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## **Stop 23. Grand Canyon**

Arrival datetime: Friday, May 10, 6:30PM  
Sites visited: Grand Canyon National Park  
Accommodations: El Tovar  
States traveled: Utah, Arizona

We left the last of the red, cactus covered, buttes in Utah and entered the rolling plains of the Vermillion Cliffs Scenic Highway. A bank teller in Kanab was the last in a long line of people to recommend that we not miss the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. The others included our Sante Fe jeep guide and our Zion horse guide. So, leaving the pink and white cliffs in the distance behind us, we traveled the 60 or so miles out of the way from our way to the South Rim to experience the North Rim.

The temperature was in the sixties, similar to Zion, but the instant we got out of the car at the Visitors Center, we were cold. The wind must have been between 40 and 50 knots. We strolled on the quarter mile paved walkway to Bright Angel Point, our backs facing huge white rocks and holding on to railings to brace against gusts that could lift us over the edge.

Nothing on our travels had prepared us for the view. Staircase cliffs starting from underneath us or within a few miles from us on our plateau gradually lowered into deep crevasses in the surface of the valley. Staring straight down, we saw several levels of plateaus and corresponding cliffs, all with curves, in detail jagged, but in the whole composed graceful patterns to create an image of lacey edges on refined textile patterns. At our level, the

cliffs were rust and white, dotted with evergreens and brush. But as they descended, the green became thicker and had the appearance of moss-covering or gray-green rock. With binoculars, we decided the green color was more of the same vegetation we saw at the top, covering the soil below the rugged cliffs.

From the bright Angel Point Trail, we continued along the rim on Transept Trail. Our path was even dirt through a forest of pine and, we thought, aspen. Occasionally, overhanging branches gave way to a view of the Canyon. The cliffs, appearing in different overlapping patterns, made it seem a very different place, but the far mountains and south rim gave consistency to the landmarks on the horizon. We read billboards that named some of the peaks and described their formation. Vishnu Temple was a tall mound with a bulb at the top reminiscent of Turkish architecture. We saw that the columns in the Grand Canyon were not like the hoodoos at Bryce that had been formed by falling arches. Rather, they were buttes turned into mesas (or visa versa) and eventually eroded into steeples.

We had lunch at the Grand Canyon Lodge. The wind was so fierce it blew through closed windows, often making the wood hum and groan as if the windowpanes would burst from their



*View from North Rim.*

casings. But nothing spoiled our serene enjoyment of the spectacular view.

The drive from the North Rim to the South took us through the Vermilion Cliffs, rose-colored and even, lining the horizon like a trim of wallpaper used in interior decoration. We had driven through them on the way to the North Rim as well, but now they were facing us. We had learned at Zion that they were a rock layer within the uplifted rock at Zion but above the highest layer of the Grand Canyon. That is, the layers of sandstone deposited at Zion were all higher on the continental shelf, having formed into rock hundreds of millions of years later than those at Grand Canyon.

Yet, we were losing elevation. As we lost elevation, the temperature went up. It had been in the low 60s at the North Rim, but was in the low eighties in the valley. We passed a canyon, unmarked by signs, which would have been spectacular and worthy of visitation in its own right but for its proximity to the Grand Canyon. By the time we reached the South Rim, we had traveled so high in elevation again that the temperature was again in the low 60s.

The South Rim is a wonder. At the Zion Visitors Center, and also on the Memphis River Walk, we had seen topographical models of landscape that were put together with flat cutouts piled on top of



*View from North Rim in late afternoon.*

each other. Each cutout represented so many tens or hundreds of feet. The bottom of the model was flat, with higher elevation points expressed by having their shapes outlined by stacks of cutouts, all the same thickness but growing progressively smaller in horizontal dimensions as a mountain peaked or a mesa narrowed at the top. At Zion and Memphis, these were crude approximations, because the Zion cliff faces were in fact fairly smooth, as were the mountains surrounding the Mississippi. However, this type of topographical map would have perfectly represented the Grand Canyon, for it did appear to be made up of individually carved layers stacked neatly on top of each other. Each layer was a slightly different color, most rose straight and tall from the previous one, like layers of a wedding cake designed to look like a pyramid. There were some that sloped to the next layer, but even the slopes were very geometric, triangular slopes. These were supposedly shale and siltstone, which eroded faster than the limestone and sandstone that made up the majority of these billion year old layers of ocean floor.

