

Hiking Havasu

by Varina and Jay Patel



Smart photographers pack intelligently. Apparently, we are not smart photographers. Our trip into Havasu Canyon began with a fantastic sunrise – but our cameras were packed under packets of dried chicken teriyaki (worse than it sounds), our mini camp stove (which is much more useful when it actually works), and extra toilet paper (need I explain?). So, we stood by and watched the sky turn fiery pink. The other members of our party were smart enough to keep their cameras handy, and they were rewarded with beautiful shots of the rocky buttes and canyons under that sky. Jay and I have nothing to show for our arrival at Hualupai Hilltop trailhead, but next time we'll know better. We parked the car, and prepared for our journey into the canyon – wishing the sunrise had waited until we were standing in front of a waterfall 10 miles away.



After a quick weight check of our backpacks (mostly about bragging rights for the person carrying the heaviest load), the six of us started on our long trip to the campgrounds at the base of Havasu Falls. We descended from the Hualupai Hilltop along rough trails by way of a series of switch backs - and with each step came a painful reminder that we would be returning by the same route in 2 days time. Two stray dogs led the way – and pretended to be starving when we pulled out our granola bars.

They were pleasant traveling companions, and they accompanied us all the way through the canyon until it opened into Havasu Creek, where we turned towards Supai Village. The hike from hilltop to village is approximately 8 miles, so we started early and brought plenty of food and water.

Supai is home to some 600 people, hundreds of horses, and innumerable dogs.

Be wary of the dogs... they seem friendly, but are actually just waiting for some unsuspecting hiker to put his pack on the ground. They are quick to “mark” the bag as their own – seeming not to mind that their “territory” is now rather damp. One member of our party learned the hard way... and we quickly relocated our bags to tabletops. The tiny village has gained a negative reputation in the past few years, but the locals were polite and respectful to us. The village offers a cafeteria, a small grocery store, and a general store that sells a variety of items including food and drinks. After checking in at the tourist office and paying our fees, we ate a quick lunch – then strapped on our backpacks once again, and headed for our campsite 2 miles away.

We arrived at the campsite with tired feet at around 1 PM, and quickly got to work setting up our tents. We chose a site near the river – strategically located near both the drinking water and the toilets...in case of midnight emergencies. At the beginning of March, very few people are interested in freezing their tails off at the bottom of a canyon, so we were able to be choosy. Campfires are not allowed at the campsites, so it’s necessary to bring warm clothes and a small cook stove. Newly-built composting toilets were clean and well cared for.

After pitching our tents, we backtracked about three-quarters of a mile to Navajo Falls. This beautiful area is hidden behind trees on the side of the river opposite the path. I acted as the guinea pig in my attempt to cross the riv-



er - with the help of a conveniently positioned log. My crossing was successful, and the others followed with their gear. In order to capture the images we wanted, it was necessary to stand in the cold water of Havasu creek for a long time. Jay and I had neoprene socks to wear inside our water shoes, and were much warmer than our companions – though they didn’t complain. We waited for the sun to disappear behind the clouds or trees so we could shoot the falls without harsh glare and reflections. Circular polarizer filters helped reduce glare on the wet rocks, and enhanced the rich blue-green color of Havasu Creek.

Later in the evening, we visited Havasu Falls. This spectacular waterfall is located between Navajo Falls and the campgrounds. It drops 100 feet from a sandstone ledge into a deep, turquoise pool. We chose to shoot as the sun dropped low on the horizon – leaving the falls and surrounding area in shade. Even lighting reduces the dynamic range of the image, and helps eliminate harsh glare in water shots. We shot the sunset at the falls, and then returned to our campsite.

By this time, the temperature in the canyon had dropped substantially. Typical temperatures for this area vary by 30 to 40 degrees between daytime high and nighttime lows. Layered clothing helped us maintain a reasonable body temperature. We were lucky to have warmer weather and beautiful skies during our visit, but storms are common at this time of year, and it is important to be prepared for any



weather.

