

Bandelier National Monument



After the trip, I come home bug-bitten, shins cut and bruised, nose peeling, feet and hands swollen. In spite of this, I feel ablaze with life!

Throughout the trip, there were many surprises; a complete stranger became the central character of our journey, a climb to the highest mountain in New Mexico and, finally a religious sanctuary turned out to be another amazing canyon land. This trip was truly unique.

Bandelier is very special, Mt. Wheeler is a delightful challenge, and Ghost Ranch is pure magic. These places give me everything: intellectual and physical stimulation, visual ecstasy, and a remarkably vibrant sense of peace. I leave these places feeling more alive and peaceful than when I came. Above all, I am very grateful to meet Tom Eddie, the stranger and my trail angel. He is the happiest 70 years old man I ever met.

This three parts journal is dedicated to him. May Tom Eddie be forever happy, healthy, and young.

Chi S. Chan, New Mexico 2013

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Part 1 - Remnants of the Ancient Past



“The seasons are special at Bandelier. Each night in later summer a chill breeze rises gently up the canyon, smelling of autumn even before it arrives. In winter, at Painted Caves, the midday sun heats ancient rock with the delicate warmth of a coming spring. On a bright springtime morning atop the higher mesas, warmed air, rising from basalt cliffs near Rio Grande, creates a gentle breeze over the lip of the mesas. These breezes carry the sharp scent of pine needles in anticipation of summer. It is a subtle place, alive with changing shadows, unexpected colors, and its own private seasons.”

“Sunlight yesterday, rain today, snow tomorrow”.

Photographed by Chi S. Chan
Written by David E. Stuart
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Introduction

Bandelier National Monument is located in north-central New Mexico about five miles south of Los Alamos and an hour's drive from Santa Fe. Besides it is a hiker's park, the place is an archeologist's dream. The area contains a wealth of ancient Indian ruins dating from A.D 1075 to 1550.

The Monument was once inhabited by the ancient Puebloans, for some unknown reason, perhaps due to the drought and decline in agriculture; they abandoned this site and left behind a land of enigmatic ruins and superb canyon scenery that beckons hiker, photographer and nature lover.

Inside the Monument, there are three large canyons; Frijoles, Alamo and Capulin, with a complex system of mesas and secondary canyons separating them. Rio Grande flows on the east side of the park. Elevations inside the Monument range from 5,300 feet at the bottom of the canyon to 10, 200 feet on the Cerro Grande plateau.

Monument headquarters in Frijoles Canyon is the focal point of Bandelier. 99% of the visitors arrive with shuttle buses everyday from late spring and fall. The other 1% is adventurers who go deep into the Bandelier Wilderness and explore unexcavated ruins, cliff dwellings and cave paintings. HY and I are the 1% visitors.

Falls Trail

We arrive at Albuquerque late evening on the last day of May. Next morning, we check into the visitor center and obtain our 4 days backpack permit. Once the necessary details are taken care of, we leave the crowd in the visitor center and head to the Falls Trail. According to the guide book, there are two beautiful waterfalls on this trail: the Upper and the Lower Falls.

It is a very pleasant morning. We follow the Frijoles creek and descend 400 vertical feet in 1.5 miles to reach the falls. Due to the recent flash flood, the trail beyond Upper Falls is completely washed away. There is no safe access to the Lower Falls.

We watch the Upper Falls tumbles over the dark cliff and eventually joins the well-known tributary Rio Grande in a far distant.



Frijoles Canyon – a Very Touching Moment



curious animals. I cannot help but noticing the unusual coolness inside this wet canyon.

Along the base of the northern wall of the canyon, there are a long stretch of cliff dwellings and caves honeycombed the walls. In front of the wall are the ruins of Tyuonyi which are the archeological centerpiece of Bandelier National Monument. The ruins once had a three stores high wall but what remains today is mostly rubble.

Some of the cave houses can be accessed through ladder. The most impressive one is the 140 feet stepladder leading to the Alcove house. In order to reach this Ancestral Pueblo site, we have to climb up a series of stone stairs, and a long ladder. It is definitely not recommended to those who are afraid of height.



At the bottom of the stair, two men and a 10 or 11 years old boy is about to climb up to the long ladder. I watch them with the utmost fear. The child is disabled, neither can walk nor talk. With enormous strength and determination, the father carries his son on his back and the other man watchfully follows.

