

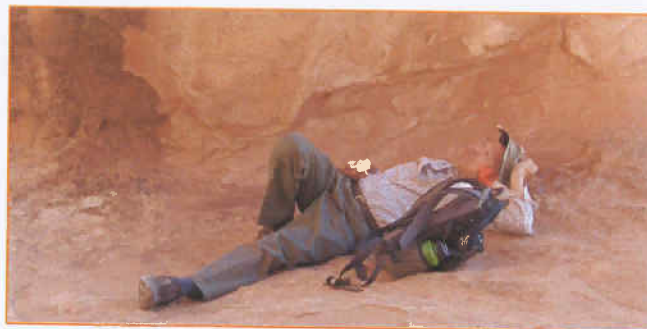
Desert Solitaire - Salt Creek Canyon

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.

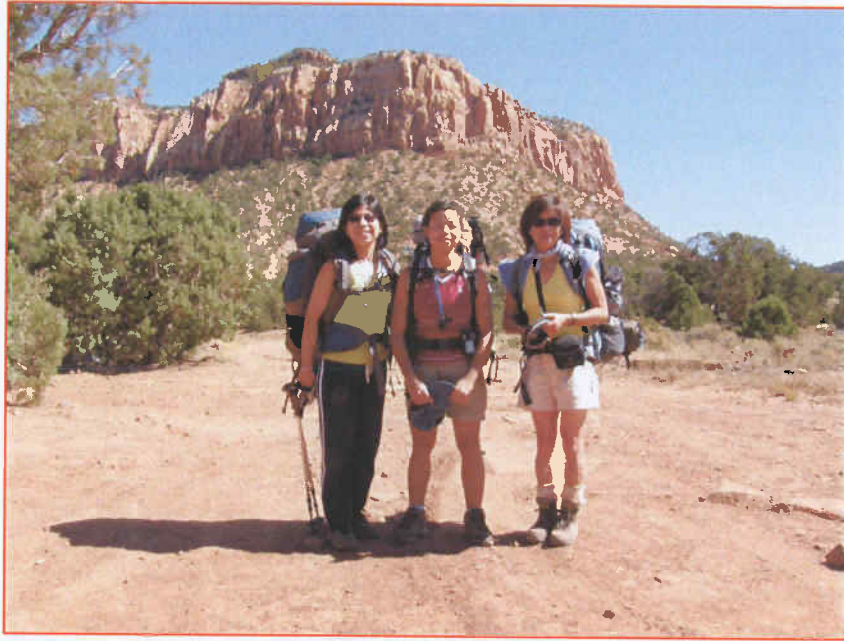
Here is the story of our two days backpacking adventure in one of the most remote places in the Utah desert.



By Chi S. Chan (section 1)
By H.Y. Lee (section 2)
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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.

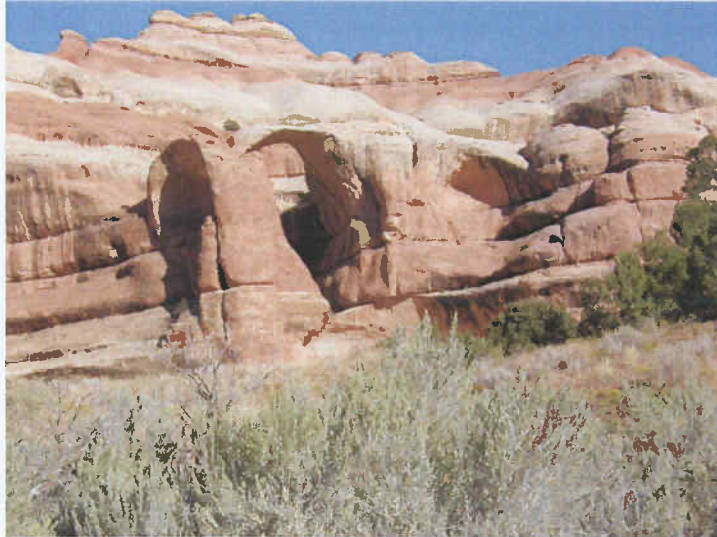
Gingerly, jumping from boulders to boulders, we begin a steep descent. Indistinctly, we can hear a voice coming from the bottom of the Canyon. We suspect it is Mr. Chen or Mr. Lee. As we get closely to the bottom, we can make out it is a male and a female voice. I recognize right away it is George, our 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.

