



Going Deep

Canyoneering in Escalante—a fear-conquering good time

SPRING WEATHER in Salt Lake can be unpredictable and depressing. (Remember the endless rain last year?) Not so for Escalante. During spring (and fall, another optimum time to visit), temperatures hover in the 70s, skies are blue, and the air is clean. With an open weekend and gas in the car, I needed an escape and I was dragging my new friend, Marty Nowakowski, with me.

Fit? Adventurous? Non-claustrophobic? Photographer? Yes to all of the above.

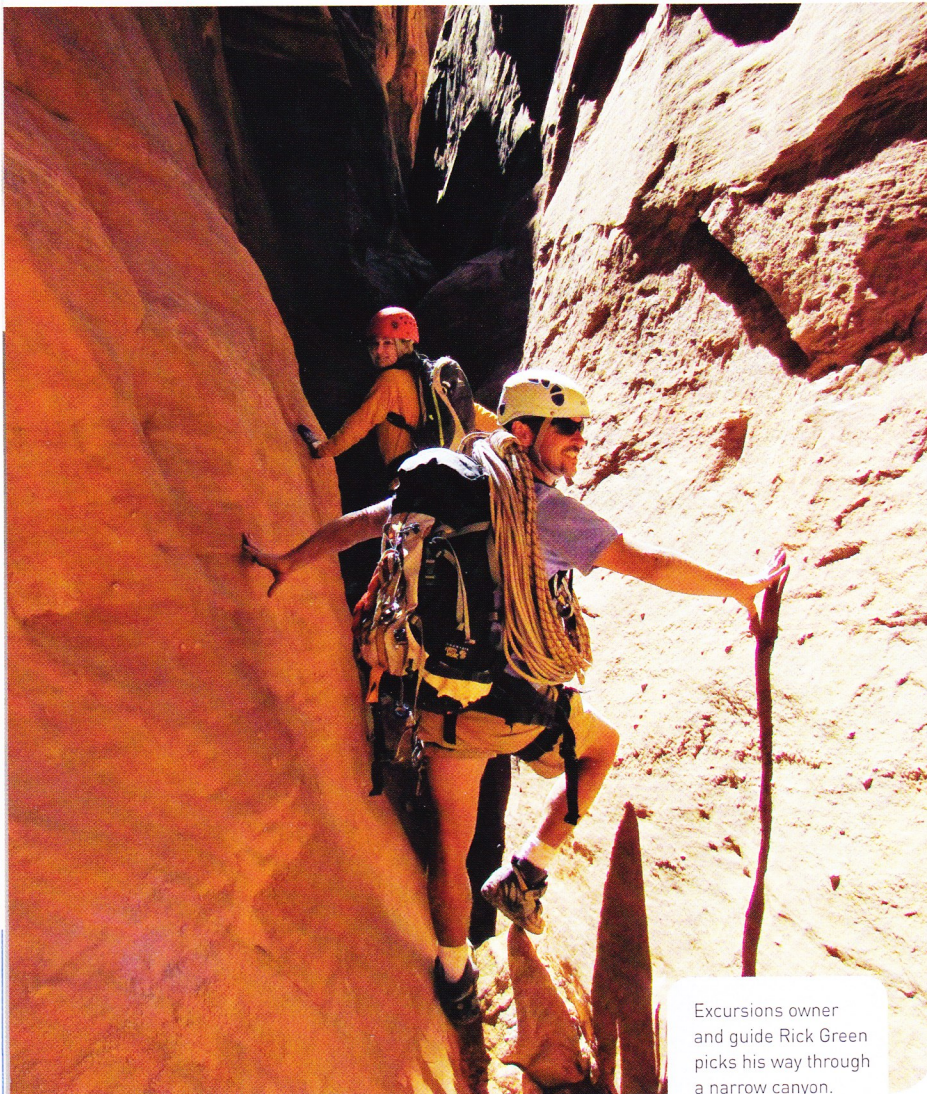
But I forgot to ask the most important question: Are you afraid of heights? Canyoneering is

not for the shy or faint-hearted. It's way out of bounds for acrophobes.

