

Backpacking In Maze - Canyonlands National Park – South Fork Horse Canyon
Sept 21-23, 2008 BY George Li



Maze or Labyrinth ?

Maze = According to O'odham oral history, the labyrinth design depicts experiences and choices we make in our journey through life. In the middle of the "maze", a person finds their dreams and goals. When one reaches the center, we have one final opportunity (the last turn in the design) to look back upon our choices and path, before the Sun God greets us, blesses us and passes us into the next world. For most of us, the Maze is about getting lost. The Labyrinths that we travel leads to loss, falls, and disappoints, but every maze has a middle, that is where you find your dreams and have the opportunity to look back upon the choice of your path, The choice is yours. It was an unforgettable exploring experience for the group to go to the Maze district in the Canyonlands National Park. Fortunately, our trip into the Maze District was just a journey to the center piece – the Chocolate Drops. The trip did have its share of broken backpacks, scraped knees, wounded elbows and torn pants. But the joy of getting to the highpoint of the trip was evident when 15 of us as a team, helping each other to climb to the top and returned safely, it was a remarkable accomplishment of this group.



Chocolate Drops



When I first saw the picture of Chocolate Drops standing atop the grand cliff tops inside the Maze district of the Canyonlands National Park, I could not take my eyes off these big Chocolate Bars. What a wonderful landmark sitting on such a high pedestal! The Chocolate Drops is the perfect centerpiece for our trip to Utah. The Harvest Scene inside the Maze is also one of the must-see attractions. I pick the Maze district because it is one of the most remote areas in the Canyonland National Park, and our destination is inside the middle of the park accessible only by dirt road, (you can hike a good 15 miles on foot, or take a river boat and land at the other side of Maze overlook, or even hire a chopper and land on the top of the Maze overlook.) But most people just have to drive all day to get to the starting point. This backpacking trip is also a tryout of my plan to travel to hard- to-get-to places in a short, light packing trip, not possible by a day trip or a day hike: There is also the advantage of staying overnight in the wild without worrying that we have to head back camp before dark, and close to the attractions of the trip, make the sightseeing portion of the trip more flexible.

Interview with Ranger Cynthia - Hans Flat Ranger Station

“Permits are required for all overnight trips in the backcountry. During the spring and fall, demand for permits frequently exceeds the number available. If you plan to visit Canyonlands during peak season, it is recommended that you make **reservations** well in advance. Backpackers stay in at-large zones. There are several reliable springs in the canyons of the Maze, and the status of these springs is available at the Hans Flat Ranger Station.”

The first step was to obtain the necessary permits for our trip, and the catch was that, even after you make the Reservation, you have to obtain the permits in person, in Hans Flat Ranger Station. We managed to arrive at the Ranger Station before the closing time of 4:30 pm, the permitting procedure is more like an interview with your boss. Ranger Cynthia Beyer went through a check list of items, and she checked off one item after another carefully. When we asked Cynthia about the road condition, and I mentioned that we might consider going to an alternate start point: The standing rock trail head, she asked what kind of vehicle we have. I answered that we have 3 jeeps. She then went out to take a look, and said, “OK, you guys have SUVs and you were better off go to the Maze overlook to start your trip.” The way she said it as if we were driving a domestic version of the 4 wheels, which in her humble opinion, was not fit for the job in the backcountry. We heeded her advice and went our way to the Maze overlook to start our trip.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Canyonlands National Park
BACKCOUNTRY REGULATIONS

A backcountry permit must be visibly displayed while traveling in the backcountry. Regulations exist to protect park resources and reduce visitor impacts. It is the trip leader's responsibility to assure that all members of a group know and obey the following regulations while in the backcountry:

- ✓ This permit is valid only for the dates and areas listed.
- ✓ For human waste disposal, use vault toilets where provided. Portable toilets are required for all visitors using designated campsites in the Maze District and at the New Bates Wilson site in the Needles. Backpackers should dig a 4" to 6" deep "cat hole," at least 100 feet from water sources and campsites. Pack out toilet paper.
- ✓ Wood fires are prohibited. Charcoal cooking is allowed at designated vehicle campsites in a firepan. All charcoal residue must be packed out along with the firepan.
- ✓ Bats, weapons, fireworks and littering are prohibited. Pack out all garbage.
- ✓ Disturbing, entering or camping within 100 feet of an archeological or historical site is prohibited. Collecting artifacts is prohibited.
- ✓ At-large camping is prohibited within one mile of a road.
- ✓ Camping within 100 feet, or use of soap within 100 feet, of a water source is prohibited. River corridor camping is excluded from this regulation.
- ✓ Camping outside the established campsite boundary at a designated campsite is prohibited.
- ✓ Disturbing or collecting natural features is prohibited.
- ✓ Hunting, feeding or disturbing wildlife is prohibited.
- ✓ Possession or operation of a bicycle or motor vehicle off a designated road is prohibited. ATVs are not permitted.

Additional information regarding backcountry regulations is available upon request. Your signature below signifies that you have read and agreed that you and your party will obey all backcountry rules and regulations. This permit is not valid without your signature.

Trip Leader Signature _____

Date _____

✓ **CAUTION:** Trails are often narrow, steep, unmarked & minimally maintained. Route finding may be difficult. Be prepared & self-reliant. Let a friend know where you are - we **DO NOT** check permits to see if you have returned. **BE PREPARED, YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN!**

✓ Collecting artifacts, touching rock art, disturbing or defacing archeological sites in **ANY** way is **STRICTLY PROHIBITED.**

✓ When hiking use existing roads, trails, slickrock, or washes. **DO NOT** walk or camp on the cryptobiotic soil.

✓ Off trail hiking in the Doll House is prohibited. Hiking is allowed only on designated NPS signed trails.

✓ Jasper Canyon is **closed** to **ALL** human entry. Pete's Mesa and the areas below and visible from the Maze Overlook are **closed** to camping.

✓ Backpackers, **DO NOT** park or camp in vehicle campsites.

Flint Trail Adventure

At the Flint Overlook peeking down on the Flint trail, it is just a dirt road threading down the side of the mountain onto the valley below, how difficult can that be? Well, if all of our professional drivers, after the “Flint trail rock and roll, and twist and turn” all come up with the same conclusion, that is, if you want us to drive back up, please find another driver, it is how scary that was. Actually there were only two really bad spots, if you look at the middle of the photo, there is a V shaped turn , so sharp, that it does not qualify for a “hair pin turn” like the one you drive to the Minnewaska State Park, This typical V turn requires a 3 points turn maneuvers. This was also the location Ben and I were talking about in “wheel base” and traction control; to make the long story short, Derrick’s Jeep was so long, that in order to get better traction, he had to order all passengers off the car to lighten up the load to get better grip on the sand trail. The other scary spots was where we had passed the V turn, invisible on the top, the trail down was turned to sort of like a ski slope, and the vehicle’s bottom constantly hit and grind on the rock outcrops on the road bed, plus the dip and roll over the bump; it made some of us “land sick” and start crying for mommy. [Just kidding] Anyhow, all 3 cars made it down the Flint Trail and brought us to our destination in one piece. The first prize for best driver goes to Gordon for the least bumps to his passengers, The second award goes to Derrick for his tender loving care to his vehicle, and you know who got the third prize....Ben, the most bang for the most Ben. I thank you to all three of you for braving this new trail. If this is not one of your lifetime crazy experiences, maybe we can try next time to go to the Doll House on the other side of the Maze overlook.



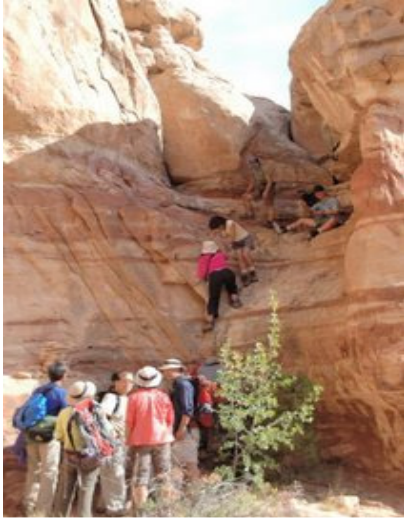
The Forbidding Landscape

We start of the hike down the Maze, into the South Fork of Horse Canyon. We were divided into 3 groups of 5. This was another permit requirement, we can hike together, eat together, but we must sleep apart and separately at least 1 mile apart. This sounds like a divorce agreement that no one likes but hey, this is regulation. We were not permitted to camp near the trail head down canyon for the first mile and not near the water holes. Those areas are considered sensitive to protect the water source and the view sheds from the cliff above. No one wants to see our tents when they are up on the Maze overlook to enjoy the views.



