

A WORLD APART

As the golden hour paints the sky, two canoes glide gracefully along the Green River, viewed from the vantage point of Two Mile campsite.

The background of the page is a light beige topographic map of Labyrinth Canyon. The map features a complex network of brown contour lines that create a sense of depth and terrain. The lines are more densely packed in some areas, indicating steeper slopes, and more spread out in others, indicating flatter ground. The overall effect is a subtle, artistic representation of the canyon's unique landscape.

ON THE GREEN RIVER

Canoe trip through Labyrinth Canyon reveals hidden landscape miles removed from modern life

Story and photographs by MIKE SHUBIC

The sky was still dark when I awoke on the first day of an eight-day mid-October canoeing adventure down the Green River in southern Utah. With my tent's rainfly removed and the sandman subdued, I rolled onto my back to see the moon overhead shining through the mesh of my shelter. The diffused stars twinkled, still glowing bright as the sun was far from shining its light.

We launched our canoes from Ruby Ranch, a private homestead 30 miles south of the city of Green River and Interstate 70. Our group of 16 camped at Ruby Ranch the night before, the first of four campsites along a 45-mile journey through Labyrinth Canyon.

Our first paddle day was filled with exuberance. Our three guides gave us safety instructions, then paired us up into teams and assigned us to one of eight two-person canoes. With our camp gear weighing down the boats, it didn't take long for us to discover that any abrupt movements needed to be communicated with our partners, or else we could find ourselves floating in the river without a canoe.

Heartbeats soon slowed, and the escape from our chaotic lives began to set in. As the red canyon walls first appeared, it was as if we were entering a new world – one with no distractions, no cell service, no demands other than avoiding the occasional sandbar.

LATE IN THE SEASON, with snow melt long gone, the river was placid, flowing just 2 ½ mph. There were no rapids or sounds, save for the paddles breaching the surface on the occasional stroke to straighten the canoe.

Our boats were packed to the gills, full of food, camping gear, groover (a camping toilet), kitchen supplies and more. One of our guides, Lauren Bond of The River's Path, wanted to share her favorite camping spots on the Green River with us. Our paddle days were planned short so that if another group was occupying the campsite, we would have time to paddle to an alternate.

We came to our first camp, Three Canyons. The embankments were laden with

mud – thick molasses quicksand that envelopes you to your waist, which Lauren discovered when she went ashore.

Lauren quickly came up with a plan that if we cut willow branches and laid them on the mud, we could make it up the embankment with all our gear to build our camp. This endeavor required all hands on deck. Despite knowing each other for less than 24 hours, we came together as a team.

Several times during “Operation Willow Branch,” Lauren proclaimed our efforts would not be in vain.

We were dubious, but after two hours of reinforcing the mud and hauling our gear to the campsite, it was evident she had not led us astray. We trusted our leader.

While most people set up near the

campsite, a few of us wanted to explore before committing to a sleeping spot for the next three nights. I chose to set up my tent in front of what I dubbed the “Tree Arch,” a phenomenon where a sturdy oak split, but refused to die.

Exploring past Tree Arch transported me into a portal of rarely visited back-country wilderness. Petroglyphs peppered the canyon walls, telling stories known only by those of ancient times. Otherwise, the land is unspoiled and untainted by human hands – a welcome respite from the modern world from which we escaped.

I hiked to the end of one canyon, where I traversed boulders up dry waterfalls with pools punctuating the way. The rush of water during eons of wet seasons created





Camp kitchen at Three Canyons (opposite page) offers dramatic views. Adventurers serenely drift along the slow waters of the Green River in their sturdy canoes.



Under the vast tapestry of a star-studded night, canoes rest undisturbed. A fireside gathering of fellow travelers is a lasting memory.



smooth curves and arches, which are revealed during the dry season.

At the end of the canyon, I came to a monolithic wall in an amphitheater. I sat on a stone, contemplating this amazing place while nibbling on a turkey, tomato and avocado sandwich.

All alone, I decided to test an echo by sending out a loud bellow that boisterously made its way back to me. Later at camp we came together for a mealtime ceremony called the friendship fire circle. We gathered around, sang a song, shared our thoughts of the day and gave thanks for our meal.

The silence during the night was exceptional, broken near dawn by the soft sound of a flute played by Monica, one of our tour guides, followed by the shallow, rhythmic beat of a drum.

AFTER THREE DAYS in Three Canyons, it was time to continue our adventure downriver. We paddled 12 miles through more majestic terrain, then arrived at our home for the next two days, Keg Spring campsite.

