

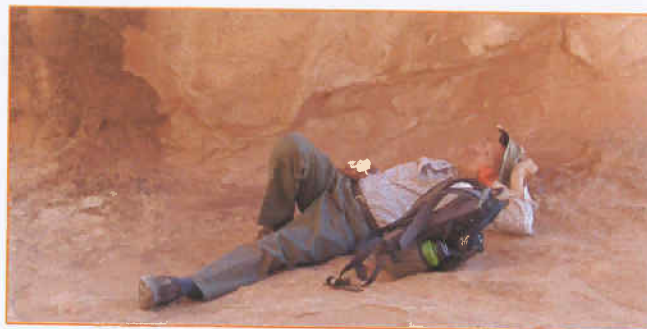
Desert Solitaire - Salt Creek Canyon

The heat, the thirst, the pain, and the ultimate escapade.....



Mr. Chen: Thanks God it is over, but it is good pain girls!
 Chi: It is hard, but I love the solitude, BE QUIET OVER THERE!
 Koti: I can do another one, no big deal. Mt. McKinney next!
 Sunny: Oh! Picture taking, smile
 HY: Don't worry; be happy, I had a sexy dream last night.

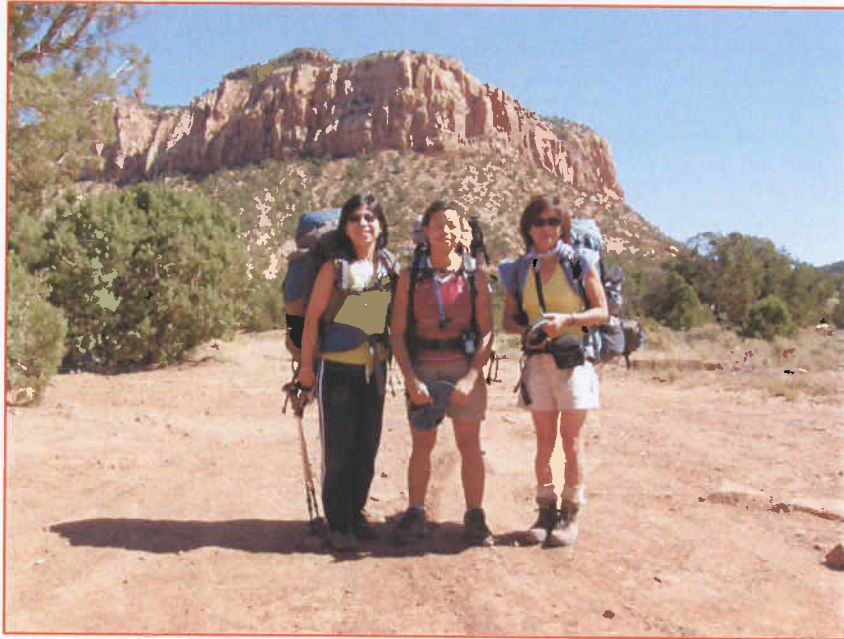
Here is the story of our two days backpacking adventure in one of the most remote places in the Utah desert.



By Chi S. Chan (section 1)
By H.Y. Lee (section 2)
 September 25, 2008

Lost Already

Leaving Derrick at the Cathedral Butte trailhead, forty-five minutes later, we reach the middle section of the canyon. Six of us, Mr. Chen, Mr. Lee, Koti, Sunny, HY and I stumble upon a wide opening. We approach the rim. From there we can look down into the bottom and are in awe of the size of the Salt Creek Canyon. It must be at least a few miles from the rim to the other side. Immediately below us is a big drop of a red rock wall stretching from left and right with no visible trail going down. Now we realize that we are away from the main trail.



The three musketeers in front of the Cathedral Butte

Koti's GPS confirms our error and we decide to spread around to look for the trail. Five minutes pass, we are still wondering around the juniper bushes. Someone suggest that we should back track to the last cairn¹. Mr. Chen insists on hiking along the rim to search for the trail. He and Mr. Lee quickly disappear behind the thick juniper trees. Four of us hike back a few hundred yards and find the cairn but still can not locate the next one. Accidentally, turning right and after hiking a few hundred feet, I notice a huge broken opening of the canyon wall. A steep path littering with giant boulders show the way to the bottom of the canyon. I give others the news and we regroup at once. Mr. Chen and Mr. Lee, however are no where to be found. We call their names as loud as we can, but the only human voice we can hear is our echo. H.Y. tells us to go on hoping they will catch up with us or perhaps we will catch up with them.