At the end of the day, we pulled out our cooking utensils and began to prepare our meals by moonlight. Our friends lit their stoves and heated water in small tin pots, while we tried to light our “highly efficient, space-saving” alcohol stove. After several failed attempts (and a near miss at setting the picnic table on fire) we finally gave up and heated our water over a friend’s (they were long-finished by now). We ate our reconstituted meal, and by the time dinner was over, our feet and bodies were desperately crying for bed. We crawled into our tent, with our cameras and wiggled into our insulated sleeping bags. We always sleep with our cameras on cool nights outdoors. They aren’t the best bed-fellows, but keeping the camera warm helps extend battery life. We both slept well, despite our lumpy companions.

In the morning, we decided to shoot from the base of Havasu Falls. I crossed the river to get a shot from the opposite side, and was thereafter designated as willing leader for crossing semi-dangerous waters. The crossing was not difficult, but a misstep would have meant a plunge into cold water, and very real danger of hypothermia. I took care to avoid damaging the fragile, underwater ledges as well. My waterproof shell kept my upper half dry despite heavy mist from the falls, but my pants were soaked through by the time I returned. They dried quickly – thanks to lightweight and quick-drying synthetic material – and I stayed relatively warm. Cutoff gloves with mitten flaps and a water resistant lining allowed me to use my fingers to control the camera without sacrificing body heat.

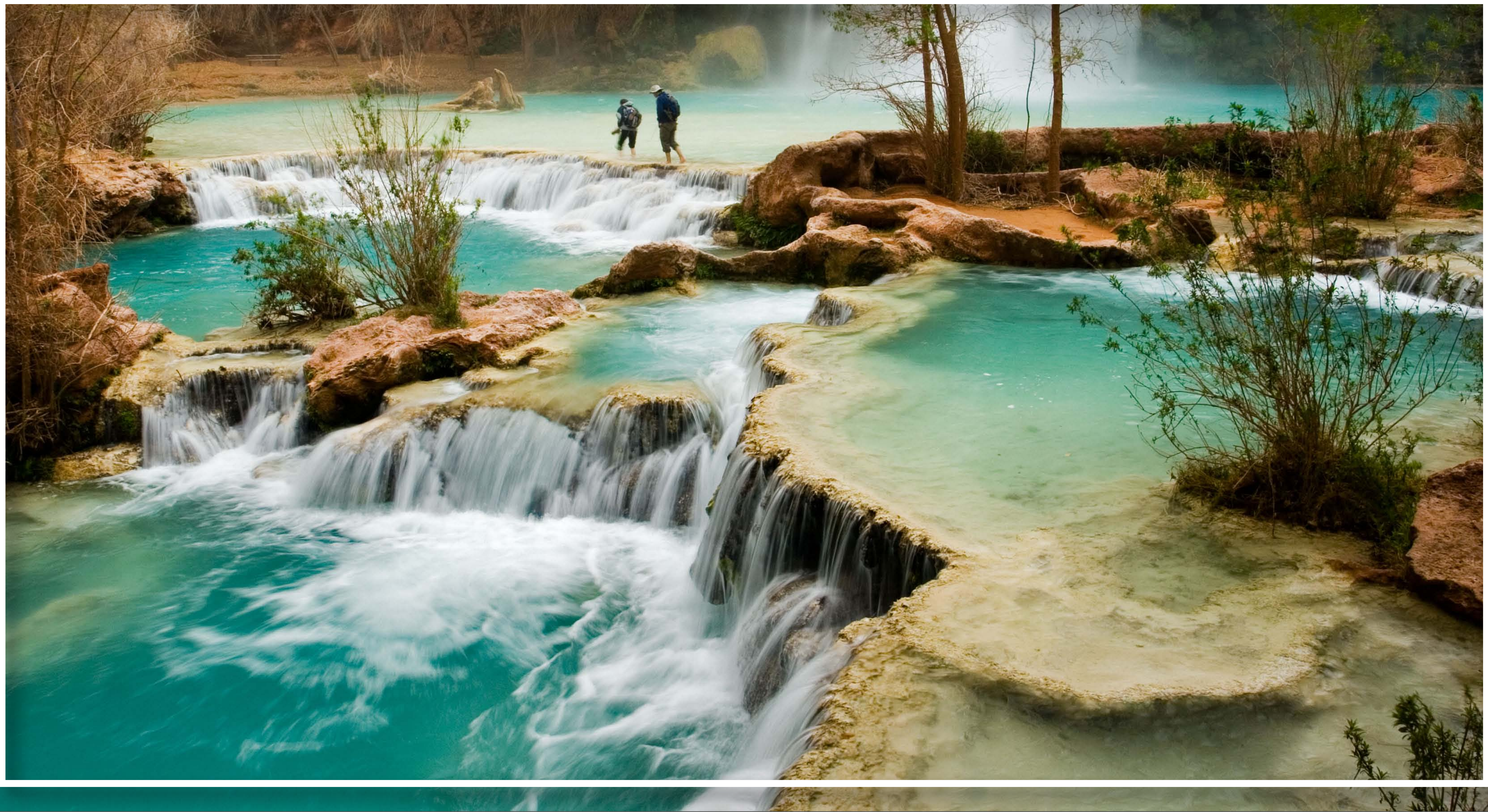
We returned to the campsite for a quick breakfast of oddly purple cereal (oatmeal with blueberries), and then headed down-river. Mooney Falls is located about half a mile from the campsite. The climb from top to bottom is not to be attempted by the weak-of-heart. The “trail” drops 200 feet, and requires passage through narrow caves, a descent on a rickety ladder, and a steep climb down a sheer cliff face carved with narrow ledges. The locals have kindly installed heavy chains so visitors can hold on for dear life while they lower themselves from one slippery “step” to the next.

