



ROCK OF AGES
An aerial view of the Colorado River and the rafts' take-out point near Bar 10 Ranch, 300 kilometers downstream from Lee's Ferry.

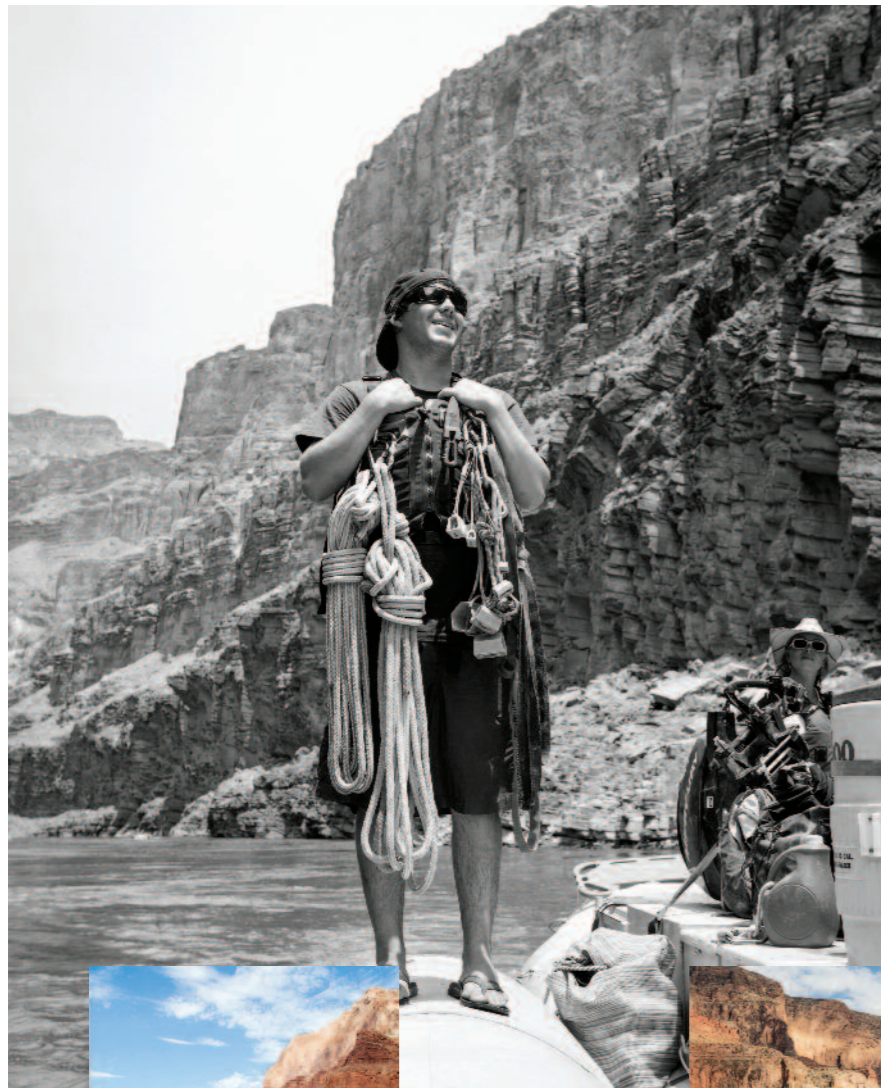
The
GRANDEST
ADVENTURE

An eight-day rafting trip
through America's most treasured
natural wonder reveals
as much about the Grand Canyon's
ancient history
as it does about the
intrepid spirit of the
boatmen—and women—
who ride the river that
runs through it

By **AARON GULLEY**
Photographs by Jen Judge



CANYON COUNTRY
 Clockwise from left:
 The view downriver from Nankoweap Canyon, at river kilometer 85; the rafts sharing a beach with other boats; ocher cliffs tower above a placid stretch of the Colorado; turquoise waters at the mouth of the Little Colorado River; Billy Shores, the trip's lead swamper.



