

## Forbidding Canyon Excursion



*September, 2013  
Chi Chan*

## Returning to the Rainbow Plateau

- into the Forbidding Canyon



*Far across the red valley, far beyond the ragged line of black mesa and yellow range, lay the wild canyon with its haunting secret – Zane Grey, the Rainbow Trail*

Standing by the Round Rock Trailhead, I wheel to gaze out and down to the somber and compelling landscape. Forbidding Canyon appears lonely, wide and grand. Nothing moves below, but a raven sails by, black as coal, uttering a hoarse croak. A southwestern author, Irvin Cobb once wrote:

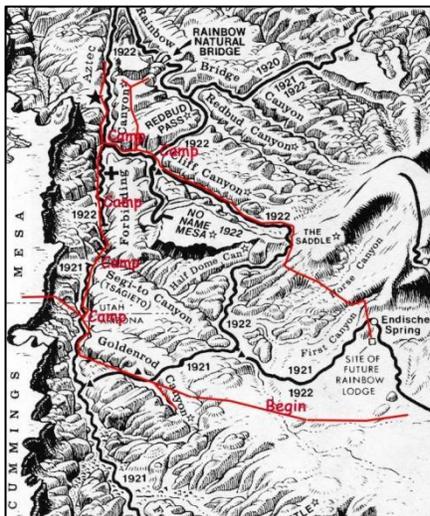
*“I’m reasonably sure that none of our species will ever get down into Forbidding Canyon or, having got down there, ever get out again. So you see it is appropriately named.....Birds fly above it but it is reasonably certain that no living creature, anyway no two-footed or four-footed creature exists in it”*



The unfathomable terrain, billows of bare red stone, carved and scoured by wind and sand, reaching mile after rocky mile into the intricate network of white, red and yellow canyons, creates this seemingly impenetrable labyrinthine maze. Beyond the horizon, nonetheless is this wonderful mystic haze of distance. Four years ago, I was here. Six of us were not prepared for the hardship. Unexpected and prolonged rain worsened our situation. Suffering from physical exertion, we eventually turned back. For four years, I dreamed about coming back.

Today, the landscape before me is as rugged, desolate and bare as I remember. The peace and silence, openness and freedom are also as overwhelming as I felt four years ago. I once again have this peculiar kind of excitement..... When it is time to go, I swing my pack onto my back and walk down to this unforgiving ancient enigmatic land. Returning to the Rainbow Plateau not only is my dream, it is my calling.

## Our Route



*“Our route is followed by no one; we shall almost certainly have the area entirely to ourselves.”*

*- Richard Fite*

Our backpacking trip begins at the southwest flank of Navajo Mountain, at a rock formation known as Round Rock. Day 1, we follow a little used Navajo livestock trail into the Forbidding Canyon. Once we reach the bottom of the canyon, our adventure begins. Every day, we rise before dawn, explore side canyons, follow Navajo sheep trails to mesas, swim across deep pools, rappel down to cliff walls, rope up to rocky hills, and hike on steep slick rocks. It is a quest only for the brave soul!

## House on my Back

The author of “The Complete Walker” Colin Fletcher refers his backpack as a house on his back. When planning the house on our back, Mr. Fletcher says the rules are simple: Rule#1, if you need something; take it. Rule#2: Pare away relentlessly at the weight of every item. In paring away, you will find that if you look after the ounces, the pounds will look after themselves.

Few weeks before the trip, I received an e-mail from Richard, our leader stating that because every member of the group has to carry his/her share of commissary (group equipment and food) of 12-15 pounds, we should minimize the weight of our personal pack to no more than 20 pounds, including everything except water. If our pack is more than 25 pounds, it is NOT “ok”. He asserted that he would have a scale to weight our packs at the group meeting. I tend to over pack. With Richard’s warning, I must have packed and repacked my bag more than half a dozen times. I fought hard to let go most of the “girlish” items.

At the group meeting, Richard examines my bag and he advises me to leave out additional unnecessary items. Back in my hotel room, I once again reshuffle my pack. When at last I hoist the fully-furnished pack onto my back, it still weighs more than I have hoped, around 40 pounds. But I decide to leave my pack as it is and let the experience show me what items are not essential.

