

## Grand Canyon Backpack – Thunder River Loop (late October, 2006)



*Halfway down from the North Rim of the Grand Canyon on the Thunder River backpack loop*

The South Rim of the Grand Canyon may boast the most spectacular overviews of this immense marvel of nature, but it's overrun by tourists and commercial development. In sharp contrast, the North Rim is unspoiled, infrequently visited and offers several access points, off gravel roads, to uncrowded backpacks that explore the canyon down to the Colorado River.

The Thunder River Loop, a three-to-four-day backpack, is particularly fine, featuring two bookend canyons with the strange spectacle of waterfalls and streams feeding cottonwood trees right next to cacti.

For some of us, it's an annual rite of late fall to head south from Canada for a last blast of heat and some rock climbing, hiking and exploring in the U.S. desert southwest. This typically involves a day-and-a-half driving marathon down the I-15, compensated by the superb scenery – wide valleys flanked by low mountains and bisected by trout rivers – of Montana and southern Idaho. In southern Montana, we make the obligatory stop at the Patagonia outlet store in Dillon, a lovely town worth buying property in if richer Yuppies weren't likely already driving up prices (National Geographic Adventure listed it as one of 31 places to live and play in a September 2006 article). Further south, we endure the one-

hour nightmare of driving through the urban sprawl around Salt Lake City, the only sizable city on our whole route.

South of Salt Lake City, we swing east from Cedar City on Highway 14 and climb steadily to Cedar Breaks National Monument, which features a couple of Bryce-like red rock amphitheatres. Eager to stretch our legs, we go for a short, slushy run up a snowy road to the top of Brian Head, a rounded bump of a mountain slightly above 11,000 feet. We then continue east and then south on Highway 89 for a back-door entrance to Zion National Park, where the next day we do the sublime hike up to Observation Point, which climbs 2,100 feet to a fine overlook of Zion Canyon, high above nearby Angel's Landing. There we run into a retired engineer, who contributes a new word to my vocabulary: "ruggedized", which becomes a running joke the rest of the trip.



*Beautiful soft light and amazing cross bedding in Echo Canyon, midway along the Observation Point trail.*

Our original plan had been to then spend four days backpacking down Paria Canyon along the Utah-Arizona border. But the combination of recent heavy rains – making some stream crossings chest deep – and our inability to arrange a shuttle ride forces us to consider other options (as we're leaving the premises of one potential shuttle ride, the guy says, apropos of nothing: "Don't blame me. I didn't vote for Bush.")

So we scurry down to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, where the permit office is closed because the ranger is evacuating a backpacker with a broken leg. Fortunately, we find someone in an office who lets us phone the South Rim station, where an official grills us on our credentials, despite our protestations that we're seasoned mountaineers. "An Englishman and two Canadians – what do you think?" we can overhear him saying to someone in his office. "You want to go WHEN? TOMORROW? People book months ahead for these trips."

Finally, he relents, though we have to get a map, which means a 45-minute drive back the way we came, arriving a few minutes before the office that sells them closes. We then drive back towards the North Rim, negotiating a maze of gravel roads in the dark to reach the Bill Hall trailhead, where we hastily erect our tents.

After a night of sporadic rain, we start down the initially steep trail into the canyon under threatening skies. After a couple of hours steady descent, we reach a lovely plateau, known as the Esplanade, where we traverse across orange slickrock marked with potholes containing rainwater (camping allowed here). By the time we make the next steep descent, we're engulfed in a driving rain. We pass a couple of stationary backpackers, including one guy in shorts lying on his side – waiting, I guess, for hypothermia to intervene.

Another steep descent brings us to an amazing sight: a thundering waterfall emerging from the middle of a huge sandstone wall and nurturing an oasis of trees in the midst of an otherwise barren landscape, except for scattered cacti.



*Thunder River emerging from a huge sandstone wall*

We follow this verdant canyon downstream to a campsite occupied by a lone backpacker, who tells us his trail nickname is Lonesome Rose; it's been a leisurely eight-plus hours to this point. After a starry night, we continue down the high-walled valley, making a couple of below-the-knee stream crossings and then traversing high above a deep gorge.

