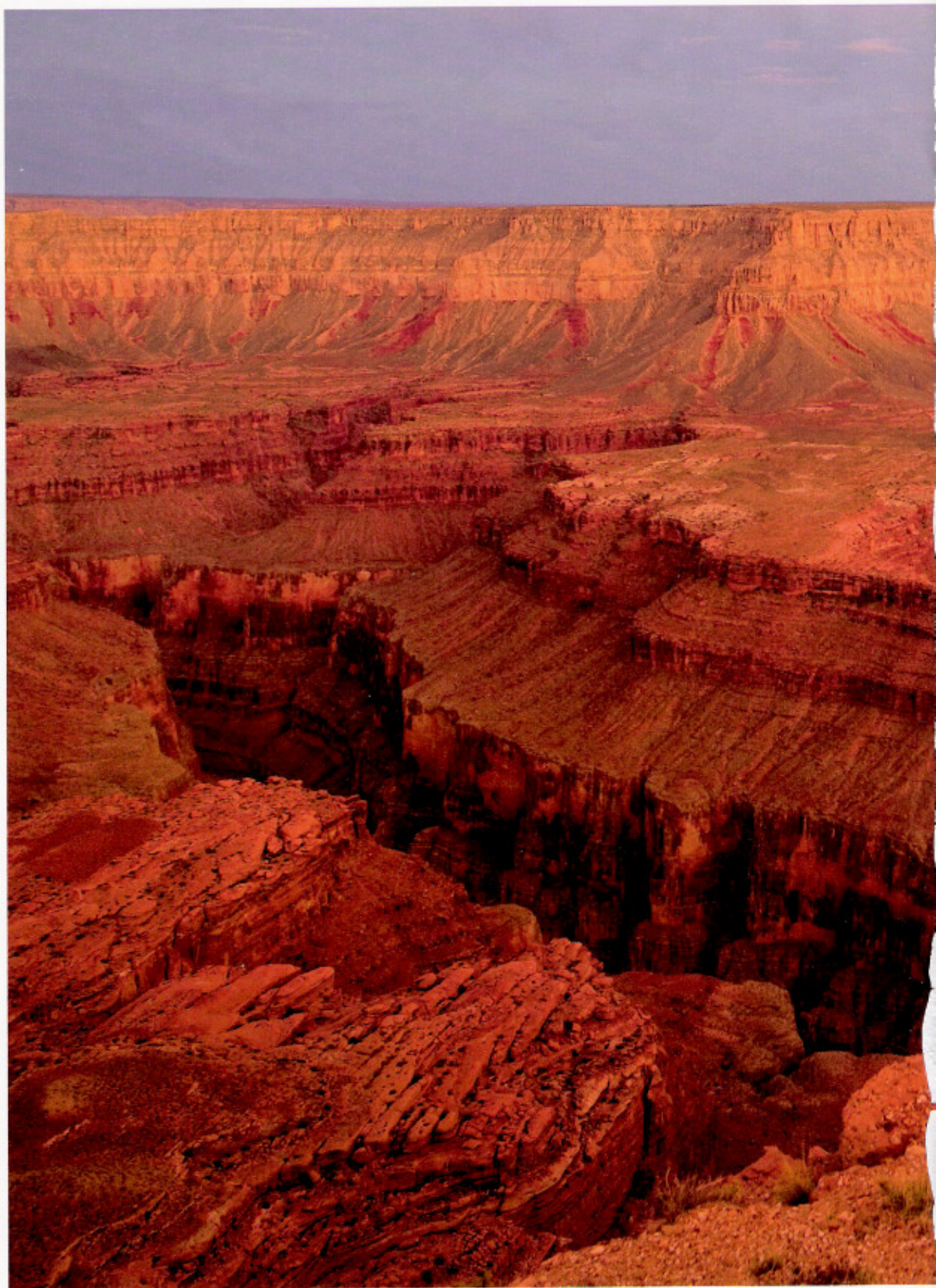




# The Unexpected Canyon

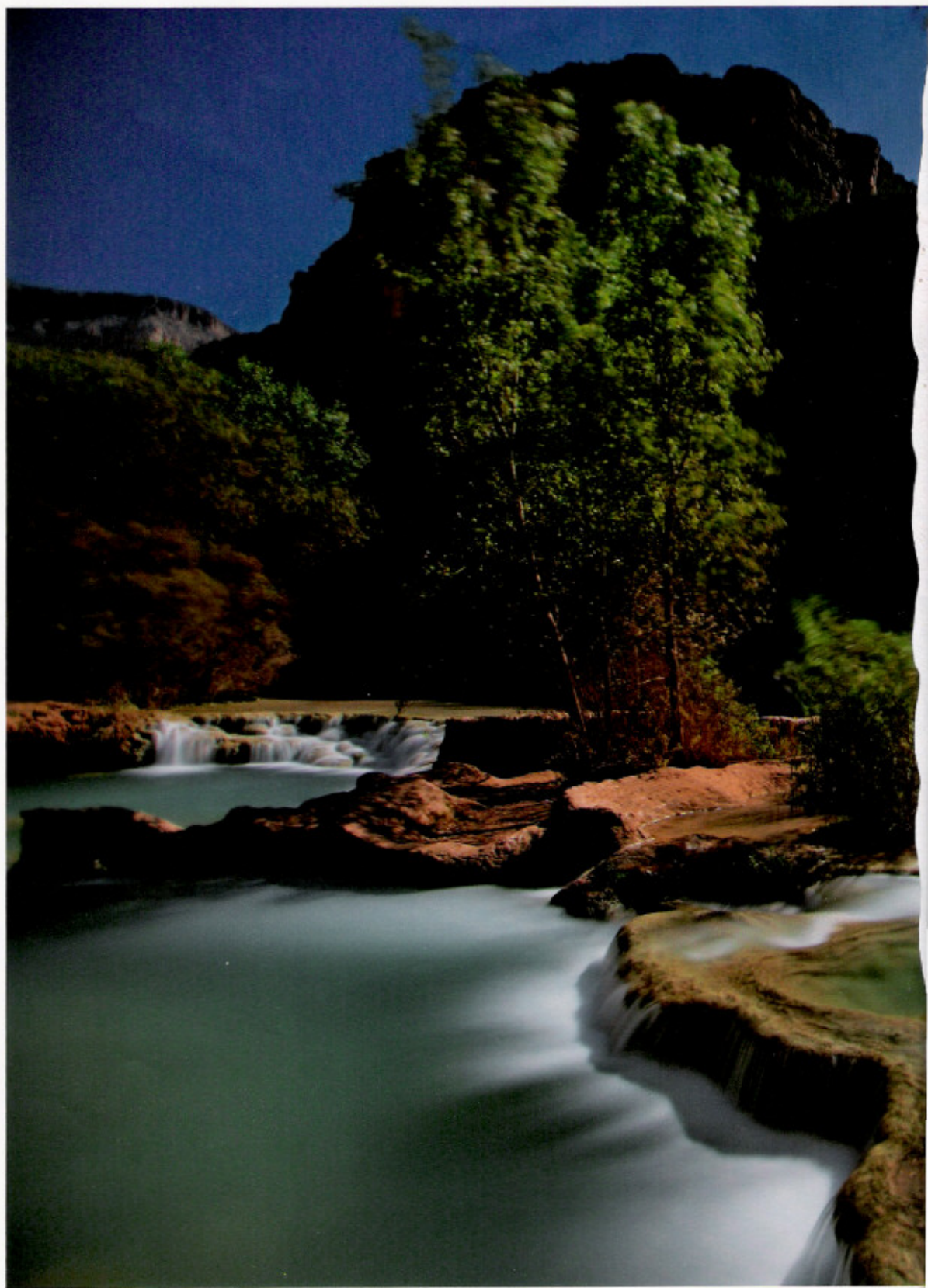
*Winter mists shape the view above Bright Angel Trail in Grand Canyon National Park.*