The Maze Overlook Trail - Hike down or climb down?

“Trails in the Maze are primitive and lead into canyons and to various viewpoints. Due to the nature and depth of Maze canyons, access to them is limited. Routes into the canyons are cairned from mesa top to canyon bottom, but routes through washes are often unmarked. Many of the canyons look alike and are difficult to identify without a topographic map. The Maze Overlook Trail and other routes in the district require basic climbing maneuvers in order to negotiate sections of steep slick rock and pour-offs. A 25-foot length of rope is often essential for rising or lowering our backpacks in difficult spots. Many routes may make hikers with a fear of heights uncomfortable.” So this was the prospect of down canyon, and we soon found out what “25 foot length of rope” meant.



Gravity Does Its Work

The Next Day, we got up early to watch sunrise and packed our tents. Our plan was to stow all unnecessary gears in Mr. Chen's campsite so we could carry a light backpack to go to the Chocolate Drops. Gordon would be staying behind because he twisted his ankle while down climbing a tight spot between the rocks. Our destination, the Chocolate Drops was no more than 600 feet from the valley floor. However, getting to it required scrambling up three rock face of about 10 to 15 feet in heights. On the first rock face every one tried and succeeded to overcome the climb, but the second one was slightly more technical and we had to rope up the climbers to protect them from falling over the rock. This was very slow going but everyone did their best to help each of the teammates up the ledge. Paul was very gracious to let Nancy step on his knee to help her hang on the handholds and Nancy really struggled to make it up. Nancy, with all the yelling and hand over feet, did clear all three difficult pitches and made it to the top of Chocolate Drops. At the top, we took a short break and took lots of pictures. Then we started to go down: fortunately, climbing down was easier than we thought, and we were on our way to view the Harvest scene. When we were back to our rest area, Gordon told us that there was a chopper flyby in our canyon. We went hiking back up the same trail up to the Maze overlook, and at sunset, we reached the last ledge and enjoyed the last golden 15 minutes.



Sun rise picture took by Ah Shou



The harvest scene

Friendly Maze

As we were heading back to the rim, Marji, Mandy and I were talking about how lovely this Maze, or the South Fork of the Horse Canyon is so pretty; it is just like the girl next door who is very lovable and very close to you. We are trying to compare it to Grand Canyon, which is kind of unreachable and too deep to approach.

Got the idea ? Well, a girl next door is always more approachable than a glamorous movie star!!



Derrick's Prayer

After dinner, Derrick told us his incident. His car's battery went dead in the morning and he was worried about what would happen when he was struck in the middle of nowhere. Then he started praying. His prayer was answered when a ranger show up with a Jeep [a real 4x4] and helped him to start his car. The ranger also went down the canyon to check on our campsite and our compliance to the regulations. The Ranger did come back and told Derrick he was worried because he cannot find our campsite at our designated area, none of the 3 groups could be found. This was bad news to him, and he probably radioed Hans Flat Ranger Station and ordered an air search, first by the chopper, and then by a fix wing craft. That was the one Gordon heard at the bottom of the Canyon. We were all very impressed. Who in the world will call for a Search & Rescue Mission for a few lousy backpackers? But the Rangers in Canyonlands meant business.

Accomplishment:

I have to thank every one of you that took part in this amazing maze trip. All you did your best to make this backpacking trip so enjoyable for all of us. I can sense a feeling of relief; some of you got a blissful look watching the sunset; and yours smile never faded from your faces.





Did we do all we planned? The most important accomplishment was that everyone finished safely. For all those that this was your first backpacking trip, I hope this will not be the last.

The end