hour to see it. “The Valley, which is only about a mile across and two miles long, is full of thousands of mushroom-shaped pinnacles a few metres high that someone obviously thought resembled goblins” This was a great side trip I hadn’t originally planned to make – the website with the quote above helped convince me, plus it became clear that the hike to Hickman Natural Bridge at noon wasn’t going to be the best way to spend our time. The “goblins” were great, and so was the adventure of taking the “back way” from Goblin Valley to I-70 on some 24 miles of gravel road through the San Rafael Swell. Some stretches would have been messy if we had met oncoming traffic, but the only other car we encountered stopped at a wide spot to let us by. This was also our only experience of rain on the trip – just enough to turn the wipers on for a few minutes and totally coagulate the dust on the car into mud blobs. This “short cut” (well, no backtracking to Rt. 24 at least) got us to I-70 a little west of the San Rafael Reef, where we passed through Spotted Wolf Canyon to get to the bottom. I-70 and Rt. 24 both pass through the San Rafael Swell – we would have seen the San Rafael Reef en route to I-70 on Rt. 24, but what we did was more fun.

No gas E of Crescent Junction on I-70 until we get to Moab via Rt. 128 – *this was the warning from my guidebook; actually, there was a gas station one exit further east, but that was it.*

- Scenic Rt. 128 from I-70 to Moab (paralleling the Colorado River) ~44 miles (good part starts at Dewey Bridge, about 15 miles from I-70); good viewpoint for Fisher Towers a few miles after Hittle Bottom Recreation Site. Fisher Towers was worth seeing, and the scenery in general along Rt. 128 was great, with views of the snow-capped LaSal Mountains in the distance. On some future trip I'd like to take a side trip through the Manti-LaSal National Forest (the road branches off from Rt. 128 going south, turns west in the forest and comes out on Rt. 191 south of Moab).
- We stayed at the Best Western Canyonlands Inn in Moab (435-259-5167). This is the only place where we stayed two nights for the whole trip, and I was glad we got a "queen suite" with a sitting area – it was nice to spread out for two nights! We also made use of their guest laundry to get some of our clothes clean for the 2nd half of the trip (I sure needed it!). The free breakfast here was, again, adequate – and being included in the price is just fine.
- The first night in Moab, we ate at Pasta Jay's, just across the parking lot from the motel. Aunt Miriam was a bit surprised that her eggplant Parmesan had the skin on it still! The second night, Mom and Aunt Miriam had soup from a grocery store down the street, and I had rainbow sherbet from an ice cream stand across from the motel. Nothing like healthy eating...

Monday, May 15: Moab: Arches National Park, Canyonlands National Park

- **Arches National Park** – *get driving guide at Visitors Center (we never did go to the visitors center, as it turned out)*; a lot can be seen from the car; no food in park, so carry lunch (at least) or go back into town for a late lunch and carry dinner – We did half of the latter plan, besides carrying water and snacks in the car, we went back to town after visiting Arches and had lunch at Denny's before going up to Canyonlands. Arches is only 5 miles from Moab, Canyonlands is over 30 miles away, so this was a good sequence for us.
 - ✓ Delicate Arch – 3 miles, ~1.5 hours. This took me an hour and 45 minutes, including a brief detour to see some Indian petroglyphs on the way back. It's quite a climb and a bit hard on the knees, but well worth it! A sign at the beginning of the trail says, "Control your children" – a sign of the dropoffs to come. It would have been nicer for photography to be there in the afternoon when the arch wasn't backlit, but it was already getting hot (I started out before 9AM) so I'll live with the photos I could get.
 - ✓ Delicate Arch Viewpoint – 1 mile past Wolf Ranch. There are two viewpoints, one close to the parking lot (where we went) and one further uphill. I was able to get a couple of nice photos with a telephoto lens; Mom and Aunt Miriam at least got to see the famous arch.
 - ✓ Devils Garden – short side trail to right goes to Tunnel Arch and Pine Tree Arch, 2 miles roundtrip (~1 hour) to Landscape Arch – This was a great place to see, though I'd like to have gone sometime other than midday. Landscape Arch is amazing – it's not surprising that part of it collapsed a few years ago, it looks so fragile.

