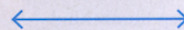


# Travel

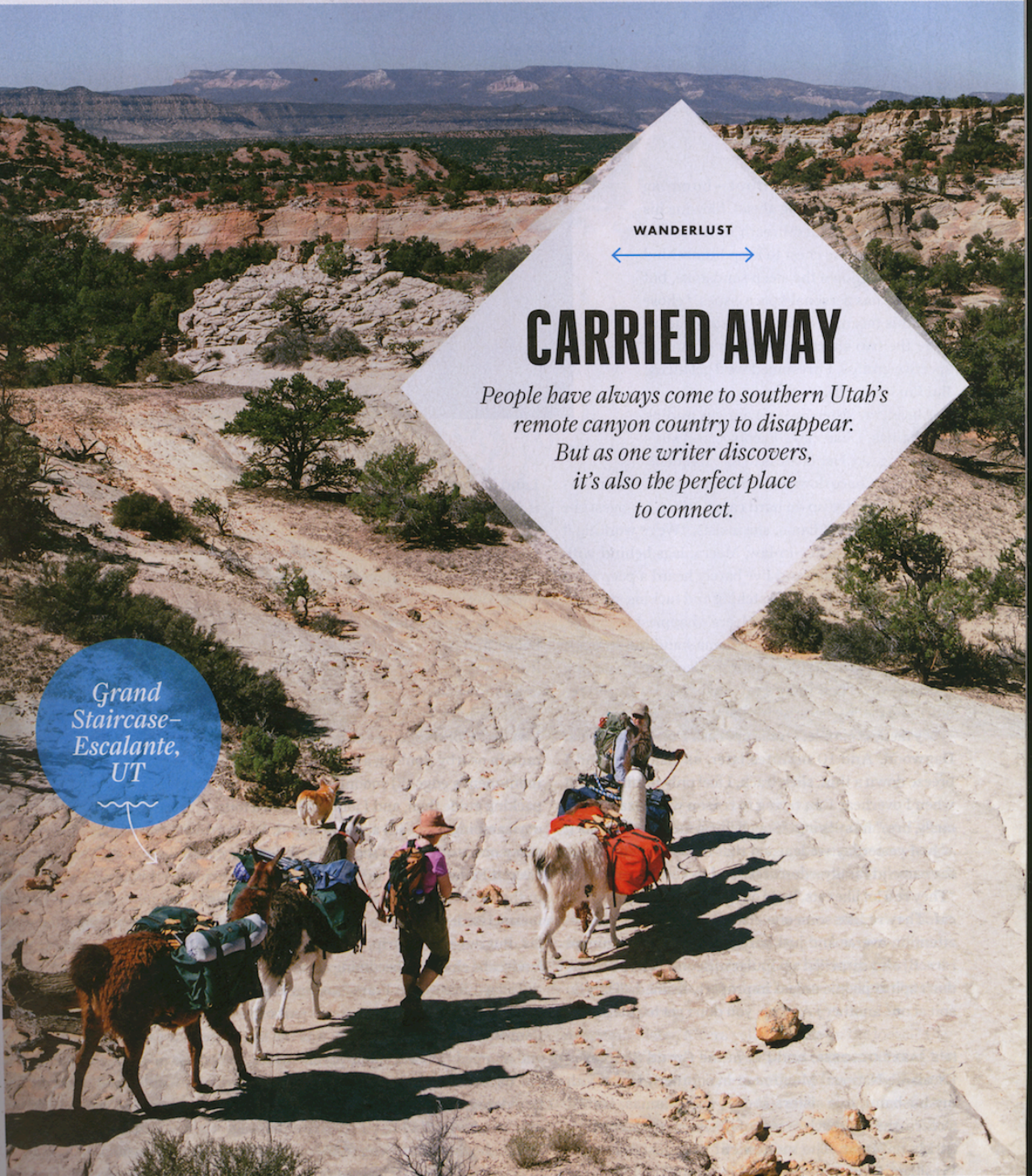
WANDERLUST



## CARRIED AWAY

*People have always come to southern Utah's remote canyon country to disappear. But as one writer discovers, it's also the perfect place to connect.*

