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# Winter hiking in the Grand Canyon

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A snowy New Year camping expedition to the canyon's floor is the best way to savour the prehistoric landscape



View from Yaki Point, on the South Rim

My first visit to the Grand Canyon was a disappointment. Almost 30 years ago I drove from Las Vegas, where I worked in a casino, to pay homage to one of the great American landscapes. The car I had borrowed broke down. I arrived at the South Rim as the sun was setting. For 15 minutes, I aimlessly photographed the standard views. In the thickening darkness and feeling thwarted, I headed back to Sin City.

Then, last year, an invitation to return came from a friend in New York. An inveterate outdoorsman, he had managed to secure a reservation to spend two nights, including New Year's Eve, in Phantom Ranch, at the bottom of the canyon. The Ranch comprises a series of basic cabins and bunkhouses with a canteen. It was built from wood and stone in the 1920s, among a stand of cottonwood trees, to house weary hikers as well as rafters on the Colorado river. Space is limited to 90 or so beds and reservations — released on a first-come, first-served basis on the first day of the 13th month before arrival — go very fast. My friend had hit the phone at 7am. Would I join him and his family on their pilgrimage into the Grand Canyon, a sanctum of national culture that had tantalised me decades ago? Would I bring my 14-year-old son, Lucas? Yes, and yes.

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Over the intervening months, more friends wanted to come but Phantom Ranch was fully booked. Some of us would have to camp at the Bright Angel Campground next door, run by the National Park Service. Backcountry camping in the Grand Canyon requires a permit: they are issued four months in advance and are also in high demand. With the trip becoming increasingly complicated, my friend hired a professional guiding company to help arrange the permits and logistics.

Fifteen of us gathered at dusk in the “Village”, the busy tourist hub overlooking the South Rim, on December 29: seven adults and eight youngsters ranging in age from 10 to 22. Our shepherds in and out of the canyon were Dave Logan, Bob Cheeseman and Brandon Snickers from Four Season Guides, based in Flagstaff, Arizona. Our camping equipment and packs were sent down on the mule train at first light on December 30, while we split into two groups — “Team Youth” and “the Masters” — for the hike down the South Kaibab Trail, the shortest route from the rim to the Colorado river.

The Grand Canyon is somehow aloof when you stand on the rim, peering in. To experience it, to savour the awe, to comprehend the scale, to see it as a child sees it and to feel the weight of this prehistoric landscape, you have to hike into it. What few people realise is that winter is the best time to do this. You won't have the whole National Park to yourself, but the majority of the nearly 5m annual visitors come in summer, when searing heat can make hiking up and down a test of blind endurance.

Wrapped in jackets, gloves and hats, we edged down the first icy switchbacks as the sunlight slowly poured over the canyon's rim. The cold bit our fingertips. With each turn in the trail, the view changed. After a mile, we stepped out of the shade and into the sunshine, beneath O'Neill Butte.

"You cannot see the Grand Canyon in one view, as if it were a changeless spectacle . . . to see it you have to toil from month to month through its labyrinths," wrote John Wesley Powell, a one-armed civil war veteran, geologist and ethnographer, who made two pioneering boat trips down the Colorado river in 1869 and 1871-72. His writings first brought the magnitude of the canyon to the nation's attention, drawing miners and early tourists. Native Americans had been living here since the end of the last ice age some 10,000 years ago, and the canyon remains important to several tribes including the Hopi, Navajo, Havasupai, and Paiute.



The human history, however, is the blinking of an eye compared with the geological, as Logan explained when we stopped to peel off layers of clothing at Cedar Ridge. Hundreds of millions of years of rock are exposed in the mile-deep gorge. The uppermost layer, the Kaibab formation, formed as marine sediments 260m years ago, before the dinosaurs. As you descend further, the rocks get older and older. With each step, thousands of years pass.

The Toroweap Formation gives way to Coconino Sandstone, which leads to the Supai Group and then Redwall Limestone. Lower down the canyon, Bright Angel Shale meets Tapeats Sandstone. At the very bottom, the layers of dark, metamorphic schist called Vishnu Basement Rocks are 1.7bn years old — approaching half the age of the planet. As the American naturalist, Donald Culross Peattie wrote: "The Grand Canyon is . . . all time inscribing the naked rock; it is the book of earth."



