

# GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE

Grand Staircase-Escalante is so big, so diverse, that choosing a favorite place resembles the proverbial blind man touching the elephant. There's that beloved secret side canyon lush with orchids, monkeyflowers, and maidenhair fern. An otherworldly dome of sculptured, cross-bedded, butter-yellow rock rises in surprise from a mesa. What about the big views across the Escalante River basin at sunset, leading your gaze past shadowed clefts and ruddy bands of slickrock to the elegant skyline of the Henry Mountains?

Every canyon, every mesa, every back road has its special delights.

The monument's enormity contributed to its founding. When President Bill Clinton signed the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument proclamation in September 1996, he created a gigantic natural laboratory. Scientists applauded his use of the 1906 Antiquities Act to grant special designation for 1.9 million acres of public lands, embracing sufficient space and multiple habitats to conduct innovative research on climate change, speciation, and migration corridors. As the first unit of the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) National Landscape Conservation System, the monument became the model for a new conservation mission for the BLM.

The monument proclamation acknowledged geologic and cultural treasures first noted 150 years ago by geologist and explorer John Wesley Powell. The monument's rocks provide "one of the best and most continuous records of Late Cretaceous terrestrial life on Earth," as the proclamation puts it. Scientists find new dinosaurs nearly every time they visit—notably in the Kaiparowits Formation, a fossil locality so rich that Grand Staircase turns out to be the best place on earth to study the extinction of the dinosaurs.

The president recognized the scientific importance of the 100-mile elevation gradient between Grand Canyon and Bryce Canyon, with cliff-barricade risers and plateau treads, christened by pioneer geologists the "Grand Staircase." He protected what was left of the Escalante rivershed above Lake Powell. This dissected sandstone wonderland formed the western anchor of a legendary national park proposal in the 1930s. Clinton's proclamation ended a thirty-year

debate about whether we should strip-mine coal on the remote and pristine Kaiparowits Plateau.

Or so we believed.

The nonprofit Grand Staircase Escalante Partners began working here in 2004 to advance monument science and "honor the past and safeguard the future," with programs in research, conservation, and education. A decade of restoration partnerships eliminated invasive Russian olive from 90 river miles in the Escalante watershed. Recent efforts to acknowledge the monument as the ancestral lands of eight Native nations strengthen connections with indigenous neighbors on the Colorado Plateau.

When Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, Utah politicians saw an opening. Still incensed about President Clinton's executive order, they believed Clinton had disrespected their insistence on the primacy of states' rights. Local officials lobbied the new administration to reduce and dismantle the monument. They dreamed of jobs and profits from extractive industry, with little regard for irreplaceable spiritual and scientific values.

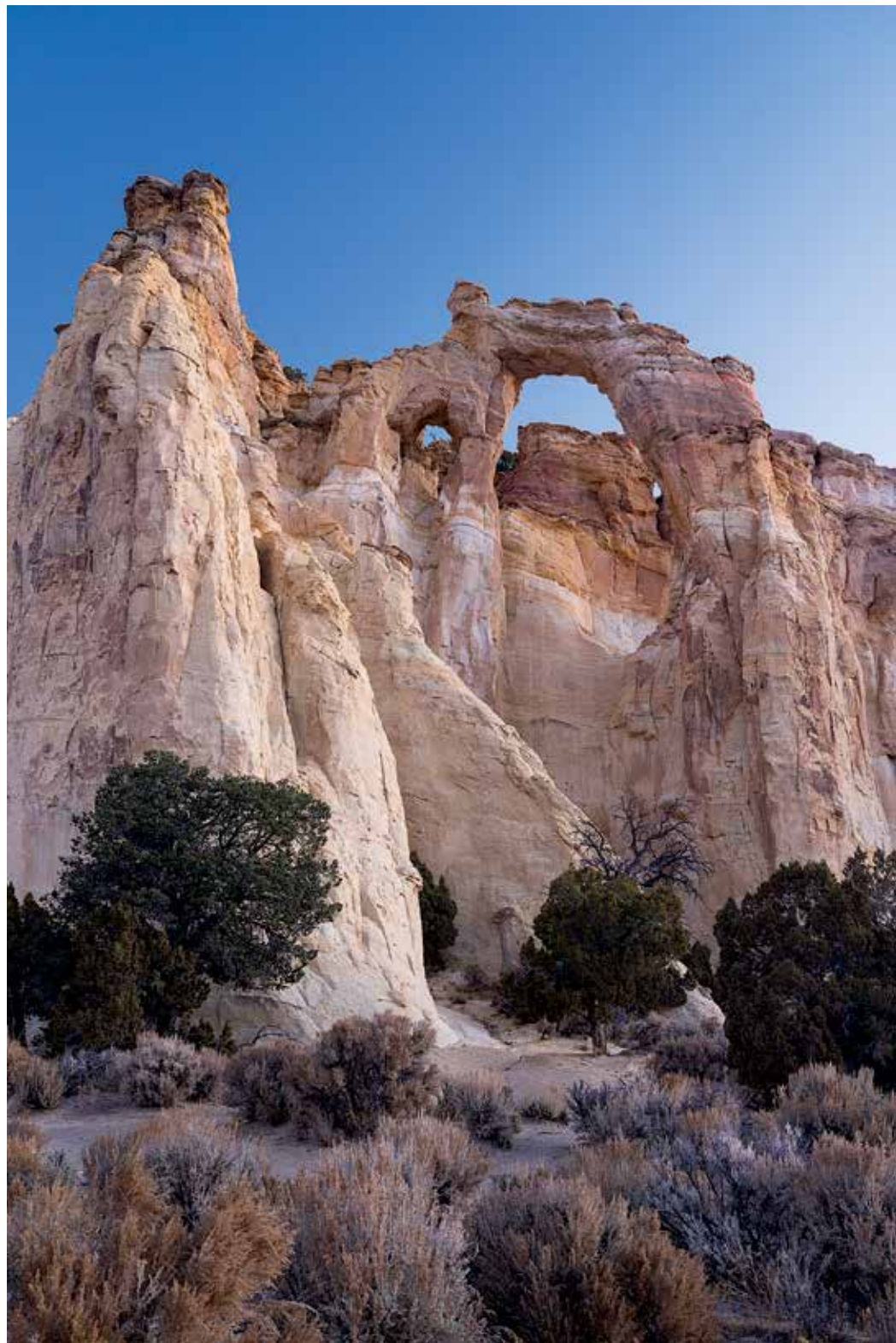
President Trump opened the door for desecration in December 2017, when he reduced Grand Staircase by half, creating management chaos and legal confusion. He severed a cherished and successful national monument into incoherent fragments, removing protections from lands excluded by these new boundaries. Controversial new BLM resource management plans would open vast areas of Grand Staircase-Escalante to clear-cutting, unmanageable recreation, and increased off-road vehicle use.

In 2017, Grand Staircase Escalante Partners joined other conservation and scientific organizations in the legal battle to restore the monument's integrity. With a new administration in 2021, defenders of Grand Staircase believe we will soon see the day when we celebrate the reconsecration of this international treasure.

