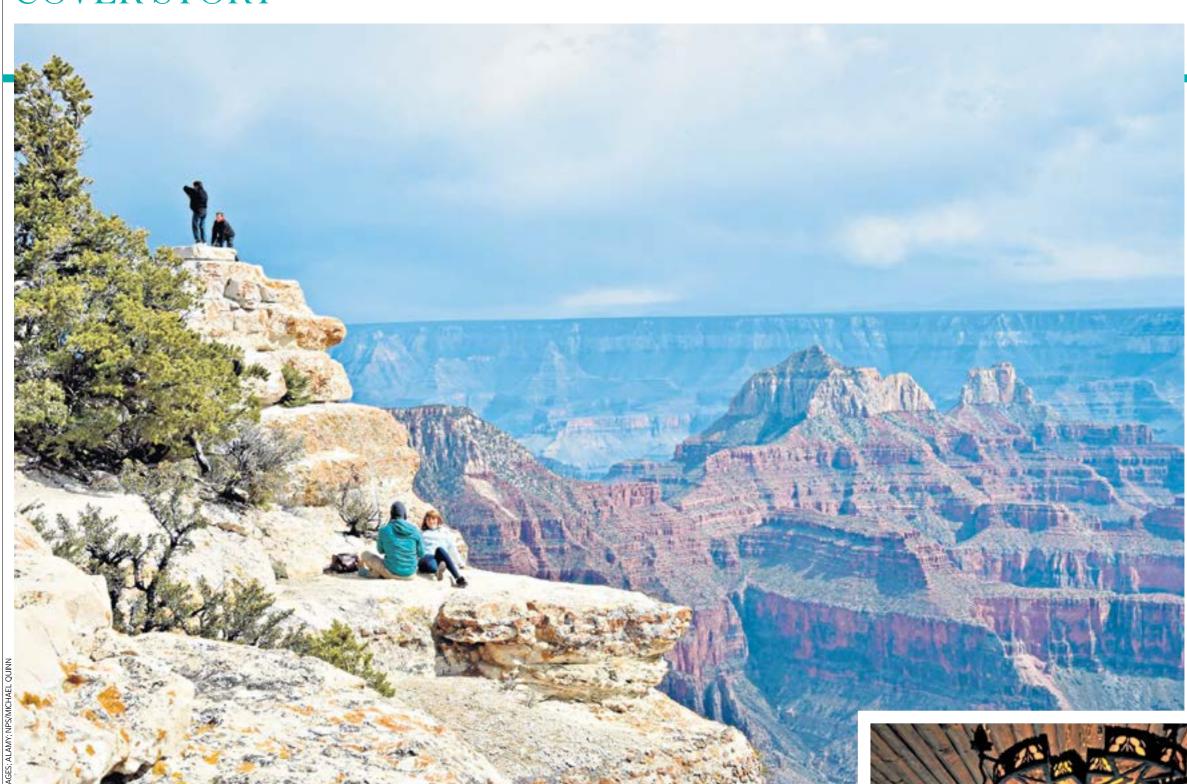
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COVER STORY



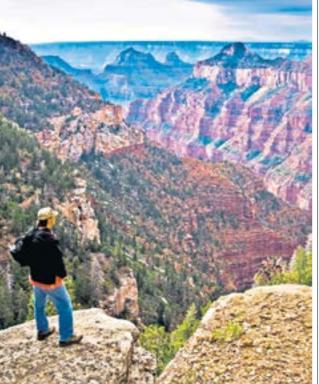
SO NEAR YET SO FAR Just 10 miles distant as the condor flies, the North Rim is a 215-mile drive from the canyon's more heavily visited South Rim

A luminous landscape that grips you like no other

n midafternoon at the South Rim, it was hard to believe that Americans once had to be encouraged to visit the Grand Canyon. Daytrippers, fresh off the train after a twohour journey from Williams, pouted at the end of selfie sticks; hikers sweated the last yards up the Bright Angel Trail; diners in the El Tovar Hotel gazed through the windows over the crumbs of their club sandwiches; and browsers in the gift shop dithered over the Grand Canyon thirstystone coasters, the Grand Canyon prickly pear taffy, and the beige cotton Grand Canyon National Park bandanna, complete with topographic map of the Colorado River, that carver of A few browsers, this one included,

paused by a postcard stand, where offerings included reproductions of two watercolours. Even at seven inches by five, they were impressive: images of near-photographic detail, subtly balancing light and shade and conveying a powerful sense of the canyon's depth. I didn't need to turn to the back to see that they were by Gunnar Widforss. He had brought me to Arizona, just as, in the Twenties and Thirties, he brought thousands of others.

