



**GATEWAY TO PARADISE**  
Rainbow Bridge National  
Monument, Lake Powell, Utah

# Water in the Desert

Behind Arizona's Glen Canyon Dam lies one of the world's most spectacular lakes, ringed by thousands of deserted beaches and framed by towering monoliths

BY JOSH DEAN

**T**here is no other body of water on earth like Lake Powell. Its 254 square miles of surface area dwarf any other man-made lake in America, and its nearly 2,000-mile shoreline stretches longer than California's entire Pacific coastline. But Lake Powell isn't just big—it is barren and beautiful, remote and almost otherworldly. Imagine the Grand Canyon, flooded halfway to the

brim, and you'll get some idea of the scope. Environmentalist Edward Abbey felt that this area was at least as fantastic as the aforementioned natural wonder of the world, and it inspired his novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, about a band of environmentalists who attempt to wreak havoc on the industrialization of the West—one wants to blow up the dam and free the Colorado River. Taking it in for the first time, it wasn't difficult to see what made Abbey so emotional. Then again, without the dam, we wouldn't have been there.

There were eight of us—all friends, all city folk, all descended upon this remote corner of the American West from cities on both coasts for a four-day escape from cars and traffic, jobs and stress, e-mail and phones, pets and—I hope they won't take this the wrong way—wives and girlfriends. Two of my friends had recently endured divorces and were especially in need of some escapism, not to mention alcohol, adventure, and camaraderie. It was to be a boys' trip of the kind Tom and Huck might make, only instead of a



**WAKE-UP PLAN**  
Speedboating through one of Lake Powell's countless winding canyons

wooden raft, we'd be floating around on a houseboat, towing a ski boat in our wake.

It was the second week of September, a date strategically picked right after Labor Day. The stifling days of midsummer had subsided. Schools were back in session, and the crowds typically found on the lake had vanished. There were no boats loaded with screeching kids, no swarms of families competing for prime beach sites. What's more, water temperature peaks in August (around 80 degrees) but it's nearly that warm well into September, a month when the days are hot but not brutal and the nights are cool but not frigid—perfect for swimming and wakeboarding by day, and grilling, storytelling, and beer drinking by night.

The area surrounding the lake is wild country, at least a six-hour drive in any direction to anything resembling a city. It explains why this area is home to the darkest night sky in the continental United States and has some of the best stargazing on the planet. There are no hotels or restaurants or lakefront houses. Aside from a handful of marinas that rent boats and sell fuel, there are no structures on the lake; the only accommodations are houseboats and the campsites of hikers who happened to wander in out of the 1.2-million-acre Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. For a group of guys looking to escape from reality for a few days, it's hard to imagine a better place.

All was good, save one thing: Jeff had not yet arrived.

Now, organization is not Jeff's specialty. Not only had he missed his first flight out of Newark Airport, but also his second (he was buying a sandwich at an airport kiosk) and a connection, and here it was, nearly twilight. We either had to set out for our first docking site or spend the night at the marina. The decision was made: We'd send somebody back in the speedboat to get him later.

Sandstone cliffs loomed over the lake, empty except for a few other boats also motoring out in search of a place to spend the night. A key element of the Lake Powell ritual is that each night you pick a deserted beach (and there are thousands) to call home. We chose one about a hundred yards long, horseshoe shaped, and in the crook of a mesa that was turning red in the twilight. Those of us not at the helm scrambled overboard as soon as the boat was beached and began digging holes for the boat's four anchors. We filled the holes with sand, admired our handiwork, and popped open the first beers of the trip. Life was good.

Only one problem: We still had to get Jeff. The dark desert night is, of course, a bad thing for a speedboat, and an hour after our rescue party set out for the marina, we began to worry. Lake Powell isn't a lake as you might imagine one: a vast, ovoid body of water that is more like a landlocked sea. Rather, it's a flooded canyon system, cut over millions of years by the Colorado River and its tributaries. Each bend in the water reveals a labyrinth of canyons to explore, some of

## Great Lakes

America's most scenic spots for houseboating



### Lake Amistad

Located on the Texas-Mexico border in Del Rio, Texas, this man-made reservoir is surrounded by 850 miles of limestone cliffs (above). Rent a houseboat at Lake Amistad Resort and Marina and explore the hundreds of caves located along the shoreline, including Panther Cave (accessible only by boat), home to an 80-foot wall of Indian pictographs, some dating back some 10,000 years. [lakeamistadresort.com](http://lakeamistadresort.com)

### Shasta Lake

With more than 365 miles of shoreline and thousands of coves to explore, it's no secret why this California reservoir is rated the best recreation lake in the Western United States. Fishing is the major attraction, but water sports are a close second. For wakeboarding, check out the school run by world-champion wakeboarder Mike Schwenne. Sign up for a day of "power lessons" and go out in a private cove for a day of whirly birding. [shastawakeboardschool.com](http://shastawakeboardschool.com)



