

It Takes A Community to Hike a Jen

Kanab Creek Backpacking Trip – 7 days in the wilderness of the Grand Canyon

Warning: I will be talking about bodily functions and medical and mental health issues in this writing. Also spiders and other scary things, so be forewarned, friends.

Forward

This is the hardest thing I've done in my adult life. There have been a few hard things, especially of late. But this; this chosen adventure was the biggest mental, emotional and physical challenge I've faced since Outward Bound as a teenager. For those unfamiliar with Outward Bound, here is the first paragraph description on Wikipedia.

"Outward Bound (OB) is an international network of outdoor education schools that was founded in the United Kingdom by Kurt Hahn and Lawrence Holt in 1941. Today there are schools in 33 countries which are attended by more than 250,000 people each year. Outward Bound International is a non-profit membership and licensing organisation for the international network of Outward Bound schools. Outward Bound helped to shape the U.S. Peace Corps and numerous other outdoor adventure programs. Its aim is to foster the personal growth and social skills of participants by using challenging expeditions in the outdoors."

When I was 14 years old I went to the Voyageur Outward Bound School in Ely, Minnesota and set out on a 23-day group canoe trip into the wilderness of Minnesota. I had been to this area before with my parents as a child doing canoe trips as well, where we would load heavy, canvas Duluth packs with garbage bags labelled as "Monday/lunch" and "Thursday/breakfast" containing all the components to each meal. We also carried sleeping bags and pads to insulate us from the ground, tents to protect us from insects and weather, clothes, a few books and two aluminum canoes, which would carry all of us and our stuff as we paddled through peaceful boreal forests. We would pack the car, park it, gather our things and eventually head off into the wilderness of the Boundary Waters for a week. No phones (this was the 80s, people), no satellite stuff...just me, my family and the great outdoors.

I am so grateful to have been introduced to wilderness as a child. Not car camping, though there's nothing wrong with that. Wilderness holds something special. I have a hard time describing it. It's a calm and a buzz all at the same time. It's life EVERYWHERE and I am part of it. It's sitting still and allowing the natural world to go on around you so that you can inhale a small piece of its energy and take it with you back to the real world.

"In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, -- he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me" — Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature

I was changed by that first OB experience. I was lifted to another level of humanity by going through such a challenging experience so young. Many others have had their own personal experiences from Outward Bound, but I can safely say that mine was life changing. I became a better person. I became more adept at leading when it was appropriate and, conversely, being a part of a group when that was more appropriate. I had learned and honed new leadership skills. The will and determination I learned by pushing my boundaries stayed with me.

I was so affected by the experience that I chose to do a second course when I was 16 years old. During my VOBS experience in Minnesota, we did wall rock climbing one day. We learned how to be in harness and on belay and also how to handle the ropes for another person on the wall. I'll never forget the first route I did called "greasy but groovy". I scampered up the hill like a monkey. This led me to a love of mountains that I would never leave me. That led me to heading to Colorado and doing this second month-long course that again gave me new experiences, challenges and memories that may have faded in part but never in full.

There's no doubt that these experiences contributed to the person I am today. I learned courage and endurance. I learned fortitude and determination. I may have forgotten those traits in my darker years, but I'm thrilled to say, "I'm back, baby!" I've got some great stories from those experiences, as well as stories from several solo backpacking trips that I've taken as an adult. Every time I leave civilization, I learn more about myself. I usually write a lot of songs on my baby Taylor when I'm out by myself. This time, I chose to leave my backpacker guitar behind. I'm glad I did. I was too busy concentrating on every step and then concentrating on resting and recovering in the evenings to process and write. So those trips contain other stories of triumph over adversity, just as this one does...but those are stories for another day. Those stories contain more peaceful time communing with nature and time spent contemplating other parts of my life and putting pen to paper to tell those tales through song. The story I'm telling today is my Grand Canyon Epic Adventure Story, aka "It Takes A Community to Hike a Jen".

Here begins my journal for the trip on the days leading up to walking away from civilization.

October 10, 2019 – Prepared to head out into the unknown! Excited for this new adventure!

October 13, 2019 – Beautiful mountains in the distance here in Phoenix – so ready to head out! Made a meeting last night. ☺ Feeling very fit spiritually, mentally and physically.

We met the night of October 13 to review the gear we were supposed to provide and also get our packs, sleeping pads and bags and tents, along with some other

gear we would be carrying as a group dispersed between us. We sat at a picnic table in the growing dark getting ready to meet the people we would live with, walk with, talk with and learn with for 7 days. We each said our names and why we were going on this trip. P. and J. are a father and son from the east coast. They have both done a previous hiking trip to the Grand Canyon with Wildland Trekking, which is the outfitting company for this trip. The trip they took was shorter and less isolated/wilderness, which means they would see/interact with other hikers and rangers. They had wanted another adventure that was more challenging with a longer duration and more solitude. The Kanab Creek Tour offered by Wildland Trekking (www.wildlandtrekking.com) is a 5 out of 5 on the difficulty/challenge scale and also a 5 out of 5 on the solitude scale, meaning we would see very few people and rarely be on a trail. This was true wilderness/backcountry. Back to the group. G. is a nurse practitioner from the east coast as well. She named several impressive hikes that she had completed. She seemed determined and strong and experienced. She is the only other female participant, though our guide, A. is female as well. S. is a sweet gentleman from B.C. Canada. He has driven down for this adventure and tells tales of interesting hotels in San Francisco and other destinations along his way. He is typically Canadian in how friendly and colloquial he is from the start. I tell him my folks live in north Ontario and we ended up sharing Canadian jokes the entire trip. He is already an ally and a buddy. He is the only member using his own pack and equipment. I almost used my own pack as well, but it needs a bit of work. Plus, I wanted to see what kind of equipment they provided. I can tell that everyone on this group has his/her own equipment by how they talk about previous trips. Part of what WT offers is a full-service hiking trip—luxury, in a sense, for those of us who have done it alone. WT provides top quality gear for each one of us, should we choose to use it. For me, using a guide company is a nice upgrade since we enjoy more gear and better food simply because there's more manpower to carry everything. When I hike solo, I'm the queen of freeze-dried meals that are delicious and nutritious but expensive. The real reason I use them is that they are super lightweight and when we're talking about long distance solo backpacking, we are talking about every single ounce. It's the difference between a manageable pack and one that gives so much strain that every muscle is affected, joints cry out in protest, and your feet are pretty much not happy the entire time. I know from packing myself heavy on my very first solo venture, but I digress. All but one of us participants is using all WT gear and only bringing personal items.

As we show A. our personal gear and clothing, we begin talking about said items and what each of us has experienced in regards to which things hold up better in the bush and in what extreme conditions. We talk about these things often along the trip. It's clear that for all of us hiking is a way of life. We have invested time and money to be outfitted as best we can to be comfortable and safe while away from our fellow humans. We definitely have some immediate bonds as a group just

by the fact that we chose this level of trip. It isn't for beginners. It isn't for the faint of heart. We all know at once that we will have each other and hold each other for the next week, no matter what. There is good energy flowing through all of us and I can feel it.

Back to preparing and packing. G. already has plans for a mountaineering trip and is eager to pick A.'s brain as she too is a mountaineer. Think high up, thousands of feet up, often above tree line, which is around 12,000 feet above sea level, technical climbing/walking with ropes and anchors and spikes called cramp-ons that allow you to dig into icy walls with the toes of your boots to create places on which to place all of your trust and weight. This trip is the opposite of that in the matter of elevation. We will hike DOWN and then back up rather than the other way around. We start at 7,000 feet above sea level and our lowest camp sits at 1,900.

And so, our group is complete. No one is bailing out at the last minute. It is each of us and all of us at once. It is individual strengths displayed up front, as well as hidden talents lying just beneath the surface.

We leave each other one last time before we will be together continuously for a week. We will pack our packs in our respective rooms, taking only what we need and singling out things to leave behind which now seem superfluous or just too heavy. For the first time in my life since I was 14 and went on my first Outward Bound, I leave behind insect repellent. Then and there in the boreal forests of Minnesota I sustained and endured the torture of literally hundreds upon hundreds of bites. This time I will come out unscathed by insects. I will endure other obstacles this time.

I will be checking my suitcase with the hotel and leaving my civilized possessions there for the week. I drop a pair of underwear (who needs 4 for 7 days?) and a second long-sleeved shirt. I ended up wearing the same dry-material, long-sleeved shirt every day. It offered protection from the sun and the wind and sand and constant trees with thorns and other plants that wanted to hitchhike along with us in an attempt to seed elsewhere.

For the last time I prepare to sleep in a bed and a room with climate control. My alarm is set for 4:15am. We leave at 5:00 for the 4-hour drive to our trailhead. I actually drift off and sleep well for about 6 hours.

October 14

We are picked up before dawn and groggily get on our way. We talk lightly and as we wake up, the sun begins to rise. A. is driving and we are talking about the different Native American tribes that have been in this area for many generations. We stop for gas and coffee and eventually come to the mighty Colorado River. We crossed it, parked and took a few pictures from the walking bridge. We pressed on and continued toward the trailhead and away from everything else.

