

Observations from the River

by Curt Mobley

"In the first place, you can't see *anything* from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe."

—Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*

Taking Ed's advice—with minor modifications—our group headed down the Colorado River on a Sierra Club 14 day raft trip, 225 miles through the heart of the Grand Canyon. We had 4 oar rafts (one rower/guide and 4 passengers) and one paddle raft (one guide to steer and 6 people paddling). Three of the guides were men, and two were women. The most experienced, Louise, had been rowing on the river for 28 years. She started life as a fashion designer married to a stockbroker, but then came to her senses. Here are the highlights of the trip.

Day 1: I noticed that each of our three male guides had matching purple toenail polish. I deemed this to be an auspicious sign.

Day 2: We hiked up Rider Canyon (a side canyon of the Colorado River, next to our first campsite) a ways after breakfast. I found a Giant Hairy Desert Scorpion that was at least 4 inches long, maybe 5 inches if you stretched him out a bit, which Ann wouldn't let me do. In all my years hiking in the desert, this was the first GHDS I'd ever seen, and he was museum quality. I deemed this to be an auspicious sign.



The GHDS

Day 3: I found fossil crinoids and corals in a block of Redwall limestone. This was the real thing—much better than studying fossils indoors in geology lab! I deemed this to be an auspicious sign.



A tranquil section of river downstream from Nankoweap Canyon.

Day 4: We hiked up Nankoweap Canyon, where we saw dozens of fossil stromatolites, 1.2 billion years old. These are some of the oldest fossils on earth, and bigger than the one on display in the Smithsonian. I deemed this to be an auspicious sign.

Day 6: Dave was in the paddle boat. A wave in Unkar Rapid pushed him one way, and his left foot went between the side tube and the bottom of the raft. Then the next wave pushed him the other way, but his foot stayed in the same place. The knob on the bottom of his tibia broke off with a crack heard all the way to the South Rim Visitors' Center. A Big Ouch! We pulled ashore below the rapid to stabilize the fracture, and almost stepped on a Grand Canyon Rattlesnake just 4 feet from the water. We were able to make radio contact with the National Park Service (not always possible deep in the canyon) and request a helicopter evacuation, but the chopper couldn't take off because of high winds. So much for the validity of the auspicious signs.

So we waited for the wind to die down. Some people went for a hike. Some read books. Some of us amused ourselves by playing "This little piggy" on Dave's toes, seeing who could elicit the greatest expression of pain from poor Dave. It was 7 hours before the chopper could fly in and take Dave to surgery. The chopper ride cost Dave \$3750.00, but he gets to repeat the raft trip for free next year, so all was not lost. Soon after Dave left, we discovered that his drink bag contained a gallon of decent wine, which eased the sorrow of losing his jovial company.

Day 7: Today we are deep in the inner canyon, and the rapids are big and serious. I had perfected a technique for holding my waterproof camera with one hand and holding on with the other hand, so as to get action photos while going through the rapids. Unfortunately, Hance Rapid turned out to be a two-hand rapid. We hit a big wave and I was simply ejected from the raft like a fighter pilot. I remember seeing the side tube go past below me, and then I remember being in the water beside the raft, still holding the camera and heading for the rock garden at the bottom of the rapid at 20 mph. I managed to get back in the raft before I reached the rocks, and no damage was done. Ann was thoroughly disgusted with me for almost killing myself, but I was quite excited by the whole experience (its a guy thing). The photos turned out OK.



Righting the raft.

After running Horn Creek Rapid, we watched another raft (not one of ours) run the rapid. He got a bit sideways approaching a standing wave about 7 feet high and flipped like a Ford Explorer with a new set of Firestones. It was spectacular. I helped right the raft in the calm water below the rapid. This is quite a process, since the rafts are 18 feet long and 7 feet wide, and weigh about 3,500 lbs fully loaded with food and gear.

Day 8: We ran Crystal Rapid today, one of the biggest and most dangerous on the river. No photos...it was all I could do to stay in the raft, holding on with both hands.



Curt at the Great Unconformity:
The Vishnu schist below and the
Tapeats sandstone above.

Day 9: I found a perfect nautiloid fossil about 9 inches long in Blacktail Canyon. This canyon was the geologic highlight of the trip because it perfectly exposes the Great Unconformity, where a billion years of rock are eroded away and missing between the Vishnu schist and the overlying Tapeats sandstone. When I memorized the stratigraphy of the Grand Canyon in freshman geology so many years before, I never dreamed that I would someday get to touch the Great Unconformity with my own hands.

Day 12: This was the day for Lava Falls Rapid, the biggest and most feared by far. The river drops 37 feet in a distance of maybe 250 feet. You have to remember that the Colorado is a major river, not some little mountain stream two feet deep. In Lava Falls Rapid, the standing waves are 10 feet from trough to crest. Huge rocks wait to pin you. There are whirlpools like in your bathtub drain, but 10 feet across and dipping down two feet in the middle. Explosions of water burst 20 feet high when the standing waves curl over and break into the holes created by truck-sized boulders hidden in the depths. It is easy to imagine plesiosaurs hiding in the depths, waiting to rise up and slurp down an entire raft load of tender morsels. This was the only rapid where I felt that you could definitely die if the raft hit it wrong. The guides really scouted the rapid in serious detail, and planned every oar stroke before the run. Even then, my raft went almost vertical on a wave and nearly flipped. Most of all, I remember the deafening roar of the water. The sensory overload was enormous and it took an hour to come down from the adrenaline high after it was all over.



Ann's raft in Lava Falls. *Megaserious*
whitewater!!

Well, you get the idea. In addition to the excitement, this is a trip through time in the greatest geological laboratory on earth. The two-billion-year-old rocks of the inner gorge record the very formation of the North American continent, and the sediments above them show life from the pre-Cambrian through the Paleozoic. The names of the formations roll off your tongue like an Anasazi shaman's incantations: the Toroweap limestone, the Muav limestone, the Tapeats sandstone, the Shinumo quartzite, the Hakatai shale, the Vishnu schist, the Zoroaster granite.... In addition to scorpions and rattlesnakes, we saw condors, eagles, peregrine falcons, ospreys, bighorn sheep, and lizards of all colors and sizes. Every sort of cactus imaginable. Side canyons with springs and waterfalls, cottonwoods and ferns, frogs and dragonflies.

This trip was the best I've ever done. For anyone who loves nature, adventure, the southwest, white water, or geology, this is your pilgrimage to Mecca. Put it on your list of the 10 most important things to do in life. I'm serious. Spend \$3K less on your next car, and use the money to do this trip. Rafting the Grand Canyon is not a vacation, it is a spiritual journey into nature itself.

[Postscript: I know people who have done every adventure imaginable and, without exception, they all say that rafting the Grand Canyon is the best trip they've ever done. Ann and I thought this trip was so incredible that we decided to become Sierra Club raft trip leaders. We can't wait to raft the river again.]