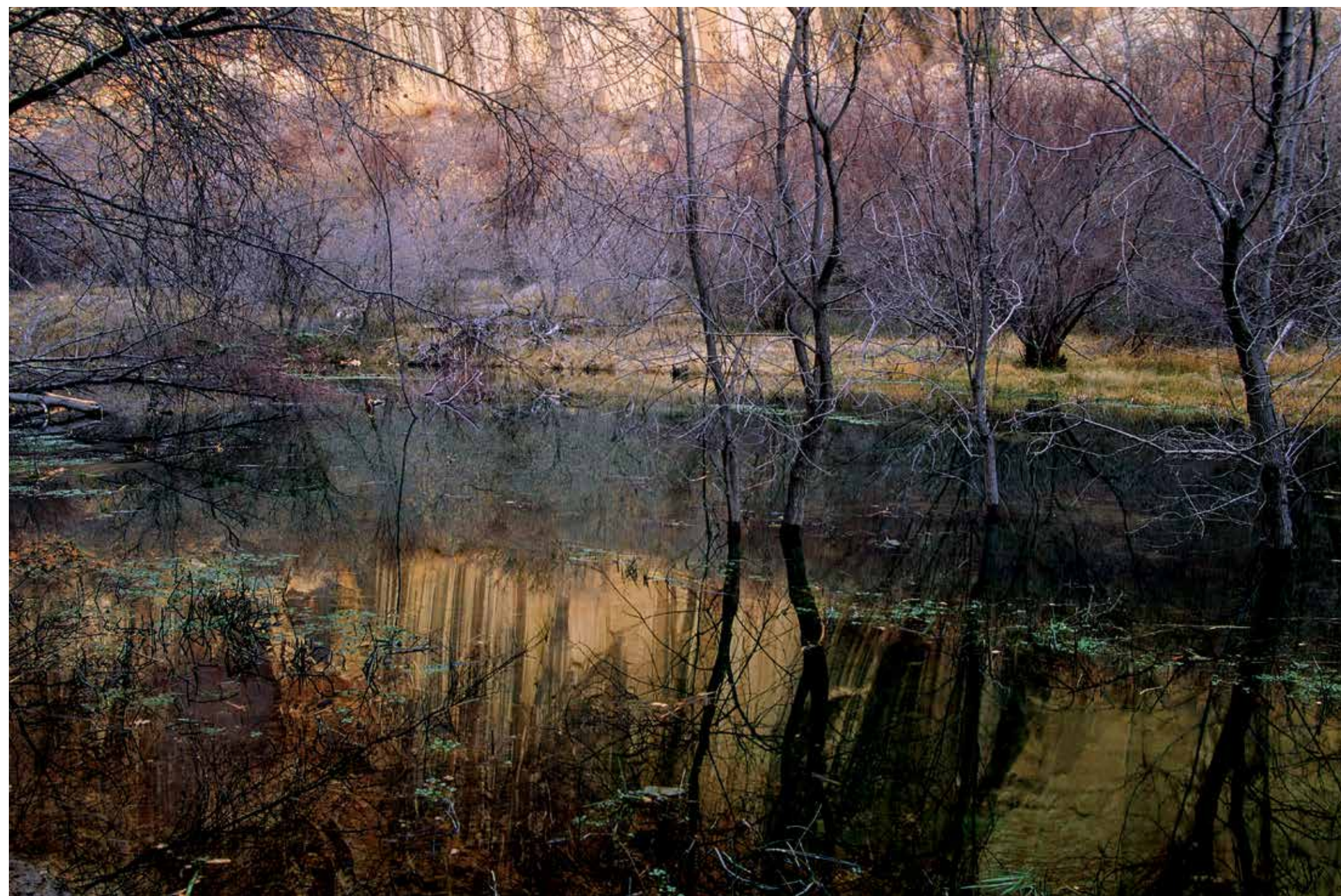
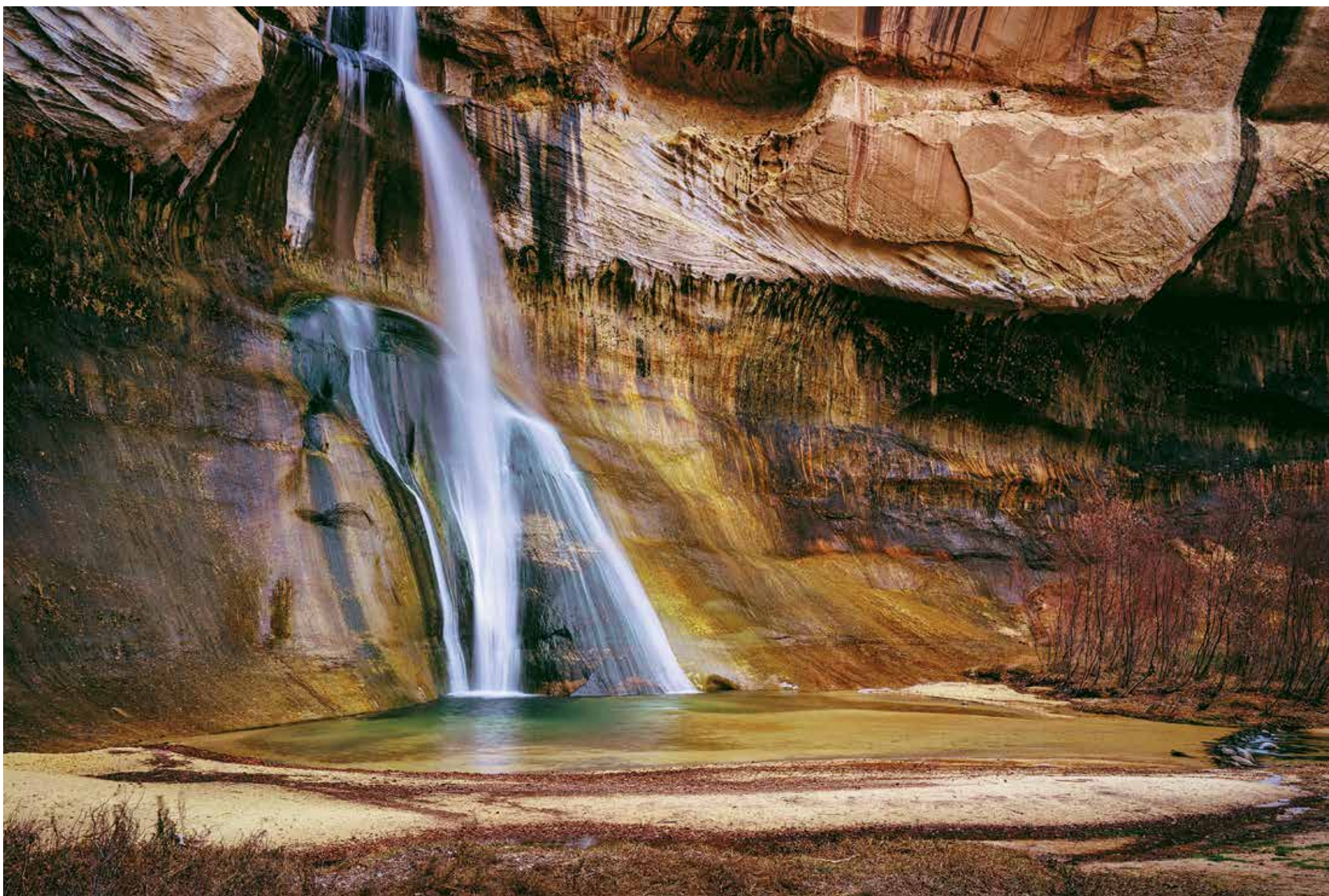
—Stephen Trimble, Board Member  
**Grand Staircase Escalante Partners**



