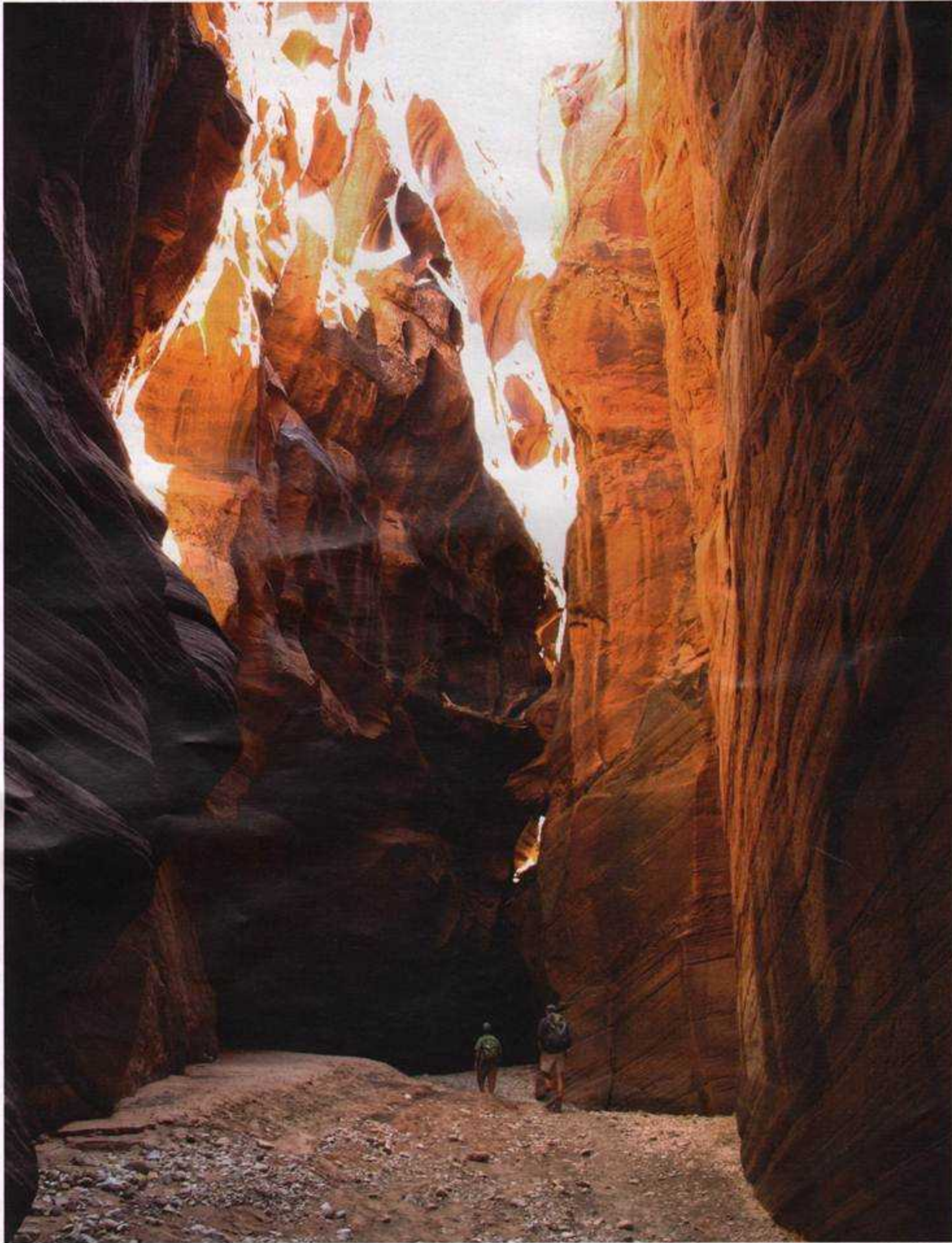


# canyoning in utah

Darrell Hartman **escapes New York to climb and squeeze through America's most spectacular desert rock formations.**



## FRIDAY 17:30

The first leg of my flight leaves Newark airport for Salt Lake City. I've packed only the bare essentials, but made room for *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey's portrait of Utah's celebrated wilds: "Naked, monolithic, austere and unadorned as the sculpture of the moon."

## FRIDAY 22:45

Jesse Bertke, my supremely able Butterfield & Robinson guide, retrieves me in St George, Utah. Two and a half ink-black hours later, she nudges me awake as we turn onto the long, winding driveway of Amangiri, arguably the state's poshest resort; the occasional tumbleweed blows across the headlight path. My room's haute desert minimalism is stunning stuff, but I'm too exhausted to explore it; I'm asleep within minutes.

## SATURDAY 07:00

Jesse meets me in the lobby with our local guide, Yermo Welsh. Sporting a shaved head, a long lick of grey beard and a pair of those odd moccasin-like barefoot-sport shoes, he's a genuine character. There's not a cloud in the sky; on the drive to the highway there seems to be a lizard sunning on nearly every fencepost. Distant plateaus loom; aeons ago, Yermo explains, all we see now was leagues under the sea. We turn onto a dirt road that leads to Buckskin Gulch, the longest slot canyon in the world.

