

# Adventure Hikes and Canyoneering in the Southwest.

---

Christopher E. Brennen

Dankat Publishing Company

*For my grandchildren, Quinn, Troy, Gavin and Payton*

Copyright © 2014 Christopher E. Brennen

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, transcribed, stored in a retrieval system, or translated into any language or computer language, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission from Christopher Earls Brennen.

ISBN 0-9667409-5-5



# Preface

## Warning

It is important to stress that there is always a significant danger associated with adventures into the wilderness. Those who wish to follow the adventure hikes in this book should be fully cognizant of those dangers and take appropriate precautions. The accounts are primarily intended for experienced hikers who will exercise informed judgment and caution. The hikes requiring technical expertise and equipment should never be undertaken without proper training and qualifications. Even given all this, the dangers should not be minimized. The accounts are offered with the understanding that readers will proceed entirely at their own risk. In “Precautions” we describe some of the precautions that minimize (but do not eliminate) the dangers and risks.

## Acknowledgments

A large part of my enjoyment of these adventures was derived from the group of young people (and a few oldies) who accompanied me. I am immensely grateful to all of them for their companionship. I especially thank Troy Sette who was born with the instinct for adventure, Clancy Rowley whose grace and kindness shines in all he does, Mark Duttweiler with whom hiking was always a pleasure and Garrett Reisman who taught me to climb and whose friendship I shall treasure for the rest of my days. I should also acknowledge Doug Hart who was a great companion on many early hikes. It was my great good fortune to have hiked with these marvelous young men. And Carl Wassgren, Bob Behnken, Sudipto Sur, Tricia Waniewski, Stuart Gibbs, Al Preston, Robert Uy, Simone Francis, Markus Ehrenguber, Deborah Brennen, Susan Sette, Eric Siering, Randi Poer, John Perry, Scott Smith, Ira Lewis, Nathan Wozny, Nathan Schara, Eric Hale, Ken King, Mark Fitzsimmons, Jane Fontana, Johanna Turner, Bernd Haase, Matt Maxon, Keith Goodfellow and others were marvelous company and quite tolerant of elderly eccentricities. My thanks also Alex Kirkaldy who gave us important guidance in the Big Tujunga region and to my old friends David Wales and Paul Jennings. This book is dedicated to all these fellow adventurers who so enriched my travels in the wilderness and, in particular, to Doug, Troy, Garrett, Simone, Clancy, David, Mark, Randi, Scott and John.

### **About the Author**

Christopher Earls Brennen was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland and emigrated to California in 1969. He has lived and worked in the southwestern United States for over forty years and has spent many great days exploring the marvelous scenic beauty of that corner of the world. In this book he tells of some of the special places that he has explored beyond the ends of the trails, in the canyons and on the summits of the American Southwest.

# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>1 PRELIMINARIES</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction . . . . .	1
1.1.1 The genesis of adventure hikes . . . . .	1
1.1.2 The adventure hikes . . . . .	1
1.1.3 The changing landscape . . . . .	3
1.2 Precautions . . . . .	3
1.2.1 Important Precautions . . . . .	3
1.2.2 Fires . . . . .	4
1.2.3 Flash Floods . . . . .	4
1.2.4 Poison Oak . . . . .	5
1.2.5 Wildlife . . . . .	5
1.2.6 Snakes and Insects . . . . .	6
1.3 Navigation . . . . .	7
1.3.1 Introduction . . . . .	7
1.3.2 Maps . . . . .	7
1.3.3 Use-Trails . . . . .	7
1.3.4 Altimeters and GPS Units . . . . .	7
1.3.5 Retracing your steps . . . . .	8
1.3.6 Cross-country hiking . . . . .	9
1.4 Equipment and Provisions . . . . .	9
1.4.1 Introduction . . . . .	9
1.4.2 Clothing . . . . .	9
1.4.3 Backpack . . . . .	11
1.4.4 Essential and emergency equipment . . . . .	11
1.4.5 Other Useful Equipment . . . . .	13
1.5 American Canyoneering Association Ratings . . . . .	13
<b>2 ARIZONA</b>	<b>17</b>
2.1 Havasu Canyon . . . . .	18
2.2 Grand Canyon . . . . .	26
2.3 West Fork of Oak Creek . . . . .	33
2.4 James Canyon and Pumphouse Wash . . . . .	40

2.5	Courthouse Rock . . . . .	45
2.6	Flatiron Plus . . . . .	51
2.7	Fish Creek Canyon . . . . .	56
2.8	Weavers Needle . . . . .	61
2.9	Salome Jug . . . . .	68
2.10	Devil's Canyon . . . . .	73
2.11	Cibecue Creek . . . . .	79
2.12	Crystal Canyon . . . . .	85
<b>3</b>	<b>SOUTHEAST UTAH</b>	<b>91</b>
3.1	Maidenwater Canyon . . . . .	93
3.2	Blarney Canyon . . . . .	98
3.3	Leprechaun Canyon . . . . .	102
3.4	Black Hole of White Canyon . . . . .	108
3.5	Gravel Canyon . . . . .	113
3.6	Cheesebox Canyon . . . . .	119
3.7	Fry Canyon . . . . .	125
3.8	Grand Gulch . . . . .	130
<b>4</b>	<b>ESCALANTE</b>	<b>135</b>
4.1	Egypt Slots . . . . .	136
4.2	Neon Canyon . . . . .	142
<b>5</b>	<b>ZION NATIONAL PARK</b>	<b>149</b>
5.1	Zion Narrows . . . . .	150
5.2	Angels Landing . . . . .	159
5.3	Orderville Canyon . . . . .	162
5.4	Mystery Canyon . . . . .	168
5.5	Behunin Canyon . . . . .	174
5.6	Pine Creek . . . . .	180
5.7	Keyhole Canyon . . . . .	184
5.8	The Subway . . . . .	187
5.9	South Fork of Taylor Creek . . . . .	195
5.10	Englestead Hollow . . . . .	199
5.11	Spry Canyon . . . . .	206
5.12	Misery Canyon . . . . .	211
5.13	Birch Hollow . . . . .	217
<b>6</b>	<b>ARIZONA STRIP</b>	<b>223</b>
6.1	Buckskin Gulch . . . . .	224
6.2	Coyote Buttes/The Wave . . . . .	234
6.3	Toroweap/Lava Falls . . . . .	239
6.4	Water Canyon . . . . .	246
6.5	Yankee Doodle Canyon . . . . .	251

<b>7</b>	<b>NEVADA</b>	<b>255</b>
7.1	Bridge Mountain . . . . .	257
7.2	Hidden Falls Canyon . . . . .	262
7.3	Icebox Canyon . . . . .	266
7.4	Icecube Canyon/The Maze . . . . .	272
7.5	Wheeler Peak . . . . .	279
<b>8</b>	<b>DEATH VALLEY</b>	<b>283</b>
8.1	Willow Creek . . . . .	284
8.2	Coffin Canyon . . . . .	290
8.3	Charon Canyon . . . . .	297
8.4	Styx Canyon . . . . .	304
8.5	Cerberus Canyon . . . . .	310
8.6	Hades Canyon . . . . .	316
8.7	Bad Canyon . . . . .	322
8.8	Natural Bridge Canyon . . . . .	329
8.9	Keane Canyon . . . . .	334
8.10	Monarch Canyon . . . . .	340
8.11	Grotto/Mosaic Canyons . . . . .	345
8.12	Telescope Peak . . . . .	352
8.13	Darwin Falls . . . . .	358
8.14	Rainbow Canyon Hike . . . . .	362
<b>9</b>	<b>YOSEMITE</b>	<b>369</b>
9.1	Half Dome . . . . .	371
9.2	Indian Canyon . . . . .	382
9.3	Tenaya Canyon Hike . . . . .	388
9.4	Cathedral Peak . . . . .	397
9.5	Eichorn Pinnacle . . . . .	405
<b>10</b>	<b>SIERRA NEVADA</b>	<b>411</b>
10.1	Mount Whitney . . . . .	412
10.2	North Fork of Kings River . . . . .	420
10.3	The Needles . . . . .	426
10.4	Seven Teacups . . . . .	429
<b>11</b>	<b>SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA</b>	<b>435</b>
11.1	Rose Valley Falls . . . . .	436
11.2	Tar Creek . . . . .	440
11.3	Sespe Gorge . . . . .	447
11.4	Malibu Canyon . . . . .	456
11.5	Zuma Canyon . . . . .	461
11.6	Big Falls . . . . .	466
11.7	Vivian Creek . . . . .	471
11.8	Tahquitz Rock . . . . .	475
11.9	Kelso Dunes . . . . .	479

11.10Afton Slot . . . . .	484
11.11Wonderland of Rocks . . . . .	487
11.12Deep Canyon . . . . .	492
11.13Cougar Canyon . . . . .	498
11.14Carrizo Gorge . . . . .	506
11.15Picacho Peak . . . . .	514
<b>12 CHANNEL ISLANDS</b>	<b>521</b>
12.1 Pelican Bay, Santa Cruz . . . . .	524
12.2 Point Bennett, San Miguel . . . . .	528
12.3 Harris Point, San Miguel . . . . .	533
12.4 Cardwell Point, San Miguel . . . . .	536
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>539</b>

# Chapter 1

## PRELIMINARIES

### 1.1 Introduction

#### 1.1.1 The genesis of adventure hikes

In my early years of hiking, I followed almost all of the 100 hikes in the San Gabriel mountains of California that John Robinson describes in his classic “Trails of the Angeles”. Later, seeking to explore beyond the established trails, I and a group of students at the California Institute of Technology began a series of explorations that we termed “adventure hikes”. These revealed such marvelous hidden treasures off the beaten paths of the San Gabriels (and surrounding mountains) that it seemed appropriate to record these adventures for those who might be inclined to follow in our footsteps. That was the genesis of my first book entitled “Adventure Hikes and Canyoneering in the San Gabriels”. In later years our explorations and adventures spread to some of the other magnificent parks of the American Southwest. In this second volume I describe a series of marvelous adventure hikes off the maintained trails in that region.

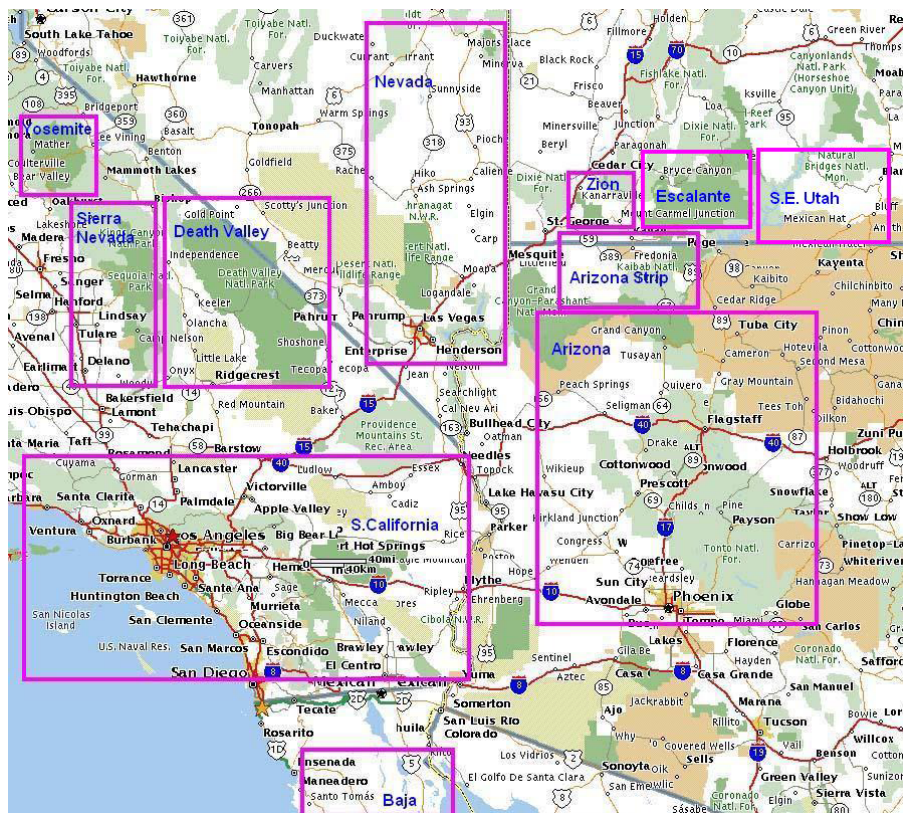
#### 1.1.2 The adventure hikes

The adventure hikes described are distributed across the southwestern United States. For convenience the hike descriptions are divided into the eleven, somewhat arbitrarily defined regions shown in the first map. Each chapter includes the adventure hikes for one of these regions. In the descriptions of the hikes, I have tried to give as much useful information as possible without spoiling the sense of adventure. When I explored them for the first time I had little or no knowledge of what to expect. In the early years, this led to some unexpected adventures such as spending an unplanned night in the canyon of the East Fork of the San Gabriel River. Later, I became more circumspect and often conducted preliminary exploratory hikes before attempting the complete version described

here. Thus, for example, I ventured into some of the canyons from both above and below before attempting to travel all the way through.

In each case, I have provided a map on which I have marked prominent features, obstacles or navigational aids. I have also included some photographs so that the reader can gauge his or her own willingness to tackle some of the challenges described herein. Estimates of the times required for the hikes are also provided though the actual time required will vary considerably depending on the weather, stream conditions and personal agility and fitness. Some readers may be able to go significantly faster than indicated here. Groups larger than three or four will most likely be slower especially when rappelling.

An estimate of the distance covered is also provided though this is much less useful than the elapsed time when discussing adventure hikes since average speeds vary greatly with the terrain. Another guide to the difficulty is the listed elevation gain that, unless otherwise specified, is the sum of all the major ascents experienced on the hike. Specific difficulties (and the equipment needed to overcome them) are also listed for reference at the beginning of each description.



The eleven regions covered in the chapters that follow (except for the Channel Islands).



### 1.1.3 The changing landscape

Mountains, rivers and canyons are constantly changing and any guide like this runs the risk that it is out of date before it is written. The canyons, in particular, can sometimes be unrecognizable after a large winter storm. The reader should remember this when using the directions and descriptions herein. Logs that once allowed an easy descent may vanish during the winter. Landslides can obliterate significant obstacles or create new ones.

## 1.2 Precautions

### 1.2.1 Important Precautions

We begin by detailing some basic precautions that should always be taken when hiking in the wilderness. When you venture off-trail these become even more important and there are additional factors that need to be considered.

First and foremost the hiker should know his or her limits and only graduate slowly from the regular, maintained trails, to the unmaintained trails and then to more remote areas.