*Clouds cast twilight colors onto canyon walls below SB Point.*





*Lit only by the moon, Havasu Falls thunders through the night.*





*A winter trickle spills through Silver Grotto.*

BY VIRGINIA MORELL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL NICHOLS

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER

It snowed furiously the night before I stepped over the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. It was mid-May, so the snow was wet and slushy, not dry enough to stick. But the moisture stained the soft soil at the trailhead a dove gray and spiced the air with the scent of ponderosa pine. The trail I was following, the New Hance, didn't dawdle but marched directly to the canyon's edge, took a sharp turn,

then plunged straight downhill, a no-nonsense approach to reaching its destination: the bottom of the canyon and the banks of the Colorado River nearly a vertical mile below.

Someone in a hurry had made this trail, I thought, as I braced each jarring step with my trekking poles; someone eager to get past the red-orange terraces rising in tiers above the river, to get down to the sandy beaches at the water's edge. Someone eager to reach home.

Home. It may seem implausible to the more than four million of us who come each year to marvel at the Grand Canyon, but this stupendous and seemingly uninhabitable geology, exalted since 1919 as a national park, was indeed once a home. For at least 10,000 years people lived, loved, traded, even farmed in the canyon's depths. They marked it with names, wove its temple-like pinnacles and bluffs into their lore, and breathed their spirits into every spring, every marbled cliff and boulder. And then, a mere century ago, newcomers to the canyon, overcome by its beauty, decided that no human habitation was ever again to mar the canyon park (aside from the buildings the new people built). Landforms that carried a name, a spirit of the past, were named anew.

"That New Hance Trail—virtually all the trails in the Grand Canyon—were made by our ancestors, the Hisatsinom," a Hopi named Leigh

Kuwanwisiwma told me as we sat at the South Rim before my descent. "Archaeologists call our ancestors the Anasazi, but that's a Navajo term that means 'old enemy.'"

Kuwanwisiwma lives hours to the east on Arizona's Third Mesa, where he's a farmer and director of the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office. But the Grand Canyon feels like home too.

"All this canyon land is covered with our footprints. It's where we had our genesis; where some of our clans farmed and lived until we were called to the mesas. It is where we make our sacred salt trek. It is where our spirits go when we die. It is where we learned the Hopi way of life, and the lessons that guide us. And the key lesson is the lesson of humility."

With that word Kuwanwisiwma had set me on the right path, and I leaned into the dust and the angle of the trail. All traces of the snowstorm had vanished. Powdery sandstone curled over my boots, and pebbles rolled like ball bearings underfoot. "We're in the desert now," said my guide, David Hogan, who's been clambering up and down the canyon for nine years. "There's no real water between here and the river, and that's eight miles away. People can die—they do die—from thirst down here."

The climate was only slightly wetter 1,300 years ago when the Hisatsinom (the Anasazi) moved into the canyon's depths to grow cotton,

corn, beans, and squash along the terraces and sandy beaches of the Colorado. Farming in the Grand Canyon seems as unlikely as farming on Mars, but the Anasazi were spectacularly successful at it. From about A.D. 700 to 1200—a span of 500 years, more than twice as long as the United States has existed—they knew this place “like the back of their hands,” said Hogan. “They knew every side canyon, every water hole, every place to hide, and every route in and out.”