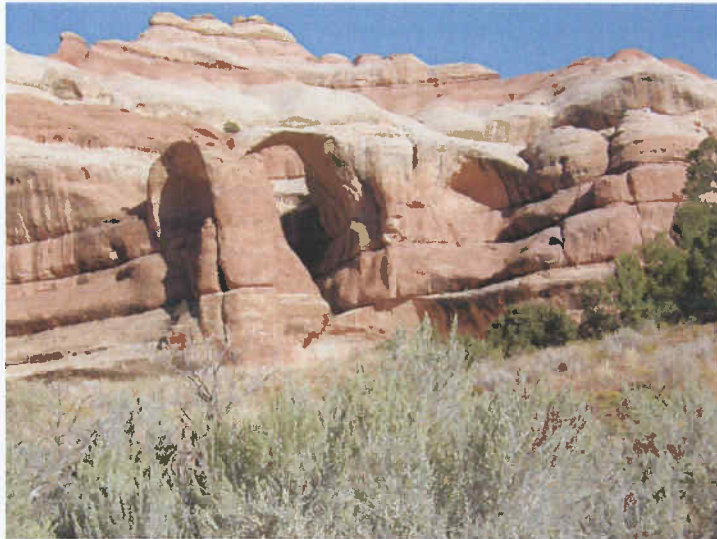
Gingerly, jumping from boulders to boulders, we begin a steep descent. Indistinctly, we can hear a voice coming from the bottom of the Canyon. We suspect it is Mr. Chen or Mr. Lee. As we get closely to the bottom, we can make out it is a male and a female voice. I recognize right away it is George, our leader and not Mr. Chen. The thought that we have left Mr. Chen and Mr. Lee behind makes us feel very guilty, what if Mr. Chen falls off the cliff, what if Mr. Lee and Mr. Chen are separated from each other, what if Mr. Chen.....

The thought that something bad could have happened to both of them makes us scream even louder for help, but in vain. No one answers us. HY volunteers to stay behind and urges us to catch up with George for advice.

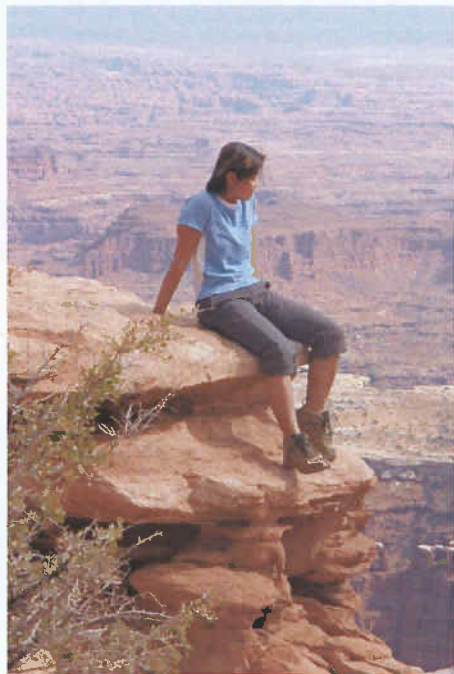
¹ Cairn: pile of rocks indicates direction along the trail.

The Oasis of Canyonlands

After an elevation loss of about 1,000 feet, we finally reach the sandy floor of the Canyon. Three of us proceed to about 1.2 miles and come to a trail junction. Reviewing the map, we identify the location as the beginning of the Bright Angle Trail. I recognize the name as few years ago I hiked on this very same trail to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. It feels like being with an old friend again. Passing 1.5 miles, we come to a marshy area where the trail is badly overgrown with grass and scouring brushes. Salt Creek Canyon is one of those special places in Canyonlands National Park where water is generally available throughout the years. The place is a green oasis in the midst of a red rock desert. Willows and cottonwoods are often found growing along the creek. Few months ago, I shared my research with Mr. Chen and George and suggested this Canyon for our backpacking trip. Looking around this Canyon, I am quite pleased with my choice.



