

## **THE MAIN CORRIDOR**

by

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On our first hike across the Grand Canyon we packed as lightly as possible. That meant leaving the nylon tent behind. In fact, at the last minute, we left our sleeping bags stashed in our vehicle, deciding that our Space Blankets could act as ground cloths and a light cotton sleeping bag liner would be enough to keep us warm. Our naive reasoning was that it was June in the desert and we wouldn't need anything more to keep off the night's chill. True to a point, we still found ourselves shivering before sunup.

On that first hike across we were only going one way, 25 miles from the North Rim to the South Rim, with overnight stops at Cottonwood Camp (near the mouth of Transept Canyon, below the North Rim), Bright Angel Campground (which is between Phantom Ranch and the Colorado River ), and Indian Gardens (4.5 miles below the South Rim). Our first night was spent in a site under the tall cottonwoods near the stone Ranger Station at Cottonwood Camp. We hung our packs from the tall metal posts as the Ranger instructed, and opened the pouches and compartments on each pack so that any marauding nocturnal critter could investigate without the need to chew through the fabric. We placed all of our food in the metal boxes supplied by the Park Service to keep the rodents and other critters from sharing our meals. We thought we were set.

That night, lying on our Space Blankets with our thin cotton covers, we drifted off watching the stars sparkle above the dark outlines of the canyon rims. But it wasn't to be a peaceful sleep. Even in slumber, feeling exposed, my senses remained alert. When a twig snapped followed by a rustling of dry grass I came full awake. Curious, I turned on my little flashlight, catching a ringtailed cat ambling across our campsite. The first I'd seen in the wild. Wanting to share the experience, I woke Chris and Arla. As we shifted to get a better view the Space Blankets crackled beneath us, but didn't frighten the ringtail. A member of the racoon family, our ringtail didn't even seem bothered by the flashlight or our stares. It continued snooping among our gear, with its prominent bushy tail raised high in the night like one of those orange flags whipping over the back of a dune buggy.

Then there was more rustling, almost above us. I redirected the flashlight, scanning the pole holding our packs, and there we discovered a second ringtail sitting calmly, helping itself to whatever it could find among our opened pockets. We watched as it pulled a clear plastic bag from Chris' pack and dropped it to the ground, creating another round of rustling at the base of

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the pole. Again redirecting the small light, we caught a glimpse of four short white and black tails floating ghost-like in the night. We watched them drift away through a patch of tall grass, off toward the base of a large cottonwood. We could hear the plastic bag rattling along over the rough ground. But no matter what their prize, I wasn't about to pursue. The Ranger had warned us about tiny spotted skunks that roamed the camp at night. Sometimes it's best to suffer your losses and leave well enough alone.

Once all of the critters moved on to other, potentially more lucrative, campsites, we tried to settle and get some rest. But there were more visitors in the night, as either other pairs of ringtails inspected our equipment, or the same pair returned for a second look. Somehow, among their rummagings, we did get some sleep.

In the morning we awoke to find a chewed-open plastic bag of Starburst Fruit Chews. In spite of his assurances, Chris had failed to stash his treats in the metal food can. Upon their delivery to the ground, the little black and white critters must have envisioned a tasty treat of their own. But it was obvious that once they bit into the candy they weren't much enthused, and much to Chris' pleasure, they left most of the contents untested.

There is a side story here, as well. We encountered this trio of two men and a woman who hiked down from the North Rim and stayed in the campground at a site near ours. We got to talking with them and were told that the woman had suffered greatly from the stress of the trail and the heat, and, to make things even worse, she had gotten deep blisters from her brand new boots, which she wore for the first time on this hike. There is an entire story here, but for the purposes of this piece I'll just mention that they had tickets for meals at Phantom Ranch for the next night. Because of the woman's condition they decided to rest at Cottonwood, then hike back up to the North Rim. Rather than let them go to waste, they gave us their meal tickets.

So, on our second night, though we camped at the Bright Angel Campground, we enjoyed a free meal of stew and wonderful side dishes at the cantina at Phantom Ranch.

Two days after our stay at Cottonwood Camp, and the morning after our stay at Bright Angle Campground, we made our way up to Indian Gardens, our final camp before our four and a half mile ascent to the South Rim. When night approached we spread our Space Blankets, as was becoming our usual practice, and once again settled in for the night. Our site nestled among a small stand of young trees, with their finger thin trunks just above our heads. Any breeze drifting down the canyon rustled the small leaves in a gentle lullaby that helped our tired bodies drift off to sleep.

