



WILD & BROKEN

A FIRST SUP DESCENT OF UTAH'S ESCALANTE RIVER

BY MORGAN TILTON

PHOTOS BY DYLAN BROWN

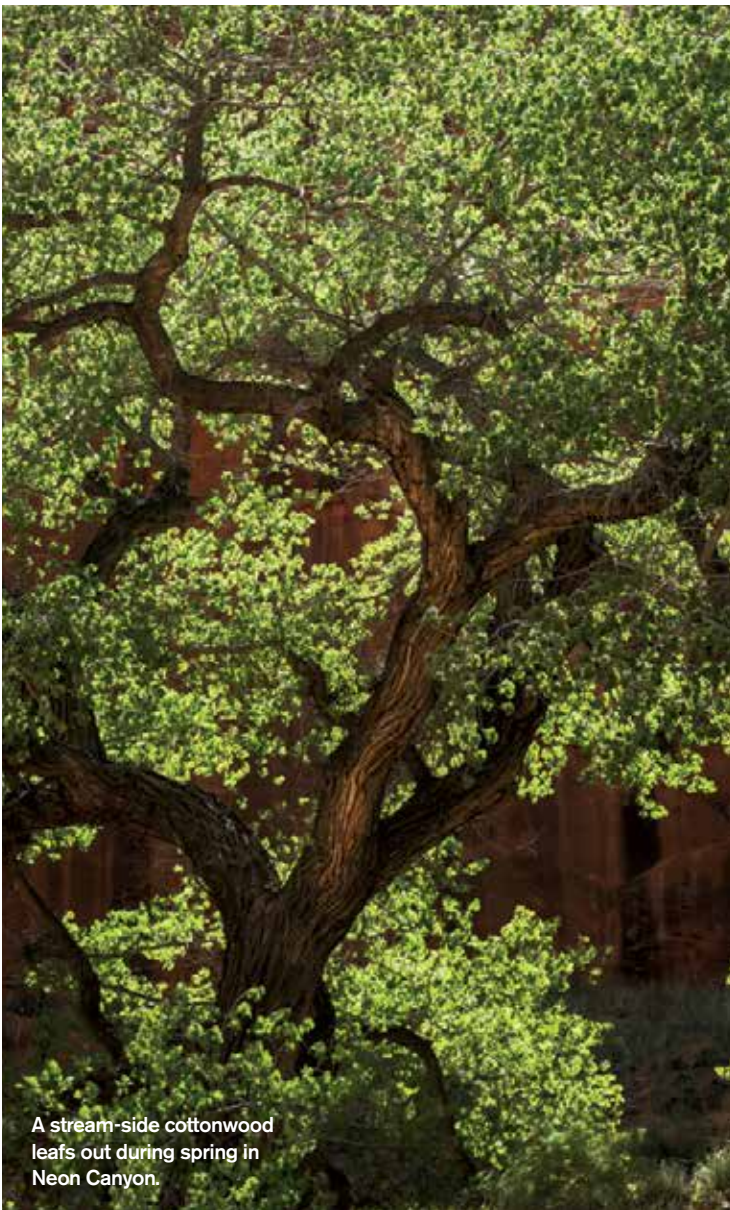
The river's milk chocolate surface, marbled with whirlpools of whitewater, draped like an infinity pool over the drops ahead. I gaped at my buddy, Dylan Brown, as he bumbled down the first cascade and rocketed backwards off his standup paddleboard—which took a 180-spin and smacked the surface, gear faced down. After clambering with the SUP (which was now lodged against a boulder), he finally leveraged it flat, jumped back on and raced down concurrent drops after his paddle. I looked back at our crew of paddlers—Jordan Curet, Morgan Smith and Aaron Kloer—whose lips moved, but the thundering turbulence that bounced off the walls of the canyon quelled any chance of hearing them.

