

When exploring Hell's Backbone, it's best to have a guide

If you go . . .

How to get there

From Salt Lake City, take Interstate 15 south. Exit onto state Highway 20, pick up state Highway 89 south to Glendale. Turn left onto Bench Road. From Las Vegas, take Interstate 15 north to Utah Highway 9 to Mount Carmel Junction. Pick up state Highway 89 north to Glendale. Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is a 1.9-million-acre desert preserve in south-central Utah. Established in 1996, it is one of the nation's newest national monuments. The park is largely undeveloped. Amenities are limited. Park staff is stretched thin over the huge preserve. Trails are few and generally unmarked. In early October, temperatures ranged from 50 degrees at night to 90 during the day — quite comfortable with the right clothing and equipment. Spring is similarly pleasant; summer, however, can be unbearably hot.

What to do

REI Adventures tour
800-622-2236
www.rei.com/adventures
REI Adventures runs park trips each spring and fall. Prices start at \$1,099, including all meals, some equipment, park fees, and one or two guides per group (depending on group size).

Local guide services
www.escalante-cc.com/visitor/guides.htm

Where to stay

Talk to locals or a park ranger about finding a free rustic campsite off one of the dirt-track roads.

Where to eat

Kiva Koffeehouse
435-826-4550
Highway 12, Escalante
www.kivakoffeehouse.com
Southwestern cuisine, soups and breads, sweets, cold drinks, and coffee are served in an amazing kiva-structure building overlooking a deep park canyon. Lunch \$6-\$10; dinner \$15-\$25.

Hell's Backbone Grill
Highway 12, Boulder
435-335-7464
www.hellsbackbonegrill.com
This gourmet oasis serves seasonally available Southwestern food from an ever-changing menu. Fabulous food at this beautiful, remote desert restaurant. Soup \$5-\$7; trout dinner \$19; steak dinner \$26.

Information

www.utah.com/nationalsites/grand_staircase.htm
www.escalante-cc.com
www.travelwest.net/parks/grandstaircase
Escalante Interagency Office
(Ranger District-Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service)
755 West Main St., Escalante
435-826-5499
www.ut.blm.gov/monument
For park maps, brochures, hike suggestions, and up-to-date weather information. Open mid-March-October, daily 7:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

Books

"Hiking Grand Staircase-Escalante and the Glen Canyon Region"
Ron Adkison (Falcon, 1998)
"Canyons of the Escalante Map"
National Geographic (Trails Illustrated)
An interpretive map of the area.

By Stephen Regenold

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT, Utah — There is a crack in the earth. I am a bug in that crack, looking up at a slit of blue sky.

I stand chest deep in icy water at the bottom of a slot canyon in an empty corner of Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

How can desert water be this cold? Five minutes ago, I was standing on sand, under a sun-baked red rock buttress, wearing sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat. Now, I'm in the depths of this black hollow, nearly naked, listening to the echoing shouts and commands of our guide, up ahead in the darkness.

"Swimming! Oh, oh, oh! It's cold! It's cold! It's deep!" he yells, before beckoning us further up and in.

I imagine my skin to be turning blue, numb. I feel something wriggle underwater, on the canyon bottom, and envision water snakes — a whole den of water snakes that I have been unlucky enough to trip over. But it's only a stick in the muddy river bottom, tickling my ankle. So I plunge forward, second in line, searching for the light at the other end of this tunnel.

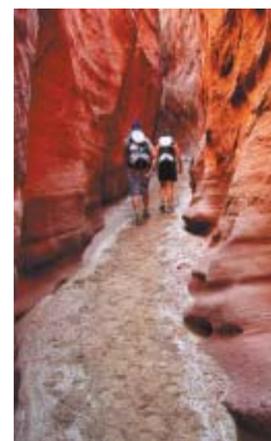
This was the fourth day of a six-day guided hiking and canyoneering trip I took last year to explore Grand Staircase-Escalante. Our group of seven hiked for hours and miles each day in the park of 1.9 million acres, rarely encountering evidence of other humans. Skittering lizards and birds turned a strange eye to us, trespassers walking through their homeland.

When we did encounter human artifacts, they were ancient. We saw untouched Anasazi ruins with maize cobs preserved perfectly through the dry millennia.

In some ways, however, the park is very young. It became a national monument in 1996. A loose network of rustic campsites, log-book sign-ins, unmarked trails, and washboard gravel roads form a vague infrastructure at Grand Staircase-Escalante, much like Yellowstone or Grand Canyon National Park of the 1940s. There are no paved trails, no fancy air-conditioned visitors centers, no shuttle buses. There are also no crowds, no endless drone of sightseer traffic, no slow RV caravans.

By and large, this is wilderness unfettered, loosely governed, only slightly monitored by a small park staff. Its ruggedness and remoteness keep it that way. It's the kind of inhospitable, alien countryside the early settlers associated with doom and damnation, and the place names reflect that: Hell's Backbone, Devils Garden, Spooky Gulch, Death Hollow.

