



Wilderness Within and Without

There's a very big secret just north of us.

There is a place so vast, so empty, so gorgeous and so spiritual that it leaves you gob-smacked, neck hairs standing and heart pounding at the power of cataclysmic forces beyond man's touch. And it's all ours.

**An endless skyline
tells us who we are,
where we fit, and what
we must do to
remain—give more,
take less.**

Walking along a sandy wash lined with cottonwoods, a riparian riot of sound and color, with the elusive whistle of a canyon wren announcing your steps and antelope carved into sandstone by Anasazi almost 1,000 years ago watching your passage, you cannot believe something so pristine is still around. Every corner dazzles the eye. Georgia O'Keeffe stole her clouds from here.

Rembrandt dropped by for a lesson or two, for everywhere light emerges from the inside. Dalí wandered into a slot canyon, so narrow and quiet only the hawk and the owl can navigate its slender fingers, dropping a feather there, a melted watch here, then a tiny mouse to form a surreal still life. And every afternoon the stone arches track the sun, changing from sulphur to cinnamon to blood red against the darkening sky, turning the tiny green leaves of the alder into pale lace.

This place of shape-shifting stretches across the whole horizon, so huge you can twirl with arms outstretched and dance across space, across time. So big that you can never walk it all. So diverse that you can scale a cliff sharp as a knife's edge or defy gravity as you leap about the waves of sliprock, skipping over lizards and feeling ageless.

These twisted and arched and buckled and bunched rocks seem malleable in your own hands, not layers of Chinle or Kayenta or Slipstone but lush velvets and satins and silks.

It is a land of pure magic.

It is the Escalante Grand Staircase National Monument, the northern part of a geologic art show that tickles the sides of other national parks and ends up yawning over the Vermillion cliffs outside Lee's Ferry, Arizona. Its modern political status as a National Monument was born in conflict

because it was so big, because some saw the same gold the Spanish sought, albeit in 40-acre development parcels, and because few had the vision to see it *was* the gold—but only without man's improvements.

Bruce Babbitt had that vision, born out of boyhood rambling with his brothers on the Paria Plateau and the Grand Canyon and honed as our Attorney General and then our Governor, dead-set on protecting the land that he knew we need to sustain us. Later, as Secretary of the Interior, his mission and his mantra were to ensure that small-bore minds did not set upon the large open spaces that are the soul of the West, and in 1996 he cast the vision in stone. Two million acres of it.

I do not believe it is an accident that Bruce is a graduate geologist and a lawyer. Science taught him how much our earth needs its wild areas, and law taught him that their protection needs teeth. He is now appreciated by the locals, even venerated, because each day they look out on an endless skyline so large and so compelling that it tells us who we are (just another species visiting awhile), where we fit (poorly, at best, compared to the creatures who beat our track records by millions and millions of years), and what we must do to remain (give more, take less).

No religious text could move one to humility more easily than a visit to this natural world. It is bleached to its essence, pared to its bones. Escalante is unadorned beauty, and it is a teacher of all things that matter to anyone who stops awhile to listen. If you open yourself to it, the great calm of an untouched, sacred place can bring you the peace of wilderness within.

God lives in Escalante, but we get to visit. 



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