

DESTINATION
UTAH'S
CANYON
COUNTRY

Road Trip

IDEAL SEASON:
FEBRUARY TO MARCH
MILEAGE: 124
DAYS: 3
HIGHLIGHT: DRIVING THE

Red Rock Passage

STUNNING AND SELDOM DRIVEN, HIGHWAY 12 IS THE BEST LITTLE ROAD IN UTAH.

By Kate Siber

Most people come to the Southwest for one of three reasons:

Grand Canyon, Zion, or Arches National Park. But while the masses head to the A-list sites, the roads that connect them are stunning in their own right. Few are more spectacular—and empty—than Utah's little-known Highway 12.

Running between Capitol Reef and Bryce Canyon National Parks, the two-lane byway packs some of the Southwest's most spellbinding landscapes into a single 124-mile strip of winding blacktop. This is remote country—nothing but waves of Navajo and Wingate sandstone, slot canyons, and funky little towns. The road



PHOTO: CREDIT: TK

Capitol Reef National Park, at the northern tip of Highway 12.



Clockwise from above: fresh pumpkin pies at Capitol Reef's historic Gifford Homestead; one of seven hand-built log cabins at Escalante Outfitters; a local furniture maker outside the town of Escalante; the Burr Trail Outpost, in Boulder

has two entry points—one at the north (Highway 24), and one at the south (U.S. 89)—leaving the rest to the lucky few who know where to access it.

It was precisely this promise of solitude—and directional simplicity—that lured my friend Kelsey and me one balmy October weekend. Our first stop was **Capitol Reef National Park**, near where Highways 24 and 12 meet (nps.gov/care). Long and narrow, the park protects the 100-mile-long Waterpocket Fold, a rippling river of red rock that could be a backdrop for a John Ford movie. We drove the park's 90-minute scenic route, cruising through huge rocky amphitheaters, braking for a hike, and picking apples in orchards originally planted by Mormon pioneers a century ago. When evening fell, we hopped into the car and drove a few miles south to Torrey.

At first glance, the loose collection of clapboard houses seemed like little more than a cowboy crossroads. But a cruise down the mile-long

main drag, dotted improbably with three small art galleries, revealed another more eclectic side. "Artists come for the scenery, open space, and peace and quiet," said Patricia Priebe-Swan-son, the owner of **Gallery 24** (135 E. Main St., gallery24.biz), a painter who had recently moved from Seattle. "I'm not a woo-woo type person, but there's an energy here that just draws them in."

Torrey's creative spirit was on full display at **Cafe Diablo**. Kelsey and I

sipped glasses of pinot grigio next to a flower garden and watched waitresses present dishes like rattlesnake cakes and banana-leaf tamales (599 W. Main St., cafediablo.net, entrées from \$21). After dinner, we retired to the **Torrey Schoolhouse B&B**, a 1916 red sandstone building that once held boxing matches frequented by Butch Cassidy. The inn now houses 10 newly renovated suites with bay windows framing views of rust-colored cliffs (150 N. Center St., torreyschoolhouse.com, doubles from \$110).

Torrey is the northern terminus of Highway 12—we hadn't even made a dent in it yet—but the next day, Kelsey and I hit the road in earnest, winding into the Henry Mountains, the last-mapped range in the continental U.S. As we climbed, pines and aspens crept in among the junipers, and burnt-red canyons punctuated the forests. West of the Henrys, we pulled into the tiny town of Boulder.



Purple sage and red-rock bluffs along the scenic route in Capitol Reef National Park

The collection of wooden cabins and barns has long been an outpost for nearby ranchers, but like Torrey, Boulder was beginning to appeal to a more bohemian crowd. That was immediately clear to us at **Hell's Backbone Grill**, a restaurant decorated with Buddhist-prayer flags and pumpkins from the on-site organic farm (20 N. Hwy. 12, hellsbackbonegrill.com, entrées from \$13). Kelsey and I settled into the cozy dining room and dipped fresh local peaches into a pot of pillowy goat-cheese fondue. Our final stop for the night was next door, at the rustic **Boulder Mountain Lodge**, a trio of two-story lodges set in the middle of an 11-acre bird sanctuary (20 N. Hwy. 12, boulder-utah.com, doubles from \$79).

If Highway 12 had been beautiful up until this point, what followed was positively surreal. We traveled through seemingly endless fields of sage and snaked along a stomach-twisting ridgeline known as the Hogsback that was barely wider than the road. It didn't even feel like driving—more like flying an aircraft at low altitude.

About TK miles south, Kelsey and I arrived in the town of Escalante, at the edge of **Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument** (ut.blm.gov/monument). The park contains more than a million acres of canyons, and if there's one man who knows them best, it's Rick Green, owner of **Excursions of Escalante** (125 E. Main St., excursionsof-escalante.com, guided trips from \$125).

Rick drove us to the maze of chasms, where we shimmied into a slot scarcely wider than a basketball.

