

Exploring the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River

Why would someone want to paddle the Grand Canyon? Well, it's kind of like religion: to a non-believer, no explanation is possible; to a believer, no explanation is necessary. Why would someone want to paddle the Grand Canyon in December? What most people fail to realize is that wintertime temperatures at the bottom of the canyon are usually ten to twenty degrees warmer than those at the rim, thousands of feet above. They also fail to realize that water temperatures run around forty to fifty degrees year 'round, so no matter when you boat the Canyon, a wet suit or dry suit is mandatory. Therefore, in summertime, with air temperatures in the Canyon often exceed one hundred ten degrees, you find yourself slowly broiling you in your own juices inside your cold-water gear.



Grand Canyon, viewed from the South Rim

It all began when...

Two years ago, during our BRRR Annual Western River Extravaganza, we paddled the Lower Salmon River in Idaho. On this trip, we were accompanied by the late David Morgan's long-time paddling buddy, Bill West, and Bill's wife, Cathy; his son, Jason; Jason's fiancée Corrie Bruner, and his friend Dennis Lillis. It was during this trip that Bill informed us that he was on the waiting list for a Grand Canyon permit.

The National Park Service's newly revised Colorado River Management Plan (CRMP) now offers river trips of varying lengths to the public. Permits must be won through a weighted lottery; those who have been on the waiting list are given additional weight, based on the length of time they have been waiting. The length of the trip and number of participants varies with the season; winter trips are allowed up to 25 days, due to the shorter winter daylight hours. Most lottery applicants request launch dates during the warmer months; thus it is much easier to land a launch date in the winter.

And so it was that in the spring of 2007, Bill West informed us that he had obtained a launch permit for November 29, and that he wanted Dave, Danny and I to come along. Unfortunately, neither Dave nor Danny was able to fit a three- to four-week trip into their schedules. I, however, had already decided that if asked, I would go, come Hell or High Water. As it turned out, at the end of July I found myself prematurely retired (a euphemism for being laid off) from my job, and therefore had way too much time on my hands.

Planning and Preparation

Bill had already made several trips down the Grand Canyon, and had determined the optimum number of participants to be approximately eight, and the optimum number of rafts to be around four, with two people per raft. This proved to be a very workable number; four rafts were able to carry supplies and equipment to support a group of eight for three weeks without being seriously overloaded.

Bill and Cathy assumed responsibility for the logistics, meal planning and coordinating the efforts of all the participants. Early on, they asked each member to produce one evening's dinner for each of three weeks.

Dave, Danny and I have assembled an impressive collection of river expedition gear and equipment, including a very sturdy sixteen-foot self-bailing raft, with a heavy-duty cargo-type rowing frame, dry boxes, dry bags, camp kitchen, and other items too numerous to mention. During the past four or five years, I have rowed our venerable beast-of-burden, the USS Iowa, down many a challenging river, in support of our frequent multi-day expeditions. It has always served us well, and I had no qualms about piloting this behemoth down the Grand - at least, not until I realized that I would be pursuing three sleek, agile, fast and highly maneuverable catarafts, for almost three hundred miles, through more than two hundred of the biggest, gnarliest, meanest rapids in the U.S. of A. It then became obvious that the only way I could ever hope to keep up with the rest of the group was to obtain a cataraft of my own. I didn't have a job, but, By God! I had a pocket full of credit cards! And so it was that I soon became the proud owner of a brand shiny new Aire Leopard 18-foot cataraft, with an NRS custom rowing frame. And it was a Beauty! I couldn't wait to put it on the water.



The "USS Iowa"



The "Wampus Cat"

Now, the National Park Service requires that Canyon boaters must practice leave-no-trace camping; all refuse, including feces, ashes and trash, must be carried out, and in approved waterproof, leak proof containers. We also had to haul our own fuel; we had chosen propane and charcoal for cooking purposes. The NPS allows the burning of driftwood for warmth during winter months, but all fires, including charcoal fires, must be contained in an approved steel fire pan. These items alone made for a heavy cargo, and we still had food, clothing, bedding, cooking and camping gear to transport.

The Shakedown Cruise

One Friday afternoon before Thanksgiving, I took my new cataraft and all my gear up to West Virginia, with the intention of floating the New River from McCreery to Fayette Station. After an enjoyable dinner at the Mexican Restaurant in Hinton, I pulled into the Wal-Mart parking lot, and pitched camp in the back of my truck.

