



Wintertime along the Fremont River

Chapter 7

CAPITOL REEF



The Castle

CAPITOL REEF

This extraordinary park is often overlooked by visitors to the Southwest and isn't heavily frequented outside of summer. I see three explanations for this: its geographic location, which makes it less accessible than its better-known neighbors of Bryce and Arches; the limited amount of paved roads inside the park; and the fact that there are no well-known icons that would-be visitors can readily identify.

This trend is gradually being reversed due in part to the added presence of Grand Staircase-Escalante Nat'l Monument to the south and a surge of new motels built just outside the park, in Torrey and Hanksville.

Nevertheless, Capitol Reef is one of the jewels of Utah, thanks to its unmatched geological variety, fantastic scenery, surprisingly rich vegetation and lack of crowds. But be forewarned! This park only reveals a small part of itself to the casual visitor. Sure, you can cross it in the course of a few hours, including a short incursion on the famous Scenic Drive, but there is plenty more great scenery awaiting off the beaten track. Plan on at least two days in the park because you need to hike its many trails and explore remote areas with a 4WD vehicle to fully appreciate it.

One of the principal attractions of Capitol Reef is the great geological diversity of its landscape and sedimentary layers. This translates into an extraordinary palette of hues and textures, great for visitor and photographer alike: cliffs, ridges, domes, canyons, monoliths, badlands come in a huge diversity of colors, which become even more striking during the golden hour. You can better appreciate this exceptional relief with a bit of knowledge of the paleo-environment of

Capitol Reef and the forces of erosion which are constantly at work exposing them. Free brochures are available for travelers at the Visitor Center. Don't miss this opportunity as Capitol Reef, more than any other park, gives you tremendous insight into the geologic history of the Colorado Plateau—the essential ingredient behind these landscapes that we so much admire today.

Torrey, a small town at the west entrance of the park, makes a perfect base for your explorations. Over the course of the last few years, Torrey has seen a great deal of expansion: where in the 1980's there wasn't a single motel, now there are almost a dozen vying for your business. The beautiful oasis of Fruita, inside the park, is especially nice if you are car camping or want to pitch a tent. During autumn and springtime, it is one of the most pleasant campgrounds anywhere.

Panorama Point

Coming from Torrey on UT 24, you discover a superlative road, bordered to the north by impressive cliffs that become even more spectacular during the golden hour, mornings and evenings. Among the formations at the base of the cliffs are Chimney Rock and the Castle. Chimney Rock isn't really awesome in itself, but it photographs nicely in the afternoon from the parking lot, when the dark red Moenkopi formation capped by the white Shinarump sandstone really stands out. As for the Castle, it offers a remarkable collection of sedimentary layers that can be enjoyed right by the side of the road.

One of the best spots to photograph this area is Panorama Point, located about 4 miles past the west entrance of the park and 3 miles before the Visitor Center. From this promontory, you get a splendid panoramic view of the western part of the park with Capitol Dome, the Castle and the Henry Mountains in the distance. A sign claims that this spot is the least polluted in the United States and that, on a clear day, you can see over a hundred and thirty miles! Even though the validity of this claim has become doubtful in this day and age, you'll certainly rejoice in the fact that you can see at least 60 miles on most days.

In the morning, Panorama Point affords an excellent view to the west in the direction of Torrey. Toward the east, a 100 to 200mm telephoto lens works great for capturing Capitol Dome and the Henry Mountains in the afternoon.

Continuing another mile on the dirt road south of Panorama Point, you can take the short 1-mile round-trip foot trail to aptly named Sunset Point, which offers a fantastic view in late afternoon. You can use either a normal lens to photograph the various geological strata of the reef or a medium telephoto to capture the shadows of the formations on the red cliffs. From the same parking lot, a very short trail leads to the Goosenecks of Sulphur Creek, a promontory above a deep canyon that is unfortunately difficult to photograph because of the shadows, although mornings are better. Nothing particularly awe-inspiring or to compare with the "big guys" (Dead Horse Point, Horseshoe Bend, and Goosenecks State Park), but it's interesting to note that these goosenecks are cut

through the same layer of sedimentary rock as that of the White Rim of Island in the Sky fame, a formation rarely seen in that section of the plateau.

