

USA Travelogue

Introduction

A story of a trip made by Professor Peter Sonksen and his wife Sue to the USA in the summer of 2007, complete with a Tramper on a trailer behind a large motor home.

In December 2002 Peter had a skiing accident in Park City (Utah, USA) where he ended up with a spinal injury (C4/5 incomplete). He had 2 months in University Hospital, Salt Lake City (rehabilitation and surgery) before returning to the UK for another 2 months rehab at The Royal Bucks Hospital, Aylesbury. He was discharged home on Good Friday 2003. He has continued with physiotherapy twice a week since then and has reached a steady state where he can walk up to 100 yards very slowly using elbow crutches or preferably a 3-wheeled rollator.

Peter feels fortunate to live in part of a large house in the heart of rural Hampshire. It converted easily to accommodate his needs with a (Thyssen's Flow) stair lift going from the front door to first and second floor. This allows access to pretty well the whole house. There is a large garden totaling 2.5 acres.

In 2004 he invested in a Tramper (and later a trailer) that gave him access to the larger part of the garden and to local footpaths and farm roads and the local pub! The South Downs Way runs along the top of the downs about a mile away and he ventures out there from time to time although he finds some of the ruts somewhat daunting!

Last Summer he started thinking about going skiing again and after a lot of family debate, decided to revisit Park City at the end of the season when the weather would be warmer. he persuaded his daughter and her husband and 3 children to join them. They were also invited to join a couple of longstanding American friends to join them on a trip around the South West National Parks in their newly acquired 34ft Winnebago motor home.

Peter chose Park City for several reasons including the fact that it is the centre of US disabled activities including adaptive skiing. As only the Americans could name it, it's the 'National Ability Centre' (NAC) Since USA are so far ahead of UK and EU in adjusting for people with disabilities and they speak a language closely related to us, it seemed the best location to sample adaptive skiing. He and his wife had been skiing in Park City for 15 years and had owned a condo there for 10 years, so they knew the area (and loved it and the people) very well. It has as the State motto says "The best snow in the World" or certainly the best in the USA!

Peter had no fears about returning to the place where he had his accident, indeed he said he couldn't wait to get back on the mountains and see the fabulous views that one gets.

The rest of this story is based on the travelogue written at the time by his wife Sue and e-mailed back to their friends around the world. Peter illustrated it with digital photos.

USA Travelogue

The first Sitski lesson

Peter had his first ski lesson yesterday and it went very well. After half an hour's assessment he was put in a 'bi-sit ski' (sitski with 2 skis) with outrigger skis on his arms that he controls himself. He had a very pleasant volunteer instructor called Don and a helper called Adam.

He managed 5 runs down the beginners slope and was making good turns at quite a speed. Don is still hanging on to the back of the sit-ski so that Peter doesn't overbalance. Don doesn't let anyone overbalance on their first lesson - bad psychology - but I'm not too sure when he will be allowed to fall over.

Some of you will know that we had a Trampler shipped from the East coast courtesy of the manufacturers. (The Trampler is an 'Americanised' version of Peter's off road scooter he has at home). The manufacturers are planning to market it in the USA so will welcome plenty of publicity shots in the snow and overlooking the Grand Canyon etc. Dennis (one of our American friends who own the Winnebago) and I unpacked the Trampler from its shipping crate this morning so it is all ready to go for tomorrow's ski lesson. It will make access much easier because it is very difficult getting out to the slopes in his normal wheel chair as the Spring snow retreats yards every day and there is a mud bath between the NAC and ski slope.

Peter is already thinking of next year's skiing. Let us see if he is still as enthusiastic by the end of the fourth lesson!!

The last ski lesson

Peter has had his last ski lesson (for now) and had a wonderful time. He has really enjoyed himself and achieved all that he set out to do and more. The weather was much colder for this lesson with grey, overcast skies and we realised how lucky we had been for the previous lessons.

Yesterday was very cold and more snow fell so we were grateful we weren't skiing. The resort is quite empty now and it feels as though it is very much the end of the season.

The four week adventure in the Motor Home with Barbara and Dennis:

Park City to Taos

We set off from Park City on Sunday and headed South East and stopped in an RV (Recreational Vehicle) resort in Moab for the night. Beautiful scenery but quite cold and we had a dramatic thunderstorm during the night.

