

# TRAVELS NOW AND THEN

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## ICEBOX 2002

One of the pleasures that remains long after an epic physical ordeal has passed is the sense of comradeship of a challenge jointly met and safely conquered. There is something in the rawness of the experience that strips away pretensions leaving a compassion that is revealed, shared and deeply valued. It is as though the trust necessary for joint survival generates lasting momentum that, once created, endures into lifelong friendship. So it was in Icebox, in the dark, in the cold, in the deep wet pools that sucked out the last ounces of our strength and our bodyheat, one dark December night in 2002.

That December morning had dawned crisp and beautiful, not a cloud in the sky. The red and ochre cliffs and canyons of the Red Rock National Conservation Area glistened in the rising sun, their deep rifts holding promise of awesome vertical adventures yet to come. Just 20 miles west of Las Vegas, Nevada, and within sight of that neon fantasia, the Red Rocks are a spectacular and convoluted maze of interlocking canyons and sandstone bluffs, a wonderland that is surprisingly little known outside of a group of local hikers and climbers.

We were three strangers. Myself an aging warrior of many outdoor adventures, trying hard to experience all I could in the few active years remaining to me. Dick Shear, a former Los Angeles County Deputy Sheriff and company executive striving to find a larger place in his life for adventure and the outdoors. And Randi Poer, mother of three, finding a few moments of solitude away from all that responsibility, moments to enjoy the wilderness and rekindle the spirit. Somehow, circumstances had brought these three strangers together on this December morning.

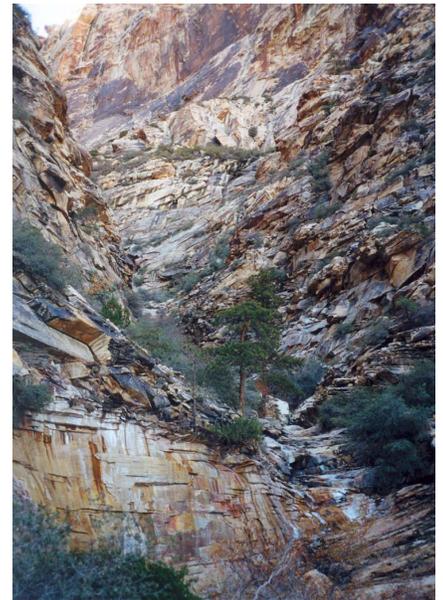
We were part of a much larger group that had gathered for a weekend of exploring in the Red Rocks area. Several hikes had been planned for both days. After two moderate adventures on the Saturday, the evening discussion around the campfire focused on whether or not anyone wanted to face the much greater challenges of Icebox Canyon and the huge wet rappel descent near the bottom that involved at least one swim. Icebox had been listed in the agenda but the stories of a previous descent in which Dick Shear participated had frightened off almost all the other hikers present. Ominously, a professional guide from Utah who had originally considered going, backed out with the comment that swimming in December was not his idea of fun. Only Randi and I spoke up when a head count was taken. As always, I was spurred on by the stories, driven by the thought that I might never have the chance again, that every opportunity had to be grasped and relished whether or not the circumstances were ideal. Randi seemed driven by the same ghost though she would have many more years than I to return to the Red Rocks. As one of the organizers, I think Dick felt some obligation to accommodate our wishes, though I sensed a little reluctance on his part. Perhaps, in the back of his mind, he suspected that he was setting in motion the wheels of an epic adventure.

We were very fortunate that my friend Troy Sette had volunteered to drive us to the trailhead early the next morning, a considerable undertaking for the rough 4WD road from the Scenic Loop in the Red Rocks National Conservation Area to Red Rock Summit involved five miles of rock-rutted driving and more than 2000ft of elevation gain. Once there, we paused at Red Rock Summit (elevation 6450ft) for a last equipment check and the statutory photograph. It shows three strangers each standing a respectful distance from one another, each hunched up against the morning chill. And then we were off, puffing up the trail toward the high ridge above us, loaded down with huge lengths of rope. So loaded that it took us almost an hour to climb the 670ft through sparse juniper forest to the ridge-top. The crest (elevation 7120ft) arrived abruptly and we found ourselves

standing on the edge of a great escarpment. Below us the sandstone was sliced through by a spectacular maze of dramatic red and white canyons, a vertical world of stark and sheer slickrock with huge drop-offs in every direction. Rising above these, its white rock striking in the morning sun, was the great block of Bridge Mountain, another marvellous hike in this wonderland of rock.



