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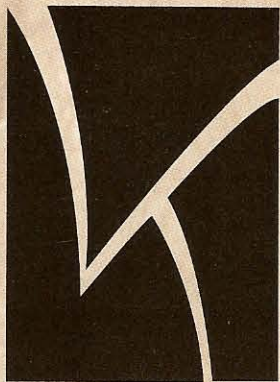
the land of stone and light

A long week's journey into light: a rim-to-rim hike in the Grand Canyon

Story and photographs by Annie Osburn

Like water nymphs, we step gently over pond pebbles to throw our heads under the icy blast. We've shed all unnecessary layers of clothing. In the absence of Supplex togas, our quick-dry shorts will have to do. Hands embraced, we walk as if in a dream, slowly backward toward the roaring water. As we near the ancient stone wall, we shut our eyes, hold our breath, thrust our heads backward, and scream. • Standing under Ribbon Falls in the heart of the Grand Canyon with three fellow backpackers, I am finally becoming one with nature—my computer left behind in Newport Beach, the telephone no longer attached to my ear, my atrophied gluteals reawakening to movement. • I am just another success story on a week-long, 24-mile women's

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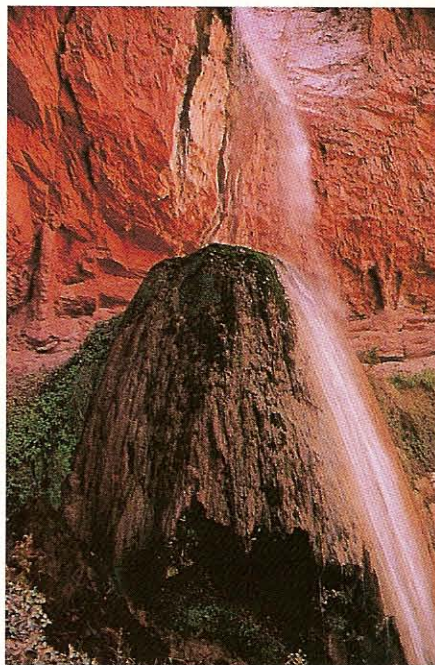
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STONE AND LIGHT

backpacking trip from the Grand Canyon's North Rim to the South Rim. Including day trips, my feet will log a total of 40 miles. Along with a crew of seven other hikers, I have embarked on a well-guided adventure sponsored by the Grand Canyon Field Institute—possibly one of the best-kept secrets in this popular section of the southwestern United States.

The first time I saw the Grand Canyon was 10 years ago. For several years when I was a child, I had a recur-



ring dream of the desert under a full moon. As I was born in Miami, Florida, the image clearly diverged from my otherwise damp and floral landscape. Something about the desolation, the absolute power of nature that abounds in the desert, stuck with me. I decided to cycle my way across the Southwest by joining an organized cycling tour. After grunting for hours on demanding terrain, I finally arrived at the Grand Canyon Lodge at the top of the North Rim. Throwing my bike to the ground in near collapse, I lumbered inside the lodge and up to the huge window overlooking the Grand Canyon. At that moment, I felt a continuous circle finally close. I was back in my childhood dream and looking into the great mouth of Mother Nature. I was home.

"I've been looking out this window for years, and I never get tired of it," says Mike Buchheit, field coordinator for the Grand Canyon Field Institute. The institute's offices are located within the historic Kolb Studio, originally built in 1904 by the Kolb brothers, Emery and Ellsworth. The Kolbs were the first to make a business out of photographing visiting tourists. "I look at the canyon all day long and it never looks the same."

Such experiences are common. And here I am, again, for one of my own. Joining my trip are hikers from various cities and suburbs across the country. All share my love of the canyon. Our mission on this journey is to explore the desert lands and become better at the art of backpacking. "Better," I find, is a relative term. More like a science, the backpacking on this trip teaches me a few things my well-traveled feet thought they already knew. Lightweight, expensive outdoor gear is popular for a reason.

My guide, Denise Traver, a sun-kissed blonde who literally eats up trail in this awesome canyon, is a master of invention. When I arrive at Kolb Studio, she flashes her big, bright smile and barks, "OK, everybody, dump out your packs.

It's time to lose some weight." (I am beginning to understand why so much time was allotted in the course outline to an equipment and inventory overview.) A former Grand Canyon National Park ranger and interpretive guide, Traver spends more time inside the canyon than most people could even imagine.

