

## The News Tribune

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### **A grand journey through the Grand Canyon on the Colorado River**

**NATURE:** 8 days in breathtaking landscape transform spirit

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After months of anticipation, trip planning and a final reminder to keep our life vests on at all times on the river, the moment finally arrived.

Our Grand Canyon Expedition Co. crew of four, joined by 25 customers, launched two motorized rubber rafts into the Colorado River on May 5 for a 277-mile journey through Grand Canyon National Park.

The eight days and seven nights on the river were a spiritual, humbling experience amidst the rock formations up to 2 billion years old — geological legacies that predate life on Earth and imprison fossilized seashells that speak to geologic upheaval and ocean floors where deserts sit today.

This sanctuary put on a colorful display of brilliant blue desert skies; a river the color of a Heineken beer bottle; red, orange, mauve and black rock formations; yellow flowers of the prickly pear; and turquoise waters of Havasu Falls. Pick a color: It's there in the Seventh Wonder of the World.

Strangers from around the world are thrown together for a week and quickly feel the bond of shared experiences: the exhilarating rapids that soak the rafts and their occupants; the sightings of condors high in the sky and bighorn sheep clinging to the steep canyon walls; and the chatty lines that form at the rafts each morning and night to load and unload personal gear, camping equipment, folding chairs and, don't forget, the portable toilet.

More than 20,000 people in private and commercial parties travel the entire length of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon every spring, summer and fall. Some are even equipped for the quirky weather they may encounter, from 100-degree days to frosty mornings. You haven't experienced thunder and lightning until you hear it reverberate and see it flash off the canyon walls.

The Grand Canyon in all its enormity, mystery and complexity overwhelms the senses. You leave the canyon, but the canyon doesn't leave you.

Gary St. Peter, 62, and a lawyer from Providence, R.I., put it best on this trip, his fifth to the Grand Canyon. Four years ago, stricken by streptococcal pneumonia and near death, this trip was not foreseen.

Yet there he was, ready to board the raft at Lees Ferry, wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the phrase: "I'm Not Dead Yet."

In camp the first night near river mile 20, between walls of redwall limestone some 350 million years old, St. Peter talked about the transforming powers of a river journey through the Grand Canyon:

"For me, it's the most spiritual place in the world," St. Peter said. "If you're too full of yourself, it knocks you down a notch or two. If you're feeling down, it can lift you up."

#### **DAY TWO**

Early in the day, Vasey's Paradise (River Mile 32) comes into view, a gush of groundwater cascading out the side of a redwall limestone cliff, tumbling through a lush green foliage that includes watercress, narrowleaf plantain, crimson monkey flower and mosses. It's one of the few springs that flows directly out of a canyon wall and the wet spring weather has given it a boost.

"That's the most water I've ever seen flowing out of there," said Neal Shapiro, a burly, ex-school teacher and coach who has guided motorized rubber rafts through the Grand Canyon 220 times since the 1980s. One of our two guides, he answered to "Bear."

We set up camp early at Saddle Canyon (River Mile 47), leaving time for a hike, which is one of the true pleasures of a river rafting trip through the Grand Canyon. Mating calls from red-spotted toads echoed off sandstone walls that nearly touch, leading to pools in a grotto that abruptly ends at the bottom of a 30-foot waterfall.

On the way back to camp after a refreshing plunge in waist-high water, I talked with our other river guide, Grand Canyon Expedition Co. owner Mike Denoyer, who first rafted down the Grand Canyon as an Evergreen State College student joined by Evergreen professors Linda Kahan and Oscar Soule in 1973. Denoyer fell in love with the canyon and river, met his future wife, fellow student Roxanne Schammel, on the trip and found his life's calling.

"The trips never get old for me," said Denoyer, 62, a veteran of more than 300 river trips. "I still get an adrenaline rush before every one."

Soule was on the trip, too, along with seven other people from Olympia. Each year, Denoyer and Soule hook up for an early May adventure that features a chance for them to renew their deep friendship and for Soule to treat fellow canyon travelers to entries from his 1973 trip journal and spin campsite lectures about the ecology of the Grand Canyon before dinner is served. It's called the ecology trip.

#### DAY THREE

We reach the Little Colorado River, a major tributary flowing in from the South Rim side that represents the official start to the Grand Canyon as named by explorer Major John Wesley Powell in 1869. The stretch of park upriver of here is known as Marble Canyon.

