

Thunder River

- One of the Top Ten Backpacking Destinations



“Like a gift from God, booming streams of crystalline water emerge from mysterious caves to transform the harsh desert of the inner canyon into absurdly beautiful green oasis....”

*Chi S. Chan
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It is 7:00am in the morning, the sun already blasts over the rim rock and begins to warm, but only modest warmth, barely enough to take the edge off. Its light is brilliant, harsh. *“It is going to be a long day”*, Vince, our leader, casually reminds us. He hoists his backpack and glances over to the North Rim. If he really worries about our group’s ability to finish this hike, he definitely does not show it. His confidence in us grows each day as we overcome one obstacle after another. It all begins on day one.

Mountain Sheep Spring

The weather man predicts the rain, but no one takes the warning seriously. Rain storm in the desert usually passes as quickly as it comes. A few splash of rainfall is not going to deter us. It rains briefly when we reach our first camp. Our site sits on a dried river bed. No one knows when the last rain reached this part of the canyon. It appears to be a completely safe dry camp. Vince and his older brother Bill, who is also our assistant leader, set up their tent on the edge of the river bed. On the eastern side of the canyon, a few small alcoves provide resting quarter. With a few ancient and faded Indian pictographs decorating on the wall, these caves provide ideal ground to shelter in for the night. I am too late to claim a spot, so I choose a spot on the other side of the canyon wall.



One special feature about this campsite is the spring. When we first reach the camp, not a hint of water is in sight. Then, my teammate points out the natural spring hidden below our camp; the Mountain Sheep Spring, Edward Abbey words resonate *“Water, water, water.....there is no shortage of water in the desert but exactly the right amount, a perfect ratio of water to rock, water to sand.....”*. How miraculous it is to find cold refreshing spring water leaking out underneath this dusty arid earth. When I dip up a handful, I find the liquid is clear and cool and sweet. With its damp walls, ferns grow lushly around the spring. The mountain sheep and other wildlife must depend on this precious water source to survive. Tonight, we, the outsiders will depend on this life-giving source of water as well.

Macaroni and Cheese Dinner

Vince has his own meal preparation style which I absolutely love; simple, tasty and swift. The best part is, he does all the cleanup and we just eat and relax. Our 1st dinner (and thereafter) is Macaroni and cheese. Everyone seems to like it. We all go to bed with a full and happy stomach.

2nd and 3rd and 4th night the dinner is named differently, but to me it is just another version of Macaroni and cheese. I am not complaining, as a matter of fact, I enjoy them. Unfortunately, my stomach does not agree with so much cheese, it creates lots of gas in my tummy. No matter how hard I try the “noise” echoes into the night and I am embarrassed about it. Others have the same problem. By the 4th night, I do not care anymore. A “musical symphony” (as Vince

describes it) is playing into the night and every night until dawn. After this trip, one thing for sure, I am NOT going to have macaroni and cheese for a while.

Stormy Start

It is past mid-night, I am waked by a muttering sound of thunder. I can hear the thunder moving closer and closer. Suddenly, a clap explodes directly overhead. Lightning pierces the sky. Now, I am wide awake, staring at the roof of my tent, and fear the canyon walls collapsed anytime. Outside, thunder continues to rumble ominously. Rain soon begins to fall. At first, tentatively, soon gaining force and comes streaming down. The storm hammers our campsite well into the night. It rains on and off insistently. By 4:00am, I take notice of the rampant sound of a river. I panic, immediate realize that my tent is set up next to the creek bed. Quickly I put my pants on and start packing. I do not dare to go back to sleep. Just sit inside my tent, hold on to my meager belongings, and listen to the thunder rolls and reverberates in the narrow canyon. It is



a restless night. Our journey has a stormy start and my mind begins to wander.....

Things have been going too well lately in my life, a good job with decent work hours, a promotion and reasonable pay check. But I also become conscious that my life has grown soft, too easily.

“I need something to pare the fat off my soul, to scare the shit out of me, to make me grateful, again for being alive... there is nothing like a wilderness journey for rekindling the fires of life. Simplicity is part of it. Transportation reduces to leg- or arm- power, eating irons to one spoon, such simplicity, together with sweat and silence; amplify the rhythms of any long journey”

I agree with these words wholeheartedly. Colin Fletcher, for the same reason, left behind the comfort of his home, and went on a six-month 1,700-mile river journey on the Colorado River, ventured alone from Wyoming to Mexico's Gulf of California. I may not be as courageous as Mr. Fletcher but I come to the desert for the same intention. I am seeking adventure and I am having it now. Rain is still lashing down and I am lying in my tent listening to a storm drumming the tent fly. The optimist in me begins to return and with confident, I am positive our trip will surmount this stormy start and before long, glitter. My uneasy feeling soon subsides.