Fruita Oasis

In all seasons, Fruita is an oasis where it's nice to relax between two rocky landscapes. This old Mormon colony is located on the banks of the Fremont River and has abundant vegetation, contrasting heavily with the surrounding desert. Near the Visitor Center, several cabins containing pioneer-era artifacts are visible from the road and warrant a brief stop.

The historic orchards are opened from June through October for public harvesting. Inside the designated orchards, you can eat as much as you want; however, you pay for the fruits you take outside. The vast grassy area adjoining the pleasant picnic grounds with its peaches, wisteria and jacarandas allows you to get some great shots when they're in flower (March and April). The cottonwoods bordering the Fremont around Fruita are magnificent in spring and fall.

Sulphur Creek, which empties into the Fremont River at Fruita, is a lovely walk. Just behind the Visitor Center, a short footpath quickly brings you to a shallow crossing and a series of lovely pools.

The Fremont Gorge Overlook Trailhead is located near the Blacksmith Shop. This little-known walk provides a great view of the Castle from atop a high mesa. A mid-range telephoto is perfect to frame the castle and surroundings. After a mile or so, the Castle really opens up and, at about a mile and a half, you'll get an optimum view in mid-morning or mid-afternoon.

The Scenic Drive

The Scenic Drive, which begins a bit after you pass Fruita, offers some spectacular views of geological features such as Grand Wash, Fern's Nipple, the Slickrock Divide and the Egyptian Temple, all this along an 8-mile long paved road. Get yourself one of the mini-guides to the Scenic Drive at the entrance and stop at the various landmarks, following the interesting explanations it contains on the sedimentary origins of the park.

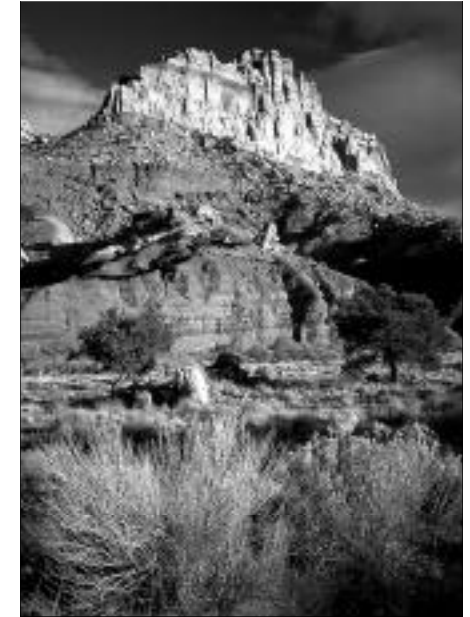
After making sure that no flash flood danger is in the forecast, continue your drive on a good dirt road winding down about 2 miles between the tall cliffs of Capitol Gorge. This short but spectacular road is passable to any passenger car in good weather. A 2-mile round-trip foot trail leads toward the end of the canyon, passing by the Pioneer Register and the Waterpocket Tanks (the latter are more interesting when water is present). The 4-mile round-trip hike to the Golden Throne is also worthwhile, but more strenuous.

Although it doesn't give the same impression of isolation as some of the narrower and less visited canyons described in this book, Capitol Gorge is well worth the trip, much as its longer and deeper counterpart: Grand Wash.

The entire Scenic Road is especially photogenic while driving back from Capitol Gorge in late afternoon. That's when you get the best light on the sensuous, multicolored sandstone walls and layers of Capitol Ridge. Less than a mile past the spur to Grand Wash, locate the last little hill before the road starts its descent toward Fruita, park on the right, and enjoy one of the most photogenic



Early morning on the Scenic Drive



Scenic Drive near Grand Wash

views in the Southwest. You'll be looking at badlands topped by pillars and cliffs to the right, with the narrow road winding down spectacularly toward the oasis and the Castle in the background. You can use a wide range of lenses to capture either grand scenics or small details of this beautiful landscape.

Hickman Bride & the Navajo Knobs

Following UT 24 from the Visitor Center in the direction of Hanksville, the Fremont presents a festival of colors with a number of orchards. The countless tamarisk trees lining the riverbed are particularly photogenic in autumn.

