

Return to the Grand Canyon (Back into the Abyss) 31st August 2009

Almost twelve months ago we had stumbled out of the Grand Canyon looking like the living dead and I had told Dawn, "shoot me if ever I suggest doing anything like this again". After dragging ourselves out of the furnace that is the Grand Canyon for a second time I have no need to repeat myself. Dawn has assured me I will be shot if I try anything like this again.

The pain and suffering of our last hike into the abyss of the Canyon had long since passed. I was getting restless and thoughts of a return to the Grand Canyon were still high on my agenda. Just 1% of the millions of visitors who make the journey into the Grand Canyon National Park actually hike down into the Canyon. Those that do either gain a strange fascination for the place and want to go back or swear never to put a foot in the Canyon ever again. I fit into the first category.

Once one descends even ten feet below either Rim of the Grand Canyon, one has entered a new and different world. This world is the most convoluted, massive, and jaggedly vertical landscape on Earth, a vast complicated labyrinth carved by the vagaries of erosion as it removed 1,000 cubic miles of rock in a dendritic drainage pattern that gnaws into bedrock cliffs thousands of feet high and fractures the landscape into 600 tributary canyons. The few practical routes penetrating this landscape are themselves fraught with precipices and pitfalls and decaying sedimentary rock that weed out the unwary.

The inner Canyon is a desert environment where temperatures reach 110 degrees plus. This is extreme hiking that pushes you to your limits both mentally and physically. There are many dangers that you face when hiking in the Canyon. People have fallen off the trail, suffered from heat exhaustion, been hit by falling rocks and have been washed away by flash floods. All have resulted in fatalities. If you put the dangers to one side the Canyon is an extraordinary place. It is a powerful and inspiring landscape that forms a natural barrier some 277 miles long. I couldn't wait to get back.

We arrived in Las Vegas and after a good night sleep set off early in the morning. Once again the 250 plus mile journey to the Grand Canyon took us through a town called Boulder and across the Hoover Dam where unnoticed by many people you pass from the state of Nevada into Arizona. Boulder is the only place in Nevada where no gambling is allowed and is well known for the goat like wild animals that graze on its roadside. We also stopped at Williams on our journey and would recommend staying here for a night. It is a beautiful little place that was once a stopping point just off the famous route 66 and is the departure point for the Grand Canyon Express. From here you can take a scenic train journey right into the heart of the Grand Canyon National Park.

Having arrived at the Grand Canyon early we were able to afford ourselves the luxury of a walk around part of the South Rim of the Canyon and identify the route down the South Kaibab and up the Bright Angel Trails. These were the trails we had hiked the previous year and didn't look as menacing now. The normal warning signs were still posted at the start of the trails warning people not to hike to the river and back in a day. Our journey this year would once again bring us out along the Bright Angel Trail. To try and come out of the Grand Canyon on the shorter South Kaibab trail during the day is complete madness as there is no water and you would most likely die trying. **Don't ever attempt this.**

This year we were to hike across the Grand Canyon from the North Rim to the South Rim. The North Rim is 1390 feet higher than the South Rim so the obvious choice is to walk from North to South so that you have less uphill at the end of your hike. The sensible approach would be to take the normal three to four days doing the hike. As permits are required for camping inside the Canyon and are difficult to obtain for the campsites along this route we had decided to do it all in one day. We were warned that this was going to be one of the most strenuous endeavours we had ever undertaken. Hiking in the Grand Canyon is so demanding that even people in excellent physical condition often emerge exhausted. Already the difficulties we had encountered the year before in the Canyon had long since faded from our memories. Walking from the North to the South Rim in a day has been called a death-defying challenge, suicidal, idiotic and is not recommended by anyone. It has however been accomplished by many people and has been described as one of the greatest hikes in the world. A challenge we couldn't resist.

Because the Grand Canyon forms a natural barrier across the landscape it can only be crossed by traffic in two places. The Hoover Dam and the Navajo bridge at a place near Lees Ferry. The journey by road from the South Rim to the start of our hike at the North Rim was over 200 miles. As the crow flies it is about 12 miles wide between the two points. The only realistic way to get to the North Rim of the Canyon is on the Hikers Shuttle. This is a privately run shuttle service that leaves both rims on a daily basis and has to be booked in advance. We boarded the Hikers shuttle outside Bright Angel Lodge on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. The next few hours were spent driving through a desert wilderness that is populated by a few Indian settlements. Our fellow passengers spent most of the journey trying to persuade us that it was madness to try and walk from the North Rim to the South Rim of the Canyon in a day. Even our driver tried to talk us out of this and lectured us on the cost of any search and rescue procedures within the Canyon. That was of course if they reached us in time. He did however also suggest that we should ask the Indians to do a rain dance for us!

