

Welcome to the Grand Canyon

On August 17, 2009, newspapers around the United States published photos of the First Family peering over the Grand Canyon's South Rim, part of a summer trip to the West. They, like so many families who had visited the canyon before and would continue to come in the times ahead, seemed captivated by the magnificence of the sight before them.

Years ago, upon completing a hike in the Grand Canyon, I, too, stood at the rim, gazing at the colors below and recognizing the wonder of this place. I felt the canyon had moved me in the way religion moves fervent believers. At the time, I wasn't sure why. Only after I began work on this book did I begin to understand all those things that, for me, make the canyon not just a beautiful place, but a sacred one.

When I returned, I was awed again by the terraced buttes and mesas rising thousands of feet from the canyon floor and dividing the many side canyons. Early cartographers and geologists noticed similarities between these pinnacles and some of the greatest works done by human hands. Clarence Edward Dutton, who scouted the canyon for the U.S. Geological Survey in 1880 and 1881, referred to them as temples and named them after Eastern deities such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. François Matthes, who drew a topographical map of the canyon in 1902, continued the tradition by naming Wotans Throne, Krishna Temple, and other landmarks.

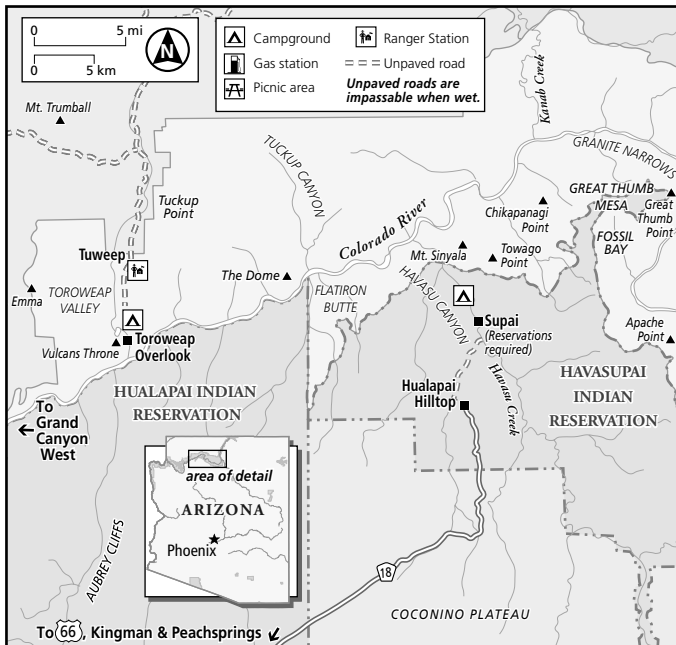
The temples not only inspire reverence, but also tell the grandest of stories. Half of Earth's history is represented in the canyon's rocks. The oldest and deepest rock layer, the Vishnu Formation, began forming 2 billion years ago, before aerobic life forms even existed. The different layers of sedimentary rock that piled up atop the Vishnu tell of landscapes that changed like dreams. They speak of mountains that really did move before eroding into nothingness, of oceans that poured forth across the land before receding, of deserts, swamps, and rivers the size of the Mississippi—all where the canyon is now. The fossils in these layers illustrate the very evolution of life.

Many of evolution's latest products—more than 1,500 plant and 400 animal species—exist at the canyon today. If you include the upper reaches of the Kaibab Plateau (on the canyon's North Rim), this small patch of Northern Arizona encompasses many diverse zones