Shortly before reaching the Hickman Bridge trailhead, stop at the Fremont petroglyphs pullout, as well as at the very moving Mormon schoolhouse. The Park Service has recently constructed a boardwalk that makes it easier to observe and photograph the ancient Fremont glyphs—which are unfortunately badly weather-damaged.

The self-guided nature trail to Hickman Bridge is a short and easy 2 miles round-trip, but don't expect too much photographically, as the bridge is some-



Navajo Dome

what ensconced below a ridge. Press on toward the Rim Overlook Trail, branching from the previous trail after a few hundreds yards, for a series of interesting sights. After about 0.25-mile, Pectol's Pyramid comes into view on the other side of the Fremont; its unique shape makes for an interesting picture. Continue walking another 0.25-mile or so past the sign until you get the best pyramid shape. Pectol's Pyramid can be photographed in the early morning; however, only its left face will be well lit. Mid-to-late afternoon offers better light. Standard focal length to short telephoto will yield the best results. About a 0.5-mile further on the trail, you'll be able to catch excellent views of Navajo Dome to the right with a standard lens to short telephoto.

At the end of the trail, 2.25-miles from the parking lot, the Rim Overlook provides a bird's eye view of Fruita, the Fremont Valley, and the Goosenecks of the Sulphur, but it's a bit too expansive to yield a compelling picture. Continuing toward Navajo Knobs for another strenuous 2.25-miles, you'll be rewarded with a 360° vista of the valley, the domes and the Waterpocket fold.

If you've done this strenuous hike in summer, you may want to stop for a dip in the deep pool located below a small waterfall on the left side of the road, about 4 miles further east on UT 24 past Behunin Cabin. Watch for the strong undertow and, of course, don't venture in the pool in bad weather or during a thunderstorm! A picture of this waterfall was used in the Introduction chapter to illustrate the tremendous power of flash floods in the Southwest.

The Waterpocket Fold

This strange and spectacular geologic formation is unfortunately less spectacular when seen from the ground than in the superb aerial photograph that decorates the National Park Service brochure. But it still warrants a detour if you can afford the pretty full day that it will take to drive the 125-mile loop described below. Note that this tour—one third of it on dirt roads—encompasses the superb Burr Trail as well as Strike Valley Overlook, both described in the Grand Staircase-Escalante chapter.

You can get to the Waterpocket Fold by way of the Notom-Bullfrog road which starts off UT 24, 9 miles east of the Visitor Center. This road is paved along the first 6 miles and well maintained thereafter, so it's suitable to passenger cars in dry weather. However, there is a wash before Sandy Ranch that can present problems after heavy rains or when it's icy in winter.

You get a very good view of the Henry Mountains to the east and the strange nipples of Capitol Dome to the west from the top of the hill, just after you reach the unpaved part of the road. The Waterpocket Fold doesn't really become visible until after you pass the spur leading to the Cedar Mesa campground, about 22 miles from the junction with UT 24. Even there, this extraordinary geological phenomenon remains a bit disappointing when seen from the Notom-Bullfrog road, especially in comparison to aerial photos.

Instead you may want to concentrate on details in the landscape. This area contains amazingly colorful stripes of tuffa, lining up the badlands on the east side of the road. They are best photographed in early morning, when still in the shade, or in late afternoon. However, to really bring out the color, nothing beats an overcast or rainy day; just remember to eliminate the sky from your image.



Badlands along the Notom-Bullfrog Road

About a dozen miles further, you'll come to the well-marked junction leading west to the Burr Trail. As you reach the base of the fold, the dirt road climbs toward the Escalante Plateau in a series of steep and spectacular twists and turns carved in the flank of the hill. These switchbacks may be difficult or even impassable in a passenger car when the road is weather-damaged.

Shortly after the switchbacks, you'll come to the 4WD road leading to Strike Valley Overlook or Upper Muley Twist (refer to the Grand Staircase-Escalante chapter). These are the only points from which you can capture the true expanse of the Waterpocket fold. After another few miles, the Burr Trail becomes paved and leads to Boulder, where it joins UT 12. You can then drive north on UT 12 and west on UT 24 to complete the loop.



Waterpocket Fold Badlands

Instead of turning on the Burr Trail, you could go on the Waterpocket Fold road all the way to the Bullfrog Marina, where you can cross Lake Powell by ferry to Hall's Crossing and either descend towards Monument Valley or climb back up towards Moab. To go south on the ferry, refer to the Cedar Mesa chapter.