The path increasingly turns into very narrow; and in some areas are very hard to follow. With the afternoon sun blazing on our backs, the heat quickly becomes unpleasant. It was 2:30pm in the afternoon, the hottest time of the day. Due to various reasons, we did not start our hike until 1:00pm. Usually, one should avoid traveling in the desert between 12:00pm and 3:00pm. Our sweat soak through the 40lb backpack we each carry, but it dries as fast as it forms. The temperature out in the sun must be well over a hundred degrees. I look over to my two female companions and find no sign of irritation. Koti and Sunny, certainly are the toughest hikers among the group.



Koti and Sunny

I know Koti through work. The first time I met her, I thought this girl was extremely shy. She was quiet and reserve. You can ask her a hundred questions and she would simply respond to your questions with a smile and a few words. It was six months ago that I finally got to know her.

Koti has the passion for outdoors and is born with the exceptional skill to survive in the wilderness. She has the gift of mountain climbing and remarkable talents of learning new things. On Mt. Rainier, I witnessed those talents in her. In the office, she is a hard worker. At home, she is a dutiful daughter and a supportive big sister. Koti is “COOL” and I just hope that someday, she can use those talents to pursuit her dreams. No mater what those dreams are, I know Koti will accomplish them one by one. I have complete faith in her. Koti is one of the rare individuals who truly impress me.



Sunny is another strong individual. She is tough and like challenges. 26-mile hike was her biggest achievement and today, with her 1st backpacking experience, she has proved to be a better hiker than many CMC members. I hope she will continue to grow, to learn and most important, to respect nature. Without the profound understanding of nature, one will never be able to fully appreciate it.

Kirk's Cabin

Following the narrow path, the grass land surrounding the marsh area extends all the way to the right side of the canyon walls. Fifteen minutes later, H.Y. catches up with us and gives us no news of Mr. Chen. A young cottonwood tree appears and we find George's group resting under the tree. We inform George about our concern for Mr. Chen. We wait for about fifteen minutes, Mr. Chen and Mr. Lee show up unharmed. We are glad to be united. Our group has a much longer distance to cover since our assigned campsite is another 3.5 miles from George group. It will take at least another eight miles to get there. It is already late afternoon; and our group worries about reaching the campsite before dark.



We hike along the canyon walls for a short distance; a stream flowing with cool fresh clear water emerges. It is a pleasant surprise for all of us. We refill our water bags and wet our bandanas to cool off. About 150 yards beyond the stream, we locate the 100-year-old Kirk's cabin. Its size is quite small but is still in a good condition considering its age. An arch named after the owner Mr. Kirk is about a mile from the cabin. Unfortunately, it will require some bush whacking to locate the Arch. With the time we have, the arch will have to remain

hidden for now. ☹

Along the Trail

According to the guide book, the next eight miles through Salt Creek Canyon contains many interesting highlights: natural bridges, arches, cliff dwellings, hidden canyons and pictograph panels, best of all, the beautiful Angel Arch. To fully explore all these interesting features, it

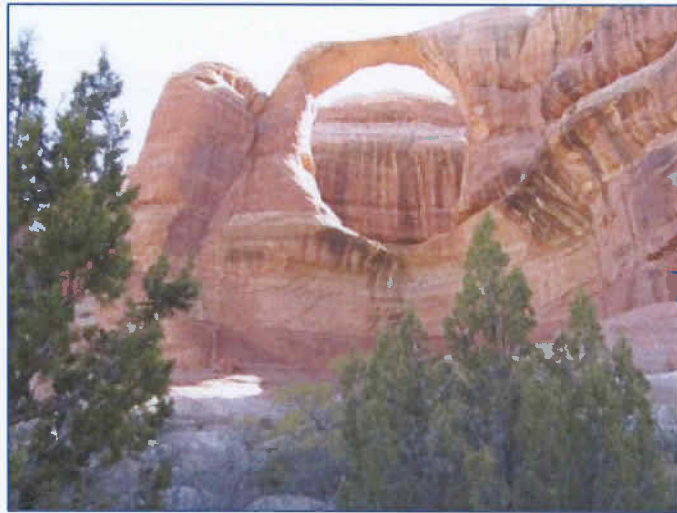
is recommended by the guide book to spend at least 3-4 days backpacking in the canyon. With only 1 ½ day time, we have to forgo almost all of the side trips Koti and I originally planned to do. Passing every canyon wall, I desperately look up to the ledge, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Anasazi ruin site, drawings of bighorn sheep, mule deer, and men with lances. Sadly, I see none as we continue to rush to our campsite.



