

Mystery Canyon and its Redbud Tree



A set of Moqui steps carved into the wall gave Mystery its name. These foot and hand holds came to a spot that nobody could climb. Nobody knew where they went or what was on top – that was the mystery.....

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Prologue

After the 2013 “Forbidden trip”, I dreamt of repeating the same crazy journey many times. This one did not disappoint me. Again, I walked on the hard remote trails. The eight-days excursion seems like a fairy tale to me. In spite of the hardship of climbing up those killer buttes, the misery of getting up in a frigid morning and the distress of hiking under a hot sun, I would still rather be there than anywhere else. Richard’s Rainbow trip reminds me that American still has its secret places where adventures are still possible.

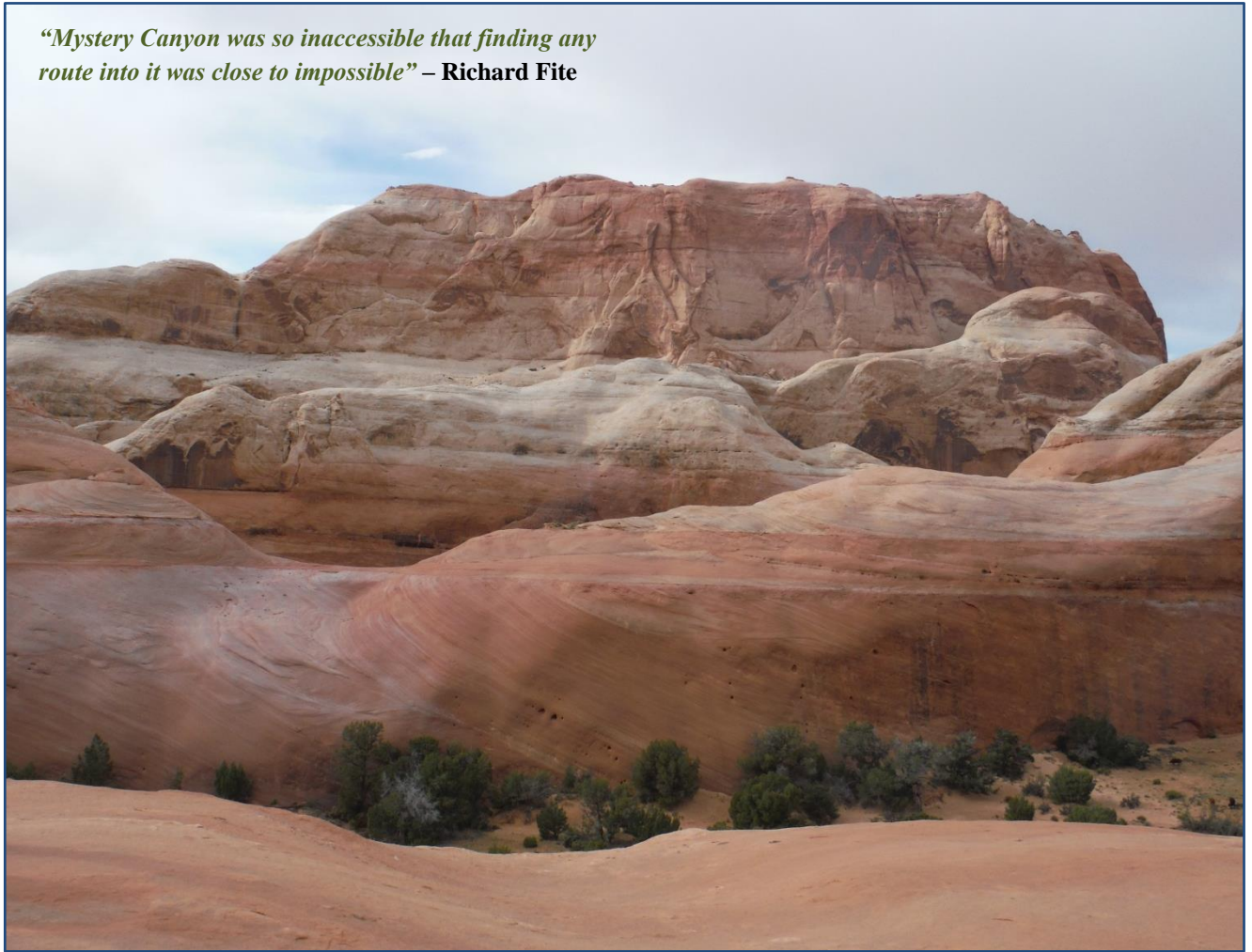
As for my leaders and teammates, I have never met such a group of agreeable individuals; they are witty and intelligent, flexible and resilient, courtesy and kind. How pleasurable it was living with them for eight days.

Fourteen of us came to the Rainbow Plateau seeking adventure and we found it. Here is how it all begins.