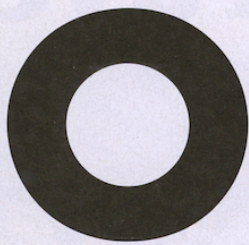
Grand  
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By LAVINIA SPALDING

SUNSET ♦ OCTOBER 2015 19

## Travel



**OZZY IS GIVING ME ATTITUDE**—bumping against my pack, nosing ahead, blowing his semisweet-fermented breath in my face. I nudge him on the chest to keep him behind me as I inch down the steep sandstone, but he clearly has personal-space issues. I chose Ozzy this morning based on stature—as we were the two shortest members of our respective groups, I presumed we'd get along. But I'm having llama drama.

Ahead, my sister-in-law Laurie is leading two llamas, Chaco and Escobar, and she's struggling too. Her tactic is to halt frequently, slowing Chaco down. A school counselor, she's determined not to give up on hard cases. When I suggest she request a different llama, she insists, "We're working it out." My other sister-in-law, Meera, lags behind with Montana and Frodo, and I've barely heard a peep from her—she's too busy bird-watching and tucking sprigs of sagebrush behind her ears. Meera's happiest in nature. Still, she's employing her own llama-handling strategy, holding one arm up like a tour guide while tightening Frodo's rein. Then there's my husband, Dan, who requires no tactics, because his llama is perfect.

My tactic is simple: I trade up. I ask Dan for his llama, Dagwood. And 10 minutes later, as Dagwood and I breeze down a thin, slick track, I feel only minimal guilt when I overhear Dan trying to reason with Ozzy. "Seriously, bro," he's saying. "Stay behind me."

Just yesterday we learned that llamas—members of the camelid family—don't respond to vocal commands. "They're a lot like cats," said our guide, BJ. "Only not *your* cat. They're like someone else's cat." In other words, attention-averse and just barely tolerant of the human race. BJ also dispelled a popular misconception: Llamas don't spit at people unless improperly trained. (They do spit at one another.) And no, you don't get to ride them.

**IT'S EARLY OCTOBER**, and I'm in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah, with my husband, two sisters-in-law, eight llamas, and BJ Orozco, the laid-back owner of the llama pack-trip outfit Llama2Boot. The monument was designated by President Clinton in 1996 and is run by the Bureau of



Land Management, and it is incomprehensibly vast and rugged: nearly 1.9 million acres of golden buttes and vermilion cliffs, slot canyons, mesas, monoliths, dinosaur bones, and Native American ruins—plus plenty of water, wildflowers, and cottonwoods.

We're here because 14 years ago, BJ and I waited tables together at my sister's restaurant, in nearby Boulder, a tiny town right at the monument's edge. BJ moonlighted as a llama-packing guide then, and I joined him on a four-day camping trip with another friend. We borrowed two llamas-in-training to carry our stuff, and at night BJ pointed out constellations and told stories of Everett Ruess, the young poet and artist who explored this area with his burros in the 1930s but mysteriously disappeared. Since moving to Boulder, I'd been mesmerized—and overwhelmed—by the kaleidoscopic, seemingly infinite vistas. But during that trip, cocooned in a sleeping bag deep inside a canyon, the landscape changed, becoming close and real and personal.

Today I live in San Francisco, but Boulder remains my second home. With a population of just 200, this area is part of the West that's still wild. The Escalante Canyons, where we're hiking, was the last place in the country to be explored and mapped. The Escalante River—which we'll cross many times over the next few days—was the last major river discovered in the continental United States. Boulder was the last town in the nation to receive its mail by mule; electricity didn't arrive until 1947; and just five years ago, there was zero cell service.

Roughly half the town's residents are Mormon ranching families—many kin to original settlers. It's also home to artists, hardy retirees, organic farmers,

**Clockwise from top: Packed snacks; sure-footed beasts of burden; ancient llama-crossing sign?**



wilderness guides, doomsday preppers, and even some survival-television stars. Local small-business owners, like my sister and BJ, are a minority. Earning a livelihood in Boulder isn't easy; it requires a modern-day version of pioneer spirit. But it's one reason the town stays small and special.