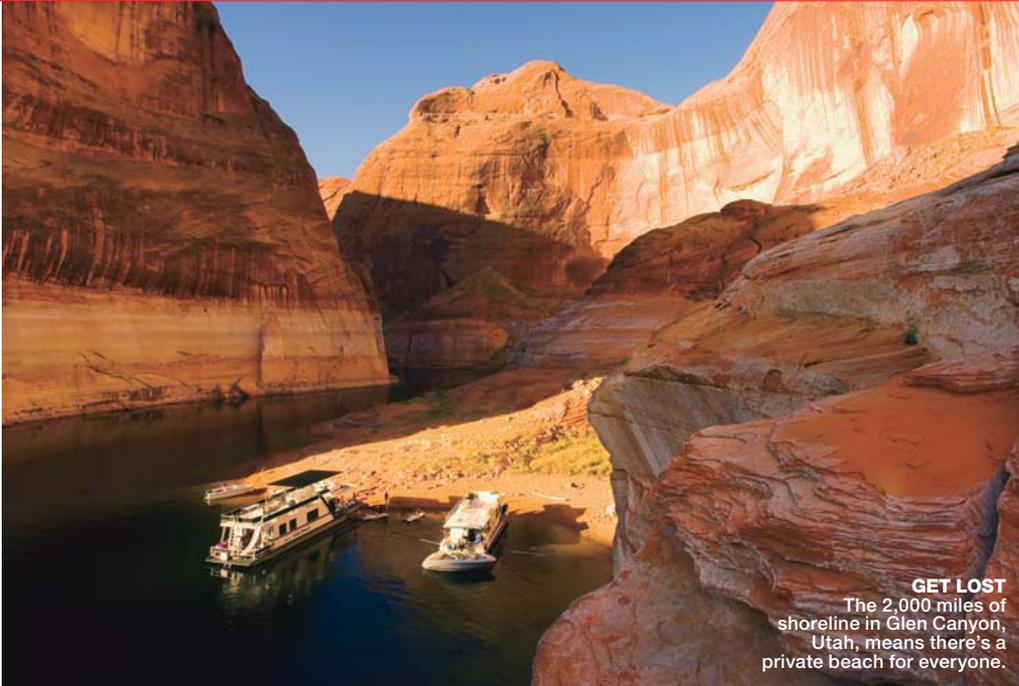
### Lake Vermilion

There are so many nooks and crannies to this 40,000-acre body of water—northern Minnesota's largest lake (below)—that it can feel as if you have the whole place to yourself. When you're done visiting the islands (there are 365 dotted throughout), break out the canoe and head to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, which contains more than 1,200 miles of canoe routes and access to thousands of other lakes. [bwca.org](http://bwca.org) ALISON KOTCH



**FRESHWATER FUN**  
Head inland for the ultimate island adventure.

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) GRAFTON MARSHALL SMITH/CORBIS; BOB DAEMER/RICH/CORBIS; MARK E. GIBSON/CORBIS; LAYNE KENNEDY/CORBIS



**GET LOST**  
The 2,000 miles of shoreline in Glen Canyon, Utah, means there's a private beach for everyone.

them with openings only a few boat widths wide. Which all goes to say: It would be very easy to crash a speedboat in the pitch black. Finally, we saw the flicker of the boat's red safety light across the darkness. There's almost no cell service on the lake, but my friend Adam managed to get a signal. Via some crackly messages and the flicking on and off of deck lights, we guided them in and the group was complete.

I found that the best way to start a morning was to wake up early, climb the ladder to the top deck with some biodegradable soap, and descend by slide (did I not mention the slide?) into the water for my morning bath. Once everyone was awake, we'd whip up some breakfast and decide what to do with the day. The speedboat served as a sort of lunar rover, and we'd set out on it to explore empty canyons on foot, wakeboarding along the way. The lake's perimeter is littered with Indian ruins and sites



deserted beach and laughed at some videos Adam had shot of a handful of us scrambling up walls and diving into the lake. We had covered barely a third of Lake Powell's length, but this was as far as we could go and still hope to make it back to the marina in time to head home. Any farther and we'd miss our flights.

I looked at Jeff and thought for a second. Maybe we should put him in charge after all. ■

of geological importance. The most famous is Rainbow Bridge, one of the world's largest natural bridges. Picture the St. Louis Gateway Arch, but made of sandstone and carved over millions of years.

One afternoon, we found ourselves in a chasm known as Forbidding Canyon. We anchored the speedboat and slogged through some swampy water into a deserted creek bed that sliced into the cliffs. We followed it uphill, through several miles of narrow canyon, until it opened into a huge valley shaded by massive cliffs. Large animal tracks were visible in the mud, and reeds whistled in the wind. It felt like the kind of place no one had been in centuries, and I wouldn't be surprised if that were the case. Standing there, listening to Ralph swear that some caves high above us were Indian ruins, it struck me that we could be having this conversation in any one of nearly 100 canyons, and we'd be in the same position—entirely alone and about as far from the world we'd left behind as we could be.

That night, we sat around the fire on yet another beautiful

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