"When I found this work, I found myself," she admits. It's hard to think of what Traver does as "work." With her gift of contagious enthusiasm, she seems able to buoy even the most sluggish souls. Besides her special love for leading women's courses, Traver never tires of the ceaseless wonderment and trivial concerns of her intrepid troops. Removed from the creature comforts of home, most of us banter constantly about things like blisters, moleskin, dehydrated food, salty versus sweet snacks, how much water to drink, the importance of packing out every last bit of trash, and the benefits of adjusting, readjusting and cinching backpacks around the waist.

CARRYING 37 POUNDS OF FOOD, shelter and clothing on our backs, we have hiked into an enormous hole that averages 10 miles

the details

The Grand Canyon Field Institute offers a variety of outdoor courses on geology, natural and human history, photography, the arts and wilderness studies. Courses range from \$55 to \$485, depending on duration and topic. For more information about the institute and a catalog of courses, write to P.O. Box 399, Grand Canyon, AZ 86023, or call 520-638-2485.

The South Rim of the Grand Canyon, where most Field Institute courses originate, can be reached by plane, car, bus or train. By car, the drive from Orange County to the Grand Canyon is about 500 miles each way (eight to nine hours driving time).

Many people fly to either Phoenix or Las Vegas and rent cars for the four-hour drive to the Grand Canyon. Round-trip coach fares from John Wayne Airport to Phoenix or Las Vegas cost about \$100 on America West. A seven-day advance purchase will help you get the lowest fares.

Small airlines also fly from Las Vegas to Grand Canyon Airport, located 10 miles from the South Rim (shuttles and rental cars are available there). Airfare costs between \$85 and \$100 each way.

Rental cars for the drive from either Las Vegas or Phoenix to the Grand Canyon cost \$32 per day. Bus service is operated by Nava-Hopi Tours, (800-892-8687) from the airport in Phoenix to the Grand Canyon, with a change in Flagstaff, AZ. The bus trip costs \$22.

The Grand Canyon National Park entrance fee is \$20 per vehicle. Your receipt is good for one week after purchase.

For the well-outfitted backpacker, outdoor stores such as REI and Sport Chalet carry a full line of backpacks, tents, cook stoves and other essentials. Both store chains also offer rentals on equipment, such as backpacks and tents. In addition, Babbitt's General Store, easily accessible once you're in Grand Canyon National Park, has incredible deals on equipment rentals. Students participating in Field Institute courses receive a generous discount.

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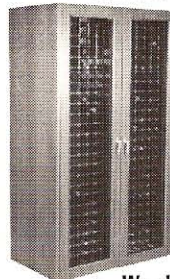
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wide, rim to rim. It grows to 18 miles wide and shrinks to one mile in some places. Its walls of ancient strata are more than a dozen layers thick. Any apprehension I may have had at the mouth of the North Rim, brought on by severe rainstorms, two weeks of flash-flood warnings and an elevation of more than 8,000 feet, have abated. I will spend the days ahead putting one foot in front of the other, jaw dropped, head craned back, looking up in amazement.

"I can tell this is going to be an interesting group," jokes Brad, our shuttle driver. After meeting at the Field Institute's offices on the South Rim, Brad drives us the four-hour distance around to the North Rim of the canyon, where our journey will begin. Brad's colorful sense of humor and odd descriptions makes us forget we're cooped up inside a van.

Before us lies the quiet zone. Deep time. A place where I will

of crisis, although I am more concerned with not slipping than whether or not a crisis is imminent. I remember with humor that our course outline says we will "discuss water and its role in the desert environment" on this seven-mile leg of the journey. No discussion necessary.

Although we cannot see it, we are descending through the many layers of fantastic rock in the canyon. I barely catch a glimpse of the Coconino sandstone as it turns into the Toroweap Formation. The combined forces of time, water, wind and varying temperatures, along with the flowing strength of the Colorado River, caused the rapid erosion of the canyon into cliffs and terraces. As if our descent was not treacherous enough, occasionally we make way for mule trains carrying visiting tourists, mail bags and supplies. I pass behind the rumps of several mules, making my way through a sloppy crevice wide enough for only one of my hiking boots. The mules, which provided the first true pas-

where to stay

You may want to stay at one of the lodges for your first night before beginning a Field Institute course. For lodging information in Grand Canyon National Park and vicinity, call South Rim Travel at 800-682-4393. Rooms cost between \$58 and \$270 per night (April through October). Lodging information also is available through Grand Canyon National Park Lodges, 303-297-2757.

suggested reading

Most of these books are available through the Grand Canyon Association by calling 800-858-2808 or at local bookstores.

