

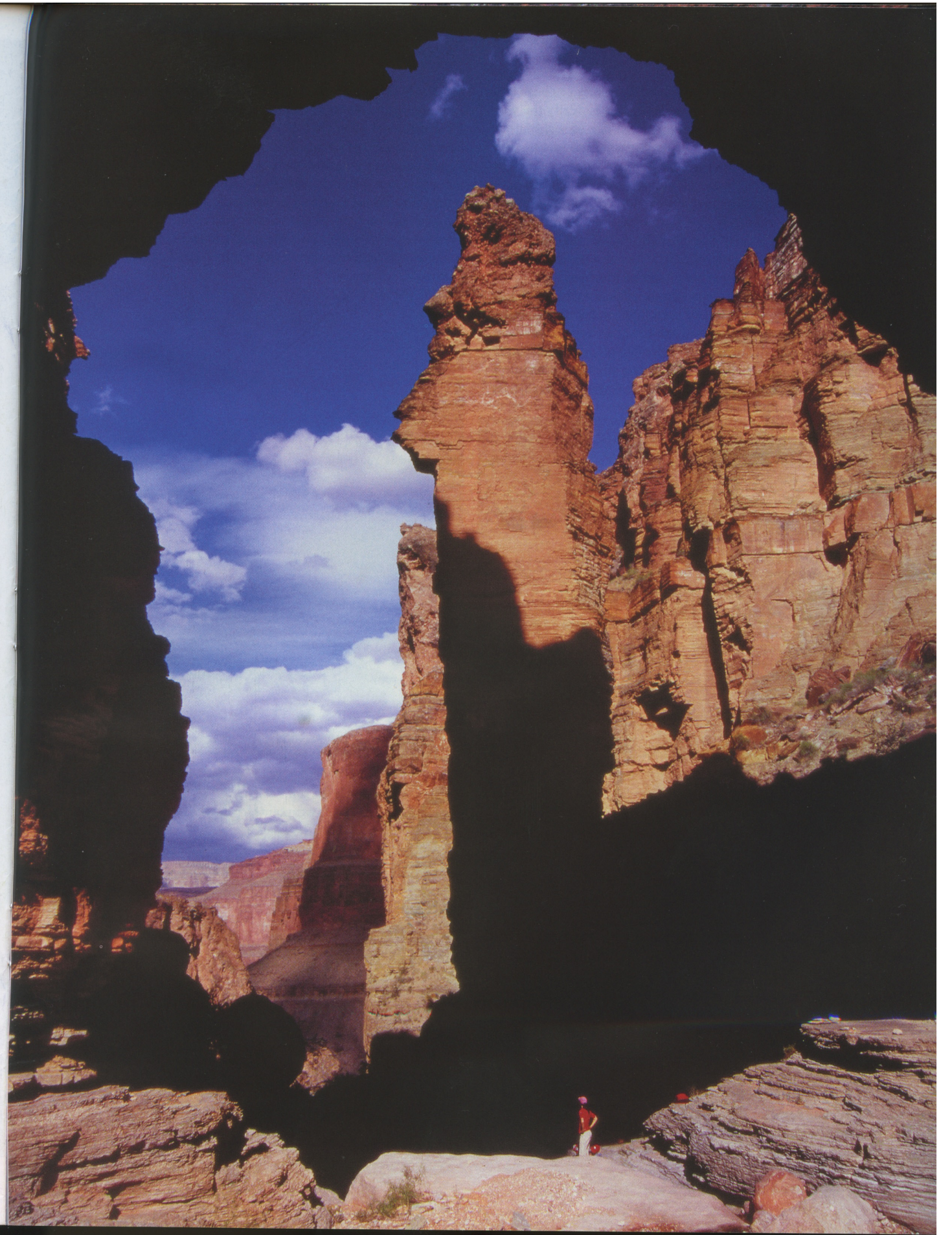
# ARCH RIVAL

OF ALL THE BACKCOUNTRY HIKES IN THE GRAND CANYON, THE POINT HUITZIL ROUTE TO ROYAL ARCH IS AMONG THE MOST CHALLENGING — IT WAS EVEN A NEMESIS OF THE GREAT HARVEY BUTCHART. ALTHOUGH SOME PEOPLE WOULD SAY YOU'D HAVE TO BE CRAZY TO DANGLE FROM THE EDGE OF THE SOUTH RIM TO GET THERE, OTHERS WOULD SAY THE PAYOFF IS WORTH A FEW DOZEN DEATH-DEFYING MANEUVERS. OUR WRITER IS ONE OF THE OTHERS.

