

There and Back Again



There ...

It is said that a great photograph tells a story. I've always wondered whether this one tells its real story very well. That story, for me, is the story of its making. It is not a tale epic enough to deserve a book or a movie. My arm was not trapped by a falling rock. I did not tumble into a crevasse and need to crawl miles to be rescued. In short, I did not almost die (although it certainly felt like it at the time). But it was to me - a moderately out-of-shape, non-hero type - quite a struggle. And more than that, it remains in my mind a significant journey.

Some will recognize the location as the *Subway*, situated in the backcountry of Zion National Park. There is no trail to this location – one simply follows the river upstream. It is nine- or ten-miles round trip. It doesn't sound bad, other than the required permit, sought after and difficult to obtain.

I managed to secure such a permit for a July day some years ago. Since I was traveling solo, I can only imagine I lucked out as the last permit in the lottery – no one else wanted the singleton remaining. Stopping by the visitor center the day before, I picked up my permit and noted that the flash flood warning was “*Possible*”. I asked the ranger how possible “*Possible*” was, and was told something to the effect of “well you never know, you should always be careful”. Great, very helpful.

Reading up about the hike told me it was generally considered difficult. It also warned that good route-finding skills were required which truly puzzled me. If you simply follow the river, how could one get lost? But those warnings, combined with my less than stellar fitness, the thirty-pound pack I’d be carrying with 4x5 camera gear, and the knowledge that flash floods were “*Possible*”, convinced me to make an early start of things. So, I was the first at the parking lot that morning, and first to descend the four hundred vertical feet into the canyon to the river. It was at that point that I almost gave up for the first time.

While there had been a semblance of a trail down the canyon wall from the parking lot, upon reaching the river there appeared to be nothing. Where exactly was I supposed to proceed upriver? I contemplated this for a few minutes, then decided I was supposed to jump in the river and wade up stream. So, I jumped in, only to discover the bottom littered with obstacles. Progress was glacially slow, mis-stepping and fighting the drag of the water. I considered the prospect of wading like this for the miles required and realized there were not enough hours in the day to make it to the Subway and back. I contemplated quitting right there.

It was then that other hikers arrived, and passed me, speeding up the side of the river. Huh, there must be some sort of trail I realized. Feeling stupid, but re-energized nonetheless, I climbed out of the river, found the “trail”, and began to follow the other hikers. As I did this, I began to better understand what was meant by “good route-finding skills required”. There was a trail, sort of, but it was very easy to lose. It crisscrossed the river to find the most accessible upstream route, and often broke into a series of herd path options, some more fruitful than others in terms of the progress they allowed. I decided the best option was to try to keep up with the group of hikers, since they seemed remarkably skilled in route-finding by comparison. This approach worked for a while, but eventually I was defeated by the thirty-pound pack and my poor fitness, and I lost too much ground. So, I had to go it alone. That meant false starts and many moments of pause. Significant portions of the river were littered with boulders and fallen trees. If you moved away from the river, you were immediately met by dense brush. It was a game of constantly finding one’s best way past all these obstacles. Sometimes paths were worn enough to recognize, but at other times they were not clear, or I chose “poorly” from available options. But slowly, very slowly, I began to develop some experience and skill in finding the way ahead.

Remarkably, I was among the first handful of people to reach the Subway that day. It was not for some newfound speed as the hike progressed. Clearly most of the competition had slept in. It took some five hours of exhausting hiking – climbing over obstacles, wading

through the river, working my way up stretches of wet, unbelievably slippery rock. But when I finally arrived, I was greeted by ... well, not the photo above. Nothing even close. I had fretted over this possibility - that I would get to the Subway and the light would be all wrong. To achieve the image shown above, the light must be just right. The sun reflecting off rock walls beyond the “subway tunnel” splashes warm light back into the “tunnel”. But again, everything must be just right for that to happen. And it wasn’t. So, I waited.

Several hours I waited. And as I did two things kept running through my head. First was perhaps a more rational fear. I had only made it halfway. I still had to get back, was already tired, and knew that I had an equally agonizing trip out with the same obstacles to work my way over, under, and around. And sadly, I had not left breadcrumbs, so I was going to have to do much of the same route-finding to get out. Second was perhaps a less rational fear. The warning “Possible” flashfloods kept echoing in my head. I knew as morning rolled into afternoon, the likelihood of thundershowers increased, and while most of the route along the river had access to higher ground, standing in the Subway itself was not where you wanted to be if a flashflood were to occur. The clouds which increasingly rolled in overhead both fueled my paranoia further and decreased the odds I would get the light I needed. In the end, all these concerns won out over my hope for light, so, I packed up the camera, and headed back out, defeated that I was leaving without the image I had labored for. I’d count that as the second time I gave up.

