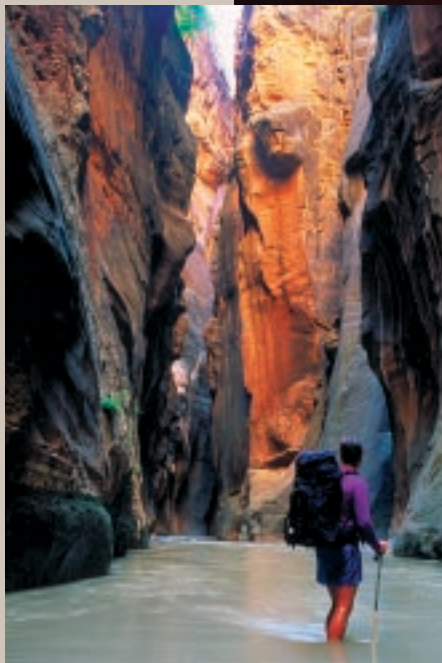


INTO THE CANYONS



JAMES KAY'S
CANYONEERING
PHOTOGRAPHS
ARE ONE PART
LANDSCAPE AND
ONE PART ACTION,
MIXED WELL WITH
A STRONG DOSE
OF THE SPIRIT
OF OUTDOOR
ADVENTURE

Acrophobia: the fear of heights. Claustrophobia: the fear of confined spaces. Even the words that describe these conditions can instill fear. Yet there are photographers such as Utah-based James Kay who enjoy finding themselves canyoneering—out on a limb over a dramatic landscape or in a tight squeeze between massive boulders. Kay brings back images from these precarious situations that convey the majesty and feeling of the place for us to enjoy from the safety of our armchairs.



Outdoor Photographer: When and how did this desire to crawl and climb manifest itself?

James Kay: I first developed an appreciation for wild country during my teenage years while hiking and skiing in the Northeast. I traveled west in 1972 to attend the University of Utah and was amazed by the magnificent scenery just outside my window in the Salt Lake Valley. Having grown up in the well-watered rolling hills of New Jersey, it was as though I was viewing a Martian landscape when I first laid eyes on the red-rock canyonlands of southern Utah.

It didn't take me long to realize that the Colorado Plateau was one of the most unique and remarkable geologic provinces on our planet. Initially, I was drawn to this region not for photography, but to explore its deep canyons and high mesas. My first major excursion

into the canyons of southern Utah involved a 60-mile backpack trip with my wife down the Escalante River. Without benefit of a trail, we saw one person in eight days as we negotiated endless boulder fields and river crossings and bushwhacked through thickets of cow pie-fertilized tamarisk. We managed to poke our heads into several of the narrow canyons that drain into the Escalante. We were amazed by what we found. These sinuous, deep and beautifully lit canyons, we decided, were the real gems of the Escalante. Looking back, the seeds were sown on that trip for my future passion for photography in the canyonlands of the Southwest.

Outdoor Photographer: How did the idea of canyoneering evolve?

Kay: In a world where you can travel to the most distant points on the globe in a matter of hours, it would be easy

to imagine that there aren't many places left where a photographer hasn't set up a tripod. The standard views of the Sierra Nevada, the Alps, the Himalayas and Monument Valley have been crawling with photographers for more than 100 years. As soon as I began to explore the nooks and crannies of southern Utah, I realized there are countless unexplored and never-photographed canyons just a few hours from my home. The "sport" of canyoneering was in its infancy and the canvas was blank. It was as much the attraction of descending unexplored canyons as it was the chance to photograph my companions rappelling through them.

The secret to locating many of these canyons is an understanding of the rocks. I searched out books on the geology of the region, pored over topographical maps, logged miles on the ground and

With his thirst for adventure, James Kay captures the beauty and light of the canyons of the West. Slot canyons can also be dangerous, and hikers who don't heed warnings about flash floods can be killed by the rushing waters of summer thunderstorms. Yet it's those thunderous floods that sculpt the canyons, creating an ever-changing landscape. **OPENING SPREAD: Slot Canyon, Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, Utah; INSET: Virgin River Narrows, Zion National Park, Utah; THIS PAGE, LEFT: Cedar Mesa Region, Utah; ABOVE: Dirty Devil Canyons, Utah.**

SLOT CANYON: Pentax 67, Pentax 45mm, Manfrotto 3021 tripod and ballhead; NARROWS: Nikon F4s, Nikkor 35mm; CEDAR MESA, DIRTY DEVIL: Nikon F4s, Nikkor 50mm; ALL IMAGES: Fujichrome Velvia



THIS PAGE, ABOVE AND TOP RIGHT: Paria Canyons, Vermillion Cliffs Wilderness, Utah; RIGHT: Zion National Park, Utah. OPPOSITE PAGE: Lime Rock Canyon, Utah.

