

Travel

Afloat in the Arizona desert: houseboating on Lake Powell

Surrounded by arid wilderness, Lake Powell makes a beautiful and bizarre destination for a summer boating holiday

Bella Pollen SEPTEMBER 13 2018

The sun blazes noon-high over the concrete loop of Page's Antelope Marina. It's so hot it feels as though the last of the oxygen has been choked out of the air. It's so hot, the rows of big American Suburbans shimmer like liquid metal in the car park. At the top of the ramp, groups of parents and teens, waiting for a dock transfer, wilt alongside their thousand dollars of Walmart rations — mountains of deli turkey sweating in plastic, leaking hamburger meat, jars of separating peanut butter. A sagging father is re-packing bedrolls and torch batteries with a look of implacable horror I know well — one that loosely translates as, "Why didn't I stay home, invest in a paddling pool, book a solo ice-fishing holiday in Alaska and the kids be damned?"

August is no time to be in the Arizona desert. From the Vermilion Cliffs to the dusty bluffs of Monument Valley, the earth of which this part of the American West is made is scorched to arid. A summer break for the serpentologist or the rock hound with his brush and chisel, but a family-friendly holiday? The West does not do seaside. It does not give good bucket and spade.



Thank God, then, for the anomalous 7.9tn gallons of water at the bottom of the ramp. Swilling over the Arizona state line, and on into the great beyond of Utah, is man's deplorable/inspired tweak of nature, a surreal oasis known as Lake Powell. "For millions of years," says local captain JJ McMahon, driving me towards the dock in his buggy, "this was one of the world's greatest deserts." He waves a dreamy hand at the extraordinary panorama: "Now look!"

Lake Powell, formerly Glen Canyon, is, of course, not a lake at all but a vast reservoir. Second largest in the US to Lake Mead, it was named after John Wesley Powell, the one-armed civil war veteran and explorer who, strapped into an oak armchair lashed to his boat, mapped the treacherous rapids of the Colorado River (responsible for carving Glen Canyon). Lake Powell is the result of the flooding of Glen Canyon by the Glen Canyon Dam, an elegant, dizzyingly high, concrete curve, completed in 1963.

It's almost impossible to grasp just how dramatically this transformed the landscape. Glen Canyon was once a majestic gash in the earth. Bristling with plant and animal life, it was a wonder of precipitous cliffs, sandstone buttresses, arches and natural bridges. Today the upper reaches of this sculpted rock park, almost devoid of vegetation, emerge above crystalline blue water, 400ft deep. I've been coming here for the past 20 years, but every time I return, it exerts the same dreamlike quality, as though I've stumbled into a disaster movie or the aftermath of a cataclysmic geological event, just one where everything turned out eerily OK.

With his strong weathered face and springy hair, JJ presents as a grizzled swabbie in the making. He lives and breathes this lake, he tells me, handing me down into his flat-bottomed metal boat. "It's my home, my workplace, and any type of other life is inconceivable."



The ramp to a dock on the lake © Michael Turek

He fires the engine and soon we're grumbling across the harbour — away from the tat of the gift shop, away from the groups of singledotted men with graffitied biceps, fuelling up on beer — and into the “narrows”, edged by pale bulbous cliffs under a brilliant sky.

It will be nearly 25 miles before the sheer size and scope of the lake makes itself visible. Powell has close to 2,000 miles of shoreline and more than 90 side canyons filled with caves, grottoes and alcoves. August is high season but here, 3m visitors a year are easily absorbed. We pass a few souped-up speedboats and the occasional private yacht, the size of a multistorey car park. I'd trade either for the Marina's classic houseboat rentals with their distinctive blue canopy and giant plastic slide. These wonderfully tacky old-school offerings are big enough to sleep 12, and practical to a fault. The Walmart foodberg vanishes into the kitchen cupboards. The tiny cabins have sheets. The showers run hot. All but the most humble of models come with an outside BBQ and a hot tub. The open flat roof is the best place to sleep, though when my kids were small, I'd tie them to a belt around my waist in case they rolled sleepily overboard while I was busy gawping at the stars.



The Glen Canyon Dam © Michael Turek

There's no doubt that any self-drive boating experience comes with the tropes of comedy disaster. With only a lean half-hour of tuition, steering a valuable 60ft vessel is nerve-racking enough, let alone trying to moor the thing. If you're spending four or five nights on the lake, though, mooring is key. Lake Powell is a maze of hidden waterways that reveal their openings only once you draw close enough. Houseboats are slow, horrible to reverse, and must be anchored before dark. Too often, finding an unoccupied spot can be a frazzled game of musical chairs, played against the faltering light to a soundtrack of weeping teenagers intimidated by their parents' hysterical bullying re gas efficiency, blocked loos and the precise meaning of differential thrust. From personal experience I can confirm it's a short distance along the continuum from loving father/mother to full-blown Captain Bligh.



A moored houseboat © Michael Turek

Still, once the ropes are tied and the steaks wedged to the grill, with only the glory days of rock, sun and swimming ahead, all is forgiven.

