

# Grand Canyon rim to rim and back again – or so we thought!

by Chris Meyer

The Grand Canyon rim to rim to rim hike is a great achievement to accomplish. Although, you need to be prepared. You must respect the Grand Canyon because it does not care about you. It can suck you in, chew you up, and then spit you out without a concern.

I had completed this trip back in late September 2006 with Mike Shackelford, Linda Lou Williams, and Peppe Sotomayor. Mike took the shuttle back to the South Rim, while Linda Lou, Peppe and I continued the hike back to the South Rim the next day. Peppe and Linda Lou beat me by about 1.5 hours on the way back and they were 64 and 66 years old respectively. They were in great shape. Years later, I wanted to do the trip again with Peppe who would be 71.5 years old. I knew I still wouldn't be able to keep up with him, but I'd try. I wanted to do it again when he was 75 and again when he was 80 with the hope that I would finally beat him. Also, at that time my son would be old enough for the trip and he would most likely beat all of us. As a result, I contacted Peppe in July 2013 to suggest this trip. He agreed to do it in mid-May 2014 on the first weekend the North Rim opens.

We trained separately since our schedules didn't match. I had limited time since my son's Little League baseball was in full swing, it was busy at work and other family activities. I did manage a few long hikes including Red Springs in Red Rock to the Grand Circle and around White Rock Hills Peak and Trail Canyon in Mt. Charleston to Raintree to NLT and back again. I found myself encountering several roadblocks preventing me from training as often as I'd like. The biggest roadblock was hitting a deer on Kyle Canyon road about a half mile past Harris Springs Road just before sunrise on April 25<sup>th</sup> causing over \$4000 damage to my car. It was repaired and I was fine, but of course the deer was dead. I discussed my concerns with Peppe. Although, out of the blue he leaves me a message on April 30<sup>th</sup> indicating he can not go on the trip with me and he can't explain why. I was hurt by this message with no detail. I had already made hotel reservations and my wife was going camping at the North Rim with our son and a friend with her husband and daughter. My wife had originally wanted to go, but Peppe was insistent the trip was only for the two of us. I decided to post the trip at the last minute on the LVMC Meetup for only four people since I had reserved a hotel room with two beds. I received three responses right away. The trip now includes Bill Inglehart, Fabrienne Bowman, and Michelle Murrell. All of us have extensive hiking experience in the desert. Although this would be the first time for Fabrienne and Michelle to hike in the Grand Canyon. Bill has done this same trip (I forget) eight times. Bill and Fabrienne were going to drive and stay in their own hotel room. Michelle and I would drive together and share the room I reserved.

We all met at the Maswik Lodge for dinner the night before the hike to finalize details. We then went to our respective rooms to get ready. Since this was Michelle's first time hiking in the Grand Canyon, we finalized what to bring along. She was concerned about the proper shoes to wear considering issues with her feet. She made her pick and we didn't think it would be necessary to carry another pair for the entire hike. We slept soundly. I planned on carrying almost 5,000 calories of food and 4-liters of water with a filtration system in case the pipes broke from Roaring Springs. The pipes are very old and have a tendency to break once in a while.

We woke up early enough to meet the 05:00 am hiker's shuttle at the backcountry office next to Maswik. I ate a very big bowl of Cheerios and almond milk. I then prehydrated by drinking a liter of  $\frac{3}{4}$  orange juice and  $\frac{1}{4}$  water mixed with  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of chia seeds that had been soaking for a day. The last time I went on this trip, the hiker's shuttle had a couple other people. This time, there was standing room

only. This hike has sure become popular. We started the hike at 5:30 am. Unbeknownst to me, Bill took off wanting to be the first hiker to the Colorado River for that day. Fabrienne and Michelle tried to keep up with him, but soon gave up. I had no interest since a steady reasonable pace is necessary for safety and energy conservation for the much harder hike uphill. Bill and I had walkie-talkies so we communicated a couple times.

The trip down was very pretty as we watched the sun rise from within the Grand Canyon. The views at Ooh Aah Point were amazing. Plenty of great photography. There were a few photographers with high-end cameras taking pictures of the sunrise from that point.

