

MY FAVOURITE TOURISTS #1

JEFF WOODS...the Welsh Hitchhiker

Jim Stiles

The first time I met Jeff Woods of Swansea, Wales, I was a ranger at Arches National Park. Most of the time I worked out of the Devils Garden, 18 miles inside the park. But today, I'd been called down to the visitor center to cover for another ranger on sick leave. The questions were easy to answer, but consistently the same. After awhile I could answer before they asked: "Two hours, if you don't want to get out of your car" (How long does it take to see this place?) and "Outside and to the left" (Where's the bathroom?).

Most of the tourists looked the same... a lot of polyester and doubleknit shirts out there. But when this one particular visitor shuffled through the double plate glass doors, I sensed instantly that my day was about to be changed. The man stood barely five and a half feet tall (at 5'8" I towered over the little fella), and he sported a scraggly, fiery red beard that actually made him look more elf-like than ferocious. But mostly, I noticed his pack. His pack, a giant red nylon monstrosity with about thirty zippered compartments clinging to every square inch of it, towered over all of us. It barely cleared the doorway as he passed through. Red beard headed directly for the information county and me.

Meanwhile, a gentleman and his wife had approached me for information and advice. They had hoped to see 13 national parks in six days and there wasn't a moment to lose. They figured they had about 90 minutes to devote to the Arches and they wanted me to budget their precious time for them. The man with the red beard and enormous pack muscled his way beside them, eager to ask a question of his own.

But the couple was not about to leave. Stylishly attired in his and her matching Mickey and Minnie Mouse royal blue, zippered, jumpsuits, the man asked about the condition of the road.

"Not that it matters," he explained. "Our motorhome may be 36 feet long, but it can go darn near anywhere."

Suddenly a muffled explosion split the conversation in half. Minnie, with a look of absolute horror, buried her face in her hands and turned away. Her husband, angry and offended, turned to the hairy elf next to him and confronted him -- man to man.

"Excuse me!" he said with self-righteous indignation, "But you farted in front of my wife!"

"I'm terribly sorry," the accused replied with British aplomb, "but I didn't know it was her turn."



Mr. Mouse turned shakily to me. "Ranger! I demand that you do something! This man's behavior is OUTRAGEOUS!"

"Well, sir," I replied. "I'll have to check the Code of Federal Regulations. That would be CFR 36. I'm not real clear on just what the law is regarding flatulence, but I'll be glad to find out."

His wife shrieked again and ran out the front door and he was right behind her. The air cleared, so to speak, and activity in the visitor center resumed a semblance of normalcy. My gaseous friend remained standing by the counter.

"Well, I must say," he began, "you Americans are a bit sensitive at times. And what was that bloody costume they had on? Do you people always dress in pairs?"

"We Americans are truly a diverse people," I explained, "as well as sensitive..... and who might you be?"

"Geoffrey Woods. Call me Jeff... I'm hitching around the world, and I thought I'd drop in for a few directions."

Jeff was looking for Canyonlands National Park. He planned on taking an extensive backpacking trip, he said, and also wanted to spend some time on the river. I showed him the maps, which he studied at length, and gave him the names of some rangers at Canyonlands that could help him, if he needed any. We shook hands and he said goodbye.

And that was that. I told a few of my friends about the incident with Jeff and Mickey and Minnie, but it soon faded from my memory. A couple weeks later, I left Moab for a trip to the Maze District of Canyonlands. I'd managed to put five days of annual leave together and I wanted to see this stone labyrinth first hand, after only reading about it for so many years.

Although the Maze itself is only forty miles southwest of Moab, as the crow flies, the rest of us have to take a more circuitous route. Just to reach the Hans Flat Ranger Station, you have to travel north on US 191 to Crescent Jct (30 miles), then west on I-70 past Green River to the junction with State Route 24 (36 miles), then south on SR 24 to the junction with a dirt road (26 miles), then 60 miles east on a sandy, washboard dirt track that leads to Hans Flat and beyond. The plan was to meet my friend Mike Salamacha, a seasonal at the Maze, and stay the night at the Hans Flat residence. The next day, we planned to head downcountry.

After a long dusty ride from the pavement, I reached Hans Flat at sunset, just ahead of a wicked thunderstorm that was moving in from the southwest. I found Salamacha and after moving some gear from my car, we sat down with a beer to study the topos and plan the next day's trip.

We had barely settled in to our chairs when the doorbell rang. At Hans Flat, no one rings the doorbell. At the time only three or four rangers lived at Hans Flat. They were the only human inhabitants in an area that spanned millions of acres. I got up to open the door. I couldn't believe it. It was that Limey again.

"Hello mate," he said. "Fancy meeting you again way out here."

I looked around for his car and then remembered he was hitching. Still I'd neither seen nor heard any vehicle at all.

"How did you get here," I asked.

"Oh... walked up from the river," he explained.

"The river? Which river?"

"Oh, you know, mate...the Colorado."

By now, Salamacha had joined us and knew the distances better than I. He was amazed.

"That's a good thirty miles," Mike said. "You came all that way in one day?"

Jeff shrugged. "Well it was a bit up hill, wasn't it?"

We brought Jeff inside, and he told us his story. Here's what he had accomplished in a matter of a few days. After charming a woman ranger with his tale of adventure, she loaned him the use of her two-man rubber raft. He floated down the river and after several days had reached Spanish Bottom last evening.

This morning.... this morning, he'd strapped his pack and the rubber raft (deflated)

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to his back and hauled this enormous load to the Doll's House, two thousand feet about the river. There, he hid the raft behind some rocks, and with only his fifty pound pack to slow him down, managed to walk another 32 miles and end up mooching a beer off Salamacha just a few minutes after sunset. Mike and I studied the Limey closely as he took a last gulp of Budweiser.