We didn't stop at the Canyonlands area (in Southern Utah) as we have visited it before but we had an unexpected detour whilst looking for Newspaper Rock. Still

USA Travelogue

heading South East we stopped to shop in Cortez and stayed the night in Mancos, Colorado.

Yesterday (Tuesday) we had a wonderful trip to Mesa Verde National Park and visited the Anasazi ruins which were spectacular. **Peter had the ride of his life on his borrowed Tramper descending a narrow and steep path down to Spruce Tree House which are beautifully preserved cave dwellings.** We have some great photos and videos of the whole experience.

Last night we spent at Pagosa Springs (still in Southern Colorado) in a very pretty RV park by the San Juan river. Parking for us isn't too straight forward as the motor home is 35 feet long, 8 feet 6 inches wide, 11 1/2 feet tall, and this followed by a 10 foot trailer carrying the Tramper! The motor home has slides that extend the width to make more room inside so you can see we are rather large! This Winnebago is supposed to do 10 miles to the US gallon (diesel \$3.00 per US gallon) which would make this an impossible trip in the UK. I'm having to pretend that I'm not eco-friendly during this journey.

We have just arrived in Taos and found a RV park the other side of the town from the Pueblo Reservation. We have just had another ethnic experience eating at the Tiwa Kitchen, which is food native to the Tiwa tribe who live in the pueblo at Taos. Peter and I ate buffalo (amongst other things), which was as tough as old boots. Tomorrow, at crack of dawn, we are going to visit Taos Pueblo and hope that Peter will be able to get around using his Tramper.

Taos to Carlsbad

We got up at crack of dawn on Thursday morning to be at the car park in Taos Pueblo by 7.30am (traveling with Peter still in bed!). We had a light breakfast in the motor home before touring Taos Pueblo with an Indian guide. The tragedy is that we have lost all the photos that we took at the Pueblo (inadvertently wiped) and we took some pretty good shots. **The Indians were quite happy for Peter to tour on his Tramper (including going in to their church) so it made it more enjoyable for him.**

From Taos we drove to San Juan Pueblo where Dennis comes from. It's a small reservation on the way to Santa Fe and although we took photos they were in the batch that were wiped off the disk.

We stayed in an attractive RV park on the outskirts of the town where all motor home users had to be over the age of 55. Our first experience of Senior Community living.

We set off for Albuquerque the next morning and dropped in to visit Evelyn, Dennis's sister, on our way through. We were headed for El Modelo which is the most famous 'take away' New Mexican food in the area

We stayed the night at Isletas Lakes on an Indian reservation. What we hadn't realised was the rail road was a couple of hundred yards from the site and because

USA Travelogue

there was a level crossing there the trains hooted their horns at full volume as they approached, absolutely terrifying in the middle of the night! To make up for it the showers and loos were absolutely 5 star clean.

Sunday morning we set off for Carlsbad, found and reserved a site in a RV park and then headed off for the caves. If any of you have been there you will know just how amazing they are. Words can hardly describe the size and beauty – it's like entering a fairy tale world and the caves are absolutely ENORMOUS. **We took the Tramper down 750ft in the lift and negotiated the narrow paths around the cavern with a certain amount of nervousness in places but all went well and we had a wonderful visit..**

Carlsbad to Las Vegas

We left Carlsbad on Monday 23rd April and stopped at White Sands National Monument on the way to Las Cruces. This is a large area of white gypsum sand dunes in the middle of nowhere and is blindingly white. **Peter took a trip on the Tramper and managed to make it to the top of some of the dunes** - once again we have plenty of photos to record the visit. We spent the night at Las Cruces (New Mexico) where we were the smallest motor home in the RV resort we stayed in - a very 'chi chi' place.

Thursday we arrived at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon and stayed at Trailer Village. Having parked and hooked up, the Tramper was unloaded and we set off for our first walk to the rim trail at about 5 pm. Anyone who has experienced their first view of the Grand Canyon will understand how I felt as I came to the end of the path, turned a corner and there it was! WOW, WOW and more WOW! Photos just can't do it justice and it fair takes your breath away.