The next morning at 4.30 after only a few hours sleep at the North Rim we set off for the trailhead. Early morning is the best time to start a hike of this magnitude as it is still cool. Some of the passengers from the Hikers bus were also taking the shuttle to the trailhead. By now they had realised nothing they could say was going to prevent us from this crazy idea we had of doing the hike in a day so nothing else was said on the matter. When we arrived at the trailhead everyone wanted a photograph taken with us. I sensed they thought we would not make it and the photograph was their trophy. I could visualise them back home showing people the photograph saying, "we told them but they wouldn't listen".

After pleasantries had been exchanged we set off alone down into the vast chasm below. We were now in the strange world that is the Canyon and within no time at all the heat had risen significantly for us to strip down to our shirts. This year we would be ascending into the inferno of the Inner Canyon through a fault line down Roaring Spring Canyon and then down Bright Angel Creek to a place called Phantom Ranch. More importantly we would also have access to treatable water on our way down. The previous year we had no access to water on the way down other than what we could carry. The route down last year was also the shortest to the Colorado River and bottom of the Canyon. A fact I had conveniently put to the back of my mind on attempting this hike that was going to be seven miles longer just down to the Colorado River.

We quickly passed the Coconino Overlook and were through the Supai Tunnel in no time. Soon we were passing over what is known as 'the Bridge in the Redwall'. This bridge spans the Roaring Spring Canyon and was built in 1966 when most of the North Kaibab Trail was washed away in a major flood. It leads to a dramatic section of the trail that was blasted out of the sheer cliff face of the Redwall Limestone. Along this section of the trail we passed the spectacular rock formation simply called 'The Needle' and got our first glimpse of the water gushing over and out of the Limestone cliffs at Roaring Springs. After what seemed like an eternity we descended the trail to the Roaring Springs Residence. This is the home of the pump house operator and his family and seasonal drinking water is available. Water is pumped from here all the way up to the North and South Rims of the Canyon. The trail also levels out a lot more here before reaching what is normally the first overnight stop for any one hiking from Rim to Rim. This is Cottonwood campground and is 6.8 miles down the trail. It has a Ranger station, rest rooms, emergency phone and a supply of fresh water. Ammunition type boxes are also supplied to lock food away so that the rodents can't get to it. After soaking ourselves with water to cool our overheated bodies down we set off from Cottonwood down past Ribbon Falls heading towards the Colorado River.

Strangely for the Inner Canyon there was an area of lush vegetation along the trail here and I could hear the distinctive sound of Rattle Snakes along this section. The Rattlesnakes within the Canyon have a formidable reputation. Hundreds of people hiking and camping in the Canyon have been bitten by Rattle Snakes. The reality however is that they have evolved to feed off small mammals and their venom is designed to stun and kill these rodents. There are no known recordings of anyone having died from a Rattlesnake bite in the Canyon. It has also been said that you can walk a lifetime in the Canyon and not see a snake. The writing was on the wall. As I bent over to cool myself down in the water at Bright Angel Creek I came face to face with a Rattlesnake on the banking directly in front of me. Not wishing to test the strength of the snake venom I quickly

retreated backwards ushering Dawn to run as well. The excitement over we reached 'The Box'. This was a part of our hike that I feared the most on our route down. Here the walls of the Canyon close in to a few metres wide along a four mile corridor with walls of rock on either side 1000 feet high. Being in the Inner Canyon the heat in this confined space is unbearable and I am told can reach 130 degrees or more. There was also the added danger of flash floods. Rain twenty miles away could send a wall of mud, water and rock cascading through this natural drainage. We would have little chance of surviving such an encounter as research had shown there is little warning of such an event. I suppose it is the same as being caught in an avalanche. Despite the intense heat I had decided we should get through this area as quickly as possible. Surprisingly we made it through without any ill effects and the land in front quickly widened out for the last 0.75 mile walk to Phantom Ranch at the bottom of the Canyon.

