Grandest Canyon

Eternal, ever-changing, intimate, profound: This is the one sight you must experience for yourself.
WE ARE GATHERED on a low bluff along the Colorado River, a loose assortment of people from around the world. Some have come to this spot 180 miles inside the Grand Canyon from as far away as Wales, New Zealand, Haiti, and Alaska to see this moment, this opportunity to paddle through North America's roughest stretch of navigable river.

We are at Lava Falls, a class 10 rapid, looking down at the water—a lot of water, doing things that we've never seen water do before. Water rising in 15-foot waves and plunging down into the abyss of whirlpools. Red, muddy water crashing into submerged rocks, dividing into currents, spinning against itself again and again. A river that roars, turned fiercer than the ocean, if only for a short stretch before it is reconjured into a calm, broad stream.

Lava Falls is truly a fall, as the Colorado River—carrying the runoff of a large portion of the American West—plunges 37 feet in 200 yards, starting with a 13-foot drop off a midstream ledge. I'll be the first one through, riding the bow of a supply raft rowed by Connie Tibbits, one of the river's pioneering female commercial guides.

It is The African Queen in reverse: Tibbits, who also has worked as an Alaskan commercial pilot, has run the river since 1978. This is my seventh day. Her job is to find a course through this perfect river storm, to keep us from flipping and to avoid the swirling holes that could catch the raft. My job is to keep hold on, duck in time to avoid getting washed overboard, then bail as soon as I can stand. Tibbits also reminds me to make sure that she's still in the raft.

"So, what if you're not?" I ask.

"I don't know. Just grab the oars. See what you can do." The scene has an ominous cast. We have left the canyon's colorful red rock behind and entered an area of dark volcanic flows cast in grotesque, rounded shapes. Purple-gray clouds overtake the blue and reduce the sun to a perfect round ball. A hot breeze blows up through the canyon.

Tibbits coaxes the raft into the current, and we glide onto the tongue, the glass-smooth flatwater prelude to the rapids. As we plunge in, I am calm, if slightly alert, deep in the moment.

The river closes in on us, big and loud. I look at Tibbits and see her eyes darting across the rapids, taking quick snapshots of the rolling river.
ready for takeoff. Down on the river, 20-passenger motorized rafts race through in half the time of dory and paddle trips. Many argue that such services are inconsistent with the canyon’s protected status. Others say that these services make the canyon accessible to the widest range of visitors.

Rusting companies work with the park service to reduce congestion. But there is still competition for the prime campsites, and sometimes crowds conditions at remote spots best experienced in silence. Currently about 22,000 people travel downriver annually. With numbers frozen at 1976 levels, tours book a year or more ahead for commercial trips, while private groups wait 12 years for permits.

As recently as 1955, fewer than 200 people had ever gone down the canyon.

JUDGMENT DAY

I arrive by bus from Flagstaff, Arizona, on a weekday late in the season, two days before the raft trip. Though I have visited the North Rim and the canyon’s western edge, this is my first South Rim experience. After the noise of tourist throngs, I prepare for the worst.

And so I am surprised to find the South Rim quiet. It isn’t wilderness, but neither is it Disneyland. With the sun setting, I hike west toward Powell Point, an overlook named for John Wesley Powell, who in 1869 led the first expedition down the Colorado.

The trail is almost empty—a few hikers and a couple playing a violin and clarinet duet atop one outcropping. I look out at a landscape as weathered and formal as ruins, and I’m not sure what to think. First reactions to the canyon have long been more complicated than you might expect.

“I hear rumors,” wrote British author J.B. Priestly about the Grand Canyon, “of visitors who were disappointed. The same people will be disappointed at the Day of Judgment.”

Pioneering geologist Clarence E. Dutton was more sympathetic to the baffled Grand Canyon traveler. “He expected to be profoundly awestruck by the unexampled dimensions, and to feel exalted by the beauty of its proportions and decoration. He forgets that the human mind itself is of small capacity and receives its impressions slowly, by laborious processes of comparison. So, too, at the brink of the chasm, there comes at first a feeling of disappointment; it does not seem so grand as we expected.”