2 Grand Canyon Overview

WELCOME TO THE GRAND CANYON

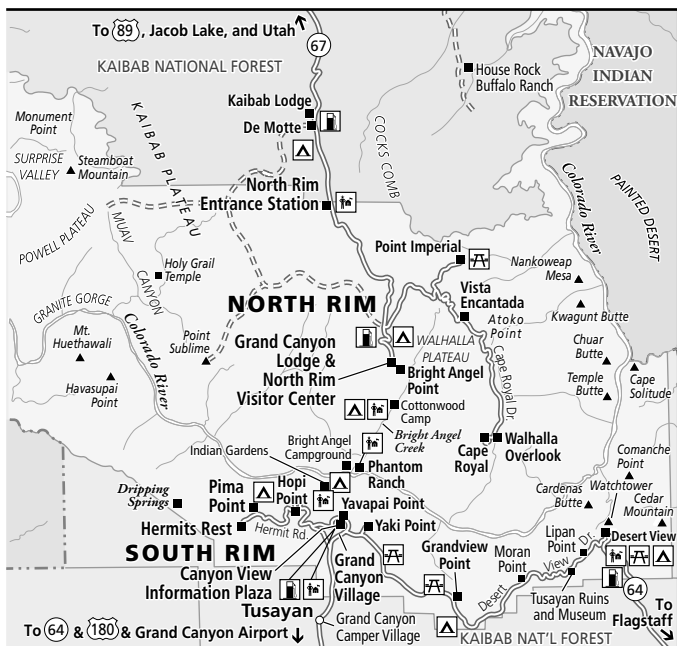
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of biological life (associated plants and animals that fall into distinct bands or communities). In fact, climbing from the canyon floor to the top of the North Rim is like traveling from Mexico to Alaska in terms of the biological life you'll see.

The species come in every shape, size, and temperament, ranging from tiny ant lions on the canyon floor to 1,000-pound elk roaming the rims. And for every species, there is a story within the story. Take the Douglas fir, for example. Once part of a forest that covered both rims and much of the canyon, this tree has endured since the last ice age on shady, north-facing slopes beneath the South Rim—long after the sun-baked rim itself became inhospitably hot.

As much as I like the stories, I also enjoy the unexplained mysteries. The web of ecological cause and effect among the canyon's species is too complicated for any mortal to untangle. It leaves endless questions to ponder, such as, "Why does the agave bloom only once every 20-odd years?" Similarly, the canyon's rocks withhold as much as they tell. More than a billion years passed between the time the Vishnu



Schist formed and the Tapeats Sandstone was deposited atop it—a gap in the geological record commonly referred to as The Great Unconformity. Other gaps—or unconformities, as they’re called—exist between other layers. And river gravels that would have explained how the canyon was cut have long since washed away.

There’s a fascinating human history here, too. The more time I spend inside the canyon, the better I hope to understand the first people who dwelt there. A number of tribes have lived in or around the canyon, and the Navajo, Havasupai, Kaibab Paiute, Hopi, Zuni, and Hualapai tribes still inhabit the region. Before Europeans arrived, they awakened to the colors of the canyon, made their clothes from its plants and animals, smelled it, touched it, tasted it, and felt it underfoot. The Hopi still regard the canyon as their place of emergence and the source to which their dead return. Native Americans have left behind more than 4,000 archaeological sites and artifacts that may be as old as 10,000 years.

I also reflect on some of the first white people who came to this mystical place. The canyon moved them to take extraordinary, if not always productive, actions. I think about the prospectors who clambered through the canyon in search of precious minerals, and then wonder about the ones who stayed here even after their mines proved unprofitable. I wish I could have met icons like Georgie White, who began her illustrious river-running career by *swimming* 60 miles down the Colorado River in the western canyon, and Mary E. Jane Colter, the brilliant architect who aspired to create buildings that blended with the landscape, going so far as to grow plants out of the stone roof at the Lookout Studio (p. 48). I'd still like to meet David Brower, who, as the Sierra Club's executive director, helped nix a proposal to dam the Colorado River inside the Grand Canyon. He did so by running full-page ads in the *New York Times* that compared damming the canyon to flooding the Sistine Chapel.

Theodore Roosevelt also belongs in this group. During his 1903 visit, the canyon moved him to say, "Leave it as it is. You cannot improve on it. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it. What you can do is to keep it for your children, your children's children... as the one great sight which every American... should see." That wasn't just talk. He backed up his words, using the Antiquities Act to declare the Grand Canyon a National Monument in 1908. Congress established Grand Canyon National Park in 1919. I imagine that President Obama, during his summer visit to the Grand Canyon with his wife and daughters, strongly identified with President Roosevelt's counsel.