"You have to try to find a foothold to survive in Boulder," says BJ. "I found a niche. And I love being out here. I rely on the wildness to keep my magic alive."

**OUR HIKE BEGINS** at the Escalante trailhead and descends down an old wagon road, which isn't a road at all but a wide-open, unmarked trek over Navajo sandstone domes. According to BJ, this route linked the two main settlements, Escalante and Boulder, in the early 1900s. "They say it's how the first baby grand piano was

delivered—in pieces," BJ says. Me, I can barely handle a well-mannered llama on a leash; maneuvering a loaded horse-drawn wagon seems inconceivable. Still, taking in 360° of multicolored ancient seabed, it's clear why it was worth the toil.

When we break for lunch on a flat sweep of sandstone near some water holes, I tie Dagwood to a spindly pine and, in an effort to make him love me, offer him my apple core. He rejects it. "He'll eat it," BJ says. "Just not from your hand." Only after I set it on the ground and walk away does Dagwood take an interest. "Llamas are very prideful," BJ explains.

They're wily too. A few minutes later, Meera yells, "Llama on the loose!" Dagwood, having broken free, heads for a water hole. We spread out, surrounding him in a wide circle. "Don't make eye contact," BJ instructs. "Just pretend you're out for an afternoon stroll." Dagwood scans the ring of bodies and—in a repeat of every Red Rover game from my childhood—identifies me as the weakest link. When he makes for the space to my right, BJ calls, "Raise your arms to make yourself bigger!" It works: Dagwood retreats, BJ catches him, and we resume lunch.

*Photographs by* BENJAMIN RASMUSSEN

## Travel

At dusk we make camp near the river in a meadow bordered by rock formations in hues straight from a fall menu: pumpkin, honey, cinnamon. The yellow leaves on the cottonwoods shimmer, and a full copper moon rises over the rocks. We all turn in shortly after dinner but wake in the middle of the night to a lengthy call-and-response between two owls. When I drift back asleep, it's to the soft hum of llamas yawning.

**THE NEXT DAY, I GREEDILY RECLAIM DAGWOOD**, and after a while, I'm not even holding his lead. I drape it over one shoulder, and he follows. By afternoon, I'm certain he'll have warmed to me. But no: I can't get his enormous head into the same frame for a selfie. When I try, he leans out. Our love affair is starting to feel one-sided.

Meanwhile, BJ calls attention to nature. See that ring around the sun? It's called a sun dog and tells us to expect rain. Here—touching the buds on a tree—is serviceberry, named because it's one of the first wildflowers to bloom in spring, so pioneers used it in wedding-service bouquets. And over there—indicating the dark, almost burned-looking ground—is cryptobiotic soil, or literally, “hidden life.” Made of blue-green algae, lichen, and mosses, the crunchy, knobby crust thwarts water and wind erosion while feeding nitrogen and carbon to the soil—essentially preventing everything from becoming sand dunes. And this, he says—kneeling to scrape white, cottony fluff from a prickly pear—is cochineal, an insect that produces a carmine-colored dye when its pod is squeezed. Fifteenth-century Europeans discovered the Aztecs using cochineal to make red clothing; till then, only royalty could afford red dyes. Cochineal quickly became a treasure of the New World, valued alongside gold and silver. Before moving on, Meera and I tattoo our skin royal red.

Finally, up there is an exquisitely intact granary, some 800 years old, tucked into a cliff far above our heads, and below it, a rock wall covered with Anasazi and Fremont petroglyphs. As I stand and gape at the panel of images—a sun, a snake, a seven-toed bear claw, a horned humanoid figure, an animal we unanimously decide is a llama—I contemplate how many people have loved this place and claimed it as their own.

Over the years, cattle ranchers, loggers, miners, developers, and ATV fanatics battled with environmentalists—making the 1996 monument designation highly contentious. Though celebrated as a major victory among conservationists, the announcement came as an unwelcome surprise to many, including local ranchers. Because parts of the area had historically been overgrazed—cattle had roamed free here since about 1870—the new bill limited grazing in the monument. Today some ranchers still hold a grudge, and the politics between ranchers and environmentalists remain as shadowy and labyrinthine as the canyons themselves.

