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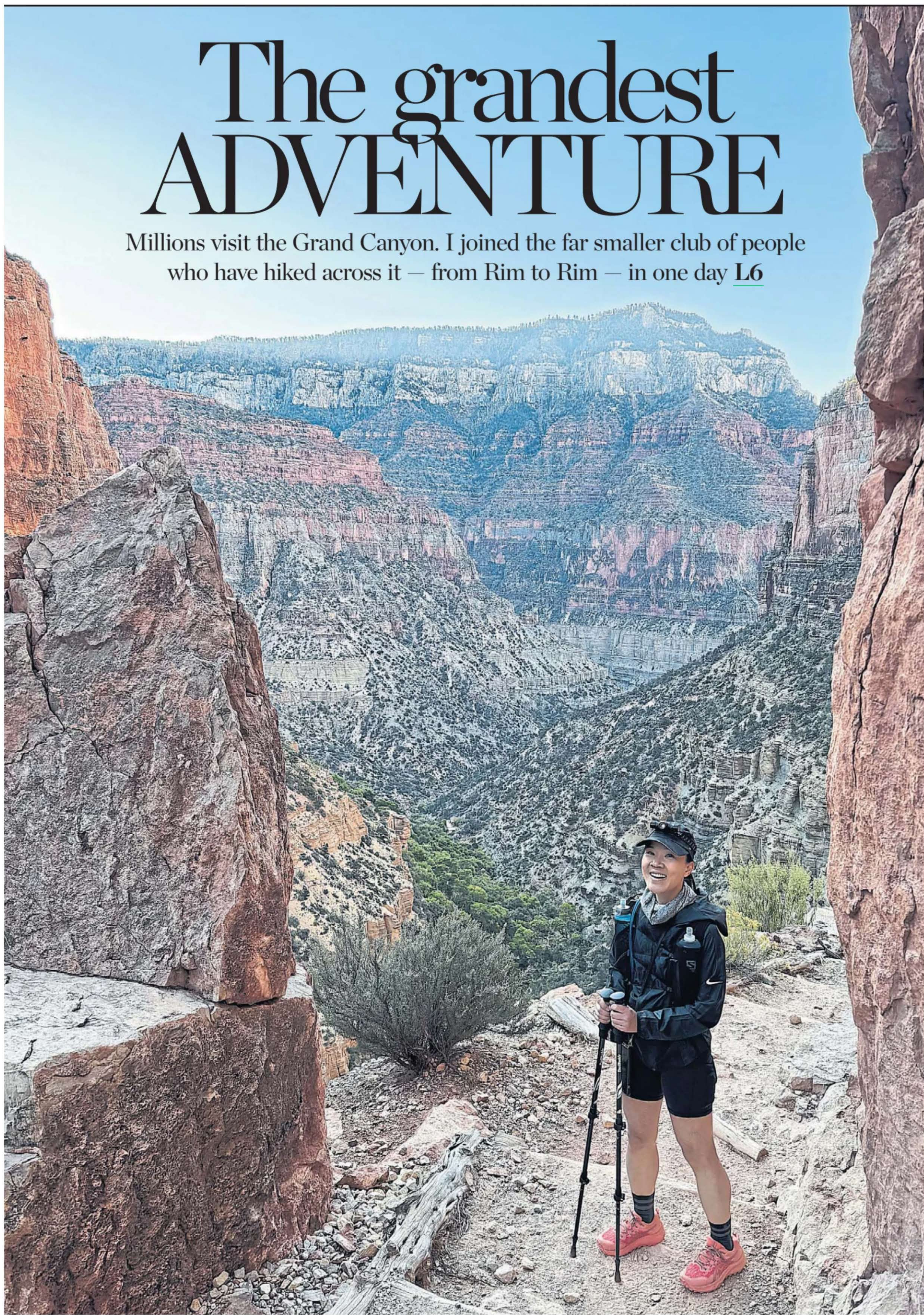
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LIVING

TRAVEL, L2
FOOD, L9
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The grandest ADVENTURE

Millions visit the Grand Canyon. I joined the far smaller club of people who have hiked across it — from Rim to Rim — in one day **L6**



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Daring to go BELOW THE RIM

WING SZE TANG
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"I have to say ... the canyon is pretty deep," says my good friend Ivy, peering over the edge, the bottom invisible from our vantage point. This understatement is akin to casually observing that outer space is a little bit big before sparking up the rocket ship. "I can't get over how much we have to descend and climb," continues Ivy, who has been rallying the group chat to do this dream trip for years.

Although we can't see the water from up here, the Colorado River sculpted this geological wonder over millions of years, with layers of rock older than dinosaurs. If it's even possible to grasp the gorge's size and scale, it must be done step by step.

We're in Arizona at the Grand Canyon's remote North Rim, more than 2,400 metres above sea level. Located high on the Kaibab Plateau, this place can see snow half the year. Relatively few tourists venture here, and fewer still will attempt what we have in mind.

