

Into the GRAND



Greg and K.J. riding the tube on the Grand.

BY JUSTICE GREG HOBBS

Grandson K.J. and I say goodbye to the Navajo Teachers at Canyon de Chelly and head for the Hopi and the Grand. It's the last week of July 2010, and we're into the "monsoon" season on the Colorado River Plateau.

Ancient and weathered, the three Hopi mesas bear into the sky the longest continuously inhabited villages within the continental United States. We pull into the only place visitors may stay—the Cultural Center on Second Mesa—and check in with our Hopi guide, Val Northrup.

She quickly says, "Hurry on over to Third Mesa; there's a 'Going Home' dance at Hotevilla!"

Kachinas are sacred beings who live half the year in the San Francisco Peaks to the west above Flagstaff. The other half, they rotate dancing in the plazas of the various host villages. As a visitor, you can never be sure whether you will ever see a dance, but book a guide through the Cultural Center and you may be able to get in. Though you may have a chance to observe, you may never, ever take a photograph of them.

K.J. and I climb a wooden ladder, shaped of long poles and cross-bar limbs, onto a crowded rooftop. On the opposite

rooftop, children clutching miniature dancers carved of cottonwood root are playing a fleet game of tag. Below us, counter-clockwise, the Kachinas are circling! Drums beating, in perfect unison they dance, huffing and rattling, spruce boughs hanging from their woven belts. Women move around them clockwise, sprinkling corn pollen from small pouches onto glistening limbs.

Since March, they've been dancing for rain. In the recent weeks, their prayers have been answered. Dryland Hopi corn is firming into ears. Now, they joyously celebrate their going home to the peaks. The dance ends with a thrilling rush of wind—like a storm sweeping in—from the lungs of sonorous men whose masks once again permit the spirits to take residence within.

To the west, the San Francisco Peaks glow sunset crimson. Back at the Cultural Center, we feast on blue corn fry bread and lamb stew. The next morning, we walk with Val into sandstone bluffs etched with fantastic ancestral Pueblo petroglyphs on cliff faces. After winding back, forth, up, and down the three mesas by car, she leads us on foot into several ancient villages.

At Oraibi, a Hopi woodcarver approaches K.J. with the corn maiden kachina that will be going home with him.

KACHINAS

Spirits of the invisible
forces of life,
dwelling in the lofts
of the San Francisco Peaks,
their sacred home
half the year

In the kivas and the plazas
spruce bough, deer horn,
eagle feather, corn ear,
turtle shell rattle,
become visible
the other half.

Carved of cottonwood root
children play rooftop
Hummingbird,
Mouse Warrior,
Corn Maiden,
Wolf

Circle countering
circle, the women sprinkle
corn pollen blessings
on the perfect beat
of their glistening
limbs.

Northwest through Tuba City in the Navajo Nation, we journey through the Echo Cliffs and Cedar Tree Hills, dropping into the great rift the Colorado River fits its will to. Passing over Navajo Bridge, we overnight at Cliff Dweller's Lodge beneath, the banded Vermilion Cliffs, earth-red and sky-pink.

K.J. and I strew our bunks with seven days worth of clothing and camping gear we each must compress into no more than 30 pounds. We have rented from our outfitter, Hatch River Expeditions, sleep kits complete with tent, ground cloth, sleeping bags, and pads.

This will be a 187-mile motorized raft run through the gut of the gorge to Whitmore Wash, where we'll be lifted out by helicopter. There will be two rafts traveling together on this journey.

K.J. is six weeks short of 14. An agile, tall talker. Soon enough, everyone will think him 18. At the Lee's Ferry launch site, we meet our guide and captain, J.P. Running, his crew man Spencer,

and eight other passengers who will start the trip here. Halfway down, we'll pick up 16 more voyagers who will hike down from the South Rim Village to meet us at the Phantom Ranch Bridge.

Into the Grand, strangers become dunking buddies in less than half a day. After loading our "night gear" onto the rafts, where it's lashed under tautly drawn waterproof tarps, we smooth through open vistas on quiet water. A mountain sheep family grazes along river right. We visit.

Companions on the first half of our trip include a Belgian and a Frenchman, a newly married couple, crew man Spencer's mother, and three older men who do an annual adventure trip together.