Just beyond, we reach the chocolate-coloured waters of the Colorado River, where we run across a guided group of rafters on a three-week trip downriver. A number of them are embarking on a loop hike, following our path up the Thunder River and rejoining the Colorado River at Deer Creek Canyon, where we will be camping tonight. Our route follows the Colorado downstream, eventually climbing high above the river and traversing through some nice red-rock desert.



*Traversing above the Colorado River, where a couple of flat-bottom boats are running some mild rapids*

In a couple of hours, we reach Deer Creek Canyon, another fine oasis with a lovely little waterfall and an ever-deepening chasm as the creek plunges towards the Colorado River. After setting up camp upstream, we wander down through the canyon and then descend steeply to the river, where the rafters are camped for the night. A misty waterfall empties into a pool about 50 feet above the river bed, which has been carved that deep since the river was dammed upstream in the early 1980s.



*A small waterfall plunging into Deer Creek Canyon*

After a chilly night perfumed by a skunk blast in the early morning, we follow Deer Creek upstream before climbing back up into a desert landscape punctuated by barrel cactus. Though we have a permit to camp on the Esplanade, we decide to go all the way out, climbing some 5,000 vertical feet to reach our car on the canyon rim in eight-plus hours. Though it's a sunny day in the low 70s (F), we manage to do it comfortably with about three litres of water each.



*Halfway up en route back to the North Rim*

Up on the high plateau, we drive through a ponderosa pine forest, passing many big trucks, ATVs and canvas tent camps – deer season is open, and it's nearly open season on us as a distracted truck driver just about runs us over. We camp that night at Lees Ferry, the southern exit to Paria Canyon, near the Navajo Bridge (the first bridge built across the Colorado River), where captive-raised California condors (once nearly extinct) are being released into the wilds. Two days later, we are greeted at the Canadian border by the first real snowstorm of the season and crawl on icy roads back to Calgary.

### **Backpacking in the Grand Canyon**

Despite official warnings of the perils of backpacking in the canyon – I guess they have to issue these considering the number of neophytes wandering down unprepared – the Thunder River route is quite reasonable for experienced backpackers. Though there are only a couple of signs along the way, the route follows pretty good trails, with lots of cairns, especially across the slickrock areas. It's a steady descent going down (and a fairly big climb coming out), with a few exposed spots requiring a couple of scrambling moves. It's definitely not a trip you'd want to do in the furnace-hot days of summer, and some people stash water on the way down for the trip back up (in the two canyons, you can treat creek water for cooking and drinking). But in the third week of October, it never seemed excessively hot, and we found pools of rainwater (which we treated) along the Esplanade on the way out. The only downside was the 12 hours of darkness, which meant long nights in the tent.

For a much more detailed description of the route, check this site:

<http://www.zionnational-park.com/grand-canyon-thunder-river.htm>

Note: It doesn't include the stretch we followed along the Colorado River to Deer Creek Canyon and the exit from the canyon, though there's nothing more difficult along this stretch, which is well marked by cairns.

### **Culinary Highlights of the Trip**

- Lees Ferry Lodge – Located in a 1927 stone building in the roadside whistle-stop community of Vermillion Cliffs, Arizona on Highway 89A en route to the Grand Canyon's North Rim. Amazing pork ribs, big juicy burgers (I had the one with fresh garlic; stunk up the car for a day afterwards), genuinely home-cut fries and a list of 84 bottled beers from around the world. Our Englishman nearly wet himself when he saw Old Peculiar (or Old Pecker, as the barman called it) on the list:  
<http://www.leesferrylodge.com/beerlist.htm>
- High Note Espresso and Art Gallery – In an old house in Basin, Colorado (between Butte and Helena along I-15), a former mining town now a haven for artists and musicians (one customer broke into a brief aria at breakfast). Fabulous, potent coffees and great fresh-baked goods and breakfasts. Seems to be only open weekend mornings; it was closing for the season the day after we stopped in late October:  
<http://www.stonehouseinbasin.com/highnote.html>
- Escobar's Mexican Restaurant, in Kanab, Utah – Great margaritas, fresh salsa and Mexican food. Nearby was a cop car with a dummy policeman behind the wheel (to deter speeders), a couple of such sightings in small towns along this stretch of Highway 89.