

Surviving a Flash Flood in a Slot Canyon

Narrow canyons can turn into sheer-walled death traps during heavy rain. Emerging from them safely depends on smart planning, constant awareness, and, when those don't work, a healthy dose of luck.

By: Joe Spring for Outside Magazine

On July 24, 2010, a flash flood swept 39-year-old Joe Cain and two friends through Utah's Spry Canyon and over a 40-foot cliff. He lived to talk about it—barely. Here's his story, as told to JOE SPRING.

IT WAS MY FIRST TIME canyoneering. I was camping in Zion National Park with two friends, Jason Fico and Dave Frankhouser. We planned to do two canyons. The three of us had been doing outdoor stuff for a long time and we had all been rock climbing. I'd been climbing since the mid-90s. I'd been in slot canyons before, scrambling around and hiking up the narrows, and we were all very proficient about setting up rappels on anchors.

The first day, July 24, we decided to do Spry Canyon. Jason had been through that canyon before. It's a three-hour hike from the trailhead to the top where we dumped in. There were sections that you kind of scrambled through, sections you hiked through, and then a drop off with some anchors where you have to rappel. We anticipated we would be done in four hours.

This was late July, 2010, monsoon season in Utah. We knew that if it rained this time of year it would probably start in mid-to-late afternoon. There was a 20 percent chance of rain that day.

We started our hike around 9:00 A.M., dropping into the canyon around noon. After a few hours, we were about three quarters of the way through the canyon, in a section where there were three or four rappels in a row. The walls were very tight and steep. There was no opportunity to hike out, and we had pulled our rope down so we couldn't climb back up. It started drizzling. We had just passed several places in the canyon where we could have hiked into some trees and waited if it started raining, but now we were in exactly the wrong place at the wrong time.

I had rappelled into a particularly narrow section and was the first guy down. I unclipped from the rope, walked a few feet through this narrow slot, looked out over the edge, and saw a roughly 40-foot drop to a rocky floor below. If we got down to that next section, there were several spots where we could hike up to some rocks and be safe. We knew we were approaching the end of the canyon. Our thought was, "Let's just keep moving and try to get out of here."

We weren't dilly-dallying, but it took Jason a few minutes to rappel to the slot floor next to me. When he got down, the water was knee high. The rain picked up. I think it took Dave a little longer, because he was basically rappelling through a waterfall. After four or five minutes, he got down. The water was chest deep and building fast.

We really didn't have a lot of options. The canyon here was three to four feet wide with sheer walls that went up 50 to 75 feet. Just straight up. There was some discussion between us.

"Is there something else we can be doing right now?"

"I can't think of anything. Can you?"

"Should we try to climb up out of here?"

There was no place to climb up anywhere. If I had climbing gear, maybe there might have been some cracks that I could have put a cam in, but I didn't have that gear.

We needed to leave our rope in place so that we could hang on to it and not get swept off the cliff. We wedged in. I put my feet on one wall, and my back against the other. My two buddies did the same thing, facing me. We just looked at each other.

The water got stronger and deeper, full of branches and other debris. Rocks blasted through as the pressure intensified. We thought a big log was going to come through and knock us out. More likely, we thought we just weren't going to be able to hold on any longer and get swept over the edge.

You don't really ever appreciate the strength of water until you're in a situation like this. It felt like cement was rushing past us. It was all we could do to push as hard as possible against the walls to prevent from getting washed over.

There was thunder and lightning and rain coming down and it was echoing off the side of the mountains. At a certain point, it got so loud that we stopped talking. I was sitting there thinking about my two children; my daughter was not yet two. "If I die right now, she is not even going to remember me," I thought. "People will show her pictures of her dad, but she won't remember."

After roughly five minutes, there was a shift. Something, either a big surge of water or debris, knocked all of us out of our positions, sweeping us off the edge. It was like going off a five-story building. I thought, "This is it. These are the final moments of my life."

