

Kayak Lake Powell

A Welcome Respite From Winter by Tom Bol
Watching the snowflakes lazily dropping out of the gray sky this frosty morning is making me edgy. I am definitely not ready for another long, dark Alaskan winter. Cabin fever is setting in, and it's only October! The only way I can cure my restlessness is to travel south for a paddling trip. Visions of red sandstone, narrow slot canyons and crimson sunsets creep into my mind. My remedy; sea kayaking on Lake Powell. One red-eye flight, three connections, four cups of Starbucks coffee and 20 hours later, I step out of my dusty rental car in Page, just south of the Utah-Arizona state line. The immense blue sky, dry sagebrush scented air, and extensive shorelines of Lake Powell overwhelm my senses. I feel like a bear coming out of hibernation to greet the sweet smells of spring. Overhead ravens randomly soar in the rising thermals, occasional doing barrel-rolls, getting an upside down perspective of the world. I greet my friends, Les and Helen, at their home in Page. After the mandatory joking, we discuss logistics for our sea kayak trip. We decide with our limited time, and the massive size of Lake Powell, we will use a motorized raft to ferry our gear and boats deep into the labyrinth of Lake Powell. This strategy allows more paddling in the remote, narrow slot canyons for which the lake is famous.

Lake Powell was formed to provide water storage for the Southwest's water needs. Glen Canyon Dam, built in a narrow canyon on the Colorado River, was completed in 1966. The lake and surrounding high desert now comprise the 1.25 million-acre Glen Canyon Recreation Area. Rising 10,388 feet, Navajo Mountain towers above this contrasting scene of orange desert canyons and clear indigo water, its pine-covered summit often blanketed with snow during the winter months.

Lake Powell is huge. Stretching 186 miles long, with tentacle like canyon arms spreading out into the surrounding Colorado Plateau, the lake has 1,960 miles of shoreline, longer than the entire west coast of the continental United States. Some 96 major canyons branch out from the main lake, with countless other smaller side canyons. It would take months to explore the entire lake by sea kayak. Les and Helen own Hidden Canyon Kayak, a sea kayaking company that guides trips on Lake Powell and they know the lake intimately. Without their detailed knowledge of the lake, I would be wasting a lot of time figuring out where to go. Tomorrow we begin paddling. "I can't believe how warm the water is," I keep repeating to Les, as I idly paddle my white kayak beneath an overhanging sandstone cliff, a stark difference from the iceberg-choked fjords of Alaska. "Right now it feels a little chilly to me, maybe around 70 degrees," Les humorously replies. During the summer the water temperature warms into the 80s. You go swimming a lot, or intentionally roll your kayak.

Lake Powell - Photo by Monique Beeley
We are paddling up Twilight Canyon, a sinuous narrow canyon off the main lake. Vertical orange sandstone walls, striped with brown bands, tower overhead. The water color changes from deep blue to emerald green as the bottom gives way to lighter shades of sandstone. Carp and striper bass lounge in the shallows, basking in the warm desert sunshine. Canyon wrens trill from above, their cheery song drifting down the canyon walls. Things can't get much better than this. A few more friends, Dave, Christy and Jeff, join our group. They decide to paddle to the end of Twilight Canyon. I have another idea in mind. Lake Powell is a cliff diver's paradise. The desert rim rock presents a variety of diving platforms, varying in height from the water's edge to Acapulco heights. I am giddy with excitement. I swim out and check my landing zone. The water is deep and clear. Scrambling back up the coarse sandstone to a good ledge, I take a moment to reflect. Things look a little higher from up here, but the landing is good ... Bonsai! "When camping in slot canyons, one needs to be aware of the hazards of flash floods," Dave explains, as our colorful pod of kayaks ambles up Cascade Canyon. "Some people have found themselves in big trouble or have even been killed when they have been flashed. Late summer is the time to watch out. We get lots of flash floods then." This explains why we see large tree limbs wedged in cracks high on the canyon walls. A unique aspect of kayaking on Lake Powell, unlike anywhere else, is paddling into slot canyons. Cascade canyon is a great example of these geological phenomena. Paddling deeper into the canyon, vertical red Navajo sandstone cliffs slowly engulf us, some more than 500 feet high. Sunlight bounces off the vermilion walls, illuminating our boats with a warm surreal glow. The vast desert sky narrows to a slender blue ribbon slicing through a sea of orange sandstone. At the end of the canyon the walls close in and I can't even paddle. Back paddling or pushing are the only ways to get back out. "This canyon is a little mysterious, spooky," Dave hints, stemming up a round, water polished chimney. "The last time we hiked up here we found dead birds lying on the ground; kind of eerie." Suddenly Les jumps three feet, narrowly missing a tan colored rattlesnake directly in our path. Closer inspection reveals the camouflaged rattler is dead. Further in the canyon we encounter more dead critters; birds, tarantulas. I'm starting to wonder if there are some ancient Anasazi spirits still lingering here, unhappy with modern man. Reaching the end of the slot canyon, after numerous 5th class climbing moves, we discover a PFD wedged in the rock. This sends our imagination running wild. Where is the owner? Who would bring a PFD way back in this canyon? We've had enough. We quickly hike back to our boats, happy to be leaving. Sitting in the warm sand back at camp, I soak up the last rays of sun. Navajo mountain slowly transforms from orange to red, culminating with an intense purple color. A red tailed hawk slowly floats in the cool evening breeze, finally disappearing over a craggy sandstone butte. Tomorrow I return to Alaska. I am ready now. Lake Powell has been the cure I needed to face another long Alaskan winter. This article first appeared in Canoe and Kayak Magazine and is being used with their permission.