Second, it is very important not to travel alone. On any hike, it is valuable to have companions who can seek help should you become ill or have an accident such as an injury to a leg. On an adventure hike, as simple and common an accident as a sprained ankle could be life-threatening if you were alone. Therefore, you should find some companions with similar interests and be prepared to adjust your itinerary to satisfy the group interests and objectives. The ideal is probably a group of three or four people.

A related and essential precaution is to leave a written description of your proposed route with a family member or friend who will be in a position to seek help if you or your party fail to return. You should also leave clear instructions with that family member or friend as to the steps they should take. I recommend the following instruction: "Call the police or sheriff's department if you do not hear from me by 9pm on the day you expect me". A third precaution in the same category is to carry a cellular telephone. However, the hiker should be aware that cellular telephones require line-of-sight for operation. Thus, they will often work on peaks and ridges but they will not work in canyons.

On an adventure hike, it is easier than one might imagine for an individual to become separated from the group. Therefore, it is important for the group to always remain "connected". For example, when struggling through brush in an extended single file every member needs to maintain regular contact both with those ahead and those behind. An important item in any emergency kit is a whistle; everyone should carry one on a necklace. Be sure that all members of the group know the universal distress signal: three sharp blasts on the whistle (or three short repetitions of any kind of signal). Note that it is part of the universal creed that every hiker has an obligation to respond to such a signal of distress.

The third category of precaution is to become accustomed and knowledgeable about navigating your way in the wilderness. In the next chapter a brief summary of navigation is given. For the present, it is valuable to emphasize the importance of knowing where you are. In the wilderness, it is always important to plan ahead and, to do so, you must know your location relative to various destinations. You must always know the location of the next source of water. You must always have some estimate of the distance to your destination and whether you can reach it before nightfall. It is an essential safety precaution to be able to halt at least one hour before sunset so that proper preparations can be made for the night. This is especially critical when you underestimate time and distance and have to spend an unplanned night in the wilderness. If you are unwise enough to press on in the darkness you not only risk injury but you also reduce substantially your opportunity to prepare shelter and warmth for the night. I dwell on this because, on the one occasion when this happened to me, I found it very difficult psychologically to resign myself to a night in the mountains and to stop in time to gather firewood and make a fire and a bed for the night. In the wilderness it is often difficult to make accurate *a priori* estimates of travel time since that depends so much on the terrain. Therefore, it is essential to be flexible and realistic and continuously adjust your plan.

The fourth set of precautions concerns proper safety equipment; we deal with this later in this chapter.

### **1.2.2 Fires**

In many wilderness areas, open fires are not permitted except in specifically designated fire places in campgrounds and, even then, a fire permit is often required. On overnight hikes, I strongly suggest a small, portable hiking stove for cooking and, if you must have a fire, use only dead wood, keep it small and confined to a safe fire pit, preferably an existing one.

If you are trapped unexpectedly overnight in the mountains and you feel you have no alternative but to light a fire in order to maintain warmth then you must take every possible precaution. Learn how to choose a safe location and how to construct a safe fire pit. Keep the fire small and under control at all times. Never leave the fire unattended. When leaving the campsite, douse the fire with water to ensure that it is completely extinguished and then dismantle the fireplace so that as little remains as possible.

### **1.2.3 Flash Floods**

When hiking during or after rainfall you should be alert to the danger from flash floods, especially when traveling in one of the larger canyons or narrower gorges. If the level of the stream begins to rise quickly, take immediate refuge at a higher elevation. Perhaps the most dangerous phenomenon is a flash flood that involves a “bore” or sudden wave traveling down the canyon. These flash floods often produce a characteristic rumbling or roaring noise (often likened to a train) and you should take especially rapid action if you detect such a noise.

Even in the steepest sided canyons there are often places where it is possible to climb some distance above the level of the stream. About 30ft of elevation should be sufficient for safety in just about all of these situations. But it is best to avoid these kinds of hikes during rain or for several days thereafter.

#### **1.2.4 Poison Oak**

Many people are susceptible to poison oak and it is therefore wise to learn to recognize this low (3-4ft high) sparse, weed-like plant whose leaves are shaped like those of an oak tree. In the summer and fall, the leaves often turn multi-colored, red and green with some yellow. Some individuals are fortunate to be immune from poison oak and can walk through these plants without any fear of the dreaded rash and itch appearing a couple of days later. Others have a mild reaction and merely have to avoid direct contact, for example, by wearing long pants. A third group seem to suffer severely even from second-hand contact such as that acquired by rubbing a hand over clothing that has contacted the plant. During adventure hikes at lower elevations, it is very hard to avoid all contact with poison oak. For those that are susceptible it is wise to cover legs, arms and hands as completely as possible and to be very alert to the presence of poison oak. Alternatively it is now possible to purchase creams that you can apply to exposed skin and that provide a measure of protection against poison oak. It is always wise to shower thoroughly after returning from an adventure hike and this can also help after exposure to the plant.

#### **1.2.5 Wildlife**

One of the glories of the southwestern wilderness is the fact that so much wildlife still survives. There are deer, bears, cougars, bighorn sheep, coyotes, bobcats and many other smaller animals. I hope that you are fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of one or more of these marvelous creatures. Provided you are sensible, the risks are essentially negligible.

Deer are plentiful and, because of their camouflage, you often hear them before you see them. As elsewhere, it is most likely that you will catch a glimpse of them at dawn or at dusk.

The populations of bear and cougar are increasing in many places. Cougars tend to avoid all human contact and are very rarely seen. In all my years of exploration I have never been fortunate enough to see a cougar. Thus, the danger from cougars is extremely remote. Black bears are more frequently seen though I have only had the privilege on one occasion. They may present a marginally larger hazard though still a miniscule one. Probably the only significant danger might occur if you placed yourself between a mother and her cubs.

For those who might have read of confrontations between humans and bears in the distant past in the southwest, we should note that the original bears in some of the wilderness of California were California grizzlies, an extinct species closely related to the grizzly bears of the northwestern states. The last grizzly

in the San Gabriels of California was shot in 1898. However, smaller black bears were imported by men in the early part of the century and have now found their place in the biological niche originally occupied by the grizzlies. Black bears are much less dangerous than grizzlies and so the confrontations of the distant past would not occur today.

If you are confronted by a bear or cougar, you should stand up, wave your arms, shout and scream. A walking stick is valuable not only to strengthen your own resolve but also for defensive action in the extremely remote chance of an attack by the animal. Do not move forward because such a move might trigger a defensive reaction. Do not turn your back or run away because cougars have a built-in urge to attack a fleeing prey. Rather you should move slowly backward while continuing to make very aggressive motions and noise.

Bighorn sheep can be found in a number of remote places in the southwest. For example, they roam the slopes of Mount Baldy near Los Angeles.

### **1.2.6 Snakes and Insects**

Perhaps the most significant danger from wildlife is the possibility of a rattlesnake bite though this is also a rare event. On the few occasions on which I have encountered rattlesnakes I have seen them before they saw me. It is probably sufficient to recognize the rattle noise of these snakes and to step away from the sound when you hear it. If you are unfortunate to be bitten be sure to follow the standard instructions. Try to immobilize the area and get to help as soon as possible. Only if you are a long distance from help (more than four hours) should you resort to drastic measures such as cutting open the area of the bite. It is wise to carry a snake-bite kit just in case and these always come with explicit instructions. Finally, you should note that there are also many harmless varieties of snakes in the southwest, including some whose patterns are similar to those of a rattlesnake. The latter is most readily recognized by its rattle and diamond-shaped head.

As to insect bites, it may be important for any hiker to ensure that they are not allergic to any insects, for example bees or mosquitoes, and to carry appropriate medication in case of a problem. Even if you are not allergic to wasps, bees or yellow jackets, these can pose a danger comparable to that of rattlesnakes. The author once inadvertently stepped on a wasp nest and was stung about 20 times before he could jump into and immerse himself in a pool of the nearby stream. The subsequent reaction of the body that included dizziness, sharp pains across the forehead and, later, a sore throat were alarming and debilitating. They could have caused a serious problem for someone with a less robust immune system. Some hikers I know carry medication in a hypodermic syringe for such emergencies.

If you have been bushwhacking (or even if you have not) it is wise to check for ticks after returning home. Provided you detect them early and before they have had time to burrow in, ticks are easy to remove. If one has buried its head in your flesh it is probably wise to have a nurse or doctor remove it, otherwise it may itch for a couple of weeks.

## 1.3 Navigation

### 1.3.1 Introduction

Navigation is more important when one ventures off the beaten track. On the maintained trails it is usually sufficient to carry several trail maps and to stop regularly to try to identify your location. On adventure hikes, navigation becomes much more important and significantly harder.

### 1.3.2 Maps

The first essential equipment in locating yourself and the trails is a collection of trail maps that should be studied in detail before setting out. Simplified or shaded maps are of little or no value on adventure hikes. In the National Parks it is usually possible to purchase a detailed topographical map (“topo” map) on which the maintained trails have been imposed. Alternatively, you should obtain 7.5 minute series US Geological Survey maps (“topo” maps) for the area(s) covering your hike. One problem with the USGS topographical maps is that the information on the trails marked on the maps may be very out of date. Many of the trails that are marked have long vanished, either because they were washed away or because they have become completely overgrown. Other, newer trails may not be marked.

Whichever type of topographical map you obtain, it is valuable to practice reading the topology (the mountains, canyons and other identifying features) from these maps as you hike along. Initially, it is not easy to look at a topographical map and to relate it to the scenery around you. But, with a little practice, this becomes second nature and greatly aids in your navigation, to say nothing of your peace of mind. You should also equip yourself with a compass that will allow you to adjust the map to the same orientation as your surroundings. It is important to make a habit of stopping at high points on your hike to consult your maps and the topology of your surroundings. Try to fix the principal features and landmarks in your mind for later reference.

### 1.3.3 Use-Trails

The adventure hiker will come to learn that many of the negotiable canyons contain “use-trails” beaten down by some combination of animals and humans. These are often useful, particularly when you must find a way around a waterfall or other obstruction. Moreover, the absence of a use-trail is usually a sign that a major obstacle lies ahead.

### 1.3.4 Altimeters and GPS Units

Another useful navigation device is an altimeter watch that you can now purchase for about \$80.00. If this is properly adjusted to the known elevation at your starting point, it can tell you your altitude to within about 40ft. Not

only is this valuable for its own sake, but, in combination with a topographical map, it can greatly help you locate your position. By identifying the contour corresponding to your known altitude and following it on the topo map, you can often factor in other observations (such as a compass bearing to a nearby peak or knowledge that you are in a particular canyon) to closely identify your position. Of course, GPS positioning units can now be purchased for less than \$150.00 and are highly recommended for those who are not confident in using the more primitive methods. In combination with a topographical map, a GPS unit can locate your position to within a few tens of feet. The only circumstance in which the GPS unit might fail to operate is in a deep canyon where line-of-sight with one or more of the satellites can be lost.

### 1.3.5 Retracing your steps

Another simple rule of navigation that is often overlooked by the novice hiker is the ability to retrace your steps. One of the essential and enjoyable elements of adventure hiking is the challenge of venturing into the unknown. But a necessary corollary is the chance that you might encounter an obstacle that you cannot surmount. Then, it may be necessary to retrace your steps though you had not initially planned to do so. You might also need to retrace your steps in the event of an accident. Therefore, it is a basic safety measure to ensure that you can do this without running the risk of taking a wrong turn and getting lost.

There are several simple steps that you should always take to minimize this danger. First, when traveling down a canyon you can easily pass the mouth of an adjoining canyon without noticing it. The result can be that, when retracing your steps on the way up the canyon, you may not be able to decide which canyon to follow. Therefore, take note of any such junctions while hiking downstream. In particular, when you pass such a junction, look back and fix the right path in your mind. If you are in any doubt mark the entrance to the correct canyon with a “duck”. For those unaware of this term, “ducks” are readily-recognizable human-generated markers created from naturally occurring materials. Most frequently they take the form of a prominently displayed pile of two, three or more rocks sitting unnaturally on top of one another. A series of ducks spaced 20-50yds apart is often used to mark a trail that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to follow. Alternatively, as suggested here, you can use occasional ducks to mark your trail. Other variations can include a row of rocks and/or logs placed to make an arrow. Such a signal should be used to mark the place where you should leave a trail or a canyon on the return journey. Markers that should not be used are any that may damage plants or animals; do not, therefore, carve marks on trees or break limbs from trees and bushes in order to mark the way; even excessively large ducks should be avoided. In summary, visualize your return by looking backwards fairly frequently and leave markers wherever necessary to remind you of the correct route.

### 1.3.6 Cross-country hiking

There are several other factors that should be considered when choosing a route through the wilderness. It is clear that, in a rugged and mountainous area, the canyons and ridges form the most natural cross-country routes and, in general, the larger canyons are less brushy and usually allow easier travel except in the more narrow sections. Often one must find a route from a canyon to a ridge or vice-versa. Then, the steep “transverse” ridges or gullies form the most natural routes with which to accomplish such a transition. Again, the best choice is usually the largest gully you can identify and follow. Though you may have to climb over many boulders and waterfalls you are usually saved from the need to plough through bushes. Often such lateral gullies will have the largest cliffs or waterfalls near where they join the main canyon and you should be prepared for this possibility.

Another factor to keep in mind when selecting a route is that the vegetation of the north-facing slopes in the southwest is quite different from that of the south-facing slopes. The former usually consist of oak forest or, at higher elevations, pine forest. These trees coat the ground with an accumulation of soil and leaves that is much easier to travel through than the harsh rock cover under the bushes, yucca plants and scrub of the south-facing slopes. This difference is valuable to remember in plotting a cross-country route. Moreover, the south-facing slopes are more frequently exposed to fire and for this and other reasons tend to be more unstable.

## 1.4 Equipment and Provisions

### 1.4.1 Introduction

Being properly clothed, equipped and provisioned can mean all the difference between an exciting wilderness experience and a miserable ordeal. This chapter is intended to give some guidelines on these issues though each person will soon discover their own particular preferences as their experience broadens.

