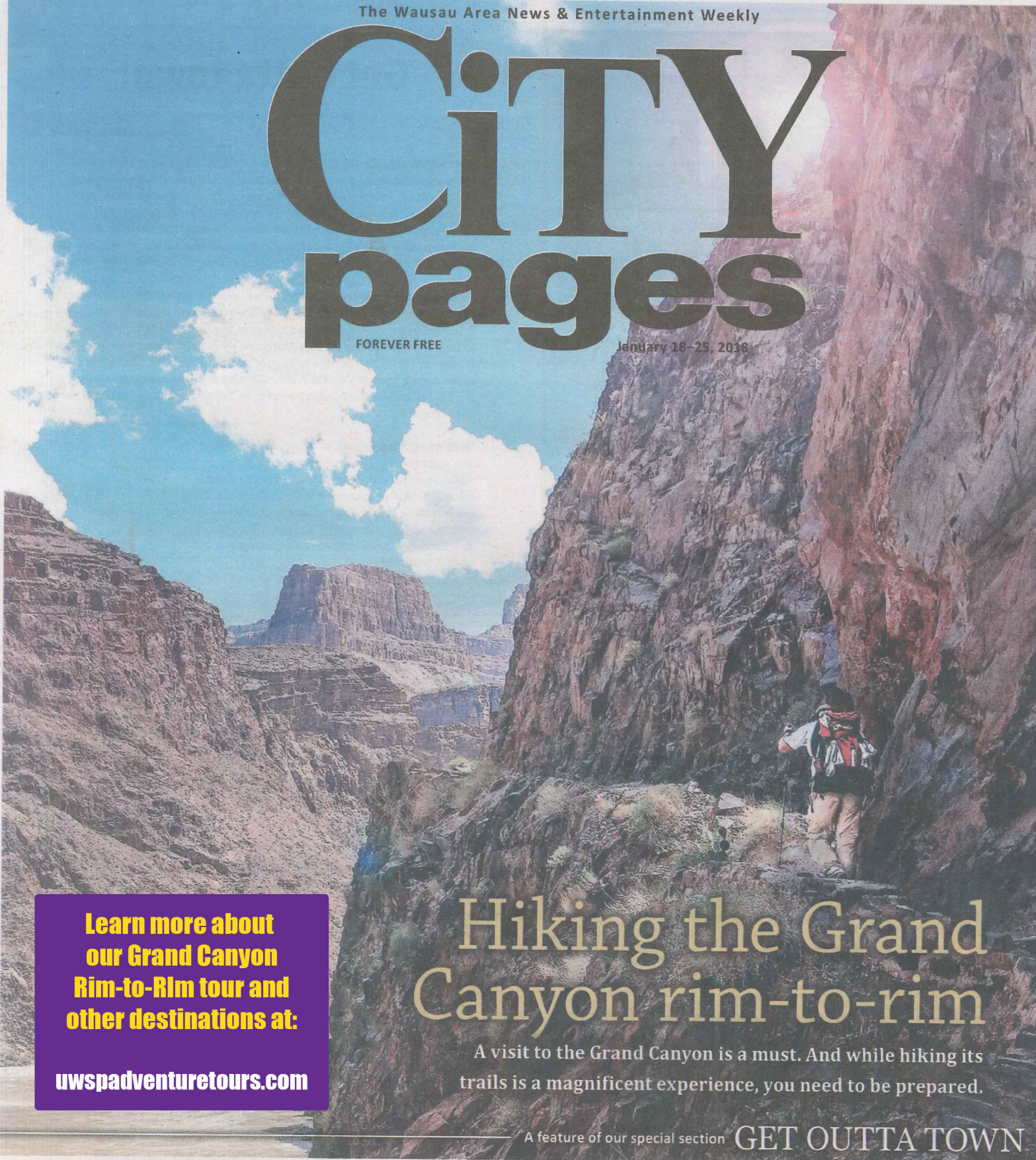


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Hiking the Grand Canyon rim-to-rim

A visit to the Grand Canyon is a must. And while hiking its trails is a magnificent experience, you need to be prepared.

