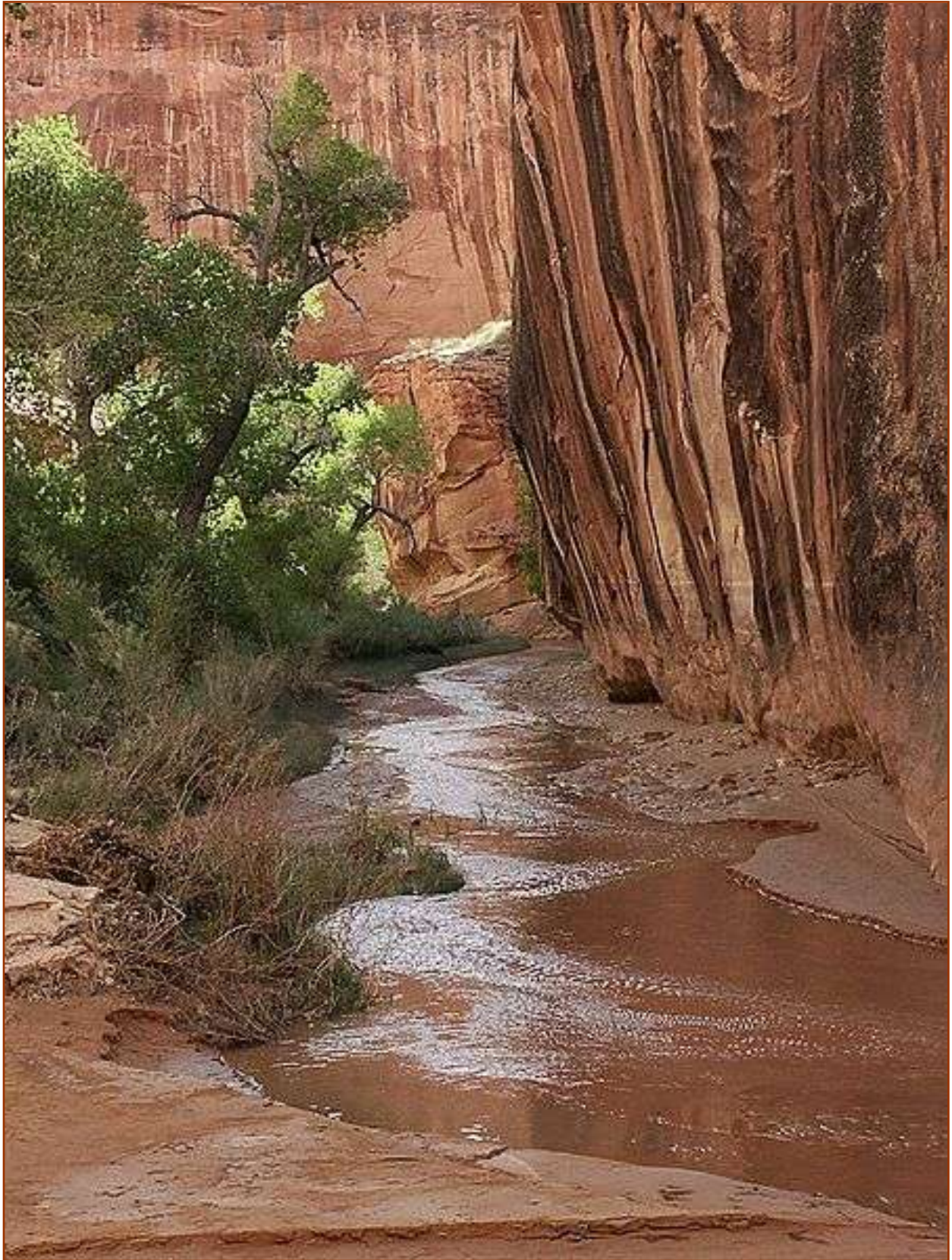


Into the Escalante

A Bit of Magic in a World Grown too Real



"I have seen almost more beauty than I can bear."

- Everett Ruess (1914-1934)

Good-bye to the life I used to live,
And the world I used to know;
And kiss the hills for me, just once;
Now I am ready to go!