AT LONE CEDAR CAMP, 37 KILOMETERS
 down the Colorado River's inexorable rush through the Grand Canyon, the first wake-up call of our trip is early and abrupt. "Coffee!" howls Billy Shores, the boats' lead swamper and designated breakfast chef.

Being barked at so early in the morning—half past five, to be exact—would ordinarily irritate me, but down here Billy's cry glances off the canyon's limestone walls and is instantly dissolved by the staticky din of the river. From my cot, I stare up at cliffs that rear almost two kilometers skyward. In the millions of years it took to achieve such monumental stature, this rock has witnessed continents being created, oceans rising and falling, and the evolution of single-celled organisms into human beings with rubber rafts, Gore-Tex, and the nerve to launch themselves into this formidable chasm.

It's a weighty thought to wake up to—in the Grand Canyon, such existential moments come as fast as the river tumbling past Lone Cedar's sandy beach—but before I can really turn it over, I need a cup of joe.

In the camp kitchen, Billy and his fellow swamper Erica Byerly, the apprentices who do much of the grunt work on the river, are busy frying bacon and scrambling eggs in anticipation of the 28 hungry clients about to descend on breakfast. Mike Rayes, the quiet boatman heading the second raft in our party, is checking the pressure of his boat's pontoons and loading camp chairs into its holds. And the woman in charge of delivering us safely and happily down 300 kilometers of the most muscular river in the United States, alpha guide Ariel "Earl" Neill, is hefting gear along the sandy river shore and looking none too pleased.

"You can't just yell it. *Sing it!*" Ariel reprimands Billy as she passes through the kitchen. "A wake-up call has to make people want to get out of bed." Ariel, on her 96th passage down the river, understands what Billy, on his 15th trip, doesn't yet. At US\$2,680 a seat for eight days of rafting through one of the world's natural wonders, most clients expect indulgence with a side of adventure—not the other way around.

The setup at Wilderness River Adventures, one of the premier outfitters for this northern Arizona excursion, is pretty deluxe. After serving us coffee and hot breakfast, the four guides load up our two 11-meter S-Rigs—inflatable nylon rafts buoyed on each side by pontoons and propelled by 30-horsepower four-stroke motors. The mass of gear these boats can carry in their holds is staggering: easy chairs, sturdy cots, kitchen equipment, a week's supply of liquor. Dry bags full of bedding and clothes are arranged into comfy seating above. Guests don't lift a finger beyond bucket-brigading gear to shore in the evening and erecting their own cots, and in the few minutes it took me to do that each night, Ariel and her team would stack the hors d'oeuvres table with cheese plates and shrimp cocktails and ice for our gin and tonics. Big platters of grilled pork chops or prime rib would arrive shortly after, followed by trays of fresh-baked brownies or cheesecake. "Plain or blueberry?" Erica would goad.

Things weren't always so breezy along the Colorado. On the very

first voyage down the river in 1869, an expedition team led by one-armed Civil War veteran John Wesley Powell portaged their heavy wooden boats around some 100 rapids. They lost one craft and a third of their provisions just 16 days in, and subsisted for the next three months on starvation rations of flour balls, dried apples, and beans. The Grand Canyon's history is scrawled with countless such tales of peril and audacity, a fact that weighs on me as we float leisurely down the river with cases of chilled beer and what seems like enough food to sustain Powell's entire trip. It's not like I want flour balls, but shouldn't any excursion into such a wild and storied place have at least a little adventure? Has commercial guiding sucked this epic chasm dry of all its vigor?

Ariel tells me that the canyon is still plenty unpredictable and fierce. "This is an expedition, not a vacation," she says. "You'll see."

Sure. Now, how about some more chipped ice in my bourbon?