Although around five million people visit the Grand Canyon annually, only an estimated 10 per cent set foot "below the rim." Most tourists simply sightsee from the top of the more accessible South Rim, 2,100 metres above sea level.

Just one per cent of visitors go all the way down to the canyon bottom, which, of course, necessitates hiking *all* the way back up. This bucket-list route is known as the Grand Canyon Rim-to-Rim, and we — an intrepid group of seven that includes my husband, Andrew, and some of our closest friends — have come to do just that.

It's not an organized event but a plan-it-yourself adventure. Many people choose to split up the distance into segments by camping in the backcountry (permits required). We're intent on covering the whole thing, which is nearly 39 kilometres, all in the same day.

It's an endeavour the National Park Foundation calls "strenuous," with possibly "catastrophic results" for the unprepared. Canyon signage bluntly asks, "Will you become a statistic?" while citing helicopter rescues. But our group is undaunted. We're all hardened marathoners, with just one exception, Tania, an avid hiker and sister of my close friend Mo.

On game day, our 4 a.m. alarm is a rude awakening, but we have to start in the pitch black, illuminated by stars and headlamps, to avoid hitting the toughest sections in the hottest hours. We aim to finish well before the October nightfall.

Fuelled by canned cold brew and a taste for irrational pursuits, we jog from our cabins to the North Kaibab trailhead. "Group hug!" insists my energetic friend Shal, as we snap one last "before" pic, hiking poles in shivering hands, vests laden with water, sweets and salty treats for the long haul.

While the descent should be easy, my fear of tripping over the brink makes it a slow go. But it's never too terrifying, and we're not alone. There's a sporadic stream of other hikers of all ages and athletic abilities. In fact, afterwards, I learn that a 92-year-old geologist, Alfredo Aliaga, completed Rim-to-Rim this same weekend, in a bid to set a Guinness World Record.

Golden hour arrives faster than I expect, the beauty of the sky's palette rivalled only by the shades of the russet valley, greened by prickly cacti, pines and stout shrubbery. We pause often for photo ops, taking in the scenery and trying to grasp

the mind-bending vastness.

"You're my heroes!" a fellow hiker calls out, apropos of nothing, as we pass. "Life is beautiful," a stranger observes to the universe and no one in particular. "Enjoy it, enjoy it," another urges. The chorus of affirmations on the trail makes this feel like we're part of some plucky little community.

When the terrain finally turns to level ground — the flats won't last long — we break into a run where we can, the sun cranking up the heat. Before noon, we arrive with relief at the legendary landmark at the canyon's bottom: Phantom Ranch, the only lodging facility "below the rim," whose stone cabins have stood since 1922. It's so wildly popular that sleeping here requires lucking out in a lottery (enter now to stay in 2025).

Hikers congregate at the ranch's canteen to recoup, slather on more sunscreen, and order the famous reward for all who've trudged the distance: possibly the best lemonade of your life. It's ice-cold, sparkling and fresh out of a Lemmy's soda fountain.

"The views from the top are magnificent obviously, but looking around from the bottom is more special to me," says Ivy. "These are experiences possible only for those who go all the way down."

Soon after Phantom Ranch, crossing the suspension bridge over the Colorado River marks the end of the easy part. It's almost all uphill from here. The climb from the ranch to the South Rim, via the Bright Angel Trail, is just shy of 16 kilometres, but on average it takes hikers six to 10 hours. One section is so wickedly steep, it's dubbed the Devil's Corkscrew.

In psychology, there's a phenomenon called the goal gradient effect. In short, when the end is nigh, people are motivated to go faster. It's what compels bone-weary marathoners to sprint the home stretch. But I can't call on the mind trick here. The switchbacks stretch as far as the eye can see. No finish line in sight.

