

Flagstaff

Ruins Signs and Volcanos



A Photo Essay By
Jim Witkowski

Flagstaff

Signs, Ruins, and Volcanos

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Published By
Jimwitkowski.com
P.O. Box 354
Congress, Arizona 85332
480-454-6600

Printed by Blurb Books
www.blurb.com/

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Book Production Notes

Designed by Jim Witkowski
Jimwitkowski.com
Images captured on a Sony ICLE-6300
Processed: Adobe Photoshop 23
Layout: Adobe InDesign 17

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my slave-driver editor Anne Witkowski and the rest of the hard working staff at *On the Road With Jim*. Thanks for making this book possible: The State of Arizona, City of Flagstaff, Walnut Canyon National Monument, the Babbitt Ranch, and Wupatki National Monument.

To see other portfolios, visit Jim's Website:
www.jimwitkowski.com

To read more of Jim's picture stories visit:
On the Road With Jim
www.jimwitkowski.com/blog/

Introduction

We had to break from the heat this summer, so we dusted off the trailer and drug it up to Flagstaff. We didn't escape the humidity, though. Since it was the height of the monsoon season, the weather in the high country was the same as at home—only 30° cooler. There's been a lot of news earlier this summer about the Flagstaff fires, so we found an RV park on the west side of town—right where Old Route 66 merges with Interstate 40. When we got there, the seasonal rains had already quenched the burn. U.S. 89, which both fires crossed, had reopened, but Sunset Crater National Monument was still closed. It suffered extensive damage to the campgrounds and buildings (otherwise, the cinder cone and Bonita Lava Flow were unharmed).

Our trip served a couple of purposes. First, I needed topics to get this publication through the balance of the hot summer months. Second, we wanted to take Ritz (our trailer) on a shakedown cruise to see how well it and the Jeep played together. Finally, we longed to sleep under the covers with open windows in air, not contaminated with that old-person smell—we accomplished all of that. It's hard to describe how wonderful it felt to enjoy a glass of wine outside and listen to the sound of rain on the awning. Besides, there's no more fabulous evening entertainment than watching a newbie learn how to do their first black-tank dump (go back and watch the 2006 movie *RV* again).

On the Colorado Plateau, water generally flows to the Colorado River. In Flagstaff, however, someone put our state's tallest mountain smack-dab in the way, so water has to drain around the San Francisco Peaks. A couple of miles west of town, you

cross the Flag Divide, where streams flow west of the mountains. East of the divide is the Rio Flag and Walnut Creek Drainage system. Here the streams flow east of the volcano into the Little Colorado River. Walnut Creek drains Mormon Lake, Upper Lake Mary, and Lower Lake Mary. You can count Arizona's natural lakes with one hand, and this little creek drains three of them. Perhaps that explains how an ordinarily dry creek could carve a deep channel into the limestone. Of course, all of that happened before our 22-year drought. Today, Mormon Lake is a broad, shallow dust bowl with a mud puddle marking the deep spot. Both Lake Marys are similarly low.

In the picture, *Walnut Canyon Bend*, we're standing at a spot that overlooks a horseshoe bend in the creek. I took this photo from the north side of the canyon facing south. In the distance is Mormon Mountain, some 16 miles south. The lake is located on the left flank of the mountain. When the creek is wet, water flows from right to left and empties into Rio Flag several miles downstream from this point. Then the river then turns north and flows under I-40 until it reaches the Little Colorado River, about a mile east of the Grand Falls (sometimes called Chocolate Falls).

I hope you enjoy discovering Walnut Canyon and seeing this week's image. You can view the Web version of Walnut Creek Bend on its page by clicking [here](#). Next week, we'll hike one of the trails and poke around some ruins displayed in the national monument. I hope you'll join us.

Walnut Canyon

When Queen Anne and I married, we lived most of a decade in a second-floor condo. Besides living in cramped quarters, the thing we most disdained was lugging groceries from the parking lot and up those stairs. My right knee cracked with each step. We swore then that we'd never live in a two-story house.

The Sinagua people would've considered us Snowflakes. Imagine your family living in a small cave with a plastered rock façade built on the side of Walnut Canyon. They scaled the canyon walls (without stairs) to get to work. Once on top, the men tended small patches of fertile soil along the edge. They grew drought-resistant crops because their name means Without Water. At least, the Spanish called them that when they first visited the canyon. For protein, they hunted deer, elk, and big horn sheep. After butchering the game, they stuffed the meat into Safeway plastic bags and lowered it on ropes.

Given my extreme age, my most significant anxiety would be getting up in the middle of the night for a glass of Water. As it is, I struggle to find our kitchen in the dark, much less climb down to the creek and back. Of course, their local wise man was in his thirties, and he knew when to stand up and declare, "Today is a good day to die." Then as he tossed his blanket over his shoulder, he'd tromp out of the camp to the nearest mountaintop, where he'd sit for weeks until dying of starvation. Once again, I've proved that exercise is unsuitable for you.

There are many disadvantages to living on a cliff-side cubby hole, but for me, it's the TV reception. It's lousy down there. How

could you possibly spend a Sunday afternoon without a cold beer and a NASCAR race. You'd need to get a satellite dish or at least cable. Then you'd waste a whole day waiting for the cable installation guy to show up.

There are two trails for you to explore when you visit Walnut Canyon National Monument. Both are under a mile long. The Island Trail is a loop that drops into the canyon, past several dwellings, and then climbs back to the rim. We'll explore it next week. The Rim Trail stays on top of the mesa and is easier to hike. It goes past some old crop fields and a couple of ruins. I took this week's picture on the Rim Trail.

The image that I call Sinagua Pueblo shows a two-room stone building of generous size. This structure was probably a communal building for ceremonies and grain storage, like your condo's community center. Here is where the Sinagua unloaded their trucks after a Costco run. You must surely realize that I'm joking. Flagstaff doesn't have a Costco. Recovered artifacts show that the Sinagua traded with the villages at Eldon Mountain, Wupatki, and Homolovi—after a short train ride to Winslow.

As you quietly stand and admire the pueblo's stonework, you can hear Sinagua ghosts laughing, smoking peyote, and chanting with the rhythm of deerskin drums late into the night—until one of the neighbors comes by and yells, "turn down those damn drums."

Until then, more cowbell please.



Bend in Walnut Creek



Signagua Pueblo



Hidden Passage



Corner Unit



Trees on Limestone

Rock Mat





Juniper on Trail

Signs of Flagstaff

When Queen Anne and I spent a week in Flagstaff last month, our primary goal was heat relief, but I was confident that I could snap a few shots of historic buildings and signs to add to my Route 66 collection. In this journal, I've written several times about my experiences traveling the Mother Road as a kid, so I'll spare you from repeating them. Instead, I must say that I was disappointed at how hard it was to find kitschy motel and dinner signs along the main street. More profitable strip malls and professional offices are rapidly replacing them. Interstate 40 travelers prefer the newer hotels on Butler Street, where the Little America Hotel is. Nobody drives 66 anymore—too many lights and too much traffic.

John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, the depressing story of dust bowl migrants searching for survival, didn't make Route 66 famous. Nor did that fame come from my father's generation, who—like the Joad family—moved en masse to California after World War II. It came when Angel Delgadillo—the Seligman barber—pitched a historic highway idea to the State of Arizona. When that designation came through, tons of beer-guts had a play-pen to gather and drive their car toys. We're dying off now, and like the coals in your Webber Grill, that passion is dying with us.

Flagstaff's downtown is split by the proverbial railroad tracks—but in this case, I don't think there's a wrong side. The north side is a historic district; on the other side, old warehouses fill the limited space between the Union Pacific tracks and Northern Arizona University. Each has a distinct vibe of its own.

Older masonry structures make up the historic district and crowd the sidewalks. As a result, the streets are narrow, and parking is limited. If you find a parking spot, it's easy to walk around the 24 blocks downtown in a couple of hours. When the founders laid out the town, they included alleys so deliveries and utilities would be off the street. That may have worked in the mid-twentieth century, but retail space is at a premium, so landlords subdivided the buildings, and now store fronts occupy the building's front and back. That means there's always a beer delivery truck clogging the street somewhere.

I get the feeling that since the city is Arizona's "premier" ski area, the city planners are using other resort towns as models. There is the usual mix of restaurants, bars, souvenir shops, and galleries for you to spend money in. The building owners maintain the facades well and have decorated them with low-voltage lights—for that Disney Main Street look. However, something's missing. The Snow Bowl doesn't draw the same class of skiers as Aspen, Telluride, or Park City (the airport doesn't have room for that many private jets).

If the area north of the tracks is all façade, the south side is another story. It's more bohemian, rustic, and organic—as you'd expect from a college town. The merchants may slap paint on their industrial buildings and hang an open sign in this part of town. They don't have a wad of cash to invest in marketing and merchandising, so they depend on the product and repeat clientele to survive. You'll get the same bar food, but without the pretentiousness.



Flagstaff Depot



Saint Anne Apartments



Motel Du Beau



Motel Downtowner



Speaeasy



McMillan Bnk and Tavern



Open?

San Francisco Lava Field

If you drive north on US Route 89 from Flagstaff, you get to see one of the best scenic views in the country. To get there, we need to get around the San Francisco Peaks—the remains of an ancient volcano, and they rise over 12,000 feet—Arizona’s high point. Route 89 is on the east flank of the peaks and winds through Flagstaff suburbs that suffered fire and flood damage this spring. As the road climbs a gentle grade, the scenery changes from open meadows full of new homes to a ponderosa forest. There was substantial fire scaring, but many tall, red-barked trees survived.

At the top of the hill, the four-lane highway briefly flattens before you reach the Sunset Crater National Monument entrance road and the 7288-foot elevation marker. A mile further, the road suddenly drops from its mountain elevation to the Little Colorado River Bridge, 3100 feet below and 35 miles away. On an exceptionally clear day, you can see into Utah—I swear.

This vista encompasses every rainbow color. On the left, the dark green pine trees grow down the mountain slope until they make way for lighter green junipers and then the yellow grass-covered cinder cones on the Babbitt Cattle Ranch. The twenty-one miles of perfectly straight blacktop divides the east side from the west. On the east side, patches of black lava flow give way to the distant Painted Desert colored in hues of reds, whites, greys, and purples. Above everything, the deepest blue skies—a color they don’t make anymore—tie the canvas together.

Every time I see this scene through my windshield, I have a smile on my face. My joy is probably because I’m on my way to someplace fun, like Lake Powell, Lee’s Ferry, the Grand Canyon, or (shudder) Utah. As I drive down the mountainside, I habitually switch my dash view to see if I can recover my gas mileage before I hit the bridge.

Except for a few visits to Sunset Crater and Wupatki National Monuments, I’m usually passing through this wonderland. But, during our July visit to Flagstaff, Queen Anne and I came to the mountain’s north side to photograph the cinder cones in the San Francisco Lava Field. They’re technically on the private ranch owned by the Babbitt family. The Arizona pioneers that have been successful ranchers, merchants, and politicians.

Before we drove out to the ranch, I checked in at their store in town to see if we needed a hall pass. “No, if the gate is open, you can enter as long as you’re respectful and drive on the roads.” Taking the caution to heart, I was surprised when we reached the old trading post that there wasn’t even a gate to open. The dirt road was so smooth that we didn’t tax our Jeep’s capabilities—not even its four-wheel drive. It’s only a couple of miles to the lava field, but before we got there, we drove by a cattle tank where some uncouth slob left an old beer can. I was so upset that I stopped to document what the thoughtless cretin had done.

As you might have figured out already, it’s not actually a beer can but graffiti that some vandal painted on the side of one of the ranch’s metal water tanks. They’re used to hold water for the cattle during the dry season. Indeed, the lettering is still vandalism, but one that appeals to my perverted sense of humor. Besides the tank, I don’t know what the trash can lid is. Perhaps it’s a cache to store surplus hay for when a herd is in the area.

An unnamed volcanic cone appears in the background, and it doesn’t seem very high until you try climbing it. Neither Anne nor I tried scaling anything on this trip because there weren’t any stairs for me to bitch about, so as usual, Anne stayed in the Jeep reading her Kindle while I ran around taking pictures.



Moonsoon Over Lava Field



Pinion annd Basalt



Beer Can



Split Top



Colton Crater



Shit Pot Crater



Clouds and Craters

Wupatki Box Canyon

When I photograph a place like Lomaki (the Hopi word meaning Beautiful House), I try to walk its perimeter, looking at how the light falls on it. Then I concentrate on details that help fill in its story. As I move around, I'll stop and take shots of things that intrigue me. My photos are more intuitive than systematic. I look for contrasts and shadow patterns that place the subject in a specific moment.

I was doing that when I entered the Lomaki ruin and came across the door in this week's picture. I saw the door and thought, "This looks interesting." I framed the shot and snapped the shutter. Typically, an image with a busy pattern in a uniform light doesn't work because it looks like a Where's-Waldo puzzle. However, the dagger of light on the room floor commands your eye to go through the opening. It's a walk-towards-the-light moment.

As a younger man, I was six-foot tall, but gravity has taken its toll, and now my diminished stature is only 5 foot 11½ inches. Even in my current dwarf state, I had to do a full Asian bow to fit through the doorway. That tells me that the Pueblo people that built this structure were short. Otherwise, they would constantly bang their heads on the lintel when they came home Saturday nights drunk from the bar. Believe me, that gets old fast.

As I walked through the complex, I got to another room with a low window. Through it, I saw a creature with five legs. It gave me a fright. Was it a centaur with an extra appendage or a giant arachnid with three missing legs? On closer inspection, I saw three legs were carbon fiber, and the other pair wore shorts. The creature turned out to be a fellow photographer. She was an ASU coed from working on a YouTube video.

I think it's funny how photographers behave when they bump into one

another out in the field. After seeing another camera, they let down any guards. They stop being solitary wanderers and suddenly become highly social as they compare notes. "Did you see this?" You should go there." In the age of digital photography, it's gotten worse because now they can compare their shots on the back of their cameras and go into full chimpanzee mode, "Look at this one—ooh ooh ooh ah."

After our pleasantries exchanges, we parted ways, and she returned to the parking lot. Of course, I didn't think to ask her name or YouTube channel. Queen Anne would kill me on the spot if she knew I talked to a college-aged woman in the field without her chaperoning. My mother always twisted my ear the same way when I was in trouble.

After I finished shooting, I hiked back to the parking lot, where Her Majesty waited in the car. If I was lucky, her nose was buried in her Kindle reader, and she didn't notice anything. Before I could say a thing, she blurted out, "I asked that girl if I had to go up there to rescue you."

"What did she say?"

"She said you were happily wandering around snapping pictures, and you'd be down when you ran out of film." It was only then that I realized I was a bit hot, so I started the Jeep and guzzled some water while cool air conditioning blew on my face, before driving back to Flagstaff.

I've checked several times since we got home, but so far, there are no new YouTube Wupatki videos, but I'll keep looking while I dream of mermaids.



Summer Rains



Ghosts of the Past



Lomaki



Door to the Sun



Lomaki Crater



Box Canyon



Above the Creek

for jenn

Flagstaff

In July 2022, my wife—Queen Anne—and I needed a break from the Arizona desert heat crossed, so we hooked up our Casita trailer and headed north to Flagstaff. We spent a week in the cool pines exploring the town and some of the local attractions. During the trip, I photographed the places we visited and wrote some of the thoughts of our memories. I hope you enjoy viewing my photographs and reading my notes as much as I did making them.