Entrance to the Mystery Canyon

“Mystery Canyon was so inaccessible that finding any route into it was close to impossible” – Richard Fite

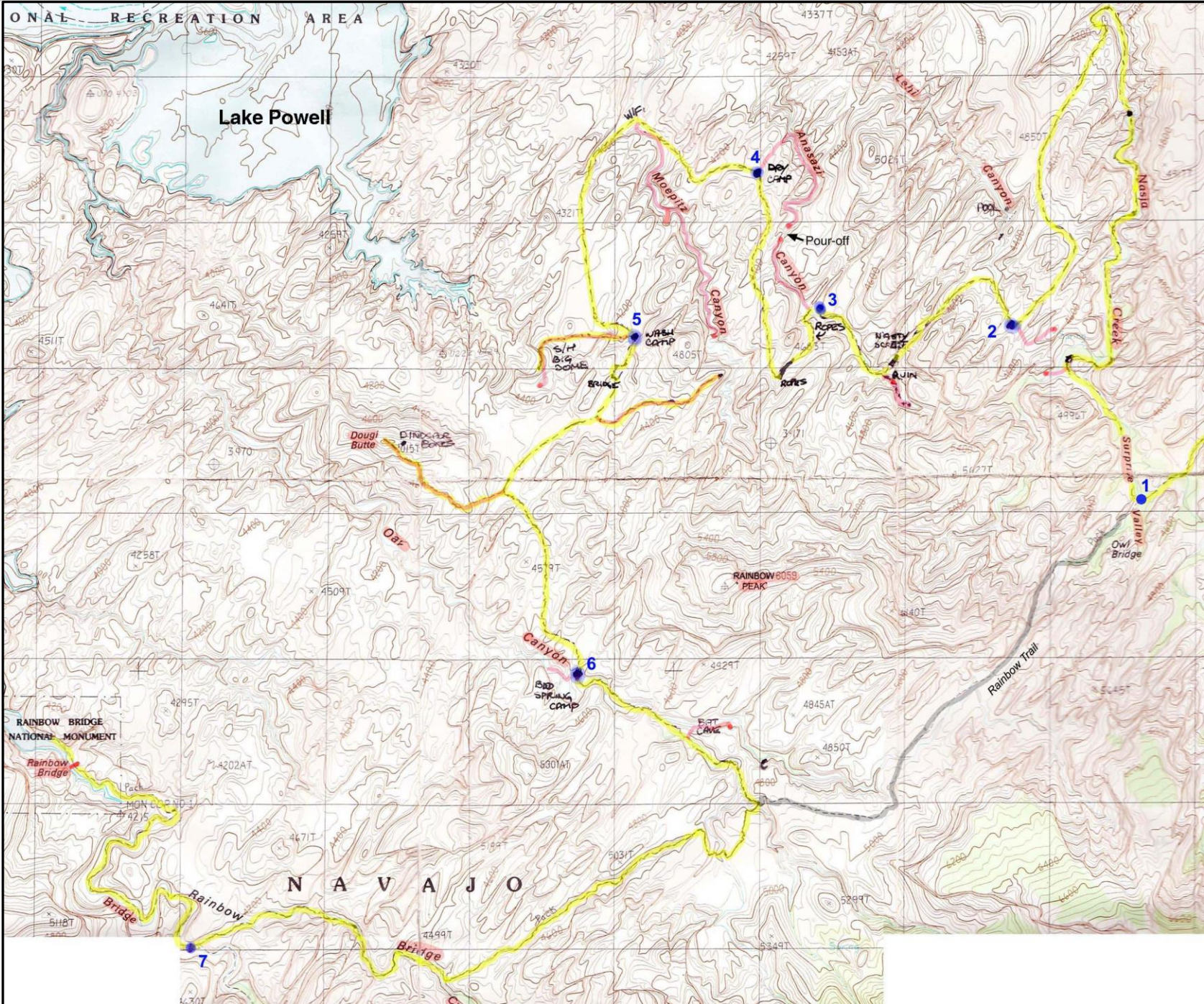


Mystery Canyon consists of three tributaries: Anasazi, Lehi and Moepitz canyons. It was originally named by Norman Nevills who was a pioneer of commercial river-running in the American Southwest. During one of his expeditions, he found a set of Moqui steps near the mouth of Mystery Canyon. The pecked step were cut in the rock up and seemed to go nowhere. What lay beyond in the upper reaches of the canyon was the mystery.

At the canyon's upper end, the three branches embrace a nearly 2,000-foot-high sandstone battlement; they are narrow, vertical slots with no easily found routes in or out. Various attempts were made to enter the canyon from the western side near the head, but they were unsuccessful. Finally, with the aid of two Paiute Indians, Dan Lehi and Toby Owl, in 1959, a team of archaeologists was led into the heart of the canyon.

Today, entering Mystery Canyon continues to be a challenge. The area remains well protected from casual hiker. To unveil the mystery behind those impenetrable walls, eleven of us followed Richard; our leader, Becky and Michael, our assistant leaders, and ventured into these mysterious walls.