I hit the water in a semi-sitting position and then hit rocks, shattering my tailbone. The rocks lacerated my skin, and something sharp punctured my knee. Then I was getting tossed around in this pool by the force of the waterfall above. I thought, "Great, I survived the fall but now I'm going to drown."

I was running out of air and about to pass out when I got pushed away from the swirling water. I popped up and my feet touched bottom. The water wasn't over my head. I stood up. The water stopped at my armpits. During the time we had been hanging on to that rope, the water must have built up. It broke our fall. I saw some rocks off to the side, grabbed them, and started to pull myself up.

There had been a group in front of us in the canyon all day, and I saw them on the ledge above. They threw a rope down to me and I wrapped it around my wrist. They pulled me up to a higher spot where they had been waiting for the water to pass. I collapsed next to them, bleeding from my wounds. "Don't worry," one of them said. "You're way higher than the water. You're safe. This is a good spot."

I looked around but my two buddies were nowhere. "Oh my God," I thought. "They hit a rock. They are pinned under a log. My friends are dead."

They must have been swept around a bend and then off the next drop. The guys helping me went to look. After about ten minutes, they came back and said, "We see your friends. We can't reach them. They are down below. It looks like one is hurt. The other is OK."

The guys applied pressure to my tailbone wound, which was bleeding pretty badly. We were almost through the canyon. I think there was one more rappel left after that point and a little bit more of a hike out. I could see the main Zion road. I just wanted to get out.

My adrenaline had dropped and I could tell I was starting to go hypothermic. A bunch of my gear had been washed down the canyon, but I had a mini-emergency kit with a foil blanket. I put it on. I didn't know the extent of my injuries, and a big part of me wanted to get medical attention as quickly as possible. "Let's just try it," I said. "Let's see if I can do the rappel and get out of here."

I got up and my injury started spraying blood. One of the guys said, "Ahhhhh, I don't think this is a good idea. You've got to lay back down."

Someone put a flashing headlight strobe on. Rangers out on patrol saw the light, hiked up, and shot a rope gun to where we were. They climbed up and administered first aid. A few hours later, a helicopter came and flew me to the hospital.

My friends had gone off another 60-foot cliff. Dave wasn't that badly injured, and walked out on his own. But Jason's femur had blasted through his hip bone and he was airlifted out right out after me.

The first couple days in the hospital I could barely roll over because I was in excruciating pain. My whole right butt cheek and right thigh was one giant bruise. The puncture wound in my kneecap took a couple of months to heal. I'm a hundred

percent now except for a little pain in the tailbone area, which may never go away. I was really lucky. I didn't have any muscular damage or damage to any ligaments. I didn't have any broken moving parts.

My wife knew after I got out of the hospital that I would keep doing these activities. After I was released, she said, "If you're going to keep doing this stuff, climbing or whatever.... I know you love it. I'm not going to tell you, 'You can't do it.' But you need to get a lot more life insurance." I did.

EXPERT OPINION: Outdoor recreation professor Steve Kugath, 48, has been interested in flash floods ever since 1993, when he heard about a deadly Utah canyoneering accident that had trapped five teenagers and killed two adults. Kugath has now developed an extensive database of canyoneering survival stories that details 64 accidents and incidents, posting expert analysis online so that others might learn from it. More than half of the accidents reported involved a group of close friends. Men filed 89 percent of the reports, and the most identified accident was a "slip on a rock." Haste, fatigue, and cold, wet conditions were the biggest contributing factors. Canyoneering novices—people who had navigated less than 25 canyons—filed more than half of the reports.

"Storms often come out of nowhere and put canyoneers in tough situations with few options," says Kugath. "Joe, Jason, and Dave were in the absolute worst spot in Spry Canyon, but they did the best thing by grabbing on to something and holding on tight. Prior to entering technical sections, you should be sure to have a good read on the weather. Take into account group member skills and speed. If the weather is at all threatening, find cover and a safe spot to wait out the storm. Only push through a technical narrow section if you are confident that your group can do so quickly. You may only have minutes."