On our second day at our new campsite, Lauren took us on a hike to show us an area with petrified wood. I broke off from the group when I saw a spot where I could navigate up the canyon wall to a mesa. I got to the ledge just below the mesa, secured my daypack and decided to push to the top.

Sandstone is grippy and easy to scale when dry. I made it to within 75 feet of the peak when an impassible ledge halted me from going higher. A bit dejected, I began my descent and eventually made it back to the group.

Our next paddle day would be a big push, nearly 20 miles, and would take six hours. We stopped halfway to break for lunch at a sandy bank. Some explored, while others threw a frisbee. It was much-needed relief from sitting in the canoe for so long.

Later that afternoon, we arrived at Two Mile campsite. With a sandy beach, it was perfect to set up the kitchen and friendship fire circle.

I hiked to a higher ridge, and in short order found an incredible spot for my tent overlooking both directions of the river and directly down on our camp. My only

disappointment was that there were no trees to hang my hammock.

Soon after arriving, a group of pack-rafters (packable kayakers) landed at the same campsite. They hiked up the hill past my tent to camp on the other side of the bluff. Unbeknownst to us, their leader spoke with Lauren and shared some unsettling news.

That evening, the bells rang, signaling dinner was about to be served. As usual, we formed a circle, sang thanks for our meal and moved over to the ring of chairs around a fire on the beach. After sunset, the air on the river usually cooled rapidly, but not this evening – it was unusually warm and pleasant.

As we finished our meal, Lauren announced housekeeping items. She told us that the river guide who had come ashore informed her there was a significant storm front coming, likely the reason for the warm evening air. This is an area with no cell service. However, in case of emergencies, Lauren has a satellite phone. She contacted her mother, who verified the coming weather front.

Lauren made the difficult decision to cut the trip short by a day. We were all disappointed, especially since we hadn't had the opportunity to explore this camp area. We understood and agreed with her decision for our safety.

Our final night on the river was a lovely evening perched up on the cliff. I laid awake in my tent with the fly off and the door open so I could take in the extreme dark skies and bright stars.

Jupiter was bright, as it had not been this close to earth in nearly 60 years. I felt so far removed from society, full of peace and tranquility.

WE WERE ON the water by 9 a.m. the next day. The river was calm, and the sky bright blue. As a precaution, Lauren instructed us to lash our canoes in pairs to give us more stability in case the river turned turbulent.

Fifteen minutes later, the wind picked up. The water became choppy. Thirty minutes later and around the next bend headwinds hit us and forced us to do serious paddling just to move forward and stay straight. The river had transformed itself from a loving and docile creature into an angry animal.



Pitched alongside the Green River, this secluded tent is high enough to overlook Two Mile campsite and to spot an approaching group of packable kayakers.



Lauren, with ukulele in hand, serenades the wilderness with her heartfelt melodies. A bird's-eye glimpse of the inviting entrance to Three Canyons.



The entrance to Three Canyons is picturesque, but the hike through it can be too difficult and technical for some. A ledge with an ancient petroglyph overhead offers those who make the morning climb a quiet moment in the sun.

We were experiencing the full range of emotions from this living river.

We did not have many miles to cover, but it was clear it was going to take us a while to reach Mineral Bottom, the take-out point. The wind and waves continued to pick up. Our boats were filling with water; our feet became submerged and chilled.

My hands ached and were blistered from holding and stroking the paddle so hard. Around one bend, the winds pushed the boats against the embankment, and we started to pile up. The lead boat became stuck, pinning the other boats in place. Adrenaline was running high, but we stayed in fair spirits as we dislodged and continued down-river.

One more obstacle came into view as we made the last turn to Mineral Bottom. The river had shifted from a storm several weeks earlier, and now a massive sandbar blocked our exit.

Lauren got out of her boat onto the sandbar to have a closer look. Thankfully, there was a narrow passage of water on the other side of the bar. To access it, we continued downstream, then turned 180 degrees and paddled upstream into the narrow estuary that took us to the end of our paddling journey.

The pitter patter of the rain started about the time I got to my hotel in Moab. After six days on the river, a hot shower never felt so good. By that evening, a full-blown thunderstorm was raging. The hill

out of the canyon from the take-out point is very steep, and had we not left when we did, we might have been stuck camping in the rain and muck for a couple of days.

Our journey, like that of a river, changes course over time. No matter how hard we fight the current, we will never go back to the point where we started – the only way we can change our situation is to move forward.

Escaping the pressure of everyday life for a week – with no outside influence or distraction – is a prescription for well-being. And giving ourselves time for self-reflection is imperative for a life well-lived. The bonds created and the collective consciousness shared during this canoe trip is something I will treasure for a lifetime. 🐦