



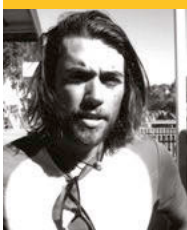
CONQUERING THE CANYON

*Is it possible to escape the crowds while hiking the Grand Canyon? AT regular **Maxwell Roche** finds the best possible answer while trekking Rim to Rim.*



PRECIPITOUS PATHWAYS

WHO'S WRITING?



MAXWELL ROCHE is a literature graduate who spends time in antiquarian bookshops taking great long sniffs. He also hurls himself off, down or into anything for a story or a photograph, and travels in search of a view, because it's all about the view. He's a desperate climber, addicted surfer and frivolous cyclist, horrified by the prospect of missing out and tormented by indecision regarding his future.

"F

ire in the hole!" yelled Jimmy as he stood mid-campsite, feet shoulder width apart with a football-sized rock held menacingly aloft above his head. Through the silence of the night Jimmy's rock came down upon the inflated wine bag, which exploded like an A-bomb, echoing along the canyon.

"Heeeey," whined a slumbering lady somewhere nearby as she sat bolt upright in her tent, fear of god in her eyes. Jimmy and the rest of us rolled about in stitches. Why we found it so funny I'm not sure. Perhaps it was the perfect juxtaposition between what is perhaps the most ethereal place on Earth, the bottom of the Grand Canyon on a moonlit night, and the prankish drunken

behaviour of our lovable but deeply mischievous guide Jimmy Flip-Flops (so called because he always wears flip-flops).

What is the Grand Canyon to a hiker if not the ultimate cliché? The iconic landscape, a backdrop for Hollywood movie stars, famed the globe over for its striated walls of coral and gold; one of the world's ultimate wonders, on a par with Mount Everest and the pyramids of Egypt. Adventurous types may well be wary of such a locale. After all, what is adventuring if not seeking out new experiences and steering clear of clichés in favour of the authentic, the avant-garde. You may be thinking, as I was prior to my visit last autumn, that a landscape so esteemed must surely be overrun, a dastardly Disneyland full of selfie-sticking, Crocs and socks wearing renegades who just want a quick snap before moving on to the next bucket list location. Well, I'm delighted to report that although the above is true to some extent, less than 1% of the Grand Canyon's five million annual visitors venture more than three metres beyond the gift shop. Which means... sequestered riches can still to be found by stout-soled adventurers, even upon such hallowed ground.

In 2019 the Grand Canyon National Park celebrates its centenary, and for that reason, among others, I thought, "to hell with it, I'm going". Research revealed aspiring hikers, given the consequential nature of the terrain, do well to join a group and enlist the services of a guide. So, I got in touch with the good people at Arizona Outback Adventures (AOA), who seemed a legitimate bunch given their 20 years of experience guiding in ►



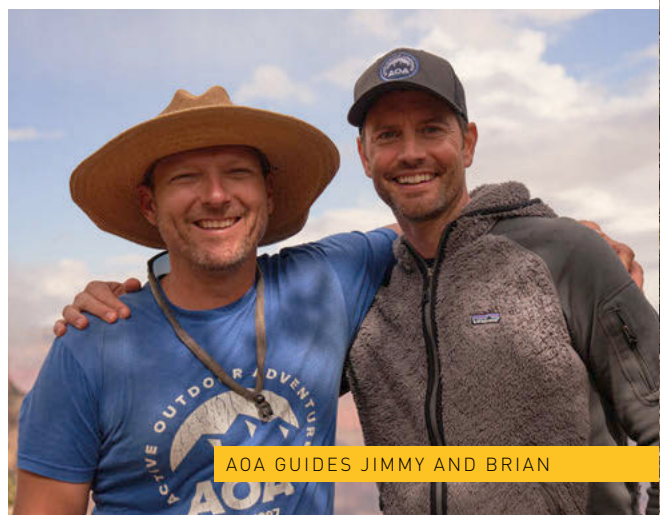
NAVAJO BRIDGE



LAYERED LIMESTONE



THE RED WALL



AOA GUIDES JIMMY AND BRIAN

the dusty deserts of the American Southwest. We were a team 10 strong. Brian, Jimmy and Siera from AOA Guides, Scott and Ben from the Arizona Tourist Office and the punters, a real multicultural melee of hiking enthusiasts; myself, Jan from Germany, Terryn from China, Patricia from Mexico and Johannes from France.

