

The Event: a 50 Mile Rim-to-Rim-to-Rim crossing of the Grand Canyon

Why? To celebrate 50 years; for the Challenge; and - because it looked like a great Adventure.



The Report:

We started the 50 Mile R2R2R run at 5.00am on Friday 10 May 2013. A couple of us had a day or so to adjust to being at altitude and the heat, and at least one ultra-runner [JulieT from Hawaii] - didn't, but that didn't phase her a bit.... By arriving just the night before, I don't think her body even realized what was going on for a least a few hours and by then, we'd already started the run. At 5am, the temp was 39 degrees and very dry so it didn't feel cold at all. We took our pre-run photos and headed down South Kaibab trail - the first 7.4 mile leg - descending 4800 feet into the Canyon. The downhill was tough on the quads, lots of switchbacks and mostly steps, and for one of the 2/3 Julies it was tough as she was also working through some injury issues.

We reached Phantom Ranch in about 2 hours crossing the Colorado River on foot [yay!] and the first of only two bridge crossings in the bottom of the Canyon. It was so cool to see the hugeness of the canyon and exquisite views of everything on the way down. What doesn't sink in until later on...is just how many vertical feet you have dropped in a short span of time, in the beginning of the run. Yeah. Ex-actly. We headed into the next leg to run to Cottonwood Campground, a 6.8 mile leg with a 1500 ft elevation gain. This is where it started to sink in, for me, at least. The temps were going up, and so was that constant, slight uphill run for the entire section. It was tough already, because the legs were slightly beaten up by that big drop over the first 7 miles. The trails were easy by comparison - very well



groomed and relatively smooth, so it made for nice cross country running. [Sidebar: we were informed on this trail that a local ultra-runner was attempting the speed record on a double crossing that day. Not sure of his name because we didn't get a chance to ask when the blur flew past us, but he looked very comfortable at that point. A beard and running shorts was all there was of him. We never did find out if he'd broken the record or not.*] The Two Julies had moved ahead by this point, which, I knew was a good thing -they run at a faster pace and are very closely matched. DC-Cheryl and I settled into a comfortable run-walk pace, I wanted to keep it consistent at a level that I felt good to last. But by the time we got to Cottonwood, I was already having some pain in my legs, and some early stage stomach issues. I think the heat also very quickly started to have an impact. I knew that we could have done the full crossing at that point, but I also knew that I was looking at an incredibly hard and long slog to do it. We all know it, when we reach that decision point and you have to make the Smart Runner call, versus the X factor that can lead to disastrous results. I wanted to be successful in at least a 50K run of the Canyon, without having to call in the sag wagon or another form of retreat. In addition, based on the research I did for this run, I knew that once you commit past Phantom Ranch, there is only 1 way to get yourself out of there and back to the Start, and that is on foot. If you climb the 7 miles to North Rim, you cannot make any easy way out if you need to bail. You have to crawl back. There were enough X factors at that point that I knew it was a smart call to stick with the backup plan of run the 50K and still make a crossing and back of the Canyon. The 50K covers 2/3 of the Canyon and back, and is still a decent adventure.



So, we made the hard call, turned at Cottonwood, and headed back, approximately 16 miles of run still ahead of us, and a climb out of the Canyon on Bright Angel Trail that would be the 'gift' I would remember from this run. The 2 Julies advanced way ahead of us at this point and I was glad to see that they had a good pace. DC-Cheryl and I settled into our consistent pace and comfortably got to the 2nd bridge crossing of the River [yay!] after Phantom Ranch.



Then we began 'The Climb', and at this point... again I knew it was a smart call to turn at Cottonwood. The climb back up was - interesting - to say the least. I remember reading in one article prior to the run that running the Canyon is like 'running a mountain upside down' - that you have to do 'The Climb' - last. So, after running a short stint in deep soft sand at the river's edge [afterwards, every one of us noted it and said 'wtf was that sand all about ?!?!'], we started heading up the 8-9 miles of steep vertical climb back up to 7000 ft. I love to climb, love the mountains, I'm okay with altitude, but the heat... well, that's a different story. I wasn't mentally prepared for the super steep climb in 90-100 degree desert heat with little to no shade, AFTER running 23 miles. Talk about having your ass handed to you.... yep} I bonked big time. And, got hit by stomach issues again which is now resolved thanks to speaking with a very knowledgeable ultra-trekker I met out on the trail named Lisa . Basically – the mix was too much sugar and synthetic supplements, and not enough natural foods over the course of the run. The good news is, it's fixable ;-). So, this is the part that ALL those ultra-runners stories' I'd read before the run - were talking about. It was beautiful, climbing up, and seeing all of the Canyon, the rock faces, the wide

