

Grand Canyon rafting trip May 17-25



Hitting one of the big rapids down the Grand Canyon

It all started with a dream - a dream to visit one of the most rugged wilderness areas in America, the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. I had seen videos about such an adventure and appreciated them even back in high school. And now that I'm in a stage of life to be able to enjoy such an opportunity, I decided to go. I always thought it was nearly impossible to get on a trip after hearing of seemingly endless waiting lists - my friend has been waiting for over 12 years to go! And I know people that when they finally got to go, they were married with small kids and weren't able to go anymore anyway! But the waiting list is for private trips where you paddle your own raft. But I was more inclined to pay for a commercial trip, get treated to nice food along the way and have the planning taken care of (and wouldn't have to wait 12 years to go!)

Last year, my friend John Keen and I went to Costa Rica which included a bit of white water rafting through some remote stretches of the rainforest - it was a great adventure. So I figured John would be inclined to maybe doing the Grand Canyon as well. I asked Allen also, and he was so eager to go, I think he booked first and then I was committed to go!

I had a few expectations, but tried not to hype it up too much - they sent plenty of materials ahead of time and pictures and information, but mostly just read the logistical parts. I'd rather be surprised than have tons of expectations and get disappointed along the way. Plus it would be much more stressful having so many expectations! Probably my greatest expectation was that the trip would be beyond what I could expect and I would see new meanings in life by experiencing this journey together.

As usual before a big trip, a lot of anticipation preceded the adventure. I was trying to be very careful the weeks before the trip to not spoil anything at the last minute! So much planning went into the couple months before we left - and with John's meticulous planning, we had to make sure every detail was perfect. We changed our minds a couple times - flying to Phoenix instead of Las Vegas and renting a car and driving instead of taking the flights. The fact we could have a guy sign our rental car agreement in Flagstaff on the way so we could have our car shuttled (instead of us having to take the bus and shuttling it ourselves - saved probably 3-4 hours each way, and the price was about the same as the bus. It was just dealing with a bit of headache and a bit of uncertainty in case the car didn't show up)

May 17

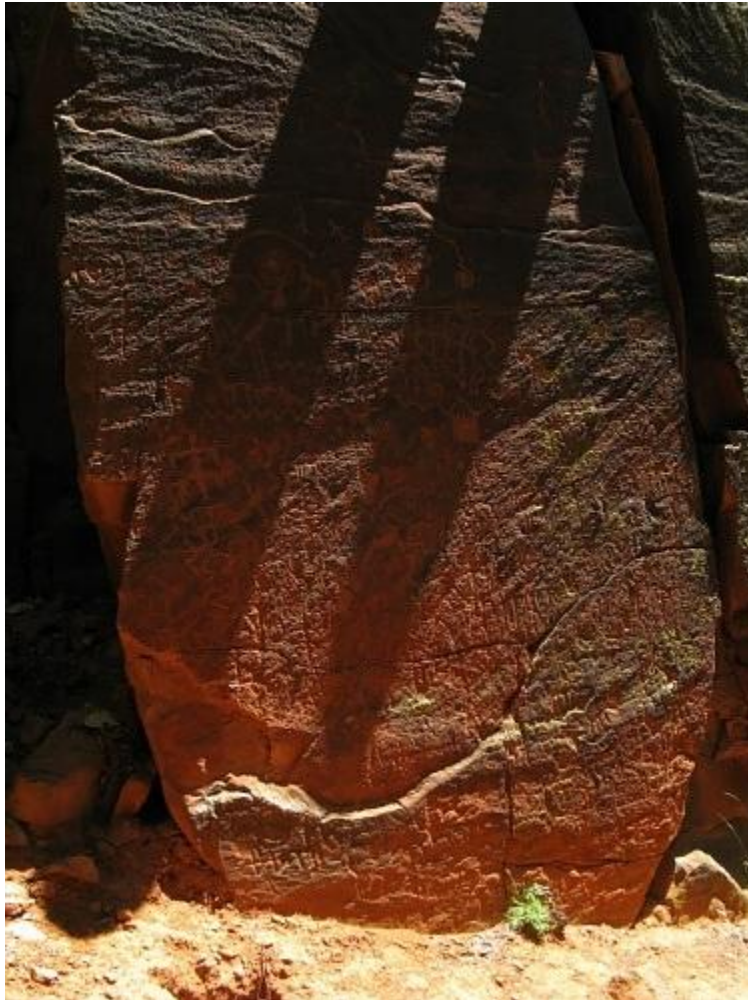
It was a fairly early wake up, but I was out of bed so quickly in anticipation of a great trip. After meeting at John's and taking the cab to SJC, we were on a plane heading to Phoenix. It felt a bit strange going on a 9-day trip with just a backpack (I felt I was missing so many things - normally I'd be checking at least another whole bag on a trip that length), but we had to realize we were going to rafting and hiking out of the canyon with pretty much all our stuff (besides a little we'd leave behind in the car), so we were packing pretty light.

Allen did a bit of research on some side trips to do along the way and brought a whole packet of info - his passion is archaeology and visiting ruins, which there are plenty of in northern AZ. There's ruins in the grand canyon - Nankoweap, Tusayan and others, as well as Flagstaff area - V-Bar ranch, Walnut Canyon, Wupatki to name a few. I figured this would be icing on the cake but as for Allen, I think he was looking forward to the side trips at least as much as the actual rafting on the river!

Out of the Budget rental car center, we got straight on the road and started heading north. We just had to be in Marble Canyon by 8:00 for our orientation meeting. It was about 10 am and the drive was about 5 hours, so we had plenty of time (and John shouldn't have to stress too much about being late). It was interesting how even in just a couple hours, how the scenery changed dramatically. The road climbed steadily out of the Sonoran desert with its signature flowering Saguaro cactuses to grassy steppes around 4000 feet, and eventually to juniper and pinion pine forests by Flagstaff. It was surprising how just in a couple hours how much the landscape had changed - the desert seemed so far away from the lush pine forests.

Allen took us up to V-Bar ranch, a site featuring Southern Sinagua rock art dated between around 1150 and 1400 AD. This is one of the few sites where archaeologists actually can understand the meanings of some of the petroglyphs carved hundreds of years ago. The shadows of a couple protruding rocks would

align with certain features of the rock art at different times of the year. Certain significant times were the equinoxes and solstices as well as the start of some of the growing seasons. When we were there around noon, the shadow fell next to their symbol for "corn" - a vertical symbol that looked more like a caterpillar than an ear of corn, but when you look at it a certain way, you realize "oh yeah, I see how that could be an ear of corn". This shadow placement meant it was about the right time of year to start planting corn. Some petroglyph symbols are pretty universal (like the sun shape and swirls meaning water), but many other shapes were ambiguous. Some archaeologists see V-Bar as a sort of "Rosetta stone" to help interpret some of the Sinagua petroglyphs.



The V-Bar site was significant since it was actually an example of archaeoastronomy, since it could tell Probably the most famous examples of archaeoastronomy include Stonehenge and the great pyramids in Egypt and the Jantar Mantars in India, but it was interesting how the local Sinagua Indians employed the same principles - even though they were perceived as a fairly primitive people. But I wouldn't doubt that some of the people were probably as intelligent (and maybe even more so) than people today - coming up with innovative ideas for astronomy as well as how to be resourceful with what was given in their environment. So many people in America today often don't have to be resourceful - you can just

search on the Internet to find ideas, or you can just go to Wal-Mart and buy what you need, instead of having to be creative and invent something.

