

Everybody was talking about the double rainbow that suddenly switched on over Hualapai Hilltop as the sun set over the sandstone Spaghetti Western horizon. In Native American lore, a rainbow is a bridge from one world to another. The occupants of cars pulling into the parking lot for the night at the edge of this thousand-foot-high cliff—the terminus of Indian Road 18 on Arizona’s Havasupai Indian Reservation—all had a sense they were in for one mind-bendy journey.

Waking at five in the morning, the Hilltop pilgrims exit their vehicles to begin the three-and-a-half hour trek to the most remote community in the lower 48 states. On the Internet, clickbait listicles proclaim Supai, Arizona among the most remote spots to live In The World. What kind of masochist looks at a destination where the temperature hits 111 in June and thinks “summer vacation”? But hidden at the bottom of this hot winding gorge, in a place gold-greedy Spanish conquistadores just couldn’t be bothered with, is the unlikeliest of unlikelies: Cataract Canyon. The Grand Canyon’s swimming hole. A ribbon of dramatic waterfalls the color of Windex unspooling one after the other amid Jurassic scenery that flies in the face of all reason.

The Havasupai (translation: people of the blue-green water) remain the only continuously residing Indians in the Grand Canyon. Today they are sole proprietors of a secret Shangri-la still only reachable via the three h’s: hike, horse, or helicopter.

Individuals speak of making as many as 900 calls to the persnickety tribal office to nail a campsite here when the checkered flag falls every February 1<sup>st</sup> at 8 a.m. Mountain. These are generally the people starting down the switchbacks before dawn with headlamps and heavy packs. Youth groups and scout troops. The DIYers who sacrifice a night in the back of the Camry or at a cheapie Route 66 motel so they can make tracks in the dawn’s early chill.

Then there are those who pay operators \$1,000 or thereabouts per person just to *handle it*: Secure the elusive permits. Convoy the tents, air mattresses, and meals (and sometimes even the clients) to the bottom and back by mule train or helicopter. It seems a bit overkill until I notice the same hiking boots that did a yeomanlike job getting me to Everest base camp leaving odd blisters on the ends of my toes after just one hour playing *turn-turn-turn* on those switchbacks. Hitherto underappreciated muscles ache like hell the next day, which is when I reconsider my opinion of all those wimps shelling out \$85 one-way to fly in and out by chopper.

The Havasupai have been living here since before Columbus, and people of one tribe or another had been living here since before Jesus and perhaps even before *that*. Creationists point to a petroglyph of some kind of long-necked, long-tailed *somethingsaurus* photographed in 1924 on an archaeological expedition funded by oil tycoon Edward Doheny as evidence human beings co-existed here with dinosaurs. The Havasupai believe the entire human race was born in the Grand Canyon after the god of good fashioned a canoe to save his daughter from a great

flood started by the god of evil; she then found herself pregnant first by the sun and for a second time, courtesy of a waterfall in the sacred canyon.

I step off Switchback Hill into a flat gravel gulch where once a mighty river roared. Two hours to go, two liters of water left. The nomadic ancestors of the Hualapai (of which the Havasupai are a subset) were naturally selected to survive longer on less water. Their descendants have lower blood pressure than white people (or Anglos, as they are also called here on the reservation).

In the dim light of their headlamps, some mistake stray branches lying about for rattlesnakes there's little chance of seeing down here. The sun now up, I hear what sounds like a low growl and pray this isn't one of the fabled mountain lions that patrols the highest reaches of the canyon. To my relief, I spot a black-chinned hummingbird circling a cactus, its wings beating 50 times a second. A plant that goatees from another fissure is Mormon tea, which contains pseudophedrine and is brewed by the natives to relieve nasal congestion.

Impossibly cantilevered stone canopies and giant-tossed boulders provide shade along this easily trudged path and prove agreeably photogenic—as is jimson weed, a flowering trumpet fanfare announcing the early a.m. the entire length of Cataract Canyon. The flat gravel trail is obvious but also cairned wherever a red-sand spur shortcuts off the main drag and is far easier on the legs.

There is nobody else in my sight line, which is how it's going to be for much of this trip. And only when you experience that do you appreciate how rare it is these days.

Ravens sound like they're auditioning for an Ennio Morricone score where the canyon now narrows to a channel. In 2001, flash floods here swept two adults and a child to their deaths. I am here at the start of what's called monsoon season: July and August. It practically rained frogs the night before in the Hualapai capital of Peach Springs up top, but only a few drops fell here, say hikers one runs into headed home. Seasonal floods have been known to reshape the falls; lower Navajo Falls (a.k.a. Rock Falls, the first falls one encounters on the trail) didn't even *exist* before 2008.

