

# Learning the ropes

## Introducing your child to the wilds of Utah: Canyoneering style

When my first son was young, I was haunted by nightmares of him falling from some arbitrary hotel balcony that I had somehow filed in my subconscious. He loved to climb, as all boys do, and I was terrified for his safety. Ironical, perhaps, since his mother is a former rock climber, has enjoyed skydiving and has been known to hike the razor edge of a mountain or two. But nonetheless, we fear for our children. As he grew older I accepted that he knew his balance and his body. It occurred to me that I could bond with him by introducing him to things that I found fulfilling and that he would also enjoy because of the adrenaline and challenge. I also realized, if done correctly, I could teach him how to participate safely in fun, adventurous and active hobbies.

"Christian," I say, "this is Rick. And Rick, this is Christian."

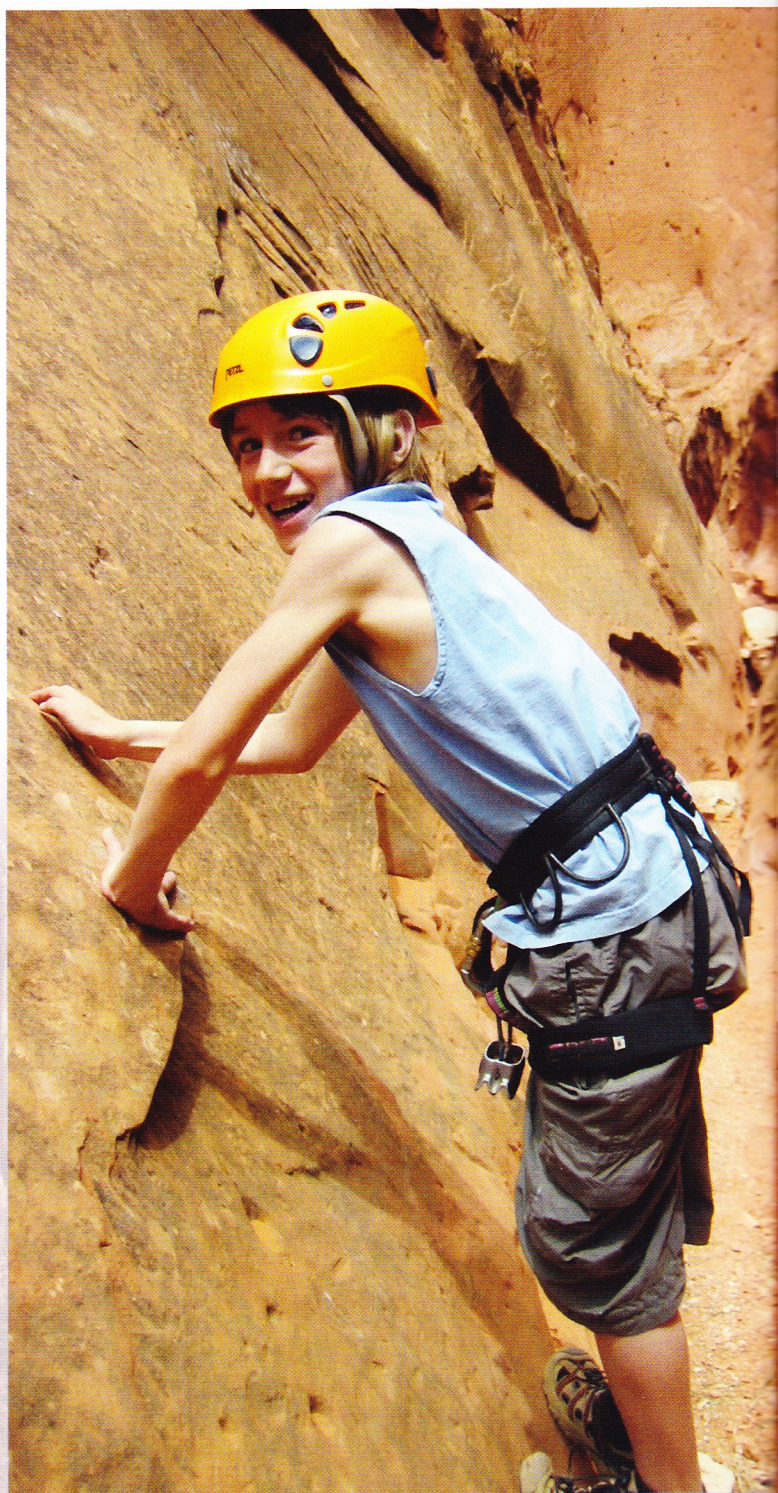
I am doing more than introducing my 11-year-old to Rick Green, the owner of Escalante Excursions and a nine-year veteran canyoneering guide; I am also introducing him to canyoneering.