We made a brief stop at the Budget rental car center in Flagstaff to make sure the paperwork was signed to have the shuttle driver take the car for us. I was anticipating a bit of headache and John having to do a lot of explaining, but it actually went pretty smooth (but I know John spent countless hours on the phone to make sure it was going to work out). In the end, I'm really glad it worked out, since it saved us some expensive flights (about \$360 R/T per person = \$1100, but the car was just a couple hundred), and gave us plenty of flexibility to see things along the way.

We crossed the Mogollon rim and started heading back downhill toward the rim of the Grand Canyon. The snow-covered San Francisco peaks seemed like a bit of Switzerland inside the Arizona desert - so out of place. An ancient stratovolcano that blew its top several times, Humphreys Peak is currently the highest at 12633 ft. Supposedly the trail to the summit is about 8 mi roundtrip and about 3000 ft elevation gain - fairly moderate. We will have to go back sometime and do the hike to the AZ highpoint.

It was a mostly uneventful drive up to Marble Canyon - across mostly open desert once we passed Flagstaff. Then out of nowhere, we came upon a deep gorge - the sign said we were crossing the Little Colorado - it was a pretty deep (but dry) canyon. I heard about the brilliant blue water that flowed down the Little Colorado but wondered if it was dry this time of year - hmmm, bummer. Well we continued the rest of the way to Marble Canyon, enjoyed the view from the Navajo bridge adjacent to our hotel, and enjoyed some burgers and nut brown ale for dinner. A couple folks spotted some California condors around the bridge - I'm glad the environmentalists did something right to save the 9-foot wingspan birds.



The folks at the table next to us, Irene and Wendy were also going on the rafting trip - in fact they'd be paddling as well, so we would be in the same boat! Apparently it was not an uneventful flight from Vegas to Marble canyon - the luggage ended up in Grand Canyon village - oops, so they had to make a special detour to pick up the luggage and come back! The airstrip at Marble canyon is not so apparent - just an area where a few bushes were cleared so small planes could land!

At the briefing, we met the 20 or so people on the trip - we had 3 oar boats with 5 people each, and a paddle raft with 6, with 4 guides (Matt, Ben, Carrie, and Tom), and 2 taking the gear boats (Chris and John). People came from all around - the 3 of us from the bay area, a group from TN, a local (AZ) group, 4 Aussies, a couple Canadians and a few from the east coast. We were all looking forward to a great adventure!

May 18: (day 1)

After a quick breakfast and getting our gear ready, we were ready to set out. We parked the car in the long-term parking, expecting to see it 6 days later at Grand Canyon village... Fresh batteries loaded and fresh memory card ready to go, and thanks Allen for lending me a waterproof camera bag (I had planned to use a Tupperware and keep the camera in the dry bag, but with the camera bag I could actually take pictures on the river!) We were about to embark on a journey that back in 1869 John Wesley Powell pioneered for the first time. Now, it is a fairly commercialized operation that almost anyone can do (with a choice of kayaking, paddling a raft, going on an oar boat, or riding a giant motorized raft that can take over 20 people).



The waters just downstream of the Glen Canyon dam were clear and cold and very still - the reflections of the growing canyon walls becoming more dramatic as we descended into the Kaibab and Toroweap and Coconino layers. The waters would have been much different if the dam wasn't built in 1963 - after a really good snow year in the Colorado Rockies, the water would be a muddy rushing torrent running at a pace near 100K cfs instead of the mellower 10K cfs. The calm clear water was serene but not natural - many of the native fish have died off and been replaced with cold-water trout. The water released at the bottom of the dam is quite cold even on the hottest summer days. The park service actually ran a controlled flood for about 2 days back in February, helping to replenish some of the natural beaches (the clearer water with the dam tends to erode the beaches and wash away nutrients for the plants to live). I'm glad the proposed dam (Marble Gorge Dam) further downstream was never built (you could see where geologists dug prospector tunnels to investigate the quality of the rock). But I guess the Glen Canyon dam was a blessing and a curse at the same time - without the dam, we probably wouldn't be rafting the Grand Canyon - the conditions would be much more unpredictable.

We got our paddles warmed up as we hit the first couple rapids - the Badger creek and Soap creek rapids. Both are rated up to class 6 (out of 10 on the grand canyon - these would probably be easy class III otherwise - the Grand Canyon has its own rating system for rapids. So no, class 6 is not a waterfall here to be portaged! The biggest rapid of the upper canyon is Hance, rated up to class 9 (class IV otherwise) - the biggest is Lava Falls (class 10 = V), but that's a ways downstream of our take-out point. We'll have to come back next year to run the rest of the river!

Most of the rapids are formed from when flash floods washed debris down the side canyons, temporarily damming the river, until the river forces its way through the debris. The deeper and steeper the side canyon, generally the bigger the rapid. Many of our campsites and lunch spots ended up being right after a rapid on one of the beaches (we'd run the rapid, eddy out just after it, and land on the beach).

We passed 10-mile rock, a seemingly out-of-place giant slab of rock that must have fallen with quite a thunk from high above - the slab stuck out of the river probably 20 feet high and was probably 30 feet long. The weather was getting pretty hot - probably was 100 degrees outside, but when we were on the river, the dry heat didn't seem too apparent. Every splash was a bit of a shock at first, but then was a nice cool relief afterward! We took turns jumping off the raft and going for a swim - Allen eagerly took his turn enjoying the cool water before struggling his way back into the boat. It was good practice to make sure we could get ourselves back in the boat in case we had to swim any of the rapids coming up. When it was my turn, they said I bounced right back in the boat even before touching the water - oh my it was cold!



We didn't hit a lot of big rapids the first day - the canyon was still relatively shallow, but the big rapids were to come. We camped near mile 18 in the Supai sandstone layer just upstream of North Canyon. This layer tended to create beautiful "amphitheatres" created by headward erosion of the sandstone. Enormous curving shelves of red and tan sandstone would hide fascinating chambers cut from the rock above. We had passed a few of these along the way, but I didn't expect to see too many of the up close. It turned out there were 2 of them right at the campsite! So before dinner, Allen and John and I went exploring.

Just as we were hiking back toward camp, we heard the blast from the conch shell - time for dinner! The conch would be dearly anticipated for the next few days - and would signal the start of each feast. Tonight's dinner was grilled steaks and vegetables and chocolate cake for dessert.



It was a lovely broad sandy beach and we all found our little niches hidden among the brush to lay our tarps and mats and sleeping bags (it looked like less than a 0.00 % chance of rain, so forget the tents!). And there were no mosquitoes, so we enjoyed a beautiful night under the stars. I slept pretty soundly until the bright full moon came up over the canyon walls high overhead - it was hard to sleep with the beautiful and enchanting desert moon overhead. A few of my favorite barbershop songs were relentlessly going through my head as well - "when I'm a-roamin' ... "to Arizona, where I'm a gonna miss the winter weather by the borderland" ... "riding through the Rockies and the canyon grand".

May 19: (day 2)

When I awoke, it was already light out, but before 6 am. They said there would be a conch to wake us up, then another one in 30 minutes saying breakfast was ready. I was awake for less than a minute when the conch went off - I figured I had 30 minutes until the next one, so I curled up in my sleeping bag a little longer. Unbeknownst to me, Allen took a picture of me missing breakfast, because that was actually the second conch (and I had already slept through the first one)! Oops - I scarfed down a couple pancakes (whatever was left) and got stuff packed up for a big day.

