

A full-page photograph of a person rappelling down a massive, smooth sandstone wall in a canyon. The person is a small figure against the vast, textured rock face. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights on the rock. The title 'NO EXIT ROUTE' is overlaid in a stylized, white, gothic-style font.

NO EXIT ROUTE

What started out as a short, pre-lunchtime hike, one that *might* include a bit of rappelling and *might* require a bit of climbing, turned into a nightmare of narrow passageways, frigid pools of water and multiple rappels into the unknown. That's what happens when you break almost every rule of canyoneering.

BY MORGAN SJOGREN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID WALLACE

OPPOSITE PAGE: Chris Erwin peers through a narrow sandstone slot in Lower Waterholes Canyon, near Page.
THIS PAGE: Laura Segall rappels a 320-foot sandstone wall in the canyon.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is republished from Morgan Sjogren's book *Outlandish: Fuel Your Epic*, with permission of VeloPress. The photographs were made by David Wallace on a separate trip.

Last night I dreamed we became the canyon walls. Two strong and separate sides, east and west, narrowing in on each other so tightly they appeared as one, and yet bending just enough to let the sacred space between us flow through. I awake, eyes still closed, wrapped in Mike's arms in the back of the van. I move ever so slightly, wiggling my fingers to make sure we are not made of stone.

"Just so you know," he says, "we probably aren't getting out of here before dark."

I look at Mike, then peer over the edge of the red sandstone cliff, so sheer and high that the bottom does not even exist. I am haunted by last night's dream.

"I know. I don't even care. I just want to get out alive."

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Several hours ago, we started out on a short, pre-lunchtime hike that *might* include a bit of rappelling and *might* require a bit of climbing to get back out. It's not the first time that a short jaunt required we bring some gear, so initially, I thought nothing of it. The outing has now become a full-day saga that has included more than 15 rappels, squeezing through narrow passageways and navigating frigid pools of water. Before and after each rappel, Mike has taken note of possible routes for us to climb out, but at this point, there is no obvious exit. Thinking that we'd only be out for an hour or two, and having just eaten massive breakfast burritos, we foolishly failed to pack any snacks or water. In fact, we have nothing more than light jackets, our harnesses and a small pack of nuts, plus one 50-meter and one 70-meter rope. We'll soon discover what a difference those 20 meters will make.

Let me preface this with the fact that I am afraid of heights in the true sense of a phobia — cold sweats, body shakes, white knuckles, irrational arguments out loud with the universe, and a dual-gut-evacuation-plan kind of fear. Despite this, I continue to tie in directly to my fear and expose myself to activities on the edge of my internal panic button. Steadily, my anchor keeps getting set higher and higher, yet the fear never seems to dissipate. Instead, I grow more willing to climb with it haunting me.

I got through most of the previous short, 10- to 25-foot rappels along the route by thinking back to my adventures on the playground as a kid. I usually found myself getting roped — literally — into something interesting and imaginative with the boys. On one such occasion, we were playing Indiana Jones. With a stack of jump ropes in hand, our crew climbed to the top of the monkey bars, where we planned to use the ropes to lower down and find the lost ark. I volunteered to take the plunge first: tying the jump rope around my waist and stepping over the bars, putting my full trust in four 5-year-old boys. Just before the moment of letting go, I heard loud yelling in the distance: "Morgan! Stop!" My kindergarten teacher raced across the playground and promptly put our recess adventure squad in timeout, where we likely used the quiet time to dream up our next crazy game.

In this moment, I can't decide whether I need to channel that fearless 5-year-old or be my own kindergarten teacher, but when we reach the top of the next rappel, it's clear I'm going to have to grasp for something different altogether. As I approach the 1-foot-wide opening of the canyon on the edge of the cliff, I take note of how much it opens up from here. For most of the journey, we have been wedged between red sandstone walls so narrow, we had to shimmy sideways for our bodies and ropes to fit through. Here, however, the canyon is almost a quarter-mile wide. I look up at blue skies, then look down. The cliff is so high, and so sheer, that I cannot even see the bottom.

