



<http://www.latimes.com/travel/la-tr-lakepowell3apr03,0,6098318.story?coll=la-home-travel>

## Exposing Utah's depths

**A six-year drought has dropped Lake Powell's water level, revealing a once-hidden world. Hikers can explore the sculptured canyons, spires and arches -- for now.**

By Susan Spano  
Times Staff Writer

April 3, 2005

From Glen Canyon Bridge on U.S. Highway 89, you can see both sides of an argument. To the north is placid Lake Powell, a big, blue tropical cocktail in the arid no man's land of southeastern Utah. It's Exhibit A in the case for letting 42-year-old Glen Canyon Dam stand. To the south is the Colorado River, testily emerging from impoundment, cutting through sheer rock walls on its way to the Grand Canyon, wild and free, the way nature made it.

I stood there with my brother, John, in early February, thinking about Seldom Seen Smith, the fictional mastermind of a plot to blow up the Glen Canyon Dam in Edward Abbey's 1975 novel, "The Monkey Wrench Gang."

Smith, Abbey wrote, "remembered the golden river flowing to the sea ... canyons called Hidden Passage and Salvation and Last Chance ... strange great amphitheatres called Music Temple and Cathedral in the Desert. All these things now lay beneath the dead water of the reservoir, slowly disappearing under layers of descending silt."

The book has achieved cult status among lovers of Utah's slick-rock plateau and canyon country. But Abbey's book never expected that nature, in the form of a blistering six-year drought, would toy with the fate of Lake Powell.

The last time the reservoir was full — at 3,700 feet above sea level — was in July 1999. Since then the drought has lowered the water level 144 feet, leaving the reservoir at about 33% capacity, shrinking the length of the lake from 186 miles to 145 miles and gradually re-exposing something remarkable underneath: the arches and spires of Glen Canyon. People travel halfway around the world to see the canyon of China's Yangtze River, doomed by construction of Three Gorges Dam. So was it any wonder that John and I felt compelled to go backpacking in little side canyons on the fringes of Lake Powell, where the water is rapidly receding? It was a chance in a lifetime to see something that couldn't be seen five years ago and may not be seen five years from now.

\*

**Boat trip to Davis Gulch**

February isn't prime time on Lake Powell, and just getting to the place where we planned to start backpacking required us to take a motorboat 90 miles up the reservoir to its confluence with the Escalante River. Then, among a maze of unmarked tributaries, we had to find Davis Gulch — a stream that enters the Escalante on the west side — take the boat as far into the channel as possible, tie up and make our way across the quicksand that tends to accumulate at the mouths of such creeks.

There, we were supposed to meet Bill Wolverton, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area's backcountry ranger, who would hike in from the west to show us around for two days.

He had responded to a request from John for information about backpacking in Davis Gulch and Fiftymile Canyon, two deeply embedded Escalante River tributaries where a red Navajo sandstone sculpture gallery similar to the one that once lined the whole of Glen Canyon is gradually being re-exposed.

Wolverton has spent the last 17 springs and autumns prowling around the Lower 48 for the National Park Service and can scale sheer canyon walls without working up a sweat. He almost single-handedly launched an effort to eradicate invasive, nonnative plants from the Escalante River canyons he loves.

Just don't call the big body of water at his doorstep Lake Powell. "It's not a lake," he insists. "Lakes are natural features."

Before I could formulate reservations — How cold would it be in southeastern Utah in February? What if it snowed? How far would we have to hike and how many nights would we camp? — Wolverton and John had started planning the trip.

After taking in the view from the bridge, John and I stopped at the nearby recreation area's Carl Hayden Visitor Center. To enter, we had to pass through a security system tighter than any I've seen at airports, instituted a few years ago to deter terrorist attacks on the dam. We apprehensively noted the posted weather forecast — temperatures between 35 and 49 degrees, with rain or snow in the offing. We studied a 1990 topographical model of Lake Powell, now hopelessly anachronistic because of shrinking water levels, and took a short tour of the 710-foot-high dam, completed in 1963.

It was led by a sandy-haired young man who told us the concrete of Glen Canyon Dam was good for two millennia but sediment buildup could render the dam inoperable in 700 years.

Environmentalists are less conservative. They say silt coming in from the reservoir's tributaries could clog it up in a few centuries, never mind that the dam has already damaged habitats and geology at the Grand Canyon 100 miles downstream.

Partly for this reason, environmentalists with cooler heads than Seldom Seen Smith have advocated decommissioning the dam and draining the reservoir — a drastic measure that, nevertheless, has been carried out in the last few decades at about 100 dams across America.