We cruised down the serene and smooth waters of the Colorado, watching a couple herds of bighorn sheep grazing in the grass by the river's edge. It was great to really feel in the wilderness - and we had 5 more days! It was great. Life was good.

Our first "official hike" was up North Canyon - a beautiful slot carved in the Supai sandstone. We cruised through the rapid at the mouth of the canyon and beached just downstream - this would have been a cool place to camp too - there were beautiful areas everywhere! We got our shoes out (the guides put them all into a big waterproof bag, so we'd have them ready for the hikes), and greased up with sunscreen and filled our water bottles (thanks to an industrial size water filter and tubs full of Gatorade powder). Our hike was soon interrupted by chuckwallas - giant lizards posing for great pictures sunning themselves among the rocks. I had a 2 GB card which could hold over 900 pictures - I figured that would be plenty, so I was just shooting everything (though I would be badly mistaken later on the trip - I would have to find blurry or duplicate pictures to delete to take new ones)!

The canyon ascended a series of sandstone ledges - often like climbing steps through layers of geologic time. Different flowers were blooming everywhere - everything from the giant white sacred daturas to Indian paintbrush and marigolds and so many others I couldn't name. My favorites were the cactus blossoms - the bright pink and purple blossoms of the prickly pears and beavertails and hedgehog cactus. A little further downstream were the enormous century plants - the giant 15-foot stalks were covered with yellow blossoms - just watch the prickly leaves at the bottom!



The canyon was quite dry, though it was evident that enormous amounts of water had flowed at some time. The walls were full of interesting layers of sandstone, bent and curled in all different shapes, kind of like those 3-D models formed with stacked layers of cardboard cut to match the contours of the landscape. But here the contours wrapped around the walls in all different angles - creating an idyllic setting like from another planet. It was actually a bit frustrating trying to get photos - since the interesting formations were all around us (which direction do you point the camera for the "best shot"? And there was so much dynamic range - the brights were too bright, the darks too dark, so the exposure bracketing got put to good use!)

It was such a magical place - but it turned out the best was yet to come - a giant pool formed in an opening in the canyon - but the walls kind of overhung, hiding the pool until we were right next to it! The water was like glass, reflecting the beauty all around like a mirror. It was a great surprise - and one of the reasons I didn't want to read too much about the trip before going on it - it's one thing to see

places like this when you expect them, but it seemed much more mystical and enchanting to "discover" them without knowing they were there.

We had many more miles to cover on the river and alas, we had to leave the enchanted place eventually, but not without looking back a few times. Back on the rafts, we entered the Redwall limestone layer in the canyon as the rim continued growing higher overhead. We passed through the "roaring twenties" - a nice set of rapids as we descended deeper in the canyon, on our way toward South Canyon and Vasey's paradise. It was a nice change after a lot of flat-water earlier on the trip.

We were soon at our camp for the night - near the mouth of South Canyon. This was probably the most interesting spot along the river - the geology throughout the Redwall limestone layer is fascinating. South canyon ends with a beautiful slot canyon carved through hundreds of feet of the Redwall limestone. There are even some side slot canyons that empty into South canyon. The hike is semi-technical, though, navigating 15-20 foot boulder-chokes, spillovers, narrow ledges, and waterfalls. An interesting (but quite adventurous) way to the Colorado river is through South canyon - you have to drive many miles of bumpy dirt roads to access the trailhead, then negotiate many obstacles along the trail, but it is an amazing hike!



We arrived at camp fairly early, giving us some time to mess around and enjoy the place. A few of us got a game of horseshoes going and a bunch of guys were playing some crazy stick game (which I never got the name of, but apparently it is an "official game"). A group of us decided to go on a hike of our own toward one of the giant caves above our camp. It didn't look that far, and there was a good trail, so we went for it. The cave was called Stanton's cave, and was discovered by Robert Stanton when he was surveying a railroad route along the Colorado River around 1889. The cave contained artifacts including

4000-year old split-twig figurines and pottery and many other items. The park service put a gate around the entrance to protect the treasures inside as well as protect the habitats of the Townsend big-eared bats inside. The cave probably went back another 80 feet further (you could see to the end from the gate), but it would be interesting to actually explore some of the treasures inside (but you'd wonder how long they would last before they all got pilfered...)

The view out the entrance was spectacular - the 500-foot wall behind the smooth green water of the Colorado was framed in the giant 80-foot entrance of the cave. We watched as a couple other rafting companies took their boats by - I guess they would be camping just a bit downstream. I felt lucky to be at such a great spot - maybe that's why we tried to get there first! We still had a bit of time, so we decided to head a little further out to the enchanting waterfall, which we learned later was called Vasey's paradise. It was a bit of paradise too, the beautiful and lush green plants, monkey flowers, and mosses and ferns were all around. The mineral water from the waterfall with the scents of the plants reminded me of being back in Costa Rica in the rainforest - it was lovely. What was truly amazing though was how the waterfall spilled out of the middle of the wall! Apparently there was an enormous cave system through the rock and the water drained its way out through the rock wall. If only there was a way to climb up there and poke around a bit...

A couple of us went up through the plants to the stream to the pool at the base of the waterfall - the water was so much warmer than the freezing cold Colorado - what a relief! I knew we didn't have a whole lot of time to hang out, but I wanted to soak it in at least a little bit. Rodger had my camera to take pictures of me (I didn't want to risk dropping it or getting it wet, so I left it behind, not realizing the best part was just behind the bushes - oh well, the memories would last a lifetime!)



Back at camp, I was dismayed to find out the "lush green plants" were indeed poison ivy (one of the few spots in AZ where they have poison ivy in fact) - bummer. But fortunately I spent a lot of time in the water that hopefully most of it washed off. But just as a precaution, I took soap and did a good wash in the river, braving the icy water. A few days later, I had just a couple bumps on my foot, but they never spread or really itched much, so I felt I dodged a bullet. Whew!

The guides had mentioned the 3 H's: health = hydration + hygiene. I felt a lot better after cleaning up, and I made sure I had plenty of water around dinner (before the alcohol... even though beer is mostly water, the alcohol offsets the benefits of the water, so we had to be mindful).

Dinner was grilled salmon - another culinary treat! This rafting company was great - the best camps and the best food!