Mike pulls out the ropes and sets up the first rap. So, we *are* doing this. Despite my gut telling me that this is a questionable decision, I can't think of any alternative. I watch Mike drop into the rap first, and within minutes, he is completely out of sight. At this stage, it's a very good thing that I have no experience with canyoneering; otherwise, knowing what we have to do next, I'd probably still be sitting on the edge.

It's a slow, stressful process for Mike to locate and reach the next rap station, if there even is one. Not having planned to complete this route, he has no route beta to guide his decisions, and instead must rely on his background in climbing and mountaineering — and, let's face it, on total guesswork — to find on-site solutions.

The fear monsters jump on my back again: *What if the next rap station isn't there? What if it's too far away for our ropes to reach? What if something happens to Mike? What if I don't clip into my belay device properly?* A distant call from below signals that Mike has figured it out, and he cues me to begin my descent.

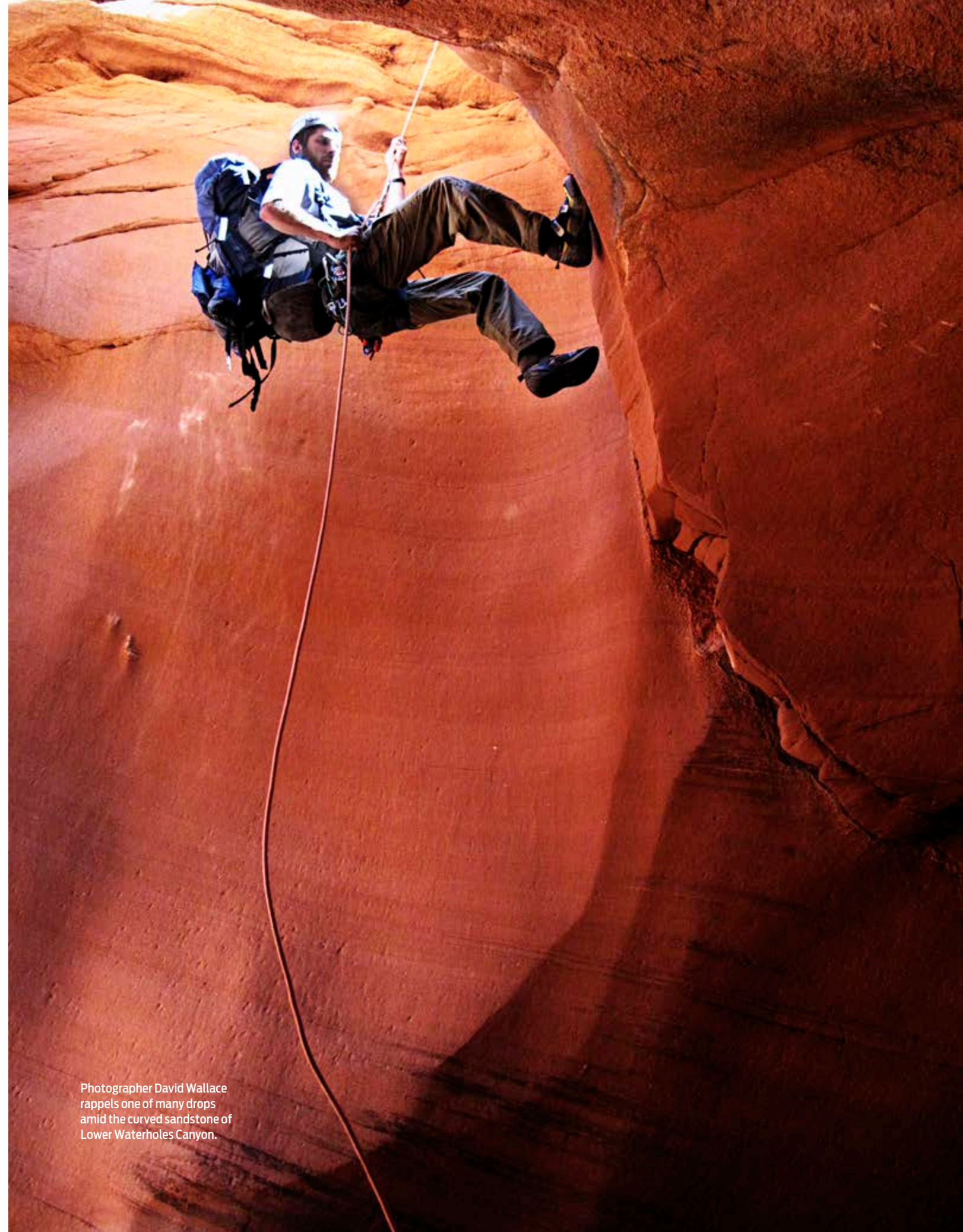
Experienced canyoneers will smoothly and swiftly kick off the walls and allow the rope to flow between their hands, trusting the gear and process. For me, it's jerky, slow and awkward. Each time I lower myself a few inches, it requires an enormous pep talk and a deep breath.