Instead of turning on the Burr Trail, you could go on the Waterpocket Fold road all the way to the Bullfrog Marina, where you can cross Lake Powell by ferry to Hall's Crossing and either descend towards Monument Valley or climb back up towards Moab. To go south on the ferry, refer to the Cedar Mesa chapter.

Introduction to Cathedral Valley

Cathedral Valley with its huge monoliths and panoramic vistas is, in my view, one of the most remarkable spots on the planet. An incomparable majesty emanates from the place. Its remoteness and the rare presence of other members of our species make you feel deeply privileged to find yourself in such an untrammeled natural sanctuary. This feeling is even more prevalent if you get a chance to camp at the remote campground in Upper Cathedral Valley. From there you can have the whole valley to yourself during the golden hour. Note that dispersed low-impact backcountry camping is permitted on BLM land just outside the park for even more solitude—although I am yet to encounter another visitor at the remote campground in many trips to this valley.

Happily or unhappily, it is not easy to visit and most visitors to the park abstain from venturing there. Few people choose to drive the 57-mile Cathedral Valley loop crossing many distinctive parts of the valley; the drive requires a minimum of six hours to be thoroughly enjoyed. The Cathedral Valley road is a perfect example of a "feasible" road that's nevertheless risky because of its fragility and isolation. First, the road is only feasible if you have a high clearance vehicle. It is not advised to drive the whole road in a regular car—and even less so in a



Upper Cathedral Valley monoliths

camper. The state of the road can vary a lot, depending on whether you are traveling before or after rains or when the bulldozer resurfaces the road, once a year.

Never set out until you have first inquired of the rangers or one of the local residents as to the condition of the road. The rangers will systematically discourage visitors from adventuring down this and other Cathedral Valley roads in ordinary cars and they do this with good reason: each year visitors get stuck in the mud or a rut that suddenly appeared from nowhere. As a general rule, a 4x4 tow-truck costs \$150 an hour from the time it leaves the garage. The cost of the operation can easily reach more than \$1,500 to bail you out.

Always check the weather forecast, as some clay-based parts of the road can be impassable to any vehicle when wet. Fill up your fuel tank; take a lot of water and some food, just in case. Don't forget to buy the excellent booklet entitled *Self-guided auto-tour of Cathedral Valley* at the Visitor Center in Fruita. When used in combination with the park map, it is sufficient to do the main loop road. As the mileage of each stop and intersection is precisely recorded, you should encounter no surprises if you stay on the road and check your odometer regularly. However, if you want to drive other roads branching from the main loop road, you'll definitely need to get a topographic map before setting out. This is true of all the roads described below, outside of the main loop road. All these roads include many branching secondary roads that don't show on the large-scale maps and it's easy to set off down the wrong path. Please take this suggestion seriously. You'll often find yourself consulting the topo map. You can get one of these at the Visitor Center.

Once all these precautions are taken, you can start the loop from the River Ford, located 11.7 miles east of the Visitor Center on UT 24 or 7 miles west of Caineville. The reason I suggest starting from River Ford is that it's better to cross the ford at the beginning of the loop rather than having to backtrack if, for some reason, you find out that you can't make it or the gate is locked.

In really good weather, it is also tempting to begin before dawn from Caineville in order to reach Lower Cathedral Valley at sunrise and continue up the valley with the sun behind you. Coming from Torrey, you can stop at the ford first to check it and make sure that you'll be able to cross it later, before beginning the loop counterclockwise at Caineville.

Instead of doing the whole classic loop, it's also possible to reach several parts of the valley from various side roads. Not only will you be able to discover different landscapes, but by combining different approaches, you'll see and photograph the most interesting spots during the golden hour—assuming you can devote a couple of days to the area. The previous recommendations concerning driving apply to all of these side roads, in particular the requirement of a topographic map.

For clarity's sake, the valley's main attractions and their respective access are described separately below.

The South Desert and the Bentonite Hills

The road overhanging the South Desert and the Bentonite Hills, called the Hartnet Road, begins at River Ford and follows a dry riverbed between the extreme northern end of the Waterpocket Fold and the depression of Cathedral Valley. The Bentonite Hills are remarkable for their rounded forms and strange, checkerboard appearance colored by the Morrison formation. All the colors of the rainbow can be seen. Many exceptional viewpoints are accessible from the road as you follow it to the northwest from River Ford.