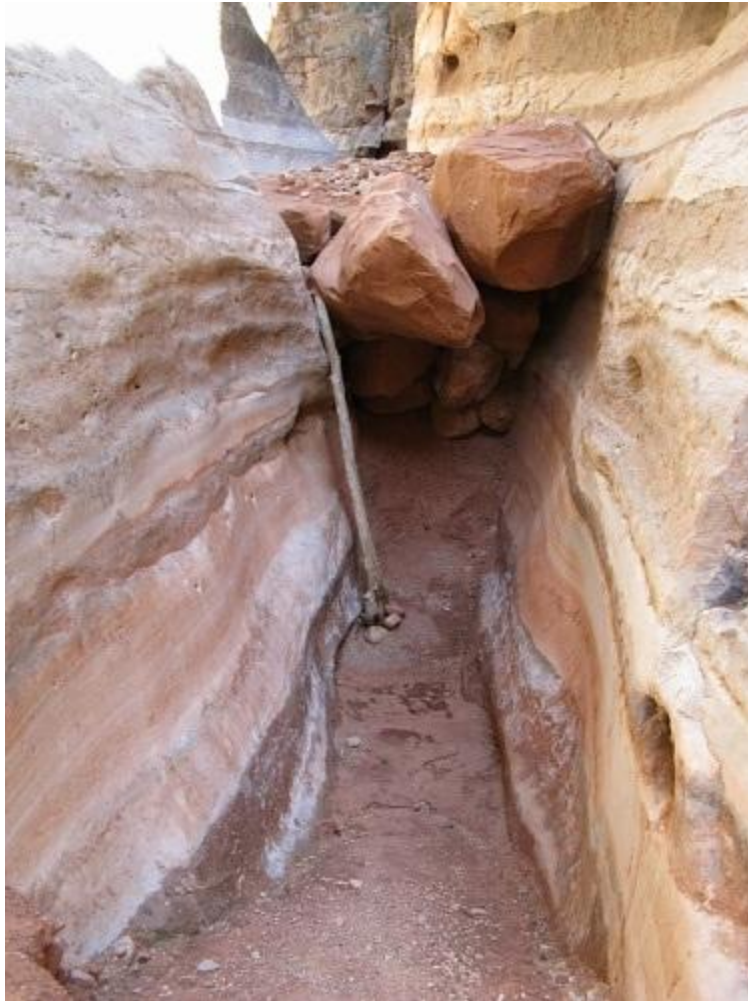
It was a big day and we were in bed shortly after dark - we started adapting to sunlight hours pretty quickly. It was still a bit hot when going to bed, but as it cooled off during the night, I woke up several times, putting on more layers!

May 20: (day 3)

Today, I actually woke up on the first conch, so I enjoyed a leisurely coffee and breakfast and hanging out a bit in the morning. Blueberry pancakes and fruit for breakfast were quite a treat! As we were breaking down our camp, I saw the bag of shoes was out again - we were gearing up for a hike.

I was thinking - oh shoot, we just did the hike last night on our own, and we were going to do it again? But the guides had a different hike in mind - to go up to one of the other caves and see the winding slot of South Canyon. I had heard the canyon was pretty interesting, but I was surprised a bit when we bypassed the entrance of the canyon. Tom, our guide pointed to a cave high up in the Redwall layer - that was our goal. Wow - quite a ways up there. This hike ended up being one of the most interesting on the whole trip, however. We climbed through a deep crack in the rock (some people needed a boost, but we all made it). I'm glad we had the shoes, since it was a good trek probably 500 feet up. But it was quite rewarding as we visited rocks covered with petroglyphs, some Anasazi ruins, and finally our objective, a cave that opened in the back as well, framing a view deep down the South Canyon slot - wow! The slot was beautiful, the narrow and slick walls winded as far as the eye could see. Some of us traversed some narrow (and pretty scary) ledges for a great look.

Back on our way down, we waved to some of the other rafting companies and private kayak groups passing by, as we negotiated the steep trail. I knew we had the steep crack to down climb - I was a bit worried about some people, but we must have gone a different way since we were soon on the sandy banks of the river - whew! On the way back to camp, it didn't look like we were going to be visiting the canyon after all - hmmm. I was looking forward to it. I was hiking back with Carrie, one of the guides and she was explaining about Stanton's party and how they hiked out through that canyon. I wanted to check it out a little.



Going into the canyon, I could see what appeared to be a fairly flat sandy and gravelly floor with some boulders sticking out a little. We had probably 10-15 minutes before we had to be back, so I poked in a little. However, quickly to my dismay, what I thought was a low boulder sticking just a couple feet above the gravelly canyon floor was preceded by a 10-foot deep hole. Apparently, when the canyon flash-floods, the torrents of water form a rapid and reversal, scouring out the gravel just downstream of the boulder choke. Fortunately, there was a nicely placed log next to the boulder, so I was able to gingerly climb the log and cross the obstacle. Carrie stayed at the bottom and didn't go up, so I didn't want to go too much further. I was hoping that would be the only obstacle, but soon afterward was another boulder choke, this time with two 6-8 foot boulders preceded by about a 15-foot hole. There was also a log there, but it looked quite treacherous and without Carrie spotting me, I didn't want to attempt it on my own - bummer. But we only had a few minutes and I had to get back - at least I still got some good looks down the canyon - we'd have to go back some other day - maybe the boulder chokes will be easier next time - those sort of canyon features are transient and change often.

Back in the rafts, we soon passed Vasey's paradise on our right, giving us a good angle of where we were last night. Several large amphitheatres were carved out of the limestone by seeps - like the weeping rock in Zion national park, but much bigger (but much more inaccessible). It was awe-inspiring to gaze

up at these huge domes hundreds of feet overhead. Just around the corner, however, was one of the most impressive features of the whole canyon - Redwall cavern. This vast chamber, said to be able to hold 50000 people was carved by a bend in the river. The ceiling is so high and the cavern so deep, we soon had a good game of Frisbee going. I've heard of groups setting up volleyball nets and having a nice game of beach volleyball in the deep sand in the cavern!



The rocks on the downstream side of the cavern were full of fossils thought to be crinoids and nautiloids, ancient sea creatures that lived in the shallow sea where the Colorado plateau was deposited layer by layer. We were greeted by probably 3 other rafting companies there - it is one of those "must-see" spots for any river trip. And for good reason too!

The stretch of river through the Redwall layer was pretty flat - not too many side canyons spilled debris down the towering and sheer walls to make rapids. But it was a nice relaxing stretch, as we gazed high overhead at the cavernous domes and arches on both sides. One of the arches probably rivaled Rainbow arch on Lake Powell in sheer size, but due to its inaccessibility, seemed pretty obscure and the guides didn't even mention a name for it. The guidebook mentions "Royal Arches" - that sounds good to me.

The wind started to kick up a bit and we started to fall behind a bit - paddling started to become hard work. But this was partly due to Ben our guide - he was on a quest to collect beer cans - we managed to find and pick up 2 cans of Miller Lite floating in the river that one of the previous rafts had left behind (must have had a hole in their mesh drink bag!) Our moment of glory was when Ben managed to sweet-talk the guide on one of the motorized rafts that was passing through to give us a tow to get us caught up! The wind was howling by now, and the tow was great - and we celebrated by sipping our new prized beers!

The Redwall limestone gave way to the Muav limestone and then the Temple Butte limestone. When the Temple Butte layer was just one foot high out of the river, the guide mentioned for us to look the next day after we passed the Little Colorado River to our right at Temple Butte, and we could appreciate how much we were descending in the canyon. It felt like a journey experiencing the different rock layers and it was allegorical to experiencing different stages in life. We could look back and see how much we've grown through the years through different experiences. The Kaibab and Toroweap layers from just a couple days ago now seemed impossibly high. The canyon provided a visual metaphor of how something seemingly insignificant at one point can turn into something grand later on, if only we're faithful on our journey through life.

We crossed into the Bright Angel shale formation, where the rock was significantly more crumbly than the harder layers above. The canyon started getting broader with wider banks, and soon we were at the mouth of the Nankoweap delta. At the end of a long rapid (a relief from all the hard paddling through the flat water earlier), we pulled into camp. High above our heads were a set of granaries built by the Anasazi around 1100. These granaries protected corn and seeds from rodents and provided a good storage shelter for crops that the Indians farmed in the delta by the river.



