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## On Lake Powell, Kayaking a Reemerging Canyon

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[National Geographic Adventure](#)

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The curving little slot canyon in Lake Powell that our group has been kayaking for the past quarter hour abruptly narrows until it's impassable. In the lead, Tom Hogan, whose kayak is sandwiched between high, pink walls, shouts back that we need to reverse out. His voice, amplified by the encroaching sandstone, booms, then echoes and plaintively fades.

"Turn arrouunnd." I'd happily comply—the canyon, though sinuous and lovely, is claustrophobic—except that I'm an abject novice as a paddler and not at all sure that I can make my boat go backward. For a moment, I panic and begin pushing off with my hands against the close stone, making my kayak carom wildly from wall to wall.

"Whoa," Jim Adkins, our guide, shouts from behind me. "Maybe you should just get out and turn that baby around." Sheepishly, I glance down at the water. It's perhaps a foot deep. With exaggerated dignity, I clamber out of the kayak, then upend and twirl it with as much grace as is possible in these confines. Jim grins. "That was easy, wasn't it? Just so you know, if you'd wanted to do that last year, you would have had to carry scuba gear."

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Glen Canyon, once considered the Grand Canyon's contender in beauty and size, was submerged in 1963. After five years of drought, the canyon is reemerging from the water.

*Photograph courtesy National Park Service*

Tom, his wife, Grace, and I are taking a long weekend's jaunt on the depleted, though still immense, body of water. This year, the 186-mile-long (300-kilometer-long) reservoir ("Fake" Powell, as an eco-snark friend of mine calls it) that straddles northern Arizona and southern Utah hit its lowest level since Glen Canyon Dam stoppered the Colorado River in 1963.

The lake, which inundated what many considered the Grand Canyon's lovelier sibling, has dropped by a hundred feet (30 meters) in the past few years, leaving a bathtub ring high up along the rock towers that emerge from the surface. The reservoir is at just half its capacity—it was full as recently as 1998—and the water is expected to continue falling. (It is typically at its highest in July and its lowest in February.)

This diminution of one of humanity's great endeavors to dominate nature was brought about, of course, by natural forces. The severe drought across the West over the past half decade has starved the lake while increasing the need for water in the parched lower basin of the Colorado River, which includes Las Vegas and its inexhaustible demand for fountains and faux naval battles. The drop in reservoir levels has intensified concerns about water supplies throughout the desert West.

It also has reinvigorated calls to drain the lake altogether. Activists argue that this would actually safeguard water supplies by cutting evaporation and seepage into the underlying rock, which now claim up to a million acre-feet (120,000 hectare-meters) of water each year. Besides, they say, sediment is slowly choking the reservoir. Decades or centuries from now—the time line is hotly disputed—the facility may have to be closed anyway. So, goes the argument, why wait?

Apart from inflaming passionate debates, the drought has revealed an entirely new Lake Powell, with tantalizing glimpses of what Glen Canyon must once have been. At its deepest point, the lake still measures 450 feet (137 meters). Nevertheless, majestic rock formations, submerged for decades, have risen back above the surface. Drowned slot canyons have reopened. Riparian landscapes have reasserted themselves on ground that, as recently as last year, was underwater.

Many of these newly exposed areas are accessible only by small, maneuverable craft, and that fact has

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helped create an outdoor-industry boomlet. A few years ago, there were no kayak outfitters on the lake. Now there are a half dozen, catering to people who desire an atypical Lake Powell experience—one that offers the chance to learn and repeatedly employ reverse-paddling skills.

### Treetop View

When Glen Canyon Dam went into service, hydrologists were more concerned about the waters flooding than falling. In 1983 excessive rainfall threatened to send the lake roaring over its banks; only hastily constructed retaining barriers held it back. But that's a distant memory. "We're in a prolonged drought cycle," says Kirk Robinson, executive director of the Glen Canyon Natural History Association. "Cycles end—but is this a 5-year cycle or a 20-year cycle? Honestly, no one knows."

As our group paddles the lake, Jim frequently points out caves and fire pits 40 to 50 feet (12 to 15 meters) overhead that he boated to just a year ago.

"We could float a mile farther in last month," he says ruminatively as we ground our boats on a muddy beach in one canyon. "Hope you don't mind some extra hiking." We don't. For the next hour, we squoosh through the damp canyon, past rockfalls and over rounded, marble-like boulders. Lush tamarisk, willows, and reeds line—and in spots choke—the channel. The land here is a discordant but oddly affecting mix of skeletal rock and rain forest.

"Is this what Glen Canyon used to be like?" Grace asks.

Jim shakes his head. "I know it feels like we're walking on the bottom of the canyon," he says. "But we're not. There's 10 or 20 feet [three to six meters] of mud between us and the true bottom." He points to a dead branch poking up through the sand. "That's probably the top of a tree." We stare in silence. It looks disconcertingly like the raised arm of a drowning man.

Overhead, the long slice of sky above the slot has deepened to purple. Evening is coming. The last vestiges of sunlight gild and burnish the pink walls. Jim, who's wiry and dreadlocked, a leathery white Rasta, has been guiding raft trips in the Grand Canyon for a decade and outfitting kayakers here on Lake Powell for three years. He pats the warm sandstone and draws a deep, sighing breath. "I

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would love to have seen Glen Canyon the way it was," he says. "But I have to say, it's pretty darn great as it is."

### **Echo Chamber**

Although it's possible to kayak on Lake Powell without motor support, it's not ideal. The reservoir is blessed with some one hundred major canyons, as well as countless smaller, unnamed chasms. Many of these side canyons are miles apart, and equally far from Page, Arizona, the starting point for most trips. Self-powered, you'd spend much of your time paddling in the main channel, with its rough water and extensive motor-craft traffic. Better to laze against the cushions in Jim's pontoon boat on the ride out of Page and watch the red-rock mesas slip past on the way to a sandy campsite.

West Canyon, one of the longest and most spectacular of the lake's slots, is a few miles beyond our tents. We motor close and land on a narrow, white-rock abutment, then take to our kayaks. The water slowly draws in upon itself, until the surface shimmers pink with the reflection of the rock walls. The lake peters out after three or four miles (five to six kilometers). From there we hike another four, through a wide, swooping channel, until it, too, thins. Eventually, we're scrambling sideways until, abruptly, the walls curve back outward into a kind of rock chamber filled with deep pools. It's breathtaking. Tom looks at the water, glances back through the telescoping slot, then erupts into a loud "yahoo!" The sound bounces and repeats.

On our final day, we paddle into Face Canyon, about eight miles (13 kilometers) closer to Page, and end up hiking over ground that was underwater until a few years ago. Few signs of the submersion remain, apart from some clamshells and sun-dried crayfish. Scrub pine has taken hold on the bare rock. Tumbleweeds blow by. Nature has a rapscallion adaptability, I think. Glen Canyon, even if the lake were drained, would never be what it once was. But it's no longer what we tried to make it, either.

We end up hiking to Slit Arch, a cracked, wobbly-looking rock formation. It appears ready to tumble. It apparently has looked that way for millennia. I find the thought appealing. A breeze brushes past. You can smell the lake from here, but not see it. Hundreds of years from now, the scent, too, may be gone. But Slit Arch, I'd wager, will still stand.

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