

Awash in Paria Canyon – September 24-27, 2007



Synopsis: A great, four-to-five-day backpack in southern Utah, down a 38-mile red sandstone river canyon, half of it between reasonably narrow, 1000-foot-high walls.

Somewhere south of the endless expanse of Salt Lake City, the rain began. This was not good news. In two days, we were to embark on a backpack down the Paria Canyon in southern Utah. And a day-long rain meant one of two things (both bad) in a high-walled canyon: flash floods or deep pools of standing water that might require swimming, with a big pack, to cross.

As it turned out, the two days after the rain stopped were sufficient to bring the water down from chest and neck levels – as evidenced by the high-water marks we saw along many stretches of the canyon – to mostly below the knee. The one thing we hadn't counted on, though, was the quicksand.



One of many lovely sandstone formations along the canyon

That wasn't the only entertainment on a trip down this stunning red-rocked canyon. As I've discovered on other popular backcountry trips in the U.S. southwest, there are plenty of woefully unprepared and out-of-shape adventurers out there. The Paria was no different, attracting the full allotment of 20 people per day allowed, by permit, into the canyon. One guy, for example, was wearing big leather hiking boots going down a river; the heavy, sodden boots didn't help much when he was stuck up to his chest in quicksand. Another pair turned around after a frigid night in their tent because their sleeping bags and clothes – which they hadn't wrapped in plastic bags inside their packs – had got soaked when they keeled over in the river; meanwhile, we were roasting in our sleeping bags. And then there were the two parties who got stranded, for a day, by the flooding river two days earlier because they hadn't read, or paid attention to, the forecast of steady rain.

But the strangest thing of all was arriving at the BLM backcountry office near Kanab, at 8:30 a.m. the day before our departure, and encountering a swarm of mostly German tourists inside the small office. They weren't going down the Paria but were instead lined up for a lottery – complete with little pingpong balls in a wire drum – to see which of the select few would be allowed to hike into a colourful, nearby sandstone area known as The Wave. Most Americans have never heard of the place, but for many Germans it's become a pilgrimage, after some of their countrymen "discovered" these formations a number of years ago.

After the chaos of that encounter – complete with one, American, couple getting caught trying to enter their names twice in the lottery – we were happy to set off down the Paria in relative quiet, once we'd zipped past a group of 10 from a national conservation group. (We did encounter them again, as they camped below us in an alcove of canyon that provided perfect, echoing acoustics for the two chain-saw snorers in their group.)



Wandering beneath high, narrow walls

We had planned to start our trip down a narrow, 14-mile stretch of canyon known as the Buckskin, but had been persuaded by park staff it would be nasty and unpleasant with the recent rain. Later that day, we did go up the lower three miles of that canyon, where it joined the main Paria River Canyon, and the water levels seemed quite reasonable. It's hard to know, in popular places like this, what to make of such advice, which seems aimed at keeping novice hikers out of trouble.



The canyon starts getting wider

In any event, we certainly didn't get cheated out of canyon. Later that day, we entered a long, spectacular stretch of winding canyon, often about 15 feet wide, with red sandstone walls rearing about a thousand feet above our heads. (A few days after our Paria trip, Colin and I went a few miles up the famed Virgin River canyon, in Zion National Park, and found the aesthetic experience definitely inferior to the Paria).



A splash of colour that isn't red

Can you get too much of something so stunning? I suppose. After six straight hours of narrow, high-walled grandeur, you stop taking pictures and start longing for a little change of scenery. But after a good night's sleep, when the soft orange light of early morning creeps down the sandstone walls, it all seems fresh and wonderful again. And over the next three days, the scenery did change, with the canyon opening up to a broader valley, with lots of point bars cloaked in cane-like grasses and dotted with big cottonwoods, marking the many formal and informal campsites. And there were several lovely side trips for diversion – such as a one-mile hike through a lushly-vegetated, narrow valley to a huge arch – though, strangely, few other through-hikers seemed inclined to explore them.



Kanab Arch, one of the largest arches in the region, at the end of a lovely one-mile walk up a side valley

What was just as compelling a storyline as the long, deep canyon was the river that had carved it. For the first two days of this voyage, you are constantly in the river, either crossing it or wading straight down it. Our choice of Keen's sandals with neoprene socks worked perfectly, though the water wasn't that cold. Because the river was a muddy gray, you couldn't see the sudden deeper spots until you plunged into them, unless you carefully probed with a pole.



Gingerly treading through pudding. Note the mud-caked hands, courtesy of the river

For the same reason, you wouldn't know there was a patch of quicksand until your foot, or feet, suddenly sank in a soft mass of muddy goo. Immobilized, you'd try lifting, with all your might, one foot encased in liquid cement. But the effort would often cause the other foot to sink deeper, and with nothing solid to push against, you'd wait for one of you guffawing comrades to gingerly edge close and help pull you out, the foot finally sucking itself loose with about five pounds of mud attached.

Not all the quicksand was in the river. The rain-softened banks were often firm enough to walk across, though occasionally you'd dance across a quivering section of chocolate pudding that would *just* support your weight. But now and then, the pudding didn't have a supportive skin, and down you'd sink. With some effort, you could usually extricate yourself and back up, but it was nice to have a companion close by. By the third day, the quicksand had pretty much disappeared, and we started missing its unexpected entertainment value.



Pulling Reg out of the muck

A couple of other unusual things, for us, about the river. It was so muddy that if you tried to wash off a hunk of bank dirt, your hands emerged dirtier than when they went in. So the only way of cleaning your hands, other than wiping them on a piece of your shorts that wasn't already caked in mud, was to use a wet wipe.

As well, though there was water everywhere, there wasn't much to drink. The only sources of fresh water in the canyon were occasional springs, which ranged from one with good flow to drips or seeps that, if you didn't consult the map and keep a sharp eye out, were easy to miss or in some cases muddied beyond use by the recent rain.



Filling up with dripping spring water

Some of the usable springs were far enough apart that, when you had the chance, you'd fill all four one-litre bottles (and treat the water), which would then have to last you all day for drinking, plus that night's dinner and the next morning's breakfast. For us, this need to carefully and democratically ration our water, meant that if we all wanted a cup of tea, each person would first fill a cup from *their* water supply and then pour it into the pot.

If you were desperately low on fresh water, there was always the river. This involved filling one of our two pots with river water and letting it sit for an hour or so, until an inch or two of clearish water had separated itself from the muck below. Then you'd carefully spoon a cupful off the surface for a passable drink, though the muddy pot could only be cleaned by wiping it with toilet paper.

Once, when Reg was forced to take this measure, he made the mistake of dumping the river water into his narrow-topped drinking bottles instead of the pot. Not only did this result in only a spoonful of separated, clear surface water but his water bottles were now filled with mud and thus useless for carrying water.

There was no fresh water at all for the last 13 miles of our 38-mile journey. This was compounded by the canyon valley opening up considerably over this stretch, which meant much greater exposure to the pounding afternoon sun in this desert-like setting. So after tanking up at the last watering hole on day three, we

went five miles further before camping, which resulted in a shorter last day and seeing no more people till we got out.

Fortunately, we were out by noon on day four, exiting at Lee's Ferry in northern Arizona after stopping to view some ancient native petroglyphs, which unfortunately had been added to by modern louts. In a couple of more dry days, I'm sure the river would have been lower, the banks firmed up and the quicksand negligible. But we were glad to have the full experience.



Detail of native petroglyphs

Links

BLM Paria information and permits: <https://www.blm.gov/az/asfo/paria/index.htm>

Good information on what to expect:

http://www.utahwild.com/desert_canyon/paria_canyon.phtml