Getting this monster pack on my back is also another challenge. The easiest way to load is to use a loading platform – a convenient rock ledge or bank or fallen tree trunk, and then I just slip my arms through the straps. If during the trip, I fail to find such platform, I can always ask my teammates to help me, and it turns out Jerry and Georg are such graceful helpers!



## My two hiking buddies

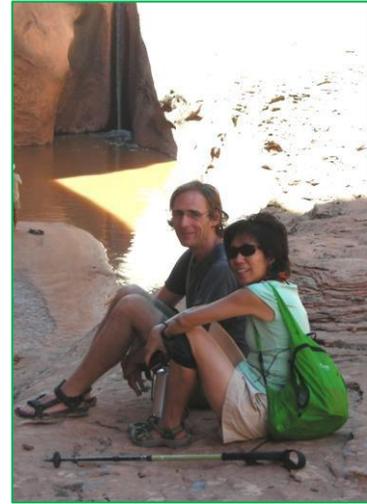


**Jerry**

For the seven days, Jerry, Georg and I develop a good relationship. Every day after we haul our packs, it becomes an unwritten rule that Jerry would be hiking behind me, and I would stay closely to Georg. Georg and I have a similar walking pace; actually he is a better hiker than most of us. Georg is from Austria, he is tall and lean, quiet and only speaks when is spoken to His backpack is the coolest. Georg is very disciplined, follows Richard’s instruction 100%. He even skips his camera to lessen the weight! He must have the lightest pack among all of us, but he is a nice guy, always volunteer to carry extra commissary. Another amazing thing about Georg, he is a vegetarian! I do not know where he gets his energy to carry such a heavy load and hike so effortlessly. He is a likable guy; we all welcome this foreigner to our “American” group.

Jerry, on the other hand, is a steady hiker. He does not always catch up with us, but with his extra-long legs (he is more than 6 feet tall) he manages to stay closely behind me. Whenever we stop for a break, he would sit next to me and ask me bunch of strange questions. We get along, Jerry and I even team up to perform group cooking duties with no mishaps.

Georg



### A leisurely Canyon Walk





Day one is an easy hike down to the canyon floor. Once we reach the bottom, we rest next to a shallow creek. Richard urges us to change to our water shoes for we will explore a side canyon. We follow the creek and enter into a narrow gully. Immediately, the red walls tower few hundred feet above us. Whenever I come to a canyon country, I love to take time and explore the side canyon, particularly the small ones. I find them extremely delightful.



While most group members advance ahead, I stay behind to fully enjoy my surroundings. The canyon widens and deepens and stretches farther on between tremendous walls of red, and splits its winding floor with glimpses of a gleaming rivulet. Inside this small canyon are looming stone walls and whispering cottonwood. In some places, the walls are so high and sunlight is impenetrable. The blackness, too, seems rather comforting.



Around the corner where the sun filters in, the great cliffs turned gold, the creek changes to glancing silver, the green of trees vividly freshens, and in the clefts, ray of sunlight burns into the blue shadows. The creek is clear, swift, deep in some places and shallow in others. It murmurs strangely with a hollow gurgle. The untainted air and the sweetness of silence are intoxicating.

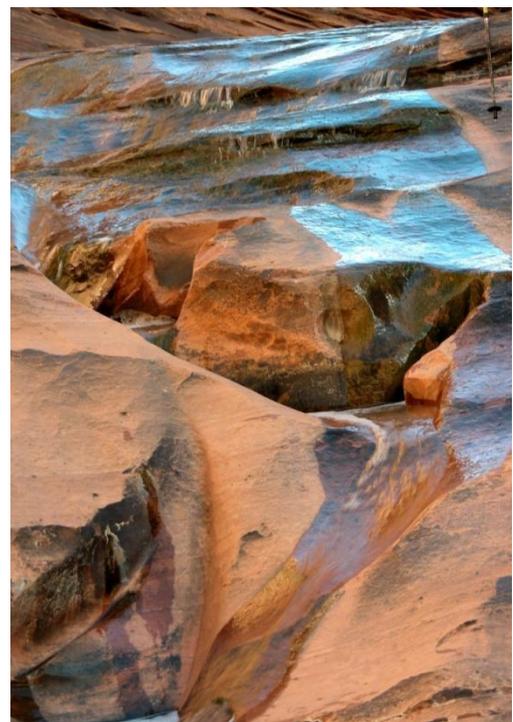


The walls are naturally decorated with dark straight lines where seeps and rainwater have stained the reddish stone. The naturalist calls them tapestry walls. I am truly mesmerizing by this magical hideaway. Inside this delightful canyon, one should dream instead of think! (Dream Georg dream!)



