

FRANCIS TRIBUNE

FLOATING THE GRAND CANYON—AGAIN!

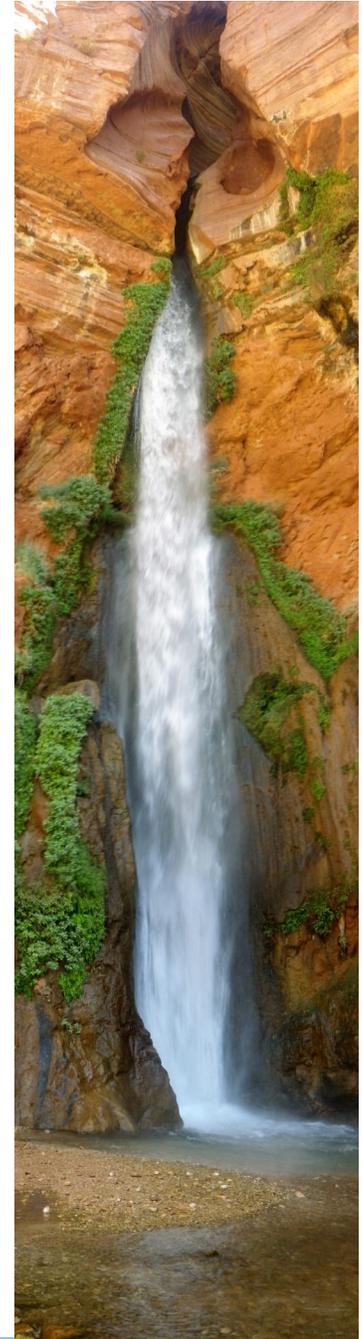
I was listening to a radio program a while back that suggested that one should never do a great event twice. I think they were talking about events like going to Disneyland or Graceland, but maybe it was about eating rattlesnake or maybe getting bitten by a rattlesnake. I can't remember the details. The point made was that some events are meant to be unique and preferably a once in a lifetime happening. Such occurrences are described with superlatives like "greatest" and "best" and they transcend all possibilities of comparison. There is great danger in repeating a "best time of my life" experience because now there is a possibly for comparison, and the basic facts of the situation guarantee that one will be better than the other.

That being said, I went down the Grand Canyon a second time. I think the Grand Canyon is supposed to be one of those "once in a lifetime" events. That is what Terry said when I invited him on this trip, and then he change his aphorism to "maybe twice in a lifetime."¹ The expense of a Grand trip is significant, the opportunity is rare especially for a private trip, and then the required time and skill all contribute to the limiting factors. Faithful *Francis Tribune* readers will remember that I went down the Grand Canyon two years ago,² and words like "greatest" and "best" were used to describe the trip. And yes, there is the temptation to compare. And that being said, I am going to try hard to not compare the two trips. They were different, and a comparison is not fair.

About five years ago, the Grand Canyon river office contacted me and asked if I would like to pick a date for a private party launch on the Grand. In 1992, I had joined a wait list to float the Grand Canyon. The list was long when I signed up – about 2000 names long if I remember right. But as others also joined the list, it became clear that the wait list was not practical and the opportunity of getting a permit to float the Grand was eventually changed to a lottery system. But I was still on the wait list, and believe it or not, the NPS (National Parks Service) honored my wait. I was given a date of 6/5/16 as my launch, a mere 24 years after putting my name into the mix. There is a danger when one waits so long for something to want everything to be perfect and to thus justify the long wait. I am pretty sure

¹ Remember the opening line of *Yellow Submarine*, "Once upon a time, or maybe twice."

² If you want that report, it is *Francis Tribune*, Vol 23, No. 1. Ask for a copy.





I suppose that if I would have joined this group instead of taking the picture, it might have alleviated some of my stress.

that trap did not happen with me. I was more on the other side. I had waited so long that I no longer cared. I have enough other events going on this summer that are even more significant,³ and the Grand trip was just something I needed to get over with.