When Mike's voice booms directly beneath me, some of my tension releases, and I feel as though I've made it — and then I look down. He is clipped in directly to the sheer wall and hanging there. And I still can't see the bottom.

I stop, suspended in the air. "What the [expletive] do I do now?"

"Just get down here, and I'll show you."

What choice do I have? If you're going to follow someone over the edge of a cliff, there is no halfway, no middle ground.



Photographer David Wallace rappels one of many drops amid the curved sandstone of Lower Waterholes Canyon.

At the point of no return, I stop analyzing what is happening and decide to commit and surrender.

I tune out my fear for a moment to fully focus on Mike’s instructions. I clip in directly to the anchor on the wall, then watch him descend into the abyss once again to find the next rap station. Even in a partnership, there will always be moments that you must take on completely solo. I hang with the solid rock against my back and open air under my feet. I’m alone with my fear — unable to deny it, but unwilling to let it consume me. It could not be clearer that the present moment is the only reality.

So, I hone my focus on *right now*. First order of business: Take care of my soaking-wet pants, which are the result of forced passage through the water, cold enough to sting my legs, pooled in an earlier point of the canyon. I’m starting to get chilled, which is no good as the sun lowers in the sky. It’s the middle of February, and even in the desert, nights can be bitingly cold.

At this point, my pants are damp only up to my knees. Clipped in directly to the anchors on the wall, I bend toward

**I HANG WITH THE SOLID ROCK AGAINST
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my legs, stretching as much as possible and using both hands to lift each leg toward my mouth so I can tear a small hole in the leggings with my teeth. I then use the puncture to rip off the lower portions and convert them into shorts. It’s less coverage, but they are dry, which is a much warmer situation, at least for now. I contemplate saving the wet rags, but I have enough to deal with at the moment. I let go and watch them disappear beneath me. I’ll retrieve them at the bottom. If there is a bottom.

Mike’s distant voice below me again steers me out of my own thoughts. I rappel just a bit smoother this time. I’ve finally recognized that my fear isn’t getting me down any faster, and I want to get the hell off this cliff and place my feet on the sandy, solid ground. I am learning to let it flow.

In the two rappels that follow, I surrender to my fear of heights, imagining that I am a bird soaring around the canyon. Hundreds of feet above the ground, I contemplate how rare, and in its own way beautiful, this experience is — to be suspended in midair in a place humans are not naturally designed to travel through. I examine the textures of the walls and the clouds moving above my head in the blue sky, and I take slow, deep breaths.

I’m so excited to finally see the canyon floor that I completely skim over the fact that one of the ropes ends nearly 20 feet above the ground. That damn 50-meter rope. What happens next is a mixture of Mike’s stellar lasso work and a gath-

ering of old ropes we’ve found in the canyon today. My mind is so fixated on terra firma that the final steps feel like magic. I recall Mike talking me through something about extending the rope with a shorter one, using a piece of cord to make a Prusik knot and conjoining two separate ropes. My distress at the time prevents me from remembering the details any clearer, and although we have practiced on other climbs, Mike talks me through the technical process. Despite the intimidating scenario, I execute the moves under the pressure. I follow through numbly, without a hitch, and I’m so relieved to make it back onto the ground that what we just did hardly resonates with me. Until I look up.