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Footbridges at the bottom of the canyon allow hikers to safely cross the Colorado River.

Hiking the Grand Canyon rim-to-rim Story and photos by Trevor Roark

A visit to the Grand Canyon is a must. And while hiking its trails is a magnificent experience, you need to be prepared.

Cat scat was not a welcome sight at 5 am on day two of our hike. We did not want to encounter a mountain lion in the Grand Canyon (ever), but especially not on this vulnerable stretch of inner canyon.

It's not often you know you're about to risk your life hiking. But because hiking the Grand Canyon has so many other more common hazards, that's the thought that clouded my mind as we drove the rental car closer to the Grand Canyon Village at the South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park in August last year. What if a monsoon sweeps in? What if one of us slips and sprains an ankle? What if we encounter a mountain goat, mountain lion, or rattle snake? Each has the potential to be fatal. Food, water, and physical training were part of the equation too—the larger part. More than 250 people need to be rescued from the canyon every year.

Visiting the Grand Canyon should be on everyone's bucket list. And there are numerous ways to see this astounding natural marvel for those who are less mobile:

- Hopping on the bus to visit Hermit's Rest, catching a shuttle to the North Rim
- Stopping in the main Visitor's Center (on the south rim entrance) to investigate its geologic history.
- Taking the Grand Canyon Railway north from Williams (a few miles west of Flagstaff, Ariz.) to the Grand Canyon Village, the tourist town on the south rim with lodging, food and visitor services, plus the most overlooks of this geological wonder.
- Catching a ranger talk to learn about the distinct features of flora and fauna that have evolved in such harsh climate. Many visitors also choose to hike the



The switchbacks and varying terrain of Bright Angel down, leading down the canyon

Trevor's South Rim must sees and dos

- **Hermit's Rest.** Built by architect Mary Coulter in 1914 as a pit stop before reaching the Hermit Trail to Hermit Camp, this historic structure brings you back in time. It's a great stopover to grab a drink, snack, or souvenir while hiking the Rim Trail or riding the free shuttle bus.
- **Watch the 25 minute video** at the Grand Canyon Visitor's Center near Mather Point. This video dives into the geological, historical, cultural, ecological, and conservation efforts within the Grand Canyon National Park.
- **Sunrise.** Near the visitor center is my favorite sunrise viewpoint on the planet, and might yours too.
- **El Tovar restaurant.** The food is delicious, the hospitality is welcoming, and the architecture is magnificent!
- **Rent a hybrid bicycle** and hit the road. Paved trails stretch throughout the Grand Canyon Village and merge nicely into the roads. Jump on Hermit Road and head west to Hermit's Rest.

Grand Canyon, and there are several day-hike options that take you along the rim, or even partway down and back. But never should you hike down to the river and back in one day; the elevation and terrain simply are too much.

Less than 1% of visitors do a rim-to-rim hike—navigating by foot and/or mule the meandering trails up and down between the north and south rims of the Grand Canyon. This hike is possible if you're reasonably fit, however heed the warnings: Hiking rim-to-rim is very challenging, even for weekend athletes that love silent sports.

The National Parks Service purposefully placed signs at trails heads and other locations to warn people not to hike down to the Colorado River and back in one day. This mistake can be fatal. The descent down to the Colorado River confluence can feel inviting, but then there's the return up. We're talking a combined total of 8,600 to 11,400 feet of elevation change in sometimes extreme conditions.

An overnight stay at the bottom of the canyon is necessary. The Phantom Ranch provides hikers and mule riders a safe and comfortable refuge in cabins or dorms. The Bright Angel campground allows the more courageous to pitch a tent at one of the most incredible campouts in the world.

I hiked the Grand Canyon rim-to-rim the summer before, co-leading a UWSP Adventure Tours group with my faculty friend, Corey Huck. This time I was on a training trip for the same program, exploring Bright Angel Trail to learn the trail further, and study the conditions in order

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to make me a better tour leader (hiking guide) and to prepare for the worst.