Saturday dawned chilly and overcast and misting rain. After feasting on Hardee's sausage, egg and cheese biscuits and about two quarts of coffee, I drove to the boat ramp at McCreery, where I proceeded to assemble my new cat boat. Four hours and much grunting and cussing later, I finally shoved it free of the ramp and climbed aboard. I was pleased to discover that I had done a fairly good job of placing the dry box, the kitchen box, the cooler and most of the other large items that had to be fit into the frame. The oarlocks were in the right place, but it became apparent that they needed to be pivoted outward to give me more leverage on the oars. This I quickly accomplished, and proceeded downriver.

The boat handled quite well; despite its greater length, it was much more nimble than the USS Iowa, even with comparable loads. The weight distribution was not quite right, and it was a bit heavy in the stern, which caused it to float stern-first in the current when I was not rowing. However, I was too proud and too happy to let that worry me.

I had not been on the water very long when I discovered that the water level was very low, making it difficult to navigate through the many shoals, ledges and boulder gardens. Somehow I managed to wiggle and spin my way free whenever I got hung up, but the going was painfully slow. This part of the river was quite wide and quite shallow, and the current was very slow and hard to find.

I had initially planned to camp Saturday night somewhere near Thurmond, about fifteen miles downstream from McCreery. Four hours of boating as hard as I could row had brought me nowhere near Thurmond. The sky was overcast and darkening, and the temperature was falling. Even in my dry suit and fleece, I was feeling chilly.

Shortly before dark, I discovered what turned out to be a NPS campground on river right, with a gently sloping beach and a trail leading up to the campsites. It obviously had not been well-maintained; the weeds were knee-high in many places, while other areas were slimy with mud. Some of the locals had been entertaining themselves by doing doughnuts in the mud with their ATVs, leaving muddy ruts among the picnic tables and charcoal grills. I didn't let any of this put me off, though, and I quickly hauled my stuff up from the raft and pitched camp. With my tent erected on a fairly dry, fairly flat piece of terrain, and my kitchen set up with the coffee maker exuding the wonderful aroma of French Roast, and wearing my down booties and several layers of fleece, I was feeling positively cheery. I quickly assembled the requisite supplies and equipment, started a heap of charcoal to burning in the pedestal-mounted grill which the NPS had so thoughtfully provided, and commenced to prepare Mountain Pizzas for my dinner.

Gourmet Pizza on the River

Now, I am aware that among my readers, there are those unfortunates who have never experienced the joy of preparing and eating Mountain Pies. Therefore, I shall elucidate: A Mountain Pie consists of two large, square slices of bread, between which are placed the filling of your choice; in my case, it was to be pizza sauce, shredded mozzarella cheese, pepperoni slices, diced green peppers, onions, mushrooms, cooked ground beef, sausage and pickled jalapeno peppers. My dessert consisted of a Mountain Pie filled with peach pie filling and dusted with sugar and cinnamon. You are only limited by your imagination.

Mountain Pies are cooked inside a specially-made "Pie Iron", consisting of two square cast-iron shells, approximately the size of a slice of bread, with a rounded depression in the center. These two shells are joined at one edge by a hinge, which allows them to close against each other; with the contents trapped inside. The edges opposite the hinge are equipped with long steel rods with wooden handles on their opposite ends, which allow the user to manipulate the iron. The process is begun by nestling the closed iron among the hot charcoals. Once it is hot, you remove the iron from the coals, open it,



and rub the inside of each shell with a stick of butter. You then place your bread, along with your filling, on top of one shell, and while holding it in place with the flat of a knife blade, you close the iron, which pinches the edges of the bread together, forming a seal. You then place the iron back among the coals for a minute or so, turn it over and cook on the other side for another minute or two. You then remove the iron from the coals, and carefully open the iron and dump your (hopefully) finished Mountain Pie onto your plate. If you have carefully followed instructions, your Mountain Pie will be golden brown on the outside, and hot and steamy on the inside, with the cheese all melted and hot and gooey; just the way God intended it to be. Pizza Hut, eat your heart out!