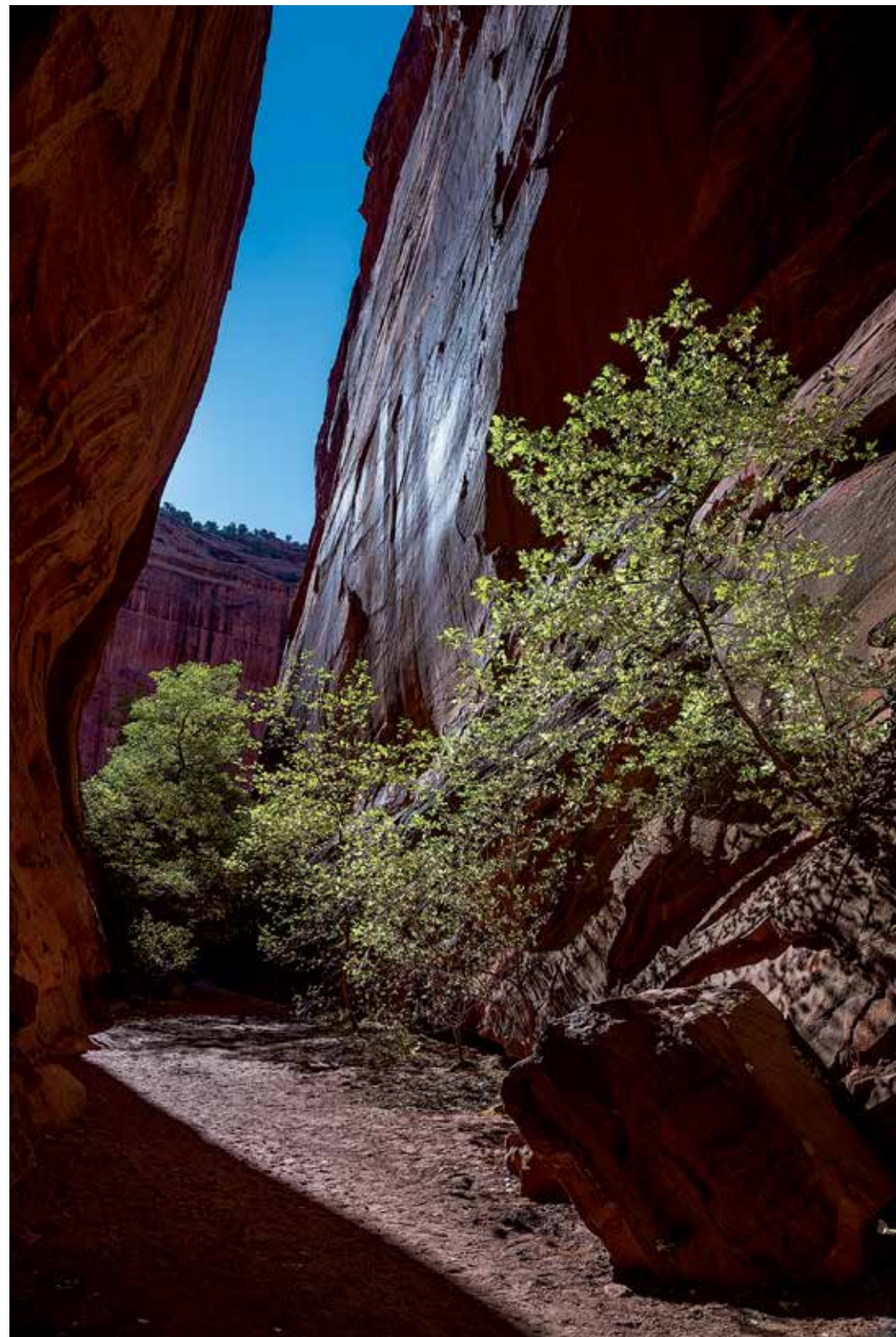
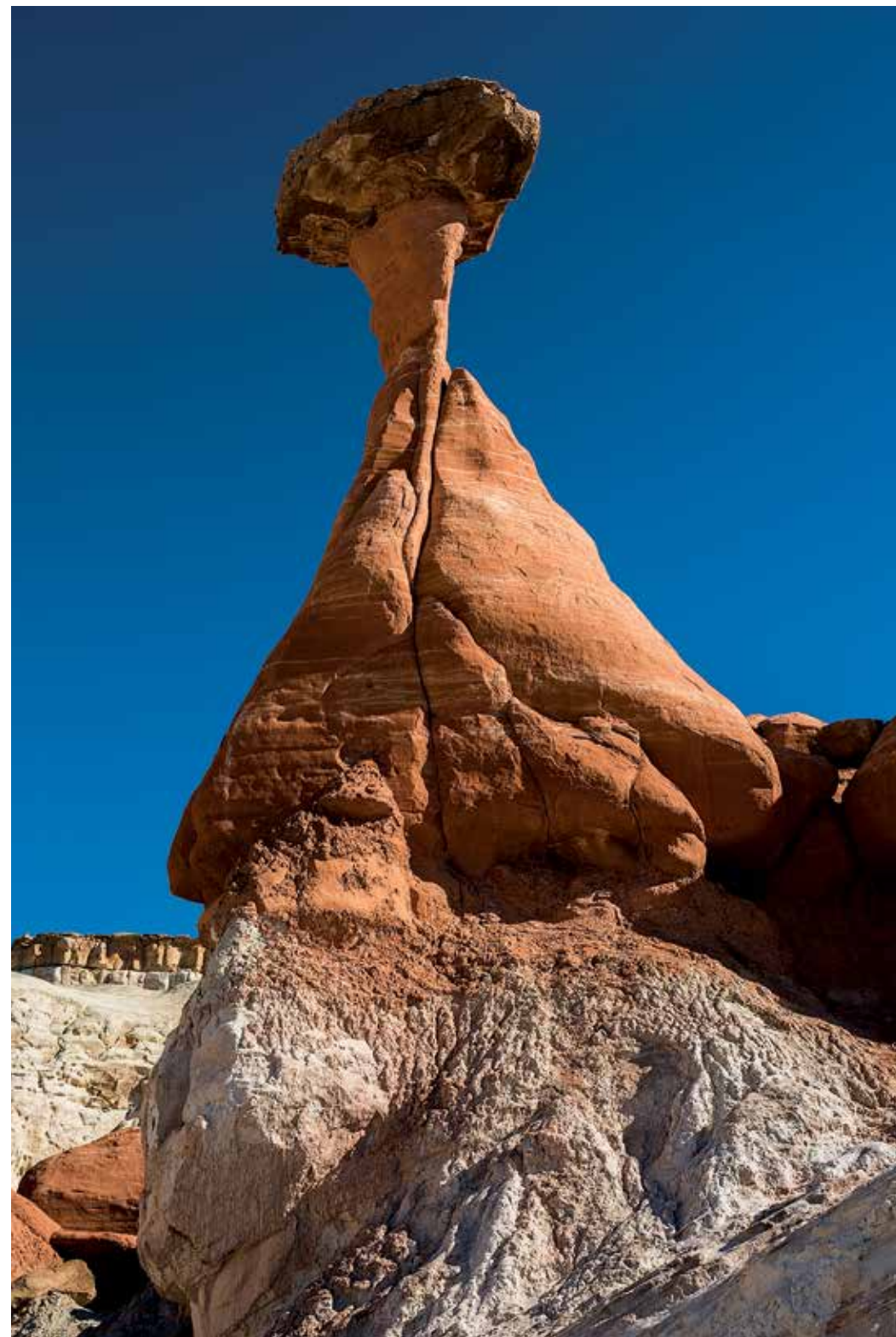
