

Grand Canyon Rim-To-Rim Hike

Recommended Route: North Kaibab Trail
to Bright Angel Trail

Length: 24 miles (one-way)

Level: Strenuous

Best Time to Go: May - October

There's no question about it, the rim-to-rim hike in Grand Canyon National Park is a classic bucket list adventure. But it's no stroll through the park, that's for sure. Being unprepared can have catastrophic results. However, when you've trained properly, have the right gear and know what to expect, it can be one of the most memorable and rewarding experiences of your life.

The Grand Canyon Rim-to-Rim Experience

For the hearty souls who are willing to work for it – less than one percent of the Grand Canyon's five million annual visitors – the real magic lies below the rim. On this epic Grand Canyon hike, you'll leave from the North Kaibab Trail on the North Rim, challenging your personal limits as you descend 14.3 miles and 6,000 feet to the bottom of the canyon before connecting with the Bright Angel Trail and climbing 4,500 feet and 9.6 miles back out again to the South Rim.

Along the North Kaibab Trail you'll take in mesmerizing scenery as you pass through two billion years of the Earth's history and eleven layers of ancient rocks. Eventually, after hours of knee-pounding hiking, you'll reach the sandy banks of the Colorado River. Here, in the heart of Grand Canyon National Park, dozens of massive rock formations will tower above you on all sides. For those with a love of the natural world, it's pure sensory overload – thrilling, dizzying, enlightening.

At the bottom, you can enjoy a much-needed rest and overnight stay (maybe longer) at Bright Angel Campground, or one of the most exclusive lodges in America – Phantom Ranch – where a cold beverage, warm meal booked in advance, and a cozy bed await. Soak it all in, because the real adventure still lies ahead.

Climbing out of the canyon along the Bright Angel Trail, considered to be the park's premiere trail, may be rewarding, but it's no easy feat. However, ample shade, seasonal water sources, and views framed by massive cliffs make it a more pleasant, even enjoyable experience, for most hikers. Many, many switchbacks later when the journey is over, you'll stand along the top of the South Rim, knowing that you've seen the Grand Canyon in all of its glory.

Work For It

Everyone from small children to the elderly have successfully hiked into the Grand Canyon, but even the most avid hikers and physically fit people need to take training seriously. To put it into perspective, many people compare the Grand Canyon's rim-to-rim hike with climbing Mt. Whitney in California, the Lower 48's highest peak, which is a 21.6-mile, 6,000-foot undertaking. In preparation for this demanding trek, it's critical to work your heart, knees, and hips in the months prior to going. Even if you're in the best shape of your life, whatever work you put into targeted training will make your experience that much more enjoyable and safe.

Gearing Up

Training isn't the only thing you need to keep in mind for a successful rim-to-rim hike. Bringing the right gear is also critical. To lighten the load, many hikers opt to hire a mule service to transport their gear to the bottom of the canyon and back out again for a fee (only available from the South Rim). But either way, you'll need to carry a well-thought-out daypack including a variety of clothing and essentials for temperatures that can swing dramatically. At the very least you'll want a good pair of sneakers or light-weight hiking boots, a hat, sunscreen and lip protection, sunglasses with UV protection, a hydration system or several water bottles, a first-aid kit, and plenty of snacks with a mix of salt, protein, and carbs.

Plan Your Trip

If you're serious about hiking the Grand Canyon rim to rim, you'll want to start planning more than a year in advance, especially if you plan on staying at Phantom Ranch. Reservations for Phantom Ranch, which is operated by Xanterra, open up 13 months in advance and are best attained by calling 888-29-PARKS. If you prefer to camp, backcountry permits for camping at Bright Angel Campground near Phantom Ranch and the other campsites below the rim – Cottonwood along the North Kaibab Trail or Indian Garden along the Bright Angel Trail – become available on the first of the month, four months prior to your start month. And don't forget this is a one-way hike. Unless you want to do it all over again, you'll need to stage cars, leaving one at the Backcountry Information Center on the South Rim for the completion of the hike. Or, plan to be shuttled back to your car at the North Kaibab Trailhead by a service such as Trans Canyon Shuttle.

Of course, if you want somebody else to handle all the planning, including snagging reservations at Phantom Ranch without the hassle, you have options. You can choose to go with an experienced outfitter like O.A.R.S., which has been guiding rafting and hiking trips in the Grand Canyon since 1969, and offers several guided Grand Canyon hiking itineraries.