

---

## A COLD NIGHT IN RED CANYON

by

Frank Stehno

---

In the summer months we try to hike locally every weekend that we are home. With the Wasatch Mountains right out our front door, we have plenty of options. Often in the warm seasons, on every other weekend, if nothing else is pending, we try to take a camping trip to somewhere a bit farther away, but usually within a three to five hour drive. From where we live that includes a great deal of spectacular landscape. These weekend trips range from backpacking and tent camping to more comfortable pop-up trailer camping. In the early spring and autumn we tend to stay in inexpensive motels, and then go out on day hikes.

No matter how often we've camped, that first outing each year tends to be a shakedown trip. It seems that we always forget something. But by our second or third trip everything is gathered together and preparations go as planned. Most of the time, on those early trips, when we have forgotten something, it is usually small and of little significance to the success of the trip. Things like table salt or a pillow or our walking sticks. Yet there was one time we forgot one of the bare essentials.

One of our favorite campgrounds and locations is in the Red Canyon Recreation Area between Panguitch, Utah and Bryce Canyon National Park, along the western edge of the Paunsaugunt Plateau. It's a relatively small area with lots of red and orange and pink spires, or hoodoos, similar to those found in Bryce Canyon proper. Actually the two areas sit on opposite sides of the same plateau and are cut from the same strata. Many tourists, coming from the west, usually from Zion National Park or the Grand Canyon, believe they have reached Bryce Canyon when they drive up through the Recreation Area. There are two tunnels cut through fins of red sandstone and clay that have become tourist stops with great photo opportunities, and I'll bet that the majority of photographers note that these shots were taken in Bryce.

Due to the popularity of the location, the Forest Service, which is responsible for the area, it being part of Dixie National Forest, has enhanced the off road parking areas and put in a 14 mile paved bike path that generally parallels Highway 12. There used to be a double wide trailer which acted as a make-shift Visitor Center, staffed by volunteers. Now there is a beautiful stone structure with all modern facilities, which, unfortunately, in spite of the prominent signs, probably encourages more tourists to believe they have reached Bryce.

Anyway, across the highway from the new Visitor Center, there is a long, thin campground

---

that stretches out parallel to the highway and is nestled up against more cliffs under the shade of the tall ponderosa pines. It's a well maintained campground with large sites, great views, drinking water, and modern restrooms, including pay showers. The showers are always a nice plus. Eight quarters for two minutes of warm water. Not a bad deal, if you hurry.

We have unintentionally established a pattern of staying in this campground about once every other year, and, with the exception of the year of the high winds, have always had good experiences. Well, except for one other year when it was our first trip of the season.

On that trip we brought along our Kirkham's springbar tent. We drove down from Sandy, about a 4.5 hour journey through some spectacular scenery, selected one of our favorite sites, and proceeded to set up camp.

The tent is usually the first thing to go up. Get your shelter established, then everything else falls into place. With the tent up, the next thing is the bedding. Down goes one of the Space Blankets to act as an extra barrier between our sleeping bags and the tent floor. And then the sleeping pads and sleeping bags. I walked to the Trooper to fetch the bags, but they weren't there. No Thermarest pads, and no sleeping bags. We had been so proud of ourselves that we'd remembered to bring everything else, that we forgot to bring the bags; probably the single most necessary item for an overnight stay.

Most of our camping gear sits on shelves in our garage, right where it's handy to load up when we're ready to go. But because of bugs and the possibility of mice, we keep anything made of fabric in the house. Our sleeping bags and pads have a permanent spot in a closet in the basement. When we packed up we had everything loaded from the garage but forgot to go down into the basement and pick up the bags.

Now, as you might guess, since this was our first trip out for the season, it was sometime in the late spring, when the days can be warm and pleasant, but the nights can drop down to near freezing, especially at something over 7,000 feet in elevation. We were in for a long, cold night.

We talked it over, discussing options from driving into Panguitch to buy new bags, to packing up and heading home. We didn't like either option. Okay, we hadn't camped all of those years in all sorts of weather to give up so easily. We decided to tough it out; make it an adventure. But how?

We actually had three Space Blankets with us, because I had recently retired my old reliable blanket to duty in the emergency box in the back of our vehicle. That allowed us to place one blanket beneath us and to use the other blankets to wrap around us. We each had a thermal hooded jacket and a denim jacket that could fit over that. By wearing a sweat shirt and both jackets and curling up in the fetal position under the Space Blankets we could hope for the best; and maybe get some sleep. The ground would be hard, and the night would be chilly, but we would survive.

We camped there for two nights. It was rough, but we made it. No chattering teeth. We marked it as an adventure. But without our trusty Space Blankets we never would have tried it. There would have been no way we could have gotten any sleep without them.

~ THE END ~

Created: December 11, 2006  
Revised: January 30, 2011

Copyright © 2007 by Frank P. Stehno  
All Rights Reserved  
1,074 Words