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Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park

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Black Canyon: A trip through Colorado's rugged gorge challenges Hiker's endurance and lends insight to an ancient Indian Superstition

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BLACK CANYON

DARK CHASM OF BEAUTY AND GLOOM

A TRIP THROUGH COLORADO'S RUGGED GORGE CHALLENGES HIKERS' ENDURANCE
AND LENDS INSIGHT TO AN ANCIENT INDIAN SUPERSTITION

MICHAEL HAMBRICK

The Ute Indians, who for centuries camped and hunted in the area of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River in southwestern Colorado, held a superstitious dread of that awesome gash in the earth's surface. They believed that anyone traveling through the canyon would never come out alive. Today many parties have traveled through the canyon by raft and on foot. We decided to attempt the latter mode.

The four of us departed from East Portal at 9:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning in October. The weather was overcast, and a light rain had fallen earlier that

At The Narrows, five miles below the beginning of our trip at East Portal, the river narrows to sixty feet wide and the canyon walls rise vertically for two thousand feet. We saw waterworn sculpture like that below throughout our trip.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL HAMBRICK

morning. As we waded into the knee-deep water below the Gunnison Tunnel Diversion Dam with our destination thirteen miles and four days ahead, I could not help being slightly apprehensive.

Near the general store-gas station village of Sapinero, in southwestern Colorado, the Gunnison River has carved a narrow chasm westward for about fifty miles. The most spectacular part of this canyon lies within the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument. The name refers to the shadowed blue-grey gloom of the light in the canyon.

Undisputedly, the Black Canyon is one of the great wild canyons of the southwest, with a savage beauty all its own. The depth of the canyon, measured from Vernal Mesa (elevation 8,000 feet), ranges from 1,730 feet to 2,425 feet within the boundary of the national monument. The distance from the north rim to the south rim is 1,300 feet at the most narrow section, and riverbed width is 40 feet.

Geologists believe that the process of erosion through the schist, gneiss, and crystalline-granite that form the canyon walls took more than 2 million years. In the eastern part of the monument sheer pinnacles and needles as high as 400 feet abound.

Traveling on the north shore we covered the first mile making good time on a trail made by the footsteps of many fishermen. Abruptly the trail began to steepen and finally came to an end. Ahead lay a deep pool at the bottom of a vertical thirty-foot wall. We investigated the possibility of climbing higher in hopes of going above and around it, but an easy pitch could not be found.

Turning back, we walked upstream a short distance to a flat, rocky area and changed into sneakers, which we would wear on all crossings. (Sand in our hiking boots would have caused much grief.) I stepped into the 53° water first and found out quickly that the moss-covered river rocks had no intention of letting my sneakers hold onto them. Almost losing my balance, I returned to shore and found a large stick of driftage to use as a third leg.

We were required to cross the river several times during the morning to avoid vertical cliffs that descended into deep pools of blue-green water. The previous week we had discussed river crossings at length, and I found myself dreading them at various times during preparation for the trip. Frankly, I did