

Desert blooms in Canyonlands National Park.

Six Days on the Green River

Story and Photos by Mary Klest



We launched our canoe when the wind was against us. Starting at Crystal Geyser in southern Utah, we planned to end near the confluence of the Green and Colorado Rivers. We struggled to move forward. At the stern, Rudy kept the canoe on course.

“Have you been in these conditions before?” I yelled to him.

“Yes, and worse,” he assured me. Minutes later I asked the question again.

“We’re not bailing water. Don’t worry,” he said.

I heaved the paddle through choppy water while wiping rain from my face. “You said all I needed to do was sit at the front of the canoe and enjoy the scenery.”

“Keep paddling,” he answered.

Rudy and I loved each other while in college. Our first canoe trip was on the Jacks Fork River in Missouri during spring break. After graduation, we parted. He moved to the mountains and I moved to the city. In the years that followed I married, raised a child, and divorced. He never married. His presence reminded me that that college girl still lived inside of me. His love of the outdoors and sense of adventure were still strong. So were mine.

Years ago, I had kayaked the white-water portion of the Green River in Utah seeking thrills. This time, on the flat-water portion of the river I was looking for something else. Our 120-mile journey would take six days. We would pass Labyrinth and Stillwater Canyons into Canyonlands National Park where the cliff dwellings and rock sculptures began forming millions of years ago. Our goal was to travel 20 miles a day. There is no cell phone reception, no grocery store or hotel, only pockets of uninhabited land to pitch a tent. I considered being in such a remote area as the ultimate in alone time. Would we speak of love, or regret? Would an embrace replace a hug? Are we then or are we now?

Dellenbaugh Butte at the upper end of Labyrinth Canyon.



Rain and 50 mph headwinds stalled us at only ten miles on our first day. “We’ll make it up,” Rudy said. When the wind finally calmed and the rain stopped, it was quiet, a sound more foreign to me from Chicago than him from Colorado.

A faint smell of mud filled the air. We loosened the gear in our tightly packed canoe removing a light-weight tent, portable potty, tiny stove, water jugs, and food. An ingeniously designed stainless steel cup was my favorite. Its flexible handles flipped out like wings. Placed on the tiny stove we could cook noodles or beans and in the morning drink coffee from it.

On the cold mid-May mornings, we pulled on sweatshirts and wool hats. We ate oats, yogurt, nuts, and bananas for breakfast. Without wind and rain, the river’s slow current nudged us forward. Canyon walls rose higher creating a fortress that offered but one way to navigate. We drifted.

At night we camped on sand dunes under a clear sky only to feel the temperature drop and the wind billow our tent as if it were a sail. Sand flushed the tent’s mesh folds. I had read warnings in Belknap’s waterproof Canyonlands River Guide: “River channels change frequently, sometimes within

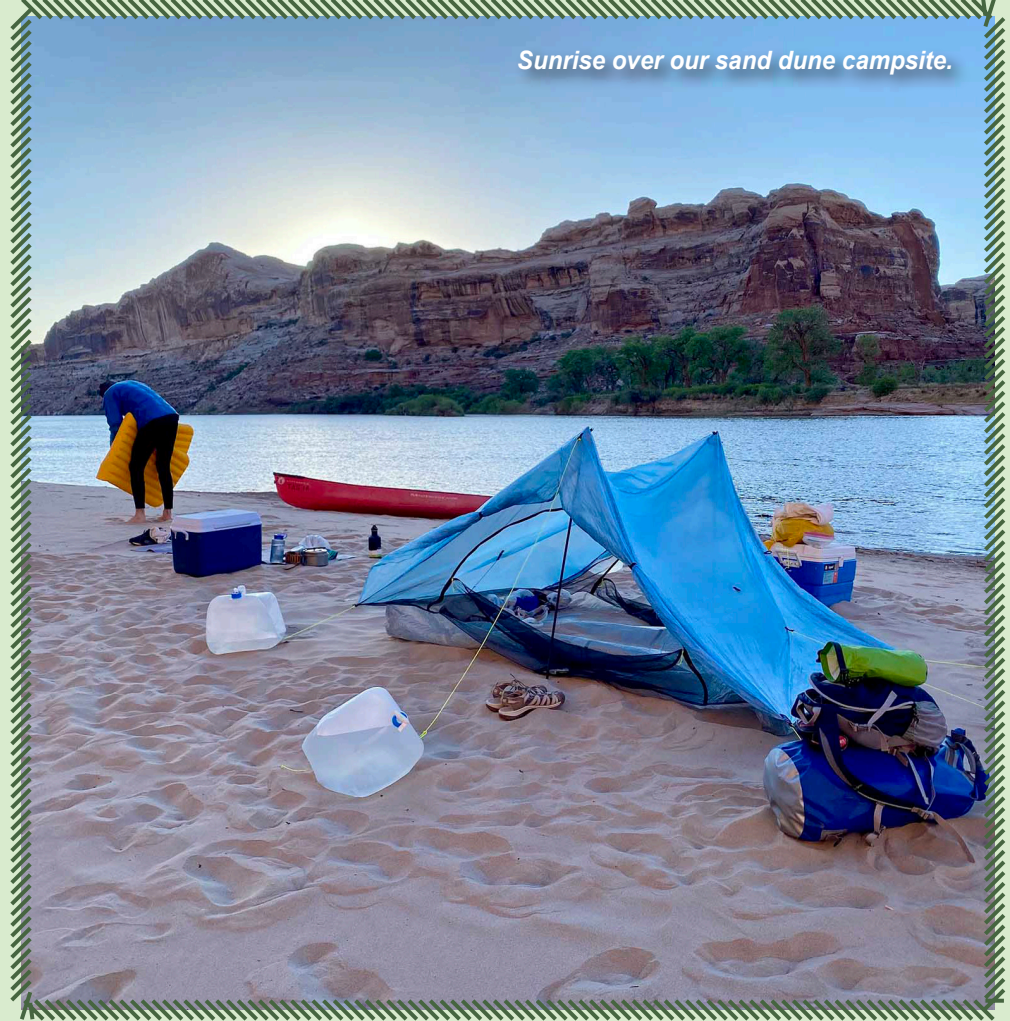
a few hours. Rocks, sandbars, or other obstruction may suddenly be laid in or washed away.” I didn’t worry as long as we stayed together.

