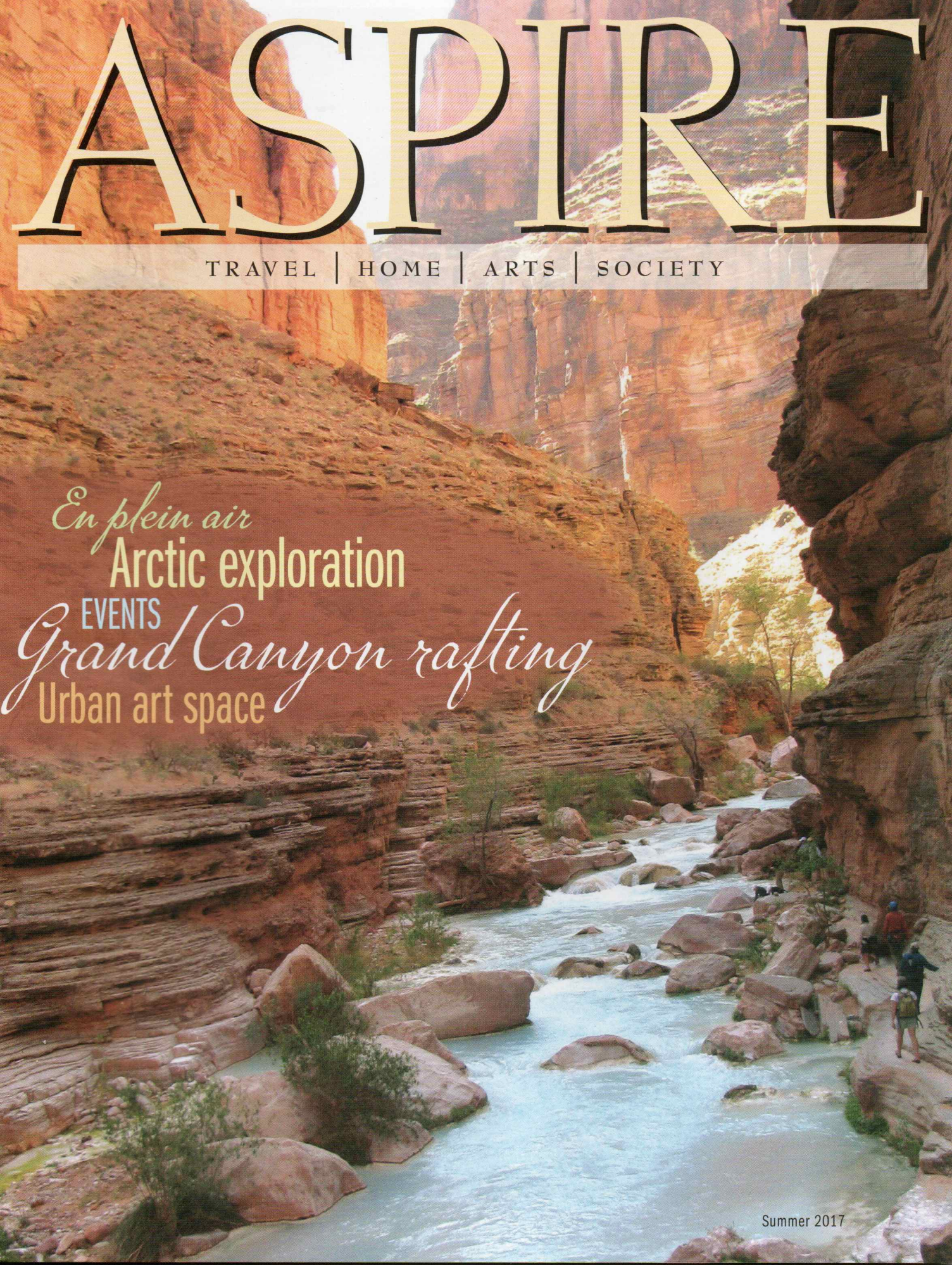




# ASPIRE

TRAVEL | HOME | ARTS | SOCIETY

*En plein air*  
Arctic exploration  
EVENTS  
*Grand Canyon rafting*  
Urban art space