Our Never Ending Twisting Route



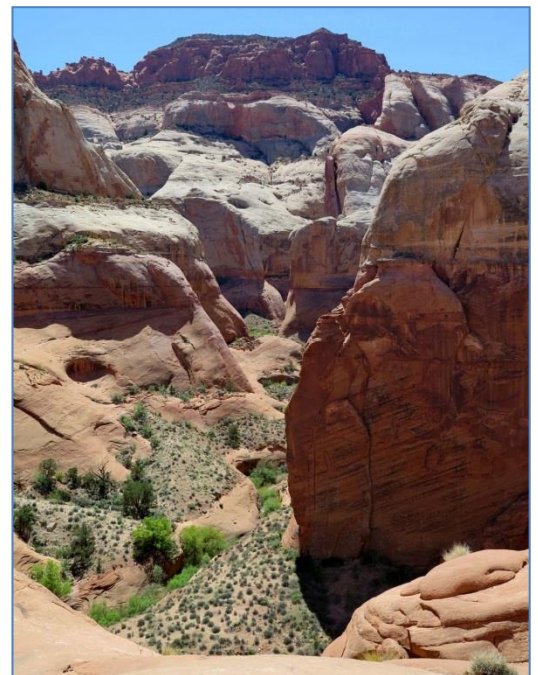


Navajo Mountain



We start at Rainbow Trail, where the land falls away to the north and west, toward Lake Powell. We look down into the earth, into enormous basements of bedrock and a tangled web of cliffs, towers, mesas and ravines. There are iron buttes, orange, yellow and white colored domes, unfathomable mesas and inaccessible arroyos.

Behind us looms Navajo Mountain. The upper slopes of this sacred mountain are still white with snow. But down in the canyon where we are heading, it is already spring. Patches of green cottonwoods, like jade, cover the bottom of Surprise Valley. It is to be our first campsite, with picnic tables and murmuring Nasja creek nearby, a welcome sight at the end of our first day's hike.



Desert Flowers

Even though it is only the beginning of April, there is an intensely spring-on-its way feeling. Out in the sunshine, primrose blooms in profusion. I grab Roberta (I should have invited her instead, just to be polite) and we sit among those brilliant white flowers. Winter is retreating drop by drop into spring. How lovely to start our eight days backpacking trip with such a delightful weather.



Each day, we get more acquainted with other desert flowers; Indian paintbrush, prickly pear, hedgehog cactus. Loveliest of all, delicate and sweet, with a fragrance like that of orange blossoms, is the cliff rose, or as Richard refers it desert rose. When not in bloom, the shrub might not catch your eye, but after a trace of rain in the spring it comes on suddenly and

gloriously, with dense clusters of flowers that are a creamy pale yellow. I visited the desert many times, but never once saw the cliff rose bloom. Perhaps it is a good omen for our trip.

My favorite flower on the entire trip is the wild onion blossom. Contrasting to the irresistibly attractive cactus flowers that have violet, saffron and red blooms, the wild onion only bears tiny purple flower. Down in the desert valley where soft sand dominates, wild onion grows side by side with prickly pear. Day 4, our prickly pear meadow campsite is so full of them that I have to crush a few clumps in order to make room for my tent. Its distinctive onion smell permeates our camp. At lunch,



Becky asks me to pick a few for our salad; I am more than happy to make good use of them.



On the last day of our trip, David M spots a special flower that I have been searching for. Nesting cozily in a rock niche is the exquisite Utah state flower, the sego lily. The flower reminds me

of the “sealed wife” in Zane Grey’s novel; *The Rainbow Trail*. He used the flower to personify the character of his heroine.

At the end of his story, the sealed wife was rescued and set free, just like this delicate flower, blossoming in the wildest desert wind.

Hidden Passages and Winding Routes



I often wonder how many scouting trips Richard must have taken in order to remember the entrances to these three intricate canyons. Throughout our excursion, some canyons stand only a few hundred feet below us, but to reach their bottoms, we have to veer away from the canyon, then scale up a vertical butte, descend a dreadful gulley, bushwhack through thorny desert shrubbery and further negotiate in and out rocky cracks. We never head in a straight line. Our route always has many twists and turns. We stagger along, hungry and tired, our shins cut and bruised, very much confused about our whereabouts. Then Richard announces, “Here is our camp of the night!”

Miraculously, we have reached the bottom of the canyon. Unbelievable!

Water

Permanent springs or waterholes in a desert are few and far between. They are secret places deep in the canyon, known only to the desert animals and our competent desert guide, Richard. Among all the potholes Richard identifies, the most concealed and onerous one to reach has to be the one located at the upper Lehi Canyon. Two peculiar little water pockets are well hidden amid clefts. I wonder how Richard uncovered them. Richard and I cram inside to retrieve the water. It takes us a long time to fill eleven water jugs!

My favorite water source of the trip nonetheless is a seep spring found inside a box canyon. At first, the canyon does not look very appealing. Its dry streambed is scattered with parched cottonwood leaves, broken branches and fallen rocks. Richard is not even sure there is water inside. Further down the canyon, we begin to find puddles here and there; dry sand gives way to shine of silt and glint of water. At last, we locate a few shimmering pools resting peacefully in the shadow of a canyon wall. These pools have more water than we can drink!



The box canyon turns out to be as inviting and mysterious as others. Its soaring rock face has a beautiful salmon pink hue. Tapestry stripes come down over the top, some are shiny black, others chalky white. It is just lovely. The cliff curves slightly inward, forming an overhang. Beneath the overhang, a dripping spring wets the whole wall. Water oozes down painstakingly slow, one drop at a time. The spring certainly is the birthplace of those pools.

The boys are busy filling our canteens by the pools; I join them and taste the water with a cupped hand. Percolated through sands and rocks, the rainwater is naturally purified. It is cool, sweet and refreshing; no water purification tablet is needed! (In spite of Roberta's disapproval...)

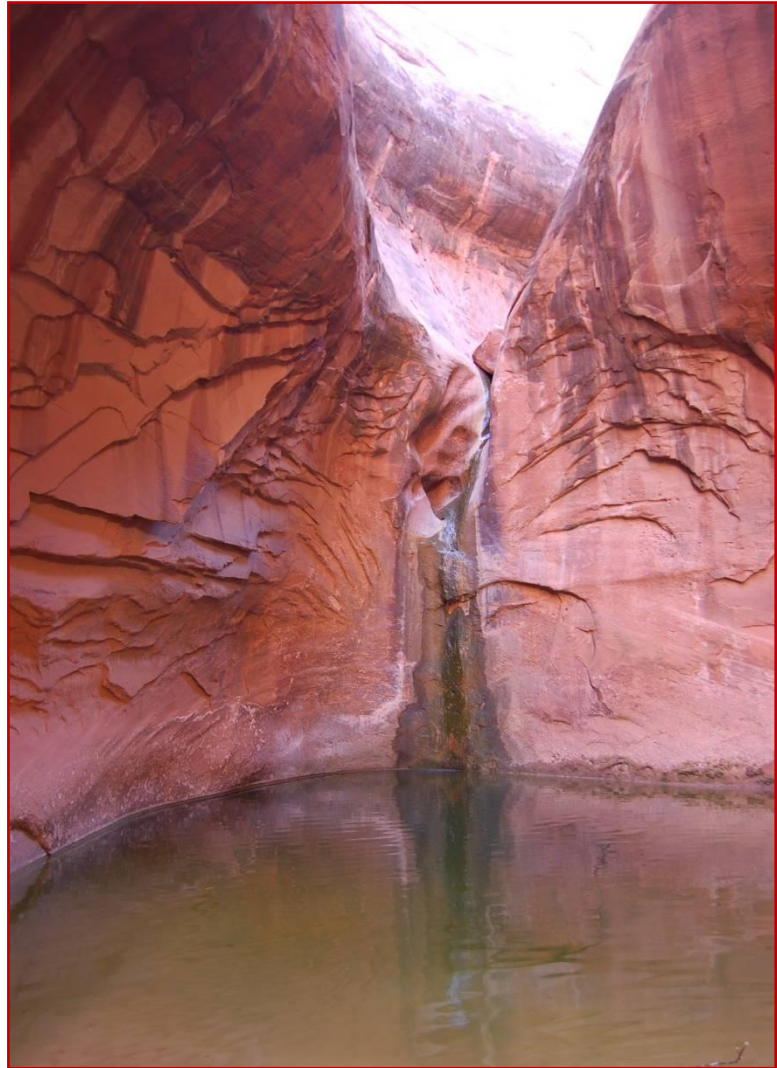
David Roberts' "Pour-over" Place

Here is the infamous overhanging "pour-over" that gave David Roberts and Jon Krakauer so much trouble in their 1994 Mystery Canyon excursion. Armed with a rope and inflatable raft, they landed safely to the bottom and further explored the lower section of the Anasazi canyon.

"We shall be down there tomorrow."

Richard mentions our hike to the pool tomorrow. He says it in such a casual manner that makes me believe he has found an easy way down.

Next morning, dawn breaks and clear. Once again, with no map, no GPS, and no handwritten notes, Richard surveys our surroundings, broods over a few seconds, and then he points to the butte thousand feet above our camp and says, "Up there is our route!" What! I can hear my brain screaming with pain.



The hike to the pool turns out to be atrocious. The distance between the pour-off and the pool may be just a hundred feet, but the ordeal we undertake to get to the pool is immeasurable. We climb and climb, more than I can remember. Once we reach the top we have to negotiate across a little ramp of rocks and logs (Navajos Bridge) to get pass a drop-off. When we think the worse is over, we face another challenge; a steep broken precipice hundreds of feet above the canyon floor. A rope is needed to lower us down. Scrambling, falling, sliding, kicking, and skidding, we drag ourselves to the bottom. Once we reach the floor, the walk becomes somewhat easier. We follow the meandering stream to its end. There the corridor widens into a vaulted hall, at the head of which a slender thread of water falls into a deep pond. At last, we have arrived at the ominous plunging pool, the very one we saw yesterday! The chamber is dim and chilly. The pool is green like Chinese jade, motionless as a mirror and ice cold. A few brave souls jump in and have their bodies stabbed by thousands of needles.

Everyone has his or her special place in heart. I am not sure this is David Roberts' Shangri La, but I am certain this is the place he will never forget.

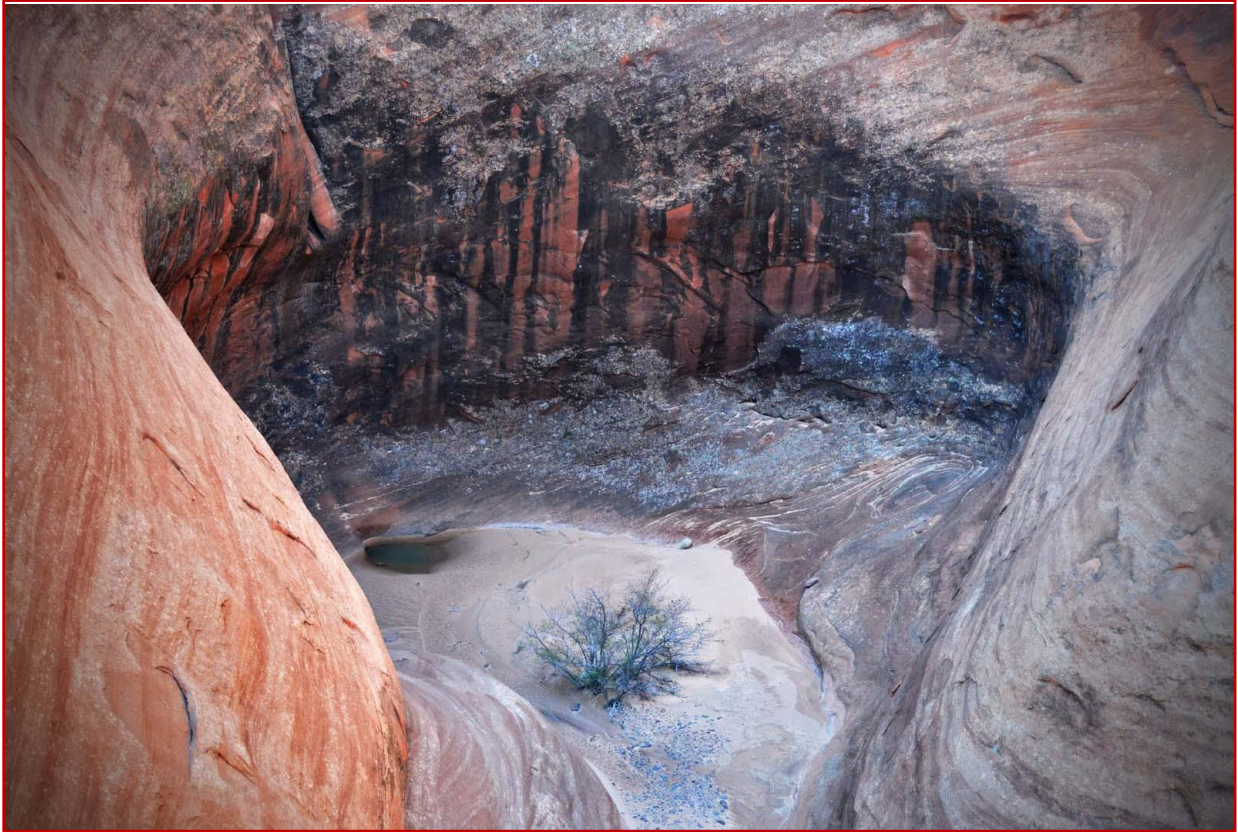
Side Canyon and the Red Bud Tree

While there are great sights to behold and interesting discoveries to make on the main canyons, the small side canyons always have the most powerful pull on me. A few years ago on the Coyote Gulch hike, I accidentally walked into a side canyon and stumbled upon an idyllic lagoon filled with blue dragonflies. It was a magical place.

Many of the side canyons Richard takes us are beautiful as well. One particular side canyon is no more than a mile in length, snakes back only two or three turns before ending abruptly in a rounded open hall. Standing in the middle of the barren sand is this imposing, arrogant and noble red bud tree.

Her branches are ornamented by thousands of infinitesimal red buds. Young green leaves begin to unfold and dot between flowers. Scattered around her base are myriad petals forming chaotic yet interesting patterns. There are no other trees or plants inside the canyon. I am immensely enticed by her gracefulness and solitary beauty.

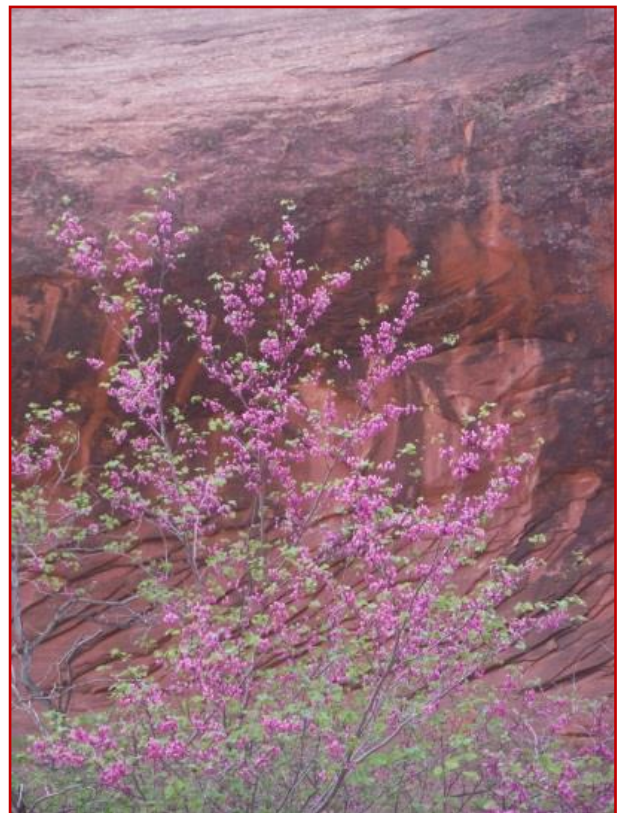




Subsisting on a seasonal waterhole a few yards away from its stem, the red bud tree epitomizes the strength of desert plant. In some years when rain fails to reach the canyon this tree may not even have a chance to flower. Fortunately, this year, rain arrives early and fills the pool to the rim.

As lonely and aloof as this tree may seem, she appears to be happy inside this desolate canyon. The gigantic sandstone walls act as a protector; shelter her from storms and gales. I watch her branches dancing in the wind and can almost hear she sings.

Perhaps it is true that wind carries voices, trees speak a language, and canyon does have a heart.



While I am driven to desert flowers and picturesque scenery, David S is fascinated by the canyon geological features and unique formations. Here is his research on natural bridges, arches and Moqui Marbles.

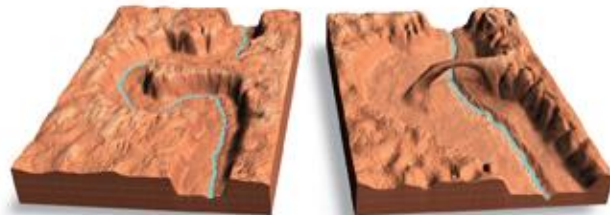
Red Rock Formations in the Colorado Plateau,

- Natural Bridges, Arches, Marbles and Ribs

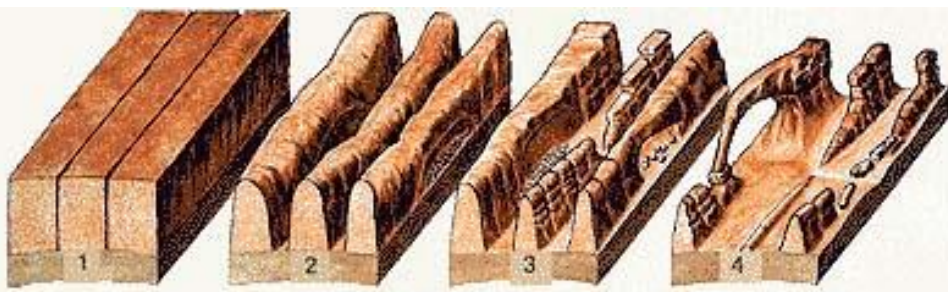


The red rock regions of the Colorado Plateau harbor many amazing geological features both large and small. Among the larger formations are natural bridges and arches. Rainbow Bridge is the archetypical natural bridge due to its size, graceful structure, and setting. However, the distinction between natural bridges and arches is not often well understood. Indeed some natural bridges have been named “arches.”

The hallmark of a natural bridge, as opposed to an arch, is that a stream flows under it. The bridge is created by the erosive action of the stream. A natural bridge forms where there was formerly a tight meander of a stream. At the meander, a fin of canyon wall forms (left image). Eventually, the uphill part of the stream erodes through the fin, creating the natural bridge (right image). The stream's course changes from around the fin to straight under the bridge.



Arches, by contrast, form by gradual weathering erosion of softer rock beneath a harder, more erosion-resistant upper layer.



Rainbow Bridge
(bottom right) in
Bridge Canyon

Natural bridges are much less common than arches. For example, Arches National Park has over 2,000 arches. Below are a few examples:



“Royal Arch” is a natural bridge in the Grand Canyon



Stevens Arch near the mouth of Coyote Gulch in the Escalante Canyons



Jacob Hamblin Arch is a natural bridge in Coyote Gulch

Two tiny arches near the Escalante River



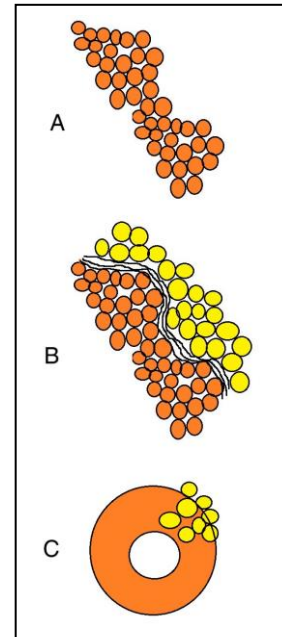
Moqui Marbles

- Iron oxide concretions

At the smaller end of the scale are innumerable iron oxide concretions seen in certain strata of Navajo sandstone. Most distinctively, these concretions form stone spheres known as Moqui Marbles. They also occur in other odd shapes ranging from discs and cylinders to platters. Moqui Marbles range in size from pea-sized to a baseball. The exact way in which these rock spheres form is not known.

The red coloration of Navajo Sandstone is due to iron oxide - hematite (a mineral named for its blood-red appearance), which forms a thin coating on the constituent sand grains of the sandstone (A). Water gradually (over millions of years) permeates the porous sandstone dissolving the red iron pigment, leaching it from the sandstone and bleaching it a white or yellowish color (B). When the dissolved iron encounters oxygenated water, its solubility diminishes and the iron oxide precipitates forming a hard layer within the sandstone cementing the sand grains together. Now, instead of being a thin red iron oxide film on the sand grains, it forms thick dark iron oxide concretions within the sandstone (C).

Eventually the adjacent sandstone erodes exposing the iron oxide concretions. Iron oxide concretions take on a variety of shapes and sizes – spheres, disks, cylindrical pipes, irregular platters or corrugated sheets.



It is unknown how the iron oxide precipitates into uniform spherical concretions which when eroded from the adjacent sandstone form Moqui Marbles. Perhaps a “seed” or nucleus alters the local chemistry leading to precipitation of iron oxide into a spherical conformation.



Moqui Marbles - hematite concretions



Interior of a Moqui Marble



Tubular iron oxide concretions “Dinosaur Ribs” on Dougi Butte

Sources:

Chan MA, Parry WT: *Mysteries of Sandstone Colors and Concretions in Colorado Plateau Canyon Country*. Public Information Series no. 77. Utah Geological Survey, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2002. From Wikipedia, the National Parks Service, Utah Department of Natural Resources, and Geocaching.

Traces of the “Old Ones”

Close to the end of our eight days adventure, we emerge from hidden canyons and re-track the Rainbow Trail. On top of a small hill, Richard makes a sharp left turn and veers us away from the main path. Just around the bend, a huge alcove comes into sight. Quietly nestled at the base of the overhang is a badly eroded ancient dwelling. It is scarcely visible in the patterns of the landscape.

The sandy trail leading us to the cave is rather steep. Fragments of the ruin along the trail are extremely fragile. They crumble by the touch of our hands. Inside the cave, we find level ground. The cave is spacious enough to house a few families. Many flat stones that once stood as a wall of the dwelling pile up in silent. Up on the

ceiling, there are few blackened patches that indicate cooking fires. Painted on the curving wall are few hand prints and a stiff-shouldered ghostly like human figure staring down blindly at us. I wonder, how many time has passed since the last Anasazi artist made his sketches here.



The valley down below the cave is a green garden full of pinon, juniper, bluegrass and purple daisies. They are shining in the morning breeze. Here all is quiet and warm. I think that this cave must have been a good place to live.

The other day, one of our teammates, Marcus found an interesting stone and when he flipped it over, what he discovered was a

half broken piece of treasure; an ancient stone tool used by the Anasazi to grind corns and seeds into flour.

I picture a group of women and girls gathering in groups here using the same tool that Marcus found to grind corn, giggling and perhaps gossiping about their husbands and neighbors. Children were playing, climbing up and down the valley. This alcove ought to be a nice place to sleep, to play and to dream.



Rainbow Bridge at Last



After eight days of hiking, we finally reach the Rainbow Bridge. I have waited six years to see this natural wonder. Looking at this soaring ribbon of sandstone three hundred feet above me, I can only stand there with silence and awe. At last, I have fulfilled my years of longing to see this compelling monument. I am not disappointed. The Bridge resonates with power, mystery and magic. I am humbled by its presence.

