

In March of 2003, Scott Morrison and I went backpacking in the Grand Canyon. The temperature is nice at this time of year, but water is already starting to be scarce. Another issue with this time of year is getting permits. It's a popular time to come to the Grand Canyon, since it's spring break for many students and families.

Our first adventure was simply getting out permits. We flew into Phoenix to stay with some friends. We met up with my parents who drove us up to Flagstaff. On Day 1 we got a very early start from Flagstaff and drove to the Grand Canyon. Our whole trip was fairly last minute, and we were planning on getting same day permits. The permit office opens at 8am. We were there by 6:30am, and there was already a considerable line. Plus, people who got turned away the day before get to jump ahead. So we were about 11th in line when all was said and done. After the rangers had helped three parties, they told us that the office was closed and they had no more permits to give out. After some negotiating with a ranger, he eventually showed me the availability chart. It looked really full, but there were some scattered openings. Using that chart, and a GC map, I looped together a trip without concern to mileages or water supply. But at least we had a permit. Our trip was to last 6 days and take us from the South Bass trailhead to the Bright Angel trailhead. The majority of the hiking would be contouring along the West Tonto trail, dipping down into little canyons as we came across them.

To start, my parents spent two and a half hours driving us 30 miles over incredibly washed out roads. The rental car got some good use. We had an SUV; a high clearance vehicle was very necessary. The road goes through reservation land, which, if being manned, requires a \$20 fee to pass. No one was collecting money when we went through. More info on this road is available at the ranger's station when you get permits.

We eventually made it safely to the trailhead, by about noon. We had the capacity to take 6 liters of water each, in 2 gallon jugs, and 4 1 liter bottles. We hadn't filled them all, since we didn't yet know how scarce the water would be.

The first day would take us to Bass Rapids, all the way into the canyon down to the Colorado river, 4400 feet of elevation loss over 7.8 miles. I should make note of the mileages here: the miles on the West Tonto seem *very long*. Ten mile days last forever. Once ease of Hermit Creek, the miles go much faster, and a ten mile day can be finished before noon. This seems to have less to do with the terrain, than with the way the miles were measured.

The first day was lots of downhill. My knees were killing me. The upper half of the trail is steep and has lots of boulder hopping. Down below it gets more gradual, until the very end when it steeply descends to the Colorado. The trail is mostly very easy to follow. We got lost at one point, but used the description the rangers had given us and we were fine. We slept our first night on the bank of the Colorado. There was very little room on a tiny sand bank. I was aching. I lay down, unable to move, while Scott made dinner. We filled up all our jugs with the silty Colorado water, since we didn't know if we'd find water the next day. Bass Rapids is a bit out of the way. We would have to do some backtracking the next day, but we had to make sure we had water.

The next day was very miserable for me because my knees were totally shot from the day before. Our goal was to make it to Ruby Creek, supposedly 8.6 miles away. This was not exactly what we had a permit to do, but it seemed acceptable. We hiked *all day*. We crossed Serpentine Canyon which had a tiny bit of water, a happy surprise. But we had to go searching for it. Mostly it was very tiny drips or stagnant puddles.

Despite the popularity of the Canyon, we hadn't seen any people since the trailhead. It was dusk when we got to Ruby Creek, so we hiked up out of the canyon, and decided to stop at the first suitable site we saw. I got bit by a cactus on my way out of the canyon which was not fun at all. I thought a bee was stuck in my pants and was repeatedly stinging me. We sat down with the tweezers and eventually got all the little stickers out. Once back on the Tonto Platform the sky clouded over and it started to rain. I insisted we stop immediately, especially when it started to thunder. We set up our tent quickly and snacked. When the rain had died down a bit we cooked from inside the tent then went to sleep.

The next day our goal was to hike to Slate Creek. From Ruby to Slate is 15.1 miles. We were already a mile past Ruby, and we would stop just before Slate. We crossed Turquoise, Sapphire, and Agate Canyon. They all had very little water. Sapphire had the most. It was a beautiful canyon and a nice place to eat lunch. We walked up the canyon a bit for water. The pools were small, but sparkling. And they were much cleaner than most of the water we'd seen. I had renewed energy on the third day and my knees had fully recovered. We were both hiking fast and almost made it to Slate Creek by dark. We camped just before the canyon on the Tonto Platform.

We saw people for the first time when we awoke the morning of the fourth day. Some hikers walked past us in the opposite direction. It was a little over ten miles to Hermit Creek, our goal for the night. The miles flew by and we arrived shortly after lunch. Now it was Scott's turn to be exhausted. He lay down and couldn't move, while I set up camp, fetched water, and made dinner. This was the first campsite we'd slept at. There were 4 or 5 other parties there with us. I don't think we had a permit to camp here

either, but no one bothered us. The permit we'd obtained consisted of very short and very long days, so we averaged them out by camping illegally. We went for a short walk down the canyon. It was very gorgeous, with water worn pockets in the rocks, and a flowing stream to walk in.

We rose really late the next day, since we only had 7.2 miles to our campsite at Salt Creek. I was hiking well, Scott was still pretty tired. We were seeing more and more people on the trail – several other parties of backpackers, mostly families and boy scout troops. We arrived early in the day, even with our late rise and pancake breakfast, but mostly lay around once we got there. We got up after a nap and went exploring up and down the canyon. I got a bit sketched out by some of the down-climbing, but Scott went as far as he could go – until he hit a 100 meter drop in a narrow canyon, and decided to go back. It got fairly cold at night, since it was very windy. It was a one-party campsite, so we had the place all to ourselves.

The last day we had twelve miles to hike out to the Bright Angel Trailhead. We got an early start and hiked *fast*. When we hit the Bright Angel it was like being thrust onto a highway. There were so many people. There were horses and donkeys, and swarms of tourists. Scott was rude to a donkey train or two. We hiked fast and arrived at the top before noon. It's about 3000 feet up the Bright Angel in 5 miles, which was enough to make us tired when we got to the top.

Our next task was getting back to Phoenix. We knew a bus could take us from GC to Flagstaff, but it would cost about \$20 each. Also, the next bus wasn't until three or four, which meant we would miss the four o'clock Greyhound to Phoenix. The next bus out of Flagstaff wasn't until 1:30am! So, we would have to hitchhike. It's a couple hours

from the GC to Flagstaff. Luckily for us, hitchhiking out of a national park, with a backpack on your back, may be the easiest way to catch a ride. We got a short lift almost to the park exit. After less than twenty cars we got another lift to the town outside the GC. Literally two cars later we were picked up by a truck which took us almost half way there. Then again, literally two cars later, another pickup stopped for us and took us the rest of the way to Flagstaff. We arrived at 2:30pm or so, maybe 10 minutes later than if we'd had our own car!! We got the last tickets they had for the bus to Phoenix, and our trip was over. We flew back to Oakland the next day.