

There are some great places to spend the night in Arizona. One of the best is located at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Although it takes some work to get down there, a night at Phantom Ranch is anything but a hardship. Thanks to the impressive crew of 17 who run the ranch, hikers, river runners and mule riders get to enjoy a soft bed, a hot shower and a cold beer in one of the world's most unforgiving environments.

# DESERT OASIS

BY ANNETTE MCGIVNEY  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN BURCHAM

PHANTOM RANCH  
WELCOMES YOU

CLOSED

CANTEEN & CHECK-IN  
HOURS:  
8:30 AM - 4:00 PM  
&  
8:00 PM - 10:00 PM  
MEALS BY RESERVATION ONLY  
SHIRT & SHOES REQUIRED



every time I could.” After nine months, Moullet applied for a job at Phantom and was hired. That was two years ago. Moullet still intends to get his college degree, but he’s no longer in such a hurry.

“Working here has made me slow down,” Moullet says as he sits at a picnic table in front of Phantom’s dining hall. He’s taking a break from running the cash register at the canteen, where he’s been selling candy and postcards all morning. In addition, a steady stream of hikers have been limping in, asking for ice to nurse their swollen knees and ankles.

“This job has made me think about what I want to do with my life and how I want to enjoy my time between high school and college,” Moullet adds.

been working as a packer for three years. “I love doing this,” he says. “Every day on the trail is a new adventure because the mules all have different personalities.”

Badley is standing by with a clipboard, checking off the incoming inventory and feeding carrots to the mules, while another employee, Robert Nance, 40, carries the cargo to the kitchen in a wheelbarrow. Badley, 51, has been working at Phantom off and on since the mid-1980s and was appointed general manager four years ago.

“We can’t run out of steak or toilet paper,” she says, noting that Phantom keeps a constant 10-day stock of food and supplies. “From the moment people check in, everything has to run very smoothly. We are prepared for anything and operate with maximum efficiency. We recycle and compost. We fold our sheets a certain way and our towels a certain way.” The sheet technique is called the “Phantom fold” and enables two employees assigned to make 92 beds in a few hours to function

Even though a relaxed atmosphere prevails at Phantom, the work isn’t easy. The staff rotates between various job duties, working morning, midday or evening shifts that focus on running the kitchen and dining hall and maintaining 11 guest cabins. The well-oiled Phantom Ranch machine usually serves breakfast and dinner to more than 80 people, while the resort, with room for 92 guests, is booked solid years in advance. The off-the-grid location, combined with the demands of constantly operating at capacity, leaves little room for error among the staff.

The breakfast cook arrives at the kitchen at 1:30 a.m. to make bacon, eggs and pancakes, as well as bake cakes and cornbread for dinner. The dining-room wait staff reports by 4:15 a.m. to serve two breakfasts, at 5 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. After the cabin guests check out at 7:30 a.m., the rooms are cleaned and beds are made in time for the next round of guests that afternoon. Mule packers arrive from the rim by about 9 a.m. with supplies — including approximately 2.5 tons of food per week — and carry out trash and duffels.

On this morning in March, one of the packers is Steve Trent, who goes by the trail name of “Captain Howdy.” He looks straight out of central casting for a Hollywood Western. Trent, 46, grew up in Montana, where he honed his skills as a rancher, but he’s also worked as a banker in the mortgage industry. “I still do financial consulting on the side,” he says as he pulls crates of food and duffels out of saddlebags. He’s

Bright Angel Creek runs through Phantom Ranch.



Every afternoon at about 2:30 p.m., Joni Badley walks to the Phantom Ranch corral carrying a sweating pitcher of ice water in each hand. And the afternoon of March 7, 2015, is no different.

“Hello, Phantom Ranch mule riders!” Badley says as she sets the pitchers down on a covered picnic table and turns with a big smile toward the dust-covered group. “Welcome to the bottom of the Grand Canyon!” She pours water into cups and hands them to 10 guests who gingerly dismount from their steeds and duck into the shade. After more than five hours in the saddle while descending from the South Rim, they are tired, thirsty and ready to relax.

