

American Odyssey

In September 2011 my partner, Aine, and I headed to the USA for a holiday. In the course of that holiday I visited a number of places of interest from a walking point of view and I concentrate on these places here.

Having flown to Las Vegas, via New York, we drove down to Arizona, stopping off at the **Hoover Dam** en route. The Hoover Dam is built on the Colorado River on the border of Arizona and Nevada.

The Dam itself was built between 1931-36. It supplies water to cities in Nevada, Arizona and California, it is used to generate electricity and to regulate the flow of water in the Colorado River.

From there we drove south on US HWY 93 to Kingman and then along I 40 to **Williams**. Here we stayed in the Grand Canyon Railway Hotel. Next morning we took the Grand Canyon Railway to **Grand Canyon Village**, a journey of two and a quarter hours. Our first call was to El Tovar Hotel for lunch and then it was out to view the canyon itself.

The view was truly spectacular. The sheer scale of the panorama, the richness of the colours, the depth of the canyon left one almost speechless. Soon we made our way down to catch the **shuttle bus** out along the **South Rim**, and alighted at one of the view points from where we could make the Colorado River as a brown streak a mile below almost us. A raft appeared as it made its descent through the canyon. We could not make out its occupants without binoculars. It disappeared behind a landform and it was some time before it appeared again further downstream. We speculated if it had difficulty negotiating some unseen rapids or whether it had capsized and had to be righted.

As we were booked back on the train the same day, we had to make our way back to a bus stop for the return trip to the village (the bus does not pick up at all the drop-off stops). Soon we were on the train back to Williams. Not far from Williams, a number of cowboys on horseback rode alongside the train which soon came to a halt. The cowboys boarded the train and made as if to rob us, accepting any dollar bills we were ready to part with. Soon the sheriff appeared and routed the bandits, whom we soon saw driving past the train with their horses in a trailer, and surprise, surprise, they were ready and waiting to see the train back into the station.

The old **Route 66** once ran through Williams, and the main street of the town is adorned with Route 66 signs and the Route 66 Café, with an old cruiser perched on its forecourt. Route 66 has been replaced by the **I 40** which by-passes the town, which now has the appearance of a place that time forgot.

If you do choose to take the train to Grand Canyon, do spend at least one night in Grand Canyon Village as your options are severely limited by time on a one-day trip.

My next place of walking interest was the **Yosemite National Park**. Coming from LA, I stayed in Fresno the previous night and drove up State Hwy 41 through **Oakhurst** to enter the Park at **Mariposa Grove Road**. Having paid my \$20 fee

(which gives access for a week), I drove along the winding roads through the forest for 20 miles. This road then enters a tunnel and at the other end you emerge to see the **Yosemite Valley** out before you, with **El Capitan** on your left, **Half Dome** at the head of the valley and **Bridalveil Falls** on the right. There is a busy viewpoint here where almost all newcomers stop to get their first view and photos of the amazing scene.

I drove down to the valley floor and continued to a carpark near Yosemite Village, over which looms the **Lost Arrow**, a spire of rock that rises up close to the Yosemite Falls. Lost Arrow was the setting for the opening sequence in Cliffhanger, where Stallone tries to rescue his climbing companion as she falls from the Tyrolean bridge to the main cliff. After lunch, armed with my camera and binoculars, I took the **free shuttle bus** to El Capitan Picnic Site. Here I watched a number of parties climbing on the vast face of El Cap and took pictures with my 70-300 mm lens. I continued around the valley floor, beside the Merced River which is fed by melting snow further up the valley and now in late September is a gentle stream. The road here is a one-way loop that brought me to the start of **Four Mile Trail** which I was determined to do on the morrow. Here I caught the shuttle bus back to my car, and drove back out to Oakhurst for the night.

Next day I drove back to the valley and parked at the start of **Four Mile Trail**. I was on the trail by 11.00 and started up through the forest on what would have been a tarmac-ed footpath many years ago. The tarmac is still evident in places though now it is mostly eroded. The trail rose up under the flanks of Sentinel Peak by a series of switchbacks through light forest for the most part, giving occasional views down into the valley floor and later into the **Little Yosemite Valley** which was dominated by the bulk of Half Dome. After three miles I came to a fork in the track and continued on the left branch up through mature trees.