The air temperature by now had dropped into the low thirties, but being full of hot coffee, hot pizza and hot peach pie, and being warmed by the remaining charcoal, I tuned up my guitar and proceeded to serenade myself at the top of my voice. I'm no music critic, but I'll have to admit that I sounded pretty good. As the few remaining coals died down, my fingers became too chilly and stiff to fret the guitar (They don't do much better when they're warm), and so I crawled into my sleeping bag, and knew no more until the next morning.

Sunday dawned dreary and chilly, but slightly warmer than the previous day. Undaunted, I prepared a pot of fresh coffee, and scrambled several eggs, which, along with the leftovers from last night's dinner, produced several excellent Mountain Breakfast Pies. Haven eaten my fill, I decamped, loaded the boat and headed downriver.

One hour later and two miles further downstream, I finally passed under the bridge at Thurmond. I still had thirteen miles to go, and the water was even shallower than the day before. Navigation and propulsion were becoming a bit of a chore; I frequently got stuck on rocks, and had to pivot the boat back and forth in a wide arc to break it free. Once, I had to wade downstream and tow the raft through a maze of cobbles.



Several hours later, I was despairing of ever getting to the take-out, when finally I passed the Cunard access ramp on river left. I quickly realized that I had run through Surprise Rapids without even recognizing it; the river was that low!

Upper Railroad Rapids was still big enough to give me an exciting ride. Lower Railroad Rapids was studded with exposed boulders, but I managed to thread my way through without mishap. My runs through Upper, Middle and Lower Keeney Rapids were exciting, but uneventful. They looked much smaller than I remembered, seated as I was on top of this eighteen-foot-long seven-foot-wide monster of a cargo barge. Piece of cake.

I ran Lower Kaymoor Rapids on river left, and back-ferried toward the middle of the river behind the large flat rock near the bottom of the rapids. Just as I entered the current

at the right side of the rock, my right oar struck a rock on the shallow river bed and violently popped free of the oarlock, snapping the buckle of the oar tether. Fortunately, I was able to free one of my spare oars, and to work my way into an eddy, just in time to watch my lost oar slide slowly beneath the waves.

In order to reduce the effort required to raise the oar blades clear of the water between strokes, I had fitted the oars with 2-1/2 pound counterweights. They worked very well in that capacity, but it hadn't dawned on me that they also made the oars heavy enough to sink. I am no longer using the counterweights; replacement oars are too expensive.

The rest of the rapids passed without mishap, and as I passed the gauge beneath the Fayette Station bridge, I noticed that the level was only slightly below zero; not nearly as low as I had previously thought. It was then that I realized just how much riding this monster raft had altered my perspective, making everything look smaller than ever before.

It was with great relief that I beached my boat at the Fayette Station ramp, and discovered that my Shuttle Service had indeed come through for me; my truck and trailer were waiting exactly where they were supposed to be. I began unceremoniously to pile pieces of gear into the trailer with no concern for order or organization. Being already exhausted, I struggled to hoist the heavy frame onto the racks on the roof of my truck. Finally, after getting everything strapped down and (more or less) put away, I headed for Beckley and dinner, and finally home.

Getting ready for the big one

For months, I had been seeking a partner to share the trip with. Since Danny and Dave were unable to go, I was faced with the prospect of having to drive by myself, and raft by myself. Finally, in sheer desperation, I e-mailed every paddler in my address book. And lo and behold, I got a response from Jenny Johnson, an old rafting friend in Vancouver, Washington. Jenny was unable to go, due to having to work, but said that her sister Shelly wanted to go. Shelly is a rafter and kayaker, and had been down the Canyon previously. When I contacted Shelly, she had just returned from a month of trekking in the Himalayas of Nepal with her father. She had the time, money and equipment, and was raring to go. I forwarded her contact Info to Bill West, along with my recommendation that we bring her along. When Bill called her, he was immediately taken by her enthusiasm and cheerfulness, and readily consented to her inclusion in the group. Okay. Now I had a partner. But I still had to drive by myself.

Thanksgiving week was filled with frenzied activity. I was continually adding, taking away, moving, packing, unpacking, re-packing, and trying to fit everything into the back of my Ford Excursion. Finally, on the evening of Friday, November 23, 2007, I stuffed the last piece of gear into my overloaded truck, and hit the road.