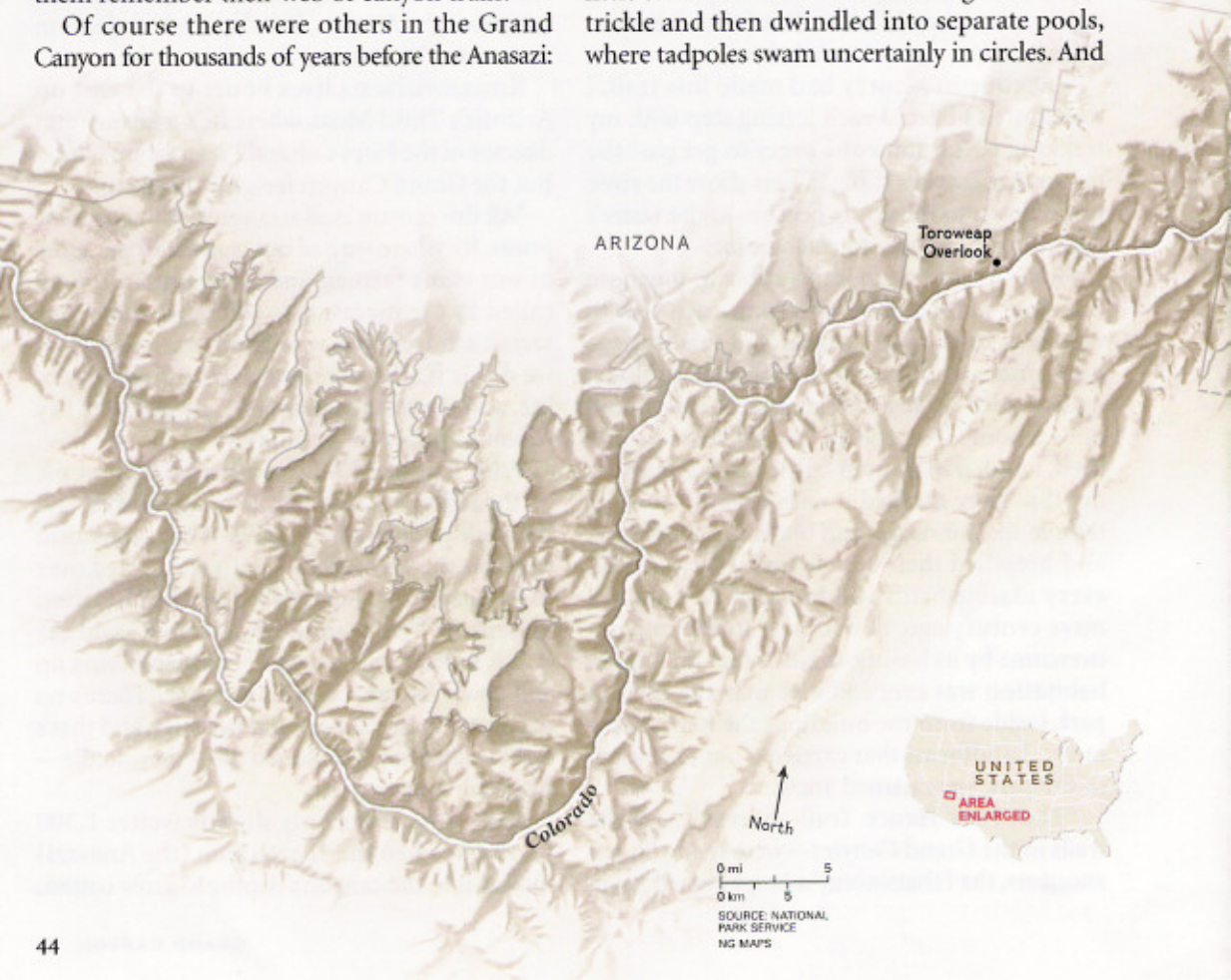
They filled the canyon with what Kuwanwisiwma calls their “insignia”—ruins, bits of pottery, these trails, things they made and left behind. Hogan showed me one: a human stick figure and three stair steps carefully pecked into a pink boulder. The pictograph’s meaning was so clear that anyone could read it: “This way to the top.”

Probably they also had trail runners who carried messages from one community to another, as did the Southern Paiute who were living here in 1869 when John Wesley Powell boated down the Colorado. And maybe, like the Southern Paiute, they had a repertoire of songs to help them remember their web of canyon trails.

Of course there were others in the Grand Canyon for thousands of years before the Anasazi:

Paleo-Indians who hunted megafauna like the giant ground sloth, and later peoples who painted colorful figures on the canyon’s rock canvases. And after the Anasazi slowly migrated out of the canyon on the heels of a long drought, there were others still: Hopi, Zuni, Southern Paiute, Hualapai, Havasupai, and Navajo. “Never was there a time—until the coming of the park—when some of our brothers and sisters weren’t living in the canyon,” Kuwanwisiwma said.

THERE’S NO WAY TO KNOW what the earliest canyon dwellers thought when they first saw the Grand Canyon or looked up from its depths, where Hogan and I now finally stood, two days after starting out. Unlike those who had forged our trail, we had felt no urgency to reach home. We had lingered, picking our way up and down dusty side canyons, over limestone rocks studded with fossils, and across iron red mudflats that broke apart in flaky chunks. But as soon as we’d heard the river, our steps quickened. The temperature was approaching 100°F; the little streamlet we’d been following shrank to a trickle and then dwindled into separate pools, where tadpoles swam uncertainly in circles. And



there ahead of us, drawing us on, rushed the Colorado—a heaving tongue of jade green that lashed at the hard shale on the far shore and lapped more gently against our sandy beach.

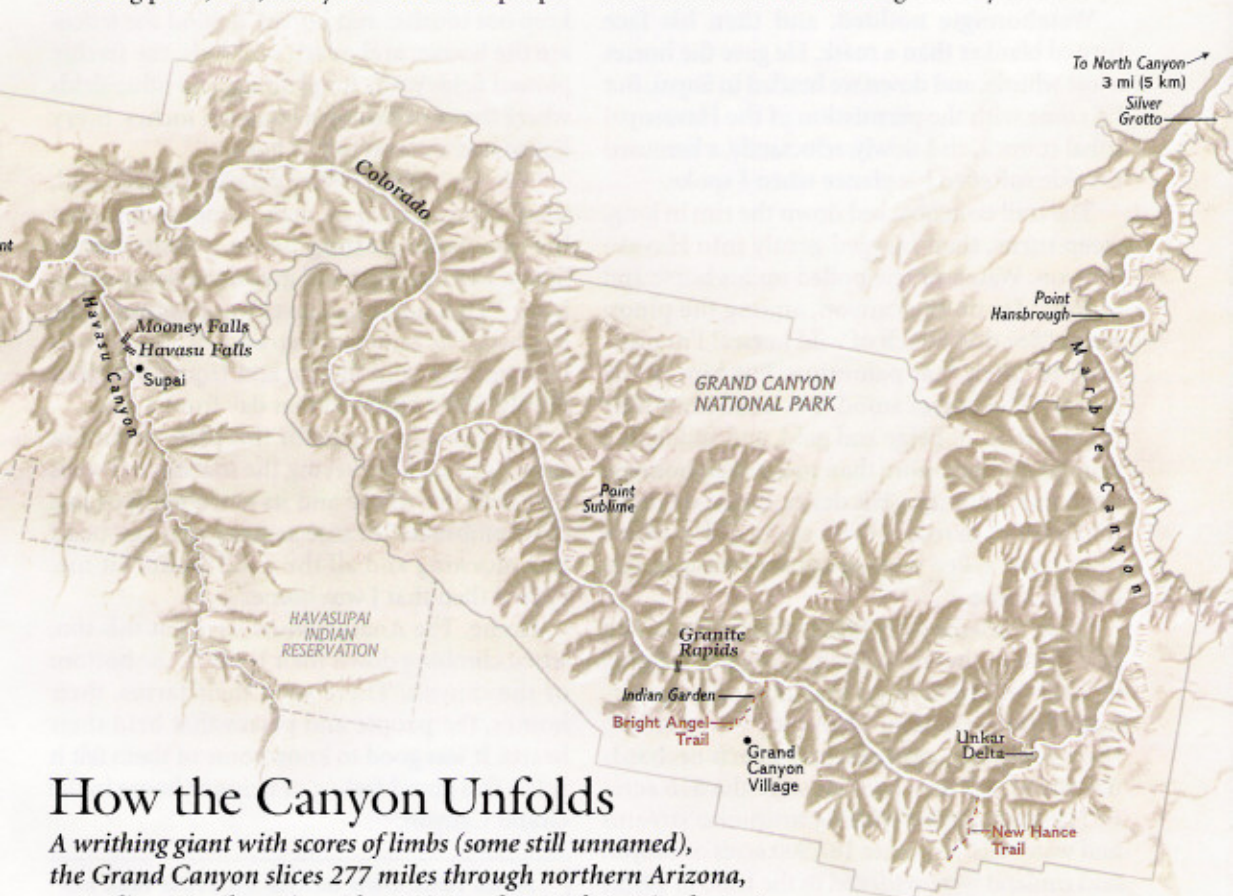
To the Hopi this canyon was *'ongtupka*, their ancestral home; to the Southern Paiute it was *puaxant tuvip*, holy land; to the Western Apache it was simply *ge da'cho*, edge of the big cliff. And for me . . . I only knew that I now stood in a place of nearly two-billion-year-old rocks. Such numbers are as humbling as the number of stars in the sky—and as hard to comprehend. But that I could reach down and touch a part of Earth that existed when life itself was a mere billion-plus years old made this big cliff land seem very holy indeed.