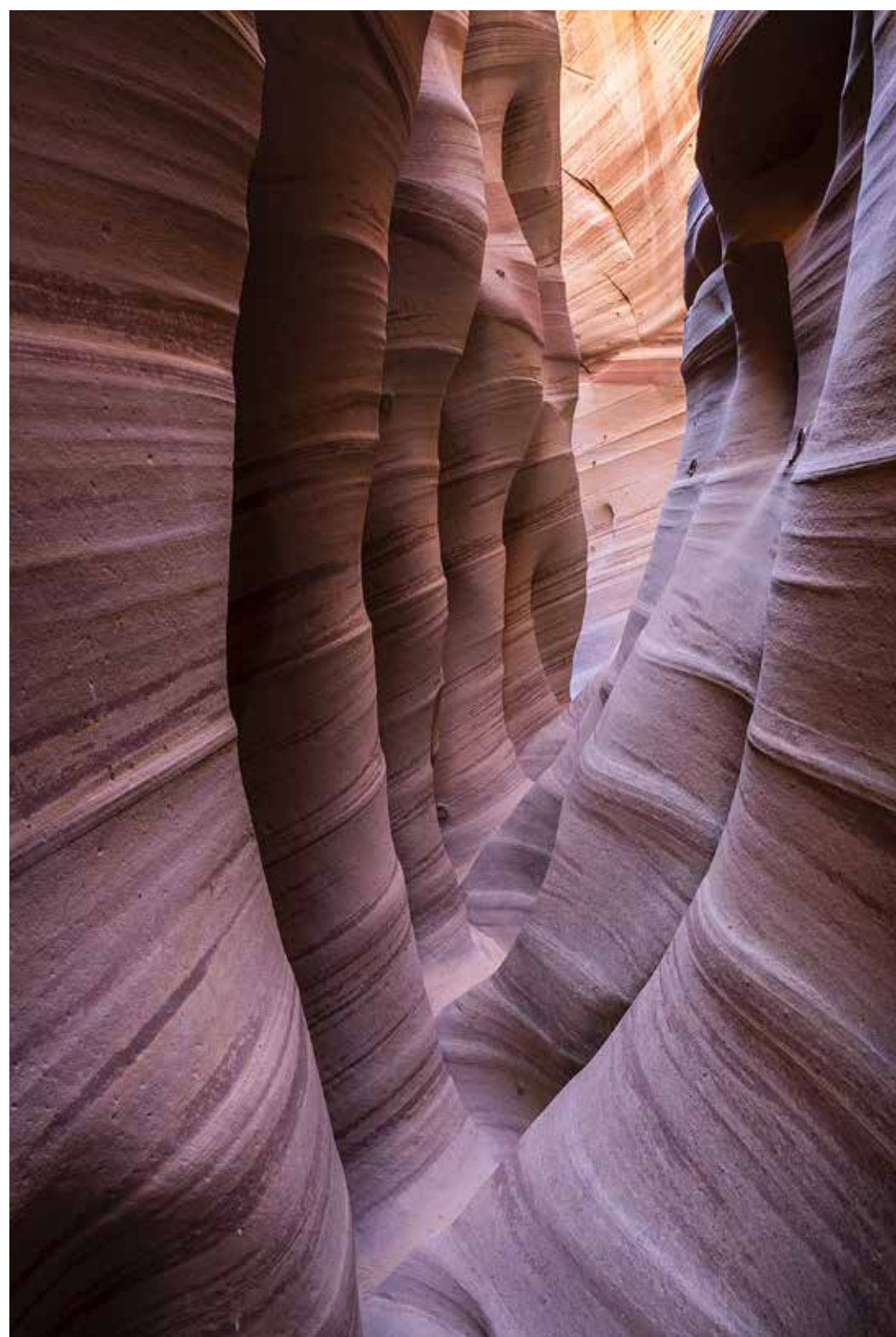
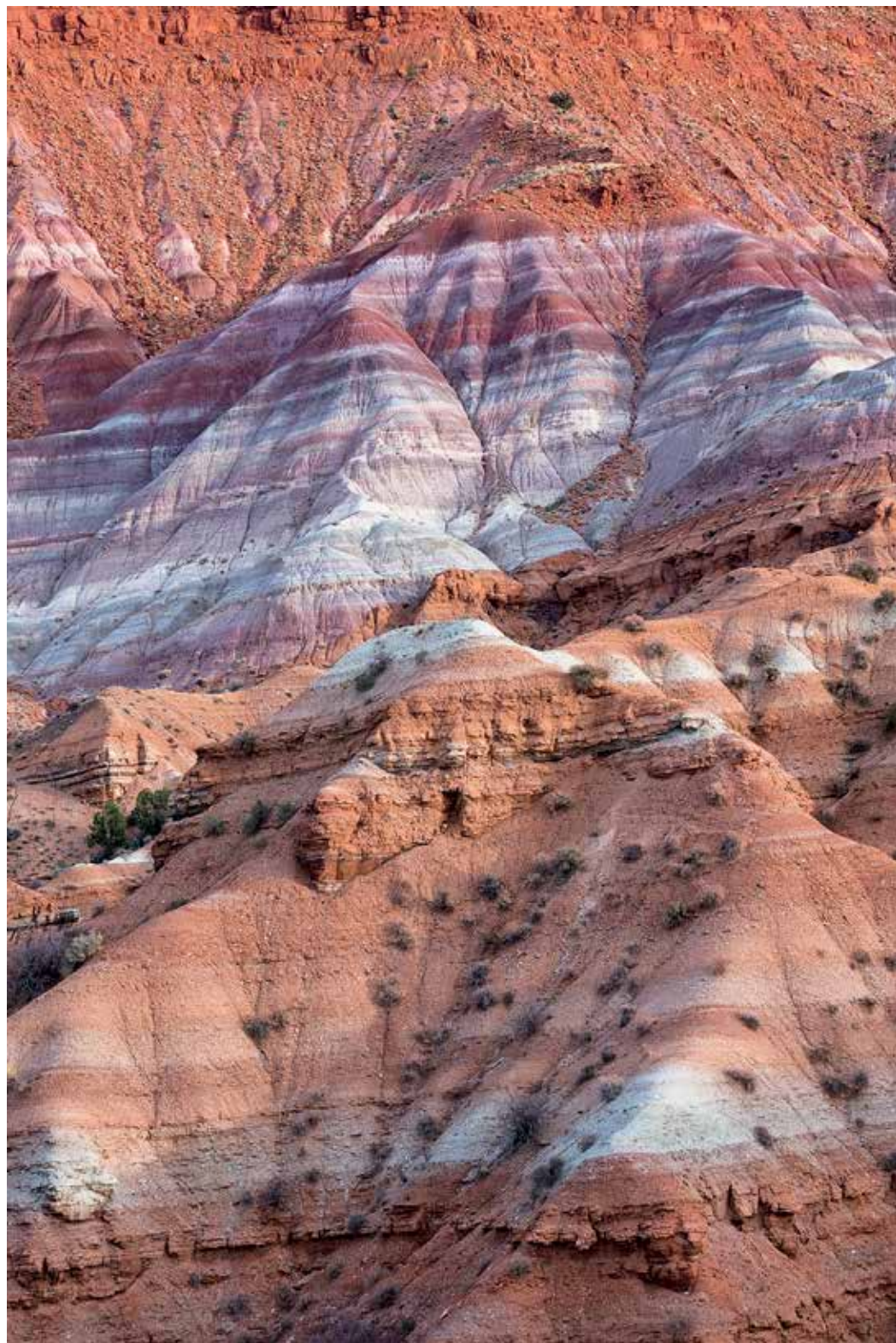