Finally: The sign announcing "You're almost there!!" with a smiley-face that everyone complains is actually a half-hour-plus from Supai. As if on cue, a mule train led by the town's foremost smiley-face, chatty cowboy-hatted packer and night ranger David Bartholomew, pulls up. Hikers who trade tips online call Bartholomew "the one friendly person in the village." He came as a tourist years ago and married a local woman. But the natives still call him "Mexican Dave" (he's half) to distinguish him from another non-member of the tribe kicking around and known as "White Dave."

The Havasupai have the reputation of being disdainful to outsiders. I experience the opposite: At the Sinyella grocery store, on the edge of town I buy a \$5 frozen-solid Gatorade from Warren Sinyella and his brother-in-law Loren. Loren (Indian name:

Sitting Bear) shyly asks what it is they say on the Internet about the reservation. They say it's more beautiful than anything anyone's seen in the Caribbean and Hawaii, I tell him. He walks around from behind the counter and gives me a hug, glowing like he's swallowed a light bulb. To cool off, I slip the Gatorade up my shirt.

I'd run into Warren minutes earlier; he'd been out since 4 a.m. digging an irrigation trench to his corn from the milky blue creek now rushing parallel to the trail and only hinting at the vistas to come. He was explaining how other members of the tribe had their own plots for melon, squash, and the like. These same fields had sustained his people for hundreds of years. (Indeed almost every tourist report of rancor may be traced to a single snippy employee at the town's short-order "café", the same who after mentioning the joint was out of beef—only the central ingredient in three-quarters of the menu!—tossed my receipt for a vegan fry-bread "Indian taco" at me.)

In 1776, a Franciscan missionary from Spain came and went with no converts, the first European contact. For almost 100 years afterward, the tribe was pretty much left alone, cliff dwellers farming here in summer, wintering on what's now the South Rim of Grand Central National Park. Then miners and ranchers started getting notions.

When in 1880 the government finally snatched all the tribe's lands save for one square mile deep in the canyon leaving them without a single waterfall, the Havasupai weren't even notified. They carried on as usual, tolerating those they considered trespassers. Twenty-three years later, President Theodore Roosevelt personally warned his South Rim scout, a minor chief known as Big Jim (Indian name: Whiskers) helping him hunt down mountain lions, that "we are going to save this space for the people of this world." Roosevelt ordered him evicted from the Indian Garden below the park's present-day South Rim—but gifted Big Jim his top hat and frock coat.

Finally it was Senator Barry Goldwater who in 1975 helped the Havasupai get back 276 square miles over the objections of the Park Service and the Sierra Club—the largest amount of territory ever restored to a single tribe—in a single swipe of President Gerald Ford's pen. Though the tribe now numbers 650-plus, only 140 or so live down in the canyon today. The tribe made news most recently when they sued the University of Arizona for "genetic piracy," after they discovered blood samples were being used to test for such markers as schizophrenia, and a research paper suggested the Havasupai had originated in Asia, contrary to their religious beliefs.

At the base of fraternal-twin red-rock spires its people call the Watchers, the town of Supai is all tidy horse corrals and little houses. It isn't ever thus; some guests remain appalled by any overt sign of poverty (though it's the visitors creating what there is of errant trash, difficult to extract with such limited services, which is why one is asked to pack it out from the canyon.) First impression now finds the town

and trails reasonably groomed. A few front yards feature trampolines. There are no fresh horse carcasses lying around, dead from a flash flood or unknown causes, then burned where they fell to release their spirits—and not *such* an uncommon sight in these parts.

Every house has a horse grazing its front lawn: the family car (though a handful of Polaris Ranger UTVs tool around, delivered by chopper via sling load). Most all else arrives via U.S. mail—including my own camping equipment. Shipped free by Wal-Mart “general delivery” to the post office, a tip from the definitive guidebook by Greg Witt *Exploring Havasupai*. Supai is the only place in the country where the mail still arrives by mule train and goes out with a distinctive mule-train postmark.

There’s some up-the-street commotion, and I step out of the way of a pony giving chase to a yapping herd dog. Up until the end of the nineteenth century, when a Havasupai died, his horses went with him, killed so he’d have something to ride to the underworld. (His dogs suffered the same fate. Possessions, home, and crops were also burned.)

The Havasupai still break their horses deep in the creek, and horse-packing today is a primary source of revenue. It doesn’t take a genius to realize if the Havasupai were the travel-industry pros some clearly wish they were, it would be the ruin of the place. It’s these perverse barriers to entry that keep crowds low. Nobody really wants to see a concession stand atop Mooney Falls. Or a Rent-a-Tent outlet. The sole 24-room lodge at \$145 a night is basic and warehouse-y and far from the action at the campgrounds a further hour past town, where the picture-postcard waterfalls start in earnest.