*View down into Icebox Bowl*



*Upper Icebox Canyon*

Veering north along the ridge for about a quarter of a mile, we came to a promontory with a spectacular overlook of the great slickrock bowl at the head of Icebox Canyon. Beginning about *400ft* below us, the Icebox bowl funnelled down into a deep canyon leading, eventually, to the desert about a mile and a half away. Our spirits lifted by this awesome prospect and warmed by the sun reflecting off the slickrock, we descended an easy earth slope through small juniper trees heading directly for the bare slickrock on the right side of the bowl. In a few minutes we were standing on the edge looking down into the great bowl, plotting the course of our descent down to where it funnelled into the canyon far below us. We would have to choose our course carefully to ensure there were tree anchors where we needed them and, as far as possible, avoid the sheets of ice that coated the bowl in places. Then we edged over the rim, downclimbing the steep cliff over broken rock and ledges, heading for patches of trees and then descending by two rappels of *100ft* and *130ft* to a broad ledge with an awesome view down into the upper part of Icebox Canyon. Contouring left we reached the streamcourse and the base of the bowl, some *500ft* below the rim, after *3hr 45min* of hiking.

This short traverse brought us to the start of a section of downclimbing in which several detours into the brush on the left of the gully were necessary. Then we climbed down into a bedrock channel where, at an elevation of *6300ft*, there were two rappels in the streambed, a *60ft* drop from a boulder anchor on the right side and then a short *20ft* descent from a webbing anchor under a large chockstone in the center of the channel. More downclimbing in a steep canyon stream course followed, before we came to the first of two class 4 downclimbs, a tricky *30ft* descent on the left side of the canyon followed shortly thereafter by a similar *35ft* downclimb also on the left. This is where Randi showed her climbing ability; together she and I manhandled the heavy rope-filled backpacks down these steep downclimbs. And just a little later at an elevation of *5590ft* we arrived at a *50ft* drop into a large round pool about knee-deep. Anchored by a large tree on a shelf to the right, we rappelled down onto a ledge about *2ft* above the water. From there Randi found a way to avoid wading in the water by climbing along small ledges on the right side of the pool.

This is a beautiful section of the canyon where the stream wanders down lovely sculpted and scoured sandstone bedrock. Though still huge and vertical, scattered pine trees prospering in cracks

in the slickrock soften the landscape and provide shade and shelter. But the canyon continues to narrow, and, after more downclimbing, we arrived *5400ft* and *7hr 40min* from the start at a *20ft* rappel around a large canyon blocking chockstone with much overhang.

We were now approaching the major physical challenge in Icebox Canyon, a huge vertical rappel preceded by a pool that had to be swum. Before that, at *4990ft* and *8.5hrs* into the hike, we came to a *40ft* two stage waterfall, a small but deep hanging pool about *10ft* below the lip followed by a *30ft* drop into a waist-deep pool. The short winter daylight was now fading quickly and we decided to pause and take time to prepare ourselves as best as possible for the challenges ahead. Dick had a drysuit; Randi and I had wetsuits though mine was only a "shortie" and I supplemented it with raingear that I duct-taped to my ankles, wrists and waist. Dick had also loaned me a pair of neoprene gloves. Thus attired and helmeted with headlamps attached we descended the two-stage waterfall using a tree high on the left as the rappel anchor. I was the first to get wet in the waist-deep pool at the bottom and my feet were already beginning to get very cold before we resumed our hike down the canyon. It was just a short step to the first place where swimming was necessary; a *10ft* slot that we chimneyed before a *10yd* swim.



*The big rappel*



*Below the big rappel*

Just below this we finally arrived (at *4920ft*, *9hrs* and *2.3m* from the morning start) at the top of the grand challenge, first recognized by the large dead tree propped up against the right-hand wall of the canyon about *30ft* from the top of the descent. This tree provided a solid anchor for the rappel; to an existing webbing wrap that stretched to a quicklink at the edge of the drop, we added a backup length of webbing. From Dick's previous descent we knew that at least *200ft* of rope would be needed to reach the bottom. We had two ropes, a huge *340ft* length and a *240ft* piece; we set up a single strand rappel with the longer rope and deployed the shorter one as a recovery line. I had volunteered to go first; Dick would go down last, his duty being to manage any emergencies that might arise. Without further delay (for I was getting colder by the minute), I rappelled down a steep *15ft* slot into the deep pool and, still on rappel, vigorously swam *10yds* across the pool to the smooth lip at the far end. The lip was broad enough to allow me to stand safely and I quickly fed the main and recovery ropes over the edge and down into the abyss. Below I could see nothing but a pitch-black emptiness. I slipped over the edge (using my famous slide entry to a rappel) and began the vertical descent. There is always a moment of apprehension at the top of a rappel before you get into a comfortable rhythm of descent. Fortunately this came quickly, and after about *30ft* I began the long free rappel down across the face of a huge cave (the "Icebox") where the sandstone is massively undercut. It was an out-of-body experience, floating in the air surrounded by pitch-black darkness, my headlamp only dimly capable of detecting the great sandstone walls far beyond my

