

Grand Canyon (rafting), Arizona

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One yellow raft is already tied up at a beach deep in the Grand Canyon, as a boatman is about to land the red oar boat, and the yellow paddleboat is soon to arrive. (Claire Walter photo)

Rafting America's Gorgeous Gorge

By Claire Walter

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“Know The Canyon's History. Study Rocks Made By Time.”

So goes the mnemonic which Colorado River guides use to help clients remember the rock layers visible as they float through the nearly mile-deep Grand Canyon in northern Arizona: Kaibab Limestone. Toroweep Formation. Coconino Sandstone. Hermit Shale. Supai Group. Redwall Limestone. Muav Limestone. Bright Angel Shale. Tapeats

Sandstone. From top to bottom, you're looking at 1.7 billion years of rock formation and erosion

"Know The Canyon's History. Study Rocks Made By Time." I repeated it to myself over and over, like a mantra, during my voyage down the Colorado River. I wanted to learn, wanted to imprint the order of things in this grandest of canyons in my mind. That mnemonic represents the geological history of one of the most stunning examples of nature's might and artistry on the planet. Most of the five million visitors from around the globe who visit Grand Canyon National Park each year view this gorgeous gorge from on top.

The South Rim, where Grand Canyon Village and its vast infrastructure of hotels, campgrounds, shops and restaurants are located, gets the bulk of the visitors, though some opt for a different view from the less trafficked North Rim. Still, when you look down into the canyon from either side, it is impossible to see the Colorado River flowing more than 5,000 feet below. To experience the grandeur of the canyon, you must venture below the rim, and a raft trip down this river is one of the planet's epic trips.

Options on the River

If you have great river knowledge and are properly equipped, you can apply for a private permit, but the wait is well over 10 years. For most people, a commercial trip of six to 18 days is the only real option. River trips come in various flavors. On an oar boat, the guide rows, a couple of clients ride as passengers, and the raft holds a lot camping supplies and food lockers. A paddle boat normally accommodates one guide and six clients, with everyone paddling all the way. However, on multi-day Grand Canyon itineraries, an all-paddle boat fleet is not practical because they can't accommodate much cargo.

A hybrid trip involves a small flotilla of several oar boats and one or two paddle boats, so everyone has a daily choice of paddling or riding – or put another way, a daily choice of being active or contemplative. Hybrid trips usually include a couple of "duckies," inflatable one-person kayaks that some people like to use.

Arguably the most romantic option is a dory. Two commercial outfitters row these sturdy wooden boats, which are not unlike those in which Major John Wesley Powell and 10 companions first braved the uncharted river and negotiated its unnamed, untamed rapids in 1869.

Larger motorized pontoon rafts also ply the river. They can buzz the entire canyon in about a week, but purists feel that rowing or paddling is the only way.

Whatever your river style, such a trip has often been described as a life-altering experience. This summer, visitors will see a river that itself was recently altered. In November, a 90-hour controlled flood of Biblical proportions was released from Glen Canyon Dam to redistribute 80,000 metric tons of sediment in an effort to restore beaches, replenish habitat for native species and protect archeological sites.

The stretch of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon is called a pool and drop river, with stretches of flat water interspersed with 161 rapids. The mighty Colorado is joined by inflow from watercourses ranging from small, ephemeral streams to such major tributaries as the Little Colorado River.

They have formed side canyons that lead up into the Grand Canyon's rocky walls, often revealing lush oases and spectacular waterfalls. Hiking up these side canyons is a

true highlight of a river trip, while a highlight of the rafting part are the rapids created by debris deposited just downstream from each side canyon. These short but thrilling whitewater sections are adrenaline activators between long stretches of languorous flat-water floats.

There is a rhythm to such an adventure: float, hike into a side canyon, lunch, float, hike into another side canyon, set up camp, dinner, relax by the fire, sleep under canvas or under the stars, breakfast, break camp and start the whole process over again. The so-called real world is washed away by the river's steady sound. There is also a vocabulary to a river trip: a raft is a "boat"; every guide, whether male or female, is a "boatman"; and the portable toilet set up a short, discreet distance from each campsite is a "groover."

The only thing that river trips have in common is that they are all different. The weather is different – perhaps cool in the Upper Canyon and hot in the Lower, or hot or cool all the way. Cool isn't great on the water, but it's divine when hiking up steep, often shade-free side canyons, especially in mid-summer. The water itself can be different, roiling brown torrent or a ribbon of stunning emerald green interspersed with frothy white rapids. The light on the canyon walls is different from hour to hour, day to day, and month to month as the seasons change.

Most important, interpersonal dynamics between the small, temporary community floating down the river together varies. Some groups bond instantly or within hours on the river, others take longer to warm up to each other. and a very few never do mesh. On the fall trip my husband and I took, there were couples, singles and a group of four buddies who take one vacation a year together. Our group included two engineers, one newspaper publisher, one advertising executive, one doctor, one restaurateur, one airline captain, one health-club owner, one dental hygienist and one probation officer. The geographical reach was from Vermont to Los Angeles.

