

# Mile 76.5

Until you've faced it, it's hard to know what it's like. If you're a private whitewater rafter, it's likely something you've never done before and may never do again. And if you do it again, it will never be the same. It's always and forever unique, strange, challenging... and sometimes, disastrous. It's mile 76.5 on an almost 300-mile whitewater river trip through the Grand Canyon.

What makes this mile so significant? Lees Ferry, not far below the abomination that is Glen Canyon Dam, is where all boats that raft the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon start, and therefore counts as Mile Zero. Hance Rapid, at the 76.5 mile mark, is the first really big rapid you encounter. It's your first real Grand Canyon whitewater test, and it's a doozy. This means that it looms large in your thoughts all the way down to it. You wonder if you

will have what it takes when you get there.

At Mile 179 lies Lava Falls, the biggest rapid on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. The classic saying is "*You are always above Lava.*" Meaning, you anticipate it your entire trip, and as soon as you survive it, you think about running it on your next trip. Hance has always been similar to me. After about half-a-dozen trips my nemesis rapids have only been Hance and Granite. Not Lava Falls. That seems strange, but for me it's true.

Hance Rapid is a wide, boulder-strewn obstacle course. In lower flows you can only enter on the right, which really limits your options, but in higher levels a run on the left becomes available. Now, sadly, it's almost never high enough to run left.

These days, entering the rapid is usually always done on the right, although you have choices about

where on the right to enter. Some go far right, while others hug the left of the channel to avoid the rock that usually forms a small hole just left of center. At some water levels going over it is just fine. However, it can slow you down, which is not good when you are headed to a series of holes and large waves which you will need down-river momentum to survive.

From there on, it's a complete mess of holes, pour-over rocks, and large breaking waves. Unlike nearly all Grand Canyon rapids, there is no clear line. Unless you're very experienced and skilled, you just deal with whatever presents itself. If you're rowing a wooden dory, as commercial guides with the commercial rafting company OARS (Outdoor American River Specialists) and some private trips do, it's a real nail-biter with all the rocks you could crash into or fall over.



## Winter backpacking in the Grand Canyon.

that was going on under the very surface of the water. I had no idea what I was about to face and looking back, I was so thankful that I didn't.



The interesting thing was that running it in a whitewater raft was far from my first acquaintance with Hance Rapid. My first time there wasn't from a boat, but from shore. Before I was a river guide, I was a dedicated Grand Canyon backpacker. By the time I became a river guide, I had hiked almost all of the trails in the Grand Canyon, which made my

first river trip in the Grand Canyon all that sweeter.

While backpacking, I had camped at Hance Rapid more than once. My last backpacking trip in the Canyon was on Christmas vacation when I hiked down to Hance Rapid, and then on to Tanner Rapid.

I was young enough (twenty years-old) that I could ignore weight considerations to some degree, so I had a three-person tent, two sleeping pads, in-step crampons for the ice and snow I had to hike through, and an odd assortment of food items with absolutely no freeze-dried crap. I had cheese, a dense sliced bread, chocolate, nuts, a can of frozen orange juice and an avocado, (which never ripened in the cold and I had to pack it back out just to throw it away at home, ouch!). I was a quirky hiker. The weight of my pack seemed rather immaterial to my younger and much less sensible self. I could simply do what I wanted to do, without thinking a lot about weight.

My first experience with Hance was in 1978, when flows were generally high. But I was a rookie and I was naïve enough to take advice from our private trip leader, who had also never been down before. He had a bright idea of doing a “momentum run” on the right. His hair-brained plot was to start on the far right, with a strong ferry angle to the left, so you could row hard and build up momentum to slide behind the rock on the left of the tongue just after passing it. At that time, all the really bad holes were on the right, so you really wanted to be in the middle. Never on the right.

The essential problem was the timing. I should have known from the beginning that it was a completely idiotic plan. But I had learned to run rivers only three months before, on the much, much smaller Stanislaus River in California. What did I know? I was soon to find out.

Simply put, I was taken in by my own ignorance and inexperience, while believing in someone else,

despite their own ignorance and inexperience. We were both grasping at truth, with absolutely no reason to think we had it in our hands. And we didn't.

Let me be absolutely clear. There is no such thing as a “momentum run.” If you want to duck in behind a rock, you want to just barely miss it and then nip in, not try to calculate all of the variables that go into rowing across a span of thirty-feet while accelerating down a slope. Any idiot could see that. Except, as it turned out, me.

