

# Rafting the Grand Canyon

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## GRAND CANYON RIVER STATS

LENGTH: 278 miles

ELEVATION CHANGE: Approximately 2,200 feet  
(varies with the level of Lake Mead)

AVERAGE GRADIENT: 8 feet per mile

AVERAGE WIDTH: 300 feet

NARROWEST WIDTH: 76 feet

MAXIMUM WATER DEPTH: 110 feet

AVERAGE WATER DEPTH: 35 feet

NUMBER OF RAPIDS RATED 6 OR HIGHER: 28

NUMBER OF CAMPSITES: 225  
(from Lee's Ferry to Diamond Creek)

AGE OF OLDEST ROCKS: 1.8 billion years

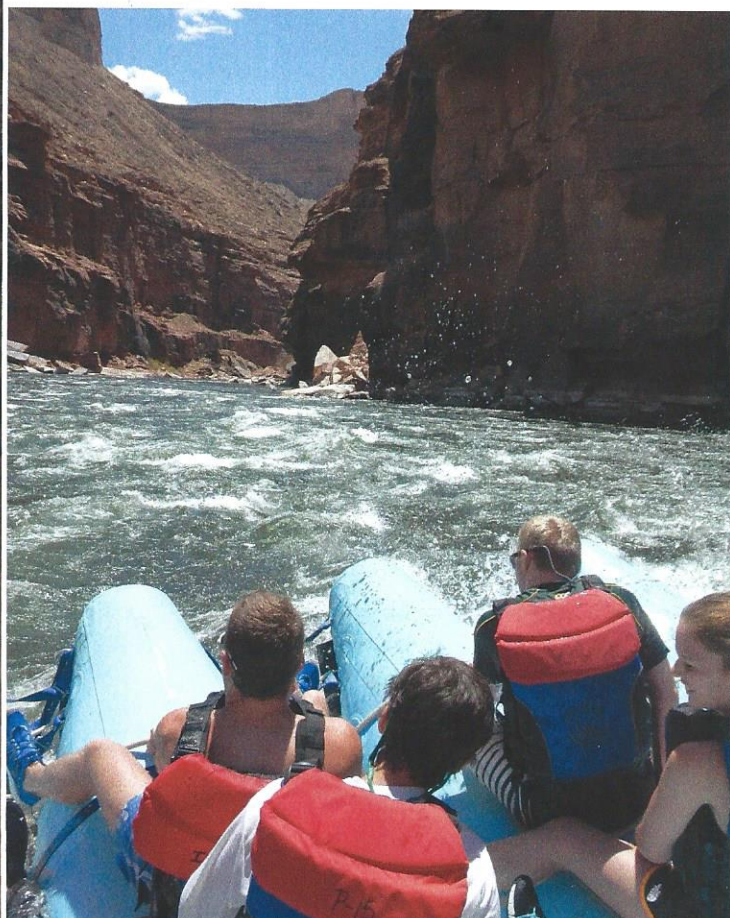




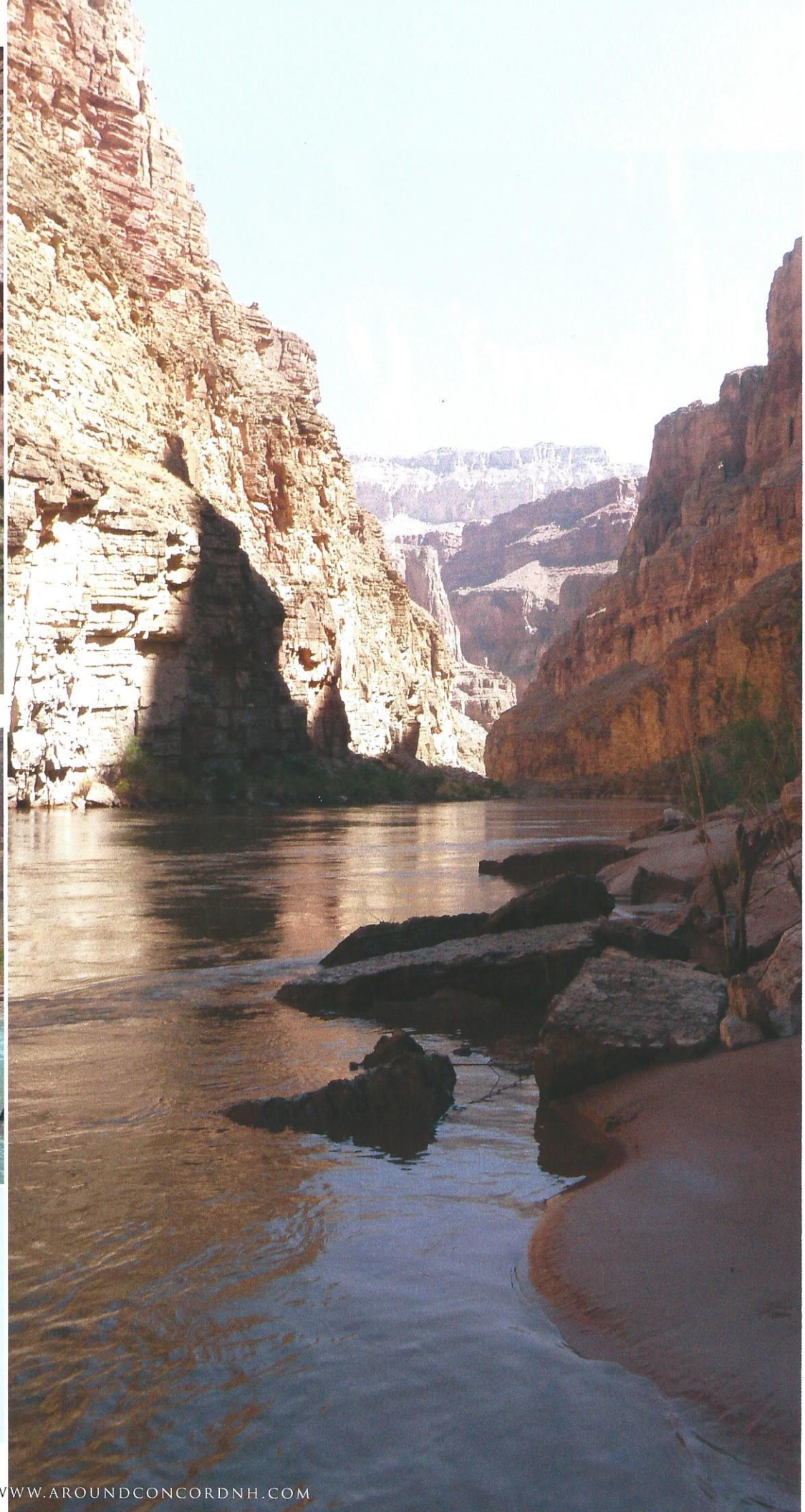
Traveling through the upper canyon, the 16-person raft is dwarfed by the towering cliffs.

Right: Heading into a stretch of “tame” whitewater. (When the standing waves grew to 10-plus feet, the author opted to hold on to the safety line rather than her camera.)

“Suck rubber!” shouted our guide above the roar. We pressed our faces to the pontoons between our legs and tightened our grips on the safety lines just as a wall of frigid 48-degree water collapsed over us. The sizeable 16-person raft careened to the left, then bucked skyward like a badly aimed Frisbee caught in a powerful gust of wind. Another wave crashed over us, its powerful wet hands tugging tenaciously at our legs and arms. The raft jerked upward and then dove again. I resisted the urge to raise my head and peek at the roiling river. The wet tempest needed only an inch to snag and pull me overboard. ▶