I would never ever say the canyon is disappointing. Still, the higher-elevation North Rim, where the canyon is viewed from aspen and ponderosa pine forests, has surpassed me. The South Rim looks much as I expected. Not unlike a giant museum diorama.

Then my compliance dies with the fading light. The canyon does something I never anticipated. For a short spell, it turns violet-blue, a reminder that even as its most well-known sites, the Grand Canyon can crush any and all preconceptions.

Another reaction is more prosaic. The canyon is high—damn big—and I struggle for scale. I wave my arms to see if I can spot movement on a bluff probably 1/2 mile away. Nothing. In my notes, I pontificate, “No one can cast his shadow upon the Grand Canyon.”

The next morning, Grand Canyon Field Institute director Mike Buchheit laughs when I describe my flailing, real and rhetorical, “The Grand Canyon,” he says, “as where superlatives come to die.”

We are sitting in the Kolb brothers’ photography studio, opened in 1902 as one of the canyon’s first tourist operations. The view looks out on the monumental towers and buttes that led early canyon surveyor Dutton to reach back into ancient history to name them. He called the formations tempies, and named them for figures from ancient cultures. Osiris, Isis, and Shiva.

“I can discern neophytes from more experienced hikers when they call. If the callers talk boastfully, it often turns out they have hiked only short, easy trails. If the callers speak modestly, there’s a good chance they’ve covered considerable ground.

“They have this humility,” says Buchheit, “that can only be attained after the canyon has kicked your behind. I’ve never run into a 1,000-mile hiker who still has an ego.” Buchheit estimates he has backpacked 2,000 canyon miles. A native of Dubuque, Iowa, he fell under the canyon’s spell after his wife went to work with the Grand Canyon Association in 1993. “I took six months off and just hiked. She didn’t see very much of me.” Indeed, the canyon can exert a sort of gravitational pull. It is that rare thing, a natural place still at the center of modern lives. And so a whole canyon culture exists, with distinct subcultures including the Flagstaff-based river-running community, a backpacking contingent that opens for weeks in trailless wilderness, and an assortment of people worldwide who do stay longer than 45 minutes. A canyon visit changes them, in some ways they never leave.

My reaction is equally visceral: I confess to Buchheit that the canyon intimidates me too. Too, too monumental, very much “nature’s own capital city,” as John Muir described it. Buchheit thinks about that, then says, “Well, when you’re tasing it and sleeping on it and it’s sticking to your sweat, it will all begin to sink in.”

THE BIG PICTURE

The Bright Angel Trail is a controlled fall of a hike, 73/4 miles and 4,660 feet down from rim to river. It can be snowing up top and pleasant on the river as the trail descends through four major climate zones. Along the way, the trail passes through more than a dozen layers of strata, about 2 billion years of geology.

We embark at dawn to rendezvous with an Arizona Hike Adventures trip that started at Lee’s Ferry. Initially no one else is on the trail, but farther down
How ironic to descend a mile into the earth only to see the universe more clearly.

Tooroweap

I return to the canyon in autumn. We drive from the South Rim to the North Rim, a 215-mile, 4½-hour trip, a reminder of what a formidable obstacle the canyon remains by air; it’s just 10 miles.

The aspens have turned, marbling the deep green forest with gold and orange. But a controlled burn obscures the vistas from the distant overlooks we travel to, such as Cape Royal and Point Sublime. So we head west on State 89, then along 60 miles of gravel road south to Tooroweap, one of the canyon’s most famous overlooks.

It is here that river and rim are said to converge most gloriously. But at Tooroweap, two instincts also clash. Your mind draws you to the edge, to see that place where rock gives way to air. Your body, however, remembers the heights of falling domes, recoils at the prospect.

I tentatively peck over the precipice, straight down 5,000 feet of rock face to the river, shut my eyes, and take a quick step back. There is no disappointment.

I accelerate to the void, alternating between looks down to the river and up to the palisades that form the rim, converging in a V far upriver.