Emily Dickinson,
(1830 – 1886)

In Memoriam **MeiMei Li**

A hiker, a friend and a sister



Every one of my Utah adventure has a story to tell and a central figure to inspire me. This one is no exception. The central figure of my recent Coyote Gulch excursion is a young brilliant artist and writer named Everett Ruess. Everett had a deepest passion for the beauties, as well as the furies, of nature in the American West.

In the autumn of 1934, Ruess was only 20 years old. He set out from southern Utah, intending to go south into Arizona to spend the winter, but he disappeared from the canyon country near the Escalante and was never seen again.

"When I go, I leave no trace,", then he vanished into thin air.

Since Everett's disappearance he had become an "enigmatic cult hero", largely because of the mystery surrounding his short life. I read his entire collection of letters, essays, and poems and when I finished, I knew the journey into the Escalante was inevitable.

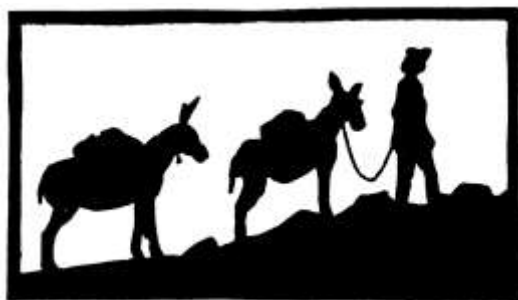


Vagabond for Beauty

In 1942 author Wallace Stegner took the measure of Ruess, offering a final word on his enduring legacy:

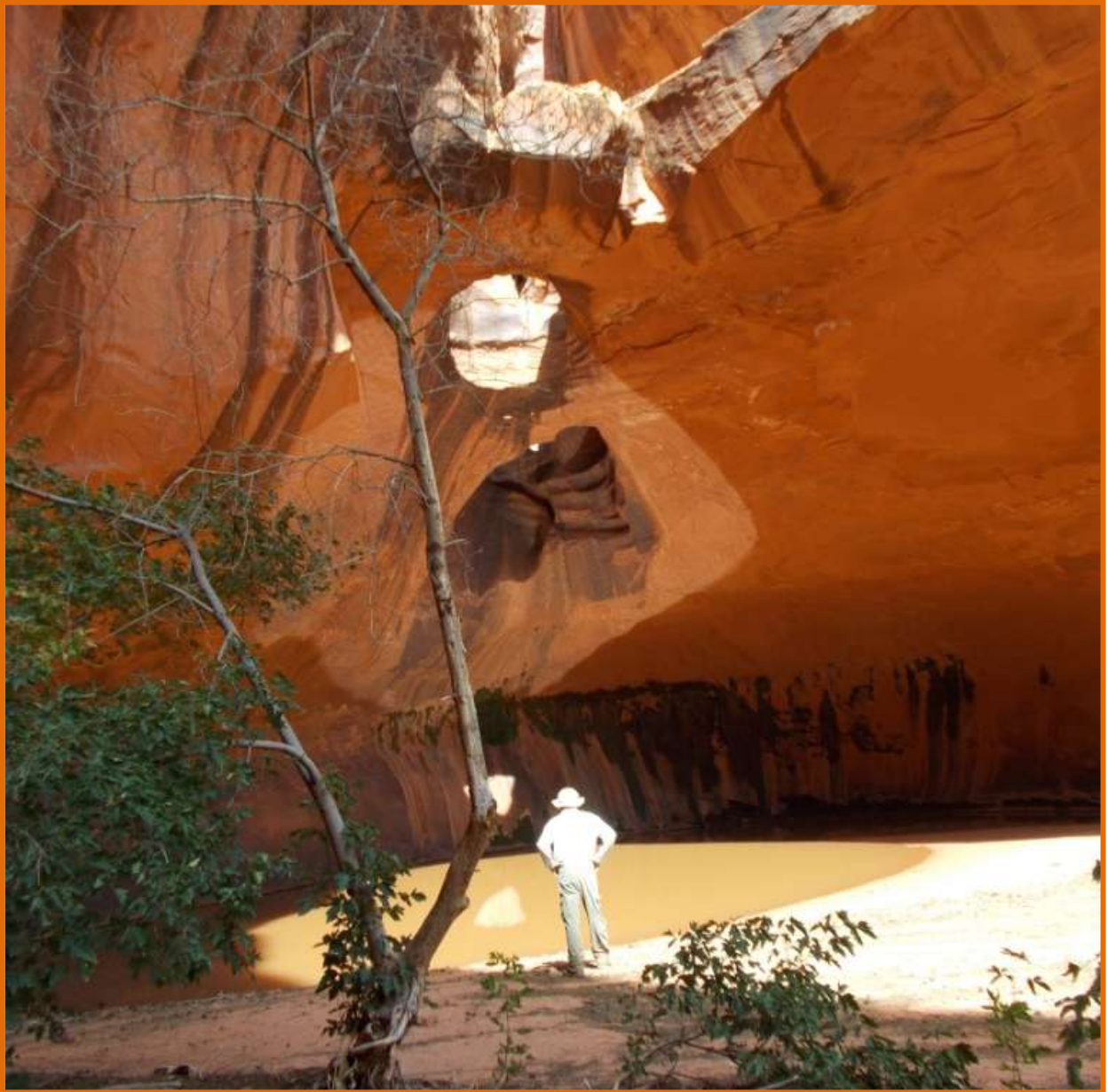
What Everett was after was beauty, and he conceived beauty in pretty romantic terms. We might be inclined to laugh at the extravagance of his beauty-worship if there was not something almost magnificent in his single-minded dedication to it. . . . If we laugh at Everett Ruess we shall have to laugh at John Muir, because there was little difference between them except age.