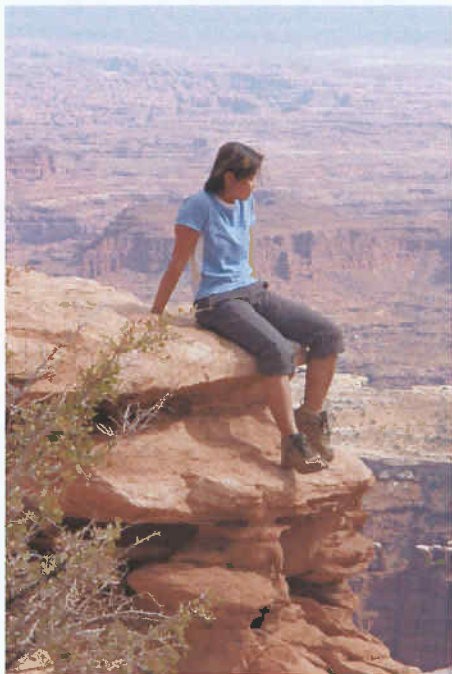
¹ Cairn: pile of rocks indicates direction along the trail.

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

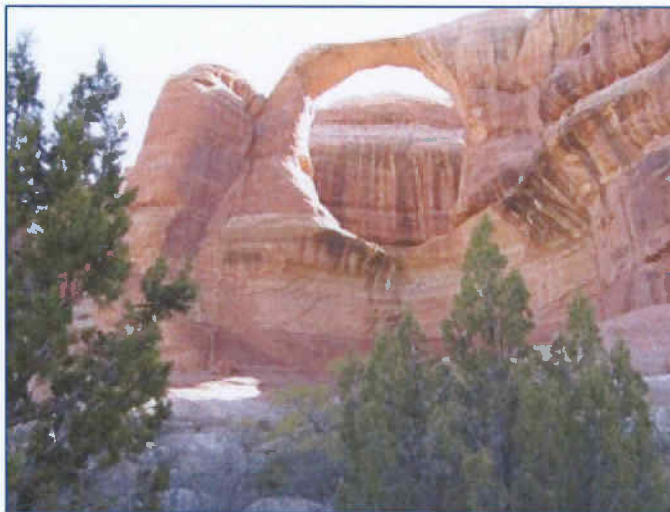
is recommended by the guide book to spend at least 3-4 days backpacking in the canyon. With only 1 ½ day time, we have to forgo almost all of the side trips Koti and I originally planned to do. Passing every canyon wall, I desperately look up to the ledge, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Anasazi ruin 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 trunk 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

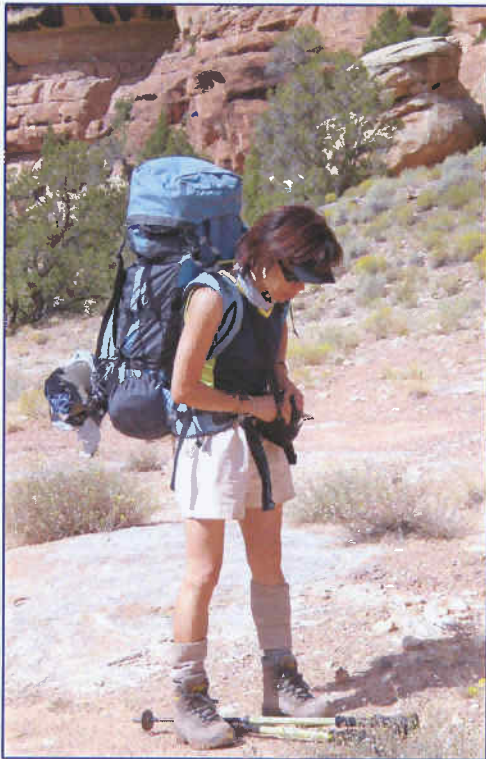
Last Water Source

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

