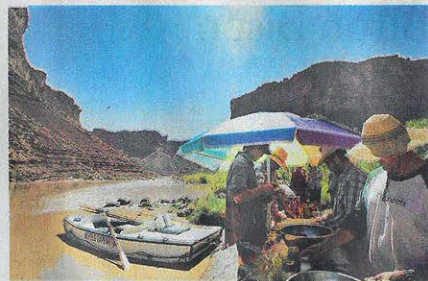
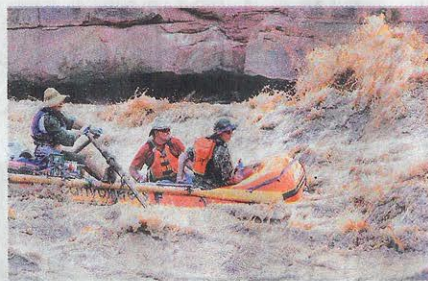
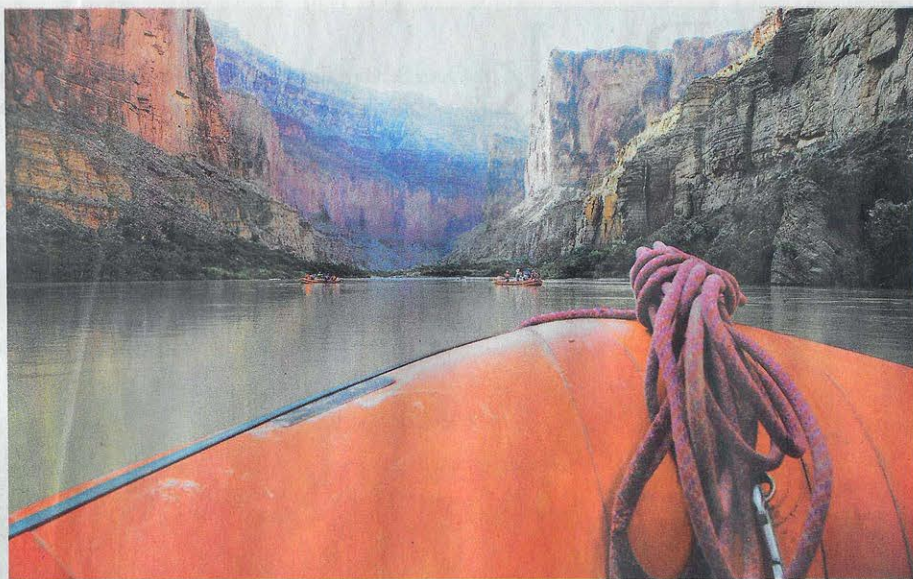


EXPLORER | ARIZONA



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Rafting Through the Grand Canyon in Vintage Style

Braving the Colorado River's white-water rapids in 'Sandra,' a 1930s wooden rowboat.

By DANIEL JONES

We were nearly a mile deep in the Grand Canyon, drifting along on the Colorado River in a wooden rowboat, when a large, motor-powered raft overtook us. As it passed, a few passengers waved; we waved back. Then one man, mocking our tiny skiff, shouted, "Good luck in that thing!"

"Good luck to you, too!" our guide, Greg Reiff, called out. "In that!"

My teenage son, Nathaniel, and I laughed, but the guy in the raft had a point. Their boat resembled an inflatable D-Day landing craft: 35 feet long with missile-like pontoons on the sides, its dozen passengers sheltered safely in the middle. Our little rowboat, meanwhile, looked barely noteworthy: 14 feet from bow to stern with us three perched mere inches above the waterline — in calm water, that is.

In case you didn't know: The Colorado River can be quite un-calm. Even the flat stretches boil with powerful currents, and the rough stretches represent some of the most challenging navigable white water in the world. On that day, one of the roughest rapids, known as Hance, loomed just a few hundred yards downstream, with huge holes and 15-foot waves that could flip our dainty dinghy in a heartbeat.

But we wouldn't need luck, or so I told myself, because we had Greg, who has been navigating this river for more than three decades. Even so, I asked him (trying to sound casual), "Have you ever flipped with passengers?"

"Oh, yeah," he replied with a big grin.

I didn't press for details.

Rafting through the Grand Canyon has become big business since the park's first commercial guide, Norm Nevills, started taking passengers in the late 1930s. Back then, paying Norm to take you hundreds of miles down the Colorado River in his fleet of wooden rowboats was like hiring a world-class mountaineer to help you scale K2 today. It was so expensive and adventurous that only the elite of the elite could do it, people who were both rich and fearless, the Richard Bransons of their day.