This trip was stressful. As TL (trip leader), the stress starts long before the launch. The NPS is a lot more concerned with one's adherence to R&R (rules and regulations) than to A&E (anticipation and excitement), and they have a timeline and payment schedule that forces one to start the stress early. I needed to recruit people, hire an outfitter, figure

costs, and put together itineraries. I am grateful to everyone who was so friendly and helpful in every aspect of the trip. And I am especially grateful to Brad who worked with the outfitter and ordered up one of the best eating programs I have ever experienced anywhere. Brad figured out that the charge was basically the same whether one ate well or went on a weight loss plan, and being a Nebraska boy like myself, he went for eating very well.⁴

Our group consisted of a few of my friends from Montana, and a few of daughter Jodi's friends from Colorado, and then a few friends of friends or family of friends. We ended up with a unique group, spanning three generations and evenly split between those born in the 40's, 50's, 60's, 70's, 80's, and 90's. We even had three father daughter combinations⁵ and a fairly even mix of first timers on the Grand, second



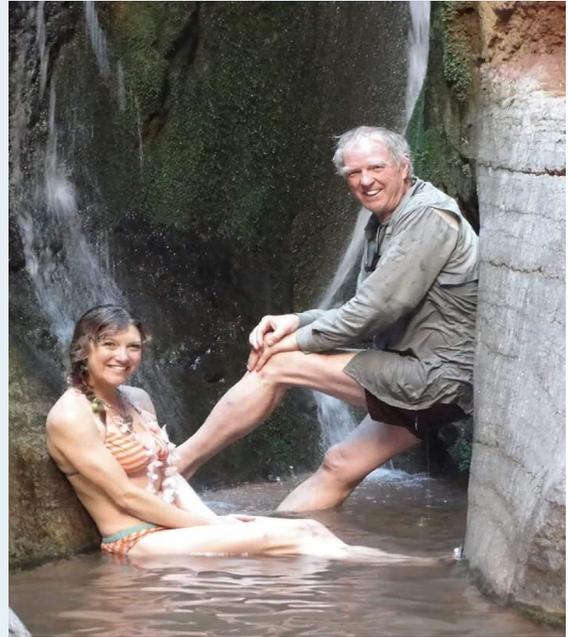
This is quite a picture, taken by Jim Price, a guy that was with a group that launched a day behind us, and whom we leapfrogged periodically throughout our trip. We are in Lava Rapid and Dave and Brandi are leading the way. Note all of us gathered above ready to make our stab at it. Dave, I can tell you right now, you are headed a little too far right but in retrospect, your skills compensated nicely.

³ Retiring from Great Falls Public Schools, buying a house in Richland WA, Jodi's wedding, moving to Richland, etc.

⁴ And everyone else, whether they know it or not, is grateful that I did not take on the job of planning meals. I was seriously looking into soy lent for meals and it was not pretty.

⁵ Me & Jodi, Richard & Jodee, Gary & Jamie. Jamie, master chef and all around cool, pointed out that Father's Day was day 15 of the trip.

timers on the Grand, and seasoned Grand runners. Jodi recruited Glenn and Racheal and Kate as SUP boarders extraordinaire,⁶ and she was the kayaker / safety gal.⁷ But we needed rowers. All my friends (and me) were – how shall I say this – past their prime. Jodi recruited the Patrick & Sarah / Dave & Brandi team that exchanged places at Phantom Ranch and did a great job with one boat, playing the role of lead boat for much of the trip. Dave recruited Bob to manage his boat with Aleah and they played sweep for much of the trip, making sure the SUPer and other boaters were safe. Brad and Gary had proven themselves on my



Jodi and me on a side hike in the first half of the Grand Canyon float.

2014 Grand trip, they were responsible for two more boats. I was thrilled to have them along, doing things to make our trip successful that too many times went unnoticed.⁸

Richard, who was penciled in back in 1992 for this trip,⁹ preferred not to row and then ended up with surgery a couple weeks before the trip that made it impossible to

row. Richard had suggested Terry back in January. Terry proved to be a conservative rower – which means good. It is one thing to plan to take a safe line, but quite another thing to pull it off.