As it turned out, the journey was not done with me yet, and there was one additional challenge left – the heat. It was after all July, and I was not in the relative cool of the Zion valley, but in the desert backcountry. All that waiting I had done meant that I was now in the heat of the day, and although I am not sure exactly how hot it was, days before and after had hovered near 100° F. It began to get to me. I had to stop increasingly frequently in the shade to sit and cool. I alternated those stops with filling my hat with water in the river and pouring it over my head. About halfway back I ran out of the drinking water that I had brought with me. Although I had no water filter, I was carrying iodine tablets, so I made the decision to take water from the river, and dose it with iodine. I probably was not looking great at this point, and a couple of other hikers asked me if I was ok. I politely said I was, but really was not. I could feel myself having a harder time making decisions. In hindsight, I was probably suffering from heat exhaustion, and without the river to cool me, I likely would have been in real trouble. I suspect I was also suffering from hyponatremia or a lack of salt. I was replenishing the water I was losing, but foolishly was not doing anything to replace electrolytes. The water alone was not making me feel any better.

Eventually I stumbled to the point where the route departed the river. The final climb the four hundred feet out of the canyon was brutal – steep, in full sun, and I had gone through all of the iodine treated water and was out of water again. I was in agony by the time I reached the car. I gave up a third time - all I could think is that “I am never doing this again”.

... And Back Again

Six months later, in December of the same year, I went back to do it again. Why the change of heart? In all honesty the change came quicker than the six months. After stumbling to my car that July, I drove back to Springdale, the town just outside Zion. I was miserable the whole drive. I thought the air conditioning in the car would help but it didn't – I felt like I was going to die. But as soon as I got to town, I got myself a bottle of Gatorade, and drank down the whole thing. Within a half hour I felt new again. I then proceeded to get a pizza at the Zion Pizza & Noodle Co. By the time I finished the pizza, I was saying to myself, "Wow, what an adventure that was. I need to do that again."

A few things were different the second time. For one, heat was not a problem. In contrast, the issue was cold, and I needed to wear dry pants to protect against the frigid river water. Also, daylight was limited that time of year, so the hike needed to start in the dark, and ended up finishing in the dark as well. Since those prospects were not attractive to many, I was going to be largely on my own; there would be no one asking if I was ok. Indeed, I saw only one other hiking party the whole trip. But that also meant that getting a permit was not a problem. And finally, that time of year flashfloods were "Not Expected". I didn't bother to ask the ranger what that meant.

I also made some better effort to prepare for the trip this second time. I was still not in great shape, but I was a bit more fit. And I had the advantage that I was more practiced from the first time in terms of route-finding skills.

All of that is not to say that the trip went entirely smoothly. The early start meant descending into the canyon in the dark. It was steep, you didn't want to get off trail, and at least once I could not figure out where the trail went in the dim light of my headlamp. Fortunately, I had the GPS track on my phone from the first trip in July. It was actually accurate enough I could just follow it to stay on track, and I found that helped immensely with route finding the whole hike.

Once in the canyon I also fell on the first water crossing. I managed not to totally immerse myself, but I soaked my only pair of gloves, and at the same time cut up my hand badly enough that I had to stop and bandage it. By the time I had done that, the sun was starting to emerge, and things got easier. It was still a difficult trip up the river, but when I finally arrived at the Subway, I was greeted by ... the image you see above.

On the way out I stopped at the base of the four-hundred-foot climb out of the canyon. I took a selfie on my phone – one I still use today as my photography "head shot". But mainly I just stopped to soak in the journey. I didn't really want the day to be over. But as it was starting to get dark, I turned again toward the car.

Still Round the Corner ...

The story of this image is many things to me – a journey, an adventure, a proud accomplishment, a life lesson. In the latter category, the obvious message is the well-established one - if you fall off the horse, you get a Gatorade and a pizza, and then you get back on again. But I think the less obvious message is that ends of the journey are only as precious as the means are challenging. The above image might be amazingly beautiful or creatively original (which it is admittedly not), but it is dear to me not so much for that, but for the challenges overcome in achieving it. It is not about the goal. But it is also not about the journey. It is about when the two come together. Choosing extraordinary journeys that beget extraordinary accomplishments. That is what I want my photography to be – what I want my life to be.

But does the photograph tell the story? Can this image possibly say all of that? When I entered this image in a local photo club salon, the judge gave me a perfect score. He said, “I’m giving it because I know what it took to get there and take this photograph”. Huh, maybe the photo does tell its story...