
Stop 24. Havasu Canyon

Arrival datetime:	Monday, May 13, 3:30PM
Sites visited:	Grand Canyon National Park, Havasupai Falls
Accommodations:	Havasupai Reservation
States traveled:	Arizona

We met the Discovery Trek tour staff at Flagstaff Hilton. It was already in the 70s at 7:00AM. We met our guide, Craig, and his assistant guide in training, Andrea. We also met our companions. They were Laurie and Anne, two thirty-ish singles from Erie PA, Vera and Lemoine, an “opposites attract” couple from Sacramento, Al, an Asian American from New York City, and a tense woman named Bobby from Michigan.

The two-hour drive to Havasu Canyon was fairly quiet. Anne amused us with stories of how Laurie had forced her to train for the trip. They went to a place called Wintergreen Creek that had some steep hikes and cliffs. On their first trip, they put 10-pound weights in their backpacks and tried running up the trails, soon slowing to a walk. On the second trip, they increased the weight to 20. Once, they climbed a cliff face so steep that Anne could not find any handholds only a few feet from the top. Laurie had gone ahead and Anne was left stranded for a half hour before a stranger happened by and pulled her up with the help of a tree branch. In addition, Laurie had actually run on a treadmill at home with a 25-pound weight on her back.

We gave the barest details of our drive and our plans, answering the question “How

long will you be in Arizona?” honestly but refraining from saying we were out for the whole summer. On our afternoon tour in Sante Fe, we had mentioned it right away and the group talked of it the entire trip. As we would be with this group for a while, we did not want them to be immediately jealous. Instead, Michael entertained the group with our moose story, or lack thereof. We are the only people in the world who have been to northern New England every fall and once spent two whole weeks in Alaska and we never even once saw a moose. We see them on road signs and brochures and newspaper articles about people’s backyards, but we have decided they are actually a myth.

Craig had given us each a liter of water to drink, admonishing us to have it $\frac{3}{4}$ finished by the time we reached the Canyon. A consequence of his directive was that we had to stop the van for Bobby and Andrea to go to the bathroom in the desert before we got there. Another was that the rest of us bolted for the toilets as soon as we arrived. Unfortunately, the toilets at the top of the Canyon were the first of many disappointing hole-in-the-ground outhouse experiences at Havasu. Smelly, dirty, flies, no toilet paper and no doors that closed.



Our tour group.

We had booked horses, but the rest of our party was hiking down the Canyon. A helicopter flew overhead. Our Sante Fe guide had advised us to take the helicopter on the way out but we had already contracted for the horses. Craig packed our duffel bags with the others in large canvas sacks, gave us lunch and water and introduced us to a Havasu Indian named Claudius who would be our horse guide. Claudius was sleepy-eyed and slow moving, about 5'10" and 200 pounds, . sloppily dressed,



Havasu Canyon from the the top.

including a drooping cowboy hat. Craig assured us he was very friendly and also that he did not volunteer to talk much, but he loved answering questions about

the Canyon. He left Claudius with the large canvas sacks and several other assorted containers of camping gear. The group took off down the hill and

Claudius methodically packed five horses with the gear while we sauntered to the edge of the Canyon and watched the various groups hike up or down. Several of those who ascended told us how hot it was and wished us luck.

When Claudius was finally ready, he put us in the saddles, and told us to go ahead. This was the first time we ever rode horses without a guide in the lead. We were facing straight downhill. The path was steep and alternately sandy and rocky, with wooden braces and deep ruts like the Kaibab Trail at the South Rim. Michael started out and Jennifer followed. Jennifer's horse seemed to want to be in the lead, and would run to get ahead of Michael's horse. But every time it got ahead of Michael's horse, it slowed down, and Michael's horse would push from behind. This pushing was dangerous as the horses that were facing straight downhill, seemed unsure of their footing, and stumbled a lot. Jennifer was constantly trying to get her horse to slow down, but not too hard, for she was afraid it would stumble too much and fall. The cliff edges were between five feet and twenty feet above the next switchback, survivable, but nevertheless life threatening.

It took an hour to descend the switchbacks and reach the bottom of the Canyon. Claudius by then had caught up with us and informed us that we had traversed only one mile of a 9½ mile journey. Jennifer's horse continued to try to pass Michael's. Once on the bottom, every time her horse took the lead, it started trotting. Michael's followed, and we bounced a quarter mile or so at a time until we ran into two older women with unrecognizable accents, also riding

horses. Claudius identified these as his horses as well. Jennifer's horse was soon trying to pass them, but they were bigger and did not yield. Jennifer's horse stumbled badly, both front legs losing footing so Jennifer had to lean far back in the saddle and pull hard on the reins to stay on top. Claudius told her she should pull back on the reins when that happened. Jennifer glared at him and started paying closer attention to what he was doing. He often whistled, and this caused the horses to go faster. She also caught him flicking a rope on the horse closest to him and this caused that horse to charge ahead. After that, she purposely lagged behind even the packhorses and Michael fell back with her. We were left on our own by Claudius, who continued forward with the two women.