Our quest was one of high esteem, a hike much coveted due not only to its lack of availability with regards to connecting reservations at the various campsites on route, but also because of its difficulty. We planned to traverse 25 miles across the canyon from rim to rim over a period of four days. Such an undertaking for a seasoned hiker doesn't sound that strenuous, until you factor in the following: 1,737m of descent, 1,310m of ascent, 25kg each of team and personal gear to be shouldered, and temperatures ranging from -5C at the North Rim to 35C at the base. "It's no walk in the park," said Brian as we gathered around him for lunch and a pre-hike briefing the day before our departure. "Pfft," I'd thought secretly, even in full knowledge of the statistics, "25 miles in four days. I'll be fine."

AN EXPOSED START

Day one of the hike soon came around and, after a huge USA-style breakfast of locally caught Colorado River roundtail chub at a rest stop nearby, we gathered 2,680m up at the start of the North Kaibab Trail. A few centimetres of snow covered the ground and as a light gust of wind whipped through the

ponderosa pines carrying with it the sharp, sweet, citrus smell of Christmas, all except Jimmy seemed to be feeling the chill. Wearing swimming trunks, a pair of flip-flops and a cowboy hat, he sang a country tune merrily to the group. "All my exes live in Texas, da da dahn... and that's why I hang my hat in Tennessee." As I exchanged a smirk with our resident Frenchman Johannes, he asked, "Do you know George Strait the country singer?" I replied that sadly, I did not. "Well you will," said Jimmy, before skipping off down the trail, sandals slapping in the snow. "It's seven miles to Cottonwood campground, follow me y'all, yeehaw!"

After an hour of steady downhill progress through coniferous forest we broke free of the foliage and out onto a rocky plateau to catch our first glimpse of the canyon. "Woah," said everyone in unison as they dropped their packs and gawped. The morning sun had burned the snow cover into a mist that hovered above the bustling pines like hair caught in a well-used brush. Vertical walls screamed straight up between green expanses of forest on each side, leading our eyes away into the distance where seemingly never-ending waves of ruptured rock stood imposingly. Brian handed me a piece of cheese on a cracker, which I enjoyed disproportionately given the complimentary sweetness of the panorama. We were soon through the Supai Tunnel, a satisfying tube of stone blasted out of the cliffside which led to the most impactful terrain of the day, a 76m linear limestone section named the Red Wall, which formed perhaps



COTTONWOOD CAMPGROUND



BLACK BRIDGE



CACTUS-LINED PATHWAYS



SUPAI TUNNEL

the most striking geological strata in the complex cross section of the canyon. The path began to follow narrow channels chiselled straight out of the escarpment, the perimeter of which dropped away 250m to the canyon floor. I put my toes over the edge and enjoyed the exposure, observing the horizontal uniformity of the rock, looking back in time, pondering upon the Red Wall, a Palaeozoic layer. Jimmy told us the crimson layer represented an era when arthropods ruled the world, evidence of which had been found mummified within the limestone.

Soon we were across the miniature suspension bridge at Roaring Springs and a long lunch of baloney and gherkin baguettes at the Pump House Ranger Station kept us charged. By mid-afternoon we reached Cottonwood, our first camping site, awash with arid aromas, cacti shimmering through the heat haze and bugs buzzing in the underbrush. It was a tranquil spot indeed. The oriental tones of Terryn echoed all around as he attempted to teach Jimmy the lyrics to *Rawhide* in Mandarin. I skulked off, meanwhile, to find a smooth spot of packed earth to pitch my tent. As I deshoouldered my pack and bent to survey a potential patch, my knees screamed their disapproval. Noticing them to be swollen to twice their normal size following a full day of weighted descent, I popped a few ibuprofen and sought out Scott, who was threatening to uncork a bottle of bourbon. As misfortune would have it, we discovered Scott's sacred chalice of bourbon had leaked entirely into his sleeping bag. Therefore, booze-free (since nobody else had the sense to bring any)

and weary, after a few hours of astronomical observation and chat, we retired to our respective tents. Safely in, bag zipped to my chin, I reflected upon a life-affirming day on the trail and dreamt of the mighty Red Wall and its precipitous pathways.