A hiker descending the Jacob's Ladder section of the Bright Angel Trail

The rocks erode at different speeds under the weathering forces of rain, snow, freeze-thaw cycles, flash floods, frosts and earthquakes. This creates the stepped-profile of buttes and mesas, stacks, crags, chimneys and cliffs, which is central to the Grand Canyon's aesthetic allure. The South Kaibab Trail, blasted and jack-hammered out of rock 90 years ago, follows ridges and zigzags down cliffs affording the best views across the 10-mile-wide chasm.

The further you descend, the more solitary and rewarding the Grand Canyon experience is. By Skeleton Point, almost halfway along the trail, the day-hikers had all turned around: the National Park Service advises strongly against attempting to hike to the bottom and back out in one day. The traffic dwindled to the handful of people with camping permits or reservations to stay at Phantom Ranch.

After lunch, we dropped between the walls of the Inner Gorge. The colours — hues of orange, ochre and green — intensified as the sun weakened and the shadows crept up the rocks. The sky, iridescent and blue all day, began to fill with canon-smoke tufts of cloud.

The children, who had set off an hour later with two of the guides, caught us up. Lucas was beaming. Together, we crossed the Kaibab suspension bridge, 6.4 miles' walk and 4,800 vertical feet below the rim. At Phantom Ranch, we toasted our day with beer and hot chocolate. As night fell, we put up our tents beside Bright Angel Creek. Lucas laughed with joy as he slid into his warm sleeping bag. We both fell into a luxurious sleep listening to the wind prattling in the dead leaves and the water dashing over rocks.

On New Year's Eve it snowed for eight hours. The canyon was flooded by a grey pall of cloud that added to our sense of being on a retreat, far from the world. Though it often snows on the rim in winter, no one could remember when the white stuff last settled in the canyon's basement. For Logan, who has been guiding here for 16 years, it was a first.

After breakfast of eggs, bacon and pancakes, we followed Logan, Cheeseman and Snickers along the Clear Creek Trail. Flurries of snow curled round us on the wind and settled in the creases of our coats. The guides gently dispensed advice on hydration, nutrition and staying warm, as well as information on the geology, ecology and cultural traditions of the canyon. Snickers even had a few riddles, to keep the kids entertained when their feet began to drag. Perhaps more importantly, the guides exuded a respect for the Canyon that was contagious. Even Lucas picked up on it.

In the afternoon, we walked north along the creek through a narrow, box canyon, which provided perfect cover for surprise snowball attacks. We made a snowman with a cactus hat. At 5pm, the dinner bell rang outside Phantom Ranch canteen, which also serves as a shop and post office. We dashed back to eat corn bread and huge steaks.

There was a small ceremony to celebrate New Year, scheduled for 10pm outside the ranger station beside the Ranch — but that was past our bedtime: we had to get up at 5.30am to break the tents down. So, back at the campsite, we toasted 2015 at 7pm with a bottle of single malt whisky. By 8pm, I was in my sleeping bag. It might well be the best New Year's Eve I've ever had.

The hike up out of the canyon on New Year's Day was a gift. We followed the river and turned on to Bright Angel Trail, tracing Pipe Creek and Garden Creek. The cloud had lifted. The canyon was painted in snow. Flecks of white lay on exposed rock, picking out the clefts, knuckles, sills, alcoves and amphitheatres in mesmerising detail.

We refilled our water bottles and ate bagels in the campground at Indian Garden, roughly halfway. The snow was inches thick and we fitted light crampons to our boots as ravens swept the sky. An hour on, climbing Jacob's Ladder, a series of switchbacks beneath a great, red wall of limestone, we encountered the first day-hikers. They seemed noisy.

Reluctantly, we exchanged greetings. Over the next two hours, their number steadily increased. It was like a decompression zone, preparing us for re-entry to the industrial tourism of the South Rim. By the time we reached the Village, the day was dying, and New Year's Eve felt like a distant dream.

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*Four Season Guides (fsguides.com) offers a guided, three-day Grand Canyon hiking trip with mule support, including all camping gear and meals, for \$999 per person. They can arrange permits and suggest booking five months or more in advance to get preferred dates. A cabin for two at Phantom Ranch (grandcanyonlodges.com) costs \$129 per night; a bed in the dormitory costs \$45*

*Photographs: Morey Milbradt/Alamy; Robert Penn*



The group on the Clear Creek Trail above Phantom Ranch, on New Year's Eve

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