To me, the canyons with running streams are the most beautiful, some alive with green vegetation, others have a dry, rocky streambed, but there is beauty in those, too.

This little side canyon has water flows all along the way. Here and there the water comes down in little cascades over layered rocks, rippling down over the edges, creating beautiful patterns. The scene changes around each corner.



## Cummings Mesa



*"Land that God forgot"*



2<sup>nd</sup> day is our layover day. We leave our heavy packs behind and climb up to the top of

Cummings Mesa. Once we cross the Aztec Creek, the entire hike is on desert land. This 5,800 feet mountain peak looks like a monster. From a far distance, its vertical wall seems impossible to scale. But once we reach the mountain base, a zigzagging narrow trail is discernible. The climb is very steep in many places and the trail is hard to follow at times since recent rainstorms have washed away parts of the trail. The loose rocks and sandy path make the hike become increasingly difficult.

Over the years, I have developed a technique to climb steep hills. The key is not to rush, control my breathing, find my own pace and hike with an even rhythm. I use this tactic to hike, to job, to walk. Once my heartbeat slows down and my breathing turns normal, the steep hill no longer bothers me. I can climb, hike, or run miles and miles without stopping. Another important thing about hiking is to keep the momentum. I prefer not to take many breaks, and limit break time to no more than a few minutes. Once the momentum is broken, it takes a long time for the body to warm up again.

Without the heavy pack, the hike is manageable. The only obstacle is the glaring sun. The entire hike is without shade. Noon, we reach a rocky alcove hidden from the sun, just an ideal spot for our group lunch. An hour later, we reach the top with a fantastic panoramic view.

One side, the majesty Navajo Mountain looms above the plateau; Forbidding Canyon stretches all the way to Lake Powell. Across the mesa are waves and waves of wild canyons forming intricate passages twisting and turning to the end of the horizon. I certainly do not want to hike down there alone, or I will never be able to get out alive.



On top of the Mesa, potholes are here and there. Recent rains have filled them with rain water. These temporary water pools attract ravens, birds, deer and coyotes. I am hoping to see some tadpoles, but none are visible. Some pools are beginning to dry out under the hot sun. A few members take off their shoes and socks; immerse their feet to a shallow pool. Soaking your feet in cold water after a strenuous hike is the best way to release soreness of your feet. I am a true believer!

### **Contentment in Backpacking**

After the Cummings Mesa hike on day 2, I begin to realize why this trip is rated 4 out of 5 in term of difficulty. Every night after reaching camp, I cannot wait to get off my pack that has tortured me, rush to take a canyon bath to relax my stiff and sore muscles. Later at camp, I have



an almost insatiable appetite. Once I crawl inside my tent, I appreciate the luxury of lying down. My extreme fatigue soon yields to the quiet and rest of my sleeping pad, engendering a drowsiness that proved irresistible. My mind drifts on until at last I succumb to drowsiness. These experiences, I discover are giving me unexplainable delights.

For the past 10 years, I have trained myself to a point where the outdoor life is not too much for my strength. I can walk on difficult terrain, hike miles without stopping, sleep on hard floors and bathe in creeks, sit on rocks, eat simple foods, and tolerate scorching sun, freezing wind or pouring rain. In exchange, I see beauties, taste freedom and solitude, experience life that was rustic and simple but yet, happy and satisfactory.

This 7-day backpacking trip has given me the same sensation. Every morning, I am energized by the morning call; the sweet melody of Richard's flute playing. Magically fatigue vanishes, strength resumes, and smile appears on my sleepy face again. I look forward to a new adventure lies ahead. I forget about the outside world. It does not exist; all my existence is this beautiful wilderness!

