

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Havasupai – A Dream Come True

This week my better half Pat Wood writes about a trip she took on her own:

Havasupai has been on my “want to see” list for thirty years.

Havasupai means “people of the blue-green waters” and is the name of the Northern Arizona Indian tribe and their reservation. The Havasupai Indians have been in and around the Grand Canyon for 800 years, primarily farming. Now their primary industry is tourism.

Hulapai Hilltop, gateway to Havasupai, is in the middle of nowhere - only 35 “crow-fly” miles west of the Grand Canyon Visitors Center on the south rim, but it's 191 road miles, with access via Seligman. Visitors to famous Havasu Falls – on Havasu Creek, a tributary to the Colorado River - and other Havasu Canyon water wonderland delights, have to trek down eight miles on foot or horseback, or arrange for a helicopter flight.

I read about a five-day *Arizona Highways* Photo Workshop to Havasupai – with van transportation from Phoenix to the entry point for Havasu Canyon, helicopter flights into and out of the Canyon, five days camping in the Canyon, and a requirement that you needed to be in very good physical condition to handle the more challenging hiking and climbing.

I decided this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and signed up for Havasupai as my 65th birthday present to myself. I had a long screening discussion with one of the workshop photographers and she pronounced me physically fit for the trip. Yes, I would be tent camping for five days, but here was an opportunity to both improve my photography skills and satisfy one of my long time dreams!

Bob declined, saying that his camping days were long over.

The Photo Workshop was held in early May 2013. The trip was hosted by two of *Arizona Highways* renowned photographers; everything else was provided by three guides from Arizona Outback Adventures (AOA) who proved to be passionate about Arizona and the outdoors, and a “fountain of knowledge” about the area, the plants, and the animals.

There were eleven participants, including a couple of doctors, a lawyer, a few retirees, even a professional photographer - about half from Arizona (including good friends Marcia and Ted Fleming from Tucson) and others from states back East. It was one of those groups that meshed right from the beginning, enjoyed and looked after each other.

We left Phoenix early for the five-and-a-half-hour drive to Hulapai Hilltop. While our gear went on pack horses, we went by helicopter, a few at a time, until we all met up down in Supai village in Havasu Canyon.

AOA sets up a base campsite at the beginning of the season and maintains it from early March until early November. There are about a dozen tents that sleep two; AOA provides freshly laundered sleeping bags, sheets, and sleeping pads. There are camp chairs, two canopied table areas, an amazing kitchen setup with three cooking stoves. There's even a dishwashing station, complete with buckets, and on the end another bucket with a foot-operated water pump with an elevated faucet – used for hand and face

washing, also teeth brushing. There's also a shower, and five-gallon solar water bag for anyone who wants more than the creek bathing. Large coolers are hauled in, each with special "ice" packs from Australia that keep food frozen for several days.

The meals were just amazing, such as a Chinese dinner with beef and shrimp over rice, complete with appetizer and dessert. Full breakfast of blueberry pancakes with apples and sausage awaited us after our first morning shoot. And there were always snacks and the push to stay hydrated with water and Gatorade. So much for the thought that 10-15 miles of hiking and camp food would generate a bit of weight loss ... Not the camping of my childhood, this was luxury camping!

One of the biggest challenges was the hike down to Mooney Falls, a towering and breathtaking waterfall about 200 ft. in height. There is a really nice view of the falls from the top, looking down on the enticing pool into which the waterfall drops. The fun and scary part of this waterfall, though, is getting to its base. From the top of the falls, the trail continues down to two narrow tunnels built into the cliff that you have to squeeze through. When you emerge from the tunnels, you are looking straight down the cliff to the pool at the base of the falls. It is a steep descent. But it is really not too difficult, unless you are scared of heights (like me). There are sturdy chains to hang onto as you work your way down, and many footholds. The last segment of the descent is climbing down two very wide wooden ladders.

I didn't know if I could manage this, particularly with a backpack. With AOA guides leading, in the middle, and at the end, we all descended. Sometimes I could not see the next foothold, but the person below me, coached, "It's on your right so shift your weight to the left ... " One of the *Arizona Highways* photographers proudly commented that they usually leave 3-4 people at the top and we all had done it!

The Arizona Highway photographers were fantastic instructors. They taught me such things as how to use both aperture and shutter camera modes and compose better photos. They went through all my photographs and showed me what I should have done, or simply how to crop for a much better composition. They worked independently with each participant.

We had five days in Havasupai, frequently photographing while standing in Havasu Creek.

On the last morning we said good-bye to our campsite home and met up in Supai village for the helicopter ride back up to the rim. People are taken in turn, but the Indians have precedence and they kept showing up just as we thought our turn would be next. We finally had everyone out and were back in Phoenix in the early evening.

At home, over the next few days, I cleaned gear, downloaded about 300 pictures, and relished all the conveniences we take for granted. My body felt the effects of bruises, sore muscles and swollen feet.

I plan to make a photo book, but haven't yet decided whether it will be print or digital – but something worthy of my fantastic experience.

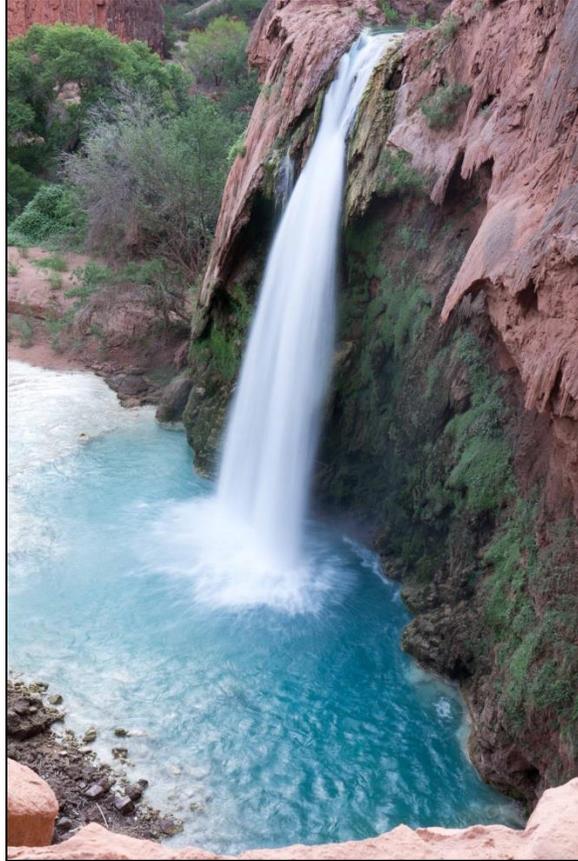
Most importantly, I finally made it to Havasupai!



The scariest part of the trip was this early morning descent to Mooney Falls.
(Courtesy of Ted Fleming)



These exceptional features were created by carbonate-laden mists from Upper Navajo Falls. As the water in the spray evaporates, the minerals are left behind. (Courtesy of Pat Wood)



Havasus Falls drops 95 feet into blue-green waters. The limestone formations around the falls keep changing over time. (Courtesy of Pat Wood)



Having survived the steep descent, I'm taking a rest in Havasu Creek below Mooney Falls. (Courtesy of Pat Wood)