

Utah Rocks

Fock 10: Kokopelli and Karma

The southwest has a distinct culture, and it's manifested in the crafts and artwork that are produced in the region. Indian influence is the key, of course, and some lore is kept alive through such treasures and trinkets. There are roadside stops along remote highways where Navajo and Hopi Indians have set up ramshackle booths to peddle blankets, polished stones, and the like. Just outside Grand Canyon National Park, there had been a veritable flea market of such booths. Strangely, only one of about twenty of them was occupied, and there was not a customer in sight.

Back at Mokee Dugway, just outside Valley Of The Gods, as I was stopped for some photo-snappin', a Native American woman had approached me. She was very pleasant as she showed me a sample of the wares she was looking to sell. It was a very nice medallion of shiny gray stone, highly polished, and carved in a sleek representation of a hand. The hand, she claimed, with the spiral shape carved within the palm, stood for Strength and Healing. Had I been browsing in a store, I definitely would have bought it. But with her right there, giving me no time to ponder it or to price it, I reflexively said I had no interest.

Somehow, though, it stuck with me, and as I drove further and further away, I kept feeling that I had blown it. Maybe it was those spirits of Strength and Healing – both of which my senescent knees craved – calling to me.

So, here in Moab, at the trendy and upscale Kokopelli Gallery, I answered that call, purchasing two polished black stones, with engraved insignias. The first was the hand with the spiral, and the second was Kokopelli himself: the man, the myth, the legend, on whom I felt compelled to do some research.

Known as a fertility god, prankster, healer, and storyteller, Kokopelli has been a mythic figure for centuries. He embodies the true American Southwest, and dates back over 3,000 years, when the first petroglyphs were carved. Although his true origins are unknown, he was a traveling, flute-playing Casanova, and he is sacred to many Southwestern Native Americans. Carvings of this hunch-backed, flutist have been found painted and carved into rock walls and boulders throughout the Southwest.

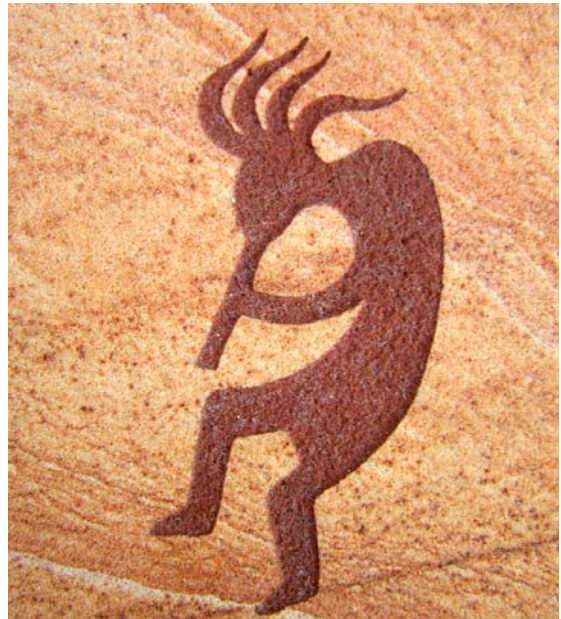
There are many myths about the famous Kokopelli, one of which is that he traveled from village to village bringing the changing of winter to spring, melting the snow and bringing about rain for a successful harvest. It is also said that the hunch on his back depicted the sacks of seeds and songs he carried. The flute playing symbolized the transition of winter to spring: Kokopelli's flute is said to be heard in the spring's breeze, bringing warmth.

Allegedly, he was also the source of human conception. Legend has it that everyone in the village would sing and dance throughout the night when they heard Kokopelli play his flute. The next morning, every maiden in the village would be with child. I have to assume that "sing and dance" is a euphemism.

Another source says that Kokopelli was hung like Koko the Gorilla, and that, while barren women competed for his company when he arrived, virgins fled in fear. I guess old Kokopelli had a way with the ladies.

At any rate, throughout the southwest, he represents music-making, "music"-making, and dancing, and he spreads joy to those around him. He is always welcome in the home.

So, he seemed like a damn good dude to have in my pocket. And each stone was only about four bucks anyway. Good karma, cheap.



Since I was so close, I couldn't resist a revisit to Fisher Towers. The twenty-mile ride out along Route 128 was good, but the sky had gone overcast, and the gray mitigated the scenic spectacle. I had hoped for a good, blazing sunset view of the tall red spires of The Titan and its underlings, but Mom Nature wasn't in the mood to give me one. So it goes. I had my coveted Delicate Arch photo, though, so all was well.

Fisher Towers' amazing cluster of towering, rippling, rock fins doesn't match anything in the surrounding landscape. The deep red coloring comes from a layer of long-dried mud that seems to have dripped and run down the sides, like chocolate dip on a Dairy Queen cone.