The days were bright and hot. Rudy steered the canoe masterfully, hugging the canyon walls to capture scant shade. We soaked our shirts in the river’s cool water and splashed ourselves with the paddles. It was good to see him laugh. He had told me of his years in therapy and his failed attempts at intimate relationships. I tried to encourage him, but his outlook seemed as solid as the canyon walls that surrounded us.

Awestruck views of nature's architecture.



Sunrise over our sand dune campsite.



We followed a long arching bend for several miles. I got good at leaping from the canoe to find potential campsites, helping set up camp, and cooking outdoors. What else in me had laid dormant for decades? When the sky turned cloudy, we stopped to hike through side canyons and peer at carved petroglyphs. We set our backs against warm rock walls to meditate, a daily practice for both of us. I felt myself drawn to him. “Do you think once you’ve loved someone it never really ends?” I asked. He looked uncertain then cautioned me against stepping on the moss that covered a rock. “That moss has been growing there for hundreds of years,” he said.

Cliffs reached higher and higher making us seem smaller and smaller. “It’s all created through cycles of floods, evaporation, and wind,” Rudy said. My eyes swept the towers of rock, tracked etched channels and traced steep shadows. Corralled by its bends, the river wrapped itself around us.

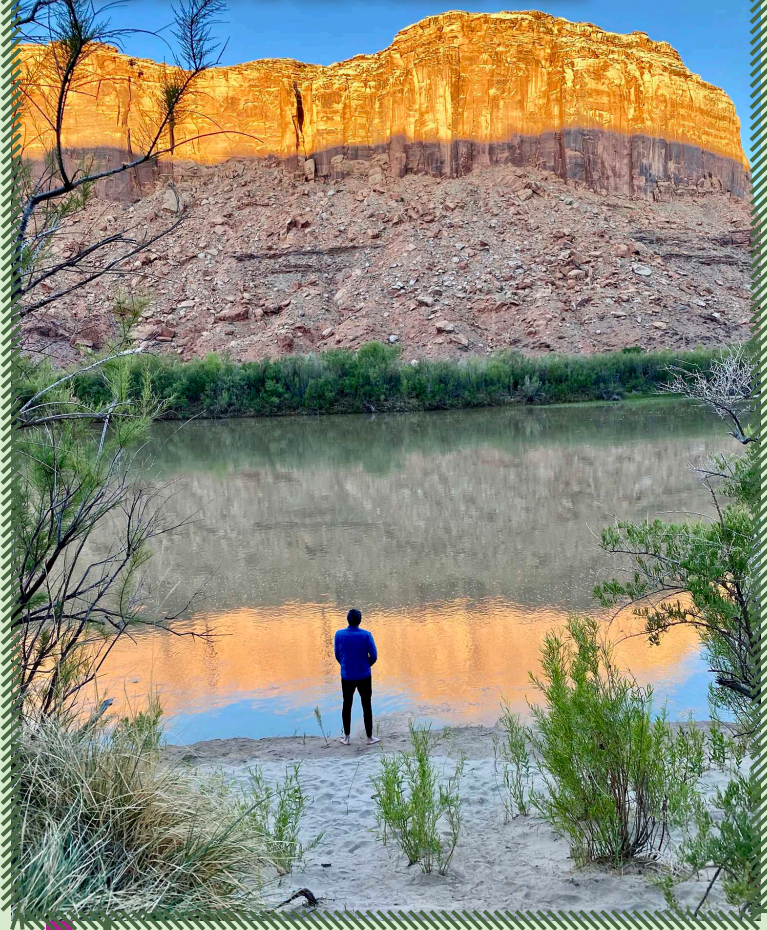
I thought the environment stark. Its wonder haunting. We didn’t see any people or animals, only a few birds. Vegetation was scarce. Drought had sucked everything dry. Trees stretched leafless limbs. Nothing appeared alive. Rudy pointed to white chalky smears high up on the canyon walls. “It’s eagle poop,” he said. But all we saw was their ghostly waste and what looked like abandoned nests. No fish jumped in the water. No turtles plopped from the bank. No flowers bloomed. There weren’t even bugs.

