

## A Day with the Anasazi (and a fully grown woman dressed like a rabbit)

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We heard about the citadel from a man who looked like an escaped convict. He sat with my dad, drinking a cold beer, the only thing below 90 degrees in this desert. Everytime he took a sip, the neck of the bottle disappeared into his grizzled red beard. We knew by this time that Utah's real crown jewel isn't Delicate Arch. Famous, sure. It's even on the license plate. But only the locals and the park rangers know about some things.

The conversation had started when his wife had hopped out of her shop, the only shop for hundreds of miles around. She was a skinny woman, with pale eyes that looked like moons. Her dark, leathery skin stuck to her bones like fly paper. I had lost track of the days, but apparently it was Easter Sunday. She insisted on giving me and my sister several packets of M&Ms in celebration of the holiday. I'd rather have had a free shower. I hadn't been able to bathe in weeks, and they cost \$5 per minute.

Her husband couldn't have been more of a contrast. He reminded me of a California Redwood. That's what he embodied. They invited us inside the shop. I don't think they had had any customers in ages. We told them we were from Washington, hiking around just for fun and to spend more time as a family. And that's when we got talking about the Citadel.

The park rangers don't like to tell people about it. The guidebooks never mention it, and if they do, they don't give directions. It's one of Utah's best kept secrets. With the gas station man's instructions, we set off in our truck down a rugged desert road. There was one radio station that we got that far out in the desert: Savage LoveCast with Dan Savage. This episode was titled "Death, Sex, and Money: another Orthodox Catholic with a dead fiance." So we turned that off. My six-year-old sister, Julia, took it upon herself to "sing" us songs. They weren't really songs, just her looking out the windows and naming things she saw. So it was essentially just her chanting the word "dirt" over and over. We drove for hours and saw no one. Finally, we stopped at the end of the road. No one was in good spirits. Julia had gotten peanut butter on my leg, I yelled at her, our parents yelled at both of us, then they yelled at each other for yelling. I was starting to wish that we hadn't gone to Utah. It seemed ridiculous to try and live in a camper for weeks with my family. I didn't even like hiking. I didn't care about the Anasazi and the "natural history". It didn't relate to me in any way, so what was I doing there?

Nonetheless, we set off. We knew that from there, we'd have to make our own path, avoiding the cryptic soil. My mom earned her degree in geology and is passionate about passing her knowledge of rocks onto my sister and I. I tiptoed through the desert as she tried to explain to me how the cryptic soil had formed. We seemed to hike forever and I ran out of drinking water. And then it happened so suddenly. We walked over a hill and I was struck with a view unlike anything I had ever seen. A wide, deep canyon stretched before me, with a high island of rock in the middle that jutted into the sky. It had a drama unparalleled by anything I'd ever seen. Only a narrow strip of rock connected it to the rest of the canyon. It didn't look like earth, and yet it looked like the most earthly thing I had ever seen. People get used to beauty, and people get used to the extraordinary, but this was beyond that. I could never get used to something like this.

I walked towards it like I was in a trance. No matter how I tried, I couldn't look away. It was for this reason that I tripped and nearly fell into the canyon. Steadying myself, I climbed with more caution over the slickrock towards the citadel.

I had done a bit of reading before coming to Utah and learned about the lifestyle of the Anasazi Indians. Upon seeing the citadel, I immediately knew how an Anasazi would have felt upon seeing it: euphoric. The Anasazi are famous for a few things: their cave art, their pottery, and their wars. Anasazi would band together in large tribes and migrate from place to place throughout the year, as needed. But there was little reason to leave this place. Perched high above the desert, a watchman could see for miles in every direction. Enemy forces only had one way in, over the gaunt bridge of rock. The Anasazi had thought of a way to defend that too, though. They built walls of stone to slow intruders. Archers were positioned all over the citadel to strike down anyone who got past the walls.

I reached the bridge, the long strip that would take me to the citadel itself. It had been a long time since any Anasazi had been there to maintain the walls which had once stopped intruders. Now, I could step over the few stones that remained lined up on the bridge. My sister ran up and down the bridge, howling with glee and jumping over the rocks, but I was too caught up in my own thoughts to join in.

Upon reaching the main part of the citadel, I craned my neck to gape at the massive amount of stone. It really was enormous. But then something else caught my eye. It looked a little bit like... a house? I began to climb the sandstone to investigate further. But it wasn't a house, technically speaking. Not anymore. Now it was just a ruin tucked into the side of a cliff. But what a ruin it was. The desert rocks fit so well together that they looked more like a miniature brick building than a primitive dwelling. Windows and a doorway were shaped without flaw, like a geometry professor had constructed them with a ruler, not a group of Anasazi, a dozen centuries ago.

Or maybe the dwelling wasn't primitive. Maybe I was the primitive one. These people had survived for hundreds of years, found food in this ridiculously barren place, created art, and formed governments with virtually nothing. I could barely make toast. I realized that I had been judging these ancient people, subconsciously assuming that I was more advanced than them, simply because I lived under a roof. It made me wonder if I had been judging other groups of people without even realizing it.