The white-noise waters of the aquamarine creek also act as a natural air conditioner for all those fortunate enough to find a parking space right up on its banks. A lightweight option is a state-of-the-art hammock entirely enclosed by netting. One sees these cocoons strung right over the creek. For such a waterlogged destination, the mosquitoes here are perhaps the dumbest on the planet—I wore no repellent and after two days emerged entirely unscathed. Havasupai is remarkably devoid of biting insects, apparently kept in check by bats whose presence is underwhelming and infinitely preferable.

Apart from trail maintenance and minimal chutes and ladders installed hither and yon to aid in the conquest of the falls, the tribe’s efforts playing nanny are minimal. At an informal depot behind a group evacuation point, an Indian named Edmond was lending out innertubes and water shoes abandoned by other feckless visitors at no charge.

A sign at Havasu Falls just outside the campgrounds states the water is a fabric-softener blue due to a high concentration of lime, calcium carbonate, which is somehow not conducive to fish. Children were doing back flips off Havasu’s tiered rims into the boil. The falls are all framed with dramatic travertine aprons, like

hanging gardens of Babylon as rendered by Gaudi. Picnic tables at every campsite have been ferried to some very inspired lookouts—inside the pool below Havasu Falls most memorably.

Mooney Falls are the campground's other bookend. Its height exceeds that of Niagara Falls; one half expect to see King Kong scaling the mossy cliff with Jessica Lange cradled in his palm. At the end of the day, a trio of Californians waited up top for their friend's drone to emerge. Earlier, one of the camp's odd two-tone squirrels with the beige head and silver body had bored its way into their tent and made off with an unopened package of nuts. (Knapsacks and garbage bags containing food are suspended from tree limbs all over the campground by those who know the drill.)

The descent down Mooney via a complicated system of chains and caves is not for the fainthearted; the falls are named for a miner who attempted same and was dashed to bits below. It is in this way Havasupai feels like a videogame; accrue points for taking a measured risk and move on to the next level.

Mooney is the barrier to entry to Beaver Falls three miles downstream, where fewer than 10 percent of visitors wind up though it's the most prehistoric walk of all, requiring that one ford the creek a few times. The trail fades in and out but there are landmarks: The enchanting fairy grotto with maidenhair ferns hung like wisteria. The valley of the vines, where the wild grapes hadn't yet ripened. The stairwell with barrel cacti like Sissy Hankshaw's hitch-hiking thumb. The lone palm tree not native to the area is a shaggy doorway signaling the approach to Beaver, where a tiered spill called False Beaver has fooled some into turning around before they experience the very bottom, where one can soak all day in the oyster lips of the several pools. The water generally comes up to the knees, but there are deeper touch-bottom places too, and if you know where to find them, two secret green rooms and a blue room up and under the falls. Some teenage boys from who come every year from Flagstaff showed me the latter under the middle tier—super-advanced scary stuff.

Keep pedaling down creek for great blue heron nesting territory; it's another 4 miles from Beaver to the Colorado River. Near what's called Beaver Canyon on the property of Grand Canyon National Park is the place to spot a bighorn sheep. They are said to make a rare appearance on the canyon floor when ancestors want to communicate an important message or warning. Sheep wandered into Supai village just prior to the attacks on September 11, 2001, says Greg Witt's book.

But I don't need a bighorn sheep to tell me I'm out of time and will not be seeing the banks of the Colorado. Zipped into my tent by 8 p.m., I am ready to break camp at 5 the next morning, heading back on the outbound lane of the rainbow.

**Sidebar:**

A number of operators offer mule-assisted hikes to the reservation:

**The Wildland Trekking Company** offers 3- to 4-day tours of the falls from \$910 to \$1,095 p.p. and tours combining the Havasupai Reservation (2 nights' camping) with the Grand Canyon National Park's South Rim (1 night hotel) from \$1265 to \$1385 p.p. including round-trip transportation from Flagstaff, guide, reservation fees, camp equipment, meals, and packhorses to move gear. [wildlandtrekking.com](http://wildlandtrekking.com); 1-800-715-HIKE.

**Arizona Outback Adventures** offers 3- to 4-day group itineraries from \$898 to \$1,024 p.p. including round-trip transportation from Scottsdale/Phoenix, guide, reservation fees, camp equipment, meals, and packhorses. (Horseback or helicopter rides in and out of the canyon are extra.) [aoa-adventures.com](http://aoa-adventures.com); 1-866-455-1601.

(Cut the last if you don't have space; also, \$1,000 is really what it ends up being including the guide tip.)