I can certainly relate to that. Everett's strong passion for wilderness resonates deeply with every romantic idealist who longs to escape. Unlike most of my friends who hike simply for fun or for health purpose. Nowadays, I go into the wilderness looking for not only beauty but also solitude and self discovery.



The logo of the Escalante arts festival adapts Ruess's vignette of a silhouetted youth leading burros off toward the unknown.

Amazing Golden Cathedral



“Nature is the expression of God”, I can see this more clearly each day. There are no words to describe how beautiful this place is.

Golden Cathedral is located at the end of the Neon Canyon. To reach the Neon Canyon, HY and I had to hike down to Fence Canyon and then search for the entrance of Neon Canyon. The access to Neon canyon is difficult to find. Even with good trail description and the help of my GPS, HY and I got lost numerous times.

The trail begins on the left end of the parking lot and immediately descends to the canyon. It is a hot day and the sun beats down on us with no mercy. We follow the cairns and reach the bottom of the Fence Canyon with minor difficulty. But once we reach the Escalante River; the confusion begins. There are network of the hiker-made trails, each one leads to a different direction. The guidebook mentions few river crossings, but we are not sure when and where we should cross the river. HY does not want to get his hiking boots wet, so he puts on and off his hiking boots on each crossing, wasting so much valuable time.



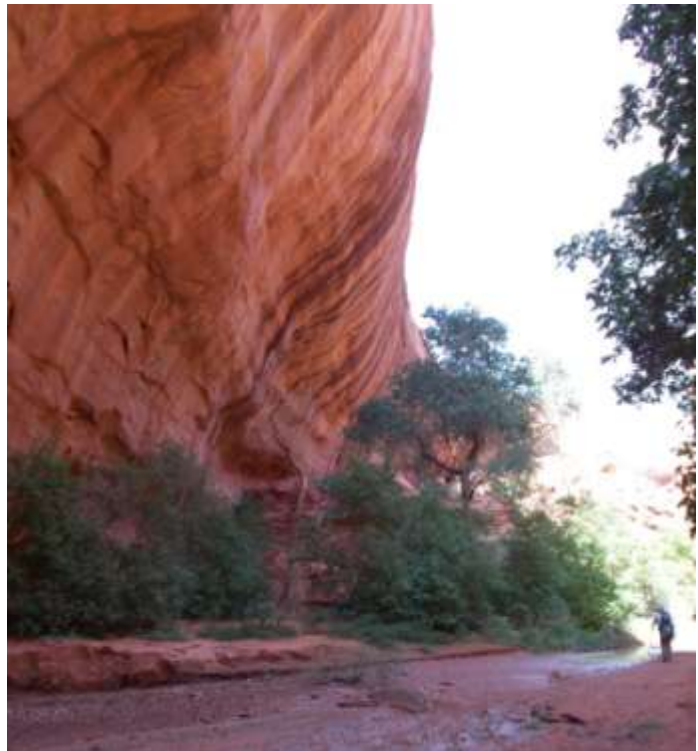
By 1:00pm, we arrive at a wide open area surrounded by high canyon wall, but still cannot find a way in to the Neon Canyon. I suggest taking lunch break by the cottonwood tree and figure out what to do next. While we are eating our lunch, HY notices some cowboy drawings at the lower section of the cliff wall facing us. I remember the guidebook mentions some old Indian petroglyphs in Neon Canyon. The petroglyphs are defaced by some cowboy graffiti and can be found at where Neon Canyon meets the Escalante. I walk over