Tonight, I will be sleeping under the stars



Rain in the canyon is very special. There is marvelous scent that graces the air, resinous and clean. It is what the world ought to smell like when it rains.



Morning soon comes, and the rain dramatically alters our surroundings. High on the cliffs, water cascades down and transforms into spectacular falls. They pour frothily into the dry bed which now turns into a raging river. Thick chocolate brown silky waterway bringing sizable boulders and debris swifts pass our camp and rushes down to the lower canyons. Overhead, the clouds still hangs somber, still drips rain. Our 7:00am "heading out" plan is out of the question, and so is every plan in our itinerary.

2nd night, our camp continues to be pounded by the rainstorm. Now, every piece of my camping equipment is soaking wet. We have no choice but wait out the storm. Sun finally comes out on the 3rd day.

We head out to Jumpup and Indian Hollow canyon.

Jumpup and Indian Hollow



This four miles long narrow canyon is a delight to explore. Inside, big boulders block our advances. Small side canyons tell story of their formation. Indian Hollow is one of the highlights of our trip.



Indian Hollow is a slot canyon. Even with the recent rains, the canyon remains parched. We can locate only a few small pools inside. This dry fall begins to carve out a small side canyon. Maybe million years from now, some adventurers will still be able to trace a few footprints we left behind.



It is at the junction of Kanab and Indian Hollow that we discover that the water in Kanab canyon is running deep. Vince decides that it is unsafe to hike down. I am disappointed for unable to see the secrets of Kanab Canyon; to taste the solitude of Scotty's Hollow, and to swim in Showerbath Spring and Whispering Falls, but the change of plan gives us the rare opportunity to undertake one of the amazing hikes on the northern side of the Grand Canyon.



North Rim of the Grand Canyon

The North Rim is an immense area that relatively few people visit. About five million people visit the South Rim each year and only 60,000 of them make it into the 1.2 million acres of backcountry. Far few people visit the North Rim or venture into its backcountry. Years with

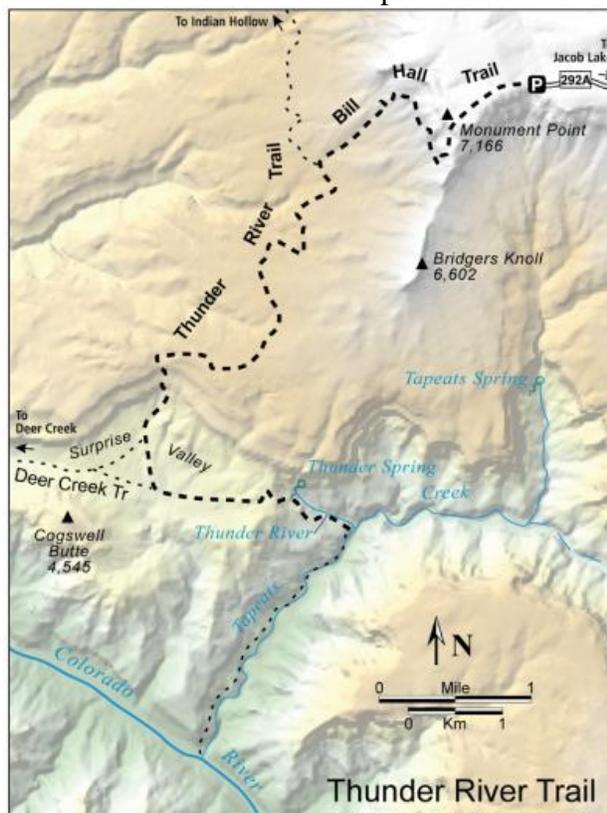


CMCNY, I have never heard of anyone hiking on the North Rim. Phantom Range, Bright Angle and Kaibab trails on the south side were the popular choices. When Vince suggests the Thunder River hike, I have no idea what to expect. My teammate who did this hike before explains to me that traditionally, it is a 2-3 days backpacking trip. A one-day hike is doable but it is going to require enormous strength and determination. I hate to admit, the implied challenge enthruses me. I know my body will suffer, my legs will sore tomorrow, and I may even lose a few pounds, but the thought of a strenuous hike that few people endured really satisfies my appetite for adventure. I cannot wait going down to the unknown.

