The Atmosphere of Discovery

ED WEBSTER

FIRST IMPRESSIONS linger in the mind . . . the river rampages through the bottom of the canyon. Its roar is deafening. The blazing sun rises ceremoniously over the silent desert landscape. These two climbing areas, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River in Colorado and the Canyonlands of Utah,* are completely different in character, and yet they share something important—a feeling of discovery and untouched wildness.

The Black Canyon has an oppressive, almost primordial feeling about it. Trapped in its course by the uplifting of the Colorado Plateau, the Gunnison River carved a 2500-foot chasm into the somber-colored Precambrian basement rock. In the minds of the Ute Indians, who once roamed the grassy plateau which surrounds the canyon, the inaccessible interior was the Land of the Dead. To enter the canyon was to tempt death.

For the well known mountaineer, Chuck Pratt, the desert environment of the Southwest was a classroom without walls, a place to walk slowly forward, eyes open, ears alert, the mind probing the serenity of the surroundings. The Canyonlands of central Utah radiate such feelings; in contrast, entering the shadowy depths of the Black Canyon usually provokes the opposite reaction, an overpowering desire to escape!

The Black Canyon and the Desert: complete opposites? At first glance perhaps they are, but as you look closer and see them as places to climb, they have a shared quality which gets harder to come by every day. Discovery. That word, with its many levels of interpretation, is an integral part of the climbing experience.

In his memorable story, "The View from Dead Horse Point" (*Ascent,* 1970, pages 37 to 42), Pratt stresses the importance of revelation and discovery in climbing and in a unique way—by *not* climbing.

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* For recent climbs in both areas, see the *Climbs and Expeditions* section.

PLATE 51

Photo by Ed Cooper

Chasm View Wall in the BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON.

"To gain any lasting worth from what the desert had to offer, we had to learn to put our pitons and ropes away and to go exploring in silence. It wasn't easy. We wasted a lot of time until we got the knack."

In a more recent piece of writing, "Anti-Climbing at Pinnacles" (*Ascent,* 1980, pages 203 to 215), Tom Higgins has coined a new phrase. Anti-climbing describes his shying away from major climbing centers to pursue, in his words, the "darker jewels," the mysteries of new climbs in remote areas. What Higgins and Pratt have written, and what is important to modern rock climbers, is to unlearn wanting to climb in overcrowded regions and relish the challenges and education of climbing in remote places.

Amongst many climbing areas in western America, the Black Canyon and Canyonlands are unique as wild and unspoiled places. The qualities of climbing in each are unusual, to put it mildly, and not always pleasant. Poison ivy, river crossings and the notorious pegmatite bands make for memorable climbing in the Black Canyon. Likewise, crumbly sandstone, questionable protection and strenuous crack climbing take a very careful and yet determined approach in the desert.

The climbing in the Canyonlands and the Black Canyon may not be convenient, accessible or safe, but that's where all the excitement and depth of the experience come.