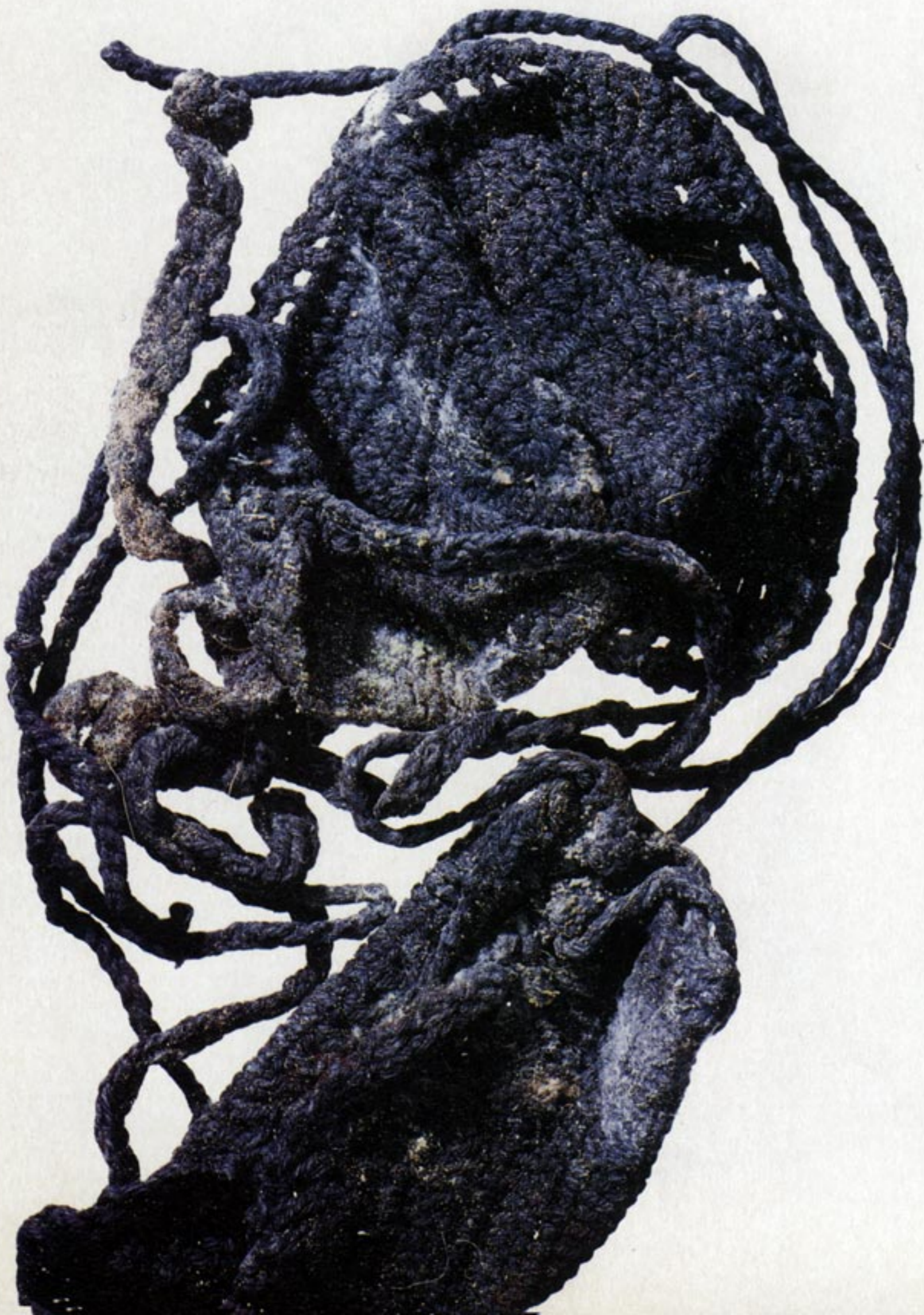


I will survive

Blistering heat. Hunger hallucinations. Ant attacks. And Gigi Guerra actually paid money to go to survival camp.

STILL-LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY BY FREDRIK LIEBERATH



I'm the opposite of Julianne Moore's character in the movie *Safe*—the farther I stray from civilization, the more rashes, phobias and paranoia I develop. Tents make me claustrophobic, and I look at fires as a marking device for bored serial killers lurking in the woods. So when I got the bright idea to go to survival camp, it's no wonder everyone in the office thought I had lost my marbles. I mean, it's not like I spend my vacations starving myself, sleeping in the dirt and living off the land. I'm way too much of an urban princess. But I figured it was time to overcome my fears and get more in touch with my spiritual side. Or at least look as though I wanted to.

