

Havasupai, Arizona

A Garden of Eden in the Desert ©

By Amber Borowski

Perhaps it is a bit of a hyperbole to describe Havasupai as a "Garden of Eden". Sure, it is a stunning region of glistening waterfalls and verdant foliage that are especially luminescent under a full moon. But our group of intrepid hikers also encountered our fair share of serpents in this garden, which amounted to danger. Big danger. From the ferocious food-mongering stray dogs to the vile dwellings of doom known only as "the toilets"- to the deadly snare of the black hole in our campsite, to our leader's murky sleeping chambers that we reverently referred to as "the tarp".

Albeit risky, this trip to Havasupai amounted to high adventure. Located in the western reaches of the Grand Canyon, it is no surprise that this place is referred to as the Shangri-La of Arizona. Maze-like canyons wind through a dusty brown landscape and eventually descend upon an oasis of turquoise waters at the foot of four cascading waterfalls. A narrow green ribbon-Havasupai Creek-connects them all as it cuts through the red canyon floor. A heat-induced hallucination? Not quite-try Havasupai!

It had been years since I traveled into the backcountry with a large group, and our group of 11 was like no other:

Ray - Sadistic Leader(S.L.)a.k.a. Tarp Man
Travis - Little guy with the fast feet
Julie - Kodak spokesperson
Robert - Guy with the patience of Job
Melvin - Keeper of S.L.'s blackmail Panda stories
Preston - Lopsided backpack man
Brent - Maniacal barefoot trail walker
Layne - Packer of the kitchen sink
Trisha - Giggly newlywed
Marshall - Camp dog
Me - CEO of Moleskin, Inc.

We arrived at the trailhead early on a mid-April afternoon. The sky was thankfully overcast, providing a reprieve from the region's typically scalding temperatures. After unloading my gear, I stood for a moment on the canyon rim overlooking the parched desert before me. From here on the arid Hualapai Hilltop, the thought of Havasupai's green and azure paradise seemed downright whimsical.

Thirteen-year-old Travis led the way down the moderately steep 1.5-mile descent to the canyon floor, and then along the Hualapai trail, which twists 6.5 miles through a flat wash to the village of Supai. The convoluted canyon's steep and embayed cliffs dwarfed

us at every turn. This dramatic sweep of sandstone was punctuated by dizzying rock pinnacles that caused us to frequently pause for orientation and inspiration.

We were alone on the trail, except for the occasional mules hauling backpacks and mail through the wash. Ray assumed the role of Tour Guide Extraordinaire. "See that tree over there?" he asked. We all leaned forward expectantly, awaiting profundity. "That is a green tree . . . with purple flowers." His banal banter continued- from "orange flowers" to "flowing creek" to identifying graffiti on the walls as pictographic evidence that "white man was here." Julie (somehow) seemed impressed because she had her camera out at every turn.

Despite Ray's comic relief, the arid stillness of our narrow confines stifled at times and our packs weighed heavily on us. I looked sympathetically at Preston, whose loosely attached sleeping bag flopped with every step. And then at Layne, who in anticipation of his first backpacking trip since Boy Scouts, was overloaded with brand spankin' new gear. Regardless, everyone remained upbeat.

About 1.5 miles before the village, the canyon opened into a wide plain shaded by cottonwood trees was correct and Havasu Creek was no mirage in the desert. We finally arrived at Supai, home to more than 500 Havasupai Indians. The tribe, whose name means "people of the blue waters," has lived in this isolated country for centuries. They once farmed the fertile canyon floor each summer then moved to the plateau after harvest to gather abundant wild foods and firewood during the winter.

Though we already had a confirmed reservation, we still had to sign in at the Tourist Office and pay the rest of our dues (\$15 per person). Conditions in town were cluttered and unkempt path and stray dogs lapped at our feet. We wandered, checked out the rodeo grounds, café and general store, and then watched a chopper land. For a price, less adventurous trekkers can buy their way into this canyon. Then again, flights in that dilapidated helicopter looked like they held their own high adventure. The campground was another 2 miles from Supai, so we continued through Havasu Canyon to where the creek tumbles over the limestone cliffs of Navajo Falls. Less known than Havasu and Mooney Falls, this 75-foot waterfall branches out into a series of smaller waterfalls that cascade into a pool shielded by lush foliage.

Nothing could have prepared me for the sight of Havasu Falls, just half a mile from the campground. Pummeling 100 feet down travertine columns and shelves that were formed by limestone deposits, its blue-green color rivaled the jealous sky. Dusk only intensified the saturation of its brilliant waters and red-rock backdrop.

We paused for only a few minutes before continuing to the mile-long campground that was nestled along Havasu Creek. Most of the campsites were just off the main trail and a freshwater spring provided drinking water. We found an area that was somewhat secluded from the bustling crowds and proceeded to pitch our tents. That is, most of us pitched our tents; Ray had instead opted to take the easy and lightweight route by packing

a tarp for shelter. An hour after the rest of us had set up camp and eaten dinner, he was still struggling to secure the tarp as he recited his knots aloud. So much for ease of use.