When we reached the bottom we gasped our thanks for our lives to the guardians of the canyon, and headed towards Beaver Falls. We would return to shoot Mooney later in the day, when the harsh sunlight no longer touched the brilliantly colored water. The trail from the base of Mooney Falls to Beaver Falls is primitive, and required several river crossings.

We wound over rocky outcroppings and through fields of brambles that scratched at our legs as we passed. Long pants are a must for this hike - and the quick-drying variety came in useful once again after each river crossing. We hiked for several miles before turning back as the sun began to drop towards the horizon. We decided to return to Mooney Falls before dark... but not before I attempted another guinea pig crossing (this time in thigh-deep water). The rest of the crew decided not to cross, and I returned wetter than ever – but cer-

tainly not unhappy. That's what landscape photography is all about, right?

Mooney Falls – located at the base of the aforementioned precarious climb – is twice as tall as Havasu Falls... and just as beautiful. Large volumes of water and a steep drop create impressive clouds of mist at the base of the falls. Photographers should keep their lenses and filters covered when they aren't in use, and clean them frequently to avoid spoiling photographs with water droplets. We found that sediment from the water (the same sediment that creates that





stunning turquoise color) was difficult to remove if it was allowed to dry on our lenses. Clean yours frequently – and thoroughly - if you are shooting in the mist.

The return to the top of the cliff was less daunting than the downward climb, since we could see where we were going – and we didn't have to look down and see how far we'd fall if we let go. We were able to photograph the interesting formations along the sides of the cliff from a vantage point half-way up. The climb was definitely worth the effort – if only because we proved to ourselves that we aren't big chickens.

After dinner, we retired early. It's amazing how well you can sleep on hard ground, in cold weather, after a long hike, and a death-defying climb.

In the morning, we took a few minutes for a quick shoot and a quicker breakfast - then packed up our gear and headed back up the trail. We carried our garbage out and discarded it in trash cans at Supai. The helicopters were a temptation (you can fly in and out of the village for a fee), but we decided that the hike was more fun. The next six and a half miles were relatively uneventful – although hiking in bright sun with 35 pounds on your back is never exactly easy. The terrain is rocky, but not steep, and we covered the distance in good time.