Michael led our group of two and we walked and trotted along the relatively flat bottom of the Canyon by ourselves for an hour or so. He first followed a dog that limped on three legs but had been keeping up with the horses the entire time. But he later decided that the dog did not always take the route that was easiest for a horse and stuck to what looked like the main drag through the flattest, sandiest part of the canyon.

After an hour or so, we came upon Claudius in the shade of a large cliff waiting for us with the two women and the packhorses. The two women had gotten off their horses to stretch and Michael got off as well. Claudius was fixing some straps on the packhorses, but Jennifer was too nervous to join the group on the ground with so many horses around, so she stayed in the saddle. Ten minutes later, we were again pulling hard on the reins in contrast to Claudius'



Jennifer during rest stop, too nervous to get off her horse.

whistles and flicks. While crossing a river, Jennifer got her knees knocked against some of the pack horses bundles. She glared at Claudius, who told her to use her reins, useless advice as she was already pulling as hard as her strength would allow. Havasu Village was still 8 miles further down.

Later we stopped at a Lodge where the two women would stay. We had no idea there was a Lodge. But as with the helicopter, hearing about it after our plans were set made no difference. The campsite was a mile and a half further and Claudius left us for a few minutes to return the women's horses to his corral on the other end of town. We sat on the Lodge porch and started eating the lunch provided by our tour guides. The turkey sandwiches had hard pieces in them and Jennifer could not eat hers. She was contemplating breaking out our emergency stash of power bars when a Havasu Indian that looked like a shorter, fatter Claudius appeared. He did not introduce himself, but told us Claudius had asked him to take us down to the campsite. We introduced ourselves and found his name was Dino. Michael

stopped eating too and we went with Dino to our campsite.

We arrived at the campsite before our guides and left Dino unpacking the horses to explore Havasu Falls. Following cryptic signs, we first climbed up a steep hill, then descended on an extremely steep alternating rocky and sandy path down to a cliff-encased clearing a few hundred foot wide and broad, mostly filled with glistening pools of clear turquoise blue water. Havasu Falls was at least sixty or seventy feet high and ten feet broad, with a two-foot gap between fountain-like spouts that spewed white water to the left and right at thirty-degree angles from the dark green moss covered center. The surrounding cliff wall was covered with rock that itself had the shape of falling water. The shape was like the draperies we had seen in Mammoth Cave and Carlsbad Caverns, but the surface was smooth, as if it had too once been under a rushing stream of water. Upon close inspection of similar hanging rock formations at the base of the cliff, they appeared to have the same popcorn-rock composition as the stalactites in the lower cave at Carlsbad Cavern. As we looked across the blue lagoon of clear water at the falls, we had the impression we were in a huge cavernous space whose ceilings had long ago fallen away and allowed sun, wind, and rain to illuminate and smooth out rough subterranean rock formations.

We went back to the campground in search of our bathing suits. Dino had left all the gear in a big pile in the mule corral. We searched through the duffle bags until we found our bathing suits and went back to the falls. The water was



Havasus Falls.

extremely cold, but we found it pleasant in the 90° heat after our harrowing ride.

Craig and Al were setting up tents even before we got back to the campground. Craig set us up with a three-person tent, two self-inflating air mattresses, two sheets shaped like sleeping bags with no zippers, two fleece sleeping bags, and two foot square pillows compressed with a self-locking cord. We moved a picnic table a few feet away from our tent and used it as an organizing platform. By the time the rest of the party assembled in the campground, we were clean, comfortable, and refreshed. Anne actually commented on our relaxed and healthy appearance in contrast with the rest of the party, whose aches and pains from hiking 9½ hot and difficult miles were becoming more evident as people got more comfortable talking in the group setting.



Michael's first camping experience.

Vera had made it as far as the Village, then found Claudius and paid \$45 to rent a horse for the last mile and a half down to the campsite. She was a bit overweight and very out of shape. She and Lemoine both admitted that their idea of a good time was a night spent watching TV. We never directly asked

why they signed up for this type of adventure, and we never found out. Lemoine had simply stayed with the rear of our pack, which was guided by Andrea and included only Bobby, who had taken six hours to make it to the bottom. Craig laid out plastic tablecloths and put potato chips and trail mix down in front of us. Then he handed out ibuprofen.

