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Color Separations by
Henry Color Service

Lithographed by
Wolfer Printing Company, Inc.

Available in Microfilm by
Xerox University Microfilms

Desert
MAGAZINE

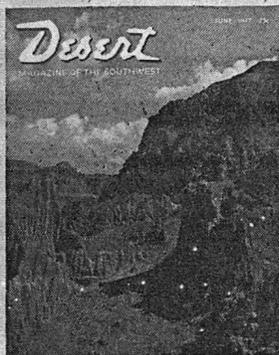
Volume 40, Number 6

JUNE 1977

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THE COVER:
Grayish-tan bentonite formations in Cathedral Gorge State Park, Nevada. Photo by Robert F. Campbell, Concord, California.

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EDITORIAL, CIRCULATION AND ADVERTISING OFFICES: 74-425 Highway 111, Palm Desert, California 92260. Telephone Area Code 714 346-8144. Listed in Standard Rate and Data. SUBSCRIPTION RATES: United States, Canada and Mexico; 1 year, \$6.00; 2 years, \$11.00; 3 years, \$16.00. Other foreign subscribers add \$1.00 U. S. currency for each year. See Subscription Order Form in this issue. Allow five weeks for change of address and send both new and old addresses with zip codes. DESERT Magazine is published monthly. Second class postage paid at Palm Desert, California and at additional mailing offices under Act of March 3, 1879. Contents copyrighted 1977 by DESERT Magazine and permission to reproduce any or all contents must be secured in writing. Manuscripts and photographs will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope.



Porcupine Rim

FOUR-WHEELING IN UTAH

by FRAN BARNES

A LINE OF 11 four-wheel-drive vehicles strung out behind the one I was riding in. The Grand Mesa Jeep Club, from Grand Junction, Colorado, was on its annual field trip into the wild country of southeastern Utah and, as happens now and then, they had asked me to guide them along some tough trail of my choice that was new to the group.

I had decided to take them into an area quite close to the prosperous little town of Moab, but so isolated by terribly broken terrain that it is entered only occasionally by stockmen and prospectors, and rarely by anyone for the sole purpose of enjoying its rugged, challenging trails and outstanding scenic beauty.

The driver of the vehicle in which I rode was a woman, a plucky and competent young nurse who saw nothing unusual at all about a single woman fighting a tough-to-handle four-wheel-drive machine along trails that often presented problems for men with years of driving experience.

As she drove, I used her CB to tell the others in our backcountry safari about the wild country through which we were traveling. Between my comments, the CB channel we were using crackled with cheerful banter between the various vehicles. To minimize the dust problem, each vehicle kept well back from the next one ahead, but the CB radios made a cohesive, unified group out of the caravan, even though they were strung out over a mile of dusty, sandy trail called the Sand Flats Road.



Above: Some years, the only vehicle trail to isolated Porcupine Rim is still covered with snow along one stretch, even in late spring. Left: Porcupine Rim, Castle Valley and Castle Tower.

I had planned a route that would add still another rough but scenic two miles to the basic trail to Porcupine Rim, so I watched carefully for an inconspicuous side trail that would not even be noticed in this rough terrain of sand and slick-rock by anyone not specifically looking for it.

There it was, just ahead. I signalled the driver to stop, then thumbed the mike on her CB. "Short stop here for putting in hubs, for those who need to.

You're going to need all four from here on."

This announcement brought a burst of answering wise-cracks about the terrible driving capabilities of various men in the group. This was just one more phase of the continuous friendly competition between the club members to see who could get into trouble on the trail the least, and who had to be pushed or winched out of some bad spot. It is always fun to travel with the Grand Mesa Jeep Club.

On our way again, the safari proceeded onto a rough but easy trail that crossed a mile or so of sand flats broken by outcroppings of eroding sandstone slickrock. We paused at one point to open a wire gate in a cattle-control fence, then signalled by CB for the last vehicle to close the gate.

Not far beyond the fence, I chose another branching trail that soon approached a steep slope dropping off sharply toward the rim of a sheer-walled canyon that twisted through a tortured landscape of broken, eroding sandstone that had few parallels this side of the surface of Mars. The trail down to this rocky rim descended an immense dune of shifting sand at an angle and grade so steep it was doubtful that even a four-wheel-drive vehicle could ascend it.