Phantom Ranch is a wonderful sanctuary. It is your local 'Tesco' store inside the furnace of the Inner Canyon. Here you can purchase snacks and stock up on your water supplies. There is accommodation, a ranger station and emergency medical facilities. It is so popular that the accommodation is booked up a year in advance. This is where most people who choose to ride a Mule down into the Canyon stop and nearly all of the log cabins here are reserved for them. For us it was a chance to rest up and re-hydrate ourselves. We took advantage of the famous lemonade sold here and like last year purchased a couple of postcards. Phantom Ranch is one of only two places left in America where mail is still delivered by Mules and the postcards are stamped – 'Mailed by Mule at the bottom of the Grand Canyon'. Dawn handed the postcards over! I suspect they will eventually amend the wording.

We had now hiked 14 miles in the blazing heat and were reaching the hottest part of the day. We had completed the 'easy' part of our hike. It had been a relief to reach Phantom Ranch and survive the 130 degrees plus heat of the 'Box'. We both felt fine and I hadn't given a second thought to the fact that Dawn had to write the Postcards out because my hand was shaking. I just thought this was my adrenalin pumping in preparation for the merciless trek out of the inferno that is the Inner Canyon.

Refreshed and hydrated we set off from Phantom Ranch past the Bright Angel Campground and bikini-clad sunbathers to the silver suspension bridge that spans the Colorado river. This and the Kaibab suspension bridge nearby are the only two crossing points over the Colorado within the inner Canyon and are spectacular feats of engineering. More importantly this was where we joined the desolate River Trail for about 1.5 miles. Last year we found this particular stretch to be horrendous. It is exposed to the burning rays of the mid day sun, is sandy and gains height only to descend back down to the Colorado river at a place called Pipe Creek.

Once again this part of the trail proved unforgiving. Dawn suddenly stopped and declared she was exhausted. I also noticed just like the year before her nose had started to bleed. Bleeding from the nose is a result of the dry air within the Canyon and we now knew was a common occurrence. We had only been walking for about an hour since leaving Phantom Ranch and the heat of the day had struck Dawn down. This is no place for self-pity or sympathy. The reality is that the intense heat within the inner Canyon can prove fatal within minutes. I shouted at Dawn to get up and keep moving. I knew from our hike last year that the sanctuary of the Pipe Creek rest house was only a short distance away. This would at least offer some shade and an abundance of water from the stream that flowed close by. Luck was on our side and we reached the rest house although by now I was also feeling the effects of the heat.

Heat is a killer, especially of the naïve or ignorant. A hard lesson here is: canyoneering is emphatically not mountaineering. In any group of mountaineers, the number of potential summiteers shrinks as the mountain lets people know how hard it really is to gain altitude solely via one's own power. In other words, mountains often weed out the unfit so early in the game that, once they realise they have bitten off more than they can chew, they can often return fairly easily downhill to their staging zone. In complete contrast, canyons do the opposite. While descending most Canyon trails, the ease and coolness of the descent are seductive. It's a breeze even for the unfit or the unprepared. Until the time comes to hike back up. Then, when it's all too often a

hot, dry, hard, agonising, and often torturous physiological contrast to the descent, the unfit get weeded out late in the game and get weeded out brutally. Sometimes fatally.

Things were not going as planned. We had only made it to the start of the ascent out of the Canyon and were both feeling exhausted. I was beginning to kick myself that I hadn't listened to the advice of others. The pain and suffering from last year was now beginning to haunt me like a recurring nightmare. Being on one of the Corridor trails within the Canyon we were at least aware that we would come across fellow hikers. Whilst at the rest house we met a group who asked what our plans were. They could see that we were not looking too good and offered us food and electrolyte powder for our water. We declined this but thanked them for their help and off they went.

Both Dawn and I were tired and I was going through what options were open to us at this point. We were in the bottom of the Canyon during the hottest part of the day both exhausted. With plenty of food to eat and a constant supply of water it would be best if we stayed in the sanctuary of the rest house and hiked out the next morning. Things however soon took a turn for the worse. Within minutes of sitting down I became violently ill. I couldn't move and was vomiting all over myself. A lone hiker who was passing crossed over the creek to see if he could help and instantly recognised what was wrong with me. I had water poisoning. In the inner Canyon it is almost impossible to drink enough water to keep hydrated so I had forced myself to drink enormous amounts.