Joining me in 2017 as a hiking partner was my longtime friend, Patrick McNally, who was new to the canyon. I knew what we were getting into, but wasn't sure he did. Conversations on the phone (he lives in Spokane, WA) and online research can't prepare hikers for what their bodies will go through hiking rim-to-rim. Patrick, a classically trained double bass player and first chair for the Spokane Symphony Orchestra, he knows music. What about extreme hiking conditions like this? There was no turning back when we arrived.

Just after the sun set over the Rim Trail extending west from Grand Canyon Village towards Hermit's Rest, we checked in at Maswik Lodge, a hotel unit near the South Rim. We were disappointed to miss the sunset on our first day, especially since this was Patrick's first time witnessing the majesty of the Grand Canyon.

After a quick stop at the Bright Angel Trailhead to get our bearings, we returned to Maswik Lodge to prepare our packs and ditch excess weight. Because we had scored two beds at Phantom Ranch in the bottom of the canyon, we didn't need backcountry camping permits or camp gear.

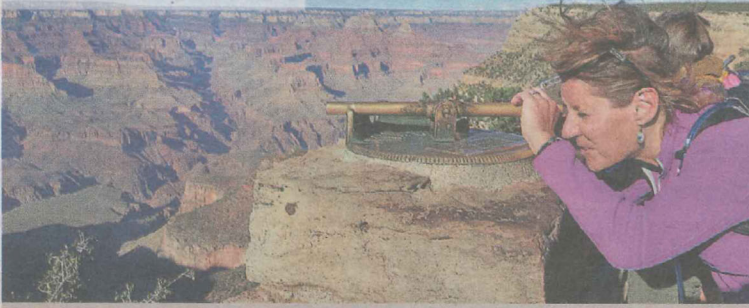
After reviewing some good hiker strategies (like hanging sweaty socks on the pack), Patrick and I hit the sack, knowing we'd rise early to begin the big hike.

Seeing that it was late August (not the best time to hike rim-to-rim due to monsoon season and heat), we carefully followed the weather forecast. Normally hikers can expect temps reaching 110° in August, but we lucked out. The prediction was closer to the 90s throughout.

Long before sunrise, we made the short walk to the trailhead with headlamps affixed. The best way to beat the heat is to avoid the sun as much as you can. For the Grand Canyon, that means hiking from pre-sunrise until about 10:00 or 11:00 am and then again (if needed) after 4:00 pm.

There it was, the south rim of the Grand Canyon and our entrance to Bright Angel Trailhead. A tiny bit of predawn light

Ellen Bruno, looking over the South Rim



Grand Canyon hiking tips

- **First, why do a full up and down hike?** As Ellen Bruno of Wausau says, "I was amazed by the beauty and scale of the Grand Canyon. I had thought of the Grand Canyon as a cliché tourist site like Niagara Falls, but the variety of terrain and the immensity of the whole area is something you have to experience... I was surprised by the ever-changing views around every bend, by the ruggedness of the hike and the fact that everything goes in and out of Phantom Ranch by foot or mule! The temperature difference from top to bottom and night to day was also remarkable."
- **Water, but not too much.** For a two-day hike, I recommend packing about 4 liters, plus one extra empty water bottle, and something to purify creek water.
- **Pack at least four pairs of socks** and rotate the socks you're wearing every time you start to feel a hot spot.
- **Trekking poles** are awesome! I was skeptical at first, but now won't hike any extreme terrain without them. They transfer the load to your upper body, which can make a huge difference in muscle soreness and injury prevention.
- **Wear light colored zip-off quick-dry hiking pants.** I unzip the back of the knees to provide ventilation while still allowing full protection from the elements. Cotton clothes are not your friend because they'll get soaked with sweat. The exception: To cool down, soak a cotton bandana or hat in a creek and wrap it around your neck or head.
- **It's better to overdress and under-apply sunscreen.** Clothes offer better protection and keep you cooler; sunscreen can shed with sweat. Since most hikers end up in the Bright Angel Creek and/or the Colorado River along the way, there's less worry you'll pollute these important waterways.
- **Train, train, train.** It's incredibly important to become physically fit for any Grand Canyon hiking excursion. Rib Mountain is a perfect resource, and it's steeper than most of what you'll find along Bright Angel Trail or North Kaibab Trail.
- **Find shade.** When the sun is high, resting in the shade is super important.
- **Electrolytes** are as important as water. Getting enough sodium, potassium, calcium, etc. is crucial for your body while sweating constantly. The amount of electrolyte loss through sweat, particularly sodium, can cause complications like hyponatremia.