## In the heart of the

## CANYON

Hiking and  
rafting on a  
trip full of  
wonder

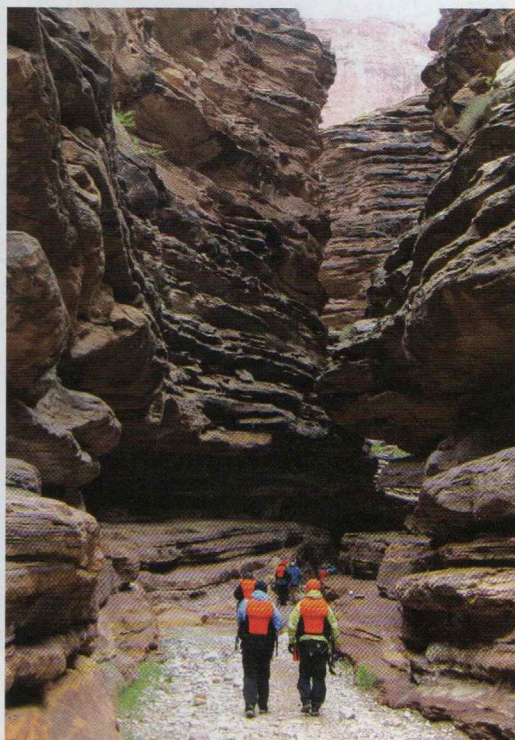
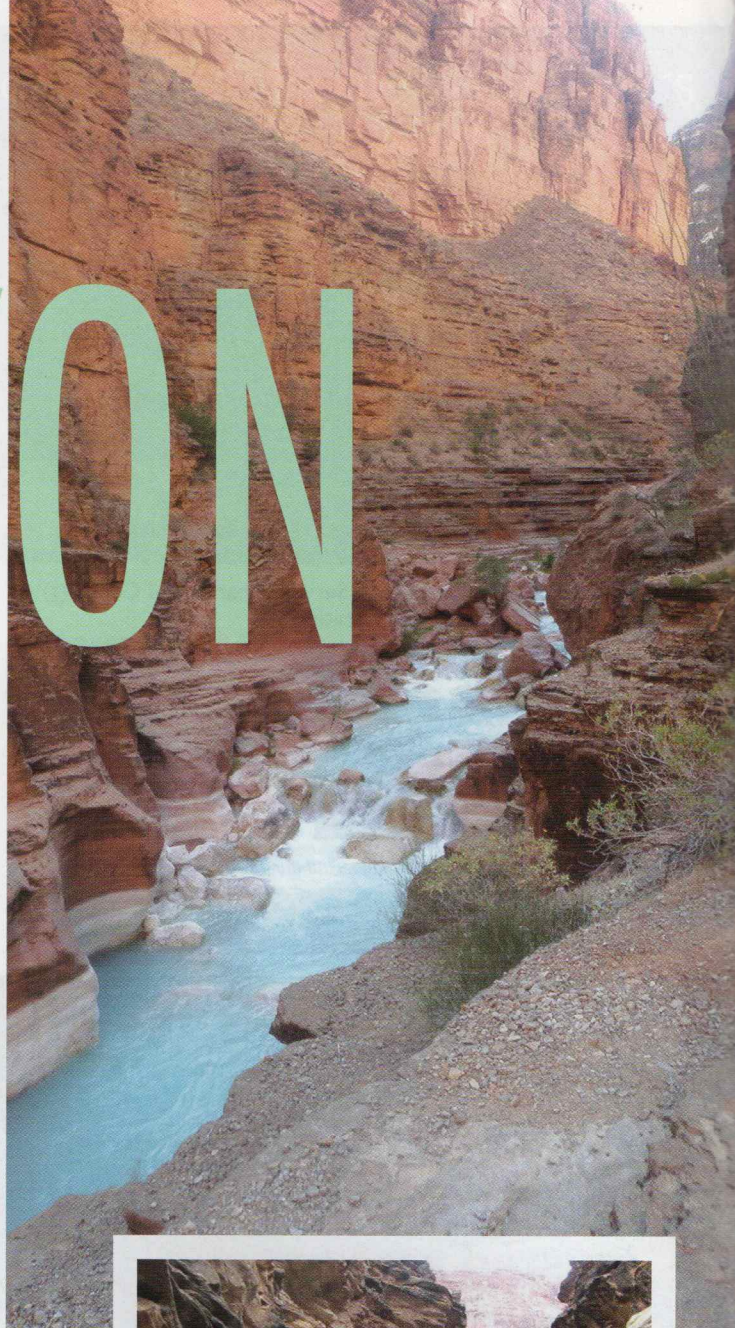
*Story and photos  
by Cris Cadiz*

Like many people, visiting the Grand Canyon was on my bucket list. But I never expected to experience it as up close and personal as I did in April 2012. I was asked to join a women's travel expedition rafting down the Colorado River. I only knew one other woman on this trip well. By the end of the tour, I had a dozen new friends and many amazing memories. To date (and I'm a traveler!), it was one of my all-time favorite trips.

Arizona River Runners has been around since 1970, so they have tons of experience taking people down the Colorado in both motorized and oar-powered boats. Our trip was a "Hiker's Special" and consisted of a 7-day motor powered lower canyon rafting trip with a hike in from the Grand Canyon's South Rim Village.

The morning we hiked in was shockingly cold, with a little snow on the ground and a few flurries in the air. But the magnificent view of the canyon from the South Rim was well worth standing in the wind to take photos. Everyone was bundled up at the top of Bright Angel Trail, but by the time we had descended to Indian Garden, a little more than halfway down, we had removed lots of layers.

