



The author (far right) and friends hike in Lake Powell's Face Canyon.

GIRLS GONE MILD

SPRING BREAK ON
LAKE POWELL FOR UNDER \$300

BY MEGAN MICHELSON

"THREE, TWO, ONE, JUMP!" I leap from the top of a 20-foot sandstone cliff and plunge deep below the glassy surface of Lake Powell. Gasping for air, my skin stinging from the cold, I surface a few feet from Nina and Kim, who are lounging comfortably in their tandem kayak. It's late May. My four girlfriends and I are one day into an impromptu weekend spring break-style trip—minus the traditional Lake Powell houseboats, jet skis, and beer kegs. Instead, our sea kayaks glide over the lake packed with tents, camp stoves, and hiking boots. Exploring slot canyons too narrow for the mega-horsepower water-skiing boats, we're learning that there's a lot more to the reservoir than the average frat boy will tell you.

If you're anything like me, you have preconceived notions about Lake Powell. You've heard about its wild college party scene and bumper-to-bumper houseboats. You may know that Glen Canyon was even deeper than the Grand Canyon, until the 50-story-high Glen Canyon Dam choked the wild Colorado River in 1964 to create this deep, sinuous lake. You may have even read Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, in which fictional eco-terrorists plot to bomb the dam into pieces. "A plug, a block, a fat wedge, the dam diverts through penstocks and turbines the force of the puzzled river," Abbey writes in his 1975 classic. "What was once a mighty river. Now a ghost." But put all those stereotypes aside and picture this: 2,000 miles of sandy shoreline, distant caramel-colored mesas, and endlessly twisting slot canyons. The best part? You can see it all on a college student's budget.

My friends and I gathered in Page, Arizona, the faded gateway to Lake Powell. It's the kind of place where La Quintas outnumber bookshops, and the best bar in town is in a strip mall. It has little defining character, but it is cheap. Dirt cheap. Hotel rooms go for less than \$50, a full plate of green chile enchiladas for \$7. The beer comes canned and cold, and costs less than bottled water.

We rent sea kayaks from 38-year-old Kyle Walker, the Carhartt-clad owner of Kayak Powell, one of several outfitters in Page. Kyle graciously offers to guide our posse of 20-something girls (surprise, surprise) on our overnight trip, but we pick the far-cheaper do-it-yourself option. We buy a map, load the kayaks onto our Subaru, and head to the Antelope Point Marina. Along the way we buy provisions—quesadilla fixings, dried mangos, Clif bars, and several boxes of wine. Then we load the food, camping gear, and plenty of water into the kayaks and shove off.

Our destination is the remote Face Canyon, which Kyle has promised us will be relatively free of floating keg parties. We enjoy several hours of scenic high-country paddling and then set up our basecamp on a sheltered beach near the canyon opening. Except for the floating outhouse across the bay from our camp, we have a gorgeous view of the red rock desert. Later that night, we build a fire, fry up veggie quesadillas on our two-burner Coleman stove, and sip red wine from plastic mugs.

"I hate backpacking," I announce across the fire pit. "The aching lower back, the lightweight gear. It's all just miserable."



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“Seriously,” Hilary says. “This is the way to go—wine, chairs, pillows. We’re livin’ it up out here.”

She’s right, though a few of us glance around wistfully, sort of wishing we’d brought maybe just one cabana boy.

The next day, we rise early with the sun. The lake is practically empty, except for a few fishermen puttering about. We spend the day paddling into slot canyons so narrow we can reach both sides with outstretched arms. When the water turns to mud, we continue on foot, venturing through curved alleyways the color and softness of a peach. Our voices clatter off the walls, just overshadowing the muffled noise of hip-hop blasting from motorboats far over the desert.

Back in our kayaks, JT, our resident geologist, points out the bathtub ring—the high water mark on the sandstone cliffs jutting hundreds of feet above the reservoir. The lake has been shrinking for years; it now holds less than half the water it did a decade ago. Somewhere Ed Abbey is smiling mischievously—the ghost of the Colorado is now becoming a ghost of a reservoir. But as I’m leaping from cliff edges and drifting over glassy waters, the lake doesn’t seem like a phantom of its former self. Rather, thanks to the re-emerging canyons and alcoves, it has reinvented itself as a place to explore, even to seek solitude. That thought strikes me just after my cliff jump—and moments before a posse of beer-guzzling jet skiers saddle up to the port-a-potty island. ■