Sun begins to set but the canyon still fills with heat and stillness. The red cliffs around us ripple behind the veil of heat, radiant like a hot iron. Occasionally, giant old juniper tree with massive, twisted truck shelters us from the sun. I love this tree. Its pale-blue inedible berries sprinkle around all the branches and add another dimension of beauty to the tree. Every thing in nature fascinates me; this tree is no exception.

Next few miles along the trail, a typical desert scene of dry wash, saltbush, prickly pear, spiny hedgehog cactus, and tiny little purple flowers envelope us. I had been at the foothill of Himalayas, jungle of Venezuela, and ruins of Machu Picchu, but nothing, nothing inspires me as profoundly as the wasteland of the desert. It is the lives that endure in this harsh environment attests that nothing in life is impossible. I first learnt this lesson in the desert of Sudan and today, the Utah desert reiterates this valuable point.

A few impressive arches appear as we continue on the trail. H.Y. is a good observer and each time, he points out those arches for us. “Is it a Wedding Ring Arch, or is it a Fisheye Arch, no, I think it is more like a window, not an Arch”. H.Y., Sunny and I each express our own opinion but only Koti gets the right answer from her GPS. Finally, we reach the famous “All American Man” pictograph. This is the only ruin that is so easy to spot along the trail. It is located in a small cave about 20 feet above us. This piece of Indian rock art has three colors, red, white and blue, and looks like the American Independence Day flag. Nevertheless, if you look closely, it is actual a tall man with a waistcloth that has a design reminiscent of the American flag. After all these years, the colors of this drawing still vividly display, surviving the test of time.



Wedding Ring Arch with a perfectly symmetrical oval

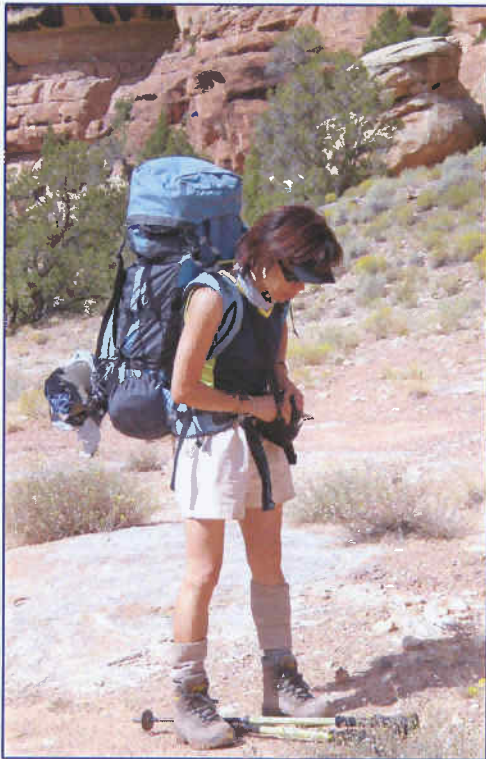
Last Water Source

Twenty minutes after leaving “All American Man”, we enter into an area that is heavily vegetated with willow plants. The temperature is much cooler and we can feel the moisture in the air. The Willow plants are tall and dense, its branches hitting our faces and blocking our exits. Once emerging from the undergrowth, we are invigorated by a mysterious sound of fresh fast running water. Mr. Chen tells us to search for the water source. This hidden stream may possibly be our last and only source of drinking water before reaching camp.



In the desert, running water is rare. Permanent springs or waterholes are likewise few and far between. They are secret places deep in the canyons, known only to the deer and the coyotes and other desert animals. Some of the waterholes we encountered so far are no more than just a puddle of muddy pool where the water is scummed with algae, crawling with worms and grubs, littered with dead leaves and further contaminated by animal dumps. However, in the merciless wasteland, water is not a thing to be taken lightly. Each waterhole sustains life and they are the solitaires of the desert.

Although we can hear the running water clearly, we can not locate the stream. The willow



I dislike crowd, loud noisy crowd. It is the solitude of the wilderness that matters to me the most.

plants cover every inch of the stream bed and literally bury the water alive. With great effort, we break through a small opening, squat underneath dead trees and begin to filter the water. Being confined with such a small area next to Mr. Chen, Koti and I somehow find amusements with the situation and crack a few jokes about Mr. Chen (Sorry, Mr. Chen). Sunny, nevertheless, running between our orders, falls on the creek and gets a complete bath. H.Y. not quite sure where he is (probably sleeping somewhere) stays away from all our drama.