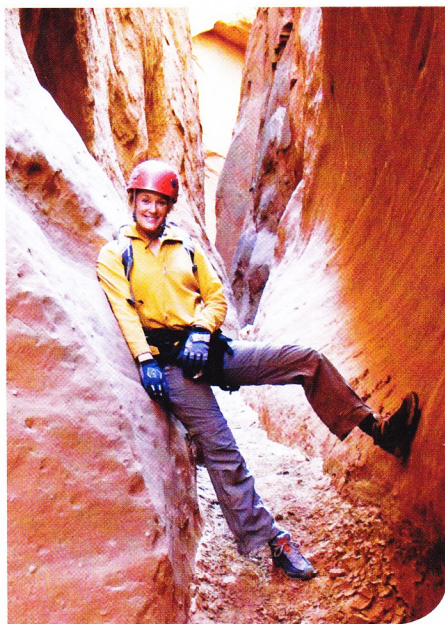
The action sport is a combination of hiking and mountaineering. You use climbing techniques like chimneying, stemming and mantling to rappel from 100 feet into areas too narrow for you to stretch your arms out. You use hiking techniques to slush through water pockets as shallow as your ankles or as deep as your armpits.

Down in the red rock slots of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, a person can end up lost, enchanted or dead depending on the weather.

The author and reluctant canyoneer Marty Nowakowski bridge a narrow section of slot canyon in Escalante.



Excursions owner and guide Rick Green picks his way through a narrow canyon.



The author poses at the bottom of the world.

Escalante is a small ranching community of 850 residents, and on a Sunday you'd think they were all out of town.

As we pulled closer to the small cottage location for Excursions of Escalante, I felt the excitement build. Marty's eyes simply bugged from fear. He sat quietly and I wondered if he was about to vomit.

We opened the creaky door and sat down at a small café booth. The walls were decorated with framed images of happy, helmeted faces squeezed amid sandstone waves. Does Marty hate me about now? Will he even go out? The outfitter's office also serves as country store, coffee house and ice cream stand. We picked up dinner supplies, got directions to the campsite and asked questions about the next day. Our guide and owner of Excursions, Rick Green, would meet us at 8 a.m.

The day started with Safety 101. Marty was quiet. Rick described the equipment we'd use and what to expect on our trek. Again, Marty's eyes bugged. I couldn't empathize.

TO GET THERE

Take I-15 South toward Las Vegas. Just past Nephi, take exit 222 for Utah Highway 28. After about 48 miles, Highway 28 becomes US Highway 89, through Salina. Merge onto I-70 West toward Richfield. After 7.5 miles, veer right onto Utah Highway 24 (Exit 48, Sigurd/Aurora) and take a quick left onto Utah Highway 259/Old Highway 89. Veer right onto Utah Highway 24 and continue on 24 through Sigurd. Keep right at the fork. Another 14.5 miles and turn right onto Utah Highway 12 near Torrey. In an hour (and past Boulder), you'll find Escalante.

For more information or to book your own canyoneering adventure, check out excursionsofescalante.com or call 800-839-7567.

WHERE TO STAY

There are several decent campgrounds in the area. **Calf Creek Falls Recreation Area**, the most scenic, fills up fast. **The Canyons B&B** and the **Escalante Grand Staircase Bed & Breakfast** are your town options. If you have the time, spend a night at the **Boulder Mountain Lodge** (bouldermountainlodge.com) in Boulder.

THE ACTION SPORT EMPLOYS A COMBINATION OF HIKING AND MOUNTAINEERING SKILLS TO LOWER YOU INTO AND TRAVERSE YOU THROUGH NARROW NATURAL PASSAGeways.