Cluelessness

It's Saturday. Thirteen of us women—nine students and four guides—have just converged in a tiny town in the southern Utah foothills. We're stocking our fanny packs for a seven-day trip into the unknown. I usually associate fanny packs with repressed joggers, but this time I'm making an effort to embrace them, since they are the only things we're allowed to carry the next two days. This is "impact," the hellish first part of our odyssey, which is structured to "break us down" (like my life in publishing hasn't already done that). We can bring only basic things—compass, first-aid kit, knife, etc. We have to find our own food and water (think clumps of mint leaves and muddy puddles). I consider sneaking a Slim Jim into my pack, but when I hear Jill and Nancy, two of our sarong-wearing guides, are inspecting everyone's contents, I chicken out. They seem pleased that I've scuttled my toothbrush from my pack. On this trip, less seems like more—and it's not like I'll really be eating.

At 1 p.m., we're dropped off in a meadow that seems like a perfect UFO landing spot—wide and flat, with a view of distant canyons below. As we start our miles-long hike from forest to desert, everyone seems uncomfortable and confused. To ensure safety, we're assigned buddies. Leisha, a maternal former TV executive from Tulsa, Okla., is mine. She's come on this trip to deal with emotional baggage. Erin—a 19-year-old student ►



Left: A bikini top I thought I'd need—
ha!—and ended up using as cord.
Here: Ant larvae. Yum. By the way,
we had to hire an animal trainer to
make sure the larvae weren't abused
on this shoot. Seriously.



Jill points to a coyote turd. I take a bite. She admits it's fake. Ah, survival-camp humor.

who works summers as an instructor at a Massachusetts spa—falls into line in front of us as we walk. Conversation turns to how she'd recently taken Calista Flockhart (the actress who plays Ally McBeal) on a hiking expedition. "Isn't that the girl from *Flashdance*?" asks the person walking behind me.

We go silent for the next half-mile as the weirdness of all this dawns on us—we're spending a week in the wilds with total strangers (who have each paid \$825). For a second, I wish I'd investigated a New York City Outward Bound course that Jill has mentioned. I'm much more adept at outrunning muggers, dealing with creeps on public transit and avoiding people I don't know. All day, Jill gives tutorials on how to avoid getting struck by lightning (squat with feet to the ground) and what to use in lieu of toilet paper (rough juniper bunches). "I prefer using sand," pipes in Dakota, another guide. "But sticks work, too." Oh, God.

Hunger

After a few hours and a lot of hunger, Erin is the first to rationalize. "They're not going to let us die or anything," she says. "It would be bad publicity." Good point, but I distinctly remember Josh, the owner of Boulder Outdoor Survival School (whose course this is), telling us about a student back who died from bubonic plague. Josh said it was the only death in BOSS history. See, the guy trapped a rabbit and didn't immediately skin it; he ended up getting infected from the fleas. Then the hospital didn't recognize the medieval disease. Yikes.

But death of another sort seems imminent. I ask if any serial killers have been spotted in the area. "There's been some fugitives loose since Memorial Day," notes Trudy, a guide. She's "sweeping," or falling last in line

to keep an eye on any stragglers like myself. A good thing, because the last thing I need is a scruffy psychopath sneaking up on me as I lag behind. I've kept near the back of the group, but I channel my fear and pick up the pace. The added rush, and a little hunger-induced light-headedness, leads me to plow into an insect mound. Dozens of ants swarm my bare legs. "Try eating the larvae," advises Trudy, unearthing some of the rice-grain-sized eggs with her Nike hiking boots. Gnarly, I know, but the crispy shell and creamy insides aren't too bad. And now I have cool stuff to brag about when I get home.

Right before dusk, Jill halts our hike and shows us how to set up camp. I use the term *camp* loosely, as we have no gear to set up. Our beds end up being small mounds of dirt covered with dried juniper needles, otherwise known as "duff" (no relation to Homer Simpson's favorite beer). Since the desert gets chilly at night, Jill recommends spooning to conserve body heat—preferably in a group. But Kim (a laid-back Colorado writer) and I aren't into physical contact with strangers, so we fluff some duff under a nearby tree. "Wake me if you get cold," Kim says before bedding down in a jacket and cozy knit cap. I'm obviously not prepared for the elements in my kiddie-size sweatshirt. When the temperature dips into the 40s, I put socks on my hands, boots on my feet and tap Kim to spoon me. She even gives me her hat. I've never felt so weak and grateful in my life. Okay, I even cry.