Top left: Two girls try to approach Deer Creek Falls, where the wind off the falls gusts over 70 miles per hour.

Above: A rafter leaps into the Little Colorado River.

Right: The Colorado River reflects the colorful hues of the canyon late in the afternoon.

Opposite: One of the many sandbar campsites tucked below the vertical cliffs.

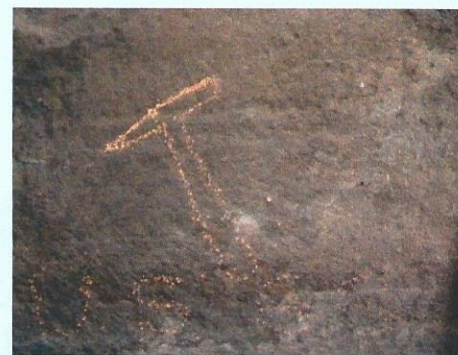




Suddenly, the craziness ended, and all was serene again. We drifted calmly below thousand-foot cliffs, the desert sun quickly warming and drying us. I glanced at my son Parker. He grinned with delight, eager for the next wild stretch of whitewater. His drugstore sunglasses tilted slightly to the left, held together with a duct-tape butterfly bandage above one lens. I was impressed that they had remained on his face after the last plunge, a 15-footer called Dubendorf Rapid, rated class 5 to 8. Unlike other rivers that are rated from 1 (flat water) to 5 (nearly un-navigable whitewater), the Grand Canyon's Colorado River is rated 1 to 10. Each rapid has a rating range, as the size of the water and the risk of running it vary depending on the water level at a particular moment.