We refill all our water bottles and Koti even carries extra ½ gallon of water on her back for the group. She is just an amazing strong girl. Mr. Chen and I are very grateful to have her in the group.

Our Group & Night March

In spite of George objection to our separation from the main group, both Koti and I much prefer to keep our reasonable distance from the group. Not being disrespectful to others, but only trying to avoid the noise generated by a big crowd. We have witnessed the situation in the restaurant and we have heard

complaints from other tourists, to respect the National Park, and most important to respect the nature, we insist on maintaining a small group in the wilderness.

An hour passes by and we are ready to progress. The time is 7:15pm, with the fading sunlight; we know we will be hiking in the dark soon. Mr. Chen tells us to have a headlight ready. The path becomes significantly narrower and wetter, lining on the sides with a dense cover of sage and rabbit brush. The trail cuts tunnel-like through thick ground cover. The vegetation that grows in the bottom of the drainage makes our night march increasingly difficult. H.Y. takes a lead, with Mr. Chen hikes closely behind him, they both searching for the path in a complete darkness. The batteries of Sunny's headlight and mine are turning low, but we have neither the time nor the place to change them. I ask Koti to hike closely behind me, casting more light on my path.

8:15pm, our campsite is nowhere to be found. Koti's GPS indicates that we have already passed SC4, our designated campsite. How could that be? Are we on the right trail? Did we make a wrong turn? Mr. Chen gives order to setup camp as soon as possible. "Let us find a reasonable decent spot to set up camp". But surrounding us is nothing but eight-foot walls of Willows. We can hardly find a spot to stand, not to mention to sleep.

Derrick's Words

Then, I remember Derrick's story in Machu Picchu. "Pray, Chi when you are in need of God's help" so I begin to pray. Like a miracle, five minutes later suddenly our path opens up and a huge cottonwood tree appears. Its branches stretch widely like a big canopy, forming a nature campground. The opening is only big enough to accommodate five of us. The ground is covered with dried leaves providing extra cushion for our bedding. We are delighted to have this spot for the night. I look up to the sky and give God a smile. Quickly, we erect our tents.



H.Y. – the Angel Man

Half way through, I look over to H.Y. and see him busy boiling the water for our dinner. In instead of setting up his tent, H.Y. takes care of us first.

Our "God given" campsite

I first met H.Y. was two years ago at the CMCNY camping trip. He came over to our campsite and introduced himself to me, telling me how much he enjoyed reading my adventure articles. Last year, I met him again at the Rainier trip. I only spent a few days hiking with him and left the group early for my job. After that, a story about H.Y. and his

high regards about me spouted out like a mushroom after rain. First I resented the gossip and was embarrassed by it. Later, I realized that the more you tried to defend it, the more the gossip will continue. Instead, I just openly be friendly with H.Y. and as a results, I got to know him better.

By nature, H.Y. is very caring person. He is easy going, never raise his voice to others, or get irritated easily. He takes life as gently as it goes. Socially, H.Y. can be friend with anyone. You can never find anyone says bad things about him. Philosophically, which is the deeper part of his psychic, in my opinion is much profound than we know. H.Y. loves to read and he seeks knowledge and passion through his readings. I am fond of him as a friend, an older brother or as a mentor. When in need of advice, H.Y. will provide answer far more helpful than I have expected. H.Y. is a good man!



Five of us sit under the cottonwood tree and eat our supper. Afterward, I make sweet ginger tea, the only luxury item we have. Tonight, I learn from Koti that I can wash my pots with used tea bag, and I am also educated by H.Y. to clean my teeth with ginger. “Nothing should be wasted” as the Angle man H.Y. said.

The Night

We turn in right after dinner. I crawl into my tent and take off my shoes. The heat and the walk during the day have trapped moisture in side my boots and my feet are beginning to show a few blisters. My poor feet have suffered enough! Gently, I clean them with wet wipes and dry them with baby powder.

