

## A Photographic Trip Through the Grand Canyon

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A float trip down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon is a truly special experience. For the photographer, the possibilities are limitless. I would heartily recommend that any landscape photographer who gets the chance to take such a trip make haste in getting there!

### Logistics

A Grand Canyon river trip begins at Lee's Ferry, Arizona and usually ends just after Lava Falls or at Diamond Creek on the Hualapai Indian Reservation, for a total distance of 190 or 225 river miles. There are two major considerations when making this trip down the river: (1) whether it is a private trip or a commercial trip and (2) whether the trip is motorized or non-motorized. Permits for private trips are difficult to obtain and participation in helping with camp duties on a private trip will reduce the amount of time available for photography. Commercial trips are more expensive, but allow a one to get on the river easier, and a paying customer will have more free time than an active participant in a private trip.

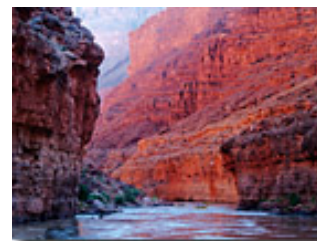
Most private trips are non-motorized, whereas commercial trips are offered in both motorized and non-motorized versions. A non-motorized trip generally lasts 15-20 days and offers the chance to really "tune in" to life on the river. For those with less time or less tolerance for camping, a 7-8 day motorized trip would be more desirable. Some commercial trips are specifically for photographers, while others are not. A photographer who is comfortable with his or her own skills or prefers to work alone might choose a trip that is not designed specifically for photographers. The advantage in such a trip would be that shooting positions would not be at a premium, but the less time would be available at interesting locations. And of course those who enjoy being around other photographers would prefer a "photo tour" trip.

### An Overview of Photography in the Canyon

Before embarking on a trip down the river, any photographer would be well-advised to do his or her homework in order to have some idea what to expect. An invaluable reference, for me as both a photographer and river-runner, was the book *The Grand; The Colorado River in the Grand Canyon, a Photo Journey* by Steve Miller. Also, I have not seen it, I think John Blaustein's book *The Hidden Canyon* would be excellent as well. For any landscape photographer with an interest in the American Southwest I can't recommend *Lasting Light; 125 Years of Grand Canyon Photography* by Steven Trimble enough! Part of the beauty of this book is that it has a wide variety of images by many superb photographers. Many of them are from the rim, but there are a substantial number from river level as well.

The first third or so of a Grand Canyon river trip is spent in what is technically a precursor to the Grand Canyon itself, Marble Canyon. This canyon runs roughly north-south, and consists of red, yellow and orange sedimentary rocks. The canyon is more open here, offering the possibility of much broader vistas than is generally encountered later. One of the most well-known views in this part of the canyon is the classic shot downstream from the Nankoweap Granaries, recently featured on the cover of *Outdoor Photographer* magazine. Once the river enters the "inner gorge" the view is much more restricted, and the rocks at river level are darker igneous and metamorphic rocks. The metamorphic rocks along the river are sculpted into many beautiful forms, but I found it difficult to do them justice photographically. The loss of grander views is not to be lamented, since it compensated by the numerous side canyons that occur in this stretch.

The thoughts and observations in this article are based on my only trip down the river in August of 2007. August is monsoon season in the southwest desert but our group experienced fairly clear



skies for almost all of our time on the river. I was hoping that the monsoon would provide some illuminated clouds near sunrise and sunset, to cast warm, even light into the canyon at those times of day. I never really got those clouds, however. Instead, I experienced difficult shooting very early or very late. Before direct light entered the canyon, clear skies caused a very bluish cast and once direct sunlight entered the canyon, the contrast between sunlit and shaded areas caused problems. I found acceptable to good lighting for various features at almost all other times of day, to be described in more detail below.



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### Photographic Opportunities

As just mentioned, under clear skies, the best light in the canyon might not be right at sunrise and sunset, even though those would be the prime times "up top." In Marble Canyon, I found that around nine in the morning and four in the afternoon the sun strikes high on the west and east walls of the canyon. This light is then reflected down to the bottom, on the opposite canyon walls, producing the wonderful glow that is seen in many desert canyon photos. The numerous points of interest in Marble Canyon include the Nankoweap Granaries, Vasey's Paradise and the Redwall Cavern.

