

Colorado

National Monument
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National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

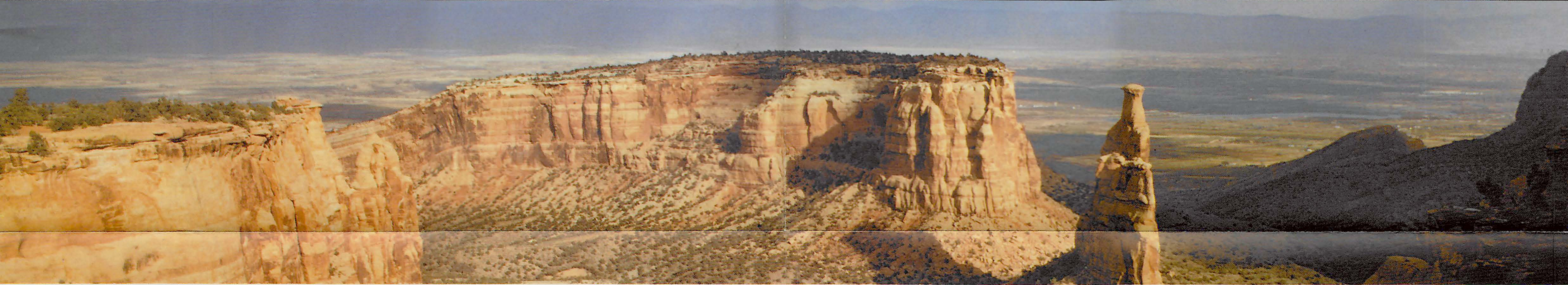


Photo by David Sumner

Canyon Country

Colorado National Monument is an easy park to visit. Once accustomed to the vast distances and the lofty rock formations that may at first make the canyon country seem remote and forbidding, you can feel comfortable here. One day is enough time to view the exhibits at the visitor center, take the scenic Rim Rock Drive across the park, enjoy a picnic lunch, and choose a trail for an afternoon hike.

You might find a vantage point anywhere along the roadway and profitably spend an hour or more experiencing the colors, shapes, and textures of this intriguing land, listening for canyon wrens, or just being drawn into the awesome silence of the place. Or if you have more time, you might want to turn your back to the pavement and seek a more intimate understanding of this part of the canyon country.

Most canyons are readily accessible to hikers. There are maintained trails, as well as old deer trails that often criss-cross north-facing slopes. Maintained trails enter the canyons gently, switching back and forth until

they finally straighten out on the canyon floors. Underfoot is massive sandstone, firmly packed sand, or rock chips washed down from above.

In summer the canyons heat up, driving most animals into the shade of the junipers and pinyon pines that grow on gentler slopes. You'll need a hat for comfort and a supply of water for all but the shortest hikes. As you walk, notice variations in the makeup of the high canyon walls. Each layer is evidence of a particular time in the Earth's history, progressing from older units near the canyon bottoms to younger layers on the uplands. Each is the result of a unique set of conditions that contributed to its formation.

Time and weather have scoured away great volumes of these rocks, remnants of which form today's dramatic landscape. The rocks' differing resistance to erosion has given rise to the varied landforms—here a rounded slope, there a sheer cliff, and beyond, a towering monolith—that grace the park. More than for any other reason, Colorado National

Monument was established to preserve these scenic treasures. Fossils and other evidence help to date these rock layers which spread across many other areas of the southwest. Here, with the exception of those exposed on the deeper canyon floors, all the rocks were formed at various times during the Mesozoic Era, 225 to 65 million years ago, dominated by the life forms we know as dinosaurs, perhaps not reptiles at all, but a form of life ancestral to today's birds. A fossil dinosaur skeleton from a site near the park created quite a stir among scientists at the turn of the century when it was found to be of the largest species ever discovered.

Today's large creatures—the mammals—tend to be seen at twilight or dusk. Mule deer are most common, and wapiti (elk) are sometimes seen, especially in winter. Mountain lions range widely in this area and often enter the park on their travels. Bison, nearly exterminated during the western frontier days, have been protected here since the early part of this century when the park was established.

The first caretaker of Colorado National Monument, John Otto, believed this was a place of surpassing beauty that all should see. Otto devoted much of his time here to carving and blasting out trails that are still used today, and promoting the park in ways that have made him almost a legendary figure. When the Civilian Conservation Corps completed Rim Rock Drive during the Depression, it was in many ways a fulfillment of Otto's original plan for the park.

Nature is never predictable, nor are its component parts arranged for our convenience. Take time to enjoy the park, to explore it and savor its beauty and diversity, its moods, and its quiet grandeur. Perhaps after your visit you will agree with John Otto, who thought that a proper visit to this corner of canyon country, even with the luxury of roads and trails, should always require a bit of physical hardship and personal sacrifice.

Focus on the Uncompahgre Highland

Pretend you are watching a movie about the shaping of this landscape over eons of time. The Earth's surface recurrently rises and falls, crumbles, and blows away. The higher the land rises, the faster it is carried away by wind and rushing water, dictated by the constant pull of gravity. You see buckling, folding, and cracking of the surface caused by tremendous uplifts from deep within the Earth. This is matched by equally dramatic forces of erosion at work on the surface.

