

My first visit to the Grand Canyon was with my wife, as a newly wedded couple several decades ago. I was so fascinated by the majesty and beauty of the vast expanse of red rock and by what must have been the immense power of the meandering river, that I told myself I had to experience this canyon and that river at closer proximity. I questioned myself over the years why I felt that way so compulsively. I am an ordinary man with no particular convictions in life. I take each day as it comes; my friends know me as a meek and risk-averting soul who has avoided every possible rollercoaster ride in theme parks. I am perfectly content and comfortable inside the confines of soothing conditioned air, talking elevators, and bluetoothed automobiles. So, why undertake a six-day-long adventure with my 19-year-old only son involving 190 miles of running the rapids on the Colorado River of the Grand Canyon National Park? Was it the pull of that mighty river, which beat all odds, and, perhaps, carved the rocks on its journey to meet its destiny? Or, was it the fascination of looking straight up at the very high peaks from the very bottom and trying to correlate which layer corresponded to the birth of my own species? Or, was it the perfect juxtaposition of such dry, hot, silent,



We tied up our boat and hiked towards a tributary known as the Little Colorado River, its turquoise blue waters starting to come into view.

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RAFTING IN THE GRAND CANYON



We made fire-lines to load and unload our waterproof bags into and out of the boat, rafted down the river during daylight, set up camps every night, and looked up at the brilliantly twinkling sky over the Grand Canyon on those moonless nights.

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from and back. The people in front were thereby, providing some protection against flipping. Also, most of the weight the boat carries is in the middle, contributing to stability against the rising front. The drive, at the helm, controls the speed and direction of the boat, giving some degree of protection on the rising water. The cold water lashes you with ferocity as you go up and down, front and back, and ASHFAQ HOSSAIN, as long as the rapid lasts. It is an adrenaline-filled ride; if you don't hold on to the ropes tightly, you can be thrown off, and the consequences are uncertain—you can hit the rocks, get stuck under them and underwater, or get thrown at any of the big solid cooler boxes on the boat, at speed. It suffices to say, for those seconds when you are on the rapid, your life is truly in your own hands.

While riding rapids one after another, I realised that each one was unique and had a distinct personality. Some had a big hit at the beginning, followed by multiple smaller hits, with another big one at the end. There were others with all possible combinations of such events. Some ran longer than others, some were shorter but steeper, some appeared to be relatively easy passes, but ended up having more churns and rolls than anticipated. The common theme was: they were all flowing fast and furious and all in the same direction.

The mountains around the river were tall and different from one another too—sometimes solid monolithic granite polished to perfection by sand, water and time; sometimes blocks of red sandstone simply reaching higher and higher. Yet like a closely-bonded family, they shared their common fate of rains, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, throughout countless millennia. Whether the mountains shaped the river or the river shaped the mountains, it felt that

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ultimately, the river was the palpable heart of this enormous landscape.

For a moment, I pondered if this river-ride was tantamount to my own life's journey, flowing fast and furious, each churning moment bearing its distinct hits and rolls—the pace smoothing between the hits but still speeding forward.

The camp on our first night was a sandy beach nestled within the red sandstone mountains of the Grand Canyon. We had covered about 30 miles on the river and were deep into the Canyon and had lost cellular connections with the outside world. The mountain across the river had a flat, vertical wall facing us. The river was not very wide at this point, therefore it was rather fast. As the sun set, people were lazily retiring to their cots, but the sky still held the remnant lights of the dying day. The fast Colorado River flowing just next to us had a constant roar, making it impossible to ignore its existence. Someone in the team walked up to the river bank and unbeknownst to anyone, started playing on a simple bamboo flute, at a high pitch. The flat face of the mountain across the river reflected the pitch of the flute and reverberated it multiple times. It was an unknown tune from a seemingly distant land and time but it wove a tapestry of human nature with the pristine nature surrounding us. The tune clearly emanated naturally from the heart of the player, through the natural bamboo, and seemed to travel through the pores of the rocks, before it vanished into the gleaming rising stars of the vast sky. It felt that it bade a glorious good-bye to a perfect day, in a perfect place, in perfect harmony.

