

Catching the Wave in Paria ©  
Amber Borowski

My friends call me Amber Murphy in honor of my adopted Uncle Murphy, whose law I have the misfortune of living. I have traveled thousands of miles for a wedding, only to miss it after getting into an accident. When I show a broken appliance to a repairman, it works perfectly. And I know that anytime I put an item in a "safe place," I will never see it again.

So what are the odds that I was one of only four walk-ins permitted to enter a place in southern Utah so remote and hidden that it is not on any map? That I stumbled upon this congealed ocean in the desert where the colors of a rainbow have been carved layer upon layer by wind and water--where violet and gold and green and salmon and scowling red splay across this chasm that trades colors with sky and cloud. Its hardened currents are christened The Wave. And I have never witnessed anything like it.

Of course, my journey was not lacking in calamity. I made the mistake of gloating to my friend John that I had road tripping down to a science and was able to pack in less than 10 minutes. John knows me too well. He flung me a skeptical look and proceeded to go through our checklist. Sunscreen? Check. First aid kit? Check. Tent? Silence. Could it be? Had I forgotten the item most integral to our nocturnal comforts? "No worries," I countered. "Temperatures are supposed to be in the upper 90s and sunny all weekend. We'll be fine."

It rained most of the weekend. As my wise Aunt Sue Murphy always says: "Things are never 100%, Amber, never 100."

### **Paria Canyon**

"I haven't seen it all. I wonder if anyone has... But I've seen a great deal of it, together with Buckskin Gulch, a major tributary [of Paria Canyon], and it is one of my favorite secret places in the canyon country.

Edward Abbey, *Days and Nights in Old Pariah*

Edward Abbey's Paria Canyon was a land of cavernous gorges, a fake ghost town built by Hollywood for some mediocre movies, a cow stuck in quicksand, high sheer tapestried walls of golden sandstone, the often impassable mouth of Buckskin Gulch, freshwater seeps and springs, blazing meteors by night and a radiant sun by day. Routine stuff.

The Wave is only a small part of the Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness. Located deep in the clutches of Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, the wild and twisted canyons of the Paria River and its tributaries offer one of the most spectacular canyon treks in the state for experienced hikers. The main trail through Paria Canyon extends 38 miles down the 2,000-foot-gorge of the Paria River in southern Utah to Lees Ferry in Arizona, where the Paria River empties into the Colorado River. Hikers must

register at White House, Buckskin, Wire Pass, or Lees Ferry Trailheads when entering or exiting.

Plan A was to backpack the length of this canyon but we did not have the 4-6 days required. We instead opted to do an overnigher from the White House Trailhead (at the mouth of Paria Canyon) to the Confluence (7 miles) and then continue 16 arduous miles up Buckskin Gulch, a major tributary. Heralded as the ultimate slot canyon of the Colorado Plateau, Buckskin is one of the longest and most consistently narrow canyons in the world. We then planned to arrange a shuttle to haul us back to the White House Trailhead the next day.

At least that was Plan B. But Plan B required an overnight permit issued from the BLM and the permits [of course] had been accounted for in advance. So, we quickly recreated Plan C. We would day hike to the Confluence and continue another couple of miles up Buckskin Gulch until we reached the rock jam, a 30-foot drop in the slot canyon. We would then retrace our steps back to the White House trailhead. The next day, we planned to enter Buckskin Gulch via Wire Pass, another tributary.

### **Murphy in Old Paria**

We followed in the footsteps of Ed Abbey and camped near what was left of old Paria (Pahreah as it was originally called) our first night. Before we hit the ghost town, we passed the Paria Movie Set where several western movies and TV shows were filmed from 1963-1991. The set survived the gunfights but not the ravages of nature and floods eventually destroyed it. In 1999, volunteers tore down the set and reconstructed two of the buildings—the Red Rock Saloon and the Lost Lady.

Most people mistake this for the original Paria, but Ed Abbey did not lead us astray. With *Days and Nights in Old Pariah* in hand, we followed the dirt road for another mile beyond the Hollywood set and past the Paria cemetery until we arrived at the silt and sand bottoms of the Paria River. We parked the Jeep under a cottonwood tree and waded across the river. Originally settled in 1865 by Peter Shirts, Paria was vacated because of Indian raids and resettled again upstream in 1870. Repeated floods forced the settlers to leave.