Although most visit the park for recreational reasons, the canyon has a daunting, even ominous side. Everyone must negotiate for survival. One look at a river guide's clenched jaw as he or she rows into Lava Rapids will remind you that the canyon exacts a heavy price for mistakes. The most common error is to underestimate it. Try to escape, and it becomes a prison 10 miles wide (on average) and 277 miles long, with walls 4,000 feet high. The canyon's menace, for me, is part of its allure—a reminder of man's insignificance when measured against nature's greatest accomplishments.

Clearly, you can suffer here, but reward is everywhere. It's in the spectrum of colors: The Colorado River, filled with runoff from the Painted Desert, runs blood red beneath slopes of orange Hakatai Shale. Cactus flowers explode in pinks, yellows, and reds, while lichens paint rocks orange, green, and gray, creating art more striking than in any gallery. It's in the shapes, too—the spires, amphitheaters, temples, and ramps—and in the shadows that bend across them before lifting like mist. It's in the myriad organisms and their individual struggles for survival. Most of all, it's in the constancy of the river, which reminds us that, in time, all things move forward, wash away, and return to the earth.

1 CURRENT PARK PROJECTS

The new millennium led to modernizing the South Rim, including constructing the Canyon View Information Plaza with a new Visitor Center, expanding the free shuttle system, and developing “greenway trails,” paths specifically for cyclists, walkers, and pedestrians which lessen the impact of motorized traffic. Visitors can now ride the park’s shuttle bus system around Grand Canyon Village, to all Hermit Road and Yavapai overlooks, and to Yaki Point. A free shuttle from Grand Canyon Village to Tusayan operates in high season, as well. More lanes have been opened for cars at the South Entrance, significantly reducing wait times there. A new parking lot with 600 spots at the Canyon View Information Plaza opened in fall 2009. Hermit Road was completely repaved in 2009, and the greenway trail has been extended to Hermits Rest.

On the South Rim, the future of the Canyon View Information Plaza includes a bicycle rental facility. On the North Rim, a bicycle rental shop is open in summer at the gas station adjacent to the North Rim Campground. A theater with a park-orientation film will open next to the Visitor Center at Canyon View Information Plaza in 2011.

2 THE BEST OF THE GRAND CANYON

Choosing the best part of the Grand Canyon is like naming what’s most endearing about your true love. However, I’ve done my best to isolate a few of the most memorable places.

- **Most Dramatic Rim View: Lipan Point** (on Desert View Dr., South Rim). Above a sweeping curve in the river and with views far downstream to the west, Lipan Point is the most dramatic and easily accessible place from which to view the canyon. It’s also a superb spot to watch the sunset. The **Unkar Delta**, one of the park’s archaeologically richest areas, is visible directly below the overlook. See “Desert View Drive” in chapter 3. (That said, all of the points overlooking the Colorado River along the rim offer dramatic views. These include Pima, Mohave, Hopi, Moran, Lipan, Desert View, and several unnamed pull-offs.)
- **Best Scenic Drive: Desert View Drive** (South Rim). You’ll see more of the canyon on this route than on either of the canyon’s other two main drives (Cape Royal and Hermit rds.). From the western overlooks, behold the monuments of the central canyon;

the eastern overlooks have far-ranging views of the **Marble Platform** (p. 43) and the canyon's northeast end. Along the way, stop at 825-year-old **Tusayan Pueblo** (p. 38), which was once occupied by the Ancestral Puebloans. **The Watchtower** (p. 40), a historic edifice fashioned after towers built by the Ancestral Puebloans, is a perfect place to finish the drive. See "Desert View Drive" in chapter 3.