The hike was quite strenuous, but I'm glad we were doing it in the late afternoon after the sun has dipped below the rim. But the view from the granaries was worth every step. It was amazing to imagine the Indians hauling sacks of food up and down the steep and narrow trail, but their livelihood depended on it. Everyone made it up to the ruins just fine, but unfortunately a couple people had a lot of trouble getting down. Fear of heights normally kicks in when you're looking down...

Back at camp, we were treated to some nice tuna steaks and some wonderful pineapple upside-down cake, and a spectacular sunset - a long lenticular cloud, kind of like a "sierra wave" was blowing over the rim of the Grand Canyon. Even though we couldn't see the rim from camp, we could infer its location by the shape of the cloud. It was a stunning red sunset, the clouds on fire, reflected on the still waters of the Colorado. I took plenty of pictures, utilizing the different modes in my camera, but worrying a little about the onset of possible inclement weather. A little while back when I was in the eastern Sierra, I was treated to a magnificent sunset, and a snowstorm, backed up against the Sierra crest was starting to blow in the next morning.

After a couple beers (we were all allotted 2 beers each night), we all puzzled through a "black magic" riddle - the solution was so simple, but plenty of "red herrings" were there to throw you off! And after dessert, we took turns taking the stage, singing everything from American Pie to being blessed by a Mercedes Benz! Doug had a great voice and serenaded the ladies a bit!



May 21: (day 4)

We awoke to another beautiful clear morning just as the coffee was being prepared - it was great to feel "in the groove" of being on the river, being adapted to daylight hours (not partly nocturnal "engineer" hours), and meals on a schedule (instead of periods of random and unhealthy snacking that's so easy to do). And I was starting to bond with some of the people - Tom and his family from AZ had a lot of great stories. And the blueberry pancakes were excellent!

I chose today to go in one of the oar boats - it was nice to get a break from the paddling. And one of the guides was predicting more wind and flat stretches. It was definitely much quieter on the oar boat, just the sounds of the oars occasionally slapping the water, no commands to forward paddle or make turns. And no more listening to "macho" stories about sex or close calls with the cops or doing jail time! In a place as majestic as the Grand Canyon, it was nice to just enjoy the scenery in peace and quiet for a bit.

The weather was indeed starting to change a bit, with clouds building around us and the wind picking up. The respite from the heat was nice though when the sun would duck behind the clouds, and I was glad to not be paddling against the headwind again. We pulled over to a nice beach by Lava Chuar, and got lunch ready. By day 4, we had the process down of making a line and passing the food, tables, and gear for cooking. A few of us went exploring around the lunch spot as the guides started cooking lunch - the 3 of us found an old abandoned mine on the side of the beach, its timbers still in place, and a pile of tailings outside the entrance. We went in as far as we could, using the lights of our bright camera LCD screens and taking occasional flash pictures. The mine went in probably 50 feet until making a hard

right turn - then the light didn't penetrate from the entrance so well, and progress was slow. We didn't go much further, but wondered how much further back it went - it seemed endless. We turned back and made it back to lunch right when the sandwiches and wraps were spread on the buffet table - perfect!

A little further downstream was one of the big highlights of the whole trip - seeing the confluence with the Little Colorado River. We could see the side canyon coming up for a couple miles - the gorge formed by the tributary river about as big and majestic as the main gorge itself. I was amazed as we got closer - the blue-green water of the Little Colorado was mixing with the darker green water of the main river. It reminded me of seeing the confluence of the Rio Negro with the Rio Solimoes near Manaus in the Amazon rainforest - the dark black water of the first river forming an undulating line with the muddy brown water of the other. But here, it was almost a pastel green and blue.

Here is where one of the fundamental rules about the Grand Canyon was important - when nature calls, do it directly in the main river - not behind bushes or in any of the side rivers. So we all did our business just past the rafts, then started hiking up the trail to the Little Colorado.

Layers of Tapeatz sandstone lined the side of the canyon where we hiked upstream of the Little Colorado. An old Anasazi dwelling had been converted into a cabin, which Ben Beamer, one of the early explorers stayed around 1890. The blue-green water was so beautiful in the river - it looked almost tropical, like the ocean at the Cayman Islands! It seemed strange that when we crossed the Little Colorado a few days ago (and many miles upstream), the muddy river-bank was pretty dry. Apparently, about 13 miles upstream, the turquoise water flows from Blue Springs, cascading toward the main Colorado River over a series of travertine dams, forming pools and rims.



We had a great view of some of the buttes high overhead - the Chuar and Temple Butte and many others. Sadly, back in 1956, this was the site of a major airline disaster when 2 commercial planes on sight-seeing flights collided in mid-air during a thunderstorm.

We took turns floating down the turquoise waters of the little Colorado - the water was so much warmer and it was great to go for a swim without worry about instant hypothermia! It looked pretty silly, but it was remarkably effective, to be wearing our life jackets like diapers! We could sit in our life jackets and float down the rapids of the Little Colorado like being on a big water slide! At the bottom of the rapid, swim toward the shore where you'll end up in an eddy, then you can walk up the sandy bank of the river. The eddy seemed a bit counterintuitive and you would float past where you wanted to get out, but the current in the eddy would float you back upstream a bit. The craziness reached a climax when about 10 of us formed a chain and ran the rapids together!

Back on the rafts, we started downstream once again - the clouds threatened a bit, but didn't rain or anything. The wind kicked up a bit though, like yesterday. Allen even took the oars for a bit, rowing like a machine propelling us into the wind. Carrie enjoyed the break! We were just about to land at a beach by the Unkar delta when Tom got out to scope out a camping spot. However, almost as soon as he set foot on the land to see if it was a suitable spot, a gust of wind came rushing in, almost taking him away in a "willy-wally" whirlwind and saying "thou shalt not pass!"

Well, back in the boats, we continued just a little further to a slightly calmer stretch, where we got out to do a short hike. It was quite windy lower down by the river, but closer to the hills where the wind was blocked, we got a nice break. Making our way up the red Dox sandstone, we soon came upon an odd shaped rock shaped like a throne meant for a king to sit. And the side of the throne was covered with petroglyphs - probably 800-1000 years old. Swirls and suns and many other shapes covered the sides. Just a little further were several more rocks with markings, making the trail we were hiking seem ancient and mysterious.



We soon came to an overlook, with panoramic views of several bends in the mighty Colorado River. Even the Desert View watchtower was visible now - that's one of the big tourist sites on the south rim of the canyon where visitors can actually see a good part of the river (in most areas, the river is covered by bends in the sinuous canyon). Just past the overlook, the trail headed across a barren windswept plain

high above the river toward an ancient ruin – the Cardinez ruin. The rock walls were still preserved, and even a bunch of pottery shards were visible, strewn around the ground near the ruin. We had to be quite careful where we walked, so we wouldn't step on and damage any pieces! The pottery shards were adorned with different colors and patterns. Evidence of trade with other Indian tribes was apparent in the different styles and colors used. Some pots had a fish-scale texture, where some were smooth and had alternating black and tan lines or red patterns.

The trail continued on and on - perhaps past even more ruins and artifacts, and even past a winding slot canyon (which would be really cool to wander through), but alas, it was time to head back. This spot where we were hiking would have been a pretty good camp, but we decided to head downstream just a wee bit further to a less exposed beach. I didn't mind - it wouldn't be a lot of fun having dinner and trying to set up camp in a howling wind - especially if there were whirlwinds like before!