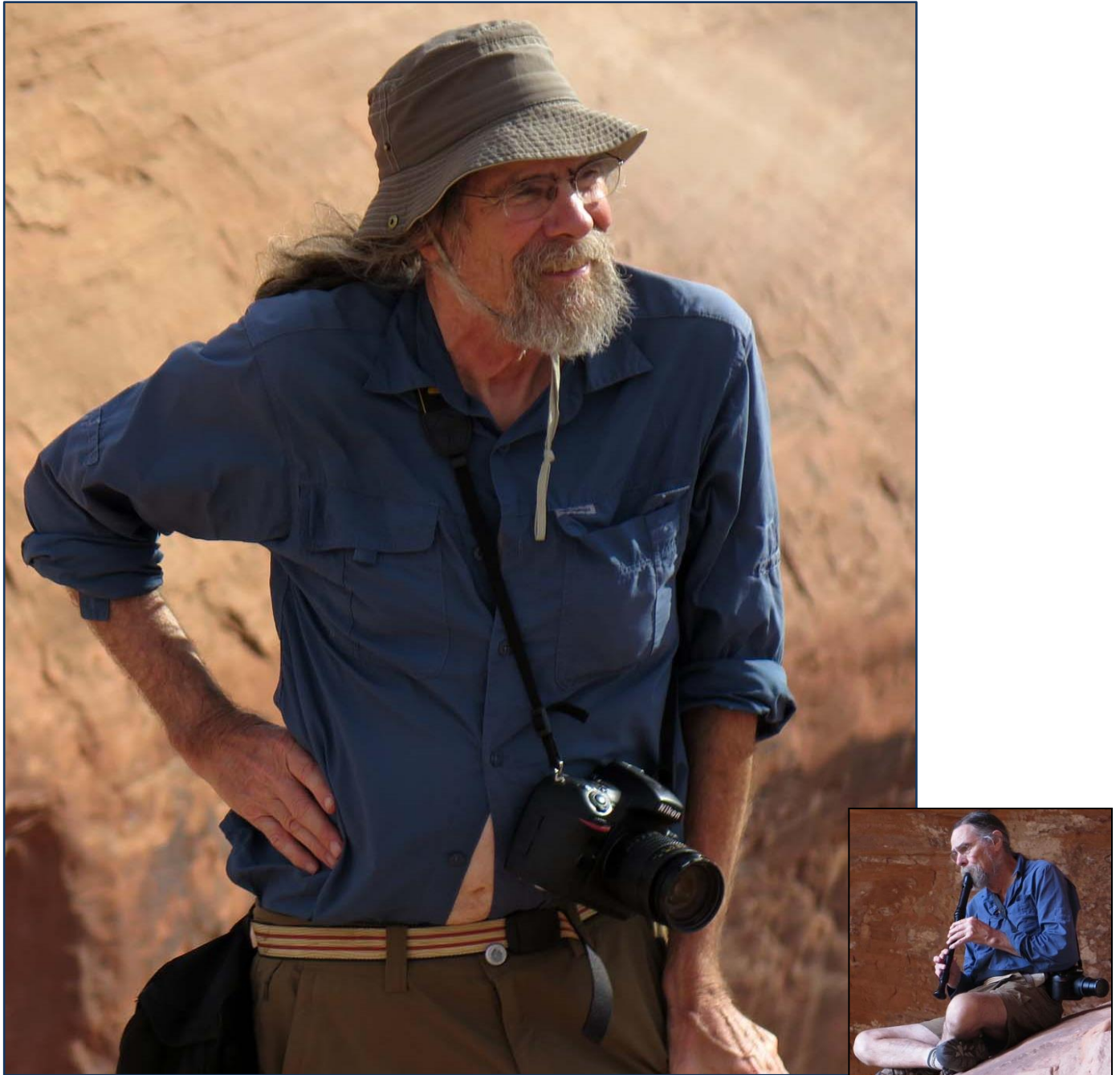
After leaving the Rainbow Bridge, it is only a short hike to our boat, which will take us back to Page, and civilization (or not?). On our way to the boat deck, we begin to see people. I do not like running into the tourists, after all of our eight days hard scrambling, climbing, and bushwhacking, it just does not seem fair to find them there with tidy clothing, clean face and sweet smelling cologne. Edward Abbey once said,



“...transforming what was formerly an adventure into a routine motorboat excursion. Those who see it then will not understand that half the beauty of Rainbow Bridge lay in its remoteness, its relative difficulty of access, and in the wilderness surrounding it, of which it was an integral part. When these aspects are removed the Bridge will be no more than an isolated geological oddity...”

That is exactly how I feel.

Our leaders



We owe much to our leader, Richard. With his remarkable knowledge of the Rainbow Plateau, Richard has taken us to places where we would never ever dream of venturing on our own. He shows us the true wilderness and beauty; leads us to the most remote, rugged, solitary, and surreal landscapes. Those places are always a challenge to reach, but they are indubitably mesmerizing and strikingly beautiful. A murmuring stream, a clump of prickly pear, a bed of wild onion flowers and a profusion of primroses, a majestic red cliff wall, a maze of slick rock domes, an enigmatic ruin, a mystifying Moqui step and petroglyph, an emerald cottonwood, aloof red bud tree, a canyon wren, a shy amphibian, a playful lizard, a reflective pool, a deep pothole, a dangerous slopes ending in a pour-off and a delightful narrow canyon walk, we experience all in eight days. These experiences will stay with us for a long time and possibly linger many nights in our dreams. Thank you Richard!



As for our two assistants, Becky and Michael, we are equally grateful for their leadership. We came to appreciate Becky more and more each day. Her exceptional organizational and food preparing skill, her endless energy and laughter, above all, her friendliness and charming personality make our evening camp such a warm gathering. Our commissary duties are a “breeze” when in fact most of the campsite chores are accomplished by her. We are simply in love with this young lady!



Michael, funny, skillful, approachable, and always wants to perform his job to perfection. Taking notes, taking photographs and taking good care of us at the same time, he is another irreplaceable co-leader. We can always count on him to lend us a helping hand, or deliver a hilarious story around camp. Michael, we are fond of you as well!



New Friends



“The attitudes and good spirits of those that come on Sierra Club trips make the difference between a merely so-so trip and a great one, and our Mystery trip was one of the best. Trip leadership is easy when the group works together as well as ours did.” – Richard Fite

We have an amazing group of people with diverse backgrounds: two medical doctors, a dentist, two PhDs, a professional writer, a CPA, an IT contractor, a registered nurse, a professor and a psychotherapist. What we are and where we come from matter very little. We are just a group of individuals with a craving for a rough country. We are attracted to the rawness of an unspoiled canyon, the intoxicating freshness of desert air and the dreamy silence of the openness. Our friends may ask, “Why visit such hazardous land?”

“The charm and lure of exploring, once yields to this craving, become irresistible.” – Charles L. Bernheimer

We develop endurance, abstinence, courage and skill. Best of all; we find common ground, forming a bond that only the “insane” like us would comprehend. May the sweet memories of fourteen of us, going back in time “In Search of the Old Ones” stay with us always!



THE END

Some of my favorite pictures