- ✓ Windows Section – *1 mile round trip, easy paths* – The paths were certainly easy but I only walked far enough here to get some photos of the closer arches (and see a really cool cactus someone else was photographing). It certainly was a nice, family-friendly area to see several arches plus some arches in the making.
- **Canyonlands National Park**
 - ✓ Shafer Canyon Overlook - ½ mile past visitor center on left. Very interesting view of the 4WD-only Shafer Trail, which was used in the movie *Thelma and Louise* (supposedly at the Grand Canyon).
 - ✓ Grand View Point + 1.5 mile Grand View Trail (didn't take the trail)
 - ✓ *Upheaval Dome + Crater View Trail (½ mile round trip to 1st viewpoint) I should have read my notes for this one and realized that you couldn't see anything from the parking area. The scenery en route was interesting, but there was nothing to see when we got there and after hiking to Delicate Arch and Landscape Arch, I wasn't ready for even a short hike.*
- **Dead Horse Point at sunset** – *“A narrow neck of land only 30 yards wide connects the point with the rest of the plateau.” – after visiting 2 national parks in one day, we'd had enough, and sunset was 2 hours away, so we skipped this one. It's supposed to be a superb place to watch the sunset, but it IS a disadvantage to be 30+ miles from Moab afterwards.*

Tuesday, May 16: Moab to Page ~274 miles, added close to 100 more with side trips

- **Needles Overlook** (Canyonlands National Park) – a short detour and well worth it. 32 miles south of Moab, milepost 93 on US 191 (a little south of junction w/UT 46), follow **paved** road 22 miles west, going left at junction 15 miles in (the other fork isn't paved and goes to another overlook that didn't sound as interesting). This was a surprisingly large overlook area, with picnic tables, restrooms (undoubtedly the pit kind we found a lot of places on the trip), and a fairly long route to walk around the edge of the overlook and see the “needles” and canyons below.
- **Bluff, UT** – Twin Rocks Café, built below 2 rock spires – this was a nice place for lunch. We also enjoyed their gift shop.
- *After passing through the gap in Comb Ridge on Hwy 163 (which we join ~3 miles after Bluff), stop and look back at the ridge – didn't remember to do this*
- **Valley of the Gods** – a smaller, less crowded version of Monument Valley, ~17 mile scenic drive. This was another great stop, though again I was glad we didn't meet other cars on some parts of the gravel road! I was a little concerned about the large puddle in the “wash” at the start of the road, but fortunately it was shallow. We drove through a lot of washes; we were alert to them after warnings at Capitol Reef about not parking in them. When it rains (and a thunderstorm was building NW of us while we were in Valley of the Gods), some of these washes can turn nasty fast.
Valley of the Gods road exits on UT 261 by Moki Dugway (1000 feet elevation change in 2 miles, on a dirt road!) I was looking forward to seeing this, but all I

could see was the signs warning you about the dirt road. I wasn't sure how far we could go north before being "committed" so I skipped investigating.

- **Goosenecks State Park** – 4 mile paved side road (UT 316) off UT 261, ~7 miles south of where the Valley of the Gods road exits – “one of the best examples of entrenched river meanders in the world.” This was another very interesting, brief side trip – it would have been briefer but Mom managed to get the bolt jammed for the bathroom (pit toilet). After a few minutes I stopped taking pictures, came over and checked the bolt on the men's room side, then pulled hard on her door – then it got unjammed and she was able to open it. Not a pleasant place to be stuck...next step would've probably been trying to pry out the window!
- **Monument Valley** – 17 mile self-guided scenic drive ~1.5 hours. This was certainly a place to see, but we were all in agreement that once was enough [at least under the conditions we had]. The gravel road was extremely bumpy, washboard in some places and just a mess in others. The people in the tour trams and jeeps didn't look all that happy either; it may have been less bumpy but the dust masks and other attempts to shield themselves from the clouds of dust made us glad to be in an enclosed vehicle. The gift shop was very nice but very, very crowded.
- Page, AZ: We had dinner at an outdoor table at Stromboli's Restaurant & Pizzeria, 711 N. Navajo Dr. The food was better than the service (our server had too many jobs to do at once) but it was a good choice for the evening. By the time we went out to eat (~7PM, Page time – no daylight savings time in Arizona except on the Navajo Reservation), it was cooling off nicely and was quite pleasant outside.
- We stayed at the Lake Powell Days Inn and Suites (928-645-2800), a large and new-seeming motel/hotel (several floors at least). The free breakfast had the most important item we needed: coffee (and more-than-adequate carbs besides).