I stood above the chute in belly-deep water and gripped the rail of my SUP so it wouldn't tornado away. The current's strong surge meant backing out was impossible. If I released my board and swam to the riverbank the prospect of a gear recovery downstream seemed too risky. I inhaled and hopped back on my SUP. To counterbalance the powerful current, I kneeled and pierced my paddle down and back, along the rail. A split second later, I was bucked off as the board's nose popped up in the landing. I bobbed to the surface and stole a quick breath before going over drop number two. Submerged and pumped with adrenaline, I kicked inside the huge billow and swam back to the surface. Feet pointed downstream, I leaned back for the third and final drop.

It was day four of our SUP first-descent of the Escalante River, which carves its way like a serrated knife through one of the most remote and untamed expanses of wilderness in the Lower 48. The undesignated terrain was discovered in 1872, east of the Kaiparowits Plateau. The gorge encompasses one of the last unknown rivers in the United States. Mapping the area's link of hoodoos, minarets and canyons—which extended to overwhelming depths of up to 6,000-feet—required six years. Today, the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM) has swollen in popularity, with 878,000 visitors in 2014, according to the current GSENM visitation report. Before the trip was done, we'd see both the good and bad that have come along with its growing reputation.

At the point that I was sucking in air above the brown water and pulling myself back on my board, we'd paddled little more than half of the waterway's 100-mile zigzag, which rambles diagonally from south-central Utah to the convergence of the Colorado River and Lake Powell. This was one of Escalante's most notorious segments and as we were learning, rightfully so.

Six weeks earlier, Dylan called me to ask if I'd join a river trip. He thought standup paddling could be a new, interesting way to thread the GSENM. The twisted gorge was too narrow for a raft and hard shells are a hassle to haul up if paddlers need to hike out. Typically, river runners negotiated the canyon's precarious waters in blow-up boats. Dylan had dreamt up the idea of an Escalante SUP run after his inaugural trip in inflatable kayaks with his father and four friends in 2011.