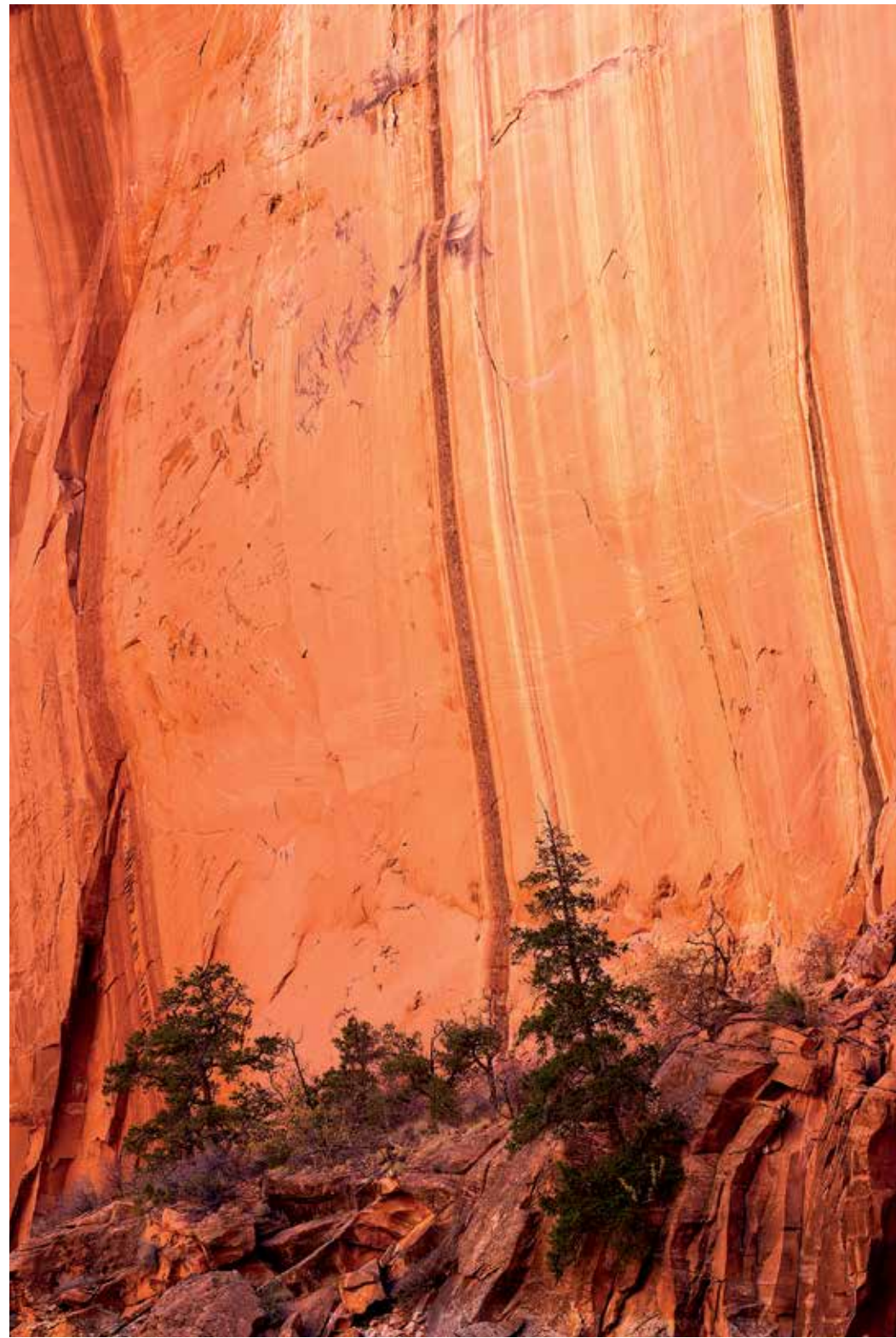




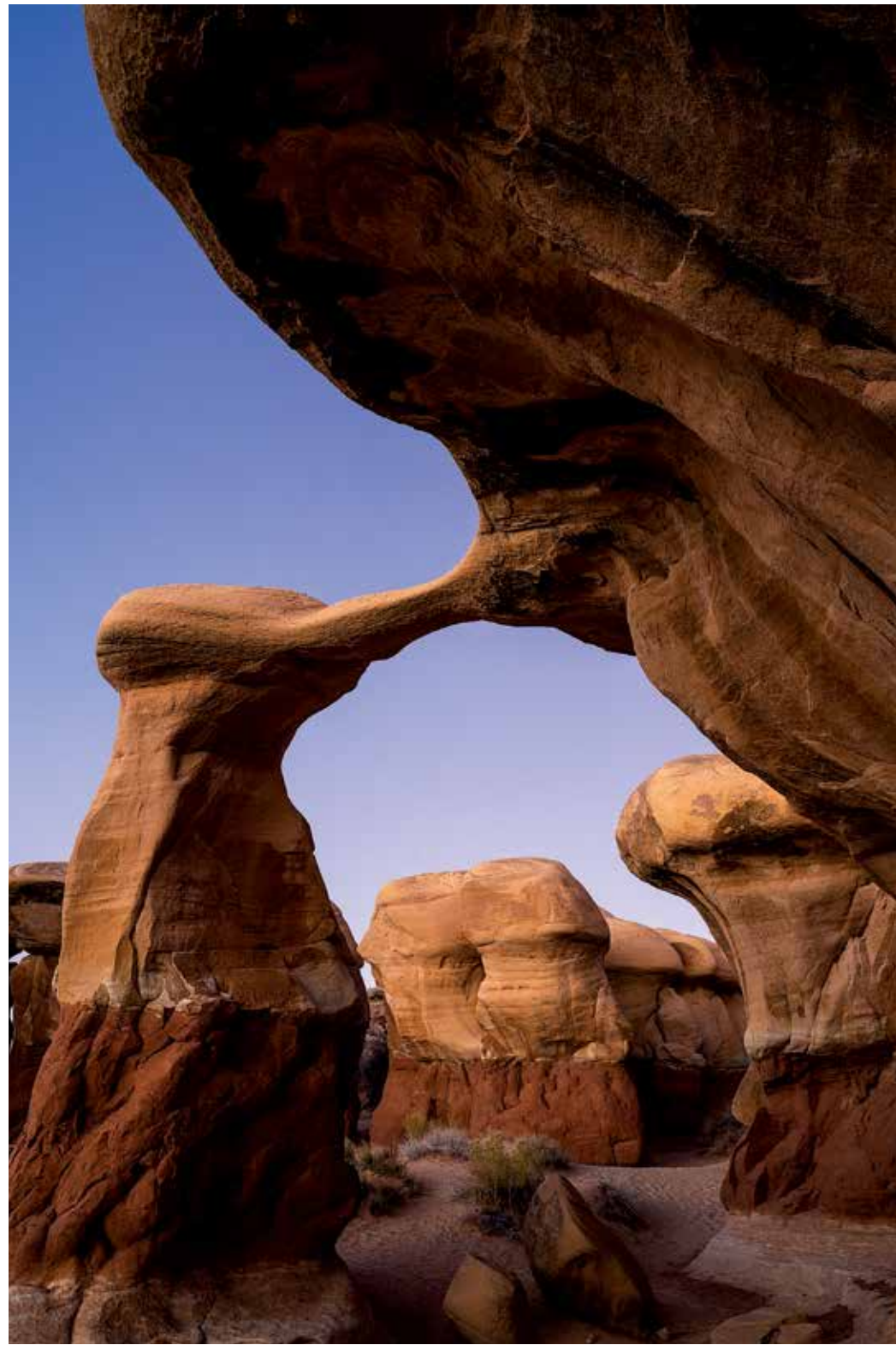
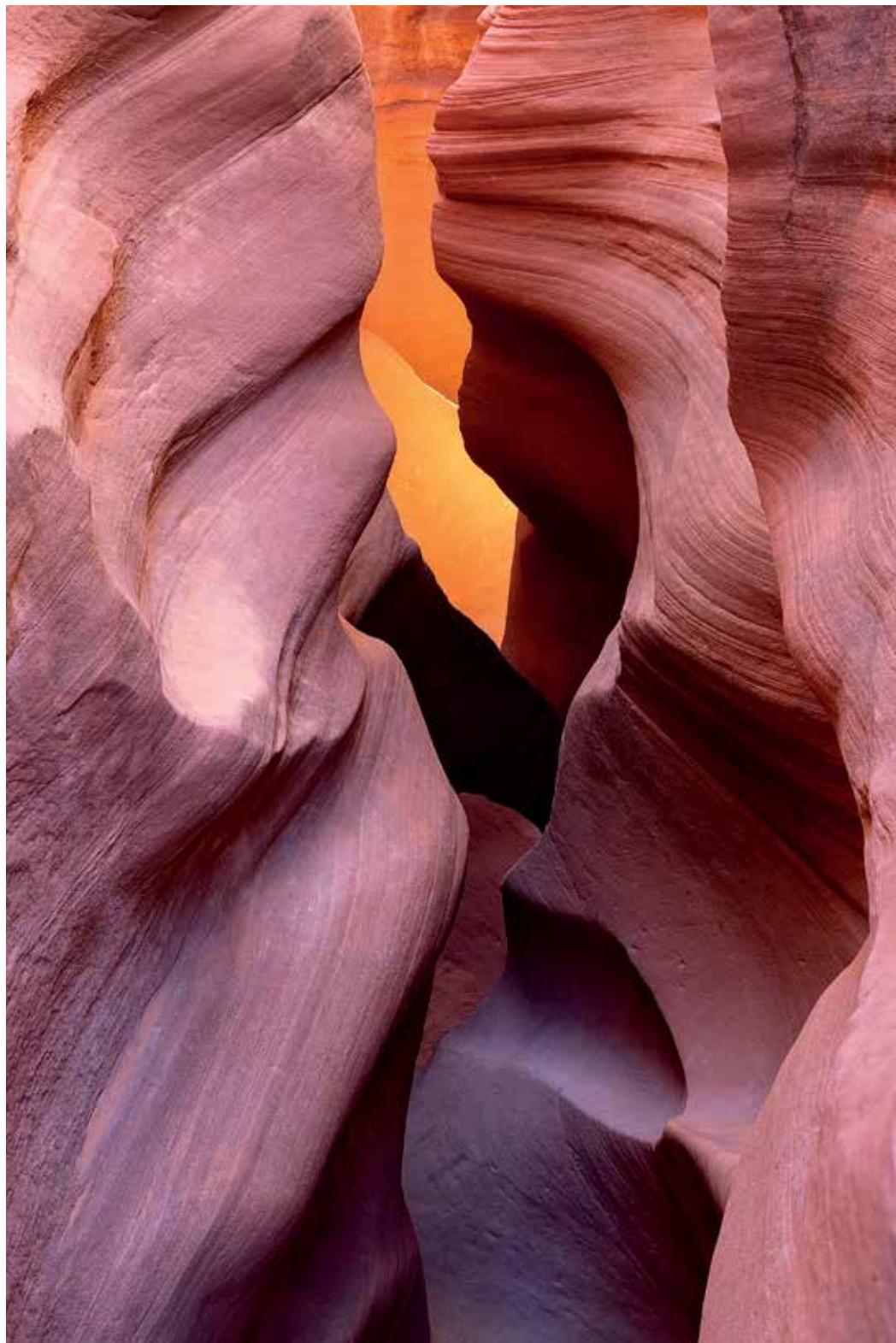