Father and son awkwardly struggle upward, taking break every few steps. Painstakingly, they finally reach the cave. Sitting next to his father, the boy breaks out a bright smile. Underneath that physical deformation, he is still a normal, cheerful, fun loving kid, and his dad, what a wonderful father, and a remarkable human being!

Stranger with an Opinion

Going in and out the cave dwelling is fun, but I sense HY is not enjoying it. He says he wants to take a nap. I jokingly suggest that perhaps he can sleep in one of those caves. Inside the cave is at least 10 degrees cooler. Of course, HY takes it seriously and when he reaches one of the caves, he goes into the inner chamber, makes himself comfortable and lies down to take his nap. I am embarrassed by his behavior and move to the other side of the cave. I find a piece of flat stone lying on the ground. A stranger approaches me and asks me the meaning of that stone.

“I suppose it was used by the Indians to grind corns” I answer

“No, you are wrong. It makes no sense to carry the corns and water all the way from the valley to the cave and do the work. It is easier to grind corns by the stream, don’t you think?”

Yeah, whatever, I turn around and ignore him. I don’t want to argue with a stranger; especially the one who has such a strong opinion. Few minutes later, a group of kids climbs up to the cave. The man say to them, “Hey kids, there is a Chinese Buddha sleeping in that cave”. All the kids are very excited and rush to look for that “Buddha”, of course it is HY.



The man’s joke ruins HY’s nap and we start to climb back down to the canyon floor. On our way to the visitor center, we meet the stranger again. His name is Tom. Tom turns out to be very friendly. One thing leads to the other. Tom is invited to join us to stay in the same hotel. HY even offers to share a room with him. Oh boy!

Next morning, we leave for our backpacking trip. We say goodbye to Tom, exchange emails but with no expectation that we will ever see him again.

Backpack to Capulin Canyon

Hiking down to the Capulin Canyon is far more difficult than we have anticipated. We have to climb in and out three main canyons before reaching our camp. In between there are two relatively small canyons that we have to negotiate. It begins with a 1,100 feet climb from the visitor center to Frijoles Canyon Rim. From the Rim trail, the next hurdle is the Alamo Canyon with 400 feet vertical drops.

Before the Alamo canyon, there is small canyon named after Charles F. Lummis. Mr.



The dry stream bed is the canyon floor. A man-made bridge is still suspending over the dry bed

Lummis respected the Native Americans and pursued a lifelong crusade to win basic rights for them. He was brash, opinionated and outspoken. (sounds like a character I know, ME!) The Canyon therefore is named after him. There is certain indescribable loveliness about Lummis canyon. The canyon is very narrow and small but lush. Rain has not fallen in this area for quite some time; the condition turns the stream into a dry bed. The dense foliage on the canyon floor nonetheless convinces me that not long ago, there was a little beautiful spring with crystal clear sweet water flowing quietly here. We take a short break under the shade of a wild olive tree. I love to stay here longer but we must move on.

After 27 switchbacks, we reach the bottom of Alamo Canyon. HY and I look up to the opposite wall and are much discouraged. We descend all the way down and now must ascend



to the top once again. Alamo Canyon is very steep. It is hard to believe that the vertical drop is only 400 feet. By the time HY and I climb out of the Alamo, we are dog-tired. When you have a backpack nearly half the weight of your body weight, climbing up and down on the rocky canyon is exhausting. After all, the hike is rated “strenuous”.

Countless up and down, we reach a junction. A small creek appears. A right turn of the canyon provides a charming campsite. Here will be our base camp for three days.

Few minutes into our unpacking, the desert sky darkens. Wind begins to pick up and it blows my tent out of the anchors. Drops of rain splatter on dry sand. Then, almost as suddenly as it began, the wind stops. Before I have a chance to cover my pack, the rain cloud already dissipates. Sunlight reappears and

everything goes back to calm and sunny.



We need to get to the other side of the Canyon. The dusty trail leads us to the bottom of Alamo Canyon. We hate to lose all the elevation and gain it back later.

As often, Desert storm goes as quickly as it comes. I wish it lingered a bit longer for the plants really need some moisture.



