

FINDING SOLITUDE IN SOUTHERN UTAH

By Alisa Tank

Sometimes it's not just what you see –it's how you see it.



We were

nearing
the river.
After
bumping
along the
dusty
desert

road for hours, a bright green stripe
ahead advertised one thing: water. My
friend Sarah had spoken to a ranger the
day before and he'd assured us that the
Fremont river was low enough to cross.

Neither of us had forded a river before,
and even with a high-clearance vehicle,
we weren't entirely convinced
that we could pull it off. As we
approached the shore, a nervous
energy filled the car. Sliding
into the rushing stream, the
wheels firmly bit into the
rocky river bottom. In
less than a minute, we
were on the other
side.

"That's it?" asked Sarah, almost
disappointed that the crossing had been
so easy. "Let's do it again!" Her eyes
sparkled as she turned the car around
for another pass through the stream.

One day earlier, we'd turned off I-70,
crossed a muddy mountain pass, and
entered Capitol Reef National Park
via a lonely back gate. There were no
entrance fees, information centers, or
tour buses. While visitors routinely
line up for hours to enter Utah's more
popular national parks, Capitol Reef
remains a secret hidden in plain view.

The narrow park protects the
Waterpocket Fold, a 100-mile-long
crease in the earth, as well as sharp red
cliffs, twisting canyons, and a handful
of geologic oddities. Strangely, though
just as stunning as its neighbors, this
park receives only a fraction of the
number of visitors.

It was the perfect place
to begin a four-day



road trip in southern Utah. Sarah and I had met two years prior, and our shared Midwestern roots and love of the desert cemented our friendship. Since then, we'd become de facto road trip buddies, roaming all over Utah's canyon country in her Nissan Xterra.

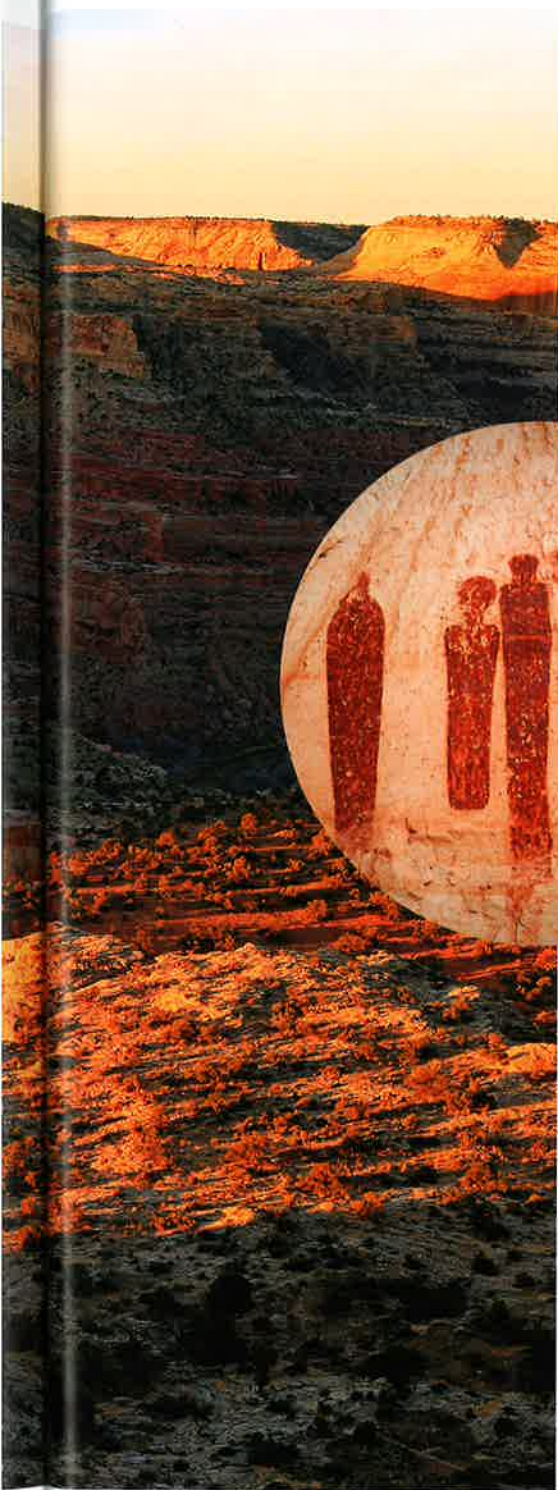
By the time we got to Capitol Reef, we'd both hiked to Delicate Arch, stood atop Angels Landing, and gazed upon the hoodoo-filled Bryce Amphitheater.