J.P. delivers basic safety instructions: No one on the boat any time without life vest fully buckled; you can ride the raft's outrigger tubes if you like; for the really big slams, you must have your backs to the lashed bundle and your "butts to the board." The "bath tub" low in the very prow of the boat qualifies as a prime place anytime. Or you can sit high in the "tea room" at the center of the boat, formed by a series of ingeniously packed gear and food boxes.

Mid-afternoon on the first day, most of us astride the tubes, we are baptized in a series of white water rapids called the Roaring Twenties. We shiver into a stiff headwind. Rain as hard as hail strikes us.

A cross-canyon blow inflates the tents we struggle to pin down like balloons. We run around helping each other pitch, and wait out a soaking rain. The crew prepares a steak dinner under an awning they've rigged over a blowtorch gas bottle, grill, and serving tables.

The next morning we wake to a cloud so low it hugs the river. Come launch time, it hasn't lifted and we embark into a landscape as unfathomable as Conrad the able seaman wrote of Asian oceans in "Lord Jim" and "The Secret Sharer." I can hear the river gurgling around our vessel and see nothing but J.P., standing in the motor mount well, feeling his way downstream on nothing but the intuition from two decades of Grand Canyon running.

Side hikes take us high above the

river to ancestral Pueblo ruins, petroglyphs, and a cave that pokes a hole through the sandstone wall just wide enough that you could slip yourself all the way through to oblivion. We travel a trail of embedded trilobites and gastropods up another slick rock tributary



K.J.'s Corn Maiden in a Hopi cornfield.

wash.

That night, the stars come out and dance about our tentless sleep out on the beach. The trio of adventure men have adopted my grandson. The first, a retired Air Force pilot, the second a navigator who flew with this pilot many times, the third a cousin of the pilot. They tell K.J. exotic hunting and flying stories. In turn, he spins their yarns into various "Survivor" competition scenarios for a future Colorado River trip, if J.P. and Hatch will agree to it.

Upland rains have turned the Little Colorado from turquoise to a churning reddish chocolate brown, the native load-bearing color characteristic of the mainstream Colorado. Despite the sediment stopper-effect of the Glen Canyon Dam upstream of Lee's Ferry, flash floods continue to make the Colorado the mud man it wants to be.

We glide past the sacred Hopi salt mines on river left just below the confluence. From last month's Navajo Teacher's workshop on the South Rim, I recall one of our instructors saying how culturally rich this stretch of the river is. Navajos, as well as Hopis and ancestral Pueblo people before them, collected salt from these seeping walls. Tribal elders, herbalists, medicine men, and women of eleven Colorado River tribes honor the canyon's blessings.

Opposite the Tanner Trail, we climb high above the north side of the river to ancestral Pueblo ruins that look out on floodplain cornfields of a thousand years ago. A boulder shaped like a regal arm chair carries the adornment of ancient symbols.

We have a long wait at Phantom Ranch for the hikers who will join our voyage. It's blazing hot. Luckily, there's a clear cold pool in Bright Angel Creek that keeps us sitting cool. The hikers straggle in, exhausted, some of them nine hours en route from the South Rim, dangerously dehydrated and favoring injured knees. I think, what a hard way and what a loss! The six-and-a-half days we will have on the river barely seems enough and our new friends have only half of that.

We welcome and minister to them. A family of four, including a teenage girl and boy, join our boat. Truly, now our ark bears the ages. We enjoy seeing the three young people revel in the smack of the waves and hearing them holler gleefully as they jump from promontories into side pools of crystal clear water.

The next three days are a glory of running the really big rapids, including the granddaddy dilly of them all, Lava Falls. We have daytime side hikes to Elves Chasm and Deer Creek Falls, but we cannot put in for a hike up Havasu Creek because of a flash flood pouring through that drainage.

A few at a time, we board the helicopter at Whitmore Wash, for the hop out to the Bar 10 Ranch on the North Rim. Saying goodbye to each other, we fly light planes back to Lee's Ferry or Las Vegas.

Crossing back on Navajo Bridge, K.J. and I head home to Colorado, stopping off at brother Will and sister-in-law Jean's place in Durango. They've run the river 10 times in their own oar boat! If you want to preview or relive your own run into the Grand, read Will's young adult novels "Downriver" and "River Thunder." **D**