

Outdoor Photographer

Tuesday, April 27, 2010

The Grand Canyon From Within

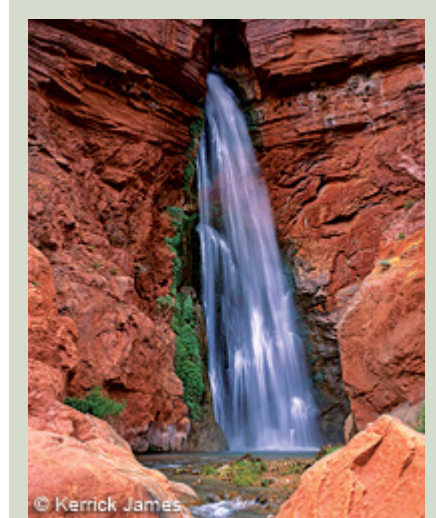
Be adventurous and get away from the hordes of tourists who crowd the plateau to see this natural wonder from a completely different perspective

Text and Photography By Kerrick James



Elves Chasm, Grand Canyon National Park, AZ

How many of us first approached the Grand Canyon from rim level, took a long sweeping look and then despaired over how to depict the beauty, spirit and scale of this geologic wonder in a photograph from that spot? The obvious solution, of course, is to strap on the boots and head down the trails, of which there are many that lead to superb photo sites. But Newton's law of gravitation applies with a harsh twist in the Grand Canyon: What goes down must go back up! And, more importantly, there are so many magical inner canyons and waterfalls, beaches and rapids, ruins and reflections that only can be accessed from the river itself. To see them, you simply have to get wet.



Deer Creek Falls, Grand Canyon National Park, AZ

For many years now, I've believed that the very best way to create stronger photographs of the Grand Canyon is to take a river trip down the Colorado, from Lee Ferry to either Whitmore Canyon or all the way to Lake Mead. And I've been privileged to do it nine times, in both motorized and paddled rafts, and in a dory, which is the sweetest ride on the river. To have enough time to enjoy side hikes and explore the variety of hidden wonders a vertical mile deep in the crust of the Southwest, you want to join a trip of at least seven days, and more time is always better.



*Havasupai
Reservation, Grand Canyon National Park, AZ*

My favorite Anasazi site in the Southwest are the granaries of Nankoweap. Inset in a massive limestone wall and overlooking a singular view downstream of the Colorado River, these tiny windowed rooms preserved hard-won food for peoples who made this their home a millennium ago. The rocky switchbacks climb steeply perhaps 400 feet to the granaries, but don't pass up this hike! The sun line illuminates the windows by midmorning, but dawn's rich colors are long gone, so my suggestion is to make the hike in late afternoon. Then the granaries are in open, soft shade, the river is reflecting the cool blue sky overhead, and the cliff facing due west acts as a giant warm reflector, spilling light onto the trail and small windows. Turning a two-stop neutral grad filter holds the sunlit cliff in range and balances the overall scene, or consider this an opportunity to hone your HDR skills. Either way, this is a place you'll long remember.

I was able to stay at the granaries into twilight and light the windows with tea candles set just inside the openings. An exposure of 20 seconds with my Pentax 12-24mm lens, set at 12mm, recorded both Jupiter and the lights of a river runner's camp far below. (Note that the candles were enclosed and no wax was spilled. Always leave a location unspoiled, as you would hope to find it.) Don't forget your headlamp to safely descend this ankle-breaker of a trail!

Downstream the next day, you'll encounter the confluence of the Little Colorado River with its much larger namesake. If late snowmelt from the White Mountains over 200 miles southeast or runoff from monsoon storms is absent, you'll be treated to as lovely a stretch of water as can be conjured, especially at dawn. I used a two-stop neutral grad filter to balance a brightly lit buttress and preserve its reflection in the calcium-carbonate-laden waters of "the LC," as river guides call it. The best time to reliably see the water this rich turquoise hue and clear of silt is from early June to maybe mid-July, or in the winter. And, yes, you can reach this place by foot, using the old Hopi Salt Trail across Navajo lands, which requires a permit and serious route-finding skills. Trust me, a river trip is the best way to glimpse the Little Colorado confluence.