reach while the trickling water of the stream drenched me from above. It seemed ages before I came to land on some steep and wet rock steps just above a large deep pool. Here I had assumed I would come to the end of the rappel. But in the darkness and cold, I could see no way to bypass the pool, no alternative but to swim yet again. With some consternation I thrashed my way across the *10yd* pool only to peer down another *10ft* drop into yet another pool. At this point the cold had begun to seriously affect my strength and agility but there was only one way to go. I half-waded, half-swam the second pool only to find myself at the top of yet another *50ft* drop that ended in a third pool. On rappel again and at the end of my strength, I slid my way down the *50ft* drop and waded across the pool to a beach. Only 5 extra feet of rappel rope trailed in the last pool; there was no sign of the recovery rope.

I knew that I had to get the wet clothing off as soon as possible. I had to find some way to warm up before hypothermia set in; my feet were particularly painful and I regretted not making an effort to borrow a pair of neoprene booties. Even though the gloves had kept my hands quite functional, it was particularly difficult to find and grasp the ends of the duct-tape, so as to remove the rain gear. Eventually and with much trembling I managed to undress, to don a dry tee shirt, a pair of long johns and a fleece jacket and to begin to warm my core. Now, I turned my attention to communications; a long whistle blast signaled the top for Randi to begin her descent. Then I forced myself to put my shoes back on for I knew that was the only way my feet would warm. Stomping around also helped.

I confess, I was so intent on my own predicament, that I was only dimly aware of the spot of light high overhead as it slowly descended. I think I yelled directions and encouragement at Randi, but I am not sure. Soon she was down and we both communicated with Dick over the radio. Randi also hastened to change into warm clothes but both of us were in no fit state to mount any rescue should Dick need help. We decided to light a small fire. Randi found some kindling and small logs and I soon had a very welcome fire burning. Overhead Dick's light seemed very dim as he rappelled through space. When he reached the bottom of the free-rappel, he tried heroically to adjust the ropes so as to allow rope recovery when he got to the bottom. But the total rope length was inadequate and it took some time before we realized that there was no alternative but for Dick to descend without any hope of rope recovery. We would have to leave them behind and hope to recover them at a later date. Then, as Dick began his transit through the lower pools his light died completely. Struggling mightily in the wet and cold, it took an age for him to remove the batteries from his radio and, using only feel, to install them in his light. I still do not know how he managed it. Finally, we all breathed a great sigh of relief as he made it down safely and we could begin preparations for the hike out. By this time, warmed by the fire, Randi and I had recovered substantially and we were able to help Dick get changed and packed.

As we started on our way down the canyon, it was a great relief to finally be moving again. Almost immediately, however, we were unexpectedly faced with a small steep slot and a deep pool; fortunately, Randi found a way around this by way of a high shelf on the right. Though some further route finding was needed to negotiate other pools and boulders in the canyon, the trail gradually became easier to follow and the trek to the trailhead became uneventful. It was now approaching *10.00pm*, our travails at the big rappel having consumed several hours. Our minds naturally turned to the next challenge, the reception we would receive from all those who would be waiting anxiously, perhaps fearfully, for some news of our circumstances. We finally reached the Icebox Trailhead (elevation *4300ft*) after *14hrs* on the trail; in that time we had covered but *3.6m* of this wild land.

It was the next weekend before Dick and I hiked back up Icebox Canyon from the trailhead, carrying additional rope with which to complete the rope recovery. In daylight it was clear that there was a downclimbing route that bypassed the pools below the free-rappel but it would have been almost impossible to find it in the dark unless one were familiar with the territory. We had little

difficulty with the rope recovery and were able, while we were there, to clear up the remains of the fire that had been so important to us the previous weekend.

Despite the pain of the cold, it had been a wondrous adventure in a spectacular place. I shall always remember descending into that pitch-dark abyss with my headlamp bouncing patches of dim light off distant slickrock. But, most of all, I will remember the quiet competence of my two companions and the teamwork that allowed us to overcome very adverse physical conditions without risk or trauma. In the cold, in the wet and in the darkness, a special bond was formed between three strangers, a bond created by the shared ordeal and cemented by the trust that we now felt in each other's strengths. At the end we hugged and parted, each for the moment intent on pleading forgiveness from those who had waited anxiously for our appearance. But we knew we would come together again as treasured friends and, each time we did, we would talk of that fantastic adventure in the "Icebox".

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*Last updated 12/23/02.  
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