

AMERICAN AIRLINES - AMERICAN EAGLE 05.01.04
AMERICANWAY

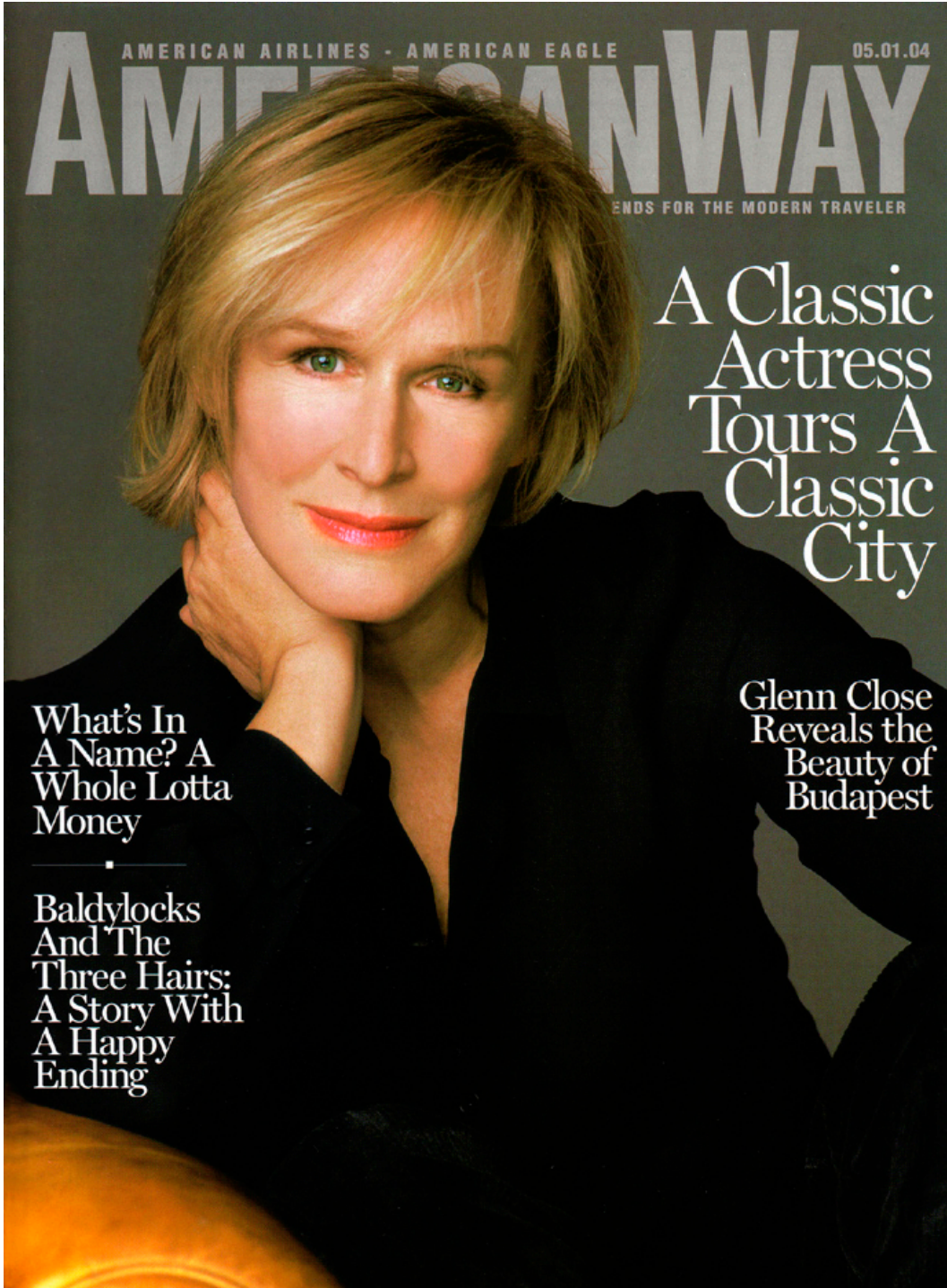
ENDS FOR THE MODERN TRAVELER

A Classic
Actress
Tours A
Classic
City

What's In
A Name? A
Whole Lotta
Money

Glenn Close
Reveals the
Beauty of
Budapest

Baldylocks
And The
Three Hairs:
A Story With
A Happy
Ending





Climb

atop the great,

twisting snake
of the

Colorado River
as it slithers and strikes

through the Grand Canyon's depths and take

The
Ride

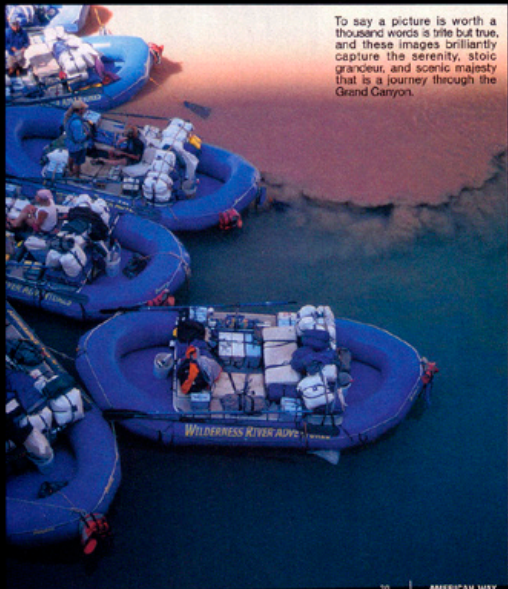
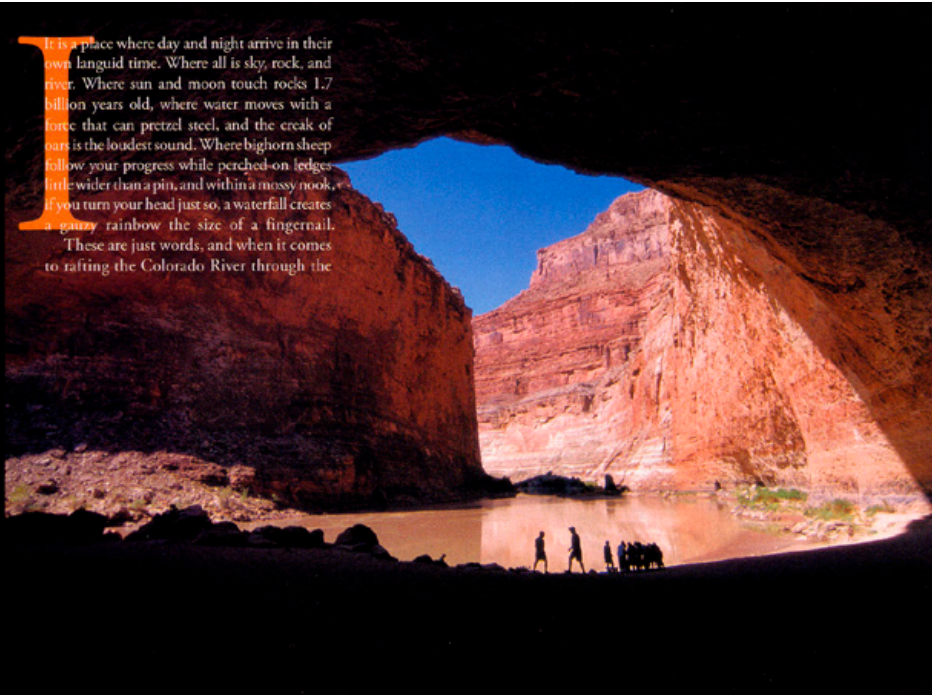
of Your Life

STORY BY KEN McALPINE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NORBERT WU

08 | AMERICAN WAY | 02.01.04

It is a place where day and night arrive in their own languid time. Where all is sky, rock, and river. Where sun and moon touch rocks 1.7 billion years old, where water moves with a force that can pretzel steel, and the creak of oars is the loudest sound. Where bighorn sheep follow your progress while perched on ledges little wider than a pin, and with a mossy nook, if you turn your head just so, a waterfall creates a gauzy rainbow the size of a fingernail.