The final one and a half miles of the trip are by far the most difficult. The climb is very steep, and it's important to make sure you have enough water to make the final leg of the trip. We rested occasionally and motivated ourselves to continue with thoughts of a big steak dinner, hot showers, and real beds. When we reached the top, we rejoiced. Four hours later, we checked into our hotel. We scrubbed three days of red dirt off in a hot shower, went and found ourselves a juicy steak dinner, and dropped – exhausted – into real beds. We can't wait to return to Havasu Canyon.

Note: A broken dam upriver caused dangerous flash flooding in Havasu Canyon about a year after our trip. Sadly, Navajo Falls is no longer flowing, but two new waterfalls have been created in the area. The beautiful step formations you see in some of these photos were destroyed by rushing water, and will take some time to reform. We hope to return to photograph the changes as soon as we can.

Tips for Shooting in Havasu Canyon

- Extend battery life by keeping your camera warm. During the day, keep it inside your jacket next to your body, or use chemical heat packs. At night, sleep with your camera next to your body.
- Use a circular polarizer when shooting wet locations. The polarizer reduces glare and reflections, and enhances colors.
- Use a Graduated Neutral Density filter when shooting sunrise and sunset. This filter reduces the brightness of the sky, helping the camera to capture a broader dynamic range without blown highlights or shadows that lack detail.
- A lightweight tripod is a good idea for a long hike like this one. You'll want to be able to strap it securely to your camera bag – especially when climbing down to the base of Mooney Falls.
- Use a UV filter to protect your expensive lenses from sediments carried by the mist. Clean your filters often to avoid build-up of hard-to-clean deposits.
- Water shoes with neoprene socks help keep your feet warm and protected when crossing the river.
- Synthetic materials such as fleece and nylon are lightweight and easy to carry. Quick-drying clothing is especially useful for river-crossings, and waterproof outerwear will protect you from mist or rain. Layer clothing for extra protection and convenience.
- Prepare for variable weather conditions. Temperatures can change rapidly in the canyon.
- The most difficult part of this hike is the last 2 miles of the return trip. Even if you leave early, you won't arrive at the base of Hualapai Hilltop until the sun is high. Be sure to dress appropriately and bring plenty of water for this leg of the trip.

