

Grand Canyon Backpacking Trip - Oct 23-29, 2005

This written account is of my first overnight backpacking trip in the Grand Canyon. I have previously completed several rim-to-river dayhikes, but wanted a several day trip so that I could take the time to really enjoy the Grand Canyon. I had read about Clear Creek and how visiting it really gives you a sense of what Bright Angel Creek must have been like before Phantom Ranch. I chose to make Clear Creek the main objective of my trip.

My first trip itinerary was approved by the NPS (having faxed it the earliest day I could send it), and I was scheduled to hike down from the South Rim to Bright Angel campground and stay there for one night, followed by 2 nights at Clear Creek Camp, then one last night at Bright Angel camp before hiking back up to the South Rim. I had hotel reservations at Bright Angel lodge the night before my hike and the night I returned to the top. I was very pleased that I received my first choice on trip itineraries.

The physical preparation for this trip began months in advance with a lot of weight training and aerobic conditioning in an attempt to get myself in the best physical condition of my life. I also spent a number of weekends hiking around the community with a full pack load in an effort to get used to the balance and weight of a heavy pack. In retrospect, I am glad I spent this time in training, as it made the trip enjoyable and less risky.

10/23/05 - Getting to the South Rim

Flew from OKC to Phoenix, picked up my rental car and headed up I-17. Since it was a Sunday morning, traffic was relatively light on the Interstate, and I made it to Flagstaff in only a few hours. While in Flag, I had to stop at a grocery store and sporting goods store to pickup food and fuel for my stove. Important lesson learned here... 'CV470 fuel - camping gaz' is not compatible with a MSR Pocket Rocket stove... more on that later.

Having purchased all my supplies, I proceeded on Hwy 180 to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. The weather was picture perfect until I left Flagstaff. There was a storm hanging over the San Francisco peaks, and I drove through rain and some small hail between Flag and Valle.

After waiting out the sudden downpour at the gas station in Valle, I then drove to the canyon, making it to the Bright Angel lodge by 2pm. Having never stayed in that lodge, I didn't know what to expect. Thankfully, I was pleasantly surprised that for \$58/night it was a clean room - no frills - but nice.

After getting my gear unpacked, it was time to get everything organized for an early start the next day. The loaded pack seemed even heavier than what it was when I trained on the weekends with it. I know I wasn't roughing it

compared to ultralight backpackers as I was willing to carry a few extra pounds of luxury items like an inflatable air mattress, 2 man tent, even a 1lb plastic jar of peanut butter. However, I decided to dump out a few things like a 4AA battery lantern, extra flashlight, the foam mat to go on top of the air mattress, extra clothing I felt was unnecessary due to the moderate temperatures in the inner canyon, and an extra bottle of water. I didn't regret this, as I never missed any of the items I left in the trunk of my car at the South Rim.

Now back to the CV470 fuel. I assumed (incorrectly) that all the isobutane canisters were the same, but now I know better. The CV470 canisters don't have the threaded collar that the MSR canisters have. I ended up going to the Market Plaza at the South Rim and buying two more 8 oz canisters of fuel for the trip. Lesson 1 for newbie learned... ;)

I checked into my cabin at Bright Angel Lodge, then took a short walk up the rim trail to Maricopa Point to get a view.



It was beautiful to see the canyon with some cloud cover which makes for some great contrast for photography. I was surprised to find my cell phone worked from Maricopa Point, so I called my family back home to let them know I had arrived safely. "Hey, guess WHERE I'm calling from". Even got one shot with a rainbow over the North Rim.



It was nice to stretch my legs on the rim trail after a day of traveling, but I knew I had a long day in front of me, so I turned in before 8pm to get an early start the next day.

10/24/05 - Hike from South Rim to Phantom Ranch

Really didn't sleep well in the hotel room, probably due to the anticipation of the hike the next day. Kept waking up every hour or so, and by 3:30am I gave up and began packing for the hike. Like most first-time backpackers, I had way too much stuff.

As I mentioned earlier in this account, I ended up leaving some gear I was pretty sure was not needed, and I am glad I made that decision. After whittling down what I didn't need, I packed the extra stuff in the rental car in the parking lot, then was on the trail by 4:30am. My hotel room was only about 100 yards from the Bright Angel trailhead, so it was an short walk to get started. Temperatures were in the upper 30's along the rim, but I warmed up quickly as I started down past the 2 tunnels on my way to the 1.5 mile rest stop. The trail was dry, so no mud holes or water puddles to dodge in the pre-dawn hours.

