

Across the Grand Canyon to Havasu and Hualapai Canyons from Boysag Point

Boysag Point is a very remote place. To get there you have to drive 50 kilometers on dirt roads across the Uinkaret Plateau, then four hours through a maze of jeep trails, followed by 10 kilometers of hiking and canyoneering through trailless terrain across One Hundred and Fifty Mile Canyon and two smaller, unnamed side canyons. When I came upon recent human footprints there I was surprised.

Photo Paul Fretheim

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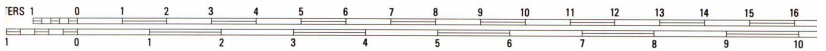
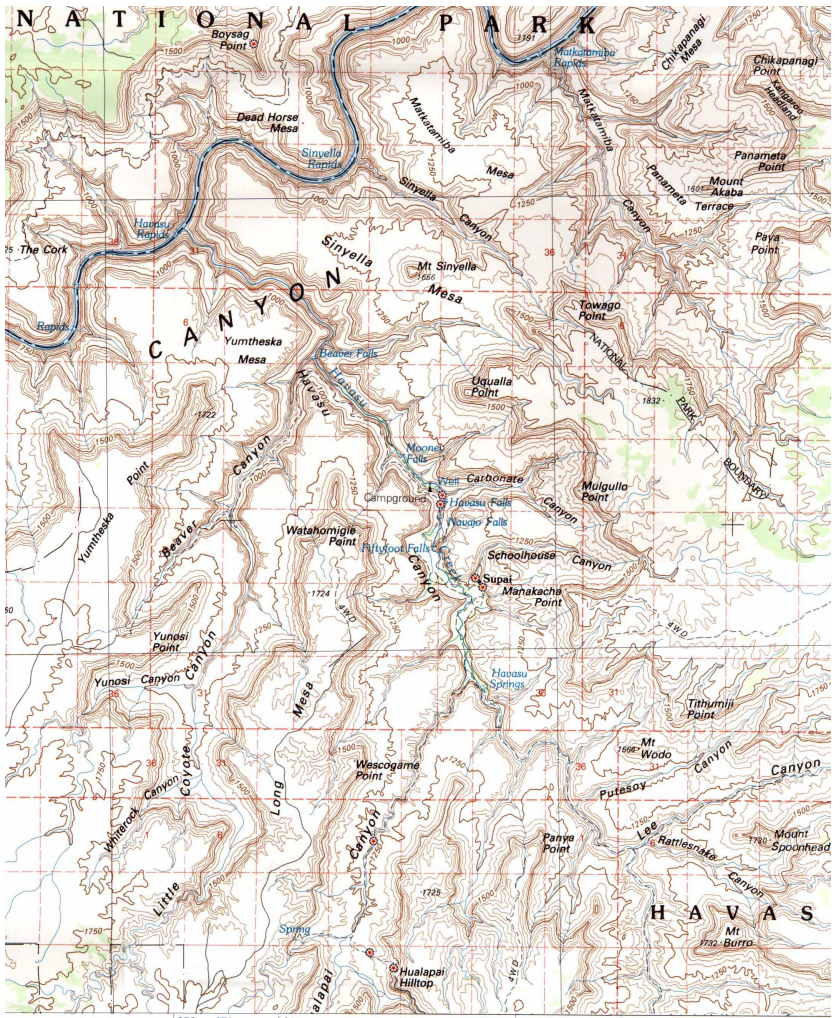
Topo Map: Supai; Coordinates: 36° 15' N - 112° 45' W

The Village of Supai Deep within the Grand Canyon

by Paul Fretheim

The Havasupai Indians of the Grand Canyon have lived seasonally deep within the canyon for over 700 years. Modern day Havasupai reside year round at the village of Supai, which is located 12.6 kilometers from the nearest road at the bottom of Havasu Canyon, a major tributary canyon of the Grand Canyon.

Supai is the last remaining Post Office in the United States which is served by pack train. All the groceries and other supplies are



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Just after leaving the parking lot, the trail descends a series of steep switchbacks through the white cliffs of the Coconino Sandstone.