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We gather and recoil the ropes, both our own and several that Mike has cut off the canyon walls in case we need them. “So, now what?”

For the first time, I sense concern in Mike’s face and voice. “Try to look up ‘Lower Waterholes Canyon exit route’ on your phone.”

I’m just relieved that our location has a name.

I pull out my phone and summon the cellphone gods to drum up something with one bar.

Lower Waterholes Canyon. No exit route. Boat out only.

My heart deflates, releasing any remaining optimism. I hand Mike the phone.

I’m beyond hungry — too hungry to even get mad. What

will that accomplish? This is where we are now: stuck at the bottom of Lower Waterholes. My head rattles through possible solutions. We slow down the pace to scan the canyon for footprints, cairns, signs of a faint trail or anything that might signal a way out. I’m not optimistic, but what choice is there but to try? Finally, the sound of rushing water becomes louder and the sand siltier, and we reach the shore of the Colorado River.

I want to stay by the river to try to flag down a boat and hitch a ride before dark. But Mike is convinced that we can climb out, so we turn around. I do not like this idea and resist, but Mike insists we explore this option. With daylight slipping fast, we must go immediately.

We backtrack a half-mile and follow what looks to be a faint path up a sandy hill to the base of the rock formations leading up and out of the canyon. Mike free-climbs up ahead of me. Once he’s given it a fair assessment, he greenlights me to proceed and throws a rope down for me to tie into. It’s not super-difficult climbing, but it’s chossy and awkward. Navigating crumbly sandstone in dimming light does not feel safe, but does anything that we’ve gotten ourselves into today?

Determination alone gets me past hungry exhaustion, fear and mounting frustration to the top of the first pitch. I realize more than ever that we are just animals, and our ropes are wings to fly us into the cold night where our future sits perched high in the canyon walls with the owls.

We walk along the edge of the cliff band, scanning the sheer

walls above for the approach to a feasible exit. As the sun sets, I hear the motor of a boat far below us on the river.

“Dammit.” For the first time today, I’m angry. I stop and sit on the ground, refusing to take another step. It’s getting dark. I’m out of energy. My reasoning is impaired to the point where the only decision I feel comfortable making is to stop.

Mike begs me not to be mad at him. I’m not — I’m mad at both of us. Mad that we didn’t look at the route, mad that we didn’t pack the proper gear, mad that we didn’t tell anybody where we were going, mad that we broke nearly every rule of preparation for basic safety and survival, mad that we didn’t discuss and communicate a clear game plan with one another. In canyoneering, your fate hangs in the sum of your collective decision-making or actions. It’s a relationship that carries a weight much heavier than romance.

We finally sit down together for the first time since breakfast. It’s dark, and we are going to spend one long, cold and miserable night, if not more, together in the canyon. After throwing myself over a 400-foot cliff, sleeping out on the edge of one at first feels like the sane part of this day.

It’s 6 p.m., and a long night is ahead of us. Mike begins to gently wrap the ropes around me for extra warmth. His intentions are meant to comfort me, but I feel like I’m being mummified. Once I’m fully enveloped, he packs me in with more dirt and rocks, like I’m being buried alive. But not for one moment am I complacent or dead. I feel the cold rocks begin to rob me of my body heat. “Hell, no!” I wiggle myself to loosen the ropes and pull them off me so I can stand up.

“Let’s rap down to the river!” I want off this cliff more than anything I’ve ever desired in my life. Yes, the same woman who is afraid of heights, hates rappelling and less than an hour ago refused to do stupid stuff in the dark is demanding to do all of the above. After the past few hours of my life, hanging off uncertain ropes beneath poor-quality rock suddenly doesn’t even make me flinch.

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With just enough moonlight to light the way, we’re retracing our steps along the cliff band when I remember my phone. I pull it out and notice I have a trace of reception and battery life. Mike looks at me. “What are you doing?”