⁶I was not very excited about have SUP boarders on this trip. I figured that we would have to stop at every rapid and tie a board on and carry passengers through the rapid, and we would need to do this all the time. But we ended up NEVER stopping for a SUPer. They took on ALL the rapids and getting washed overboard did not seem to daunt them. I guess it pays to be crazy. Actually, the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon is probably a better place to SUP than some rivers. Although many rapids are WAY too big to successfully run, the crash is usually into just water and there usually are no rocks like so many rivers have. Glenn never took a break the entire trip, diving into big stuff without hesitation. Well, maybe some hesitation.

⁷Jodi, I must say that your skills in kayaking are impressive. You were especially conscientious and helpful at each rapid to assure that everyone got through safely.

⁸But I noticed, G&B, and thank you very much.

⁹In 1992, I had no idea who would be available when I finally got a permit. Jodi, who at the time was in grade school, was on the list, and so was David who was about one year old. They made the list as family. Richard was an honest river rat who logged 100's of miles with me, and we have been together on rivers off and on for 20 some years.



Scouting seemed like a good idea at the time.



Pete rows me through House Rock Rapid. He did great, but I am still donning a wetsuit and helmet.

The last boat was mine because there was no one left to row. I was still nursing a sore right shoulder and sore left elbow, and I was concerned that I would be unable to row. Pete joined us at the last minute¹⁰ for the first eight days of the trip, and he agreed to row although he could not guarantee the required level of competence. Pete transferred his flatwater Missouri River rowing skills to the Colorado whitewater, and performed flawlessly. Pete hiked out at Phantom (with Kate, Patrick, and Sarah), and David and Corinne (with Dave and Brandi) hiked down. David has hundreds of miles of river running under his belt, mostly as a child passenger while his Dad rowed. David took over the oars at Phantom, hit one of the biggest rapids on the river five miles down, and it became clear that I would not have to row much at all on this trip. I think Jodee as relief rower rowed more than me. All total, I rowed about 20 miles of the river. My shoulder and elbow were slightly irritated by the rowing action. I probably could have rowed if necessary, but it felt good to not have to.

When I picked the date for the launch, I was hoping for warm weather and I was not disappointed. In case you do not know, Arizona is hot in June. We were told that on the second to last day of the trip, temperature was 120°F, and there were reports of heat danger in the news. I did not think it was that hot as everything gets exaggerated on trips like this, but yes it was hot. Coming from Montana, it was kind of nice to be warm for once.¹¹ For contrast, the river water is COLD. It comes out of the bottom of Glen Canyon Dam at temperatures in the 40's or 50's°F, and it does not warm up much, even 200 miles downstream with 100+°F air temperature. This became a real

¹⁰ Pete join the group when Trish backed out a couple weeks before launch. I got a call from Brad. "Hey Vern, bad news! Trish suffered a heart attack and I don't think she is going to be able to go on the Grand Canyon trip. **But I'm still good.**" IT DID NOT HAPPEN QUITE THAT WAY! But Trish really did have a heart attack, and after some scary moments and then consolation with doctors, it was decided that Brad's wife Trish was out of danger and it would be reasonable for Brad to be gone a couple weeks while Trish recovered. Take care Trish, we are so glad you are recovering. But it is a much better story to stick with the "I'm still good" part.

¹¹ I was reminded of Robert Service's poem *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. "Since I left Plum Tree back in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm."

¹² I also brought a dry suit for this trip (Most people did not bring any such equipment but they are warmer blooded than me), but I could not find my dry suit until after we got back home. It was in my clothes bag, and I did not change clothes for the entire trip.

issue when faced with major rapids. One did not want to fall in, and I wore a wetsuit for most of the big ones.¹² But Pete and David kept me in the boat, although the wetsuit earned it keep whenever I got drenched with big waves which was fairly often. Although the warm temps were nice, the sun was another matter. I felt like I needed to cover up all the time, wearing long pants and long sleeves. Many times there was no shade, even at camp. Kate and Racheal and Jodi often wore bikinis, and although they looked good, I am not sure how they did it. That sun was relentless.