But down we went, one by one, in what might be described as a controlled slide. At the canyon rim, we turned up-canyon, and the trail became

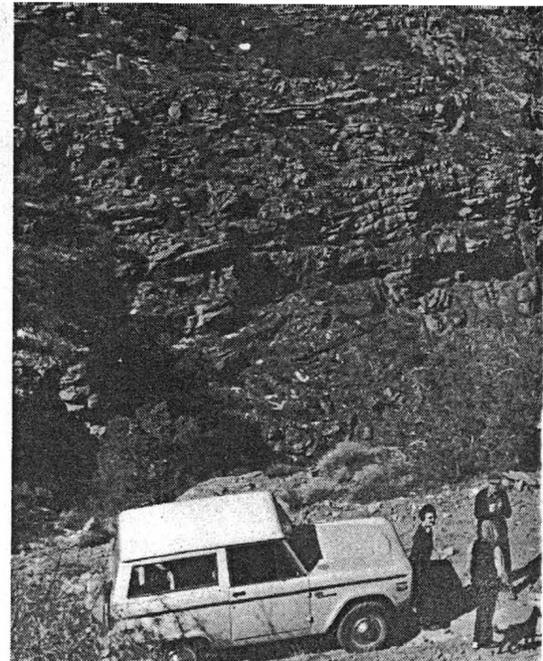
very rough. Within a short distance, I noticed a big gap in our caravan. My young driver, with just a hint now and then on how to approach a bad spot in the trail, was having no real trouble, but chatter on the radio told me someone else was.

Not for long, however, and within another mile the safari came to a stop, right where the trail hugged the canyon rim it paralleled. The view down into the deep, sheer-walled chasm was breathtaking, and the several children with the group were cautioned about the dangerous drop, even though most were quite accustomed to being wary of dangerous terrain.

Our safari struggled steeply upward for another mile or so, with the rough trail totally preoccupying the drivers, and the woods too dense for much scenic viewing by passengers. I watched for a certain outcropping of rock as the trail finally leveled off a little. As I signalled for a halt, it was possible to get glimpses through the trees toward our left of the great canyon system we had just skirted, but a steep slope of tree-studded slickrock on our right gave no hint of what lay in that direction.

As people piled out, presumably for a stretch after that last bad length of trail, I shouted for everyone to follow me, then started climbing up the slope to the right of the trail. After about 50 feet, the climb topped out, and I paused to let the others catch up.

As they did, a few at a time, a chorus

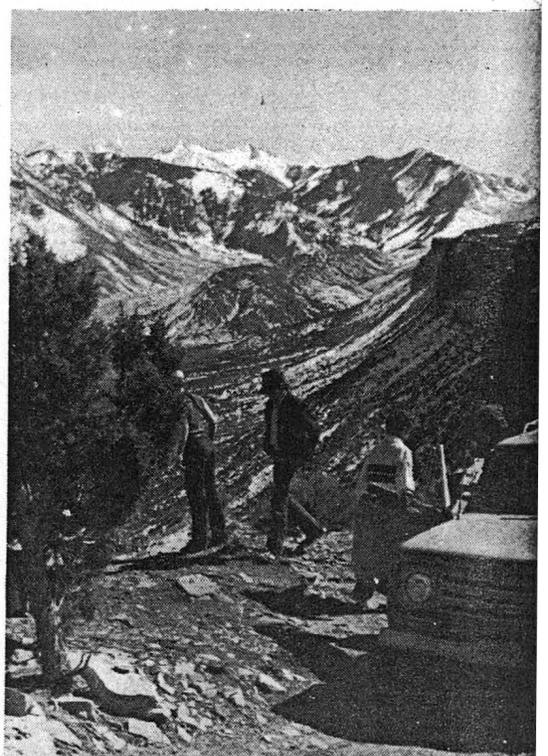


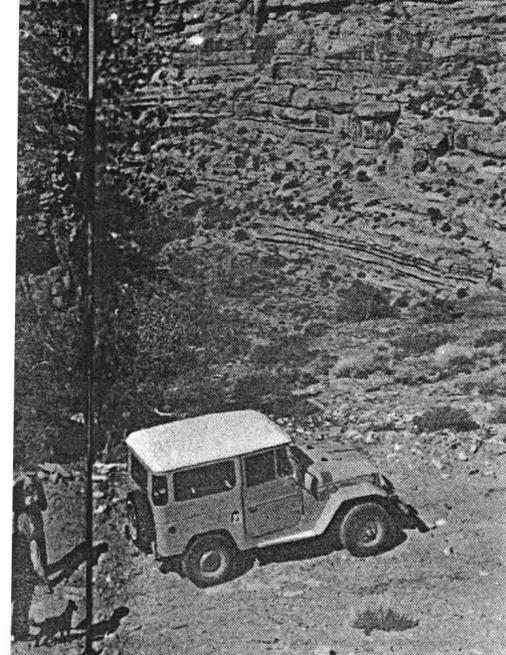
of gasps broke out, because we stood on the very rim of a broad and spectacularly beautiful valley—we stood on Porcupine Rim, high above lovely, unique Castle Valley.

