





HIKING THE GREAT RIFT  
May 13-17, 1993

John H. Walz

*It is 5:30 PM. There's no sound except for the "crunch" of my footsteps. I wince with pain as a piece of razor-sharp lava turns and cuts into my ankle. As far as I can see in any direction there is nothing but shiny black rock and shimmering waves of heat rising from them. The silence and feeling of isolation is overwhelming. Suddenly, two military jets scream over my head and bring me back to reality. I am standing in the middle of the Craters Of The Moon lava field, which is part of the Great Rift in Southern Idaho.*

*The Great Rift System consists of a series of north-northwest trending fractures in the earth's crust. In 1968, the Great Rift was designated as a national landmark. The system has been divided into four sets of fractures: The Great Rift, the Open Crack Rift Set, the Kings Bowl Rift Set and the Wapi Rift Set. The total system is 62 miles long and may be the longest known rift in the conterminous United States (Marley, 1987).*

*The Great Rift is a place of surprising beauty and change. It offers hikers challenges that cannot be found in any other type of terrain. Route finding, lack of water, heat and the physical difficulty of merely walking over the lava, combine to defeat you.*

*The rewards outweigh the problems. For me, a sense of adventure and discovery along with the natural scenic beauty, kept my spirits high as I traveled through the area. The wildlife, vegetation and geology changed constantly as I traveled south through the area. I discovered a feeling of peace and self discovery which is quite addictive. It makes me long to be in the desert when I cannot be there.*

DAY ONE: May 13, 1993

We awoke about 6:00 AM and ate breakfast. We then broke camp and waited for the television people who were coming to film our departure. A reporter from KMVT TV in Twin Falls interviewed us and shot some tape. At 7:30 AM, Mike and I decided to start out and left Ryan to wait for KIDK TV. While waiting for the TV people, Ryan visited with Jon Jarvis, Superintendent of The Craters of The Moon National Monument who had arrived at the campground to see us off. At 8:00 AM, Ryan departed since KIDK had not arrived.

The walk on the road was uneventful and seemed quite long. I was somewhat nervous with all the press coverage which was all I could think about. I hardly noticed the features along the road due to my preoccupation with the press. I began to wonder whether my feet would hold up for the entire trip.

We arrived at the Tree Molds Trailhead at approximately 9:00 AM and sat down to wait for Ryan. The reporter from KMVT arrived and Ryan got there about 9:30 AM. We then proceeded down the trail with the reporter filming our departure. -

The hike from the trailhead to Echo Crater was uneventful, probably because we have made this trip several times before. We did see a Blowsnake which was about three feet long. We continued down the trail through Trench Mortar Flats and had quite a discussion as to why Robert Limbert had given the area this name. We came up with several ideas, but will have to wait and read his article again for the answer. We passed the Tree Molds and went around The Sentinel on the southwest. The land between The Sentinel and Fissure Butte is rough and overgrown with brush. We did find a fairly easy route around an area to the east which is extremely rough and was given a name by a C.O.M. volunteer which we won't print.

We passed Fissure Butte on the northeast side and continued on around Sheep Trail Butte. Two "hot" miles later we arrived at the northeast side of Vermillion Chasm and decided to camp for the night. It was approximately 6:00 PM. We had three gallons of water stored here which we had hiked in earlier. We set up our tent on the northeast side of Vermillion Chasm and then walked to the top of the crater to look around. We originally thought that this was Two Point Butte, but as soon as we reached the top we knew that this was Vermillion Chasm. This was exciting, because I thought that we would have to search for it the next day. It was getting late and the sun was nearly gone so we took some pictures and returned to camp to eat. I prepared a dinner of freeze dried Beef Burgundy, which was topped off with a can of pineapple. Following dinner, we returned to the crater. I located the vent that Limbert photographed on his first trip. His photo showed him being pulled out of the vent on a rope. This photo had fascinated me for years and was the primary reason I wanted to see Vermillion Chasm. The vent was perfectly flat all around the hole. It was only about six feet deep and four feet in diameter. We spent half an hour looking at some of the other vents in the crater. We then scooped up some snow from one of three large patches in the crater for the purpose of cooling our water. As we prepared for bed, Ryan started chilling although it was still quite warm outside. This may have been a warning of what was to come. We were quite tired and fell asleep quickly.