At 14 miles from River Ford, a side road leads to the Lower South Desert Overlook. The South Desert is a large valley running parallel to the Waterpocket Fold. The viewpoint yields a splendid view of Jailhouse Rock, with Temple Rock and the Fishlake Mountains in the background.

Less than 4 miles from the intersection with Lower South Desert Overlook, a 1-mile trail leads cross-country to a saddle with a good view of the great monoliths of Lower Cathedral Valley. If you think this view is beautiful, wait until you're in the valley proper.

About 10 miles further along the road, Upper South Desert Overlook is very impressive and gives a good idea of the depth of the South Desert depression if you include a bit of the plateau in the foreground. From the edge of the knoll, those suffering from fear of heights could get weak in the knees.

During the next mile or so, you'll successively encounter spur roads leading to Upper Cathedral Valley Overlook, Hartnet Junction with Park Creek Road—



The Bentonite Hills

allowing access to UT 72 over Thousand Lakes Mountain—and the Cathedral Valley remote campground. The campground is located just before the switchbacks leading down into Upper Cathedral Valley (all these individual stops are covered in the next section).

Getting there: take the Hartnet road from the so-called River Ford, located a dozen miles from the Visitor Center on UT 24. The biggest problem will be the Fremont River crossing just 3/4 of a mile past the beginning of the road. You ford the river on a rocky bed, which is usually not too deep, but watch out for potential engine flooding in a low clearance car. The ford is passable most of the time; however, the gate is locked during spring runoff and after rains when even a 4WD can get stuck. Check at the Visitor Center where rangers will let you know if it's passable or not. Beyond River Ford, the track is sometimes passable in a passenger car if you pay close attention and drive slowly depending on whether the bulldozer has been through recently.

Time required: 2 to 3 hours to Upper Cathedral Valley.

Upper Cathedral Valley

Located at the far north end of both the park and the Middle Desert, Upper Cathedral Valley is one of the highlights of Utah. The majesty that emanates from the powerful monoliths and the encircling mountains is reinforced by the isolation and the effort it takes to get here.



Upper Cathedral Valley

Once you're in the valley, about 3 miles west of Cathedral Valley Junction you'll see a sign saying "Viewpoint" on the north side of the road. There, you'll find a narrow footpath that takes you up onto the plateau, where you can get a spectacular close-up view of the two main groups of 500 feet high monoliths, with the Walls of Jericho in the background. This easy hike is a 2-mile round-trip and offers different angles for photographing the monoliths. If you came from Caineville, continue up the switchbacks for two miles and you'll reach the primitive campground with only six sites. If you've come equipped, camping here will allow you to catch some fabulous evening shots of the extraordinary walls of Entrada sandstone as they turn bright red against a background of dark gray sky. Canyon country at its very best!

Leaving the campground to your right and continuing up toward the plateau, you'll soon reach the junction with the Thousand Lakes road coming from the mountains and the Hartnet Road coming from River Ford. Follow the latter for a quarter of a mile until you come to the spur road to Upper Cathedral Valley Viewpoint, from where you can admire the whole Upper Cathedral Valley in all its splendor.

On the way to Lower Cathedral Valley (see below) you'll be crossing the Middle Desert with its many different geological features. Just before Cathedral Valley junction, you'll find the Gypsum Sinkhole—a gigantic, sunken artesian well almost 200 feet deep and over 50 feet in diameter—which is well worth the mile-long detour on a good spur road, though it's practically impossible to photograph because of its size.

Getting there: there are four possible ways to reach Upper Cathedral Valley.

