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hidden COLORADO

WORDS & PHOTOS | BILL & SUSAN DRAGOO

White-faced cattle munch on late summer pasture, ignoring our approach as we near the entry to Picture Canyon, a remote outpost of the U.S. Forest Service in a far corner of southeastern Colorado, barely north of the Oklahoma border. We turn south off the Baca County road and the landscape changes quickly. The long views of the prairie yield to sandstone formations as the dirt road winds into a picnic area as devoid of people as the blank space on the Colorado map suggests.

Picnic tables and a Vault toilet are tucked against a bluff; the tables shaded by white-roofed pavilions against the heat of the sun, an unrelenting force here in July and August; months we've only just escaped. Interpretive panels along a concrete path tell the story of the canyon, named for the rock art left here by historic Plains Indians and their prehistoric predecessors.

This is a side trip on the way to elsewhere. It's a habit my husband Bill and I have picked up in our frequent travels from central Oklahoma to the high peaks of the Colorado Rockies and the red rocks of Utah. Between Oklahoma City and Albuquerque we travel across the broad, flat grasslands known as the Great Plains. The half-million square miles of this region reach north into Canada and south to Mexico. Conventional wisdom says it's a place to get across as fast as possible, but we've discovered it holds many surprises for the inquisitive traveler willing to slow down and escape from the interstate.

One of those surprises is Picture Canyon. Plains Indians found shelter and spring water in this gentle sandstone canyon amid rolling hills and low buttes. We plan to hike the Arch Rock Trail to see the rock art, but it's a warm afternoon and we decide first to explore in our Tacoma, purpose-built for such a jaunt. Miles of four-wheel drive roads wind through the yucca and juniper, up and down the canyon, through deep sand and

overcast looks. We stop to examine a stone ruin left by homesteaders who settled the area in the late 1880s. The remaining walls of the structure are filled with gourd vines and, probably, a rattlesnake or two. The hope for living off this land was lost to farmers during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Now, it's part of a half-million-acre preserve in southeastern Colorado called the Comanche National Grasslands.

It takes several hours to get our fill of driving and soon it's time to settle on a campsite. We'll hike tomorrow, in the cool of the morning. Dispersed camping is allowed anywhere in the Grasslands and we find a perfect spot in a grove of cottonwoods. Chris swarms around my head as we set up camp but a good shot of Deep Woods Off alleviates my annoyance and my irritation fades altogether when, after dinner, we escape to our Elzi-Avi truck-top tent. There we listen to heavy raindrops thumping on the roof as a thunderstorm passes through. When the storm quiets, coyotes make sure we know whose canyon this is, and we fall asleep to their serenade.

The next morning we set out on Arch Rock Trail, a 2.6-mile loop. Along the canyon walls are alcoves housing pictographs (ancient drawings or paintings on rock walls) and petroglyphs (rock carvings). There's a tour group — four people on horseback — ahead of us on the trail and when we catch up with them the guide, Laneha Everett of

Canyon Journeys, invites us to tag along. Some of the markings here have astronomical significance; in particular, those in Crack Cave are illuminated by the sun's rays at dawn only during spring and autumn equinox. The Chamber of Commerce in nearby Springfield, Colorado, sponsors equinox festivals and tours of the cave to celebrate the events.

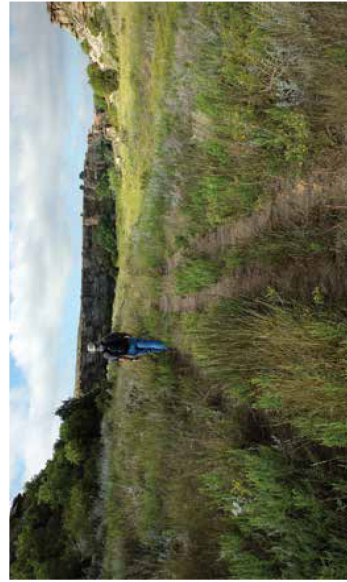
Crack Cave is protected by locked metal gates, but another rock shelter I climb into has markings that look much the same. Everett says that most people believe the inscriptions are of similar origin. "Traditional thinking has them down as calendrical markings for the passing of time. The non-traditional line of thinking says they are of the alphabet Ogam (an ancient Celtic system of writing) and could even potentially give a message such as 'water found below.' The marks are often found with solar alignment sites throughout the Oklahoma Panhandle and southeastern Colorado."