We've reached Padre Bay now and are twisting through Labyrinth Canyon, a lunarscape of rounded ochre boulders, looking for a spit of sand to anchor up. JJ lowers the kayaks off the boat and we blade off to explore a slot canyon that becomes increasingly narrow until there is only the barest strip of blue sky visible between the soaring corridor above us. We cul-de-sac in a puddle of bright green algae and reverse out, brushing past a bed of tiny mussels and displacing a lizard who has no trouble gaining a new foothold on the slick rock. River wrens chatter. A small fish ripples the water. Mostly, there is absolute quiet.



Boats on the water © Michael Turek

Overhead the sky is darkening. JJ looks up hopefully but the rain doesn't come. Rain is what's needed. Tourism on Powell generates annual revenues exceeding \$100m, but that is merely a side deal to hydroelectric power. The dam is what turns on the lights from Arizona up to Wyoming. But as with Powell's sister reservoir, Lake Mead, levels are dropping at an alarming rate. "See?" JJ points to the vertical line on the cliff, "that's where we were a decade ago." It's hard to interpret this perfect tracing of black on white as anything other than the writing on the wall. Today the lake is just under half full. The region's natural hydrological cycle — which depends on run-off from the Rocky Mountains, has been drastically skewed by bitter years of drought. Lake Powell loses hundreds of billions of gallons in evaporation and billions more to fissures in the ground. Environmentalists are calling for it to be drained.

The Glen Canyon project has always been controversial. It goes without saying that much precious had to be destroyed for it to exist. But then the story of the American West has ever been one of lost history and desecrated wilderness. Glen Canyon, before the flood, was sacred ground for the Navajo and Hopi people, many of whom lived and farmed here, as did their 13th-century predecessors, the Anasazi. Countless archaeological sites and geological treasures have now been submerged. Nevertheless, in the mid-20th century, monster dams such as the Hoover seemed the answer to the country's grievous lack of water.



Bella Pollen (standing on the boat's roof) with captain JJ McMahon © Michael Turek

A dam was originally proposed at Echo Park in Dinosaur National Monument, Colorado, but after passionate campaigning by environmentalist David Brower, the Bureau of Reclamation agreed to relocate it to the remoter Glen Canyon, a place Brower had never seen. It was an own goal he was to regret the rest of his life. In 1956, President Eisenhower detonated the first blast from a button in the White House and a fragile and complex ecosystem changed forever.

The nobler part of me accepts I ought to boycott Lake Powell. I, too, worry that, snowboarding mountain by rafting river, the West is slowly becoming one gigantic playground, littered with fatuous health and safety notices and signs for scenic viewpoints. And yet, the shameful truth is that I have so much fun every time I come here that I can't bring myself to stay away. Powell is too bizarre, it's too beautiful. Then I have an existential fear of the ocean, and a very different fear of everything lurking in it. Here in these emerald waters, there are no tides, no sneaky undertows. Nothing wants to eat you, not even the lumbering prehistoric catfish said to cruise the very darkest, deepest depths. So I drift through the next few hours, paddleboarding, swimming and dozing off on one rock or another, heat seeping into my skin like a warm iron. Floating around the edge of an echoing stone amphitheatre, the water changes from blue to green into petrol black. Hundreds of feet above me, the cliffs are varnished with streaks of manganese and iron oxide, while below? Well, who knows: pictographs, petroglyphs, arrowheads, shards of pottery and the crumbled bricks from Anasazi granary walls, all testament to man's enduring struggle for one kind of civilisation, forever submerged in the pursuit of another.



Canoeing on the lake © Michael Turek

The sun is falling away by the time I return. JJ is doing upper body pull-ups on the boat's metal bar, his arms as taut and sinewy as the rope cable we're tied up with. Incongruously, a helicopter buzzes across the amber sky. It hovers over the soaring monolith of Tower Butte, then spits a group of stick-like figures on to its flat top. A prescient reminder, perhaps, that whatever we have, it is never enough. The town of Page, born half a century ago, was once overloaded with Mormon churches and the neon signage of small motels, proudly offering chlorinated Jacuzzis as though fulfilling a basic human right. Now Page is home to a Hyatt and the Aman chain's most successful hotel, the spectacular Amangiri, which helicopters guests to rock yoga every dawn and dusk. But if the demands of tourists are growing, so too are the water requirements of the continent. Every year the West becomes hotter and drier. The visual magic of Lake Powell makes it easy to believe that man has got one over nature, but everyone knows nature ends up having the last laugh.



Rock diving © Michael Turek

Current science agrees that draining Lake Powell would allow the equally beleaguered Lake Mead to re-fill. In terms of water credit this seems the most viable solution, though one can only imagine the vast eyesore of burping mud and oozing sediment left behind. Still, by virtue of their self-clogging design, all dams tend to have a shelf life. Engineers give Lake Powell another 20 years. For the time being, while this extraordinary fusion of man and nature remains, I for one intend to enjoy every last drop of it.

Details

Bella Pollen was a guest of [Dunton Journeys](#), which offers tailor-made trips in the US southwest. For houseboat rentals on Lake Powell see [lakepowellhouseboating.com](#); a 59ft Deluxe boat sleeps 12 and costs from \$6,979 for seven days. The [Hyatt Place Hotel](#) in Page, has doubles from about \$115

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