Painted Cave

The sole purpose of this backpacking trip is to visit this sacred site. Next day, we head out to find the cave. My research tells me that the cave is located on the left hand side of the canyon wall. I keep telling HY to stay on the left side of the trail, but men NEVER listen to women, and they don't like to be told what to do. He keeps straying away to the right. I am tired of telling him so I just follow but keep my eyes closely to the left hand side of the canyon wall. Suddenly, I spot some cave rooms underneath a large rock overcrop, I insist on going over to check it out. Even we cannot find the cave; at least we can explore those dwellings.

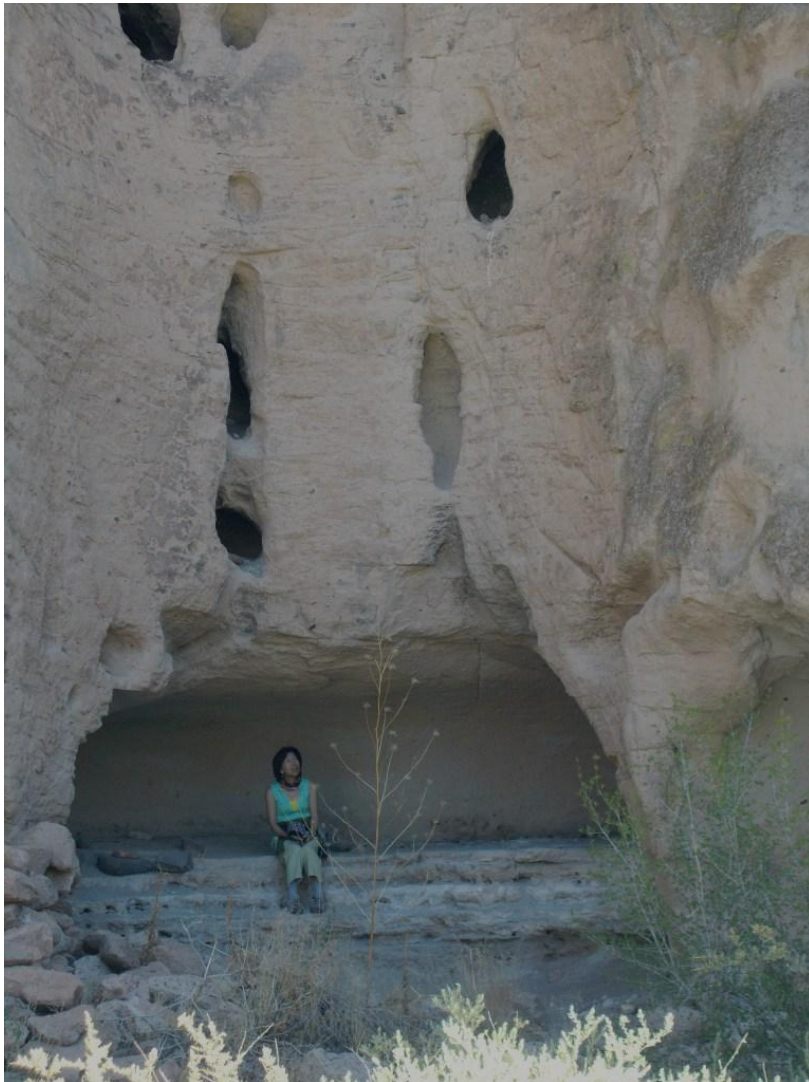
We cross the river and back to the left hand side of the canyon. I find a faint trail leading up to the cave rooms. Half way to the cliff, I look up and there it is; the famous Painted Cave!



We nearly miss the site.

The cave is actually a large, recessed rock overhang. On its curve ceiling is full of primitive drawings in red, yellow, brown, white and black. Unlike the more common engraved petroglyphs, the art works here are painted. While I find the drawings are fascinating, HY moves away and takes his nap again. I leave him there and climb up to the ledge to take a closer look at the paintings.

There are big-horned sheep, hand prints, stars, various masks, stepped cloud designs, adobe houses, birds, horses and crazy human figures, but I cannot find my favorite one, the Kokopelli. The more I look at the drawings, the more I am interested in knowing the meaning of these drawings. Are they messages or simply doodles? Perhaps some cool morning, when there was time, shepherds or hunters, who dwelt in this cave used a stick or fingers to sketch out a record of something important, maybe a ceremony, a dance, or a beautiful woman they saw, and left the figures for others to see. And then went on their journey.



