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## Grand Canyon National Park

By Dennis Gaub for KOA Kompass

Grand Canyon National Park constantly ranks near the top of lists of great places to visit in the United States.

And there are good reasons for the perpetual popularity of the 1.2-million-acre northern Arizona wonderland that was designated a national monument in 1908, a national park in 1919 and a World Heritage Site in 1979.

Geology provides the top draw for many of the five million-plus visitors drawn to this massive park each year.

According to the National Park Service, the much-studied Grand Canyon "offers an excellent record of three of the four eras of geological time, a rich and diverse fossil record, a vast array of geologic features and rock types, and numerous caves containing extensive and significant geological, paleontological, archeological and biological resources."

If you're looking for a textbook case of arid-land erosion, you'll find it here.

A few statistics tell the Grand Canyon story. It centers on the Colorado River, which has carved a gorge:

- 277 miles long
- 4,000 feet deep on average
- 6,000 feet deep at its maximum
- 15 miles across at its widest

"It's one big ditch," says Montana snowbird Jim Held. Held and his wife, Willie, have used recreational vehicles to winter in southwestern Arizona for years. But, as they were returning home in late March after their latest sojourn, the Heds visited Grand Canyon for only the second time, the first having been in 1955.

Recalling the recent outing, Jim Held said he was impressed by the park's shuttle system, which uses natural gas-powered vehicles to reduce pollution. "It's very efficient, very good. It's the only way to move a lot of people" in a congested setting, he said.

Willie Held said she enjoyed seeing the interaction of light and shadows on rock formation colors, depending on the time of day. Various minerals, most notably iron, produce the famed vivid colors -- shades of red, yellow and green -- seen on the canyon walls.

Besides sightseeing at numerous outlooks, visitors can enjoy Grand Canyon through:

- **Day hikes.** Be sure to read [tips](#) and observe [precautions for summer hiking](#) from the National Park Service. Hikers are warned about hazards that result from "extreme heat and some of the steepest and most rugged terrain on Earth. Each year, scores of unprepared hikers, lured by initially easy downhill hiking, experience severe illness, injury and death from hiking in the canyon." The park service advises planning trips to avoid hiking in the hottest part of the day. Also, hikers are advised travel on inner canyon trails may be limited to early morning and evening during periods of high temperatures.

- **One-day raft trips on the Colorado River.** [Options](#) include all day, white water trips in the western end of the canyon and half-day smooth water trips from Glen Canyon Dam to Lees Ferry.
- **Trips on the river offered by commercial outfitters.** The National Park Service has issued permits to [more than a dozen concessionaires](#) ; they provide trips that take 7-18 days using craft-paddle rafts, motorized rafts and dories.
- **Private, or non-commercial, river trips.** Applicants are placed on a waiting list for a [limited number of permits](#) . The list has grown to more than 8,000 people, and more than 1,000 people are added annually. So, as part of the Colorado River Management Plan effort, the park service has put a hold on adding names to the noncommercial river permit wait list. A decision on whether to continue the waiting-list process is expected by the end of 2004.
- **Mule trips and horseback rides.** [Mule rides](#) down to the Colorado River and back up to the South Rim take two days. They may be booked up to 23 months in advance; slots fill up early. Shorter horseback rides, lasting one to four hours, are available.
- **Air tours.** Scenic air tour operators, based outside of the park, offered fixed-wing and helicopter tours of the Grand Canyon region daily. [Several companies use Grand Canyon Airport](#) , just south of Tusayan, as their base. Other operators are based in California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona.

RV visitors will find three nearby KOA Kampgrounds, at Seligman, Flagstaff and Williams.

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