BY ANNETTE MCGIVNEY PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELIAS BUTLER

“Here?” I’m secretly hoping it’s not here. Stepping off the lip of the South Rim of the Grand Canyon where there’s no trail feels like a skydiver jumping out of an airplane. I knew it would require a leap of faith, but I was somehow expecting that my first foray into Grand Canyon route-hiking would begin on more solid footing.

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
Author Annette McGivney is dwarfed by the massive, high-rising Royal Arch overhead and the rock spires nearby.





"Looks like this is it," says my friend Elias Butler as he points a handheld GPS toward a bottomless abyss to verify the waypoint called Kaibab Break. There's also a pile of rocks at our feet, which could be a cairn — or just a pile of rocks. After driving to the old Pasture Wash Ranger Station, we'd bushwhacked through a tangle of juniper trees and then rockhopped down a shallow ravine to suddenly pop out here, in the middle of nowhere, at the edge of the Earth.

Unlike flatter recreation areas, the Canyon is not a landscape where hikers should just strike out in any direction. It's a relentlessly steep obstacle course that descends 5,000 feet from rim to river, and in most places, the elevation drops like an elevator shaft — 300 feet or even 1,000 feet straight down.

Ravens and bighorn sheep have the travel advantage here. Bipeds — especially those shouldering unwieldy backpacks — are gravitationally challenged. Make one slip that turns into a tumble, and it could be curtains. This is why the vast majority of people who hike rim to river stick to a dozen or so established park trails. Originally used by Native Americans and prospectors, these well-trodden rim-to-river paths are clearly the most logical way down. Yet, they're not the *only* way down. Throughout the 1.2-million-acre national park, there are also countless unofficial "routes," which means someone has figured out a way to scramble through a drainage, around a cliff, maybe all the way down to the river.

After living in Arizona for nearly two decades and hiking every established trail on Grand Canyon's South Rim at least once, I found the possibility of traversing an off-trail route alluring. I'd long contemplated it the way a college undergraduate might consider going to graduate school. It could be good for me. So when Butler asked me if I wanted to join him on a backcountry hike along the Point Huitzil route to Royal Arch, I thought, *Why not?*

But I fear I'm getting an answer to that question just barely a few hundred feet below the rim. Perhaps I'm not ready for this. My legs quiver on the steep scree as I struggle to know where to step next. Venturing off-trail in the Grand Canyon is way out of my comfort zone.

**B**ack in the mid-1940s, when a college math professor named Harvey Butchart started exploring the Grand Canyon, there was no information about the terrain beyond the national park trails. Butchart studied topographic maps and became increasingly determined to establish himself as a Grand Canyon explorer. He approached pioneering new routes in the Canyon like solving a complicated math equation, methodically working his way down drainages and geologic layers, recording detailed notes on his topos of "what goes" and what doesn't. Over a period of four decades, Butchart became the undisputed king of Grand Canyon off-trail hiking, logging more than 12,000 miles and 1,000 days below the rim.

The Point Huitzil route, which drops off the South Rim just west of its namesake promontory, is legendary because it's one of the few places that confounded the daring math professor. It took Butchart five failed attempts and extensive scouting be-

fore he finally solved the equation of how to safely traverse the Canyon's upper layers to find what he was hoping would be a more direct way to get to Royal Arch. In his extensive guidebook series, *Grand Canyon Treks*, Butchart called Huitzil "the most interesting way through the Coconino [rock layer] I know."