As the general manager for Phantom Ranch, Badley is in charge of everything from supervising employees to keeping the kitchen stocked, but she says greeting the guests who arrive by mule every day is her favorite part of the job. Badley, two female wranglers and the guests go over cabin assignments, when to eat dinner and where the bathhouse is located. Between now and when they ride back up to the rim tomorrow morning, the group will experience the rustic beauty of Phantom Ranch in much the same way guests did in 1922, when the resort first opened.

“We don’t have TV or access to Wi-Fi down here,” Badley warns. “But you can do old-fashioned things for fun, like skip stones in the creek and write postcards.”

Compared to the primitive camping required anywhere else below the rim, a stay at Phantom Ranch is hardly roughing it. Here, in a place that is only accessible by foot, mule or raft, you can sleep in a soft bed with clean sheets, take a hot shower, fill your ice bucket and enjoy a cold beer after a steak dinner. This rare oasis of creature comforts is made possible by a crew of 17 dedicated Phantom Ranch employees who run a finely tuned operation, one that’s been perfected over the decades for maximum efficiency in one of the world’s most unforgiving environments. Largely invisible to guests, the Phantom Ranch machine operates almost 24 hours a day, and often without a hitch, powered not by technology but by people.

“It takes a special person to fit in here,” says Joseph Moullet, one of the staff members. “You

have to be flexible with your living and working conditions. And you have to love hiking in the Canyon.”

The employees live in a small bunkhouse located in the middle of Phantom’s cluster of cabins. They work shifts of 10 days on and four days off. Although hiking to and from work is a job requirement, the connection to the Grand Canyon, for Phantom employees, goes beyond the bimonthly commute. “This is a minimum-wage job, so it’s not about the money,” Moullet says. “I do it for the scenery.”

After graduating from high school in his hometown of Portland, Oregon, Moullet, 23, took a job at Maswik Lodge in Grand Canyon Village. He planned to attend the University of Arizona as soon as he gained in-state residency. But then he hiked to Phantom his first week at the South Rim. “This place was like a sanctuary,” he says. “I started hiking down here



Preceding panel: The Phantom Ranch canteen welcomes more than 80 diners a day for breakfast and dinner.

Above, left: Tom Hagan, one of 17 Phantom Ranch employees, prepares to open the canteen for dinner.

Above: Mule packer Steve Trent arrives with supplies from the South Rim.

Below: Dan Trenchard rings the historic Phantom Ranch dinner bell.



at lightning speed by yanking the sheet from either end and tucking it around the mattress in one fluid motion.

Just about everyone working at Phantom is what the staff calls a “maid,” as employees cycle into and out of various jobs on a weekly basis. On this March morning, Brandy Upton is the maid. She has stripped all the beds and is now in the laundry room, loading sheets into the washing machine and putting towels into the dryer. Due to limited storage space in the historic facility, Phantom does not have room for extra linens. Everything must be laundered each morning in time for the next round of guests. The towels are washed first because they take the longest to dry.

Upton, 42, is from Louisville, Kentucky, and first came to work at Phantom in 2008 to join friends who were employees at the ranch. She stayed until 2010, when she thought it was time to move on and take a better-paying office job in Louisville. “I really missed the Canyon when I was away,” she says as she rapidly folds towels coming out of the dryer. She moved back to Phantom in 2013 when a position opened up. “Hiking in and out to get to work has given me a sense of independence,” she says. “Last week, I was hiking down the South Kaibab Trail during a snowstorm and I heard a rockslide. I was a little freaked out, but I had the confidence to keep going. I wanted to get home to Phantom.”

However, a home at the bottom of the Grand Canyon has its drawbacks, even if they are negligible. Moullet finds the triple-digit summer temperatures difficult, especially in the laundry room, which isn’t air-conditioned. Upton misses being able

to go to restaurants on a whim.