### **The Labyrinthine Canyon Floor**

At the bottom of the canyon floor, there is nothing ordinary. One minute, we are walking inside a desiccated gulch; next bend the canyon changes to an emerald green oasis. The water does magic to these canyons!

## Another Magical Canyon - Cliff Canyon



Seeing this waterfall alone is worth the entire trip. Day 5<sup>th</sup>, after we load our pack, Richard promises us a lovely swim in a deep pool. We follow a serpentine rivulet meandering deep into the Forbidding Canyon.

An hour into our hike, the stream abruptly disappears on the edge of drop off. A vertical slot cut, no more than inches wide slices deep into the rocky face, channels the stream to a thin waterfall plummeting to a greenish still pool beneath. Inside the pool, there are hungry fishes nibbling our toes, indulging themselves with our salty feet.

After a swim, few of us leave the pool and follow Richard to further explore the canyon. A little farther on, the majesty of the canyon is upon us. The untamed environment reminds me what Richard once said, *“Our route is followed by no one; we shall almost certainly have the area entirely to ourselves”*, and he is right. We see no one, and are followed by no one during the entire trip.

The deeper we enter into the canyon, the wilder it becomes. Quicksand is everywhere. A huge boulder the size of a truck had landed in the middle of the stream, obstructing the course of the river flow. Behind the rock jam, the streambed is littered with sizable rocks, pebbles, tree trunks and debris, creates a chaotic scene. But in front of the rock jam is a series of idyllic pools with no trace of any rubble and debris, containing nothing but crystal clear water. It is such a contrast, truly an amazing display of nature. Nearly at the end of our walk,



another waterfall appears! The creek is funneled down to a perpendicular wall, where the constricted stream plunges in amber and white cascades over fall after fall, tumbling, rushing, and singing its water melody.

That is why I love a canyon walk. Every canyon is different and each impressive in its own way. Some are deep, dark, and narrow, intricately carved by rushing floodwaters, others, wide and sunlit with clear streams on sandy bottoms, bordered by rushes, fern, willows, and cottonwoods. The azure blue of the sky, the reddish brown of the canyon walls, and the fresh green of plants and trees, all are so appealing that I can walk for hours, always wishing and waiting to see what is around the next bend.

## Daily Campsite



When we enter into the Forbidding Canyon, Aztec Creek becomes our permanent water source. Our daily campsite almost always situates next to this creek, or a deep pool, sometime even overlooks an attractive waterfall. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> night, I deliberately erected my tent on top of a small rocky area right across from a singing cascade. Each night I fall asleep with this soporific sound, so relaxing and comforting.

As for setting up my camp, at first I have a hard time, often misplacing items and getting myself frustrated. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, I become more organized; develop a skill to perform daily housekeeping more efficiently. Each item inside my pack now has its own place. Putting up my tent in the evening and dismantling it in the morning take me less and less time and effort, which allows me to spend more time relaxing around camp, such as taking an evening bath.

Nothing soothes me more than having a cool canyon bath after a tough hike. The most delightful campsite for the entire trip is on the 5<sup>th</sup> night when we camp at the junction of Forbidding and Cliff canyons. Cliff Canyon has a permanent stream as well. Unlike the Aztec Creek which has a sandy bottom, the stream inside Cliff Canyon flows over rocks and the water is crystal clear. When Richard leads us to the mouth of Cliff canyon, I notice two small water holes, just the right size for my evening bath. When everyone is busy taking care of their housekeeping, I slip out of camp quietly with my towel and head to the water hole.