PARIA CANYONS: Nikon F4s, Nikkor 35mm, Manfrotto 3001 tripod and ballhead; PENTAX 67, Pentax 105mm, Manfrotto 3021 tripod and ballhead; ZION: Nikon F4s, Nikkor 50mm, Manfrotto 3001 tripod and ballhead; LIME ROCK: Pentax 67, Pentax 45mm, Manfrotto 3021 tripod and ballhead; ALL IMAGES: Fujichrome Velvia

used information gleaned from aerial photography to become intimate with many of the Plateau's most remote and inaccessible areas.

Many times, my companions and I have no prior knowledge of earlier descents or what obstacles lie ahead. Most narrow canyons contain hidden drop-offs and deep, cold pools of stagnant water that would induce instant hypothermia without wetsuits. Some are

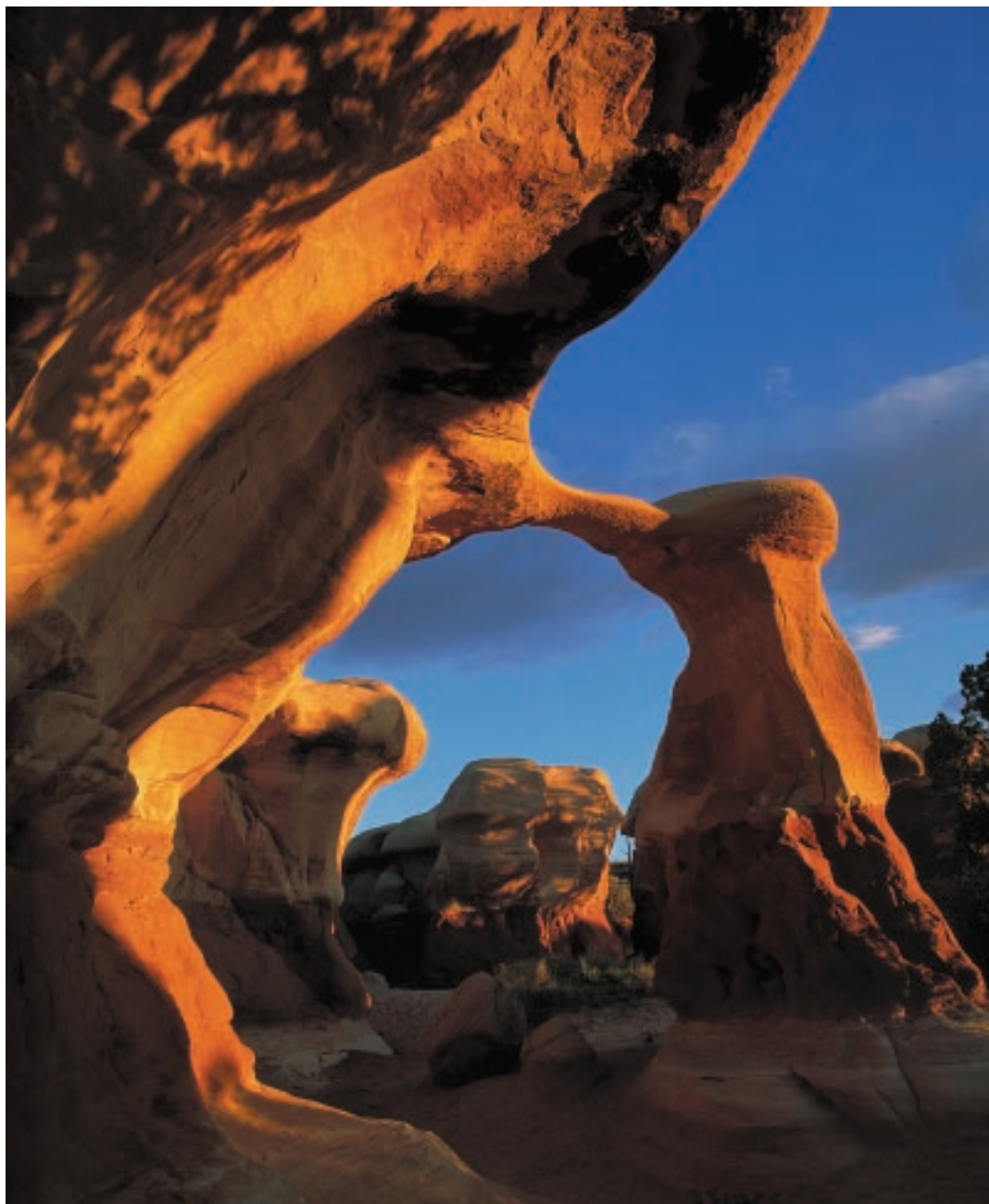
so narrow that it's difficult to squeeze through even without a pack. The skills acquired from climbing mountains are useful when descending a deep, narrow canyon and the hardware is almost identical. This would include ropes long enough for all anticipated drops, climbing harnesses, mechanical ascenders, slings for setting rappels, waterproof river bags for clothing and food and wetsuits for any swims. The primary concern

