

Mission to Mars?

Out-of-this-world landscape contributes to Utah adventure



Travel editor's note: Mike Woolsey of Kasson is an employee in the P-B Internet Services Department.

By Mike Woolsey

"Bear with me," said my buddy Tim calmly as he jockeyed our overloaded rental car up a steep gravel embankment.

The sun had long set in the Colorado River Valley and the city lights of Moab, Utah, had just faded in the rear-view mirror.



Woolsey

"Trust us, this is the coolest campsite around," said my other traveling companion, Tom, from the back seat.

Tim and Tom must have sensed my frustration. Our loosely planned trip from Kasson to Rocky Mountain National Park, Colo., was now extending across the Continental Divide into the evening desert of southeast Utah. Hungry and tired, I tried to put on my best face.

We bumped and banged our way over an eroded road until it made a sharp turn, backed the

car up a few feet, shut off the engine and popped the trunk.

"Here we are. This is Slick Rock Campground," Tim announced.

"It's just as I remember," said Tom.

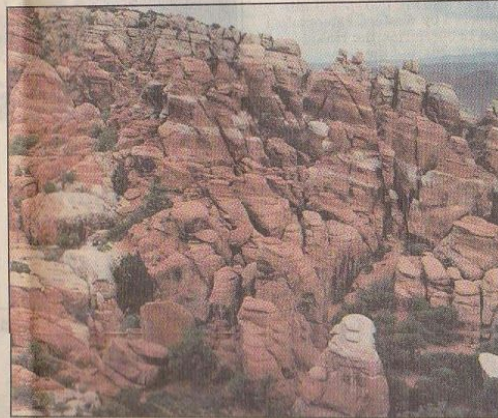
I slowly got out, stretched my legs and thought, "Now where have they taken me?"

The night air was still; it was room temperature and dry. With flashlights strapped to their foreheads and coolers and duffel bags in hand, Tom and Tim disappeared down a small slope into a valley. I quickly followed. Rock walls towered over us. The Milky Way was our canopy.

We set up camp and ate a sand-tainted meal on the floor of the desert in between the rock walls. My companions rolled out their sleeping bags for slumber under the moonless night sky. Grumbling to myself about wanting a cold shower and bedding free of sand, I dragged my road-weary body to the shelter of a small tent.

A change of attitude

Sunrise changed my attitude. Stepping out of the tent was like stepping onto the surface of Mars. Unnoticeable under a night sky, the desert was orange and the smooth rock walls that



surrounded us were more than 40 feet high. Our campsite would not have existed were it not for thousands of years of erosion. Never had I been to a place so absent of green foliage and yet more beautiful than any forest.

My companions were sleeping around the smoldering campfire as I stole a moment to explore. Out of the small canyon, I walked to the weather-worn road we came in on. A curtain of sunlight lowered itself across the rusty, crusty landscape as I walked among the roller coasters of sandstone walls. With each glance into a new direction, I was overcome with awe. Wind-sculpted sandstone caves stood lonely and hollow before the cloud-enshrouded La Sal Mountains in the distance. One hundred-year-old junipers dotted the landscape. Tiny tan lizards scurried along these gnarly trees as I approached. The scene was surreal.

I climbed the natural steps to the top of a rock wall that towered over our campsite. Thirty miles to the horizon line could be viewed from this vantage point. The sun was still rising and with each passing moment the desert colors and details changed. Red, orange and pink

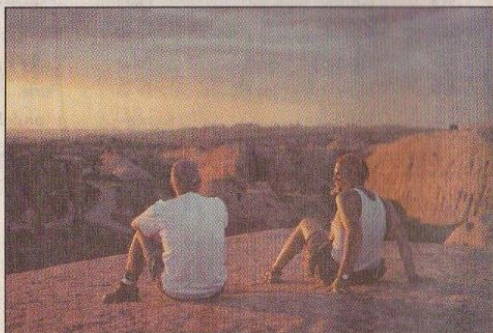
all fought for dominance along the distant ridges and mesas. As the sun rose higher, new shadows revealed ridges and buttes that seemed to blend into the landscape just moments before.

"The best cup of coffee I ever drank was on this rock," said Tom, making a reference to his last visit as he reached my vantage point with cup in hand.

Arches National Park

Later, we made our way to nearby Arches National Park. This wonderland of geological oddities featured even more spectacular views than our unique campground. Sandstone arches and red rock monoliths are the major attractions for the hundreds of domestic and foreign tourists we passed on numerous walking trails.

Even more fascinating than the rock structures is the painted desert floor. Turquoise, green and dull gray-colored sandy crust lay at the base of many of the more obscure rock formations. Oddly, this crust is alive. Known as cryptobiotic crust, it contains fungi, lichen and algae that absorb moisture and provide nutrients for the small amount of foliage that exists. Because it



Tom Moe, left, of River Falls, Wis., and Tim Muckerheide of Fort Collins, Colo., enjoy the sunset in Moab, Utah.