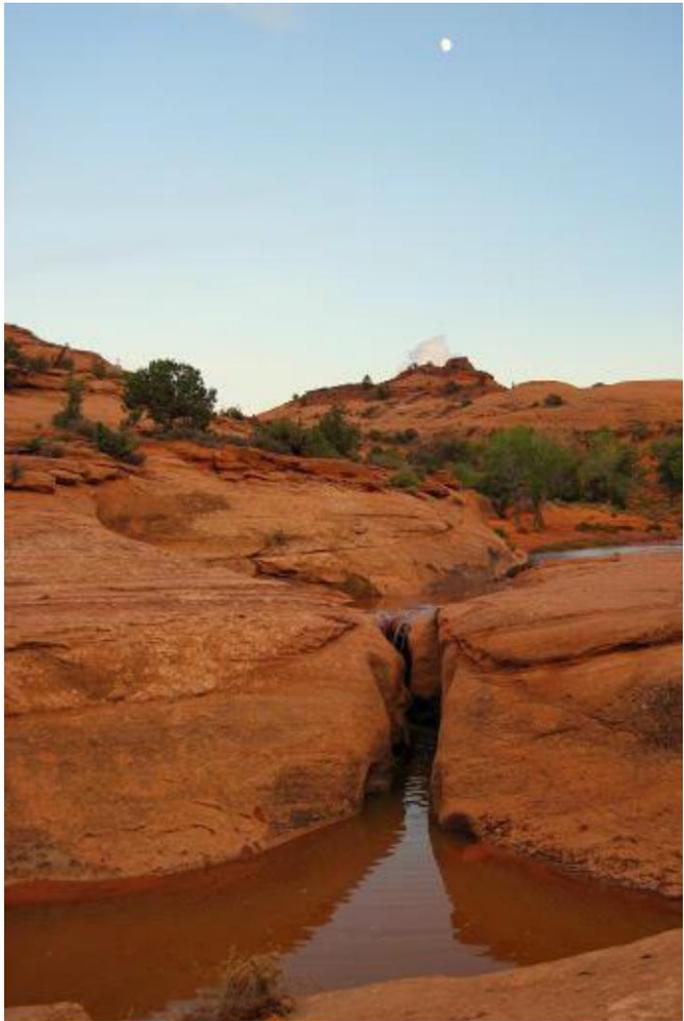
The 1<sup>st</sup> waterhole is small and exposed. The 2<sup>nd</sup> one is further down and has a young cottonwood tree growing next to it. It forms a protective shield blocking any uninvited attention. I quickly undress, sit on the bottom of the pool and relax. The water is cool but not cold, still has the touch of the afternoon sun. The water washes away my fatigue, dirt and sweat. The invigorating bath sends me to heaven. For that moment, life is nearly perfect.

The week we camp down in the Forbidding Canyon coincides with the full moon cycle, the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival. Every night, we have this incredible bright orange full moon as our lantern. One night we all sit on the top of a small hill, watch as the moon gradually comes out behind a canyon

wall, casts its soft bright light on our camp, treetops, canyon walls and the bottom of the Aztec creek. The moonlight is so bright that we do not even need a headlamp to walk around camp. Richard Proenneke once said,

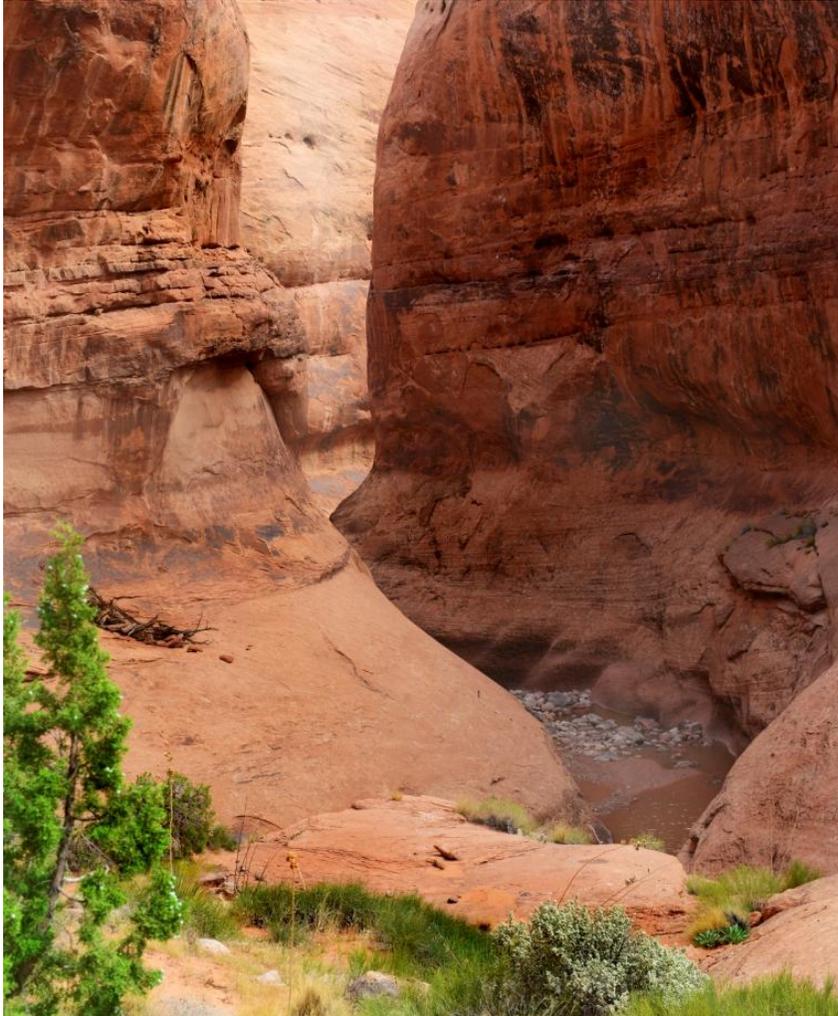
*“I have found that some of the simplest things have given me the most pleasure. They don’t cost me a lot of money either.....the world is full of such things”*