peered through the canyon as we tramped down the switchbacks.

It wasn't long into this heavily hiked trail when the sun rose above the southwestern ridge. Taking in our newfound perspective, Patrick and I would now balance the canyon's beautiful majesty and its powerful threat to our lives.

The first day's goal was to safely arrive at Phantom Ranch before the sun reached

its peak. Built in 1922 by the Fred Harvey Company (with architectural design by American architect Mary Colter), the site was originally known as Roosevelt Camp after President Theodore Roosevelt visited while on a hunting expedition in 1913. Colter's contribution, leading to the National Park Service rustic architectural style, shows in the Phantom Ranch buildings—hand labor, native rocks and

materials, and rough-hewn wood. It was our "luxurious" sleeping accommodation and it was world-renowned.

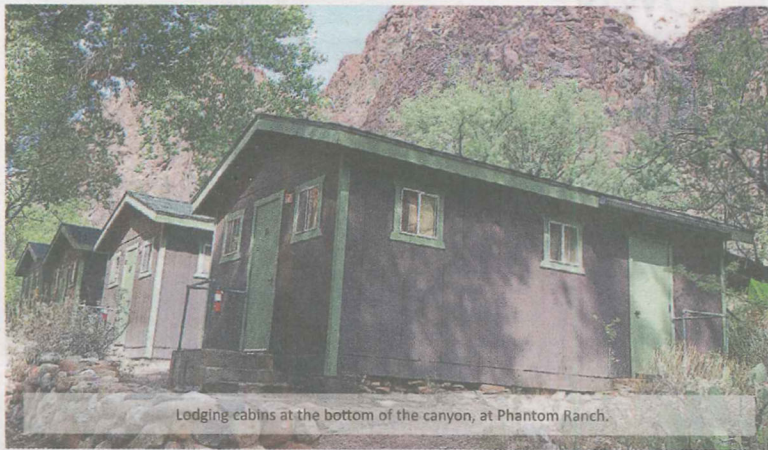
We stopped briefly at Indian Garden, an oasis about three-quarters down the canyon (about 3,000 feet from the top) where campers can pitch a tent (with a backcountry permit), rest in the shade, and air out their feet and clothes. We helped ourselves briefly to its well water and shade, then kept trekking on down toward the river.

In my first time experiencing Indian Garden, I could easily understand why the Havasupai people used to settle this area seasonally until President Roosevelt, along with the National Park Service, forced them out in the 1920s. Garden Creek meanders through, and tall cottonwood trees offer shade for hot summer days—an obvious refuge in desert land. We were thankful for this albeit fleeting experience.

Our hiking pace didn't have to reach super athlete speeds to achieve the first day's goal, yet we couldn't afford to mosey either. Still, some hikers passed us and some were passed by us.

One passing person caught our eye as we started traversing down the most intense switchbacks of Bright Angel Trail. A young hiker with thin athletic shoes, a tiny backpack, and a super-sized soft drink seemed to glide along by herself. That's right, she brought a big soda to go! It was evident this explorer wasn't taking the terrain seriously, and Patrick and I agreed to make sure she had plenty of water and food.

