



The Grand Canyon, 277 miles long and a million acres, receives about five million visitors each year. The canyon drops 6,000 vertical feet at its deepest point.

GRAND COLORS

Road trip to the Southwest offers bright world of rugged beauty

Story and photos by KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

The first glimpse of the Grand Canyon took my breath away. Yeah, I know it's a cliché, something all serious writers doggedly avoid. Timeworn clichés, however, originally became part of the vernacular because they describe a truth in an engaging new way. And this particular cliché fit this particular situation. Gazing out at the unending space, I actually stopped breathing.

I knew all the stats from the guidebooks. The Grand Canyon is 277 miles long and drops 6,000 feet at its deepest point. From rim to rim, the gorge spans 18 miles in places. Hiking to the bottom and back takes two days.

Somehow, the book knowledge doesn't prepare one for the vastness. No photograph could fully depict this massiveness of expanse or the hues of red, yellow and orange or the layers of sedimentary rock revealing a stony diary that exposes the canyon's geologic history for all to see.

As I gaped, a disturbing sight drew my attention. Three twenty-something men had stepped over the safety fence and were picking their way along a spur ridge that jutted out into the canyon. My legs felt gelatinous as I watched the men posing one at a time by the edge, one step away from oblivion, as the others snapped pictures with their smartphones.

Later, curious, I asked a Grand Canyon public affairs person how many of the more than 6 million people who visit the park annually die in falls. Vanessa Ceja-Cervantes said people definitely die each year by falling, but couldn't tell how many. She said a dozen-or-so people perish annually for various reasons. She said some simply misjudge their own fitness or the effects of hot weather, hiking down below the rim and struggling to hike back up. Some suffer cardiac arrest. A sign posted a little ways down the South Rim's Kaibob Trail shows a man in distress. The sunburned fellow is on all fours, vomiting onto the trail, his backpack and T-shirt shucked aside. Park Service employees have fondly nicknamed him "Victor Vomit." The text on the sign advises hikers

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Capitol Reef National Park in Utah offers rugged beauty to the 750,000 people who visit each year to ogle the park's domes, canyons, monoliths and jagged cliffs.



A visitor to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon poses for a photo after climbing over a safety fence. Most years, two or three people die after falling.



A lizard hangs out on a rock at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon.



Two turkeys wander near the road inside Capitol Reef National Park in Utah.