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JOURNEYS

From the Depths, a Cathedral Emerges



Lin Alder for The New York Times

DRYING OUT A motorboat visits the Cathedral in the Desert, a slot canyon in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area that until recently was underwater in Lake Powell. A long drought has lowered the water level.

By **TOM PRICE**

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SQUINTING in the late afternoon sun at a topographic map covered with tiny elevation lines, Jeff Bury, an assistant professor of geography at San Francisco State University, had to admit the obvious. "I have no idea whether or not this way will go," he said, using canyoneering jargon for a route's viability. The reason for his confusion wasn't poor map skills - as a lifelong hiker, he has spent plenty of time navigating the

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backcountry. But this trip in southern Utah was different - the route he was hunting couldn't be found because until a few weeks ago it didn't exist.

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Our destination was the Cathedral in the Desert, an often mythologized yet little-seen sandstone amphitheater in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area that has become a Brigadoon for the backpacking set. The Cathedral has been hidden for decades beneath the waters of Lake Powell. But a six-year drought has dropped the water level in Lake Powell 140 feet, and miles of sinuous slot canyons and rolling sandstone cliffs are visible for the first time since the 1960's. The result has been a poorly mapped land rush of sorts among desert aficionados like Dr. Bury.



Lin Alder for The New York Times
STRETCH Dr. Bury, foreground, and the author, Tom Price, navigate a slot canyon.

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"This thing is all but worthless," he laughed, stuffing the map into a cargo pocket and shouldering a backpack. "I guess we'll just have to go take a look." With that, we set out hiking over the trackless undulating sandstone, rolling like frozen waves of pink and orange rock all the way to the horizon.



Lin Alder for The New York Times
A DESTINATION REBORN The Cathedral in the Desert towers above visitors.

Lake Powell is a 185-mile hydrological anomaly, a glittering blue oasis in a desert of rock and sand. Over millions of years, the muddy Colorado River patiently gouged serpentine channels through the relatively soft sandstone, and ancient peoples built stone houses in their clefts and crags. Then came the Glen Canyon dam. In the late 1950's, the Sierra Club led the charge to stop dams

proposed for the Grand Canyon, but it did not object to a dam in little-known Glen Canyon. After the dam was completed in 1963 and the water began to back up, David R. Brower, executive director of the Sierra Club at the time, explored the area with his children and was stunned. Here was a temple of stone unlike anything else on earth - and it was rapidly disappearing. Lamenting the lost canyons and grottos as "the place no one knew," Mr. Brower spent the rest of his life attempting to undo his mistake.

That effort has since been joined by groups like the Glen Canyon Institute, formed in 1997 by Richard Ingebretsen, a Salt Lake City emergency room doctor, to advocate draining Lake Powell for good. Although the institute's Edward Abbey-like call to pull the plug has not gained much traction, Mother Nature has quietly been doing the job. Oddly enough, the plunging level of the lake has brought an unlikely rapprochement of sorts between conservationists and the lake's multimillion-dollar recreation industry, with both promoting this as the best season in decades to see the wonders of the desert.

"There's now a chance to explore places no one has ever been," Dr. Ingebretsen said. "It's like a new national park has been born, right in the middle of what had been just another flat lake."

The emerging landscape has drawn a flood of attention from news outlets, with everyone from ABC News to National Geographic Adventure rushing to get the word out. But those reports also point out the truth of touring what is, in effect, the West's biggest bathtub: what goes down may soon go up. According to the Bureau of Reclamation, the federal agency responsible for managing Lake Powell, sometime in the next several weeks the winter snow melt will begin refilling the reservoir. The bureau expects the water level to climb as much as 45 feet by mid-July, once again submerging the Cathedral and dozens of other newly revealed features. How long they will remain under water and whether they will soon be revealed again is a subject of fierce debate.