On the Road

I was able to drive approximately 800 miles each day without becoming overtaxed. I kept my cruise control set at 9.999 miles per hour above the posted speed limit, and managed to make good time. The first few nights were spent in only minor discomfort, with my carcass spread across the two front seats and the console, alternating between short periods of sleep and twisting and turning, trying to restore the circulation in my various extremities. The first few days were rainy and chilly, but somewhere in western Arkansas

or eastern Oklahoma, the sun finally came through. Then in western Oklahoma and the northern Texas panhandle, I began to see patches of snow, which had apparently fallen only a day or two before. Having lived in Texas many years ago, I knew that these people had no idea whatsoever about how to drive in snow; one brief snowfall in Austin had left both lanes of I-35 littered with bumper-to-bumper wrecks. At any rate, I felt fortunate to have missed the snow and the ensuing mayhem.

As I neared Groom, Texas, I began to see signs advertising “The World’s Tallest Cross,” which I decided to investigate. Following the signs, I found myself confronted by one of the most amazing religious shrines I have ever personally encountered. Here was an absolutely HUGE cross, which was surrounded by many bronze statues and plaques, representing the Stations of the Cross. One hour and fifty photographs later, I was back on the road.



A few miles east of Flagstaff, Arizona, I came across Walnut Canyon National Monument. Having no idea what it was, I decided to investigate. My Senior Pass got me into the park free of charge, and I was pleasantly surprised to discover that Walnut Canyon had been home to an extensive pueblo-building group of Native Americans many hundreds of years ago. Built into recesses in the face of the cliffs, the remains of their dwelling have survived the ravages of time and weather surprisingly intact.

I spent several hours, wandering the various trails and admiring the skill and ingenuity of the ancient craftsmen who had built this community. To refer to these early settlers as “savage” or “primitive” is to show a total lack of knowledge or understanding.

Flagstaff, Arizona is a picturesque community nestled among the foothills of the San Francisco Mountains; a range of heavily-forested volcanic peaks where snow can be found almost year-round. Flagstaff is a unique blend of the rustic and the modern; tourism, logging, business and industry have all found a home there. A brief search led me to a number of outdoor outfitters’ emporiums, where I found several excellent guides to the Grand Canyon and vicinity, which I added to my library. Then, heading north out of Flagstaff, I set my sights on Page, Arizona, which was the nearest town to my rendezvous with the rest of the group.

Page, Arizona began in 1957 as a labor camp for the workers involved in the construction of Glen Canyon Dam of the Colorado River. It was here that I planned to make my final preparations for the main event. After a satisfying dinner at one of the very nice Mexican restaurants in town, I headed for a nearby NPS campground on the north shore of Lake Powell, where I spent a comfortable night stretched out full-length in my tent.

The next morning, Monday, I was able to realize one of my favorite dreams. For many years I had marveled at occasional photographs of some unknown, brilliantly-colored, spectacularly wind-and-water-sculpted slot canyon, and had wished that I could see with my own eyes this fairy-tale landscape. Some months ago, with the aid of Google and the Internet, I finally discovered that my dream canyon was named Antelope Canyon, and was located on the Navajo Reservation, a few miles southeast of Page. There was no way that I was going to miss this opportunity to visit this unbelievably lovely work of Nature, so I had built extra time into my itinerary just for the occasion. And so it was that I signed onto a guided tour with a very knowledgeable, informative and thoroughly pleasant and entertaining Navajo guide.

A brief drive along paved roads brought us to Antelope Wash, where we left the road, and ploughed through several miles of deep, loose sand, which threatened to stall our four-wheel-drive Chevy Suburban, even though it was fitted with a lift kit and oversize tires. However, our guide brought us safely to the entrance to

Antelope Canyon, a narrow crack in the face of a seventy-foot-high cliff. Inside the entrance, we allowed ourselves a few moments for our eyes to adjust to the relative gloom, and proceeded to follow our guide through the twisting, winding, narrow canyon. The walls of the canyon snaked sinuously upward toward the sunlight, which rendered its upper reaches brilliantly banded with shades of red, yellow and orange. Fantastic shapes



of water-sculpted rock were silhouetted against the brightly-lit background.



Our guide led us to several outstanding photograph opportunities, and even volunteered to photograph the various members of the group against the fantastic background. He also told us how frequent floods would rip through the canyon one year, lowering the floor many feet, only to have another flood deposit many feet of silt the next year.