There is room for about two dozen cars in the dirt parking area at the base of the Towers, and a small, six-site camping area where I would once again be spending the night. Each site was empty, just as they had been in 2000. It would make for some very excellent solitude. There were two other cars parked near the trailhead, but I somehow knew they would be leaving before dark.

There were still a couple hours of daylight left, so, despite the melancholy atmosphere, I decided to hike the trails now, curl up for the night in Chief, and move on first thing in the morning. It would get me back "on schedule," but it seemed lacking. Fisher Towers deserved better attention, especially with its photogenic potential.

The Fates must have agreed, because something intervened and messed me up and turned me around. The trails are not marked with signs or markers, but with small cairns (rock piles) placed for line-of-sight guidance. In the soft ground, the footsteps worn into the red dirt make the trail easy to follow, but much of it is across hard rock surfaces where footprints just don't stick.

Of course, you can go wherever you can walk, and each direction takes you to some pretty cool views of these unique towers. The trails are set up to help you find the best ones, but if you wander off course, you still see some cranko things. Trouble is, the terrain isn't exactly what we runners call "flat and fast." The trails wind and snake down into forty-foot deep gullies, and twist back up the rock ledges on either side. The ledges are irregular peninsulas that once stood like several dozen fingers among these water-filled gullies. On a map, it would be as convoluted as an intestinal diagram.

The cairns themselves are often little more than three small, flat stones in an uneven pile. Sometimes they catch your attention just fine, but there are other times when you really don't think the trail is turning – the gully is going straight ahead, so you assume you are too – and by the time you figure it out, you are dead-ended with no place to go but back.

And in fading daylight, such miscues are even more common. I sincerely tried to follow the primary trail that I had done my Deer Mode run on – The Lookout Trail – but each time I got back on target, I would almost immediately lose my way again, and find myself wandering around among the strangely-shaped and usually-colored rocks, futilely searching for little piles of stones.

But, like I said, the Fates had different plans; they knew more about this place than I did. They blinded my eyes to the cairns, and clouded my focus with focus-clouding stuff. When the lightning began flashing beyond the wide valley – Moab must have been getting really wet – and the thunder starting rumbling in long, deep, throaty sentences, I knew that it was just as well that I had not found the 2.2-mile long trail after all. Instead, I just found a quiet little spot under a really gnarled, twelve-foot tall rock, chilled out, and enjoyed the stormy view for a while.



It still took a while to get back to Chief, because that gnarled rock was waaaaay off the marked trail, and retracing all those random steps was all but impossible. By the time I did get back, a light rain was starting to fall. The other cars were long gone, and I was about as alone as a man can be.

Other than a jug of water poured over my head at Arches, I had had no cleansing since the Apache Motel -- which seemed like a LOT more than twelve hours ago -- and much dust and sweat had been encountered since then. So, I doffed unnecessaries and let the rain be my shower. The air was still plenty warm enough, and the drops, which were getting heavier and more frequent, were coldly refreshing.

After a good rinse, I retreated into Chief. I passed a little time by downloading the rest of today's photos, and processing some of the Arches pix from that morning. I found myself looking at that day's Delicate Arch photos with an Oh-yeah-I-remember-that attitude, as if it had been a long time before.

At 8:20, I bedded down for the night. Damn early. It wasn't dark yet. Dusk, yes, but still a good hour from being really dark. It was amazingly quiet. Intermittent light rain occasionally tap-danced on Chief's roof and lulled me to sleep.

I definitely missed Blue Man. His bed was terrific: so well cushioned, and large enough for comfortable sleep at any angle. Chief just couldn't match that. Even with extra towels and clothes laid out under the doubled-up old comforter that I had brought with me, Chief's rear deck was still unforgivingly hard. That deck measured about 6'2½" inches diagonally across, which was about ½" too short for my lanky frame. My head was nestled in the far-back corner, and my feet barely fit, one atop the other, jammed between the back of the driver's seat and the door. Flat on my back, it was not at all comfortable, and when I rolled on my side, it was just plain intolerable. So, sleep would be spotty, and I knew that as I settled in.

But when the calf cramp hit me at midnight, discomfort went to a new level. This was one nasty cramp. It hit like a Tomahawk missile: swift and cruel. Between the hiking overload of the day, and the bunched up position of the night, the muscle just freaked.

In Blue Man, I could have stood up, put some weight on it, and help the cramp pass. But in the low-ceilinged Jeep, it became an acrobatic act.

Still, I could only smile and laugh about it all, reminding myself that I was in this situation because I loved it, and I had traveled a long way to be doing exactly this.

Outside, the clouds had moved along, and stars shone brightly. The next day would begin with sun, and Fisher Towers and its trails would be there waiting.