Every day that you drop deeper into Riverworld, wonders continually delight. In truth, no one trip can exhaust all the possibilities. Some river guides will take you where others won't, and vice versa, and some spots have very limited access to tie up the large rafts. You may miss Elves Chasm on one trip and see it the next time. In nine trips, I've seen Elves Chasm three times, but only once did it have clean open shade with no hot spots. Luck favors the prepared, so be sure to carry your wide zoom and tripod. A DSLR works beautifully here. Its sensor can hold the highlights of the yellow limestone far better than most films [which Kerrick used in the late-1990s shot shown in the opening spread].



Star tracks over the Colorado River, Grand Canyon National Park, AZ



Getting wet with Arizona River Runners

Even more rare is the chance to do the loping, rigorous hike to Thunder River, reputedly the shortest river in the world. The round-trip hike from the Colorado River is roughly seven miles, much less than the taxing, three-day backpacking excursion in from the North Rim.

Another incredible spot to shoot is majestic Deer Creek Falls. It drops 80 feet straight to a shallow pool, is visible from the river and is a wonderful waterfall. I shot it years ago with a Pentax 67II, a 45mm lens and Fujichrome Velvia 50 in open shade [opening spread]. Swirling mists mean you'll be wiping your filter if you shoot from the base of the falls, so I opted to back up and include fallen blocks of orange sandstone in the foreground to define the corners and lend visual weight to the image.

As you'll have six or more nights on the river, seek out a site with scenic potential when your raft ties up for the night at a beach. I tend to like the water's edge, as the foregrounds can work for either wide scenics or detail images. A bonus is that the music of the river's flow will lull you to sleep and drown out the snores from other exhausted campers.

At night, the usually clear sky shows a torrent of whirling stars, and if you ever wanted to shoot star tracks you may have a series of nights to practice. The caveat is that digital doesn't permit all-night exposures, even if you have extra batteries. My solution is to carry an old 35mm film body, a wide zoom and a cable release and compose during twilight. I trigger the exposure when full darkness falls. The trick is to focus at infinity and remember to wake up predawn to stop exposing! The straight-up view of the stars from deep in the Inner Gorge shows both sides [opposite page].

If you've had dry weather during your trip, your stop at Havasu Creek will be stunning, as the waters of the creek will be ultra-aqua and you won't need any saturation in processing. Be very careful to wipe off any stray water on your glass as the lime precipitate will be difficult to clean off without resorting to hydrochloric acid.



Your time exploring the creek will be limited, so hiking up to the famous waterfalls is rather unlikely. Scenic possibilities include the narrow flooded gorge that's the entrance to Havasu Creek and detail images of the pools. Havasupai means "people of the blue green water." I shot the gorge with a Pentax 10-17mm fisheye zoom at 10mm at $f/13$ and $1/125$ sec., into the sun to record the sunstar [opening spread]. I felt this helped to depict the otherworldly qualities of this place, where colors are jarringly unreal. By the way, the waters of Havasu Creek are much warmer than the flow of the Colorado River, which helps as you'll cross the creek frequently to scout and shoot images.



Anasazi granary at Nankoweap, Grand Canyon National Park, AZ

How do you store and preserve your gear on the river? I store my Pentax K-7 and lenses from 10mm to 300mm in Pelican cases and secure them to ropes using carabineers, so I always have easy access when we stop for a hike or to shoot between rapids. Bring a dry bag or two, as they will come in handy. You can and should bring a tripod, and ask your trip leader where they would like to stow it for use during the day. Comfortable wet/dry hiking shoes work very well for most of the hikes offered, which tend to be less than a half mile. Forget about electricity for at least a week, so bring plenty of charged batteries and limit your chimping! A backup drive is welcome, but keep it in a padded and sealed case, as the ride through the rapids can be violent and not just wet.

You may want to shoot your way through some of the 133 rapids on this stretch of the river, and this is the way I pull that off without sacrificing bodies, and lenses, to the river. Ewa-Marine makes very good, reasonably priced shooting bags to fit various camera makes and models. The bags can be used with compact up to large optics mated to an optical glass port for best quality. You operate them with your right hand in a rubber glove and hold on for dear life with your left, a skill that you develop rather quickly. Digital capture makes this so much better than all my previous trips shooting color transparency through the contrasty rapids, when 36 frames always seemed to run out way

too soon, making missing peak action a problem.

There are a number of river companies permitted to operate in Grand Canyon National Park, but my favorite is Arizona River Runners, based in Phoenix, (800) 477-7238, www.raftarizona.com.

*To see more of **Kerrick James**' photography, visit www.kerrickjames.com.*