Here is the first journal entry I did in the bush. It was written at the end of the day but feels like an appropriate way to start, so you can see how I journal/think.

October 14- It was a tough day - tiring. But I did it. This amazing journey has finally begun. I'm a little sore, but pretty good. A., our guide, is fabulous.

A., our guide for this trip is indeed fabulous. She is incredibly knowledgeable about just about everything in my opinion. She knew everything about the geology of this place and the creatures in it, both alive and fossilized. She told us about the different kinds of scorpions and tarantulas we would encounter, as well as the black widow spiders. We talked about the timespan to create the canyon, as well as differing scientific opinions about dating the layers themselves. Each participant is an adult, but we begin to ask her questions like kids in a classroom. Everyone in the group is thirsty for knowledge and it's a welcome way to begin our trip together. Three of us have never been to the Grand Canyon before and we yearn for knowledge of the new ecosystem we are experiencing together.

Another sentence from my journal: *A., our guide, checked my feet at the end of the day as I've complained about hot spots under both of my big toes.*

Hot spots are your body's warning that blisters are on the way. Catching and treating these hot spots early can be the key to keeping happy feet while hiking. For more information on foot wellness, look up military foot regimens. It's essentially the same. Happy feet make happy soldiers.

We are each carrying packs of varying weights, according to our frame/build and fitness levels. I am carrying between 40-45 lbs. at this time. I have hiked with this weight before, but I know it will bring out "all of the old familiar aches", a lyric from my song, "Hypnotized" ©2018.

A. has distributed the food into bags according to meals. So, one bag has a breakfast and lunch, another has a dinner and breakfast and so on. She also distributes group gear like cups and bowls and fuel for the stoves. A. will bring me the fuel tanks on Day 2, 3 and 4, call me her little firecracker and have me carry those as my portion of group gear. A. is carrying the actual stoves, pots and pans and secret food that she will reveal with great delight at later meals. She will be preparing all of our meals and hot drinks for the duration of the trip. She clearly takes pride in what she brings and prepares for us. It is truly a luxury experience to be in her backcountry kitchen. We do not know what we will be having, so it's a beautiful surprise at every meal! I cannot stress enough how amazing everything she made was and how much we all looked forward to meals after the first few proved wildly delicious with fresh ingredients and thoughtful condiments.

Again, we have each gone through our personal gear deciding which items are essential and which can be left behind. Every ounce counts when you're carrying it yourself. I know I've already said that, but on day 1 you are considering every little thing you brought and whether or not you need it. We were each told to choose 1 personal item that we couldn't live without. Mine was my Crazy Creek camping chair. (www.crazycreek.com). I've had my current chair for 20+ years. I originally had one from VOBS with its logo on it. My parents might still have that one. The

stays wore out after excessive usage and I ended up with a newer version for my adult camping excursions that I've had ever since.

At our meeting the night before, we have each chosen 20-24 snacks that we carry for ourselves and can eat at any time we feel like it. Most of us snack 2-4 times per day. Snacks consisted of snickers bars, cliff bars, Luna bars, Cheez-its, goldfish crackers, nuts or trail mix, M&Ms and other single serving goodies. We each took a variety and salt, we are told, is an important component of our diet of which we will need more of in this environment. I knew I was working hard and sweating but it dried so quickly that I wasn't aware of it like I normally am whilst hiking. We each consumed these snacks whenever we wanted along the trail. I'd say I ate 1-2 snacks between breakfast and lunch and another 1-2 snacks between lunch and dinner. The idea is a constant flow of energy and salt to compensate for both sweat and muscle weakness, as well as a greater intake of water. Each of us consumed different amounts of water but I averaged 3-5 liters per day. As for our actual hiking, we hiked a half day on Day 1 and Day 7 but every other day in the backcountry we awoke between 5:30-6:00am in the relative darkness, headed out between 8 and 9 am and hiked 8-12 hours per day carrying our packs filled with everything we needed to survive and thrive. I had a journal, some daily meditations and my plushie pink kitty, of course! She weighs almost nothing but brings me comfort at night. What can I say? I'm a kiddo at heart.

Here is the description of Day 1 from the Kanab Creek Tour Itinerary from Wildland Trekking.

Day 1: Shuttle to the North Rim: 3.5-hour drive from Flagstaff. Hiking Mileage: 3.5 miles. Elevation Loss: 2,200 feet.

Beginning from Sowats Point the trail descends rapidly to the esplanade, a broad terrace at approximately 5,000' of elevation. An enjoyable 2-mile traverse of the esplanade brings us to Sowats Canyon. The canyon is shallow and dry for ¾ mile until we get to Mountain Sheep Spring, a gushing spring of fantastic drinking water. We'll make camp up from the spring in a beautiful alcove beneath scarlet overhangs.

After walking away from the van, we descended on a trail to the Esplanade. This layer is what many folks have experienced of the canyon: desert-style plants and cactus, rattle snakes and other animals making this place their home. We never did see a rattlesnake but I bought a plushie one at the end of the trip that is now part of the herd and named Kanab.

We have trekking poles and A. has instructed us on how to use these properly as we work our way down into the canyon proper. The sun is shining, the afternoon wears on and we work and sweat and begin to get to know each other. As the light fades, we are stopped by A. and told to listen. For the first time today, we hear water. It is our first camp at Mountain Sheep Springs. We drop our packs and begin to

assess the ground, deciding where each of us will lay our heads tonight. Our tents are awesome single bivouac style shelters with a nylon floor and full mesh walls. We are carrying a separate rain fly, but we would never need it the entire trip.

The weather was clear almost the entire time and it never actually rained. The weather is ridiculously important on this trip. Our guide, A., told us that if it rains in Utah, we could be swept away by flash floods where we were going to be the next day. Soak that in; a storm hundreds of miles away could kill us all with little to no warning! We all absorbed that news and said little. We had complete faith and trust in A., our guide. She very carefully watched the skies all the time. Every day. Every night. She was constantly assessing our conditions so if she had to make a decision that would change our trip, but was ultimately to keep us safe, she would be informed. We lucked out with the weather and were comfortably able to hike through tight slot canyons that, when flooded, accommodated only huge amounts of water and what that water was carrying, like rocks, sand, stones, boulders, trees; it all depends on the volume of said water.

Hiking required massive amounts of concentration all day every day. Day 1 and 7 we were on a slim trail but all the days in between we were in wilderness backcountry. No trail. Never just walking. Always having to pay attention to which rocks we could hop onto and which we had to step over. Which would move and which were still. Which would support you on an angle (porous rocks that can hold water are grippy under your boots) and which had to be glided over. G., S. and I had never been hiking in this climate/ecosystem before. We were learning a lot about which rocks would hold us and which would let us slide. They were different than the rocks we knew in streams from our native hiking habitats of the eastern US, Pacific Northwest and Midwestern North Woods. We were adjusting our minds and bodies to the new elevation, climate, pack weight, everything. And all of this is happening from the moment we set foot on the trailhead.

Another piece from my journal that first night:

When we stopped for lunch on the first day, I became woozy and short of breath as we took off our packs and got ready to eat. I felt a little queasy and like I was almost out of body. My bowels clenched and I knew I had to relieve myself. A. walked away with me, showed me the proper technique to dig a hole in this earth, of which there is little to no organic matter and makes the technique different from what we were used to in our home forests, and then leaves me to do what I need to do. She says to call out if I feel like I might faint. Here comes a bodily function part, people. So the technique for a good deposit hole is to dig a little less deep (I'm used to digging about 6 inches deep in boreal forest but here it's 2-4 inches) and to employ more mixing of our organic matter and the dirt that we are going to put back in over the hole. The mixing allows the little bit of soil and organic matter to break down our leavings in approximately 2 years instead of the 5 years it would normally take for the ecosystem to break down my one-time waste product if I merely deposited it and covered it. 5 years! This place is dry and doesn't support

the larger number of organisms that thrive on decaying matter in wetter climates. I don't know about you, but it's something I've never really thought about. The decay rate of our waste. When you start to add up the number of humans and animals and the amount of waste we create, it is extremely beneficial to know how best to deal with said waste so that it creates as little impact as possible. To that end, we also carried some special bags with powdered enzymes in the bottom and a strong Ziploc seal on top, which was intended for use in areas where there just wasn't any organic matter for us to dig into and therefore, we would carry those leavings with us and dispose of them when we left. Yup. I pooped in a bag a few times. Successfully, I might add. And carried it out. But let's move on (puns intended).

Back to my journal. *Once I went, the feeling passed and I ate lunch and drank water and felt good. No more problems after that.*

I got bitchy one time when G. asked me to hold my trekking poles in front of me rather than with the spikes facing backward. I said she shouldn't be following so closely to me, but I bristled and snapped that answer to her.