- **Best Place to Picnic: Vista Encantada** (on the North Rim's Cape Royal Rd.). This picnic area has canyon views and provides a convenient stopping point when you're visiting Cape Royal Road's overlooks. You'll find few tables on the South Rim, so you'll need to be more creative there. If the weather's calm, pack a light lunch and walk along one of the rim trails until you find a bench or smooth rock on which to picnic. (If the weather's inclement, skip the picnic.) See "North Rim: Cape Royal Drive" in chapter 3.
- **Best Bike Ride: Hermit Road in summer** (South Rim). During high season, when this road is closed to most private vehicles, motorized traffic consists mostly of the occasional shuttle bus. Between shuttles, you'll often have the gently rolling road, and some of its overlooks, to yourself. The greenway trail now extends to Hermits Rest. See "Other Sports & Activities" in chapter 4.
- **Best Rim Walk: Rim Trail between Yavapai and Mather points.** This walk along the rim affords views straight down into the canyon. Paved and smooth, it lets walkers enjoy the scenery without worrying too much about their footing. Its 10-foot width allows friends to stroll side by side. Considering its location between two of the park's busiest overlooks, it can be surprisingly quiet. On the North Rim, try the Widforss Trail. See "Trails on the South Rim" in chapter 4.
- **Best Day Hike Below the Rim: Plateau Point Trail** (accessible via the Bright Angel Trail). With views 1,300 feet down to the Colorado River, Plateau Point is a prime destination for fit, well-prepared day hikers. The hardest part of this 12.2-mile round-trip is on **Bright Angel Trail**, which descends 4.6 miles and 3,060 vertical feet from Grand Canyon Village to Indian Garden. The trail head for the Plateau Point Trail is a half-mile west of Indian Garden on the Tonto Trail. From there, it's a smooth and relatively level stroll to the overlook. This is an especially tough hike in summer, when you may not want to venture farther than Indian Garden. See "South Rim Corridor Trails" in chapter 4.
- **Best Corridor Trail: North Kaibab Trail** (North Rim). For those backpacking into the canyon for the first time, this is a scenic, less-crowded alternative to the South Rim corridor trails. During its 14-mile, 5,850-vertical-foot descent from rim to river, the trail

passes through vegetation ranging from spruce-fir forest to Sonoran Desert cacti. **Cottonwood Campground** (p. 79) lies halfway down. The trail ends near **Phantom Ranch** (p. 106), the only lodging inside the canyon within the park boundaries. See “North Rim Corridor Trail” in chapter 4.

- **Best Active Vacation: Oar-powered raft trips.** On these trips, expensive and worth it, you’ll negotiate thrilling rapids on the Colorado River. Between rapids, though, rafts move slowly and quietly enough to reveal the canyon’s subtle magic. During stops, hikers have access to some of the prettiest spots anywhere. See “Other Sports & Activities” in chapter 4.
- **Best Historic Hotel: El Tovar** (Grand Canyon Village; ☎ 928/638-2631). Made of Oregon pine, this grand 1905 hotel rises darkly above Grand Canyon Village on the South Rim. Inside, dim lighting accentuates the hunting-lodge feel; guest rooms feature classic American furnishings. By far the park’s most upscale hotel, El Tovar received a significant face-lift for its 100th anniversary. You don’t need to be a guest to enjoy the hotel, and the elegant rim-view restaurant is one of the area’s finest places to dine. See p. 103.
- **Best Hotel near the Park: Best Western Grand Canyon Squire Inn** (Tusayan; ☎ 800/622-6966 or 928/638-2681). Just a mile outside the park, this Best Western offers many of the amenities generally associated with big-city resorts. Here, you’ll find the town’s best dining (in the elegant Coronado Room), its liveliest watering hole (downstairs, in the sports bar that locals call “The Squire”), and its only bowling alley and arcade. The deluxe rooms in the main building are great for families. See p. 129.
- **Best B&B: Inn at 410** (Flagstaff; ☎ 800/774-2008 or 928/774-0088). Your journey doesn’t end at the door of this inn. Inside, each elegantly decorated room evokes a different setting. One celebrates the cowboy way of life; another recalls a 19th-century French garden; a third is fashioned after a music conservatory. See p. 121.
- **Best RV Park: Kaibab Camper Village** (Jacob Lake; ☎ 928/643-7804). Old-growth ponderosas and views of Jacob Lake make this RV park, about 45 miles from the North Rim entrance, the best in the area—now it even has showers. Tent camping is possible here, too. Supplies are available at the nearby store and gas station. See p. 97.
- **Best Campground: North Rim Campground** (☎ 877/444-6777). The campsites along Transept Canyon’s rim have lovely views accented by ponderosa pines. The trees shade the sites, which are far enough apart to afford privacy. For hikers, the Transept Trail

