

**Our Grand Canyon Trek 2008  
150-Mile Canyon  
November 8-14**

**Some Personal Thoughts and a Trip Summary  
By Rick Light**

**Photo Gallery:** <http://picasaweb.google.com/RickLight.rxl/GC150MileCanyonTrek#>

**Trip Participants:**

Elizabeth Kelly  
Rick Light, trip leader  
Roy Michelotti  
Rob Ryne  
Martin Staley  
Mike Sullivan  
Cheryl Waschenko

**Overview:**

150-Mile Canyon is a deep slot canyon in the western area of the Grand Canyon, near Tuckup Canyon and approximately across the Colorado River from the Havasu Canyon area. The only well-documented descent/ascent (I know of) of this canyon is among George Steck's writings, most notably in his book on hiking loops in this end of the Grand Canyon. (The most recent publication of his books is now one volume called "Hiking Grand Canyon Loops", published as a Falcon Guide, ISBN 0-7627-1208-2. 150-Mile Canyon info starts on page 131.) In this book, Steck describes the descent of the Redwall Gorge in 150-Mile Canyon as something "that will take most of the day," with 4 and possibly 5 chock stones blocking the way. Indeed it was an adventure. It turned out to be a wonderful trek of discovery; a perfect trip for our 16<sup>th</sup> year of trekking the Canyon.

**Technical Side of the Gorge:**

- At least 8 major drop-offs between start of the gorge and the Colorado River
- At least two are between second camp and Colo River (bypassed)
- Six drop-offs negotiated during descent/ascent of gorge
  - A 60-foot drop at the top of the gorge
  - Four 20-foot drops, one 12-foot drop
- One of these required rappelling naked or mostly naked into chest-deep water
- One we rappelled with full packs, then waded through navel-deep water with packs on
- Four of the six drops required lowering packs with ropes

**Slot Negotiation Times:**

- 8 hours to descend from top of gorge to 2nd camp
- 10 hours to ascend from second camp to top of gorge
- These times are for 7 people with full packs
- A larger group would have taken longer

(By the way, the details included in this report are not only to document our trip, but to help us or others in the future who might want to do this again. For reference, sunrise for this trip date was

at 7:00am, sunset was at 5:30pm. This report includes a subset of the 360+ pictures taken on the trip.)

### **Original Trip Plan:**

Sat Nov 8<sup>th</sup>: Drive to Kanab, over night in hotel  
 Sun Nov 9<sup>th</sup>: Drive to trailhead, hike to first camp  
 Mon Nov 10<sup>th</sup>: Descend inner gorge to second camp  
 Tues Nov 11<sup>th</sup>: Layover day – explore area, hike to River  
 Wed Nov 12<sup>th</sup>: Ascend inner gorge to first camp  
 Thurs Nov 13<sup>th</sup>: Hike out to car, drive to Vermillion Cliffs, overnight in hotel  
 Fri Nov 14<sup>th</sup>: Drive home

### **What Really Happened:**

Saturday, Nov 8<sup>th</sup>, was slightly overcast, windy, and looking like the forecast was accurate – some rain and wind for the first 2 days and then clearing to nice sunny days for the rest of the trip. It took us 11 hours to drive to Kanab, including about an hour stop for lunch. Three of us left Los Alamos, NM, at 8:00am, connecting with 2 more in Santa Fe, to caravan west. Mike and Cheryl left a few days earlier from Colorado to spend some time hiking en route, and then met us in Kanab on Sat. We met at the Quail Park Lodge around 7:15pm, and enjoyed a wonderful dinner at the Rocking V Café.

Sunday we arrived at the trailhead at 2:30pm, following an unexpected but perhaps fortuitous delay en route. We began hiking around 3:00pm under a gray sky and spitting rain mixed with occasional snow. The “stroll” down to our first campsite starts down an old trail (probably created for cattle a zillion years ago), which eventually turns west to wind around into Tuckup Creek Canyon. The trail often disappears en route, giving rise to the opportunity for hikers to use those rarely used skills related to self preservation in moments of aimless wandering along 35-degree rugged scree slopes. In the rain, we often mistook erosion paths for the trail, expediting our descent and straining our knees. The path to the wash below drops about 1500 feet in something like a mile and a half.