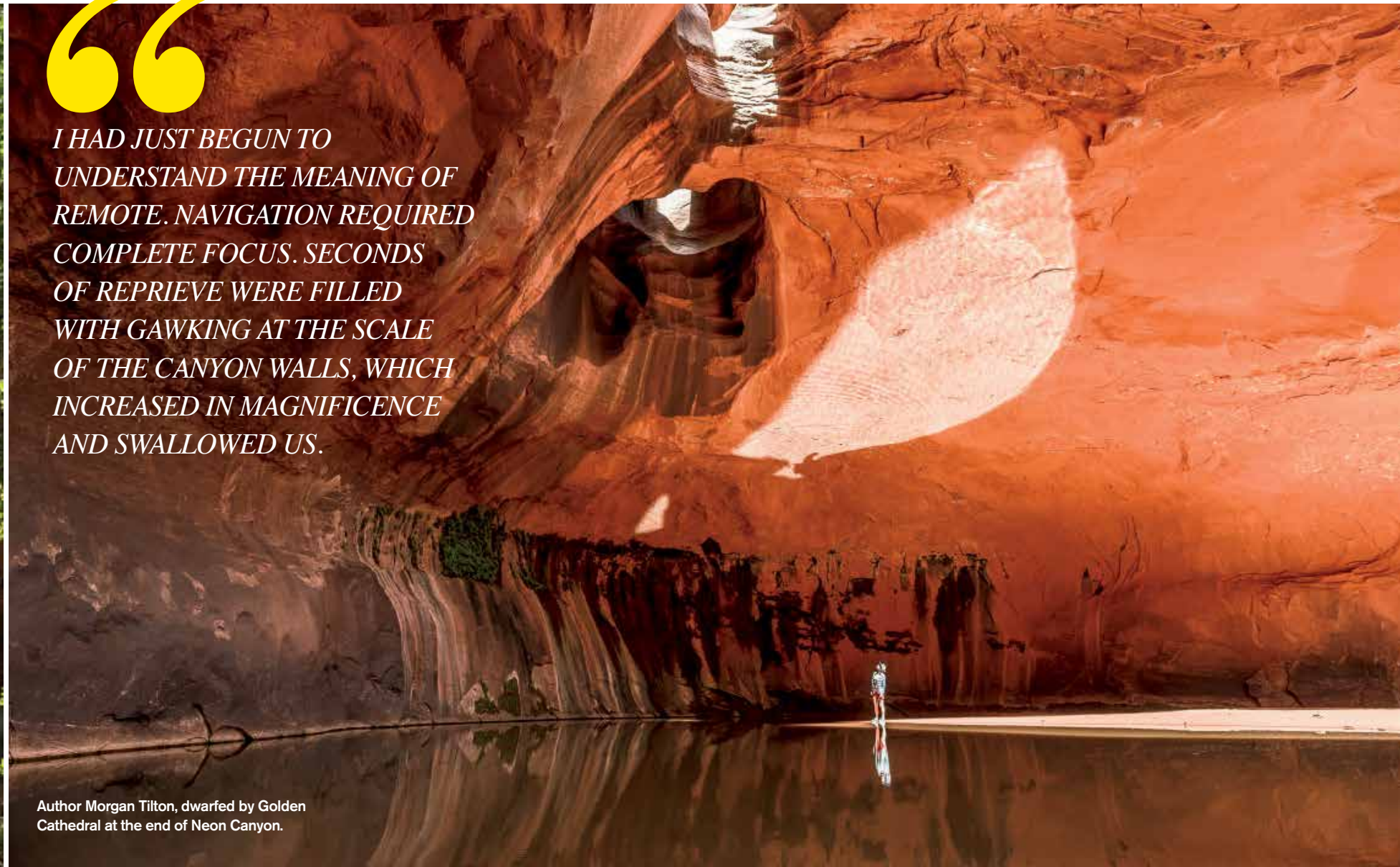


A stream-side cottonwood leafs out during spring in Neon Canyon.



I HAD JUST BEGUN TO UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF REMOTE. NAVIGATION REQUIRED COMPLETE FOCUS. SECONDS OF REPRIEVE WERE FILLED WITH GAWKING AT THE SCALE OF THE CANYON WALLS, WHICH INCREASED IN MAGNIFICENCE AND SWALLOWED US.

Author Morgan Tilton, dwarfed by Golden Cathedral at the end of Neon Canyon.



The crew paying their Escalante tolls. Portaging is a trademark of low-water desert missions.

Despite my novice SUP skills and my unfamiliarity with GSENM, I felt that I had most of the requisite skills for a trip of this type: I'd tied myself off for spelunking and canyoneering on rivers in Italy and Southwest Colorado and completed a handful of backpacking trips in all seasons. Most importantly, though, I trusted Dylan as trip leader. Raised in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, Dylan's parents started sowing roots in the Escalante community more than two decades prior and moved there almost 10 years ago.

I wouldn't meet our other crewmembers until seconds before the push off, below the bridge along Highway 12, fifteen miles east of the river's namesake town. Morgan and Aaron's paddle skills were as equally compelling as mine. Jordan was the exception. Raised by the ocean, she started standup paddling in 2007, and has tracked around 500 nautical miles each summer.

But this would be a new challenge for all of us. Come spring, snowmelt from Aquarius Plateau flows eastward and feeds the Escalante River and Boulder Creek, one of the most significant tributaries of the river. If the winter's precipitation is weak, the window of opportunity (a seven-day minimum) is even hastier. In our case, a blizzard hit 24 hours before our original April launch date. Icy conditions at 11,000 feet impeded the river's lifeline. Free and undammed, the Escalante's flow is dependably erratic and contingent on nature's will alone. Our best odds were to wait for the zone to warm a hair, then make a dash.

A couple weeks later we stood on the edge of a seemingly not-so-mighty Escalante. The river's sole gauging station on the periphery of town, upstream from our put-in, reflected a dismal eight cubic feet per second (CFS) flow a few days prior. Not very much water. The BLM's recommendation for floating the Escalante was at least 50 CFS. Nonetheless, Dylan approved our departure and we committed. Between the gauge and our put-in, two major tributaries feed into the flow. Their contribution was what we'd hoped: enough to get started.

