

SUPAI,  
ARIZONA*Beautiful and*

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, SOME photographs were floating around the internet of the most incredible blue-green waterfalls crashing over high cliffs against the colorful backdrop of the Grand Canyon. It's easy to assume the pictures are enhanced, that nothing could be that color. But it can.

On a trip to the Grand Canyon, I met a fellow hiker who had made the trek to this unearthly landscape, and he swore the water was that color. In fact, it was even better in person.

The Havasupai Falls (also known as Havasu Falls) lie deep in the canyon about 30 miles west of Grand Canyon National Park, and are one of the most beautiful and surprising features of the American Southwest.

I knew then that I needed to see these waterfalls for myself. A quick internet search revealed that the falls are accessible only by hiking, horseback riding or helicopter, and reservations and permits are difficult to obtain. They open up on a specific day each year and sell out within hours. Backpacking and camping equipment is necessary unless lodge accommodations in the village of Supai are secured.

Opting for a guided hike left nothing to chance with permitting, and in February I arrived at Sky Harbour International Airport to make my way to Flagstaff, Arizona, to meet my fearless leader, Emily.

Here's how it went:

Checking into the hotel, I prepare for my meeting with Emily. Wildland Trekking provided me with a comprehensive list of gear to bring, and I begin putting the necessary items into the backpack I carry.

Emily, an accomplished hiker who has backpacked more than

STORY BY TAMI BROOKS • PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED



# Havasupai Falls

*surprising Southwest waterfalls*

3,500 miles, including a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail, meets me in the lobby to answer questions, go over gear and talk a little about where we're going. It's just the two of us, and we agree to meet at 6:30 a.m. to make the three-hour drive to the Hualapai Hilltop, where our 10-mile journey to the falls will begin.

Once we get off Interstate 40, we pass through the small town of Seligman, inspiration for the animated film "Cars," on Route 66. We stop for my last real coffee and then make our way along two-lane highways through the tribal land to the hilltop.

Arriving at Hualapai Hilltop, we leave our camping gear and food by a shipping container, keeping only our backpacks, lunch, snacks and water, to be transported via horse by members of the tribe. There's a helicopter pad, some out-houses and the trailhead. Descending along the rocky switchbacks, we begin the 8-mile trek to the village of Supai, where we'll check in and then make our way to the falls, another 2 miles or so.

The switchbacks are only about a mile-and-a-half long, and then the trail levels out. It's rocky and sandy, at times almost like moon dust. As we progress down the canyon, the walls grow higher as the canyon narrows. Emily points at various markings along the way and talks about the history and the geology of the land.

We stop midway for lunch while large black crows hover close by, hoping for a scrap. We begin seeing some greenery and vegetation as we arrive at the village of Supai, which has been referred to as "the most remote community" in the contiguous United States by the U.S. Department of Agriculture,

and is the capitol of the Havasupai (which means People of the Blue-Green Water) Indian Reservation.

The people of Supai don't like to be photographed and ask that no pictures be taken in the village. I ask Emily if the tribe has a love/hate relationship with the hikers, and she says it's more like tolerate/hate. Tourism is the main source of income for the tribe.

I'm warned that people may not talk to me, but a gentleman strikes up a conversation while I'm resting on a bench in front of the small general store. He asks about the hike and tells me about his job delivering the mail. He talks about life in the village and I thank him, expressing gratitude for being allowed to visit.

About a mile past Supai, we arrive at Fifty-Foot Falls, the first of five. After Fifty-Foot Falls comes Navajo Falls. Stopping briefly at each for some pictures, we press on to get to the campground. The trail steepens, and soon we arrive at the most famous of the falls, Havasu Falls.

I was a little worried that it wouldn't be like the pictures, and it wasn't. It was even more stunning in person. Magnificent turquoise water pouring over a massive limestone cliff hydrates the entrance to this lush canyon oasis in the middle of a harsh desert landscape. Truly incredible!

Exhausted, I climb into my tent after dinner and fall asleep almost immediately. It's only 7:30 p.m., but it's been dark for a while. I wake up in the middle of the night and peek out of the tent. It's almost a full moon, and there are a million stars smeared across the sky. Pulling on a hat, some extra layers and my boots, I step outside. Making my way quietly >>>





through the campground, I hike back to Havasu Falls. It's just me, and the scene is ethereal. I'm not sure how long I sit there. My mind suggests it was a dream; my knees assure me that it wasn't. I head back to the tent to rest up for the next day's exploration.

Day two finds us tackling Mooney Falls, the tallest and most forceful of the five. You may have seen the somewhat infamous tunnels and ladders that must be negotiated to get to the bottom of Mooney. Pretty daunting — but worth it.