Capulin Canyon is believed to have been densely inhabited at one time. Even today, to many hikers, the canyon with its level floor, sheltering pines and dancing stream, is the jewel of the monument. When I close my eyes, I feel another world here; a world set aside, a canyon of museum of what was here before.

High up on the ledge, well hidden between two talus are many bird nests. Little gray birds are flying in and out protesting my present. I watch them with amazement but have no intention to intrude their privacy. It is all right with me that there should be places that only small gray birds can go.



It is difficult to get here, and I feel I am rewarded. Only 1% of the Monument visitors would visit this sacred place, how

privilege I am. When I am ready to go, I glance over to the sleepy HY and cannot help but wondering how much he really understand and appreciate this place.



A Private Canyon Bath

On our way back to the campsite, we find a rapid running over rocks and it creates a pool large enough to submerge in. HY decides to take his most needed wash here. I am tempted but not willing to share the pool. I return to the campsite and realize the pool is only a few minutes' walk from our camp. I gather my towel, wait 10 minutes and walk towards the pool. HY already finishes his bath and he looks refreshing. As soon as HY is out of sight, I peel off every piece of my dusty hiking clothes and soak into the pool. It is absolutely heaven. The water is just pleasant, neither cool nor warm; a boon for sore feet and tired shoulders.

Knowing that no one is around, I totally relax, sit on the bottom of the pool and glance up to the sky. The clouds barely move. Besides the chirping of birds and the rumbling sound of rapids, the canyon is still and quiet. Here in this remote canyon, there is nothing between me and nature.



Ten minutes has gone by and I know I should return to the camp and start dinner but I am reluctant to do that. I indulge myself for another five minutes, then get up and air dry off. The bath is simply delicious. It has to be the most luxurious bath I ever took.

I stand on a flat rock to observe my surroundings. The Las Conchas fire in 2011 burned nearly everything to the ground. Inside the Capulin Canyon where we camp, charred trunks and sterilized soil are all that remained. But nature has its way to heal itself. Today, vegetations, grasses and shrubs begin to reappear. The devastated fire is tragic but it gives new life to the forest. I have complete faith in Mother Nature; soon this place will have a new face. Change is important, or life would be dull and tedious.

I finish my laundries and head back to camp.



Fire in the Canyon

Our original plan is to stay one more day to visit the Turkey Spring. Our campsite overlooks the trail and it is a steep rough trail. The guidebook rates the hike to be “extremely strenuous”. We decide to cancel the hike and climb out the canyon early morning to avoid the mid day sun.

Around 4:00am, I am awaked by a light smell of smoke. We were aware of the fire before the hike but not sure how close the fire to our camp. The range did not advise us to cancel our trip either. I try to ignore the smell but cannot go back to sleep. I unzip my tent and smell the air. The burnt odor is obvious, and I even feel a draft of warm air when the canyon wind rises. I panic. I wake up HY and ask him to smell the air. He shows no sight of concern and mutters that the animal would have been running around if there was in fact of a fire. Somehow common sense tells me “GET OUT!”

I tell HY that I am leaving. Reluctantly, HY gets up and starts to pack as well. By 6:00am, we are ready to go. Early morning hike in the canyon turns out to be a smart choice. It is still relatively cool by the time we reach the high plateau. Once we are on high ground, I can relax. The park service helicopter will spot us if the fire becomes imminent.

On our way to Alamo, we pass Yapashi, the unexcavated Indian ruins. HY finds some fragments of Indian pottery on the ground. As we look around carefully, we discover more



and more broken pieces scattering around the ruins, we even find arrow heads. I am tempted to take a few pieces home but it is against the park’s regulations. I also remember Aldo Leopold once said:

“Ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching- even when doing the wrong thing is legal.”

I place those relics back on the ground where they belong and feel very proud of my self-control.

Before noon, we manage to climb out of Capulin, Alamo, Lummis and Frijoles Canyons. I go into the visitor center and inquire about the fire. The ranger explains that there is in fact a fire. The fire is still burning but it is far from the park. However, she tells me that I did the right thing by getting out. Back in the car, I check my iPhone and find a long e-mail from TOM EDDIE!

To be continued on Part 2