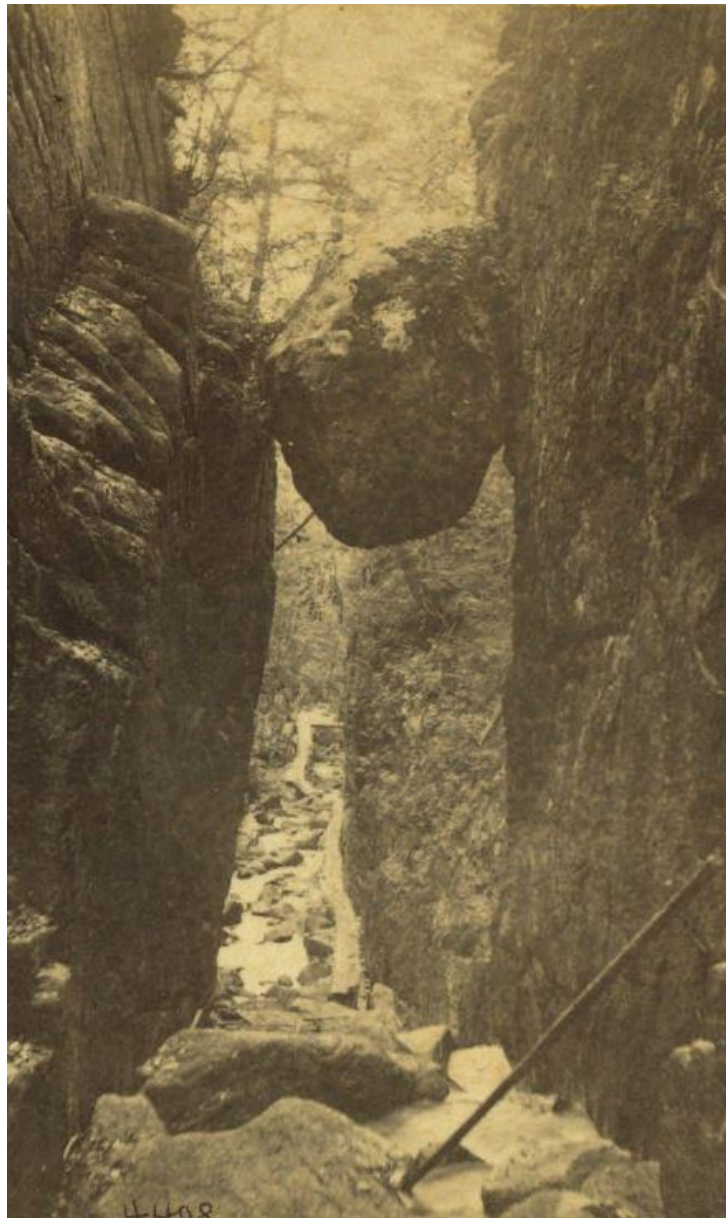


Utah Arizona Canyons

– Dan Styer

For as long as I can remember, I've been entranced by box canyons. Before reaching my eighth birthday I saw, hanging on a wall in my grandmother's house, a black-and-white photograph of New Hampshire's "Flume" – perhaps this one:



As a teen I saw pictures in *National Geographic* of Fern Canyon in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park, California. Eventually I found box canyons in my home state of Ohio, my favorite of which is Clifton Gorge.



In 2010, during a flight from Las Vegas to Cleveland, I peered down and found a notable red-rock slot in the desert north of the Grand Canyon, which I would later identify as the Paria River. And my Internet searches pointed to a box canyon in Utah, Buckskin Gulch, as the “longest slot canyon on Earth” (more than 13 miles long, compared to 800 feet for the Flume). When I found out that Buckskin Gulch was a tributary of the Paria River, it seemed only natural to plan a backpacking trip down both Buckskin Gulch and the Paria River. On Monday, 9 May 2016, I flew to Las Vegas, rented an SUV, and drove to Mesquite, Nevada, where I spent the night.