The rest of the day was spent exploring Glen Canyon Dam, Lake Powell on its upstream side, and the Colorado River downstream. That evening, having already spent far too

many nights sleeping (?) in my truck, and lured by the idea of a real bed and a hot shower, I opted for a cheap motel room.

Next morning, I hiked into Horseshoe bend, where the Colorado River made a large loop, almost meeting itself as it curved around the base of a spit of rock that protruded from the north canyon wall. The sun was just coming up, and I watched the shadows creeping downward from the opposite wall of the canyon. The nearly full moon was still quite visible high in the sky above the bend.



Back in Page, I proceeded to purchase my share of the expedition groceries, and to stow everything away in my dry boxes, rocket boxes, five-gallon buckets and dry bags. The meats, frozen foods and perishables went into our 130-quart Yeti cooler, along with forty pounds of block ice and ten pounds of dry ice.

After another self-indulgent night in the motel, I broke fast at Carl's Jr. (The western version of Hardee's) and then spent an hour in a local coffee-and-internet-café, making one last check of my e-mail. The rest of the morning was spent making some last-minute purchases and making sure that everything was safely packed away. I then headed south and east toward Lee's Ferry, Arizona, and our rendezvous point.

The Clan Gathers

Around 2:00 on the afternoon of Wednesday, November 28, I arrived at Navajo Bridge, which is the last highway crossing of the Grand Canyon for over 200 miles to the west. The original one-lane steel truss bridge was built in 1929. In 1995, a new two-lane bridge was opened, and the original bridge became a park, open to foot travel only. With my camera hanging around my neck, I hiked out onto the bridge to view the beautiful blue-green river almost five hundred feet below. In only a day's time, we would be floating beneath, looking upward to where I was standing now. It occurred to me that if I had waited another day, I could have watched myself float by.

About this time, Bill West telephoned to say that he and his group were about two hours away, and would be at the Grand Canyon Lodge in Lee's ferry in about two hours. So, I drove to Lee's ferry, and arrived just in time to meet my partner-to-be, Shelly Johnson.

Having never met Shelly before, I had speculated as to what kind of person she would turn out to be. Having floated several rivers with her sister, Jenny, I was expecting her to be a mirror image of Jenny. This proved to be the case, with one major exception: Both girls are short, wiry, very strong and athletic, with blue-gray eyes and dark brown hair. But while Jenny is quiet and almost shy, Shelly is wide open; she is ebullient, bubbly,

cheerful, and operates at a constantly high level of excitement and curiosity. She was to prove to be an outstanding choice for a rafting partner.

Shelly had just finished a short hike down nearby Cathedral Canyon; a narrow canyon that led from the road into Lee's Ferry to the Colorado River about 1-1/4 miles away. Having already made plans to make the same hike, I invited her to join me for a second trip. She readily accepted. So off we went, with Shelly leading and me following. Shelly is agile, and nimble as a gazelle, and she was leaping spryly from rock to rock, while I could only stumble after. My style of hiking is a continuous process of falling and catching myself, usually just in time, but not always. Anyway, the hike was scenic, and very enjoyable, and not too difficult. We made the downward descent in just under 45 minutes, and headed back up to meet our group.

Arriving back at the Lodge, Shelly and I had a light lunch, which we ate on a picnic table in front of the Lodge. Soon after, Bill and Cathy showed up, along with Bill's son, Jason, and Jason's sweetheart, Corrie Bruner, and three others whom I had not yet met. Bill introduced them as Amy Witherow; Amy's Significant Other, Kevin Ahern; and their friend, Paul Barton. Introductions out of the way, we all checked into our rooms at the Lodge, with the exception of Shelly, who was camping near the Lee's Ferry Put-in.

Later that evening, we drove a few miles north to the small community of Vermillion Cliffs, where we had an excellent dinner in a rustic café, which boasted a very eclectic menu, and an unbelievable assortment of beers and ales. After dinner, we gratefully retired to our cozy rooms; the evening having become quite cold.

