

## JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

We were young and unfettered. We hadn't yet met the men we would marry and who would be the fathers of our children. Arthritis was not in our vocabulary. We had no need for fitness classes. Youth, energy and stamina made us invincible. If we wanted to climb mountains or hike down into the Grand Canyon and back in a day we could do it. So we did.

Back in the last millennium (1972), a very skilled and enthusiastic Oshawa travel agent assisted my girlfriend and I in stretching an advertised week long California Wholesale Deal into 20 glorious days exploring south western U.S. After a trip from California's San Francisco to San Diego it included the driving of a rental car through New Mexico and Arizona. The major highlight of a trip with many highlights was a 3 day visit to the Grand Canyon. We traveled by coach from Phoenix arriving there in late afternoon. After checking in at the hotel at the head of the Canyon's Bright Angel Trail we strolled over to the nearest Canyon viewpoint.

No photographs or books can prepare visitors for the first glimpse of the immensity and grandeur of this natural creation. We gazed in awe at the ever changing hues and shapes of the rock towers and pinnacles before us. We spent our first full day exploring the Canyon along the rim path at the summit and taking countless photographs. But gazing at it's magnificence was not enough for us. We wanted to experience it more intimately, to make the descent into its full embrace. We had considered taking a mule trip into the Canyon but that was costly and had to be booked months ahead of arrival. Also we had learned that the mules had a scary habit of halting at the edge of a trail precipice and lowering their heads to allow riders to admire the view. At that stage of our lives we had more confidence in the strength of our legs to get us safely down the Canyon. There was no internet so no opportunity to

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google information to prepare for our hike. We had no special hiking boots with us. For some time I kept as a souvenir the light canvas shoes I wore for the descent that were stained with the rust coloured dust of the trail. We did however heed the warning signs at the head of the trail that advised hikers of the temperature variation between the Canyon's cool summit and the almost tropical heat of its depths and of the need to carry our own water supply. Armed with food and drink in a small back pack we took turns to carry, we set off bright and early on the day of our adventure.

The spirits of the Canyon were smiling on us on that bright October morning. As we started our early morning descent wisps of mist floated in the Canyon, soon to be dissolved by the rising sun. The width and gentle switchbacks of the first part of the trail allowed us to focus on our surroundings without undue physical stress. Squirrels, chipmunks and small birds darted among the stunted pines and junipers that grew along the early stages of our path. We stepped aside to allow a mule train to pass by and waved to the riders perched on the backs of the patient animals. The trail dust on the path changed to a deeper rust colour as we passed through the upper limestone layer into a sandstone tier. The trail coils eventually leveled out as we reached Indian Gardens.

That's where we had our first main rest and refreshment period and saw more people than we had encountered all morning. It's an oasis on a plateau studded with cottonwood trees. A burbling brook fringed with lush grasses flows through it. We enjoyed chatting with a cheerful 80 year old man who informed us that regular climbs in and out of the Canyon helped him to keep his arthritis at bay. For some people it's an overnight camping spot between rim and river and for others it's as far as they decide to go before returning to the rim. We knew we could not linger long there if we were to achieve our aim of hiking from rim to river and back in a day.

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After leaving Indian Gardens we became aware of changes in climate and surroundings. The trail was getting steeper, the temperature was increasing and the alpine foliage was changing to desert vegetation. We saw cacti although I also recall a startlingly green swathe of moss where water was somehow escaping from the interior to trickle down the dry rock face. As we descended further the trail wound in a series of switchbacks known as the devil's corkscrew. On either side of us were billion year old walls of grey Vishnu Schist rock. They obscured the sun but the heat was tangible in this sombre place where few other hikers were venturing at the time of our climb. We gradually became aware of a faint roaring sound, a message from the River Colorado. It slowly became louder and as we rounded a last corner, there it was. We stood spellbound watching this wide stretch of muddy water continue with its work of creating an ever deeper and Grand Canyon.

We knew that about a mile along the river was Phantom Ranch, a collection of cabins for overnight visits for which reservations were needed. However, knowing too that we needed to preserve energy for the return climb to the rim prevented us from exploring further. We were fully aware that this would be the more arduous part of our adventure and it was. We summoned all the strength in our legs and lungs and began the long ascent. Daylight was beginning to fade as we arrived again at Indian Gardens. After a brief respite we joined the group of assorted people for the final slow haul back to the Canyon rim. Among them was a mother with 3 children, the youngest a stoical 5 year old. Darkness was falling for the last part of our hike but we were happy to be part of a group which boosted our confidence to complete the climb. The first stars glimmered far above us and suddenly I felt my weariness falling away to be replaced by a feeling of elation. I seemed to be drawing energy from the camaraderie of the group but also from the Canyon itself and I felt remarkably fresh and certainly ready for supper on emergence into Grand Canyon Village.

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The next day bodily sensations returned. Getting out of bed was a major challenge. Climbing the steps of the coach for our drive back to Phoenix caused us both to groan with pain although our bodies suffered no lasting ill effects.

I have never returned to the Canyon but my friend has. She even bought the tee shirts, one for her and one for me, that announce we climbed the Grand Canyon. She told me of the Glass Bridge, a horse-shoe shaped covered engineering marvel that now extends 10 feet over the Canyon so that visitors can gaze directly down to the river at the foot of the Canyon, a breathtaking experience but not in the way that our Bright Angel Hike was.

We climbed the Canyon in the days before cell phones and computers. Today would be a different experience. Had a trip over a rock in the path caused one of us injury, the mobile one of us would have had to go alone to the occasional emergency phone box along the trail and wait for help to arrive from Rangers based at Phantom Ranch or Grand Canyon Village. Today there would be more hiker traffic, no doubt carrying cell phones although cell phone reception is only available at certain locations on the trail. Googling tells me there are now Ranger Stations with pit toilets and water refills at Indian Gardens and beside the River Colorado.

Writing about our journey through geological time has itself been a journey through time. With the aid of memory and imagination I can travel again to that magical day 46 years ago and descend painlessly through countless millennia to the River Colorado at the foot of the Grand Canyon. Thankfully time has not erased the wonder of that magical day.

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