Bobby chatted about leaving the chocolate for those who appreciated it and complained that we were not being served shrimp cocktail. All the while, she took handfuls of trail mix, picked out the nuts, then put the raisins and M&Ms back into the package. This grossed us out and we stuck to the potato chips. We studiously ignored Bobby while she chatted with Vera, who later told us that Bobby had regaled against the “depraved” culture that had resulted in her daughter’s experiments in body-piercing, apparently unconscious of the fact that Vera had a nose ring. Anne and Laurie were all a chatter. “Did you see the flower by the cemetery?” “How long have you been married?”

By the end of dinner, all personalities had been exposed. Al seemed quiet and reserved, but possessed an unexpectedly sharp wit. Anne was nice with a capital “N” 99% of the time, but very confrontational in the remaining 1%, to the point of embarrassing Laurie, who was earnest and sincere to a fault. Vera explained how she went from being a garbage collection professional to an aromatherapy consultant. It seemed a logical transition. Andrea was a recent college graduate who would never think of working for a big corporation so was trying out the tour guide thing instead (as

if this company was not owned by a corporation). Craig was a knowledgeable and competent professional who rarely said anything out of character for a tour lead.

The guides made turkey burgers for dinner. Then Craig had to move Bobby's tent, as she had repeatedly complained that it was out of the way. This caused him to delay his planned half-mile hike to Mooney Falls, though Vera and Lemoine did not care as they opted out of the trip. Craig had wanted to show us the twilight colors, but due to Bobby's neurosis, we had to settle for dusk. Mooney Falls was taller by twenty feet than Havasu. Our hike ended at the top rather than the bottom of the falls. We could see if from the side, one bright white gush of water slamming straight down into a deep bluegreen fern lined lagoon below. Craig said the bright green colors in the pools were caused by the abundance of travertine in the area.

Like Havasu, Mooney was surrounded with smoothed over cave drapery and stalactites. The limestone filled pools at its base were segmented by leveled stalagmites whose tops were just inches below the surface. Except for the rushing stream that left these pools, it was surrounded by high cliff walls as if a cave ceiling had been washed away.

It got dark and Craig told us a ghost story. At some time in the distant past, the Apaches came to invade the region. The Havasu defended themselves, but lost many warriors. It is said that the dead warriors walk the Canyon between 2:00 and 4:00AM some nights, but can only be seen by dogs and toddlers. So if we hear dogs barking at 2:00AM or toddlers

crying, it is because of these ghosts. Of course, we heard them. But luckily, we forgot about the story at that time. We were not used to such harsh conditions, or moving around after dark, so as soon as we got into our tent, we fell asleep and did not move until morning. We even ignored Anne's urging to come out and look at the stars.

The next day started out at about 80° and sunny, promising only to get hotter and sunnier. Craig took us on a hike past the bottom of Mooney Falls. That is, all of us except Vera and Lemoine. The cliff upon which we had stood in the evening had a two-foot wide steep path along one edge with a few switchbacks leading to two carved out caves. Each cave had ten or so uneven steps inside, each of which descended a foot or lower. Beyond that, there were chains and carved out footholds on the face of the cliff. These chains descended about 200 feet to the floor of the falls. Had we not just triumphed on Angel's Landing, Jennifer would not have been able to face this descent.

Craig described the whole descent, then led us through the switchbacks. Andrea brought up the rear. We waited for the group to assemble before descending into the first cave. But Andrea and Bobby did not show. Craig went back after them. It turned out that Bobby had lost what nerve she had mustered and Craig talked her into giving up rather than risking her freezing on the face of the cliff. He told us that had happened on occasion and it was very dangerous and tense to get someone who had frozen up to resume a climb.

We made it by following Craig's step-by-step instructions for each handhold and by watching the person below us execute them first. We handed each other our cameras so we could all get pictures of ourselves on the cliff face. We all gave each other high fives as each person made it safely to the bottom.



Descending the cliff to bottom of Mooney Falls.

The hike proceeded along a sandy, tree-lined path that sometimes was edged with long grasses or yucca that scraped just a bit at our legs. Craig had long legs and moved fast. Whoever was directly behind him struggled to keep up, the next person or two lagged about five feet behind, and whoever was the last ended up out of sight. A stop for a photo often left us 50 feet behind the group. But we managed not to get lost. Craig led us to a set of turquoise blue pools whose beauty, tranquility, and charm rivaled any movie set or travel poster that exists. Two and

three foot waterfalls gurgled over flat ledges between them.



Mooney Falls.