The Little Colorado was a milky turquoise color, thanks to calcium carbonate minerals carried downstream. Hiking upstream, we met Arizona Department of Game and Fish biologist Brian Clark. He's conducting a population and spawning survey of a native fish called humpback chub, which is a federally endangered species. It prefers the warm, silty water that used to flow down the Colorado before the Glen Canyon Dam was built. Now the water flows out of the dam reservoir at 40 degrees. Predation by rainbow trout introduced to the river has spelled trouble for the chub, too.

"They've had a tough go of it," Clark said of the member of the minnow family, green to silver and white, and about 18 inches long.

At River Mile 72.5 we tied up the rafts and hiked across a sloping river delta at Unkar Creek, home to some 600 Anasazi Indians around 1050 A.D. They intensely farmed the canyon floor, relying on sediment from silt-laden river flood events. Pottery shards and foundations of their homes abound. Today's Navaho Indians call them the ancient people.

We camped below Nevills Rapid (River Mile 76), named after Norman Nevills, who began commercial river runs on the Colorado River in 1938. His first boat was built out of scrap lumber from a barn and an outhouse.

"There are a million stories out here in the Grand Canyon," Soule said as a lead-in to his evening lecture. "And I'm only going to tell you one."

He told a story of adaptation. For instance, plants deep in the canyon floor have tiny leaves to keep from getting fried by the heat and ravens fly around with their mouths open to keep cool.

#### DAY FOUR

Ancient rock formations and a steady onslaught of powerful rapids highlight this day.

Early in the morning we encountered a polished black rock called Vishnu schist and veins of pink granite called Zoroaster granite that dates back at least 1.7 billion years, making it some of the oldest exposed rock in North America.

"You can almost feel the pressure of the rock pushing up," said Tom Fitzsimmons, Gov. Chris Gregoire's former chief of staff and past director of the state Department of Ecology.

Mike Ryherd, a retired legislative lobbyist from Olympia, established himself early on as the top birder on the trip. Binoculars always in hand, Ryherd spotted two condors soaring just downstream of Bright Angel Trail (River Mile 89).

With wing span that can reach 10 feet, the condors are an incredible sight high above the canyon walls.

"There's no guarantee we'd see them on this trip and it's already happened twice," Ryherd noted.

Firmly entrenched in the canyon's granite gorge, we encountered several rapids ranked 8 to 10 on a scale that tops out at 10. They slapped the rafts around and soaked everyone.

At River Mile 95, Hermit Rapid treated us to a roller-coaster ride. "That, to me, is the most fun ride," Shapiro said.

After the daily lunch stop, the wind picked up and clouds billowed above the canyon. Questions abounded about the chance of rain.

Denoyer, his typical unflappable self, just said: "We'll just have to wait and see."

That night in camp, we used tents for the first time. Soule talked about the canyon wrens serenading us during the day with their beautiful songs and recalled how it was there that Denoyer laid eyes on his future wife in 1973.

A thunder and lightning storm blasted through the camp at midnight, but no tents blew away.

#### DAY FIVE

We broke camp surrounded by white-throated swifts caught up in erratic flight akin to paper airplanes. Two or three planned day hikes were canceled because of threat of flash floods in the side canyons from the overnight storm. We left the Vishnu schist around River Mile 119.

By mid-afternoon we plowed through an upstream wind and torrential downpour. The temperature dropped 30 degrees in two days.

Denoyer guided his soggy expedition to shore earlier than normal, seeking shelter under an outcropping of 500 million-year-old Tapeats sandstone. Chicken noodle soup never tasted so good.

#### DAY SIX

The blue skies were back and everyone's spirits were lifted. We broke camp to the sight of a Lazuli bunting, a blue-headed songbird with blue-edged wings. Matkatamiba Canyon awaited us at River Mile 148.

Clinging to a slender ledge, about half of the party followed Denoyer — he was wearing flip-flops — up into the magnificent canyon while the rest stayed behind in the rafts. We hiked among cat claw acacia trees, multiple cacti species in bloom, columbine, bright red cardinal monkey flower, ponds, waterfalls and a natural amphitheater adorned with rocks of every color. After about an hour we headed back to the rafts to journey on to Havasu Canyon (River Mile 157).

Once again, we were treated to turquoise water stepping down a boulder strewn stream with multiple pools and waterfalls. It was easy to see why this is one of the most photographed places in the canyon.

We arrived in camp late that night, so Soule read his daily notes and lecture with aid of a head lamp. He prepared us for a day of lava flows — 150 all told — and remnants of 19 lava dams from an eruptive period in the geological history of the Colorado Plateau some 40 million to 70 million years ago.