### 1.4.2 Clothing

Choice of clothing will vary with the weather, the time of year and personal tastes. As a general rule it is better to rely on a number of layers for warmth rather than single thick and bulky garments. Of course, in more severe climates, mountaineers can get very technical in choosing these layers. For example, they select one for next the skin, one or more for heat insulation, one for external protection and one for rain. If you wish to invest in these more expensive and coherent systems by all means do so. However, in the San Gabriels it is almost always adequate to choose more inexpensive layers. Thus I use tee shirt and underpants, a thicker upper layer for warmth (usually this is shed once I warm up and I end up carrying it in my pack) and a pair of shorts. Pants, whether long or short, should be roomy enough so that climbing movements are not

impaired. While cotton garments may suffice on a hot summer day, it may be wise to invest in “wicking” garments made of modern synthetic materials such as polyester and a warm polartec jacket. These not only dry much faster than cotton but they will also keep in the warmth even when wet. In addition I carry rain gear in the form of lightweight Goretex pants and jacket. This rain gear can also serve as emergency clothing should you encounter an unexpected drop in the temperature or have to spend the night in the mountains.

Some of the above choices need further comment in the context of adventure hiking. First, if you are susceptible to poison oak, you should recognize that it is not easy to completely avoid coming in contact with this plant at some point during adventure hiking. Thus you may be better off wearing long pants and long-sleeve shirts. Second, one’s outer clothing almost always takes a beating during adventure hikes, whether from pushing through undergrowth, sliding down loose scree or climbing over rocks. Consequently you should avoid expensive outer garments.

Several other items of clothing are almost essential for adventure hiking. First, for protection from the sun you should always wear a hat, preferably one with a brim that protects the eyes, face and neck from the strong sun in the San Gabriels. The hat, along with sunscreen and lip balm, becomes even more important at higher elevations and triply important if you are hiking through the snow. In this last case, good sunglasses are also essential for protection against snow blindness. Some people can also suffer sun blindness in the bright desert; for them, a hat and sunglasses are essential at all times in the San Gabriels.

For different but equally obvious reasons, a good pair of leather gardening gloves (preferably quite tight fitting) is essential for hand protection when bouldering, climbing steep earth slopes or pushing through undergrowth. I use leather rather than cloth gloves for protection against the many prickly plants in the San Gabriels. Leather gloves also provide good friction when clambering over rocks. Some even choose to use gloves while rope climbing or rappelling though this is not recommended.

Another essential purchase is a good pair of hiking boots with lug soles. I have two pairs. One pair is more flexible but not waterproof. The other is Goretex-lined but not so comfortable. I like the former when the hike involves a lot of climbing and/or wading and the latter for hiking in wet weather or in the snow. Under either pair, I utilize two layers of socks. Next to my skin, I wear a thin pair of polypropylene socks. These minimize the chafing or blistering of the skin. Outside these I wear a thick pair of woolen or polartec socks. This equipment is particularly crucial because comfort for your feet is essential to the enjoyment of hiking.

In addition, many of the canyon bottom hikes will require you to wade in the river and, for these outings, I recommend taking a spare pair of socks to change into when the wading is done. For such occasions, I do not use the waterproof boots; rather I wear an old pair that drain and dry more quickly. While you may choose to take an old pair of sneakers in order to keep your hiking boots dry, I do not recommend this because sneakers slip too easily on the rock. It is better to wade in your boots. Besides, in the warm climate of the San Gabriels



and with the warmth generated by hiking, your feet can dry out surprisingly quickly.

For wading (or swimming) through deep pools it is almost essential to bring along a “dry” bag in which to stow your entire pack, or at the very least your valuables. While a large plastic trash can liner might serve, it is also easily ripped. You can purchase very tough and light waterproof bags called “dry bags” in an outdoors store that caters to rafting and kayaking. When swimming, it is also convenient to employ the dry bag as a flotation device. I also suggest you take along a small towel (it has many uses) and spare tee shirt and shorts.

Of course, additional clothing and equipment may be needed if you intend to hike in the snow. Then crampons and an ice axe become essential. However, the hikes described herein are all intended to be tackled in good weather.

### **1.4.3 Backpack**

A sturdy day backpack in which to carry all your equipment is clearly essential. On adventure hikes, a backpack can take quite a bit of abuse as you plough through the bush, slide down slopes, haul the pack up steep slopes by rope or wade through deep pools. Consequently a strong and secure day pack is a must. Mine is roomy, has strong zips, contains two side pockets for water bottles and will float for a brief time without the contents getting wet. For really wet hikes, one can now purchase moderately priced waterproof backpacks that are very convenient.

It is a vital safety measure to keep the contents of your pack dry at all times. Therefore, within your backpack, it is a very good idea to store items or groups of items in sealable plastic bags. This not only provides protection against rain or river dunkings but also helps to keep your stuff organized. Moreover, an essential part of any plan to negotiate a deep pool, is to arrange safe passage for the packs. Many people get careless and allow their safety to be compromised by not ensuring dry passage for their packs. One method is to put your pack in a large, waterproof bag as described above.

On overnight hikes, it may be convenient to use a larger backpack. Then, internal frame packs are preferable to the external frame variety that can be very awkward to manage during climbing or scrambling for they tend to hang up more often on rocks and vegetation. The best idea is to travel as light as possible. Indeed, a large day pack with a strap-on sleeping bag maybe be better than either an internal or external frame pack for the overnighers described herein.

### **1.4.4 Essential and emergency equipment**

The following is a list of the essential and emergency equipment that I carry with me in addition to the clothing described above:

- Maps. Fold these so that the area you will be consulting is on the outside and then install them in separate, sealed plastic bags so that they can

be read without removing them. This not only protects the map against wear but is essential in the rain.

- A compass and binoculars. While the latter may not be essential, I have found a small, lightweight pair of binoculars to be very valuable in helping to identify distant features or discerning smaller objects like rappelling anchors.
- A pocketknife.
- A small, quality flashlight and a set of spare batteries. The head lamp variety is particularly convenient.
- A space blanket.
- Two butane lighters and some matches. Warmth is an important key to survival and the lighters, matches and space blanket are to preserve warmth. You should learn how to light a fire in the wilderness (see preceding section).
- In addition I carry the lightweight waterproof pants and jacket mentioned earlier not only for use in the event of rain but also as layers for additional warmth.
- Several packages of paper tissues. Please ensure that you bury your waste in a hole at least six inches deep and as far from a stream or creek bed as possible.
- An ace bandage (or athletic tape), several bandaids, neosporin ointment for bites or stings and ibuprofen for pain and muscle relaxant.
- A snake-bite kit with instructions.
- A leather thong for multiple uses including as a tourniquet.
- Sunscreen, lip balm and poison oak protection cream. These I carry in several clear plastic bags with airtight seals.
- Water and Food. It is essential to carry two or more quart-sized water bottles with good quality screw tops so that they do not leak after just a few uses. Despite the weight, I always start out with two full bottles, usually one filled with a quality sports drink and the other filled with plain water. On longer hikes, I notice a significant difference when I use the sports drink rather than plain water and so I recommend it strongly. In addition, I strongly recommend that you carry a light-weight water filter pump and use this rather than water treatment chemicals. The filter pumps now available at camping stores are very effective; in all my years of hiking I have never experienced any problems when I used a filter pump. Besides, the water in the San Gabriels is excellent and worth savoring.

To the beginner, these provisions for drinking may seem excessive. But the experienced hiker knows just how dangerous dehydration and/or hypothermia can be and knows that all of these precautions are essential. Conversely, food is not necessary as an emergency item. I always take a lunch and a snack but little more. You could survive for weeks on the roots and berries of the San Gabriels if it became necessary. Incidentally, it is not a bad idea to learn of some of the edible plants.

### **1.4.5 Other Useful Equipment**

In addition to the above, I carry a selection of other items that depend on the circumstances I expect to encounter:

Especially as you get older, a good hiking stick can be useful on many adventure hikes. It is particularly valuable as an aid in the many stream crossings that are a part of many of the adventure hikes described herein. It can also be useful in dealing with brush, as an aid in climbing or for dealing with snakes or other hazards.

Even for those without any formal training in rock climbing, I recommend purchasing some rudimentary climbing gear in order to fabricate some simple protection when climbing in places where a slip could mean a serious accident. Rather than a rope, I recommend for this purpose the 1in wide tubular webbing that you can buy in most sports shops. At about 30c per foot it is quite inexpensive and can therefore be left behind if necessary. Webbing is easier to grip than a rope and can be adapted for many purposes. I have several lengths (10ft, 30ft and 60ft) and I choose whichever piece seems most useful for a given hike. In addition, carabiners are useful and I carry several of these in my pack.

Some of the hikes described herein require both the training and equipment to allow you to rappel down cliffs of various heights, from 12ft upwards. You should not attempt these particular hikes unless you have obtained such training. However, it is fairly simple to learn to rappel and not as frightening as you might imagine. I learned some simple rock craft at the age of 53 and enjoyed it much more than I had imagined I would. The necessary equipment consists of a good quality climbing rope (at least 150ft and preferably 200ft long), a climbing harness, a rappelling device (ATC or figure eight design).

## **1.5 American Canyoneering Association Ratings**

Since most of the adventures described in this collection involve canyoneering and since it is valuable to provide as much information as possible on the technical difficulty of each adventure, an American Canyoneering Association (ACA) Rating is provided with each account. A description of these ratings can be found at the American Canyoneering Association website, specifically at the ACA Ratings System webpage or in Tom Jones' Canyoneering site under Ratings.

A rating begins with a number from 1 to 4 signifying the following:

1. **Canyon Hiking.** Non-technical; no rope required. May involve some easy scrambling requiring the occasional use of hands for balance and support.
2. **Basic Canyoneering.** Scrambling, easy vertical or near vertical climbing and/or down-climbing requiring frequent use of hands. Rope recommended for hand lines, belays, lowering packs and possible emergency use. Exit and/or retreat possible without ascending fixed ropes.
3. **Intermediate Canyoneering.** Exposed technical climbing. Down-climbing could be difficult and dangerous; most people will rappel instead. Rope required for belays and single-pitch rappels. Obvious natural or fixed anchors. Retreat up canyon will require ascending fixed ropes. Basic pot-hole escape techniques (i.e. partner assist, counter-weights) may also be required.
4. **Advanced Canyoneering.** Route may involve any combination of the following: 1) difficult and exposed free climbing and/or down-climbing, 2) climbing using direct aid, 3) multi-pitch rappels, 4) complex rope work (i.e. guided rappels, deviations, rebelayes), 5) obscure or indistinct natural anchors, 6) advanced problem-solving and anchor-building skills.

This is followed by a letter indicating how wet the hike may be:

- A. Normally dry or very little water. Dry falls. Water, if present, can be avoided and/or is very shallow. Shoes may get wet, but no wetsuit or drysuit required.
- B. Normally has water with no current or light current. Still pools. Falls normally dry or running at a trickle. Expect to do some deep wading and/or swimming. Wetsuit or drysuit may be required depending on water and air temperatures..
- C. Normally has water with strong current. Waterfalls. Expect to do some deep wading and/or swimming in current. Wetsuit or drysuit may be required depending on water and air temperatures.

Note that the water level in any canyon can fluctuate greatly from year-to-year, season-to-season, even day-to-day. If, upon arrival at a canyon, you discover the water volume/current is greater than indicated by the rating, descent will be more difficult. It will be necessary to reevaluate your decision to attempt the descent.

The third symbol, either the letter R or X, is optional and is used to designate unusual risks:

- R. Risky. One or more extraordinary risk factors exist that could complicate the descent. Solid technical skills and sound judgment critical. Not recommended for beginners.

- X.** Extreme. Multiple risk factors exist that will complicate the descent. Errors in technique or judgment will likely result in serious injury or death. Descent should only be attempted by expert canyoneers.

Note that the presence of an R or an X in a rating suggests that the canyon will involve higher than average risk. The absence of an R or an X does not suggest that there will be no risk. All canyoneering involves risk. Risk factors include number and frequency of rappels, length of rappels (single- or double-rope) and exposure, anchor availability, anchor quality, route finding, obstacles, problem-solving, terrain encountered between technical sections, flash flood potential, availability of exits and high ground, water temperature, prolonged immersion, and difficulty of evacuation or rescue.

The last alphanumeric symbol is a Roman numeral indicating the time duration of the hike:

- I.** Short. Normally requires only a couple of hours.  
**II.** Normally requires a half day.  
**III.** Normally requires most of a day.  
**IV.** Expected to take one long, full day. Get an early start. Bring a head lamp. Plan for possible bivy.  
**V.** Expected to take an average one and a half days.  
**VI.** Expected to take two or more days.

Note that time estimates are based on average group of 6 people or less. Larger groups and less experienced groups will take longer. An accurate self-assessment of your abilities will be important. For some users, it may be adequate to refer to time in terms of half day, full day or multi-day. Others may prefer a more specific estimate and choose to use the Roman Numeral Grade system common in traditional multi-pitch rock climbing.

Finally, I have followed the example of Tom Jones and added an expression of my own enjoyment of each of the hikes by attaching one, two or three stars:

- \*\*\* A classic. Really good.  
\*\* Pretty good, well worth doing.  
\* Has redeeming qualities.

Of course, there were many canyons that we dropped into with high hopes only to find little of interest to canyoneers. These are not included in this book.



## Chapter 2

# ARIZONA

This selection of adventure hikes in Arizona includes a cross-section of the variety of off-trail (and a few on-trail) experiences that can be enjoyed in this spectacular state. Two of the three descents to the Colorado River within the Grand Canyon are included (the third, the descent from Toroweap to Lava Falls, can be found in the chapter on the Arizona Strip). But this chapter also includes the ascent of two of Arizona's most dramatic monoliths, Weaver's Needle in the Superstitions and Courthouse Rock in the Eagletails. There are also several lovely, modest canyoneering descents including the famed Salome Jug. For further details and other adventures the reader is referred to Williams (2005) and Warren (1996).



Arizona region.