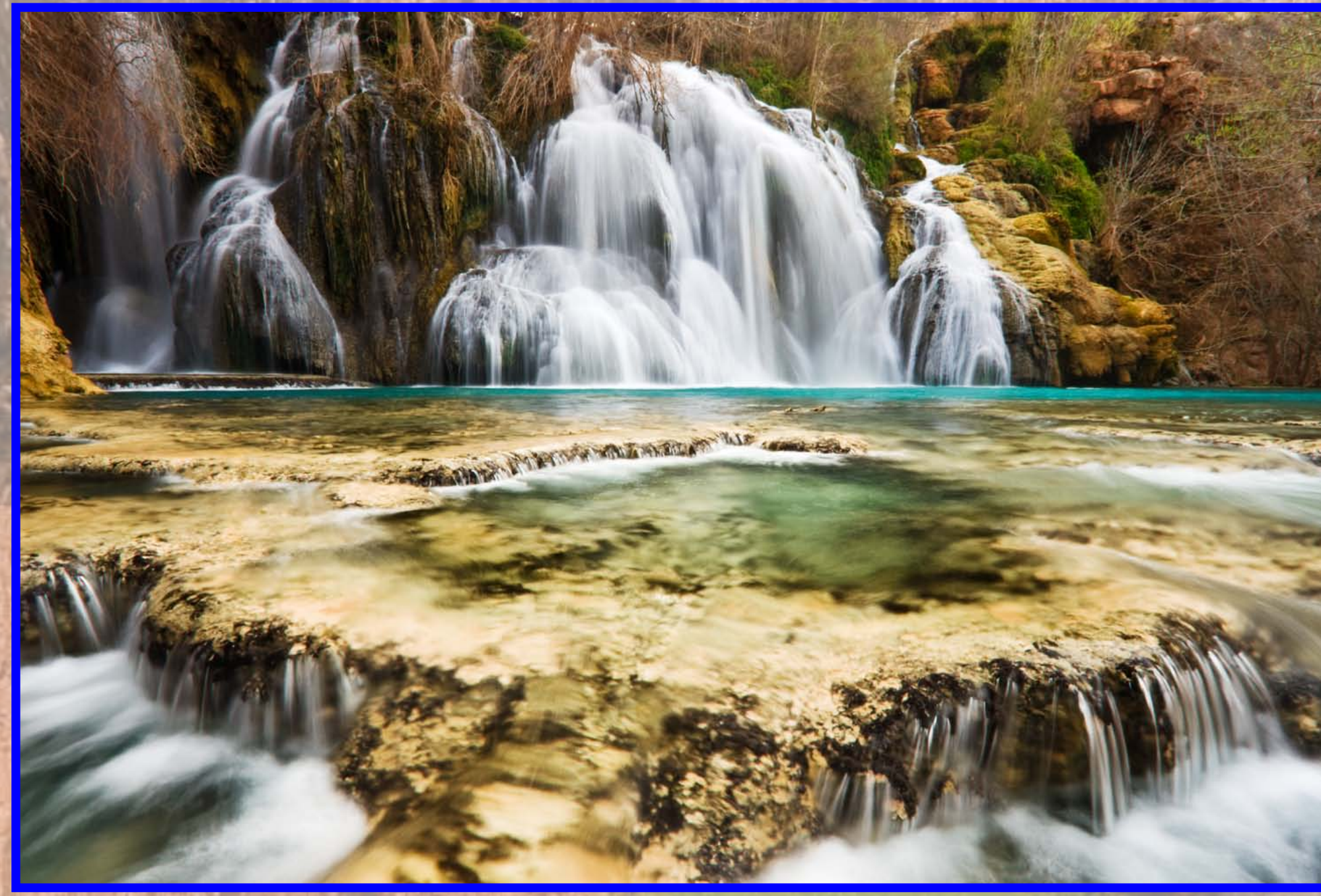
Useful Websites

- Havasupai Tribe Website: <http://www.havasupaitribe.com/maps.html>
- Trail Information: <http://www.havasupaitribe.com/hiking.html>