These are just words, and when it comes to rafting the Colorado River through the



To say a picture is worth a thousand words is trite but true, and these images brilliantly capture the serenity, stoic grandeur, and scenic majesty that is a journey through the Grand Canyon.



TAKE A WILD RIDE

More than a dozen professional river outfitters will take you down the Colorado, and they offer lots of options — half-day floats to 8-day motorized trips, escorted kayak trips, and 16-day oar trips. Most commercial trips are offered between April and October. Outfitters have their own personalities, so it pays to ask around to see which one is right for you. For more information, visit the Grand Canyon River Outfitters Association at www.gcroa.org.

- ARIZONA RIVER RUNNERS**, (800) 477-7236, www.rftarizona.com
- CANYON EXPLORATIONS & CANYON EXPEDITIONS**, (800) 654-0729, www.canyonexplorations.com
- GRAND CANYON EXPEDITIONS**, (800) 544-2931, www.gcex.com
- HATCH RIVER EXPEDITIONS**, (800) 433-8396, www.hatchriverexpeditions.com
- MOKI MAC RIVER EXPEDITIONS**, (800) 264-7280, www.mokimac.com
- O.A.R.S. (OUTDOOR ADVENTURE RIVER SPECIALISTS)**, (800) 348-6277, www.oars.com
- WESTERN RIVER EXPEDITIONS**, (800) 453-7450, www.westernriver.com
- WILDERNESS RIVER ADVENTURES**, (800) 992-8022, www.riveradventures.com

TRAVEL



Grand Canyon, words fail miserably. Numbers, too. Between Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Mead, the Colorado River flows 277 miles. The river's average depth is 35 feet; its average speed is 4 miles an hour; its temperature, coming as it does from the depths of Glen Canyon Dam, 50 degrees. There are more than 160 rapids within the Canyon's confines; in some, the river's speed increases appreciably. "I was told rafting through the Grand Canyon would be the best experience of my life," a woman once told me. "And rafting the Grand Canyon would be the second best experience of my life, and the third..."

Such whispers had reached me for years. So I decided to take the only possible course. I went to see for myself.

Here's the best thing about rafting down the Colorado. Unlike other grand adventures — climbing Everest, meditating with puff adders — pretty much anyone can do it. Choose to sign on with a professional river outfitter (the waiting list for private trips is currently 15 years, though cancellations can make the wait shorter), and most companies require only that you be at least 12 years old for an oar trip and 8 to ride in a motorized craft. Other than that, you just have to adjust to a single pertinent reality: "Some people really embrace the soli-

tude, and some people don't expect it," smiled Christian Seamans on the drizzly fall morning of our own departure.

Christian dipped his oars into the cocoa-brown Colorado and smiled again. "Welcome, everyone," he said, as we moved out into the main current. "It's always nice to push away."

Enjoying nature is about pushing away, and all of us — 19 paying customers who had signed on for a 14-day oar trip with Wilderness River Adventures — had ensured ourselves additional solitude by coming to the river in October.

It is something of a secret, and I will likely be tossed into the Colorado tied to an anvil for saying so in print, but fall and spring are the river's unsung seasons; quieter, cooler, heavier with repose. In July, the average high in the canyon is 106 degrees. In October, it is 85, and the low, on average, is a still-quiet-pleasant 59. In summer, 150 people a day put on to the river at Lees Ferry, 15 miles below Glen Canyon Dam, and plenty more would join them if the Park Service didn't enforce this cap. On the morning we left, only three other groups were starting off. Over the next 13 days we saw them now and again, but mostly it was just us. October offers a final plus. No motorized craft are allowed on the river after mid-September, making it easier to hear a raven's wing beat

or the sound of your own heart in the last wink of silence before a rapid's roar.