begins just a few yards away. See p. 93. On the South Rim, try **Desert View Campground** (p. 90).

- **Best Expensive Restaurant: Cottage Place** (Flagstaff; ☎ 928/774-8431). The quiet serenity of Flagstaff's most elegant restaurant is ideal for special occasions; it's a wonderful spot to peacefully celebrate your vacation to the Southwest. Original art decorates three rose-colored rooms, where soft conversations emanate from candlelit tables. Chateaubriand for two is chef-owner Frank Branham's signature dish. See p. 124.
- **Best Moderately Priced Restaurant: Pine Country Restaurant** (Williams; ☎ 928/635-9718). The pie here is so good that many locals order dessert first. Most of the straightforward dinner entrees—baked chicken, pork chops, and fried shrimp—go for less than \$15. See p. 140.
- **Best Inexpensive Restaurant: The Black Bean Burrito Bar & Salsa Co.** (Flagstaff; ☎ 928/779-9905). Get a burrito as heavy as a hand weight—at a price that makes it feel like a handout. The food is ready within seconds, making this a great place to get a quick fix after a long day. See p. 127.
- **Best Bar in the Park: El Tovar deck** (☎ 928/638-2631). It's hard to imagine a more inspirational view of the South Rim than that from El Tovar Hotel's deck. A draught beer come sunset could be the defining moment in your quest to better know the canyon. Light meals are offered as well. See p. 110.
- **Best Bar outside the Park: Cuvée 928** (Flagstaff; ☎ 928/214-9463). As wine bars gain in popularity around Flagstaff, this one has emerged as the most spirited, with a terrific selection of California and international wines. Cuvée, popular with locals and singles, offers an excellent selection of light dishes and opens onto Flagstaff's festive Heritage Square. See p. 126.
- **Best Place to Watch the Sunset: Grand Canyon Lodge's westernmost deck.** While the sun disappears behind the pines along the rim, soak up the colors on the horizon while sitting in a comfortable chair, sipping a beverage from the nearby saloon. After the sun sets, cozy up beside the huge outdoor fireplace on the lodge's eastern deck. See p. 107. For unobstructed views, go to **Lipan Point** on the South Rim (p. 39) or **Cape Royal** on the North Rim (p. 41).
- **Best Accessible Backcountry Destination: Havasu Creek's waterfalls.** Surrounded by Havasu Canyon's red-rock walls, these turquoise falls seem to pour forth from the heavens into the Grand Canyon's cauldron. Travertine dams the creek in places, forming

seductive swimming holes. The 10-mile hike from Hualapai Hilltop eases you into this area, home of the Havasupai people. See “Havasupai Canyon & Supai” in chapter 7.

- **Best Area Museum: Museum of Northern Arizona** (Flagstaff; ☎ 928/774-5213). This museum has one of the most extensive Native American art collections in the country. Functional and striking, the artifacts are compellingly displayed in exhibits that illuminate the close relationship between the indigenous people and the Colorado Plateau land. There’s no better place to begin learning about the area. See p. 118.
- **Best Place to Escape the Crowds: More than a half-mile from any parking lot or shuttle stop.** The vast majority of park visitors seldom venture farther than this. If you do, you’ll find quiet and solitude. This is especially the case on the North Rim.