In the evenings, sunlight capped the rock sculptures. I gazed at the edges of the man who invited me here. Remarkably unchanged he stood, tall and fit, though his hair had turned white and thinned on the top. We watched the moon rise in an unfamiliar sky. We listened cheerfully

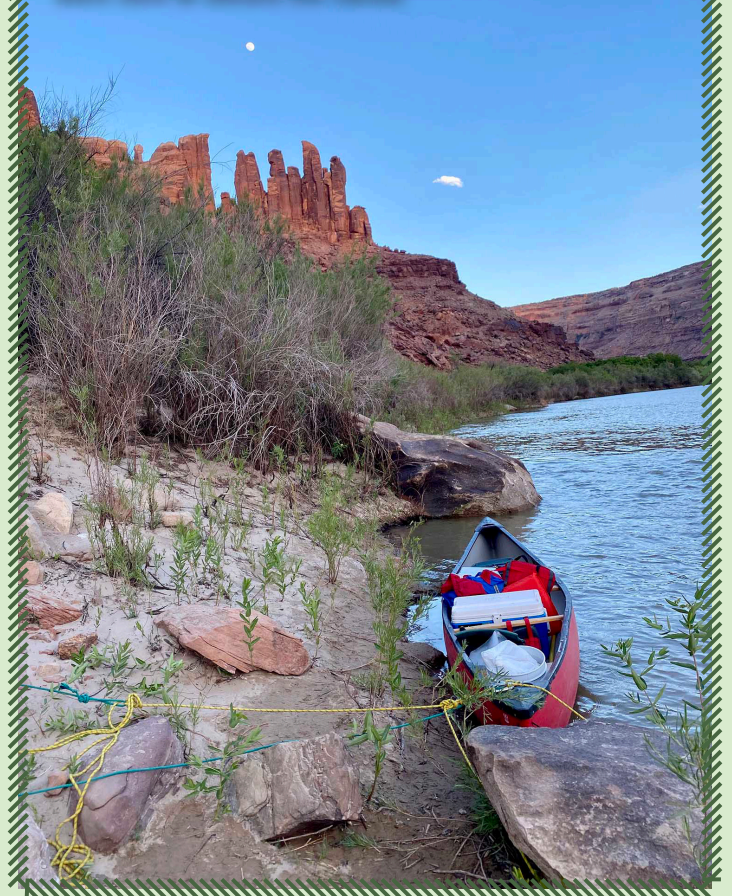
to our echoed calls: “Where are we?” I yelled to the wind that repeated “we, we, we” back to us. We sipped hot chocolate from our steel cups. I slipped on a red cotton dress I had brought to change into after our trip and felt myself a creature changing colors with the sunset.

On our last night I wanted to camp at Spanish Bottom where we might encounter other travel-by-river people. I imagined trees with Spanish moss hanging from the branches. Rudy wanted a quiet, peaceful place to end our journey. Realizing the physical demands he had endured and the skill needed to navigate the canoe, I agreed to stay where he wanted. His abilities impressed me and I told him so. He dismissed my praise.

A human scale to the cliffs in Stillwater Canyon.



With changing water elevations we were sure to secure the canoe.



We reached the confluence of the Green and Colorado rivers on time and floated to Spanish Bottom.

No moss hung from the trees. There weren't any people to talk with. Only a watery cul de sac. Waiting for our pickup boat I was anticipatory but Rudy was pensive. "What are you thinking?" I asked.

"I could stay on the river a lot longer," he said. The Park's first superintendent Bates Wilson shared this sentiment when writing "...you have to see it to believe it. And even then you may go away with the awesome feeling that its secrets have escaped you, and no matter where you go, its charm will forever tug on you like a magnet." After six days I was ready to go.

The quiet, reflective water created a stillness around and inside of us.



Our return on the Colorado River in the jet boat was efficiently swift. I joyfully pointed to the telephone poles sporadically erected on the rocky margins of the river. But I didn't reach for my phone. Civilization would return soon enough. Thoughts of Rudy and I dissipated like the ripples of water that churned under the boat's motor. He was my adventure as much as any river or canyon. Yet some people, like some places are better off left alone. The Green River was a safe place for him, a place with no capacity of loving him back.

Rudy returned to his log home and I returned to the city. He gave me the steel cup to remember our journey by. While floating down the river we did settle our thoughts on lasting love. We agreed that once you love someone, in some sense it never ends, like river water that eventually becomes a part of the sea.

Hiking in the canyons gave our legs a stretch and our eyes a close-up view of rock formations.



Role reversal with Rudy at the bow of the canoe and me at the stern.



Coffee in my steel souvenir cup on our last day.