DAY TWO: May 14, 1993

We woke up about 7:00 AM. At 7:20 we were hit by a large thunderstorm. A bolt of lightning struck approximately two hundred yards away and started a couple of small trees on fire. The rain put the fire out quickly.

Ryan and I started walking while Mike elected to sit out the storm under a tree, despite our repeated warnings about lightning. We walked southeast along Vermillion Chasm and the spatter cones which stretched out for some distance. The first ice cave appeared to be about thirty or forty feet deep and had snow at the bottom. It then appeared to run north and south. The rest of the vents we saw were full of snow and we weren't able to determine depth or direction. After walking half a mile, we stopped to wait for Mike. He caught up with us at about 8:00 AM and then discovered he had lost his sleeping pad. Mike ran back and searched the area but could not find it. The black foam pad is still there, somewhere.

The rain finally stopped and we headed for Blacktail Butte. The terrain consisted of alternating strips of aa and pahoehoe lava which ran in a north-south direction. There were numerous small lava tubes, some of which looked inviting as it was beginning to get very hot. We made our first scheduled radio contact with the Idaho Transportation Department using the repeater on Chinks Peak east of Pocatello. We tried the repeater on East Butte but it was breaking up. Apparently, the Big Southern Butte was in the way.

We now began to cross a very rough stretch of aa lava, an older flow which was covered with a lot of brush and occasional trees. The difficult part of crossing this area was the ups and downs. It reminded me of the waves on the ocean. You drop over a ridge and can't see anything until you climb the next one. Sometimes you could see landmarks unless trees got in the way. The trees have changed from Limber Pines encountered the first day to Fir and Juniper. The wild flowers were becoming more numerous in this area and were really beautiful.

We arrived at Blacktail Butte at approximately 1:00 PM. We found the three gallons of water which we had previously stored in a small cave on the north side of the butte. There are a string of fairly large vent holes and spatter cones that trail from the butte on both the northerly and southerly sides. We didn't take the time to explore these vents as Ryan was beginning to show stress from the heat. We ate lunch, which consisted of freeze dried chicken and rice along with canned pineapple.

After lunch, we began what we felt would be the roughest part of our hike, e.g., Blacktail Butte to the easterly edge of the lava flow. We passed by The Devil's Cauldron and associated spatter cones and vents, but again, we didn't take the time to explore them. We'll come back later. We then turned south, walking on the "relatively smooth" Blue Dragon Flow. The surface of this flow is one of the most brilliantly colored I have seen. I fear that people will find out about this lava and steal it to put on the walls of their houses. The brilliant blue color is reported to be the mineral titanium.

Ryan was the first to step off the lava flow. Sheldon Bluestein, in his book Exploring Idaho's High Desert, stated; "a few people have hiked the Great Rift-one of North America's great challenges".(1) He was referring to the hike across the Craters Of The Moon lava field, which we had just completed. We were very tired and our feet were getting sore. I was relieved to be off the lava and near a road. Ryan complained of nausea and had not eaten much today. We continued for about three miles until Ryan asked if we could stop for the night. We set up camp and in checking our inventory, found we had only one canteen of water left. We found a stock watering trough with dirty brown water in it but our filter wouldn't clean out the dirty brown color. Mike used some of the filtered water to make oatmeal.

We watched a beautiful sunset, ate granola, saw some antelope and listened to the coyotes serenade us to sleep. Ryan was chilling and nauseous before going to sleep.

DAY THREE: May 15, 1993

We awoke at 6:00 AM. Ryan was still nauseous. We ate a granola bar and broke camp as soon as possible to get going before it got too hot. We were concerned about getting to our next water which was still about five miles away. We only had half a canteen to share between the three of us. Shortly after we started walking, I saw a bobcat take off about 100 yards away. I couldn't believe how fast it was running. After about three miles, I noticed Ryan had found a mud puddle and was soaking his shirt to cool off. As soon as we reached our water, Ryan began vomiting and became deathly ill. Mike built a lean-to out of rocks, two old three foot posts he found and the ground tarp. Ryan used the radio to call for help. The only repeater we could key was at Burley-Cottrell. He talked to a man named Fred who called my wife Jodi and asked her to come and get Ryan. Jodi called her brother, Casey Thompson and he, his wife Shyrene and Jodi drove out and got Ryan.

