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The return of Glen Canyon

By **Dan Leeth**
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PAGE, Ariz. -- The desert's own extreme makeover began March 13, 1963. Diversion tunnels closed, and the flow of the Colorado River began flooding sandstone gorges near the Arizona-Utah border. The new reservoir transformed Glen Canyon, "The Place No One Knew," into Lake Powell, "Jewel of the Colorado."

A rafter's river became a boater's haven. Although the aquamarine lake augmented access to the blushing tapestry of canyon country, many of the area's grandest cliffs, slots, arches, bridges, windows, domes, pits, alcoves, grottos, seeps, springs, fins and falls lay seemingly drowned forever beneath the wakes.

Times have changed. The West's lingering drought has dropped Lake Powell more than 130 feet, and formations that have been waterlogged for more than three decades now stand high and dry. Boaters today have what may be truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see sights unseen since the year Neil Armstrong sauntered on the moon.

It may not last. Already, with the spring runoff just beginning, the lake has risen 3 feet. And it could, according to a National Weather Service forecast, rise another 42 feet by July 1.

"People think they know Lake Powell because they've been coming here for 25 years, but they have never seen it at this level," says Steve Ward of Lake Powell Resorts. "It's been quite an eye opener."

More than a half-dozen natural arches and bridges have emerged from the depths, once again offering rock-rimmed portals to a blue sky. Some pierce precipices while others arc straight from water's edge. Most remain nameless or bear monikers long since forgotten.

Weathering pits, which graced canyon-top mesas before the dam, are again seeing sunlight. These pothole depressions can stretch 125 feet across and plunge 50 feet deep. Topped with sun-warmed water from the receding lake, they form natural slickrock soaking pools, ideal for houseboaters who lack hot tubs.

Freshly exposed sandstone domes poke like bald brown noggins in a sea of blue.



Submerged walls that once forced a canyon's meander again breach the surface, turning high-water bays back into sinuous waterways.

"I'm sure they are a pain for motorboaters, but for kayakers, it's like being in little mazes," says Les Hibbert of Hidden Canyon Kayaks.

These obstacles away from the main channel can cause problems for unwary navigators. First timers, for whom everything is new, should have no problems, but veteran houseboaters, who think they know the area like the Titanic's captain knew the North Atlantic, must exercise caution.

"There's no safe level of the lake," says Ward. "Every time the water goes up a couple of feet, it covers up rocks that were barely out of the water. Every time it goes down a couple, it exposes things that were barely under. It's always changing."

While old shortcuts now stand dry, the lake's still over 130 miles long and the buoy-marked main channel is still 400 feet deep at the dam. There is plenty of water to entice even the most intrepid houseboater.

The lowered waterline has increased the number of lakeside beaches available to houseboaters for anchorage. Because they have been freshly formed or sat immersed for years, the newest remain clean and unchoked by vegetation. Overnighters can relax on the sand and watch as burning sunsets turn vermilion buttes into fiery conflagrations of color. Those who bring their own wood can follow with weenie-roasting blazes of their own.

By day, Lake Powell still offers its usual array of diversions that includes swimming, sunbathing, paddling, waterskiing, personal watercrafting and of course, fishing. For those hoping to hook a whopper, the reduced reservoir promises some of the best angling in its history.

"Fill a bathtub with water, stuff it full of fish, then drain it halfway down. It just condenses the fish," points out Mike Stickler, owner of Stix Bait and Tackle in Page.

For those content to let Mrs. Paul furnish dinner, Lake Powell offers endless opportunities to explore side canyons with a kayak or motorboat. Every inlet, notch, slot or arm offers a chance to see something new.

"These are the canyons we used to see in the early days as the water was coming up," says Ward. "It's like exploring back into the '60s."

Many wind through the cliffs like a drunken sidewinder, progressively narrowing until the enclosing walls shut out all but a sliver of sky. With 13 stories of additional depth, these cool and unworldly slots can feel like the lair of Gollum from "Lord of the Rings." Even the porous sandstone appears dark. Saturated by 40 years of inundation, it oozes water like a wet sponge. In these hidden haunts, even the bathtub ring effect seems minimized.

Scourge of artificial lakes, receding water exposes a white scum of calcium carbonate that stretches up to the high water mark. At Lake Powell, it is most noticeable on sun-baked faces, but it seems to be quickly disappearing. Ruddy runoff has begun to restrain the whitewashed cliffs with streaks of reddish brown, and constant sloughing has eroded the coating from less vertical surfaces.

At canyon's end, boaters have a choice of turning around or going for an exploratory stroll up terrain few have ever hiked. Another benefit of lower water is easier hiking. Over time, sand and silt have been washed down from above until they reached the lake level where they settled. As the water has dropped, so has the sediment, leaving canyon floors flat and sandy. These water-saturated deposits often form a slow version of quicksand. Hikers can move quickly and stay on top, or they can dig their feet in and slowly sink into ankle-clenching muck.



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Kids love it.

A favorite quicksand-free hiking destination is Rainbow Bridge, world's largest sandstone span. Not long ago, water lapped beneath this towering ring of rust-colored rock, and a floating dock stood within eyesight. Now, it's a pleasant 1¼-mile stroll. Walking the trail, hikers can savor the region's remoteness, feel the desert's aura and appreciate why this once lonely spot is sacred to the native Navajo.

Of all that the diminished lake has revealed, the re-emergence of side-stream grottos where narrow canyons dead-end in waterfalls may be the most exciting. Inside these three-sided slots, stained sunlight once reflected from towering cliffs, canyon wrens called out, maidenhair ferns clung to sandstone seeps and streams danced down pour-offs. Few were grander than Cathedral in the Desert, where a 60-foot fall sloshed through a pear-shaped hollow.

Thanks to the lake's lower level, much of the chute now stands above water. The ferns and wrens may be absent, but stained light again reflects from the walls and a clear canyon creek once again splatters over timeworn rock.

"This was the level those of us who were running tours wanted the water to stay. It had opened up some of the canyons and it hadn't ruined a lot of things," says Joan Nevills Staveley, director of the Page-Lake Powell Chamber of Commerce.

How long Lake Powell will remain at this level depends on weather patterns and outflow commitments. Under normal conditions, experts estimate it will take at least 12 years to refill, but locals remember one wet spring when the water once rose 60 feet in just three months—even more than is now being forecast.

"A couple of big seasons like we had in the '80s, we could get back up to 88 percent full in two years," says Bureau of Reclamation spokesman Barry Wirth. "It's not beyond the realm of possibility."

Slow or fast, when the water rises, one thing remains certain. Today's unveiled sights will once again be lost beneath the wakes.

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The advertisement features a book cover titled "A global pilgrim" and a DVD case titled "John Paul II: The road ahead". The book cover shows a man in a yellow raincoat, and the DVD case shows a similar image. The background is a textured, light brown color.