For the thirsty dwellers of the dry Southwest, the specter of losing a water and energy source may be upsetting. The dam's power plant produces \$90 million of electricity a year, and Lake Powell serves as a holding tank for Lake Mead downriver, a big water supplier to Southern California. Beyond that, the reservoir has undeniable recreational value. But since the onset of the drought, visitation to million-acre Glen Canyon National Recreation Area has decreased from 2.6 million in

1999 to 1.8 million in 2004.

Meanwhile, the National Park Service, which manages the recreation area, is extolling the virtues of newly reclaimed sights while busily extending boat launch ramps at northerly marinas, such as Bullfrog.

"Visitors can still enjoy and participate in the same activities that they did when the lake was full — boating, fishing, hiking, camping and exploring," says Kitty L. Roberts, recreation area superintendent.

But it all depends on the weather.

In February, the water level stood at 3,561 feet, just 71 feet above the lowest point at which the dam can generate electricity. "If it drops below that, we're out of business until the lake comes back up," said Tom Ryan, a hydrologist for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which built and operates the dam.

Despite heavy winter snowfall in southwest Utah, Ryan said, it looked like an average year for runoff, which routinely plumps the level of Lake Powell in July. He expects the reservoir to rise about 40 to 45 feet by then, though at that rate it still would take years for the lake to refill.

"And if we have a hot, dry spring, that estimate will be eroded. There's still a lot of uncertainty," he said.

From the dam, John and I drove five miles north to Wahweap Marina, the winter nesting place of huge, luxurious houseboats, some with DVDs, staterooms and fireplaces. There we claimed the far more modest 18-foot powerboat I had reserved for the trip up the reservoir.

Opponents of the man-made reservoir call it "Lac Latrine" and "Lake Foul," but I can't agree with their aesthetic evaluation. It's majestic, with tucked-away coves and beaches backed by surrealistically shaped mesas and buttes.

On the way north we saw Lake Powell's bathtub ring, a white calcium carbonate deposit left by the receding water, distinct in some places but already wearing away in others.

At Dangling Rope Marina, we stopped for a \$100 fill-up. The attendant, who hadn't seen any visitors in days, told us about a good place to camp in Oak Canyon, a few miles up on the east side of the lake.

While tying up the boat there, I got caught in some Lake Powell quicksand, which has the consistency of cellulite and is sticky enough to suck a short person, like me, in to the thighs.

John and I pitched our tents, cooked up one of those wretched, dehydrated backpackers' dinners and went to bed. Unfortunately, it snowed that night and my rented tent leaked, leaving me with stiff joints, a sour mood and a wet sleeping bag. I was ready to abort the trip in the morning, but John thought we should at least try to make our scheduled rendezvous with Wolverton at noon in Davis Gulch.

So I went on to Lake Powell's confluence with the Escalante. Along the way, we passed Hole-in-the-Rock Arch, where Mormon pioneers cut a treacherously steep wagon trail from the plateau above to the river in 1880, and the mouth of the San Juan River on the east side.

We went astray a few times but finally found the Escalante and turned into it. Between periods of drizzle, the sun came out, revealing bright blue skies and scudding clouds. But the river's meeting at Davis Gulch was an ugly scene, choked with flood-strangled cottonwood trees.

Then I saw what I assumed to be a hallucination: a man in a blue shirt, picking his way across the quicksand.

It was Wolverton. He had kindled a campfire up the gulch, where I warmed my feet and hands, dried out my sleeping bag and decided that, having come this far, it would be folly not to continue.

\*

### **Exploring the depths**

As the only backcountry ranger in the Escalante River region of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Wolverton has been keeping a close watch on sinking water levels in area tributaries. But the last time he climbed down into Davis Gulch and Fiftymile Canyon was last summer. Like us, he was eager to see what new glories the drought had revealed.

La Gorce Arch came first, a triangular window on the sky framed in lustrous sandstone, 100 feet wide and 75 feet high. Just a few years ago when Davis Gulch was fuller, it could be reached only by kayak. Now, as nature intended, you have to crane your neck to see it from the creek bed.

Hiking up the gulch was sloppy, so we exchanged our boots for rubber sandals and neoprene socks. Sometimes the walls of the canyon narrowed, forcing us to wade in the cold water. Then they'd open back up, flooding the chasm with warming sunlight from the plateau hundreds of feet above.

"This place is like a big Christmas present gradually being unwrapped," said Wolverton, stopping short once and opening his arms wide.

On formerly inundated rock ledges, spring-green vegetation had taken root and the bathtub ring had faded. Underfoot, we crunched "canyon popcorn," perfectly proportioned balls of pebbles fused together with mud on their roiling way downstream.

Farther up the gulch we saw mounds of silt the size of tanker trucks, trapped and then left behind by the retreating water of Lake Powell, which has more silt-bearing tributaries than Lake Mead, another reservoir on the Colorado River impounded by Hoover Dam.

