

Trip 2 – Episode #50 – How to Attract Tourists if You Don't Have a Grand Canyon

After experiencing the (literal) Grand Canyon High, one might wonder how anything could possibly compare. And we did too.

But the thing we've found is that each new destination, whether natural or manmade, huge or miniscule, awesome or ridiculous, is memorable in its own right.

And within the next few days after leaving the Grand Canyon, we saw examples of each.

The first stop was another example of the inventive ways Americans (and others I suppose, but I think Americans have a special talent) create something from almost nothing, to give their community a tourist attraction.

When you think of a town in Arizona called Winslow, you may think (as we did) that you'd never heard of it.

But when you say "Winslow, Arizona" out loud, it might have a familiar sound. And then, all of a sudden, it hits you. There's that song...



For those who are either too young or too old to remember, it was a lyric in a song called "Take it Easy", by a group called The Eagles.

You can't help but wonder how many people have posed like this:



And on the main street of the town, it was everywhere.



Even our RV park capitalized on the recognition value.



There wasn't much else to see in the town, except for what is purportedly the world's smallest church.



We happened to be there on St. Patrick's Day, so we went along with tradition.

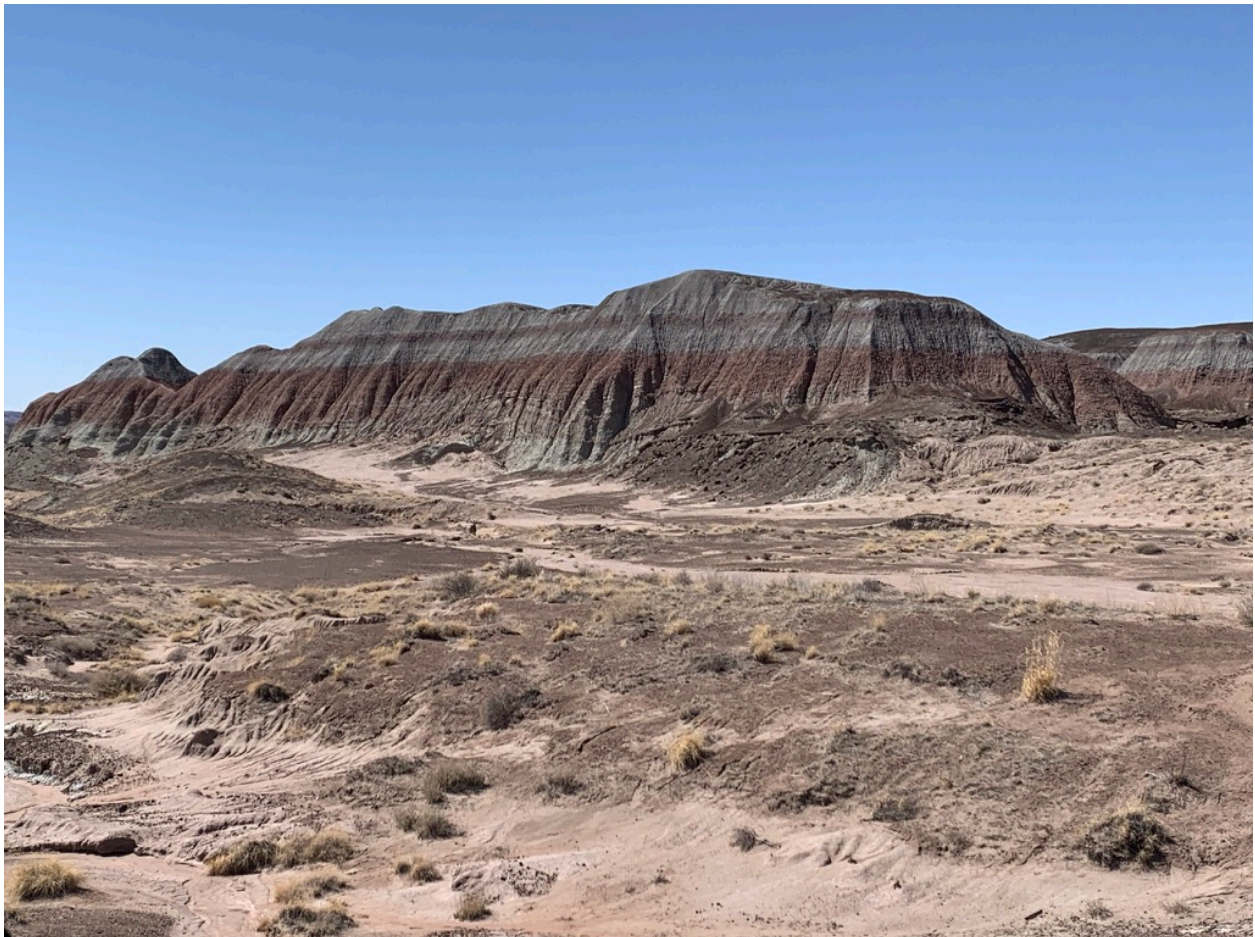


And the next day, we travelled down to the next wonder – a real, natural one.



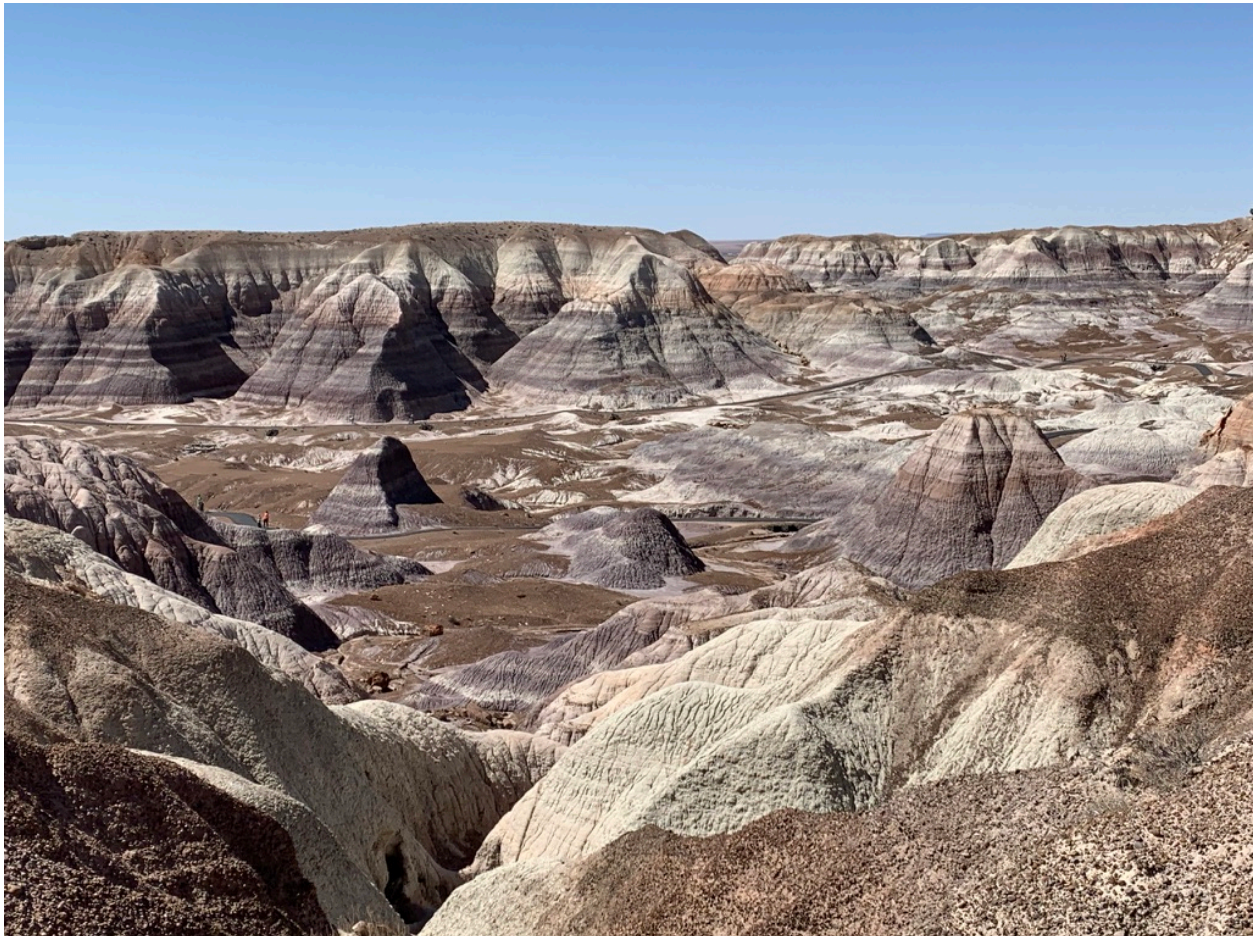
Although the sign says it's Petrified Forest National Park, it's also part of the Painted Desert, which occupies hundreds of square miles. Though not as "grand" as the canyon, it truly felt as though we had been transported to another planet. And the colours were amazing.