For the first six miles we hopped on and off our boards as we scraped against the earth-toned rainbow of pebbles on the riverbed. A game of limbo was inevitable, despite the flow. The banks along that section are plagued with invasive Russian olive and tamarisk trees, which reached their sharp, spider-nest arms and roots across our path.

Dylan explained that these trees were the focus of serious conservation efforts in the area. The Escalante River Watershed Partnership (ERWP)—a coalition of more than 30 private and public agencies, groups and individuals ranging from the BLM and the Grand Canyon Trust to the Four Corners—is amid a projected five-year restoration project with an emphasis on eliminating the Russian olive trees. Post-Dust Bowl, the thorny species was introduced to reduce soil erosion. Now, it channelizes and chokes the river, traps sediment and overcrowds the native cottonwoods and willows, altering the streamside ecology. The ERWP has worked hard—volunteers have removed the trees from more than half the river with only 19 river miles and the Harris Wash tributary remaining, as of ERWP's 2015 report. However, the coalition's method—girdling the trees by cutting away a ring in the bark and cambium above the roots—leaves behind mass quantities of dead debris with the hope that they'll wash or rot away. An alternative would be to burn them, Dylan said, noting that the dead trees are dangerous and problematic for boaters. This difference in perspectives and implementation exemplifies the complex layers of contentions that fill the area's history, from roads to grazing rights to the very water we're paddling on.

After our trip, I was surprised to find that my grandparents were among the social-political push-pull that surrounded the protection of Escalante. In 1963, the year Glen Canyon Dam opened, they *hiked* along the bottom of the entire canyon that we paddled down. The dam would prevent future flood damage caused by the Colorado River, distribute water to surrounding states and generate electricity. On one side of the argument, the structure was a utilitarian solution that had addressed several current and looming problems. Today, the alluring turquoise expanse of Lake Powell has been enjoyed by millions of recreationalists, including me. But beneath the reservoir's crystal façade is an irrecoverable cost: Glen Canyon, a deep labyrinth of caverns and hollows that was said to rival the beauty of the Grand Canyon. As the lake and its surrounding fingers swelled, the Escalante likewise rose hundreds of feet and expanded from a trickle six inches deep to a raging waterway. Consequentially, much of the Escalante's thriving wildlife, artifacts of ancient peoples and mindboggling sandstone formations were buried.

"Back then, there wasn't a great deal of understanding regarding the impacts that the dam would have, compared to today," my grandpa, John Cunning, told me as we pored over hundreds of photos from their week-long walk on the riverbed.