"Sediment is the reservoir's fate," Wolverton said. "It doesn't matter how much boaters want [the lake] or how much water people need. It's going to silt up and the whole thing will be gone."

Wolverton led us out of Davis Gulch on a steep, old slick-rock stock trail. The world seemed different — more horizontal — when we reached the top of the plateau. I could see places I'd known before only on a map: the long rise of Waterpocket Fold to the north and the tiered flanks of the Kaiparowits Plateau to the south, looking in the snow like a Mexican petticoat.

It was flat and easy going for about two miles north across the plateau, but then we came to the edge of Fiftymile Canyon and started down. No old stock trail here, just sure-footed Wolverton to follow.

He had our campsite for the next two nights already chosen, a wide, narrow shelf high above the stream, sheltered by a lip of rock. Delicious, cold, drinkable water was available from a seep in a nearby cliff, and there were plenty of secluded spots on the bank for a camping-style sponge bath. Fire rings and graffiti — including a well-rendered Donald Duck — testified that others had been there before us, mostly boaters, Wolverton said.

So we settled into a place that even the most widely traveled soul could never forget. Protected by the overhang, we did without tents, though in my down bag I slept in three layers of shirts, two pairs of pants, gloves and a hood. When I occasionally woke up in the middle of the night, I saw a star-spangled crescent of black sky at my bedside.

We spent the next day exploring Fiftymile Canyon, which is even more beautiful than Davis Gulch — much narrower in places, like the Subway, a stretch where three people can't walk abreast. The stream undercuts both sides of the creek there, and the canyon is wider at the base than at the top, allowing light to filter in and bounce eerily between the walls.

Occasionally, I thought with dread about the prospect of climbing out of Fiftymile, recrossing the plateau, descending into Davis Gulch by the stock trail and then retrieving the boat for the trip back down the reservoir. But there was the carrot of a steak dinner and clean sheets at a motel in Page. More compelling was the here and now in one of the loveliest places on Earth.

I've seen the Sahara Desert and Denali in Alaska. But none of that tops Fiftymile.

I can't wholly agree with houseboaters who think Lake Powell is paradise or with canyon rats like Wolverton who would be glad to see it shrivel up like a strip of fried bacon.

For now, Mother Nature seems to have decided against the reservoir. And somehow, I take great consolation in knowing there's no gainsaying her.

\*

(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

Lake Powell for hiking, boating, camping

GETTING THERE

**From LAX**, United and America West have connecting service, changing in Phoenix to Great Lakes Airlines, (800) 554-5111, <http://www.greatlakesav.com>, to Page, Ariz. Frontier and American fly to Denver, connecting to Great Lakes Airlines for flights to Page. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$376.

**By car**, take Interstate 15 to Utah Highway 9 to U.S. 89. Page is about 550 miles northeast of Los Angeles.

BOAT RENTALS:

**Lake Powell Resorts & Marinas**, (888) 486-4665, <http://www.lakepowell.com>, rents houseboats and powerboats on Lake Powell. Weeklong houseboat rentals run \$1,332 for the 44-foot Explorer to \$7,152 for the 59-foot Discovery XL.

## WHERE TO STAY:

**Page** has a good selection of chain motels, including:

**Best Western at Lake Powell**, 208 N. Lake Powell Blvd.; (888) 794-2888, <http://www.bestwesternatlakepowell.com> . Doubles \$69.

**Courtyard by Marriott**, 600 Clubhouse Drive; (800) 321-2211 or (928) 645-5000, <http://www.marriott.com> . Doubles \$59-\$109.

**Lake Powell Resorts & Marinas** (above), manages a lodge, RV park, campground and marina at Wahweap, near Page and Glen Canyon Dam. Doubles in the lodge \$120-\$141.

**Glen Canyon National Recreation Area**, P.O. Box 1507, Page; (928) 608-6404, <http://www.nps.gov/glca> , has information on campsites and backcountry camping.

## WHERE TO EAT:

**Steaks and burgers** dominate menus in Page restaurants:

**Ken's Old West Restaurant**, 718 Vista Ave.; (928) 645-5160. Entrees \$7-\$27.

**Dam Bar & Grille**, 644 N. Navajo Drive; (928) 645-2161, <http://www.damplaza.com> . Entrees \$6-\$25.

## TO LEARN MORE:

**Glen Canyon Institute**, 1520 Sunnydale Lane, Salt Lake City, UT 84108; (801) 363-4450, <http://www.glencanyon.org> , offers educational backpacking and service-oriented boat trips to lower Escalante River tributaries such as Davis Gulch, beginning March through June and late August to November.

— Susan Spano

---

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at [latimes.com/archives](http://latimes.com/archives).

**TMSReprints**

[Article licensing and reprint options](#)

Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times