Like a lamb to the slaughter, I took on the challenge and was the first boat out, with no passengers in my boat, luckily. With more arrogance than confidence, I rowed hard to the right shore and started the slow drift to the head of the rapid. As the seconds ticked by, I tried to overcome my fear and time my hard pull to the left with as much precision as I could muster.

The mud-laden water made it difficult to see the rocks, or anything

Halfway down into the canyon I set up camp in the snow. Back then, wool was the thing. Wool gloves, wool hat, wool jacket, even wool pants. No space-age down jackets, only old school. My boots were of heavy leather construction with recently introduced Vibram soles. Even now, after many, many hiking miles over forty-plus years, those soles look almost new. The boots, after many bloody blisters, are completely shaped around my feet. The double sleeping pads—a closed-cell foam pad on the bottom and a two-inch open-celled foam on top—formed adequate insulation from the frozen ground. My down sleeping bag did its job, and the three-person tent helped contain my warmth.

I enjoyed the challenge of solo backpacking in such extreme conditions. Snow excited me for the challenge it presented. I bought in-step crampons to more safely hike the trail down into the canyon. I took a small notebook to write my thoughts. I experimented with food I had never taken on a backpacking trip before. It was the trip where I pushed my backpacking boundaries, thankfully, just before I, without any anticipation or premonition, completely abandoned it as a pursuit.

Although I really enjoyed backpacking for a number of years, rafting ruined it for me. You can take anything at all with you on a river trip, even the heavy stuff, and still be out in the wilderness. Although I did not watch my backpack weight all that closely, I still wouldn't take things like beer, which nearly any river trip would. After I started rafting, I abandoned backpacking. Now I prefer to boat into my outdoor adventures.

Oddly enough, on this trip I found a can of beer floating in a riverside eddy that had escaped from a river trip. That must surely go down as the best beer I've ever had in my life, as it was so completely unexpected. I didn't care which brand it was and to this day I can't even recall. It was a beer, cold, and that's all I cared about.

I really love camping at Hance. The location is dramatically scenic, since it's relatively open with expansive views upstream and also up to the rim, snow-dusted on this trip. It also has a lovely expanse of sand dunes just perfect to set up a freestanding tent. The nights are magic; the sky is filled with stars and the flowing water is a nightly lullaby. I will always and forever wish I could fall asleep next to a river.

Since I would never build a fire in the canyon, and flashlight batteries were always at a premium, I would sack out not long after dark and get up at the break of dawn, as one should likely always do when in the wild.

You haven't really lived until you've experienced dawn at the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

The sky lightens slowly, so that it takes time to make out the surrounding cliffs and river right before you. All of a sudden the sun turns the top of a cliff into a fire of red or orange, depending on the rock layer it hits first. It then slides slowly down the cliff until, eventually, the sun strikes you. In winter at the bottom of the canyon, that can take a while. When it finally does, it becomes a welcome revelation. You go from cold to warmth instantly.

Something else to appreciate is that the geologic formation that creates Hance Rapid is a dramatic volcanic dike that slices through the sedimentary layers at a diagonal slope that meets the head of the rapid like an arrow striking the ground. Clearly, the dike made the rapid. Few rapids in the Grand Canyon, except for Lava Falls, have such a clear geologic reason for existing beyond the rocky outfall of a side creek. The canyon is relatively open here, which means you get some great views of the cliffs that soar a mile above you.

The hike down to Hance is also well worth it. Halfway down into the canyon on the Grandview Trail you reach a horseshoe-shaped mesa, aptly named, Horseshoe Mesa. It sits

almost exactly halfway down into the canyon, which means you can stand on the edge of the mesa suspended halfway between the rim and river. There are few places quite like it.

There is also at least one cave just below the mesa rim that I've visited more than once, before it was locked up by the Park Service to preserve it from, well, people like me, although I always treated it with care. Once a hiking companion and I crept in far enough that we decided to switch off our flashlights and experience total darkness, which is more of a rare experience than you may think. In the modern world we rarely experience it. We spent a few minutes with our eyes wide open without being able to see any light at all, not even our hands in front of our face. When we were ready to head back out, we turned our lights back on, but my companion set off in the opposite direction I was going. Thankfully, I won that argument, and before long we exited the cave, but I never forgot how easy it could be to get disoriented in the pitch black.

