

# Canyoneering

## Delve Into the Narrow, Winding World of Canyon Country

The sun fades as you lower into the Medieval Chamber. Your eyes adjust to the darkness and the vertical stone walls turn salmon pink, a contrast to the glowing oranges and reds the sandstone takes on under the desert sun. The legacy of the water that carved this cavern is obvious, the walls undulating in ripples and waves. You brush your hand against the smooth rock and feel the course, sandy grains against your fingertips. The air is cool and moist, a refreshing respite from the heat above. Your feet touch down on the soft sand of the canyon floor. You've completed your first canyoneering rappel. Enter the world of canyoneering and the hidden treasures of canyon country. Canyon descents are often in remote landscapes where rescue is difficult, but with the proper skills, equipment, and training, you can take on these adventures of discovery.

### Train Up

Start with an easy canyon that has an established approach trail to familiarize yourself with canyon travel. Take classes with the American Canyoneering Academy ([canyoneering.net](http://canyoneering.net)) to learn and hone your technical skills or hire an American Canyon Guides Association—certified guide ([canyonguides.net](http://canyonguides.net)) to show you the way.

### Reduce Your Impact

Stay on bedrock, in a wash or creek, or on established trails wherever you can to minimize erosion. When traveling through canyons of soft stone, such as sandstone or limestone, extend the anchors for rappels over the lip to avoid wearing grooves into the rock when you pull your rope.

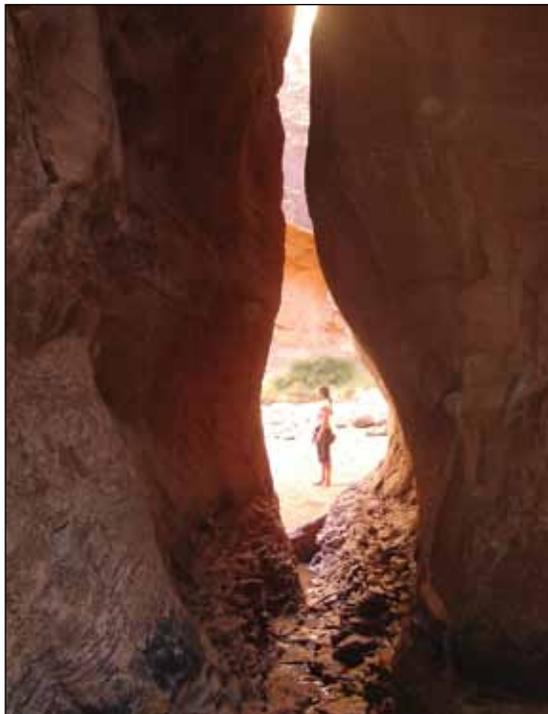
### Route-Finding

Canyon country can be disorienting, with ribs of rock and deep chasms often blocking passage. “You’re not always going to be on a trail, so it’s important to be able to read a map and understand and identify main features so that you make sure you go down the right canyon,” says Stephanie Martin, a 14-year canyoneering veteran based in Arizona. Here are Stephanie’s best route-finding tips.

- **GPS is helpful, but don’t rely on it.** Technology can help with the approach, but once you’re inside the canyon it’s hard to get a lock on satellites.
- **Use the twists and turns of the canyon** and incoming drainages to orient yourself on the map.
- **Know your route.** You won’t always be going to the bottom of the canyon, so watch for tributaries you may have to turn up as part of your exit route.



**canyoneering** (also canyoning)  
*noun*  
 the sport of exploring a canyon by engaging in such activities as rappelling, rafting, and waterfall jumping.



By Casey Flynn

## Anchor Evaluation

Though some well-established routes have artificial anchors like bolts or pitons, most descents involve rappelling off natural anchors, such as boulders or trees. Evaluating the reliability of natural features is a difficult skill to develop. “Unfortunately, it’s all kind of subjective, whether you wish to trust your life or your person to whatever you happen to be using for the anchor,” Stephanie says. We advise extreme caution, formal training, and guidance from a more experienced canyoneer.

- Use thick, deeply rooted trees, logs that are securely wedged, or large boulders that cannot be moved as anchors.
- Never trust an old anchor without first assessing it. Canyons regularly experience fast-flowing water and a large weather event may have shifted the terrain and compromised the anchor.



### Find a friend

Going with guys can be great, but finding a group of gals to explore with is a whole different experience. Join the Chick-Fest Yahoo group ([groups.yahoo.com/group/ChickFest2](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ChickFest2)) or visit Bogley Outdoor Community's Ladies Only canyoneering forum ([bogley.com/forum/forumdisplay.php?119-\\*\\*\\*-Ladies-Only-\\*\\*\\*](http://bogley.com/forum/forumdisplay.php?119-***-Ladies-Only-***)) to find a partner or ask a question.

### Flash-Flood Risks

Narrow canyons funnel water from large drainages above and a small amount of rain can turn into a twenty-foot flood. Rain many miles away can drain into the canyon you're in, so pay attention to the weather forecast for the whole watershed that feeds your river or wash. Recent rain that has saturated the soil or drought that has hardened the surface can also cause increased runoff.

## Rappelling

Descending canyons requires unique rappel skills that are more akin to caving than rock climbing. Rappel starts are often awkward and ungraceful because of sharp overhangs or questionable anchors. Malia McIlvenna, Utah canyoneer and regular attendee of the annual Chick-Fest Women's Canyoneering Festival, offers advice from the field.

- **Ease your weight onto the anchor.** Sit and scoot over the edge, or downclimb using your feet and non-brake hand to get the rope on the rock surface. This added friction helps ease the load on the anchor.
- For sharp overhangs, **place your knees against the lip and lower yourself gently** until your upper body is below your knees. Once your rappel device has cleared the edge you can let your knees off and settle into a free-hanging rappel.
- **Be careful of pinching your hand** under the rope or webbing as you weight it. You can grab on to help lower yourself into the rappel, but make sure you remove your fingers before the rope presses against the rock.
- **Have someone give inexperienced rappellers an additional belay** from above and a fireman's belay from below, where a partner holds the bottom rope strands as a back-up brake.



## Gearing Up

“I try to do all my shopping at thrift stores,” says Malia. “Canyons are hard on clothes.” Beyond the technical gear—rope, belay/rappel device, webbing, harness, helmet, and extra carabiners—Malia offers up some innovative gear ideas.

- Protect your joints with kneepads and elbow pads. Wrestling kneepads stay in place better than volleyball pads and neoprene elbow sleeves, like those made for football, are great for protection and extra friction.
- Go with sticky-rubber shoes that drain well. La Sportiva and

5.10 make canyoneering shoes, but neither have women-specific models. Wear them with thick wool or neoprene socks to avoid hotspots. Approach shoes for rock climbing that have a synthetic upper or river shoes for kayaking and rafting are lightweight and good choices for summer.

- Affordable and durable nitrile gardening gloves are great for rappelling and sticking to the canyon walls. Get some with a synthetic back so they dry quickly.