Our party numbered 26: 7 guides, 19 clients, 6 rubber boats, and enough food and drink to embarrass Club Med.

Our Wilderness guides proved supremely competent, but they didn't take their competency too seriously, preferring instead to dye their hair green, announce dinner with a Gregorian chant, and even, on the proper occasion, wear women's underwear. There was Christian, Heather, Brett, Jeffe, Nate, Nute, and our trip leader, Okie. It quickly became obvious they all loved the river and the canyon. They knew its history, its wildlife, and its geology, but mostly they knew how to rightly enjoy it.

Though it is casually labeled a river trip, rafting the Grand Canyon is far more. Traveling down the Colorado gives you access to remote places otherwise reached only with great difficulty or a very long fall. We saw hikers now and then, dirty, bedraggled figures who regarded us dully with the vacant eyes of a mongrel dog. We simply hopped ashore from our happy blue-rubberboats, lunched on taco salad and fistfuls of Oreos, and duly fortified, strode into side canyons serene and glorious, hushed places pressed in by walls as smooth and cool as satin sheets, where clear creek trickles ran, and here and there sat truck-size rocks deposited at times when the creek was nothing like a trickle.

Some side canyons were dry — tomb-still and quiet. Others drummed — waterfalls cascading into pools with a sonorous boom blew sprays of rainbow mist. One canyon held turquoise pools so clear and still they appeared to be not pools at all, but vast emerald gems set in the earth. In some of these places we sat apart in contemplative silence. In others, we did what was only right, plunging into the pools and hooting beneath waterfalls like 10-year-olds who had discovered their parents' hooch. These places had magical and apt names: Elves Chasm, Shinumo Creek, Matkatamiba, and Blacktail Canyon. They sat stoic and seemingly untouched. It felt as if we were the first to set foot there.

We weren't, of course. On our sixth day, 68 miles downriver, we hiked up to a butte overlooking Tanner Rapid and then followed a trail along the sloped hillside. Here and there were *metate* and *mano* — stone trough and handstones used by the Anasazi Indians to mill corn. They were scat-

TRAVEL

tered about as if the Anasazi had just up and left, perhaps to take advantage of this lovely day and go for a hike.

Okie picked up a shard of pottery, turning it slowly in his fingers.

"How old is that?" I asked.

"Close to 1,400 years old," said Okie.

It was as if past and present had collided as one.

Okie looked toward the Colorado, running brown beneath the sun.

"Yep," he said. "That's the same river they saw."

And the Anasazi were merely members of the Newcomer's Club.

In another silent side canyon, Christian crouched and splashed water on a rock. A shape appeared, trumpet shaped and maybe five inches long.

"Crinoid," said Christian. "That's probably 400 million years old."

Our days unfolded in languid fashion. We woke, warm in our sleeping bags, to cool silence on white-sand beaches, the tops of the canyon walls catching the first tracings of dawn. Breakfast followed, the smell of coffee and bacon residing beside the river, and then the guides would break down camp and pack their respective boats, meticulously lashing down piles of gear like fussy moms. By 9, we would be on the river.

Though *muchado* is — rightly — made of the Colorado's vaunted rapids, most of the river is rapidless. Yes, there are more than 160 rapids between Lees Ferry and Lake Mead, but they compose 9 percent of that section of river. And so we floated, lazy as a dream, between brown river and blue sky, the canyon walls ever-rearing up on both sides, while beneath the boat, the river made small commotions and fidgets.

Great blue herons, dragonflies, gossamer strands of spider webs, they all wafted past us at a syrupy pace. Late afternoon, we would bump up against an empty beach and, in short order, we would be dining on shrimp scampi or prime rib, tiki torches throwing flickering light on the sand.

My favorite time came after dinner when the guides recounted stories of explorers and river runners, folks like John Wesley Powell, who went down the river with one arm, wood boats, scarce and spoiling supplies, and no surfeit of determination and courage. We would listen appreciatively, our bellies digesting brownies fresh from the Dutch oven, sparks from the campfire drifting up to join the stars.