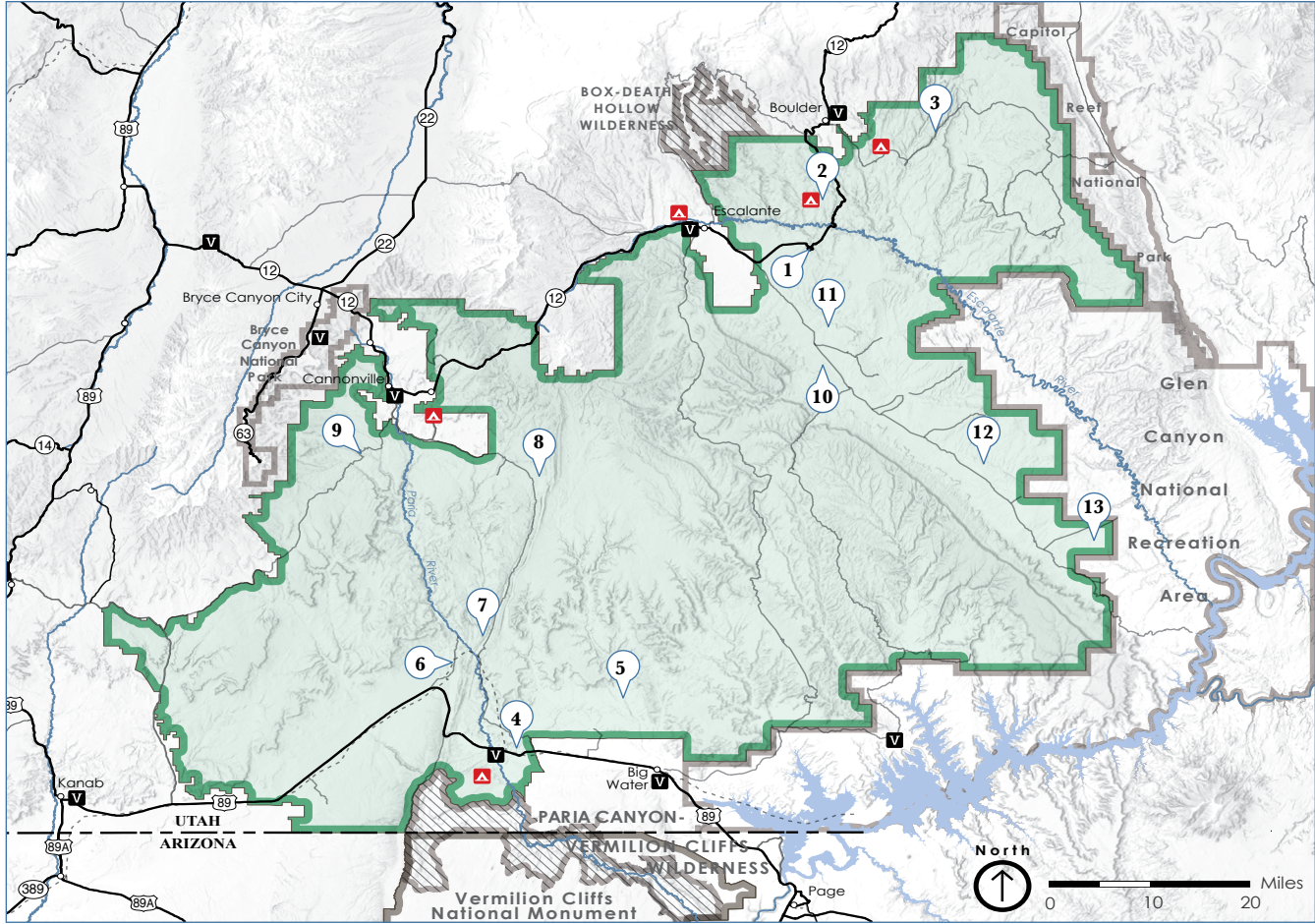
# GRAND STAIRCASE - ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT

LOCATION: 250 MILES SOUTH OF SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH  
ESTABLISHED: 1996 • BLM • SQUARE MILES: 2,938  
HIGHEST POINT: AQUARIUS PLATEAU, 8,600 FEET

A wild and beautiful country of multicolored slickrock, Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument encompasses an area so remote it was the last region in the contiguous United States to have been mapped, while the Henry Mountains and the Escalante were the last mountain range and river to be named. When designated in 1996, the national monument was by far the largest. Stretching from Bryce Canyon National Park to the west to Capitol Reef National Park and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area to the east, it forms a bridge that helps maintain the region’s ecological integrity.

**ORIENTATION** The main access is through two east-west highways bordering the monument: US–89 to the south and UT–12 to the north. Two major unpaved roads run north-south: Cottonwood Canyon Road that links US–89 to UT–12 and Hole-in-the-Rock Road that comes to a dead end near Lake Powell. Together, they divide the monument into three sections, Grand Staircase, Kaiparowits Plateau, and Escalante Canyons. In the west, Grand Staircase refers to a series of uplifted and differently colored sandstone escarpments exposing in sequence 200 million years of Earth’s history, cut by the Paria River and traversed by Johnson Canyon Skutumpah Road. The Kaiparowits Plateau, at the center of the monument, has been the scene of many paleontology discoveries and is its wildest, highest, most arid, and least accessible part—its main road, Smoky Mountain Road, is risky to drive. The east is dominated by the vast canyon system of the Escalante River, with its many tributaries and side canyons. It is linked to Capitol Reef National Park by the Burr Trail. Most roads within the interior are unpaved, and their clay sections are unpassable when wet. There are three small campgrounds, and dispersed camping is generally allowed. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) visitor centers are located in Escalante, surrounded by the monument, and in Kanab, 120 miles to the west. Both form an excellent gateway to the monument. Limited services are also available in Big Water, Boulder, Tropic, and Cannonville.

**SEASONS** Spring (April–June) and early fall (September–October) both offer moderate weather. Summer temperatures can reach 100°F at lower elevations. July and August bring thunderstorms curtailing travel on dirt roads, with monsoon season sometimes extending into September. Late fall is colder but can be an excellent time for exploring before the arrival of winter storms. Snow and subfreezing temperatures can occur during the winter.



**1. Scenic Byway 12**  
*Head of the Rocks, dawn*

Although the monument is vast, most of it is roadless. UT–12, or Scenic Byway 12, one of the most spectacular roads in America, comes the closest to a scenic drive in the monument. My favorite section is between Escalante and Boulder. The highway traverses pastel-colored slickrock terrain, giving an excellent introduction to the monument’s geology. I have photographed successfully from the Head of the Rocks roadside overlook at sunrise and sunset, when the air, clearer than at midday, allowed me to take in expanses of rock extending almost to the horizon.



**2. Calf Creek Recreation Area**  
*Calf Creek Falls, late afternoon*  
*Calf Creek Canyon, afternoon*

Traveling east, UT–12 then descends into the canyon of the Escalante River. The pleasant hike along the river is maybe the most accessible of the Escalante River canyons, and along the way, you can see arches and ancient structures. Hundred Handprints panel, one of the largest pictograph panels in the monument, sits high above the Escalante River Trailhead. Next is the Calf Creek Recreation Area, one of the most popular places in the monument. With its thirteen sites, the campground is the largest in the monument and the only



foot desert waterfall plunging into a sizable pool. The absence of sunlight in the morning and late afternoon reveals subtle variations in color on its wall due to moss and rocks. A polarizing also helped by reducing glare on wet rocks.



**3. Burr Trail / Long Canyon**  
*Desert Varnish, Long Canyon, midday*  
*Singing Canyon, late morning*

Formerly a track used by Mormon pioneers for seasonally moving cattle, Burr Trail is a back-country road starting from Boulder and featuring remarkable domes and cliffs on its way to the southern section of Capitol Reef National Park. Its first 31 miles, up to the national park boundary, were paved in the 1990s, significantly increasing the area’s visitation. Midway past the small but delightful Deer Creek Campground, Burr Trail follows the bottom of aptly named Long Canyon for 7 miles. Desert varnish and unusual erosion

one with water. In a place generally arid, I was delighted by the lush environment of this desert oasis of grasses and trees along Calf Creek. Unexpected beaver dams created pools reflecting the canyon walls, where you can see rock art. The mostly flat, 6-mile round-trip self-guided nature trail starting at the campground ends at Lower Calf Creek Falls, a rare 125-



patterns of Swiss cheese–like deep holes grace its sheer red walls of Wingate Sandstone. I strolled into a surprising small side canyon on the north side of the road, slightly more than a mile from Long Canyon’s southwestern end. Called Singing Canyon because of its acoustics, this slot canyon is enlivened by photogenic trees and a beautiful glow in the early morning and late afternoon. As the sun reached the canyon, I used the play of light and shadow for images of a different character. As I exited the canyon to the east, red cliffs turn multi-colored like those of the distant Waterpocket Fold. A saddle at the rim of the Circle Cliffs provided an excellent viewpoint over badlands, plains, and cliffs.



**4. Rimrocks Hoodoos**  
*Toadstool hoodoo, morning*

The Rimrocks Hoodoos are easy to access, as the trailhead is just off US–89 (milepost 19.3). It is only a half-mile of hiking through a wash to the base of impressive red sandstone spires supporting massive boulders on their heads. Those formations came into existence after boulders of harder Dakota Formation rolled down-slope onto softer Estrada Sandstone, sheltering rock directly below from erosion. A more difficult hike starting from milepost 20.8 leads to distant white toadstools. The formations are fragile, so tread lightly.