The sun began to come up about the time I made it to the 3 mile rest stop. I stopped there for a few minutes to get some pictures. This was taken from the short path that leads out the back of the 3 mile rest stop:



It took me 6 hours to make it down from the Bright Angel trailhead to Phantom Ranch. Since I was at Bright Angel campground early in the day, I had my choice of campsites and took the second one from the bridge on the side away from the creek.



There were only about 4 campsites taken at that point, but the campground filled up completely by dark. The last 2 hikers that made it in got stuck with the site right by the bridge. I'm sure there was plenty of noise there from campers walking across the bridge.

I got my tent setup and ate some lunch. That afternoon, I walked over to the Canteen for some lemonade, and confirmed my sack lunch for the next day, and the steak dinner I had reserved for Oct 27th. I was told that I could pickup my sack lunch anytime after 3am the next morning. Everything seemed to be going perfectly so far.

I came back and relaxed that afternoon. Tomorrow was a big day for me doing the 9 mile hike on Clear Creek trail. I did walk down to the Colorado River to view the Indian ruins and do a bit of sightseeing before it got dark. The cottonwood trees were still green here at the bottom. Quite a few deer and several wild turkeys were wondering around the ranch. I guess some of the folks from urban settings have never seen deer in the wild and were fascinated.

The sun set around 6:20pm, and without a moon, it really got dark. Guess I was used to streetlights and light pollution in the city; I could see the full swath of the Milky Way across the sky that night. It was impressive. I went

through my gear, making sure I didn't forget anything and tried to organize things I thought I'd need often in the outer pockets of my pack.

Finally sat down and got out my backpacking stove and boiled some water. Tonight's menu was Chicken ala king with noodles. I'd never had a dehydrated meal before, and really didn't know what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised (or I was just really hungry after the hike down).

I had stripped out several items from my mess kit as I knew I really only needed a pot to boil water and a cup. I really have no idea how much weight I was carrying, but as the trip wore on, it seemed to get heavier! I used a MSR Pocket Rocket stove that was ideal for the trip; it was very economical on fuel. I carried two 8oz bottles of fuel but only used up about ½ of one tank for the entire trip.

10/25/05 - Phantom Ranch to Clear Creek

I was up around 5am to get my tent and gear stowed and ready to pack out to Clear Creek. There was already plenty of activity around the busy Bright Angel campground. It was still dark when I picked up my sack lunch at the canteen at 6am. The sack lunch consisted of a bagel, cream cheese, apple, seasoned meat stick, peanuts, raisins, small can of pineapple juice. Was somewhat disappointed at what it contained, but I guess I can't complain considering it took a lot of effort to get that food down there.

I walked on up the North Kaibab trail with my headlight on. I carried a Petzl Tikka XP headlamp which performed admirably on this trip. I'd never hiked this section of trail before, and wasn't sure how far I'd have to go to get to the Clear Creek trail intersection. Seemed like I had hiked quite a distance, and I began to worry that in the darkness I might miss the trail cutoff. Turns out it was clearly marked and easy to spot by headlamp.

Clear Creek trail immediately begins climbing in order to reach the Phantom Overlook. It took me about 30 minutes to reach to overlook. The CCC did an impressive job on this section of the trail, and even placed a bench made of stones there:



The yellow minnow bucket you see hanging off the back of my pack came in handy as a place to store my sack lunch, and also served to scoop water out of the stream to filter for drinking water.

I swear by hiking poles. I find them ideally suited for helping to take some of the weight/strain off my legs. Never had any problems with my legs on this trip, thanks to the hiking poles.

Once you leave the Phantom Overlook, you begin a pretty steep climb which affords some great views of the Colorado River and the Black Bridge far below. I thought I heard voices, and while trying to figure out the source of the voices, saw there was a group of visitors on mules going up the South Kaibab trail. Wow, they must have been talking loud, or else the wind was carrying the sound. This would be the last human contact I would see or hear until later in the day.

Once the trail got to the Tonto Platform, it generally leveled out. It did cross several dry washes, where I learned to look for rock cairns to determine where the trail began again on the other side of the wash. Every direction I looked was full of stunning beauty.



When I was about 3 miles away from my destination, I ran into a group of hikers that I had traded e-mails with a few months previously on the Yahoo groups Grand Canyon site.