## 2.1 Havasu Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3 days
- Estimated hiking distance: 22 to 34 miles
- Elevation gain: 2710 to 3450 feet
- Map: Grand Canyon Hiking Map
- Difficulties: Heat in the summer
- Special equipment: Water filter
- ACA Rating: 1A VI

One of the most interesting and spectacular adventure hikes in the Grand Canyon is the classic descent through the Havasupai Indian Reservation to the tribal village of Supai and the beautiful blue-green river and waterfalls beyond. The hike begins where the road ends, at a parking area on the rim of the canyon called Hualapai Hilltop. From there the hike descends 8mi to the village; the first stage is a steep, switch backing descent into the bottom of Hualapai Canyon, followed by a dry and dusty but more gentle descent along the Hualapai Canyon wash. Just before the village, you join Havasu Canyon. The lovely river that flows in that canyon has created a verdant and riparian canyon bottom in sharp contrast to the earlier trail setting. From here on to the Colorado River, Havasu



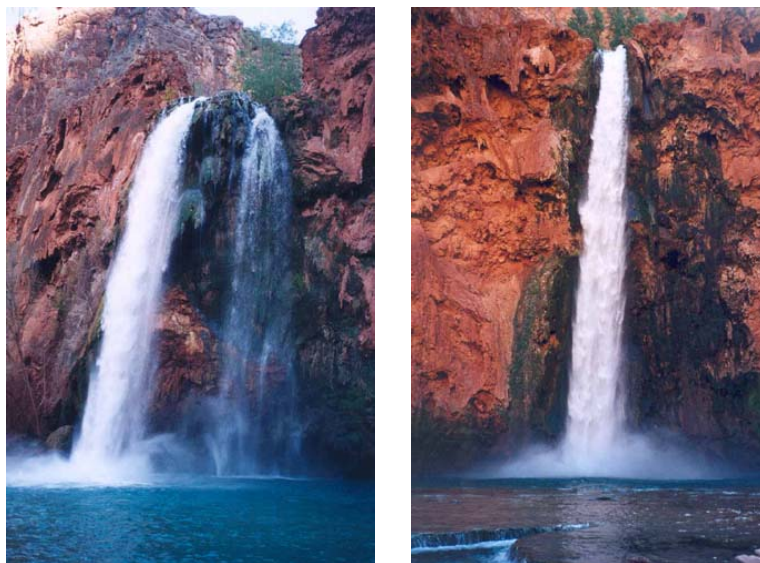
*View from Havasupai Hilltop.*



Canyon is beautiful, its sculpted red sandstone walls contrasting with the greenery in the canyon bottom and the blue-green waters of the lovely river that flows through it. Just beyond the village there are some of the loveliest waterfalls to be found anywhere in the world and the hike is worth it just for the opportunity to experience Navaho Falls, Havasu Falls, Mooney Falls and Beaver Falls.

But this hike has other marvelous facets for it provides a window into the proud and surviving culture of the Havasupai, the “people of the blue-green waters”. The village of Supai is home to about 450, the majority of the Havasupai people. They have lived in the Grand Canyon for many hundreds of years and the isolated community of Supai remains the center of their world. In ancient times during the spring and summer they would live in the canyon where they would tend to their gardens. In fall and winter they would move up to the plateau for hunting and gathering. When the US government created the Havasupai Indian Reservation in 1882, it confined the tribe to a tiny area around the village denying them their range lands on the plateau. Fortunately this was corrected in 1975 when Congress returned nearly two hundred thousand acres to the tribe forming the current Havasupai Indian Reservation. The Havasupai are also proud of their native tongue that was transcribed to written form about 1980.

The village of Supai is situated where Havasu Canyon briefly broadens and allows extensive farming. But the red walls of Supai Sandstone still tower over the village providing security and shelter. Two columns that protrude above the western wall are called Wii’iglivva and are considered male and female figures that protect the Havasupai people. The village itself is unique in the United States, being isolated and therefore insulated from the outside world. There are



*Left: Havasu Falls. Right: Mooney Falls.*

no motor vehicles, no gasoline fumes, no asphalt roads and very little concrete. The pace of life is gentle and rural; horses and dogs are everywhere. The wooden homes are spread out over the available land, individual plots being defined by trees and wooden and barbed wire fences. There are two small stores, a school, a church, a post office and a health clinic. Off to one side is a lodge for tourists though it is usually booked up for months ahead. One has the impression of a proud people who have had some success in maintaining their culture and way of life by partially isolating themselves from the outside world.

## Trailhead

From a junction on historic route US66 about 7 mi east of Peach Springs, Arizona, turn onto Indian State Secondary Road 18 and drive 62 mi north-east to the end of the road at the Hualapai Hilltop parking area (36°9.59'N 112°42.58'W). Note that there are no services anywhere along this road. It is however a good road across the mesa-top flatlands of the Havasupai Indian Reservation. Watch for the open range cattle and for the antelope that frequent these grasslands. Near the end the road drops down a little way before coming to the top of a sheer 1000ft cliff, the upper rim of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. Park here in the Hualapai Hilltop amidst the horses of the extensive pack station and beside the small heliport.

Before setting off, check to ensure that you have everything you need for a three day back packing trip. Some groceries and drinks are available in the Supai village store but you will need to bring everything else with you. Open fires are not permitted so you will need a stove if you plan to cook. The campground has a single treated water supply but few other amenities. Check the weather forecast before you set out since it may be unnecessary to bring a tent.

## Hike

From the end of the parking area (36°9.59'N 112°42.58'W and elevation 5200ft) the trail drops dramatically down the Coconino sandstone precipice via a series of switch backs cut into the cliff. After just 1 mi it has descended 1000ft to the dry wash in the bottom of Hualapai Canyon. For the next 5.5 mi the trail follows the gently sloping wash as the canyon drops down through the red layers of Supai sandstone. Several times you may hear the percussive sound of approaching hoof beats from the pack mule teams galloping downhill or trudging uphill. Then it is time to stand to the side and let them past. As the sculpted red walls grow the shade available increases, providing some comfortable rest stops under the overhangs. Near the end of Hualapai Canyon there are some small springs. Shortly thereafter at 3250ft, 6.5 mi and 2hr 20min from the hilltop, you come to the end of Hualapai Canyon at its junction with Havasu Canyon. Here the nature of the canyon bottom changes for just upstream of the confluence in Havasu Canyon, a gushing river emerges from the ground at Havasu Springs. This river irrigates the canyon bottom and allows a profusion of desert plants and trees. Please note that Havasu Springs, Havasu Canyon

upstream of the confluence and, indeed, all Havasupai land aside from the main trail described here is regarded as private by the Havasupai people and should not be trespassed upon.

Turning downstream beside the river, the trail from here on is in the welcome shade of willow, tamarisk and cottonwood trees. It is just 1.5mi from the confluence to the Havasupai village of Supai (elevation 3205ft) that you should reach 3hrs and 8mi from the hilltop trailhead. In the center of the village ( $36^{\circ}14.24'N$   $112^{\circ}41.36'W$ ) is a tourist office, right beside the small area that serves as the helicopter landing field. All campers must register at the tourist office (\$20 entrance fee and \$20 camping fee per person) where you can also get a hiking map and information on other services.

Having obtained your permit, you may then proceed on through the village following the trail as the canyon narrows again and begins to drop. Following the main path (there many braided paths) to the right of the river you will pass a place where there is a steep unstable bank with many warning signs. Here, off on the left side, you will see Navaho Falls through the trees. You can get closer to those pretty falls by working your way upstream from below. Shortly thereafter there is a sign to the Havasu Campground and the trail descends to and then crosses the river by two wooden bridges. Just beyond those bridges you will arrive at the top of the spectacular Havasu Falls ( $36^{\circ}15.31'N$   $112^{\circ}41.90'W$  and elevation 3010ft) about 40min and 2mi from the village. This magnificent waterfall plunges about 100ft into a crystal blue-green pool. It is a beautiful place that alone is worth the hike down from the hilltop. The trail descends steeply to the left of the falls and there is a trail to the edge of the pool where a swim is more than welcome on a hot day.



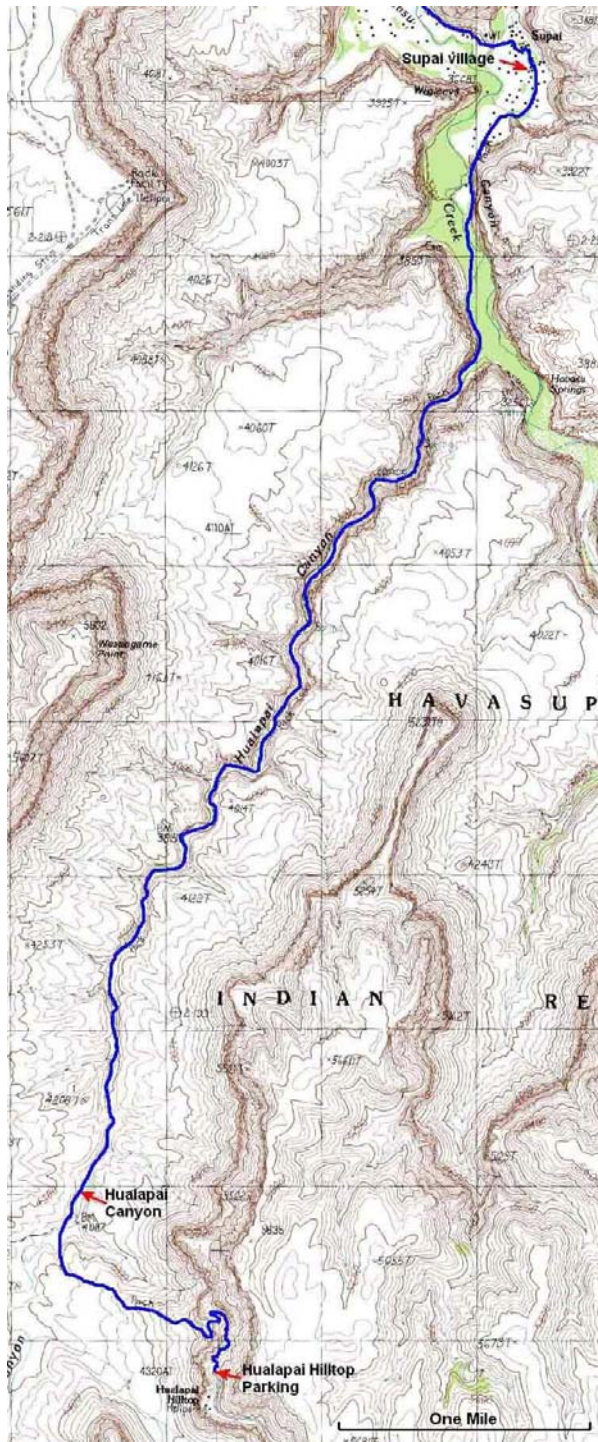
*Left: Descending beside Mooney Falls. Right: Beaver Falls.*

The campground (elevation 2840ft) is just downstream of Havasu Falls and consists of many well-shaded sites (tables) stretched out along both sides of the river in a narrow part of the canyon with towering red sandstone walls. Many of the sites lie along the stream banks. However there is only one purified water faucet along the west wall of the canyon and you should be careful to use only this; though the river appears clean it is downstream of the village and is probably unsafe to drink. It takes less than 4hrs to reach the campground from Hualapai Hilltop, a distance of 10mi.

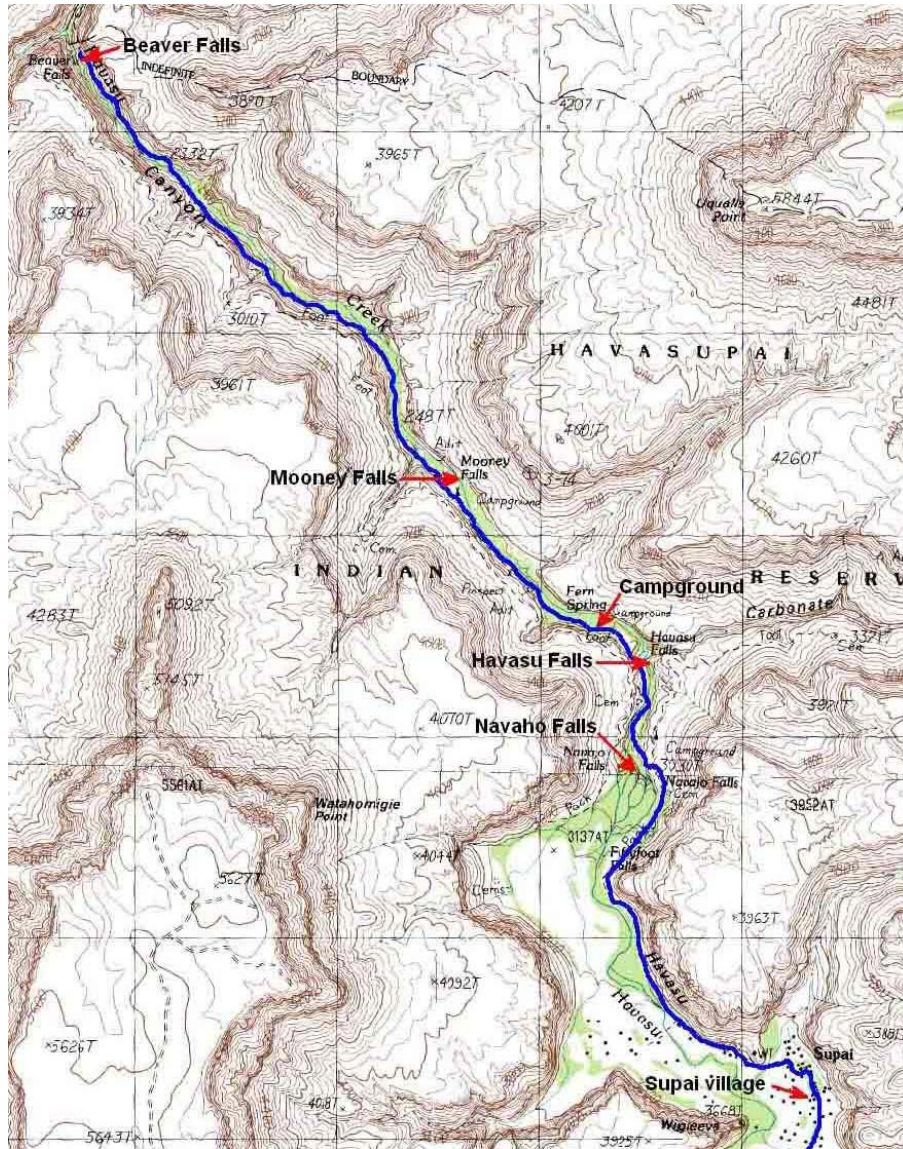
From the campground, there is a beautiful hike along the trail that continues downstream to Mooney Falls, Beaver Falls and, eventually, to the Colorado River. Decide for yourself how far you wish to go before turning around. From Havasu Falls it is 1mi through the drawn-out campground to the top of the awesome Mooney Falls, some 200ft of free-falling water plunging into another blue-green pool. The downclimb consists of several small tunnels and platforms cut from the travertine rock followed by steep steps and ladders with chains. Though straightforward, extra care must be taken when the rock is wet. At the bottom there is a marvelous view of the falls and the plunge pool.