Walking west, I peer down at a modest riffle; a little churn but nothing more. The whitewater is actually lava flats, looking as impossibly small and benign from high above as it looked huge and inaccessible from within. What appears to be boulders in the stream turn out to be cliffs, just specks on the river making a silent, bobbing passage through the falls.

That afternoon, two women from Salt Lake City, Susan Clark and her adult daughter Gerron, arrive at Tooroweap. The canyon has become a mutual fascination for them since a rafting trip in 1975. They’ve never wanted to come out to Tooroweap for a long time, to reconnect with the canyon. To see Lava Falls again.

They stand on a boulder that affords them their first look at Lava Falls. All around each other’s waist they look out and smile beatific smiles. And then Gerron says something that reminds me that the point is not to know the Grand Canyon but simply to bear witness. “Look,” she whispers. “There it is.”

GRAND CANYON TRAVEL PLANNER

Now that you’ve decided to see the Canyon, how much time can you spare for the place that President Theodore Roosevelt described as “one of the great sights which every American, if he can travel at all, should see?”

The good news is that there are ways to see the canyon for every level of commitment. The bad news is that whether you spend an hour on the rim or three weeks, there is much, much more.

On the South Rim, May is generally pleasant, with average daytime highs hovering around 70°. The North Rim is cooler, while daytime highs in the Inner Gorge can rise well into the 80s. Temperatures soar into the 90s by late July and August bring frequent thunderstorms. September and October, more tourists visit, are the latest time of year in the canyon.

The park entry fee is $20. For general information, call (520) 638-7888. Here’s a look at Grand Canyon destinations. Area code is 520 unless noted.

South Rim

Think of this as downtown Grand Canyon; what the South Rim lacks in solitude, it makes up for in history, views, and activities. Early spring and mid- to late autumn are ideal, while November through February are the least crowded months.

RIM DRIVE: Hermit Rd. (West Rim Dr./State 89) is closed to vehicles, and a shuttle runs on the 16-mile round trip to Hermit’s Rest. Cars are permitted on the 46-mile round trip Desert View Dr. (East Rim Dr./State 64), which eventually connects to U.S. 89, so you might explore here if you’re bound for the North Rim or Flagstaff.

RIM WALKS: The mostly flat

crumbing slopes, along narrow ledges, and across crevices running thigh-deep, we climb to Thunder River to see a great 100-foot torrent of whitewater pouring out of a gap in a cliff. We trek up Havasu Creek to Beaver Falls, where irrevocable rock structures terrace pools and its minerals turn the water a tropical jade. And sometimes we hike just to soak in cool, clear streams, and to rinse away the silt that coats us.

At night, I fall asleep slowly and wake up often. The canyon walls frame the sky, and I watch the stars’ passage through the night. Instead of appearing as a flat backdrop, the sky has a three-dimensional depth. How ironic it seems to descend a mile into the earth only to see the universe more clearly.

Still the river is ever moving, never silent, endlessly new and challenging. At first the rapids have a melodic quality; but it’s pointless to ascribe any intent to such raw energy. Or take it personally.

That’s right,” Tibbits says as we drift along on the second day. “It’s not about you. It’s all about the canyon.”

As the trip progresses, the world both shrinks and expands. The great rock walls cut us off from the outside, and the river’s meandering course constrains views both ahead and back. We are just where we are, beneath layered rock as patterned as a Navajo weaving; younger rock up top, with the oldest rock—the 2-billion-year-old Vishnu schist—at river level. To touch something so ancient is to connect to the earth.

The canyon is unfinished; when I help Tibbits paddle through Crystal Rapids, we are fighting through a maelstrom created by boulders deposited just 34 years ago in a side-canyon flash flood.

The side canyons offer respite from the main gorge’s immensity. Each day we explore intimate, hidden places. Up steep,
Rim Trail covers 9 miles between Wepaup Point and Hermit's Rest. The shuttle gives you numerous options because you can walk a long section, then bus back.

- A good orientation hike starts at Bright Angel Trailhead, then goes east toward the visitor center. This section visits many historic structures.

- Head west to get away from crowds; Powell and Hopi points make nice destinations from the village.