They provided me with a lot of valuable information about the upcoming trail, and also informed me that there was no one currently staying in Clear Creek canyon. I would have the first night there alone! I had read on many trip reports that the last ½ mile or so of the trail descending into Clear Creek is pretty crumbly and narrow, and they confirmed this report, but assured me I would have no problem.

Adding to my concern was a line of thunderstorms that were brewing over the South Rim of the canyon. I did get a few sprinkles during this last section of the hike, but not enough to really get wet.

It seemed to take forever to cover that last 2 miles to the final descent into Clear Creek canyon. I am a novice to unmaintained trails, and this last ½ mile was really lousy. The trail went along a crumbly slope of red rocks and fine gravel, and the trail itself was only about 12-18 inches wide. In some places, vegetation grew over the trail, forcing me to push my way through it to keep my footing. A slip here, and I would be sliding down to the bottom in a hurry.

I'm not fond of heights, and I was still probably about 250 feet from the bottom.

I considered turning around and camping up on the Tonto, but I was down to less 1 liter of water, and I had not seen any source of water in the 9 miles I had covered from Phantom Ranch. I was carrying a 3 liter water bladder in my pack, and two 700ml bottles of water in my side pockets of my pack. In the darkness that morning at Bright Angel, I had failed to properly tighten the collar on my 3 liter water bladder, and during the course of the day it had leaked out what I hadn't drank. I had been drinking out of the other bottles during the day thinking I still had plenty in the bladder.

Due to my water situation, I had to choice but to face this trail and proceed down. Let's just say I was a bit stressed out at this point. It took me over 30 minutes to cover this last section of the trail leading to the dry wash that leads to Clear Creek.

I was about ready to kiss the ground when I got down the last switchback. In retrospect, it was worth it. It took me 8 hours to cover the distance. Clear Creek is absolutely beautiful and unspoiled.



I passed by the first 2 campsites, and took the one nearest the man-made pool in the creek. There were food boxes at each campsite, but no picnic tables like at Bright Angel campground. The first thing I did was get off my heavy pack, then take my plastic bucket down to the stream and dip out some for filtering. This water had very little sediment in it, so I was able to being filtering it almost immediately. The water I filtered here tasted better than the water from the faucets at Phantom!

Here's my campsite where I stayed 2 nights at Clear Creek:



I had barely got my tent pitched when I looked to the south and noticed the thunderstorms on the South Rim were breaking apart. All of a sudden, the wind began blowing about 40 mph. My tent wasn't very securely anchored, so I was hanging onto it the best I could as a fine red dust filtered into everything I owned. This wind lasted for maybe 10 minutes, then quickly died back down to a dead calm as it was before. I wasn't going to let anything like almost running out of water, a crumbly trail or a freak gust of wind ruin my experience of this magnificent area of the canyon.

Some thoughtful person(s) created a small dam in the creek that made for a great place to soak some tired feet. It was just about knee deep, but that water was pretty darn cold. Felt good for about 30 seconds until the cold started kicking in... ;)



I only had a few hours of daylight left, so I hiked around the immediate campsite to see if indeed I was alone. I was. The hikers on the trail warned me about ravens trying to get into their food. I only saw one raven who flew away after I tossed a rock in his general direction.

I took everything out of my pack and put all my foodstuffs into the metal cans at my campsite. As soon as the sun went down, I was visited by a number of small mice looking for food. They had no fear of humans, moving to within inches of my feet as I checked on the water I was boiling for dinner. After trying to stuff myself as much as I could, but I still had some food leftover. I took it about 30 yards away from the camp and dumped it on the ground. Came back a few minutes later, there wasn't a scrap of it left. As soon as I cleaned up after dinner and had all my food put away, the mice left and either didn't bother me the rest of the night, or I didn't know it. I went to sleep around 7:30pm and didn't wake up until 6:00am the next morning.

10/26/05 - Exploration of Clear Creek Area

The morning was not filled with chores and packing since I was staying in this site for a second night. I leisurely ate a breakfast of dehydrated eggs & bacon (quite tasty actually) and mentally planned my day.