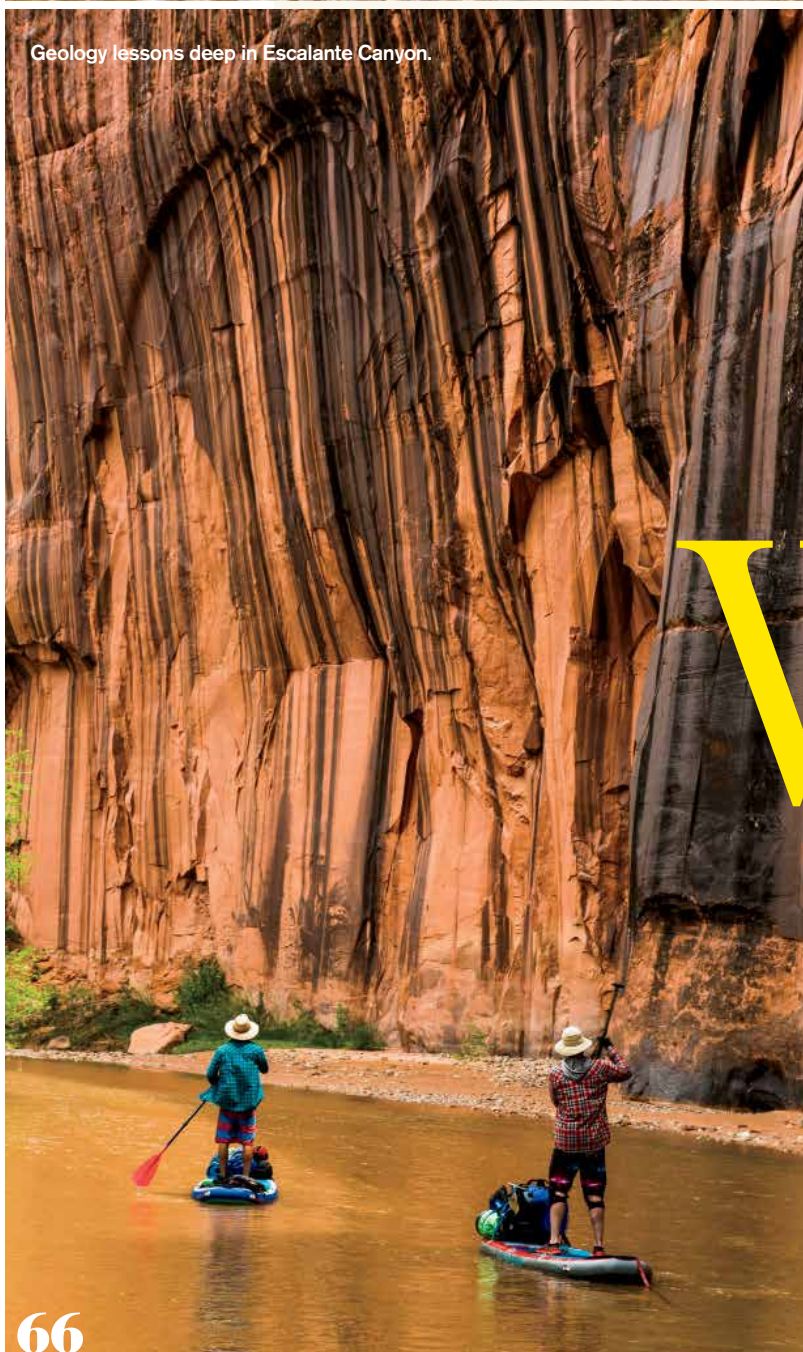


THE CANYON REOPENED AND REVEALED A 360-DEGREE FORTRESS OF REDDISH-BROWN FINS AND BUTTES. WE PULLED OUR BOARDS UP TO A SOFT, IVORY SANDBAR, THREW OFF OUR SHOES AND CLIMBED THE SLOPE BEYOND THE BEACH, A DUNE OF VIBRANT RED SAND THE TEXTURE OF CASHMERE.





Sunny skies in the desert can be misleading: Shortly after this photo was taken, it started hailing.



Geology lessons deep in Escalante Canyon.

“Now we have 50 years of environmental research and controversy.”

He and my grandma recalled a general public awareness of Glen Canyon Dam’s pending impact and that some expressed opposition, but the decision to proceed was more or less mandated.

If the dam were to be demolished, the impact might be even starker than the drought-induced bathtub ring that surrounds Lake Powell today.

“What’s beautiful is what’s under water, but the damage is done and there’s no way to make the canyon what it was intended to be,” my grandma lamented. While I may never see the canyon in the same light and form as my grandparents, I was completely magnetized and inspired by the portion that still exists. I deeply empathized for their feeling of loss.