Now the night flows back, the mighty stillness embraces and includes me. Above me, I can see the stars peeping through the branches of the huge cottonwood tree. Not wanting to let the fatigue overcome me, I fight back to stay awake and enjoy the night. I never expect to find such a remote place in the Utah Desert. The whole day, we saw no other hikers. Most likely, we will not see another one tomorrow. We are all alone in the desert. We are miles away from the nearest civilization, instead of loneliness, I feel loveliness. When finally the waxing half-moon rises up high above the treetop, I lie down to rest. I sleep well, very well indeed, lullabied by the wind of the night.

Angel Arch Canyon

In the blue dawn under the faintest of stars we break camp, pack our gears and look forward to another day. After a quick breakfast, we leave the lovely campsite and on our way to discover the Angel Arch. Twenty minutes into our morning walk, the trail begins to open up. Here the Canyon walls are a little wider, and the floor is covered with red sand. In some areas, the trail is still quite confusing, but we manage to follow the footprints and go back to

the main trail after making a few detours. Using her GPS, Koti alerts us every time when we are off the main road. About an hour, we come to a sign post indicating the area is SC4, our designated campsite. Now, we realize the GPS waypoints that George sent me and Koti are completely off! From this point on, we will only depend on the GPS and ignore all the waypoints.



Koti and I found the signboard which definitely needs some repair

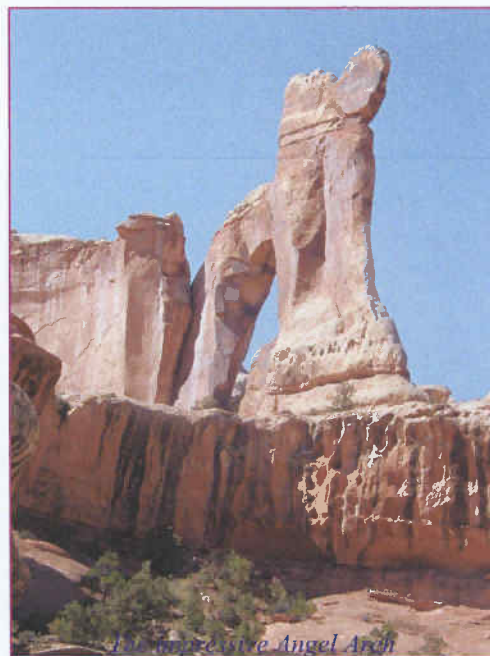
The morning sun is beginning to give me a headache. The heat is building up quickly in the canyon. We are hiking under a clear blue sky, not a drop of cloud. About 2.5 miles, we reach a junction. There, a weathered signboard, half hanging and half burying among the over growth indicates the trailhead to the

side Canyon of Angle Arch. Mr. Chen suggests that we should find a spot to hide our packs. Since this is a one-way trail, we will have to return here after our visiting to the Arch.

Exploring the Side Canyon

The Arch; suggested by the guide book is the most impressive arches in the Canyonlands. Personally, I am really looking forward to this extra hike. Hiding our backpacks under an old tree, we return to the junction and enter into the side Canyon. Before long, an old jeep road appears. About 10 years ago, it was possible to drive 4WD vehicles through this canyon to see the Arch. When the Park realized that the motor vehicles had caused unacceptable damage to the area and the wildlife, in 1998, the road was permanently closed. I am glad for this smart decision.

About an hour hike, another signboard points to an over hanging rock just right below the east side of the Arch. Climbing up to the rock ledge, we take a closer look at this beautiful Arch. It is bathing under the morning sun and eminently standing against the deep blue sky. The arch is indeed strikingly beautiful. Nature had created another impressive art! There is a



The impressive Angel Arch

cairned trail that continues from the viewpoint to the opening below the arch, it will require another 30 minutes scrambling to get there. Koti and I love to go, but Mr. Chen discourages the idea since we will have to leave soon.

We sit on the rock floor and enjoy the scenery. The Canyon walls around us are magnificent. H.Y. and I try the walls for echo values, and the sounds that come back to us, far off and fading, are so strange and lovely, transmuted by distance, that we fall into silence, enchanted.



I happen to look up and see on the opposite wall, a hundred feet above the floor of the canyon, the ruin of a tiny stone house in a shallow cave. Not sure it is one of the Indian ruin mentioned in the guide book. This place just has so much to offer, someday, I will have to return.