Nicki, the head guide, delicate-looking and lady-like, finessing each rapid and leading the trip with quiet effectiveness. Chris, a family man, pulled between the lure of the river and the desire to spend summers with his wife and kids. He thought it might be his last summer on the river, but his colleagues reported that he says that at the beginning of every rafting season. Sam, daredevil canyon-runner in summer and computer programmer in the off-season. Lynn, introverted, deeply knowledgeable about the Colorado's geology, wildlife and flora – and with a crystal-clear singing voice that filled our campsite and echoed from the canyon walls each night after dinner. Steve, bearded and wiry, whose slogan, as he aimed the paddle boat straight into the teeth of the wildest waves, was "go big or go home." Tracey, bubbly recent collegian, cramming canyon knowledge during her first year on the river.

Our little flotilla set off each morning – the primary-color rafts reduced to insignificance beneath to soaring earth-tone cliffs of brown and taupe, rust and buff. Yet the rafts, the river and the rocks became our universe. Ours was a hybrid trip – five oar boats, one paddle boat and a couple of duckies, one-person inflatable kayaks. One day, six women commandeered the paddle boat and Lynn took Steve's place as boatman, we earned the nickname the "princess cruise" – or, alternatively, the "maiden voyage" – although there was not a maiden among us.

Cruisin' Down the River

All river mileage is measured from Lee's Ferry, Arizona, where most boats put in. Diamond Creek, the most popular takeout, is 226 miles downstream. Occasionally, trips continue 54 miles farther at Pearce's Ferry. In addition to through trips that take two weeks or more, some outfitters offer the option of two half-canyon trips of about a week each. Clients join or leave partway downriver, usually at Phantom Ranch or Pipe Creek near the end of the Bright Angel Trail (Mile 88).

From Lee's Ferry, it seems like only minutes until you pass under the twin Navajo Bridges, spanning the gorge 467 feet above the water. When the original bridge was completed in 1928, fewer than 50 people had attempted this river trip. As you read this, a new bridge spans the Colorado right next to the old one – and 22,000 people a year now take river trips through the Grand Canyon.

Most of the time, we floated down the river, moving with the current and gazing up at the stunning canyon walls. Spiritually inclined or not, all of us are entranced by canyon's surreal beauty and awesome dimensions. Twice a day, we pull up to a sandy beach at the mountain of a side canyon, scrambling up rock walls, crossing catwalks, following smooth trails, discovering waterfalls, lounging on ledges shaded by overhangs and fording streams. Every side canyon hike is different.

Nautiloid Canyon (mile 38.5) was named for the fossils of the same name found there. A steep trail up Nankoweap Canyon (mile 53) leads to ancient Anasazi granaries. The confluence with the Little Colorado River (mile 61.5) provides an opportunity to hike to Beamer's Cabin, the stone house occupied by prospector Ben Beamer in the 1880s. Unkar Creek (mile 72.5), a former Anasazi settlement.

With the boatmen's acquiescence, some doing the whole river get off at Boat Beach (mile 87.5), detoured half a mile to Phantom Ranch for running water and cold beer, then hiked down the River Trail to Pipe Creek to meet the boats. Crystal Creek (mile 98) is known for its daunting rapids and for a short, beguiling hike. Elves' Chasm (mile 116.5) at Royal Arch Creek displays fantastic rock formations.

A well-marked trail up Tapeats Creek (mile 134) leads four miles to the source of the Thunder River. Deer Creek (mile 136) to Surprise Valley shows off its ancient petroglyphs and its 100-foot waterfall dropping into a clear pool. Four miles up Kanab Creek (mile 143.5) is Whispering Falls, the same distance as the Havasu Canyon (mile 157) trail to Beaver Falls. The Lava Falls Trail (mile 179) is short, steep and thrilling, because it overlooks Lava Rapid, the biggest, baddest stretch of whitewater in the Canyon.

Everything after Lava Rapid was anticlimactic, for everyone quietly understood that the trip of a lifetime was about to become an indelible entry in our individual memory banks. We floated to the Diamond Creek takeout – passing a rapid here, a side canyon there – each of us in individual trances. We hit the beach on Hualapai Nation land and accessible by unpaved road, adjusting our eyeballs and attitudes to the shock of motor vehicles, and tribal boatmen readying their pontoon boats for their downriver runs. They were the first strangers we had seen in days.

We began unloading the rafts one last time. Now, instead of setting up camp, we hefted our gear into the outfitter's trucks, dismantled the rafts and sat down for a picnic lunch featuring fresh fruit, fresh baked goods, cold cuts, cheeses and cookies to help us wean ourselves from the rhythm of river life.

IF YOU GO

General Information

Grand Canyon River Running, a website that bills itself as “the unofficial guide to the Colorado river in the Grand Canyon,” has oodles of information on commercial and private trips, canyon ecology and other issues; www.azstarnet.com/grandcanyon/river.