For our trip, we had US Geological Survey maps. Topographical lines lay tight and winding on the paper, canyons dropping from sheer 6,000-foot mesas, roads just faint black lines in an immense tangle of intricate, carved, natural detail. We also had Steve Kasper,



STEPHEN REGENOLD/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Pothole view on Peek-A-Boo Gulch, left, and a trek through a slot canyon near the Dry Fork of Coyote Gulch in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

48, a Californian who had led more than a dozen trips through Grand Staircase-Escalante. For the next few days, Kasper would be our cook, our human pack mule, our archeology professor and, most critically, our guide.

The first day was typical. Kasper picked up a stick next to our van and began sketching the day's route in the sand. He told us how it would take us downhill through a wash that narrows into a river canyon and eventually pinches off into a slot just two feet wide and more than 100 feet deep. We would be spit out onto a wide river bottom, from which we would slink, squirm, swim, and climb the day away exploring tributary streambeds and slot canyons with walls of rock that can close down to eight inches in places.

Each day in the park left its own impressions. Within its vast boundaries we encountered ancient petroglyph graffiti, sprawling plateaus, natural arch bridges, riverbed oases, and innumerable labyrinthine canyons.

Zebra Canyon, however, is the place that defines Grand Staircase-Escalante for me. Standing at its mouth on the fourth day of the trip, Kasper described it as insurmountable. Because I'm a veteran rock climber, the description sounded like an invitation, a challenge. I wanted to be the first into the maw, the first to worm up through the narrows and scale the cliff at the end of the canyon to reach the desert plain above.

We headed up into the canyon under towering sandstone walls, half the group surrendering at a particularly comfy sandbar just five minutes from the mouth, content to let me, the guide, and one other compatriot — all three of us named Steve — continue.

Our guide, Steve No. 1, led us into the first of Zebra's many frigid pools. Steve Casimiro, a writer from Orange County, Calif., and our Steve No. 2, went second, howling just a little as he waded into the dark waters. I, Steve No. 3, waited a couple of minutes, al-

ready a bit cold standing in a shadow wearing just a swimsuit, looking up at the red and orange rock walls above.

Black, spiderlike water bugs scattered on the surface as I paddled fast through the pool, gazing ahead 50 feet toward the next spot of dry land. I continued like this, swimming through pools, climbing up and over trapped boulders, and basking in rare sunny alcoves to warm my skin like a lizard.

The canyon narrowed to just a foot wide, my shoulders scraping each wall. Then, I was swimming in a narrow slot, trying hard to keep my head above water.

Above, suddenly, blood on the wall, a big, bright red smear on the sandstone above a boulder. I yelled out — "Steve!" — hoping one of the two would answer from up ahead.

Nothing. An eerie desert silence. Subtle water sounds, quiet trickling and sloshing below the bloodied wall, water bugs bobbing on the ripples.

Around the corner, 100 feet ahead, in a sun patch, Steve No. 2 leaned against the rock wall, wincing. He was looking down at the bottom of his foot, as if stretching out a hamstring. Blood dripped from a puncture.

"A snake bite?" I asked.

"No," he said. "A stick under the murky water. Should've worn shoes."

Steve No. 1 was farther ahead. His ambitions were the same as mine, and when I caught up with him, he was staring at the first in a series of three cliffs that guarded the canyon top. We were in the shade, both of us shivering, and I was feeling out the handholds, wet and slimy, on this first cliff face.

I stepped off the ground, reached high to a hold, and lunged at a shelf 10 feet up.

Easy scrambling for another 10 feet and I was on top of the first slippery little cliff, looking down at Steve No. 1.

"Go on," he said, "I'm staying here."

I could smell the desert above, 50 vertical feet away. Again, I reached up and felt the initial handholds. A pool of water — motionless, stale, green — was below my feet as I traversed over to the main wall. It was another leap to the top of this section. A slip would mean a soaking in the nasty pool below, and I was picturing hidden sticks and Steve No. 2's souvenir puncture wound.

Three times I lunged up toward the top and missed, catching

myself with a quick grasp of a handhold. Steve No. 1 was yelling for me to come back; he was cold and the group was waiting.

"Hold on," I yelled. "I'm really close, really."

But I knew I wasn't. This move was beyond my ability, and then there was another cliff farther up that appeared even sheerer. One more lunge, one more miss, and I climbed down and slunk back into the earth like a bug toward the Steves and their echoing calls.

Back in the canyon depths, I was with the water bugs again, skimming my hands on the surface, raking fast through the icy water, lungs tight with cold, hoping to avoid the sharp stick.

The Steves were ahead; I could hear them talking and laughing with the rest of our crew. I could hear them explaining the blood, describing the beauty of the narrows, of the multicolor striped sandstone and orange light playing off tight twists of the canyon. I stepped out of the water, trudged over the sandbar, and got out of the shade to finish the rest of the trip in bright desert sun.

Contact Stephen Regenold, a writer in Minneapolis, at sregenold@hotmail.com.

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