Once one enters the Grand Canyon itself, which runs roughly east-west, there are a number of striking side canyons that usually trend north-south away from the main canyon. The beauty of these side canyons is that the light is often good during the midday hours, unless one happens to be in one for just the short period of time that the sun reaches its floor. Reflected light is often encountered in these canyons and slots, eliminating the blue cast that is normally experienced when shooting in the shade. The most spectacular side canyons are named and well known: Elve's Chasm, Deer Creek Canyon, Matkatamiba Canyon, National Canyon and Havasu Creek.

Another opportunity that presents itself regularly in the canyon is a reflection of the canyon walls, either in slower-moving parts of the river or in numerous pools of standing water that can be found in the side canyons or along the banks of the river itself. The high contrast between shade and sun is often problematic in the canyon, but the combination of a shaded pool reflecting sunlit canyon walls can provide a wonderful opportunity for a striking image.

When in the canyon, one should definitely not be so attentive to the grand scenery that the mid-sized and small landscapes are missed. There are a number of fantastic sculpted rock formations, a variety of cacti, plenty of lizards and the occasional bighorn sheep.

### Photographic Challenges

There are a number of challenges to shooting in the canyon. One of the more obvious ones is protecting one's gear from water and sand. There are various waterproof camera boxes available that provide quick and easy access to camera and lenses. I wanted something less rigid for carrying in my kayak, so I carried my camera in a dry bag. I usually put the camera in a ziplock bag (as an extra precaution), then put it in the padded case I normally use for hiking. Finally, I place that in the dry bag. Lenses were stored in their usual padded cases, enclosed in ziplock bags, and put in the dry bag.

Another challenge is keeping gear located and organized. The volume of boating, camping and cooking gear is huge, and things tend to get scattered all over the place in camps. Wet gear is laid out to dry, camping gear is dispersed about, and there is always the activity of filtering water, setting up the toilet ( a "groover" in riverspeak) and kitchen, and preparing food. I learned the danger of this organizational complexity the hard way. At some point I managed to lose a memory card with two days worth of photos. While posting a "lost and found" notice about this on a rafter's forum, it was suggested that in the future I make the first image on every card a JPEG of a sheet of paper with my contact information on it. In hindsight this is a great idea!

Although I rarely felt imposed upon by other groups on the river, it is common to encounter others when stopping at the well-known attractions. This can be problematic when trying to get shots without people in them. I was fortunate in the Elve's Chasm in that we

got there just as a large party was leaving and before the next party arrived. I occasionally had to set up my shot as the rest of our party frolicked in some pool, then asking them to get out for a minute or two while I got my image.

Ironically, there were other times when I wanted rafts or people in my photos, but by the time I was ready to take a picture they were gone! The reflected light image in Marble Canyon would have greatly benefited from a raft or two in the foreground, but by the time I recognized the opportunity and got the shot the rafts were too far away. Unless one is on a trip organized around photography, the rest of the party will likely be following their own agenda of running rapids, rowing through flat water, and finding lunch and camp spots, and they may be impatient if asked to stop too often or slow down.

As mentioned earlier, the contrast between brightly lit canyon walls and areas of deep shadow provides great photographic challenge. I found that many of my early morning and late evening efforts to be in vain because of either contrast or an excessively blue cast from light cast by clear blue skies. A split neutral density filter is often useless because of jagged edges between light and shade.

A final problem, which is common to photography everywhere, is letting preconceived expectations and plans blind one to alternative possibilities. Before the trip, I made a list of all the places I wanted to stop and photograph. (Given the time restrictions we had, it was impossible to stop at every interesting side canyon!) A person can also have certain expectations of the light or other attributes of the canyon's scenery that might not be realized when actually there. For example, before the trip, I had seen many images of beautiful turquoise water running over limestone ledges in the Little Colorado River, and my excitement mounted as we approached where it enters the Colorado. When we arrived it was running a muddy brown! The rest of the group just stood in disappointment, but I decided to try to make the best of the situation.

## Conclusion

A trip through the Grand Canyon is a wonderful photographic journey, not to be missed! The scenery is astounding from start to finish, with no end of photographic opportunities. If you ever get the chance to do it, don't hesitate to seize the opportunity!

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