

Hava good time.

Drive, hike and helicopter adventure deep into the Grand Canyon

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LEAD WATERFALL PHOTO BY TIA ASTLE

Driving: 2013 Acura ILX
Odometer: 207,567 miles
Trip distance (drive): 600 miles
Trip distance (hike/fly): 20 miles

Havasu means turquoise or blue-green water. Havasupai are the native people of this wondrous place. Supai is the census-designated name for this village in Coconino County, said to be the most remote community in the Lower 48 states—and one of the oldest, at over 800 years. Havasu Falls, shown here, is one of six along Havasu Creek.



Imagine living in a place so remote that the cold Dr Pepper you're about to swig had to come in on a pack mule or be airlifted there by a helicopter. Given the logistical challenges of sustaining a town so remote, I was surprised such a luxury was even available—let alone refrigerated. I even got this one at a discount because the can had been damaged during mule transport.

I'm about to introduce you to a community that has thrived in the heart of northern Arizona for hundreds of years. If you're lucky, you'll pick up a hint of 3G cell signal there. But otherwise, the inhabitants of the village of Supai are about as "low-tech" as you can get in the year 2019.

I've lived within a few hours of the Grand Canyon my entire life, yet had only been into the (mile-deep) middle of it one time, three years ago when some friends and I did a crazy 26-mile South Rim to North Rim hike. Now, it was time to put the hiking boots back on (or, just my running shoes, in this case) and trek back into one of Arizona's wonders of the world.

The Havasupai Indian Reservation is surrounded on all sides by Grand Canyon National Park, and it's one of the most difficult to obtain a hiking permit to access. In fact, twice in the past (2008, and then again earlier last year), I've had a permit that has been cancelled or rescheduled due to flooding in the canyon. This time, we crossed fingers that our trip would proceed as planned, and it did—for the most part.

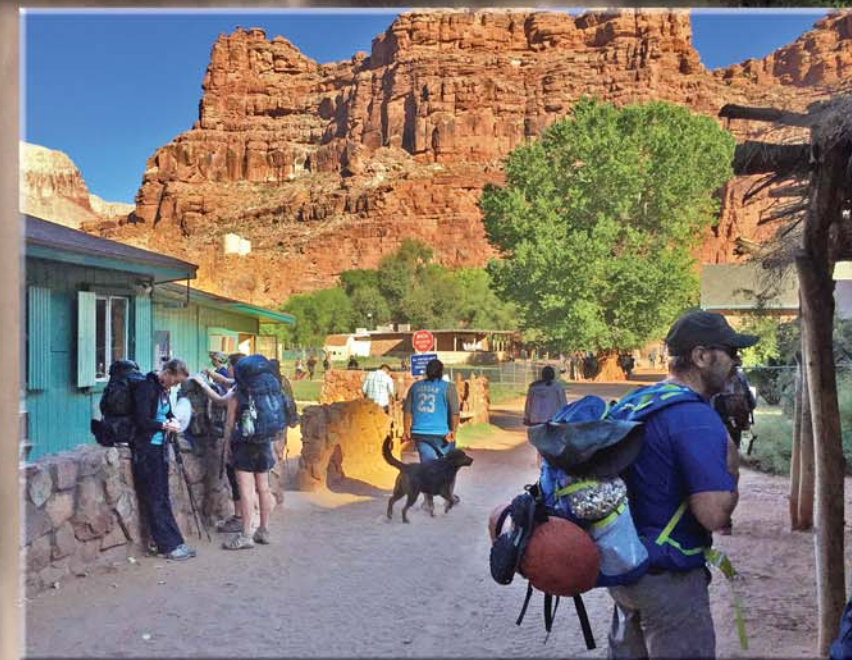
Havasupai is a word that means 'havasu' (blue-green waters) and 'pai' (people). So the 639 people who live within the 300-square-mile reservation are the people of the blue-green waters. They are governed by a constitution that was signed in 1939 and led by a seven-member Tribal Council.

Our party of nine met up at the crack of dawn—actually, a little before it—on a Friday morning last fall. Getting there was a straightforward trek up Highway 89 from Phoenix, through the Route 66 towns of Seligman and Peach Springs, and then about 68 miles on a paved two-laner to the trailhead parking lot.

Getting all my gear into a backpack was no small challenge, carefully prioritizing which items were critical for the trek. The eight-mile initial drop into the town of Supai was easy, thanks to cool morning temperatures, well-traveled pathways and primarily downhill grade. Amenities there were impressive: a café, general store, schoolhouse and churches were all present, staffed by natives and welcoming to the estimated 200 tourists who are camping in the area on any given day.

We found the perfect campsite for our party, two more miles down the dirt pathway and locat-

KEEP RIGHT >>



ed right on the verge of Mooney Falls, the highest of six waterfalls, which sends crystal blue waters cascading about 200 feet to the canyon below. We set up a hammock along the river, which ended up being my favorite place to (literally) hang out. Best of all, we were disconnected entirely at that point from contact with the outside world.

On Saturday, we scaled the cliffsides—with assistance of chains and ladders—to the pools below Mooney Falls. It was an unforgettable experience in conquering any fear of heights. The most unnerving thing about making the descent was the fact that over time, the rocks and ladders had worn smooth, so grip was limited. Besides that, the waterfall's mist kept all footholds nice and slippery with water. Yikes.

We enjoyed the sights and sounds of Mooney Falls for a couple of hours before making our ascent to camp again. That afternoon's highlight was getting a taste of some of the natives' frybread. A \$12 taco with beans, cheese and tomatoes was the ultimate afternoon snack and worth every penny to someone who was sick of eating dehydrated meals from tinfoil bags. You can also opt for the dessert version, drizzled in Nutella and caramel. In fact, Jack had two of these, and made me promise not to tell anyone. Sorry, Jack!

Campfires are explicitly outlawed in the Havasupai region, so we told nighttime stories huddled around the picnic table, before calling it a night.

Already a little sore from two days of trudging around in the sand and water, I wasn't feeling too keen on a roughly 10-mile (uphill) return hike to the parking lot on Sunday morning, so three from our party elected to take a helicopter from Supai instead. It was my first time riding in a helicopter, and I was glad that I did. The one-way fare for a seven-minute flight was \$85 and because of limited seating (only room for six) and a high volume of people leaving the canyon that day, it took about four hours until we actually got onboard. The views were spectacular.

Note that horses and mules are also available for transport of your gear, yourself or both, one way or round-trip. Costs vary, but can easily approach or exceed the helicopter. Nobody in our party went that route, though a few gave us their backpacks to carry to the top by helicopter.

By the time we got back to our vehicles, the members of our group who'd opted to hike out had already beat us there and had left the area. I played catch-up in my Acura ILX and reunited with Kyle, Jack and Justin at Roadkill Cafe in Seligman, before continuing the rest of the way into Phoenix.

Now whenever I crack open a Dr Pepper, I remember this trip with fond thoughts of sand in my shoes and a babbling brook underneath me in a hammock. ■