As a fit person with plenty of hiking experience, I was surprised how tiring walking downhill on a well-main-





tained trail was. From the top of the South Rim, we descended 4,400 vertical feet over 7.5 miles. I was so glad we did not have to hike back up! The group started out en masse and spread out as everyone found their own comfortable pace. Eventually, we all arrived at the boat launch, where Pipe Creek joins the Colorado River. After resting a bit, stowing our gear in dry bags, donning life jackets and meeting our guides, we climbed aboard two large blue rubber rafts and began the 135-mile tour of the lower Grand Canyon.

I loved the combination of hiking and rafting on this trip. On the boat, we experienced both the power and

serenity of the river. The rapids were scary but fun in a roller-coaster kind of way. The large rubber rafts had a cushy, Cadillac ride. There was little danger of the boat flipping even in the worst sections of churning white water. You could expect to get wet, but if you held on tight there was no danger of a dunking in the frigid 50-degree water.

Much of the river trip was gentle travel with the current. The massive walls of the canyon soared overhead as we passed through, revealing the story of our earth in the different colored layers, types and formations of rock. Although not trained geologists, our guides of-



ferred many interesting facts about the canyon's ancient history along the way. They also pointed out wildlife; we were fortunate to see a number of big horn sheep grazing on the rocky riverbanks.

Some of our hikes offered a totally different perspective of the river from the cliffs above. Looking down, the Colorado's green water tracked sinuous curves between ocher and gray canyon walls. One day we explored the serpentine pathway of a slot canyon, where I could visualize how rock was carved by water over thousands of years into dreamlike passageways.

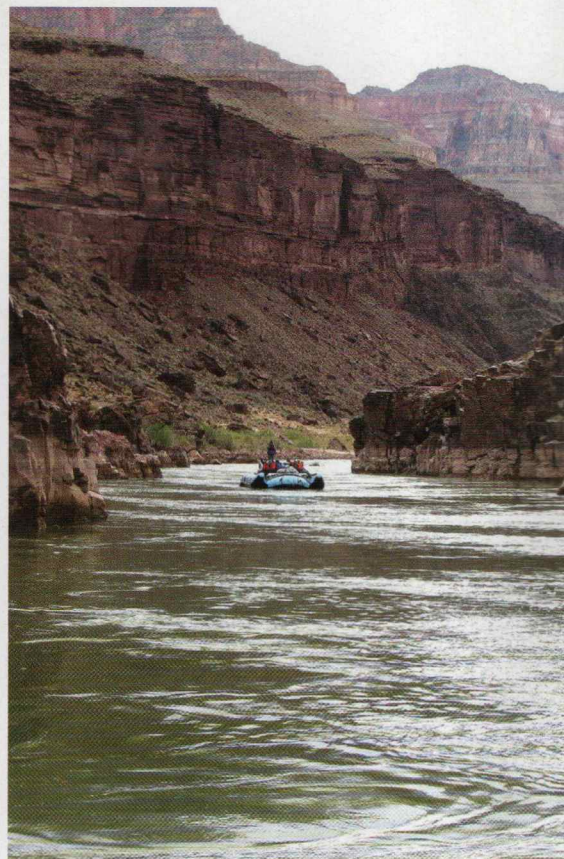
Our stop at Havasu Creek was unforgettable. Here the water — a surreal turquoise blue colored by the mineral calcium carbonate — looked as if it flowed directly from the Caribbean into the canyon. Other hikes revealed treasures such as caves, waterfalls, pictographs painted on the rock by ancient people, and rocky brown trails adorned with vivid yellow, pink and red blooming cactus and wildflower gardens. Hikes were sometimes challenging, especially for those not fond of heights or shuffling along narrow ledges. But the scenery was worth every step.

The camaraderie of the group was another treasure. Our guides — two young men and two young women — were young, strong and unfailingly cheerful. They were storytellers and songwriters, jokesters and musicians, cooks that coaxed delicious meals from a camp stove. They hauled water and waste, steered us confidently through raging rapids, positioned our outdoor toilet in the most beautiful of settings, and read us cowboy poetry and their favorite quotes about the river. Every morning their group chorus of "COFFEE!!" roused us from our warm sleeping bags to enjoy another adventure on the river.

Every day we drifted down the Colorado offered a routine of simplicity and sensory stimulation. Wake and eat, clean up, pack up, ride the river, hike, then camp on ledges and sandy beaches, the ever-present music of the river lulling us to sleep. Living outside for a week with no distractions from work, phones or media allowed our group get to know one another well. We had nothing to do but watch the canyon walls slide by, take photographs, look for wildlife, chat and joke and tell stories. By the time we reached our take-out point at Diamond Creek, no one wanted to leave.

Together we had marveled at the pristine wilderness all around, at the confluence of rock and sky, sun and







water. We felt the rush of adrenaline in the rapids, and experienced the changing moods of the river. We marveled at stars so bright, you felt you could reach up and touch them. And we basked in the sacred beauty of sunrise and sunset warming the canyon walls. The sounds and sights of the river soothed us all into a sense of deep peace and contentment as the hectic human world drifted away.

*For more information about Arizona River Runners trips, visit [raftarizona.com](http://raftarizona.com).*

