

Adventure,

By Janelle Brown

**Taking kids
on outdoor
expeditions isn't
always easy,
but the payoffs are
big.**

Even before the thunderstorm hit and my son fell in a killer mudhole, our family outing was hardly serene. Then again, I'm not sure any adventure with kids in tow is ever more than a stagger from disaster.

We were riding our mountain bikes on one of the fabled slickrock trails near Moab, Utah. The day started out clear and bright, both in terms of the weather and my children's moods. Then things abruptly changed.

My son skidded on loose scabble and skinned both knees. He never really recovered. My daughter complained that tiny bugs called "no-see-ums" were tormenting her. She demanded we turn around at once. My husband and I looked at the map, looked at the sandstone pinnacle in the distance, and realized that somewhere we'd taken a very wrong turn. Then lightning struck nearby.

We huddled beneath an overhang as mayhem exploded above us and rain splattered the red sand. Every crack of thunder drew us closer, until we resembled a family of nervous sardines. My daughter found the sandwiches and gorp. We munched

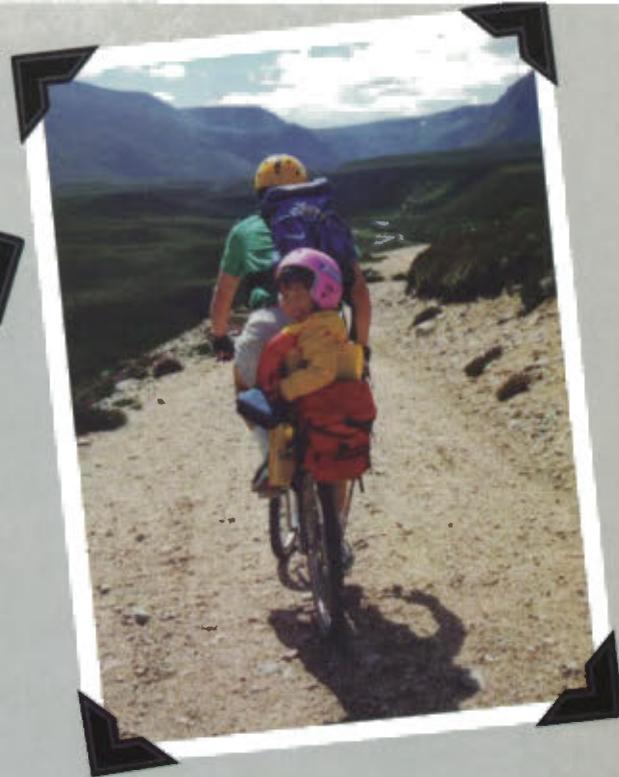
silently and watched the storm rage.

It didn't last long. Moments later the sun blasted through and the ground started to steam. We emerged from our shelter and gasped in surprise.

Water was pouring over the sandstone cliffs, cascading a thousand feet to the wash below. It looked like a scene from Kauai's Na Pali coast, etched in red stone instead of verdant green. We hooted and hugged each other, not quite believing it was real. The skinned knees, the bug bites, the morning's irritations were forgotten. A desert waterfall had washed them all away.

Moments like these are the reason I take my children on outdoor adventures, despite the difficulties our trips often entail. They bring us closer together and offer us chances to connect in ways that simply don't exist in our busy workaday world.

Over the years, I've taken my kids on many expeditions. When they were 3 and 5, I camped alone with them for three weeks in the desert Southwest, exploring arroyos and washes and making endless castles in the sand. This past winter, our entire fami-



Family Style

Janelle Brown, husband Carl Hoerger and their children, Kelly and Alex, have learned from each other during their adventures in places like Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains, Utah's Arches National Park and Scotland's Cairngorm Mountains.

ly skied 8 miles into a yurt in the Sawtooths, where my kids, now 12 and 14, excavated elaborate snow caves and skied powder. We've dog sledged, backpacked, mountain climbed, bicycled and drifted down rivers, taking harder trips as their endurance and competence increased.

It's never been simple or stress-free, but then going to Disney World isn't a piece of cake either, I'm told. We've forgotten gear, gotten lost (briefly) and had major squabbles over some pretty stupid things. We've bailed out when things got too hard or dangerous. But we've also had some incredible times.

My kids have taught me to slow down, to appreciate the ground at my feet instead of yearning for the summit in the distance. They've taught me it's OK to weep when you're tired, to exult when you're happy, to refuse bad food even when that's all there is.

My kids have convinced me that bribes (in the form of M&Ms at every switchback) definitely have their place and that big questions, like what color are shadows or why does the wind sing, can have many answers. They've demonstrated that bad hygiene isn't fatal, at least right away.

My son and daughter have climbed precipices and challenged me to think about how much risk I'm willing to accept on their behalf. They've made dollhouses out of sticks and rocks and reminded me of the power of creative play. They've seen images in the clouds I couldn't and helped me understand that none of us views this world in exactly the same way.

One spring, we were hiking in southern Utah when my kids spied the same cool-looking rock. They both immediately claimed it. Foolishly, I got involved, and their small argument escalated into a major battle. I finally confiscated the rock. Today, it sits on my kitchen windowsill, a reminder to let my children solve their own conflicts.

Stories like that one still make us laugh — and pick up the argument again. But perhaps someday we'll look back on these family adventures and see them through a different light. We'll wonder why we did so much, or so little. We'll mourn that we can't go back.

My kids are growing up fast. They're charting their own adventures now, including ones that don't include me. While that's

mostly OK, it makes me a little frantic. I want to hang on to every moment I can.

But I don't think about that when I'm following my kids down a rocky bike trail or up a steep mountain. I don't think about much at all, except how good it all feels. It's after I get home, unpack the car, head back to work, that I feel a foreshadowing of loss.

Our adventure in Moab didn't end with the thunderstorm. We still had the small matter of getting back to civilization. We headed down a waterfall-laced canyon, avoiding the narrow draws where we could be trapped by flash floods. By the time we hit a slippery jeep road, we were soaked. Surprisingly, we were also in extremely good moods.

My son saw a huge mud puddle and pedaled straight for it. He hit hard, catapulted over the handlebars and vanished into 3 feet of thick goo. Moments later he emerged, covered with mud, laughing so hard he could barely breathe.

We joined in, laughing at ourselves, the situation, the joy of simply being. We didn't stop for a very long time. □