We were actually told by A. that hiking is like skiing in that the person in the back is responsible for the person in front of them and not the other way around. We need to keep a bit of distance in case someone falls. We were walking so that our packs were straight up and down, mostly, cinched very tight at the hips with a hip belt to avoid shoulder strain. A. reiterated that the person behind should keep some distance and I felt vindicated, but I didn't like the way I responded. Being right isn't as important to me as it used to be. Also, in my new existence, I no longer have the luxury of anger, irritability or resentment. I used to drink in response to those things, even if I hadn't known it consciously. So now, when I feel irritable or angry, I have to address it IMMEDIATELY or it will fester into something more debilitating in my brain and ultimately cause me more grief than it's worth. I tend to carry unresolved things and I cannot do that anymore. To that end, a bit later, as we rolled into camp, I told G. that I was sorry I snapped. I hadn't meant to give that kind of energy. She also said she was sorry for forgetting about staying back and we both felt resolved. I felt really good about admitting my wrong right away (when it was appropriate) and I really think it solidified our ability to get to know each other and continue forward in our bonding without any animosity. In short, I did the right thing by promptly admitting my error. From my journal: *That felt really good. I like feeling like I'm doing the right thing. It truly helps. So happy for this Good Orderly Direction. So far, so good!*

We setup camp and settled in for dinner. A. has asked us not to reveal her recipes to the world so that future hikers can enjoy her surprise meals. I respect that and will hold to that promise. I will say that I have NEVER had such delicious and nourishing FRESH food all the way through a backcountry hike. This was unprecedented. I knew our guide would be buying the food and cooking the meals, but I never expected the things she brought and made! We carried much of the

food as a group, distributed daily by A. according to what she thought we could handle. She carried a few things herself always – the pots and pans, the eggs (yes, I said eggs and we had them twice – once on day 2 and once on day 6) and certain vegetables that were more fragile, like avocados. When she made a simpler dish for lunch, like chicken salad, she used nuts and berries and spices. We always had hot sauce, salt and pepper, and other thoughtful condiments that fit the flavor profile of the meal. She often had a bowl of fruit available at breakfast and often setup the kitchen like it was an actual kitchen. There, in the center of the “kitchen” sat a bowl of apples or clementine oranges, along with some laminated pamphlets detailing flowers, birds and other information about the place we are experiencing together. A backcountry bed and breakfast where Mother Earth provided the beds, if you will. As I’ve stated, A. was constantly assessing the conditions, the obstacles, the route and additionally, each of us. She was always – always – in tune with everything. She is a very special human being. She carried a medical kit and was trained to a paramedic level, basically. She also had a background in geology and was extensively knowledgeable. She described the geologic layers and their approximate ages (which I can’t recall). She also knew a great deal about the flora and fauna, and not just in the area we were in. She was a true scholar and lover of all things nature and wilderness.

The group was quite inquisitive, so we all loved hearing about things and I’m sure we all learned a great deal. Everyone on the trip was knowledgeable about many subjects, which lent to our getting along.

S. found the first scorpion hiding in the rock ring at the center of the first campsite. He looked for them every single night. I just adored his sense of wonder and wanting to explore. It felt akin to my own heart. We both had a tendency to fall back as he had a great camera and took some amazing shots that I can’t wait to see and share and we both wanted to stop and look around a lot. As a fellow photog (I enjoy framing and taking nature photos as well) I totally understood and wished we had a little more time for photography and also just being in this place. As I write this, I know that in hindsight I would prefer a trip that was a little less rigorous and a little more meditative. I knew this was going to be tough – I guess I just didn’t want to realize how tough. They said 5 out of 5 on the difficulty scale...but what drew me was the 5 out of 5 on the solitude scale. I prefer deep wilderness, so I chose the trip for that aspect. Alas, deep wilderness often requires great physical effort, mostly in miles, often vertical ones at that. So, I ended up with the difficulty while pursuing the solitude. I did make it and I am proud of that. I would have preferred getting to camp earlier and having a little more time to just be.

In any case, we were here. We were all together and all doing this momentous thing. After a delicious dinner, one by one, we turned in under a gorgeous blanket of stars that would soon be outshone by the full moon. It was like daylight every night with such clear skies. A few nights I watched the moon rise and this first night

I was alone when it happened. Everyone had turned in relatively soon after dinner. That was pretty much every night. I would sit and drink tea while A. did the dishes and put away camp for the night. I sat in my Crazy Creek Chair and wrote in my journal. This night, I went out away from camp a bit to pee one more time before bed. I had noticed the moon had risen but it was still low on the horizon and I couldn't see it from camp...there were cliffs obscuring my view. However, as I stepped out into the path of the light, her face shown down, and I couldn't help but smile. I was here! I was doing it! I had already been taken aback several times by the beauty of this sacred place and it was just the beginning. I headed back and went to bed. My mind wanted to clamor but I eventually fell asleep and awoke feeling refreshed and ready to go.

October 15

From the Kanab Creek Tour Itinerary from Wildland Trekking

Day 2 - Mileage: 9.5 miles Elevation Loss: 1,300 feet

A hearty breakfast will precede our descent of Sowats Canyon. After a mile of hiking adjacent to Sowats Creek we'll arrive at Jump-up Canyon. At this point Jump-up is more of a broad valley than a canyon, allowing views of the rim above. However, a little further on we'll encounter the first layers of the red wall limestone; a layer of rock hard enough to promote formation of the Jump-up slot canyon. Soon we'll find ourselves hundreds of feet deep in a narrow swath of polished stone. Several miles further on the canyon widens and intersects Kanab Creek. Now through the layers of hard limestone the canyon is wide and deep, with brilliant red walls rising high overhead. Another couple of hours brings us to the hanging garden of Showerbath Spring. Just beyond the spring is a campsite protected by more overhangs. This is a long day consisting of 8 miles of rugged canyon hiking and will likely take 10-11 hours to complete.

We were awakened at around 5:30am, before dawn. As I've stated, this was every day except Day 4, when we didn't move camp. A. comes around and says, "Good Morning, Jen" and goes to the next tent. That's the signal for each of us to rise and be at the kitchen for hot beverages and breakfast in 10-15 minutes. I wake up happy and ready to go. I put on my hat and sweater as it's chilliest in the mornings. A. told us that the October trip is the best for cooler temperatures but the worst for shortening days. We had big mileage to cover on Day 2 and Day 6. It said right there in the itinerary that it would take 10-12 hours to complete. WHAT WAS I THINKING?!? The last time I did a 10-mile day on my last solo wilderness backpack hike, I got into camp, exhausted, took a Vicodin and wasn't going anywhere the next day. I wasn't going to have any of those comforts this time. We started out great and then only a few hours into our hiking day, I turned my left ankle a bit on a pretty good rock. I teared up a bit, but I was ultimately ok to continue. It wasn't too bad. I could continue. By the way, have I mentioned that there was no trail?

EVERYTHING was rocks. Always. Big. Small. Moveable. Solid. You never knew what you were going to get. Our hiking trip took us along the bottom of dry creek beds in slot canyons that saw flash floods in the monsoon seasons and very few people anytime. There was literally never a time when we were just walking. Every step had to be purposeful and both daring and cautious at the same time. A great deal of concentration was required. And yet, the mind doesn't do well with heavy focus for long periods of time. At least not my mind. We basically took a pack break every 1.5-2 hours, which helps more than you'd think. That means stopping and taking our packs off for 10-15 minutes and then donning them again and heading further on our journey. We did a nice lunch break, taking somewhere between 30-60 minutes, albeit not as lingering as some would like. We walked by amazing places, some of which are pictured, some of which are only pictured in my mind. We got to this spot where the wall was just beautifully carved and smooth and we could hear an echo from across the canyon. I sang. Loudly. This was literally the only time I did that. I didn't perform for the group. I didn't ask everyone to listen to me. I felt I had enough attention by the fact that I was slower and needed more support from everyone in general. Sure, I sang to myself a bit as I often do when I hike. It is self-soothing and a tiny distraction from the constant focus of not breaking yourself at every step. Mostly, we talked to each other. It was nice to get to know these humans and to talk about each other. It helps to connect me to others as well as pass the time. It became a bit of a joke for me by the end of the trip where I'd say, "tell me a story, please!". We all knew I needed the most outward mental support--and therefore distraction from tasks at hand--and I'm happy to say I was grateful to have it and be connecting with everyone. I had great conversations with each person and I really enjoyed those times as we worked our way towards our daily goal of camp.

After lunch we headed out again and continued to enjoy incredibly beautiful vistas when we looked up and fossil after fossil when we looked down. The entire floor of the area is littered with fossils. Literally. Everywhere. We saw lots of shells and several segmented worm-like creatures, all from primordial seas in this area millions of years ago. We hiked by a rock wall that was a fossilized clam bed. It looked like beautiful wallpaper had been roughly applied. The evolution of life was literally surrounding us at all times. Many times A. would point things out for us and explain them. It was nice to get continued education along the way. Again, more ways for us to talk about amazing things while continuing to move through difficult terrain.