The next morning I rose before the sun but after the stirring dogs. Following a brief mishap when I discovered the camouflaged hole in our campsite the hard way, I limped to the dreaded outhouse. On the way, I was struck by the desire to visit Havasu Falls. I had yet to see them in daylight, but the thought of witnessing them by myself before sunrise was appealing.

I wasn't disappointed. A light wind carried the falls' mists like dust through this mystical lagoon. I expected the colors to be dim in the early light, but instead they had caught fire when touched by dawn's cool brilliance. I tested the waters with my toe. The air was brisk and the water colder, yet adrenaline pushed me to jump in. It pulled me out even faster.

By the time I reluctantly made my way back to camp, sunrise had awakened the surrounding peaks and campers as dawn sketched patterns in the sky. Ray quickly discovered his food was missing. After searching all over the campsite we could only deduce one thing: the roaming dogs must have feasted on it the night before. Sympathetically, we thrust food his way. "Beware of dog" took on a new meaning in Havasupai's campground.

An hour later, drowsy newlyweds Marshall and Trisha emerged from their tent. The rest of us were discussing Tarp Man's great loss when Marshall plopped down at the table and innocently said, "Hey, I don't know whose this is, but someone left it out last night," and tossed Ray's bag of food down on the table. Laughter followed shock as we identified the dog to beware.

We had plenty of options for our day of exploration. We could: 1) Hike up the small side canyon to the east of Havasu Falls; 2) Follow another trail that can be reached by carefully climbing up a steep rocky area near the village cemetery along the west rim of Havasu Canyon that leads to Beaver Falls; 3) Hike along Havasu Creek another 8 miles to where it flows into the Colorado River; 4) Continue a few miles down Havasu Canyon and swim below Mooney and Beaver Falls.

We chose the last option and hiked to Mooney Falls, a hike of half a mile beyond the campground. Heralded as the most impressive of the area's waterfalls, they plummet 196 feet into a vibrant pool that is a popular swimming hole. Gazing down from the steep ledge, it takes little imagination to see how prospector Daniel Mooney (after whom the falls are christened) fell to his death in 1880.

With the aid of chains and iron stakes, we eased down the steep, precipitous trail that descends through the travertine's handiwork which resembled petrified waterfalls (or were we the petrified ones?). We were fascinated, awestruck and nervous as we passed through two tunnels that dulled the resounding drum of the falls. Upon reaching the

bottom, we jumped into the chilly waters. I marveled how Mooney Falls was as much a visual splendor as an experiential one.

We then continued along the creek's moist banks. Lush with cottonwood, willow, wild grapes and watercress, they provide a dense haven for hummingbirds, mallards and rock squirrels. The trail, though rough in places, offered a welcome sense of variety versus the flat wash that brought us to the campground. We climbed into the cliffs, passed by countless travertine pools and traversed the creek. After several crossings, a very frustrated Brent ditched his damp shoes and went barefoot, defying the sharp rocks and prickly cacti along the trail.

We discovered a swimming hole at our first river crossing and as a bonus stripped down to our bathing suits and took our turns swinging into the tranquil pool. Robert and Travis then opted to patiently wait while the rest of the group continued a few more miles to Beaver Falls. The largest of the travertine pools and small cascades, this area was more difficult to find and less frequented than the other falls.

When we finally headed back to camp, I marveled how I could feel such isolation and solitude while surrounded by so many people. Perhaps that was the magic of this canyon. It was only when I saw footprints meandering haphazardly along the trail that the presence of others was brought into my realm of serenity.

Dinner was uneventful. No missing food. No black holes. Just Melvin's entertaining blackmail stories, Trisha's contagious giggle and a smorgasbord of chow as we tried to devour everything to avoid packing it out the next day. And not to be forgotten was Ray's glorified chicken noodle soup. Oh, I mean delicious angel hair pasta dish. Even the adopted camp dog (the real one, not Marshall) was invited to partake of our goods.

At dusk, we made our way down to Havasu Falls and were surprised to find that we were alone. The hues of the ebbing sun and presence of our group changed this beautiful place that had seemed frozen in time that morning. It came to life as we played Frisbee, explored the filmy curtains of travertine that produced small caves at the base of the falls, and enjoyed one another's company.

I sat quietly for a few minutes breathing in my final scent of the spray before we headed back. Two torrents of water sliced down the canyon and bellowed over the falls. Perched between them a lone tree sat, defying erosion. Below, the subtle silver paints from nature's palette glazed the cliffs as a waxing moon fought for space in the clouds until it finally dominated the ebony sky.

As we walked back, the full moon set the trail aflame. "Look," someone commented, "It's almost like we have a spotlight on us!" I looked around at our group and it was true radiance made us glow like beacons in the desert... a Garden of Eden in the desert.