The others all had "sport sandals," rubber and velcro contraptions that allowed them to swim with shoes on. They navigated the pools much better than us, but we managed to walk on the sandy bottom of the nearest pool to one the ledges, and dove into one of the larger

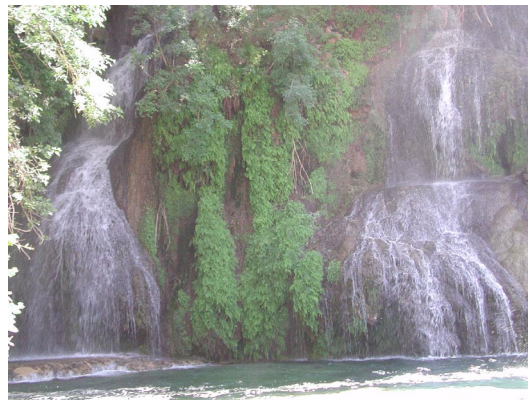
pools for a swim. There was a rope hanging from a tree limb at the side of the pool and we tried to pull ourselves up in and drop back in, but we did not get very far up. The water was pretty cold, but felt very refreshing indeed on our scraped shins and hot feet. We even managed to wade in all the pools at least once, stepping gingerly on moss-covered rocks.

On the return hike, Craig led us to a side Canyon that he called Fern Canyon. A comparatively small stream and correspondingly smaller water falls gurgled through it. We followed the stream up to a rock that we had to go under to get around, just like the one that blocked our hike up the side Canyon while canoeing the Rio Grand in Big Bend. But this Canyon was much wider, perhaps fifty feet across. The rock was not wedged against both side walls, but leaned against one side wall and was one of many huge boulders that were piled in the Canyon's center. A space between it and the rock next to it was big enough to crawl through provided you could climb the four feet or so to the opening. We could not, but Craig provided a boost to each of us and one at a time, we were hoisted through. The inside was a nice example of erosion on sandstone. We could scramble up over the rock rubble to a point where the sandstone was actively breaking and falling into the rubble we had just traversed. It was all red rock lined with "desert varnish," a descriptive term for minerals leached out of rock by water and left there when the water evaporated. Where the more recent breaks had occurred, the rock remained plain red. The varnish had not had time to form.



Craig, Laurie, Anne, and Jennifer on a ledge in Fern Canyon.

We had lunch with the others back at the campsite, then walked to yet another gorgeous waterfall and swam in yet another set of turquoise blue pools below them. This one was called Navajo Falls.



Navajo Falls.

It was actually four or more separate waterfalls. Its cavernous space was at least 100 feet wide and the whole length was flowing with twenty to forty feet of water. Pools spread for about half that length into the forest surrounding. Again, a cliff led down to it. We had to cross a stream to get to the cliff edge. We could not navigate this trail without getting our hiking boots wet, so we left them on a rock. Michael got his boat shoes soaked and Jennifer walked in her poolside sandals that did not attach at the back. We

both took these off to actually swim in the pools. There was a challenging straddle up a log to stand under one of the higher waterfalls. Again, Craig was the only person who could do it on his own. We did not try for fear of losing our shoes. It seemed too dangerous to try it without them. But we swam and floated in the last rays of hot sunshine.

Dinner was spaghetti with marinara sauce. Great for us, but Bobbi had Craig cook her some broccoli she had bought in the village while we were hiking Mooney Falls. This made Craig start our evening activity after dark rather than before. It was a hike to a cave that had some supposedly spectacular ceiling of quartz crystals. Headlamps had been suggested in our tour literature as items to bring and we had ignored the suggestion. The hike to the cave involved a climb to the entrance and we were not up for it without headlamps. We were happy to get into our tent and organized for sleep before darkness fell. We were asleep by 8:30PM.

Michael woke up at 5:30AM to find Craig already organizing the troops. We dragged ourselves out. We had thought that we were supposed to ride horses out, but Craig had told us that the group was to have breakfast together at the Village, and the horses were to be picked up at the Village after breakfast. Vera and Lemoine, immediately after arrival, had also ordered horses for the return trip. Anne wanted to ride as well, not because she could not make the hike, but for the experience of riding out west. Bobby wavered back and forth on whether she wanted to ride or not. Her 6-hour journey down made us all fearful that if she hiked, it would be 9 hours back up

and we would be at the top until dark waiting for her. So we encouraged her as much as possible and she finally told Craig to order her a horse. He sent her, Vera and Lemoine on up the path to the Village, and sent us right after them. We were somewhat disappointed to be ranked with the slow group, but did not mind leaving the campsite before the cleaning up was done. Luckily, Bobby had persuaded Craig to make coffee before leaving the campsite. We lingered just long enough to have our power bars with our coffee and were on the trail to the village by 6:45AM.