It is almost a century since the Grand Canyon was designated a national park – on Feb 26 1919, three years after the creation of the National Park Service itself, under the directorship of Stephen Mather, businessman, outdoorsman and born promoter. It was Mather who



SPLENDID ISOLATION A viewpoint on the Widforss Trail, above; the Grand Canyon Lodge, above right set Widforss on his way to becoming "the painter of the national parks".

Widforss was making a reputation but not much of a living by the age of 41, when he left his native Stockholm in December 1920 intending to travel via the United States to Japan. By the time he reached Los Angeles, he was short of cash, so he did what he had long done in Europe: he found scenic places busy with tourists where he could sell his landscape paintings.

By March 1921 he had reached

Yosemite Valley in California, where he bumped into Mather one morning. Mather needed someone to show Americans what there was worth seeing and saving in their country's newly protected places; Widforss needed work. Over the next decade, the Swede (who would become a US citizen in 1929) painted pretty much all the national parks in the west. His paintings were everywhere from railroad company brochures to the galleries of the Smithsonian Museum in

Washington DC.
No landscape gripped him as the canyon did. He wasn't the first notable artist to paint it (Thomas Moran and William Holmes preceded him), but he was alone in making the place his home, giving his address as "Grand Canyon".

And yet, less than a century on, though the North Rim has a Widforss Trail and a Widforss Point, the man himself is forgotten. Well, not quite. He has two notable champions. One is a fellow Swede, Fredrik Sjoberg, who with his 2016 book *The Art of Flight* has paid entertaining tribute to Widforss's role in that great American project, as he puts it, to place "virgin reserves..."

of weekdays". The other champion is Alan

here and there throughout the

country, like Sundays in a landscape

ESSENTIALS

☐ Michael Kerr was a guest of Arizona Office of Tourism (visitarizona. com) and flew from London to Phoenix with British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com; returns from £597). He stayed at Tempe Mission Palms (001 480 894 1400; missionpalms.com; double rooms from \$237/£183 next month); the Residence Inn Flagstaff (001 928 440 5499; marriott.com; from \$136); Thunderbird Lodge (grandcanyon lodges.com; from \$234); and Grand Canyon Lodge North Rim (001 877 386 4383; grandcanyon forever.com; from \$141). ☐ Further reading: Arizona & The Grand Canyon (Moon Guides); How the Canyon Became

Grand by Stephen J Pyne

(Penguin).

For further information about the artist Gunnar Widforss, see gunnarwidforss.org.

GRAND CANY NATIONAL PA

Las Vegas Widforss

San Fra

Petersen, curator of fine arts at the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff, a silver-haired, silver-bearded man of 63 with the lean frame of a regular cyclist. In 2009, he organised the first Widforss exhibition in 40 years. He is cataloguing the artist's works (currently more than 1,200) and planning – when he gets a break from teaching – to write a biography. When we met in Flagstaff, one of the tourist gateways to the canyon, he told me: "My mission over the past 10 years has been to get Gunnar greater recognition."

Thanks to Sjoberg's book and Petersen's writing, I was well acquainted with the Widforss story. How he had been born in 1879 as Gunnar Mauritz Widforss, one of 13 children whose father Mauritz was a



shopkeeper dealing in guns and hunting clothes and whose mother was an amateur painter. (The shop, incidentally, was bought in 1968 by the womenswear chain Hennes. which renamed itself Hennes & Mauritz – now better known as H&M - and added men and children to its customer base.) How, when he fetched up at the Grand Canyon, he traded paintings with the company running the El Tovar Hotel (one hangs in the lobby still) for a room in a staff dormitory and meals at Bright Angel Lodge. And how, having been warned by a doctor that he shouldn't be working at altitude, he resolved to wrench himself away from the canyon and his friends and, on the drive to bid them goodbye, had a heart attack. He died on Nov 30 1934, aged 55.

Until I arrived in Flagstaff, though, and joined Petersen in an archive room at the museum, everything I had seen of Widforss's work had been a reproduction. But here were nearly 20 paintings, mostly of the canyon but also including depictions of a park in Colorado and cypress trees in Monterey in California. There was a thrill in seeing the luminous layers of his watercolours on an original.

New to me, too, was the story of how Petersen's and Widforss's careers had become entwined.