The wash is a rough arroyo filled with boulders, river rock, sand, and bushes, creating an ever-changing terrain that kept the hike interesting. With darkness approaching, we found it necessary to choose a “dry” campsite. Roy found us a perfect place on some rock outcroppings some 50 feet or so above the arroyo. By 6:15pm everyone had arrived at camp and it was pitch black. We found it nice to be settling in for the night. Luckily, not only did the rain stop, but we had enough left-over drinking water to enjoy freeze-dried dinners that night even though our camp was without water. That meant, of course, that breakfast the next day would be dry, but we all had contingency food for just such a situation. This was not the campsite we had planned to reach the first day, so we knew the next day would be very long indeed.

The next morning I was again amazed at the simple beauty of endless stars and some clouds moving across the sky silently in the night. Monday’s morning was partly cloudy as we left camp at 7:15am. En route we found water in pot-holes and pumped enough to rehydrate everyone and refill camelbaks for the day. We arrived at the first gorge pour-off at 10:00am.

Along the way we saw a couple of places that could have been what George Steck had meant to be the first campsite, but nothing like what we had expected. And, George says when he came through here all of the rappels were 15 feet in length. So our interest was piqued when we found the first drop-off to be something in the neighborhood of 60 feet! I was delighted that we had carefully planned our trek and decided to bring long ropes to cut as needed, rather than cut ahead

of time to Steck's expected drop lengths. (In fairness to George, perhaps the steep hiking entry he describes is this 60-foot drop, but for us and apparently others, it was a rappel.) We found a single bolt at the top of this 60 foot drop-off. Mike set up the rappel rope and a hand line anchored to this bolt and a rock horn, both with back-up anchors using pro and some 9/16" tubular webbing as sling material. The hand line was necessary to help everyone get into position for the rap since it was an awkward start. I rappelled first, and then received the packs as Mike lowered them one at a time using the rap rope as our pack line. Once the gear was down, everyone else did the rappel with Mike helping at the top, while I provided a "fireman's belay" at the bottom. It took quite a while to get everyone and the packs safely down. The bottom here was about 5 feet wide, sculpted, fluted, beautiful smooth rock walls, each some 60-70 feet high, winding out of sight down stream, and up-stream ending in the drop-off dry pool. It was a fantastic and inspiring way to start the descent of the gorge.

Shortly below this area we encountered the 2<sup>nd</sup> chock stone, a drop-off of some 15 feet or so. There were 2 bolts at the top for anchoring the rappel into the dry gulch below. We lowered packs after Mike had rappelled, and then easily rapp'ed through it. Within another 5 minutes of walking downstream we found the 3<sup>rd</sup> chock stone, again a 15 foot drop into a dry gulch. Same procedure was used to get past it. We're getting the hang of this! All the while, as we descended, the walls around us were getting taller and taller, and the gorge became more winding and sculpted. Since we didn't know what lay ahead, it was a true experience of adventure and discovery. Everyone was focused in the moment – just trying to survive the current difficulty at hand – and, of course, everyone had an acute awareness of the danger that we were not capable of self rescue if any serious accident were to happen. This gave the entire descent an air of excitement, fun, seriousness, and beauty not usually present.

About 20 feet or so downstream from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chock stone we came to our first water. We waded through some 20 minutes or so of various sized pools sculpted into the rock floor. None of these were deep. It was fun and definitely kept our interest as the landscape changed around every bend.

It took us a total of 40 minutes to descend from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> chock stone. This is where the adrenaline rush returned in spades ...

As we looked down over the huge plug in the canyon we could only see a large pool of deep water – it was impossible to actually see where we would land while rappelling. So, it rested upon me as trip leader to go first – and it was a first for me (and for some of the others as well) – the first time I've ever rappelled naked, let alone into 50-degree water! So there I was, wearing only my ski hat, water shoes, and climbing harness, smiling for the camera before I descended over the edge into the unknown. Mike called me "the Intrepid Rick" (a name I assumed had another meaning – like really dumb, very naïve, super gullible, extremely foolish, ..., but I went for it anyway). I landed on a large boulder that then drops immediately into the water. I took the rope out of the belay device as I stood in the cold, chest-deep water and then crossed the pool, using the rap line as a hand line. The pool was indeed very cold. Once on the other side, Mike and I worked to set up the "zip line" and a secondary rope to lower packs across the pool. Once my pack was down I was able to get dry and dressed again, before receiving the other packs. Once the packs were down, everyone else did the rap - after seeing the depth to be only chest deep, everyone else was able to rap just bare from the waste down with a shirt pulled up high - much warmer than my approach!