John took the lead as I read Abbey's instructions aloud. "You wade across the river and climb the left, or eastern bank. Here, scattered over a mile of rocky benchland, some of it shaded by cottonwoods, are the ruins of the original town."

It is probably not difficult for the average person to find the ruins, but as I've said before: anything is [im] possible with Amber and Co. John and I split up and scoured the sandy wash and benches but the only remains we found were petrified cow pies.

To our credit, Paria's ruins were few even in Abbey's day. But after a while, our fruitless search was forgotten. As we casually made our way back, the sun began to glow upon

the surrounding mesas and buttes. The shadows lingered with rhythms of light and shade through tucks and swales and ridges, abruptly shifting as if haunted by the spirits of Paria.

We set up camp (which, thanks to my absentmindedness, consisted of our sleeping bags and pads) under the cottonwood along the banks of the Paria River. John, still in the spirit of the great Kerouac of the desert, consoled me, “Amber, don’t worry--Ed Abbey never used a tent!” These words were recanted the next two nights when it rained. That John—*such* a fair-weather friend...

I have spent many nights in the outdoors cursing my stubborn insomnia. But on this night, sleep was a waste. I watched the falling sun set the bluffs ablaze, backlit by puffs of smoke-like cloud that shrouded the valley with a thick smell of history. And when the sky fell dim, I watched far-flung deities in the heavens.

The next morning, we stopped at the Paria Ranger Station on Highway 89 to check out conditions in Paria Canyon. A couple from Switzerland was in front of us talking to the ranger. As Eavesdropper Extraordinaire, I overheard them mention The Wave, and my interest was piqued. I had seen a *National Geographic* special on The Wave a few years ago and had been transfixed by this Kodachrome enclave.

But its environs were kept nebulous and for good reason. Fragile and cosseted, The Wave is not marked on most maps. It is located within Coyote Buttes, a protected area deep in Escalante. The BLM’s Web site issues only 10 permits per day, and these are usually booked six months out. The ranger station allows four walk-ins per day, and often has to turn to a lottery system because demand is high among the few people who know about it.

With these odds, the probability that a member of the Murphy clan would get a permit was pretty slim. But miraculously, there were two walk-in permits still available for the next day. I did a Murphy-Be-Damned jig and we eagerly listened as Ranger Dennis gave us detailed instructions to The Wave. We then set out for our day’s adventure to Paria Canyon.

### **Paria Canyon**

We did not arrive at the White House trailhead until 10:30 a.m. and the pulsating sun was already inexorable. We registered and paid \$5 each at the trailhead and then wound down Paria Canyon’s 2,000-foot gorge. Promises of The Wave were soon forgotten as we lost ourselves in this multihued conduit that electrified 200 million years of geologic history.

The riverbed that sweeps through Paria Canyon is navigable if you don’t mind getting your feet wet in multiple river crossings. In early spring, expect to hike in ankle-to-knee deep water. During summer, the Paria River can be dry for the first seven miles, with the remainder below the Buckskin Gulch confluence flowing year round. Few

obstructions block the path except for the large boulders that clog the river at mile 28. Most hikers leave the canyon floor and follow a route on the south side of the stream. Flash flood danger is high July through September so precaution should be exercised.

The Paria River's white tongue trickled out when we reached some power lines, the unofficial 2-mile mark. Four miles in, the wide but dry riverbed slimmed into the Narrows, and these sinuous confines led us 3 miles to the Confluence. The shade of the canyon walls lengthened and often only a sliver of the sky was visible from between the 500-foot ramparts.

When we reached the Confluence, we paused before entering Buckskin Gulch, Edward Abbey's secret hideaway. Innumerable little worlds, surprising worlds, and hundreds of hidden paradises existed within those crimson walls. Photographs fail to capture more than a micro-slice of its magnetism.

There are three routes into the Buckskin: Paria Canyon, Buckskin Trailhead, and Wire Pass, a shortcut into the gulch. This slick-rock slot canyon is like a canyoneer's funhouse. Rock- and log-jams require innovative bouldering techniques. And large, deep stagnant pools of water may require swimming through stretches of the gulch where the walls are an arm's length apart.

