

Through Grand Canyon

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By Doris Scharfberg
special writer

WHEN 11,000 or more people a year take a particular trip, it has gone from the realm of rare and exotic experience to an "in" thing to do... unless you're talking about whitewater boating through the Grand Canyon on the Colorado River.

It will never be anything but rare and exotic to find yourself tossed along a sand-colored river, bouncing like a cork in a Jacuzzi between cliffs higher than a stack of Ren Cens and then falling asleep on the hard sand without caring whether anything's crawling toward you.

For all its hazards, traveling through the Grand Canyon is an encounter with glory. The winding channel through northern Arizona is a geologist's dream and a sportsman's challenge. Photographers never want to leave and those with any sense of awe are rendered speechless.

PARTICIPANTS do more than tumble through rapids (at least 90 white-water encounters between Lake Powell and Lake Mead) and sleep on sand bars. Side canyons and high rise hikes take you to hidden Shangri-las of thick vegetation and gushing waterfalls. You totally forget that the land thousands of feet above you is a dry desert.

The prerequisite, clearly, is to be in good physical shape without undue fear of water or heights. "Good," however, does not mean you must pass an astronaut's fitness test. Any senior citizen who hikes regularly could handle it, although the tour companies won't take children under 12.

Twenty expedition firms are permitted by the National Park Service to travel the Colorado. They all launch tours at Lee's Ferry near Glen Canyon Dam at the southern end of Lake Powell, then stop a third of the way through at Phantom Ranch (straight

down-cliff from Grand Canyon National Park) to take on or let out guests. The tours end near Lake Mead.

MOST OF the outfits run giant motorized rafts that can carry their passengers through in six or seven days. Those offering smaller, muscle-powered rafts pride themselves on adventures lasting up to three weeks.

Martin Litton, longtime environmental activist, whose colorful wooden dories are featured in nearly every sizable Grand Canyon study, has boats patterned after ancient fishing craft, pointed at front and nearly so in the back to give more maneuverability.

I learned to love, cherish and obey the oarsmen (one petite, savvy oarswoman). Just when you are certain the boats will tip over and drown, the oarsmen carry you through, soaking wet, cold and bailing like crazy. The river temperature runs about 50 degrees much of the time; the sun can bake you to a 120-degree turn.

To save time, I joined a tour the hard way, by hiking 10 miles down Bright Angel Trail from Grand Canyon Village; meeting the boats and getting out two weeks later.

YOU WOULD have to have the soul of Pac Man not to be emotional about walking into the Grand Canyon for the first time when the unseen depths before you are still purple with night. You step into a world of utter silence, down, down, down a winding path through eons of time.

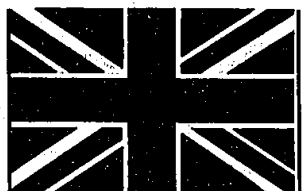
Bright Angel Trail is wide and comfortable. I thought I'd be clinging to the walls, but it's not at all scary unless high places bother you, period. Down to Indian Gardens, the last water stop, then down the endless switchbacks and finally to the bubbling river. By the time you see it the sun is very hot and you have another mile to go... through soft sand. Mush!

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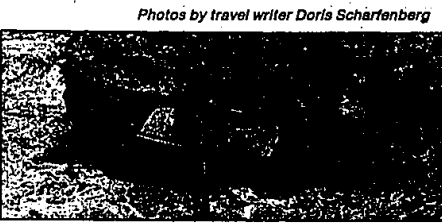
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Thursday, April 28, 1983 O&E (T.S.F.Ro-7B)* 11C(P.C.W.G-OC.R-10A)* 19A.



Photos by travel writer Doris Scharfberg

Writer Doris Scharfberg traveled the coursing Colorado River in a boat patterned after an ancient fishing craft. "The first time through a rapids is a moment of much truth," she says.

The first time through a rapids is a moment of much truth, and there is no turning back. River traffic is all one way. Being scared stiff and changing your mind is just tough. Don't fret. You'll soon get hooked on all that adrenaline, and it won't be so bad. Every couple of hours the boats tie up on one of the narrow beaches for a hike, lunch or to camp for the night. You scramble out, find a spot between the rocks and tamarisks and put down your sleeping bag. Some folks bring those neat little pop-up tents. Whatever, it's all lug-it-and-do-it yourself.

Tips down the Colorado River cost from \$600 to \$1,500. For information, write River Management Unit, Grand Canyon National Park Headquarters, South Rim, Arizona 86023 (602-638-2411).

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