Trying to enter the Cathedral by land means driving 50 miles of graded dirt along the Hole-in-the-Rock Road, following the path of Mormon pioneers. Just before you leave the pavement is the small ranching town of Escalante, which also does a brisk adventure travel business. All spring, would-be explorers have been stopping off to load up their rucksacks and get the latest news on what can be seen.

The Cathedral isn't the only place newly unveiled. Gregory Arch in Escalante Canyon - the world's second-largest natural bridge after Rainbow Bridge on the lake's south side - is poking its head out of the water. Hundreds of Anasazi structures like Fort Moqui as well as Indian rock art panels are emerging from the depths and drying out, and it's believed that some newly dry side canyons may have never been visited by humans. All told, 40 "new" miles along the banks of the Colorado and 30 miles along the Escalante River will be above water for at least some time this year.

IT was the crown jewel, though, that was tugging at us. But after two days of scrambling through narrow slot canyons and over sloping domes, a land route into the Cathedral was still elusive. "I'm sure there's a way down there; I just don't know where to find it," Dr. Bury said, looking down a cliff into the top of the chamber.

In camp that night we decided to drive around the lake to a marina, rent a boat, and go in over the water. Waking the next morning, we discovered we weren't alone in our do-whatever-it-takes passion. During the night, two Minnesota college students had pulled in; inspired by a magazine article on the rebirth of the area, they'd driven 1,500 miles nonstop to spend their spring break exploring its freshly revealed wonders.

Four hours later, after driving through Capitol Reef National Park without pause, we left the Bullfrog Marina in a rented motorboat. There, earthmovers were adding yet another extension to a boat launching ramp; in the last three years the floating marina has chased the receding water for almost a quarter mile toward the center of the lake. Motoring downstream, we passed through a geological layer cake, dropping through millions of years compressed into sandstone walls covered with a bright white "bathtub ring" denoting the high water mark, and dozens of unnamed side canyons and sinuous formations that just last summer were largely unseen. In one grotto the wreckage of a long-sunken speedboat lay at an unnatural angle, waiting to be explored.

Turning away from the main channel, we nosed up under the same cliffs we had been unable to find a way down the day before, and into the narrowing opening of Clear Creek Canyon. The deep blue water turned olive green in the shallows, out of which the skeletal arms of a century-old cottonwood tree stretched into the dry air like a drowning swimmer.

Around the final corner, the boat drifted up to a sandbar. Orange-hued sandstone streaked with seeping water closed

in from three sides, the rock soaring nearly 200 feet overhead. The walls above seemed almost to touch, parting just enough for a shaft of late afternoon light to warm the sepulchral chamber in a soft glow. We had reached the Cathedral. We stepped reverently onto an alluvial fan, which was visibly draining decades of accumulated silt - the water level had only days before lowered enough to yield dry ground. At the far end, a thin tendril of waterfall dropped through a narrow groove worn in the stone, filling the air with a soft tinkling sound.

The moment was interrupted by a two-story houseboat pattering in, disgorging a family onto the sand. A stout man with a salt-and-pepper beard emerged and gazed at the waterfall, removing his glasses to wipe away tears. He turned out to be Richard Norgaard, who first came here in 1962 as an 18-year-old river guide, and returned repeatedly over the years, once on David Brower's storied 1963 trip into the canyon. The rest of his party joined him, including Mr. Brower's children, Barbara and Ken, back for the first time since they had visited with their father almost 40 years before.

As children and grandchildren spilled out of the boat, Mr. Norgaard and the Browsers took out picture books of themselves from decades before, showing the Cathedral with hanging gardens of ferns and without almost 30 feet of silt that has been deposited by the waters of Lake Powell. Without that debris, the chamber had once had a pronounced pear shape and what are reputed to be symphony-hall acoustics. Looking at photographs from his youth and then at the reborn canyon in front of him, Mr. Norgaard said, "This is a hell of a chance for this canyon again." But, he added, "I'm upset that it was lost in the first place, and that in two months it will be lost again."