Above us castellated bluffs and terraces of rainbow-hued soils rose to the sky like a geological cathedral. We were dwarfs on a desert beach—but dwarfs with a princely flood of water at our feet. So we flung off our packs, dropped our trekking poles, and, surely like those first people

to reach the river's edge, plunged into the cool waters that had carved this canyon, the grandest canyon on Earth.

One night we camped on the edge of a high red wall that bellied out into the river. On the opposite shore the Colorado swept past a broad swath of beach: the Unkar Delta, site of one of the largest Anasazi settlements. There among the gravel lay stony walls, the tracteries of their homes, and, nearby, pillows of plumped-up earth—the beds of their gardens. I tried squinting, narrowing my eyes so that the willows on the far shore might resemble young corn, but nothing could make up for the dryness of a garden missing its farmer.

When a park archaeologist brought Leigh Kuwanwisiwma to this site by boat, she didn't have to tell him what he was looking at. "I'm proud to say I'm a farmer," he told me, "and when I'm in the canyon, I look at all the places with a farmer's eye. And I'm always amazed, because I can see that I'm farming like my ancestors.



## How the Canyon Unfolds

*A writhing giant with scores of limbs (some still unnamed), the Grand Canyon slices 277 miles through northern Arizona, extending 18 miles at its widest point and 6,000 feet at its deepest—one of Earth's largest canyon systems. Cut by the Colorado River in the past six million years, it exposes rock strata that detail nearly two billion years of North America's geologic history.*

I see where they put their farms and homes and granaries near the little tributaries and oases—and I think, yes, that is right, that is where a farm would be.”

Native people are, in fact, still farming in the Grand Canyon, if not in the park itself. In Havasu Canyon, a narrow side spur, the Havasupai, or Havasu ‘Baaja—“people of the blue-green water”—tend fields where they’ve lived for at least 700 years. About 450 of the tribe’s 650 members live here in the village of Supai. There are no roads or cars, so almost everyone takes the eight-mile trail in by foot, horse, or mule.

Claude Watahomigie, a slim-faced, taciturn fellow, put me on his tall piebald horse, Kid, for the trip. “Going to Mooney Falls?” he asked, since that’s the prime destination of most of the 25,000 tourists who come to Havasu Canyon. (The waterfall’s true name is Mother of the Waters; Mooney was simply a hapless miner who fell to his death there.)

“Yes and no,” I said. “I’d like to see the farms.”

Watahomigie nodded, and then his face turned blanker than a mask. He gave the horses a low whistle, and down we headed to Supai. But I’d come with the permission of the Havasupai tribal council, and slowly, reluctantly, a bemused twinkle softened his glance when I spoke.

The trail switchbacked down the rim in long, steep turns, then merged gently into Havasu Canyon. Watahomigie pulled up his horse and pointed far up the canyon, among the piñon pines. “See that bunch of wild horses? I’m planning to catch that palomino. Put him in my corral.” The horses stood in a small knot near canyon walls of beige and gold, and suddenly I wanted nothing more than to see Watahomigie catch that palomino. His desire, the wild horses, the freedom to round them up, to gallop where one’s heart called seemed as rare a thing as this canyon home.

Once, until the early 1900s, the Havasupai had also lived in the main Grand Canyon, farming an oasis on Bright Angel Trail now called generically Indian Garden. Then they were evicted; their wickiups, gardens, and peach orchards destroyed. All they had left were the 518 acres of Havasu Canyon with its turquoise streams and waterfalls. (Another 187,500 acres of canyon and rimland were returned to the tribe in 1975.)

So when someone like me, a paleface like those who did the evicting, rides into dusty

Supai, a cluster of shabby prefab buildings tucked beneath the tall cottonwood trees, people tend to look away or right through you, as Watahomigie had initially done. You are as invisible as they believe your ancestors hoped they would become.

“They wanted us to disappear, to vanish,” Carletta Tilousi told me hotly in my meeting with the tribal council. “Like the Anasazi—who they say disappeared too. Well, we didn’t vanish, and the Anasazi didn’t either. We *are* the Anasazi.”

“And the true spiritual guardians of the canyon,” added Dianna Uqualla, the council’s vice-chairwoman. “Not just this canyon, but the entire Grand Canyon. That was our home, you see. We pray every day for its protection.”

Uqualla, an amply built woman, then grasped her stout prayer stick trimmed with beads and feathers and guided me from the tribal chambers to the village outside.