Whitewater isn't the only titanic trait of the Grand Canyon. Every aspect of this 278-mile natural wonder of the world is on a mammoth scale. One feels like a tiny minnow caught in a vast, unstoppable current. From the river, a mile below the famous North and South Rims, one glimpses only a narrow vertical piece of the famous red, white, purple, and gray rock cliffs that wind like a colorful labyrinth through the Arizona desert, but the views are equally dramatic, and the experience is a once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

**The Trip.** Only 27,000 people—half the number who climb New Hampshire's Mount Washington annually—run the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon each year. Private parties wait a dozen or more years to receive a permit from the National Park Service to run the river without a guide. Parker and I were among a group of three families from the Upper Valley and one from England traveling downriver with one of the 16 licensed commercial outfitters. ▶



A 1923 USGS marker at a potential dam site that was never developed.

## HUMANS IN THE GRAND CANYON

Though Native Americans have occupied places in the Grand Canyon for over 10,000 years, the Spaniard Captain Garcia Lopez de Cardenas and his soldiers were the first Westerners to look upon it. Guided by Hopi Indians as they searched for the legendary Seven Cities of Gold, Cardenas and his troops stood on the South Rim in 1540.

The bottom of the Grand Canyon remained a mystery for another 329 years, until 1869, when Major John Wesley Powell, a geology professor who lost an arm in the Civil War, led 10 men down into the canyon. A few daring prospectors, trappers, geologists, and cartographers followed him. Then in 1924, the US Geological Survey conducted the first instrument survey of the Colorado River through the canyon, looking primarily for places to build hydroelectric dams.

Today, the flow through the river is greatly influenced by Glen Canyon Dam, 15 miles above the put-in at Lee's Ferry, and somewhat by Hoover Dam, which forms Lake Mead at the bottom of the canyon. Numerous tributary creeks feed the main channel inside the canyon, as well as the Little Colorado River, which enters at mile 62.