At the top of the South Rim, there were trees and bushes, but it was a low growth forest compared to the tall pines and aspens of the North Rim. However, the view into the Canyon stretched wider and deeper, enveloping the horizon. The rock layers were seemingly endless, similar colors at similar depths, continuing down into the canyon until the spaces between the mesas and buttes were only shadows, continuing up into the distance until the line of vision blurred the colors of the topmost layer into the one behind it. We arrived near sunset, and the colors were mostly brilliant orange and midnight blue, with hints of green, yellow, and pink as the sun's rays left their last caress on the tops of the cliffs.

It was blustery cold. About 40° and the winds must have been 25-35 knots. We did not have a dinner reservation at our hotel because we were not sure what time we would make arrive, so we had to brave the weather in search of dinner. At Angel Bright Lodge, we found the best combination of food and service we have had in a National Park. Walking back to the El Tovar, we glanced up at the myriad of stars but it was too cold to really stargaze.

Our goal was to hike the Kaibab Trail. We had to walk two blocks to a bus stop, take one bus from the "Village" to the Market to pick up lunch (they did not sell box lunches at the El Tovar). Then we got back on the same bus to get to the Visitors Center, where we had to change buses to get to the Kaibab Trailhead. They seemed to have three or four bus routes, some of which had East and West distinctions to make it even more complicated. We remembered nothing of this from our trip to the South Rim 13 years before. Then

things were easy to find and there had been plenty of parking. Now, even the Ranger talks were scattered among the mandatory bus routes and never seemed to be near the ones we were on. The buses seemed geared for thousands of people, but the vast majority of the population (especially non-English speakers) would be completely confused by their options. Moreover, the buses were dirty and it was discouraging to try to see views through the windows.

We had the earliest possible breakfast at the El Tovar, a challenge, as there were lines of people waiting to get into the dining room when it opened at 6:30AM and practically no restaurant staff other than the hostess passing out pagers and seating only about ten tables at a time. We got the earliest buses possible after that and still did not make it to our trailhead with our lunch until about 10:00AM.

The hike down was very easy. Nevertheless, people passed us at a disquieting rate. Later, at a Ranger talk, we learned that 99.5 percent of hiking injuries happened falling downhill, and that relieved us a bit. It was harder to go slowly and carefully than to take advantage of gravity's assistance in acceleration.

We had chosen the hike because we remembered from our previous trip that this particular trail was closed to mule traffic. However, mules did frequent the trail, and even when we did not encounter them, we encountered plenty of evidence of them. We remembered that there had been a reason that mules were not on the trail 13 years ago. There had been an accident involving a mule

and the trail at that time was being repaired to make it safe for them again. We chided ourselves for not being cognizant of the fact that things can change a lot in 13 years.

It was windy, but the hiking kept us warm. Blowing sand occasionally made us cover our faces with our hats or hands, and made us independently recommit to buying kerchiefs before our planned horseback ride a few days later. The Canyon was as deep and wide as we descended as it was from the top. The focus on the nearer pyramids and steeples got sharper as the horizon got closer. One butte Michael remembered as being far below us at the beginning of the hike ended up above us in our view from our hike's destination at Skeleton Point. The views still extended as far as the eye could see. We decided that the green slopes at the bottom were not rock, but vegetation, clumps of grass like the ones at our feet, but growing close enough together to blend into what looked like a moss-green carpet on the lower slopes. We picked out Vishnu temple and so knew that we could most likely see where we had been on the North Rim. But we could not identify the exact ridge so we could not find any evidence of the Grand Canyon Lodge with our binoculars.

Our goal was to see the Colorado River. On the Kaibab trail, that meant a six-mile round trip. We passed a few lookout points that would have been fine destinations for a Canyon trek, continuing until we reached a plateau overlooking Phantom Ranch. On our previous trip here, we had stayed at Phantom Ranch, and tried to pick out with the binoculars where our cabin had



*Approaching Cedar Ridge on the Kaibab Trail, Skeleton Point plateau beyond butte.*

been, where we had cross the suspension bridge, where we had tried unsuccessfully to submerge ourselves in the icy Colorado river, and where the stream feeding into it had provided a small pool warm enough to satisfy our quest for a swim. We ate our lunch, fighting all the while to keep a determined squirrel a sanitary distance away from our food.