I began my exploration of the canyon by hiking up the left dry fork that the trail led into. You only can hike about ½ mile up this dry wash when you come across this obstacle:



If anything, it was a great place to yell and hear your voice echo back (haha). So, I hiked back to camp and checked to see if any critters were raiding my camp. No problems there, so I then headed up the right branch which Clear Creek flows through. It was rough going for some of the distance due to all the vegetation growing around the creek. The previous campers had left plenty of footprints in the sandy areas, so I just looked for their footprints as a guide to follow. Got more great views looking up the canyon:



After about 90 minutes of hiking, I was down to half a bottle of water. I really didn't want to tackle a hike of any great distance that day. Besides, I was beginning to get hungry, and I wanted to hike downstream as far as I could in the afternoon.

I returned to camp and boiled some water to cook beef stew. This was probably my least favorite of the various dehydrated foods that I brought on the trip. Chicken seems to handle dehydration a bit better than beef. After cleaning up after lunch, I headed down to the pool to cool off. The daytime temperatures were in the low 80's so the cold creek water did feel good for a few minutes.

After climbing back out and walking the few feet back to camp, I noticed there were a couple of campers in the site about 75 yards back upstream. They walked over and asked if I knew if there was a latrine in this camp. I had found it while hiking around the area the previous afternoon and pointed it out to them. I missed it on the hike in, as it was behind some foliage a few feet off the main dry gulch leading into the campsites. I asked them what they thought of the descent into Clear Creek, they agreed with me it was pretty challenging.

After relaxing for a few minutes, I decided to hike downstream along Clear Creek. After reaching a bend in the creek where it makes a right turn, the canyon walls began to close in, making for some impressive views.



Clear Creek is very shallow and was easy to cross by rock hopping. I had to cross the creek about a dozen times in the 3 hour hike. Never got my feet wet. I didn't make it to the point where Clear Creek empties into the Colorado due to the distance from camp, and I knew that sunset came pretty early this time of year. Short daytime is about the only drawback I see of hiking in the canyon in late October. I took this picture at the furthest point I progressed downstream.



I never got to the segment of the hike where you need to climb down a 20 foot vertical section, but I knew I wouldn't want to try that alone and without a rope. I then hiked back to camp before the sun began to set. By now, preparing dinner was routine and I ate as much of my food as I could in order to lighten the load I had to carry back to Phantom Ranch the next day.

What an awesome day this turned out to be! After the sun set, I had front row seats to one of the clearest night skies I've seen in years.

10/27/05 - Hike from Clear Creek to Phantom Ranch

Today is my 45th birthday. I couldn't think of a more peaceful and scenic place to spend it than here. I set my alarm for 5:00am in order to get my camp packed up and get on the trail by first daybreak. I had the steak dinner reserved for 5pm that day, and I wanted to allow myself plenty of time to make the 8 hour hike back to the Ranch.

The worst part of the hike was the first 30 minutes of that narrow, loose-footing trail leading out of Clear Creek canyon. It was still pretty dark, so I couldn't see how far I'd slide if I did slip off the trail. My imagination was filling in for what my eyes couldn't see. ;)



This picture shows the crumbly slope of red rock the trail crosses. The resolution of the picture is not too good, but there is a trail crossing that lower section. I was so glad to be off that section and back onto the mainly flat sections on the Tonto Platform.

After I climbed back onto the Tonto, I was greeted by a magnificent sunrise:



The air seemed pretty warm already, and I wasn't in the sun yet, so I knew the latter part of this hike was going to be warm. There isn't much shade along the trail, so you learn to appreciate what little you find. I can't imagine hiking this trail during the day in August.

You do get a few views of the Colorado River from the trail like this one:



The hike back to Phantom Ranch went smoothly until about 1pm when it started to get pretty warm. As I've mentioned there really isn't any shaded parts of the trail so I just tried to pace myself and not overexert myself. Fortunately, some high clouds moved in during the afternoon which did reduce the heat on the trail. The weight of the gear I had on really started to wear me down, and I think the only thing that kept me going was thinking about the nice steak dinner that awaited me at the canteen at 5pm. The last 2 hours of the hike is where I really appreciated all the time I spent getting physically prepared.

I ended up making it back to Phantom Ranch around 2pm (8 hours total), which gave me plenty of time to pick out a nice camping spot at Bright Angel and clean up for dinner. I made it over to the canteen around 4:45pm to wait for the call to dinner. After eating trail food for several days, a sit down steak dinner sounded great. There were a couple of wild turkeys wondering around the area near the canteen and I shot a picture of them.



A little after 5pm, we were invited in the canteen. It was a full house for dinner. I was seated next to 2 fellows from Texas and I enjoyed listening to their canyon stories and I shared my own. Not many folks venture over to Clear Creek, so I had a big audience listening to my trip report.