Norm designed and built his fleet of six "cataraact" boats himself (a cataraact is a large-volume waterfall), half of which were lost in action over the years. Of the surviving three, only one remains in use today, the "Sandra," and we were sitting in it.

More than 70 years old, the Sandra was named for Norm's daughter, who is Greg's mother. The rafting company Greg works for, Canyoneers, is the same family-run outfit that Norm founded in the '30s, when only a few dozen wealthy thrill-seekers per year could experience the canyon that way.

Today some 20,000 people make the trip annually, paying thousands of dollars each for excursions ranging from days to weeks, depending on how they prefer to travel (human-powered rafts or motorized) and how far they go (partway or full length — roughly 280 miles, which takes 14 days in a raft).

Approximately 80 percent take motor-powered rigs, which move faster, shortening a full-length trip to seven days. The rest go in oar-powered rafts or wooden dories. Only a minuscule number of people, however — maybe 40 each summer — get to experience the river as those early adventurers did, in a Norm Nevills cataraact boat.

I had been dreaming about this trip since I was my son's age, when my parents took our family down the Colorado on a motorized raft. As much as I loved that experience, I had envied the groups I saw bouncing through rapids in oar-powered rafts and dories.

Grand Canyon National Park has 16 licensed outfitters that run the river in a tight choreography that allows for maximum use without crowding. I had little sense of the outfitters' reputations, but because I was booking late, our choice was made for us: Only two companies had space, and the Canyoneers trip better fit our schedule. We had no idea how lucky we were.

Our trip started in mid-July at the boat launch in Marble Canyon, a few miles downriver from Glen Canyon Dam, which forms Lake Powell. The river emerges from the bottom at a bone-chilling 45 degrees, and it doesn't warm up much as you float through the sun-baked landscape, where summer temperatures simmer in the 90s and 100s.



Top, travelers can choose among motor-powered rigs, oar-powered rafts, wooden dories, or even rarer, a cataraact boat. Top right, from top, riders on a Canyoneers trip navigate the rough white water, and take a break during a riverside lunch. Above, the artist Véronique Robigou gave art lessons on the Canyoneers trip.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

We flew in and out of Las Vegas's McCarran Airport, which is a nearly four-hour drive to Flagstaff, where you meet the Canyoneer guides to start your trip. Those seeking a more direct route can use Pulliam Airport in Flagstaff.

HOW TO BOOK

Canyoneers offers trips that range from \$1,159 per person for a three-day motorized excursion to \$3,750 per person for a 14-day, full-canyon oar trip; canyoneers.com.

To find a trip that best suits your schedule, preferences and budget among the 16 companies that run trips in the Grand Canyon, try *Rivers & Oceans*, which serves as a kind of travel agent representing all outfitters. We used them and found the agent to be very knowledgeable; riversandoceans.com.

WHERE TO STAY

Among the places to stay on the South Rim is *Kachina Lodge*, in the park. Rooms from \$215 a night; grandcanyonlodges.com/lodging/kachina-lodge. For other South Rim lodging options, visit grandcanyonlodges.com.

I launched myself into one big wave and then another.

When a wave rolls over you, the contrast is bracing.

Nathaniel and I would be floating the Upper Grand only, a six-day trip, hiking out from Phantom Ranch to the South Rim on the Bright Angel Trail. The rest of our group would continue for another eight days, running nearly the full length of the Grand Canyon. Eight guides manned our flotilla of seven boats (six rubber rafts and the Sandra), and each morning we could choose a different boat and guide for the day.

Marble Canyon's gentle riffs offered little hint of the thrashing that awaited us downstream. As we slathered on sunscreen and gulped water in the blazing heat, we began to learn about the geological wonder we were descending into. Our boatman that day, Cliff Ghiglieri, knew each layer of rock, how many millions of years old they were, which plants were invasive and which explorers had died there.

Every guide on our trip loved to hike, and luckily, so did the guests. Our hearty group of nine included a retired National Park Service historian from Alaska; a former National Forest Service staff member and his wife from Cottonwood, Ariz.; and a super-athletic family from Carbondale, Colo.: mother and father chiropractors with a daughter in college and a son headed there, who scampered about the rocky slopes like the Big Horn Sheep dotting the distant cliffs.

