

# ANCIENTS AMONG RV PARKS

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**I GREW UP IN SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA.** I don't think you could get much farther from the glitzy, coastal, big-city feel than Bluff, Utah.

This dusty town of only around 250 permanent residents, bordering the Navajo Nation, was completely foreign to me when I first rolled into town on a brisk January afternoon.

For one, paved roads aren't a given. Nor is cheap food — but those small luxuries are easily forgotten as soon as you meet the people. These people aren't the “put in your headphones and ignore the world” type I would walk past in my hometown — these were creatives, business people and stewards of the land.

The townsfolk are a collage of all that typifies “Americana.” New business owners, shipped in from the East. A dance teacher, passing down cultural dances to a new generation. A trading post owner, with tight, familial relationships with all the artists she buys from. A high school art teacher, preoccupied only with getting young people to express themselves. A handcarver, keeping the unique symbology passed down to her alive.

This town balances two realities — the history of the Latter-day Saint settlers, dating back to 1880, and the history of the ancient inhabitants, dating back much, much further. This blending of two time periods makes Bluff feel alive — a constant conversation between ancient and modern.

## Bluff International Balloon Festival



This annual festival runs all weekend, with balloons flying over Bluff proper on Saturday morning just after sunrise, and staying up until around 10 a.m. There are no charges for spectators, and balloons take off from all over town — so walk around and see what you can find! The view of the balloons next to the town's twin rocks formation is a striking sight, although I've been told that setting up atop a nearby hill might've been the better view.

When I was visiting, I stuck around some ballooners setting off from the Twin Rocks Trading Post parking lot. One smaller balloon, strapped to her fuel tank, cracked a pun as she waved us goodbye, legs swinging in the empty air below her. The other, larger balloon drifted directly above us once she was airborne. Quite strange to look straight up and see a spot of bright yellow amidst an otherwise cloudless blue sky.

## Cow Canyon Coffee

Just across the street from the twin rocks formation, is the small Cow Canyon Coffee Shop. This indie stop has more than just coffee — it has homemade baked goods, and sells other wares from independent artists and sellers from the wider four corners area. Above all though, come for the coffee shop's lovely back porch. With wall-to-wall windows, the natural light from the sun beaming through the glass is unmatched with a hot chocolate in hand.

This spot reminded me of the indie coffee shops found in my own gentrified hometown — “shabby chic” decor, local vendors' work for sale, baked goods made in-house, and a chalkboard menu.

When my classmate and I were walking around after the initial balloon take off, we came across the owners and operators of the coffee shop — not working with their customers, but all standing outside. Their heads were craned upward to get a view of all the bright balloons against the sharp blue sky and red rocks, fiery with the morning sun. Near them, a group of customers also stood enraptured, eyes heavenward. My classmate and I joined them for a few minutes, until they got their fill and returned to tend to their patrons. Only in such a small town does a coffee shop completely grind to a halt for a few minutes of awe.



## Cow Canyon Trading Post

“Sorry, I had some of their coffee, so I'm totally wired,” the woman said in passing, as she weaved around the wooden display cases and shelves filling in her small shop. That wasn't hard to believe. She sported a statement piece of a winter hat, with long, wavy gray hair visible underneath it — the messiness of which she left ignored as she rushed to help some newer customers who had just entered.

After a few minutes, she shifted her attention back to me. My classmate and I had been bumming around the main entrance area of the shop, ogling at some of the more striking pieces, but entirely ignorant of any of their significance. She quickly noted our interest, and began animatedly explaining some of her most prized pieces to us, pulling us around the rooms to go through some of her favorites.

“She” is Liza Doran, the longtime proprietor of the trading post. A Bluff resident for 40 years now, her charm and passion are absolutely contagious. If you're looking for traditional art from local artisans, you cannot miss this trading post.



Liza Doran,  
owner of the Cow  
Canyon Trading  
Post.

## Sand Island Petroglyphs

If you want to get in touch with the ancient side of this area, these petroglyphs are easily accessible, just a short drive out of town. High up on a cliff face and protected by a chain link fence, these ancient carvings reveal the true age of the creative culture of the area.

The oldest carvings here are in the Glen Canyon Linear style, which is thought to date back as far as 3000 B.C. Creatives did not spawn into existence here a few decades ago, no — there have been artistic folk here for millennia.

Before visiting, I knew only intellectually that ancient peoples had been in and around Bluff for centuries. It didn't really connect for me that this small town of mostly RV parks really held an ancient heritage. Only once I stood where these ancient artists stood, and saw their scrawled work, did I really begin to glimpse Bluff's true history.

The petroglyphs have their own internal story, too — at a glance, it all seems equally ancient. But looking closer, some carvings are centuries older than others. Many people, ancient to us today, carved next to the work of those that were ancient to them. A vast history marks this wall.

Walking through this area and finding the various markings of different ages, it's difficult to not feel a kinship to these artists of old, when all they really did was draw weird little dudes onto some red rocks.

Fetching snacks at the single gas station in town, bundling up each morning to gawk at balloons with a bunch of strangers, worshipping with a small branch of around 30 people — moments like these were the ones that set Bluff apart. Not the new resort we stayed at, not the fancy food we ate. The people, simply living their small-time lives, charmed me endlessly.

To someone used to tall skyscrapers, wide freeways and long lines — the world feels smaller when you're in Bluff.