The 5<sup>th</sup> chock stone came some 5 minutes downstream presenting another 15 foot drop onto a dry landing. By now we were pretty good at getting packs and people down such short raps. We were glad we didn't have the original 11 people planned for this trip. Such a large number would

have been much slower, and it was already becoming dark. Two minutes downstream from number 5 was the 6<sup>th</sup> chock stone. Again we were aware that Steck's description did not include a 6<sup>th</sup> rap. Adventure has no preset rules!

And, due to the late hour and approaching darkness we rappelled this one wearing our full packs. This was a rap of some 15 feet onto a dry landing that led immediately to more pools. Most were thigh deep, but one was navel-deep. Since we were wearing packs to cross it, it was tricky to keep our packs dry. Once again some of us rappelled naked, this time with both harness and pack on, then entered the pools. It was dark, cold, and we were getting tired. We got dry and dressed and pressed on with headlamps. Luckily we found a reasonable place to camp only 20 minutes walk downstream from these pools. Mike arrived at camp around 6:00pm, the last member of our team got there around 6:45pm. Everyone was tired but fine. Dinner was scarfed down eagerly as we were all ravenously hungry. There's something really special about a hot dinner after a day like this. And, what a day it had been!

Our camp was again on flat-ish rock surfaces, this time in the bed of the slot. Our gravity filters worked well, and pools were nearby for dinner water boiling. Life was good. The full moon came out as we finished dinner, just crossing the V in the skyline of the canyon walls at the extreme of our vision down stream. It was breathtaking. The silence of the canyon engulfed us as we relaxed into a well deserved night's rest.

On our layover day we slept in, awakened by the laughter of the Canyon Wrens around 7:00am. After a relaxing breakfast we decided to attempt hiking to the River in 2 groups – an early group and a later one. After 5 minutes assessment downstream, we were glad we decided to keep camp here for 2 nights rather than moving it closer to the River. It also became clear that only one group was going to attempt this hike. We encountered a large recessed pool blocking our path. Soon we found a bypass route on stream-right enabling us to continue our adventure downstream. However, this bypass included some scary friction climbing on slanted rock, as well as difficult scree to negotiate, so the late group decided not to pursue it and chose to relax near camp instead.

The remaining 4 of us (Mike, Roy, Martin, and me) continued another 10 minutes downstream to find a huge pour-off (maybe 50 vertical feet) that would have required extensive effort to negotiate. We searched and found another bypass, this time on stream-left that ended up being probably a quarter mile in length. It started with ascending very steep scree, rock, and dirt (probably 35 degrees) along a faint game trail that meandered along the edge of the slope near the cliff above, with some 300 feet of exposure below. It was not for the faint of heart or those prone to tripping. I'm usually pretty free-form in my hiking, not really caring if I follow a trail or the person in front of me, but today I noticed that Mike was walking much like a lead-climber moves on the rock – very deliberately and carefully, every step placed with focus – so I did the same, once again very aware that we were not in any position to do any kind of rescue, and of course, wanting to be sure not to cause rock fall on anyone else.

There were also lots of “helpers” along the way, very pointy plants (like cactus, cat's claws, etc.) and sharp limestone outcroppings that loved to grab our clothes, skin, or packs when least expected. At one point Mike had to stop to clean off his pants and pack from a “velcro plant” – weird plant whose leaves and stems acted just like the sticky stuff, planting themselves squarely onto you and refusing to let go. It took him almost 10 minutes to do this after just brushing against one of these plants! The cat's claws were the worst – they seemed to have fish-hook like branches that just enjoyed causing pain.