A canyon bath is one of these things and moon bathing is definitely another!



*My tent overlooks this singing cascade, and the moon is shining down to our camp.*

## The Anasazi Artifact



On the morning of day 5<sup>th</sup>, Richard has a surprise for us. He does not want to tell us what it is, only mentions that the surprise is only 100 feet from our campsite. He leads us to a precipice a few hundred feet above the canyon floor. Below, Aztec Creek is shimmering in the morning light. Facing us is another impressive canyon wall ornamented by stripes of black water. Richard takes out a rope and asks Ron to tie the rope around his waist.

*“There is an artifact underneath the cliff. I will lower you down with the rope. There should be a small ledge wide enough to support your feet. Once you touch the niche, squat down and you will see it. Don’t touch it and don’t tell others what it is, ok?”*

One by one, my teammate descend to the ridge; peek down to the cliff with amazement but one would reveal the nature of the

artifact. When it is my turn, I find my heart beating fast. Is it a mummy, a grave, a cliff dwelling or a cave full of treasures? Richard assures me that I will not be disappointed.

He begins to lower me to the overhang. Physically, I am shorter than my teammates so I have a hard time landing my feet to that “ledge”. Richard lets go the rope further and at last, my right foot feels a hard surface, I look down between my legs and find that “ledge”. Once I am able to position myself safely, I squat down and search for the artifact.

*“Oh my god!”*

There before me, just underneath the overhang and tucked into that two-foot aperture sits a Anasazi pot. I get on my knees and peer closer. The pot is about the same size of a football, probably can hold 2 gallons of water. It is covered in a thick layer of ancient dust; a few cracks and tiny hole are visible on its base. Other than this imperfection, the pot is completely intact.

It is difficult to identify the color of the pot without brushing off the soil. The pot is very ordinary with no apparent decorations or stylish designs. I suppose, the pot had been cached in this concealed spot by the owner, placed here for a purpose, perhaps to store valuable items, perhaps to hide it away on this ledge where the wrong ones would not find it, or perhaps to place here temporarily and retrieve it later, but the owner never came back. For at least 700 years (as Richard suggested), the pot had rested in its niche, saved from the weather by the overhang above, and preserved by the dry desert air. I cannot help but wondering how many human eyes had gazed on

this pot between the owner's and ours'.

Richard slowly reveals the mystery of this ancient artifact. A few years ago, he led a group of hikers here. They were walking on the opposite side of the canyon. One hiker looked across to our current campsite. He espied an object tucked underneath a small opening. He informed Richard and the following year, Richard came back with the climbing equipment and examined the pot. When Richard finishes his story, he looks down to the cliff once more with a very caring tone of voice and says,