The hike back up was hard and hot, long stretches of steady 20° uphill, wooden braces unevenly strewn across the path to stop sand from washing away, and deep uneven ruts mules trains had dug around large rocks. But we took it easy. The wind helped to keep us cool when it was not throwing sand in our faces. We pulled

our windbreakers on and off accordingly. We trudged slowly, stopping for water. Michael encouraged Jennifer, who lagged behind until the very end, when she sprinted past him on the last 10 yards, earning the cheers of the small group of hikers who had also just finished the trail and were waiting at the trailhead for other laggards.

As it turned out, we made it up in only ten minutes longer than it took to go down. To us, that meant that we were judiciously careful on the way down (as opposed to being wimpy, as we felt at the time all the downhill hikers were passing us). We navigated the buses back to the El Tovar, showered, and shopped. We went to an



*The Colorado River and Phantom Ranch from Skeleton Point.*

art exhibit at Kolb Studio on the South Rim that featured paintings of lots of National Parks. We delighted in the familiar sights, some we had seen and some we are looking forward to seeing later in the trip.

Dinner at the El Tovar was an exercise in patience. We were seated in time for our reservation, but it took at least 15 minutes to gain an audience with a server. Our wine took another 15 or so, and so on, and so on. But we were relaxed and not personally responsible for the people waiting for a table so we enjoyed our dinner and even had room for a leisurely desert.

We rose to see the sunrise. As the El Tovar makes no accommodations for such a plan, we had provisioned ourselves with orange juice and bananas. You would think that in a place where they even host a “sunrise tour,” they would have coffee available, but no. We left the hotel at 4:45AM and hiked two miles from the Village to Mariposa Point. Fearing we would miss the start of it, we jogged part of the way. It was very cold, definitely lower than 45 and perhaps in the thirties. But the exercise and the view made it bearable. The gray sky became pink and brought pink to the rugged pyramids and temple-topped peaks. Then orange in the sky brought orange to the buttes and mesas. The



*Sunrise from Mariposa Point.*

colors and shadows eventually made it to the cliff walls of the Canyon, and the full array of colors emerged white, gray, green, rose, and purple. Sunrise at the Grand Canyon is truly a unique experience.

Breakfast was open at the El Tovar when we got back at 6:40AM, but there was a 20-minute wait for a table. They had put out coffee in the lounge, but it was gone already. We brought this to the attention of the front desk, then shivered in the lounge until the pot was refilled.

Later in the day, we rode the bus to the end of the line, Hermit's Rest. We bought a sandwich and hiked along the rim of the canyon back toward the Village. We sauntered in our best John Muir style,

observing the flora and fauna, staring down our fear of heights, and taking lots of photos. Five or six miles brought us to Mohave point, where we bus-hopped through the remaining overlooks back to town.

We had dinner again at the El Tovar, this time a bit early in order to make it to a Ranger talk. Michael did not mention this to Jennifer at the time, but as we ate dinner, a small mammal with a bushy ringed tail walked across a beam on the ceiling. Just as well the service was too slow to stay for desert.

We were able to drive our own car to an auditorium that was off the beaten track. The Ranger was highly knowledgeable and entertaining. He first dazzled us with

facts and figures about the Canyon. It was one of the World Heritage Sites' "Seven Natural Wonders of the World." It was big enough to house all the soil in the state of Florida without us noticing any difference in the view from the Rim. He then told us some funny stories of people's questions while gazing across the Canyon from the Range Information Station at Yavasupai Point. "Is that Canada?" "Does the mule train have a dining car?" The scheduled program was a reading from a journal of someone

who had been a boatman on Jim Powell's expedition down the Colorado. It was an enlightening slice of history from the point of view of someone paid to go where no white man has gone before with good reason as it was dangerous and the food was really bad.

We had to get up and out by 5:00AM to make our Havsupai Tour. We made it by 5:15, too early for breakfast, or even for another sunrise.

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Miles traveled: 347  
Departure datetime: Monday, May 13, 5:15AM  
Departure weather: 38° Light Fog