

# Tenaya Canyon Canyoneering

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Steve Cole, Shauna Hermes, and I descended Tenaya Canyon on Sunday, September 4, 2005. Tenaya Canyon had long been on my list, and had I known that the scenery, adventure, and experience were to be this fulfilling, I would have never waited so long. I can easily see a descent of Tenaya Canyon being an annual trip of mine – indeed, it is that awesome.



*Shauna and Steve at the first beautiful pothole pool in the canyon. It was too deep to see the bottom, and harbored large trout.*

In a nutshell, the journey involves approximately four thousand feet of descent; ten miles of distance (this mileage in no way compares to an ordinary ten trail miles); a minimum of two rappels (four if you don't want to commit to a couple of downclimbs); a frigid 15m pool swim; two crawl-through's (packs must be passed); loads of downclimbing; tons of talus hopping; and a few miles of easy-to-lose-and-get-hosed sketchy trace trail. At least six hundred feet of the descent is steep-ish exposed slab, and due to my lack of time spent on the rock in recent days, those harrowing slabs seemed a lot like downclimbing one of the easy Larks at

Tahquitz (although not quite as steep). Regardless, there is little margin for error on the slabs.

For those unfamiliar with Tenaya Canyon, it runs east/west and connects the west end of Tenaya Lake (below Stately Pleasure Dome and Tenaya Peak in the Tuolumne Meadows region) with Mirror Lake and Yosemite Valley. It's pretty fair to say that it is a substantial drainage with consistently substantial and world-class scenery in a remote and rarely visited (good!) setting. Despite never being more than ten miles from one of our National Park system's busiest summertime locales (Yosemite Valley), you always feel pretty *out there* and that you are experiencing something that not many others have (good again!).

About forty minutes after leaving the car at the Sunrise trailhead at Tenaya Lake, our thoughtful government admonishes via rusted steel signage:

**--- WARNING ---**  
**THIS IS NOT A TRAIL**  
**TRAVEL BEYOND THIS**  
**POINT IS DANGEROUS**  
**WITHOUT CLIMBING**  
**EQUIPMENT. RETURN**  
**TO TIOGA ROAD**

Not surprisingly, this is where all the fun begins. Not long thereafter, one of the first significant sights arrives in the form of a massive and beautiful granite bowl (especially beautiful in the early morning light). This granite bowl has been expertly polished and stripped bare by glaciers and provides an extremely pleasurable walking experience in superlative surroundings. A while later the aforementioned slabs come along, and this will likely be the most gripping part of your day. It is possible to directly descend the Pywiack Cascades, but this involves additional rappelling and considerably more serious steep slab downclimbing. The bypass we used deviates from the watercourse for a spell, but it gained us a more rapid descent with less risk.



*Michael and Steve descend into the massive granite bowl.*

According to Christopher Brennen – whose beta we used for our descent – the most difficult and technical portion of the day will cover approximately only two miles (from *The Lone Boulder* to the exit of the *Inner Gorge*), but it will require six hours of effort.



*Michael descends into Lost Valley. Half Dome looms in distance.*

After the slab descent, one passes through *Lost Valley* – and indeed it is. It's hard to imagine how bears could have ever made it into this miniature yet lushly forested glen tucked between significant technical barriers, but indeed they did, and we had the pleasure of a close-encounter. I'd had a premonition that I would see a bear in the canyon, and it came to be while I was out front, with the youngster (no mamma bear to be found) splashing across the creek in

front of us while attempting a fast getaway from the encroaching humans. He tried to hide in a nearby thicket, but I easily picked him out as he carefully watched us amble downstream towards Yosemite Valley (to join the rest of humanity).

