

High adventure in Canyonlands National Park

By Michael Cooper
Columnist

Storm clouds were fast obliterating the sun as Ted Greenwald, an editor for the *Wall Street Journal*, surveyed the forbidding desert landscape sprawled below him.

“You’re not going to be happy when you see this,” Greenwald said, his voice ominously sober.

Greenwald and I were backpacking in the most remote area of the continental United States: the far-flung Maze District of Southeast Utah’s Canyonlands National Park. Named for its bewildering labyrinth of sandstone canyons, the Maze was ranked in 2008 by *Backpacker* magazine as the most dangerous hike in America due to its extreme isolation, dangerous terrain, paucity of water and severe temperature swings.

Not content to take the easiest way into the Maze, Greenwald and I had devised a dicey off-trail route that would plunge us off a rim-rocked mesa to a steep-faced saddle named The Gap and thence down to the desert floor below.

But now, scrutinizing our route from the precipice

above The Gap, the way down looked doubtful and intimidating. Multiple tiers of sheer cliffs straddled the scarp, festooning the 1,700-foot-per-mile grade all the way down to austere desert flats.

Trial-and-error search and a down-climbing rock scramble led us off the mesa to the saddle. It began to rain. Descending in earnest from The Gap, our travel was repeatedly blocked by eroded palisades. We had to traverse along the top of each band of cliffs to find a bouldery break that would allow us passage to the next level below, after which the process began again.

It took us three hours to execute the 0.7-mile descent, by which time we were running out of daylight. We were forced to make camp far from our first water source, at the head of a side-canyon overlooking the Maze. The sky cleared, and the sinking sun set ablaze distant pink and gold rock pillars. I was ecstatic.

The next morning, we attempted to drop directly into the Maze from camp. Climbing down white arch-topped domes, we came to impassable sandstone cliffs

100 feet above the canyon bottom—a dead end. With only two liters of water remaining between us, we initiated a contingency plan: high-tailing it cross-country over open desert to the head of South Fork Horse Canyon, where hearsay had it there was a sure way down into the Maze.

Map-and-compass work brought us to the correct drainage leading into the South Fork. But dropping into the steadily narrowing slot, it soon became apparent it was booby-trapped with vertical pour-offs formed by flash floods, interdicting our further descent.

Someone had placed a series of cairns along a ledge on the lip of the canyon. We followed the cairns, hoping they would lead us down to water. They’d better — we were now too low on water to make it back to our vehicle, and route-finding our own way into the South Fork would literally take days; the topography was that extreme. Either the cairns would lead us to water or we’d be drinking our urine to survive.

The cairns followed a zigzagging route along and down from successive ledges — providing jaw-dropping



PHOTO PROVIDED

The author points to The Gap and his off-trail route down to the Maze.

airplane views of the South Fork en route — to a slick-rock pothole filled with remnant rainwater. We eagerly filled our water bottles and slaked our thirst, thankful for our reprieve. Recharged, we executed a final steep pitch to the bottom of the canyon. We had made it into the Maze.

We backpacked blissfully a couple miles down-canyon, past huge flashflood-carved alcoves and towering rock pinnacles, enjoying the now-easy travel. That night, we camped near a luxuriant spring bordered by lush willows and other exotic,

sweet-smelling vegetation.

Unfortunately, I had developed a steadily worsening problem with my right Achilles tendon over the past couple days. Backpacking farther into the Maze seemed unduly risky and irresponsible given my disability. We were forced to abort the remainder of our route on the third day, a very bitter pill to swallow.

Two months later, I sit in the shade of my front porch, safe and daydreaming of the Maze’s resplendent, multi-hued cliffs and secretive slot canyons. I’ve made a promise to myself: I will return.

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