Photo Paul Fretheim

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brought in and trash and other garbage brought out my pack train. Each day several pack trains of horses and mules are driven between Supai and the rim at Hualapai Hilltop.

The fact that Supai is 12.5 kilometers from the nearest road does not fully describe how remote a place Supai actually is. The nearest town of any size is Kingman, AZ, which is 200 kilometers away. Leaving Kingman for Supai, you drive for 100 kilometers on old Route 66 before reaching the turnoff for Supai. Then you drive for another 100 kilometers through virtually uninhabited country before you get to the parking lot at Hualapai Hilltop.

Huge Elk on the Aubrey Cliffs

When I drove back to Route 66 from the Hilltop parking lot in late March, I saw many elk in the ponderosa pine forest near the pass



After descending the white cliffs of the Coconino Sandstone, the trail crosses the red Hermit Shale of the Supai Group. Then the trail drops into the canyon for the rest of the way to Supai. Mt. Sinyala is visible in the distance.

Photo Paul Fretheim

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over the Aubrey Cliffs. I have seen many elk in lots of places over the years. I was really impressed by the huge size of the elk of the Aubrey Cliffs. Perhaps an especially large sub-species has evolved there?

The Hike to Supai

The trail from Hualapai Hilltop drops down the Coconino Sandstone cliff in a series of steep switchbacks immediately upon leaving the parking lot. After descending the cliff the trail enters a huge amphitheater which is the head of Hualapai Canyon. At the foot of the Coconino there is a spectacular view to the north (right) of Mt. Sinyala some 15 kilometers away rising above the Sinyala Mesa beyond the confluence of Hualapai and Havasu Canyons.



After crossing the Esplanade the trail drops down into the wash at the bottom of Hualapai Canyon. The young Havasupai family who can be seen in the 360° view, are Fletcher Wescogame and his wife and baby. They were hiking home to Supai.

Photo Paul Fretheim

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After crossing a long gradual slope across the Hermit Shale, the trail descends into Hualapai Canyon. For the next 10 kilometers or so the trail winds along through the red sandstones and limestones of the Supai group within the wash at the bottom of Hualapai Canyon. Views here are restricted by the narrow confines of the canyon. The section along the wash is the longest part of the 16 kilometer trail to Supai. Eventually you reach the confluence of Hualapai and Havasu Canyons about 10 kilometers from the parking lot.

Before you actually get to Havasu Canyon, you can hear the rushing waters of Havasu Creek ahead. A short distance after you begin to hear the creek the trail comes to the creek and the intersection



Havasus Falls. *Photo Paul Fretheim*

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with the Havasu Canyon trail. Supai is another 2.4 kilometers to the left, that is, downstream.

Havasupai History

The pre-contact range of the Havasupai band of the Pai people stretched from area around Cataract (Havasus) Canyon on the west to the San Francisco Peaks on the east and from the Colorado River on the north to a line roughly from Flagstaff to Kingman on the south. Traditionally the Havasupai only lived in the canyon during the growing season, where they tended their gardens in the wide place in the canyon just below where Hualapai Canyon and Cataract Canyons merge to form Havasus Canyon.

By the early 20th century conflicts with cattlemen and other settlers on the plateaus above drove the Havasupai to abandon their traditional nomadic life-style. They settled at their former summer home year round. Over the years the Department of Indian Affairs



The two rock towers on the horizon behind this house on the main street of Supai are called *Wigleeva*. A Havasupai legend says that *Wigleeva* are the guardians of the Havasupai people and that if the red pillars were to fall, the canyon walls would collapse and the entire village would be destroyed.

Photo Paul Fretheim

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(BIA) has helped build various generations of reservation style housing at Supai. Most of the wood frame houses which are found in Supai today date from the 1970s.

Today the Havasupai make their living from tourism, which has completely replaced the former subsistence agriculture and hunting and gathering which was practiced to some extent until the middle of the 20th century.

Campground and Falls

A permit is required to hike and camp in Havasu Canyon. You may purchase a permit at the Tourist Office, which is on the main street of Supai. There is also a modern tourist lodge in Supai.