Take, for example, the Russian olive tree, an invasive species introduced after the Dust Bowl to prevent soil erosion. It's since run rampant, choking out native willows and cottonwoods and clogging the watershed's delicate ecosystem. For about five years now, crews have occupied the canyons in late summer and fall, working to control the trees. These crews are the only other people we see along the trail. When we pass some workers one afternoon, they stop to stare at our menagerie. “Llama packing,” I overhear one woman saying to a coworker, “is the best thing I've ever seen in my life. We *need* llamas.”

The monument now draws about 700,000 visitors annually, but the Grand Staircase still feels untouristed, sacred. And standing here at the bottom of the Escalante, gazing at ancient petroglyphs, I feel even more invested. I like knowing it's protected. →

**It's a timeless image, the shadow of a human leading a pack animal.**

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**Escalante Canyons: last place in the States to be mapped.**

AT DUSK WE GATHER around an overturned bucket to play Scrabble. The game sparks fierce family rivalry, but tonight we're outclassed by Zorro and Echo, who are giving each other stink-eye. When Echo wins by spitting all over Zorro's face, we cheer. Not because it's cute (llama spit is essentially vomit), but because it's a coup de grâce, like a boxer knocking out his opponent.

After dinner BJ circles back to the topic of Everett Ruess. Before his disappearance, Ruess was roaming deep into the wild and expressing a desire to vanish altogether. Then he did. BJ mentions a 1933 block print Ruess made of himself leading his burros. "It's such a timeless image—the shadow of a human leading a pack animal," BJ says. "Sometimes when I'm hiking with the llamas and I notice our shadows on the rock walls, I think, This could be any time in history. I'm connected to this place by a passing shadow in time."

As I sip wild-mint tea and admire the eight fuzzy llama heads poking through the sagebrush, I think, *I get it*. Back home in San Francisco, I have two jobs, three offices, multiple Facebook accounts, hundreds of unanswered emails. Urban living consumes too much time and space. Here there's *only* time and space. Wandering the canyons with a beast of burden, I'm finally unburdened—and I can feel the pull to retreat in a deeper, more permanent way.

The morning of our third day, Laurie asks BJ which llama is his favorite. Ever diplomatic, he answers only,

"Ozzy has heart." Suddenly I see the feisty animal I struggled with on day one in a whole new light. I ditch the seemingly perfect Dagwood—the animal kingdom's answer to a five-star bellman—and trade.

Hiking boots caked with red dirt, hair as tangled as fur, I'm ready for a llama with heart, and Ozzy doesn't disappoint. He hums in my ear the entire way back to the trailhead. During one of many stream crossings, he lurches ahead, dunking me, but his incessant nearness no longer bothers me. I've learned these guys are true pack animals, prone to separation anxiety. Ozzy only wants me to keep up. When I do, he rewards me by standing still for my camera.

In the afternoon, I glimpse a shadow of Ozzy and myself—one tiny creature leading a larger one—and see myself reflected in this place and in BJ's words. Deep nature can rearrange concepts of who we are and what we need. At first I fought to control Ozzy, just as back home I struggle to balance city life with actual living. Today I let go, and it feels like I've tapped into my own wilderness. I also realize I'm no Everett Ruess. I don't want to disappear—especially not alone. Like Ozzy, I'm a social animal. I cherish this land, but it means the most when I can share it with my herd. ▽

*Lavinia Spalding's books include *With a Measure of Grace: The Story and Recipes of a Small Town Restaurant*.*

## HOW TO GET NOWHERE

To reach Boulder, rent a car in Salt Lake City (4 hours away). Hotels are scarce, so be sure to book at **Boulder Mountain Lodge** on scenic State 12 and ask for a room overlooking the bird sanctuary. The on-site **Hell's Backbone Grill** serves three squares a day made with ingredients from its organic farm. **Llama2Boot** runs llama pack trips spring through fall, offering drop camps, outfitting, and full-service trips complete with all the gear you need, plus gourmet backcountry meals. **Lodge:** From \$135; **boulder-utah.com**. **Grill:** \$\$\$; open Mar–Nov; **hellsbackbonegrill.com**. **Pack trips:** \$900/5 days all-inclusive; **llama2boot.com**. —L.S.