We pulled into camp and set up tents just as the sun was losing its battle with the night. We were all exhausted and most of us took a portion of ibuprofen after dinner. I, again, stayed up a tad later than everyone else. (What can I say? I work at night. Even if I am exhausted, I'm not always sleepy.)

S. would be asleep before I finished my nightly tea. I knew because he snored. Lightly but it was there. He also had the superpower of falling asleep quickly. I told

him to stay grateful for that. Even now that I don't drink, I still have to be dog tired to fall asleep easily. Staying asleep is easy now. I sleep like a champ pretty much from when I fall to when I wake, some 7-8 hours later. That second night in camp as I retired I heard at least 2 people snoring, if not 3. We were all exhausted from the long day, our first full day. The snoring didn't keep me up long. I would lay down in my mesh tent and look at the stars and let my mind tell me what it wanted to - a form of meditation before falling asleep. I always gave thanks and gratitude and take stock of my thoughts and deeds of the day. This night it got me thinking about how so many humans don't have access to wilderness, have never been exposed to it, don't have the means to go on a trip like this, don't have the courage to go on a trip like this and so on. Even as I acknowledge my sore, aching muscles and the new blisters on my feet I'm ever so grateful to have the chance to do this. In other news, I got my period. Yep. Day 2. Luckily I look at everything I have these days and say thank you or my attitude would have taken a serious turn at this news. Again, I have made it through another day in my life and I am alive and well and richer for my experiences. Here is my journal entry from the end of the day.

October 15 – *Wow. Today was a hot mess shit show. But I'm good! Really, really tough. Long. Brutal rock walking. Twisted my left ankle and two of my toenails on my left foot look.... angry, as A. said.* [The big toenail and fourth toenail both had been banging against my boots as the boots themselves were too small to accommodate two pairs of socks to prevent friction and the amount of swelling to the feet from both pack weight and the dry, arid climate. I had bought boots that were one size larger. They should've been two sizes larger. At this time, A. told me to hike in just my thin liner socks and leave my thicker smart wool socks in my gear. Done. Anything to make more room. She said I may or may not lose those nails. They seem good now, so I think I won't have to go through that. Phew! From my journal: *My goodness. My thighs are super over it lol. My boots are too small for this environment & itinerary. The wilderness, however, is INCREDIBLE. Utterly epic & will be totally worth it. I also got my period. I wanted a test - boy, have I gotten it. Some of my fears were founded. I'm slower. I don't see as well. But dammit, I am doing it. ☺ My spirits are good, all considering. I'm super proud to say I used a lot of my coping tools today & I'm happy for that. I also cried half the day, but that's okay too. I let it out, I talked about it & I dealt with it.* At lunch I was tearing up and expressing to the group that I felt slower than everyone else and that I was holding people back and making their trips less enjoyable. They all reassured me, and we moved on. I did not express this self-pitying sentiment again, though I did have the thought several times throughout the trip. I use my newfound techniques for warding off these negative thoughts and not allowing them to seed and poison my mind, as they have so often done in my past. Now, I freely express gratitude and appreciation for everything each of them is doing for me throughout each day.

October 16

From the Kanab Creek Tour Itinerary from Wildland Trekking

Day 3: Mileage: 4.5 miles Elevation Loss: 400 feet

Another hearty breakfast will precede a shorter hike downstream. The canyon grows ever deeper and presents a show of features including massive overhangs, enchanting springs, exquisite lighting and a myriad of colors. Camp is made adjacent to a narrow and beautiful side canyon (see photo below) containing Whispering Falls, a rivulet of water that "whispers" its way down a polished incline.

NOTE: We did not make the camp we wanted to on night 2, so we added a mile or two to Day 3. Hence, we hiked into the darkness – that's right. Scrambling over rocks and boulders and through the creek in places in the dark with headlamps on. I was done. Like, 3 hours before we made camp. I was exhausted and sore and working on my last bit of strength. I dug deep and made it – we all did. We had to. We were one unit moving through the night in this place that held so much energy in every crevasse. We had moved all day, again, from before dawn and this time, into the night. We were in Kanab Creek and the creek itself had steadily grown over the day. We had waded through water, sometimes ankle deep, once up to our hips. This creek flows down to the Colorado River, as do all the waterways in this area. Naturally, the creek picks up water from underground sources and running through rocks and boulders, so the water is now rushing in places and we can always hear it as we hike. I find it comforting and I know I will sleep good with such a beautiful soundtrack. Also, it will drown out the snorers. Happy day!

As we sat down to dinner and fellowship after the day, I was leaning back watching the bats swooping in on the insects attracted to our headlamps and one small solar-powered lantern. They were dive bombing right above us! It was glorious! I love bats – I've encountered them many times and they may be a spirit animal for me of sorts. I say that because I was given the Indian name "Lioness Who is Searching" at the end of my first Outward Bound course and I've always identified with it. I'm always searching. I find a lot! But I'm restless in many ways. I require new things and new places and new challenges to be proud of myself. That's deep shit right there. I'm an outgoing introvert, so my fulfillment MUST come from within. It took the clarity of thought I've been having these past 6 months to see how foolish I was for seeking validation and love from strangers on any (every) given night. Not to say that I don't enjoy what I do, because I wouldn't trade it for anything. I have real, deep, emotional moments with strangers. Regularly. And I like it. It's what I'm meant for. But my true happiness must come from within. I think this is why people have been telling me lately that I'm glowing. Yes, I've been healthier these days. I'm around 30 lbs. down and fitter and healthier than I've been in several years. Somewhere between 5 and 7 years, I'd say. So that searching Lioness is my greater spirit animal, but bats have always held a special place in my heart. Maybe now I have more in common as I only have one good eye. Maybe it's

the way they use sonar to locate prey and I liken it to my newly rediscovered intuition. I've always loved bats.

Anyway, I was watching the bats. Meanwhile, J. and S. had discovered a large black widow's web behind J.'s tent. As darkness enveloped us it was a pleasant temperature. We were at the lowest point we would be, which was approximately 1,900 feet above sea level. The entire area sits a couple thousand feet above sea level. A. told us why, but I can't remember. We learned so much I couldn't retain it all! I love that kind of situation.

Anyway, we went to see if the spider herself was in the web now...and she was!! She was pretty small - well, smaller than I had imagined. I'm sure I've only ever seen stupid Halloween decorations of black widows. I saw several creatures for the first time in real life on this trip! Anyway, she was facing us, so we were seeing her belly and that red hourglass marking that both genders of black widows possess. It was AMAZING. We were cautious and quiet and got to witness our own Discovery channel special in front of our eyes! A Daddy long legs was chasing an ant just a few inches away and narrowly avoided one of the longer strands of her web. Black widows don't create symmetrical webs like other spiders do. It looks like a mess from far away. However, upon closer inspection, you can see engineering and beauty in the chaos that was the first impression. I didn't get a picture of this myself, but I know someone in the group did. I will be asking for folks' pics. Grin. We went back to the circle, had our hot beverages (some folks have tea, others had hot water, others nothing) and everyone else trotted off to sleep. I was marveling at the place we were soon to awake in and what I could see as the moon rose to brighten the edges of my view. Again, the stars shone bright for an hour or two and then the moon slowly took over for the evening. As A. was finishing her nightly chores (dishes, gathering water to treat for us to drink the next day) she saw a tarantula in her path right near where our circle was. She was barefooted, as she often was in camp. This camp was very sandy and super comfortable for sleeping. I was actually comfortable in every site. Even the ones where we set our tents on smooth rock surfaces, my inflatable sleeping pad kept me insulated from the ground and comfy on my back and sides (I don't sleep on my tummy. Ever.). Here's my journal entry from the end of the day.

October 16 - AM Entry: Felt like I didn't sleep much but then I remembered my dream about them cancelling me in Aruba after a week. OMG, duh! It was my accident that cancelled me in Aruba in April, so I definitely see the dream meaning more under observation. Feeling good about our supportive group. I need to continue to remember others triggers & boundaries. How can I be of more service to this group? How can I keep the focus away from me?