Below us, the solid sandstone rim fell away in a sheer cliff for a hundred feet or more, then continued downward for another 1,500 feet as a monstrous, steep talus slope. This sparsely wooded slope eventually blended into the valley floor far below. Jutting up from that floor not far from us was an immense, rocky upthrust — Round Mountain, seemingly a solitary peak, lost from the high La Sal mountain range that sprawled across the upper end of Castle Valley.



Left: One end of Porcupine Rim ends in the high slopes of the La Sal Mountains, which add to the beauty of the broad panorama visible from this lofty, isolated ridge.





*Right: With few promontories or breaks, lofty Porcupine Rim is almost perfectly straight for 12 miles
Left: The trail to Porcupine Rim parallels the branching Negro Bill Canyon system for several miles,*



The far side of the broad valley, some three and one-half miles from where we stood, rivaled the La Sals for scenic beauty, but in a completely different way. A huge, sheer-walled peninsula of salmon-hued sandstone jutted out from the mountain slopes toward the distant Colorado River gorge that Castle Valley joined far to our left.

Eons of erosion had left this great wall of sandstone broken into segments. The intact upper peninsula was called Adobe Mesa, and once I had stood upon its lofty, lonely and remote tip, overlooking Castle Valley from that rarely-seen viewpoint. A great gap separated the tip of Adobe Mesa from the nearby spire of

Castle Tower, a tall and slender finger of monolithic sandstone standing on a gigantic, layered pyramid of dark red sandstone deposits.

Next in line on the far side of Castle Valley was a huge fin of sandstone, fully as tall as Castle Tower and standing on a similarly laminated base of ancient red rock. One end of this fin was broken into immense jagged spurs of rock that looked like human figures in a familiar tableau. The group had been named the "Priest and Nuns," and bore a startling resemblance to a robed priest, standing before two kneeling and cowed nuns.

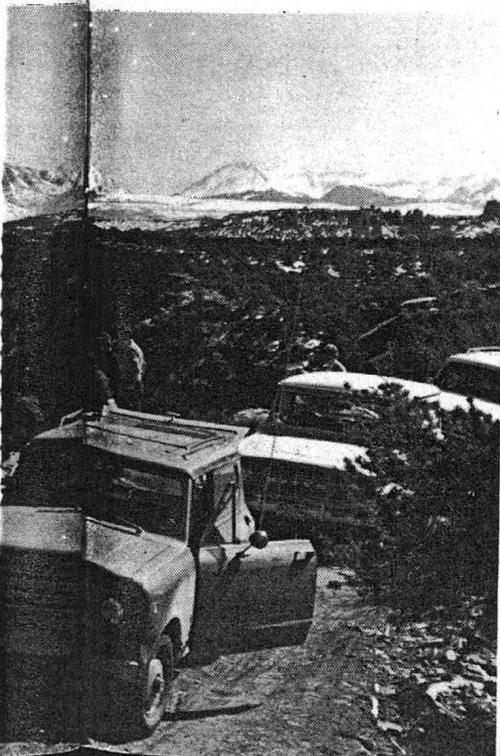
Castle Valley — in all of its unmatched splendor — lay below, as our

little group stood in stunned silence on Porcupine Rim, partly awed by the sheer beauty of the half-circle panorama that stretched out below, and partly shocked by the surprise of coming upon it so suddenly, so unexpectedly, after a tough, blind stretch of vehicle trail.

After many pictures had been taken, we headed along our trail and within the next several miles, the trail actually traveled right on the edge of Porcupine Rim in a few places, affording excellent views even from the vehicles, and closely parallel to the rim the rest of the time.