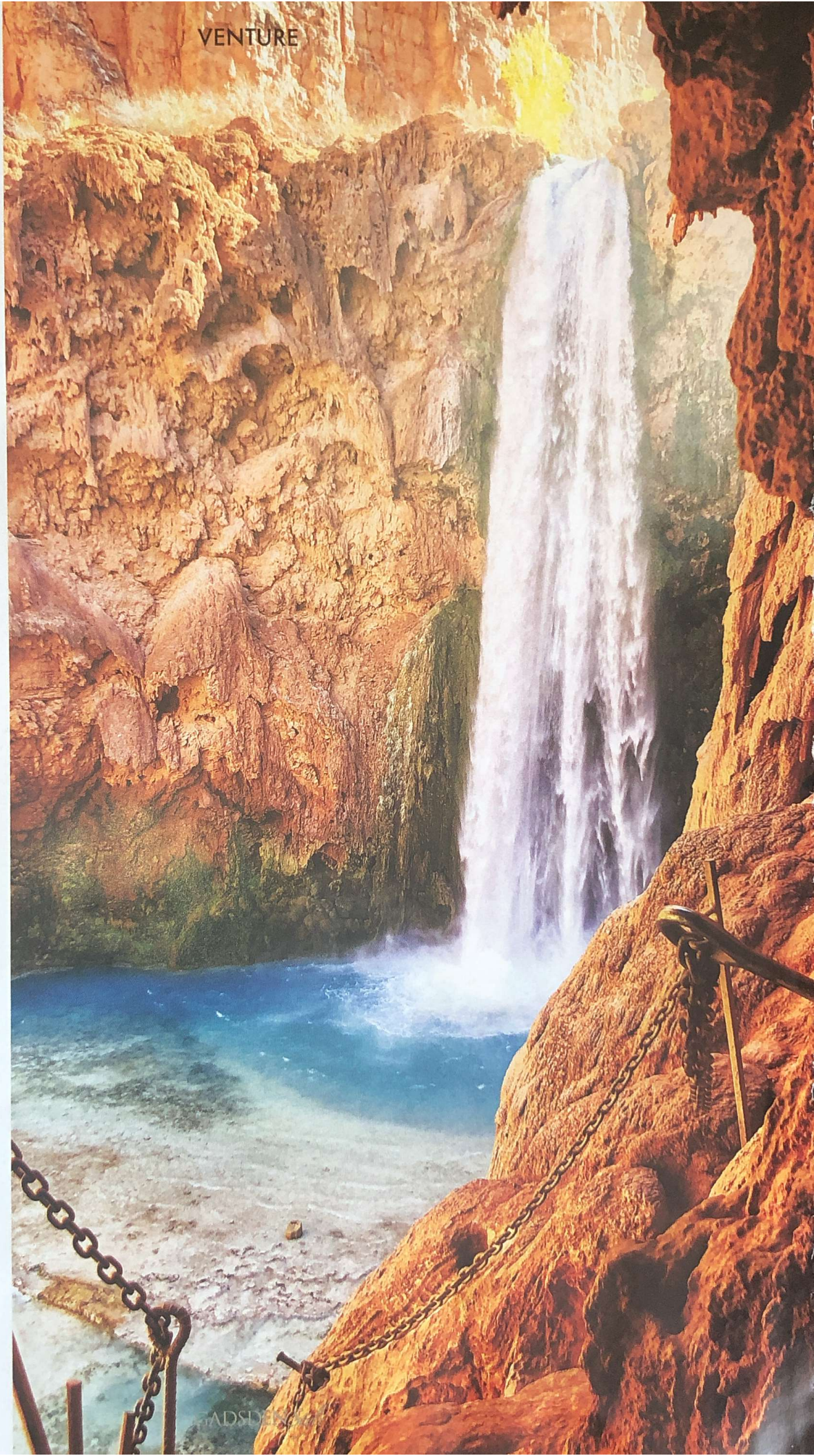
From here you can go further down the canyon to Beaver Falls, which involves several water crossings. Since it is February, we choose to head back to Fifty-Foot Falls for a picnic lunch and exploration of some of the side canyons. We spend time looking for fossils and even visiting an abandoned silver mine.

Night falls quickly, and we return for dinner and rest before the hike out the next morning. Emily tells me to grab a couple of snacks for my pack. We'll leave right after breakfast and have lunch when we get back to the van.

What goes down, must go back up. It's relatively steep until we reach the village, where the trail levels out until the last mile-and-a-half, which is where we begin our climb. Slow and steady wins the race for me, and before I know it we're back at the van eating lunch and heading back to Flagstaff.

I jump in the shower when I get back to the hotel, and watch as the canyon dust turns the water a reddish-brown as it swirls down the drain. Tomorrow I'll make my way back to Phoenix and return to Alabama — at the end of an incredible adventure that I'll never forget.

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## Planning a trip to Havasupai?

A few things to know before you go...

- 1) You **MUST** have a permit! There is no day hiking allowed. They will check when you arrive at the village and oftentimes on the trail.
- 2) Be prepared physically. Train for the hike before you arrive. You'll have a much better time swimming and exploring if you're not too sore and tired from the hike in.
- 3) There is no alcohol allowed on tribal land. Be respectful and courteous to the people who live here and allow us to visit their home.
- 4) Want to avoid the hike out? You can take a helicopter for \$85. It's first-come, first-serve. Supai people are given priority boarding at anytime.
- 5) Pack all of your trash out — a good rule of thumb at all times.
- 6) Consider a guided trek. I used Wildland Trekking. They had top-notch equipment, set up camp and did the cooking. Their knowledge of the area and trails was great and they handled all of the permits.
- 7) Just go! You won't believe this spectacular oasis in the middle of the desert.



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