

Canyoneering

Slot canyons are among the Southwest's most iconic photographic subjects, but they require proper preparation and attention to the potential hazards

Text And Photography By James Kay



When I began to turn my photographic efforts toward capturing landscape images of the American West 17 years ago, it seemed as if there was no virgin territory left. At first, I felt obliged to search out those iconic photographic overlooks from the Grand Canyon to the Grand Tetons, but I soon became frustrated as I found myself jockeying for position at even the most remote backcountry locations with hordes of other photographers. As I ventured farther and farther off the beaten path in search of new places, I began to discover locations in the West where I had the opportunity to create images where no photographer had previously deployed a tripod.

During the late 1980s, a group of friends and I turned our attention to exploring slot canyons on the Colorado Plateau, which were only accessible with the aid of climbing equipment. On these adventures, we discovered not only some of the most beautiful canyons we had ever seen, but every once in awhile, due to the lack of climbing slings, bolts or other devices left behind by previous parties, we realized that we were the first people to travel through some of these canyons. The opportunity to create photographs of subjects that had never been seen before due to the difficult access motivated me to search out and explore scores of canyons across the plateau.

Back then, there were no canyoneering guide books or Internet sites provid-

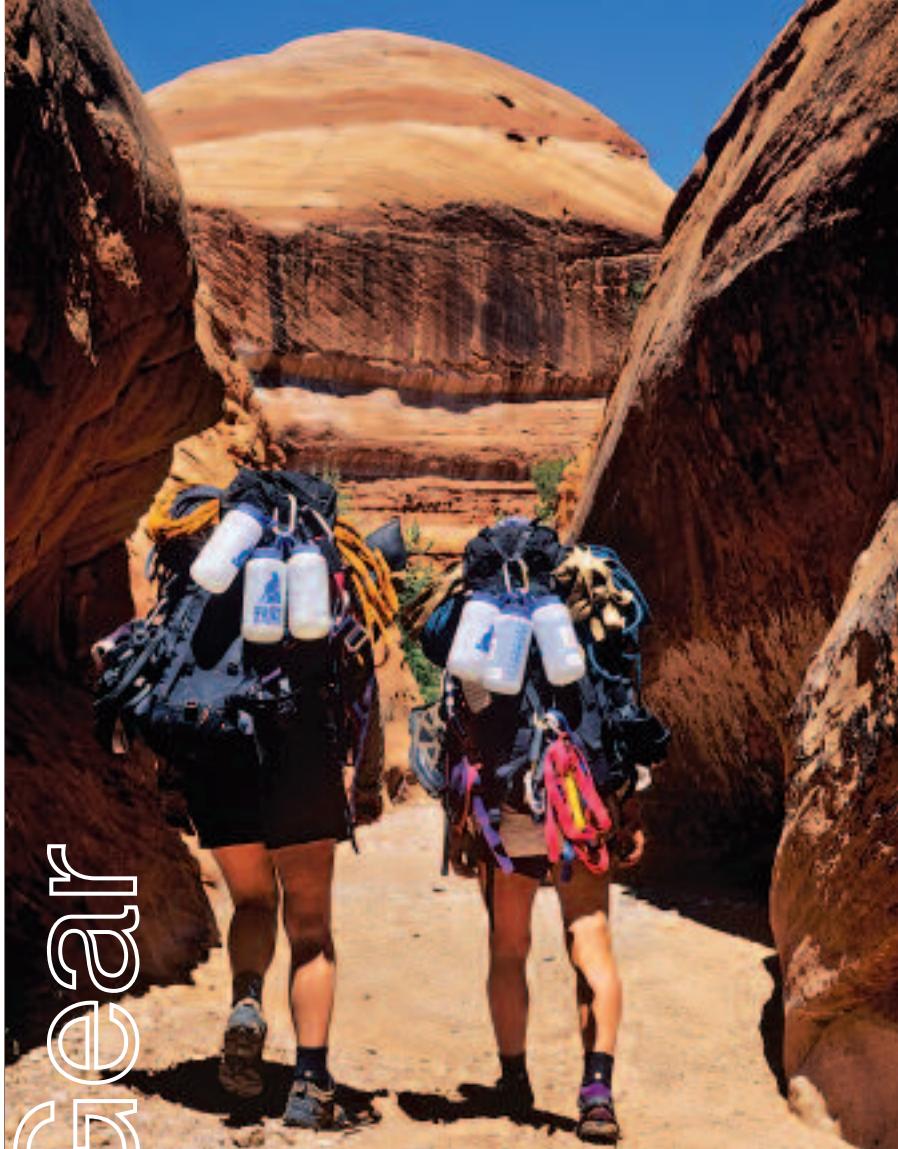
ing detailed descriptions of how to locate and navigate these remote slots, so we had to find them ourselves. During this same period, I photographed much of southern Utah from the air, and it was on these flights that I located many of the canyons. I made notes during the flights and pulled out topographical maps

when I returned home to pinpoint locations. My friends and I scrutinized the maps to ascertain entry routes near their headwaters high on the mesas and plateaus.

While these canyons are shallow and relatively easy to enter in their upper reaches, they begin to cut deeper and deeper into the sandstone as you proceed downstream. At some point, the canyon floor drops off into a deep slot. These “dryfalls” represent the point of no return. Once the rope is pulled after descending into the slot, there’s no going back. The only choice is to continue down canyon where additional dryfalls will be encountered. It’s in this section of the narrowed canyons, with dryfalls above and below, that the best opportunities exist for photographing previously unknown terrain.