I'd loved it all, but I was also craving some time alone with the desert, and a popular national park wasn't going to cut it. I was looking for that quiet space that only exists between rock and sky.

Sarah and I had correctly assumed that Capitol Reef's remote Cathedral Valley would be quiet, but we hadn't expected to find an open campsite on a Saturday afternoon in April. That evening, we watched from camp as long shadows

slid down the massive red sandstone fins and marched across the wide valley before disappearing into the darkness.

The next day, we drove to Little Wild Horse Canyon, a non-technical slot canyon that's so popular with hikers it now boasts an overflow parking area in addition to the original trailhead. On a cloudy Sunday evening, however, it was nearly deserted. We had the canyon to ourselves, and we maneuvered through



its delicate curves and smooth walls with quiet ease.

That evening, a wind storm moved in. Taking refuge in the car, we watched as our tent stakes pulled from the ground and poles bent in unnatural ways. Sand gave the wind physical form. After 15 agonizingly long minutes, we decided to pack up camp and head to the nearest town for the night. As we slept, tumbleweeds piled

up en masse outside the hotel's door.

At first light, we headed toward Horseshoe Canyon, a detached unit of Canyonlands National Park. Few cars were parked at the trailhead when we arrived, ensuring that the three-mile hike in would be peaceful. Our

destination was the Great Gallery, a well-preserved rock art panel believed to have been created between 400 and 1100 CE. As we made our way down the switchbacks into the canyon, a sign pleaded, "Please don't touch the rock art—not even once."

Arriving at the panel, I studied the otherworldly figures staring back at me: faces with wide eyes and alien-looking antennae, dark shapes resembling ghostly bodies, and a king-like figure towering over them all. I wondered about their creators as the cottonwood leaves rustled around me.

On the hike out of the canyon, we stumbled upon a ring of stones circling an indentation in the rock: a fossilized dinosaur footprint. Yet another reminder that time is relative, and nature always wins.

With a couple hours of daylight remaining, we made an impromptu stop at Goblin Valley State Park. The field of drip-dropped, red-hued hoodoos welcomed exploration, and as we climbed up slickrock ramps and around twisting columns, we were soon surrounded on all sides by this foreign landscape devoid of vegetation. Towers

resembling wet globules of sand rose hundreds of feet above us.

We departed as the sun dropped below the horizon, our only company two pronghorn antelope snacking on sagebrush along the side of the road.

Finally, the time came to return to the city. To help ease the transition, we used Sarah's well-worn road atlas to plot a circuitous route home through the San Rafael Swell, a vast swath of public land filled with crumbling cliffs, stout buttes, and rushing streams. As thunderclouds rolled past and rain misted the windshield, we followed the empty road as it wound its way north.

We'd planned for one last stop at a formation called the Wedge. Yet as we reached the overlook, a sea of clouds spread out before us, obscuring everything. Perhaps there would be no view today.

But we weren't in a hurry, and there wasn't another soul in sight, so we parked at the rim of the steep mesa to wait. Inside the warm vehicle, we listened to the Talking Heads and laughed at how close we'd come to watching my tent uproot and bounce across the sky days earlier.

Suddenly, the clouds rolled away and an immense fissure in the earth appeared. Uneven layers of rock splayed across the landscape. Wind whipped through the juniper trees. Far below, the San Rafael river continued to run its unhurried course, oblivious to the two tiny figures above, looking out in wonder. **R**

Find more of Alisa's adventures at alisatank.com or on Instagram, @alisatank.