Hance Rapid is named after John Hance, a real character, who came to the Grand Canyon around 1883. He tried to mine gold, silver, and asbestos, but his real income came from guiding and providing lodging to early tourists who came to see if the tall tales told by John Wesley Powell were true. They were, but Hance's tales were another matter. He became a legendary fixture, who would spin yarns about how he had dug the canyon himself. For example, he once said "I've got to tell stories to these people for their money; and if I don't tell it to them, who will? I can make these tenderfeet believe that a frog eats boiled eggs, and I'm going to do it; and I'm going to make 'em believe he carries it a mile to find a rock to crack it on."

When President Roosevelt visited the Grand Canyon in 1903, John Hance served as his guide, as he did for many visitors at the time. He was the first Postmaster for the Grand Canyon and opened the

first post office on the South Rim. He died on January 8, 1919, at the purported age of 84, only a month before the Canyon became a national park. Although he has been called "Captain," there is no evidence that he ever actually was, despite likely serving for the Confederacy during the Civil War.

The Grand Canyon has attracted a number of interesting characters of European descent over the years, but it's important to acknowledge that Native Americans have inhabited the Canyon for a very, very long time, such as Havasupai, Pueblo, Paiute, Navajo, and Zuni to name some. There are Native American sacred sites as well as ancestral and current homelands (Havasupai) within the Grand Canyon. No doubt they visited Hance Rapid frequently over the centuries.



The challenges the Colorado River offers sneak up on you. The first days of any river Grand Canyon trip are fairly mild. Marble Gorge, which is the first part of the trip, is a gentle introduction. It's tremendously beautiful with gentle floats between 800-foot limestone cliffs, and the canyon beyond extending above that. It's by far my favorite section of the river.

This sets up a contrast—what you are currently experiencing is relatively easy and calm, with just enough difficulty to lull you into thinking you have met and vanquished the challenges the Canyon has to throw at you. You may think that having sailed through the "Roaring Twenties" (a set of rapids in the twenty to thirty mile mark, rated around five on the one to ten Grand Canyon Scale of difficulty), that you have the Canyon *nailed*. If you think that, you are very, very mistaken. Your first real trial is at Mile 76.5.

It's a great thing that you get five or six days, when rowing a 14- to 18-foot boat, to get accustomed to the big water of the Colorado River.

But you should take advantage of this time. It's your opportunity to up your game, to build your strength, sharpen your perceptions, and hone your Grand Canyon water reading skills, to safely navigate all that is to come. And there is much to come beyond Mile 76.5.

Even though you likely won't experience the same high flows (25-40,000 CFS) of the '70s and '80s, the typical 15,000 CFS of modern days is still a large flow, and something worthy of respect and skill. You can still hit a wave badly and flip your boat. You still need to take things seriously. Just as I should have in 1978, when I was too ignorant to know what the hell I was doing.



On my very first run of Hance Rapid in 1978 I never did find out how everyone else ran the rapid. My guess is they did something completely different. Subsequently, I always did every time I ran the rapid.

As I slipped down the tongue of the rapid, I did my best to pull hard to the left at exactly the right time, but, to no surprise, timing the run was way too difficult. I ended up trashing all the way down the right side, which meant crashing through a series of holes. My saving grace was that I was in an 18-foot ancient floppy rubber raft called a Havasu. The boat completely doubled up on itself in the first hole and took on so much water that it was unflippable for the rest of the rapid. We had become one with the river. But I still had the rest of the holes to crash through. All I remember is a series of rough falls into whitewater maelstrom, and then lumbering slowly out to somehow continue downriver. I don't recall how.

When I came out at the bottom of the rapid, I had to row with everything I had to get to the side of the river, into a calm recirculation called an eddy. After I was able to stop, I slid off my rowing seat into what had literally become a

swimming pool. The floor of my boat had sunk so low from the water that had poured in that I couldn't find the bottom. I got my five-gallon plastic bucket and spent the next half-an-hour or more bailing the water out of my boat, several gallons at a time. It remains the worst run of a rapid I've ever had in my life.

Subsequent encounters with Hance were thankfully better, but still challenging. There was the time I went far left and popped an oar that I had to reseat on its clip in the middle of the rapid, with both of my parents in the boat. But it could have been worse. Not many people knew just how worse, but I sure did. Let's just say that to this day, I greatly respect mile 76.5. And you should too.

### **Edward Out**