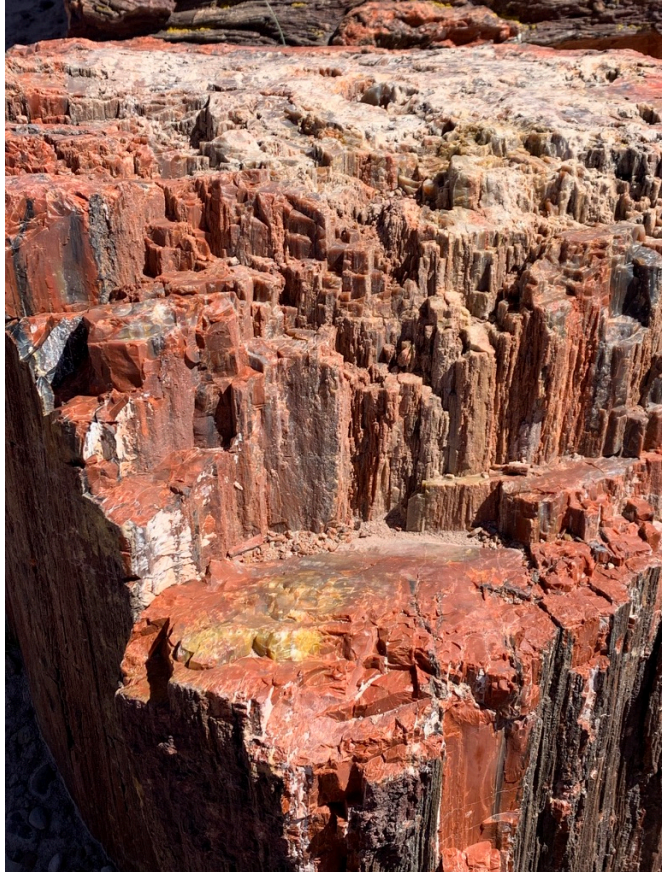
Eventually we got to an area where we could walk and see the actual Petrified Forest, which doesn't look much like a forest, until you get up close. Strewed around the vast area, which had a walking path through it, were trees that had fallen millions of years ago. From a bit of a distance, they just looked like parts of trunks or logs.





But up close,
oh my!







It was truly wondrous to see what used to be a tree turned into such richly coloured stone.



That night, we stayed in Lyman Lake State Park, which had its own beauty.



And we were lucky enough to be visited by some equine friends. I don't know for sure if they were wild, but there are wild horses in Arizona, so I choose to believe they were.



The next day was my birthday, and we celebrated in strange and unusual ways. Yes, we entered New Mexico.