PM Entry: Another kick ass (aka kick my ass) day! We hiked into the night - not long into but still - and tomorrow is a pack-free day!!! I'm happy we get a play & rest day - it'll be Day 4 & we're going to visit Whispering Falls. Remembering to look up is sometimes difficult. Especially when I feel how much I need to focus &

pay attention to keep good hiking form. I like A.'s analysis of Type 1 & Type 2 fun. 1 is fun while it's happening, while 2 is a bit more fun when it's over. I do super appreciate the sense of accomplishment. And I'm doing this trip before I can't. It's true. I don't think I'll be choosing anything quite this strenuous again. It's only partly my age & the accident. I know I had mostly done easier hikes (MOSTLY - remember the one 10-mile day?) Yeah. I'm not done with wilderness, but this may be the end of crazy hard shit. lol

October 17

From the Kanab Creek Itinerary by Wildland Trekking

Day 4: Mileage: 8.0 miles optional round-trip day hike Elevation Loss/Gain: 200 feet
Today is a much-needed layover day (camp will not be moved). Willing members of the party have the option of a day hike to the Colorado River and back. The mouth of Kanab Creek creates a thundering set of rapids on the Colorado. We'll eat lunch while appreciating the grandeur of the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon

Waking up on Day 4 was so glorious! A. told us the night before that she thought the best thing for our group was not to take the optional hike to the Colorado River, which was 8 miles round trip. She said she knew some folks were more goal oriented and wanted to be sure everyone was copacetic with doing the side trip to Whispering Falls and then hiking back up Kanab Creek to a place called The Slots and hanging out there for the afternoon. We all agreed it would be a wonderful way to spend the day here. I took lots of pictures this day. Most of the water pics and the pool pics, as well as a few pics with the group were from that fabulous day. S. and I both remarked to each other that all the hard work was worth it, just for this day. This was the one and only day where we spent some time apart, just being, reflecting, listening, soaking up the energy and recharging our own bodies and spirits as we prepared to begin the trek back towards Sowats point and the van and civilization the next day. I wanted more of these days. I wanted more time to meditate, feel the energy, and just be in this magical place. At Whispering Falls I joked, "Ok! I'll be here! Come grab me in the morning!"

As I lay in my tent, waking as I want, sky already light, I relish the knowledge that we don't have to pack our gear and put on packs and trek. It is an absolutely delicious feeling. This is the only day we wake up lazily after sunrise. We languished around the kitchen, drinking extra coffees and teas and enjoying another fantastic breakfast made with love by our Lady of the Canyon (as she has been dubbed). We're all happy and smooth in A.'s Café (another name/term we're using regularly. A. would yell "the Café is closing in 10 minutes!")

After we are all satiated, we set off together, feeling as light and sunny as the day around us. We hiked cheerfully, pack free, heading up a side path to Whispering Falls. A. tells us about how this place is sacred and to realize how special it is to get to visit a place like this. I'm thinking of how few humans have had the opportunity

to lay eyes on this special place to which we are headed. We all agree around halfway up that we will stay quietly reverent and allow this place to wrap around us. After some significant scrambling and technical walking (we are not rock climbing here – we are not on ropes), along with a few hands offered to help each other along the way, we reach Whispering Falls. It is a small alcove with high cliffs all around. There is a gorgeous, clear, almost blue-ish pool shimmering before us. A large cave sits perched halfway up behind the pool as a backdrop. The surface of the pool is constantly being rippled by droplets from above. It creates the whispering sound for which this sacred place is named. The water droplets are coming from above, but it is not rain. The drops hit quietly, though also turbulently, as they break the surface of the pool far below where they have fallen from the high cliffs above. I look up and realized the water is both maintaining and releasing from hanging gardens hundreds of feet up on the canyon walls. The water was dripping through the rocks, then over them, feeding these hanging gardens and subsequently the pond below. Tiny little frogs were around, as well as boat bugs and a few other creatures. The water was bitterly cold but so clear and beautiful. I sat down and allowed myself to lie on my back on the ground so I could watch the descent of the drops as they fell like rain from the sky, some flying away from a straight descent due to thermals, which are currents of warm air that rise up from special parts of the canyon enjoying the radiating love of the sun.

I wept that day, just a few tears, feeling so humble and grateful for all the events that led me here. So many factors played a part. My parents taking my brother and I on family canoe trips when we were young, introducing us to the Wilderness. The fact that I had an accident that catapulted me towards finally pulling the trigger on this bucket list trip. The means I had to do it (even if I am in debt, this was happening), the fact that I could make time for it, the fact that I can continue to enjoy so many privileged aspects of my life. I took it in. I breathed out the negativity and allowed myself to truly recharge from the energy in this sacred space. I received and I gave – I exchanged with a primal part of my humanity that isn't tapped into very often. I was in a place that very few humans have ever--or will ever--see. I saw fossils. I saw people that were intertwined with me. I saw me and I saw everything. I felt so small and so big at the same time. I could've stayed there all day, listening. Breathing. Being.

As our time in that sacred place came to a close, A. commented that that's why it's a sacred place. Because we can't stay. We can only visit. It is a place I will never forget and will always hold a piece of in my heart.

We left Whispering Falls renewed, restored...at least I did. We got back to the main creek and headed back up to an area called The Slots, an area we had hiked through in the dark the night before. Here there were deep pools for swimming and lots of smooth rock faces. There were cool grooves made by the mixture of soft and hard rock, like everywhere in this canyon. We saw another tarantula and were informed that it's mating season in October for these little guys. Therefore, they're seen

more often this time of year. Lucky us! They were super chill and awesome to check out. A. thanked the tarantula for being awesome and wished it a nice day. A. had a sweet conversation with literally everything we encountered, animate or inanimate. I don't know why that's so endearing to me. I think I identify as I talk to myself and lots of other animals and other things as well. A. had a quality of contentment and love that was continually comforting. She loved life and her surroundings, and it showed. Even when she was exasperated – like telling the wind to just calm down enough to keep the flame going to cook or telling the moth to please stay out of the beam of her headlamp – the way she spoke to everything, negotiated with everything, wished everything well...it was endearing and inspiring. We spent time here at The Slots, bathing, talking and just being. We split apart, sometimes coming together to show others something cool we had found. We saw another tarantula, several more notable fossils, some tracks in the sand made by mice...It was glorious!

We headed back to camp, had another amazing meal and wrapped up a lovely day feeling recharged. We all enjoyed a good night of rest and felt ready to begin the second half of our trip: the ascent back out of this magnificent canyon.

Here's my journal entry from that evening.

October 17 – Today was absolutely amazing! It was in-camp day, so we side hiked to Whispering Falls. A. called it a sacred space. That was not an exaggeration. All the super hard work on this trip is worth it for today. Watching the water fall from the sky – I wept. The pool was so beautiful. Everything about it is why I'm here. So grateful. This has been grueling at times but this day – relaxing, playing, exploring pack-free – this is what makes it all worth it. The Slots were also cool! Stepping down waterfalls, deep swimming holes...it was the only time I actually bathed for like 20 seconds. The water was pretty cold! Felt good to rinse everything!

October 18

From the Kanab Creek Itinerary by Wildland Trekking

Day 5: Mileage: 4.5 miles Elevation Gain: 400 feet

Day 5 is done in reverse of day 3 to the same camp just downstream of Showerbath Spring.

This time around we actually did stay at the Plan A camping spot. It was a wide-open rocky area on the bank of the creek. We had a larger view of the night sky here than in any other camping spot. I felt good this day. I was stronger. I was rock hopping well. I did twist my right ankle a touch early on in the day, but whatever. I was always in some sort of foot pain at this point. They were just extra obstacles – kind of like drinking at work used to be. I had better hiking skills now, so I was more focused on steps. Shit still happens but I was also used to hiking with my foot pains. So, it was like I knew what to do even if I was fighting through minor, enduring pain issues. I felt really strong. We got into camp with time before

the sun set and enjoyed another amazing meal together. Everyone seemed at ease and happy and comfortable. This is why 3 days isn't enough. You don't get used to the old familiar aches until day 4 or 5. Then you get your hiker stride and it makes everything easier because you're used to it now. Physically, mentally and emotionally. Here is my journal entry for the day.

October 18 – It's been a really good day! We made really good time. I felt really good & sure-footed, mostly. Nice to see some progress – still the slowest, but maybe I get most improved lol. The group has been very supportive & that helps a ton. Now that I ask for help when I need it, the pendulum may have swung too far from "I got it", but that seems not terrible. We really did mesh as a group – I can see we all found our roles & helped each other. Today is the first day I didn't cry. Day 5 and day 7 are the only two days I didn't cry. I didn't know what was coming. I did know this was tougher than I wanted, though not tougher than I expected. It wasn't so hard I couldn't do it, but it was enough that it was detracting from my total enjoyment just a tad. I went to bed mostly happy and satisfied and I woke up fuzzy bunny as usual when I heard A. near my tent saying, "Good Morning, Jen".

October 19

A. says there are two types of morning people: fuzzy bunnies and rabid wolverines. The fuzzy bunnies are all like, "Hiiiiiiiiiiii! Good morning!! Hooray! Another beautiful day!" That's me, btw. I'm a pretty happy morning person. I was lost for a few years and didn't do mornings. But my original fuzzy bunny is back.

Right. So rabid wolverines are the people that need coffee and silence and reflection and solitude for a length of time upon waking. There's always some of both in everyone's world and it can be challenging. I super get it. I don't bug people. I try to be calmly chipper. (What a fucking oxymoron!) Anyway, I try. G. asked if we could hike in silence for about 30 minutes each morning when we started out. We all conversed lightly at breakfast, but we had found each other's grooves and spaces and allowed them to be filled on each of their own terms. So we honored that request daily. We naturally began conversing and getting into the days routine and it seemed we were all respectful of what each person needed intuitively.