WITH RIBBONS OF brunette hair and a body built for little black cocktail dresses, Ariel Neill is not your typical river guide. I first met her

None of the thousands of photos I'd seen of the canyon prepared me for its staggering beauty. Layers on layers of stone painted in hues of cream and burnt sienna stack up on both sides of me from the horizon to the sky, a palimpsest of eons of geological history





LEGEND IN THE MAKING Whiskey in hand, trip leader Ariel Neill is considered one of the Grand Canyon's top river guides. Opposite: Looking over the Colorado Plateau near Lee's Ferry on the post-float flight back to Page, with 142-meter-high Navajo Bridge in the foreground.

at a thousand-dollar-a-night luxury retreat in southern Utah a few years back; I was there to cover the place for a magazine, she was moonlighting as an outdoor guide for the resort, and neither of us could otherwise afford to be there. Ariel, who was striking enough to stand in as a model for the magazine's photo shoot, mentioned while posing by the pool that her real job was running rafts in the Grand Canyon.

You have two options if you want to raft the canyon. The first—and the most difficult—is to organize a self-guided trip, which involves a daunting multi-year lottery process to get a permit. The second option is to go with a commercial outfit like Wilderness River Adventures, whose excursions can generally be booked less than a year in advance. I wasn't patient enough to wait for a private trip. Besides, I knew Ariel.

What I didn't know was what a Grand Canyon hotshot Ariel had become. "She's one of the best on the river right now. Probably *the* best," Mike Rayes told me one night over a glass of bourbon. And since Mike, a veteran guide with more than 250 Grand Canyon trips under his belt and a legend in his own right, didn't speak up a lot, I listened. I found out that we were floating with a seriously pedigreed crew. Lead swamper Billy Shores, whose father had been a guide on the Colorado for decades, grabbed the family oars at age 14; five years later, he is steering his first boat down the river. Erica Byerly, whose aunt Karen is immortalized in bronze on the South Rim as one of the most renowned water women of the Colorado, is assisting on her third Grand Canyon passage. Even one of our passengers, an off-duty guide named Carl MacDonald, is a minor river celebrity with 150 trips to his name. "It's tough getting a job on this river," Erica told me. "Maybe it's family, maybe it's knowing someone. But you don't just roll up and become a guide."

But Ariel did. After realizing she didn't have the cash for college and working to support herself on an oil derrick, she found her way to the Grand Canyon through a friend, worked her way up the river caste system, and earned a boat to guide.

Aboard her S-Rig, it's easy to see why. On big rapids such as Crystal, a ferocious churn of white water 158 kilometers downriver from our put-in at Lee's Ferry, Ariel takes the helm and blasts through the seething froth like an ambulance through New York gridlock. And when the Colorado is smooth, she hands the tiller to Erica, climbs up on the boat's hummock of gear, and narrates the river's history in prose as vibrant as the ocher cliffs above us.

She recounts the disastrous 1889 expedition of Frank Mason Brown, the real estate magnate whose quixotic vision to build a railroad through the Grand Canyon led to 11 deaths—his own among them. And there was William Wallace Bass, a miner who settled on the canyon's South Rim in 1885 and began bringing clients on rim-to-rim hikes by way of a rugged footpath and rudimentary cableway.

Ariel often circles back to Georgie White, a hard-living woman whose brainstorm to repurpose army surplus rafts for commercial use brought motorized rubber boats to the Grand Canyon in the early 1950s. And if she was famous for introducing mass tourism to the river—only 100 or so people had navigated the canyon's section of the Colorado before the advent of rafts—White, who guided in a leopard-print leopard with a can of beer in one hand and a cigarette on her lip, was famous for her eccentricities.