Before our trip to Point Huitzil, I sought the advice of Rich Rudow, a modern-day Butchart who is equally obsessed with off-trail exploration in the Grand Canyon (he's descended more than 117 slot canyons in the park). He also runs the Phoenix-based GPS company Trimble Outdoors. But Rudow told me a GPS alone is not all that useful for navigating the deep recesses of the Canyon. "I study Harvey's maps [which are available online through Northern Arizona University's Cline Library] and try to eyeball which way it's going to go," Rudow says. "You learn how to make navigational choices based on the geology. From a distance, the route may look completely improbable, but then you walk around a cliff band and find ruins. You suddenly realize that people have been going up the Canyon that way for a long time."

This situation is exactly the same with the Huitzil route. Even as Butchart was perplexed by how to find a path down in the 1980s, he could see Ancestral Puebloan ruins tucked in the cliffs below. Now, as Butler and I make our descent through the fossil-studded white rock of the Kaibab limestone layer and then the Toroweap, we use the ruins as a navigational landmark. Along with a couple of key GPS waypoints from Rudow, I have a printout of his route instructions crumpled in my hands, and I struggle to read them while still gripping my trekking poles.

"Hike the Toroweap bench to a point where you're above the ruins and can descend a series of ledges," Rudow advised. "Descend past the ruins on the ledges until you hit Coconino slabs. Continue down a few slabs until you see a small flat slab on top of a cliff. This marks the entrance to the cave." This 20-foot-tall crack has a "ladder" that Rudow said to climb down to get to more ledges we could descend through the rest of the Coconino formation. "This is a very delicate route," he added. "There are many twists and turns."

I feel like we're on a scavenger hunt, going from point to

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**WHAT I DON'T SAY IS THAT, SO FAR, WE'RE ONLY HALFWAY TO ROYAL ARCH.**

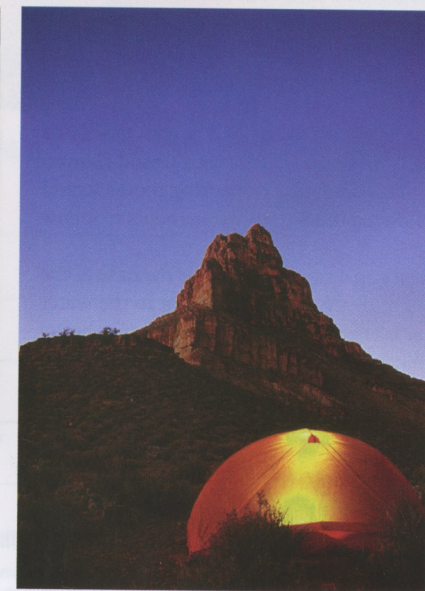
point in search of the next clue. And constantly distracting me from the challenge of not slipping is the spectacular panorama of the Aztec Amphitheater that sprawls below us. This wild, trail-less expanse of swirling rock and twisting drainages in the western Grand Canyon is a route-hiker's paradise. I gaze out wondering when (if?) we'll make it to Royal Arch, a distant prize some 10 miles down canyon and well out of view.

As Butler and I negotiate our way down the ladder (actually an old cottonwood trunk with nubs on it) and inch across the steeply angled slabs, we cling to the sandstone like lizards.

It's March, and a spring windstorm with gusts up to 40 mph threatens to peel us off the rock. We lower our packs down with a rope in some especially precarious places. And we get around narrow ledges with 100 feet of exposure by slowly placing one foot in front of the other as if we're walking a balance beam.

After sliding down the fine, red scree of Hermit shale, we finally hit a solid bottom on the dry, boulder-filled bed of Royal Arch Creek. We drop our packs and decide to camp on a ledge where there are a few potholes filled with rainwater. I tell Butler that my legs are like Jell-O. But what I don't say is that, so far, this hike is much harder than I'd expected. And we're only halfway to Royal Arch.

As Butler wanders away from camp to take photographs, I sit on the ledge and feel adrenaline still running hot through my veins. Maybe it's just from a day of what felt like constant near-death experiences, but I fight the creep of panic. The sil-



ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT: Author McGivney and her son, Austin, trek along Royal Arch Creek.  
FAR LEFT: McGivney inspects panels of petroglyphs that are coated with desert varnish.  
LEFT: A well-lit tent contrasts sharply with dark, predawn mountains on the South Bass Trail.