Arizona Dreaming
© Jay Patel



Navajo Falls
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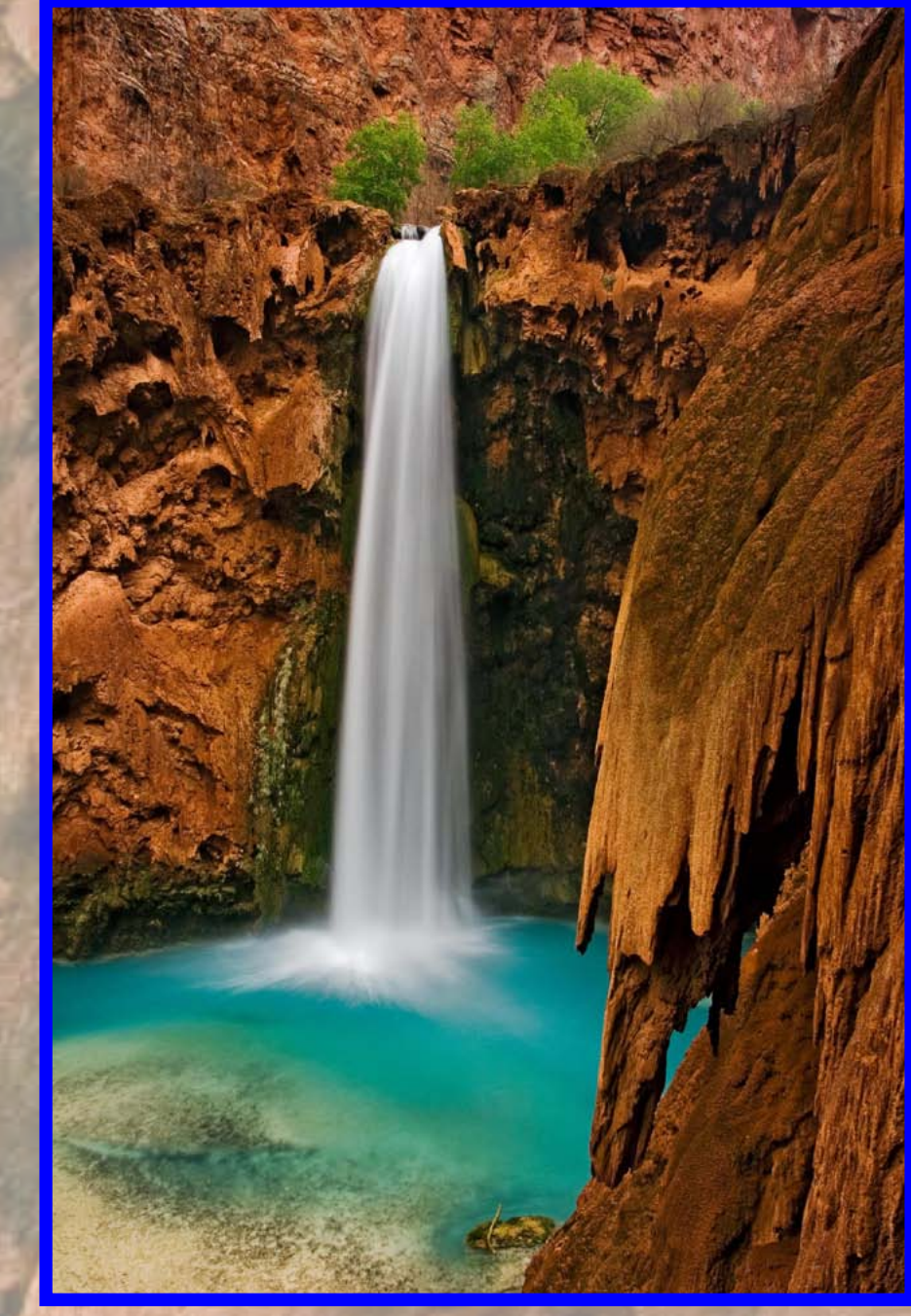
Coloring Book
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The Classic View
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The Crossing
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Mooney Falls
© Jay Patel



Green Zone
© Jay Patel



Sediment
© Varina Patel

Jay Patel

Seeds of Jay Patel's appreciation for beautiful places were planted early in his childhood on numerous trips to some of the most breathtaking locations on the Indian subcontinent. His passion for such magnificent places now manifests itself in a continuous search to capture nature's majestic specularity with his camera. Jay's career in photography began in the summer of 2001 when he purchased his first digital SLR. In subsequent years, he spent much time reading photographic magazines and Internet articles and studying the styles of great landscape photographers. He has had no formal education or training in photography.

Contact: pateljx@gmail.com

Website: <http://www.jaypatelphotography.com>

Varina Patel

Landscape photography is demanding. It is not unusual to climb a steep trail and wait several hours for sunset – despite intense heat or numbing cold – only to climb back down in the dark without getting the shot because the light wasn't right. Varina is more than willing to return to a location many times if necessary. She doesn't mind cold hands, wet feet, muddy clothes, or aching muscles – if in the end, the photograph makes an impression. She loves hiking long trails through wilderness, crossing rivers on slippery stones, and climbing sand dunes by the light of the moon. Varina thrives on rising before the sun in order to capture those first rays of sun on the mountain, and she is irresistibly drawn to the challenge of finding the right light, in the right place, at the right time.

Contact: varina.patel@gmail.com

Website: <http://www.photographybyvarina.com>