About a fourth of the visitors to Supai arrive either by horseback or helicopter. The tribe operates pack trains and helicopters to provide transportation in and out of the canyon. You can make reservations by calling the numbers listed below:

For Camping:

Tourist Office

Havasu Falls Campground

General Delivery

Supai, AZ 86435

520-488-2141

For Lodging:

Havasupai Lodge

General Delivery

Supai, AZ 86435

520-488-2111

Havasu Falls

About two kilometers beyond Supai, Havasu Creek plunges over a series of falls. The first fall you reach on the trail below Supai is Navajo Falls. Next you arrive at Havasu Falls, formerly known as Bridal Veil Falls. Havasu Falls is generally considered to be the most beautiful of the falls.

Not far beyond Havasu Falls you come to the campground. The campground was located by the National Park Service during the 1930s on the traditional burial ground of the Havasupai. They actually did not bury their dead until recent contact with Christian culture, but traditionally practiced a form of cremation and the ashes of their ancestors were scattered in the narrow confine of the canyon where the present day Havasu Falls Campground is located.

Below the campground the trail becomes less traveled and more rugged. Mooney Falls is the highest of the falls in Havasu Canyon. It is located is less than one kilometer below the campground, but on my hike I did not make it to Mooney Falls. To get to Mooney you have to scramble down the side of the cliff next to the falls through some steep, narrow tunnels in the cliff. Some of the other hikers I talked to said that the tunnels were really narrow and that I might get wedged in one if I tried to climb down through them with my big pack of camera gear on. I decided not to try it. A lot of things don't bother me, but I didn't relish the thought of getting "wedged" in a steep, cramped tunnel on the side of a cliff a million miles from nowhere.



It was a little too cool for a swim on the early March morning when I took this picture, but in the summer these pools are very popular with bathers.

Photo Paul Fretheim

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The hike to Havasu Falls and back is strenuous, but not difficult. I did the hike in late March and the weather was perfect. The warmer months would be preferable for swimming in the travertine pools beneath the falls, but things would also be a lot more crowded and you would need to make reservations, especially on a weekend. On a weekday in late March I had no trouble finding a campsite even though I had no reservation and arrived late.

People of the Blue-Green Waters

The name Havasupai translates roughly to “People of the Blue Green Waters” in English. The name comes from the color of the water in Havasu Creek.

Cataract Canyon begins not far from Williams, AZ, some 60 miles south of the Grand Canyon. Cataract Canyon used to be called Cataract Canyon all the way to the river, but in recent times the canyon

below the junction with Havasupai Canyon has come to be called Havasu Canyon.

All the rock layers of the Coconino Plateau warp downward toward Cataract Canyon. This formation is called the Havasupai Downwarp, and it creates a giant funnel which channels all precipitation that falls on the Coconino Plateau into Cataract Canyon. Except for occasional floods, the water flows underground in Cataract Canyon. The Coconino Plateau covers 7,600 square kilometers (3000 square miles) and all the precipitation that falls on the plateau later surfaces at the springs just above the confluence of Cataract and Hualapai Canyons. This explains the strong perennial flow of Havasu Creek.

The upper layers of rock of the of the Coconino Plateau are mostly porous limestone.

As the water flows through the predominately limestone bedrock of Cataract Canyon, it dissolves minerals from the rock. Calcium, magnesium carbonates, calcium sulphate, and magnesium chloride are carried by the water in solution in high concentrations.

There is a layer of impermeable rock that surfaces just upstream from the confluence of Cataract and Hualapai Canyons. This layer of impermeable rock forces Havasu Creek to emerge from the ground in a series of large springs.

When the mineral saturated water begins to flow above the surface it comes in contact with the dry desert air. When this happens some of the water evaporates. As the water evaporates, the minerals it carries are left behind. They coat the bottom of the streambed with a light colored mineral deposit known as travertine. Particles of travertine suspended in the water cause a scattering of light that gives the water its distinctive shade of pale blue-green.

Any rocks or twigs that get splashed with water from Havasu Creek become coated with travertine deposits too. The spray from the big waterfalls and the high mineral content of the water flowing over them results in large deposits of travertine below the falls. These travertine deposits form dams behind which aquamarine colored pools form. The travertine pools below the falls are very popular for swimming in the warmer months.

The End