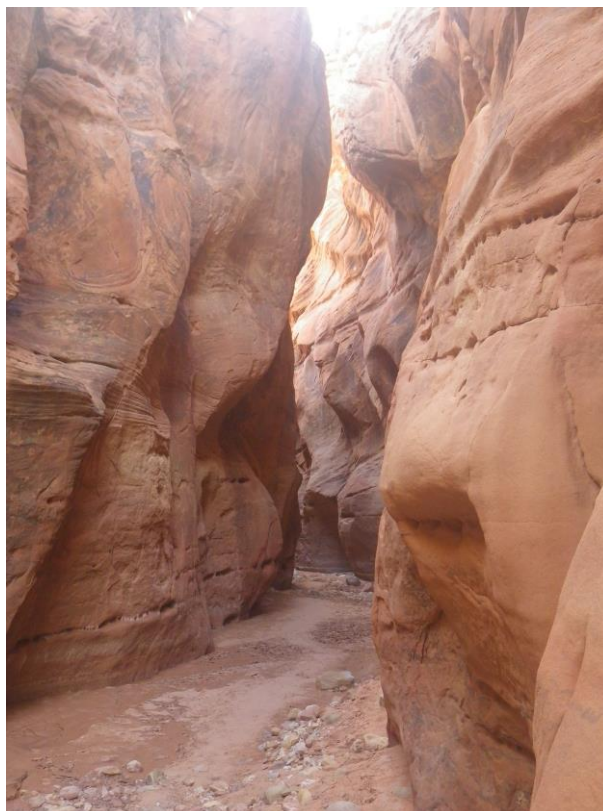
Day 1: Tuesday, 10 May 2016

I drive to Lees Ferry, where the Paria River empties into the Colorado. There (through prior arrangement) I’m picked up by Ote Dale, who drives me to the Buckskin Gulch trailhead. I had met Ote (her name is short for “coyote”) in 1976, when I was twenty-one years old, and she was one of the boatmen on my first float trip down the Grand Canyon. She can’t remember me or any of the other passengers, but she remembers the trip and we have a wonderful chat about that trip, about the years following, and about what’s ahead. She has the same vibrancy and enthusiasm for life that she did forty years ago.

Buckskin Gulch starts off as a typical desert valley



but the walls grow taller, steeper, and closer until it becomes a box.



A tributary called Wire Pass comes in from the right through an even narrower slot. I walk up that one, admire a jackrabbit, eat dinner, watch the fading light, then walk back to the Buckskin Gulch – Wire Pass confluence to camp. Just before setting up camp I notice that someone has been here before. A thousand years before:



Swallows dart through the air, then Jupiter and the Northern Crown blaze from above, and then I fall asleep.

Day 2: Wednesday, 11 May 2016

I waken for my big day walking down the world's longest slot canyon. I cannot describe what I saw, and photographs are inadequate. But photographs are all that I have:









If you want a better sense of Buckskin Gulch – its colors, its textures, its light and its shadows, its pebbles, its wildlife, its spirit – you’ll have to go yourself.

At 3:30 pm I come out of the Gulch onto the Paria River, where the rock walls are just as high, just as steep, and just as colorful, but further apart because a river runs between them. There's no trail, I just wade down the river. There are few campsites, but I walk down a mile or two and set up camp on a sandbank.

This night is even better than the first, because (1) there are bats as well as swallows at sundown and (2) in the dark I have a wider view of the starry sky.

Day 3: Thursday, 12 May 2016

Morning shows that the rock wall opposite my campsite carries this sensual sculpture (in the photograph the rock appears grey – it is actually a warm rusty orange):



Walk on to Big Spring, with Maidenhair Fern and Stream Orchid, and with delicious, life-giving water. Walls of desert tapestry. Ravens. Cactus in bloom. The red walls of the canyon drift apart ever so slowly.

Day 4: Friday, 13 May 2016

Into the side canyon called Wrather Canyon. Several wildflowers, plus Wrather Arch:



Day 5: Saturday, 14 May 2016

Early in the day, the canyon widens out significantly. Walking is mostly on informal (unmaintained) trail rather than wading in the river. I am fortunate that clouds have come in, because I can no longer cool off in the shade of canyon walls. The many wildflowers and birds are unfamiliar and exciting.



Near the end of the hike, I sign out on a trail register. In the space for comments, I write the trip summary I've been turning over in my mind for five days: "To call this place magical would be to severely under represent this place."

After this, it's a short jaunt to the mouth of the Paria. And that would ordinarily be the end of the story, except that as I walk back from the mouth to my parked car, I see a California Condor, the rarest of all North American birds.

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There's some time left over before my flight home, so I drive north into Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. On 15 March I depart from Egypt trailhead, walk down to the Escalante River, then follow that river downstream until Neon Canyon comes in from the left. (Again, no formal trails.) I walk up Neon until my path is blocked: the Golden Cathedral.



My night at Golden Cathedral shows me almost no stars, because the walls are so tall and the slot so narrow. The next day I retrace my steps. A thunderstorm greets me between Escalante River and trailhead. I'm so desperate for coldness and wetness that I take off my hat, invert it to catch hail, then chow down on the ice.