Willie Nelson craves gummy bears and his king-size mattress in storage back home in Tampa, Florida. “I miss that bed,” he says after his morning waiter shift is done. Nelson, 32, applied to work at Phantom three years ago, when he was living in Florida. Badley insisted that she interview him in person before offering him the job, but he didn’t have the funds to visit Arizona before making the move. “The first time I hiked in Grand Canyon was for the job interview,” he says. “I sublet my apartment, put all my stuff in storage and bought a one-way ticket to Arizona. Fortunately, things worked out.”

Although Phantom employees seem to rarely stop moving, there’s a brief period in the afternoon when many kick back before the dinner shift begins. As hikers, trail runners and river runners mill around in front of the closed dining hall beneath towering cottonwoods, laughter, singing and guitar-strumming can be heard coming from the fenced yard of the bunkhouse. But by 4 p.m., the staff is

Above, left: Two suspension bridges cross the Colorado River near Phantom Ranch. This is Silver Bridge, also known as Bright Angel Bridge.

Above: Mary Jane Colter designed Phantom Ranch in what became known as “National Park Service Rustic” style.

Phantom Ranch employees, including (from left) Robert Nance, Brandy Upton and Tom Hagan, come from a variety of backgrounds. What they have in common is a love for the Canyon and the people who visit.



setting up for the 5 p.m. steak dinner.

This afternoon, Nelson, along with Tom Hagan and Dan Trenchard, is sweeping the floors of the dining hall and laying down 44 place settings. Hagan will also serve as the evening waiter, and Trenchard as the dishwasher. One of numerous traditions among Phantom staff is that the dishwasher gets to choose the music played during setup and cleanup. R.E.M. is pulsing in the dining hall as the three move in lockstep with plates, silverware and glasses. They complete dinner preparations in a record 12 minutes.

“I’m the new guy,” Trenchard says. He took the job at Phantom six months ago after graduating from Northern Arizona University’s Parks and Recreation Management Program. Trenchard, 24, plans to pursue a career in outdoor-leadership education when the right job opportunity opens up. “For now, being here keeps me close to nature,” he says. “And it is also great for networking.”

Other Phantom employees have been at the job for decades, coming and going in what the staff jokingly calls the “recycled-rancher program.” Like the Grand Canyon itself, Phantom Ranch seems immune to the passage of time and is run in much the same way today as it was 20 years ago. This allows employees who know the system to leave and then return months — or years — later to seamlessly slip back into the workflow.

Hagan, 46, is one of those who can’t stay away for long. He started working at Phantom in 2001 after completing his first Grand Canyon hike, a 52-day traverse from Havasupai Tribe

land all the way to the Little Colorado River. “On that trip, my thought processes slowed down and everything began to make sense for the first time in my life,” he says. “The answers would just show up.” One of those answers was Phantom Ranch, which he visited on Day 27. He was offered a job on the spot and began working after his trek. Hagan’s routine is to work at Phantom for a few years and save money. Then he travels all over the world and eventually returns to Phantom to plug back in. “I don’t own a house or a car. I’m just having fun,” he says.

Tom Hagan (foreground) and Dan Trenchard set the canteen’s tables for dinner service.

At 8 p.m., the dining room is converted into a beer hall. It’s filled with dozens of hikers telling stories and drinking beer while donning their headlamps for the dark stumble back to the campground. Boy Scout Troop 280 from Chandler, Arizona, is huddled around a large table and playing checkers and card games. Hagan cheerfully rings up a long line of customers buying one more drink.

At 10 p.m., the hall is supposed to close, but people are having such a good time, no one’s getting up to leave.

“My priority is to make people smile and laugh,” Hagan says. “That is why I work here.”

By 10:15 p.m., the crowd finally filters out. Hagan and others quickly clean up the dining room and lay down place settings for tomorrow’s breakfast. The lights turn off at 10:45 p.m. In less than three hours, it will start all over again. **AH**