I was packed a tad earlier than the others on this morning and I went to A. to see if I could help with anything. She said, "I think this is a great time for you to go meditate" in a cute and encouraging way. She was so right. And so I did. I perched myself, as I had daily on this trip, on a comfy rock and closed my eyes. I asked the universe for strength and courage to face the challenges of the day. I said the serenity prayer out loud. I expressed gratitude for all the support from everyone and everything keeping us going strong. I set myself right and prepared for the long day of hiking ahead.

About two hours in, we were going pretty fast in my estimation. This is totally relative, especially considering pack weight, small boots, hurt feet and toes,

cumulative fatigue, still dealing with my monthly hormones and physical issues, etc. but in my mind, I wasn't going to be able to keep up the pace we had set for the first few hours of the day. I expressed that and A. said we were grooving fast on the early part of the day to make up for the technical climbing challenges we were to face at the end of the day. This included some places on our hike/climb towards the top of the canyon again that were literally 6-inch-wide trails that are normally used by the likes of big horn sheep and smaller animals like a ringtail or a packrat. We were on mountain goat trails, essentially. These are very small, precarious places where on one side, the world side, you had boulders to hold on to but also some that would betray you and allow you to fall to your death. Literally. On the other side is emptiness and gravity that will help you alllllllll the way back down to the bottom, whether you like it or not. But we aren't there yet. Currently, we are moving fast, and I am internally worried about my stamina and ability to focus on those hard sections later on if I deplete all my energy now. Snacks help. Even little fruit snacks that give a burst of sugar and sweet for the body and mind. But I guess I was more anxious than I thought. I wasn't mentally spinning out, but I felt a lump form in my throat as if I wanted to cry. I'm sensitive. I cry. A lot. I cry for happy, sad, angry, disappointed, irritated; for every emotion, basically. But I've been able to control it a bit more on this trip as the days go on because if I tear up, I CAN'T FUCKING SEE and I have to see every single step. So, I'm not going to cry right now, I tell myself...but the lump isn't clearing. In fact, it feels like it's growing. I feel like I can't breathe right. I say so and say I need to stop for a second. I take off my pack and stand there holding it against my thigh while I try to control my breathing and give myself enough air. I feel like I'm almost at the point of sucking wind and I'm trying to slow it down and control it but I'm just not able to get a good breath in and a good breath out. I try again to breathe in deeply, counting to 5 as I inhale and trying to count to 7 as I exhale. I do it again. And a third time. The group talks lightly but I can feel everyone feeling me. I know A. is paying particularly close attention. I get myself calmed down fairly quickly - within 5-7 minutes, I think - and we move on. I push this incident way down on purpose and resolve not to think about it until we reach camp. If I do, I might realize this was the beginning of my first (and hopefully only) panic attack.

We enjoy a lovely lunch at the juncture of Kanab Creek and Jumpup Canyon. We move a little farther and pick up our cached food bags from Day 2. A. had us leave the last few meals so we wouldn't have to carry so much as we knew we were planning to come by this same junction, though we would be taking a different route back to the Esplanade after that. She has stashed a secret dessert and we are all now speculating on what that will be. It's in a brown bakery style box and we all enjoy making guesses as to our reward.

We are mostly feeling light and good and preparing to start some serious scrambling at near 90-degree angles, all the while watching for scorpions, spiders and rocks that don't want to hold us but send us tumbling. We get our packs on

and get ready to hike to one more destination before camp, where we will fill all of our water bottles and bladders as we will not have access to water the last day until we hit the van. The sun has that beautiful late afternoon glow. We are doing well and I am doing ok. I'm getting tired and starting to feel my energy slipping but I am pushing on. I am stronger than I was 5 days ago. I can do this. We are doing this. I'm now closer to the end than the beginning. It's great and sad at the same time. It's bittersweet knowing that our epic adventure is coming to an end soon but an impending sense of relief is helping keep me calm.

From the Kanab Creek Itinerary by Wildland Trekking

Day 6: Mileage: 8.5 miles Elevation Gain: 1,100 feet

Today's hike will re-trace our steps through Jump-up Canyon, however once we've hiked through the slot canyon we'll immediately turn east into Kwagunt Hollow. Kwagunt is more dramatic than Sowats and presents a variety of terraces and overhangs. Camp is made this evening in Kwagunt Hollow near small seeps that we'll use for our drinking water.

We got to our last watering hole and filled everything. Like, everything. All water bladders. All hard-sided bottles. We each had 4-6 liters on us and the two fittest members, P. and J., carried the water we would need for cooking and beverages and hand washing. There was a 6-liter and a 10-liter bladder for these things. Mostly A. has been carrying these empty and filling them at our campsites. But our last site will not have any water, so we have to carry what we need from here until we come out at the van tomorrow around lunchtime. We are nearing the pictograph we will be lucky enough to see during pink light...pink light being when the sun is setting and blanketing the world with a sweet pink light before retiring for the evening. We get to the spot where we could view ancient peoples communicating, whether with art or just marking their place in space and time. It is a figure of a person with red earrings. It is ancient. It is connective and awe inspiring. I am almost too tired to appreciate it but I smile, breathe and take it in.

And then, it is grueling all over again. Just when I feel more confident with my pack and my skills and my muscles, I have added weight and sacrificed balance. I'm exhausted and starting to feel the anxiety creep back in. We put one foot in front of the other. We get out our headlamps and prepare to hike into the dark again. We have no choice. We cannot stop here. We are on goat paths. I am beyond sore and tired in every possible way. I'm digging deep. I don't know how much more I have in me. A. squeezes my hand and says, "You're doing great. Keep digging deep. You can do this." It helped but I was starting to lose the ability to do anything but put one foot in front of the other. I was grunting and sighing with every move. I was crying and snot was running out of my nose. I farmer blow (put one finger on one side and let loose the other onto the ground) and see blood. I say so and A. says "its normal for the climate and the exertion - just keep going, we're almost

there, we're almost there. Let me know if you feel light-headed". We make it to where we can safely camp and the group goes about setting up their tents. I take off my pack and sit down where I am. I go from a slow steady cry to a soul-wracking sobbing pattern. I am mindful of not being too loud, so I hold back my vocalization. I cry as silently as I can, rocking back and forth and shivering. I say several times I'm not cold but I can't stop shivering. A. takes my pulse and gives me a diabetic goo to drink. She says it'll give me a much-needed influx of sugar for my system to account for the trauma of how far past my physical limits I have pushed today. It takes time but I finally get myself together and my mood is drained but better. I ask S. for a favor as I'm finally setting up my own tent. He comes over ready to help me set up. I don't need help with my tent. I need a hug. He's the perfect body size to envelope me and make me feel safe and held and comforted. I am so appreciative of this bit of human kindness and touch. The only drawback to strangers is our tendency to stay back physically, respecting boundaries. What I needed was a hug. I needed human touch. It really helped me get over what had just happened. I made it. I was almost to the end. We were almost finished. We all began to feel how close we were to the end and what that meant. Feelings of accomplishment and pride, feelings of relief and anticipating comforts like sitting down on a commode and having a hot shower. I was fuzzy and drained, as I said. I didn't stay up for an extra half an hour like I had every other night. I asked for my ibuprofen and laid down soon after. My feet and legs and hips were sending a circuit of aches back and forth between them. But somehow, I slept. I awoke feeling more tired this day than any other but feeling good and ready to climb out of this canyon that had taught me so much. Here is the entry from my journal after that hardest of days.

October 19 – I haven't experienced a day as enduringly hard as this one in a long time. Maybe many years. I didn't cry yesterday, but today I cried profusely upon arriving in camp. I also experienced my first panic attack, I think. Super scary shit. I had a lump in my throat that was closing down and I couldn't breath for longer than I would've liked. I used 5-5-7 breaths and got through it, but I couldn't acknowledge it till we got to camp. God, thank you for sending me these humans to help me. I needed each of them today. Every single one. So very grateful.

I thanked G. the next day for being helpful by offering a hand here and there and also being verbally supportive. She seemed slightly surprised, like it wasn't something as significant to her. I reiterated how much it helped me, and she smiled and received it. I thanked J. for talking to me several times that day. He asked me about things like the fundamentals of music and other subjects that I suspect may not have been supremely interesting to him, but he knew it would distract me sufficiently from the difficult hiking at hand. I thanked the whole group more than once for all they were doing. I hope it didn't seem insincere by how much I said it. I wanted to be sure they realized how truly tantamount they were to my well-being.

As everyone drifted off to bed, I was soon to follow. As I said, I didn't stay up as late as I had on previous evenings. I was exhausted in a way I hadn't been since my accident, where I had fallen down the stairs in a foreign country and was forced to go home and heal in every way, physically, emotionally and mentally. I was telling A. how much I appreciated everyone and how I couldn't have done it without each and every one of our group. She quickly responded with a smile, "It takes a community to hike a Jen," and set about packing up camp for the night. I told her she was going to end up in a song with witty phrases like that. It did make a fitting title of this writing as well. Thanks, A. For more than you can ever know.