When the opportunity struck, we asked if she was headed all the way to the river and if she had enough water. The answer was yes to both, and our concern deepened. Further down the trail we came upon her again, resting and eating some melted chocolate—another bad sign. After passing her by we started to talk about the "what if's." What if she has done this many times before? What if she's a newbie and didn't pack enough water for the return? What if nobody knows she's down here?



Lodging cabins at the bottom of the canyon, at Phantom Ranch.

We turned around to ask more questions. She was still resting on a large rock when we asked about water, routing, and safety. I began to sense her annoyance and/or feelings of being threatened. So we ventured onward. There were no emergency reports in the canyon that day. We just hope she didn't end up becoming a statistic.

Less than two hours later, we reached the Colorado River. Trekking through a sandy section of trail our excitement endured as we approached Silver Bridge, a massive steel-cabled foot bridge that stretches across the Colorado continuing the Bright Angel Trail. We could see Black Bridge in the distance.

Our bodies were taxed and we were ready to rest when we reached our first day's destination, Phantom Ranch. Checking in was a breeze and I walked through some important logistical details with Patrick, like when we could enjoy our veggie stew at the canteen.

One of our most important tasks of the day was to soak in the Colorado River. It's highly advised not to swim in the river, as this can mean certain death. However hikers can find a very calm, shallow section of shoreline just west of Black Bridge. It's shocking to experience icy cold water when temps are in the 90s and above. This is due to the frigid waters escaping the bottom of Lake Powell at the Glen Canyon Dam.

It was a glorious night with delicious food at the Canteen (everything is brought in by pack mule), more cold drinks, and good conversation. What I recall best was the Milky Way. I'd never seen stars like I did that night. The depth, glow, and sheer numbers burned a memory that will last the rest of my days.

Sometime around 4:30 am the next morning we were back in our boots, already sore before starting the 5,600 feet ascent to the North Kaibab Trailhead. We went, headlamps a-glowing.

Not far along this trail we spotted the cat scat. Seemingly fresh-looking, this could only mean we were sharing space with a large, dangerous critter. Even though mountain lion attacks are rare in the Grand Canyon National Park, we didn't want to take any chances, so we started to sing. Loudly.

Never did we see a mountain lion along the trail. But as they say, if you see a mountain lion in the canyon it's already too late.

We made our way north and up to stops at Cottonwood Campsite, Manzanita, and the Supai Tunnel. We stopped often along the way to relax in the shade, rest our feet, change socks, take sips of water, and recharge with salty (and other electrolyte-heavy) snacks.

The second day is usually tougher, and we both felt it. After the Supai Tunnel we slowed down and Patrick started to regress a little. He showed signs of heat exhaustion and hyponatremia (salt depletion) with a headache and slight nausea. We needed a change of pace. I told Patrick we'd rest for a while to recharge before our last push to the end.

Even though we were less than 1.7 miles from the north rim trailhead, we'd already hiked over 20 miles and this last stretch was daunting with its switchbacks and uneven surfaces. Mule trains left scattered dung piles in some of the best spots to land our boots. It's impossible to avoid them and it wasn't long before we didn't care.

The last stretch is where pre-trip training becomes so important. Our muscles worked way past their normal thresholds. We took our time. What mattered was our safety and enjoyment. Through the remainder of switchbacks, our stamina was waning.

And then we arrived. We did it! Exhausted and elated, we stepped up to the trail head, took off our packs, shoes, and socks, and just sat down with smiles on our faces. We hiked rim-to-rim and made it out alive!

Death isn't really a funny thing in the canyon. We met another hiker at the Grand Canyon Lodge, which sits wonderfully on the edge of the canyon's North Rim for some majestic overlooks, and he shared excerpts from a book he recently read called *Over the Edge: Death in Grand Canyon*. What stuck with me the most was the two most common ways to die in the Grand Canyon: arrogance or ignorance. I pondered that for a moment and I couldn't help but think of that young hiker sipping on her big gulp. **CP**



Trevor Roark (right) and Patrick McNally, shortly after finishing their two-day rim-to-rim hike.

Trevor Roark is tours program manager for UWSP Adventure Tours.

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