During the five-hour wait, we kept Ryan as cool as possible. A sheep rancher happened by and told us he would be back in a couple of hours and bring us some more water. We were in a constant battle with wood ticks as they were thick and kept crawling all over us. Casey, Shy and Jodi arrived at about 4:30 PM with pop, water and some food. It was great to see them. During the wait, Ryan's condition improved somewhat which relieved me. I was very worried about him.

After they left, Mike and I began to walk again. We felt alone after seeing the others and we miss Ryan. We made another five miles to our next water supply and it began to rain. We walked for another five miles and decided to set up camp. I was suffering from a pulled tendon in my leg and we both had blistered feet. We went to sleep in a steady rain.

DAY FOUR: May 16, 1993

We were awakened by coyotes at about 6:30 AM. My leg felt a little better but as I walked, I began to think that there was no way I could continue for two or three more days. We continued south through an area that was beautiful. The lush green carpet of sagebrush and wildflowers seemed to go on forever. After about three hours we stopped for a break. Mike and I discussed what we

had to do. We couldn't see any landmarks for hours and we crossed numerous roads that didn't show up on our maps. It was very confusing however, we knew approximately where we were and which direction to go. We walked for another hour and then saw a natural arch to the east. As we were looking at it, Mike heard something near his feet. He looked down and saw a baby rattlesnake trying to strike at his ankle. We moved quickly out of its way as it crawled about six feet and coiled. I took a picture, being careful not to get too close.

Continuing on toward Crystal Ice Cave we saw dust on a road headed towards us. As it got closer, I could see flashes of green and I knew it was Ryan. Our mood improved immediately as we walked toward the road. Ryan had sandwiches, pop and cold water. He also brought me new sunglasses as I had broken mine the second morning out. Ryan was feeling much better. We talked and went over our maps. Ryan told us he would meet us at the ice cave. He drove away and we headed for the Abyssal Pit. On the way, we passed a large rattlesnake and a little further a large blowsnake. We had a very limited conversation with a Basque sheepherder who could speak very little English. He had a beautiful horse, two dogs and lived by himself in a sheep camp wagon.

We walked by the Abyssal Pit but did not stop as we had been there before and the pain in my legs and feet was getting pretty bad. I finally had to take a pain pill just to keep walking. We passed Creons Cave and made it to Crystal Ice Cave by about 5:00 PM. I was unable to continue at this time. Ryan helped Mike and I set up the tent by the picnic shelter and then had a welcome sponge bath with extra water and soap Ryan had brought. It felt great to towel off four days dirt and sweat that we had accumulated. Ryan took pictures of our feet before we applied the next layer of "Moleskin". We shared the area with two groups of motorcyclists who were very friendly and courteous. Ryan said goodby and good luck and left. The motorcyclists left shortly thereafter and Mike and I found ourselves alone again, thinking about the rest of the trip. I began having serious doubts about being able to walk the next morning. We sat in the tent, enjoying a refreshing light rain, ate dinner and were soon asleep.

DAY FIVE: May 17, 1993

We broke camp at 6:00 AM and headed south along the rift. We passed Kings Bowl, thinking about the recent caving accident which had taken a life there. We pressed on past South Grotto which has been reported to be the deepest cave in the rift, however, the deepest descent that has been properly recorded and to the best of our knowledge is in the Great Cavern, just south of the Crystal Ice Cave. We took a road from South Grotto to Wapi Park where we picked up the water we had left earlier this year. My leg felt as good as new but I can't say the same about my feet. We started into the 2,200 year old Wapi Flow at about 9:30 AM and headed for the "Old Juniper Kipuka". We couldn't see it for a while, but then it appeared on the horizon as two green hills. Higgins Blowout could be seen southwest of and behind the kipuka. The Wapi Flow is a nice break from the other lava encountered on our trip. It is relatively without vegetation and consists of mostly smooth pahoehoe lava. We began to see wildflowers everywhere, Indian Paintbrush in hundreds of different shades of red and many other varieties of flowers. We traveled fast but the pressure ridges are huge and some required us to climb with hands and

feet. When you reach the top of one there is usually a large crack that you have to go out of your way to find a place narrow enough to cross.