As you might expect, at some point in the night I heard a rustling among the leaves that didn't match the breeze. As on the first night, I quietly pushed myself up onto my elbows so I could see, careful not to make the Space Blanket crackle. Darkness hid whatever prowled among the trees. The sound stopped, and I laid back down.

Of course, a few minutes later, it began again. This time I just lifted my head and turned on my little flashlight, hoping to catch the little critter in motion. Again, nothing. By this time I feared it might be a snake, because I had a clear view through the bare trunks of those little trees,

and there was simply nothing in there above the level of the fallen leaves. Whatever was there, it sensed my presence, and froze. Trying to ignore it, I once again tried to doze off.

As soon as I'd settled, it moved again. This time louder, not at all snake-like. Some large critter definitely lurked among the trees, too close for comfort. This time I sat up quickly and flashed the light. Still nothing. Then a twig snapped above my head. I directed the pale light upwards, and there I saw, standing about five feet in front of me, a young female mule deer. She chewed a soft leaf, looking at me as if nothing were wrong. I hadn't been able to see her before, even though I was looking right at her, because in the weak light her thin legs looked like tree trunks. Once again Chris and Arla were rudely awakened as I aroused them to see this wonder close at hand. Three sets of eyes focusing on her was too much. The young deer stepped off to enjoy a more private meal.

As I write this I have made seven trips across the Grand Canyon, from rim to rim, all along the Main Corridor. From the Lodge on the North Rim to the mule corral on the South Rim, it is just about 25 miles. Six of those trips were backpacks in which we took several days to cross. The seventh, our latest and perhaps final hike across, was a one day (13 hour) hike from the North to the South Rim. Four of the six backpacking trips were actually part of two rim to rim hikes, meaning we hiked from the North to the South Rim and then turned around and backpacked back.

On our six backpacking trips we always camped at Cottonwood and Bright Angle. So, over the years, we got to know at least this one part of the Grand Canyon fairly well. And on all of these hikes, including the single-day crossing, we have taken our Space Blankets, and on all but the last couple of trips it was my original Space Blanket that provided service. As typical, the blankets have been used as ground clothes. On many of the trips we did not take a tent, choosing to stretch out on the ground and gaze at the stars and the dark canyon walls. But during the late afternoon and evening hours the blankets have served in several other capacities.

On our one "ill fated" trip, which was supposed to be a rim to rim to rim crossing, there were six of us. Anne and me, Anne's sister Janine, from Tucson, my sister Sue and her husband Dan, from Omaha, and an old friend of mine from Denver, Mark. Janine is very athletic and hikes quite a bit in the desert mountains around Tucson, but Sue and Dan and Mark have only limited experience on any kind of trail. It was also the first backpack trip for Sue and Dan. Not used to the added weight, and also not used to the dusty and rocky trail conditions on the route down from the North Rim, Sue lost her footing on a sand covered boulder, landed on her hip, and gave her body a terrible jar. We were probably no more than three miles down the trail, so I suggested that perhaps she turn back. But no, she was determined to make it across, and felt she could tough it out.

To help her, Dan moved a few heavy items from her pack into his. Then we continued on down. Sue struggled heroically all the way, and was much relieved when we reached our day's destination at Cottonwood Campground, about eight miles down from the rim. We found that the

Park Service had closed the section of the campground under the tall cottonwoods. That meant we had to take an exposed site. We selected Site 1 because it was large enough for our entire group and there were several short trees and tall bushes along the southern end. They at least shaded the picnic table from the 100 degree sun.

We slipped from our packs and drank lots of fresh (although heavily chlorinated) water from the campground spigots, and tried to settle in as best we could. But it was hard to get comfortable in the burning sun. Mark and I used a long section of rope that he packed along, tied it through the corner grommets on my old space blanket, and rigged a functional sunshade. We laid out Anne and Janine's Space Blankets in the shadow and were all able to stretch out and rest our backs and doze in the warm air. The blanket gave us relief until we felt rested enough to walk the short distance to Bright Angel Creek, where we washed the dust off our legs and squirreled up the courage to dunk our steaming bodies in the ice cold water. We couldn't stay in for long, but that brief chill sure felt good.

