Over the Rim and Down

“Aren’t you going to change into hiking shorts, Dan?” asked my brother, Jim. Sweat glued the shirt to my back, but I wasn’t going to put on shorts—not while hiking through a land of scorpions, Gila Monsters, and pink rattlesnakes. “No,” I answered.

We were on the South Kaibab Trail, beginning a four-day hike through the Grand Canyon. I had a good excuse for wearing long pants. Along the South Rim where we started, the nighttime temperatures neared freezing. Snow had fallen on the North Rim, 18 miles across the canyon. Halfway to the bottom, however, as we crossed the desert of the Tonto Plateau, summer ruled. But I still wasn’t switching to shorts.

Swarming Bees and Critter Poop

Park rangers had warned us that drought had dried up the streams crossing the Tonto Trail. “Dig in the creek beds for water,” they said. Well, here we stood, hot and dusty at a creek. We dug pits until the creek looked like a pockmarked desert moon—but no water. Frustrated and melting in the heat, I finally put on my shorts, pink snakes or not.

By day’s end, we were almost out of water. So, while Jim made camp at the mouth of a box canyon called the Hopi Wall, I went exploring. Toting a water-cleaning pump and bottles, I started up the canyon looking for a spring. At the canyon’s end, pink walls towered over me. Standing quietly, I heard bees. On the wall to my left hung a veil of flowering vines, and above the vines was a dark wet splotch. Water! Unfortunately, hundreds of bees swarmed around the vine.

I climbed as close as I could and began looking for a spot where water might collect as it seeped down the wall into the sandy soil. Sure enough, beneath a rock, a shallow impression in the sand held water. But yuck! Beside the water lay animal scat, otherwise known as poop. Hoping the purifier would do its job, I started pumping water into the bottles.

Dan and Jim’s hiking map

Looking down Windy Ridge on the South Kaibab Trail
A World on Many Levels

After hiking for three days, edging around a Gila Monster, and seeing few other hikers, we reached Hermits Creek. It was flowing with clean, cool water.

Jim discovered a waterfall high enough to crouch under. I shed my boots and dunked my aching feet in a pool enclosed by tall grass. Looking around and seeing no one, I peeled off my sweat-soaked clothes and began to clean myself. Then I glanced up. On a shelf of the cliff above me, hikers were relaxing at their campsite. Oh, well.

The next day, I saw another example of how life can exist in the Grand Canyon both above and below wherever you may be. We were climbing back up to the rim. As we paused at Hermit’s Rest, a shelter clinging to the upper canyon wall, we saw a bald eagle soaring below us.

I settled myself in the shade at Hermit’s Rest. My feet hurt. My shoulders ached. And I hadn’t spotted even one pink rattlesnake, which I would have liked to see. Really. Yet, perched among the rocks watching the eagle, I wouldn’t trade the view or the adventure of getting there for anything. I had found the most beautiful place on Earth.