



Backpacking the Havasupai trail in the Grand Canyon

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Navajo falls, Havasupai

Within 36 hours, we were as far away from civilization as possible. From San Francisco, we had flown 500 miles to Las Vegas, driven 220 miles to Hualapai Hilltop, hiked 12 miles along Havasupai trail and were now standing at the rim of a gorgeous blue-green waterfall named Navajo falls. We were in the heart of the Grand Canyon near a village called Supai and this was our first sight of the blue-green waters of Havasupai. My first thought was, we should jump in now! In front of me lay a surreal but thrilling sight. A pool of water as clear as glass, shining with the iridescence of emerald-sapphire in the sunlight. But let me not get ahead of myself, I should first explain how we found ourselves in this paradise.

Hiking the Grand Canyon from rim-to-rim might be more popular, but surely most people would find it impossible to forget their first sight of turquoise-blue Havasu Falls. It's no surprise that Havasupai is also known as the Garden of Eden. It's famous waterfalls – Navajo, Havasu, Mooney and Beaver form lush oases of blue-green beauty which are in surreal contrast with the red-rock desert.



View of the canyon from Hualapai Hilltop, Havasupai

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Hiking on a Native American reservation is a unique experience. When hiking in a national park, we are aware that no human actually lives inside the park. What we see and experience is inside a protected area, kept pristine by limiting human activity. But a Native American reservation like Havasupai is home to many people. People who live and work on the land, reside in villages, have families, build communities – same as what we do. But what makes this unique is the remote nature of their lifestyle. Supai village is far away from anything resembling urban modernity. In fact, Supai is the only place in the entire United States which still receives its postal mail by mule! Which is not to say that the locals do not live comfortably and have access to internet. But for a village which is deep in the valley of the Grand Canyon where the only way in and out is by hiking, riding a horse or taking a helicopter, the sense of remoteness becomes part of it's identity. For me, coming from a lifestyle where I was used to being online and available every waking moment, I was looking forward to experiencing this remoteness firsthand.

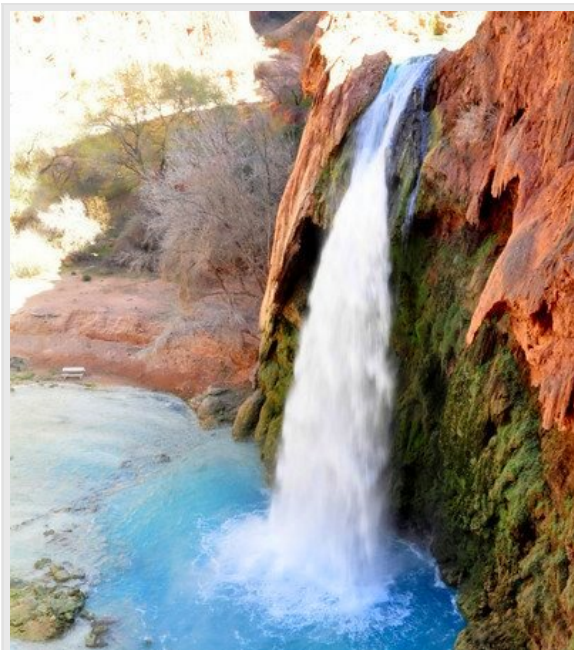


Backpacking on the Havasupai trail

We drove from Las Vegas to Hualapai Hilltop and started hiking before noon. The trail is rough and strewn with rocks and pebbles. Watch out for fragrant mule dung! We walked through tall narrow canyons with walls pressed in closely on us. We watched the red-rock desert sand glint in a thousand different shades of gold and vermilion as the sun shone brightly overhead. The crunch of sand underneath our feet echoed off the canyon walls. We scrambled aside on hearing the thundering hooves of a fast-approaching mule train. To truly experience Havasupai, it is imperative that one hike it.

There are no evident signs on the trail so most people try to complete the hike in daylight. As we walked, the night got darker and once familiar sights & sounds took on a scary life of their own. Even though we were a large group, there was silence as everybody focused on walking. All was well until a horse neighed loudly in a field next to us and made us all jump out of our skin! Soon a signpost encouragingly informed us that we were a mile away from the village. As we approached Supai, it appeared completely deserted and empty. A few dogs howled loudly, raising a racket as they sensed strangers passing by. It was a spooky welcome but we were looking forward to a good night's rest after backpacking 10 miles!

Rejuvenated the next morning, we headed out to explore Supai's famed blue-green waters. Geared up in swimsuits and daypacks we hiked to the nearest falls a mile from the village – Navajo falls. The original Navajo falls used to be 75 foot high, but the present falls were created by the 2008 flash floods. The destructive nature of the floods is evident by how the earth's crust has been ripped apart and the river has made its way through, as a gentler waterfall. The area is now surrounded by a lush green oasis in the middle of the desert landscape.



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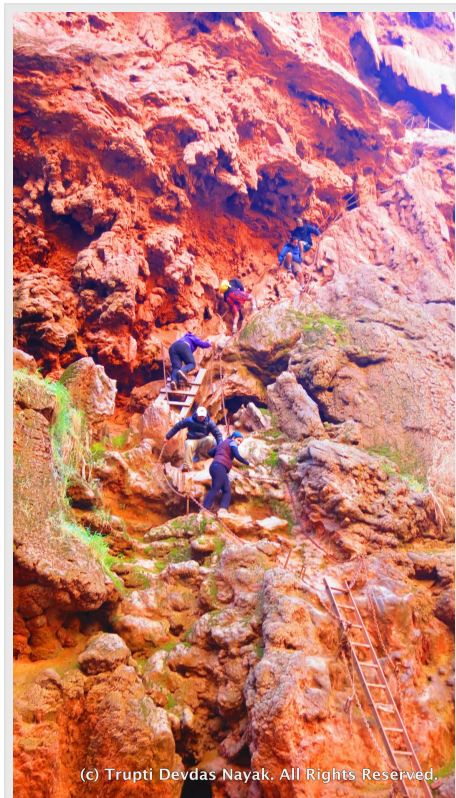
Havasus falls, shades of turquoise and blue

From Navajo we continued hiking to Havasu falls which is half a mile away. You'll hear Havasu before you see it! The water leaps off from a height of 100 feet, crashing into the canyon below. Nearby, Havasu Creek makes a perfect swimming spot with its warm mineral-rich waters. The sight of these turquoise-blue waters was so tempting that we jumped in without hesitation for a lazy afternoon swim.



An afternoon swim in one of the many mineral-rich pools formed by Havasu Creek

After swimming and a picnic lunch we had time left for one more waterfall. Beaver falls is stunning, but a good hike away. We decided to visit Mooney instead. Mooney is well known for its treacherous and exhilarating climb down the vertical canyon walls to get to the base of the falls. All we could grab onto as we slid down the slippery red-rock canyon walls were rusty chains and huge nails hammered into the canyon. I don't recall why we were insane enough to do this, but once we started, pure adrenalin just kept us going.



Hiking down the slippery vertical canyon walls of Mooney Falls – Adrenalin rush!

The canyon walls are slick with water since the falls are right next to us. There is no actual path,

except for chains and nails. A few wooden sticks and planks are strewn across resembling makeshift ladders. At one point I was swinging from one chain to another like a monkey! Glad to report that this monkey and her monkey friends made it down to the base of the waterfall safely.



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We made it! Ecstatic at the base of Mooney Falls

Supai village has a population of approximately 200+ people who live and work on the reservation. They own horses and mules which are necessities for getting around in the desert. Incoming tourists help to keep business going. We saw several locals who were busy driving the mule trains and carting tourists back and forth on horses or flying them in helicopters. They always gave us shy smiles and friendly nods.



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Supai Village scene: horses grazing, wooden cabins, red-rock canyon walls

Our day in Havasupai was so wonderful that we did not want to leave! But as it always does, morning came all too soon. As we started hiking back on the trail slowly and steadily, several mule trains passed us. It was a surreal wild west scene, cowboy hat clad locals on horses and mules, galloping along at a hurried trot.





A mule train kicks up dust as it thunders past us on the trail

An old Native American man I met on the trail told me he did this hike twice or thrice every week. He was used to it by now and said he enjoyed the exercise. Since he couldn't afford a horse, this was the only way for him to commute. I was in awe of his endurance and energy to be able to walk 18 miles round trip every time he needed to go into town!

As we made our way back to Hualapai Hilltop, I looked back and marveled at how even a short time spent in any place, no matter how remote and desolate, opens up its beauty to us. Hiking in the desert, swimming in the waterfalls, talking to the locals, watching out for mule trains and experiencing the raw beauty of Havasupai will stay with me forever.

If you go:

Make sure you **get a permit** to hike in the reservation. [More information here.](#)

What to see: Navajo Falls, Havasu Falls, Mooney Falls, Beaver Falls

Where to stay: The [Havasupai Falls Lodge](#)

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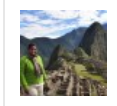
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About the Author



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Trupti Devdas Nayak is a freelance writer and photographer who is as passionate about travel as she is about writing. Her greatest joy is when she combines these interests to craft a story that is both compelling and evocative. Among other things, Trupti has trekked the Inca trail to Machu Picchu, snorkeled with sharks in Oahu, witnessed horses dancing flamenco in Andalusia and has hiked in over 30 national parks around the world and counting. She writes about her experiences at [Exploring the Blue Marble](#).

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