to the cliff wall and take a closer look. I take a few photos. HY and I compare the drawings in the photo to that in the guidebook. They match and we are elated!

Ten minutes after leaving the petroglyph panel the trail climbs up a small dune and turns left into the mouth of Neon Canyon. Massive cliffs of deep reddish-brown Wingate sandstone begin to rise above the canyon floor. Along the trail, there are alcoves, overhangs, seeps and grottoes. Our afternoon walk is extremely pleasant, with ample shade and lots of greenery. There are no obstacles along the way and the elevation gain is minimal. After an easy walk of 0.9 mile, we arrive at our goal, the amazing Golden Cathedral!

It is a magical spot, equally as impressive to see in person as in photographs. The most notable feature of the Golden Cathedral is the opening in the ceiling. Like an enormous chandelier in the center of an opulent ballroom, the natural skylight casts a soft glow on the golden-colored room below. A large pond of mirror smooth water reflects the reddish-orange walls. The site is a photographers dream! Nature indeed is the expression of God.



Sleepy Hollow – the Unnamed Canyon



Sleepy Hollow is a wildlife sanctuary. Inside the alcove-type cave, we found deer tracks, animal foot prints everywhere. A little flowing spring is the heart of the cave, where animals come to drink, to nest, to rest and perhaps to dream.

Sleepy Hollow, an unofficial name given by some hikers, is a much less visited canyon. Most guidebooks or topo maps do not even disclose this tributary of the Coyote Gulch. In 2006, a hiker who was desperately looking for a campsite after a long day's hike accidentally walked to this side canyon and found a huge alcove-type cave. The alcove, he claimed, is bigger than all the alcoves he saw in the Coyote Gulch. That night, thunders and lightnings threatened outside his

camp, but safely tucked under the protection of the gigantic alcove, he slept through the night unperturbedly. Dawn broke and clear, he woke up and left the place, but the memory of that night haunted him. Few years later, he went back but was unable to locate his campsite again. In his journal, the hiker mentioned he entered to the canyon from the south. I was fascinated by his story and determined to explore this side canyon.

Day 1 of our 4-day backpacking trip, HY and I descend to Coyote Gulch via Chimney Rock Trailhead. The route is a direct access to Sleepy Hollow and Coyote Gulch, but the trail is not maintained by the National Park. We have to follow footprints and hiker-made cairns. The desert wind has blown away most of the track, and the cairns are few and far between. Even we watch the trail as closely as possible; it is still difficult to navigate.



Once we reach the canyon floor, we simply follow the Coyote Creek. Soon, a small spring bisects the Coyote Creek. Its narrow opening is choked with overgrowths. A side trail cut across to the canyon and leads us to the flowing spring. First 0.3 mile of the hike is entirely bush wrecking, using our hiking poles to force our way in. There are no trail, just tall willows, joint weeds, mud and thorny bushes. Ten minutes into our exertion, HY give in and decides not to go further. After some tough negotiations between us, he agrees to go on without his backpack. I sense HY does not trust my ability to navigate. After all, this is our first trip alone. Having read none of my plan and itinerary, he knows nothing about the difficult of the hike, or the condition of the trial. Moreover, he must be tired. I do not want to argue with him, so I hike in the front, still with my heavy backpack, determine to proof to him that I am right.



