

Breath-taking Bryce

“You gonna have slaw with the pulled pork? Awesome! Where’re you from?”

Wales – “Is that in Yurup or Scotland?” – was, it transpired, just as awesome as my choice of dressing.

Moments later the waitress was repeating the exclamation at the next table, (two cheeseburgers, Seattle). I soon discovered, however, that Kimberlee’s high-octane enthusiasm did not extend to her surroundings.

This was Panguitch, Utah, less than twenty five miles from the geological wonder of Bryce Canyon. Kimberlee, a local girl, had never been tempted to visit and could only advise, “I guess you’ll find a whole buncha rocks.”

I had come to Utah to hike the National Parks; the weather, however, had gone rogue. TV reports warned that the violent storms, which had already claimed several lives in Colorado and had now moved south and west, showed little signs of abating. Zion and Bryce had been closed for three days, their normally dusty tracks now swirling rivers of rust. I huddled in the steamy diner, hail and thunder warring overhead. Leaning my head against the rain-streaked window I sighed gustily, not for the first time that day.

A bruised and bloodshot evening sky gave way to a morning bandaged in mist. Good news, though: Bryce had re-opened. I splashed along through puddles of burnt umber, windscreen wipers impatiently trying to rub a hole in the clinging mizzle. I might as well have been in a Lincolnshire cabbage field than within yodelling distance of the iconic wind-sculpted hoodoos. According to Native American legend, these totem-pole-like formations were originally a local tribe, turned to stone by the coyote god for their mistreatment of the land. Inching forward in blind hope, I finally reached the park entrance.

First stop was for a coffee at Ruby’s Inn where the smiling staff were keen to feed me titbits about the park’s history.

“Bryce is named after Ebenezer Bryce, a Mormon pioneer who came to settle in the area in the 1850s”, explained Chad as he brought my drink. “He and his wife built a ranch in the valley and grazed cattle.”

“Word is, old Ebenezer didn’t find nothing to get excited about when he first set eyes on the hoodoos”, the barista chimed in. “Just said it would be a helluva place to lose a cow. Folks was more practical in them days. Saw rocks and such as getting in the way of farming.”

Fuelled with caffeine and renewed determination, I headed out. On my trek across the plateau I could see that the mist was thinning; the pale tips of Greenleaf Manzanita shrubs poked defiantly through its weakening tendrils. Soon it seemed I could almost hear the last remaining shreds sigh as they dissolved in

the rapidly warming air. And then, as I approached the rim, a shaft of sunlight, biblical in its intensity and suddenness burst on the horizon and an azure hue spread across the sky revealing a vista of dazzling beauty. Mile upon mesmerising mile of magically-fashioned rocks stretched out in a glowing spectrum: from ochre through cinnamon, coral and apricot to dried putty.

My first, shimmery impression was of a petrified forest, autumnal foliage blazing. When I zoomed in on detail, the imagery became increasingly fanciful: over there, I decided, was the Great Wall of China flanked by a platoon of terracotta warriors. Here, between that trio of gossiping, white-wimpled nuns and Gothic cathedral windows, were giant strawberry ice lollies, topped with whipped cream. Surely that rose-pink hoodoo in the middle distance bore more than a passing resemblance to Queen Victoria in unamused profile? Eventually though, the metaphors petered out as I gazed at the panorama before me. I could find no better word than Kimberlee's: it was simply awesome.

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