The only time I've seen the sun rise is when I've stayed up all night. But now I see it, and that's not because I'm out whooping it up. Sleep deprivation hits me late Sunday afternoon, as we're trudging through a cow-dung-infested swamp lined with sharp, chest-high reeds. Impact must be working,

spaced-out and broken. Then Faith, a doctor from Oklahoma, spots Jill ahead of us in a clearing. She has food and supplies. I start to cry again.

Paranoia

When we finally eat our first meal, it's so small—scant portions of things like rice and cornmeal, with an occasional vegetable chunk thrown in. The lack of food—or maybe it's Diet Coke withdrawal—seems to be making everyone paranoid. "I swear we had another half-potato," mumbles someone nervously after dinner. When I drop my allotment of a single onion slice in the dirt, I just pick it up, brush it off and eat it. Later, Leisha and I actually get excited when Jill points out some edible coyote droppings. After we take a bite, she confesses it's just a snack bar she's molded into a turd-like shape, complete with tapered end. Ah, survival-camp humor.

We stay in the same spot for days, learning tent-erection tips, fire-starting techniques and other things I knew I'd never master. My comprehension skills continue to fail me when I forget to check my bathroom-bound juniper bundle for ants. Ouch.

Realization

I guess Jill, Nancy, Trudy and Dakota finally feel our group can survive without guidance, because on Tuesday they send us on a mission: to navigate through 10 miles of challenging terrain. Jill bequeaths a map to our elected leader, the aptly named Faith. We have two days to traverse vacant sandstone expanses (like the one in the lower-right photo), slippery rock drop-offs and a waist-deep river teeming with parasites. It all feels very *Road Rules*. Well, without the catering truck, wardrobe person and standby paramedics.

A mile into the hike, we run into a winding, desolate road—the only sign

of civilization we've seen. We've been told we might encounter some campers. But Jill has warned us that if they offer food—God forbid—we should kindly decline. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I’d do,” deadpans Erin as our stomachs grumble. By dusk we are lost, after narrowly avoiding a rattlesnake attack. But there’s something so serene about overlooking a sweeping Grand Canyon-esque mesa in fading light and having no clue what to do next. I never knew utter helplessness could breed such contentment.

But then it dawns on me: Maybe we aren’t really that helpless; by setting us free, our guides have forced us to figure things out for—and about—ourselves. And it’s funny what happens when you remove trivial things like an apartment, job and a sense of security from your life: You actually start to open up and care about other people. So maybe that’s why we banded together and divvied up the contents of Leisha’s pack when she got fatigued and couldn’t carry it anymore. Or why I find myself getting sappy next to her by the fire that evening when she tells me her mom—whose death she is trying to deal with on this trip—was nicknamed Gigi. This blows my mind; the only other Gigis I’ve heard of were poodles.

Solitude

The most terrifying part of our mission comes Wednesday when we have to climb a steep rock face with a thunderstorm rumbling up behind us. If we don’t get to the river in time, the water will be too high to cross—and we’ll be stuck for the night. But when everyone finally makes it up the cliff, across the water and over to our destination—a sand-filled cave—it’s sort of anticlimactic. There’s still another challenge—the 24-hour solo.

Personally, the concept of being left completely alone seems like the least daunting thing so far. How hard is it to sleep for as long as you want? Which is what I do. I am so weak that I don’t

Opposite page, from far left: Erin and Kim; dinner; desert. Right: My skanky shirt. Below, from left: Me, in bed; ouch; hiking without guides.

eat, I don’t pee, I just snooze. So what I remember is sketchy: collapsing under a spindly tree, starving and too weak to move. Bats looping overhead and clouds shape-shifting into a giant Alf head (it even had the nostrils). Dozing off. Drooling.

Christina is sitting next to me when I open my eyes the next morning. I can’t figure out why she’s hanging in the desert and not back in our office cube farm (see Dish, page 32), but it’s nice to have some company. Twenty minutes later I realize I’m hallucinating. It’s the strangest acid trip I’ve never been on. I’m still tripping when we meet back up with our guides later that day for our farewell dinner and shvitz in our homemade sweat lodge.

Enlightenment. Or whatever.

I know survival camp sounds like hell, but we’ve had some amazing moments—mostly of the cheesy, women-bonding variety. So I’ll spare you. But the craziest one of all comes when I enter the squeaky-clean hotel lobby after returning from camp. I can smell myself. I know this doesn’t sound like a big deal, but for the first time in my life, it doesn’t seem to matter that I stink (unless you’re the guy who checks me in). I suddenly realize how awesome it feels to lose touch with the superficial things I’ve learned—while getting closer to those that are much more instinctual (foraging for food, defecating in a dirt pit, baring

my soul to strangers). In the end, it seems harder to go back into society than leave it. Well, at least until I have my first shower. ■