To maintain hydration, I set the timer for my watch to ring every ten minutes to remind me to take a sip of water from my camelbak. Fabrienne and Michelle were slightly ahead of me until we reached Cedar Ridge. At that point, we stayed together until about 7:50 am at a little past the Tonto Trail Junction. The bathroom at that junction now read 85 degrees. We knew it was going to get warmer as we went lower in elevation. I was making sure to eat salty and energy foods once in a while to maintain my energy level. The previous trip of mine, my knees hurt on the way down so this time I used two poles which is rare for me when hiking. I felt great! About that time, I lost sight of Fabrienne and Michelle. I heard from Bill via the walkie-talkie learning he was leaving Phantom Ranch and was feeling great. He passed a lot of people and made it to the river first for the day. Remember, I'm the one with the water filter. Thankfully, we didn't need it.

I arrived at the river about 8:50 am just as Fabrienne and Michelle were leaving. They commented I'm not going to get out of the canyon in a reasonable time since I'm moving slower than they were. I remarked that I typically move at a reasonable pace on the uphill and I'll be fine. They continued ahead of me. I rested by the river area for about thirty minutes soaking my feet in the river, using the toilet for a good poop (wait for the reason why I mention this) and ate lunch. I only drank two liters of water on the way down, but still felt great. Of course, I filled my camelbak at Phantom Ranch and drank more water. The lunch I ate was my normal whole wheat bread with lots of peanut butter and honey with lots of flax seed and a ¼ cup of chia seeds. The only thing not normal was the amount of chia seeds on the sandwich of which I typically include less than a tablespoon. I also ate miscellaneous salty foods and a 12 ounce V8 can (non low-sodium variety).

I left the Phantom Ranch at about 9:35 am. I was surprised to see my thermometer only indicated 85 degrees with 15% humidity. I would have thought the temperature would be much hotter. I continued starting to feel a little off. I thought it might be the conditions so I changed my timer to ring every five minutes instead of ten minutes to remind me to drink water. After about 20 to 30 minutes since eating lunch, I started to feel worse. I started thinking I have an electrolyte imbalance so I consumed a salt, vitamin C and vitamin K tablets. I even rested and ate some more salty and energy foods. Later, I realized I was bloated and had a bulge in my lower left abdomen between my pelvis and mid-section between my penis and belly button. I started to hike slower than usual and began to wonder if I'm going to get out of the Grand Canyon. I later had the need to poop again which is odd since I just did earlier. When my body gets stressed, I poop. Those who have hiked with me at altitude know about this fact. I wanted to hold it until I reached Cottonwood Campground to use their facility particularly due to the leave no trace policy. Although, I always carry a freezer ziploc bag, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer with me when hiking for such a need. I found a discrete place off the trail with bushes and soil only to discover it was not solid. Uh-oh, I have diarrhea. Also, my pee was not bright yellow, it was more brown. Very bad sign. I'm getting very dehydrated and since I feel so bad I'm also suffering heat exhaustion. I couldn't bag up this poop so I buried it in the soil carrying out my toilet paper. It was an effort maintaining a position to do my business considering how I felt. I continued slower than usually

for the mostly flatish area to Cottonwood Campground. I ended up stopping two other times for diarrhea. Now I've run out of toilet paper! I reached the turn-off for Ribbon Falls, but didn't visit even though I really wanted to see it again.

Upon reaching Cottonwood Campground at 1 pm after traveling 7 miles from Phantom Ranch in 3.5 hours, I realized I finished all 4-liters of water I brought and I still felt very bad. I called my wife on the walkie-talkie who was at the North Rim Lodge. I didn't hear from the others in my group. I was now hiking alone in a bad situation. I told my wife I'm suffering dehydration and heat exhaustion. I'm going to rest at the campground for a while and recharge. I had two bandanas with me I soaked using the cool water from a faucet placing them on my head and neck several times. I also forced down another 2-liters of water over the next fifty minutes. I again pooped at the campground bathroom. I figured this was going to happen again so I rolled up more toilet paper and then continued hiking at about 1:50 pm. I still felt bad and was really wondering if I'll make it out of the Grand Canyon!

After about 1.4 miles I reached another bathroom and ranger station at 2:30 pm. I tried to pee, but a little bit came out. A ranger came out to talk with me. I told her how I felt and what I was doing. She offered salty crackers, but I already had enough proper food with me. I did feel a little better so I continued. I later learned from my wife that ranger called on the radio to warn other rangers to be on the lookout for a rim to rimer with diarrhea. My wife heard the transmission stating it was me even though she didn't know the severity of my issue. Not long afterwards, I really needed to pee. It was a full pee of clear liquid. I proceeded to pee clear liquid every about ten minutes for the next almost hour. My energy level had greatly increased. I started moving uphill at a pace of about 2.5 mph and I felt great. A valve opened up giving me a big shot of energy. The bulge had disappeared, but I still felt discomfort in that area.

