



First person

Gearing up



Follow the leader

On the rocks

Sunset's editor and her daughter test themselves in the



The 300-foot drop

Canyoneering Utah

Escalante lies in southern Utah, about 300 miles northeast of Las Vegas and 300 miles south of Salt Lake City. Spring, early summer, and fall are the best seasons for canyoneering here. Rick Green's Excursions of Escalante runs canyoneering tours starting from \$145 a day;

hiking tours run \$125 a day. excursionsofescalante.com or 800/839-7567. **Canyons Bed & Breakfast** is the best overnight option in Escalante. *Open mid-Mar–Oct; rooms from \$125, including breakfast; canyonsbnb.com or 866/526-9667.*

I'M NOT AFRAID OF HEIGHTS. That's what I tell myself as I grip the rope and back slowly toward the 300-foot drop. My 16-year-old daughter, Caitlin, has already taken the plunge. How could I have let her go first? What kind of mother am I? Turns out the kind who can appreciate that my daughter has a lot to teach me.

Caitlin and I have come to Utah to learn canyoneering—exploring slot canyons, the narrow, deep passageways formed by water and wind rushing through rock. Caitlin has always been a don't-tell-me-I-can't-do-it kid. When I decided to take a two-day canyoneering trip here, I knew she'd be the perfect partner.

We're going with Rick Green, who owns Excursions of Escalante, at the heart of Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument. Rick's résumé was reassuring: He's guided tourists here for 10 years and works the search-and-rescue team.

We meet Rick and his girlfriend, Amie Fortin, at their office/cafe/natural-foods store in Escalante. And we meet our fellow hikers, Bob and Robin Rabinowitz, from New Jersey. All four of us novices are excited and nervous as we look at the photos of luminous canyons lining the office walls.

I watch Caitlin for signs of anxiety, but she listens raptly to Rick. He begins with safety, specifically weather. Flash floods are a desert phenomenon that can be fatal for hikers caught in these fast-filling crevices. Explore only when there's no threat of rain, Rick emphasizes. The minute we get outside, I look uncertainly up at the sky.

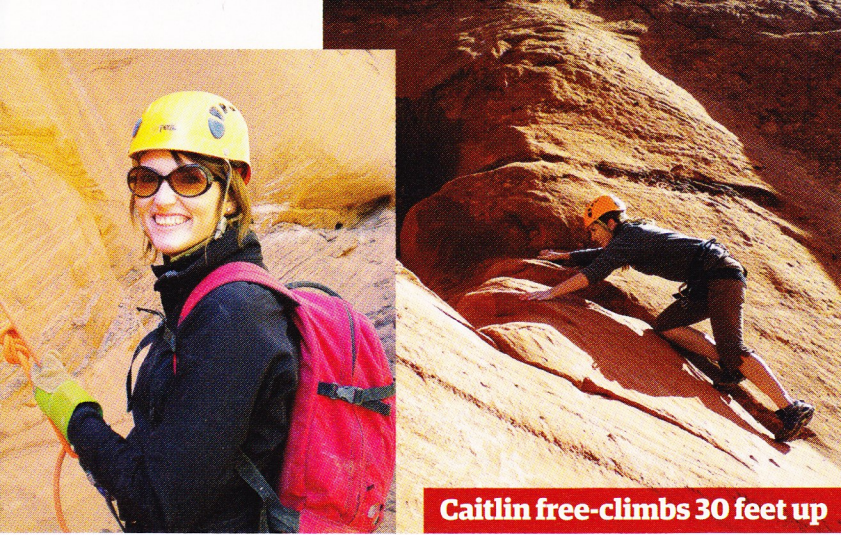
We head out on gravel roads to the Grand Staircase and our first canyon. We'll start with a 60-foot descent by harness and rope. Rick sends his assistant down first to show how it's done. Then he asks for volunteers. I surprise myself by raising my hand.

The hardest thing about descending is letting go of fear. You plant your feet against the rock and walk backward and down into the canyon, trusting the harness to hold you, trusting your own hand on the rope to guide your speed.

As I step backward, I glance at Caitlin. She rewards me with a look of wonder I hadn't seen since she became a teenager.

When all of us—including Caitlin, who descended easily—are

AMIE FORTIN/EXCURSIONS OF ESCALANTE (7)



Caitlin free-climbs 30 feet up

slot canyons of southern Utah BY KATIE TAMONY

safely down, Rick shows us the right ways to maneuver in the canyons. First, watch where you step, because a twisted ankle here is a real bummer. Also, at many points, the canyons are only 2 to 3 feet wide but more than 100 feet deep, with their floors boulder-strewn or otherwise impassable. So Rick demonstrates a seated bridge, where you put your backside against one canyon wall and feet firmly on the other. You progress by moving your butt first and sliding your feet along.

I had surprised Caitlin. Now it's her turn to impress me. Rick shows us a body bridge, where your body is parallel to the ground, and you press hands to one canyon wall and feet to the opposite. I lack the upper-body strength to do it, but Caitlin quickly becomes a master. Later, when we try free climbing, Caitlin climbs high up the canyon wall without a rope—another thing I can't do. It's not just her phenomenal physical shape that impresses me. It's her will to push her outer limits.

We walk several miles, alternating between hiking, sliding along the canyon walls, and rappelling. We're like little kids scrambling around on Mars, scraping against the red earth, getting bruised knees and not minding. Now when I look up for signs of a storm, I'm distracted by sunlight bathing the canyon. I feel like we're standing in the Earth's cathedral.

“The hardest thing about descending is letting go of fear”

At day's end, Caitlin and I are exhausted and exhilarated—and I've split my pants sliding along the canyon walls. Back at our B&B,

we shake off our dust-crusting clothes, shower, then call family to boast about our adventures.

Day 2 begins with Rick asking us if we want to tackle another 60-foot drop, or try a more daring 300-foot rappel. I look at Caitlin for an answer, but she's waiting on me. We're both pros now, admiring each other's technique and attitude.

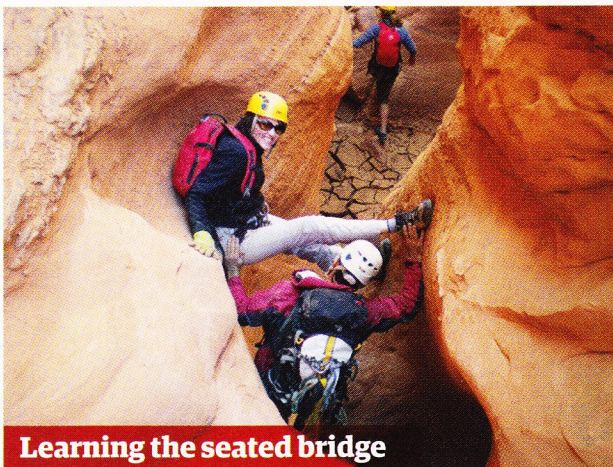
I tell Rick, “Let's go big or go home.”

Caitlin smiles broadly. “Way to go, Mom.”

We head out for the 300-foot drop. ■



Wedged in a canyon



Learning the seated bridge