We did our ritual again of creating lines to pass all the camp gear up on the beach - by now we had it down to a science, getting everything done in less than 5 minutes! I found a cool spot in a "cave" of tamarisk branches - perfect protection from the wind - you could hear it blowing around us, but it was nice and calm in the campsite.



I figured we had about 30 minutes until dinner, so I set out exploring a bit - a trail actually went right past my campsite toward the red hills behind. I figured I'd have at least a quick look - the trail branched, one way going up the hills and one way going into what looked like a nice red rock slot canyon. I didn't feel like climbing the hill, so I poked around in the canyon. Starting with a wide and gravelly river bed, the canyon soon narrowed down and the walls got much higher. Enormous boulders had cascaded down from high above - hope the wind wouldn't shake anything down when I was there! The canyon

started climbing through a series of polished ledges in the burgundy red sandstone, with occasional potholes carved by tumbling rocks and waterfalls. It was a cool find, with the feeling of "discovering" something remote.

The conch blew just as I was reaching my campsite on the way back - perfect timing! We enjoyed some nice enchiladas with a smorgasbord of different fillings, and just as I was sipping the beer, a graceful rainbow stretched across the sky to the east. A perfect moment!

However, a rainbow of course means there is rain nearby, and we even had a brief shower at the campsite. So we decided to go and set up the tents, just in case. But of course, once the tent was set up, the sky cleared into a sapphire blue and the rain seemed quite far off.



May 22: (day 5)

We awoke to a pretty cool morning - the weather had definitely changed and it didn't seem like it would get to 100 degrees like a couple days ago. The beautiful sunset of a couple nights ago did indeed mean a weather system was passing through. The morning sky was full of scattered mid-level clouds, which I know when in the Sierra, mean a good chance of rain and storms later on.

The clouds burned off though in the first couple hours of the day, as we started a hike from camp to an overlook and some more Anasazi ruins. It was pretty reminiscent of the hike yesterday to the petroglyphs and ruins on the overlook - but this time we were on probably a 500-foot bluff directly overlooking the river. Directly below us was the first of the big rapids we'd have to contend with - Unkar

Rapid (rated class 4-7, drops 25 feet). Just past that rapid is Nevills, then Hance (the big one of the trip, dropping 30 feet), then Sockdolager (love that name!), and Grapevine.

We got to see some more of the pottery shards at the ruins along the bluff - again with different multicolored patterns and textures. A lot can be studied about ancient civilizations by their artifacts. I wonder what will still be around from our civilization in 800 years.

We came back down toward camp, connecting back with the path I was on last night - coming down the hill to the intersection. A couple people went toward the slot canyon a little, but not too far. Glad I saw it on my own last night since we weren't coming back. We had camp pretty much all broken down even before we started the hike, so it was pretty quick getting back in the boats. I again was in the oar boat - but this time because a couple people wanted my spot in the paddle raft. I enjoyed the break from paddling.

We were soon in the rapids, as the canyon narrowed down as it entered the Granite gorge. The rapids came in rapid-fire succession for the next hour or so - Unkar and Nevill's were our warm-up. But before we tackled Hance, we had to get out and scout it - the people in the paddle raft were getting a good briefing on exactly what to do - they'd have to enter the rapid near river right, then paddle toward the left to avoid some big holes, then ride out the big waves near the bottom. Some of the waves were probably 10-12 feet high, and the length of the raft wasn't much more than that! Even the oar boats would pitch probably 45 degrees in the waves!



Our guide was visibly nervous before we entered the rapid, and she even made us shut up ("Be quiet - I have to concentrate!") when we were joking around about what might happen. We clammed up and took the next few moments quite seriously, and for good reason, the rapid was intense! We emerged unscathed, but just completely soaking wet - the water soaked even the inside of our raincoats!

The Hance canyon is one of the largest and deepest so far - centuries of flash floods down the canyon have washed debris, choking the river countless times. The rapid is constantly evolving - the guide mentioned that even in the last couple years, the holes are in different places and rocks have moved. Hence the need to scout it each time (you can't just use the same plan from last time). Hance canyon is also one of the few places one can hike out - the Little Colorado gorge along the Beamer trail which we

saw yesterday is another place. The Granite gorge area is so deep and rugged you're pretty well committed for a while!

Unfortunately, it was very difficult to warm up, as the skies opened and the rain started - of course, it was hard to get any wetter, but without the warming sun, we were losing some important body heat. The guides managed to find a nice overhanging rock, forming a bit of shelter from the rain, and a place where we could try to warm up a bit. A large pot of hot soup was on the fire, and we were all hunkered around the fire trying to warm up even before the soup was ready! The lunch stop turned into probably a 2-hour stop as we managed to warm up slightly and enjoy some good food. Of course food helps a lot with keeping warm. Thanks Martha for lending me a dry shirt (I had an extra dry shirt on the raft, but when I was cold, I put it on too early, and when both layers were wet, it was impossible to keep warm - I should have saved the extra shirt until after lunch and removed the other wet one... oh well, lesson for next time)

The rain was letting up, and we decided to push on a few more miles - we could have camped where we had lunch if it stayed too bad, but we were all glad to be moving again. Thankfully no more major rapids later in the day, and we were soon at our camp. The rocks in the granite gorge were fascinating - giant hunks of granite interspersed with Vishnu schist. The granite was more like a pegmatite - with enormous crystals, created under intense heat and pressure, and the rock cooling very slowly. It was like a geologists dream to see and study the rocks all around. It was good distraction from the cold and bit of rain.



We pushed on through the last set of rapids for our trip, and occasionally, the canyon rim high above would peek through between the narrow walls. By now, the Kaibab layer was almost 5000 feet above

our heads, and instead of raining there, it was snowing in the pine forests on the rim high above. Talk about extremes - it was over 100 degrees in the canyon just a couple days ago, now it was snowing!

It was a pretty cool camp, tucked in the deep and narrow ravine. How a beach formed there was itself quite interesting - it felt so isolated and remote, but fascinating to be there. The rain had let up and the sky was clearing nicely. A small side canyon emptied in the middle of our campsite - a little hike revealed numerous geological wonders - some beautiful chunks of granite with sparkling crystals would look nice on the mantle at home - if they weren't so big and heavy (and illegal!) to carry out.

We enjoyed our final dinner as a group - finishing our beers while hanging out with friends one last night. The guides prepared a spreadsheet to keep our contact information so we could stay in touch. One of the tents turned into the "party tent" with some of the girls and a couple guides hanging out into the night... We even had a chocolate cake - the guides were excellent! And creative too - well I guess over the many years this rafting company has been in business, the guides learned many cool tricks. You can make an oven by heating charcoal and covering one pan (with the cake) with another pan, then covering with more charcoal.

The stars were coming out as we settled in our tents (definitely wanted them, just in case!) I wished we could be going on and rafting more of the canyon, but was time to think about packing up. Another group of 20 were going to meet us tomorrow and we'd exchange places. They were hiking in, and we were hiking out. All of the guides and gear and rafts were continuing (well it's pretty hard to hike out the rafts and gear, but interesting there were no guide exchanges).

May 23: (day 6)

It was another cool and mostly cloudy morning - hmmm I hope it wouldn't be a soggy hike out. At least that's better than hiking out in 100 degree temperatures! We got up a bit earlier this morning - it was probably around 5:00 when the conch blew - the morning twilight was just starting to get brighter before sunrise. We had lunches already packed from last night, and breakfast was pretty light - just coffee and fruit and some oatmeal this time. But the guides wanted to get moving early.