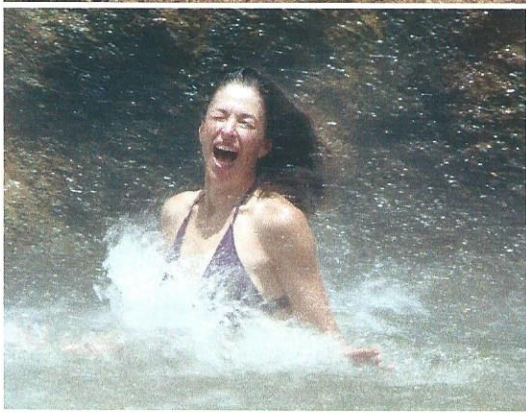
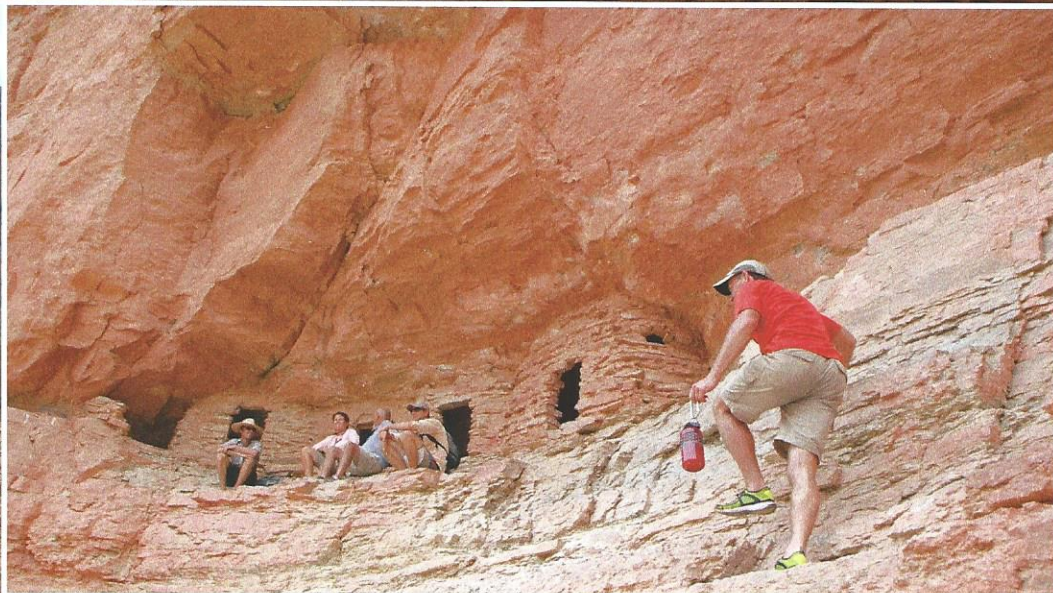
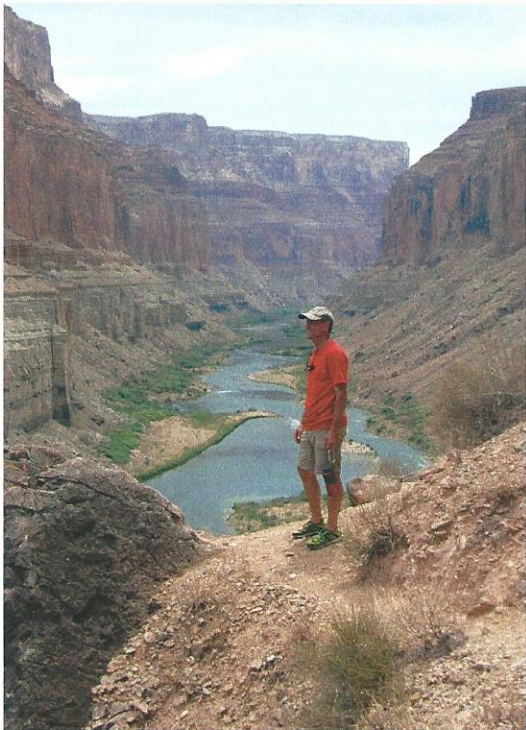
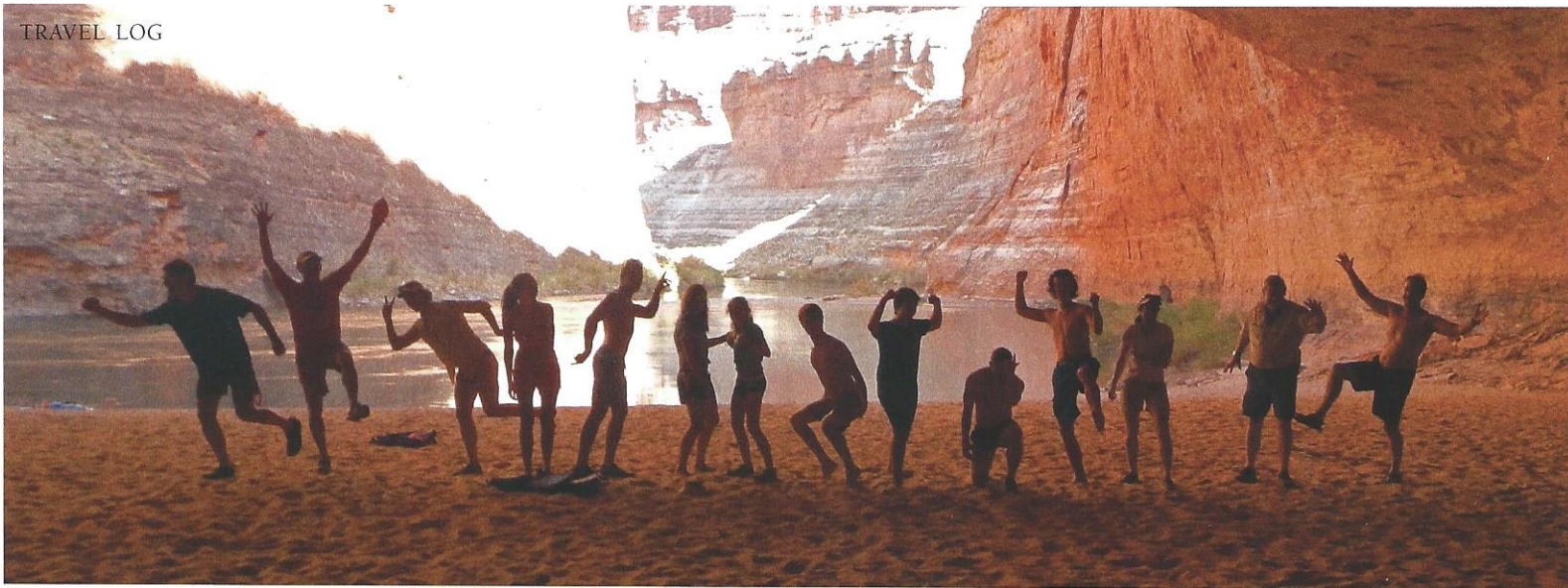
### FOR MORE INFORMATION

*Belknap's Waterproof Grand Canyon River Guide* by Buzz Belknap and Loie Belknap Evans (Westwater Books, 2012)

*Grand Canyon, The Complete Guide* (4th edition) by James Kaiser (Destination Press, 2011)

Grand Canyon National Park official website (includes a list of licensed commercial rafting companies): [www.nps.gov/grca/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/grca/index.htm)





Clockwise from top: Rafters pose in Redwall Cavern. Rafters by the Granaries, where Pueblo Indians stored food in the desert environment. A guide walks the ledgy trail beside the Little Colorado River. The author by Deer Creek Falls. A view of the canyon on a perch en route to the Granaries.