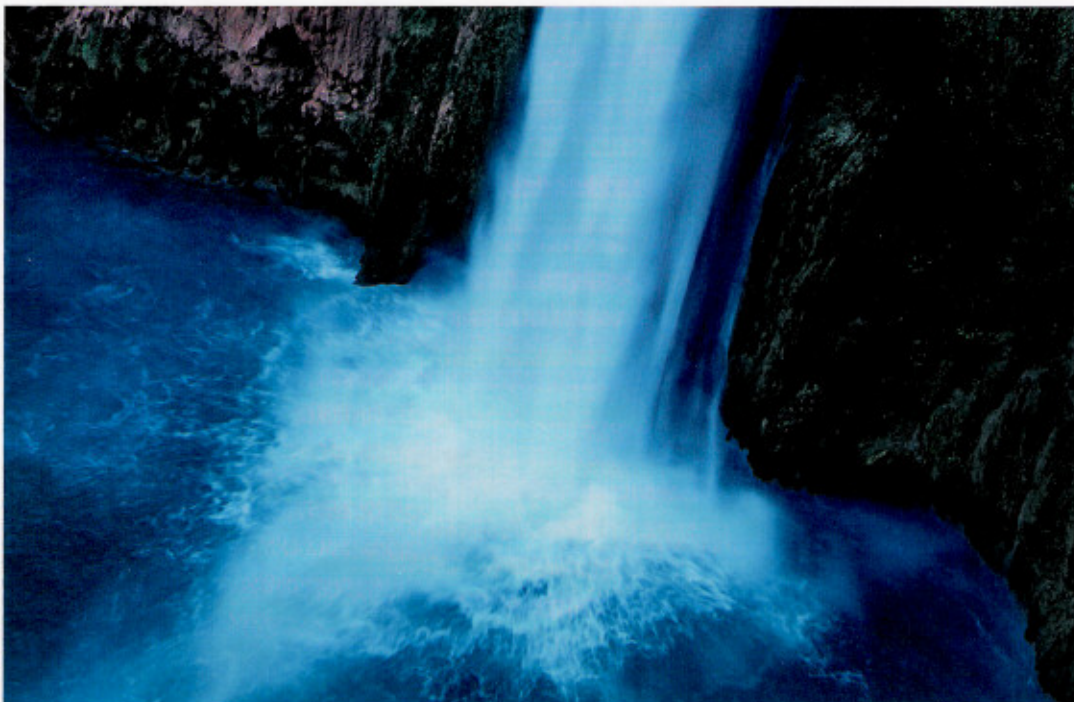
Most of the tribe’s farmland is rich bottomland that borders Havasu Creek and is fenced to keep out tourists and horses. Behind the fences are the houses and peach orchards, the freshly plowed fields ready for planting, and other fields where the corn was up a good ten inches. Every house had a corral full of horses.

“Oh, yes, we’re a horsey people,” Uqualla said, when I commented on their numbers. Just then her son came trotting by on a white horse, Spirit, her two-year-old grandson balanced in front. “That horse just loves my grandson,” she laughed. The honeyed fragrance of cottonwood blossoms hung in the air, and Uqualla inhaled deeply. She’d returned that day from a trip.

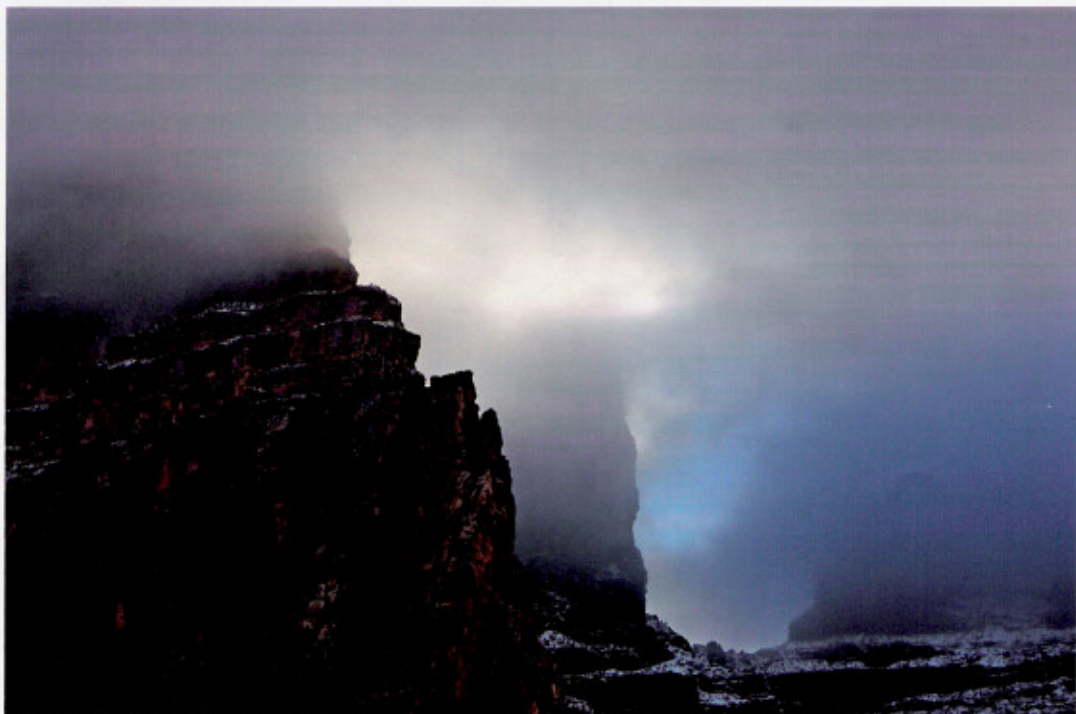
“My heart just cries for this place when I’m gone,” she said, surveying the soaring red walls that held the village and its green gardens in a close embrace. “I came around that last bend this morning and all the good scents hit me. I knew then that I was home.”

Home. The Anasazi must have felt this too, when climbing down their trails to the bottom of the canyon. There were their farms, their homes, the people and places that held their hearts. It was good to know some of them felt it still—this grand feeling of being at home in the Grand Canyon.

