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Not only the Grand Canyon: Heading into the US National Parks

It is the spectacular Nature which lures each year many Visitors to the US. Bryce Canyon, Antelope Canyon, and Grand Canyon are three of the most beautiful US National Parks. Karl Kaltenegger had an image-rich statement about the origin of these striking formations. Native American legend has it that beings in the form of birds, lizards, and other animals lived here before them. But these beings were dissatisfied with their homes and tried to beautify them. The enraged chief Coyote simultaneously showered them with paint pots and turned them into stone. That is what we see today: their bodies dyed brown, upright and packed together, as the legend says it happened.

The man for whom the park is named, the Mormon Ebenezer Bryce, lived here for only five years, starting in 1875. According to the history books, "Bryce Canyon is a pretty bad place to lose a cow". So Ebenezer moved on to Arizona, in an area where it is easier to graze cattle. The state wanted to name it Utah Park, but the name never caught on. What makes this park so unique are the so-called hoodoos, covering over 30 kilometers at the edge of the Paunsaugunt Plateau ("home to the beaver", as the Paiute Indians called it). Hoodoos are bizarre columns, standing up in the rust-colored sandstone. It is a wonderful spectacle to stand at Sunset Point at dawn and look down on the huge semicircular amphitheater of Bryce Canyon. The amphitheatre is a width of almost five kilometers, a length of 19 kilometers, and a depth of 240 meters.

Thor's Hammer in amphitheater

The countless distinctive spires of rock rise as high as 60 meters. As the sun goes down, you experience a color explosion of brown, yellow, and rust red. Technically, iron oxide causes the red, yellow, and brown in the mixture of basalt and sandstone. The presence of manganese causes shades of lavender. The most striking stone stelae bear imaginative names like "Indian Princess", "The Three Ways", and "ET". For lovers of American Nature, 2016 is a very special year because this year the US National Park Service celebrates its centenary. President Woodrow Wilson signed the founding document forming the Service in 1916. First Lady Michelle Obama and former First Lady Laura Bush took the helm to chair the anniversary celebrations. There are a total of 401 National Parks. To my surprise, there are many parks that are good that are not the Grand Canyon (No. 2) or California's Yosemite Park (3rd place). We now consider some of the finest outdoor recreation in the US Southwest.

Bryce Canyon: Indian legends

Many consider the most spectacular National Park in the southwestern United States to be Bryce Canyon in Utah. It is called a canyon, even though technically it is not, because it was not created by the erosion of a river. Over the millennia, wind, water, and ice dripping off of Paunsaugunt Plateau created large amphitheatres with bizarre towering spires. Attracted by this natural wonder, 1.5 million people visit Bryce Canyon annually. This incredible panorama is one of my personal Wonders of the World. Bryce Canyon is famous for its dark nights, making the high plateau ideal for the observation of starry nights. You can go by yourself or in the company of the Park's night rangers on a journey to bring the stars close, far away from the light pollution. An incredible 7,500 stars are visible in the firmament at the new moon; the Milky Way extends over the entire horizon. You feel yourself back in daycare, to a time when there were not so many disturbing light sources. The highlight is the annually-held Astronomy Festival, this year, June 1st to 4th.

Antelope Canyon: Radiant Ravine

Antelope Canyon is another peculiarity of nature - a place that is made of light and shade, with sunbeams somehow pushing through the stone barrier. It is located in northern Arizona, near Page, on the Navajo Indian reservation. The Americans call it a slot canyon that was formed by flowing water; we would call it a gorge. The colors of the canyon are spectacular; it was named after the antelopes that lived in this area long ago. The upper canyon was called by the Navajos: "The place where the water flows through the rocks". The whites used the name "Corkscrew Canyon". It is about 400 meters long, up to 40 meters wide, and at ground level, so easy to hike. One can only hike it with an official guide; the trek is well-organized by the Navajos. From the Visitors' Center, you can drive in open Jeeps about five kilometers along the sandy road to Antelope Creek. After an explanation of the light conditions, which is very helpful in the adjustment of your camera, you go with your group to a predetermined time slot for your hike. In the Canyon, expect incredible light effects to be triggered by sunbeams which somehow got lost between the rocks. Suddenly the reddish sandstone shines in wonderfully soft pastels. It is a symphony of colors, recreated every time the sun moves on the sky. It is aesthetic fireworks when the rocks glow in the dim light.