Thursday morning came all too early. We walked to the nearby store, where we had been promised that we could find breakfast, only to discover that the owner was late in opening and that the cook had given up and left in a huff. Fortunately, the owner showed up in a few minutes, and the cook came back shortly later. We had to wait about a half-hour while the grille was heating up, but we used the time to drain the coffee pot several times. Meanwhile, our cook prepared a large batch of sandwiches, consisting of thick slices of sourdough bread, scrambled eggs and a copious heap of shaved ham. Once these had been washed down with more coffee, we loaded up and drove down to the Put-in.

The Expedition Begins

Day 1

For many years preceding the opening of the first Navajo Bridge, Lee's Ferry was the only place that the river could be crossed, for hundreds of miles either way. In the early 1870's John D. Lee operated the ferry. Legend has it that he had been a participant in the infamous Mountain Meadows Massacre, in which a band of settlers passing through south-western Utah were slaughtered by a group of local Mormons, who believed that the settlers planned to displace them, even to kill them. At any rate, the Mormon Leader, Brigham Young, had directed Lee to set up the ferry, where he might hopefully escape prosecution. Unfortunately for Lee, he was arrested, convicted, and in 1877, he was executed by firing squad. Lee's Ferry is now operated by the National Park Service, and serves as the launching point for all Grand Canyon float trips.

Thus it was that on the morning of Thursday, November 29 2008, we proceeded to unload our vehicles; to



assemble our rafts; to heap them with unbelievable quantities of gear and equipment, and to present ourselves and our equipment to the Ranger in Charge for inspection and orientation. Our months of planning and preparation paid off; the Lady Ranger was satisfied with our equipment, and she allowed us to proceed with our rigging.

During our preparations, we were visited by a pair of very large, very black ravens. The Ranger had already informed us that a pair of ravens would be assigned to us, and that they would follow us all the way to Diamond Creek. She also warned us that ravens were notorious thieves, and that they worked in pairs; one raven would draw attention to himself / herself, while his / her mate made off with the loot. Sure enough, while we were listening to the Ranger's orientation talk, one of the birds took a candy bar and a pair of sunglasses off of Jason's raft.

Having filled our water jugs, finished loading our boats and parking the vehicles where the Shuttle Service would pick them up, we finally launched and floated westward. We were on our way.

Immediately downstream of the launch ramp, Paria Wash enters the river from the right side. A series of gently rolling waves marks our first rapids; Paria Riffle. Just short of Mile 3, Cathedral Wash enters from the north; Shelly and I had hiked to this point the preceding afternoon. Around mile 4.5, we floated beneath the Navajo Bridges. It occurred to me that if I had come by a day earlier, I could have seen myself standing on the bridge above. The story of my life; what can I say?



Shortly before dark, which arrives around 5:00 PM each evening, we landed at Six Mile Camp, on river right, and proceeded to set up our camp. Tables and kitchen boxes were quickly set up, propane stoves were connected to their fuel tanks, firewood was gathered, and dinner preparations were begun. We each chose our tent sites and made ourselves at home. After consuming an excellent dinner, we gathered around the fire pan to ward off the evening chill. By 8:30, everyone had retired to their tents for a long and well-deserved rest.

Day 2

Coffee is an essential ingredient in my day-to-day life. My brain doesn't begin to function until it has had its first infusion of caffeine. Thus it was that I had early on volunteered to assume responsibility for the procurement and preparation of this necessary commodity. This meant that I had to be the first one out of bed each morning, to start the coffee brewing. Several years ago, I had acquired Coleman's version of the Mr. Coffee drip coffee maker. This contraption has a water reservoir, a carafe, and a filter basket, just like its electric cousin, but this is where the similarity ends. This unit sits on one burner of the propane camp stove, which is set on its highest flame. Properly set up, this system produces twelve cups of excellent coffee in about fifteen to



twenty minutes; the colder the weather, the longer it takes to brew. Also, unlike the electric version, this unit must be removed from the heat immediately when brewing is complete; otherwise, it can burn up. This didn't always happen, and by the end of the trip, many of its metal parts were warped and discolored; however, it never failed to work.

Cathy West was usually the second member of the group to rise, followed shortly by her husband, Bill. Next to me, Cathy was the most serious coffee-drinker in the crew, with Bill a close second. We quickly fell into a morning ritual routine; I would rise around 6:00 AM, and when Bill and Cathy heard me fire up the stove they would crawl out of bed and show up in the kitchen just as the coffee finished brewing. Meanwhile, I would gather driftwood and start a roaring fire. We would then fill up our cups and begin breakfast preparations. The rest of the crew would straggle in over the next half-hour.