The steak was a bit fatty, but I wasn't complaining. The sides served were baked potatoes, peas and carrots, corn, cornbread, salad, and a slice of chocolate cake for dessert. They had cold beer available, and did that ever hit the spot! ;)

After dinner, I went back to camp and relaxed and updated my journal. I wanted to buy a Phantom Ranch T-Shirt, and was told I should come back to the canteen after 8pm when they re-opened after the stew dinner.

I went back to the canteen to pickup a T-Shirt. They had them compressed into little packages about the size of a paperback novel. What a great way to package an item for hauling back to the rim.

I was asleep by 9pm that night.

10/28/05 - Hike from Phantom Ranch to Bright Angel trailhead

My alarm woke me up at 5am, and I got everything packed and was on the trail by 6:15am. Made it to Pipe Creek Beach around 7:05am where I took a few pictures of the Colorado River and stuck my hand in the water to test the temperature. The Devil's Corkscrew didn't seem so bad since I was still in the shade and the temperatures were only in the low 50's. I made it to Indian Garden by 9:15am, and stopped to eat and rest for about 45 minutes.

Rain clouds began moving in, and it was off and on rain pretty much the entire remainder of the hike out. Another newbie lesson learned: Backpacks are NOT waterproof. Everything in the top half of my pack that wasn't in plastic bags was soaked.

As I passed the 3 mile rest stop, I was seeing a lot more people. One guy remarked to his group while pointing at me, 'that guy went so fast down the trail that he lost his skis' - making fun of my hiking poles. They may look strange to some, but they were a great help to me on the trail.

Some folks would stop and ask me about my trip and I was more than happy to share my experiences. These brief stops really helped to take my mind off the climb up the switchbacks towards the end. I wasn't acclimated to the 7000 ft plus altitude and it didn't take many steps before I was breathing heavily. I think I knew my hike was nearing its completion and I wanted to savor it as long as I could.

I ended up making it to the trailhead at 2pm. I walked over to my parked rental car to drop off the pack so I could walk into the lobby to check into my room for the night. It was like walking on air to be able to walk without that pack weight on my back.

I'm sure after 4 days on the trail, I wasn't exactly smelling like a rose, but they got me checked in very quickly at the front desk of the Bright Angel lodge. After getting a hot shower (man that was awesome), I walked out to Maricopa Point and got a picture of a great sunset.



Had no problem sleeping that night - a real bed felt pretty good after sleeping in a tent for 4 days.

I found this hike to be very challenging and something that I will remember for the rest of my life.

Injuries on hike:

- Few minor scratches on arms and legs from getting too close to the indigenous plant life.
- Minor blisters on each foot.
- Sore back.
- Lost 10lbs in 5 days. I thought I was drinking plenty of water, but apparently not.

Things I'm glad I brought:

- 1) Stocking cap to wear when I got cold at night.
- 2) Gatorade powder to replenish salts.
- 3) Plenty of socks.

4) Hiking poles.

Things I wish I'd brought:

- 1) A spare shirt (no amount of dipping into the creek could make my other shirts smell clean again - lol)
- 2) Binoculars - there were some distant objects on top of some of the canyon walls I couldn't make out with the naked eye. Couldn't tell if they were man-made or plant life. Binoculars would have been nice for star gazing.
- 3) A pair of flip-flops or water shoes to wear as 'camp shoes'. My feet got tired of wearing hiking boots the entire trip.

Things I didn't need:

- 1) Spare batteries. Didn't need them. I shot 137 pictures with my camera without a battery change, and my headlamp and flashlights never needed a battery change.
- 2) Extra stove fuel. Ended up only using half a tank.
- 3) Too many flashlights. I'm a flashaholic ;)
- 4) Too much food - I still had a lot of trail mix, oatmeal, raisin bread, English muffins and $\frac{3}{4}$ of a jar of peanut butter left.
- 5) Razor. Who needs to shave while they're in the wilderness, anyway?

Things I would do differently if I hiked this again:

- 1) Hike with a group. Hiking alone adds considerable risk to a journey off the maintained trails in the canyon. I probably would have explored more of Clear Creek canyon if I was part of a group. Hiking alone forced me to be too conservative in what I could do.
- 2) Purchase more ultra-light gear. I was carrying over 50lbs which was a burden towards the end of the trip.

And of course the big question: "Would you do this again?"

YES!