Shortly after *Lost Valley*, one encounters the first rappel, which drops you into the incredibly rugged yet highly scenic *Inner Gorge*. The rappels are all fairly straightforward with a maximum drop of seventy feet, and all appear to have been rebolted with all new hardware (including beefy stainless steel rings) since Brennen's descent. The Inner Gorge is truly a sight to behold, and despite the technical difficulties and slow going, it's one jaw-dropping emerald or sapphire pool after another. From a



*"Are you **sure** there's no way around this?"*

photographer's perspective, there is loads of photography to be done here. You can downclimb the second rappel (which is on the right side, directly in the fall-line of the waterfall) on the left side, although for some it may be a little sketchy. The pool at the bottom of this massive chockstone is where you'll swim. We all stripped to the skivvies, and I went in first and without trepidation as I knew it had to get done. The water was sufficiently frigid by my standards, and I swear that I thought I was going to drown. Curiously, I can handle with aplomb cold air temperatures, yet cold water seeps deeply into my bones and causes me intense pain. This pool was no exception, and I completely lost composure while gasping and thrashing to the opposite shore. But I lived. The well-composed Shauna went next, and I had a difficult time discerning if she was even experiencing discomfort (yet she dresses Inuit-style in well-above freezing temperatures - go figure). Steve remained, and while the paparazzo (me) had the camera trained on him, Steve's facial expressions clearly gave away his enthusiasm for the pool. It seemed like minutes that we waited for Steve to muster the courage to go in but alas, he did, and he emerged on the far side of the pool looking like a bedraggled rat, with Shauna there to lend a hand. Steve, too, found the pool sufficiently cold, and made sure that his rescuer knew what kind of effect water *that* cold has on a man: "Shauna, you do know about shrinkage, don't you?" Invigorating as it was, we dressed quickly and moved on.

According to Brennen, after 5.4 miles of travel and just shy of eight hours (walking time; breaks and recesses not included), one emerges from the Inner Gorge. The technical difficulties end, but the slowness and ruggedness of the travel most certainly does not. After exiting the Inner Gorge and completing a fair amount of talus hopping, a steep and wooded slope begins to emerge on the right. One should attempt to locate as early as possible the faint but necessary use trail which will carry you



*Steve makes the swim, and a helping hand awaits.*

all the way to Mirror Lake - *if followed carefully*. I cannot stress enough how important it is to locate this trail, for I suspect that those remaining few miles could conceivably take *hours* if one is to remain in the streambed. The wrath of the 1997 Yosemite Valley flooding is terrifically evident in this part of Tenaya Canyon (I'm not certain I have ever seen a more disastrous looking watershed), and at times the cutbanks of the creek were near vertical and fifty feet high. The streambed is rife with huge boulders and massive downed trees, and the couple of times we lost the trail and were forced back into the creek, the going became very tedious, difficult, and slow – definitely not welcome at the end of a long day. In fact, we were in remote danger of a bivouac, as our descent took nearly as long as there were hours of daylight, and this terrain is virtually unnavigable in darkness.

Finally, after twelve hours of travel, we emerged into the city some refer to as Yosemite Valley - a city at least at the time of our emergence, as it was the evening before Labor Day, and families, children, couples, romantics, bicyclists, walkers, city slickers, and vagabonds alike all contributed to the teeming mass of humanity seething about Curry Village. We loaded into the car as quickly as we could, and began our return to the comparative serenity of Tuolumne Meadows.



*In the Inner Gorge, Half Dome in the distance.*

**Epilogue:** I cannot recommend this adventure enough. It now ranks on my list as one of the super-coolest things I've done, and for plenty of good reasons. I already want to return next September; if you're interested, you're welcome to join me.

**Beta:** there's a number of reports available online, and R.J.'s *Peaks and Passes* includes it as well (although as an *ascent*), yet the beta we consistently relied on is Christopher Brennen's: <http://www.dankat.com/swhikes/tenaya.htm>. Brennen's beta and writing style sometimes provides a little too much detail, making things seem much more complicated than they genuinely are for an experienced mountaineer. However, his report contains everything that you'll need to know to complete a safe and successful Tenaya Canyon descent. Twelve hours was not what we could record time (it has been ascended *and* reversed in a day), but this is not the kind of landscape that anyone should want to run through.

One important thing to note is that in early season Tenaya Canyon can be deadly due to high water volume (spring thaw). I'm not sure when it ordinarily becomes passable without significantly more difficulty and heightened risk of drowning (July? August?), but our timing seemed perfect.