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America's Lost National Park: Glen Canyon Slowly Reappears

By **Maureen Clarke**
 March 17, 2005

In Glen Canyon, on the border of Arizona and Utah, Mother Nature herself is reversing what founding Sierra Club director David Brower called "America's most regretted environmental mistake."

As recent drought conditions in the Southwest are drinking up Lake Powell -- the manmade byproduct of the Glen Canyon Dam -- they're unveiling a monumental labyrinth of canyons and gorges that were drowned for nearly forty years. The most spectacular of these, called the Cathedral in the Desert, is "the eighth natural wonder of the world," says Chris Peterson, executive director of the Glen Canyon Institute, a nonprofit group fostering the canyon's recovery.

In 1963, when the Glen Canyon Dam gave rise to Lake Powell, by flooding the Colorado River for 186 miles, naturalists mourned. Tourists, on the other hand, celebrated a new water park: With electric blue waters bordered by blazing red sandstone formations, Lake Powell attracted thousands of visitors a year, and stored water for the Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Phoenix metropolitan areas as well. The price the dam exacted, however, was keen: For one, it imprisoned the Colorado -- that wild, stubborn, Michelangelo of a river, whose surging carved the Grand Canyon over millions of years. It also sent 125 side canyons, which were once slated to become a national park, to an early, underwater grave.

In 1996, the **Glen Canyon Institute** (tel. **801/363-4450**; www.glencanyon.org) formed with the mission of "restoring a healthy Colorado River through Glen Canyon." Recent droughts, while unfortunate on most counts, only served to aid GCI's progress. In its prime, Lake Powell was 500 feet deep, with 2,000 miles of shoreline. By January 1, 2005, it was 37% full, and draining at the breakneck rate of 50 feet a year. Now, the reservoir services only the 8,000 residents of Page, Arizona, and GCI is rallying hard to reroute what remains of the water supply to nearby Lake Mead, and restore "America's lost national park." Expect a media firestorm in the coming weeks and months, as GCI fights efforts to replenish the lake. And make your way to Utah now, to explore this newfound wonderland while you can.

GCI Field Trips (www.glencanyon.org/gcift/index.php) will guide you with expertise, by boat or on land, through the landscape's transformation while it's occurring. From now through fall, the researchers who have been studying the region most closely are running about ten hiking and boating itineraries, of varying degrees of difficulty.

Peterson recommends the Coyote Gulch and Lower Escalante River tour through a serpentine gorge carved into sandstone -- what GCI calls "one of the most spectacular slick rock canyons in the Glen region." And the Escalante River canyon, below Coyote Gulch, is visibly in the throes of recovery. The four-day, easy to moderate hike, which departs from Salt Lake City, is \$400 for GCI members, and \$550 for nonmembers. (Membership is \$30 for individuals; \$15 for students; \$50 for families.) The trip price includes transportation from Salt Lake City, guides,

dinners, and park fees. GCI supplies gear for an additional charge. This trip takes place April 1 to 5, May 13 to 15, and October 10 to 14.

The very strenuous Rainbow Bridge hike takes you ten miles a day for five days to the largest natural bridge in the world, with its 275-foot span of red sandstone. Underwater until recently, the ground surrounding the arch is now clear and dry for hiking. This trip is \$450 for members, \$600 for nonmembers. The scheduled dates are November 7 to 12.

GCI is also running canyon cleanup boating trips for discounted fees. These expeditions are \$200 for five days and \$170 for three days. Seven departure dates are available between now and early October. At this point, a cleanup trip is the best way to see Cathedral in the Desert, which Peterson praises as the most remarkable site to emerge from the draining. Widely considered Glen Canyon's crown jewel, it's an enormous natural amphitheater with natural light filtering onto hanging gardens and a waterfall inside. Call GCI for scheduled cleanups of the area.

GCI also conducts three-week boat tours through the Colorado River's masterwork, the Grand Canyon. In wooden dory boats, you'll run the full length of the canyon, from Lees Ferry to Lake Mead, through staggering scenery and rigorous white waters. The trip takes place April 2 to 23, when the desert is in bloom, campfires are legal, the weather is cool, and the park is uncrowded. No experience is necessary; guides are highly knowledgeable. The maximum number of people on this trip will be 18. The cost is \$3,990, plus a suggested contribution of \$500.

Experienced, maverick hikers can explore Glen Canyon's newly emerged sections on their own, but Peterson recommends calling GCI first. They're publishing a book of hikes in the spring, but in the meantime, they'll report current conditions, which are in constant flux, and recommend which areas of the canyon to investigate and which to avoid.

If you want a self-guided boat tour, along the Colorado, Peterson recommends flying into Salt Lake City, renting a car, and driving to Bullfrog, Utah. Bullfrog has boat rental facilities and a single hotel. The three-star **Defiance House Lodge** (Hwy 276, P.O. Box 4055, Bullfrog, UT; tel. **800/528-6154** or 435-684-2233) has 48 rooms, for \$85 a night.

If you're exploring on foot, drive to Escalante, Utah, as a base for day hikes into the canyon. Accommodations near the most virgin territory are scarce, but Escalante has camping facilities, and **Boulder Mountain Ranch** (tel. **435/335-7480**; www.boulderutah.com/bmr) has cabins that sleep two to four for \$54.50 to \$60 (which you can rent whether or not you're taking one of their horseback tours through the desert). See the **Escalante Chamber of Commerce** website (www.escalante-cc.com/visitor/guides.htm) for a complete list of outfitters.

The cheapest fares we found to Salt Lake City, from May 12 to May 18 (in time for the Coyote Gulch Lower Escalante trip), are \$182 from New York on Delta, through **One Travel** (tel. **866/567-3594**; www.onetravel.com); \$221 from Chicago on **Frontier** (tel. **800/432-1359**; www.frontierairlines.com), and \$279 on United through One Travel; and \$182 from Los Angeles on **America West** (tel. **800/235-9292**; www.americawest.com).

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