For the Navajos, this was a holy place. Into this cathedral the sun's rays entered; here they were one with nature. Another adventure awaits at the lower Antelope Canyon, which the Navajos call "Spiral Rock Arches". This canyon is less frequented, since the entry ladders keep many from attempting the hike. The gorge also leads through narrow crevices and narrow stairs, and the light is brighter here. In addition, the time allotted to the experience is more generous.

Crowd Puller: Grand Canyon

Among the best known American National Parks is the Grand Canyon National Park. The Canyon is notable for its great length - 450 kilometers long, 350 of which are located in the Park. It is relatively easy to reach the park from the west from the desert Glitter City Las Vegas, and the plane offers a fantastic view from the air. Another way to get there is through the city of Williams, where you take

a historical train, the Grand Canyon Railway. Before we start the trip, a Wild West duel unfolds at the train station, authentic costumes and all. As we travel the 2 hours and 15 minutes to the Canyon, 103 kilometers through the pine forests of Arizona, we enjoy a Country/Western singer. The iron train reached the Canyon in 1901. Wood and water were transported by rail to the Canyon. But these days, the tourist trade has become increasingly important, as many endeavor to have a look at the fabled "Grand Canyon". As cars came into use, the "iron steeds" disappeared, and in 1968 the route was completely shut down. Twenty years later it was revitalized. Today a diesel pulls the historic cars. On special occasions, good old steam locomotives are put to use.

From the train station in Grand Canyon Village, one is within walking distance of the so-called South Rim, the southern rim of the Grand Canyon. The way leads past the Hopi House, built by American architect Mary Colter. Colter married the Indian to the Hispanic style and is responsible for some of the most interesting historical buildings. Finally one stands on the trailing edge, the horizon widens, and you look with an astonished eye on the impressive Natural Landmark. In millions of years, the waters of the Colorado River have cut through the various layers of sandstone, limestone, and shale and broken them into this giant canyon with a width between six and 30 kilometers and a depth of 1800 meters.

Wonderful light effects and impressive sunrises and sunsets make the rocks shine in russet, red, and ochre tones. Whoever wants to can walk along the trail lying along the slope. Or you can climb 34 kilometers down the Bright Angel Trail to the Colorado River and then up the other side on the Kaibab Trail to the North Rim. If you want to reach these two points by car, you must expect to travel ten times the distance as there is no bridge over the Canyon. Hermit's Rest, a fine viewpoint, is easily accessible from Grand Canyon Village by a shuttle bus. Those who prefer a rental car can drive the 40-kilometer road along the edge of the canyon, stopping at various viewpoints up to Desert View. The less frequented North Rim of the Canyon is also available to explore. Its main attraction at the contemplative and higher elevation North Rim is Bright Angel Point, where a lodge is stuck up on a slope like a Felsenest. Currently it is closed in winter and opens in mid-May. The South Rim is open in winter.

The National Parks have more money in the budget this year to make investments and infrastructure. The entrance fees, which have not been raised since the 1990s, are increasing. However, only about 25 percent of all Parks require an entrance fee.

For its anniversary, the National Park Service made itself an opulent gift: a sensational 3D movie. "National Parks Adventure" was filmed in the past year with the help of high-resolution ImaX cameras, and the helicopter and slow-motion shots are impressive. Director Greg MacGillivray takes the audience on a spectacular journey through 30 National Parks, away from the marked trails. The film premiered February 12, 2016, and the narrator is none other than actor and environmental activist Robert Redford. A preview trailer can be accessed free on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iqF2Tk_1WA.

This article was prepared for the Grand Circle Association (www.grandcircle.org), a non-profit organization responsible for tourism in Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. The trip was organized by Southwest Adventure Tours (www.southwestadventuretours.com).