By the way, the surprise dessert was a pecan pie. A freakin' whole pecan pie! It was EVERYTHING. Other folks who have ventured into the wilderness or done very physically demanding tasks can testify to how amazing food tastes no matter what it consists of when you've really earned it. This pie was like that with a zillion little stars all over it. It would've been amazing anytime but in the field on our last night together it was truly a sensual pleasure to behold. ☺ What a wonderful, earned reward for all of us near the end of an unforgettable trip.

October 20

From the Kanab Creek Itinerary by Wildland Trekking

Day 7: Mileage: 4.5 miles. Elevation Gain: 2,400 feet. Shuttle to Flagstaff : 4.5-hour drive from the North Rim

After a lazy morning we'll exit Kwagunt and re-join the Sowats trail near the bottom of the switchbacks. Ascending these to Sowats Point will complete this classic Grand Canyon journey. From the top of Sowats Point we'll be able to look out over each canyon we hiked to the Colorado River.

I awoke still stiff and sore but feeling good and ready to tackle the last day of this monumental adventure. We had a lovely breakfast and packed up our gear for the last time. The sun was shining and for all the deep exhaustion I felt, I was feeling so humble and grateful for all the factors that got me here, yet again. Repetition never hurts when it is done with good things.

We ate, packed and looked over our last campsite. We turned our faces to the sun, shining brightly upon us with a waning moon still working its way West to leave the sky for the day. We took pictures of each other in front of yet another amazing vista, capturing some of the changes that surely shone in our eyes. I asked everyone if we could circle and hold hands for a few moments and just be thankful and full of gratitude to this place, to each other and to ourselves. We did an amazing thing and we did it together. Don't get me wrong, we weren't out of the woods yet, pun intended. We had several hours of uphill climbing to go from the Esplanade, where we camped the night before, to get all the way back to the trailhead and the van. By now you're probably bored of reading how hard it was but guess what: it was still hard. Now we were in the full sun rather than down in deep

canyons where our sun was limited to patches or short-lived wide swaths when we turned corners within the canyons. We were on the same trail from which we had started but now we were going up instead of down. I actually like going up better than going down, generally speaking, as I feel more stable and my toes aren't smashing into the front of my boots all the time. However, it's hard work and I have to pace myself and take my time and balance my weight forward just so. Now we were working our bodies and cardiovascular systems again but at higher elevation so there was less oxygen as we climbed. A. commented that everything here physically tries to keep us down in the canyon. From gravity and pack weight pulling us down to dwindling oxygen and little to no shade for the duration of the last day, everything in the world wanted to put us back down to the bottom. Only our will and determination would take us higher until we reached the plateau and safety at last. The last half day proved no less difficult than any of the full days, all things considered. It was just shorter. As we ascended closer to the trailhead, we stopped to take one more active rest. Active rest is stopping but not removing your pack. A. said that everyone could go on at their own pace as we had established trail for the rest of our ascent. I stepped aside and let my new friends go on at the paces they each wanted since I knew my pace set our group pace most days and this one had been no exception. I was mostly in the front or the middle of the group from Day 2 on. This avoids leaving anyone behind and it also allows A. to set the pace for the entire group, not just the fittest eager beavers who want to be right on her heels. I knew it was the right thing to do and also that it benefited me the most in some ways.

A. stuck behind me as we finished the last portion at my pace. We talked about how everyone had done a great job. I talked about how grateful I was and how much I had enjoyed meeting everyone. Then, all of a sudden, there was backside of the wooden sign that marked the trailhead. We were out. The backpacking was over. I went over to where everyone was sitting and laughing and dropped my pack. We said good things like "congratulations" and "we made it". We were all basking in the sun and the glory of what we had just accomplished.

A. had kept a Yeti cooler in the car and proceeded to set up sandwich fixings for lunch, along with bags of chips and cold drinks. Heaven. Everyone else had (of course) been finished for a while. I don't know how long and frankly, it doesn't really matter. We each finished. Each of us did not die. No one had to be carried out of the bush by the rest of the group. No helicopter or hospital would be necessary, thank you. I sat down. I smiled. I took off my boots and put on my camp shoes: Tevas. No socks. It was windy and chilly and the foliage had taken a beautiful turn towards fall. It dawned on me that it was late October and I hoped I hadn't missed color season back home. I made a sandwich, ate it, and drank a cold drink with bubbles. It was divine.

As we loaded our stuff into the van, we were all happy and sunny and ready to get back to "real life". S. said he couldn't wait for a burger and a beer. G. was excited

about her impending shower. I was noticing how fucked up my feet actually were. As I write these last lines, over a week later, my feet are still a bit sore. The blisters have calloused and healed. Both of my ankles and some spots throughout my feet are still sore and cause me to be slightly slow as I get going from sitting to standing and walking. I estimate I had 9 pretty good blisters form in various spots. I tweaked (aka strained) both ankles. I'm guessing I've got some minor stress fractures in those feet, though I haven't bothered to have them X-rayed. I hadn't really looked at my feet in the daylight without socks, so I hadn't really seen the swelling until we were riding back in the van to Flagstaff.

I forgot to mention a funny little last bit to this story!! As we finished our lunches and packed the van with all of our dirty stuff and our dirty selves, the van wouldn't start. It didn't click. The battery was dead. Everyone laughed and remained calm but A. went into action, once again. She got a battery charger out of the back of our van. It didn't work. It may have accidentally been in the on position the entire week we were out hiking, or so we surmised. Either way, she made a satellite call and text to let the WT office know we were currently stranded. In the meantime, everyone began checking the wheel wells for keys. It is somewhat customary for folks to leave their keys, somewhat hidden but ultimately findable, in case someone were to come out of the wilderness needing help and to get to safety. A. had told us this when we left, also so if something had happened to her we could take the van to get help. For just these kinds of emergency situations, many seasoned hikers leave their keys in the wheel well or under a rock near the car just in case someone were to really need it. I ABSOLUTELY LOVE THIS IDEA. So, everyone was checking and then S. yelled "Jackpot!" from behind what seemed to be a rental car. He got in, started it, and then we hooked up the jumper cables we had, and jump started our own van. I had my journal, of course, so I tore out a piece of paper and wrote a note to leave in the car. It went something like this:

"Dear Hiker Friends! We have just come out of the wilderness after a 7-day backpacking trip and our van wouldn't start! We found your keys and used your car to jump ours. We can't thank you enough for saving our butts!! If anything seems amiss, please call ____ - ____ - _____. Happy hiking!" The number was of A.'s boss at WT. I need to find out if anyone called! Anyway, that was a last little funny thing worth mentioning about our unique journey. We then started the trip back to Flagstaff and the rest of our lives.

I didn't write a journal entry on the 20th. It was a surreal day. We said our goodbyes, hugging and gathering our personal gear in WT totes provided to us. We had each other's emails and spoke of exchanging pictures and staying in touch. Here is my journal entry from the 21st.

October 21 – Yesterday was another grueling uphill day. We made it out!! The van wouldn't start – ugh! We found keys to another car parked at the trailhead & used their car to jump ours. Crazy! All part of the story. I'm stiff & sore but I'm alive and better for this experience.

It has taken my body more time to recover than the time it took to do the damage, but I suppose that's natural. When I broke my face, it probably happened pretty quickly and then took months to heal. As I've stopped drinking, I'm told that it can take 1-2 years for my brain to truly heal from all the damage I've caused over the years of heavy drinking. I do feel well on my way to recovery and happiness as I do all the things I've learned to self-care, self-manage and pursue a life that is good for me and others around me. I couldn't have done this if I hadn't stopped drinking. As it was, I may have been a little early in my recovery process to take on such a monumental task. But I did it. And it was EPIC.

I was comfortable with the knowledge that I was the slowest...and the knowledge that I needed help. Not only was I able to ask for that help, I was made better for asking and receiving it. We humans are aware of the greatness of life. We see the miracles and find joy in all kinds of amazing feats. We are all connected. All of us. All things. All creatures. Every grain of sand and every sigh of the wind. Everything that lives and dies. Everything is vibrating. Everything is something. Everything is everything.

I have come out the other side having recharged parts of myself that haven't been accessed for years. My flame is re-ignited to continue forward on my journey. There is an old familiar feeling of how small and insignificant my problems really are. I am alive. I am a miracle. I am good. I am who I am and I am where I am supposed to be. "Where would I be if I weren't where I am? Ray of Light come in to my life / beat the dark and lift me high" – Jen Porter "Ray" (I call it the first song I ever wrote that didn't suck)

Thank you for your time. I hope you found something inspiring in this story along my journey. I claim spiritual progress and I'm so grateful for everything.

Additional Info from the Kanab Creek Itinerary provided by Wildland Trekking, including training, clothing, equipment and gear lists, along with some fun facts!

Hiker Notes & Equipment List

The following information includes conditioning recommendations as well as clothing and equipment requirements to help ensure a satisfying experience. All items are designed to better prepare you for your trip and need to be carefully read. If you have any questions after reviewing this information, please feel free to contact our office. Also, please pay special attention to any item marked "Important note".