SIMPLE PLEASURES

"Wakey wakey, eggs and bakey!" bellowed Jimmy, drumming the back of a saucepan with a wooden spoon. I peeled my face from the side of the polyester tent and rolled out into the dirt under a pastel blue sky. Everyone was half packed already. Like a bloodhound I was spurred to action, following my nose toward bacon rashers crackling in the pan. Brian sat surrounded by the team dispensing freshly cooked pancakes, eggs and various other breakfast delights. I retreated to find some shade on fleecy ground below a Cottonwood tree and practised my terrible Spanish with Patricia from Mexico – aka 'The Walking Backpack', so called on account of her petite physique (you could only see her backpack when you walked behind her on the trail). While we chatted over our blueberry pancakes it dawned on me how thoroughly well we were being looked after. Isn't camping supposed to be miserable? The trip thus far, excluding the aching joints, had been nothing short of luxurious. The AOA team had catered for every eventuality. So, well equipped and very well fed, we spilled out onto the North Kaibab Trail and commenced the second, far steadier day of hiking seven ►



TERRYN ON THE TRAIL

miles south-west to Bright Angel Campground on the banks of the Colorado River.

As we wandered through emblematic cactus fields I felt like John Wayne in *Rio Bravo*. The temperature rose to 35C in the windless valley and suddenly Jimmy, in his swimming trunks, looked appropriately dressed.

“When the sun is high in that Texas sky, I’ll be buckin’ at the country fair. Amarillo by morning. Amarillo I’ll be there,” he sang. Brian stopped and pointed us down a side trail marked Ribbon Falls. The sounds of rushing water up ahead suggested a potential escape from the slightly tortuous heat. Jan the German newspaper mogul let out an extended “ooooo” when we reached the base of the falls. We were greeted with a most unique scene. A towering wall of brilliant green moss, over which sparkling water slowly drained, led up to a large, circular hot tub sized pedestal upon which even more sparkling water from high on the canyon descended in a fine mist. Seconds later, we were all semi-naked dancing around the amphitheatrical pedestal below the falls like native Indians at a pow wow. I took

some pictures of Brian doing his best impression of the girl from the Timotei adverts before we skipped back onto the trail.

Despite the invigorations of the waterfall, we were all still very excited about the prospect of a warm shower when we arrived at Bright Angel Campground late that afternoon. Even

more exciting were the two large cases of booze, which had arrived ahead of us, courtesy of the mule train. Après shower, squeaky clean, cold beer in hand, I took the opportunity while the others unpacked to sneak off and take some photographs at Boat Beach down by the river. With golden hour in full swing, and the tripod poised, the sun cut across the canyon illuminating the Colorado which ran, the colour of melted chocolate, below the Kaibab Black Bridge. The suspension bridge defied gravity and appeared to leap across the canyon, creating the most perfect architectural-aes-

thetic I’ve ever beheld. The moments I spent on Boat Beach that golden afternoon, at the depths of the canyon, were among the most affecting of the trip. One beer led to another later that evening and I rigged the camera to capture the campsite by

“ IF HEAVEN
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RIBBON FALLS



SILVER BRIDGE



ZOROASTER TEMPLE



APPROACHING INDIAN GARDEN

night. Inebriated, Scott and I made fools of ourselves dancing around on a long exposure trying to spell Grand Canyon with our head torches.

Our third day started much like the last, with Jimmy tearing the tents down around us singing George Strait songs start to finish, Brian cooking a wilderness brekkie worthy of Marco Pierre White and us enjoying the placidity of our surroundings, exchanging tales from adventures past and discussing what the canyon still held in store. The hike that day was likely to be rather more challenging than the last, however. We were set to cover a distance of seven miles uphill to Indian Garden, our final camp spot. Following our punishing descent on day one, my toenails had already starting to blacken and my knees, despite the anti-inflammatories, were still a little on the stiff side, so I was relishing some low impact uphill progress. My relish had led to some pondering upon the uniqueness of travelling downhill first on a hike. My comrades all agreed that downhill is always the least comfortable and therefore, much like eating your vegetables before the meat and potatoes, the worst was behind us.

A JOURNEY BACK IN TIME

Immediately after departure we crossed the so-called Silver Suspension Bridge and spent time gazing down into the raging waters of the Colorado. Later, we approached an endless series of switchbacks called the Devil's Corkscrew. As the name suggests, we plodded for many hours back and forth, snaking

our way up some extremely steep topography. At rest stops, Jimmy took the opportunity to give us all some lessons in geology. "Tectonic activity five million years ago lifted the Colorado Plateau high above the surrounding landscape. The plateau was then eroded by the Colorado River and its tributaries. The two opposing processes have exposed this," he said, pointing out toward the vista. "A vertical cross section one mile high, which represents over two billion years of the earth's geological history." I felt myself going a bit cross-eyed trying to contemplate such epic proportions of space and time and, by the look of the group, everyone was feeling equally baffled.