We had just about 2 miles to cover before reaching our take out point by Pipe Springs. We had camped just a bit upstream of Phantom Ranch (where most people camp when hiking the canyon) - it was cool to have the spot all to ourselves instead of with hundreds of others! I originally thought we were going to take-out at Phantom Ranch, but we went past it a couple miles. And for good reason - the Bright Angel trail simply parallels the river for a couple miles (the canyon walls on the south side are far too rugged to hike out), until you get to Pipe Springs canyon, where the trail starts heading up to the rim. We crossed under both the bridge with the South Kaibab trail and the Bright Angel trail cross the river (it seemed strange to have 2 suspension bridges right next to each other crossing the river, but if one was damaged in a flood, it would sure be nice to have the other one!)

Paddling hard to the left, we made it to the Pipe springs beach (otherwise we would be hitting the rapids right after and it would be a LONG hike!). It was definitely a bittersweet moment when we picked up our shoes and started gearing up for the hike out. It had been such a great 6 days on the river, long enough to feel the rhythm of life on the river and to have most of the cares of the outside world purged away.



My pack had to be arranged a bit creatively - I hadn't actually used my camelback until now, and I had regretted even taking it. But now, I managed to piggy-back it on my other backpack, which worked perfectly, so I didn't have to carry extra water bottles in hand the whole way out. We said farewell to the guides and rafts and the mighty Colorado River, and started on the trail.

It felt like a solemn pilgrimage hiking out - we marched out in silence for the first mile or so, saddened by knowing the great trip was coming to an end, but also knowing we were on our way back home. I knew I would have to come back someday. It took probably an hour to hike of the deep and rugged granite gorge - we were impressed at how the sinuous trail weaved its way up the steep walls of the canyon. A couple prospector mining tunnels were near the trail (of course I was curious and had to peek inside one of them, but it didn't go too far).

A couple California condors were swooping around the edge of the Tapeatz layer still above us as we neared the end of the granite gorge. The change of scenery was welcome as we hiked higher. I felt we were experiencing the trip in reverse now, re-visiting all the rock layers we had rafted through over the last 6 days. We had the Bright Angel shale, Supai group, Temple Butte limestone, Muav limestone, Redwall limestone, Hermit shale, Coconino, Toroweap, and Kaibab layers yet to go through. Each rock layer, with its characteristic formations, reminded me of places earlier in the trip. The Redwall

limestone with its steep cliffs and caves reminded me of Vasey's paradise and Stanton's cave. A side canyon in the Supai group high on the trail reminded me of the amphitheatres around the campsite the first night.

We met the other group hiking in around Indian Gardens, halfway on the Bright Angel trail hiking out. Many of us were wearing our souvenir T-shirts the guides had given us the night before, and the group hiking in recognized us immediately! They were anticipating 9 days on the lower canyon. I wished I could join them and hike back in the canyon and raft the rest of the canyon! But maybe next year...



The view from Indian gardens was beautiful - the weather had actually been mostly sunny so far. The clouds from earlier in the morning had burned off above us, but started to pile up at the rim on the other side. It was a dramatic landscape of contrasts, seeing the clouds build into thunderheads on the far rim 10 miles away, with bright blue sky over us!

The air grew cooler as we neared the rim - the hike was climbing almost 5000 feet in about 8.5 miles, almost equivalent to half dome in Yosemite! But we wouldn't have to hike back down - that's the killer when doing half dome. We were mostly seeing the clouds building at the far rim, but there were actually clouds building by the rim over our heads, even though we didn't really see them or pay attention to them. However, in a few minutes, the first few raindrops started coming down on us - then harder, then it was sleeting, or hailing, or something! Finding shelter under some overhanging rocks, we hung out for a few minutes until it passed. Then the sun came back out and it was beautiful again. But now, we could see the massive cloud moving over the canyon and deep shafts of rain coming down over the canyon far below us. Seeing the weather in the canyon gave an appreciation of the immensity of the

gorge all around us - an entire thundercloud would hover over the canyon and we'd see the sunlight in the canyon behind the thundercloud and in front of it at the same time.



The long hike was a bit grueling at times as we neared the rim - the air growing thinner and our bodies getting more tired. We had snacks for on the trail, but we were anticipating a nice lunch at a restaurant on the rim. We crossed the 1.5 mile water station (which is as far as I had hiked in the canyon previously), where we met a school group with probably 50 kids! We were gradually hiking into Disneyland - a stark contrast from the solitude on the river earlier. When we reached the rim, there would be hundreds of thousands of people!

The crowds got steadily heavier as we neared the rim - so many people hike just a short ways down to have a look, then hike back up. We made our way back up through the top 4 layers - the Hermit Shale, Coconino, Toroweap, and Kaibab limestones, and recalled the first day of the trip, seemingly an eternity ago. It was almost cold now, but at least the rain had stopped and the sun was peeking through. A couple rumbles of thunder broke the silence in the distance, but it seemed far-off.

We enjoyed a hearty lunch at the Bright Angel lodge - the burgers and iced tea were like heaven after the long hike. We had gone out earlier to check on the car to make sure they had shuttled it sometime during the last 6 days, but the preliminary search turned up empty. During lunch, we were thinking about where the car might be - maybe we were just looking in the wrong place, or maybe it was still on its way. Allen left a message with the shuttle company (really hoping to get through, but no luck). I was in one of the souvenir shops looking at books when John and Allen went to the parking lot to look again, and hallelujah, the car was there just as promised! I wasn't too worried (John was very particular in his planning to make sure all the details would work out), but I started of thinking of contingencies (take the

train to Flagstaff, rent another car to drive back to PHX and abandon the original car in the worst case). But no worries, our beautiful white Mustang was waiting for us.

Allen's favorite souvenir shop was the Verkamps - it is about 100 years old, and it's about to be shut down. It is one of the few places you can still get authentic Indian souvenirs, and not some plastic rip-off made in the Philippines. The Navajo rugs were beautiful, but even a small 2x3 foot rug was near \$1000!! The pottery was excellent too, and the guy working at the shop knew some of the artists personally and could make recommendations. I had to pass on the \$1000 rug or the \$250 vase, but instead got a small sand painting.

I peeked out of the souvenir shop and it was suddenly snowing and hailing and sleeting at the same time - wow, where did that come from?! So we perused the kachina dolls and leather belts and stuff a little more. The skies cleared pretty soon afterward and we walked outside to see the pine trees and junipers coated with a thin layer of white - it was quite beautiful. We had entered a whole different climate zone in hiking just a few hours!

We checked in at the Yavapai lodge and enjoyed a nice dinner at one of the other restaurants nearby - even met Irene and Wendy there - they went out to eat also! And we saw a couple of the others in the bar as well! It seemed a small world, even though there were thousands of people. A nice prime rib steak and red wine capped off a great day.

May 24

We had all slept pretty soundly in the hotel last night, and soon we were up (but not at 6 am) for breakfast at the hotel - it was nice to not be on a schedule, but to do things on our own timing. No conch to abide by and no guides pushing us to get packed up!



We headed out leisurely, visiting some of the tourist spots along the canyon rim, Yavapai Point, Mather Point and a couple of the other vistas. The views were spectacular, but the canyon seemed almost so

distant from the rim. I think I enjoyed the more intimate feeling of being in the inner granite gorge when the walls were all around. Even though you could only see a portion of the canyon from the inside, it felt more real and personal. The Yavapai point visitor center was magnificent - complete with cut-away views of the layers of geologic time and how the canyon was laid and carved.

