The Lost World Of Glen Canyon

I feel as though I’m traveling back through time as I round yet another bend in Davis Gulch, a tributary of the Escalante River in southern Utah. I’m descending deeper and deeper into a redrock labyrinth, which hasn’t seen the light of day for more than 30 years. Each new twist in the canyon walls reveals a succession of plant communities quickly reclaiming the newly exposed ground.

Submerged beneath 60 feet of Lake Powell water just five years ago, the small clear steam at my feet now gurgles beneath a profusion of willows and eight-foot tall cottonwood trees swaying in the breeze. Before making this trip, I had visions of a muddy slog through silt-clogged, tamarisk-choked canyon bottoms. But now, my main impression is one of amazement.

Dry years in the West have lowered the level of Lake Powell and revealed long-submerged canyons. Text And Photography By James Kay
Outdoor Photographer

as I witness this canyon quickly recovering its former natural diversity and beauty as the waters of Lake Powell drain away.

Lake Powell was created by the construction of Glen Canyon Dam on the Colorado River just across the Utah border in Arizona in the early ‘60s. As the reeling waters of the Colorado River began to pool at the base of the cofferdam, they began to back up into the magnificent water-sculpted tributaries of Glen Canyon.

When the Bureau of Reclamation announced its plans in the early ’50s to install a 10-million ton concrete plug across the river, everyone who knew the hidden secrets of the place was shocked, horrified and unable to comprehend the fact that this marvelous landscape they had come to love was about to be lost “forever.” Photographers such as Phillip Hyde, Eliot Porter and Tad Nichols worked feverishly to record the canyons on film before they were inundated by the new reservoir.

My first impressions of Lake Powell came from the deck of a houseboat in the early ‘80s. Sheer red sandstone walls rose vertically out of the impossibly blue water. At that point in time, I had very little knowledge of the wonders that lay beneath our boat as we chugged along. I had first arrived in Utah back in 1972 while the reservoir was still filling, and infuriated with the high country of the West, I didn’t discover the canyons of the Colorado Plateau until several years later when the reservoir was nearly full.

As my obsession with the canyonlands of Utah evolved, I began to understand just what had been lost beneath the deep waters of Lake Powell. By the mid-’90s, I had explored every major canyon system in southern Utah. As magnificent as these places were, I felt as though I had been denied the prize, robbed of the chance to ever gaze with my own eyes upon the wonders of Glen Canyon.

I sought out photographs and stories of Glen Canyon in books such as The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado by Eliot Porter, published in the early ‘60s in an attempt to rouse a nation’s attention as to what was about to be sacrificed in the name of progress.

This beautiful book contained page after page of images of the doomed canyons. There were places with names like Music Temple because of the wonderful acoustics provided by its huge subterranean chamber. Hidden Passage, due to its almost invisible entrance where it drained into the Colorado River; and Twilight Canyon, which was so deep and narrow

The most difficult aspect of shooting the restored canyons around Lake Powell is simply getting into the canyons. There are only a handful of locations that are relatively easy to access from trailheads and most of these require overnight backpacking.

Many of the most spectacular canyons are located between the Escalante River and Glen Canyon Dam, and are difficult to access overland. The only practical option for exploring these canyons is via motorboat. Since the marinas on the lake charge around $300 per day, plus gas, for their 19-foot motorboats, I searched around and rented an 18-foot-long pontoon boat from a friend for a more reasonable rate.

1 Light. The best light down in these deep narrow canyons is during the middle of the day when shafts of sunlight penetrate into the depths (unlike photographing sweeping landscapes above the canyon rims where great light usually means shooting at sunrise and sunset). Look for locations where sunlight is illuminating the wall across from or above your composition and casting its warm-reflected glow on the rock around you.

2 Beware of contrast. If you have direct rays of sunlight illuminating part of your scene, the contrast between the light and the shadowed areas will be extreme. This can cause highlights to blow out while the shadows go completely black. The only exception to this rule is if the subject portion of your scene is very small compared to the entire framed subject, such as a silver of light at the end of the canyon.

3 Long exposures. Exposures of 10 seconds or more may be required in the dimmer canyon light so a tripod is a must. If you don’t have warm reflective light, you may find that blue skylight entering the canyon from above may be a problem. Use warming filters (such as the 81 series) or choose a shade or cloudy preset with white balance to compensate.