Training

The enjoyment received from any physical activity is largely dependent on the shape you're in. The physical demands of hiking the canyon are in sharp contrast to those found in mountain climbing or hiking on relatively flat terrain. The first part of your

hike will be a knee-jarring descent, and the climb out will come when your legs are most tired. We cannot stress enough that the fitter you are the more fun you'll have. A combination of cardiovascular fitness, strength in all muscle groups and flexibility will help ensure an enjoyable experience. As such, we recommend you prepare for your trip with a moderate training program focused on walking and hiking, ideally in hilly terrain. Important note: Always consult with your physician before commencing with a workout program.

Training by Hiking

If you have access to hiking trails and a schedule to accommodate it begin walking and hiking in hilly/steep terrain. Nothing prepares you for a backpacking trip better than the activity itself! Try to get out at least 3 days a week. Start with short hikes (1-hour in length) with a light daypack. From week to week build the length and difficulty of your hikes and gradually increase your pack weight until you're comfortably able to hike 6-8 hours a day carrying the weight you'll have on your trip (refer to your trip packet for exact pack weight). Unless you're in great shape it is ideal to begin your training at least 12 weeks prior to your trip. Also be sure to use the boots you'll have on your trip to break them in.

Following is how a moderate program may look: First week of training Tuesday: 1-hour hike with daypack Thursday: 1-hour hike with daypack Sunday: 2-hour hike with daypack. Gradually build to: Two weeks before trip Monday: 3.5-hour hike with 20-pound pack Wednesday: 2-hour hike with daypack Thursday: 3.5-hour hike with 20-pound pack Sunday: 7-hour hike with the weight you'll have on your trip

Supplemental Training Ideas

There are many other activities that are easily incorporated into your daily life to build your overall fitness. Cross training is also important to strengthen opposing muscle groups and it helps to avoid over-use injuries. Supplemental training ideas include:

- Climb the stairs at your office, house, park, or neighborhood with a backpack. Stair climbing is a fantastic way to simulate backpacking in hilly or steep terrain.
- Bike to work or when running errands. Bike around town or on country roads outside of your town/city. Cycling is a great way to build endurance and strength in your legs.
- Gym activities including step aerobics, treadmill, bicycling, or elliptical trainers to name a few. A modest weight training program focusing on the muscles that support the ankles, knees, back, and shoulders is also beneficial.
- Swimming is a great way to build endurance and cardiovascular fitness and is easy on the joints.
- Walk to work instead of driving. Run your errands by walking and carry your groceries home in a backpack.
- Yoga and/or Pilates classes can build strength throughout your body while also improving your flexibility.
- Intramural sports
- Jogging is another option, however if you are not a regular runner it can easily lead to injuries that backpacking may then exacerbate. Undertake a jogging routine with care.

Other Training Considerations

Flexibility is an important part of training, remember to stretch before and after your workouts. For the two weeks leading up to your trip cut your workouts in half to avoid arriving fatigued. Also for a 72-hour period before your trip commences, ensure that you are consuming sufficient amounts of sodium and fluids. Doctors agree that hikers increase the likelihood of experiencing problems if they are sodium depleted (e.g., follow a low sodium diet) or are dehydrated (due to travel or using diuretics such as coffee or alcohol). If you have any questions at all about your training feel free to give us a call at the number below.

What You Need To Bring

Clothing Checklist

The following items are required for your trip. They are a must for your safety and comfort. When packing, think layered clothing systems that work together. Sturdy hiking boots, mid-weight, sturdy, above the ankle with a Vibram® sole, waterproof and ideally well broken in. Important note: Buy your boots ½ to one-size larger than your street shoes to allow for feet swelling and thicker socks. Brimmed sunhat and bandana, Rain shell, waterproof/breathable jacket, Warm top, such as a long-sleeved sweater or fleece jacket. One or two hiking t-shirts (may be long-sleeved) for protection from the sun, light colors are nice because they're cooler than dark colors. Important note: Between May 15-Sept 15th please bring a cotton shirt (long or short sleeve). It will stay wet longer during high temperature months. Outside of this time frame, no items should be cotton except a bandana. Long pants, one pair of leggings or lightweight trousers to block sun and give warmth at night Gaiters ankle-high gore-tex® gaiters. Shorts, one pair, nylon is nice for light weight and to substitute as a bathing suit. Underwear. Sport sandals like Texas® or Chacos®, or lightweight closed toe sandals or tennis shoes for camp comfort. Hiking socks, one pair for every two days of your trip. Recommended brands include Bridgedale®, Smartwool®, or similar padded socks (wearing a thin liner sock under your hiking socks is highly recommended). No cotton socks!!

Additional Clothing October – April - In addition to the clothing list above, these items are needed if your trip is occurring between October 15 and April 15: Warm hat and gloves. Long underwear, one pair of wicking tops and bottoms that are lightweight to midweight, example wicking materials include capilene, polypropylene, etc. Fleece jacket or insulated coat, warm, lightweight and packable fleece jacket or coat insulated with synthetic material. Rain pant, waterproof/breathable pant

Gear Checklist

Water bottles or bladder (3 liters total capacity), Camp pillow, lightweight, packable camp pillow. Contact lenses and glasses if you wear contact lenses please also bring a pair of glasses - your contacts are likely to become dirty and may be difficult to clean. Sunglasses, sunscreen (30+ SPF), lip balm. Headlamp, spare batteries (preferably an L.E.D. type that works with AA or AAA batteries, spare

bulb)Toiletries (such as toothpaste/toothbrush, floss, and optional body wipes / deodorant), and a small washcloth in stuff sack (bandana can serve as a washcloth)Earplugs, for campground noise (optional)Notebook or paperback book(optional)Camera, spare batteries(optional)Prescription medicine(please inform trip leader of any medications you are taking)Knee braces, if needed, Money, for tipping your guide (generally 10-15% of trip cost based on your experience)

What We Provide

Your tour will be led by a trained, experienced professional with a solid guiding background, years of personal wilderness and hiking experience, medical certifications and a passion for leading people into breathtaking landscapes.

Important note: Guides are required to take 8 hours of each 24 hour period to sleep, recuperate, take personal/down time/etc. In addition, as part of the 8 hours off they must sleep/rest or be in their tents uninterrupted for a minimum of 5 hours each night. We ask guests respect these requirements and to not interrupt guides' time off and sleep time unless there is a true (life threatening) emergency.

Group Gear

We provide top-of-the-line backpacks, tents, sleeping bags, sleeping pads, trekking poles, stoves, cookware, bowls, cups and utensils. Guides carry an Emergency Satellite Phone, water treatment resources & Company issued First Aid Kit.

Food

We provide a diversity of foods containing the necessary nutrition for sustained energy output. Meals are made from staples that travel well in the backcountry - rice, pastas, lentils, beans, couscous, oatmeal, granola, etc. Meals are also supplemented with trail foods such as crackers, cheese, granola, energy bars, fresh and/or dried fruit, and energy drink mixes. We regularly accommodate vegan, vegetarian, kosher and non-gluten diets and will make adjustments for food allergies. These and other special dietary requests may require an additional fee. In addition to your personal belongings, you will be responsible for carrying a portion of the food. Important note: It's critical that you include your dietary needs in your registration - it's too late once you've arrived!

Fun Facts

- The Grand Canyon was established as a national monument by Teddy Roosevelt in 1908 - Congress upgraded the monument to a national park in 1919.
- It's famous - it's a World Heritage Site and one of the 7 natural Wonders of the World.
- It's big - approximately 1.2 million acres, 277 miles long, 10 miles across and 1 mile deep.
- It's old - at least according to the geologists. The Vishnu Schist rock type at the bottom is 1.4 - 1.7 billion years old.
- With each step below the rim, you travel back approximately 60,000 years in the earth's history.
- 5 of the 7 life zones and 3 of the 4 desert types in North America are present.
- Over 1,500 plant, 355 bird, 89 mammal, 47 reptile, 9 amphibian, and 17 fish species make the park their home.
- And lastly, it's cool because there's no other place like it in the world!

FYI

The following are various Grand Canyon National Park regulations of interest: •Wood or charcoal fires are prohibited in the backcountry. •You must carry out ALL trash, including toilet paper if you do not use the campground toilets. •Firearms, bows, and arrows are prohibited. •Pets are prohibited below the rim. The park has kennel space available for a fee. •Removing or disturbing plants, rocks, animals, minerals, archaeological or cultural resources, is prohibited.

Group Travel

If you're joining a scheduled hiking tour, you'll be hiking with fellow outdoor enthusiasts. Please carefully examine the trip materials and difficulty prior to registering so that you can select a trip that matches your ability level. We make every effort to match the abilities of our group members however it is inevitable that individuals will vary in this regard. Consider that the trip may be a once in a lifetime opportunity for your fellow travelers and it is important to respect each guest's individual condition, needs, and desires. If you need assistance selecting the right trip we are happy to help.

Unforgettable Hiking Vacations! www.wildlandtrekking.com 1-800-715-4453