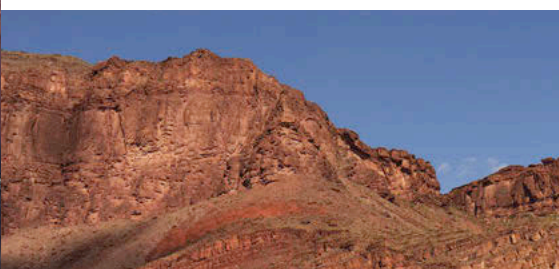
Before our minds were totally blown we moved onwards up the trail to tackle the last few miles to Indian Garden. On route to Indian Garden Jimmy explained that archaeological evidence suggested Native American peoples had been living and farming there for 13,000 years. As we approached, it had become immediately clear why. The terrain graduated and widened into a lush oasis spraying out like green paint dropped onto the desert from a great height. As we walked by ancient Havasupai petroglyphs beside the perennial willow-fringed creek, and watched the afternoon sun track and burn through greenery set in such stark contrast against the rose and rust coloured Badlands behind, I found myself thinking, "If heaven exists on Earth, we may well have just stumbled across it".

According to Brian, the fun for that evening had only just begun. He suggested we don head torches and scamper three ►

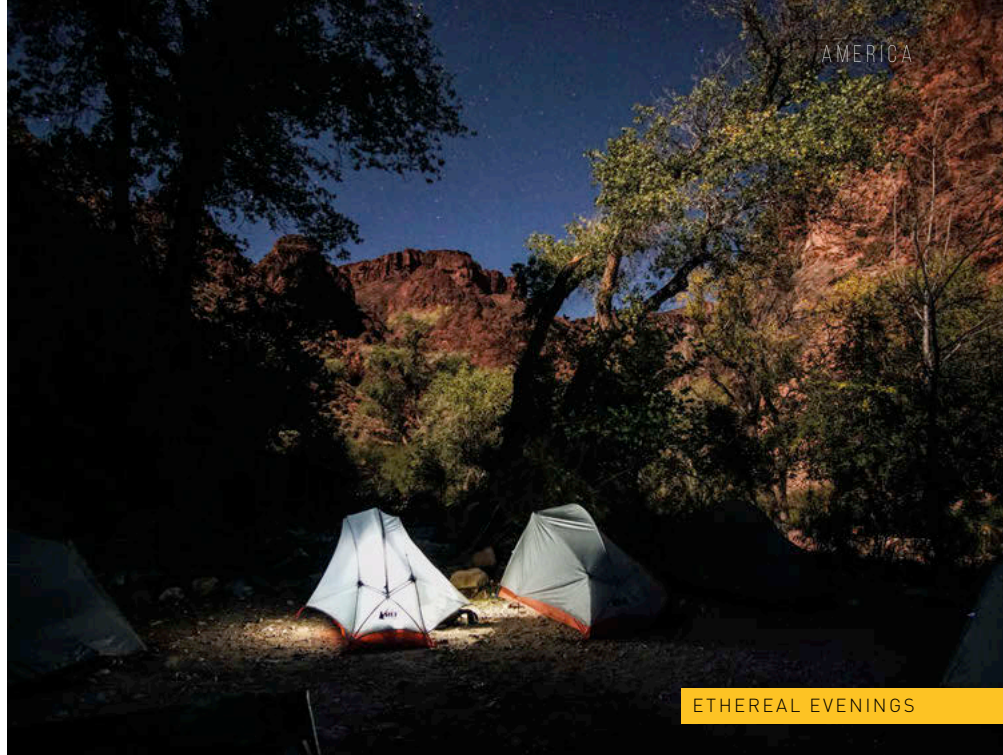




HIDE YOUR NUTS



SINGLE FILE



ETHEREAL EVENINGS



TERRYN TAKES IT IN

miles down a side trail to watch the sunset at a famous lookout named Plateau Point. The suggestion wasn't that well received by the wearisome group, but I was pretty quick out of the gate, determined not to miss my chance at another golden moment. I reached Plateau Point alone and found a *Lion King*-esque rock jutting out into space, affording me a full panorama at which to aim the wide angle. Storm clouds gathered and blues and reds combined to turn the Wild West purple. The Colorado carved its way through a great vertical chasm half a mile below, and hot currents of earthen wind swirled past me toward distant summits half a mile high in the Arizona sky. "My heart is sinking like the setting sun, setting on the things I wish I'd done," sang Jimmy, moved as we all were by the immense view, but also by the canteen full of Kentucky bourbon he was swigging like no tomorrow. "It's time to say goodbye to yesterday, coz this is where the cowboy rides away."