Attention to detail is paramount when planning a hike of this magnitude and I had made a fundamental mistake when buying our supplies. The snacks I had purchased were all honey coated rather than salted and I hadn't noticed. As a result the sodium chloride my body needed to function in this environment had slowly sweated out of me. The tell tale white staining around my shirt was a very obvious sign this had happened. Dawn was now shuffling back and forwards from the nearby stream ferrying water which she was pouring over my head to help cool me down. The breeze coming down the Canyon blew the intense heat right through the rest house. Our shaded sanctuary a few minutes ago now felt like a fan assisted oven and we were being cooked alive. By now I was unable to eat or drink anything without vomiting. The situation was becoming critical. It was now time to roll the dice.

We had the option of walking the two miles back to Phantom Ranch but this would mean walking back along the River Trail that I knew we would not be able to handle mentally. We could use the emergency phone and get help although the hour or two it would take for help to arrive could be too long. Our third option was to set off up the Bright Angel Trail during the hottest part of the day up a series of switchbacks known as The Devils Corkscrew. Our reward would be a little Oasis called Garden Creek that was shaded from the rays of the sun by trees and bushes and had water flowing through it. My mind was easily made up when Dawn offered to carry my rucksack. I knew if she attempted this then there was a chance we would both perish in this abyss. As long as I could move then we would head upwards to Garden Creek. This was the same spot that had come to our aid the year before and I imagined us having a picnic when we got there.

Off we stumbled into the heat of the day. Several times on the way up the Devils Corkscrew I collapsed into a heap on the trail and several times Dawn encouraged me to get up. I couldn't eat or drink and was exposed to the furnace of the Inner Canyon. My throat had long since become so parched that it felt like dried leather. Dawn once again came to my aid and calmed me down encouraging me to sip our water and wet the inside of my mouth. My whole body was beginning to cease functioning and I could feel the remaining energy within me slowly ebbing away. Suddenly we had another stroke of luck. Coming down the trail were a couple of hikers who had set off late in the day heading for Phantom Ranch. They had been asked to look out for us by the group we had met earlier at the rest house. They sprayed water on me and more importantly gave me a bag of salted cashew nuts. These were to provide the much needed salt that my body was craving for. I munched on a couple of these but once again this only resulted in me vomiting. Dehydrated and being cooked alive I was now bloody annoyed that I had been so stupid to attempt such a hike.

Slowly we ground our way up until we reached Garden Creek. All the time Dawn had kept remarkably calm and had encouraged me in a relaxed manner to keep going. Garden Creek was

every bit the oasis we had remembered from the year before. There was ice-cold flowing water and an abundance of shade. I slumped down into the shade with a large grin on my face. We had made it out of the furnace that is the Inner Canyon. The steepest part of our hike out of the Canyon was yet to come but that didn't matter anymore. I had made a good decision back at the rest house at Pipe Creek. It had been a good roll of the dice. We were out of the abyss. Dawn once again ferried water back and forward from the stream to cool me down and I managed to eat a banana without vomiting. We had food, water and there was a cool breeze coming off the nearby stream as it flowed past.

It was no use planning to hike out of the Canyon all in one go from here. The best option was to break the journey up into stages. All these stages would give us the option of resting overnight. We could also use the emergency phones to summon help. We had reached our first goal at Garden Creek. Next would be the camp sight at Indian Gardens (this would normally be the third nights resting place for anyone doing the Rim to Rim walk) and then the 3 mile and 1.5 mile rest houses. Our final goal would be the South Rim of the Grand Canyon.

We decided it would be best to try and reach the campsite at Indian Gardens as this was only a mile or so away and was a relatively flat walk. On reaching Indian Gardens the thermometer was showing that the temperature had dropped to 95 degrees. This was 6.30 in the evening. Here we had access to water and could summon help if required. I was still desperate for some salt but couldn't swallow the salted cashew nuts that I had been given earlier. Dawn decided the best thing to do was just suck the nuts or has she famously said to Gill in the beer garden at Grasmere a few weeks later, "he had to lick the salt off his nuts". Having licked the salt off my nuts we set off to try and reach the 3-mile rest house.