When to Go

It is not too early to begin planning a 2005 Grand Canyon trip. Schedules start as early as April and wind down as late as the end of October. The water is coldest in spring and clearest in fall. Summer temperatures are really hot, which means that side canyon hikes (optional) and hikes down to or up from the river (required on itineraries that start or end in mid-canyon) can be enervating. Motorized trips are recommended for anyone very young, very old or not in shape for the seven- to nine-mile rim-to-river hike or river-to-rim hike on half-canyon trips. They operate on a shorter season than human-powered trips.

Outfitters

The Park Service has issued permits to 16 outfitters to operate in the Canyon, though a few do not schedule regular canyon trips. Fourteen use rafts, and two row wooden dories. Some shorter trips begin at Bar Ten Ranch and cover just the lower canyon. Some outfitters offer combination helicopter/rafting trips into what they call the Western Grand Canyon, which combines mileage through Hualapai Indian Nation land into the Lake Mead National Recreation Area. For quick links to outfitters, go to www.nps.gov/grca/river/river_concessioners.htm, the National Park Service page devoted to commercial river trips. For those without the time or the budget for a multi-day canyon trip, one-day trips are available from Wilderness River Adventures, which operates upstream from the park between Glen Canyon Dam and Lee’s Ferry, and Hualapai River Runners, which offers motorized trips downriver from Diamond Creek that combine scenic, natural and cultural aspects.

Other than personal gear, outfitters supply everything for camping: tents, sleeping bags, abundant food, camp stove, sanitary facilities and first-aid kit. Exact costs vary, but figure on spending about \$250 per person, per day, including travel to the put-in and from the take-out. Boatmen expect (and deserve) tips at the end of the excursion.

- Aramark-Wilderness River Adventures, P.O. Box 717, Page, AZ 86040; (800) 992-8022 or (928) 645-3296; www.riveradventures.com.
- Arizona Raft Adventures, Inc., 4050-F E. Huntington Drive, Flagstaff, AZ 86004; (800) 786-RAFT or (928) 526-8200; www.azraft.com.
- Arizona River Runners, Inc., P.O. Box 47788, Phoenix, AZ 85068-7788; (800) 477-7238 or (602) 867-4866; www.raftarizona.com.
- Canyon Explorations/Canyon Expeditions, P.O. Box 310, Flagstaff, AZ 86002; (800) 654-0723 or (928) 774-4559; www.canyonexplorations.com.
- Canyoneers, Inc., P.O. Box 2997, Flagstaff, AZ 86003; (800) 525-0924 or (928) 526-0924; www.canyoneers.com.
- Colorado River & Trail Expeditions, Inc., P.O. Box 57575, Salt Lake City, UT

- 84157-0575; (800) 253-7328 or (801) 261-1789; www.crateinc.com.
- Diamond River Adventures, Inc., P.O. Box 1300, Page, AZ 86040; (800) 343-3121 or (928) 645-8866; www.diamondriver.com.
 - Grand Canyon Discovery, Inc., 4050 E. Huntington Dr., Flagstaff, AZ 86004; (800) 786-7238 or (928) 8200; www.grandcanyondiscovery.com.
 - Grand Canyon Dories, P.O. Box 216, Altaville, CA 95221; (800) 877-3679 or (209) 736-0805; www.oars.com/htdocs/grand_canyon/dories.html.
 - Grand Canyon Expeditions Company, P.O. Box 0, Kanab, UT 84741; (800) 544-2691 or (435) 644-2691; www.gcex.com.
 - Hatch River Expeditions, Inc., P.O. Box 1200, Vernal, UT 84078; (800) 433-8966 or (435) 789-3813; www.hatchriver.com.
 - Hualapai River Runners, P.O. Box 246, Peach Springs, AZ 86434; (888) 216-0076; www.grandcanyonresort.com.
 - Moki Mac River Expeditions, Inc., P.O. Box 71242, Salt Lake City, UT 84171-0242; (800) 284-7280 or (801) 268-6667; www.mokimac.com.
 - O.A.R.S., P.O. Box 67, Angels Camp, CA 95222; (800) 346-6277 or (209) 736-2924; www.oars.com.
 - Outdoors Unlimited, 6900 Townsend Winona Road, Flagstaff, AZ 86004; (800) 637-7238 or (928) 526-4546; www.outdoors.unlimited.
 - Tour West, Inc., P.O. Box 333, Orem, UT 84059; (800) 453-9107 or (801) 225-0755; www.twriver.com.
 - Western River Expeditions, Inc., 7258 Racquet Club Drive, Salt Lake City, UT 84121; (800) 453-7450 or (801) 942-6669; www.westernriver.com.
 - Wilderness River Adventures, Wilderness River Adventures, P.O. Box 717, Page, AZ 86040; (800) 992-8022 or (928) 645-3296; www.riveradventures.com.

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