It was fuzzy noggins all-round the following morning and even Jimmy kept quiet as we progressed the final six very steep miles from Indian Garden, to the climax of our adventure, the South Rim. "When you start seeing folks on the trail who look like they've no business at all being here, you'll know we're getting close," said Brian. An hour later, a young Japanese couple skipped past me in baseball boots and skin-tight jeans clutching a selfie stick between them. That's when I knew we'd made it. Outdoor Elysium quickly turned to tourist tragedy as we summited the rim. Coaches parked diagonally in their bays

like tiles on a parquet floor, with swathes of people flooding out, school groups and grey nomadic elderly types a plenty.

The sudden pandemonium felt irrelevant, however. Our trip had been defined by what lay behind us. Total strangers to begin with, from across the world, we had travelled by wit alone, self-sufficient, over a period of four sweet days, deep into some of the earth's most monumental landscapes and come out the other end... friends. We'd encountered barely a handful of other souls along the way, since entrance to the park is so well regulated, and had therefore been able to bond not just with our environment, but as a group.

A few days later Johannes, our crafty French companion, and I sat by the river at a spa resort named L'Auberge, together with the team, enjoying a well-deserved foot massage (an apres amble treat I would highly recommend to all Grand Canyon rim to rim hikers). We discussed our recent adventures, swapped anecdotes and laughed as only friends with shared experience could. "There is a proverb in French," said Johannes, "we make a nice mayonnaise." I think what he meant was that harmonious personalities can sometimes combine to make a great team, and being part of a great team can lead to a great time just about anywhere, but when said emotional ingredients align somewhere sensational, like the Grand Canyon, people are liable to have the absolute time of their lives. Arizona for me, aside from the fictitious beauty of the landscape, was about the people, and if the mayonnaise is good, so be the hiking. **AT**

LET'S GO

USA

HOW TO GET THERE

It's possible to fly into Las Vegas and head over to the Grand Canyon, however, many tours start in or near to Phoenix, which is where we'd advise you fly into. Return flights from London Heathrow in spring or autumn will set you back around £600 with British Airways, Finnair or Iberia and flight times are around the 10-hour mark. From there it's a four-hour drive to the Grand Canyon.

WHEN TO GO

The North Rim is only open from 15 May to 15 October, so it is advisable to avoid winter if you're planning to do the full Rim to Rim hike. The height of summer is also worth avoiding unless you enjoy walking in searing heat. We'd recommend visiting in spring or autumn for the best conditions.

HOW TO DO IT

A lot of people choose to go with a tour operator to hike the Grand Canyon Rim to Rim. He travelled with Arizona Outback Adventures (www.aoa-adventures.com), a company that offers a variety of hiking itineraries around the Grand Canyon.

For experienced hikers it is also possible to do it independently. To do so,

you'll need to book your accommodation several months in advance and plan your transport accordingly (you can get a shuttle bus between the North Rim and South Rim).

WHAT TO TAKE

Temperatures will fluctuate a lot during your Rim to Rim hike, as conditions at the bottom of the canyon can be extremely different to those at the top. Among your usual hiking setup, we'd recommend bringing shorts, sunglasses, a sun hat and sun cream for the warm, sunny parts, and warm layers for evenings at the bottom of the canyon. Light rain gear is worth taking 'just in case', especially in autumn when the area can be subject to showers. Meanwhile, walking poles can be a godsend on big descents. Plenty of water is also essential. Independent hikers will also want to take a full set of camping kit.

FURTHER INFORMATION

See the official Grand Canyon website (www.nps.gov/grca)

for real-time updates on trail conditions, weather and detailed information on everything from accommodation, parking or route maps. Alternatively, you'll find a lot of useful information on the official Visit Arizona website (www.visitarizona.com). **AT**