Friday, we spent the whole day exploring more of the South Rim. Because Peter is disabled and we have a Utah 'Blue Badge' (actually a 'blue notice' we obtained without trouble in Park City that you hang from your windscreen mirror - I gather they honour UK Blue Badges throughout USA, so take yours with you) we were given a special pass to drive the motor home on routes that were only open to the shuttle buses and were able to experience some truly spectacular views. **In the evening we took the Tramper along another path at the eastern end of the rim and were rewarded with some fantastic sights of a couple of Californian Condors.** What an AMAZING DAY. We spent another night in Trailer Village and departed the next morning for the West Rim of the Grand Canyon.

We had a great desire to experience the Skywalk on the West Rim that we read about in UK before we left - it only opened recently, so we found a RV park in the desert and forest of Joshua Tree cacti at Meadview which was the closest to the turn off. We unhooked the trailer from the motor home at the RV park and set off for the Hualapai Indian reservation where the sky walk has been built. We had been told that the road was largely unpaved but we hadn't bargained for 14 miles of dirt road in the motor home. The interesting thing was that all of the road on the reservation was paved but because a rancher had been in dispute with the Indians he refused to

USA Travelogue

allow the road on his land to be asphalted up to the reservation. The journey took over an hour as we had to drive so slowly. We didn't arrive at Grand Canyon West until about 4.30pm which meant that we got a discount on the entry fee as we wouldn't have too much time to see everything. We also had our own guide thanks to Peter and his blue badge. We started the tour with the visit to the Skywalk.

Unfortunately they haven't yet sorted out wheelchair access and Peter had to walk up 20 stairs to get to the platform. Having said that if Peter hadn't been able to manage the stairs a couple of enormous Hualapai security guards were prepared to carry him up in his wheelchair but he was so terrified of this that he suddenly found the strength to do it himself! It is a remarkable cantilevered platform which overhangs the west rim of the Grand Canyon with a multi-layered glass floor (just like the Spinnaker Tower at Portsmouth but US size!) and gives a staggering if rather nerve racking view 4,000ft down into the Canyon. We generally felt that it was worth the trip but nothing would induce us to return until the road had been paved. (Planned for next year).

The following morning (Sunday) we left Meadview and headed off for Las Vegas. The visit to Vegas was planned especially for me as every one else in our party had been before but not me. Well, what does one say about Las Vegas - glad I've been but have absolutely no desire to return.

Las Vegas to Yosemite

We left Las Vegas (hurrah) on Tuesday 30th and headed for Furnace Creek in Death Valley. We had planned to eat at Furnace Creek Inn but were told that it would not be possible as the temperature during the day was 120 degrees Fahrenheit, the air conditioning had failed and the heat in the kitchen was running at 140 degrees! By the time we arrived the temperature had dropped to 100 degrees at 9 pm and was bearable if you didn't stay outside for too long. **The following morning we got up at 6 am and took the Tramper for a hike to the old borax mine.** There was a pleasant catabatic breeze at that time of day and we didn't scorch in the middle of Death Valley. There were many photo opportunities in the stark but beautiful landscape.

In the afternoon we left Death Valley and headed for Boulder Creek RV park at Lone Pine which is at the base of Mount Whitney (highest peak in the Sierra Nevada) in the Owens Valley which is very dry as it lies in the rain shadow of the Sierras. Very pretty RV park but rather too close to the highway.

On Thursday we entered the Sequoia National Forest - what a contrast to Death Valley! The temperature had dropped dramatically (up to 8,500ft) and we needed down jackets for warmth. We dry camped (no hook ups) that night at the Azalea campground in the forest, a beautiful setting (6,500ft), but woke in the morning to snow and very cold weather! **We took the small electric wheelchair for a short walk to the General Grant tree and then moved on to parking for the General Sherman tree where we unloaded the Tramper and went for the most fantastic walk along the Congress Trail.** Because of the weather there were very few people around and we had the trail virtually to ourselves and could admire all the giant trees around us. It was damp and misty and had an ethereal quality. Not sure if the photos can really do it justice.

USA Travelogue

On Saturday we arrived at Yosemite National Park. We had been spoilt at other National Parks as many of them were reasonably quiet (due to the time of year) but Yosemite was quite different and was busy everywhere we went. Nevertheless it didn't spoil the experience of yet another WOW factor. We drove up to Glacier Point for our first magnificent overview and managed to get Peter to the lookout point by small electric wheelchair – a challenge for its small solid rubber wheels and Peter's bum. The view looking at the many peaks and 4,000ft down to the emerald green valley floor was simply mind-blowing! We then drove down to Bridalveil Falls for another fantastic view – the snow melt of Spring meant that all the spectacular falls were in spate and at there best.