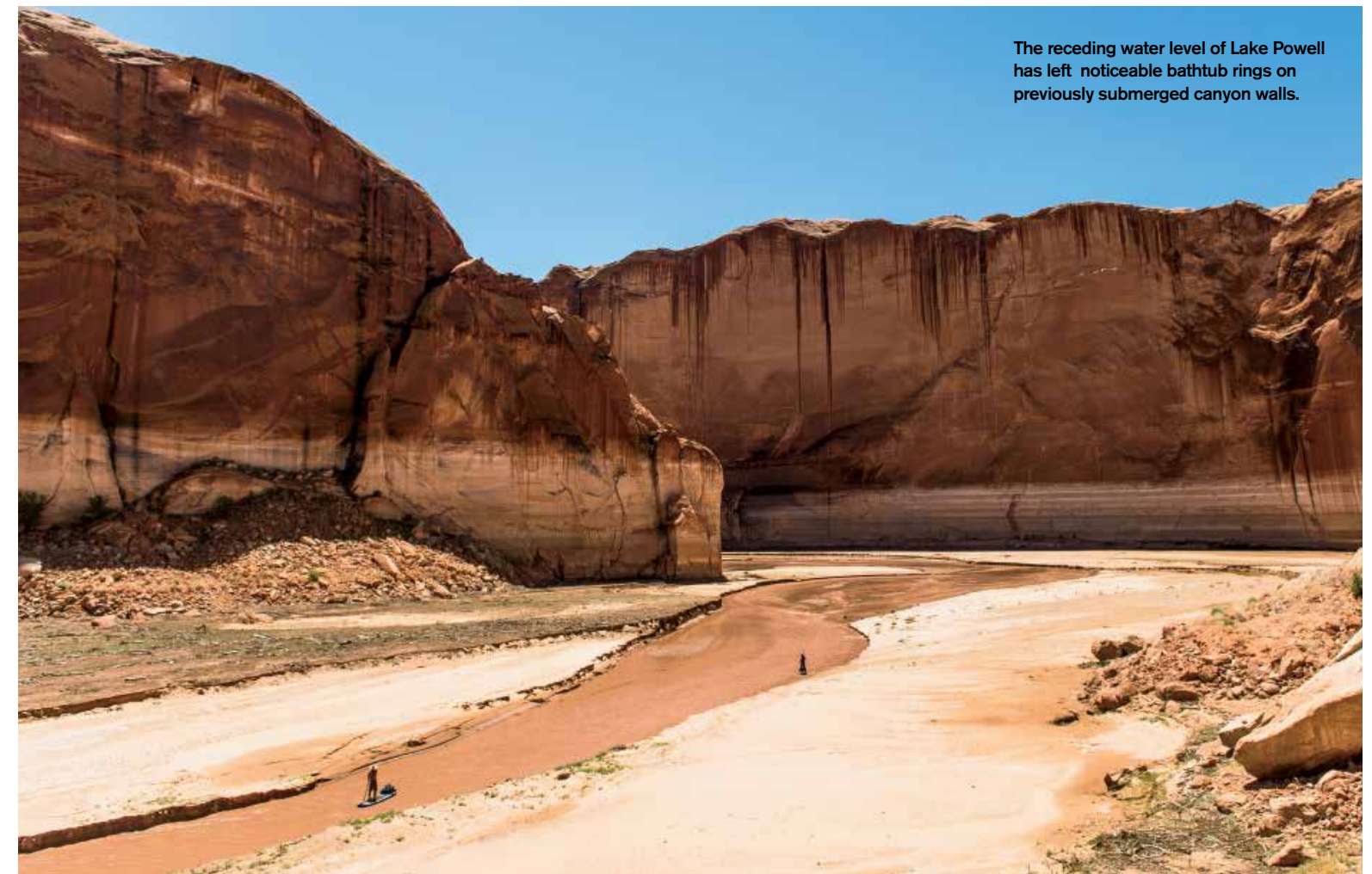
Destroying something as beautiful as Glen Canyon is condemnable. However, Lake Powell has provided recreation, irrigation and drinking water to millions of people over the decades since its construction, my grandpa pointed out. I thought about that juxtaposition as we traveled down the canyon.

WE PEERED WARILY OUT FROM OUR ASYLUM AND WATCHED A FLASH FLOOD APPEAR BEFORE OUR EYES: A GIGANTIC WATERFALL PLUMMETED FROM THE TOP OF THE BENCH DOWN TO THE ESCALANTE. WE WATCHED THE RIVER RISE.