open views, the birds [nb. when was the last time you saw birds flying BELOW you-?!? That's some cool shit.], and the glory... on foot. Every inch of it. Because I was inching most of the way back. It took us nearly 2 hours to go 5 miles to get back to Indian Garden - a much needed water stop, and a rest break. And then the last 5 miles of gruel...this is what made it all worth it. This is where, when you are feeling like crap... you have to dig in and just keep it going. DC-Cheryl and I crawled along, sadly, at a very slow pace as I was struggling with heat and trying not to hurl on the trail. I figured that would make it worse. I had a hard time keeping anything down, even water, which is the most essential ingredient you need to do this run.

So, we plugged away, and finally got to the Top at just after 5pm [and damn happy to see one of our very committed crew members and photographer, Dave... who waited 2 hrs, patiently, for us to get there]. We took advantage of all the rest, water, and shade breaks on the way up which are roughly 1.6 miles apart. For each sector, it is about 1200-1500 feet elevation gain, so it is no shit climbing all the way... uphill, with little to no breaks in the switchbacks. Which, I normally love - but on this day, it was a fight. Finally we reached the top and were happy with what we'd accomplished on the day. The 2 Julies had finished about 2 hours ahead of us - congrats to them, and I think they did a superb job of busting it out to the end. It took DC-Cheryl & I 12 hours to complete this run, and yeah -- I loved it and was also happy with the finish even though it was Plan B. [what have I always said about 'Plans'.... remember San Diego 100...!?!] And frankly, as the local ultra-trekker, Lisa, whom I met on the way up and had a great discussion with about nutrition and stomach issues - said to me "it will still be there next time", and she had complimented us on what we had accomplished that day.

In summary,

We managed to run about 2/3 of the Canyon Rim Crossing and the return, for a total of 50K (31 miles) and 10,000ft elevation. It was an Amazing place to run and it's always so cool to see everything on foot. Conditions were about perfect on the day. Best lesson learned out of it? You can't expect to show up in a place like that and kick ass if you can't train in the mountains in those conditions and at altitude. ;-)

Simple logic. It wasn't lack of training or being prepared - to do well in mountain running, you have to train like a mountain...! Overall, we did really well. I am a little disappointed at not making the full 50M, but then, I am 100% positive, that many have attempted and not been able to complete it on their first try either.

And, as usual... I'm already thinking about *that next Adventure*.

The Stats:

X factors: Desert temps, no humidity, wind, terrain, and effects of altitude.

START:

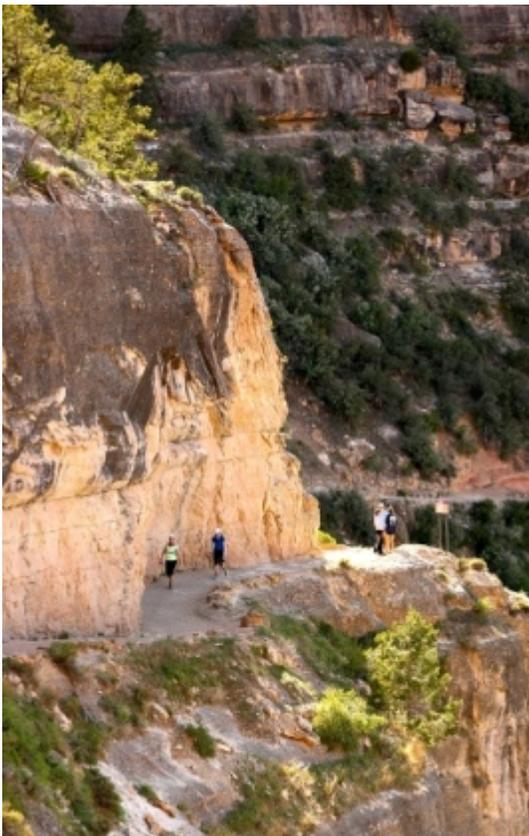
South Kaibab Trailhead [Elev 7,260] Friday 10 MAY @ 0500