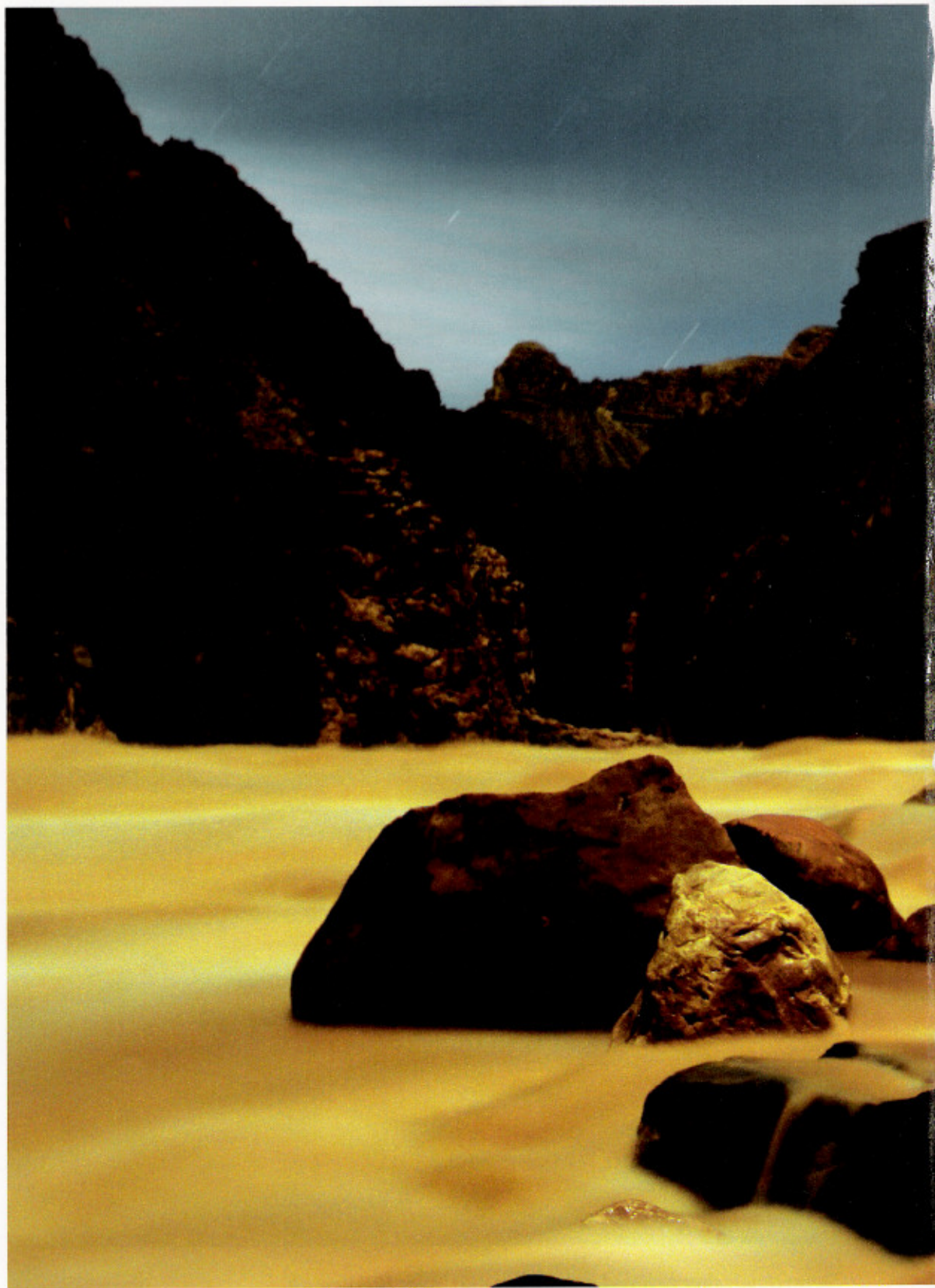
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*Mooney Falls plunges 200 feet into Havasu Canyon.*

