

Introduction

A wealth of adventures and discoveries await the readers of this, the first-ever anthology focusing on the Grand Canyon backpacking experience. In it, twenty seven writers offer authentic, close-up views of what it is like to be afoot on particular days in particular places within the vast canyon wilderness. Many of their stories illustrate as well a truth that veteran canyon hikers come to know: time spent beneath the rim, out of the press of human time, can change who you are and re-direct how you live your life. The canyon does not just invite transformation; it all but guarantees it, the way a full moon guarantees a high tide—provided you can shut down the brain factory or stay beneath the rim long enough for it to wind down on its own.

There's plenty of high drama to be found in these pages. Dillon Metcalfe, caught up on the flank of Isis Temple one blazing day, comes too close to dying of thirst. Not far away (as the raven flies) in a different season, David Zucconi nearly drowns in a plunge pool. Bob Bordasch gives a matter-of-fact account of a group hike gone terribly wrong. Nic Korte tells a harrowing tale that will sober anyone who, flushed with good fortune at being in the canyon, might mistakenly feel immune out there. Indeed, part of the allure of these stories is the knowledge that what happened to these hikers could happen to any of us. Even the worst could happen, as Nathaniel Brodie comes to know in the course of a grim recovery mission.

In a wilderness as vast and as intricate as Grand Canyon, the prospect of discovery will never fade. Arnie Richard's vivid tale of how a trio of teenagers, decades ago, found a way through the cliffs above Deer Creek Valley in what became known as the Cranberry Canyon route, will charge the engine of any youthful spirit for whom even the wisp of a trail is unwelcome. So will Scott Thybony's crisp story of a rugged expedition in Marble Canyon, in search of the fossilized tracks

of ancient animals. But one need not range so far afield to break new ground, as Kate Watters shows in her account of botanists scouring upper Phantom Creek for *Agave phillipsiana*, a cultivar whose presence suggests prehistoric trade routes with peoples in Mexico.

The trials may not always shrivel one's tongue or break one's bones, but they can be every bit as acute. With Rick Jurgen we suffer first the agony and then the woodenness of coming face to face, alone in the canyon, with a loved one's loss. Nor will all of the triumphs be as striking as Mark Jenkins' account of attaining the summit of Zoroaster Temple; the canyon novices who, under the guidance of Wayne Ranney, are led one "bite-sized" switchback at a time back up the Bright Angel Trail experience an euphoria every bit as genuine.

Speaking of the corridor trails, NPS employees Matt Berman, Marjorie "Slim" Woodruff, and Kristi Rugg offer uncommon perspectives on that most-trammeled section of the canyon. Berman's account of a surreal season on a trail crew is a cross-section of exertion, suffering, and death. We simmer with Slim as she stoops for the thousandth time to pluck micro-garbage from the trail. And thanks to Ranger Rugg's "Night Hike, South Kaibab," we are reminded that, no matter how many millions of hooves and boots may pound the trail dirt, the canyon's greatest treasure—solitude—can be readily found if you know when to claim it.

Threaded throughout the book are essays grounded in the quiet rhythms of days, weeks, lifetimes of putting one dusty boot in front of the other, on trancelike journeys where nothing in particular happens, except that you are being transformed, slowly, just as a lump of limestone under certain conditions grows into a crystal. Your eyes uncloud. Insights arrive on all levels—personal, interpersonal, cosmic. Thus, Sara Whitestone finds in the canyon's topography a perfect metaphor for the layers and the overlays of her own life. In D.J. Lee's "The Edge Is What We Have," a daughter and father see each other most clearly in a pivotal moment of shared danger. And Molly Hollenbach, in her visionary essay "Rock Bhakti: Dreaming the Vishnu Schist," sees in that most ancient of canyon rock the many faces of the Hindu god for which it was named: at one moment, "beautiful and soft," like blue-bodied Krishna; in another, "something greater and more fearsome, more like the thousand glittering eyes, mouths, and limbs of the god."

Truths such as these shimmer in every corner of this collection, like shards of precious stones at the edge of the trail.

The main virtue these essays share is clarity of vision, trained outward. Whatever happens to these hikers, be it a head trip or a body trip, happens in place. Any essay could serve as example. Jurgen's grief is witnessed by a tribe of bighorn sheep ("The Girls") and underpinned by the thunder of Boucher Rapids. Any of us who have failed—as all must—to capture a Grand Canyon sunrise in words will appreciate Ranger Molly McCormick's go at it: "Light cascaded outwards, caressing and dancing along the sheer cliffs, expansive flats, dramatic highs and lows of the canyon layers." John Yohe's celebration of "Holy Water" on the North Bass Trail is guaranteed to provoke flashbacks to some of our most cherished moments alongside dripping springs or gurgling creeks or bellowing rapids. And Thea Gavin, looking back on her barefoot rim-to-rim adventure, focuses neither on the plentiful pain nor the thrill of finishing, but on a rare moment by the water-side, when, with her "feet feeling the pull of the Colorado River," she "watched raindrops evaporate before they could become part of the current. How they caught the light, if only for a few seconds; how they made a high sparkle against the dark eroding shoulders of the old cliffs."

Veteran canyoneers will nod their heads in recognition of many of the precise places conjured in these pages: the cleft of solid shade at the foot of the Tanner Trail where Rick Dean leans back to watch the eddying river; the one and only monolithic sandstone block on the traverse of the "nameless side canyon" on the Escalante route, where Chris Propst finds temporary relief from his fear of falling. And if you ever find yourself wandering the Tonto Platform south of Holy Grail Temple, you will surely know on sight the chunk of Redwall big as "a cathedral-ceiling living room," within whose cracks Eb Eberlein and his companion wedge themselves to escape the inferno. It's not going anywhere soon!

Equally authentic are the emotional truths that arise in the course of a canyon hike. With Laurie McClellan, we will descend to the bottom on our first canyon hike wrapped in a trance of beauty. We will feel Clint King's pain as he plunges broken-hearted, malnourished, and bloody-footed toward his redemption. My own small essay, on

backpackers' encounters with river runners, may provoke a twinge of gastric memory. With Sara Whitestone, we may find "discouragement in switchbacks." And we will all recognize the note of reluctance in Seth Muller's voice as he turns his back on his beloved canyon on the climb out.

It is my hope that these stories may serve as companion for many a new canyon excursion, to be enjoyed in the shade of a boulder on a beach or by headlamp in a tent; or that they will provoke memories of days well-spent beneath the rim and anticipations of journeys yet to come.

My thanks go out to each and every writer who sent me his or her canyon-centered words. What a pleasure and a privilege it was to read them—despite the inevitable pain of having to say no to so many. A special thanks to the writers whose essays appear in this book, for their hard work and good will as I invited them to revise and re-revise their work. Gratitude goes as well to Tom Martin and Hazel Clark, publishers of Vishnu Temple Press, for their enthusiasm and input all along the way; to John N. Gibbs, the project's first editor, who found several of these essays; to Betty Upchurch, past curator of Grand Canyon Research Library, for her help in locating sources; to Tay Audevart of Rock Springs and Hannah Winward of Farson, Wyoming, my brilliant student interns; and to my partner Fern, who smooths the way. Thanks, finally, to the North Rim Artist-in-Residence Program selection committee and to the friendly tribe of NPS employees up in that blessed forest. Time, as we all know, is our most precious commodity, and the opportunity to spend several weeks in solitude at the canyon's edge infused this project with energy and momentum.

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