Michael taking a last look at Havasu Falls on the walk back to the Village

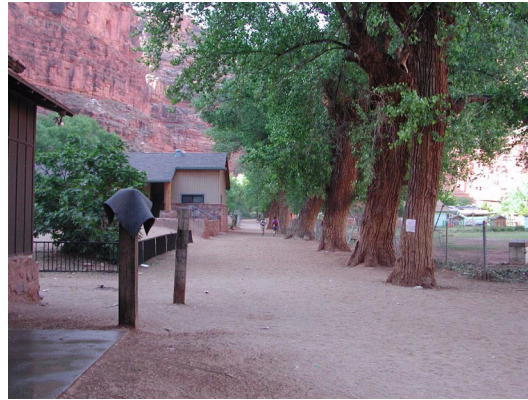
Halfway up to the Village, and it was uphill most of the way, we passed Dino bringing down four saddle horses and four pack horses. We were sure they were meant for us, but our mentality was “do what the guide says,” so we kept on walking. It was a beautiful stroll anyway. We lingered near Havasu Falls, feeling the mist on our faces and admiring its coat of glistening dew in the morning sunlight. The dew gave a softer appearance to the rugged cliffs and spiky cactus that surrounded the falls. As we proceeded, the sunlight tossed yellow and orange illumination at the tops of the

Canyon walls. This reflected down to the lush plants and desert flowers that lined the path.

In the Village, we met the “slow group” Craig has sent before us and waited for the members of the “fast group” that had not yet passed us on the trail. This was just Craig and Andrea, and Craig was to see to the extra horses when he arrived. As we entered the Village, we met Claudius. He asked us why we were not riding the horses he had sent down for us. We told him that Craig told us to come up. We also let him know that two more horses would be ordered for Anne and Bobby. When we got to town, Anne and Bobby were there, and we let them know that horses would be available.

We spent as much time as we could in the convenience store, then also in a one room Visitor Center. Both had bathrooms with flushing toilets, and we all took advantage. On the wall of the Visitor Center was a gorgeous poster of Havasu Falls. The poster was a photo of Havasu flowing from one spout, while we had distinctly seen and photographed two. We had earlier noticed that postcards we had seen of Mooney Falls displayed two spouts while we had only seen one. This was for us evidence that the rock under the gushing water was gradually falling away, creating changing patterns of waterfall as it smoothed the surfaces of the drapery hung cliff walls below.

Al and Laurie grew tired of waiting for Craig to come up and worried that, since the rest of us were on horses, they would not hike fast enough and would make us all wait at the top. So they took off up the Canyon before breakfast. When Craig and Andrea came, we assembled for



Al and Laurie taking off after breakfast.

breakfast, but the only restaurant in the Village was closed, so Andrea led us through the grocery so we could pick out what we wanted to eat. The restaurant was across the dirt road from the grocery and had outdoor picnic tables on a covered porch, so we ate there.

Craig went off looking for Bobby, who was nowhere to be found, so the guide led her horse and we took off with Vera in the lead. We trotted a bit as on the way down, but Craig and Andrea still kept up with us though they were on foot. The horses were being whipped by Herbie the Havasu, who did not whistle as much, but kept calling “Whoa horsey!” Herbie was a bit younger than our other guides and looked like a rap star. He wore a bandanna, an unbuttoned cotton cardigan, sneakers, spurs, and a smile. We did our best to share our coping strategies with Vera, Anne, and Lemoine. Everyone took the lead for a few minutes here and there. We stopped for a rest under the shade of a cliff. Herbie chided us, saying the horses usually run up the hill, but were going slow because they knew we were wimps. He gave us some tips on how to make the horses go faster, which we ignored.



Anne's turn at lead, Jennifer following.

Al and Laurie reached the top before us, but we passed Bobby at the base of the switchbacks. She refused to get on her horse. Craig was annoyed but hid it from

her well and stayed with her on foot while Andrea passed the horses to join Al and Laurie. Craig must have been a genius at encouragement because he and Bobby were only twenty minutes behind us when we reached the top. She called him her “fearless leader” and kissed him on the cheek. We decided that if she was physically capable of making it up the hill in that timeframe, her 6-hour time down had not been due to physical, but mental, limitations.

It took a good half hour to pack the van. With sheer exhilaration at having completed the camping experience in order to see such natural wonders, we giggled our way back to Flagstaff.

Miles traveled: 75
Departure datetime: Wednesday, May 15, 3:30PM
Departure weather: 75° Sunny