CONTINUED ON PAGE $4 \rightarrow$



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→ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Petersen grew up in San Diego in California. Intent as a student on one path, he bought his mother a book about Widforss as a present in 1976; he was so taken with the man's work that he decided his own future lay in art rather than architecture Like Widforss, he had spent a lot of time at the canyon, doing everything from waiting on tables at El Tovar to guiding rafters down the river ("beautiful – but with moments

of terror"). He has plans to print every canyon painting Widforss made and to walk the rim marking the GPS coordinates of each viewpoint in order to create a map. Until he finds time, Widforss pilgrims have to make their own way. I'd recommen a request to see the Grand Canyon Museum Collection on the South Rim, which, in addition to more

Widforss originals, has an extraordinary assembly of artefacts - from the pocket watch of John Wesley Powell, explorer of the canyon, to the remains of a ground sloth from the Pleistocene period. My own visit to the South Rim

began where Widforss's ended: at the Pioneer Cemetery, where he lies in the shade of ponderosa pines. Beside a miniature Swedish flag, planted recently by Petersen, stood three paintbrushes left by other visitors. Behind them, a plaque set into a boulder was inscribed with lines by Robert Browning: "Here, here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form/Lightnings are loosened/Stars come and go!" Also in the cemetery are the Kolb brothers, Ellsworth and Emery, who became famous for their photographs of tourists on mule

rides (including Theodore Roosevelt

and Albert Einstein) and for a film



CANVAS The Watchtower main, painted by Widforss, above, in 1932; crossing the river by cable in 1908, right



they made while running the Colorado River in 1911. Occasionally the Kolbs would offer Widforss a room - but then they had plenty of them; between 1904 and 1976, their rim-side seat at the canyon, which had started as a modest studio, grew into a five-storey, 23-room building complete with bedrooms, bathroom, basement and theatre. Walking around it with Dave Lewis, a cheery park volunteer, and

Kim Besom, who looks after archives (and has a Widforss as her screensaver), was like touring a Tardis. Lewis entertained us with stories of

the Kolbs' run-ins with both competitors and the National Park Service, which wanted to demolish the house before it was listed as historic Now restored, it serves as a bookshop and a gallery, where, between September and January, the work of participants in the annual Grand Canyon Celebration of Art is exhibited. I saw only an occasional watercolour among the oils, but there were one or two works in which tourists appeared, just as they tend to do most days on the

dges of the real canyon. Courists are fewer at the North Rim, which is only 10 miles (16km) from the South as the condor flies, but some 215 miles (close to five hours) by road. Facilities and viewpoints are also fewer, though, so the tourists tend to

cluster. One honeypot is the Grand Canyon Lodge, a rustic secular cathedral with soaring ceiling, where both a restaurant and a terrace offer canyon views. At sundown on the latter, a modern-day Widforss would struggle to find a pitch for a monopod, let alone an easel. After sunrise (more elbow

room, less chatter) I was

delighted to see on the

oreakfast menu a Widforss Egg White Omelet [sic]: egg, spinach, tomato and cheddar jack cheese, served with fresh fruit and wholegrain toast. Just the thing to set me up for the 10-mile round trip on the Widforss Trail.

First, though, at 11.30am, I had an appointment with a tribute artist. At one of the North Rim's viewpoints, a ranger, Kim Girard, had swapped her usual hat for a trilby and pulled on over her working clothes an

Widforss was alone in making the place giving his address as 'Grand Canyon'

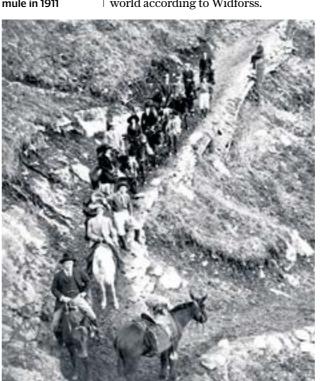
descends the

Grand Canyon by

approximation of what "Weedy" Vidforss - he was 5ft 4in tall - would have worn: baggy flannel shirt, tie, classes and gaiters. On the rim wall she rested an easel with a reproduction of a Widforss painting she was inishing off"; behind, it, on a bigger board, she had photographs of him and his family and more examples of his work. In a presentation designed to appeal to both children and adults, she gave a brief run-through of his life and his association with the canyon and reminded them that they could walk a trail named in his honour. She kindly dropped me off later at

the start of that trail, which follows the canyon rim, then winds though a forest of fir, spruce and aspen - where the artist loved to paint - before emerging at another canvon overlook, now signposted "Widforss Point". The first section is covered by a park service leaflet taking in some of the most striking features, including a viewpoint through the trees and over the canyon to the San Francisco Peaks, some 70 miles (110km) away, near Flagstaff. I was lucky to be on the trail in

mid-September, when the aspens were on the turn. Lean silver trunks were lamp stands for brilliant yellow leaves which seemed not so much to be lit by the sun as to be glowing from within. On the return, I paused again at the viewpoint towards the peaks. I had the strange sensation that I was looking not at the Grand Canyon but at a Widforss painting made real: coppery coloured pyramidal formations in front, Theodore Roosevelt | pinker formations behind a hazy ridge beyond and, in the far distance, at the top of the frame, the mountains. A



BEFORE THE CANYON AMERICA'S OLDEST NATIONAL PARKS



While its forthcoming centenary is a special milestone, the Grand Canyon is only the 15th oldest national park in the United States. Other wonders await that have been protected for even longer...