As the bypass continued we descended to the canyon bottom via a steep slope of some 40-45 degrees, which definitely kept our attention! Another 30 minutes downstream we found an additional obstacle blocking the path – a huge chock stone, probably some 20-30 feet in length was stuck like a cork into the canyon. It stuck upwards some 10 feet or more and had a long drop into the canyon below of probably 50 feet.

Again we went up to the left to find a difficult, strenuous walk-around with some several hundred feet of exposure that ended in a cliff-out overlooking the Colorado River. (We had left camp around 9:30am and arrived for lunch around 12:30pm at the River overlook.)

En route we found a boxed side canyon that might have been the one on the map that I originally thought might be a good place for our 2<sup>nd</sup> camp. Obviously it was not a good choice! Once overlooking the River, Mike and Martin tried to find a route down to the River, but soon came back to where Roy and I were having lunch saying we would need a rope to go to the River. We had none with us. So after soaking in the amazing roar of Upset Rapids and lapping up the sunshine, we carefully retraced our steps, arriving back at camp around 3:30pm. As we joined those who had rested in camp it became apparent that ours had been a fantastic hike, but not a relaxing lay-over day.

Dinner went smoothly and we all enjoyed just hanging out watching the moon rise and enjoying just being in this amazingly beautiful place.

Thursday morning was cool and clear as we got under way for our ascent at 7:30am. Retracing our path up-stream started with some 20 minutes of hiking-shoe walking before we came again to the lower wading pools. We changed shoes and prepared for cold water. The navel deep water certainly was a wake up call!

Our trip up-canyon required us to ascend the same ropes we had rappelled and left in place, so we had 6 ascensions to negotiate, including hauling packs from the top of each. The first of which was from the end of these pools, requiring a pack line that crossed all of them. We set up the zip line and hauled packs across the water and up to the next level. It took 4 people on the downstream end of the line, with 2 of us at the top. It was truly a team effort again.

The next two ascensions were from dry land and were some of the easiest to navigate. Soon we came to the chest deep pool with the chock stone above it. As it turned out, there was a small dry area behind the stone that allowed us to wade naked through the pool and then put on clothes before ascending with jumars. Nice! And, getting packs across this pool turned out to be easier than expected. Sweet! And, what a gorgeous place to be!

We continued working our way up stream to the base of the big number 1. It was slow but fun and very beautiful. Once at number 1, Mike ascended and set up a belay at the top. I ascended next followed by Cheryl and Martin since we were all 3 sharing a “Texas prusik” set-up with the jumars, and the others were using simple leg loops girth hitched to the jumars. Once up, Cheryl was dispatched to see if she could find a campsite nearby with water and flat sleeping areas. Mean while, the rest of us began hauling up packs– Roy setting things up at the bottom, Rob hanging in mid-ascension just below the overhang at the top to help get the packs over the edge, Mike at the edge to receive the packs, and Martin and I using the 2<sup>nd</sup> set of jumars as means to pull on the rope to haul the packs up. Mike and I switched places a couple of times to rest our backs, while Martin “rested” by carrying packs from our perch up to a more stable and flat area some 15 feet above us. It worked well. Soon others were jumaring up the cliff, and by 4:30pm we had everyone and our gear at the top of the gorge. Fantastic!

Luckily, Cheryl was successful in finding a suitable campsite – but it was some 45 minutes up stream. Once again, we could not rely on Steck's info, although in a pinch a few people could have stayed near the pour-off. Our last night's camp was again on rock shelves in the canyon bottom, and of course, not in the slot itself. We were again famished and tired and very grateful to have survived and enjoyed a strenuously amazing day. The full moon flooded the arroyo masking any stars that might have been peeking out as we finished dinner and settled into a good night's rest.

As the Canyon Wrens rang out their revelee it became apparent that none of this group wanted to leave the canyon. Although we had stated our intent to get a reasonably early start, it just didn't happen. After a relaxing breakfast and packing up, we sauntered upstream around 9:30am. Hiking out was mostly negotiating the boulders and rocks of the arroyo and following a faint trail along the stream bed. Soon we came to the ascent to the car, the 1500 vertical feet mentioned before. Having started from a faint trail, this time we were better able to follow the gentle-angled switch-backs of the trail all of the way up to the car. It made for an enjoyable (if still strenuous) and quite beautiful hike out. We got to the cars about 2:30pm.