From the bottom of Mooney Falls ( $36^{\circ}15.79'N$   $112^{\circ}42.56'W$  and elevation 2490ft, 30min from the Havasu Campground) the trail, now less used, follows along the left bank of the river as the vertical, red-walled canyon proceeds north on its way to the Colorado River. About 10min from Mooney Falls, you come to the first river crossing that is usually thigh-deep or less. Just a few minutes later you cross back to the left bank and then, just before Beaver Falls, you again cross to the right side. A very short distance beyond this third crossing the canyon becomes quite narrow and you must climb a short way up onto a bluff on the right side. On top of this bluff there are several augmented stone shelters in the cliff at ground level, whose purpose is unclear. Beaver Falls are below this bluff to the left but to get a good view of these smaller but very photogenic cascades you should find a steep down climbing route to a point just downstream of the falls. Note that Beaver Falls ( $36^{\circ}16.89'N$   $112^{\circ}43.79'W$  and elevation 2350ft) are 3mi and 1hr 30min downstream of Havasu Falls (or 13mi from Hualapai Hilltop). Note also that a large tributary, Beaver Canyon, joins Havasu Canyon just downstream of Beaver Falls. The author turned around at Beaver Falls but the trail continues another 4mi to the Colorado River at the Havasu Rapids ( $36^{\circ}18.47'N$   $112^{\circ}45.79'W$  and elevation 1750ft). From Beaver Falls it should take about 2hr to hike back up to the village and another 4hr to get back up to Hualapai Hilltop ( $36^{\circ}9.59'N$   $112^{\circ}42.58'W$ ). While it is possible to complete the hike comfortably in two days, most people will want to take three.



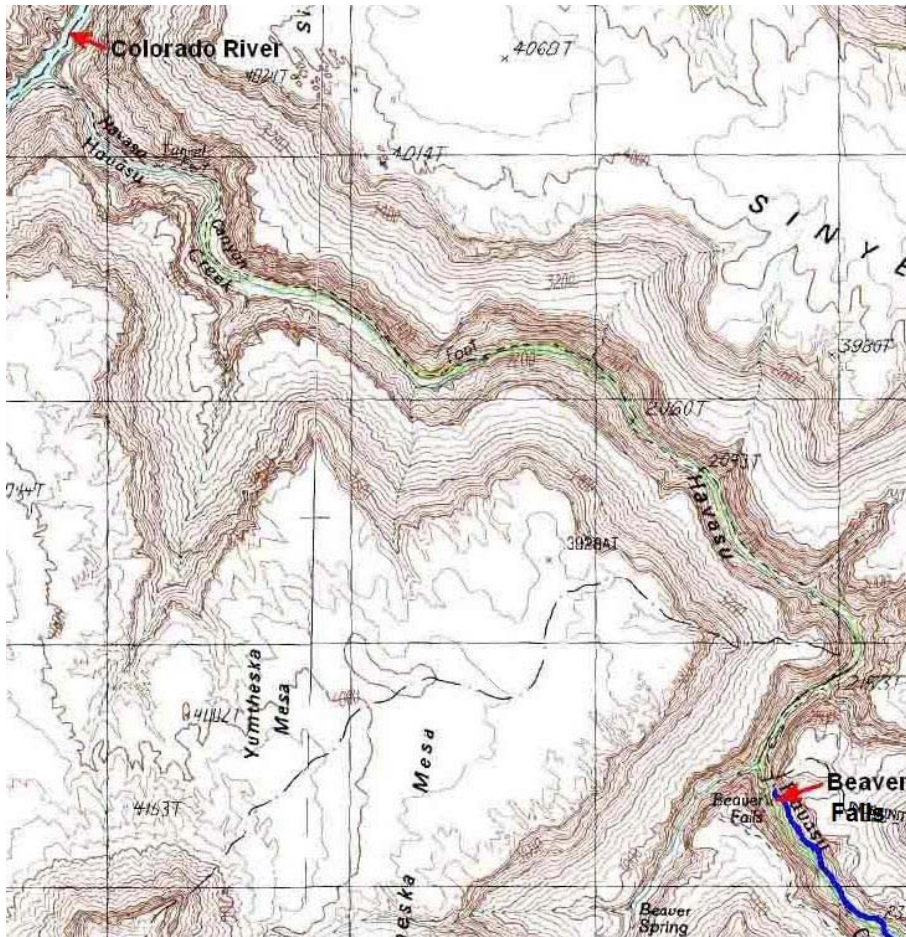


Map of first part of Havasu Canyon Hike



Map of second part of Havasu Canyon Hike





Map of Havasu Canyon Hike to the Colorado

## 2.2 Grand Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 8.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 16.7 miles
- Elevation gain: 4420 feet
- Map: Grand Canyon Hiking Map
- Difficulties: Large temperature differences between the rim and the river, high temperatures at the lower end of the Bright Angel Trail
- Special equipment: Extra water
- ACA Rating: 1A III

John Wesley Powell's transit of the Grand Canyon must rank as one of the greatest adventures of all time. His matter-of-fact diary is in stark contrast to the reality; perhaps inevitably for the Grand Canyon itself defies description. Powell's account also initiated the legend of the Grand Canyon that spread inevitably to all corners of the globe. Today, 130 years later, people come from all those corners to see for themselves the reality of this natural wonder. Most edge their way a short distance along the rim, both amazed and overwhelmed by the immensity of the sight before them. Their brains register tilt for nothing has prepared them for the scale of this deformity in the earth's surface. They stay to watch the changing colors and shadows as their eyes roam across this magnificent canvas. Some even venture a short way down the few trails that descend the great cliffs below. But to see the canyon from Powell's perspective you must embark on an adventure yourself. Though paltry by Powell's standard, it is still to this day a significant achievement to be able to stand in the Colorado River and look up at the magnificent cliffs reaching into the sky all around you. To get there you must either (1) travel by boat down miles of fierce rapids, (2) entrust your life to a mule and travel bumpily down trails with thousand foot drops just inches away or (3) hike the vertical mile down those same trails. In this account, the third alternative is described.

### Trailhead

The base for this hike is the well-developed National Park center at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in Arizona. There are two possible ways to schedule this hike into the canyon and back to the rim. It is quite possible to do this hike in one day provided you are very fit and provided you do not attempt it during the heat of the summer. If you do decide on this long day hike then it is not necessary to obtain a permit. However, the preferred schedule would be to



spend at least one night at the Bright Angel Campground near Phantom Ranch and this requires a reservation. To do so you should contact the Backcountry Office at the South Rim months in advance of the hike.

## Hike

The South Kaibab Trail was constructed by the National Park Service in 1924 to compete with the privately owned Bright Angel Trail because Ralph Cameron charged a \$1 toll for the latter. All the other trails down into the Canyon were located along the easiest routes and these were virtually all beside major creeks feeding the Colorado and those water courses had eroded substantial recesses in the canyon walls. As a consequences the views from these other trails, while still spectacular, tended to be restricted by the surrounding canyon walls. On the other hand the South Kaibab Trail was specifically constructed with hikers in mind and follows an open, lateral ridge line rather than a lateral valley. This, in itself, makes for a spectacular trail and its views are gloriously panoramic. The builders did have to build another bridge over the Colorado at the bottom of the trail and this was a major undertaking. For this bridge, eight 550 feet long, 2320 pound steel cables, 1.5 inches in diameter, had to be carried down the almost-completed trail. This considerable feat was accomplished by 42 Havasupai Indians each of whom therefore hefted 50 pounds of cable down 6.3mi of tortuous and precipitous trail. Thus did the cables creep down into the canyon like great, squirming centipedes.

A regular bus service runs from the South Rim Village to the South Kaibab Trailhead (elevation 7260ft). From that trailhead you almost literally drop over the rim. The first phase descends the very steep upper wall of the canyon by means of a spectacular series of switch backs cut into a recess in the otherwise unnegotiable cliff. At the bottom of the rim cliff you then emerge onto a talus slope and the trail contours along this slope to the apex of the South Kaibab ridge below Yaki Point. For most of the descent from this point to the Tonto



*Left: Start of South Kaibab Trail. Right: O'Neill Butte from Cedar Ridge.*

Plateau, the trail follows Cedar Ridge and allows access to frequent sensational panoramas sometimes to the west, sometimes to the east. Shortly after gaining the apex of the ridge and 40min from the trailhead, you arrive at the Cedar Ridge Resthouse with its magnificent views, 1.5mi down the trail at an elevation of 6320ft.

Continuing on, the trail proceeds around the east side of O'Neill Butte, descends to a flat-top mesa and then drops off the end of the mesa down through a quite dramatic chute. Below this it reaches down to the Tonto Plateau where there is another rest house at the intersection of the South Kaibab Trail and the Tonto Trail (elevation 4000ft). A few yards beyond that junction, the trail plunges off the edge of the Tonto Plateau at a place appropriately named the Tipoff (4.4mi from the trailhead). Suddenly, dramatic and precipitous views of the Colorado open up as the trail snakes down the steep walls of the Inner Gorge toward the river. The rock changes from the red and white sandstone of the upper cliffs to the black and green colors of the Vishnu Schist. This change is called the Great Unconformity, a name that would be pretentious anywhere else but in the Grand Canyon. Finally, 6.3mi and 3hr from the rim, you arrive at the bottom of the Grand Canyon where the river elevation is 2480ft. Just short of the river, you will come to a trail fork; the left trail proceeds west along the precipitous south bank (cliff) of the river. Take the right fork that leads, via a short tunnel, to the Kaibab or "Black" Suspension Bridge. Crossing the bridge you then pass Boat Beach just downstream on the north shore. This is a good place to rest and to wade in the Colorado River. However, the water is usually much too cold for swimming even when the air temperature is sweltering. But the river is magnificent, fast and powerful. It was hard to see how one could possibly cross it safely without some sort of boat.



*South Kaibab Suspension Bridge.*

When you resume hiking, it is only about 0.4mi to Bright Angel Campground perched on a narrow strip of land along the west bank of Bright Angel Creek just above the point where it empties into the Colorado. Another 0.5mi up Bright Angel Creek brings you to Phantom Ranch, 6.9mi from the South Kaibab Trailhead. The Ranch has a number of cabins available for rent (about \$63 per night in 1999) though these are booked many months in advance. It also has dormitory bunk beds at \$23 per night. It is a pretty and serene little place amid the relatively luxurious foliage of Bright Angel Creek. If you can find a way to rent a room or bunk here it would avoid the need to carry a full pack down into and then up out of the Canyon.

The return trip begins when you make your way down Bright Angel Creek to the Silver Suspension Bridge over the Colorado River. Interestingly this second bridge serves another purpose besides allowing hikers to cross the river. It also carries the high pressure water pipeline that supplies the South Rim with water from a spring source to the north. This pipeline is routed through Indian Gardens where the pumping station is close to the Bright Angel Trail.

After crossing the Silver Suspension Bridge, follow the River Trail westwards along the south side of the Colorado River. This section is unpleasantly sandy until it begins climbing a steep bluff where the river makes a left turn. Turning the corner the trail descends again to the small, rocky beach where the Bright Angel Trail meets the Colorado, 2.1mi and 1hr from Phantom Ranch. Here the trail enters a small narrow canyon and begins the long ascent back to the rim on the historic Bright Angel Trail.

The upper part of the Bright Angel Trail was originally used by the Havasupai Indians to commute between the rim and Indian Gardens. Prospectors, looking for gold, improved the trail at the end of the last century. Then one en-



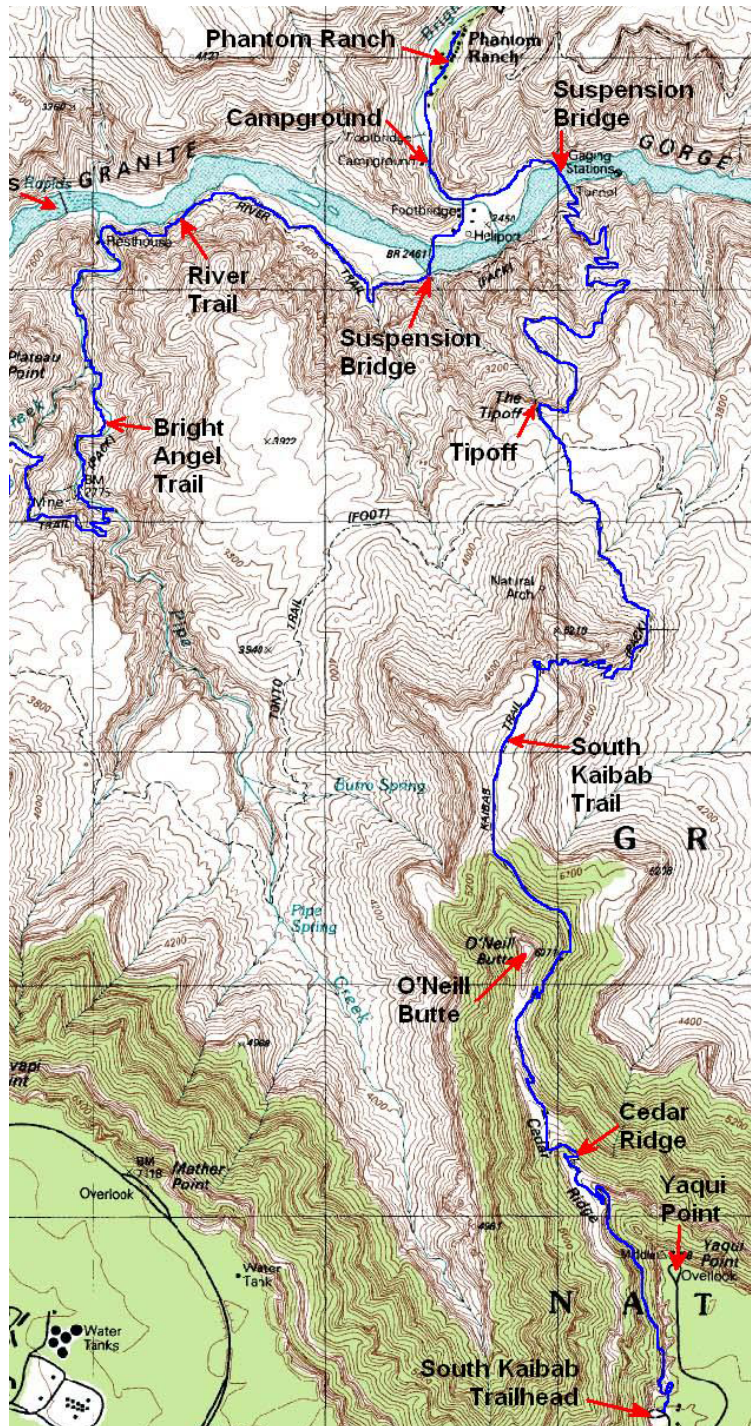
*Top of Bright Angel Trail.*

terprising prospector, Ralph Cameron, realizing that there was more money to be made from the tourist trade than from mining, bought out his companion's interests in the trail and set up a toll booth, charging sightseers \$1 to venture down below the rim. He also extended the trail to the Colorado. It was only after a long battle with Cameron that the National Park Service took over the trail in 1928.