With endless struggle among thick bushes, we finally reach an open floor. A steep sandy trail points to a high ground where a nice campsite comes into sight. We agree, it is to be our 1st night camp. Now, HY has to go back to retrieve his backpack but he is not sure that he can find his way in again. I agree to guide him back to the campsite by constantly blowing a whistle. Once we settle, we have our early supper, retire to our tents for a good night rest. Throughout the night, raven's harsh caw can be heard from the high ledge above our campsite.

Just before dawn, the most anticipated rain finally arrives. (The rangers from the Visitor Center warned me about the rain) Rain inside the canyon can be very dangerous, but we are safe camping on a high ground. Inside my cocoon 1-person tent, I enjoy listening to the sound of the rain hitting the tent top. Today, HY and I are hoping to see the

magnificent waterfalls that are created by the rain. But the rain never materializes. After breakfast, under a cloudy sky we head out to explore the Sleepy Hollow. The excursion turns out to be one of the most rewarding experiences.



Sleepy Hollow is less known to hikers mainly due to its remote and rugged settings. The place is ideal for canyoning. However, small section of the canyon, if entering from the south through Coyote Gulch, requires no technical skills and can be explored with good navigational and route-finding skills. I admit we have neither, so we just follow the spring as closely as possible in order to locate the mysterious cave.

After two hours elbowing our ways out of the dense bushes, we arrive at a narrow gorge with high wall scaling 200-300 feet above us. Just around

the corner, a sheet of flowing water glistens and meanders over a clear gravel bed. Tall willows grow along the edge of the pond, birds are singing, insects are flying, and small fishes are wriggling inside the pool, even the sun begins to shine. The whole surrounding is idyllic, just lovely, and unbelievably beautiful.

We stay on the stream and soon find it flows quietly inside a gigantic alcove. It ought to be the mysterious cave that was mentioned by the hiker. The stream skirts its way deep into the cave; continues to sculpt the cave effortlessly. How many million years this spring has been flowing inside this cave, I wonder. There are countless animal footprints and wastes on the sands, some of them are very fresh. Although I do not spot any animals, I definitely sense their presence. They must be startled by our intrusion, hiding behind bushes and peeping at us with their watchful eyes.

After leaving the cave, an hour later, we at last reach a dead end, confronted by rock falls and inaccessible walls. Here is where the technical section of the canyon begins and marks the end of our exploration. We return to our campsite, pack and move on to our next camp.



Hidden Passage, Arch & Bridge



Our 2nd camp is even prettier. Along the Coyote Gulch, there are many good campsites. For two days, we have not yet met any hikers. We can have any site we want. We set up our camp at a place where is surrounded by high cliff walls. A young cottonwood tree is in the center, silhouetted against the violet sky. Its ten thousand exquisite leaves are vibrating like spangles in the vivid air. Coyote Creek is burbling in front of our camp. We have all the water we need for cooking, drinking even a nice cool evening bath. We pitch our tents with elaboration, using HY's ground sheet to make a canopy, creating a little cozy place to shelter us from rain.

I find it difficult to describe the experience of being in these places, the hidden passage, the beauty of the sandstone and tapestry walls, the designs on the walls, the pool of water at the end, the hanging garden, the little trickle coming down and echoing over the whole place..... I hope in my next life, I will be a raven, perch high up on the canyon wall, live day to day, hour by hour. All my existence is this beautiful place.

We have our early dinner. After cleaning up all the dishes, we each choose our little private corner and take pleasure in an evening bath. When night falls, I sit and watch the sky gets darker, and then the stars come out. The moon rests on the white crescent. All is still. It is moment like this that I wish I had someone special to share with. Soon I turn in and catch some sleep, tomorrow will be a long day hike.



Next morning after breakfast, we head out to explore the most popular section of the Gulch. We will see three arches, one natural bridge, and four waterfalls. Also there will be pictographs along the way. Two couples, first hikers we encounter, are on their way out. They give us some idea as where to look for the Indian pictographs. Jacob Hamblin Arch, according to them, is only a mile away. We reach the arch promptly. The arch is very imposing, and the sandstone columns that support the arch are enormous, and the rock above the arch is at least 150 feet thick. I climb up to the top and

feel as insignificant as an ant standing underneath this massive geological sculpture.

Another three miles down to the Gulch, we reach the Coyote Natural Bridge. This natural wonder is a 50-foot span of sandstone that arcs directly across our path.