As I reflect on the Grand 2016 trip, I really can't come up with a good reason why the trip was so stressful for me. EVERYTHING went well, EVERYBODY contributed to the trip positively, and we all come back safe and refreshed. What more can you ask? I like to think that all my worrying paid off with no flipped rafts and no passengers swimming. There is some truth in that sentiment. It is when one gets relaxed and complacent that rafts get flipped or people get hurt. As I told Jodi at one point in the trip, one of my greatest joys while river



running is to see others enjoying something that I have enjoyed for many years. I never got tired of people telling me what a good time they were having. I suppose my stress wasn't alleviated much when early in the trip we were getting into camp late, eating and sometimes even cooking in the dark. There was little time to relax, sit back and repose. As the trip progressed, we got better at making camp with plenty of daylight. But I still could not relax until we had run Lava Falls Rapid, the last baddest rapid on the river. As we pulled up on Tequila Beach below Lava to celebrate a successful run for all six boats, Richard

Another picture by Jim Price, and a real favorite of mine. Corinne and me in front, David on the oars. We have almost completed Lava. David is looking back at what a few seconds ago was sheer death. Corinne is glad to be back in the boat, and I am beginning to relax, having survive the last big rapid.

comment on my silly grin. I finally was able to relax and think, "This trip is going to work out."¹³

Most people see Colorado River in the Grand Canyon via a commercial outfitter in motor powered boats four times as big as the ones we used. They travel in groups of 30+ and scoot down the river at 10 miles an hour. They take side hikes and other excursions at the outfitter's discretion, and no doubt they consider it a best vacation. Private groups are not restrained by a hired help's itinerary. Sure, they need to complete the trip in a certain number of days, but for several days they are on "river time" and able to choose their own schedule.

¹³ All six boats made it through Lava safely (as well as through every other rapid) but not necessarily with the greatest of skill. We all had our issues at one time or another. Dave, our fearless leader in Lava, went first and got backwards in the big waves, and relied on skills augmented with luck to get through. Gary and Jamie survived just fine in spite of their "Lava Rapid Swim Team" T-shirts that they had earned via a flip in Lava on a previous trip. Terry picked out a safe line, pulled it off, and made the run almost boring. Meanwhile, David was responsible for getting his uncle (me) and his girlfriend (Corinne) through by skirting the big waves on the right. But Lava does what Lava does, and David got sucked into the big waves. As I looked in horror at a wave 10+ feet tall and us going over sideways, I instinctively dove for the high side of the raft, hoping to somehow keep the boat from flipping. David said he did the same thing, and I think very likely it was our actions that kept the boat upright. Somewhere in this melee, Corinne went flying into the drink and I was able to grab her and pull her back into the boat. I have always wanted to rescue a damsel in distress, and this might be one of those incidents that qualifies, but things happened so fast that I have little memory of my heroic act. After surviving the big wave, I looked in horror at another one, just as big. Somehow we got through it.

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FRANCIS TRIBUNE

SQUEEZING 50 WORD STORIES INTO 500

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Some people want to get as much adventure in as possible, take in all the hikes, explore all the highlights, and consider it a travesty to pass on a feature. Many of our group embraced this approach. I suppose that the river itself is my attraction. Although I enjoyed our stops, it was always good to be back on the river. Sixteen days is a long time, but it is not nearly long enough to take in all the sites and opportunities along the 200+ miles of the Grand. It is hard to accept that some places and experiences were left undone. And yes it is a shame. And waiting until next time is not necessarily an option.



Toward the end of the trip, Brad and I were asking ourselves, "Is this the last time we will be down here?" The younger crowd were not making such reflections. They will be tempted to repeat the trip again and again whenever they get the opportunity. But when you are in your 60's, it is a legitimate questions. Given a chance, I probably would return to the Grand, but I am also willing to accept this as the last time. And if this was my last trip, thanks Jodi, Terry, Richard, Jodee, Brad, Gary, Jamie, Racheal, Glenn, Bob, Aleah, Patrick, Sarah, Kate, Pete, Dave, Brandi, David, and Corinne for making it one that I will forever use "best" and "greatest" to describe.