Leaving the River Resthouse, elevation 2400ft, the Bright Angel Trail first winds its way gently up the pleasant canyon of Pipe Creek. After about half a mile you pass a pretty, mossy waterfall on the right wall and shortly thereafter, the trail leaves the creek bed and climbs up the steep right wall of the canyon using a series of switchbacks known as the Devil's Corkscrew. The name refers to the fact that this is usually the hottest segment of the trail with temperatures in the summer that often reach 130 degrees. The black rock of the Vishnu Schist mercilessly absorbs the sun and bakes the air. Even on a March day it was close to 90 degrees. However the trail soon emerges from the Devil's Corkscrew and transitions into the next canyon through which Garden Creek runs. As you make this transition, the lovely sounds of flowing water float down to you and soon you can soak your head in the water of Garden Creek under the shade of willow trees. The next section is much more pleasant as the trail winds its way up through the Tapeats Narrows, the canyon of Garden Creek, finally (at an elevation of about 3800ft) emerging from the Inner Gorge onto the Tonto Plateau. From the trail you may see hikers on the Plateau Point trail over to your right. Soon you will also begin to encounter the trees and bushes of Indian Garden and, 1hr 35min after leaving the Colorado, you will arrive at that busy and attractive oasis.

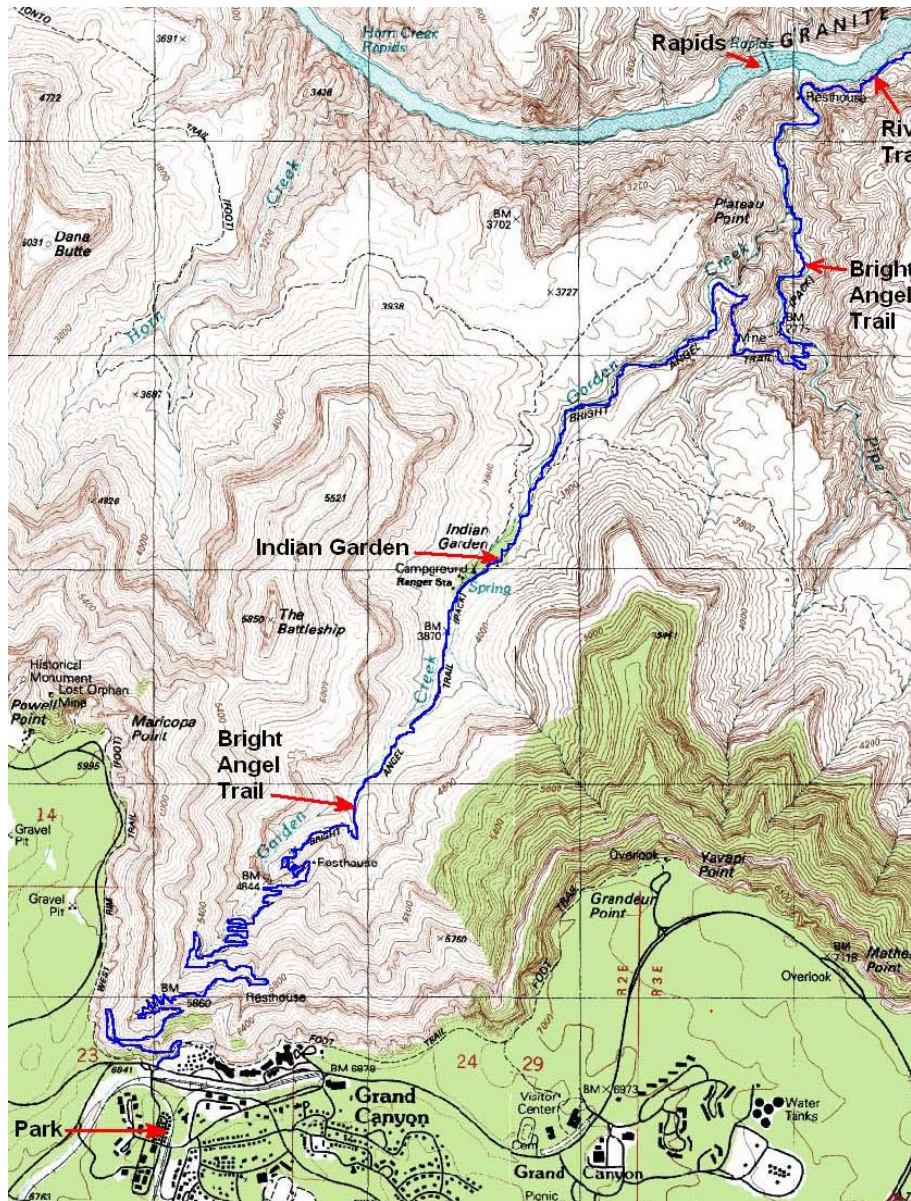
The focus of life at Indian Garden is, of course, the water fountain with its multiple spigots where you should drink your fill and replenish your water bottles. The benches surrounding the water fountain are a very popular rest area. Above Indian Garden, the trail initially proceeds into the head of the canyon until it seems almost directly below the rim. It then begins a long series of switchbacks as it climbs the increasingly steep wall below the rim. This section is known as Jacob's Ladder and involves a long and arduous climb. There are two self-explanatory rest houses along the way. An hour out of Indian Garden you arrive at Three-mile Resthouse (elevation 4720ft), perched on an outcropping with one of the better views from the Bright Angel Trail. Beyond Three-mile Resthouse, the trail has been cut into the cliff, the natural slope being close to vertical. One-and-a-half-mile Resthouse (elevation 5720ft) sits on a rock slope and presages the last 1000ft up a natural break in the cliff wall. The Bright Angel Trailhead comes into view at the end of a long switchback just below the rim (elevation 6860ft). The total distance from the river to Bright Angel Trailhead is 7.7mi and the climb can be accomplished in about 4.5hr (5.5hr of hiking from Phantom Ranch) plus whatever length of extended stop you choose to take at Indian Garden.





Map of first part of Grand Canyon Hike





Map of second part of Grand Canyon Hike

## 2.3 West Fork of Oak Creek

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 13 hours (full descent)
- Estimated hiking distance: 12 miles (full descent)
- Elevation gain: Minimal
- USGS Topo Map: Wilson Mountain, Dutton Hill, Munds Park
- Difficulties: About 6 swims and extensive wading, some bushwhacking
- Special equipment: Neoprene wetsuit except perhaps in high summer; water filter
- ACA Rating: 1B IV (full descent)

Sedona with its majestic rock monuments and red cliffs is a popular tourist destination south of Flagstaff, Arizona. Between those two cities a two-lane road winds its way through the spectacular Oak Creek gorge, some thousand feet deep with red and white rock walls, a beautiful river and a forested canyon floor. This is high desert country some 5000-6000ft above sea level and so substantially cooler than the lower, parched deserts to the south. About halfway along the highway route through the gorge, another great canyon joins from the west, the West Fork of Oak Creek. Only a walking trail penetrates this canyon and then only for a few miles. Here we describe two adventures in the West Fork.

The first is an easy adventure that takes you up into the canyon from the bottom, hiking first along the trail up the West Fork. The trail ends after about 3mi; you can then explore the gorge beyond the end of the trail to the extent of the time and energy available. Moreover, this easy hike is recommended for any time of the year. In the summer, the elevation and the shade from the high canyon walls moderate the heat and allow wading in places where the alternatives are difficult. In winter, snow may add another tinge of beauty to the canyon but also freeze the river making passage more difficult in places.

The second is a demanding descent of the entire length of the West Fork that requires a fairly long car shuttle through Flagstaff. Though non-technical this descent traverses some rugged canyon bottom with a number of swims and innumerable wades. Because of this immersion it is recommended for the summer only. In winter, snow banks in the higher reaches make passage difficult and when frozen the deep pools can be dangerous.

### Trailhead

Parking at the end of the West Fork of Oak Creek is at the regulated West Fork Trailhead (34°59.44'N 111°44.57'W) about 11mi north of Sedona beside

Highway 89A in Oak Creek Canyon. At the time of writing the parking fee is \$5.00, and you should make sure to go with correct change for the parking lot is only attended part of the time. Inform the parking attendant when leaving a vehicle overnight for the full descent hike and he/she will mark your parking sticker appropriately. Note also that the parking lot has a gate that, reputedly, is locked at 8pm. This places a significant constraint on the timing of the full descent hike.

If embarking on the full descent, then after depositing the recovery vehicle, drive north to Flagstaff on Highway 89A which joins Interstate 17 for the last couple of miles. Crossing Interstate 40, continue on Highway 89A North and drive about 1.5mi through a fast food and motel area of Flagstaff to the intersection with Route 66. Turn left onto Route 66 and drive about 1.8mi out of town to the left turn onto Woody Mountain Road. For reference check your odometer here; it is 18mi from here to the trailhead in the West Fork of Oak Creek. The road crosses back over Interstate 40 (no ramps) and, shortly thereafter, becomes Forest Road FR231, a well-graded dirt road. Basically you proceed straight on the dirt road all the way to the West Fork though the surface becomes a little rougher further along. There are one or two places where you might take the wrong fork but the main route is always straight on and obvious and there are occasional small FR231 signs to reassure you. After 6mi you come to Rogers Lake and pass around its south shore. After 14.5mi you begin a gradually descent into the Cassner Cabin Draw valley, crossing the stream via a narrow concrete bridge at 15.5mi. A sign identifies Cassner Cabin Draw. The road then climbs out of Cassner Cabin Draw and immediately begins a descent into the drainage of The West Fork of Oak Creek, which it crosses by means of a concrete bridge after 18mi. There are small pullouts before and after the bridge in which to park your vehicle (35°2.01'N 111°51.35'W). To get an early start the next morning, it is a good idea to camp here the night before; there is a broad flat area beside the stream and just below the bridge. Here signs warn of the lack of any trail downstream.

## **Out and Back Hike from the Bottom**

From the trailhead (elevation 5300ft) follow the indicated West Fork trail that proceeds southward and soon crosses to the west bank of Oak Creek itself via a footbridge. After another 0.2mi you come to the ruins of a homestead at the junction of Oak Creek and its West Fork. The homestead was constructed by Mayhew Lodge around the end of the 19th century but has been long abandoned. The ruins include the outline and chimneys of the main house, some outbuildings and a smokehouse(?) made from a cave in the wall of the canyon. Turning right here the trail enters the West Fork of Oak Creek with towering walls of red and white rock on both sides. The red rock lower down is Coconino sandstone and the higher white rock is Kaibab limestone.

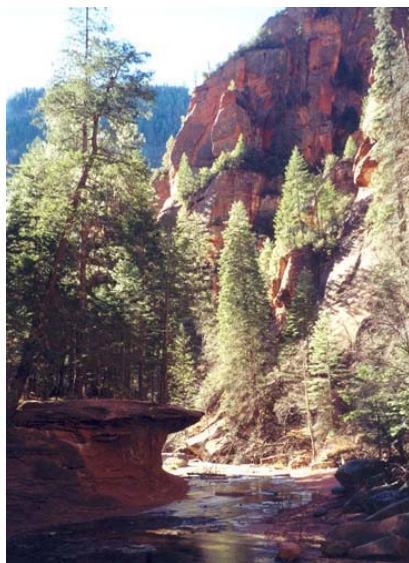
This is a very popular and well traveled trail with a beautiful year-round stream that has carved a rounded channel in the soft red rock. In places the channel has substantial overhang on one or both sides and resembles the subway-



like channel found elsewhere in the southwest, notably in Zion National Park. The canyon floor is heavily wooded with Ponderosa pines and Douglas firs making for one beautiful scene after another as you follow the trail upstream. I did this hike just after Christmas when patches of snow remained from the last storm, the river was frozen in many places and icicles hung from the canyon walls. The trail is well worn and easily followed but with many stream crossings. Except after rain, the stepping stones at these crossings allow dry passage though a hiking stick would be useful.

About 50min from the start you pass the 1.5mi marker (elevation 5340ft) and about 45min later the trail climbs onto a high bench on the left side of the canyon to bypass a channel filled with water. The trail ends when it drops down again to a boulder strewn canyon floor at a point about 3mi and 1hr 40min from the start of the hike. Here the subway-like channel is filled from wall to wall with the stream. To progress further in the summer it is necessary to wade about 50yds upstream to where one can again find dry passage to one or other side of the stream. It would be useful to bring sandals and a small towel to make this passage comfortably. In the winter, the pool may be frozen over making passage difficult.

Upstream of the subway narrows, the channel continues narrow and spectacular with huge red-rock bluffs on both sides. There are many overhangs some creating caves that would make great camping sites except that camping is prohibited within six miles of the trailhead. The stream itself continues to be shallow and gentle though there are some deep pools along the way. Though there is only a faint use-trail, the going is easy and fast thanks in part to the flat red-rock stream bed. About 4.5mi and 2.5hr from the start, a large canyon



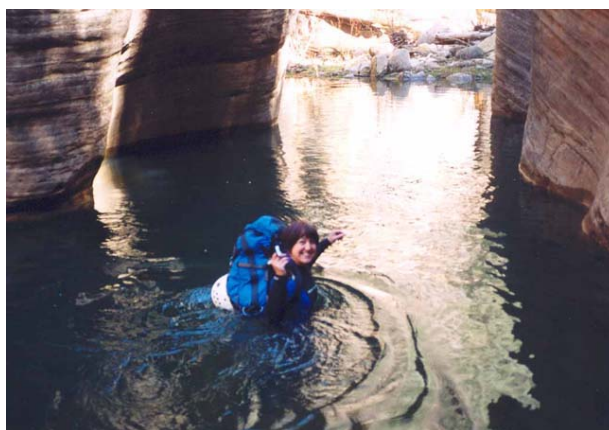
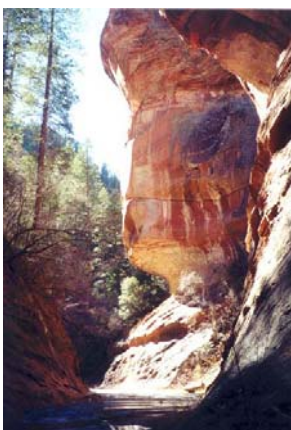
*Left: About a mile up the West Fork. Right: In the upper West Fork.*

enters from the south. Turn around when time and energy suggest it.