Everett adds that Picture Canyon is unusual in that it houses several sites with many other types of marking similar to other ancient languages. "The statistics of coincidence seems pretty high here," she says. Some claim that five ancient languages are represented in the rock shelter I explored.

"Picture Canyon offers interesting problems," says Everett. "Either there are ancient languages, which in the case of Crack Cave were deciphered and the message then proven by the presence of an equinox solar alignment site, or the Native Americans were writing in unusual ways that were highly similar to ancient languages from other parts of the world."

We have to cut short the tour and get on the road, though I hope to return and learn more. That night we visit friends in Boulder, moving on the next day to Fruita, where we pick up Kokopelli's Trail and continue into Utah. A week later we return through Aspen to see our friend Steve, a fellow Oklahoman who has lived in Colorado for many years. At dinner we talk about our trip through southeastern Colorado and Steve comments, "Half of Colorado is beautiful and half of it is ugly, and the same is true for Oklahoma. But people only talk about the beautiful half of Colorado and the ugly half of Oklahoma."

While I think calling any of it ugly is harsh (although, understandably, if you live in Aspen everything pales in comparison), Steve has a point about the way folks view the



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Our 2011 "Tacoma GS," named after the indomitable BMW motorcycle Gelande Strasse or dual-sport line, is built for fast and light backcountry travel. With Icon Stage V suspension, All Pro Off Road's heavy duty rear leaf springs, U-bolt flip kit, Timbren Industries bump stops, belly armor and rock rails, Toy-Tec stainless steel brake lines and P 255/85 x 16 Cooper Discoverer ST Maxx tires on 16 x 8 American Racing Mojave Teflon-coated wheels, we can slog through a boulder-strewn wash or zip over open two-track racing sunset to a suitable campsite with ease.

Our over-bed mounted Eezi-Awn tent and Eezi-Awn 1000 awning provide all the shelter we need for a night or a month on the trail. Baja Rack's Basket Rack luggage rack carries our axe, shovel and MAXTRAX Mk II recovery boards and provides a place to toss firewood as we approach camp, and it serves as a mounting platform for Rigid Lights.

Lightweight Aluminum bumpers carry our full-size spare tire and Warn 9.5 CTS winch with Spydura cable, offering protection and peace of mind if an errant deer challenges our right to the road or we find ourselves inextricably stuck.

Our Engel MT45 electric fridge keeps us in fresh food and cold drinks. A home-grown dual battery set-up keeps the amps flowing and Overland Solar's 60-watt folding cell keeps things charged.

The interior is modified by removal of the rear seats and retrofitted with an insulated panel against the cab and floor. A sturdy custom tubular steel rack securely supports two Fat Max boxes holding recovery gear and mechanical tools. For firearm and personal item security we installed a Lock'er Down Console Safe with a tough four digit mechanical lock.

Cover King's Ballistic Cordura Tactical seat covers protect the factory seats and their military MOLLE load-carrying system keeps small items like flashlights, sheath knife, rain gear, spare batteries, lighters and walkie-talkies within easy reach.

We installed an Extreme Air Magnum air compressor beneath the recovery gear rack, plumbed to a three-gallon tank tucked neatly out of harm's way against the front of the rear bumper. The system easily maintains 145 psi for tires, air tools or any other purpose where compressed air makes overlanding easier.

A Tech Deck mount from Bird Dawg Industries, beneath the radio, incorporates two Ram Mounts and keeps our electronic gadgetry firmly supported and within easy reach.

SOURCES:

- Suspension: iconvehicledynamics.com
- Professional suspension installation: fowlertoyota.com
- Rear springs, rock rails and armor: allproofroad.com
- Luggage Rack: bajarack.com
- Eezi-Awn tent and awning: eequipt1.com
- Rigid Lights: rigidindustries.com
- Aluminum Bumpers: aluminess.com
- Sand boards: us.maxtrax.com.au
- Extreme Air air compressor: extremeoutback.com
- Stainless Steel brake lines: toyteccliffs.com
- Lock'er Down Console Safe: lockerdown.com
- Ram accessory mounts: rammount.com
- Tech Deck: birddawgindustries.com
- Tactical Seat Covers: coverking.com

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two states. There's no need to repeat all the good press Colorado deservedly receives for its scenery. And it may be a similar restatement of the obvious to note that Oklahoma hasn't shaken its Dust Bowl image despite its diverse, well-watered terrain. But in my mind these less spectacular landscapes, eastern Colorado and western Oklahoma, reflect the more subtle beauty of the Great Plains.