Next was a stop at the Tusayan ruin, complete with kivas, storehouses, farms and living quarters. The Anasazi must have lived in close quarters, 3-4 sharing a room probably 12 x 15 foot. But with the cold high desert climate, it was practical, since heating a larger room would have been difficult.



Our last glimpse in the Grand Canyon was from the Desert View watchtower right near the east entrance of the park. It was interesting to see it again, having seen it a few days ago from the Unkar delta on the river. We now had a view looking upstream probably 10 miles, all the way back past the confluence with the Little Colorado, and even toward Nankoweap. So many recent memories flooded back - it was almost like a

Being on the river with the rims hidden most of the time made us feel we were in a secret and otherworldly place. But now to have a glimpse back through time and space made the view from the watchtower seem like a portal to the magical place we had been. A flute player was making music from another time, the ethereal notes penetrating the centuries, though the ringing of someone's cell phone was a quick reminder of the present time. Murals painted on the inside of the walls were reminiscent of the ancient culture, and even the watchtower itself was built in the ancient style of stacked rocks and logs supporting the roofs.

We said farewell to the Grand Canyon - it was a magnificent place and experience!

The trip didn't end here, but thanks to John's careful arranging of the car shuttle, it saved us enough time to enjoy almost another whole day. We headed east, past an overlook into the Little Colorado gorge - our 3rd visit of this canyon. We must have been upstream of Blue Springs, since here at the base of the 1000 foot sheer walls, glimpses at the base of the canyon revealed a muddy base without much water flowing. Someday it would be a cool experience hiking in this canyon, seeing the springs that make the beautiful blue-green water, and re-visiting the confluence with the main Colorado.

A side trip took us past the Wupatki ruins, another set of 800-1000 year old pueblos that have been amazingly well preserved in the high desert air. Sitting on the lee of the San Francisco peaks, these ruins had quite a view. It was a very lonely but beautiful place. A few lingering heavy clouds from a clearing storm were pouring over the mountains in front of us, but the peaks tore a big hole in the clouds, making bright blue (but a bit windy) skies overhead. We were right near the elevation where the juniper trees started - just below us was flat desert and as the landscape slowly climbed higher, a few scattered trees appeared, then some more, until eventually the land was covered with a sea of green trees on the mountain slopes. Higher in the slopes but socked in clouds and snow, the junipers gave way to pine forests and then the rocky windswept alpine zone.



The main ruins at Wupatki were amazingly well preserved - the main pueblos consisting of several stories and several dozen houses. I wonder what life must have been like back then. I'm sure they were busy with their weavings, pottery, farming, sports (maybe even a variation of hockey, which Allen got excited about), and hanging out with neighboring communities (at least 6-7 different pueblos were visible in the surrounding hills, so it wasn't quite as isolated as it seemed). Near the "ball court" was a blowhole, formed from a cave underground - blowing warm, steamy air in the winter and cool air in the

summer. Except today, since the storm was clearing and the barometric pressure was going back up, the blowhole had turned into a "suckhole" and when I got close to it, it suddenly sucked my brochure out of my hand! Glad there was a protective metal grate over the opening!

About 1000 years ago, Sunset crater blew its top - cinders from the 1000-ft high cinder cone altered the landscape, allowing vegetation to grow in the new fertile volcanic soil. It is believed that Wupatki wouldn't have been built if it wasn't for the volcanic activity nearby. Since we appreciated the ruins of Wupatki, we had to have a look at Sunset crater. The road followed along the edge of the Painted Desert to our north and east - a beautiful polychrome view. We climbed up to about 7000 ft in the pine trees (and dodging the raindrops) as the landscape changed to black cinders all around. Catching a bit of a break in the weather, we took a short 1-mile loop trail over the Lava trail. Many features were there, including rough aa lava flows, smoother, ropy pahoehoe flows complete with cracks, trenches, and even some lava tubes. The trail went near the edge of Sunset crater itself (though the cinder cone is closed to hiking since hiking up the loose cinders leaves scars on the mountain that persist for decades - and is very hard anyway since you slide right back to where you started!).

We made our way into Flagstaff, following the historic route 66 to our hotel - the Best Western. Dinner downtown at one of the historic hotels was a treat, and we started reminiscing about the trip and thinking about the next one.

May 25

We had a little time to hang out near Flagstaff before having to catch our 4:00 flight back home. We talked about swinging over to Meteor crater an hour to the east, but it would be a bit rushed and we probably wouldn't have been able to do much else. I kind of wanted to see it, but there's always next time. There was also Walnut canyon nearby, but apparently a large rockslide closed the trail to the ruins and it won't be open until September - bummer. Well, there's plenty to do right in town, so we decided to spin through the Northern Arizona museum just north of town.

We got a bit of appreciation for the Hopi people, witnessing some of their dancing (while balancing water-jars on their heads!) and appreciating their artwork and handicrafts. Although many of the Indians have abandoned their traditional practices and arts and followed mainstream American society, it was refreshing to see some who have retained their proud culture. One of them gave an eye-opening talk about how plastic counterfeits of their fine jewelry can be mass-produced and imported and sold to unsuspecting tourists (they had two necklaces side by side and it was hard to tell which was real and which was not). Sometimes, the color in the counterfeit would fade in the sun, and in one case, the color would bleed on your clothes if it got wet! But unless it was raining when you bought the piece, you wouldn't know. Many of the Indians are deeply saddened at how some elements of their culture had been commercialized and undermined by cheap counterfeits and other similar looking handicrafts that are made by different Indian tribes in Mexico.



Time was running short so we had to get rolling. Unfortunately we didn't make the tour to the Lowell observatory (if we waited for the next tour, we'd be really rushed, and there is often a lot of traffic getting back to town) - bummer, but we did get some great views of the San Francisco peaks. The storm had cleared, giving us a view of the dazzling white snow-capped peaks and a deep blue sky. I wish we had another day to spend, but we had to keep moving.



It was pretty uneventful getting back to Phoenix, and we even had a bit of time to visit a petroglyph site on the edge of town. Allen had been there before and he remembered talking with one of the rangers (a descendent of one of the Indian tribes) for probably an hour. The same guy was there again, and we

got an interesting presentation on the interpretation of petroglyphs, illuminating how much we know and don't know. The interpretation of the signs has evolved through the centuries (a triangle 1000 years ago might mean something different than a triangle 800 years ago - think about the meaning of the word "gay" and pictures of rainbows). There is not a cut and dry answer to so many historical puzzles.

Well the trip was finally coming to a close as we filled the tank in the rental car and brought it back to the airport. A couple tears came during the ride on the rental car bus as floods of memories from the last week came rushing through and how much I had seen and experienced. It was a bittersweet time again - I was eager to get back home and get back to my daily routine (I knew there would be floods of things to deal with at work), but I wanted to stay a bit longer too! I would have dreams for the next couple weeks of different aspects of the trip - the thrill of exploring something unexpected, the desire to run the next big rapid on the river, and the mysteries of the canyon and its twisting side canyons.

It was an on-time departure (and landing - this is getting more rare these days) and we were back home - yay!

Photos are online at <http://community.webshots.com/user/mattshots>. Or if you prefer picasa, go to <http://picasaweb.google.com/mattblumshots/GrandCanyon>



All of us enjoying the adventure!