We knew from last year that it would take about an hour and fifteen minutes to hike the next 1.5 miles. This would involve a tortuous ascent up a series of switchbacks known as Jacobs Ladder. To add to our problems it was now dark. I stumbled up the 3 foot wide trail like a drunk from one side to the other. All the time I kept telling myself not to stumble over the edge. This would be all too easy especially at the sharp bends on the switchbacks that were not easily picked out in the dark. On the plus side we were no longer subjected to the burning rays of the sun. When we arrived at the rest house I was exhausted. We were now only three miles from the South Rim of the Canyon and safety.

I was exhausted and wanted to sleep here for the night. After several minutes drifting in and out of consciousness Dawn woke me up and encouraged me to try and eat and drink something. The salt from the Cashew nuts was now beginning to take effect and I was able to eat some boiled sweets and drink some water. During this period Dawn had been kept amused by a little mouse that kept darting in and out of a small hole in the stonework. Our predicament was much better than a few hours ago but it was still too early to dream of reaching the South Rim of the Canyon that was only 3 miles away. Our next goal was to reach the final rest house 1.5 miles away.

The dark had now become our friend. We could no longer see how far and high we had to hike up out of the Canyon. For some strange reason I had this vision that I was drinking a large Coke with ice. I decided this would be our reward if we made it the last three miles out of the Canyon. It would be the pot of gold at the end of our rainbow. This was all I had to focus on and after about 1.5 hours we made it to the next rest house. As last year we found the effort involved in walking the few feet up to the rest house too great an effort so we slumped down on the trail where we stood. It didn't matter as the water was by the trail. Like last year the water here was warm and tasted of rust from the old cast iron pipe that carried it all the way from Roaring Springs on the North Kaibab Trail. I no longer craved for sleep here. We had 1.5 miles left to our goal. For a moment I dreamt I was drinking that Coke full of ice on the South Rim of the Canyon. The dream however soon faded when I remembered we still hadn't passed the spot where I had collapsed the previous year and I was in a worse condition now.

Dawn dragged me to my feet and we set off up the trail. Soon we had passed through the first of the two tunnels blasted through the sheer rock face. It was here that I had collapsed last year. We had less than a mile to go and although I was feeling much worse than last year we had almost

achieved our goal. Many hours ago at Pipe Creek rest house I wasn't confident that I would survive being baked alive. To our astonishment we were not the last people out of the Canyon that night. With only a few hundred yards left to go we came across a lone hiker who was slumped by the edge of the trail exhausted. It was the same hiker who many hours before had crossed over the stream to the Pipe Creek rest house and identified that I had water poisoning. Although we were also exhausted it was nice for us to spend a few minutes with him. We gave him the last of our water and some boiled sweets and reassured him that the top was only about ten minutes walk away before we had to leave. For the first time we were able to enjoy the sheer beauty of the Canyon. There was an eerie silence all around us. We sat down on the trail and switched off our head torches to allow our eyes to penetrate the darkness of the night. We could see right across to the North Rim of the Canyon and the lights from the Lodge where we had set off many hours before. It was a moment we will never forget.

Within minutes our adventure was over. Like the Phoenix rising from the ashes we had arose from the depths of the Canyon seventeen and a half hours after our journey had began. I was delirious and kept repeating over and over again to Dawn, "well done Champ, you got me out Champ, you got me out". Dawn had indeed got me out. Despite suffering from heat exhaustion herself she had ferried water backwards and forwards from the nearby streams to cool me down and had kept me calm and focused throughout. She had been my Guardian Angel.

To our surprise we were met on the Rim by the same group of hikers who had offered us food and electrolyte powder many hours before when I had first become ill. They told us that they had been concerned for our safety and for the safety of the lone hiker who we had just passed. They had been sat here waiting for the last six hours to make sure we got out safely. I was humbled that complete strangers could show such compassion. We waited a few more minutes for the lone hiker then thanked everyone for their concern and went on our way. As for that Coke. Dawn bought me the largest Coke available and I sat slumped in the reception area of the Maswik Lodge hotel on the 'poshest' seat I could find drinking it. I was covered in vomit, red dust and badly sunburnt. We didn't care about the strange looks from everyone that walked past. After all we had just experienced the true ferocity of one of the seven natural wonders of the world.

Graham and Dawn Howarth

Sections in italics are taken from the book – *Over the edge: Death in Grand Canyon*
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