

enRoute | Grand Canyon Camping

"I have to carry all *that*?"

I'm standing with my husband at the edge of the Grand Canyon's South Rim. Past a few parked vans and cottonwood trees, a narrow, steep trail covered in snow and ice snakes down into a shadowed landscape of cliffs, crags and gullies. It's a ridiculously gorgeous view, but I'm distracted from it by what's spread before me: 18 kilograms of stuff, including a sleeping bag, mat and pillow, hiking poles, Gatorade, M&M's, Doritos and a big bottle of water – all of which I'll have to carry in a backpack. Chris Updike, our lanky guide and canyon raconteur from the trekking company Pygmy Guides, doesn't think I'm serious. I am. I hate camping, or, more precisely, the idea of it. I've never even set foot in a drive-in campground.



Yet I'm fitting heavy-duty crampons onto my hiking boots so I won't slip in the snow at the start of our trek. Sure, we'll stick to a well-trodden route rather than exploring lesser-used trails, but that's only because of the unpredictable weather. We'll go to Bright Angel Creek

and back in a mere two days instead of the three to five other hikers take. In the middle of winter. Through three seasons and temperatures that range from freezing at the top of the rim to a balmy 18°C at our canyon-bottom campsite. *And* we'll have to shake our boots out in the morning to disgorge any lurking scorpions.

Why am I doing this in the first place? The easy answer is that I love my husband and he will owe me big time. But really, I detest being on the sidelines during his adventures. I learned this back in 1997, when I watched him run the ING New York City Marathon in torrential rains. As miserable as it was for him, it was worse to stand there getting wet and calling out, "Way to go!" (I ran my first marathon the year after.) When he suggested the Grand Canyon, he said, "I'll camp – you can wait up top for me." So here I am, hoisting a backpack and stepping over the rim to begin a descent through nine layers of ancient limestone. Tonight, we'll sleep by a creek, surrounded by cliffs that are remnants of a mountain range 1.7 billion years old.



We wandered the rim the night before, watching the sun set over a vista that seemed two-dimensional, like a beautiful painting with the perspective and light askew – something that elicited admiration, not awe. Now, being in this place carved out by time, with dark grey limestone cliffs streaked with ice looming above me, inexorable, like giants with hoary beards, I am awed. As we walk, Updike points out buttes with names like Zoroaster and Vishnu, with narrow, craggy tops that look barely big enough for one person to stand on.

What strikes me is the isolation: The familiar world with its buses and tourists disappears, as if swallowed by this immense, lonely chasm that is 1.6 kilometres deep. Whistler Mountain could be easily dropped in here. Look up and there is the horizon. Look down and there is primal, jagged scenery broken up by snow and scrub brush.

Gradually, the snow and ice give way to a dirt path. It's easy to trip over a stone and twist an ankle: "Pay attention," I tell myself. My knees make popping sounds in protest. Then, five kilometres from our starting point, we get our first glimpse of the Colorado River, a faraway ribbon of blue. We've reached Skeleton Point, an inauspicious name for a plateau where you can see the canyon in panorama – a series of pictures that flow together in a dizzying film of reds, oranges, pinks and greys.

An overnight trek down the Grand Canyon's South Rim in the middle of winter is a lesson in becoming a happy camper.

Dec 27, 2012 · By Lisa Fitterman | Illustrations by Valero Doval

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Updike tells us that most of the 4.5 million tourists who come to the canyon each year spend a couple of hours at the top; only one percent of them venture beyond the rim. And of that one percent, only one percent camp overnight. I'm beginning to feel like a member of an exclusive club, albeit a dusty, sweaty one, by the time we reach our campsite at Bright Angel Creek. I throw off my boots and, without a whit of guilt, leave the others to set up the tents. I hobble to a nearby beach that feels like a lost world discovered, pristine and unexpected, with white sand that I dig my bare toes into. People travelling the river sometimes stop here, but today it is my beach.



Several of the campers at the site are Canadian – hardy types accustomed to inclement weather and cold temperatures. I meet our "neighbours," a retired couple from rural New Brunswick who come here every year and plan to strike out on the less-trodden trails. After a supper of beef tacos, raw vegetables and chips, we are lulled to sleep by the burbling creek.

In the morning, I upend my boots and shake them hard – no scorpions – before we pull up our stakes. My knees prefer the hike back up, even though it takes seven hours, much of it along switchbacks with logs placed across them at intervals to prevent erosion. It's like climbing a giant set of stairs, and it comes as no surprise that the most arduous section is called Jacob's Ladder. About an hour from the top, Updike calls out for us to stop. "Look," he says, pointing at an indent in a cliff wall. It's one of many pictographs, faded and rudimentary, some of which were left by Native Americans 800 years ago.

As we clamber over the rim into a busy parking lot near our hotel, it feels like I've finished more than a marathon, and I realize that sometimes I need to get dirty and sore to see the world around me more clearly. In a marathon, most runners hit a barrier called the Wall; you expect it at some point during a race, and you'll get through it on hands and knees if you have to. But here, the Wall took on the shape of a cliff face towering above me, grim, grey and striking. It was at once a challenge, a taunt and something to marvel at.

We ask a woman who's ambling around the edge to take our picture – three grimy, sweaty hikers with ear-to-ear smiles on our faces.

"You were down there, in the canyon?" she asks us. I answer her with pride: "Down and back!"

Write to us: letters@enroutemag.net

Getting There

Air Canada operates daily non-stop flights to Phoenix from Calgary and Toronto. From Phoenix, the Grand Canyon is a four-hour drive away.

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