*"The best way to protect this pot from pothunters is not to mention this pot"*

For the past five years, I have grown a deep affection for the canyon countries and the people who once occupied these lands. My curiosity about their lives, their culture, and their mysterious disappearance has grown to



become an obsession. I read many books, explored as many canyons, pre-historic cliff dwellings, ancient pictographs and petroglyphs as possible. I saw many Indian artifacts; including those displayed in the Smithsonian Museum but actually witness one in its natural setting is beyond my wildest dreams. The pot has not yet been discovered and touched by any Archaeologist. How privileged and honored I feel today. For a few seconds, I have this strange spiritual connection with the pot owner. *How mystified it is to see this Anasazi Pot sitting there. How many years had passed and how many human eyes had gazed on this pot between its owner's and ours?*

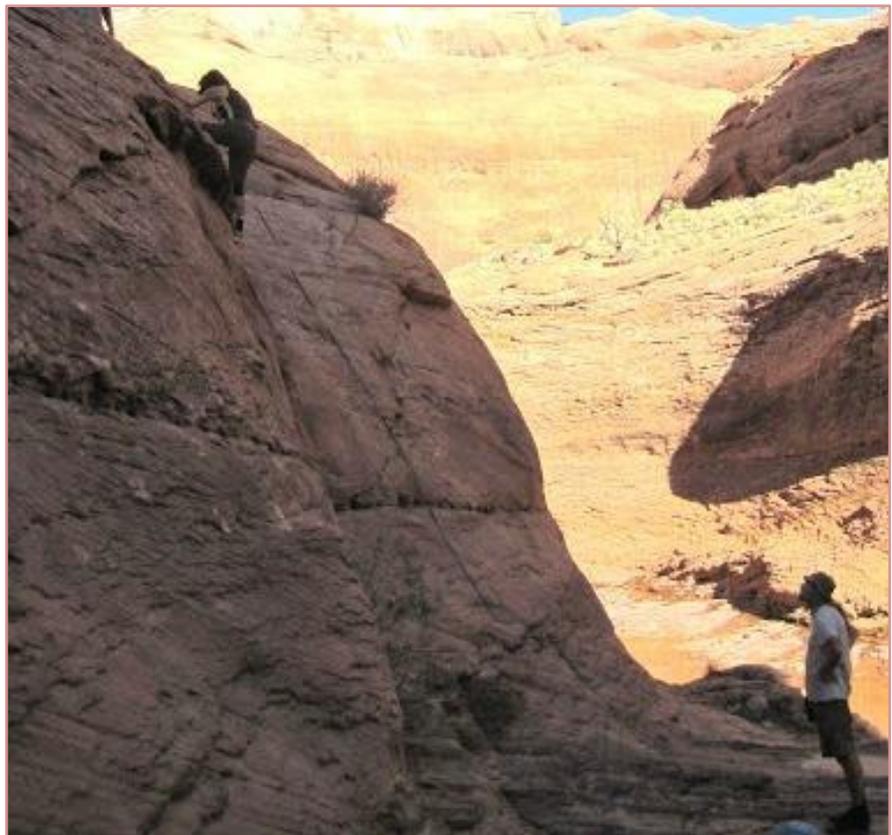
Coming to the canyon country with my other hiking friends, often I was frustrated with their ignorance of the geographic features of the land and their unwillingness to educate themselves about the history and culture of these places. Travelling with Richard and my teammates, I realize I have made the right decision. Whenever I mention a book or an article that I read, someone in my group would immediately acknowledge my reading. When I express my love of the scenery, my teammates zealously resonated my feeling. We talk the same language; share the same respect for the native Indian. When eight of us realize the existence of this valuable artifact, we feel not even a moment's impulse to dig the pot out and bring it home or to a museum. We are no treasure seekers. The pot should remain where it is; continue to wait for its rightful owner.

## Facing Many Unprecedented Challenges



I have been at the top of Kilimanjaro and at the foothills of Himalayas, suffered from high altitude sickness and severe cold. I have been in a steamy hot Venezuela jungle, tortured by hundreds of insect bites and extreme humidity

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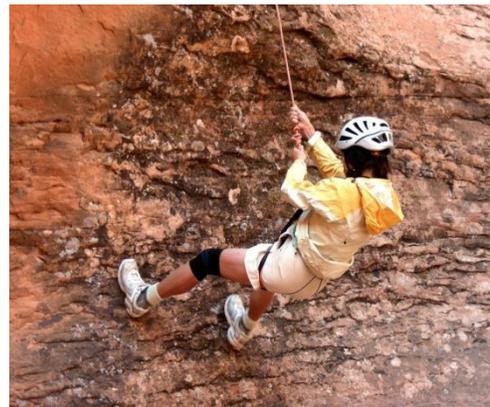


I have been in the Sahara Desert in Sudan, ached with food poisoning and a scorching sun, and I have been on top of Mt. Rainier, exhausted every ounce of my energy and dreaded if I could ever get down to the mountain on my own. Those experiences, at times frightened me and scared me to death.