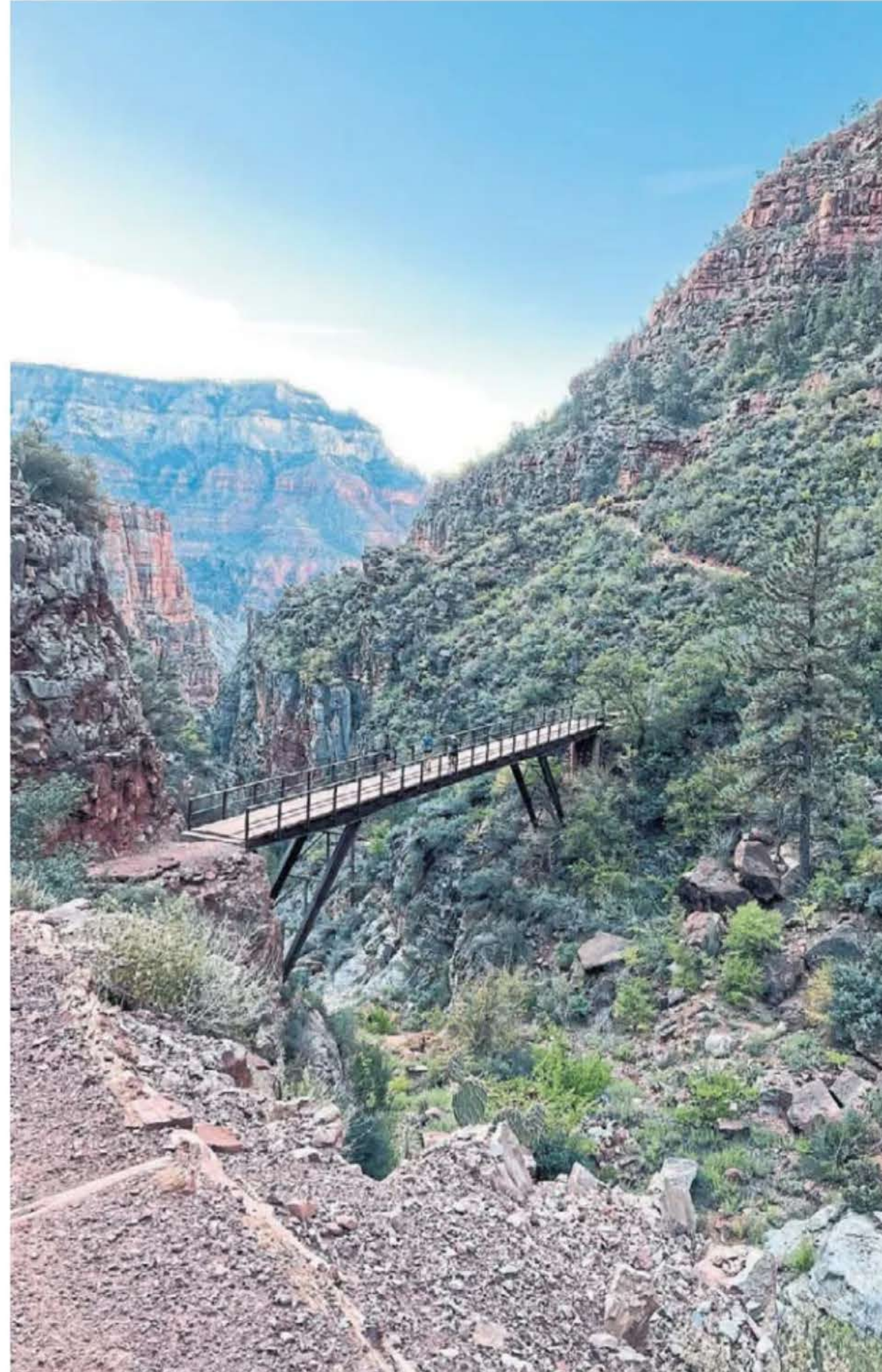
Except I hear a faint clamour. We're still a handful of kilometres away from the end, and the sun is sinking, my goosebumps returning. "Is that a crowd cheering at the finish?" I ask Ivy, wondering if I've reached the hallucination phase of exhaustion. "No, can't be," she insists. This isn't a race, after all.

I trudge on, drifting behind my friends. As my sapped muscles silently argue with my stubborn will, I fall into conversation with other plodders, who offer snacks and pep talks. "The first time I saw this, I nearly cried," declares one woman, a repeat Rim-to-Rim hiker.

"Almost there! How do you guys feel?" asks Andrew. I reply with an inarticulate groan. "Fantastic! I say we do this again," responds my friend and Ivy's husband, Huston, who does Ironman races for fun, making him a poor judge of what's hard.

Before I glimpse the trailhead, I can hear the cries of "Wooooo-hoo, wooooo-hoo!" and the clanging of a cowbell. The clamour is no figment of my imagination. It's the exuberance of a large group of hikers who finished earlier — many of them part of a company that does Rim-to-Rim every year. I'm grateful for the boost. My friends cheer me on as I run the final few seconds.

"Oh, my god, that was ... tiring" is all the eloquence I can muster after almost 12 hours in the Grand Canyon. But I can't say I wouldn't do it again.



WING SZE TANG

Roughly five million people visit the Grand Canyon annually, but only an estimated 10 per cent of them go "below the rim."

HOW TO HIKE THE GRAND CANYON RIM-TO-RIM

Choose your travel window

While the popular South Rim is open year-round, the remote North Rim operates seasonally, around mid-May to mid-October (weather permitting). Avoid the dangerous heat of peak summer.

Decide your route

Hikers can go from the North to South Rim, or vice versa. A seasonal shuttle runs between them, or hire a private driver through a company like Thomas Transportation (thomastransportaz.com).

Book pre- and post-hike lodgings well ahead

Accommodations are limited and demand is high. Find South Rim options at grandcanyonlodges.com, and the North Rim's only in-park lodging (seasonal) at grandcanyonnorth.com.

Get operational updates

The National Park Service (nps.gov/grca) provides crucial information like where potable water is available, which can change with little notice.

Find community advice

The 75,400-member-strong Facebook group Grand Canyon Rim to Rim is full of tips.



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