Esplanade and Surprise Valley

“Everyone has enough water?” Bill, our co-leader, reminds us again to carry sufficient water. This notorious dry desert shows no mercy to those who do not take water provisions seriously. Most of us carry at least six liters of water which mounts to ten extra pounds in our pack. Perhaps it is due to my body size, I tend to drink less than others. But the pressure of staying hydrated compels me to add an extra bottle of water in my pack. It is my responsibility to take care of my own needs, not others.

The parking lot of Bill Hall Trailhead to Monument Point is a popular choice to start the hike. It is a shorter but more challenging route than the longer but gentler Thunder River Trail. For the 1st half mile, the Bill Hall Trail contours on the rim, ascending a bit first before entering the canyon on the east side of Monument Point. The trail suddenly drops steeply. For the next 2.5 miles, many steep switchbacks provide passage through the sandstone and on to a small drainage leading down to the Esplanade, a 20-mile long platform without tree



cover, this side of the canyon is ruthless and rough. Even it is already autumn, the desert is still burning hot. At the junction where Bill Hall Trail meets Thunder River Trail, temperature already reaches 90 degree. We meet backpackers who carry huge pack in which half of their loads is water. The designated Campsites on Esplanade and Surprise Valley have no water. One of the backpackers we meet on the junction is an overweighed father, his yellow shirt is soaked with sweats and his pack is gigantic. I am certain he is carrying all the water provisions for his wife and two young children.

By far, the Thunder River Trail is the most popular of the North Rim’s non-maintained trail. It takes hikers into an area with interesting geology, including the world’s shortest river. Most people prefer a 2-4 days overnight trip, but our leaders decide to do it in one day. The good part is, no heavy backpack on our back, but the reality is, it is a long 20 miles and demanding hike with 4,500 feet descending and 4,500 feet climbing back up. Most backpackers we meet



along the trail shake their head and think we are crazy. Although I have not done the 26-mile hike for more than three years, my body, as a result of year's hard trainings still enables me to endure the challenge. Looking back to the trail I just walked on and peering to the winding path ahead; I feel a surge of energy inside me. God, I love hiking!

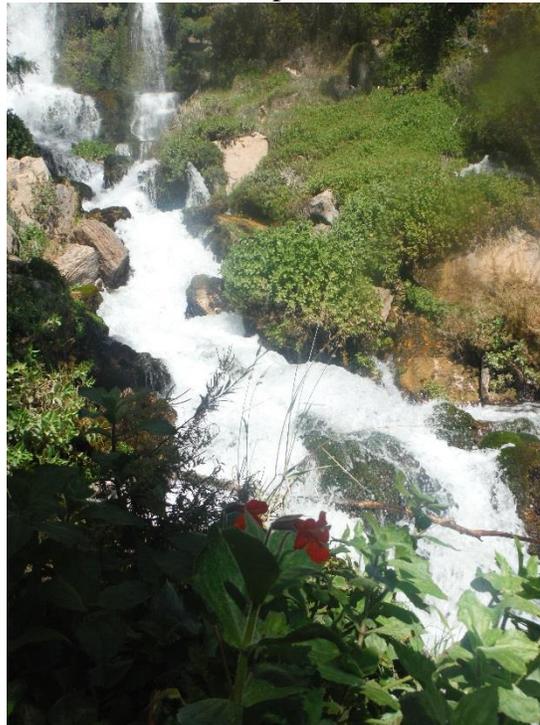
From this point on to the upper Surprise Valley, the path is in full sun with no water. To reach the lower Surprise Valley, another steep descent begins. Bill names this section as "stairways to heaven" and I can understand why. The whole canyon floor here is exceptionally quiet, not a drop of wind nor a single sound of bird. No creature can survive in this bitter midday heat.

Thunder Spring - Top Ten Backpacking Destinations

Late in the afternoon we reach the edge of surprise valley. Down below us, we catch a first glimpse of the Thunder Spring. It is still too far to feel the magnitude of the water. We make



a small climbs and reach the east rim of Surprise Valley. Here we are greeted with the roar of Thunder Spring bursting out of its Red wall Limestone caves. Like a paradise in this awful desert, Thunder River emerges from two large cave outlets and numerous smaller seeps. With enormous power and deafening sound, the spring tumbles down to a steep gully and disappears to a narrow channel.