We would spend that week shimmying up side canyons, swimming in hidden pools and tossing Frisbees in massive caverns. We sunk to our knees in mud and toured 1,000-year-old Puebloan agricultural sites. One evening we even talked Cliff and Greg into guiding us over the ridgeline where rock layers had been folded over in an ancient earthquake. Our late departure meant a return in darkness (much to Greg's worry), with us creeping along rock ledges using headlamps — risky, yes, but unforgettable.

All of that lay ahead. At the end of Day 1, we pulled up to a beach among tamarisk bushes. As we unloaded gear and dinner, dark thunderheads appeared to the west; it was monsoon season in Arizona. Were they headed our way?

Twenty minutes later, a violent blast of wind gave us our answer: You could actually see its push upriver as it whipped water airborne. We scrambled to grab loose gear, but nobody thought to secure the camp table, which looked to be weighed down by stacked dishes and frozen meat. Over it went, sending everything into the sand. Then someone's tent nearly lifted off, tethered to a branch by a single rope. When the rain hit, pelting us with huge, warm drops, we sought shelter against the cliff side.

After it passed and our guides prepared dinner, we feasted on prime ribs and vegetables. With light fading fast, we then pulled our bedding from the dry bags and laid it out. Others had erected tents, but Nathaniel and I wanted to sleep under the stars. Once we got in our sleeping bags and gazed skyward, however, it wasn't stars that drew our eyes but dozens of flapping wings, swooping low over our faces.

"Are those bats?" I asked Nathaniel.

"Yeah," he said, awe-struck. "So many." Back in Massachusetts, a bat in the house meant panicked thoughts of rabies. Here, bats were our nightly companions and of little concern, especially compared with the scorpions (that we knew were plentiful but never saw) and rattlesnakes, like the one that sat coiled near our lunch spot a few afternoons later as we feasted on taco salad.

At 6 a.m. we were roused by a boisterous call of "cawFEE!" The aroma of pancakes and sausage filled the air, but first it was time for "cowboy coffee" (loose grounds in boiled water). A bad cup of joe never tasted so good.

Before we clambered onto the rafts for Day 2, Greg asked everyone to gather on the beach. "I can never get through this story without crying," he warned. Soon we understood why.

Greg told us that his grandfather, Norm, had a thirst for adventure that went beyond exploring rivers; he was also an avid aviator who flew single-prop planes over the canyons and buttes of his beloved Southwest.

One day when Norm and his wife, Doris, were flying from their Arizona ranch, their daughter Sandra, then 8, went with others to see them off from the dirt airstrip. The plane taxied and took off, then circled back. And as Sandra watched, waving goodbye, her parents' plane sputtered, lost altitude



ONLINE: DOWN THE RIVER

A canyon ride on the Colorado at nytimes.com/travel.

through.

I didn't fully appreciate this until we ran Hance days later, the biggest white water Nathaniel and I would experience. On the Grand Canyon's 10-point scale for difficulty, Hance is an 8, with 12- to 15-foot waves and a 30-foot overall drop. I had to go up front in the "fishy" position because I weighed more. As Greg angled us down the tongue of the rapid, all you could hear was a growing roar, and then we plunged into the heart of it — and I mean plunged.

Laid out on the bow, I launched myself into one big wave and then another, my hands white-knuckling the ropes. When we dropped into a hole and shot up a third wave that looked twice my height, I felt myself slide back as the boat bucked, and I thought, "This is what flipping feels like." But then we punched through that one too, and after a few more rollers we were out, with whoops and high-fives — and a boat full of water. Commence bailing!

The next morning was our last. Over six days we had traveled 87 miles and survived 36 rapids. We openly wished we had signed on for the whole run. On the plus side, though, a room with a hot shower awaited us on the South Rim at the Kachina Lodge. To earn it, all we had to do was hike for seven hours nearly 5,000 feet straight up in triple-digit heat carrying full packs.

Always up for a hike and conversation, Cliff tagged along for our first hour; he said it would take time to restock the boats anyway. When he finally turned back, we exchanged hugs and thanks.

"Drink lots of water," he advised. "Only stop in the shade. You'll know you're almost at the top when you start seeing baby strollers on the trail."

As we plodded along, the trail grew steeper, drier and hotter. Every mile brought more breathtaking views. But the best sight of all materialized just a few feet in front of us when I could barely lift my head.

"Baby stroller," Nathaniel said. We'd made it.

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