when venturing into one of these flash flood-prone canyons is the weather, and close attention must be paid to the forecast. June is historically the driest time of year and therefore the best time to avoid thunderstorms.

Outdoor Photographer: What film and equipment do you use for this type of work?

Kay: For canyoneering photography, where rappelling and swimming





ABOVE: Metate Arch, Devil's Garden, Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, Utah.

Pentax 67, Pentax 55mm, Fujichrome Velvia, Manfrotto 3021 tripod and ballhead

through the narrowest canyons is involved, I whittle my gear down to the most essential items. For overnight trips, I use a small pack with a volume of about 2,500 cubic inches for all my clothing, food and climbing equipment, and a small fanny pack for my camera gear. I pack a Nikon N90s body and my 24mm and 35-70mm zoom lenses. A large depth of field and a wide-angle work best in these very narrow and restricted spaces. Usually, five rolls of Fujichrome Velvia film will suf-

fice. Since deep, cold pools are usually part of the program, I'll slip my camera pack into a heavy-duty dry bag. Due to low light levels, a small tripod is essential, and I'll usually wrap it with a thick foam pad for protection from scraping along the narrow canyon walls.

I've spent many days with my companions toiling in the black depths of some canyons with no opportunities for photography. Sometimes, even when presented with a beautiful image, I may be too exhausted or too focused on the

ordeal to want to deal with unpacking everything to record a single image. I'll make a mental note, however, of any particularly beautiful spots and return on my own at a later date with my medium-format gear so I can take the time to set up and wait for the best light.

Outdoor Photographer: What's your medium-format setup?

Kay: For a typical day shoot in canyon country when I'm on my own and concentrating on landscape photography, I'll load my LowePro Super-Trekker

with my Pentax 67 body and four lenses, including the 45mm, 75mm, 105mm and 200mm. I'll also pack my Fuji 617 panorama camera with its three lenses. With a Manfrotto 3021 tripod strapped to the side, two or three liters of water and food for the day, it's a healthy load. As I trudge through the sand doing my Lawrence of Arabia imitation with pen in hand, I'll make notes whenever I come across a potential shot and return at the time of day and year when I think the light will be best.

Outdoor Photographer: Where are your favorite places to photograph, and why?

Kay: What I cherish most about my landscape work is that it allows me to spend time wandering the canyons and mesas of the Colorado Plateau, without a doubt, my favorite location to shoot. In my opinion, the plateau country contains more possibilities for beautiful and varied imagery than any place on Earth. Even though the crystalline-clean air Josef Muench found is now filled with haze much of the year, the light of this region is still unmatched.

My favorite photography locations on the Plateau include the canyons of the Escalante, Paria and Virgin rivers. It's the combination of huge sandstone walls, well-watered canyon bottoms and narrow side canyons found in these areas that provides so much variety for photography. I gravitate to those areas of flowing water to add motion to my imagery and reflections of the warm canyon walls. While shooting deep in the canyons, I'll avoid the direct rays of light on my subject and instead use the warm reflected light bouncing off the walls, which causes the rock to look as if it's lit from within.

One aspect of shooting in canyon country is that I don't need to put my camera away when the sun is high in the sky. In fact, when shooting deep in the canyons, a cloudless blue sky and midday sun are the best conditions to provide the most dramatic reflected light. On a typical day of shooting, I'll look for that magic early-morning light high on the canyon rims and head for the deep canyons at the height of the day. Later, as the sun draws near the horizon, I'll return to the canyon rims and set up for a possible dramatic late-evening shot. **OR**

For more of James Kay's photography, visit www.jameskay.com.