



Canyoneering Safety Script

Canyoneering is an adventure sport combining route finding, rappelling, problem-solving, swimming and hiking. Zion National Park has become one of the premier places in the country to participate in this exciting activity. With dozens of different canyons to choose from, some barely wide enough for a human to squeeze through, Zion offers a range of canyoneering experiences from beginner to highly technical.

Welcome. . .my name is Craig Thexton, and I'm going to introduce you to some of the common dangers associated with canyoneering in Zion. Ultimately, your safety is your responsibility, and there is no substitute for planning ahead, taking the proper equipment, having the right skills and using good judgment. Being smart can make the difference between having a wonderful trip, ending up in the hospital. . .or worse.

Every week, canyoneering groups spend unintentional nights camped in the backcountry of Zion. There are many reasons for this, including difficulty finding routes, injuries and flash floods. If you think it can't happen to you, you're wrong. So as you pack for your trip, make sure you're prepared to spend the night. And if your trip involves a night out, make sure you're prepared to spend another. Every person in your group should carry extra food, water, and clothing. . .as well as a headlamp.

Flash floods are a constant danger in the narrow canyons of Zion, and they can occur at any hour of the day, on any day of the month, and in any month of the year. Check the weather forecast and flash flood potential before beginning your trip.

When the National Weather Service, says that there is a 20% chance of rain, it actually means that 20% of the forecast area will receive measurable precipitation. This fact is misunderstood by a lot of people, so let me repeat it: a 20% chance of rain means that 20% of the forecast area will receive measurable precipitation. When considering weather, you really need to ask yourself two questions: "what is the likelihood of rain?" and "how large is the drainage area for the canyon I intend to hike?"

Even a short period of heavy rain will cause flooding in Zion's slot canyons. Floods have occurred on days when the potential for flash flooding was low. A rating of moderate, high or very high should be a serious cause for concern. If you have any doubt, stay out!

Once you have made the decision to enter a canyon, assessing flash flood danger becomes much more difficult. Things that you can watch out for include cloud buildup, thunder, a sudden drop in water clarity, floating debris or rising water levels and stronger currents. If you have the misfortune to observe any of these signs, seek higher ground immediately and remain there until conditions improve. Never try to beat a flash flood out of a canyon.

Believe it or not, jumping is the leading cause of preventable injuries in Zion's backcountry. A jump of only a few feet can cause serious lower leg injuries requiring a costly rescue and a lengthy recovery. Don't jump! Bring a rope and use it.

Route finding is a critical canyoneering skill. The park's canyons lack signs or maintained trails, so following maps and route descriptions is essential. GPS units are a useful tool, but they are no substitute for common sense and map reading skills. If you are travelling through a popular canyon, make sure the social trails and other signs of use match what you would expect to see. Recognize that your first rappel is a critical decision point: once you rappel and pull your rope, you must complete the canyon that you are in. . .whether or not it is the canyon you intended to travel through.

Many accidents occur while rappelling. Before you begin your trip, evaluate your group's rappelling skills with a few simple questions: Are you able to evaluate the condition of anchors and replace them if necessary? Do you know how to create extra friction on longer rappels or free rappels? Do you know how to ascend a rope? If you answered 'no' to any of these questions, consider talking a class prior to striking out on your own. A number of outfitters and organizations in Springdale and the surrounding area offer instruction in canyoneering techniques.

In addition to protecting yourself and your group during your visit to Zion, it is also your responsibility to help us protect the park. So while you're here, show your respect for the park and your fellow visitors by observing the following guidelines:

Access trails often suffer the worst impacts along a route. If there are several different trails leading into or out of a canyon, use the one that crosses durable surfaces like rock or sandy washes. Avoid walking on steep slopes and other areas that are susceptible to erosion.

Large groups cause unacceptable impacts to the wilderness experience of others. Big groups are not permitted to split into smaller groups and visit the same canyon on the same day. Please keep your group size small and think about how your actions and behavior affects others.

Prevent bottlenecks: if another party catches up to your group, find a convenient place to allow the faster group to pass.

Avoid bolting: use natural anchors whenever possible. If you must place a bolt, do it in such away that it will last for many years and cause minimal damage during rope pulls.

Carry out your toilet paper. Don't bury it, don't burn it and don't leave it for someone else.

With your help, we can ensure that Zion's backcountry remains beautiful and wild for generations to come. I'm Craig Thexton. On behalf of everyone here at Zion National Park, I wish you a safe and enjoyable visit.