## Through Hike

We now shift to a description of the through-hike starting at the roadside stop described earlier. Just downstream of the FR231 bridge over the West Fork ( $35^{\circ}2.01'N$   $111^{\circ}51.35'W$ , elevation 6500ft), there is a use-trail alongside the stream but this soon peters out as the valley deepens and the brush increases. This upper part of the canyon is pleasant though not spectacular. It is slow going. After 1hr 40 min and 1.5mi you come to a junction ( $35^{\circ}1.30'N$   $111^{\circ}50.35'W$ , elevation 5930ft) with a large canyon entering on the right that adds significantly to the stream flow. However, the going here remains slow and it takes another 90min to come to the next large canyon junction where Cassner Cabin Draw comes in on the left at  $35^{\circ}1.48'N$   $111^{\circ}49.79'W$  and 5800ft. Just before this junction you will encounter the first of many narrows that comprised two thigh-deep wades during our descent. You should reach the Cassner Cabin Draw junction about 2.4mi from the start after 3hr of hiking.

The toughest part of this adventure lies just beyond the Cassner Cabin Draw junction where there are a series of narrows each with its own wet challenge. Since these hurdles change with time and with the season this account can only give a rough idea of their character. Just 20min beyond Cassner Cabin Draw, there is a narrows with a chest deep wade and shortly thereafter you come to the first swim. This is a good place to don your neoprene, probably essential except during the height of summer. The first swim is only about 20yds; the second follows shortly and is longer (about 40yds) and blind though it can also be bypassed via a slot on the left. Three more substantial wades follow quickly. Then, about 4hr 40min from the start at an elevation of 5700ft you come to a longer swim/wade through a narrow straight slot about 60yds long. Then the going eases and there are no narrows for a substantial time.



*Left: Just before the last subway. Right: The first swim.*

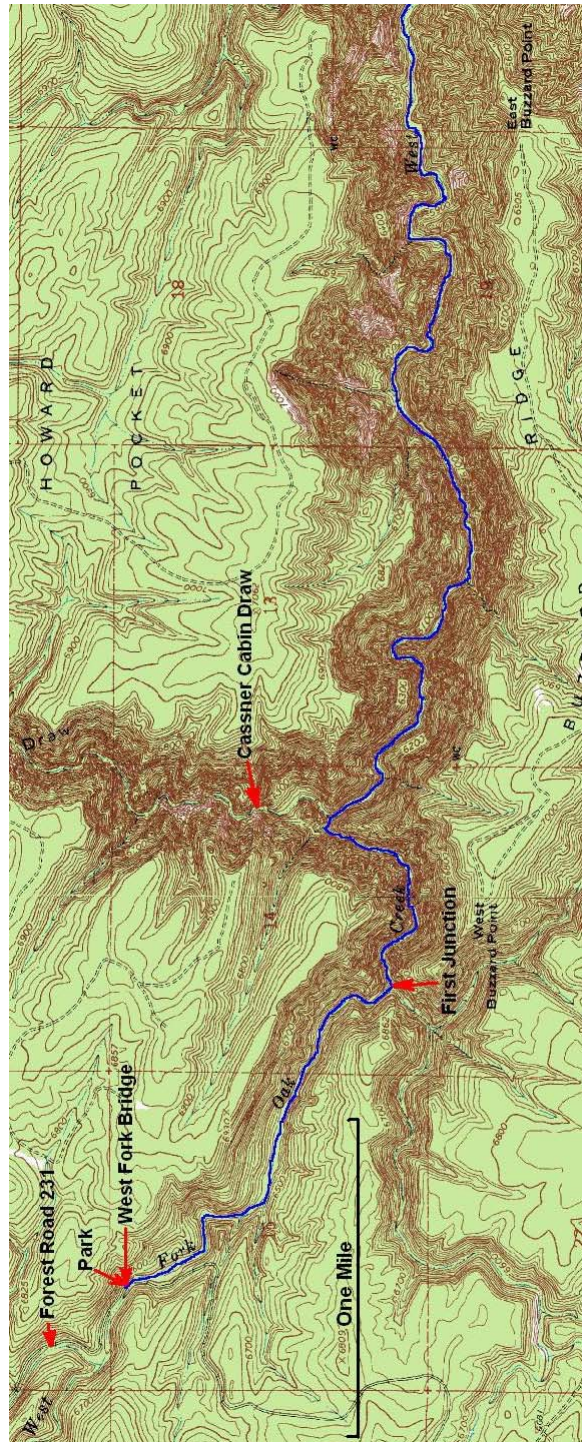
You are now deep within the confines of Oak Creek Canyon with high, rugged walls all around. It is hard to know exactly where you are on the topo map but there is little need for the way is clear. Then, unexpectedly, at 5600ft and roughly 7hrs from the start, the canyon narrows again and you encounter a 100yds long, narrow, water-filled slot whose end cannot be seen from the start. In the summer, you might enjoy this swim. However, there is also a sketchy, high bypass trail on the right that descends to the dry downstream bottom via a steep gully. Below this point there are so many wades that one stops counting for often the easiest route is in the stream. However, the going gets easier and faster for there is relatively little bushwhacking and frequently the flat bedrock provides for fast passage. Several small canyons enter on the left. Then at 5440ft and 9hrs 20min and 6.8mi from the morning start, you arrive at the junction with Barney Spring Canyon ( $35^{\circ}0.76'N$   $111^{\circ}46.94'W$ ) entering on the right. The West Fork is now a spectacular gorge with great red and white sandstone walls, convoluted and dotted with greenery. The stream bed itself often runs in channels reminiscent of redstone subways and sometimes with undercuts on both sides. Hopefully you started this hike early enough and with enough reserves to enjoy this remarkable place.

Just when it seems as though the swimming is far behind you, you will arrive 10hrs 20min from the start at an awkward, short narrows with a deep slot on the right and a shallow shelf on the left. Trouble is that shelf was so slippery when we came through that we ended up having to swim. About 1hr later and 11hrs 20min from the start, you will come to a lovely long subway with a shallow wade. Curving to the left, this brings you to the start of the established trail that climbs up onto a bluff on the right for easier passage. The trail crosses the river perhaps 8 to 10 times but provides very easy hiking as described earlier. We reached the carpark ( $34^{\circ}59.44'N$   $111^{\circ}44.57'W$  and an elevation of 5300ft) about 13hrs after the morning start having covered 12mi of rough but spectacular canyon.



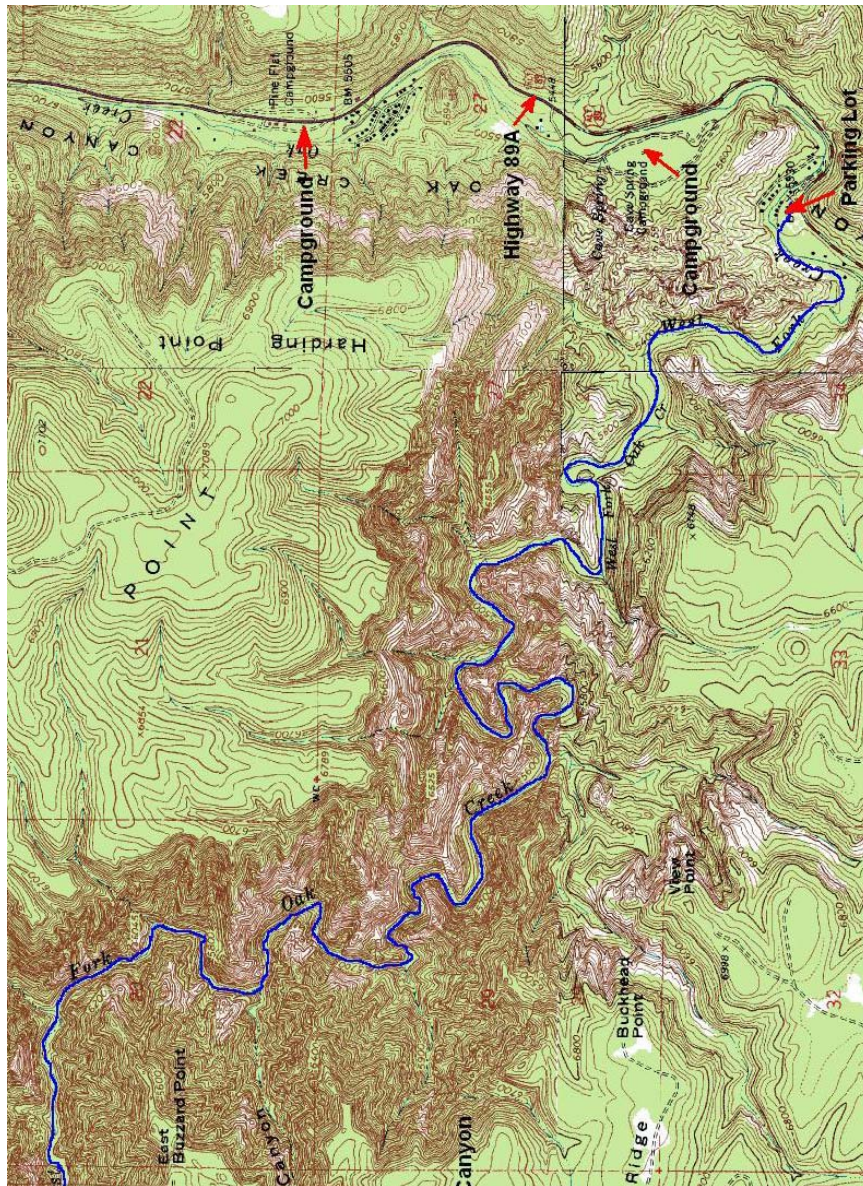
*Left: The second, optional swim. Right: The 60yd swim/wade.*





Map of first part of West Fork of Oak Creek Hike





Map of second part of West Fork of Oak Creek Hike

## 2.4 James Canyon and Pumphouse Wash

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.5 miles
- Elevation gain: None
- USGS Topo Map: Mountaineer
- Difficulties: Two rappels of 20ft and 40ft and a number of swims, one 70yd long
- Special equipment: Rappeling equipment, 100ft rope, 30ft webbing, 2 rappel rings, dry bag, wicking clothing and a warm jacket for downstream of the swims
- ACA Rating: 3B III

About 15mi south of Flagstaff, Arizona, the rolling and forested high mesa is cut through by a network of canyons that deepen and combine to form the magnificent 1000ft gorge known as Oak Creek Canyon. This empties out to lower elevations just north of Sedona, Arizona, where the red and white sandstone cliffs and bluffs that the water force has created culminate in the spectacular vistas that make Sedona such a tourist attraction. This adventure explores one of the principal canyons at the headwaters of Oak Creek Canyon. Starting on the high mesa the route descends through James Canyon to where it empties into Pumphouse Wash and then follows the latter down to the head of Oak Creek Canyon.

The route descends through various layers of sandstone each of which produces its own sculpted canyon scenery adorned with lovely pine forest. There are two modest rappels of 20ft and 40ft, the former being the more difficult because of the swimming disconnect. More challenging are the many deep pools that must be swum, one about 70yds long. These require a dry bag that can also be used as a flotation device. Note that the length and number of swims will vary with the time of year and the recent weather. I recommend you do this hike in mid-summer though, even then, the pools are cold. Bring a warm jacket to wear after the swims.

### Trailhead

This adventure requires a car shuttle. To deposit the return vehicle drive about 14mi south from Flagstaff, Arizona, on Highway 89A. At the bottom of the switch backs that descend into Oak Creek Canyon, leave the return vehicle close to the small bridge over Pumphouse Wash (35°1.51'N 111°44.14'W). Parking

here is very limited and you should note that a Red Rock Parking Pass is needed to park anywhere along the side of Highway 89A in Oak Creek Canyon. Parking Passes can be obtained at a number of small markets in the canyon.

Having parked the return vehicle, drive north again on Highway 89A, pass the Oak Creek Canyon Scenic Overlook on the east side of the road and, 1.2mi north of the Overlook, turn right onto Forest Road FR237 at  $35^{\circ}3.27'N$   $111^{\circ}43.97'W$ . This good dirt road winds through the forest for about 4.5mi and meets Interstate 17 at exit 333 where there is a Union 76 gas station and food mart. Then drive south on Interstate 17 for 2.7mi and leave the Interstate again at Exit 331, the Kelly Canyon Road offramp. Park by the side of the asphalt offramp ( $35^{\circ}3.13'N$   $111^{\circ}41.05'W$  and an elevation of 6750ft).

## Hike

A barbed wire fence parallels Interstate 17 just down a short slope from the offramp. The hike to the drop-in to James Canyon proceeds south along a rough dirt road on the far or west side of that fence; the road soon veers west. You may choose to drive down this rough dirt road for about 0.5mi and park in the forest. In either case, turn left off the dirt road after about 0.5mi and hike south following any one of several small drainages that soon drop down ( $35^{\circ}2.72'N$   $111^{\circ}41.21'W$ ) into James Canyon. You should reach the shallow canyon bottom (elevation 6500ft) about 30min from the start.

In its upper reaches James Canyon is a lovely pine-forested glen in which the stream cuts through the Coconino sandstone layer via a series of small waterfalls, each of which has a large deep pool at its base. You encounter



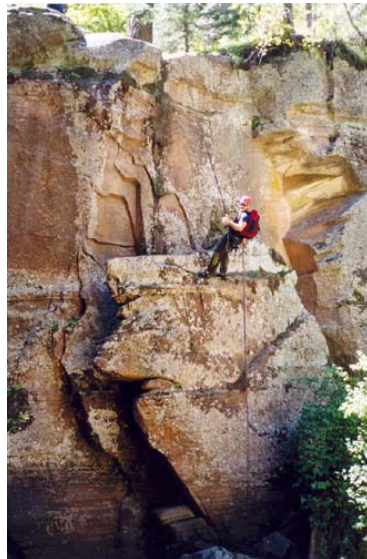
*Left: Keyhole Falls from below. Right: One of many James Canyon swims.*



the first of these waterfalls after just 5min of hiking in the canyon. A 10ft drop through a narrow rock gate leads to a large deep pool that would require swimming. However, this first hurdle is easily bypassed using a use-trail on the right that climbs briefly and then descends again to the stream bed downstream of the pool. Another 30min of hiking brings you to the first technical obstacle, the complicated Keyhole Falls (35°3.00'N 111°42.28'W). Using a combination of wraps around a log and a large rock, you rappel down about 20ft into a small but deep and cold pool where a swimming disconnect is needed. Often there are logs floating in this pool and these add to the difficulties. However, it is only a few yards across the pool to a sandstone lip that leads to a 4ft drop into a small circular pool contained in a gateway between narrow sandstone walls. Descend into this 4ft deep pool and climb onto the lip at the far side where a second 6ft drop leads into a large, wide pool. A 25yd swim across this pool takes you to the broad shore downstream of the obstacle at an elevation of 6350ft; you should reach this point 1hr 20min from the start.