The easiest way for passenger cars and small-size campers to get to this distant spot, in good weather conditions, is from the north, by way of a dirt road leaving from the junction of I-70 and UT 10, about 2 miles east of Fremont Junction. This wide dirt road, called Baker Ranch Road, is 27 miles long and crosses the forebodingly-named Last Chance Desert. It is usually well maintained for the use of local miners and ranchers, and doesn't present any major difficulties. The main obstacle is crossing Willow Springs Wash, about a dozen miles down the road. After crossing the usually dry ford, the road quickly rolls along and you rapidly reach Cathedral Valley Junction. It's also possible to reach



The uppermost giant monolith at Cathedral Valley

Cathedral Valley Junction by following the Caineville Wash Road from UT 24 (see below). The other access point to Upper Cathedral Valley is the previously described Hartnet Road from River Ford near UT 24. Perhaps the most scenic access is by way of Thousand Lakes Mountain road (also known as Polk Creek road) coming west from UT 72. About 12 miles north of Loa on UT 72, take the dirt road to the right for about 5 miles in the general direction of Elkhorn Campground. This road is usually in excellent condition until you reach a high altitude pass (at about 10,000 feet) in the Fishlake National Forest. At the fork in the road, do not take the Elkhorn Campground spur to the right; instead, continue straight ahead for 7 miles, following the signpost indicating Cathedral Valley. Here the descent becomes quite tricky and it is out of the question to take an ordinary passenger car over this portion of the road. A high-clearance 2WD

vehicle can make it easily, except in winter or during spring runoff. This route is especially remarkable as it makes a spectacular transition between two radically different ecosystems, one a high-altitude alpine environment and the other the exceptional desert of Cathedral Valley. There are exceptional photographic opportunities, especially in autumn, when you'll pass through strands of yellow aspen mingling with green conifers before reaching the ochre color of the desert. These mountains are the habitat of a great variety of wild animals—in the course of one trip, I counted almost a hundred mule deer coming down the side of the mountain in great leaps and bounds.

Time required: you can reach Cathedral Valley Junction in approximately 1 hour from the I-70 off-ramp, provided you don't stray off the path. A topo map will help you sort out the many side roads. You should also be able to reach Hartnet Junction from UT 72 in about an hour. Count on 2 to 3 hours for the other routes. Getting there is one thing, but it's a shame if you can't devote at least a couple of hours to exploring this exceptional spot.

Lower Cathedral Valley

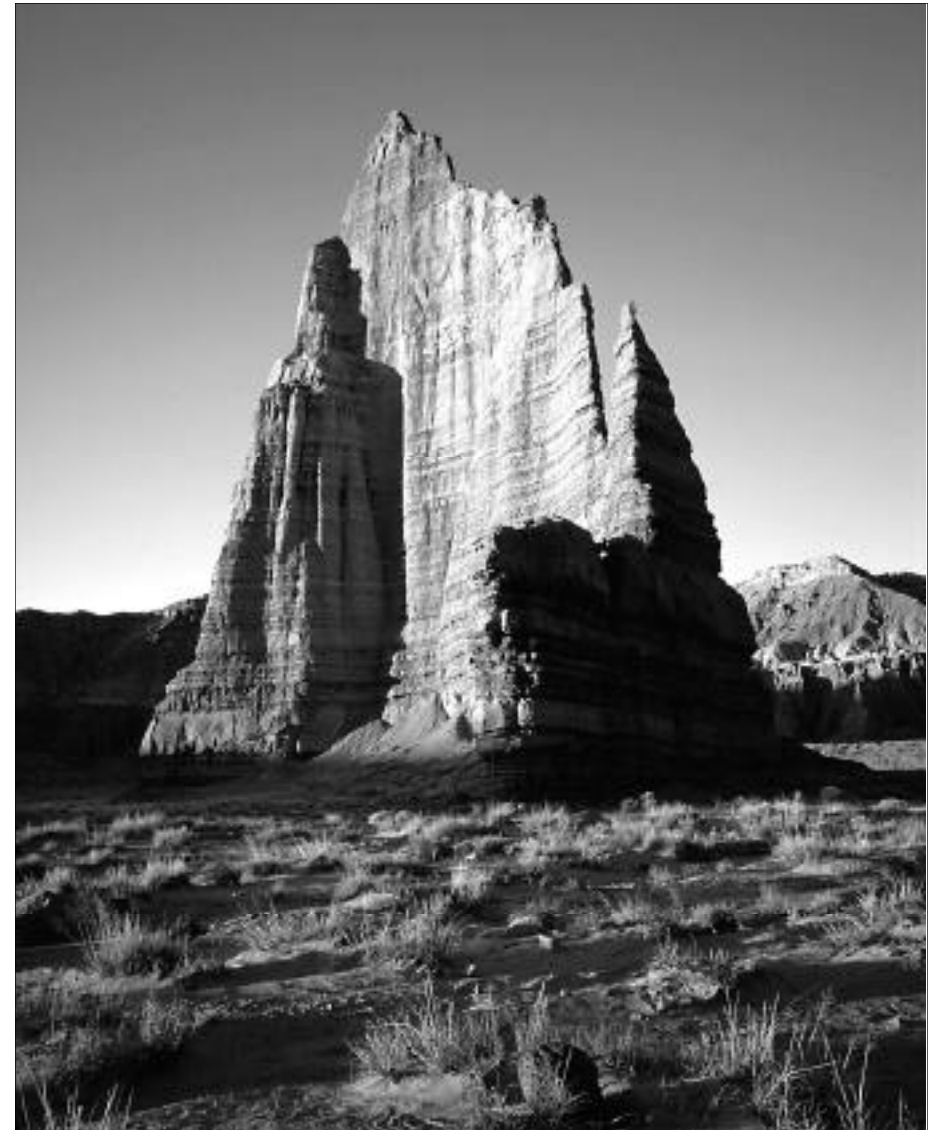
Lower Cathedral Valley is better known by the name of the two fantastic monoliths that it harbors. The Temple of the Sun and the Temple of the Moon illustrate many coffee-table books and well-deserve their names. Reaching up 400 feet from the desert ground as if trying to grasp the heavens, these two solitary temples cut an imposing profile against a rich blue sky of unmatched purity. At sunrise, these "high priests" of the mineral universe don their incandescent garments for a brief, fleeting moment, to celebrate the miracle of nature.