With breakfast consumed, the dishes washed, camp was struck, the rafts were loaded, and by 10:30 AM, we were on our way downriver.

Two miles downstream, we encountered Badger Creek Rapids, the first major rapids of the trip, with a rating of 5¹, and a drop of 15 feet. All four rafts ran the drop without mishap.

Mile 10 brought us to Ten Mile Rock, a large slab of Coconino Sandstone, which had fallen from the cliff above. Shortly after that came Soap Creek Rapids, a Class 5 drop of 17 feet. The next six miles brought us Sheer Wall Rapids (Class 2, 9 foot drop) and House Rock Rapids, a serious Class 7 rapids with a drop of 8 feet, and several large holes on river left, right in the middle of the main current flow. Again, the River Gods were benevolent, and allowed us to pass safely.



Around 4:30 that evening, we pulled out at Mile 19.4 Camp and prepared to spend our second night there. Cathy, the Kitchen Boss, decided that I should prepare my first meal; my famous White Chicken Chili, my equally famous Dutch Oven Cherry Cobbler, replete with vanilla ice cream. Dinner was prepared very quickly, and disappeared even more quickly.

The night was cool and threatening rain. After dinner, we all huddled around the inviting fire that was blazing in our fire pan, and swapped a few yarns and discussed plans for the next day. Around 8:30, everyone straggled off to their tents.

Day 3

Six o'clock comes entirely too early when your face is cold (at least the part that sticks out of your sleeping bag) and the rest of your body is toasty warm. However, duty calls. The morning routine begins. Breakfast is cooked and consumed; the dishes are washed, dried and packed away. Camp is broken. The rafts are re-packed. At ten o'clock we are back on the river. The sun is hiding behind the clouds; the temperature is in the upper 30's or low 40's. It is still drizzling rain off and on.

¹ The rapids of the Grand Canyon are rated on a scale of 1 to 10; thus a rating of 5 would be comparable to a Class III rating on the International Scale.

The night's rainfall has muddied the river. We are not to see blue water again for many days. The river looks so much like chocolate milk you could almost taste it. It even has rich, chocolate milk foam on the crests of the waves.

Today, the rapids come fast and furious: Twenty-one Mile Rapids, a Class 5 with 12 feet of drop; Twenty-three Mile (Indian Dick) Rapids, a Class 4 with 5 feet of drop; Twenty-three and One-half Mile Rapids, a Class 4 with 4 feet of drop; Twenty-four Mile (Georgie), Class 6, 4 feet; Twenty-four and one-half Mile, Class 6, 9 feet; Twenty-five Mile, Class 6, 8 feet; Cave Springs, Class 5, with 5 feet of fall, Twenty-seven Mile, Class 5, 7 feet; and finally, Twenty-nine Mile, Class 2, with 7 feet of gradient. This last rapids brought us to our campsite at Shinumo Wash on river left, at mile 29.5.

Shinumo Wash is a narrow canyon with a small, intermittent stream flowing from it. A short hike / swim / wade / climb / scramble brings one to the mouth of Silver Grotto; a lovely little cave from whence the stream emanates. It consists of one elliptical room about forty feet deep, thirty feet wide and about fifteen feet high, with flat floor and ceiling, and smooth, concave walls. At the rear of the room, about eight feet above the floor, is a small opening into an upper, much smaller chamber. To enter this chamber, one must either grow suction cups on one's hands and feet, or simply run up the wall. To do this, one simply runs diagonally towards one of the side walls, angling up and then laterally, and continue running, with one's body parallel to the floor, being held there by centrifugal force. Then one continues to circle the room, and angling upward into the entrance of the second, upper room. To exit, one simply runs out the opening, around the wall of the main room, and gradually down to the floor. One must maintain enough velocity to generate sufficient centrifugal force to hold one's feet against the wall.

Actually, it's easier than it looks. Having visited Silver Grotto in 1995, I was looking forward to a return visit. Alas, this was not to be; the water in the lower part of the Wash was quite deep and quite cold, and no one could generate enough enthusiasm to endure the trip. So we left it for next time.

To be continued...