

## Adventure in the Rough

As we stood at the bottom of the hill looking up at the dark and gloomy hole in the rock, we were astonished. I felt my jaw tighten and my stomach turn as I stared up at the cliff. The cave was set in the side of a yellow sandstone cliff two hundred feet above the green forest far below, and we had come to climb it. As we were packing our gear, I could already hear birds calling from the forest around us. While we were standing there with bags packed, and determined minds, I couldn't help feeling a bit uneasy. With that I locked my feelings inside, for there was no turning back now.

It was fairly easy going at first, and my mind drifted off quickly. I found myself thinking about how my brother had convinced me to take this crazy hike. When we had driven past this cave a few days ago, I could tell by the excitement I heard in his voice he was going to try to convince me to hike it with him. It took him awhile, but finally he talked me into it. At that we packed our backpacks full of food, blankets, water and matches, and headed out the door. I was now starting to doubt that decision as we continued up the hill.

I could feel my legs start to ache as the forest floor became a steep incline. There was no path to lead us straight there, so we cut through the woods following deer trails when possible. The steep climb was wearing us out quickly, so we stopped for a drink and a short rest. As I looked around, I could tell we were still only a third of the way to the top. After a swallow of water and a brief rest, we continued on our way.

The sight of the underbrush and forest growth, and the trees towering high above was soothing. As we were hopping over logs and crawling through brush, I was feeling at peace. We stopped for water two more times before we reached the top. Tired as we were, we still found the energy to explore around right away.

The view from the top of the bluff was spectacular. There was a clear view of the Mississippi river and its back waters. The sun reflecting off the choppy water made the river glisten, and the green islands with dark water flowing around them made the picture perfect. In the middle of it all, I saw a tugboat slowly pushing its load up the river.

After some looking around, we discovered an entrance to the cave from the top. It wound down into the cave like a chimney. Though there were many hand and foot holds, one slip up could mean a disaster, for a fall over the edge would be fatal. The climb looked difficult and scary, so we decided to search for firewood before starting down.

After gathering a bundle of wood, we climbed down partway and tossed the wood down onto the cave floor. After that, I climbed down first, and my brother tossed the packs to me when I reached the bottom. The climb was difficult, scary, and thrilling all at once. Our knees were shaking as we made the ten-foot jump to the bottom of the cave.

With a soft sandy floor, and a balcony on the side of the cliff without a railing, the cave made the perfect campsite. After the sun had set, we quickly started a campfire. All the smoke went out of the top of the cave, while the heat stayed around the fire. As soon as the fire was big enough, we cooked cans of soup on the open flames. Our make-shift dinner tasted like a gourmet meal after the long hike.

When we finished eating, we sat around the fire and sang and told stories in the firelight. After the flames died to coals and the stories wore thin, we wrapped up in our blankets and went to bed. With all the excitement and adventure the day had brought us, we fell asleep quickly.

We woke up early the next morning and climbed out of the cave. I felt well rested from my night's sleep on the sandy ground. We had a small breakfast of beef jerky and the last of our water on top of the bluff. We were both craving a good meal and a cup of coffee, so we started down the hill right away.

The hike down was much easier than the way up, and it only took us half as long. When we made it to the car, we sat down for a minute looking up at the cave where we had just spent the night. It looked so small, and so far away. At that moment, we both knew we had just made a worthwhile accomplishment.

As we drove away in the car, we were both grinning from ear to ear. I was a new man, for I had just conquered the toughest rock climb in the county. Still, I couldn't help thinking of how I had almost turned down the chance to go on this hike. I had almost let my fear and ignorance make my decision for me. Now, as I look back on my experience I know that if I ever get a chance to go on another crazy trek like that one, I won't be so hesitant to go along.

March 11, 2003