Both monoliths can be photographed individually at close range or you can shoot them together from nearby Glass Mountain, using a short telephoto to collapse the perspective of the two Temples and the cliff behind them. The hoodoos at the foot of the cliff are also quite nice. Glass Mountain itself—a small mound consisting of selenite crystals—is an interesting geological curiosity, but doesn't make for an interesting photograph.

Getting there: to get to Lower Cathedral Valley and the famous Temples of the Sun and the Moon, it's best to come from the Caineville Wash road described below. It is the easiest and fastest way to get there for sunrise and, under good conditions, you can make it in a passenger car, although it's going to be a bit bumpy. Coming from I-70 via Cathedral Valley Junction, you'll pass numerous washes between the two valleys about a dozen miles apart and the state of the road can be extremely variable.

The Temples are located 17 miles from Caineville. A spur road about a mile long leads from the main loop road to the foot of the temples and to Glass Mountain.

Time required: 3 hours round trip from Caineville; 2 hours one-way from either I-70 or UT 72.



Temple of the Moon in Lower Cathedral Valley

The Caineville Badlands

The Caineville Badlands are a vast isolated expanse of dark gray hills of Mancos shale striped with interesting colors. Traveling through the heart of these badlands on the Caineville Wash road, you'll encounter from time to time round blocks of basalt tossed out by the explosion of Boulder Mountain about 50 million years ago and then later deposited here by glacial action. These badlands are actually very deep, forming a bed of sedimentary rock between 2,000 to almost

3,000 feet thick. While contemplating this extreme desert universe, it's easy to imagine the Inland Sea that once covered this part of the valley.

Taking in the view to the northeast, you'll see the imposing presence of a mesa called Factory Butte rising on the horizon like a tall ship. There are a couple of spots on the north side of the road near Caineville where you can actually drive on BLM land and get close to the badlands for further exploration.

The badlands along UT 24 and Caineville Wash road are best photographed in late afternoon.

Getting there: you'll find the Caineville Wash road about 19 miles east of the Visitor Center on UT 24. A sign by the side of the road indicates the distance to Lower and Upper Cathedral Valley. This road will take you right into a fantastic universe of badlands in just 2 or 3 miles, passing the northern edge of the Bentonite Hills. If you want to continue on to Lower Cathedral Valley, this road can usually be negotiated with a passenger car by driving carefully, if the weather conditions are right, but it's a long drive (about 35 miles round-trip) and you'll be bounced and jolted the whole way.

Time required: less than an hour for a quick excursion into the heart of the badlands; 3 hours round-trip for the drive alone if you continue on until Lower Cathedral Valley. ✿