The drive from the trailhead to Fredonia took about 2 hours. There we said goodbye to Mike and Cheryl, who headed north for a few more days of hiking before returning to Colorado. The rest of us instead drove the hour and a quarter to the Lee's Ferry Lodge at Vermillion Cliffs. A hot shower and a great dinner made for a sweet finale to a really fun and adventurous trip. On Friday it was an easy 10 hour drive home.

Having not lost nor killed anyone, I figured it was a very successful trip!

### **Some notes for future adventurers:**

- **Some notes on Hotels:**
  - The Quail Park Lodge in Kanab was ok, but not great. The beds were wonderful, the place was clean, but the shower didn't work, and they don't serve breakfast, just fruit. Next time perhaps the Quality Inn might be a better choice.
  - We chose the Lee's Ferry Lodge at Vermillion Cliffs since a couple of years ago we stayed at the Cliff Dwellers Lodge up the road, and wanted to try both. Next time choose the Cliff Dwellers as the place to stay. Rooms and dinner are better there, breakfast is better at Vermillion Cliffs.
- **Good things we did:**
  - We practiced ahead of time rappelling on a single 9mm rope and jumaring back up. This turned out to be a really good thing to have done.
  - We brought 2 full-length (50-60m) ropes for rappelling and ascending – we cut them to the lengths needed as we descended. We left these in place for our ascent and removed them once everyone was up.
  - We brought extra pro and 50 feet of 9/16" tubular webbing for backing up anchors and in case no bolts were found.
  - We brought extra rope and cord, along with extra slings and biners to use for pack hauling and anchors.
  - We brought 2 full sets of jumars. Ended up using both, both for ascending and for pack hauling.
  - We used a sling and a biner to connect packs to the zip line (see details below).

- We brought hiking shoes plus water shoes.
- Zip-off pants were very useful for much of the wading – but did need to come off for the deep pools.
- We brought gravity filters, a pump filter, and Aqua Mira. Used both kinds of filters on this trip.
- We brought extra food.
- We brought warm clothes, hats, and jackets.
  
- **Next time:**
  - Bring pulleys and plan for Z-pulley set-ups for hauling packs.
  - Bring alpine climbing harnesses rather than swami belts or regular climbing harnesses. (Had all 3 on this trip.)
  - Bring more extra biners, especially locking biners.
  - Bring a smaller group of people: 4-5 people would be best.
  - Canister stoves might be a better choice for this trip.
  - Train people ahead of time in backpacking for canyoneering – how best to pack for lowering packs, being wet, handling trekking poles during rappels and ascends, etc.
  - Bring dry-bags for carrying clothes through deep pools.
  
- **Notes on Zip Lines:**
  - Keep poles off of packs while hauling the packs. Send the poles up separately.
  - Anchor one end of the line at the bolts, while the other is held by the “anchor man” at the bottom on the other side of the pool. Need an additional person to hold the line high enough to ensure pack clearance over the pool.
  - Use a cord and a rope together, each connected to the pack biner on the zip line, to move the pack and biner back and forth along the zip line (rope to haul, cord to retrieve the biner).
  - Connect packs to the zip line by girth-hitching a sling through the pack shoulder harness straps, then clip a biner through the sling and onto the zip line. This gives enough freedom to get the pack over the lip once the top of the zip line is reached by the biner.
  
- **Notes on Finding the Trailhead:**
  - From highway 89A at the turn-off to road 109 (8 miles west of Fredonia), it is 42.3 miles to the Grand Canyon National Park boundary. Trailhead is not far beyond the boundary.
  - En route on road 109 it is 33.7 miles to a Y in the road, right takes you to Tuckup Canyon trailhead, left takes you to 150-Mile Canyon trailhead.
  - The road requires significant clearance – 4-wheel-drive vehicles are certainly advised. Both times we’ve been in this neighborhood cars have scraped bottom, especially the Subaru Outback, but even the Pilot hit bottom this year. The 4Runner seemed to do fine.