That evening Sue and Dan set up a small nylon tent while the rest of us spread out our Space Blankets and sleeping bags and laid out under the sky. As night approached it was still too warm to crawl into our bags, so we stretched out on top, quietly conversing, reliving the day's tragedies and triumphs, and laying out our expectations for the next day's hike. With Sue's injury and Dan suffering from the extra weight and the heat we tried to work out the logistics of how to get everyone to Bright Angel Campground in one piece.

One of the negatives about sleeping under the stars is the exposure to whatever insects decide to pay a visit. Generally, in the desert, there aren't many, but from time to time, around these areas of human occupation, like these campgrounds, there can be flies and ants and other crawly things that seem attracted to bare skin. Perhaps it's the relative moisture. After a while one tends to subconsciously brush them away without much concern. Sometimes just a twitch of a muscle or the shaking of a leg will send them off to other parts.

That was the case on this evening, as the deep shadows cast by the surrounding ridges grew darker and the air began to cool just slightly. Some sort of fly had been investigating my right leg. Every time it landed, I'd subconsciously shake my leg just enough to send it away. Then there was an ant crawling along my calf. Not really wanting it sharing my sleeping quarters, I moved my leg to the right, in a sweeping action to push it to the side. It didn't like that, so it bit me. I shot up into a standing position so fast the others might not have seen it happen. Of course I shouted some expletive and turned to search for my flashlight. By then Dan had his shining out through the fine mesh of his tent door.

"Looks like a scorpion," he noted with interest. And sure enough, in the yellow light, we could see the little whip-tailed bugger shuffling along my Space Blanket and out across the sand to a secure position beneath the floor of Sue and Dan's tent.

Man that stung. It nailed me on my right calf, about four inches below the back of my knee. Of course this caused quite a bit of consternation, with scorpions often portrayed in the movies and literature as deadly assassins. But Anne and I knew otherwise. Several years before she had

been stung between her toes by a tiny Bark Scorpion in our own bedroom in Tucson. Living in the Sonoran Desert one understands that it's the smaller scorpions that are the more deadly, with the Bark Scorpion among the deadliest. We took Anne to the hospital emergency room and after waiting for two hours the doctors told us that unless she had some medical condition that weakened her system she would be alright. They treated the area to prevent infection and gave her some anti-pain medication and sent us home.

So, standing there with my leg burning like it had been scorched by a glowing ember from a campfire, I knew, logically, that I was probably going to be okay. But one never knows. Besides, this straw colored fellow was way too large to be a Bark Scorpion, so I tried to relax. Anne applied an antiseptic ointment to the inflamed location and we all tried to get a night's rest.

I know I didn't, and I suspect the others who slept outside ruminated on their chances of an encounter every time some little nocturnal critter danced across their range of perception. I don't remember many of the details of the rest of that night, but I do know that I had a fitful, agonizing sleep.

In the morning my leg still burned, but not as badly as when it first happened. I could function just fine, although I felt my energy at low ebb due to lack of sleep. I think we were all frazzled and tired, but we did what we had to and tried to look upon our day's journey in the best light. After all, we were in the bottom of the Grand Canyon, one of the World's wonders.

The rest of the journey was slow and painful for all of us, in one way or another. We spent the next night at Bright Angel Campground, and on our final day Sue and Mark loaded most of their equipment onto mules, for a price, then we all struggled our way up the 9.5 miles to the South Rim. Much relieved to have made it in basically one piece, the sad decision was made not to make the return trip. At the time it seemed like the best choice, but looking back, there was probably no reason (after a good night's sleep) for Anne and Janine and I not to make the return trip. However, we joined the others in the shuttle and rode around to the North Rim to retrieve our vehicles. Anne and I and Janine have always looked upon that as our one failed trip across.

That trip also marks the last time that Anne and I backpacked without a tent. That thin nylon barrier at least keeps the scorpions out of our bedding, and I find that I sleep a little better knowing that.

There are other memories associated with our Space Blankets while in Grand Canyon National Park. On our other hikes we used the blanket as a resting place at our campsite so we could have a clean spot to lie down in the shade and stretch our legs and relieve some lower back pain. We've napped on it and read on it and played cards on it. We've watched spiny lizards scamper across it as they made a meal of red ants, and we watched another pair of spiny lizards mate on it. My old Space Blanket has Grand Canyon dust embedded in its synthetic fibers.

~ THE END ~

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