On the rocky trail down to the cave, the roaring sound of the falls grows louder as we draw near to the falls. A steep descent alongside canyon slide, then a wet small path leads us to the middle of the fall. Inside the narrow path, the air is cool and damp and soothing to the throat. Along the edge of the falls, greens ferns and tiny bright red flowers suspend like doves in flight. Above, the spring creates mist wets the surrounding canyon cliffs, nourishing this small area into a greenhouse. Huge cottonwoods with emerald treetops provide a delightful resting place and sanctuary for hikers, birds and other wildlife. It is like walking into another world!

Water streaming off the ledge few feet above hollows out a small round basin, I take off my hiking boots and dip my feet into the chilling water. The water from the spring is extremely cold. I can only soak my feet in the pool for a short period of time. Here, we have our lunch.



The loveliness of this place is undeniable. The rushing water cools the surrounding area, providing welcome relief from the stagnant heat of Surprise Valley, which can reach 120 degrees in the summer. Wildflowers, hummingbirds, and lush vegetation flourish here but are surrounded by a hot, dry desert environment. Thunder River Spring has been ranked as one of the top ten backpacking destinations in North America. Ensued from the unexpected desert rain

storm, we end up with this spectacular hike, this place, this spring, this setting, this river, this side of the Grand Canyon!

It takes an effort of will to leave this quiet, cool place and walk out into a glare of sunlight. I take Vince advice, take my shirt off, dip it into the pool, and put it back on wet. As I walk the cooling water drips off the cuffs onto my wrists, but not for long. The shirt is dry within ten minutes except where my daypack glues it to my back. Once we leave the oasis, the silence of noon is palpable, more an onerous. Re-crossing the Surprise Valley, our team climbs back up to “stairways to heaven”. We are exposed to the full afternoon sun. No shade anywhere. On our right is the Cogswell Butte which casts no shade to our path. The steep climb up to the Esplanade is long, slow and oppressive. The temperature must be at the high 90. It would be heaven to pour a pail of cool water over my overheated head, my drinking water is hot. Not warm, Hot!



After three long seemingly unbearable hours, we finally arrive at the edge of Esplanade. Recent rain storm has filled many potholes. It is here we unit one of our teammates who has decided to wait here for our return. We rest and shelter ourselves in the shadow of a fallen rock. Completely protected from the glaring hot sun and without taking my pack off; I fish in the side pocket for a bag of nuts.

I do not remember the last time I put myself in such a strenuous hike; 20 miles with 4,500 feet down and backup, the hike is tough even for a person half of my age. I anticipate lots of



aches and pains next morning. But for now, I totally embrace and surrender myself to the challenge. Looking out over the pure sweep of seamless desert, the big empties and the crystalline dryness, the raw edges and the unfinished hems of the landscape, I reaffirm that desert is where I always want to be.

On my way to the North Rim, I keep looking back down to the Esplanade. I want to see as long as possible that remarkable canyon, remarkable in its singular character, in its surrounding scenery, in its dramatic natural wonder.

Epilogue

Most of my former hiking friends either retire from hiking or choose to do leisure hike. Backpacking is definitely not on their list. “Too old for this” is always their excuse. A famous quote comes to my mind; “*people grow old when they stop doing things*” Backpacking is indubitable my 1st love. The experience gives me an intensified sense of living. With all the places I visited, the canyon country in southern Utah captivates me the most. Here is what I wrote:

I have travelled to numerous mountains; drawn to many remote places. I have been on top of the highest mountain in Africa, seen the world highest waterfalls in Venezuela. I have endured in a sub-zero temperature at the base camp of Mt. Everest and tortured by the scorching sun of the Sahara Desert. It was on the slope of Mt. Rainer that I confronted with the ferocious wind, experienced what it took to be an alpinist.

By the Black Sea, I was touched by a glorious sunset and years earlier just as moved by the vista of the lost city in Machu Picchu. Many evenings standing by the shore of the Caspian Sea, I watched the fisherman bringing in their daily catch, singing and cheering the simplicity of life in Azerbaijan. Travelled to Turkey, I was in awe by the grandeur and the majestic mosque of Aye Sophia. On the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, I visited the Roman fortress, impressed by the ancient civilization that once dominated this part of the world. In China, the magnificent Buddha temple, Great Walls and the stone soldiers of Terra Cotta reminded me of my ancient heritage, how proud I am to be a Chinese. Finally, it was at the bottom of the canyon of Southern Utah where I sensed the deepest contentment and peace. I fell madly in love with the solitude surrounded me.



To me there is an enchantment in these canyons and the walks they provide. I shall return.

THE END