

Grand Canyon Trip – 2006

After a 15 year wait, our friend Peter Errmann received a permit to run the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. We put in at Lee's Ferry on April 24th, 2006 and, taking advantage of the maximum allowable trip length of 18 days, paddled to Diamond Creek to take out on May 13th. Here is an overview of the trip.

The Canadian contingent included Peter and Pat Mahaffey, Lawrence and Sharon Toews, John Gapp/Neil Heinrichs, Lyn and I, and our daughter Laura. Laura paddled a traditional hard-shell kayak and put up with the foibles of a bunch of old folks for the thrill of running a river that is on every paddlers' dream list. The rest of us from Calgary paddled inflatable canoes called SOARs. These are 16-foot, rubber, canoe-shaped boats that have the advantage of allowing us to paddle much bigger rapids than would be possible in a traditional tandem canoe. A SOAR is self-bailing; so, as long as you stay upright, you will not sink. You can see their website at: <http://www.soar1.com>.



Peter also invited some American friends who have done the trip before and have oared rafts. Raft support is an essential part of a Grand Canyon trip; not just to carry the beer, but also to carry the group food and



kitchen. We are used to canoe tripping with lightweight food, stove and cooking utensils. Not so this trip. The regulations require a four-bucket system for washing cooking utensils, ground tarps in the kitchen area, straining all wash water before returning it to the river and many other procedures that are well justified in such a high use area, but add to the amount of specialized gear that must be carried. The rafts also carry the all-important toilet ("the groover") since all waste must be carried out. These rules are carefully set out in a 24-page document and are reviewed by the National Park Ranger at the beginning of the trip. The results pay off: the entire area is completely free of any signs of garbage.

The four rafters were: Ohio Knox, Tom Smith, Lee Thompson and Gary Potzman with his wife, Danny. Also was Richard Caccese who was the least experienced paddler and had an inflatable kayak. Richard did amazingly well and paddled most of the rapids except the biggest ones where he deflated his kayak and rode one of the rafts as a passenger.



Lyn and I spent a week of birding in southeast Arizona with friends Doug and Betsy Lake from Minneapolis and then drove to Phoenix to meet Laura at the airport. We drove north that afternoon to camp for two nights on the south rim of Grand Canyon National Park. This gave us a change to get immersed in Grand Canyon

lore and do some sightseeing from the rim. There is no way for me to describe or photograph the Grand Canyon. Most people know what it looks like and anything I could say would be nothing more than an overused cliché. At this time of year (third week of April) it was still pretty chilly; ice on the puddles in the morning. But it is warm down in the canyon. We were comfortably warm during entire trip. In fact, the last few days were quite warm, close to 40° C and, when we got to camp, we generally sat in the shade until the sun went below the rim. I don't know how people deal with the heat during July and August.



We all met at Lee's Ferry on April 24th. We spent most of the day rigging the boats. It takes a lot of work to set up and load the rafts. Our SOARs are much easier to set up, but we still needed a few hours to unload everything from the truck, decide what to take, pack, re-pack and re-pack again until we all had it just right. The Ranger came around and checked a number of things, especially the life jackets (PFDs). They had to be US Coast Guard approved and several were Canadian which was not good enough. After

everyone contributed their spare PFDs to the pile, we ended up only having to buy two new ones at a store a few miles away. We then floated down river about 100 metres and set up camp in a spot designated for the next day's departure groups. This is a good system because it means you can get away first thing in the morning on your designated departure. The next day the only thing to be done was load the boats and wait for the Ranger to give her final orientation talk. We had a talkative ranger so we didn't actually get away until about 11:00 AM.

As a general rule, each day started at sunrise (about 6:00 AM) when the team on kitchen duty hollered "coffee's ready". In group camping there is a lot of hollering! Shortly afterward was the call for breakfast. All meals were done as a group. This is the only way to do a trip like this and the experienced river runners on the rafts were invaluable. Ohio had a pre-planned menu for each day. Peter and Ohio and Gary spent a couple of days shopping before the trip. We are all glad Peter didn't do this by himself because we might have ended up with 18 days of Ichiban noodles.☺ Each team of three was cooking, washing up or other chores on a rotational basis. The thing to say about the food was: It was big!



After breakfast we loaded the boats and got on the water by 9:00 or 10:00. As we floated along, we frequently stopped for side hikes. There are many and we did the best known ones. At lunch-time a table was



set up and the food set out. It was important to have sharp elbows if you want to get your share. The potato chips went especially fast! In the afternoon we carried on floating downriver to the

next designated campsite. There are many camping spots marked on the map and each party hopes to get the premier sites at the end of each day. As the other groups floated past, information and negotiation goes on to determine who will camp where that evening. In the busy season it may become more competitive, but for us it worked out well. We didn't have a poor site in the entire 18 days. This is another example of the benefit of having the experienced rafters along. We usually camped by 3:00 or 4:00 but sometimes as early as 2:00 and once as late as 7:00. The sun goes behind the rim at about 6:30 so there really is not much more than 12 hours of daylight. The same kitchen crew for that day made supper. We sat around camp in the evening for a while but usually went to bed early.