McGivney takes in the view of Royal Arch, which was named by famed Canyon explorer Harvey Butchart, who pioneered many of the off-trail routes seen only by the hardiest hikers.

houette of the distant South Rim, blue in the moonlight, looms over me. When we get to Royal Arch, will I have the strength and skill to make it back out of the Canyon the way we came in?

**W**e wake the next morning to clouds and a soft rain. I'm grateful for the cool, overcast skies and the fact that my legs have recovered a bit. From our camp, the route to Royal Arch mainly follows the dry creekbed. We trade the rigors of yesterday's gravity-defying descent for today's demanding obstacle course through a jumble of boulders, overgiant chockstones and, in one place, we crawl on hands and knees along a cliff band to safely get around a slick 100-foot pouroff. Gradually moving through the Grand Canyon's Redwall formation, the gorge gets deeper and, with the 2,000 feet of descending elevation, the air warms and prickly pears cling to the Canyon walls.

Anticipation about what lies ahead pulls us downstream. And, abruptly, the harsh desert vanishes. I hear the music of running water. Then ferns and monkeyflowers and glassy pools appear. The Canyon narrows and softens; it's laced with white travertine and padded with green moss. Around the next bend is a gift: Royal Arch.

The clouds part just enough to illuminate the arch in brilliant sunlight. The massive bridge, elevated 100 feet above the Canyon floor, glows gold, and through its keyhole is the Colorado River's inner gorge. The magic of this spot instantly diminishes the pain I experienced to get here. This is the second time I've hiked to Royal Arch, but I'm just as awestruck as I was on my initial visit.

During a solo exploratory expedition down Royal Arch Creek in 1959, Harvey Butchart was the first person in historic times to see the natural bridge spanning the drainage. His discovery of the significant feature, which he named Royal Arch, was one of many that elevated his status to that of a Grand Canyon hiking guru. And his obsession with pioneering routes would inspire a dedicated following of adventuresome souls to follow in his footsteps.

After pitching our tents on a sandy balcony at the base of the arch, Butler and I sit next to the creek and listen to the water gurgling in the darkness. The memory of Butchart hangs heavy here. After Butchart died in 2002 at the age of 91, Butler and Tom Myers co-authored a biography of the guru titled *Grand Obsession* (2007, Puma Press). "Discovering this bridge was one of his crowning achievements," Butler says. "It was a high point in his hiking career." As part of his research on Butchart, or perhaps just as an official excuse, Butler has hiked many of Butchart's Grand Canyon routes. Now he can check Point Huitzil off that list.

"I guess a big reason why routes are so irresistible to some



people is that you get to see things the general Grand Canyon hiking public never does," Butler muses. "It's like a doorway to another world."

Over the next two days, we retrace our steps back toward the South Rim. And as with every trip in the Grand Canyon, I feel myself soaking up the beauty like a sponge. In the process, all the cares that I hiked in with are wrung out of me. The trek back up Royal Arch Creek and Point Huitzil is easier, if only because my heart is lighter and I know what to expect.

Climbing the route, following loosely spaced cairns that are like bread crumbs left by fellow hikers, we come upon a

large petroglyph panel. It spreads across a Coconino slab that's coated with desert varnish. Perhaps I was too distracted to fully appreciate it when we were hiking down, or maybe it's the late-afternoon light that perfectly illuminates it now, but dozens of prehistoric figures are alive in vivid detail. I study etchings of what appear to be bighorn sheep, spiders, a thunderbird, humans, spirals and other mysterious geometric designs. Butler takes photos and I sit on the warm rock next to the panel for at least an hour, soaking up more beauty. The 1,000-year-old billboard is a testament to how many people have passed this way before. It is, in fact, a great way down. **AH**

**IF YOU GO:** Begin the Point Huitzil route at the Pasture Wash Ranger Station, which is 27 bumpy miles down Forest Road 328 (a high-clearance, four-wheel-drive vehicle is required). FR 328 is located off of State Route 64 north of Tusayan. A less technical route to Royal Arch is via the South Bass Trail. The trailhead is located at the end of FR 328. From there, follow the cairns down into the east arm of the Royal Arch drainage. Permits are required for all overnight camping in Grand Canyon National Park. For more information, call 928-638-7888 or visit [www.nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit](http://www.nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit).