

By Rhonda Ostertag

# WRITTEN IN

Photos: George Ostertag



## Getting There

To reach the author's first stop, Nine Mile Canyon, take 2200 East (Soldier Creek Road) north off U.S. Highway 6/191 at Wellington (southeast of Price, northwest of Green River). An interpretive sign for Nine Mile Canyon sits near the turnoff.

# STONE

Ancient red-rock images in southeast Utah offer a true glimpse of history

**T**here are many reasons for visiting the red rocks of Utah, but for me the rock art was the organizing theme. Utah has some great, unspoiled ledgers from peoples past, both Native American and pioneer.

The etched (petroglyph) and clay- and herb-stained (pictograph) images represent the early journals, newspapers and letters home. They are ballads in stone of great expeditions and heroic conquests and spiritual visions. Yet, the rock art lives in mystery, as interpretation did not pass forward.

Images count in the hundreds, even thousands. Several depicted spirits would be right at home at an intergalactic bar in a "Star Wars" film. Elsewhere, walls tell of everyday hunters. Bighorn sheep, buffalo, elk and deer share space with centipedes and frogs. Some images are life-size, while others exceed human dimension. All engage imagination. Southeast Utah holds a wealth of these records.

Art panels can be reached by paved road, graded road and foot trail. Several lie within national parks. While ping-ponging between sites, travelers can revel in the red-rock grandeur, which spills beyond park borders. Vistas, trails, ruins, dinosaur tracks, Mormon pioneer history and early enterprise

broaden the template. Camping is available within national and state parks, and at private campgrounds and RV parks. Moab is the area's urban center for full service. Supplies and fuel are generally available in smaller towns.

The following sites should help get you started. All can be reached by dinghy vehicle or small motorhome, with careful attention to road conditions and weather. Calling ahead for current conditions is never a waste of time. Vehicles should be in good repair, with fuel tanks topped off and a usable spare tire or two on hand. Carry

food and plenty of water. Binoculars are golden for appreciating art detail.

Treat each site as a fine-art museum because that's what it is. This calls for best manners. Oils from fingertips cause damage. Sadly, too many sites have suffered the destructive hands of vandals and misguided admirers.

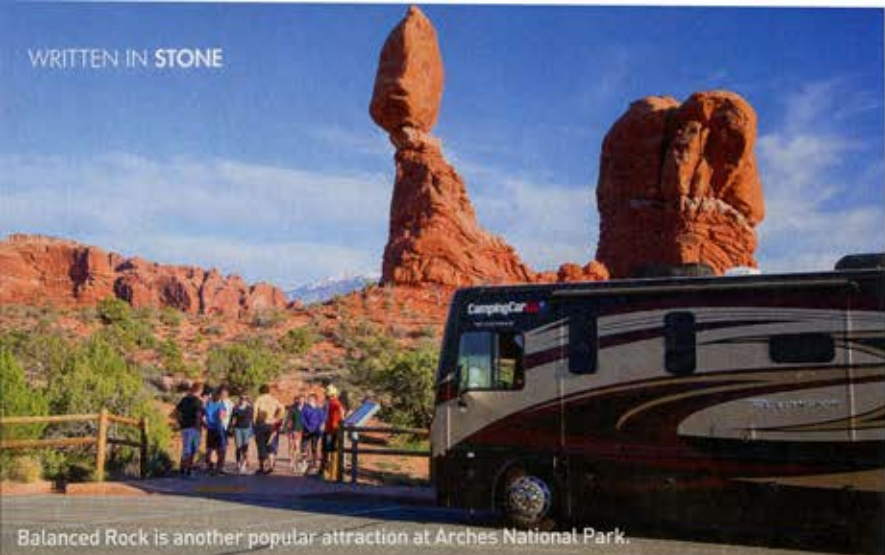
### Green River Area

#### Nine Mile Canyon

Before arriving at this most out-of-the-way art site we visited, check out <http://climb-utah.com/Misc/index.htm>. This BLM backcountry byway traces a rugged canyon route built by the all-African-American Ninth Cavalry and has served stagecoach, mail, freight and telegraph. It is paved or sealed to



Left: Petroglyphs, like these at Capitol Reef National Park, are etched rather than stained. Right: The trip to Nine Mile Canyon is well worth the extra effort.



Balanced Rock is another popular attraction at Arches National Park.

Duchesne but becomes more narrow and winding past the Great Hunt Panel at 46 miles, where we ended our visit. Gravel spurs (passenger vehicles only) expand viewing.

Because big trucks use the canyon route, drive cautiously and park off the road. A couple of turnouts have vault toilets and picnic tables.

Initial travel is through private land. Be on the alert for mule deer and cows, and use care at road dips. At the 24-mile mark, Nine Mile Ranch offers primitive RV camping, a bed-and-breakfast, authentic pioneer cabins and guided tours (435-637-2572, <http://9mileranch.com/campgrounds>).

Find the first of a dozen accessible art panels at the 26-mile mark. A small wooden fence marks the site. More than 1,000 such sites have been cataloged. The art traces to the canyon's Fremont Indians. Village sites

and cliff-ledge granaries further hint at their existence, although they may be hard to discern.

The diversity and quantity of the images strain belief. Birds, deer, dogs, horses and riders; snakes and snaking lines; dots, hands and feet; and baskets and pots hint at ancient stories. Daddy Canyon (at 44 miles)

### UTAH ROCK ART, STYLES

Rock art is a reflection of the lives and beliefs of the artists.

**[1]** Barrier art (6000 B.C.-100 B.C.) reflects a nomadic people, who hunted large and small game and harvested wild plants. They occupied caves or temporary structures. Their artistic, larger-than-life, distorted human forms reflect a shamanic or spiritual presence.

**[2]** Fremont art (A.D. 600-A.D. 1250) represents the Fremont Indian culture. This agrarian people planted corn, lived in pithouses or piled-stone shelters and fashioned basketry and pottery. Their humanlike figures may exhibit rectangular bodies. Mountain sheep and abstracts are common.

**[3]** Ute art (A.D. 1300-A.D. 1880) can be identified by horse and rider figures and bison. Utes were hunter-gatherers, using bow and arrow, baskets and pottery. They dwell in brush wickiups and teepees.



holds impressive art panels, one shaping the fourth wall of a corral. Behind one boulder hides a buffalo image. More art leads into this side canyon and across the wash.

The Great Hunt dishes up a worthy climax, with its herd of square-bodied wild sheep and lambs, large floating archer and prominent central figure with horns and trapezoid body. Its developed parking is 0.2 mile past the short trail to Big Buffalo Panel.

Dispersed images throughout Nine Mile Canyon offer chance viewing. Search the smooth surfaces and black varnished walls, at eye level and above.

### Sego Canyon

At Thompson Springs, east of Green River off Interstate 70, driving north on Sego Canyon Road leads to a fantastic BLM rock art site. For 3.5 miles on old asphalt, changing to dirt, the greeting is like a prehistoric drive-in picture show on a big rock screen. A day-use parking area and toilet serve visitors.

Despite fading, the Fremont- and Barrier-style anthropomorphic

forms captivate with size. One wall features 19 of the side-by-side sci-fi characters with masklike faces, horns and antennae. Armless mummies stand with beings with snaking arms and tapered floating forms. Elsewhere, Ute images adorn the rock. Interpretive panels aid understanding.

Just up the canyon and across the cattle guard, you can see from the road a decorated wall on private land (no trespassing). Use binoculars to better the view.

### Capitol Reef National Park

On state Route 24, this park, 85 miles southwest of Green River (35 miles west of Hanksville), holds messages of early settlers as well as Native peoples.

Admiration of its petroglyph panel (off Route 24, 1.1 miles east of the visitor center) is by boardwalk and a viewing platform with scopes. The Fremont-style art shows wonderful size, with several characters displaying big hands and feet. Running sheep stretch across a good length of panel. Push-button recordings provide a

### HORSESHOE CANYON

This remote reach of Canyonlands National Park holds bucket list-worthy, culturally significant rock art that requires commitment to see — a lengthy, lonesome, dry-weather four-wheel-drive approach to the trailhead and a challenging most-of-the-day hike, tracing an old grade from prepark days and cairns to follow a wash. The wash is then the gateway to four superb galleries: High, Horseshoe Shelter, Alcove and Great. At the latter, chained tins hold binoculars and a log book of musings inspired by the mummylike figures with different garments, heads and eyes. Canyon volunteers may supervise viewing and point out detail.



Native American perspective. Ranger interpretive programs often are held at the platform.

Taking the park's Scenic Drive (paved, then dirt) to the Capitol Gorge area, hikers can walk the wash trail to the Pioneer Register. Early on, the hike passes a handful of Indian petroglyphs, of which a rising sun is the best feature.

Graffiti has troubled the canyon. Signs announce recent culprits were

charged and sentenced, which raised a small cheer in me.

Farther along, an upper wall lists names, perfectly ruled and lettered, dated "Sept. 24, 1911." A blog suggested this was a U.S. Geological Survey party. Entering the register, etched and axle-grease names record early travelers who dared the squeezed canyon in wagons and early vehicles. Noteworthy inscriptions date from the 1880s to 1930s.

### Moab Area

#### Arches National Park

Courthouse Wash Panel, south of the park turnoff, holds a faint masterpiece that survived vandalism and a restoration of sandblasting. An interpretive board explains the preservation.

From U.S. Highway 191, north of Moab on the north side of the Colorado River Bridge, enter the parking area on the right and hike the graveled path to cross Courthouse Wash and ascend to the base of the cliffs and the art. The pictograph panel measures 19 feet high by 52 feet long, with petroglyphs along the base. Etched into varnished rock are classic symbols and animals. The pictograph shows ghostlike Barrier-style figures with square shoulders, tapered bodies and horned or antennaed heads. Smaller figures float in their midst.

Inside the park, a short walk from the Delicate Arch/Wolfe Ranch parking area leads to the Wolfe Ranch rock art. Hike past the log cabin with the sagging roof and spur left off the Delicate Arch trail just past the bridged wash to reach the rock with the Ute hunting designs. This clean panel shows horses and dogs, as well as sheep, representing a more contemporary, familiar world.

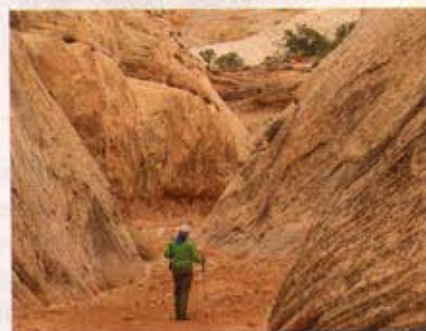
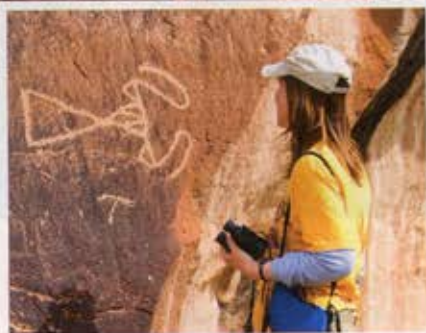
#### Potash Road (UT 279)

Pursuing the Colorado River along the base of a decorated cliff wall, this highway attracts rock climbers and offers turnouts for viewing the extensive, exceptional rock art. At the entrance to the Poison Spider Mesa Trail (a Jeep area, where we ended the short drive), a rugged hiker trail ascends to three-toed dinosaur tracks, casts and raised impressions, and additional rock art, including superb wild-sheep panels.

For the easily accessed roadway art, turnouts and interpretive signs signal when to stop. The images are prolific and ironically preserved due to the roadbuilding, which removed the talus slope that elevated the original artists, distancing modern onlookers. Fremont, Barrier and Ute images — anthropomorphs, prehistoric paper



Clockwise from top: The visitor center at Capitol Reef National Park blends in to the red-rock backdrop. A variety of petroglyphs can be seen at Nine Mile Canyon's Daddy Canyon. Hikers are able to walk the wash trail in the Capitol Gorge area of Capitol Reef NP.



doll chains, hands and feet, spirals, circles and squares — crowd each lengthy panel and bend. The signature image is a giant bear being brought down by three archers at the bear's snout, back and front foot. Great herds stretch along the wall. Dot and line ac-countings likewise appear.

### Newspaper Rock

This state historical monument, 12 miles from U.S. 191 on State Route 211/the entrance road to the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park, dazzles with its crowding and variety of etched images on black rock — a clear case of ancient typesetters gone wild. The 200-square-foot rock is jam-packed with abstracts and realistic representations: spiritual figures, bison, horseback riders, wheels, squiggles, deer, sheep and feet all tell an intricate tale.

### Bluff Area

#### Sand Island BLM Recreation Area

Off U.S. Highway 163/191 southwest of Bluff, this recreation site along the San Juan River serves river users, dry campers and art-seekers. Go right upon entering to view the petroglyph wall, which is in the National Register

of Historic Places and includes images of Kokopelli, the popularized flutist and fertility symbol. Search for this repeating image among the many sheep, squiggly armed and antennae beings, horses, dogs, frogs, snakes and geometric forms. 📷

### For More Information

**Bureau of Land Management**

<https://www.blm.gov/utah>

**Discover Moab**

[www.discovermoab.com/rockart.htm](http://www.discovermoab.com/rockart.htm)

**National Park Service**

[www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)

**Utah Office of Tourism**

800-200-1160, [www.visitutah.com](http://www.visitutah.com)