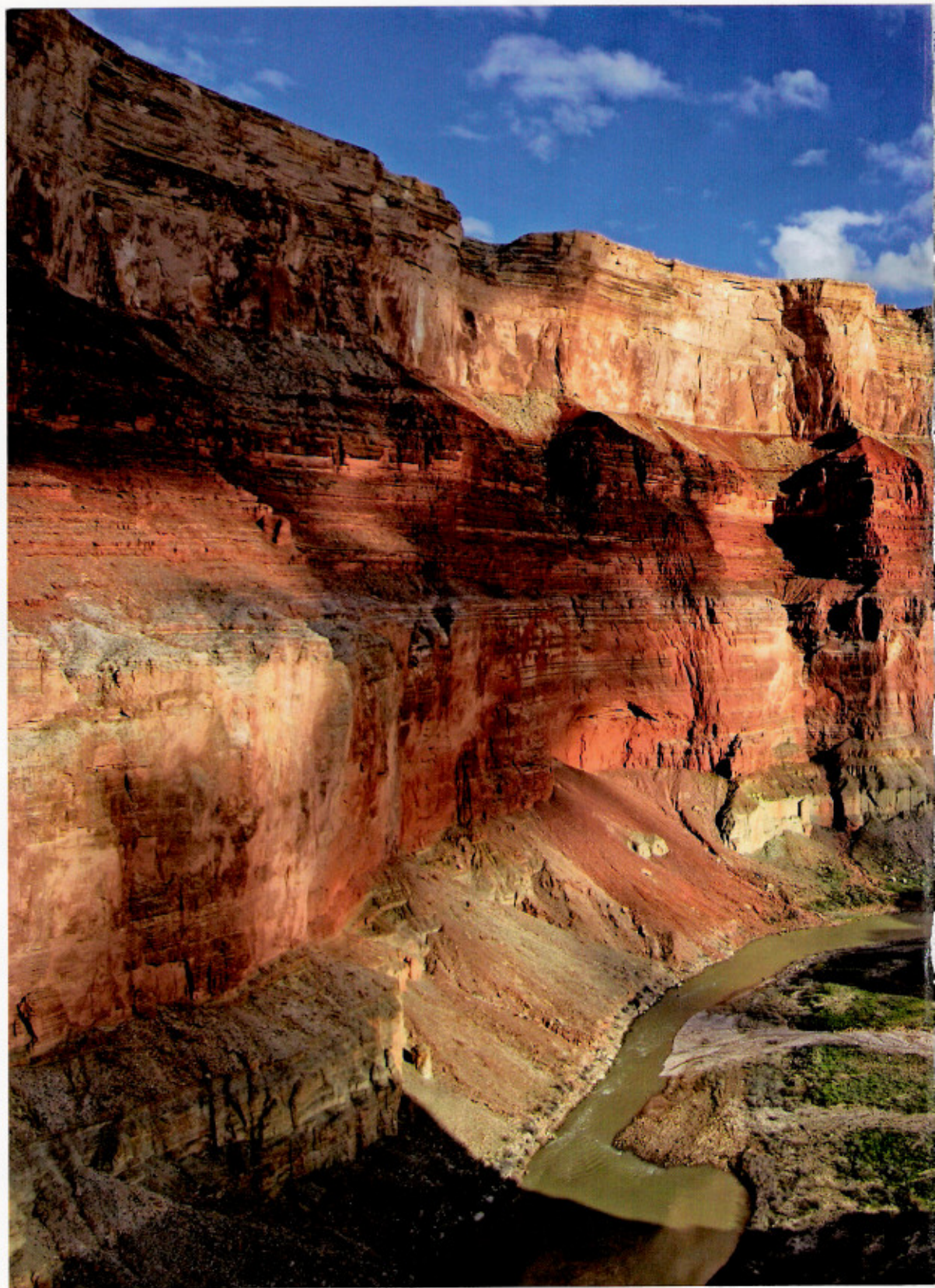


*Storm clouds clear to reveal frosted cliffs near Point Hansbrough.*



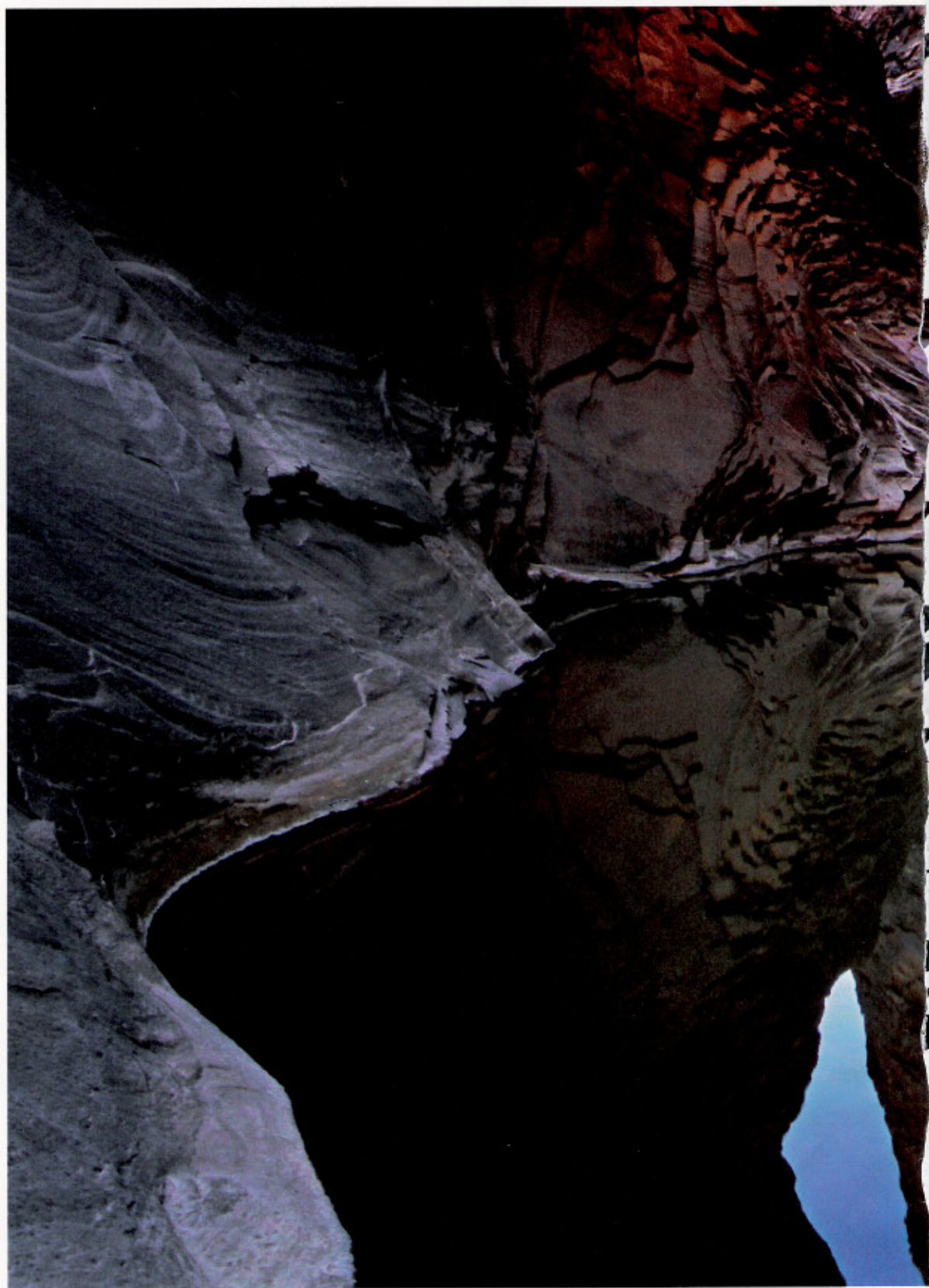
*A time exposure captures the light of moon and stars on the silty Colorado at Granite Rapids.*