Coyote stream flows underneath. Around the corner is a big alcove, we find a few seep springs running down from the wall. HY uses his bandana to soak up some water for his bottle. We probably should not have wasted so much time here for there are still lots of mileage to cover.

After the Coyote Natural Bridge, HY notices a short side canyon named “Black Lagoon” on the map. The canyon intersects with Coyote Gulch on the north. He asks me whether we should check out this place. I hesitate a few seconds for in my research, I did not come across this seemingly unimportant small canyon. But by act of God (I still believe that), the trail happens to be just right behind us, so I give him a “go” and expect nothing out of this side adventure.



This is HY’s definition of Lagoon, come up, give me a break!

The entrance of the canyon is heavily vegetated. A primitive hiker-made trail is entirely covered by towering cattails and sandbar willows. Few minutes into our walk, HY points at a water hole with stagnant water and says that he has found the lagoon. The water hole is no more than 3 feet long and 2 feet wide and cannot possibly be the “Black Lagoon”. In spite of entering this side canyon with low expectation; I would never, ever accept this water hole as the “Black Lagoon”. We argue

over whether we should continue. HY, once again refuses to go further, so I leave him there and venture into the narrow path alone.

The route becomes increasingly constricted. The canyon wall is closing in around me. Just around a bend the trail abruptly ends and the scene before me completely catches me by surprise. I stand there dumbfounded....

Black Lagoon – a Serene Place



A lagoon stretches mirror like, bottomless black and beautiful before me. Dragonflies zigzag by and occasionally dip into the water creating series of ripples across the water surface. The pond is 30 feet across and looks to be about 5-10 feet deep at its deepest point. At the right hand corner is a cylinder shaped chamber covered with stunning black desert varnish, which indicates that the trough is shaped by the powerful force of a recurring waterfall streaking down from the cliff above. Across the lagoon is the emerald green of the aquatic plants floating on the perfectly still water surface. Nature has positioned the plants artistically and poetically to form a picturesque backdrop. On the smooth canyon wall, permanent spring seeps prodigiously from the porous sandstone, giving life to a hanging garden of flowers. Mosses, maidenhair ferns and scarlet monkey flowers are in a brilliant display. I notice a set of ancient moki steps carved into the wall and lead up to a small ledge above the chamber. The Indians who lived here before 1300 AD must have visited this lagoon often. The ridge could possibly be their hiding place or a granary. The primeval steps only add more mystery to this small canyon.

Black lagoon will remain a special place in my heart. It is a lovely place, truly a divine and delightful canyon.



The lagoon is very quiet and processes an infinite peace. The deep blue sky, the reddish brown of canyon wall, the fresh green of plants, the fragrant of wildflowers, and the buzzing noise of dragonflies, the place is so appealing that I wish I never have to leave.

The lagoon is very quiet and processes an infinite peace. The deep blue sky, the reddish brown of canyon wall, the fresh green of plants, the fragrant of wildflowers, and the buzzing noise of dragonflies, the place is so appealing that I wish I never have to leave.

Finally, I run back to get HY. When he sees it, He is equally moved by the scene. What we both stumble upon is a heavenly garden. While we are enjoying lunch, we are constantly visited by the beautiful blue and red dragonflies. This place belongs to the dragonflies; it is their home, their paradise.



“Hole in the Rock” Road and our Mishaps



Most of our hikes begin on the “Hole in-the-Rock” Road. This road has a historical significance. In winter 1879, in answering a mission call, the Mormon Pioneer built a road connecting southwestern and southeastern Utah. The mission was to secure peaceful relations with the Indians and to open the area to further colonization. Their journey turned into an ordeal of unparalleled difficulty as they blazed a route across some of the most broken and rugged terrain in North America.

Even today, “Hole in the Rock” Road is still a very rugged path. Before the trip, I reminded HY to get a 4-wheel drive and high clearance vehicle. He did, except he does not know how to switch the vehicle to a 4-wheel drive. We have been very lucky using a 2-wheel drive on a 4-wheel drive road. Occasionally, our car would be stuck, but each time, HY maneuvered the vehicle and we were free. Today, our luck runs out.