We tied up our boat and hiked towards a tributary known as the Little Colorado River, its turquoise blue waters starting to come into view. With the red sandstone rock towering all around us, the light blue colour of this tributary stood in front of me, filling my heart with consummate happiness. I thought to myself those unforgettable words of Louis Armstrong, "What a wonderful world!" The water was also much warmer, travelling from the spring four miles upstream, over warm rocks, and made our dips terribly comfortable—as if we were immersed in total happiness. I thought that I found that sought-after utopia and did not want to leave. The reality in front took over me and I felt elated and rejuvenated to the core. My mind was telling me to stay immersed in the Little Colorado River forever. But soon, our guides, Steve and Lindsey, were calling us back and reality struck. There was home beckoning, college bills to pay, a supercomputer to build, and a comforter of goose-downs to slip under, at nightfall.

One of the days was designated as Waterfall Day. We hiked to several waterfalls, which cooled us off during the heat of the day. The teenagers jumped off the falls into the pools of water at the bottom. The fall at around Mile 100 was just the right height, the water was just the right temperature, and there was a perfect carving in the rock to stand under it. It felt like, in this



The mountain across the river had a flat, vertical wall facing us.

PHOTO: COURTESY

whole wide world, the best way to cleanse your body and mind. As the water hit you, you felt your muscles were invigorated; your inner-self was truly cleansed.

This spot was so memorable just for these reasons alone. Then there was a massively tall fall with huge volumes of water free-falling vertically. But the natural formation of the rocks at the bottom created a gale-force wind jutting forward as the water hit them. It was hard to get to the bottom of the fall against that forceful wind. It felt that the force of the water could chop you up into pieces. But the teenagers in the team braved these elements and went to the bottom of the fall and touched the rocks. The reflection of sunlight in the thick mist created almost a perfectly circular rainbow. I remembered that I had seen such a circular rainbow in the mist of the Niagara Falls many years ago, viewed from a certain angle on the Canadian side. Oh, what a wonderful world!

On the last day, after hitting a few more rapids, we bid farewell to our co-adventurers-turned-into-great-friends. There were helicopters to board to get back to 5000 feet, to an elegant, isolated ranch house with a landing strip. As we lifted off, the conditioned cold air of the capsule hit our faces—the first trace of many modern-day comforts which were awaiting us. As the blades chopped the canyon air, the river grew smaller and smaller underneath us the rapids morphed into white wisps on the flowing Colorado. But, this time, she was different. We had kissed the Colorado on her forehead and her rapids had caressed us within her own bosom in the only wild way she knew how to. The mountains

remained silent but graceful, saying in their own words, "Good-bye my friend! We will be here for you and for your generations to come. Remember, we are Nature. You and we, are all One!" After a shower in the ranch and a beautiful lunch, with still no signals on our screens, we charged up a tool that we would need again shortly, to keep us consumed in the days ahead—a cell phone.

On the late-night flight home, I was feeling cold. The air hostess said they didn't carry blankets for this flight. I was still in my camping outfit, wearing shorts and a flimsy t-shirt, dirty and dishevelled by now. The lady sitting next to me, whom I had not spoken a word to ever since the beginning of the flight, took off her long-sleeved shirt and placed it on my cold and bare legs. I was so taken aback by the gesture that my whole past life, inexplicably, ran through my mind in a flash. It immediately brought to the fore the moments of birth of my children I had nervously witnessed, the look on my wife's face when we first came to know that she was an expectant mother, my mother's last gasp of breath as she moved on to the life hereafter, and my father firing his shotgun at the river-birds in the only hunting trip I accompanied him as a child in a faraway land—all these visions with a subtle, yet assured, intone that I was truly fortunate to be alive. As we de-boarded, I wanted to tell her that I would never forget this gesture as long as I lived, but I could not. Among the magnificent wonders of nature that I witnessed in this trip, I paused and thought if it was the human form of it that conquered them all.

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