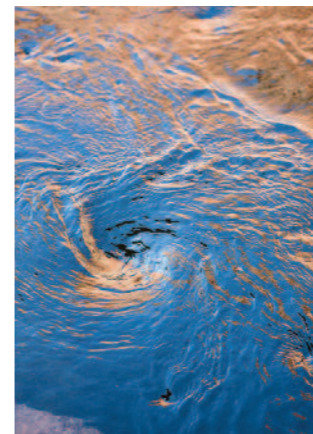
As Ariel narrates these tales, I begin to understand that not only is the Grand Canyon a geologic wonder, it's also a living monument to America. For almost two centuries, this great gash in the Arizona high country has drawn visionaries and dreamers looking to make their names, amass fortunes, and chase adventures. It's emblematic of the hope and ambition that characterized the boom days of the Wild West. And even today, through careful management as the centerpiece of Grand Canyon National Park, it remains an obscure and uncommon experience, with only 27,000 of the park's 4.5 million annual visitors

witnessing the canyon from the river. It also continues to beckon adventurous spirits.

At 28, Ariel isn't yet a legendary Colorado matriarch, but she runs the trip like a practiced mother. She makes sure the boats are on the water each morning before the summer sun penetrates the canyon, and she finds time for hikes into eons-old rocky chasms as crooked and narrow as skeleton keyholes, and to side streams where we swim in pools that gleam milky blue with minerals. At cocktail hour, she instigates the nightly plier toss, a contest that sees the four guides chucking a rusty pair of pliers horseshoe-style at a bucket 10 meters away. Whoever sinks the tool first gets the night off from cooking, though the times I see Ariel win she just pours herself a drink and heads to the kitchen to help anyway. After dark, between swigs of Irish whiskey straight from the bottle, she cracks open dog-eared books and

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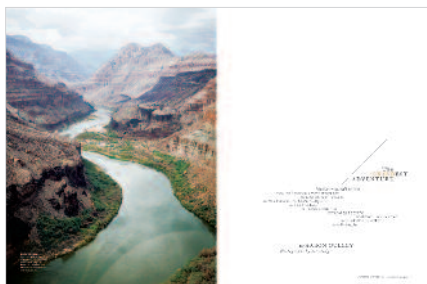


GRAND TOUR

Clockwise from top left: Prehistoric Pueblo Indian granaries in the northern face of Nankoweap Canyon; tools of the river guide's trade; a pit stop at Redwall Cavern; running one of the Grand Canyon's 70 major rapids; off-duty guide Carl MacDonald; an eddy in the river.

GRAND CANYON

CONTINUED FROM PG. 100



reads canyon stories and verses, such as the *Ballad of the One-Armed Boatman*. And halfway through the trip, she relieves Billy of his wake-up duties and takes to singing us awake herself.

“I was lucky enough to stumble into the Grand Canyon, and it has changed me. It’s made me stronger and more flexible,” she tells me one day as we’re gliding over a patch of placid water. “This place has a transformative power. I want to share that with everyone who comes here.”

As days pass and we meander toward Nevada, I start to think of Ariel as the modern-day Georgie White, a likeness she seems keen to play up when she shows up one morning in a pink snakeskin skirt.

“Nice outfit,” I say. “Echoes of Georgie?”

With a wink and a campy drawl, she says simply, “Do you know how many pink rattlesnakes I had to kill to make this?”

ON MOST RIVERS, flat water can be as tedious as a midsummer drive through Iowa corn country. But on the Colorado I appreciate the long calm stretches almost as much as I do the rapids. None of the thousands of photos I’d seen of the canyon prepared me for its staggering beauty. Layers on layers of stone painted in shades of cream and ocher and burnt sienna stack up on both sides of me from the horizon to the sky, a palimpsest of eons of geological history. Sometimes, as at the broad Unkar Delta, copper sandstone and brick-hued limestone tumble down to grassy embankments thick with fragrant sage, yellow-flecked brittle brush, and scraggly mesquite trees. In other spots, tongues of sparkling black schist lick at the boat. On these flat passages, I like to stretch out and watch the desert panorama stream by like a silent movie reel.

But eventually Ariel cries, “To the battle stations,” and like everyone on the boat, I rouse myself from the dozy reverie and clamber to a secure spot for the rapids ahead. The battle stations are the outward-facing benches along the sides of the raft. The most prized spots—

or the most deranged, depending on the size of the coming rapids—are the three seats at the raft’s nose, dubbed the Bathtub.