- More challenging option is to shuttle to Hermit's Rest, hike 4 miles to the Abyss, one of the South Rim's best river views, then pick up the bus.

**HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE**

The South Rim is a showcase for the vintage Southwest architecture of Mary Colter. Notable designs include the log-and-stone Bright Angel Lodge, the pueblo Hopi House, and the Desert View Watchtower, based on Anasazi structures and with murals styled after rock art. The 1907 El Tovar Hotel, designed as a mountain lodge, is the South Rim's grandest space, while the Kolb Studio has exhibits displaying the work of pioneering canyon photographers Eells and Smoky Kolb.

**LODGING AND CAMPS**

You should definitely book rooms ahead during prime season, but be persistent because cancellations are common. El Tovar is at the high end, with some canyon-view rooms, while less expensive rustic cabins and motel-style rooms are available at the Maswik Lodge and Yavapai Lodge. Accommodations inside the park are booked through a central number (303)921-2757. For (800) 258-2677 for view suites at El Tovar.

**North Rim**

Less crowded by 10,000 feet higher than Grand Canyon Village, the North Rim offers a totally different experience. Facilities are open only from May 15 to mid-October because of heavy winter snow.

**Overlook Drive:** A 23-mile one-way drive from the lodge takes you to two classic spots: the canyon's highest viewpoint, 8,803-foot Point Imperial, looks out into Navajo country, while Cape Royal offers views of such landmarks as Votan Temple and Totem Pole, as well as the river. A very rough dirt road loads 17 miles to the amazing views of Point Sublime, but check road conditions and make sure that both you and your vehicle are up to it.

**Rim Hikes:** The North Rim has more hiking choices than the South Rim, but on many trails, you'll spend most of your time within the forest, which is spectacular when the aspens turn but has limited openings to panoramas.

**Bright Angel Trail:** The first hike begins at the lodge, is the North Rim's version of the Trail and follows the Bright Angel Peninsula for 1/2 mile. Be sure to walk to Bright Angel Point, 1/4 mile from the lodge. The Wideros Trail, named for an early canyon artist, runs 5 miles to a vista, and the first 2/3 miles stick close to the rim; turn left on a dirt road 2.7 miles north of the lodge and drive 1 mile to the trailhead.

**Day Hikes:** Remember that what goes down must come up. Even maintained trails can be challenging, especially in hot conditions. Check with rangers for best timing to maximize shade on the return, especially in summer.

**Camping:** Reservations are available in the park from $19. Check road conditions and make sure that both you and your vehicle are up to it.

**Backcountry permits:** (800) 258-2677 for view suites at El Tovar.

**River Trips:** A river trip is truly one of the great life experiences. While the prospect of running rapids can intimidate, there are options for every skill and commitment level. Trips start at three days, while full canyon trips can last three weeks. Some companies offer opulent meals and pampering. Costs run $150-$260 per day. Options include large pontoon rafts (which cover more territory in less time), the more active paddle rafts experience, and dolley, the traditional hand-fulled river-running craft. Plan a year ahead. Our rafters have gone on trips with Arizona Raft Adventures (928-766-7299), and C.A.R.E. and Grand Canyon Dories (928-564-2771). The park has a complete list of river-running companies: (800) 659-0164.

**Grand Canyon Field Institute:** The institute offers educational programs, including multi-day backpacking trips, day-hikes, and seminars. Some programs are easy, others are more challenging. For more information, call (928) 638-2485.

**Grand Canyon Railway:** The railway has both diesel (October-Memorial Day) and steam-powered locomotives (Memorial Day-September) that run between Williams, Arizona, and the village's historic log cabin depot. Day and overnight packages available. For (701) 483-6724.

**Toward the West:** The most spectacular overlook accessible by car, it sits at the end of a 60-mile rough gravel road 9 miles west of Fredonia State St 369. The trip goes through a portion of the new Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument. It can be done in a day, and we saw standard sedans on the road—but check road conditions. The trip is not considered spending at least one night; 11 first-come, first-served campsites, including two spots at the overlook.

**Chef and canyon explorer, Swiss-born Eric Guinesses runs popular Cafe Tusayan.**

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