WHETHER that will happen is a matter of speculation, and the answer depends, in large part, on who is doing the speculating. According to Barry Wirth, a Bureau of Reclamation spokesman, the runoff from this winter's large snowpack is the start of an upward trend, and even with the usual drawdowns he expects that by next April the lake will be up 30 feet from where it is today, enough to once again submerge the Cathedral.

Dr. Ingebretsen, in a later conversation, disagreed. "It's not a drought that's draining Lake Powell," he said. "It's demand." He said that the Colorado River was already over-allocated to downstream users, and that demand would only grow. "It took 20 years to fill Lake Powell, and to do that they just shut off the river. You can't do that anymore."

While the grown-ups reflected on what has been and what may be, Mr. Norgaard's 6-year-old twins, Addy and Matt, were busy living in the moment. They ran back and forth from waterfall to the boat, their voices echoing as they giggled themselves almost out of breath. A fragment of rope could be seen hanging at the top of the waterfall, but whether it was put there by someone hiking down or by a boater at a higher level, couldn't be determined. Either way, the upper section remained out of reach. Instead, we circumnavigated the chamber, spying feathery, coral-like formations on the lower walls and inspecting the first plants beginning to emerge from its crevices. It was too early in the season for a plunge into the waterfall pool, but come August the clear, cool water will be irresistible.

The mingled groups were, for the moment at least, in rare company. "There are only maybe two hundred people who have ever set foot in the Cathedral - ever," said Dr. Ingebretsen, whose organization is planning 20 Glen Canyon outings this year, from three-day boat trips aimed at removing debris and opening access to new areas, to a first-ever hiking loop through otherworldly slot canyons. His thinking is that if more people visit "the place that no one knew," perhaps there will be a chance to keep the lake at a lower level.

But politics seemed out of place just at the moment. Dr. Bury took some photos, and then leaned against the cool stone and stared up. "This is the kind of place that words and pictures just do not do justice," he said. "You need to see it for yourself."

Then, looking over his shoulder at the lake and the waters that will soon return, he added, "while you can, that is."

Where the Lake Used to Be

VISITORS trying to reach the Cathedral in the Desert can fly to either Salt Lake City or Las Vegas; the town of Escalante, Utah, is a six-hour drive from either.

For rustic accommodations, book one of the seven tiny cabins - \$45 a night - at Escalante Outfitters (310 West Main Street, 435-826-4266). A gear shop has most everything you need, and there is wireless Internet service throughout as well as a free Internet cafe. Escalante Outfitters makes its own beer (a pale ale) and has the only liquor license in town.

For more upscale accommodations, head 30 miles northwest along a spectacular drive atop a narrow fin of sandstone to

the Boulder Mountain Lodge (20 North Highway 12 in tiny Boulder, Utah; 800-556-3446). Its 20 rooms are \$89 to \$160 a night, and its restaurant, Hell's Backbone Grill (435-335-7464), draws rave reviews.

Excursions of Escalante (800-839-7567; www.excursions-escalante.com) organizes guided outings into the slot canyons, ranging from moderate hikes to hard-core canyoneering, some intended for families with children. Rates are \$75 to \$100 a person, including lunch and all equipment.

Escalante Canyon Outfitters (888-326-4453; www.ecohike.com) does trips lasting four to six days at \$820 to \$1,175 a person.

Escalante Outback Adventures (435-826-4967; www.escalante-utah.com) provides shuttle services for hikers planning their own out-and-back loops through the canyons (you pay by the mile, up to \$140 per shuttle, not per person).

The Glen Canyon Institute (801-363-4450; glencanyon.org) is planning 20 trips this year - some on foot, others by boat - into newly exposed areas, ranging from easy to strenuous (\$400 to \$550 a person).

Boat rentals at Bullfrog Marina (800-528-6154; www.lakepowell.com) through April 24 range from \$198 a day for a 19-foot motorboat to five-day houseboat rentals from \$1,100 to \$3,500. Rates go up as the peak vacation months approach.

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