GRAND READING

The Colorado River and the Grand Canyon have inspired plenty of words. A few inspired choices:

The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons, by John Wesley Powell

The Colorado River in Grand Canyon: A Comprehensive Guide to Its Natural and Human History, by Larry Stevens

Grand Canyon Stories Then & Now, by Leo W. Banks and Craig Childs

Downcanyon: A Naturalist Explores the Colorado River Through Grand Canyon, by Ann Haymond Zwinger

There's This River: Grand Canyon Boatman Stories, by Christa Sadler

Tales from the Grand Canyon: Some True, Some Tall, by Edna Evans

Grand Canyon: An Anthology, by Bruce Bahstall

Canyon, by Michael P. Ghiglieri

Our existence mirrored the river's, and the river, in turn, proceeded like life, long spells of quiet interspersed with wild bouts of feverish activity.

Because, yes, there were the rapids. Again, floods of words have tried to define the Colorado's rapids — infamous torrents like Crystal, Hance, and Lava Falls. I will say only this: Those rapids, and others you've never heard of, are a force of nature that should be met at least once in your life. For the 19,000-plus folk who proceed down the Colorado each year, the rapids are a wet and wonderful Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. But they have meted out injury and death, too, which, of course, adds to the thrill.

We each came to these rapids with our own style. Just before a rapid called House Rock, Dennis Striegel turned to me. "Every time after we go through one of these, I wonder, 'Do I have my hat, do I have my glasses, do I have my teeth?'"

As we floated deep into the Canyon, the river began to take on a decided cant. We could actually see the river dropping away, an odd sight that leads one to better understand the trepidation of ancient mariners convinced they would drop off the edge of the world.

The Colorado's closest approximation to this is Lava Falls, 179 miles downriver from Lees Ferry, and the granddaddy of them all. As its name implies, it begins with an attention-getting spillover. Then all hell breaks loose.

Running a rapid is like dancing with a psychotic partner; all proceeds smoothly

until you step out of line, and then you are slapped, throttled, and otherwise rudely mistreated. In the case of Lava Falls, the partner is treble psychotic, the drubbing proportionately severe. Rafts flip. They wrap around rocks. And you go for a memorable swim.

Lava arrived on the second to last day of our trip. A half-mile away, the river was nearly still, as if holding its breath. Then we heard the sound, like the thunder of horses. From the bow of Okie's boat, I peered ahead. Over the passing days I had noticed how, from upstream, the bigger rapids looked like the splashing of children at play. These children were also blowing mist.

We pulled ashore just upstream to court Lava, hiking up a short trail. Sweat was funneling into bodily crannies I didn't know existed. I noticed with detached interest that I still had my life preserver on.

We crowded together at the edge of the small overlook and looked down.

Viewed from above, Lava looks like one of those whitewater boils that precede the surfacing of some monstrous sea creature. There were badly placed rocks, too, and enormous waves that rose and crashed, followed immediately by more enormous waves that did the same; a train wreck that never ended. The guides studied the rapid and spoke quietly to each other.

Okie turned on his heels.

"My boat, we're going."

Lava Falls is a short rapid. I have little recollection of the run. Okie followed a slick tongue of water that moved dreamily toward the ledge. The oar locks creaked as he applied pressure, then the boat lurched and bounded and everything disappeared. Water enveloped us: not cold, not violent, only heavy and pressing away the world.

And then it was gone and we were through, and Okie had yanked us into a small notch of eddy against the shore; everyone was talking at once.

The river, and the moment, were passing. I stood there trying to remember it all. The sun and wet on my face, the slap of waves rocking the boat, the giddy closeness I felt for my companions, a small lizard, an arm's length away, nipping ants off a rock.

The next day, 188 miles from Lees Ferry, we stepped ashore for good. The river ran on.

www.threeriverspress.com
KEN McALPINE'S travel stories have won two Lowell Thomas awards. His latest book, *Off Season*, will be published by Three Rivers Press in July.