Canyoneering is the sport of exploring narrow slot canyons through a variety of techniques including walking, scrambling, climbing, body friction, rappelling and swimming. Living so close to southern Utah's famous canyons, canyoneering offers challenging but thrilling outdoor recreation options.

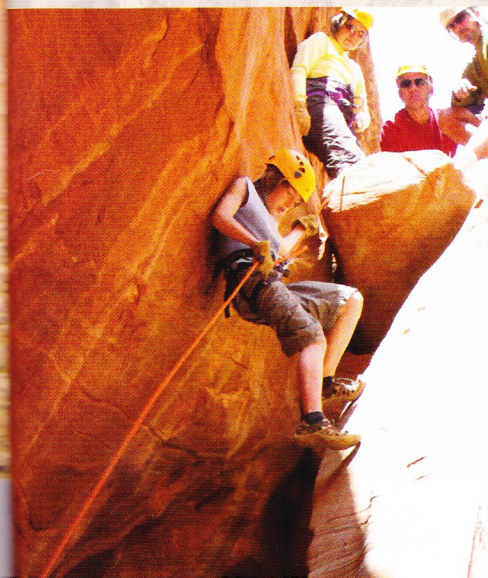
Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is one of many locations where superb canyons have been carved into the land. Today, we head out into a canyon called Egypt 2, with Rick in the lead and a group of six, to learn the ropes (pun intended).

The desert is a land of deceit. A simple look across to the horizon tells you that little but sage, juniper, grey sand and rocks inhabit the area, but when you know where to go, the ground falls away into hidden canyons that lace their way beneath the obvious in those gorgeous reds and oranges for which Utah is famous.

With packs, helmets and harnesses in place, we trundle across the slick rock, taking in the visual feast of a 300-foot drop as the canyon digs into the earth. We enter the slot,







## Respect the playing field: *Canyoneering essentials*

- The sun is real. Bring sunscreen, sunglasses and lip balm to protect yourself.
- Water can be your best friend in the desert — take plenty.
- Make sure you know the correct knots and rappel setups for safety and quick movement through the canyons.
- Let someone know where you are going and when you plan to return so if there are any problems a rescue attempt can be made.
- Use a knowledgeable guide until you have the skill set you need.
- Wear clothes you're not afraid to ruin because you're coming back with holes in them — scooting on sandstone is not clothing friendly.

but before descending our first rappel, Rick oh-so-carefully teaches, in detail, why he sets up the rappel the way he does, how to use our gear properly and then walks each person carefully through the rappel. He has taken a group ranging from experienced to never-been, middle-aged to youth and joined them together as a family where no one is left to feel like the weak link. He works with Christian — teaching him at his ability level. As we move through the canyon, I silently applaud the value of a good guide.

Though the canyon narrows to maybe 18 inches and my backpack, hips and shoulders scrape the sandy sides, my 11-year-old flows through the slot with the fluency of youth. He bounds up the sides, frictions naturally and leads the group with aplomb. Who says children can't do this stuff? Confidence building, nature appreciation, safety awareness, physical dexterity, a wholesome hobby and great stories

to tell their friends — what's not to love about introducing children, in the right way, to outdoor recreation?

Red sand covers the boulders that pave the canyon floor and we twist through the revolving door of sun and shade as the day progresses. Slots widen and narrow, course through the land like a solid red wave rising on both sides. At the tight drops, we use body friction to lower ourselves naturally down the rock. We rappel down a couple of vertical drops and shimmy through the tight sections. It's a game with the earth. A game that requires respect and know-how, but with guidance one learns how to choose the right technique from their bag of tricks to get them past the next obstacle.

The sun is toasty, but in the depth of the canyons we hardly notice the heat. As we squeak out the bottom of the canyon four hours later, thrilled and tired, it opens to a red-rock amphitheater of sorts. We lounge, heads

propped on backpacks, helmets at our feet, hiking snacks at the ready. Rick tells us about a couple who found themselves in a pothole filled with water from which they couldn't get out. I am reminded of the wisdom needed to play this game. Giving your children the opportunity to learn correct techniques for the game is crucial. I learned to rock climb from specific classes that I took, and I remember comparing my knowledge to those who had a "friend" teach them the ropes. The comparison was often dramatic.

Giving your child the gift of appreciation for the beauty of the wild world is a precious gift, but for sports and games with a danger factor, it is infinitely wisest to make sure they learn correct techniques, for their own safety and success, as well as those they are with. If you have adventurous children, you can make sure they learn the right way. Let the games begin. ww

### IF YOU GO

If you want to explore the canyons of Escalante, try the following providers:

- **Excursions of Escalante:** Rick Green — [www.excursionsofescalante.com](http://www.excursionsofescalante.com); 1-800-U-explore; Guide services for hiking, backpacking and canyoneering.
- **Escalante Outfitters** — [www.escalanteoutfitters.com](http://www.escalanteoutfitters.com); 435-826-4266; Affordable cabins, eatery and gear shop for last-minute pickups.