OPENING SPREAD, LEFT AND RIGHT: A canyoneer pulls rope down after rappelling into a canyon in Cedar Mesa, Utah. On this 105-degree day, icy pools in the depths of the canyon provided relief from the heat; A wetsuit-clad canyoneer pauses in Deception Canyon, Utah. At high noon, a shaft of light hit the canyon floor, providing fill light to illuminate this subterranean chamber. A 50-foot-long stretch of narrows, barely wide enough to slip through sideways without a pack on, opened up into this remarkable chamber. There was no evidence anyone had passed through it before. ABOVE: Some of the most remote canyons on the Colorado Plateau are found in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. With large dryfalls upstream and downstream of this point, there was no evidence the canyon had been explored prior to Kay’s trip. Without a tripod, Kay propped his elbows on his knees and shot at 1/4 sec.

Nikon N90s, 50mm Nikkor (CEDAR MESA), 24mm Nikkor (DECEPTION CANYON), Fujichrome Velvia, Gitzo 1228 tripod, Acratech ballhead; 24mm Nikkor, Fujichrome Velvia (GLEN CANYON)



Gear

>> For Getting The Shot

Due to the physical difficulties of negotiating these canyons, I keep my camera gear to a minimum. For the most arduous slots, I'll leave my bulky medium-format setup at home and instead take a small **35mm body** along with **three lenses**—a **24mm**, **35mm** and **50mm**. These wide-angle lenses work best in the narrow confines of the canyons. This equipment all fits in a small fanny pack, which I slip into an **abrasion-resistant waterproof river bag** for the water sections. The constant abrasion of scraping along the sides of these narrow slots can shred a backpack or punch holes right through the waterproof river bag protecting my camera gear. To reduce this risk of soaking my camera, I normally carry an extra river bag as a backup.

I strap a small **carbon-fiber tripod** with its lightweight **Acratech ballhead** to the side of my pack after tightly wrapping it with closed-cell foam to prevent damage as I scrape through the slot. In one situation where the tripod was too much to carry, I had success exposing a 24mm lens at 1/4 sec. with my elbows resting on my knees while pressing the shutter release button. The new **image-stabilization lenses** coupled with adjustable ISO settings in digital cameras may reduce the need for a tripod. For metering light, I use the camera's built-in spot meter.

Adventure photography is one part creative vision, one part planning and organization. Be sure your gear is easy to secure and access. TOP: Canyoners hike along a tributary of the Escalante River, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah. ABOVE: A canyoneer rappels over a dryfall in a remote canyon in Cedar Mesa, Utah. Nikon N90s, 50mm Nikkor, 35mm Nikkor, Fujichrome Velvia



Safety First

While some of these canyons can be traversed in one day, many require overnight trips. For these expeditions, all gear must be kept to a bare minimum in order to reduce the size of the load carried through these awkward-to-negotiate narrows. My goal is to make everything other than my camera equipment fit into a pack no larger than 2500 cubic inches. The pack is lined with a waterproof river bag to keep everything dry in the icy pools of water encountered along the canyon floor, and wetsuits are required to prevent hypothermia. On one trip through a narrow slot in Zion National Park, where the outside

need to deal with carefully to avoid blowing out highlights or having dark areas lose all detail. In order to minimize the effects of these extreme contrast levels, I normally avoid including any portion of direct sunlit canyon wall in the composition and instead only include the walls lit by the glow of warm reflected light. The exception to this would be when the sunlit area represents a very small portion of the overall composition, say, perhaps less than 5%. Otherwise, I try to keep the highlights at less than three stops above the midtones in order to retain detail. To reduce color noise in the dark areas when shooting digital, I use the lowest possi-

I can't overemphasize the serious nature of traversing the length of these narrow canyons. Due to difficult obstacles along the way, it once took us six hours to negotiate a quarter-mile section of canyon.

air temperature was 114 degrees, I remember plenty of teeth chattering even with full wetsuits as we negotiated countless water-filled potholes.

In addition to hypothermia, the other major hazard of traversing these canyons is the flash-flood threat from the monsoon thunderstorms of July and August. On average, June is typically the driest month of the year in southern Utah with the lowest threat of flash floods. Even during this typically dry month, however, no overnight trips should be considered unless the forecast calls for nothing but sun for at least three days. I recall a two-day trip in Zion where the five-day forecast promised only sunshine. The day after we exited the canyon, a flash flood killed two people along the Virgin River Narrows.

Slot Canyon Compositions

When I look for photographic compositions along the way, those icy pools of water can greatly enhance a composition by providing beautiful reflections of the sculpted walls above. And forget that rule of getting up early for first light or waiting for the low-angle light of dusk; the best time to photograph along the bottom of these narrow canyons is at midday, when the sun angle is high. This high-angle light penetrates deep into the slots and illuminates sections of red canyon walls, which casts a warm glow on the sensuous swirls of sculpted sandstone.

This kind of lighting creates very high-contrast situations, which you'll

ble ISO rating, preferably in the range of ISO 100 to 200.

I can't overemphasize the serious nature of traversing the length of these narrow canyons. Due to difficult obstacles along the way, it once took us six hours to negotiate a quarter-mile section of canyon. Search-and-rescue teams are constantly pulling people out of these slots, and many people have lost their lives over the years from flash floods or hypothermia. You'll also notice that I've used the pronoun "we" to describe my canyoneering trips. With all the potential hazards along the way, I'd never consider descending into one of these canyons without at least one other person.

On more than one occasion, I've passed by opportunities to make photographs due either to sheer exhaustion or the logistical problems of setting up a shot in very difficult conditions. On the other hand, I've also encountered some of the most beautiful light-bathed scenes I've ever photographed. Knowing that some of these locations have never been seen before only enhances the sense of discovery as I round each bend in the canyon wall. **OP**

To see more of **James Kay's** photography, visit www.jameskay.com.

Web Take other adventures with OP's contributing photographers by clicking on the Locations section of our Website at outdoorphotographer.com.
 >> outdoorphotographer.com