Trailhead to Phantom Ranch 7.4 miles [elev change -4780]

Phantom Ranch to Cottonwood Campground [@ 4,080ft] 6.8 miles = [elev change +1534] @ 1030am

.....
Cottonwood back to Phantom Ranch 6.8 miles = [elev change -1534]

Phantom Ranch to Bright Angel Trailhead/Lodge 9.9 miles = [elev change +4314] ~ 90 -100 degree heat / started ascent @ approx 12pm]



Bright Angel Trailhead - Final elevation 6,860ft
FINISH Friday 10 MAY @ 5pm / 1700

[*disclaimer: this is trail math, people]

Total Elevation Gain/Loss ~
10,000ft [loss = 6,314 gain = 5,848 –
start/finish at different elevation points.]

Total miles 31 / 50 kilometers

So I've essentially checked this one off
the Bucket List for now.... and I know I'll
be back to give it another go and do the
whole thing next time. ;-) Or maybe it
will be a great excuse to make repeat trips to the Canyon...

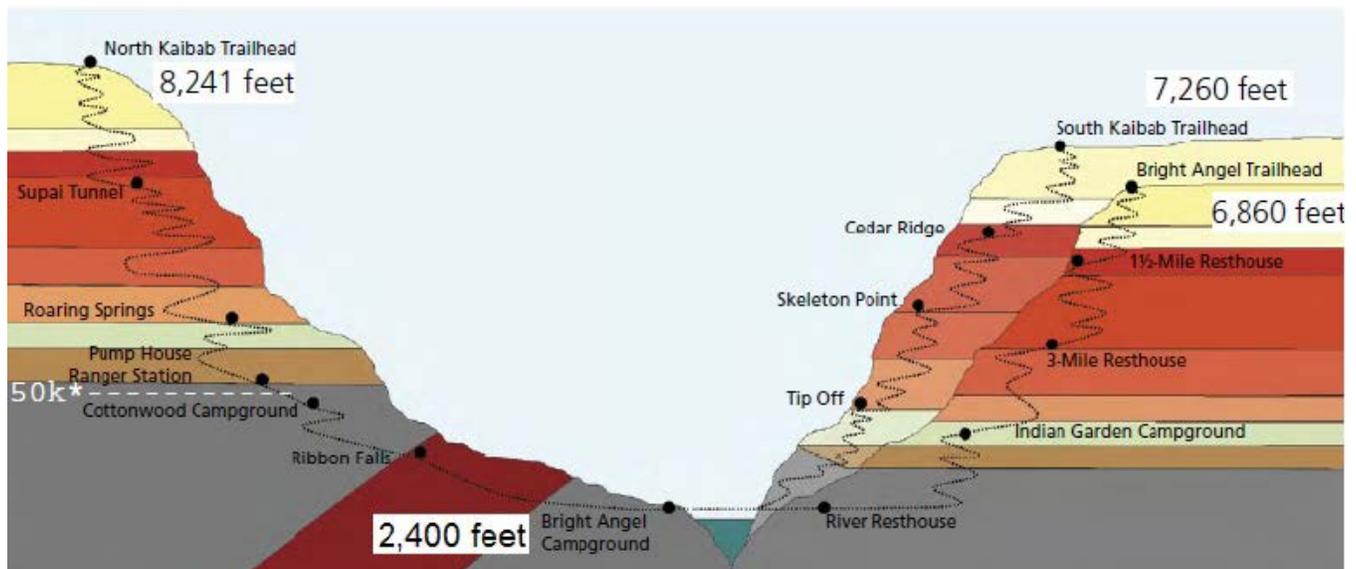


Final note: I'd like to thank the best running crew and ultra-friends Julie T, Julie D, Cheryl Y, and our supporters John, Stephane {aka French Fry} and Dave for joining in the adventure and helping to celebrate a milestone.

Thanks guys and I hope to see you for the next adventure soon.

Trippy

PS. JulieT since informed me that "the bearded guy is Rob Krar & he blew away the record that day:
Rob Krar shares the story of his Grand Canyon Rim-to-Rim-to-Rim FKT. He ran the 42 miles and 10,000'+ of climbing in 6:21,
taking 32 minutes off the record! <http://i-m.fr/KrarR2R2R-FKT>



All photos by Dave Collette except a) stairs – source the internet; and Canyon graphic – source NPS.gov.