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Commercial rafting trips in the Grand Canyon range from three to 18 days.

Ours was the classic 187-mile-long five-nighter, putting in at Lee's Ferry and taking out at a helicopter pad at the Bar 10 Ranch above Whitmore Rapid. Running the rapids was the big draw for our adventurous group of six adults and 10 teenagers, but once we entered the canyon, we discovered many other intriguing aspects of this famous geologic phenomenon.

**Redwall Cavern.** A short four miles after pushing into the water on the second day, we beached the raft at the mouth of gaping Redwall Cavern, an immense cave deeper than a football field and several hundred feet high. A Frisbee and a football quickly appeared from our dry bags. Those who weren't showing off their rock-climbing skills at the back of the cave dove for Hail Mary passes and ran helter-skelter in the sand inside this immense riverside cavity.

**The Granaries.** We beached the rafts at least once each day to hike. The first was up the steep canyon wall to a row of windows in the red rock. The windows were actually the openings of several granaries built a thousand years ago by the Pueblos to preserve corn and seeds in the desert climate and to prevent rodents from ravaging their food. Constructed from chunks of brick-like rock, the openings in the side of the cliff provided a spectacular perch from which to view a length of the canyon to the north and south around a great bend in the river.

**Endangered Species.** We camped the second night at the mouth of the Little Colorado River, 10 miles beyond the granaries. As we secured the rafts to the shore, I noticed a school of odd-looking fish gathering under the shelter of the pontoons. Neanderthal-like humps protruded from their brows, continuing down their swollen backs.

"No fishing," warned one of our guides. "Those are humpback chubs. They're endemic to the Colorado River and an endangered species." The chubs were only one of a number of creatures

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A raft takes its wild ride down Lava Falls, a class 8 to 10 rapid.

we saw along the riverbanks that included desert bighorn sheep, collared lizards, and scorpions.

**Deer Creek.** The next day, we disembarked at Deer Creek Falls, a 100-foot-tall cascade framed by lush ferns. We bound into the emerald pool at its base, excited for the chance to shower after two nights in a tent, only to stop short and shield our eyes. The falling water created a wind of 70 miles per hour, sending a bruising spray toward all who attempted to wade toward the alluring white ribbon.

We quickly retreated, opting instead to hike above the falls along Deer Creek. The ledgy trail led us through a dramatic slot canyon to a stunning oasis. A grove of cottonwoods sheltered us from the midday sun as we splashed in the refreshing creek. I soaked for an hour in the crystal clear stream that tumbled over smooth rocks into a small pool. A magical place, I half expected a water nymph to appear from under a fern, beckoning us to stay forever, but eventually our guides urged us back to the rafts.

**Lava Falls.** On the fifth day, we floated past Vulcan's Anvil, a sacred Native American site and 50-foot-tall lava island left over from a volcano that erupted 200,000 years ago. Vulcan's Anvil marked the approach of the last big whitewater of the trip. Known as Lava Falls, this class

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8 to 10 turbulent finale was a two-part descent composed of a 13-foot drop and then a 14-foot drop. Despite successfully running a number of other rapids of the same rating over the past five days, this one seemed bigger and wilder.

As the raft accelerated toward the chaos, we obeyed the now-familiar call to “suck rubber.” I closed my eyes and held my breath as I felt the nose of the raft take its first dive. Water crashed over us. The raft lifted through the froth, vaulting briefly into the air, and then slamming down into the maelstrom. It bucked and kicked like a rodeo bull, but I held on, pressing my face tighter and tighter to the rubber pontoon. And then it was over. Calm returned. Everyone high-fived as our collective adrenaline rush subsided.

As I watched my friends and family relax and sunbathe, warming up after this last wild ride, it struck me how much the Grand Canyon changed from one moment to the next. The barren cliffs turned into tropical microcosms wherever waterfalls or creeks flowed. The rocks themselves changed color and texture around each bend. We felt scorched by the sun, then chilled by waves. The water was flat one minute and churning the next. It was the whitewater that attracted us to this trip, but by the end of it, we had experienced so much more. Rafting the Grand Canyon had certainly lived up to its reputation as one of the greatest outdoor adventures on Earth. 🐾

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