The campsite at Groveland was very pretty and blissfully quiet and we were pleased to know we would be spending a second night there. On Sunday we returned to Yosemite and headed for Mirror Lake. We had been told that although the route there was closed to most vehicles, as we had a disabled permit we would be able to drive up there. What we had failed to be told was that there was no turn around at the end and any vehicle going up there would have to navigate a 3 point turn to turn around. This might be pretty easy for a Jeep or Ford Focus but just try doing it with a 35 foot motor home towing an 8 foot trailer!

Luckily we met a very helpful Ranger who just happened to be in charge of transport for the Park and he helped us unhook the trailer and negotiate the tight turn. **Dave, the Ranger was very interested in Peter's Tramper as he was involved with disability access and so we gave him all the info that we carry around with us.** We had a lovely walk around Mirror Lake and then moved on to Yosemite Falls for another walk with the Tramper. Barbara and Dennis then went off to find a phone to see if we could get a campground space in Yosemite whilst Peter and I went off for a long walk on bicycle trail around Sentinel Meadow in the low evening sunlight – WOW it was so green and beautiful. What we hadn't bargained for was 4 steps leading up to a bridge. **Peter was all for attempting the steps with the Tramper but I refused to let him, so it was a retracing of steps to make the walk even longer.**

We then took our final tour before leaving Yosemite, stopping at El Capitan to take photos and watch a couple of climbers in a bivouac high above us. All in all it had been a wonderful visit and I feel that a visit to the USA must include Yosemite in the Spring.

Lake Tahoe to Park City

We left Yosemite last Monday morning and set off for Lake Tahoe. Barbara has a sister, Diana, who lives near the lake and so we decided to go and park in her front drive

Barbara's brother, Greg, drove out from San Francisco to see us and we had a very enjoyable evening together eating dinner in a bistro down by the Lake. **We slept in the motor home (in the front drive) and then we went for a walk around part of the Lake with the Tramper. Beautiful scenery and a perfect temperature. Tramper did a great job on the sand!**

USA Travelogue

We thought that our trip through Nevada would be rather boring but it has turned out to be very unexpected. We drove through on highway 50, which is known as 'the loneliest road in America'. Sadly, the petroglyphs have been badly vandalised and there was very little left to see but we managed a walk with the Trumper on a short trail in the area.

On Thursday we arrived at Great Basin National Park and we took a glorious evening walk up Baker Creek with the Trumper where we met 5 mule deer who were munching the fresh young leaves (just like our roses!) before dry camping at Baker Creek. What a beautiful place! We were camped by a stream in perfect seclusion and grilled steaks on the portable grill. The next morning we went for another walk and then took the trailer off the motor home before attempting the drive up to Wheeler Peak (switch back road). Lovely views along the way and many photo opportunities. Were turned round by 'road closed by snow' at 10,000ft. Nevada has many surprising treasures.

On Friday we were well and truly on our way home and parked at Lakeside RV park in Provo, Utah. We spent Saturday night at The Marriott on Main Street so we sorted ourselves out and packed properly for the journey home. Luckily American Airlines had no trouble with the journey home and we arrived on a classical grey and rainy day and were gobsmacked by the brilliant green of the countryside! We'd been in SW USA for 6 weeks where the colours are browns and greys so the green of UK was really a shock – however, lovely to be home!

It had been a wonderful trip 4629 miles in 4 weeks (165 miles a day) and 7.5 miles to (US) gallon (includes air con, electricity and heating)! They are convinced that a motorhome is a great way to see USA and so long as you can organise a way of getting in and out, it's very well suited for a disabled person. There are special hoists that can handle a wheelchair. Peter is able to walk a little and he found Dennis' wooden blocks the easiest for helping him in and out. Basically these reduced the step height to <6 inches and with 'a little help from my friends' he managed to get in and out without mishap.

Having the Trumper added greatly to his participation and enjoyment. It allowed him access to many places of great interest that would have been a bit of a slog in a wheelchair. Having said that, USA is very wheelchair-friendly and with the £ being so strong against the US\$, now is the time to visit USA.