Later that evening, we checked in to a dollhouse-like log cabin at **Escalante Outfitters**, a combination outdoor store, coffee shop, pizzeria, and lodge (310 W. Main St., escalanteoutfitters.com, cabins from \$45). As we watched the sun set over the lacy edge of the Kaiparowits Plateau from our cabin's front porch, Kelsey and I sampled the local Squatters Full Suspension Pale Ale and drank in a landscape we never would have seen if we'd stayed on the interstate. Tomorrow we'd go to Bryce, but for now, we were content to simply watch the pinks of the evening sky fade into stars along an otherwise sleepy stretch of road. ■

Desert Bloom

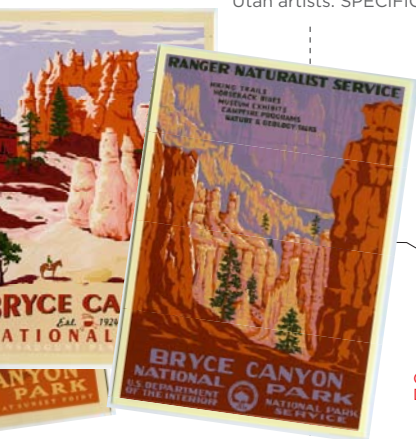
An empty highway it's not: The road from Capitol Reef to Bryce Canyon is full of far-out finds.



The **Torrey Gallery** (80 E. Main St., torreygallery.com) sells wood and metal sculptures by Utah artists. SPECIFIC?



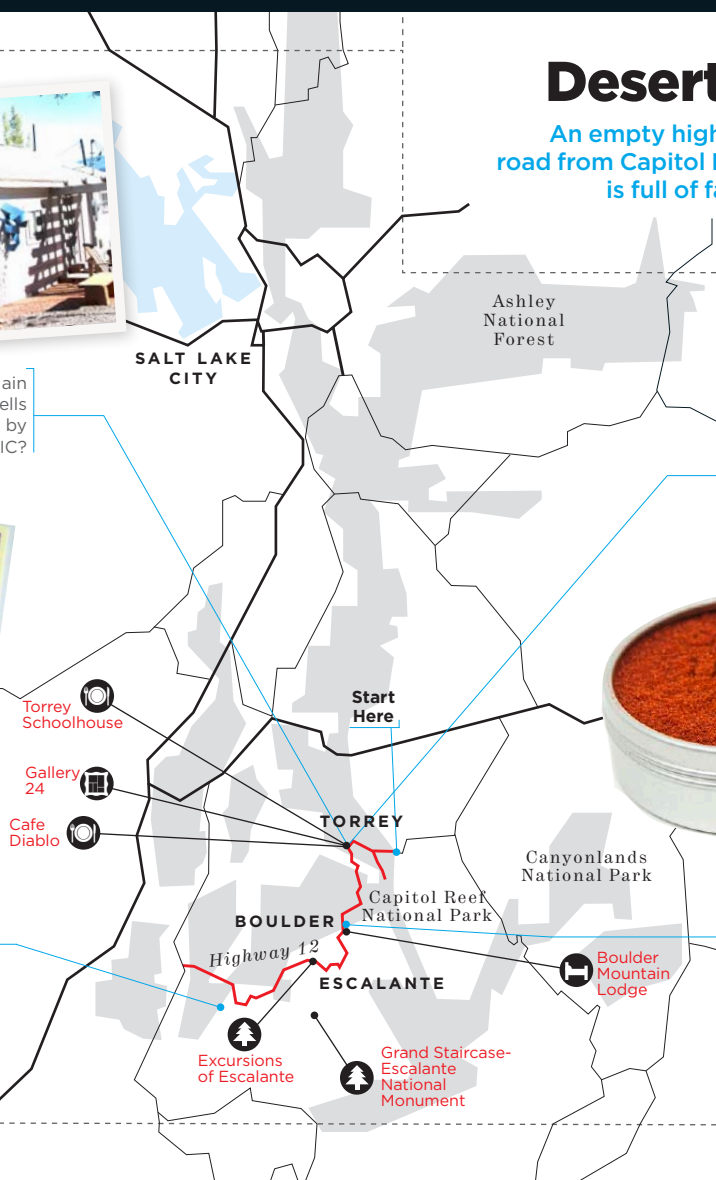
Along with the obvious, **Robber's Roost Books** sells locally-made jewelry and hosts local artist lectures (185 W. Main St., robbersroostbooks.com). ANY OTHER SPECIFIC?



We took in **Bryce Canyon's** stunning red rock along the 5.5-mile Peek-A-Boo Loop Trail.



Hell's Backbone Grill uses locally-grown organic veggies and this homemade chimayo chile powder, available in their store (1 oz. pot for \$TK), in their TKfavorite dishTK.



Ttkkthis space is for a pullquote here. But like Torrey, Boulder had started attracting more bohemian types. Wandering into Hell's Backbone Grill, festooned with Buddhist-prayer flags, that was immediately clear