Last day of our 4-day backpacking trip; we climb out of the canyon before noon and decide driving down to the end of the road and check out this special “hole”. We reach the end with no mishaps, but on our way out, our vehicle suddenly stops on a sandy area. The more HY steps on the gas, the deeper the car sinks to the sands. Few minutes in our misery, a car approaches us from the opposite direction. A man with heavy English accent walks over to help us. His name is Andy. He asks us whether we have a strong rope. Of course we do not have such a thing. He begins to help HY scooping out some of the sands around the front tires, placing rocks underneath, and trying to start the engine, but in vein, the car does not move an inch. He asks us how far the “Hole in-the Rock” is and we remember it is not too far, perhaps a few minutes’ drive. I recall meeting two men camping by the “Hole”. So I mention that to Andy.





Andy ponders a few seconds and decides to get help. Andy's car is bigger than ours and in order for his car to pass ours; he has to drive his car slightly off the main road. **BIG MISTAKE!** He loses control of his car. His vehicle is slightly tilted to the right and lands right next to ours. Now both cars are dangerously touching each other. Andy's car can neither move forward nor backward. "F" "F" and "F" are the words coming out from his mouth. He does not even care that I am a lady. Then, he turns to me and asks me to start walking to the "Hole" to get help.

Why do I have to do that, I am a lady!, HY did not even volunteer, what if I run out of water, what if it gets dark before I reach the "Hole". The more I think about it, the more I get scared. Then, I start to pray, to ask God watching over me. It works every time! Few minutes later, a jeep appears in the horizon. The driver, Jim stops, and I pour my heart out, juice up my

story and hope that he will feel sorry for me. He listens very carefully and assures me there will not be a problem. He has ropes and all the necessary gears. He is definitely a "Desert Man". Once he evaluates the situation and jumps into action. Ten minutes later, both cars are separated with only minor scratches. Thanks to Jim, my hero!

To ensure our safety, Andy and Jim drive along side with us until we are completely out of the sandy road. After HY and I thank them, half hour later we have another mishap – a flat tire. I cannot believe it! Two cars drive by without stopping, and finally a car stops. AJ, a nice young man from Florida knows exactly what to do. He is very efficient, less than 5 minutes; we have a spare tire installed.

Next morning after a good night sleep, We get the tire fixed, enjoy a good breakfast and head out for another adventure.



“Lower Calf Creek Falls



Last day in Escalante, we visit this beautiful waterfall. The fall is a popular place and we start out early to avoid the heavy crowd. Inside the canyon, the air is crisp, pleasantly cool and invigorating. Autumn is definitely approaching.

The canyon, according to the brochure was once inhabited by the Fremont and Anasazi Indians some 800-1000 years ago. At the trailhead, HY takes a booklet to help us spot some of the Indian pictographs and granaries. Unfortunately, they are difficult to see with untrained eyes. Calf Creek Stream with crystal clear water is floating next to the trail. I enjoy listening to the ceaseless gurgling sound of the river. The canyon is a haven for birds, beaver, fish and other wildlife. HY spots a family of rainbow trout swimming in a pool of sparkling icy cold water.

The trail leads to the Lower Calf-Creek Falls is sandy, and can be very strenuous walking, particularly in warm weather. However, the falls area, once reached, is a delightfully cool, shady haven well worth the effort.

Finally, after 2.7 miles, Calf Creek Canyon abruptly dead ends against a 130-foot high vertical wall of Navajo Sandstone, making it obvious that the end of the hike has been reached. Here the creek emanates from the base of the Lower Calf Creek Waterfall. The setting is beautiful, with a sandy shore, large shade trees, and a clear pool below the fall.



I walk to the base of the fall and dip my feet into the pool. It feels good and refreshing, really a best way to ease the soreness of my feet.

Conclusion



*A*fter a week of tough hike, we end our trip at a nice restaurant looking over to the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Under a pink sunset, the cliff glows to salmon color. Soon, the sky gradually gets darker; Venus is brilliantly shining down.

By and large, it is a good trip, a trip that is full of expected and unexpected adventures and beauties. I have fulfilled my years' longing to see the Escalante River, the last river in the continental United States to be named. Utah remains my favorite travelling place. I look forward to my next adventure – the Bandelier National Monument!

THE END