Then, slashing gorges forced the trail to leave the rim. As we descended into

Continued on Page 39



*Left: In several places, the Porcupine Rim off-road vehicle trail approaches very closely to its rocky edge, affording unparalleled scenic views.
Right: What more spectacular place for a picnic lunch than right on the edge of Porcupine Rim, with Castle Valley below!*



PORCUPINE RIM

Continued from Page 35

the vast sandstone wilderness to the west, my guidance became even more necessary, because old prospecting trails branched off in all directions. Most of these trail spurs soon dead-ended at some steep drop, or against a sheer bluff, but I led the safari along a route I had discovered earlier by the simple but time-consuming method of trying every trail until I found what I wanted.

The route we took soon became easier to follow as it crossed open areas, then got difficult and rough once again as it descended a series of gigantic terraces toward the distant outcropping of sandstone that was my goal. As we neared that huge quarter-mile-long fin of up-jutting rock, I led the safari up onto the broad expanse of solid slickrock that served as a base for the great monolith. We crossed this rock base, then dropped down onto a slightly lower terrace of stone where everyone gathered for a picnic lunch.

After we had eaten, I took the group on foot along the canyon rim we had parked beside. As we walked, that canyon fell sharply away below us to join a gorge that had not been visible from our lunch site. Soon we stopped, all struck by the beauty and majesty of what lay below us — a great bend in the majestic Colorado River gorge, with that silt-laden, green-bordered river winding ribbon-like at the bottom of its deep and narrow canyon.

After another half-hour of picture-taking, hiking around and rockhounding among some curious minerals just back from the canyon rim, I headed the group back along the long, rough trail. After several miles of steady travel, I again called a halt, and took up the CB mike.

"Would anyone care to follow my lead on a spur trail I have been wanting to explore — with no guarantees as to its passability or destination?"

After some discussion, about half the group decided to wait, as the more adventurous followed my lead into unknown territory. To give my driver a well-earned rest, I took over the wheel of the lead vehicle.

Down we went, into a rugged, wooded canyon, then across a rocky wash bottom that contained a tiny flowing stream.

Here, one of the following vehicles got hung up for a time on a rocky ledge. Beyond the stream, the trail climbed very steeply, and was extremely eroded. After a time, the trail became obscure as it crossed an area of slickrock.

There, I climbed out and walked ahead to find the way, signalling my co-driver in her four-wheel-drive. As I found a suitable route and walked ahead up the steep slope of almost solid rock, I became excited. Although I could see nothing ahead of me but an ascending slope of sandstone, there were indications that Porcupine Rim was not far ahead. Abruptly, the slope leveled off, I walked through a small copse of trees and there — spread out below me like a gigantic, three-dimensional map — was lower Castle Valley, from a viewpoint seldom seen by anyone.

Soon, I was joined by the rest of the group, and once again the magic of this incomparable area held us in awe. After we had scrambled around seeking the best picture angles, we reluctantly headed back toward the other half of our group, already telling them over the radio about the successful exploration they had missed.

As our trail finally left Porcupine Rim and headed down toward the great canyon system that blocked all but one access route to a whole rugged sandstone wilderness region, the group's CB radios were kept busy with chatter about the day's adventures, and misadventures, and compliments were passed up to my driver for her stellar performance as group-leader-for-the-day.

After rounding the canyon head, I watched for a side trail that would lead out to the Sand Flats Road by a shorter route than the one we had followed that morning, thus bypassing about three miles of tortuous trail.

As we topped out of the steep short-cut trail and joined the graded dirt Sand Flats Road, then headed down this fairly easy road toward distant Moab, the radio chatter grew less and less frequent.

It had been a full day and a long, rough trip — but only by taking such a trip, guided by someone who knows that piece of rugged sandstone wilderness, can you reach and enjoy the magnificent scenic splendor of Porcupine Rim, the lofty southwestern rim of spectacular Castle Valley, in the canyon country of colorful southeastern Utah.

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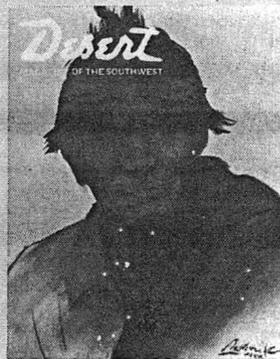
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THE COVER:
"Tarahumara Man," 16" x
20" oil, by Charles La
Monk of Palmdale, Califor-
nia, this month's feature
artist. Courtesy of Mr. and
Mrs. James Smullen, Pasa-
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