“OK. We have some options here. I can at least let somebody know where we are. It’s now or never, though, because I actually have service here and my phone is going to die soon.”

There is a long pause of silence. “I want to let someone know where we are, just in case. I’m just gonna text my mom,” I say.

“Your mom? Are you crazy? If either of us texts our moms, they will call SAR immediately.”

We agree that we both are safe, uninjured and not in peril. Search and rescue is out, but calling Mom is not. We have a safety and confidence agreement. I give her a general idea of what I’m doing, for how long, who I’m with and other essential details. It feels a bit silly to check in with my mom when I’m in my 30s, but it’s a system that must be used to some degree for any adventurer. Mom is reliable, always has her phone on and rarely overreacts about the crazy stuff I get into.

“Yes. My mom. She’s not going to call SAR unless I tell her to.



Krista Lyn climbs out of a pothole while bracing herself against the narrow canyon's walls.

She is probably the only person who won’t freak out.” Mike is skeptical, but I text. Mom — Mike and I are in Lower Waterholes Canyon. We are safe and uninjured but will be stuck overnight in the canyon without food or shelter. My phone is going to die. I will text you before dark tomorrow, otherwise, you know the drill ... Within a minute, she replies. OK, sweetie, stay warm and safe. Have fun. (Kissy-face emoji.) I laugh hysterically and show Mike. Somehow, this makes me relax and remember it’s just another adventure. We return to the spot we climbed up to get here. It’s too dark to down-climb, but there also is no good place to build an anchor to rappel off of. Mike gathers all of the ropes and ties them together. He then hands me the end of a fixed rope we found today and begins walking and wrapping it around a massive boulder. Well, *this* isn’t sketchy. Mike laments the fact that we will have to leave all of his climbing ropes behind using this method. It’s a necessary but risky choice, as his ropes are a major part of our limited gear arsenal right now. I watch Mike drop over the edge. When it’s my turn, I step backward into the dark unknown, using limited moonlight

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and intuition to re-navigate the capricious rock, careful not to kick anything down on Mike, who is waiting below me. I’ve completely run out of adrenaline at this point. To find strength for this descent, I envision quenching my thirst with muddy water and lying down on the “beach” by the river.

“We made it!” I dive into Mike’s arms, and despite this epic being nowhere near over, here on solid ground, I am awash with relief. I rest my body against his, knowing both our

teamwork and our determination will need to remain strong through the long night. We walk back down to the river, where it feels significantly warmer than up on the exposed cliff, and search for a spot to camp.

I begin to clear a smooth area for us to sit while Mike heads down to collect some water in a broken CamelBak bladder we found in the canyon. When he comes back, I guzzle the gritty, muddy water and try to not think about the illnesses I may pick up from it.

“I’ve got good news!” I’m bewildered by Mike’s cheery tone until he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a lighter. After the many errors made today, this is a major victory. We gather dry sticks and reeds, build a fire and ready ourselves to stoke it through the windy winter night. As the temperature drops, Mike builds a ring of three fires to envelop us in warmth. I understand more than ever the primal connection man has to this heat source. Despite my empty belly, the fire feeds my soul and morale.

As the wood burns down to coals, Mike buries those in the sand, and we sit on top of them. At times, it feels like they are burning me, but it’s a better pain than shivering. We sing songs and play silly word games for hours before I start dozing off in Mike’s arms. Perhaps it’s in these dark moments on the edge that our true character, our instinct to care for one another, truly shines. Or maybe it’s just dark desperation, a primal urge to survive. Despite this being a situation of actual survival, I feel strangely secure as my eyelids surrender to this interminable night.

SAFETY FIRST!