When we reached the halfway mark, near the location of our frightening toss-up, the canyon radically morphed. The surrounding wedding-cake terraces closed in and became sheer Navajo Sandstone walls that stretched hundreds of feet above our heads. Vertical iridescent blue-black streaks dripped down their faces—a varnish that was literally alive: Water had seeped over the sandstone and left behind airborne dust and clay particles, a residue that was glued down by bacteria and microfungi. Beneath the decorative coat, the cliffs were comprised of multi-toned, horizontal slices of creamy pearl, shades of amber, and deep maroon: layers which are petrified 150-million-year-old sand dunes. The mesmerizing spectrum was created by the wind’s oscillation. White quartz particles were blown from the west, while red sand was brought from the northeast. In geologic terms, erosion only recently (in the last two million years) revealed the canyon’s complexion.

My chin was 90-degrees skyward as I gazed in astonishment toward the plateau’s shelf when Aaron spotted a rock shelter with a small window about 20 feet above where we paddled. A ruin from another time that was probably a granary from the Fremont people, Dylan said. It amazed me to see evidence of a people that had roamed and lived and hunted and gathered in these canyons for tens of thousands of years. The ecosystems provided the essentials: food, animal skins, clay for pots, medicines, willows for baskets. The landscape, which at first appears inhospitable, is actually rich with natural resources.

As the contour of the canyon continued to change, the river intensified.



The receding water level of Lake Powell has left noticeable bathtub rings on previously submerged canyon walls.

Smooth, straight stretches of water became rare and a higher frequency of thrilling curves now filled with silver-crested currents. The flow boosted from 30 to 40 CFS due to back-to-back days of sun with temps reaching 80 degrees Fahrenheit, combined with the narrowing canyon. What had mostly been a Class III river so far intensified to Class IV+.

I had a flashback to what Dylan had said to me that morning when we pushed off from our camp at 25-Mile Wash: “We have to be extra careful at this point. We’re so far from anything—any trailhead or road or way out. This is the most remote section of river.”

I had just begun to understand the meaning of remote. Navigation required complete focus. Seconds of reprieve were filled with gawking at the scale of the canyon walls, which increased in magnificence and swallowed us. Concerns and the outside world were walled out, because they needed to be.

As we neared the belly of the Escalante, the walls doubled in prominence to nearly 1,000 feet high. We were mere specks in the company of such a steep enclosure. Mile 52 featured a prominent horseshoe bend that stretched for a half-mile and curled so drastically that it nearly closed itself into a complete circle. A few miles further, we reached the epicenter of it all. The canyon reopened and revealed a 360-degree fortress of reddish-brown fins and buttes. We pulled our boards up to a soft, ivory sandbar, threw off our shoes and climbed the slope beyond the beach, a dune of vibrant red sand the texture of cashmere. The bright blue sky pierced our eyes in contrast to the red earth. Below us, emerald Cottonwoods lined the river. This surreal vortex of nature was the furthest from civilization that we’d be on the Escalante.

The next day was our most trying yet. Aside from testy rapids our water filters all clogged up. And then a storm hit. We stashed our SUPs and scrambled up a steep, rocky bank to a shelter—a small cave created by a lean-to of ginormous sandstone boulders that Dylan spied from the water—before the rain turned into jawbreaker-sized hail. Thirty minutes later, the downpour stopped. We peered warily out from our asylum and watched a flash flood appear before our eyes: a gigantic waterfall plummeted from the top of the bench down to the Escalante. We watched the river rise.

Back on the water, the higher flow doubled our pace. The now-constant rapids required an unwavering focus, but the rain had soaked me to the bone. Unable to stop shivering, I sat on my SUP, crossed my legs and paddled my board like a canoe. Two hours later the sun came out. Jordan and Morgan had paddled a bit ahead and stood on a large boulder snapping photos. I pulled over to do the same. Dylan appeared from around the bend and parked his SUP next to mine.