When the sun stands noon-high between the canyon walls, we each find a tree to hide from the heat and glare of the relentless sun. We sip our drink, quench our thirst and stretch out on the floor. The

coolness from the earth provides us a temporally relieve from the heat. Life begins to seem plausible again.

Waterholes

On our way exiting the canyon, we come across a series of stagnant waterholes shrinking under the sun. Mr. Chen again suggests that we should refill our water bottles. It is the end of summer and the stream has only slimy water oozing along between sun baked flats of mud. I squat near one of the water holes, notice tadpoles and microscopic creatures of various kinds swimming in the pool. Surprisingly, the water is quite clear. I taste the water from cupped hands, it is cool and sweet!

I can write a whole chapter about how precious water is in the desert. Ancient time, in the desert, each waterhole was guarded by a tribe and the battles over the ownership of the waterhole between tribes were well documented in the history of the desert. Nowadays, these small waterholes may seem less important, for some people, they may even reject the idea of drinking water from these water sources. They may even say that the desert would be a good country to visit if only it has some water.



Tadpoles swimming in our drinking water

But I love this barren land. Since returning from Sudan, I have been longing to return to the desert. My desire traveling to the desert for a long distance grows each day. After today, this deep passion of mine will grow more intensely, agonizing me until the day I return.

My Poor Hiking Boots

Back to the old tree, we find our backpacks. The idea of going back to the sun with our backpacks is not very appealing. We walk on dried river bed, follow the ancient water course and continue to find our way to exist the canyon. The softness of the sandy floors slows down our progress. The prickly pear along the path in some areas grows knee-high and also in great clumps hairy with spines. Although they are lovely to look at, you do not want to be stung by those dangerous spines.



Half way to the Peekaboo Camp, the bottom part of my left boot completely falls off. This pair of boot has survived the coldness of ice and snow on Mt. Rainier and today, it is suffering and dying under the dry heat of Utah desert. H.Y. uses a string to reattach the bottom. I am grateful to have H.Y. operates on my shoes. He is really our Angle man, helping us and protecting us along the way. I have the utmost respect for this man.

The Secret Passage

From my readings, I know that there is shortcut right before reaching the Peekaboo campsite. This shortcut cuts down the hiking distance about ½ miles. After 7.5 miles walking under the sun, any shortcut is welcome. The clue to this “secret passage” which I read it over and over again to Koti is:

“The main trail turns southeast in order to get around a long fin that protrudes into the canyon. Look carefully at the base of the fin where the trail turns and you will see a window through to the other side. The trail leaves the road at this point and climbs up through the window to Peekaboo Camp on the other side.....the route through the window will save you a half-mile of additional walking”

Right before six o’clock, Koti informs us that her GPS indicates that the Peekaboo Camp is just over the other side of the Fin, my spirit instantly lifts up. Like a child looking for a hidden treasure, I look at the Fin in front of us, searching for that “window”. “There! I see it Koti, right there!” Obviously, Koti did not see the window and she is not as exciting as I am. I alert the group to follow the cairn trail instead of the main road. Derrick and Stella should be waiting for us on the other side.

Climbing up to the “window”, we look down to the other side, but do not see any human or car parking at the bottom. “Derrick! Derrick!” Seconds later, a tiny human figure appears at the bottom of the hill. It is our dear Derrick with his dazzling white T-shirt (compare to our dusty clothes). He is very happy to see us and run towards us as fast as he can. His smile warms us up and we greet each other like a long lost friend.

Another Amazing Journey

Stella is also happy to see us. She prepared the hard boiled eggs for us. We eat and tell stories of our two-day adventure. We enjoy our late lunch under the shade of the canyon walls. The temperature is much cooler here.



Koti, Sunny and Mr. Chen approaching the "window"

Forty-five minutes later, George's group arrives. Paul looks tired but he seems thrilled with the whole experience. Being one of the latest members of CMCNY and with no prior backpacking experience, Paul admits this is the toughest thing he has ever done. He tells me he cannot wait to share the adventure with his son. I am sure his son will be very proud of him. The evening is approaching and we are ready to leave. Our two-day adventure finally comes to an end, but there are still so much to explore in this canyon. Gusts of sand swirl before me, stinging my face.

Why do I like desert so much? I ponder the question. Perhaps it is the mystery behind each canyon wall that lures a man on and on to explore for more.



Section 1 – end