Wednesday, May 17: Page to Grand Canyon – North Rim ~123 miles

- “Best Dam View” – Glen Canyon Dam, Colorado River/Lake Powell – Scenic View Road behind Denny's off U.S. 89, good in the morning. The real “best dam view” is down a short trail to an overlook; it was steep enough that I went and Mom and Aunt Miriam contented themselves with the view from the parking area.
- Marble Canyon Overlook (before crossing the Colorado, on US 89 near rim of Echo Cliffs); we stopped here, I didn't take any pictures (!!)
- Lees Ferry/Marble Canyon – touch the Colorado River before it goes into the Grand Canyon; see Balanced Rocks on the west side of the Lees Ferry road a little north of the fee station. Besides the items from the guidebook, it was also interesting to see the rafts on shore as they prepared to set off on their 200+ mile journey through the Grand Canyon.

- Kaibab Monocline Overlook – the view was good, worth stopping for, but the amazing thing to me as we climbed up onto the Kaibab Plateau came shortly after the overlook, when we got to the top of the plateau and entered a fairly dense forest! VERY different climate from a few thousand feet below!
- **Grand Canyon, North Rim**
 - ½ day for sightseeing along Cape Royal Rd. was about right; we got back to the lodge about 4PM, which was check-in time. There we were confronted with a long line; the lodge only opened for the season a couple of days before we got there, and new staff plus computer problems were making a mess. Fortunately I was only in line for ~45 minutes and we'd already seen a lot before then! We got our "beautiful" 2-room cabin eventually, and decided that none of us needed a shower badly enough to squeeze into that small space. But it was fine, and having two rooms meant I could get up before 4AM to go out and take pictures without being as much of a disturbance.
 - Our lunch and dinner at the "deli" were not bad (and certainly cheap); I had surprisingly good cheese pizza both times. No view whatsoever but from what we heard, we probably had better service than in the lodge dining room where the staff was being trained.
 - ✓ Bright Angel Point – great in late afternoon, ½ mile round trip from lodge; this ½ mile trip is a little more "exciting" than I had envisioned, with a good bit of "up and down" as well as very narrow places. I went there a little later than I should have, since that "late afternoon" in my original notes does NOT mean sunset...but I wasn't the only one there to watch the sunset, and it was very pleasant.
 - ✓ Cape Royal – 23 miles from the lodge, .3 mile (level) trail from parking lot to Angel's Window and Cape Royal, 7865 ft. elevation; Mom and I took the trail to the overlook. There are a lot of explanatory signs about the different plant life at this spot; it's a lower point on the North Rim and the plant life is quite different than elsewhere – scrubby piñon pines instead of tall ponderosa pines and more of the semi-arid plant life seen elsewhere.
 - ✓ Point Imperial – off Cape Royal Road – more about it below.

Thursday, May 18: Grand Canyon to Las Vegas ~270 miles (plus ~50 round trip to Hoover Dam)

- **Grand Canyon, North Rim**
 - ✓ Point Imperial – Sunrise (5:15AM!!!) – elevation 8803 feet, highest vantage point on either rim; 3 miles N. of lodge, then 5.3 miles on Cape Royal Rd. left, then 2.7 miles to viewpoint. It was interesting to watch the outside temperature changing on the car's thermometer as I drove to Point Imperial; the lowest I saw was 34°, but by the time I left Point Imperial at 5:30 or so it was closer to 50°! There was a strong breeze blowing and this was the one time my winter coat and gloves

were handy. In comparison, later in the day when we were driving across the Mojave Desert, the thermometer read 107°!