Minutes passed. “Where’s Aaron?” Dylan asked before adding, “It’s been way too long.” Several more minutes ticked by before we saw him appear across the river, crouched on a rock, pale and shaken.

There's nothing like being on a river during golden hour. Aaron Kloer enjoys the moment.



“Dylan!” Aaron yelled. “I need help with my (board). It’s stuck.” Dylan walked upriver and found a place to cross. Fifteen minutes passed. Finally, they paddled toward us.

Dylan waited until we reached camp that night to disclose what happened. Aaron had nearly been trapped in a sieve: when water flows between two or more narrow places, like a crack in a rock or between and under boulders. Once a person or board slides into the entrapment and gets pinned, rescue is difficult if not impossible. At the time, Aaron had been the last one in our train. The whitewater forced him into a tall corner, which was created by 20-foot tall boulders with the current being pulled beneath. Thrown from his SUP, the board was lodged hard against the rock face. Scared of being sucked under, adrenaline kicked in, he told us. He leapt up and against the wall, grabbed a piece of driftwood that was wedged in a crack and was able to pull himself up and out.

We were silent as the gravity of what had happened began to sink in. In the shell-shocked moment, we were grateful he was still there. It was our final night of sleep along the water, and we were mentally and physically sapped. We laid in our sleeping bags on the milky sand beneath a tremendous alcove, which provided protection from the weather and a window to the stars.

I woke up anxious at daybreak. Our map ended at mile 81, but our route continued further, all the way to Lake Powell. Due to the reservoir’s drop in recent years there was a possibility of encountering thick mud, in which case we would need to pull our boards until we reached water, for who knew how many miles. That and an awareness of our journey’s end made the morning routine bittersweet. We were exhausted but enamored with the mystique of the canyon and each, in our own way, appreciated the intensity of the adventure. As we set out the water took a final turn: it got so calm that we practically sailed to Lake Powell.

After six days of paddling, we officially reentered civilization when a group

of motor boaters called out to us. “Holy shit. You guys just did what!?”

They tossed out a line, threw us beers and towed us to our lagoon, where we’d arranged for a speedboat shuttle to pick us up the next day. Later, after we settled into our camp—a football field-sized cave that overlooked the water—the five-member crew returned with their houseboat, loud music and more beer. In a way, the serene and final closure that I’d imagined for our Escalante expedition was stolen. But Lake Powell—and all of the recreational activities for which it’s valued—occupies that space now.

Though sections of the Escalante River were extremely isolated, other segments were far from being unoccupied. The highest concentration of traffic we saw was in Neon Canyon. We hiked up Neon’s vein to savor the famous Golden Cathedral formation: a cavernous overhang comprised of three layered pothole arches. Light pierced through the cavities, bounced off the pool below and created a mystical reflection on the red sandstone ceiling. A few canyoneers rappelled from a single orb, one-by-one.

The number of hikers, backpackers, packrafters and canyoneers we saw that day totaled to about twenty-five in great part due to that area’s accessibility, the equivalent of a day’s walk from multiple trailheads. Big picture, though, is that the monument’s year-over-year traffic is as high as it’s ever been. And for good reason.

It’s true that I personally feel most replenished through the solitude gifted by the wilderness. But I can’t feel resentment toward other people who seek it too. Everyone’s version of adventure is a form that fulfills one’s own self: my personal ideal is minimalist and middle-of-nowhere, which bears its own risks. What’s more important than the mode of adventure—walking, rappelling, standup paddling—is the proactivity and vocalization needed to preserve and protect such precious places from development. My grandparents were among the last people on this earth to walk along a riverbed that was known as Eden. I’d return to paddle the Escalante in a second, to absorb and celebrate its grandeur as it stands today. My wish, paradoxically, is that the Escalante were still a small stream. Then the other half of its steep canyon walls and their secrets would still be alive for all to discover. —