Shortly after crossing the border, we discovered that we were nearing a place called, believe it or not, Pietown.

Apparently, back in the early part of the last century, a clever entrepreneur began making pies for the tired and hungry travellers. Soon it became a destination for its pies. And now, it's home to the annual Pie Festival.



I tried not to be suspicious, but Jim was driving at this point, and guess what his favourite dessert is?

So, although it was my birthday, we found ourselves lunching on his favourite food, at the "Pie-o-Neer" restaurant in Pietown.



It was a fun, and very busy place!





The pie was quite delicious (mine was lemon-blackberry and Jim's was pear!).

But the best was the tee shirt they had on display. Of course, I had to have it, and Jim happily got one for me for my birthday.



Next stop, on this weirdest of birthdays ... The VLA, which of course stands for Very Large Array. I'm sure I don't have to explain this to any of my friends, but in case someone else stumbles over this blog and doesn't know what the VLA is, here's a brief explanation. The VLA is a collection of 27 telescopes placed in a Y-shaped configuration, each arm measuring 21 kilometres (or 13 miles) long.

Together, these telescopes, which can turn in any direction, function as an "interferometer".

Again, I know most of my friends won't need this definition, but an "interferometer" is a set of separate telescopes, mirror segments, or radio telescope antennas that work together as a single telescope to provide higher resolution images of astronomical objects such as radio galaxies, quasars, pulsars, supernova remnants, gamma-ray bursts, black holes and, of course, astrophysical masers. (And if you Google it, like I did, that's exactly the definition you'll get too.)



It was interesting, for about a minute and a half, and then we were okay to move on, feeling better about having stopped to see this important scientific array ... even if we had no clue what they're accomplishing.

We continued for a while, searching for an acceptable campground. If only we'd had a SSA (Somewhat Smaller Array) to help us identify beautiful campgrounds in our vicinity!

Instead, we found ourselves in this area. Which didn't seem like an ideal spot.



Yikes!!!

Eventually we found a very peaceful park area where we could overnight for free, and it worked just fine.



The next morning, we were reminded of the kind of area we were in.



Time to travel on.



Soon we found ourselves in an area called Valley of the fires. Five thousand years ago, a volcano erupted and filled this area with molten rock.

The resulting lava flow is four to six miles wide, 160 feet thick and covers 125 square miles. The lava flow is considered to be one of the youngest lava flows in the continental United States.

Interesting, but not so beautiful.



Just when we were thinking there was nothing redeeming about this area of the United States, we arrived in a town called Capitan, New Mexico, home of:



Clearly the town was proud of their most famous citizen.



There's a museum devoted to Smokey Bear...



And a pleasant little park where the original Smokey is buried.



In case you don't know the actual story of Smokey (I didn't), he was a bear cub injured in a massive fire in this area in 1950. He was rescued and brought back to health, and his story went viral. Some clever game warden recognized an opportunity and advocated for making this adorable cub a spokesbear, promoting conservation and wildfire prevention. Smokey spent the rest of his life in the National Zoo in Washington, until he died and was buried in his hometown in New Mexico.

From the
sweet to
the spacey.
Our next
stop was ...



Since 1947, stories have circulated about the possibility of extraterrestrial visitors in this area, and like other places we've visited on this trip – from Tombstone to Oatman to Winslow, Arizona – they've capitalized on the tourist opportunities.

When they say, "They're here", they're not kidding. Aliens are everywhere!



From Dunkin' Donut and Baskin Robbins, to the spaceship-shaped McDonalds, they don't miss a beat.

Notice how the streetlights have alien faces on them?



Even the Army is in on it! (Which is especially amusing since the true believers are convinced the army covered up the evidence of an alien airship crashing near here.)



And of course, you can buy all kinds of alien souvenirs.



And what would alien central be without a museum?



They may believe, but we believed it was time to move on. Because even if there wasn't another Grand Canyon to be found, we were pretty sure there'd be something worth seeing. And we were right.