- ✓ Transept Trail – level 1.5 mile (one way) trail along rim of the Transept. “Level” (from the guidebook) is something of a misnomer here, as the trail went up and downhill quite a bit. It was a very pretty walk in the forest, with periodic views of the Transept side-canyon. I was able to finish this walk by 8AM (thanks to starting so early) and then met Mom and Aunt Miriam on the sun porch at the Lodge (with a great view of its own) before going for the breakfast buffet in the dining room.
- *Mojave Desert/Joshua Tree Scenic Backway W. of St. George, take Hwy 18 to Hwy 3184 (skipping Snow Canyon State Park, which sounds very nice, unless we have LOTS of time). Go west to US 91 (not [well] marked, but about 10 miles from turnoff for Ivins and Snow Canyon), and go left. At the top of the first hill there is a dirt road on the right to Motoque. About 1 mile further is a dirt road on the left, the Scenic Backway. About 1 hour on the side road, ~16 miles – can see Joshua trees from the paved road too. Scenic Backway ends ~2 miles N of Arizona state line, about 10 miles to I-15 at Littlefield, AZ. – this sounded great in the guidebook, but I realized it was emphasizing what you could see driving around in Utah, and we were seeing plenty of Joshua Trees while we drove through the Mojave Desert back to Las Vegas. Instead, we got back to Las Vegas in time for a short trip to Hoover Dam.*
- Hoover Dam - As we had no intention of taking the tour, Hoover Dam was a bit disappointing – there is a major road construction project going on downstream, building a new overpass so they can reroute traffic that currently goes over the dam (I think). So, you really can't see the dam except from the upstream side where it isn't as impressive. However, we did see it, and also took a look at Lake Mead, where the water level seems some 20 feet below normal. There is free outdoor parking in several lots on the Arizona side of the dam; on the Nevada side there is a parking garage (not free).

Treasure Island, Las Vegas

After our “rustic” cabin the night before, the room at the Treasure Island seemed very luxurious. Unfortunately, there was no “theme” décor like the Luxor. (I did see a bit of the pirate battle while driving up the Strip to Fremont Street the previous week.) We took the tram from the Treasure Island to its “mate” hotel/casino, the Mirage. The gardens in the Mirage’s lobby were lovely, with many orchids and other flowers. The Mirage buffet was expensive (\$22.50/person) but very nice, especially for the meat-eaters; the only real disappointment was the desserts, at least mine didn't taste as good as they looked.

We took the opportunity to drive up and down the Strip after dinner (I'd done it the previous week when I went up to Fremont Street, but Mom and Aunt Miriam didn't go). The lights, the huge TV screens everywhere, and the crowds of pedestrians make night on the Strip very different than daytime.

Friday, May 19: Return home

Our “experience” for Friday morning was breakfast in the café at Treasure Island. The food was very good (pretty expensive for breakfast, ~\$10/person) but the bizarre part started at 8AM, when Keno started up. Every five minutes, a “runner” would come through asking for Keno forms (which were readily available at the tables). I learned that Keno is the lottery; in Nevada it apparently runs every five minutes or so from 8AM-midnight.

While we were waiting at the airport, I did my only gambling. I spent a whole dollar in a nickel slot machine (high roller!). Didn’t win anything, not surprisingly. There are slot machines everywhere in the airport; even the smoker’s lounge was full of opportunities to gamble. I was a bit dismayed at the casinos to discover that the slots are more complicated than “put your money in and pull the handle.” They have lots of ways to separate you from your money more quickly, like making multiple bets per “pull” (generally either pushing a button or touching “spin” on the touch screen).