A Wilderness Called Grand Canyon, Stewart Aitchison

An Introduction to Grand Canyon Geology, Michael Collier

The Well-Fed Backpacker, June Fleming

In the House of Stone and Light, Donald J. Hughes

The Backpacker's Handbook (Second Edition), Chris Townsend

A Field Guide to the Grand Canyon, Stephen Whitney —A.O.

confront nothing but myself, desert flora, night creatures and endless layers of stone stacked inside this magnificent work of nature that was carved between three million and 25 million years ago. The average visit to the Grand Canyon lasts one day, but the average time the average tourist spends looking at and into the canyon is only about 15 minutes. Luckily, I am not average, nor is the rest of my party. By the end of our seven days in the wilderness, we will experience things I thought I'd left behind in my adolescence. Things like nicknames, private jokes and hand signals. They say that after a trip into the Grand Canyon, no one is ever the same again. Perhaps I am more like myself now?

THE JOURNEY BEGINS. AFTER SURVIVING A SLEEPLESS night bundled in tents at the top of the North Rim, under sheets of rain, deafening thunder and eye-opening lightning, we spend our first day hiking down the North Kaibab Trail. With each footstep, we are literally regressing in time some 45,000 of the 1.8 billion years of the planet's history, but that's lost on us at the moment. We're ankle deep in mud on this stretch of trail. Rivulets of water rush past our soggy boots. Oddly, I am not afraid. My true colors seem to bloom in times

sage into the canyon, wink at us with bushy eyelashes, oblivious to the downpour. Their dragging hooves barely seem to rise from the mud.

We hike down for what seems like forever, descending some 4,000 feet in the first five miles. Fleeting, yet brilliant, patches of sunshine, blue sky and cotton-wisp clouds periodically appear, affording me a breathtaking view of rust-red cliffs and lush vegetation. This desert display of reds and greens accompanies us along the Kaibab Trail, considered to be one of the canyon's most beautiful.

Our first two nights are spent at Cottonwood Campground, not far from Transept Canyon and just a stone's throw from Bright Angel Creek. "They say the creek got its name from the canyon's pioneer, John Wesley Powell, because it was the only creek he found that ran clear," Traver tells us, referring to the mocha-like silt and sand common to many other water sources in the area.

After traveling through millions of years of evolution, we are happy to break camp, however soggy, and to ponder our harrowing day over dehydrated stews, tortillas, pasta and hot chocolate. Sitting at our makeshift dinner table littered with food sacks and mini-cook stoves, we begin to bond. For a few of

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us, it will take a late-night card game for alter egos to emerge.

I MUST BE CRAZY. NOT BECAUSE IT'S 4:30 a.m. and I'm awake. Not because I should have bought that inflatable air mattress. And not because my boots will *never* dry. But because it's 4:30 a.m. and I wish I were already on the trail hiking under fading moonlight.

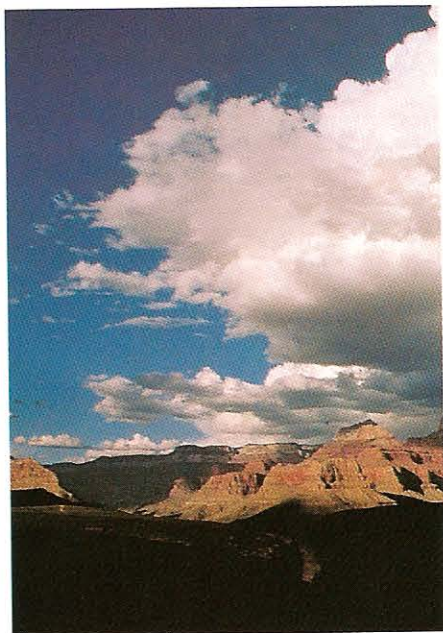
The next day finds us hiking another seven miles to the bottom of the canyon, some 5,400 feet below the North Rim. We arrive in one of the most magical of places, Phantom Ranch, a comfy section of the canyon that feels like Shangri-La tucked inside a vast desert. I am worn, tired and thirsty. The thought of cold lemonade and a fresh apple at the Canteen ahead keeps me going. The Canteen provides one of the only social opportunities within the Grand Canyon. It's the kind of place where you'll always find people just like you: soiled, sore and starved. You can even send a postcard, which will be carried by mule up to the canyon rim.