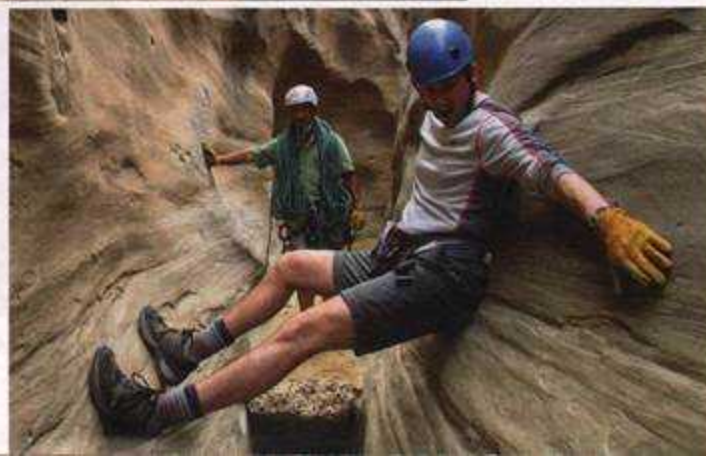
## SATURDAY 09:15

The three of us strap on our packs and follow a 1,500-year-old Native American trail through stands of yucca, sage and Indian ricegrass. With warm sand underfoot and the smell of sunblock wafting around us, it might almost be a day at the beach; except the only water we're likely to see is in our bottles. "People tend to overestimate their abilities out here," Yermo warns, relaying the tale of a hiker who a few months before had fallen to his death when his flashlight had failed. I chew on a sprig of "Mormon tea", a spiky local plant that contains ephedrine, the performance-enhancer that's widely banned in sports. We encounter few desert denizens, but are surrounded by their traces: Navajo and Hopi petroglyphs, coyote tracks, sinuous S-patterns left in the sand by snakes. Yermo crouches and beckons to Jesse and me to come and examine a

In the Utah desert, the first thing you notice is the rocks; the sculpted domes, arches, canyons and flat-topped mesas aren't merely spectacular to behold, they are also a gorgeous, occasionally dangerous, playground.

Arriving with just a rucksack to my name and a cool 40 hours to spend,

I am in pursuit of vertigo-inducing views – and face the very real threat of bodily damage, dehydration and even rattlesnake bites. But I'm about to scramble vertically up, shimmy down and narrowly squeeze through some of the most awe-inspiring monumental sandstone formations in the whole of the Americas.



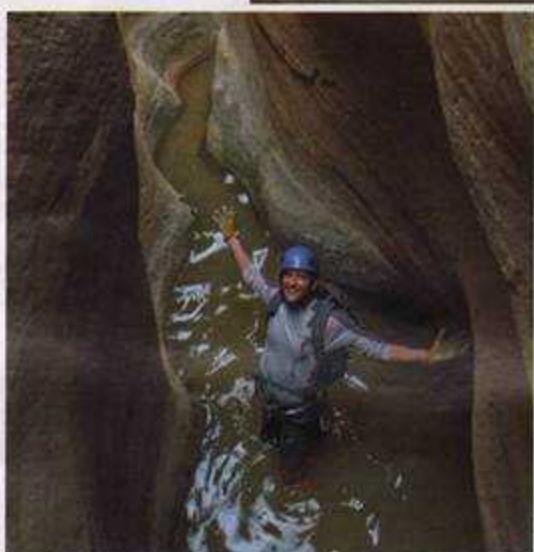
Main picture: hiking through Buckskin Gulch, the world's longest slot canyon. Left: in a canyon, Darrell Hartman, in the foreground, with local guide Yermo Welsh.



three-toed print preserved in rock: "Dinosaur," he beams.

**SATURDAY 10:30**

I take baby steps down slabs of Buckskin's famous slick rock; it looks like petrified whipped cream. At Yermo's urging, I avoid the sandy patches and try not to lean back but stand up straight – as counterintuitive as stepping into a boxer's punch. Thankfully, we've got rope for the steeper parts, and I wrap some around my waist, letting the slack out as I gingerly work my way down backwards. About 20 minutes later, we're inside the narrow canyon, a sliver of blue sky peeking through up above the 300ft-tall walls of river-carved rock. Nature's answer to walking underneath Manhattan skyscrapers, I think – but about 10 times more spectacular.



**SATURDAY 12:30**

We stop to enjoy our hotel-provided picnic lunches. A trio of male hikers passes through; they are the only other people we see all day. Conveniently, Native Americans pecked out all kinds of handholds along the exit route hundreds of years ago, so the way out is relatively easy.

