

# Hiking the Grand Canyon Part One

Beth Lamie

I have hiked the Grand Canyon three times. Once was the Bright Angel Trail down and back in one day way back in the 80's. The next time was October 2017 when Cait was doing an FKT attempt of Rim<sup>3</sup> (South Rim to North Rim and back). The third time was June 2019, Cait, Mike and I did an overnight trip into the canyon and back. I write about the 2017 trip here.

## DOWN AND BACK IN ONE DAY

Because she didn't want anything to slow her down, we left at the butt-crack of dawn to get ahead of the mule trains. We had headlamps, but apparently I've learned nothing from my attempts at running and hiking in the dark and I never have a headlamp that is bright enough for long enough. My recommendation for headlamps is simple: no matter what type you decide on, PUT FRESH BATTERIES IN IT! Just because they seem fresh when you test it out doesn't mean they will stay bright for as long as you need them. But you already know that.



We spent the night before camping out in Williams, AZ and that was an experience in itself! We woke in the dark and headed out to the canyon. We had decided to use the Kaibab Trail out and back because that was the FKT that Cait was attempting. It is longer than the Bright Angel Trail and there are little to no water stops until you get into the canyon, so you have to carry all your water with you. Some people go down Kaibab and up Bright Angel or the other way around. The advantage of choosing to go out and back on the same trail is that you can hike from

your car and back. There isn't a ton of parking at the trailhead, but if you arrive when we did you will have your choice of spaces. We arrived at 4 a.m. (!) and Cait did a video recording of her start as is required for an official FKT, and we took off. If I'm being honest, I'll tell you that I was terrified until the sun came up. It's probably worse when I think back on it, but until the sun came up I tried not to let my mind think about Cait going over an edge, scorpions or snakes that might resent me being out there, Cait going over the edge, or Cait going over the edge.

Fortunately (and intentionally), we had chosen the date for the hike based on weather and the full moon. The advantage of the full moon is obvious - although you don't always get full light - it depends on which side of the canyon you are on as you wind your way to the bottom. The weather can be tricky. You want it to be warm enough that you don't have any ice on the trail, but most people don't hike to the bottom in the summer because it will be over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, so April and October are the most popular months to do the through-hikes.

The Kaibab Trail is more open than the Bright Angel Trail and it is almost 4-feet wide in most sections. It is not technical per se, but there is a fine layer of stone dust on the ground which can be a bit slippery. I wore Inov-8 Women's Road Claw 275 Trail Running Shoe. These are nothing fancy and they aren't very pricey, but they have a very grippy sole, and unlike a lot of trail-runners, they are not overly stiff. I really like them.

I should mention how we dressed for this hike. It was pretty chilly in the morning, so layered up. We had running shorts and top for a base layer. Over that we were each wearing 2XU hooded sweatshirt, compression socks and knit caps. In our packs we had a visor, sunglasses, sunscreen/lip balm, energy bars, Salt Stick, Nuun tablets and 3L of water in camelback bladders. This is a photo of each of us at the finish. I had put my sweatshirt back on at that point because I was waiting for Cait (I'll explain) and the temps fluctuate a lot at the canyon.



As I mentioned, Cait was doing rim cubed as a fastest known time so she would be climbing/running and she would do that solo. We estimated how long we thought it would take her (~11.5 – 12.5 hours for 46 miles), and our plan was that I would turn around at 5.5 hours so if she was faster than that, she wouldn't have to wait for me at the top. Because I was hiking and not running, I got to take a lot of photos:



I got into a nice rhythm and as the sun came up the temperatures rose. It's also warmer inside the canyon than it is at the top, so you'll find yourself rapidly shedding clothes. Because we started early, there were very few people on the trail with us. You'll also find a lot more people near the top than you do at the bottom since most people only hike part way down into the canyon. Obviously, the trail winds – that's why it's a hike and not a climb. But there are some spectacular sections where you feel like you are on the world's biggest winding staircase and you get glimpses of hikers above you and below you. And even though there are others on the trail, most people are very respectful and quiet so it's a nice 'commune with nature' feeling.



At one point during the hike, I heard a noise and caught a glimpse of something 'flying' near me. It was a bighorn sheep, and it was one of the most amazing things I've seen! I wasn't able to catch it in motion, but I can only say that this must have been the inspiration for Santa's flying reindeer. Once he landed you could hear a dozen people

exclaiming "oh wow" echoing through the canyon. Apparently, it's a rare site, so I consider myself lucky. I also did get 'caught' by one of the Mule Trains. These amazing beasts carry supplies down into the canyon. They are adept at negotiating the trails and couldn't care less about the hikers along the way. Even more amazing are the people who drive the mule train!



You will hear the mule train coming behind you and when you do, just pull over into the nearest inlet on the trail and let them go by. They move pretty quickly, and the trains aren't that long, so it shouldn't slow you down much. If you were doing an FKT however, it would not be easy to pass them.

Once you near the bottom of the canyon, you go over a bridge and walk along the Colorado River where the trail flattens out. Phantom Ranch is 7.5 miles from where I started and they have water, rest rooms and ICE!! There was at least one other rest room along the Kaibab trail, but this is the first time there was what one could properly call a rest area. Continuing on past Phantom Ranch you enter an area of the canyon called The Box. It is about 4 miles long and narrow, so it can get very hot. I didn't find it unbearable, and there were no people here, so it was magical.

Just before noon I reached the turn-off to Ribbon Falls where I would turn and head back, but before I did, I decided to leave a message for Cait to see on her return. Just like time I hung a 6-foot banner from the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor balcony of our hotel on Ali'i drive and chalked the sidewalk in front of it with good luck messages for her 1<sup>st</sup> IM Kona race, the message was not noticed. But this time I anticipated that and took a picture for later reflection.



The thing that everyone needs to remember when hiking the canyon is that the second half of the hike is the hardest, so ideally, you've left something in the tank. It's also much hotter on the return if you are coming back up the same day. As I got closer to the top I saw more 'day hikers' and people who really weren't in shape to hike but thought they'd try to hike a bit of it. I think it's these people who are really concerning to the rangers. Many of them don't even have a water bottle with them and aren't sure what they are getting into. I didn't see anything too concerning, but I knew many of these people were working harder than they had in a while.

Exactly 11 hours after I started the hike, I reached the top. Although Cait hadn't passed me, I looked around for her just in case, and then hiked back down a few hundred meters to a nice rock where I could sit and watch for her. Approximately an hour from when I finished, I could see Cait coming around one of the corners near me. She looked great (of course) but was happy to be almost done. We were both filthy and tired but thrilled with what we had done and happy to talk about our day. Cait hadn't done *the* fastest known time, but she had done *her* fastest known time and had done it well (almost twice my distance in just an hour longer!)

**CANYON STATS:**

	<b>Elevation</b>	<b>Distance from South Kaibab Trailhead</b>
South Kaibab Trailhead:	7260 ft	n/a
Ooh Ah Point:	6660 ft	1 mile
Skeleton Point:	5200 ft	3 miles
The Tip-off:	4000 ft	4.4 miles
Bright Angel Campground:	2480 ft.	7 miles
Ribbon Falls	3720 ft.	13 miles (Ribbon Falls is off the main trail)
North Rim	6800 ft	23.5 miles