And we're drawn back to the canyons of southeastern Colorado as we near home. Our last night out, we camp at Carrizo Canyon, a few miles west of Picture Canyon. We arrive as the sun sets and seek a camp site right away. The area lacks the web of forest roads we enjoyed in Picture Canyon, but we find an out-of-the-way spot in a cattle pasture after following narrow two-track into a hollow. There on the edge of the canyon, camped on a slab of sandstone trimmed with prickly pear, we grill steaks bought in the last town and wash them down with red wine to celebrate our last night of camping. Next morning, fresh Colorado peaches purchased on the roadside add sweetness to our breakfast before we hike the trail along the east fork of Carrizo Creek. At the trailhead, we greet a young couple also preparing for the hike. In the high grass of late summer, the trail is difficult to follow. We end up bushwhacking through a labyrinth of cottonwoods clogged with flood debris and agree that winter would be a better time to explore.

As we leave Carrizo Canyon, we spot two mounted cowboys crossing the nearby rise. One turns back, silhouetted on the horizon, lifting his hat in a classic western salute. We return the wave from the open window of our truck, then turn southeast toward home. On dirt roads, narrow and overgrown with sunflowers, we skirt Oklahoma's high point — not quite 5,000 feet elevation at Black Mesa, just south of the Colorado border in what was once "No Man's Land," now the Oklahoma Panhandle. This is what Steve calls the "ugly half" of Oklahoma and, while these buttes are not the 10,000-foot, aspen-covered, snow-capped peaks of the Rocky Mountains, they do have their charm. Lucky for us, these natural treasures of the southern plains will stay hidden as long as most people consider the area less than appealing, and perhaps it's better not to dispel that notion. We saw a total of eight people in our visits to the two canyons — six of them on horseback. Solitude is one of the benefits of slow travel through the Great Plains and I suspect there is little danger of that changing. **✒**



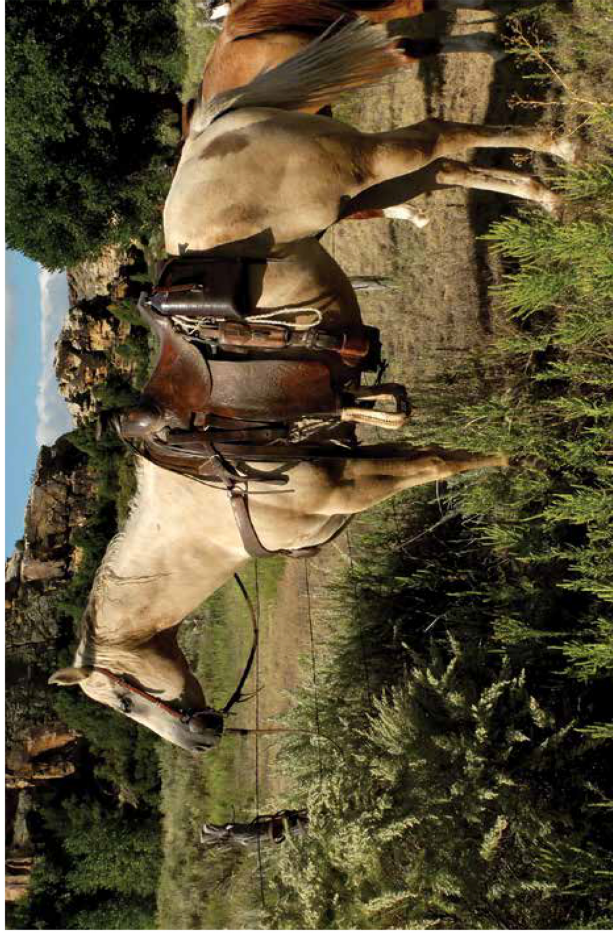
RESOURCES

Canyon Journeys, based in Pritchett, Colorado, offers tours of Baca County heritage sites, educating people through interpretation and excursions into and of local legends, historical and pre-historical sites, wildlife, plant life, geology, and astronomy. Their goal is to foster the desire to preserve, support and love the area and its western culture.

canyon-journeys.com

santafetrailscenicandhistoricbyway.org/carrizo

santafetrailscenicandhistoricbyway.org/pictcan



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