"Awfully weak, this American beer," he grumbled. "Mind if I have another?"

Mike uncapped one more and handed him the bottle.

"Aren't you exhausted?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "I am."

I was confused, "What did you say?"

"I said," he explained, "No, I am."

“No, I am?” What kind of answer is that?” I asked.
 “Well,” he explained, “You said to me ‘Aren’t you exhausted?’ and I replied, ‘No, I am.’ What is so difficult about that?”
 I looked at Salamacha. He shrugged and went outside. Salamacha was a lot wiser than I’ve ever been.
 “So,” I continued, “Are you tired or not?”
 “Yes and no,” he answered.
 “Yes and no? Can’t you make up your mind if you’re tired or not?”
 “Of course, I can. I’ve answered your question as honestly and directly as I know how.”
 “Isn’t that just like the British to make something simple into something complicated?”

Mike and I studied the Limey closely as he took a last gulp of Budweiser. “Awfully weak, this American beer,” he grumbled. “Mind if I have another?” Mike uncapped one more and handed him the bottle.

“Yes,” he groaned, “it’s not!”
 I almost hit him with my beer bottle. “What in the hell are you talking about?” I roared.
 “Let me explain this to you, yank. You said to me ‘Aren’t you tired?’ That is to say ‘Are you not tired?’ Well, of course, after walking 32 miles in twelve hours, I’m very tired indeed. So my answer, properly phrased, should be:
 ‘No, I am.’ Do you understand?”
 “Well, not exactly. Aren’t you turning everything backwards?”
 “Yes..... I’m not.”
 Salamacha walked over. “Here Stiles.... Have another beer.”

The next day, Mike and I headed for the Maze Overlook, and Jeff came along. He still needed to recover the raft, cached somewhere above Spanish Bottom. We reached the overlook in the afternoon, and the next morning, Jeff took a route via Pete’s Mesa to the Dolls House, while Salamacha and I explored the Maze. Twenty-four hours later, he’d rejoined us. When we saw him come around a bend in the canyon, he looked like a giant duffle bag with feet.

That afternoon, as we trudged through pools of quicksand in a beautiful, deep side canyon, the Limey pulled up next to an old cottonwood tree and opened his pack. Mike and I stopped, and came back to the tree.

“Why are you stopping?” Mike asked.
 “Tea time, mates,” he said.

Sure enough, he pulled out his stove, a pot, a canteen, and a tea bag. Jolly good show. He advised us to get out our cups, so the three of us did the civilized thing and had our cup o’tea at four.

It was pretty much like that for the rest of our time in the Maze. I started wishing I had a crumpet, and I didn’t even know what a crumpet was. Two days later, we were back on top. From Hans Flat, Jeff drove with me back to Moab, where he immediately re-packed and took off again. A few days later, I heard a ranger report on the park radio that he’d issued a warning to a hiker without a permit. Some crazy guy trying to walk the White Rim. What’s a hundred miles or so?

Jeff’s next trick was to walk the Colorado River to Spanish Bottom. When I later asked Jeff how he’d intended to perform this particular feat, he explained that he’d heard it was a “low water year.”

In the months and years that have passed since our first meeting, Jeff Woods has come and gone many times. He helped me build a cabin and used up all my tea bags. He drove my ex-wife’s car off a cliff. He ran over a cow in a VW bus on the road to Hanksville. (It was, he said, a black cow, on a black road, on a black night.) He went around the world. Twice. He got mugged in Albuquerque, but chased down his attackers and single-handedly disabled their pickup truck. Today, Jeff Woods rails against our materialistic society and the apartheid policies of South Africa at an all girls’ Catholic College in Scranton, Pennsylvania... I hate Jeff Woods.



The last time my little buddy came to town, I introduced him to some friends of mine. Jeff told them about the hikes, the black cow, the mugging, the ex-wife’s car.... nobody believed him. When he’d left, I heard someone say, “Isn’t he the most outrageous person you’ve ever met?”
 “No,” I replied. “He is.”

NOTE: For an update on Mr. Woods, check the Word-Press version of this story.



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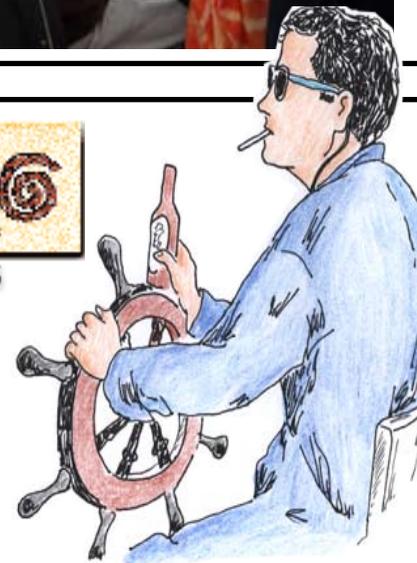
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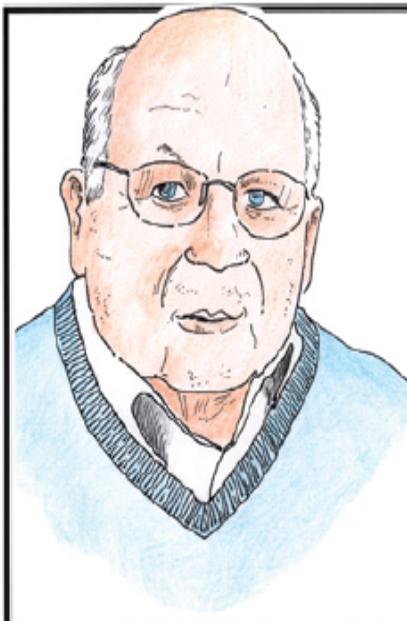


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