1. YELLOWSTONE **FOUNDED: MARCH 1872** An epic playground of hot springs and geysers, the most feted being Old Faithful, Yellowstone (nps.

gov/vell; pictured above) has long been a postcard image of the American West. Largely in northwest Wyoming, it spreads into Montana and Idaho.

2. SEQUOIA SEPTEMBER 1890

this treescape (nps.gov/ seki: pictured below) in central California. General Sherman, regarded as the planet's largest living tree (all 275ft of it), is part of the forest; Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the contiguous 48 states (all 14.505ft of that) extends its west flank down into the park.

3. YOSEMITE **FOUNDED:** OCTOBER 1890 less than a week after

Granted protected status nearby Sequoia, Yosemite (nps.gov/yose; pictured top right) is surely the most famous national park in California, its majesty visible in the towering granite monolith

El Capitan and the 617ft

south-east of Seattle where Mount Rainier (nps.gov/mora), a 14,411ft stratovolcano, juts upwards. It is viewed as one of the planet's most dangerous volcanoes, but its last reported eruption was in 1894; good news for The the 26 glaciers that cling to | remaining

5. CRATER LAKE FOUNDED: MAY 1902 If Mount Rainier is one of the Cascade Range's most

FOUNDED: MARCH 1899

up the three most westerly

serrated spine. It makes its

most prominent point in

The Cascade Range runs

California, Oregon and

Washington - like a

the latter, 60 miles

mainland states -

cavern complex of vast cultural significance to the Lakota people. Mesa Verde National Park (7) (June 1906; nps.gov/meve) in Colorado also focuses on the indigenous US, in the archaeological sites created by the Ancestral Puebloans of the region as long ago as the 12th

blew its top so

water feature.

OF THE

members of

further

the top 10 are

evidence that

parks, America

century BC. Elsewhere, Glacier National Park (8) in Montana (May 1910; nps. gov/glac) and Rocky ountain National Park (9 . MOUNT RAINIER | bad-tempered fire demons, (January 1915; nps.gov) Crater Lake (nps.gov/crla) romo) in Colorado are all is its pale ghost. This about raw geography - and advertise their specific south-western Oregon is ppeal in their names. what remains of Mount The exceptions to the Mazama, a volcano that Western rule are

Haleakala | conclusively about **National Park** 7,700 years ago that its (nps.gov/hale) collapsed caldera now and Hawaii frames this spectacular Volcanoes National Park (nps gov/havo), which ring-fence lava-born scenery on Maui and Hawaii island respectively.

looked west before it

1903; nps.gov/wica)

considered the rest of the

National Park (6) (Januar

safeguards a South Dakota

and mass. Wind Cave

Both joined the national parks register on August 1916, when Hawaii National Park (10) was inaugurated, They were split into two when it came to founding national

separate entities in 1961 Chris Leadbeater

HOW GRAND IS THE CANYON?

mile deep on

average, 277

wide. As the

flies, Grand

by road you have

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♦ Grand Canyon National Park (nps.gov/grca/ ndex.htm) was designated by an act of Congress on February 26 1919. Iwas recognised as a World Heritage Site in 1979. The park covers an area of 1,904 sq miles, making it bigger than the state of Rhode Island (1,212

sq miles).

◆ The canyon is a distance of 215 miles (346km). ♦ The ultramiles (446km) long and up to runner Tim 18 miles (29km) Freriks - a nurse in Flagstaff blazed down California condor reintroduced in from the North Rim and up to the South Rim in two hours. Canvon Village on the South Rim 39 minutes and the lodge on and 38 seconds the North Rim in October 2017. Afterwards, are only about 10 miles apart, but instead of having a rest, he went

in for the first

of three consecutive

12-hour shifts at the hospital. **♦** The canyon itself can influence the weather. **Elevation ranges** from around 2.000ft to more than 8.000ft, and the temperature ncreases by 5.5F (3C) with each 1,000ft loss in

elevation.

carving the canyon about six million years ago. The oldest human artefacts found in the national park are nearly 12,000 years old and date from the Paleo-Indian period. The park has been used and

occupied

since that time.

♦ The Colorado

opened, the canyon drew

44,173 visitors; now there are an estimated 5.9 million a year. celebrations (nps.gov/grca

visitors should

TAILORMADE TRAVEL WORLDWIDE

♦ In 1919, the

centennial.htm are likely to numbers, so prospective

♦ "100 Years of Grand" (lib.asu. edu/grand100) – a project of

book their stay

well in advance

Arizona State, Universities and **Grand Canvon** National Park brings together thousand of photographs and documents relating to the park's history.



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