Here I met a man descending and when I asked how long it would take to reach the top he said about an hour and a half, though my own estimate was 30 to 40 minutes. Fortunately, my estimate was the more accurate. The trail levelled out and continued through large trees on a springy surface strewn with pine needles. A short rise led to a small tor which was the summit of **Glacier Point**. It was now about 1.20 pm.

The views from Glacier Point were spectacular. To the left was Half Dome some three miles to the NE. In the valley between ran the Merced River, flowing from Merced Lake in the east over the Nevada and Vernal Falls with the Cathedral Range and the Pacific Crest beyond, but not a glacier in sight. The eponymous Glacier was the one that carved out the Valley below and that eroded away the missing half of Half Dome many millennia ago.

Nearby were a café and shop and a carpark, not to mention an amphitheatre where one could sit in the sun and gaze upon the vista below. This is where I sat to enjoy my lunch before turning heel to retrace my steps down to the valley floor some 3000 feet below.

I would have reached the bottom of the trail by four pm had I not encountered the man whom I had met on the way up. He was sitting beside the trail, resting. We struck up a conversation and it turned out that he had been in Ireland in the early

seventies in the company of Peter Sellers and Brit Ekland and some Guru who flew them to Belfast with the intention of persuading Bernadette Devlin and Ian Paisley to come to their senses and settle their differences. They did indeed meet the said personalities (separately, of course) but soon came to the realisation that they were in no mood to kiss and make up! I kept Will company for while on the trail before he decided to go back to look for his sunglasses which he had left a hundred or so yards back while photographing a Stellers Jay. As it was, it was almost 5 pm when I got back to the car. I then met a tour guide who was separated from her group. Having left her off at Curry Camp, I drove out of the Park by the **El Portal Road** which eventually brought me to Merced, the town on State Hwy 99 by which you would approach the Park when coming from San Francisco or points further north.

Next morning I set out from Merced along Hwy 99 as far as Stockton where I crossed onto **I 5** which runs from Mexico to Canada. I followed this through Sacramento and diverted to the Colusa National Wildlife Preserve for a couple of hours of birdwatching. Then it was back to I 5 through Redding and on to a motel in Dunsmuir, a little town that once was located on a main road but is now just a small backwater small town under the shadow of **Mt. Shasta**, a fourteen hundred foot (4000 m) snow-covered peak that dominates the skyline as you drive north from Redding. After a short walk down to a local waterfall it was back to the I 5 through some ranch country to the Oregon state line. The countryside began to be a bit greener as I drove towards Salem, my next port of call.

From Salem I drove to **Silver Falls State Park** and walked most of the **Trail of Ten Falls**. This trail forms a loop around two rivers (South Fork Silver Creek and North Fork Silver Creek) that flow into a wooded valley, cascading over ten waterfalls along their course. The first two falls are quite spectacular, even in the dry September weather, tumbling down over 150 feet and filling the gorges with spray. The trail leads down and in behind the falls giving a wonderful experience of drawing close to the Falls and then passing behind the curtain of water to come out the other side. The South Fork Creek carried more water than its North companion and the falls on this side were the more spectacular. I would recommend a visit to this park to anyone who happens to be in the area.

From Salem, I drove to Portland and flew back to Newark NJ and so back to Dublin.

Notes: As mentioned above, a **\$20 entrance fee** applies to a vehicle entering the park. The pass is valid for a week and must be shown on entry and exit.

Besides the entrances at **Mariposa Grove Road** and **El Portal Road** – both to the west – there is an entrance from the east on **Tioga Road** which gives direct access to **Tolumne Meadows**, but it is closed from November to May due to snow.

There are some hotels within the park. They are expensive and were booked out when I was there. I had been unable to make an internet booking in advance for some unknown reason.

There are canvas chalets at Camp Curry which house 4 or 8 persons. There are also ordinary campsites throughout the park, some of which are by reservation only. Permits are required for back country camping and even here restrictions apply.

Some simple trail maps are supplied on entry to the park. Estimated times are suggested for some trails, but these are based on 2 mph and 1 hour per 1000 feet of ascent.

National Geographic have a set of **1:40 000 Trails Illustrated Maps**. Four sheets cover the Yosemite NP, viz **306 (Yosemite Valley)**, **307 (Hetch Hetchy Reservoir)**, **308 (Tolumne Meadows/Hoover Wilderness)** and **309 (Ansel Adams Wilderness)**.