Today, I carry this heavy “house” on my back, swim across a deep pool, rappel down to a cliff face, lifting myself up to a rocky hill with a rope. For thirteen hours, I hike from dawn to dusk, climb up to high passes, run down to a deep canyon, and suffer tremendous pain on my neck, back and shoulders. The experience, once again gives me chill. Will I ever stop, I wonder?

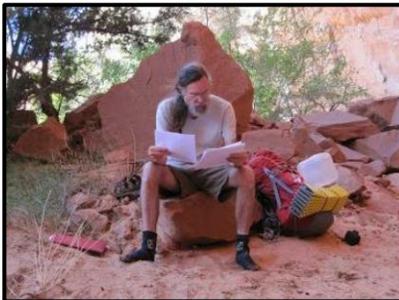
As crazy as it may sound, **I enjoy every moment of the trip!**



## Nice Folks I met



**Navajo Mountain as our backdrop**



**Richard, our leader**

Richard says that we are the most talkative group he has so far. He is right. If we are not such a happy group, there would not be so much talking among us. Ron has endless adventure stories to share with us. Wayne is such a “cool” dad for us, he and Win always performed extra commissary duties for the group. Georg and Ron carry extra equipment to lessen our ladies’ loads. Jerry watches over me and rescues me from drowning. Kathy and Martha are gentle and caring, but their endurance is impressive. Richard and Carl, our two leaders

knowledgeable, cautious and always put our safety first.

The group pictures bring back so many sweet memories. These people I had never met, but since day one, they have been no strangers to me. We



chat, we exchange hiking experiences, we joke, we cook, we eat, we hike, we climb, we scream, we laugh, we share, and we are the best of friends until the end.

## Rainbow Bridge at Last and Getting out Alive!

Forbidding Canyon is very long, it stretches all the way to Lake Powell. Our original plan is to follow the canyon to the end and take a boat ride back to Page as our exit. But the recent rainstorm has washed away the dock and the entire Bridge Canyon is closed to hikers. I am disappointed. I waited for four years to see the Rainbow Bridge, and once again, I have to turn back.

Richard takes us up to a Mesa overlooking the Bridge. From the vantage point, this world-renowned natural wonder does not seem imposing. It actually takes me a while to identify it. But the Rainbow plateau remains as impressive as I saw it four years ago.



This infinitude of open sand and rock was beautiful, wonderful, and even glorious.

This “land that God forgot” is made up with waves after waves of canyons, forming an intricate passages twisting and turning to the end of the horizon.

*“I’m reasonably sure that none of our species will ever get down into Forbidding Canyon or, having got down there, ever get out again.”*

Irvin Cobb’s quote echoes in my mind once again as I look down to the labyrinthine canyon maze, but I am determined to go down there, feel, touch and stand underneath this sacred monument that has been worshipped by the local Indians for thousands of years. I shall return.

Next morning, we are up before dawn. The journey that takes us six days to travel now must be completed in one day. 13 agonizing hours later, we reach the Rainbow Lodge and our driver is nowhere to be seen. The rocky road trail is too much for the vehicle, we must walk another 2 miles. With much of pain and suffering, the journey finally comes to an end. Everyone is dog tired.

My neck, back and shoulders suffer, and the pain lasts for days, but the seven days I spent down in the Forbidding Canyon has been one of the most rewarding and happiest time of my life.....

*More pictures at:*

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/pof11czepkie5u5/lf6rKibhZj>

<https://picasaweb.google.com/cyberquester/ForbiddenCanyonTripPics2013?authuser=0&authkey=Gv1sRgCOXn8p-gybHBbA&feat=directlink#>

<http://www.richardfite.com/Forbidding-heart-of-the-rainbow.html>