**SATURDAY 16:30**

Back at the Amangiri, I shake the sand out of my boots and poke around my room. No beer or wine in the fridge – a reminder that I'm deep in Mormon country. I have a soak in the spa's adobe-style steam room, then am escorted to a vaulted chamber, in the middle of which is a shallow pool; the water, my therapist explains, is rich in healing minerals and five times as salty as the sea. As I lower myself in, the scratches on my legs sting acutely; within moments, though, I'm blissfully on my back, the buoyant water holding me there. The therapist presses gently on my diaphragm and head, then for the second half-hour leaves me to marinate. Round two, an aromatherapy massage, is only slightly less transporting; at its end I can't believe my limp sack of a physique is the same that conquered all those rocks today.

**SUNDAY 07:00**

Today is the gruelling dual-activity day. The first is a 10-minute drive away, in Amangiri's 600-acre backyard. It's a purpose-made "via ferrata", a route of metal rungs bolted into rock, and it's the best way for a rookie climber to get some serious vertical in a short time. The way up runs along a mesa ridge with some truly gut-loosening drop-offs. It's sweaty, arduous stuff, and at one point I look down and fear the excellent smoked salmon and cream cheese of the morning's breakfast might revisit me; but luckily, the bar-steps and my faith in the equipment allow me to attack the rock; I jam my fingers and grippy shoes into nooks and haul myself up and up.

At the route's most dramatic apex, I plant my feet into a sheer wall and lean out over the void, arms open. It's 700ft to the ground at least, and vertical. Mere hours after the flotation therapy, here I am hovering over infinity – the whole "letting go" thing could become addictive. The summit rewards us with views of distant tablelands and the glassy expanse of Lake Powell. But no time to waste: a rappelling adventure awaits.

**I lean over the void, arms open. It's 700ft to the ground at least, and vertical.**

**SUNDAY 10:30**

Barely a minute up the road from the Amangiri driveway, we descend (along more of that tricky slick rock) into a diminutive canyon called Blue Pools. "Don't be scared by the name," Yermo says. "Given how little rain we've been getting lately, it may well be dry." After about 15 minutes of walking the sandy canyon-floor passage, we arrive at the first rappel point – about a 20ft drop. I cinch my harness and Yermo puts me on belay. Rope in my right hand (it will serve as my



Clockwise from far left: atop a mesa on the Amangiri estate. On an 80ft rappel in the Blue Pools slot canyon. Getting wet at the bottom of Blue Pools.

brake), I squat horizontally against one of the walls. In this tight space my knees are up around my face and there's barely an inch between my pack and the rock behind me. As I start to move a leg out, my feet slip; in a flash, I'm dangling upside down. Yermo chuckles: "Well, that's not pretty!" With considerable effort, I set myself right and lower myself down. I'm still of sound body, but there has been a casualty: my shorts, which are now ventilated at the back by a huge rip.

We reach bottom and for the first time encounter something Yermo doesn't like: a pool of murky water. It's a narrow spot and Jesse and I are tall enough to press our backs against one wall, our feet up against the one opposite and advance across like crabs. Yermo, who isn't, pulls his shoes off and sashes through.

Not long after, he stops short and glances back, mischief in his eyes. I watch as he tosses the rope over the edge. A full second or two passes, then *ker-plunk*. It appears Yermo won't be the only one getting wet. This puddle, like the last, is on the scummy side. "I thought this was called Blue Pools," I whinge. I lower myself into water, which rises up to my thighs and is colder than I'd expected.

The final 80ft drop is fast and felt deep in my stomach, but the rappel's not too hard, and before long our triumphant cheers are echoing off the canyon walls. What goes down must come up, and we exit through a sandy outlet and circle back to the car across rolling scrubland. Yermo spots a horned toad and, placing it in his palm, strokes its head and back until its eyes close. I fondly recall my evening at the spa.

**SUNDAY 14:00**

No time to shower; I slip on dry shoes and set off with Jesse on the three-hour drive to St George. Zooming through Zion National Park, we spot two bighorn sheep. My flights are packed; no rest for the weary tonight.

**MONDAY 07:45**

Even with the windows up, the cacophony of the Manhattan Bridge at rush hour seems near deafening. As my taxi joins the bustle of lower Manhattan, one of Yermo's finer turns of phrase comes back to me. "This," he said, addressing the sun, rock and air, "is reality. When you leave, it's back to unreality." ♦

**FAST FACTS**

Darrell Hartman travelled as a guest of **Butterfield & Robinson** (+1866-551 9090; [www.butterfield.com](http://www.butterfield.com)), which offers his experience, including two nights in an Amangiri suite (pictured left), a guide, all activities (excluding spa), meals and transfers for \$5,000 (about £3,167). **United** and **Delta Airlines** fly from Newark Liberty to St George, Utah via Salt Lake City, returning to JFK, from about £425. [www.delta.com](http://www.delta.com). [www.united.com](http://www.united.com).

AMANGIRIS: JESSE BERTKE/BUTTERFIELD & ROBINSON (2)