Generally we paddled 15 to 20 miles a day. The entire trip is 225 miles. For 220 miles or so, we sat in the boat and floated along with the current. I believe that there are about 70 named rapids and many more un-named "riffles". Some of these riffles are bigger than anything we have paddled in the past. Generally rapids are rated on a scale from Class 1 to Class 6, Class 3 is generally considered the upper limit for open canoes and Class 6 is un-runnable. On the Grand Canyon, the scale is from 1 to 10. We ran many Class 5's (which I feel is about Class 3+ or 4 on our scale) without scouting. We generally scouted the Class 6 and above. The two biggest are Crystal (Class 8) and Lava (Class 9) but many of the other rapids also took a whole lot of focus. None of us had any serious difficulties at any of the rapids, although we didn't always get our boat to follow the intended route. Lyn and I learned a lot about running big water. We also learned that the SOARs are very forgiving. As long as we could stay upright, we did not get trashed too badly. Laura of course had no difficulties, but she did admit that Crystal and Lava were both solid Class 5 on our scale. There were several that I feel were close to Class 5, but I admit that Laura knows better than I do.



On Day One the first big rapid is Badger (Class 5) at mile 7.8. We all scouted and ran exactly as described in the guide book. No problems, but it was a relief to get the first one behind us. We camped on river right below Badger and bragged about our prowess. On Day Two, the big rapids were Soap Creek (5) and House Rock (7). We camped at Indian Dick at mile 23. On Day Three we did the “Roaring 20s” from about mile 20.5 to 27. There are several Class 4, 5 and 6’s and camped at mile 34.8. Next two days were easy water and we had a layover day to hike to “the Saddle”. A nice, full-day hike. Generally Lee went first down each rapid and Laura followed. That gave us a couple of safety boats at the bottom. Next went the other rafts and then the SOARs. The rafts always ran the meat of the rapid but we often looked for sneak routes in our SOARs. Richard also looked for the most conservative route. However, by far the largest number of rapids were run “right down the middle”. We learned to begin down the green ramp headed either to one side or the other and attempt to get off the ramp at the bottom on one side or the other to avoid the biggest waves. Sometimes it is possible to get thru the eddy fence at the top of the ramp but this was usually a hard move and frequently was not successful and we ended up at the mercy of the rapid just trying to stay upright. A couple of times we hit the diagonal waves at the wrong angle and were turned sideways or backwards. Then we were really focussed on keeping the boat sunny-side-up. The others all had their turns at getting it right and getting it wrong, but we all survived. The rafts could bash thru almost anything.

Day 8 brought us to Phantom Ranch. This is the only habitation along the 225 miles. There is the famous Bright Angel Trail from the south to the north rim. This is where people hike or take the mule ride from the rim to the valley bottom. It is a long one-day hike but also is part of a multi-day trip or there are guest cabins at the Ranch. There is also ice-cold lemonade aid. Every river runner looks forward to this stop.



And so it went. Paddle. Camp. Eat. Fool around in camp. Sleep. The last week or so were pretty warm (close to 40°) by mid-afternoon. We typically got to camp and sat in the shade until the sun went behind the rim. We did not put up our tent, but slept on the tarp.

Even though the days were routine, they were never boring. Each day there was at least one serious rapid and the canyon is constantly changing character. The geology is fascinating. We never had to share a campsite with another group and there was not even the smallest piece of garbage anywhere. There are strict rules and regulations but the results are obvious. There are over 30,000 river runners each year, yet the place is not very different than when John Wesley Powell made the first descent in 1869. Of course the ecology of the river has changed because of the dams and there are no

floods. There have been several years of low rainfall so the releases from upstream were as small as permitted; about 11,000 cubic feet per second.

For any paddler the acid test is Lava Falls. It is the only Class 9 and every serious whitewater paddler has heard of Lava. All we can say is that on this day, Lyn and I ran it perfectly. I would not pretend we could get it right every time. As you approach Lava, you don't see any indication of the rapid. We stopped on river right and hiked along the trail to scout. Peter had told us there is a "sneak" route on river left. As we walked up the trail and the rapid started to come into view, I could see the left side of the river. I stopped and studied the possible "sneak route". I thought there is no way I am paddling down that! A few more steps and the rest of the river came into view. "There is no way we are running that! Then we all started to look at it and talk about various options. After over an hour we had a plan. Lee went first, then Laura. I had run a number of the other rapids first, but not this one. I was not moving until I saw what Peter and Pat did. And they hit it perfectly. So Lyn and I hiked back to our boat and saddled up. The approach requires that you follow an almost invisible line of bubbles toward the top "ledge hole" that you absolutely do not want to get caught in. It is necessary to paddle blind toward the right corner of Ledge Hole, then at the last second, angle your boat a bit to the right and paddle like hell. It worked! We punched thru the eddy fence at the top and got onto the perfect line. From there on it is just matter of maintaining boat angle, keeping your balance and paddling hard. It says in the guide book that a good run (or a bad one) on Lava lasts 20 seconds. I was too scared to count off the seconds but we were sure happy to get to the bottom. Laura was there waiting for us as we pulled into the eddy on river left. It was a thrill.



Lava is mile 179, so we had only three more days and one large rapid before the take out at Diamond Creek, at mile 225. The shuttle company had our trucks there waiting for us, so on May 12 the trip was over. By 2:00 we bought an ice cream in Peach Springs, said good-bye the others and headed back toward Phoenix to get Laura to the airport next morning by 10:00 AM.

We got a motel outside Phoenix and had our first real shower in 20 days. Then we went out for pizza.