#### DAY SEVEN

Lava was everywhere, spilling down side canyons and box canyons like glaciers of ice, splashed with reddish rose prickly pear cactus in bloom.

Shapiro and Denoyer cut their motors and we drifted around a bend at River Mile 179, suddenly confronted with the roar of Lava Falls Rapid just downstream. We pulled the rafts over to climb up a rock outcropping to peer down on the rapid's roiling waters.

"This is the big one, no matter what the guide books say," Shapiro said. The two guides plotted their route and we tackled the rapids one raft at a time. There was a big plunge, waves splashing from both sides, then a wave that submerged the rafts, then a powerful V-wave that popped pontoon straps on both rafts. What an adrenaline rush sitting exposed in the front of the raft.

The Vishnu schist reappeared like an old friend at River Mile 210, shiny and ancient in the mid-day sun. Soon we were in camp for the last time.

We dined on rib eye steaks, broke out the last of the alcohol and partied for the last time. Soule recapped the day and the trip.

"There are millions of people every year that look at the Grand Canyon from the rim, but only thousands truly experience it," he said. "The canyon is different every trip — you learn or see something new every time."

Denoyer said the trip had been a special one. The expedition held together through the bad weather and people stayed focused on the experience.

"Oscar's trips tend to bring these kind of people together," Denoyer said.

Fitzsimmons offered a moving tribute to Denoyer and Soule, thanking them for sharing their knowledge and love of the canyon, for allowing people to explore the side canyons and soak in the many features of an unparalleled, special place. By the time he finished, there wasn't a dry eye in camp.

#### DAY EIGHT

We woke up somber and reflective, some sad to see the journey end, others anxious for a hot shower back in Las Vegas. We ran our last rapid at River Mile 236, then floated together past the last glimpse of Zoroaster granite.

At Separation Canyon (River Mile 240) we said goodbye to the crew and boarded a jet boat, which whisked us down the final miles as the Grand Canyon washed away into Lake Mead and a great adventure segued into an indelible memory.

St. Peter, our expedition philosopher, chose his words carefully:

"You can't come down here and leave the same person — you just can't," he said.

Amen to that.

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#### CANYON FACTS

- Grand Canyon National Park is more than 1.2 million acres, highlighted by the Grand Canyon, which is 18 miles wide at its widest, 600 feet at its narrowest and 6,000 feet deep. It became a national park in 1919.
- The Grand Canyon, formed by the river and other erosional forces cutting through rock formations up to 2 billion years old, is relatively young — 5 million to 6 million years old.
- The 277-mile rafting trip through the Grand Canyon starts at Lees Ferry (elevation 3,116 feet) below Glen Canyon Dam (built in 1963), and ends at Pierce Landing (elevation 1,200 feet) above Hoover Dam (built in 1936).
- About half of the elevation drop takes place in more than 160 rapids, which typically form in front of side canyons where debris flows and flash floods have deposited rocks in the river. Many rapids deliver splashy, roller-coaster rides. A few produce waves that break over the entire raft.
- Before the Glen Canyon Dam was built in 1963, river flows through the canyon fluctuated dramatically, influenced by droughts, floods and the changing seasons — anywhere from 800 cubic feet per second to 200,000 cfs. Since the dam was built, the flow regime is roughly 2,000-29,000 cfs. The dam traps sediment, which at times in pre-dam times, made up as much as 80 percent of the river volume.
- The Colorado River runs through three of North America's four deserts in the Grand Canyon — the Great Basin, Sonoran and Mojave. The Grand Canyon is permanent or migratory home to 1,750 plants, 373 birds, 91 mammals, 57 reptiles and amphibians and 17 fish species. Many are nonnative — introduced after construction of the dams.
- Maj. John Wesley Powell, a geology professor and Union officer who lost his right arm in the Civil War, and eight others in his party were the first to explore the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon in August 1869. The number of people to travel the entire canyon by river did not top 100 until 1949. In 2010, 22,502 people traveled the length of the Grand Canyon in motorized rafts and oar-powered rafts and dories, taking anywhere from seven to 18 days. Total visitation to the national park approaches five million people a year.
- Some 16 private companies offer trips through the Grand Canyon, often booked a year or more in advance. Private trips are permitted via an annual lottery. For a list of river outfitters, visit [nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/river-concessioners.htm](http://nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/river-concessioners.htm) (<http://nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/river-concessioners.htm>).

Sources: National Park Service; "The Colorado River in Grand Canyon: A Guide" by Larry Stevens; "Down Canyon" by Ann Haywood Swinger

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