Each night that I sleep on the cool ground in this oasis, I am lulled by a gentle creek nearby. The moon moves closer and closer to fullness. On our fourth night, we sit on a picnic bench in our campsite as if watching a silent movie. Looking up at a brilliant night sky, we sit unmoving, watching as clouds weave across a lunar masterpiece.

We now are officially at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Nothing can replace the feeling of seeing the chocolate-brown Colorado River at your feet. This great river holds the promise of adventures past, present and future. Powell's epic navigation of these waters in a wooden boat boggles the mind. On the flip side, present-day river runners ride these currents in everything from dories to rubber rafts just for the fun of it. Prior to the construction of Glen Canyon Dam upstream, the muddy Colorado (Spanish for "red") carried as much as 454,000 metric tons of sediment a day past this point. Today, however, the sound of this river flowing past me at 12 to 13 cubic feet per second comforts my soul and casts the spell that so many feel when near this riv-

er. A good share of this essence was captured by musician Paul Winter, who carted a team of musicians into the canyon in the early 1980s to record *Canyon*. His melodic tunes include natural sounds of canyon wrens, the environment and the river.

THE LAST LEG. PRESSING ON-ward for the final two days of our journey, we head for Bright Angel Trail, the oldest continuously maintained trail in the canyon. We are only 15 miles from the South Rim at this



point. Confronting an ascent of 4,500 feet before us, we cross the flowing Colorado River on the Silver Bridge, a suspension bridge with little slats that afford a great view for those not afraid of heights.

I feel as if I am 100 miles from anywhere. The sun is on my face and a soft wind blows over my skin. I rejoice with the strident call of a canyon wren. Time stands still. We slowly make our way up the winding switchback, Devil's Corkscrew, like a troop of oxygen-deprived sherpas. The "rest step," according to our guide, would be good to use here. This ultra-slow pace is designed to allow hikers to ascend while still having enough oxygen left over to carry on a conversation. Still, my group is a bit short on chitchat this day.

Continuing along Bright Angel Trail, we make camp at Indian Garden Camp-

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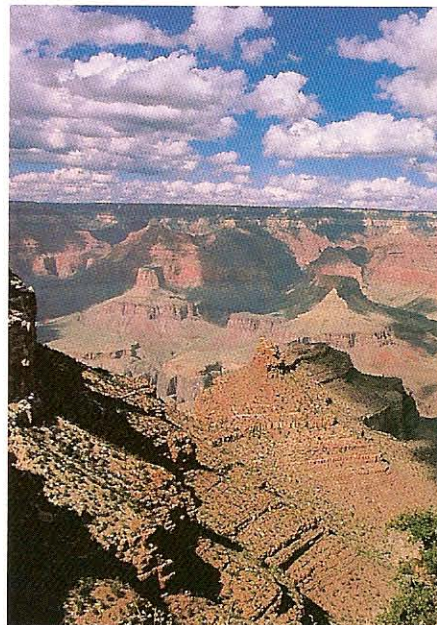
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ground. The best part of this spot is its proximity to Plateau Point, 3,100 feet below the South Rim, an easy three-mile round-trip hike that will give us our last view of the Colorado River running 1,400 feet below. A curvaceous mound of sandstone at the point is embedded with fossilized worm burrows nearly 530 million years old.

Tomorrow, we will emerge much lighter in terms of foodstuffs, and potentially a great deal lighter in terms of



brain fog. Our only regret will be the inevitable reacquaintance with reality. We will soon be bombarded by day-hikers as they charge down from the South Rim on the most-traveled section of trail in the park.

Even as I dread the final day's hike up to the canyon rim, my head is clear. I have survived a near flash flood, the beating sun and soaring temperatures, all worth the chance to walk across the grandest of big nature. A hike to the bottom of the Grand Canyon carries you deep into the land of stone and light. I have seen the inside of the Earth, eaten her dirt in my morning oatmeal, felt her coolness under my fingers and descended thousands of years with each tiny footstep.

OC

Annie Osburn is a freelance writer based in Newport Beach.

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