We arrived at Old Juniper Kipuka at 12:15 PM and found a shady spot to eat lunch. Mike and I sat and talked while I prepared the food. Suddenly, two large jets (I think they were B-1 Bombers which I remember from watching "Wings" on the Discovery Channel) flew directly over us at about three hundred feet. The sound was unbelievable. Two more flew over and Mike suggested that I get a picture. We listened and waited and then another one flew over. We knew that they usually flew in pairs so I grabbed the camera and took two pictures of the next plane. If I would have had the telephoto lens I could have seen the expression on the pilot's face.

We had arranged to call Ryan on the radio at 1:00 PM. We were able to hit the repeater at Pocatello from the kipuka. Prior to that, and after the kipuka, the only repeater we could key was the one at Burley-Cottrell. Just before I made the call I noticed two people sitting on the hill behind us. Mike talked to them while I ate lunch. For the first time today I feel that I will be able to finish the trip. While on the radio, Ryan asked how we were doing and where we were. He told me that Jodi's (my wife) grandfather had passed away and told me that we should finish as soon as possible as I was needed at home.

We walked to the top of the cinder cone where we could see the three 800 year old (Bluestein) Juniper trees. They are reportedly the oldest Juniper trees in Idaho. The view of the surrounding area is great from the top of the kipuka.

We headed for Higgins Blowout. The vegetation increased but the hiking remained relatively easy. We saw many lava tubes but nothing very large. We didn't stop to inspect any of them since we now needed to hurry and make sure we finish today. We took only three short rest breaks between the kipuka and the edge of the lava flow. We tried using the compass but it was off and we came off the lava flow about three miles before we had intended. It started to rain as soon as we got off the lava. After a few more miles, I saw Ryan driving on a road below us. We headed for the road he was on and met him and Jodi a few minutes later.

It was great to see Jodi and the thought of sleeping in my own bed was fantastic. I also felt a strange homesickness at the thought of leaving the desert, however, I will return.



*CONCLUSION:*

*In my opinion, the hike was successful. Our original intent was just to have fun and look for caves. We didn't find any significant caves that are unknown. This trip was a very valuable learning experience. It taught me about my limitations and how to overcome them. It also illustrated the changes in plant and animal life that take place as you travel from north to south. These changes are not readily apparent until you hike continuously without turning around and going back.*

*The scenery and natural beauty I observed during the hike cannot be put into words. The feelings of solitude helped me to imagine what early explorers must have felt when the "Rift" was first discovered. Although the hike wasn't any more difficult than I had anticipated, it did, at times, push me to my limits. The heat, along with navigational difficulties, could prove very dangerous to anyone who is not prepared. My father, Ryan, who suffered heat exhaustion the third day out, could have been in a much more serious circumstance, had we not been equipped with a two-way radio. I would not recommend that anyone attempt this hike until they have spent a lot of time in the area and have experience with this type of terrain.*

*I feel strongly that we should do whatever necessary to protect the entire area from man-made change. This is one area in our country that no human, including Native Americans, has affected the appearance of the landscape. I strongly support designating the entire Great Rift area, from the south boundary of the monument to the south end of the Wapi flow, as a wilderness area. This feeling is reinforced when I see areas such as the Crystal Ice Caves, where man has used, and abused, the natural scenic beauty of the land.*

*I am planning to do the hike again next spring. I have been in touch with the National Geographic Society and "Outdoor Idaho" and would like to have a film crew available for documenting the hike. Most people who would really enjoy the area may never get to see it and I would like to share what I have enjoyed with others. I am also currently seeking sponsorship for an expedition across Iceland in the summer of 1995.*