I passed by Roaring Springs at 3 pm. At 4:30 pm, I reached Supai Tunnel. My wife and her friend, Darby, were waiting for us to arrive. A little before that I caught up to everyone else. It turns out Michelle's feet were really hurting her. Apparently, we decided on the wrong shoes to wear. Fabrienne's hip was slightly out of place so she was in pain. Both were moving slower than usual. The worst was Bill. Basically, the Grand Canyon whacked him with a sledge hammer. He was exhausted. Fabrienne and Michelle continued on. My wife and Darby went with them since Darby drove to the trailhead with the intention of taking us all to the North Rim campsite. I gave Bill some Gu and light snacks to help his energy level. Unfortunately, he threw up everything he ate and drank. He was in really bad shape and running on empty. I felt great and wanted to continue with Fabrienne and Michelle, but I was concerned with Bill. Even though he took off at the beginning abandoning us, I didn't feel he should be alone for the last stretch out. The hike was slow with frequent stops. I helped him up each time so he can use his energy for walking. The next 1.7 miles took over 1.5 hours. It was annoying, but he needed someone to stay with him.

We finally reached the North Kaibab trailhead at 6:35 pm, 13 hours after starting. We were transported to the campsite by Darby. My wife and her friend had setup camp. They even put up Bill and Fabrienne's tent cots and Michelle's tent. My wife proceeded to make all of us pie-iron pizzas. A wonderful and favorite camping meal for our family. It basically consists of two slices of bread, butter, pizza or pesto sauce with mozzarella cheese and pepperoni or equivalent cooked over a fire in pie-irons. Everyone ate a lot including appetizers. Of course, we also enjoyed s'mores. We were also very surprised the temperature at the North Rim for mid-May was very comfortable. My wife was a wonderful support for all of us!

The next morning, I felt really good and wanted to go back to the South Rim, but I didn't want

to repeat that same experience not knowing the cause since it would probably be worse the next time around. I had the same food plans for the next day already at the campsite. I felt much much better than I remember after the first day from this hike years ago even though I didn't get to train as much as I wanted. Nonetheless, we all agreed to abort hiking back to the South Rim. The problem though was that our cars were at the Maswik Lodge on the South Rim. Michelle took the shuttle the next morning. Fabrienne stuck with my family as we played tourist seeing the sights at the North Rim. Bill hung-out at the campsite. Bill ate the expense for the hotel reservation while Michelle stayed in the hotel room I reserved. The next morning, Michelle drove my car back to Las Vegas. Bill and Fabrienne took the shuttle and then drove home the next morning. I drove back with my family later picking up my car from Michelle.

A few days later, I realized what caused my problem. Everyone thought it was the massive bowl of Cheerios I ate. Instead, it was the more than usual amount of chia seeds in the sandwich I ate for lunch. The seeds expanded in the intestines when exposed to water plugging up my system. When the clog was finally broken, there was a flood of water and food processed by my body giving me lots of energy. A week later, I had significant pain in that area which went away in a couple days. Since that point, the discomfort decreased significantly. I was concerned I had a hernia. Due to work, I was due for my DOT physical which would perform that check. I passed the exam in late July. Although, I still to this day I have very minor pressure in that area which resembles an overworked muscle typically occurring when I sit or bend over and I need to use the toilet. I'll bring it to the attention of my primary care doctor when I have my normal physical later this year.

After this trip, I talked with my wife expressing interest in doing the rim to rim again, but this time as a key exchange with an organized group through LVMC. I wanted the North Rim to South Rim route since I didn't get to do it. Although, now the park service has instituted a fee and reservation system due to the high demand for this activity requiring the group leader to have Wilderness First Responder training of which I am not certified. Too many people are interested in this adventure, particularly runners, which is causing a drain upon the system and tranquility of the inner Grand Canyon. I regret I didn't help with having to poop near the trail, but I did bury it in actual soil and not rocks and I carried out my toilet paper. I really learned from that experience. As a matter of fact, everyone learned from that experience. Respect the Grand Canyon, because it does not respect you!