**5. Wahweap Hoodoos**  
*Towers of Silence, early morning*

The pedestal formations first named by Michael Fatali “Towers of Silence” display a particular elegance thanks to their slender white spires. The Wahweap Hoodoos area also has other pedestal rocks of diverse shapes and beautifully textured badlands, all in siltstone. The 9-mile round-trip off-trail hike along Wahweap Creek was easier than it sounds, as it took place entirely along a flat and wide dry wash along which I marveled at mud cracks and water erosion features. Access is via Nipple Creek Road (BLM 327) off Big Water.



**6. Paria Badlands and Canyon**  
*Paria Badlands, late afternoon*

There are many badlands in the southwest, but the Paria Badlands are the most colorful I have observed. Although unpaved and rough in places, I drove Old Paria Road north of US–89 in a Prius. From the end of the road, you can hike along the Paria River in a mile-long canyon called Box of the Paria. I experienced more of the Paria River Canyon by walking south from White House Campground. Two miles of hiking led to Paria Windows, holes carved into canyon walls by wind and water. I continued to the Paria Narrows located in Vermilion Cliffs National Monument in Arizona (see page 212).



**7. Yellow Rock**  
*The Cockscomb from Yellow Rock, sunset*

The unpaved 40-mile Cottonwood Canyon Road is a very scenic drive. Despite sandy sections near US–89, I had no trouble with a passenger car. The southern section traverses

colorful badlands and a river valley lined up with cottonwood trees. The highlight was Yellow Rock, about 14 miles from US–89. After walking across a dry wash, a steep trail led to a plateau. I was astonished by the sudden sight of the massive dome of swirling and cross-bedded Navajo Sandstone, multicolored but mostly yellow as implied by the name. The formation loomed impressively and looked smooth from the base. Still, hiking to the top (2 miles round trip, 800-foot elevation gain) was straightforward. As the dome is higher than its surroundings and denuded of vegetation, the 360-degree panorama at sunset revealed so much of the area’s exceptional geologic diversity. On the way down, I wished I had come earlier in the day, as the rock and surrounding area are full of photogenic patterns and textures.



**8. Grosvenor Arch**  
*Grosvenor Arch, dawn*

The northern section of Cottonwood Canyon Road follows a high plateau. About 30 miles from US–89, a turn-off leads to Grosvenor Arch. It is the most accessible feature along the road, as a short, paved trail leads to its base. Spanning 90 feet and rising 150 feet, the west-facing double arch is one of the monument’s landmarks. It is best lit in the late afternoon. About 3.5 miles further south, pinnacles and badlands so vividly colorful the area has been called Candyland line up the road’s east side.



**9. Willis Creek**  
*Narrows of Willis Creek, late afternoon*

Near the west edge of the monument, Skutumpah Road, continuing south as Johnson Canyon Road for 46 miles, provides an alternative to Cottonwood Canyon Road for crossing the monument from north to south. Skutumpah Road is unpaved, and a few short rough sections may require a high-clearance vehicle. Although it traverses unspectacular wooded hills and valleys, the road provides access to exciting canyons. The most accessible of them is Willis Creek, 6.3 miles from the north end of the road. A year-round stream and curving walls distinguish its narrows starting just a quarter-mile from the trailhead. Shortly after the junction with Skutumpah Road, Johnson Canyon Road, one of the few paved monument interior roads, enters a special 4-mile section of white slickrock walls.



**10. Devils Garden**  
*Metate Arch, dusk*  
*Swirls and hoodoos, late afternoon*

Hole-in-the-Rock Road follows a path pioneered by Mormon settlers in 1879 on their way to establish the town of Bluff. The scenery along the 55-mile road doesn’t change much, as it is bordered on one side by a grassy plain and the other by the well-named Straight Cliffs defining the eastern edge of the Kaiparowits Plateau. However, the road gives access to fantastic sights. Easiest to access is Devils Garden (mile 12). I wandered among a collection of hoodoos with whimsical shapes, also finding natural arches, such as the landmark Metate Arch. I made sure to stay on well-worn footpaths, washes, or slickrock in order not to trample delicate cryptobiotic soil. The road is gravel-covered and well maintained up to Devils Garden. Afterward, it deteriorates but remains passable in dry conditions by a carefully driven sedan until at least Dance Hall Rock (mile 37), the area’s other roadside attraction.



**11. Cottonwood Wash**  
*Zebra Slot Canyon, late morning*

Many trails leading to hidden canyons are the main draw of Hole-in-the-Rock Road. With its pillars, encrusted iron concretions, and multicolored striations that inspired its name, Zebra is one of the unique slot canyons I have seen. In November, I found it dry, but there might be ankle- to chest-deep standing water at other times. The canyon was so narrow I could not squeeze in with my camera backpack. I tried holding my pack above my head and also chimneying the slippery and steep walls. I eventually gave up on those awkward maneuvers. I left the pack in a corner, heading out with only a camera and tripod. The latter was necessary because blending several frames focused at a different distance was the only way to get everything in focus. Starting at the trailhead at mile 7.8 of Hole-in-the-Rock Road, the hike is 5.2 miles round trip. You can combine it with nearby Tunnel Canyon, also located in Cottonwood Wash.



**12. Dry Fork Coyote Gulch**  
*Peek-a-Boo Canyon, late morning*  
*Spooky Canyon, afternoon (page 307)*

Hole-in-the-Rock Road gives access to many unusual slot canyons. Dry Fork Coyote Gulch includes four beautiful slot canyons: Dry Fork Narrows, Peek-a-Boo, Spooky, and Brimstone. Several arches distinguish Peek-a-Boo Canyon. The largest is close to the entrance, where a 12-foot climb is required. Moving further up, I found a tiny arch that added interest to a beautifully sculptured section. The best time to photograph is late morning and early afternoon when sunlight reflects from the canyon’s top into the bottom while not reaching it directly, creating a warm glow without excessive contrast. While other canyons are narrow at the bottom but open up at the top, many Spooky Canyon sections had tall walls only 10 inches wide in some spots. As a result, even at midday, it was very dark. Combined with the knobby texture of its walls, it is deserving of its name. The trailhead is at the end of a 2-mile track off mile 26 of Hole-in-the-Rock Road, and the combined hike to Peek-a-Boo and Spooky is 3.5 miles round trip.



**13. Forty Mile Bench**  
*Sunset Arch, dawn*

I started from the Forty Mile water tank (4.3 miles on Fortymile Ridge Road off mile 36) an hour and a half before sunrise. I was planning to photograph Sunset Arch (3 miles round trip) illuminated by the setting moon. I began questioning my directions when I did not see anything other than featureless sandy terrain after a half-hour of cross-country hiking. Eventually, sand gave way to sandstone slabs, but the arch itself did not come into view until I turned a corner and reached its span. By then, the sky was already too bright compared to the moonlight. I used a bright LCD light panel to add a glow to the arch’s western side as a substitute for moonlight. After photographing the moonset and sunrise through the arch and starting the return hike, I realized finding it in the dark was not a given when I looked back at the arch from a distance. Lands that, from a first glance, appear empty and unremarkable hide such gems when you take the time to walk in and look. The monument is so vast one can only guess how many geological treasures it will reveal. I felt grateful that the protection of our public lands allows the possibility of future discoveries.