



AAC Publications

Grand Canyon National Park, Keyhole Ridge

Arizona

WE DEPARTED LEE'S FERRY on November 24, 2017, seven people in two boats. This would be my fifth trip down the Colorado River through Grand Canyon. It had been seven years since my last, and though I had rafted little in the meantime, my old friend and river sensei, Levi Jamison, entrusted me with his vintage 18' Domar hypalon raft, fully rigged for the 29-day voyage.

Early in the trip, under the auspices of a national park research permit, we pursued the directive of mapping unexplored caves, primarily those accessible only via technical climbing. During a three-day layover, Andrew Chandler (our trip leader, and a talented cave surveyor) and I opened several pitches (up to 5.9 A2) accessing numerous caves, mapping roughly 800' of passage, and leaving no fixed gear other than bits of webbing for rappel. The style and setting were exotic, but as the permit bears a non-disclosure agreement, the location of these routes cannot be reported (caving in GCNP is by permit only).

Any river trip through Grand Canyon presents endless climbing possibilities, but downstream logistics often make for limited opportunities. As we continued the float, I bided my time, mindful of keeping the raft upright and waiting for the conditions to align: a willing partner, a reasonable objective, and a layover day. The bow was drawn on December 7, at Keyhole Camp, river mile 140.

At dawn, Ethan Holt and I meandered up the Bright Angel shale on the downstream side of 140 Mile Canyon towards a prominent ridgeline through the limestone layers above. We dodged right around the first band of Muav limestone, then soloed a chimney through the next band to a broad terrace. The bulk of the Muav layer was above us, steep and chunky, and we contoured right until locating a feasible line. We tied in and climbed this layer in two long pitches, up to 5.9, tiptoeing through shattered junk to connect hand cracks and chimneys.

At another terrace, beneath the Redwall limestone, we traversed left, back to the ridgeline proper. We edged up horizontal chert veins in a zebra-striped chimney. A steep plaque on the next pitch offered the best climbing of the route: a thin crack through Velcro-textured black rock. The climbing rambled from there—loose 4th class with bits of 5.this-and-that. Crimp the occasional fossil. Watch the river below. Mind the rubble. We simul-climbed a long pitch to the rim of the Redwall.

The canyon unfolded above us. We considered the next layer, but instead packed the gear and hiked south along the Redwall terrace toward a hopeful aperture of descent.

Wild burros, long feral remnants of old miners' stock, have stomped an incredible trail system along this terrace, making for a pleasant stroll to Keyhole Natural Bridge. There we expected to find descent anchors, but a thorough search revealed nothing so we slung a block and rappelled into the pit behind Keyhole Bridge. Caves funneled into a slot canyon, which we followed briefly to the edge of the Keyhole.

We threaded pockets in the limestone about 15' back from the lip. A hundred feet below was a large murky pool. I stripped to my undies and rappled in. Hugging the side of the pool, I felt my way along a sloping mud bank, submerging chest deep before bouldering out the far side with dry hair. After considerable bull-jive, we managed to rope-shuttle our gear over the water. Ethan doesn't wear undies,

so he entered the Keyhole naked in his harness.

Back in dry clothes, we lingered in the Keyhole for a good while. Then we draped the rope over a sandstone boulder wedged in the slot and simul-rappelled, counterweighted across it. We walked down canyon through dusk, until we were by the river again, around a campfire with friends serving us cocktails and hot dinner.

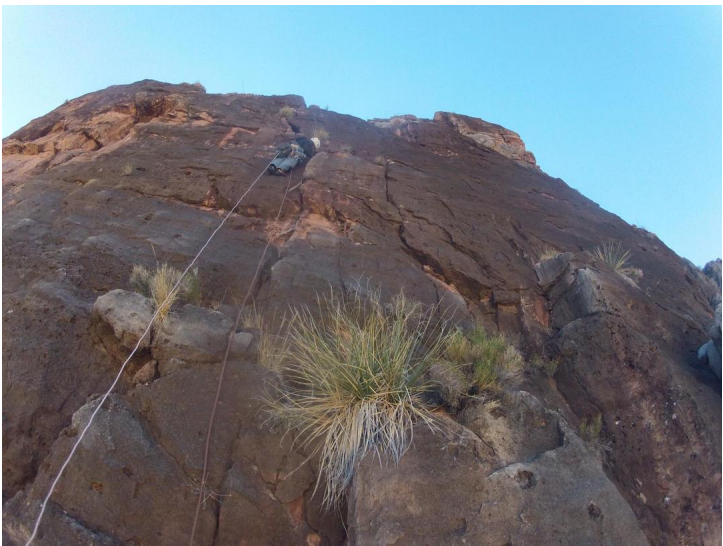
After the trip, I learned from the local canyoneering cognoscenti that the Keyhole had seen one known descent, in the mid '90s, when Cecelia Mortenson and friends descended to the river, then returned out their fixed lines. If the climb had been done, we couldn't tell, and we left it as such. Keyhole Ridge (ca 1,000', 5.9).

– Cole Taylor

Images



Cole Taylor pauses between rock layers to scout the next pitch on the Keyhole Ridge (ca 1,000', 5.9). He and Ethan Holt climbed this likely new route during a raft trip through the canyon, leaving no fixed gear on the climb and making the likely second descent of the canyon through Keyhole Natural Bridge on the way down.



Cole Taylor climbing through the redwall limestone layer during the first ascent the Keyhole Ridge (ca 1,000', 5.9) in Grand Canyon National Park. This pitch climbed a thin crack through Velcro-textured black rock, the best climbing encountered on the route.



Cole Taylor approaching the Keyhole Natural Bridge after making the first ascent of the Keyhole Ridge (ca 1,000', 5.9) in Grand Canyon National Park. The Keyhole is a popular and well-known landmark at river mile 140 on the Grand Canyon. Taylor and Ethan Holt made the climb and descent during a layover day on a river trip.



A naked Ethan Holt making the rappel into a large pool below the Keyhole Natural Bridge, above Keyhole Camp on the Grand Canyon. He and Cole Taylor made the likely second descent of this canyon after making the first ascent of the Keyhole Ridge (ca 1,000', 5.9) during a layover day on their river trip.

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