John and I continued only two miles up the Gulch until we reached a 30-foot boulder jam that requires the use of ropes to ensure a safe ascent (located 14.5 miles from the Buckskin trailhead). Reluctantly, we turned around.

Usually the return trip is anti-climatic for me but the bulging sidewalls of Paria Canyon provided a memorable playground. We skirted around the quicksand and tempted its clutches with taps of our feet. We chased the shade of shadows to escape the white sun. When the blue sliver of sky turned murky and gray, we marveled at distant glittering shafts of rain.

After slipping, slogging and hiking through the final stretch of the canyon, we were grateful to finish the hike before the torrents of rain really started. The result, I imagined, would be similar to flushing a toilet down this flash-flood prone canyon. For once, perhaps Murphy proved to be in our favor by denying us an overnight permit.

Our attempts to find sanctuary from the rain that night were disheartening. What we wanted to find: a cool grotto or casing of rock. What we found: shelter under a picnic table in a campground. I fruitlessly tried to console the chagrined John--"At least the small pavilion that encamps the picnic table is kinda cool." Ed Jr. was not persuaded.

### **Doing the Wave**

Shortly after 6 a.m. the next day, we were on our way to The Wave. We had camped only a few miles from the trailhead so it wasn't difficult to get an early start. A sleepless night under a picnic table didn't hurt either.

As we started hiking to this land of swirling sandstone atop the Paria Plateau, I felt a part of a clandestine conspiracy. The ranger did not reveal The Wave's location until after we had our coveted permit in hand. There is not a developed trail and we had to follow the landmarks the ranger had shown us via his photographs. We were then sworn to secrecy about revealing its whereabouts.

We followed a Jeep road before the trail vanished and we were left to forge across a scrub-brush hill. This eventually gave way to swirling sandstone, a hint of what was to come. Three miles later, we crawled up the final cornice.

When we landed atop the plateau, I felt like I had crawled onto a Monet canvas and was unleashed to glide across this palette of mad, extravagant colors. The Wave's concave walls looked like a kaleidoscope of frozen ocean waves. In this hanging canyon, my senses failed me. My notes later seemed as limp and banal as a televangelist's sermon. I was annoyed by my lack of eloquence, but also consoled by the realization that to describe a place that defies description by not saying anything is the best description of all.

After exploring every nook and swirl, I perched atop the apex of The Wave. For a moment, the heroic sun emerged and clanged across this stone rainbow like a cymbal. The clouds then antagonistically crept in, and the enclave was filled with an enormous hush as the sharp colors melted away in the fainting light.

Our explorations were not limited to The Wave. We climbed to a lone arch perched above us and later discovered a slot canyon that sent us gushing down Coyote Butte's sandstone whirls and eddies. When we finally hiked out of the canyon, I was taken aback by the day's perfection. Sometimes things have a way of going just right, even when the start seemed to go wrong.

Even for a Murphy.

## PARIA CANYON GENERAL INFORMATION

Flash floods—can occur during heavy rainstorms any time of the year, but be especially cautious July – September.

Water—do not drink Paria River water without treating it first. Know the locations of reliable springs. There are no reliable springs in the lower 12 miles of the canyon.

Overnight permits—Reservations, permits and advance payment are required for overnight use in Paria Canyon, Buckskin Gulch and Wire Pass. Overnight use is limited

to a combined trailhead entry total of no more than 20 people per day. The cost is \$5 per person per day. Dogs are also \$5 per day.

Day Use—Day hikers are subject to a \$5 fee and must display a receipt while hiking. Reservations are not required. Fees can be paid and receipts obtained at the self-serve fee stations located at the trailheads.

Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument  
180 W. 300 N.  
Kanab, UT 84741  
(435) 644-4300  
Fax: (435) 644-4350

**Paria Contact Station**

Highway 89  
44 miles east of Kanab, UT  
Open March 15 through mid-November.  
8:30 a.m. - 4:15 p.m. seven days a week.

<http://www.ut.blm.gov/monument/>