

Not So Grand As Bryce
by Frederick William Springer III (28 August 2006)

It was one of the few destinations on my cross-country road trip that allowed no wiggle room and the rest of my journey had to be arranged accordingly--Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah on the New or Full Moon*. On these two particular days of the month, park rangers gave a star-gazing tour.

The travel book I read beforehand noted that the two campgrounds filled fast in the summer months. However, I lucked out, there were still a few campsites available and I snagged one for a mere \$10, arriving with just enough sunlight left to pitch my tent.

I then walked to where the initial 1 hour Power Point presentation was given on an outdoor screen. We were informed that the area was the least light polluted in the United States, which made for optimal star-gazing. Just a glance up at the sky and you could see the purple of the Milky Way, an awesome sight alone when you've grown up in New Jersey. The night was concluded with an invitation back to the visitor center where local volunteers had set up several high powered telescopes where we could take a closer look at a couple stars and planets.

Honestly, I never heard of Bryce Canyon--the Grand Canyon is the famous one, unfairly in my opinion. While my trip was still just a sketchy thought in my head, two of my co-workers at the time recommended stopping here, both having had embarked on their own cross-country expeditions in their youth decades earlier.

The next morning, having already gotten out of it what I came for, I only expected to be there another hour or so exploring the actual canyon before heading down to the northern rim of the popular Grand Canyon in Arizona.

Well, I wound up spending a good chunk of the afternoon! The landscapes were so beautiful and awe inspiring, the bright red-orange of the rocks against a brilliantly blue sky and dark green trees. I seriously took nearly 80 pictures. Thank God for digital.

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Frost and rainwater shaped the limestone of the Paunsaugunt Plateau into the series of horseshoe-shaped amphitheaters that form the Bryce Canyon, named after a Mormon pioneer.

The national park was established in 1924.

The summer heat gets to you, so be sure to dress appropriately while applying sun block and carrying water. But, if you intend to stay the night (which I highly recommend on one of the star dates), bring something warm because it tends to get cold.

Admission by car is \$20 but I had already purchased my yearly, all-inclusive \$50 National Park Pass, which is the better bet since chances are you'll need to pass through Zion National Park (\$20/car) on your way up from the southwest, coming from Vegas as I did.

I left that afternoon after exploring several sections of the park along the 18 mile, dead-end road. By late afternoon I was at the northern rim of the Grand Canyon (\$25/car) and, let me tell you, what a disappointment. No one told me that, order wise, I should have done the Grand Canyon first.

You see, while the Grand Canyon, carved into the Colorado Plateau by the Colorado River over several million years and made into a National Park in 1919, may be impressive on its own if you have nothing to compare it to, it is essentially a lot of dull, dark browns, greens, and reds. It's not a feast for the eyes like Bryce is.

Now, I did choose the northern rim while the southern rim tends to be the common tourist destination, offering more activities. However, the northern rim was closet to my course of travel and, not being the tourist hot spot, was supposed to be less crowded. Luck wasn't with me though, as the only campground was full. Being a budget traveler, I didn't even bother seeing if there were any rooms available in the lodge or cabins, which my travel book warned were booked long in advance anyway.

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(I ultimately chose to drive out at sunset and eventually pulled off to the side of the road in Indian territory somewhere, which I in no way condone, to avoid crashing while I slept at the wheel, in case you were wondering.)

In any case, I was there specifically for the sights, not the activities, and the southern rim would have been the same boring, drab colors except I could have viewed them on the back of a mule rather than on my own two feet. As I came across a spot where there's actually permanent benches set up for small weddings, I thought to myself, "Boy, they've got the wrong canyon..."

So my advice is, if you're going to be out west, do yourself a favor and skip the over-hyped Grand Canyon and visit Bryce Canyon instead. If you like to admire Mother Nature's artwork, I think you'll thank me later.

* The program schedules have changed since my visit on August 5-6, 2005, so be sure to check their website for the latest information (www.nps.gov/brca/).