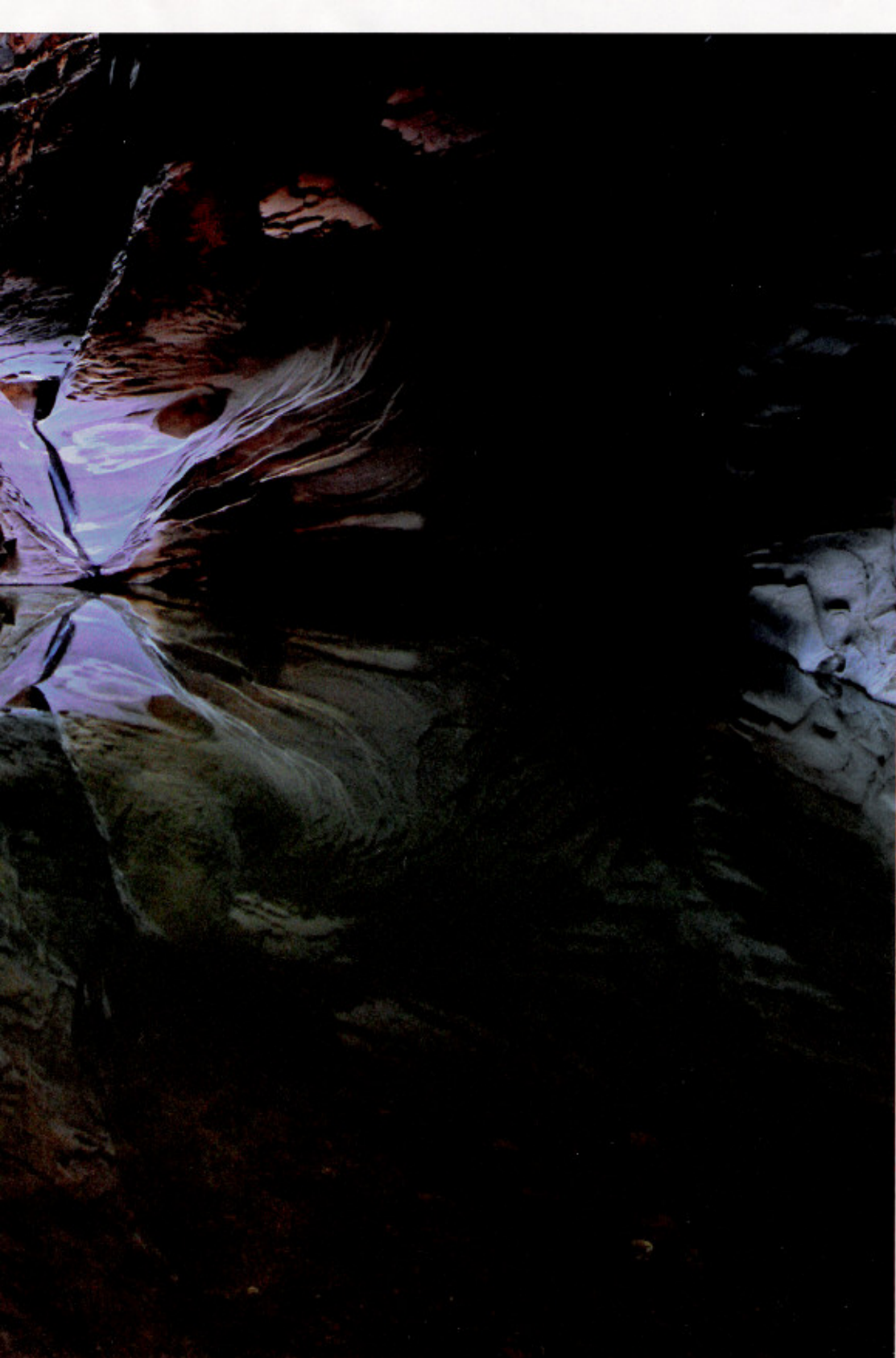


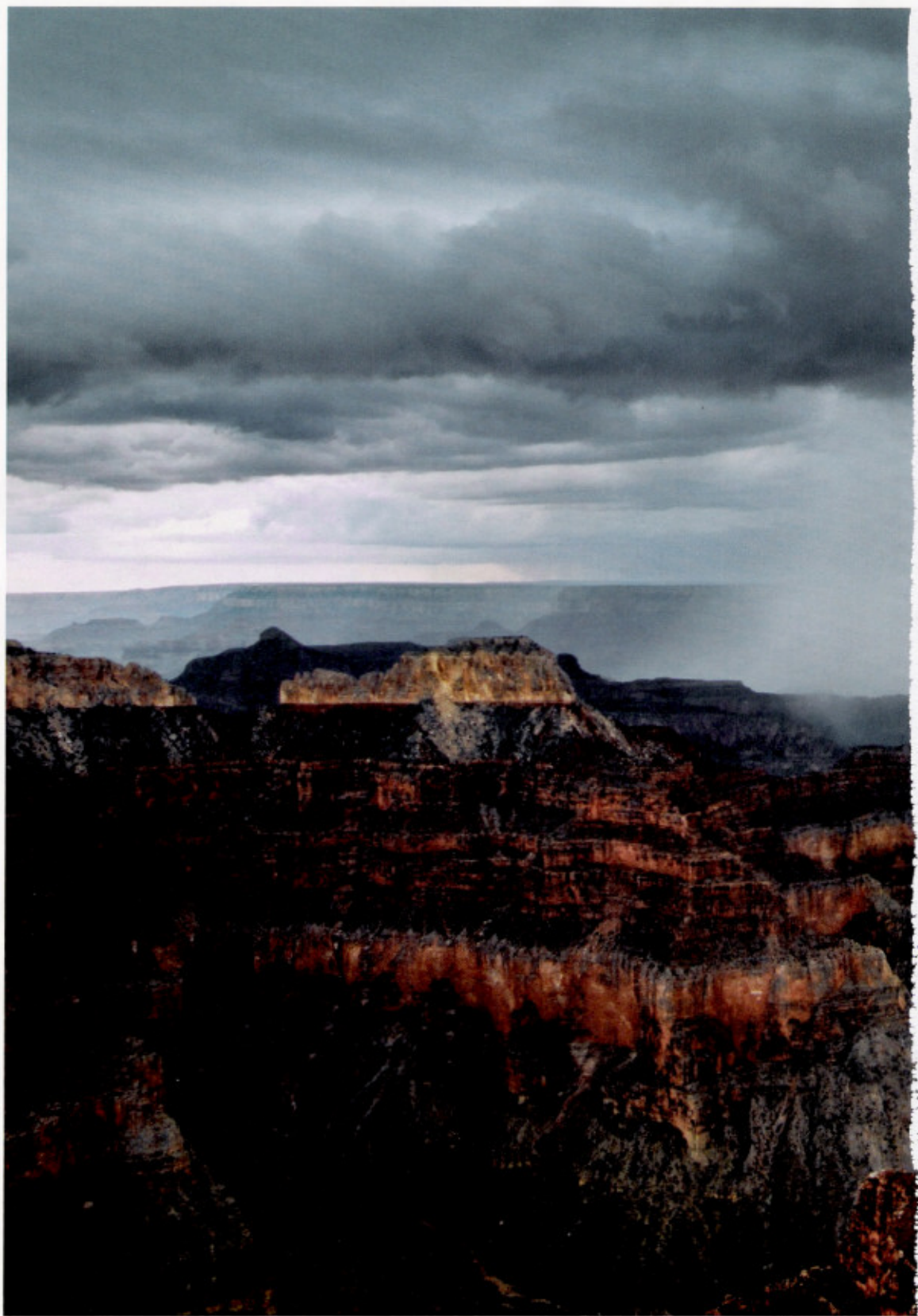
*The Colorado carves through Marble Canyon, sculpted by water and time.*





*Pooled water reflects the sensuous curves of North Canyon.*





*The power to awe: Lightning arcs into the canyon's depths near Point Sublime. □*