More than 150 named rapids pepper the Colorado’s run through the Grand Canyon, ranging from gentle riffles to massive, boat-swallowing flows. And with water temperatures rarely nudging above 10°C, anyone unlucky enough to take an inadvertent swim needs to be fished out in 10 minutes or less to avoid hypothermia.

Ariel is mostly understated about the challenges of the river, but in the days leading up to Hermits, one of the meanest stretches of white water in the Canyon, she repeatedly refers to it—eyes twinkling—as a “seething cauldron of hydraulic madness.”

“It’s not that big of a deal, is it? You can’t actually flip one of these big barges?” I ask.

“Until a year ago I would have said no. But then I saw it happen on Lava Falls. People everywhere—it was spectacular,” she says with no hint of irony. Then, catching herself, “Everyone was fine.”

Misadventures are rare on the river these days, especially on outfitted trips. But that’s not to say the Colorado has been tamed. Down here, where communications with the world beyond the canyon rim are limited, take-out points are arduous, and rescue opportunities are few and perilous, it still comes down to an elemental struggle: one boatman’s luck

and savvy pitted against a force of nature. Beyond the staggering age and brutal beauty of the place, this raw, unpredictable wilderness experience is a big part of what makes this canyon so grand.

Feeling courageous, I opt for a Bathtub seat through Hermits anyway. As we bear into the watery cauldron, so powerful is the river that it picks me up and strings me out to the side like a flag in heavy winds as I cling to the safety rope in my seat. The boat sinks into a trough and comes nose-to-nose with a six-meter wall of water. It was at this moment, I find out later, that the motor floods, the boat begins to stall, and the prospect of capsizing presents itself. But Ariel doesn’t panic. Tongue stuck hard out the side of her mouth in determination, she keeps an eye on the approaching tumult and yanks at the engine cord with her spare hand until the motor fires. Then she guns it over the wave.

On the other side, when everyone is accounted for, it’s all adrenaline-fueled whoops and high fives. Ariel, however, is serene. “It’s always a good day to come out the other side,” she murmurs. “You never know exactly what this river holds.” With that, she spins the boat onto glassy waters stained gold and red in the late-afternoon sunlight, and we follow the current westward through immense stone walls that feel like they will go on and on for eternity. ☺



THE DETAILS GRAND CANYON

—GETTING THERE

Encircled by Lake Powell, Glen Canyon, and Grand Staircase Escalante national parks, the Arizonan city of Page is a popular jumping-off point for Grand Canyon trips. Its airport is served by

Great Lakes Airlines

(greatlakesav.com), with direct flights from Denver, Phoenix, and Los Angeles. From Page, it’s about an hour’s drive to the raft put-in at Lee’s Ferry.

—WHENTOGO

Commercial trips down the Grand Canyon section of the Colorado

River run from April through October. The weather can be unpredictable and cold for the first two months of the season, while June and July can be scorching, with temperatures pushing 40°C, which makes the frigid waters all the more refreshing. Monsoon rains in August tend to make the waters brown and muddy and the boating more comfortable.

—HOWTODOIT

Sixteen companies hold concessions to guide Grand Canyon river adventures, and the trip options are extremely varied. **Wilderness River Adventures** (riveradventures.com) is consistently ranked as one of the best. Once you’ve selected an operator, the next choice is between motorized rafts, oar

boats, or dories—the beautiful flat-bottom wooden rowboats favored by Grand Canyon legend and environmentalist Martin Litton and still in use by a handful of companies. Motorized rafts tend to be more economical because they carry more clients; they also allow guides to speed through uneventful sections of river and maximize side trips. Oar boats, which a guide pilots and clients paddle, generally take longer and, because of the smaller size of the craft, are more adventurous. Trips range from three to four days to see either the upper or lower half of the Grand Canyon all the way up to 18-day paddling excursions from Lake Powell on the Utah border to Lake Mead, just outside Las Vegas. —AG