The author of this story knew better. “We broke nearly every rule of preparation for basic safety and survival ... [and] we didn’t discuss and communicate a clear game plan with one another,” Morgan Sjogren wrote. “In canyoneering, your fate hangs in the sum of your collective decision-making or actions.” She’s right. So, before you go, keep these things in mind:

- Do Your Research.** As with most adventures, it’s best to plan ahead. That means that canyoneers should map their routes; familiarize themselves with terrain, depths, weather and expected timelines; and take maps and GPS devices with them.
- Share Your Plan.** Always tell someone where you’re going, your anticipated route and

- when you plan to return or check in. A window of time is reasonable, as long as someone knows to alert authorities if they haven’t heard from you by the outside edge of that window.
- Watch the Sky.** Even if the sky is blue directly overhead, floods can happen in an instant and from storms that are miles away. That means you could end up in deep water before you even know it’s raining. In addition to checking the weather in the immediate vicinity of your route, expand that research. If there’s questionable weather on the radar, call off your excursion.
- Check Your Gear.** As ropes, anchors, harnesses and other supplies age, they’re more likely to break down. Check your gear before

- you hit the road, and pay special attention to frays. Pack a headlamp for dark rappels and in case you’re in a canyon after dark. A well-stocked first aid kit should be part of every gear checklist.
- Dress for Success.** For the most part, running shoes are OK, but canyoneering shoes provide a bit of extra traction. Quick-drying layers are key, and it’s important to pack warm clothes just in case you have to spend an unexpected night in the wilderness. When you know you’re going to be dealing with cold, deep water, a wetsuit is an excellent investment. And wear your helmet when you’re rappelling. Always.
- Use the “More Than” Rule.** Pack more food than you think you’ll need. Pack more water than you think you’ll

- need (or a small water purifier). These things can mean the difference between life and death in the wilderness.
- Know Your Knots.** The American Canyoneering Association recommends learning seven basic knots to work you through a variety of situations in canyons. Visit canyoneering.net to learn more.
- Know Your Limits.** Canyoneering requires incredible physical strength to be able to rock-climb, hike, rappel and occasionally swim. Take it easy at the beginner level, then work your way into more technical situations as you gain more experience. And listen to your gut. If ever you feel like a situation is out of your league, don’t get into it.

— Kelly Vaughn



Eric Luth (left) and Laura Segall relax on the bank of the Colorado River at its confluence with Lower Waterholes Canyon.

As the sun begins to creep over the canyon walls, the temperature noticeably warms. I stand up and stretch my legs. It’s time to resume our efforts to get the hell out of here. We scan the river for boats but see nothing and spend the next hour with our ears alert for incoming traffic. Finally, we hear the buzzing of a motorboat. My heart jumps in excitement until I remember that we still need to be seen. We race across the sand and claw through the tall, green reeds to get up to the shoreline. As the boat comes into sight, we wave our jackets and jump up and down, yelling, “Help!” As the boat closes in, we are certain that our efforts have worked, but the boat continues several hundred yards past us. Crap.

Then it stops. We resume the jumping, yelling and shirt waving. The boat turns around and heads toward us. The moment is so joyous that it nearly erases every bad memory. For now. We hop aboard and thank the three fishermen profusely. It turns out they didn’t see us at all and just happened to stop within earshot to fish. A matter of pure luck.

Freezing air rushes past our squinting eyes and wind-

chapped faces during the 4-mile boat ride back to Lees Ferry. We tell the fishermen what happened, and they laugh and shake their heads, wishing us safe travels as we step back onto shore.

Over the course of several hours, we hitch rides back to the main highway with a National Park Service ranger and a local family, who generously share water and fruit with us. Once on the main highway, we figure it will be easier given the constant flow of traffic, but the vehicles fly past us. Some slow down to look, which doesn’t help, amplifying our tattered, filthy and exhausted appearance. It’s exactly how two people who crawled out of an all-nighter in a canyon should look. Some drivers hold their hands up in a prayer signal as they increase their speed to pass us. My disappointment swells. Prayers won’t get us home.

Finally, a mother and son in a big, black truck stop. We hop in, and for the first time in 24 hours, I feel relief. I rest my head on Mike’s shoulder and find my mind drifting back to my strange dream. It now feels more lucid. A part of me and Mike will always remain with the canyon walls in Lower Waterholes. **AH**