The last quarter of this imaginary movie depicts the events that show up today in the rocks of Colorado National Monument. The Uncompahgre Highland rises to mountainous heights, then is worn down over millions of years to a nearly level plain. (These ancient crystalline rocks—granite,

gneiss, schist—which were at the core appear today in the canyon floors.) Great bodies of water follow, depositing layer upon layer of soft, sedimentary rocks as distant mountains give themselves up, grain by grain, to be reformed.

Becoming entombed within the rock are the remains of dinosaurs, fish and shellfish, early mammals, and many other life forms that lived within a span of more than 100 million years. Finally the Rocky Mountains begin their slow rise, and the surrounding land is raised as well. Water falling as rain and snow invades rock crevices, expands as ice, and begins prying pieces loose from solid material. As erosion continues, the streams and rivers sort themselves out into the ancestral Colorado River system.

Volcanic eruptions, the latest series of geological events, spread molten lava over much of the land nearby. (The remnant lava today forms a resilient cap on the Grand Mesa to the northeast.) Then, in the final frames of the geologic movie, humans arrive. They begin living in this broken, arid landscape, searching for plants and game to feed their families. Man, the ultimate predator, finds ways to use a harsh land to his advantage. These ancient people of the Fremont Culture, known from their artifacts and traces of their fire pits in the soil, are followed in about AD 1200 by the ancestors of the Ute Indians. As our imaginary movie comes to its final few frames, we see these forebears of today's Utes living their nomadic way of life and making use of the diverse bounty of their environment, their culture flourishing as it does to the present day!

John Otto fell in love with the canyon country which became his outdoor home for more than three decades. A maverick and a dreamer, he launched a one-man letter-writing campaign to stimulate interest in the creation of a national park in this area. After President Taft established the park on May

24, 1911, Otto became its first custodian, only to be relieved of his responsibility following a political dispute in 1927. He left for good seven years later, but until his death in 1952, John Otto remained a loyal booster of Colorado National Monument, and has since become a local legend.



The park in winter takes on a different beauty and interest, and cool weather is often easier to cope with than summer's heat. When scenic canyons and rock formations are mantled in snow, the Liberty Cap Trail often has good conditions for cross-country skiing. Plan to wear plenty of warm clothing,

and get out and see the park as few others do. Look for the signs of animal movement in winter conditions. The park road is open all winter.



This cactus is one of several species of cactus found in the park. Cacti are remarkably adaptable. They evolve new species so rapidly that it is difficult for botanists to keep up with them.



These unusual rock carvings were made by ancient Indians. They are found not only here, but throughout the Southwest and in other parts of the country. Scientists disagree about their significance. Some interpret them as art, while others see a pattern of symbols almost like language. Wherever you find rock

carvings and rock paintings, do not disturb them. On Federal land they are all protected by law; leave them untouched for scientific study and for future generations to enjoy.



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Highway access to Colorado National Monument is by way of Int. 70 or U.S. 6 and 50 to Grand Junction or Fruita, Colo., then by Colo. 340 to Rim Rock Drive. A 56-kilometer (35 mile) circuit can be made from Grand Junction or Fruita across the park on Rim Rock Drive and then back to your point of origin via

Colo. 340. Major airlines, a passenger train, and buses serve Grand Junction.

Visitor Facilities are open all year. The visitor center is near Saddlehorn, 6.4 kilometers (4 miles) from the West (Fruita) entrance. A campground and a picnic area are nearby,

each with tables, grills (for charcoal fires only), and restrooms. Camping is on a first-come first-served basis with a seven-person limit per site. Camping fees are collected in summer.

Private campgrounds and other accommodations are in the Grand Junction area. The

Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and Colorado state parks have campgrounds and facilities in the vicinity.

Interpretive and campfire programs are held every day in summer (less frequently in fall, winter, and spring); schedules are posted at the visitor

center and other public-use areas. Exhibits and a slide program at the visitor center can help you understand the geology and the natural and cultural history of the area. Publications, maps, and film are sold in the visitor center by the Colorado National Monument Assn., Inc., a nonprofit co-operating organization.

Hiking is a good way to see the park. Short walks along the canyon rims follow Window Rock, Canyon Rim, John Otto, and Coke Ovens Trails. Serpents Trail, 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) long, winds through many rock layers along the 54 switchbacks that once formed the original road into the high country.

You can take longer hikes on Monument Canyon and Liberty Cap Trails, or across country. Overnight hikers should register at the visitor center. Carry plenty of water when hiking. Ask for information on skiing and cycling.

For your safety, ask for specific advice and information. Here are some general safety tips: The road through the park is narrow and winding, so stop only at designated pullouts. Top speed is 56 kilometers (35 miles) per hour and lower near the entrances and other congested areas; reduce speed on sharp and blind

curves. Don't touch, feed, or molest animals; even small ones can bite. Check on conditions before you hike; never hike alone, and register for all technical climbs. Do not throw or roll rocks into the canyons; others may be hurt, and the beauty of the canyons may be damaged. Watch out for your children

around ledges and drop-offs. Please have a safe and enjoyable visit.

Park regulations govern use of this protected area. Some activities are prohibited and others require advance registration or additional permits. If you have any questions about possible restrictions, ask a ranger

or inquire at the visitor center desk. The staff can give you a list of rules pertaining to collecting, pets, fires, off-road vehicle use, guns and hunting, camping, and other activities. No open fires are permitted, but visitors to the backcountry may cook over properly shielded gas or liquid-fueled stoves.

Colorado National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent's address is Colorado National Monument, Fruita, CO 81521.