

Grand Canyon - 1996

The hard part was going home

By John Kobak

After a week, I'm still waking up trying to figure out where I am. Peering up at the ceiling in my bedroom trying to see the stars and only finding the digital clock on my nitestand. After 18 days of sleeping out on the ledges and beaches of the Grand Canyon without a tent, I still feel I'm somewhere out in the most beautiful deep canyon in the world. This is really the only way to enjoy the canyon, from the bottom looking up. You watch the rocks change each day as you slip further and further back in time.

It took 7 years for my number to come up and to get our Grand Canyon permit. Only one private trip is allowed to launch each day, each with no more than 16 paddlers. The demand for this experience far outstrips the number of available slots. You could go commercial with out much waiting if you are willing to pay 5 times as much and go with a group of strangers.

Our group consisted of 15 Keel Haulers and a friend of our lead raft guide, Fred Robinson, who has made 18 trips through the canyon in the past 20 years. The group was extremely compatible, one persons strengths overcoming another's weakness. All willingly helped with all the many tasks from cooking, cleanup, filtering drinking water, putting up the Groover, loading/unloading our 3 rafts.

After 18 days of paddling the 225 mile stretch from Lee's Ferry to Diamond Creek, through the large crashing waves, whirlpools, inescapable eddies, breathtaking waterfalls, exploring almost tropical side canyons and ruins of Anasazi villages, the hardest part was leaving the canyon for re-entry into "normal" life.

The intrepid Maj. John Powell (or was it Colin or Adam Clayton Powell) took three months to negotiate these rapids with moldy flour and coffee. We had wet rice and moldy bread, plus a lot of real gourmet food. No one complained about the good eating although some of the recipes put together by our outfitter Professional River Outfitters (PRO) were

a bit complicated. From home made Lasagna cooked in dutch ovens, to Omelets made to order for breakfast, no one starved. And we sure weren't thirsty thanks to the foul up at the put-in which got so much canned pop loaded into the rafts, that I thought we would either sink under the weight or drown in the copious quantities.

Although only one private trip launches each day, somehow after the first week we seemed to competing with 5 other private trips for campsites. They were all running shorter trips than we were. However, after Deer Creek (Mile 136) we never really saw many other boaters.

I will try to mention some of the highlights (lowlites) of the trip, as experienced by each person. I won't mention Ranger Blue's two hour talk at the start of the trip or the surprise we all got at Mile 209 rapid when 5 out of the 10 kayaks flipped.

Hank Annable, an experienced wilderness paddler, couldn't understand why everyone brought so many things on the trip including lawn chairs. This was his first experience rowing a raft and we were all impressed by his negotiation of the more treacherous rapids. Hank, one of the clubs charter members, loved every bit of the trip and gave a hand in not only his tasks but helped out others in theirs.

Kathy Chapman was our official worrier. She worried about clean dishes, running out of toilet paper and propane. She worried about low volume kayaks in big volume rivers and keeping upright through the endless wave trains.

John Fralick who guided Kathy into the large crashing waves was also a quiet leader who showed everyone his technical climbing skills in the Silver Grotto and other difficult hikes.

Steve Ingalls who got the coffee going before 5AM each day and rowed his raft confidently with clean lines through all the rapids.

Anne Kmieck the most improved kayaker who only missed one roll on the entire

trip. Her canyon art collection is growing as she paints, colors and tries to put on paper her impressions of the big canyon.

Marty Kopp our oldest rower and C-1er. Marty impressed everyone with his rowing through Crystal and his low braces in the C-1. The most memorable thing about Marty was his all night talk-a-thons. He did almost as much talking in his sleep as he did during the day. Woe to those who camped nearby.

Thury O'Connor who rode with Steve and learned to row and enjoy a raft crashing through big waves. He was mostly known for his gourmet cooking. Whenever the recipes got complicated, Thury came through with his super cooking skills.

Mark Poljak remembered for his heroic save of Hank and Marty as their raft was caught in a inescapable eddy. Mark paddled in, jumped into their raft and lent a hand on the oars to row them out to safety. He was one of two kayakers that never even rolled over on the entire trip.

Pam Poljak who kept Mark in line and seemed to always be there for Kathy when she needed assistance. The only woman paddler to run Lava Falls (Upright, this year).

Syd Reames, the comedian on the trip. He had a joke for all occasions. His large appetite assured that we had less trash to haul out at the end of the trip Syd had a way of getting gobbled up in the whirlpools that was truly amazing to watch.

Fred Robinson, what he lives on is still a mystery, as he skipped breakfast and several other meals each day. Fred showed our novice rowers how to thread those big rafts down through the complicated waves trains. None of our rafts even came close to flipping, but Fred did a back flip exit from the raft at Deubendorff leaving Francesca to fend for herself.

Francesca Rheannon, Fred's friend, was an avid hiker. She always hiked faster and further than anyone else. Probably trying to stay ahead of Chuck, our nude hiker.

She left the trip at Havasu and backpacked her way out the crystal blue stream a few days prior to the end of the trip as she had planned.

Chuck Singer our hard working Food Pharaoh. A dutch oven wizard who baked fresh bread which was a real treat. Our lead kayaker who intentionally took a few swims so no one else would feel bad about a missed roll.

Cathy Tomallo laughed at the large waves and the scorpion sting. No kidding, she said it barely hurt as she found one in her shorts one morning.

Ron Tomallo not to be outdone by Kathy's sting poked himself with a large Agave (Century Plant) spine. It numbed his leg and prevented him from hiking for more than a week. Ron, a great kayaker, tried out Marty's C-1 and now has more appreciation for a real man's boat. He also tried his hand at rowing, in which he excelled.

John (I'm the leader why do I have to do anymore work than that) **Kobak**. I managed to get up each morning at 5 AM and cook those hearty breakfasts which got everybody on the river by 8:30 AM each day. If you can brace you don't have to tip was my motto. I found out that the easiest route through the rapids was right down the middle through the biggest waves. It's those swirlies that will get you if you try to sneak. Also, who could forget the great songs I led each morning which took everyone's mind off the rapids and focused them on killing me instead.

A wonderful trip, without phones, faxes, TV or computers. Driving back into civilization was sure a shock. I would like to thank the entire group for making this such a good trip. This was the most compatible trip that I have ever been on, everyone always pitching in to help with a friendly smile. We hope to have slides and photo albums ready to show at the December club meeting. Be there and experience the Grand Canyon with the rest of us.