The day of rappelling 60 feet to the canyon floor and twisting through curls of desert stone sounded epic.

Rick, a scruffy little dude with a charming smile and gruff voice, promised he'd get us back to the car in one piece, and something about his John Wayne swagger said, "Trust me." Marty heard it, too. He must have, or he would not have roped up for Egypt 1—the first route.

We drove down Hole in the Rock Road, then turned off for another 20 miles on a teeth-rattling dirt track.

Rick chose a suitable canyon. We went over the gear, got a crash course in rappelling, put on helmets, harnesses, belay gloves and nerves,



2 Mountain Hardwear Corsica Convertible Pant and Canyon Long Sleeve, \$99–\$60

1 Gregory Trinity 18 Pack, \$70

4 Moving Comfort Alexis support tank, \$52

3 Petzl Cordex Plus Belay & Rappel Gloves, \$38

5 Montrail Hardrock Mid 09 GTX, \$150

+ WHAT I BROUGHT

1 Gregory Trinity 18 Pack—Thin for tight spaces. \$70, gregorypacks.com

2 Mountain Hardwear Corsica Convertible Pant and Canyon Long Sleeve. \$99–\$60, mountainhardwear.com

3 Petzl Cordex Plus Rappel Gloves—You need gloves. \$38, petzl.com

4 Moving Comfort Alexis support tank—Gorgeous support tank. \$52, movingcomfort.com

5 Montrail Hardrock Mid 09 GTX—Killer traction for slick rock. \$150, montrail.com

- WHAT I WISH I'D BROUGHT

>> Neosporin/Hydrocortisone—Nothing like the sting of raw flesh to remind you why you should always carry first-aid relief.

double-checked everything, then stepped over the edge.

I kept my feet on the sandstone, walking down the wall. Near the bottom, my feet came off the wall and I lowered myself through the air, touching down gently. Marty's turn.

He faced Rick and gingerly worked his way down; Rick and I both cheered him on. He came to rest next to me and took a breath. Was there a hint of a smile? We packed the ropes and headed into the canyon.

The walls of sparkling grit closed in on us, and with each variation, Rick demonstrated new techniques for tackling them—the seated bridge, the star bridge, the chimney.

We tried each, but Rick is meticulous about using the right one so no one gets hurt. He did forget to mention that I might want to cover up my bare shoulders. My seated bridge (with my back to the wall, legs out, pressing against the opposite wall) left about 30 layers of back skin behind.

We sat in the echo of a small stone alcove with the towering walls blocking the sky. We took our time savoring thick turkey sandwiches, hanging

on Rick's tales of canyon oddities and characters.

The rope came out a couple of more times as we worked our way through the canyon. Despite his fears, Marty got into the swing of things and was acting like a superhero.

But it would be easy to fail through zeal.

Respect for this hostile environment is key. One turned ankle and all of us suffer. The nearest hospital is miles away.

We popped out into the sunlight too soon. Less than three miles is just enough to get the juices flowing and not nearly enough to make me want to go home. I looked at Marty in time to witness the tension escape from his limbs.

His face relaxed. Yep, I sighed, we were done.

Back at the café, over a rich scoop of ice cream, I heard Marty ask Rick, "Did you see the tears roll down my cheek?" Rick said, "No." Marty said, "That's good. Because right then I realized how my fear might have kept me from experiencing one of the most beautiful, intense moments of my life. Thank you."

Now, I'm normally as solid as the rocks I climb, but that evening, I had a tear on my cheek, too. **SI**



😊 HIGHLIGHT OF THE TRIP

Stepping onto the sand and into the bright sun knowing that it was pouring rain back home in Salt Lake City. The savory scoop of Jamoca ice cream back at the café topped off that summery sensation.

☹️ BUMMER OF THE TRIP

I could have hiked for another five miles at least. Escalante is a vast network of redrock mazes. One day and one short trek were not enough to satiate this explorer.