4 Special needs. Be sure to bring wide-angle lenses for shooting in these narrow canyons. The challenge is to find a pleasing composition where the vast light is within acceptable values. A spot meter can be helpful so that you can meter the wide range in light between glowing walls and dark shadows.

Captions for the opening spread and for these three shots to go here if you can fit them in the space allotted here. Let me know if we need more space.

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that harsh noonday light was reduced to a soft evening glow in its depths.

But the most magical place, it seemed, was a place called “Cathedral in the Desert,” located along a tributary of the lower Escalante River. This deep subterranean chamber of stone was regarded by people who had explored Glen Canyon before the dam as perhaps the most glorious single location in all of Glen.

A longtime friend, Maxine Bounous, hiked into Cathedral before the lake inundated it. She once told me that Cathedral was located a short walk off the lower Escalante River along a beautiful, wildflower-lined stream. She said the initial reaction of nearly everyone who rounded that last bend in the canyon and suddenly found themselves staring into its glowing chamber was one of hushed silence followed by a rush of words, trying in vain to describe what lay before them. As she completed her story, tears began to well in her eyes.

Beginning in 1999, the usual deep Rocky Mountain snowpack became anemic, causing the water level in Lake Powell to fall approximately 30 feet each year since then. Back in the fall of 2002, as the drought continued, I began to realize that if these conditions persisted, I’d have the opportunity to travel back in time to revisit the canyons as they were when I first arrived in the West more than 30 years ago.

By the spring of 2003, arriving on the heels of yet another dry winter, I set out to explore as many drained-out canyons as I could before the water level began to rise with the spring snowmelt. In the wider canyons, high sediment banks rose on both sides of the streambeds, but I also found narrow canyons where more than 40 feet of accumulated sediment had been already flushed out.

I compared old photographs to what I was seeing and was astonished at the similarity. It was as if the reservoir had never been. Small plants and ferns were already beginning to reestablish hanging gardens along the walls as cottonwood shoots, willows and wildflowers spread across newly exposed ground. Desert varnish was beginning to obliterate the “bathtub” ring.

Fast-forward to February 2005 as the annual low point for the reservoir approached. I had calculated that the floor of the Cathedral in the Desert would likely rise out of the water sometime in April for the first time in nearly 40 years. The reservoir finally bottomed out at an elevation of 145 feet below full pool, a level last seen in 1969 as the reservoir was...
filling. Seventy percent of the water in Lake Powell was gone. My wife and I outfitted a pontoon boat with our gear and motored down the lake to the entrance of the Escalante and proceeded to the mouth of Clear Creek Canyon. With great anticipation of what lay ahead of us, we slowly moved up the canyon. As our boat rounded that last bend and entered the narrow chamber of the Cathedral, we couldn’t quite believe our eyes. There at the back of the chamber, the waterfall stood high above the reclaimed floor of the canyon.

I had seen this image so many times before, but only in two-dimensional photographs. Now, here we were, as if gazing into the eyes of a long-dead friend. Retrieving my camera gear from the boat, I silently began to compose my first image in this sacred place. Later on, I located and stood on the same spot where Phillip Hyde captured his iconic image of Cathedral back in 1964 as the reservoir waters were already rising. This was the most profound experience of my professional life—to set up my own tripod and create my own images in that glowing, luminous chamber.

As I write this, the spring runoff from a snowpack 125% of normal is now flooding into Lake Powell. The water level is rising 18 inches every day and has already risen 30 feet since bottoming out in April. Many of the places we just explored are now re-submerged. Although I think last winter’s high snowpack was a fluke, if this coming winter provides another above-average year, these canyons will continue to slip back beneath the dead waters of the reservoir.

Now that I’ve seen many of these canyons for myself, I can begin to understand how gut wrenching it must have been for people to have watched them slowly drown beneath the waves. For those of us fortunate enough to have gazed upon these resurrected wonders of Glen Canyon, and to now watch them slip beneath the surface again, perhaps we can find solace in the words of Edward Abbey who, while bemoaning their loss, commented that the canyons aren’t really gone at all. They’re simply in “liquid storage,” just waiting...