



Grand Canyon Field Institute, South Rim

Standing at sunset on the edge of Plateau Point, past and present stretch out before me. Trilobite tracks, formed 525 million years ago, lay imprinted in the Tapeats sandstone beneath my feet. During this introductory backpacking class, my classmates and I have, in a way, stepped back in time.

Nowhere do the layers of time stand more exposed than here at the Grand Canyon. Yet the

ABOVE AND BELOW: Backpackers make their way along the Grand Canyon's Bright Angel Trail. PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARRY LINDAHL

Canyon retains some mysteries. Time twists in unexpected ways. There are unexplained gaps in the geologic memory.

"Right above is the Supergroup," explains "Slim" Woodruff, our Grand Canyon Field Institute instructor. "The older rock is above the Tapeats. That's called an unconformity."

Tomorrow, we'll rest our backpacks on the Great Unconformity, in which a billion years of geologic time is missing.

"There's Zoroaster," Slim says, pointing out her favorite formation. At nearly every stop during our 3-day trek, Slim places the formation like a navigational star.

From there, we can also see our immediate past and future. Lights from the South Rim, which we left this morning, twinkle above us. Below us lies the Devil's Corkscrew, an imposing bit of trail we'll tackle tomorrow. Farther below, the Colorado River, normally green, appears to be the color of chocolate milk.

After hiking 4.5 miles with a full pack, I feel almost giddy. My classmates chatter happily and take turns snapping photos of each other.

"Give me some attitude," Marty goads from behind a pocket-sized camera.

Elaine, watching a cliff swallow dive and swoop, jokes, "He wouldn't be so spry if he had to walk down here."

As the sun slides below the Canyon rim, I wander off to sit by myself. Taking in the layers of geologic time, I wonder how I will stack up.

We silently reassemble as the stars begin to emerge. Lying on our backs, we pick out the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, Scorpio. The Milky Way stretches overhead like a veil.

Finally, as if on cue, we rouse tired bodies and head back to camp, our headlamps winking in the dark like a secret code.

Over the course of 3 days, we hike 22 miles between the South Rim and Phantom Ranch, camping for 2 nights at Indian Garden. Slim teaches us a little of everything: backpacking, history, archaeology, geology. We ford cottonwood-shaded creeks

and traverse a slot canyon lined with evening primroses and monkeyflowers. We pass mines and visit historical structures. We play on a sandy beach. Along the way, we glimpse mule deer, a comically defensive baby kingsnake, the tail end of a bighorn sheep. Slowly, I begin to understand the pull of the Canyon.

"It was worth any effort to get here," says Ron, who has already decided to come back.

Hiking out on the last day, photographer Larry Lindahl and I debate formations and geologic layers, and what our favorites say about us. A kind of "which tree would you be?" game.

I considered the possibilities. Would I be strong as Vishnu schist? Permeable as Kaibab limestone? Graceful as Coconino sandstone? In the end, I can't decide. And maybe I don't need to. My own path has yet to be set in stone.

— Kathy Montgomery

Information: Grand Canyon Field Institute, 866-471-4435 or www.grandcanyon.org/fieldinstitute

In the Neighborhood: El Tovar, 888-297-2757 or www.grandcanyonlodges.com; Cruisers 66 Café, Williams, 928-635-2445 or www.cruisers66.com; Grand Canyon Caverns, Seligman, 928-422-4565 or www.gccaverns.com