More deep pools follow. About 20min downstream of Keyhole Falls there is a deep wade through a narrow pool in a slot and, 30min later, you encounter a section I call the Twisted Narrows where the watercourse weaves back and forth between narrow rock walls. Here there are two small down climbs each measuring about 6ft in height and each followed by a small but deep pool that must be swum. Then the going eases for a while allowing you to enjoy the loveliness of this verdant canyon and the contrast between the greenery and the bright sandstone outcroppings.

Approximately 1hr downstream of the Twisted Narrows, you arrive at the top of the last technical obstacle in this hike, a vertical 40ft drop down a cliff



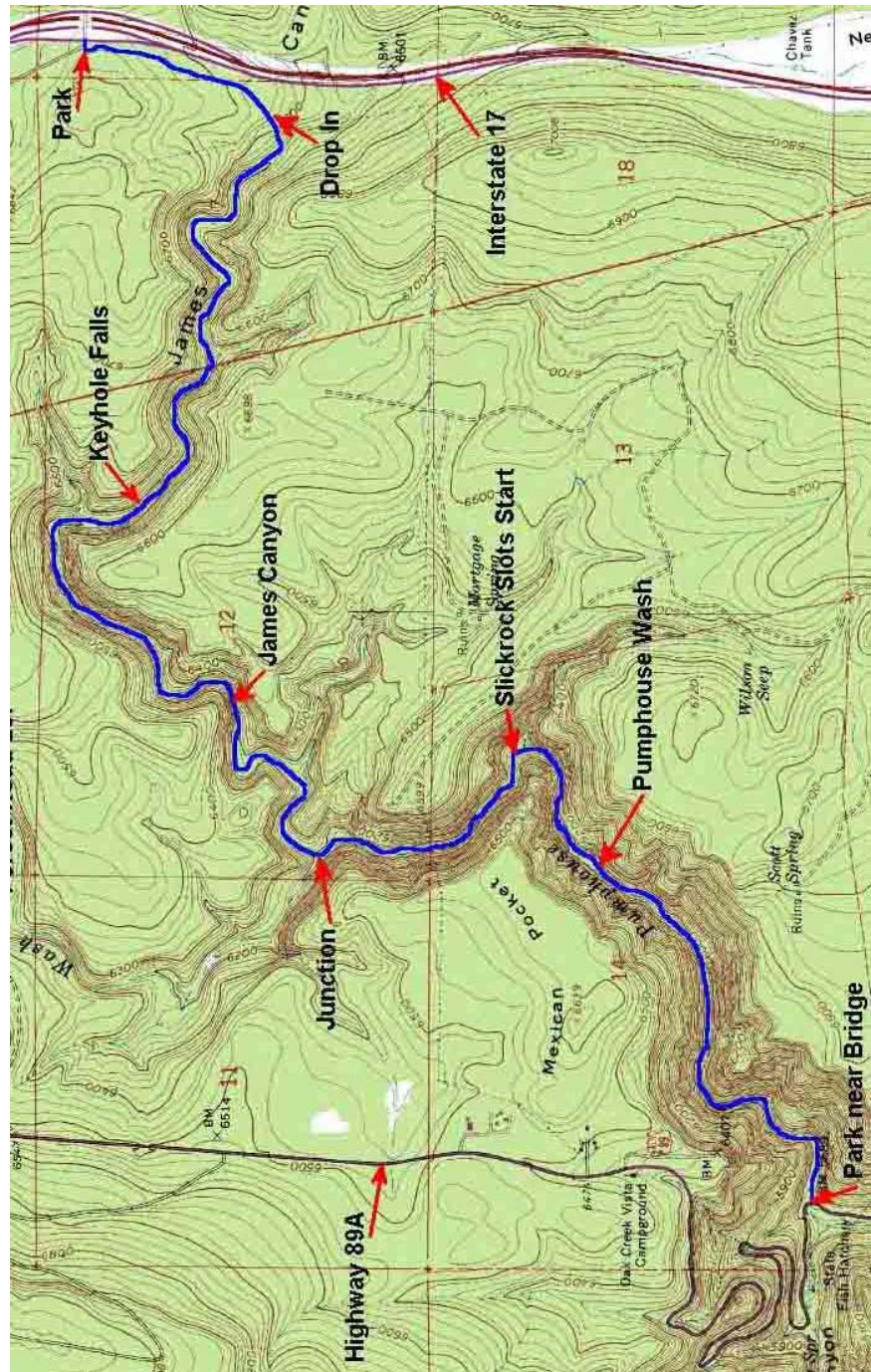
*Left: James Canyon 40ft rappel. Right: Pumphouse Wash.*



beside a large rockbound pool. You should reach this point about 3hr 20min after starting out. The anchor for the rappel is a large tree on the left side and this leads to a dry landing on the left bank of the pool. Downstream of the 40ft rappel the canyon deepens and narrows significantly. After about 1hr, you encounter a most unusual obstacle, a long 8ft wide slot between towering vertical walls. It is about 70yds long, filled with deep, cold water and involves a long and tiring swim. A short distance down canyon there is a shorter swim through another rock-walled gate. Beyond this James Canyon broadens and mellows and you hike the normally dry stream bed all the way to the end where it joins Pumphouse Wash. You should reach this junction (elevation 6090ft) about 5.5hr from the trailhead having covered 3.3mi mostly through James Canyon.

The junction of James Canyon and Pumphouse Wash ( $35^{\circ}2.60'N$   $111^{\circ}43.22'W$ ) is a wide boulder-strewn flat and the next 0.5mi of Pumphouse is quite broad and meandery. You encounter a number of large pools, all of which are easily bypassed. Then, about 50min below the junction, the Wash descends to a sandstone layer and the bed becomes sculpted slickrock, fun to walk on ( $35^{\circ}2.16'N$   $111^{\circ}42.94'W$ ). Here there are lovely swimming holes, one called The Rectangle because of its regular shape. Then the Wash makes a sweeping right turn and you encounter the first of a number of deep slots where the stream has cut into the sandstone bed in the otherwise broad bottom of the Wash. Do not descend into these slots unless you feel adventurous. In all cases it is possible to bypass the slot and the pools it contains by using the ledges on the left side. These ledges lead to easy downclimbs beyond the slots and pools. Some of those pools make for excellent swimming on a hot day.

Gradually the larger canyon narrows, the inner slots disappear and you must negotiate your way through the boulder fields that comprise the canyon bottom for the last mile or so. In one or two places the walls close in to a width of about 15ft and in those narrows there may be pools that must be swum, or, at the very least, waded. Nearing the end you will begin to hear the vehicles in Oak Creek Canyon and shortly thereafter the road bridge that crosses Pumphouse Wash comes into view. Climb up to the road via the use-trail on the left. You should reach this terminus ( $35^{\circ}1.51'N$   $111^{\circ}44.14'W$  and elevation 5680ft) roughly 7.5hr after the morning start having traversed 2.8mi of James Canyon, 2.2mi of Pumphouse Wash, and a total distance of 5.5mi.



Map of James Canyon and Pumphouse Wash Hike

## 2.5 Courthouse Rock

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 9.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 2 miles
- Elevation gain: 1300 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Eagletail Mountains East
- Difficulties: Six pitches of technical rock climbing with a few 5.5 moves; poor rock quality in places
- Special equipment: Climbing harnesses, shoes and helmets, two 200ft ropes, two sets of cams with nuts, slings, quickdraws, carabiners and some webbing
- ACA Rating: 4A III

As you drive west from Phoenix, Arizona, across the vast flat desert that stretches away into the distance beyond the valley of the sun, there is little to distract your attention from the ribbon of human intervention along which you are traveling. In the summer, the sun bakes everything into the triple digits and only the crazy would venture off the road.

About 70mi west of Phoenix a range of low but rugged mountains rises out of the desert to the south of Interstate 10. These are the Eagletail Mountains, named for the bare granite pinnacles that resemble bird's feathers. On the near side of this range a stark monolith of rock, huge and sheer-sided, rises majestically out of the desert floor and demands your attention. This is Courthouse Rock, a 2874ft guardian that is an irresistible magnet for climbers during the winter when the temperatures are moderate. This adventure tackles that 1300ft climbing challenge. It is a six pitch ascent with a rating of 5.5. The reward is a spectacular view from the very top of the legendary Courthouse Rock.

Winter is the best time for this adventure. To get an early start, it is wise to camp the night before at one of the trailheads close to the Rock. You can camp almost anywhere in this desert.

### Trailhead

About 65mi west of Phoenix, Arizona, leave Interstate 10 at Exit 81, marked Salome Road and Harquahala Valley Road. Follow the paved Harquahala Valley Road south (it travels west for a short way, paralleling the Interstate, before turning south) for 5.0mi and then turn right onto the marked Courthouse Rock Road whose road sign also reads Centennial Road. Go due west for 7.0mi on the good dirt road heading directly for the rock itself. Then veer right and drive

in a WNW direction along a rougher but still 2WD road that parallels a buried gas pipeline. Courthouse Rock now looms high overhead on the left and from the road you should examine the broad northeastern aspect of the monolith. The peak itself is on the right; near the left end you should be able to identify a deep dark gully that reaches all the way up to the long left hand shoulder of the rock.

Three rough approach roads (high clearance) turn left off the gas pipeline road and provide fairly convenient access to the Rock. From the point where you veered right at the end of Centennial Road, drive 2.1mi along the gas pipeline road where you will encounter a lone pole. The first of the three approach roads, and the one that takes you closest to the climb, turns off to the left at a point ( $33^{\circ}28.82'N$   $113^{\circ}19.34'W$ ) that is 0.4mi beyond the lone pole. It is 2.3mi along this first approach road to the wilderness boundary where you should park ( $33^{\circ}27.62'N$   $113^{\circ}20.93'W$ ). Respectively another 0.6mi and 1.6mi further along the gas pipeline road or 3.1mi and 4.1 from the end of Centennial Road are the second and third approach roads. The third has a sign indicating access to the Eagletail Mountain Wilderness Area and is probably the most reliable of the three approaches; it is 1.5mi along it to the Ben Avery Trailhead entrance to the Eagletail Wilderness. However it involves a longer hike to the climbing route.

## Hike

From the parking area at the end of the first approach road ( $33^{\circ}27.62'N$   $113^{\circ}20.93'W$  and elevation 1570ft) hike across the flat and open desert terrain toward the scree slope below the dark gully at the far left of the east face of the Rock. The hike to the bottom of the scree slope only takes about 15min. (From

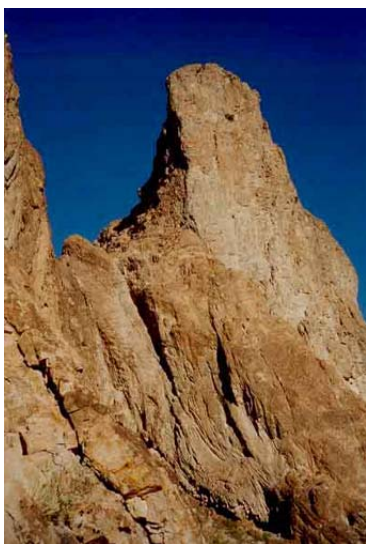


*Courthouse Rock in early morning (photo by Mark Duttweiler).*



the Ben Avery Trailhead the hike around the north side of the Rock is about 25min.) Then a brief climb up the scree using a worn use-trail brings you into the depths of the gully about 30min into the hike. The top of the scree slope ( $33^{\circ}27.72'N$   $113^{\circ}21.46'W$  and elevation 1910ft) is where the climbing begins. The left wall in the gully is huge and vertical. The right side is broken with a number of ridges running directly up the broad gully.

Some of the anchor stations or belay points along the standard route are easy to find but others are not. Awkwardly, the anchors for the first pitch are not easily found unless you start up the right ridge. It is the second longitudinal ridge to the right of the stream bed by about 20ft; it is also the ridge that appears easiest to climb. Climb about 50ft up along the left side of the arete and then transition about 6ft right onto the arete itself where there is one slightly awkward move (5.3) just below a bolted belay station in a wall to your left. It is probably best to bypass this station, to proceed up an easy gully and then climb left onto a prominent outcropping where there is a second belay station on a big ledge about 170ft from the start. The second, short pitch proceeds left along a ledge and climbs a short chimney in the stream course to a broad, recessed platform in the main stream bed of the gully. The belay station is on a ledge above the streambed on the right. This easy (5.2) second pitch is only about 50ft. The third pitch is also easy (5.2) and climbs about 160ft directly up the watercourse. It begins at about 2020ft and you should reach this point after 1hr of climbing. A jog to the right and a traverse back left take you to the broad recessed ledge at the top of the third pitch where there is a bolted belay station.



*Left: Summit block from the scree slope. Right: Leading the fifth pitch.*

At this point the gully widens considerably and there is a more formidable climbing challenge ahead. The fourth pitch (5.5) proceeds up the center of the rock wall for about 160ft. There is a partially bolted route to the left of the center; this includes one key bolt (in the middle of a blackened face and visible from the bottom of the pitch) just below the crux in which the move is back to the right and up to the top of the pitch. Some recommend climbing to the key bolt, hooking in, descending about 10ft and then swinging over to the right where there are more features. However, our preferred alternative is to climb straight up the center about 12ft to the right of the bolts. The climbing there is much easier; the problem is in finding a way to install adequate protection over the central part of the climb. Nearing the top there are several ledges and cracks that allow for more comfortable climbing. The top of this 160ft fourth pitch (at 5.5 the most difficult pitch on the ascent) is a bolted anchor station on a small but secure ledge. You should reach this 2230ft elevation about 3hr after the morning start.

The fifth pitch (5.2) proceeds up a more gently sloping and flat rock face to a bolted belay station just below the shoulder ridge of Courthouse Rock. A nice dihedral crack provides protection for the first 25ft. Beyond this secure anchor points are hard to find but it is easy friction climbing straight up about 120ft to the bolted anchor station at the top of the great gully. You should reach this point after 3.5hr of climbing.

Here it is wise to change out of climbing shoes and into hiking footwear. Climbing to the ridge-top, you hike north for about 0.25mi along the broad top of the shoulder, descending a little to pass to the right of and around the bottom of a rock mass that rises from the middle of the shoulder. Between that rock mass and the prominent summit block off to the right, is a steep gully. As you pass around the bottom of the rock mass, veer left and enter that broad hard rock gully. Climb up the stream bed to a point close to the top of the gully,



*Left: On the fifth pitch in the great gully. Right: Summit block from the ridge saddle with the author at the side of the summit (photo by Mark Duttweiler).*

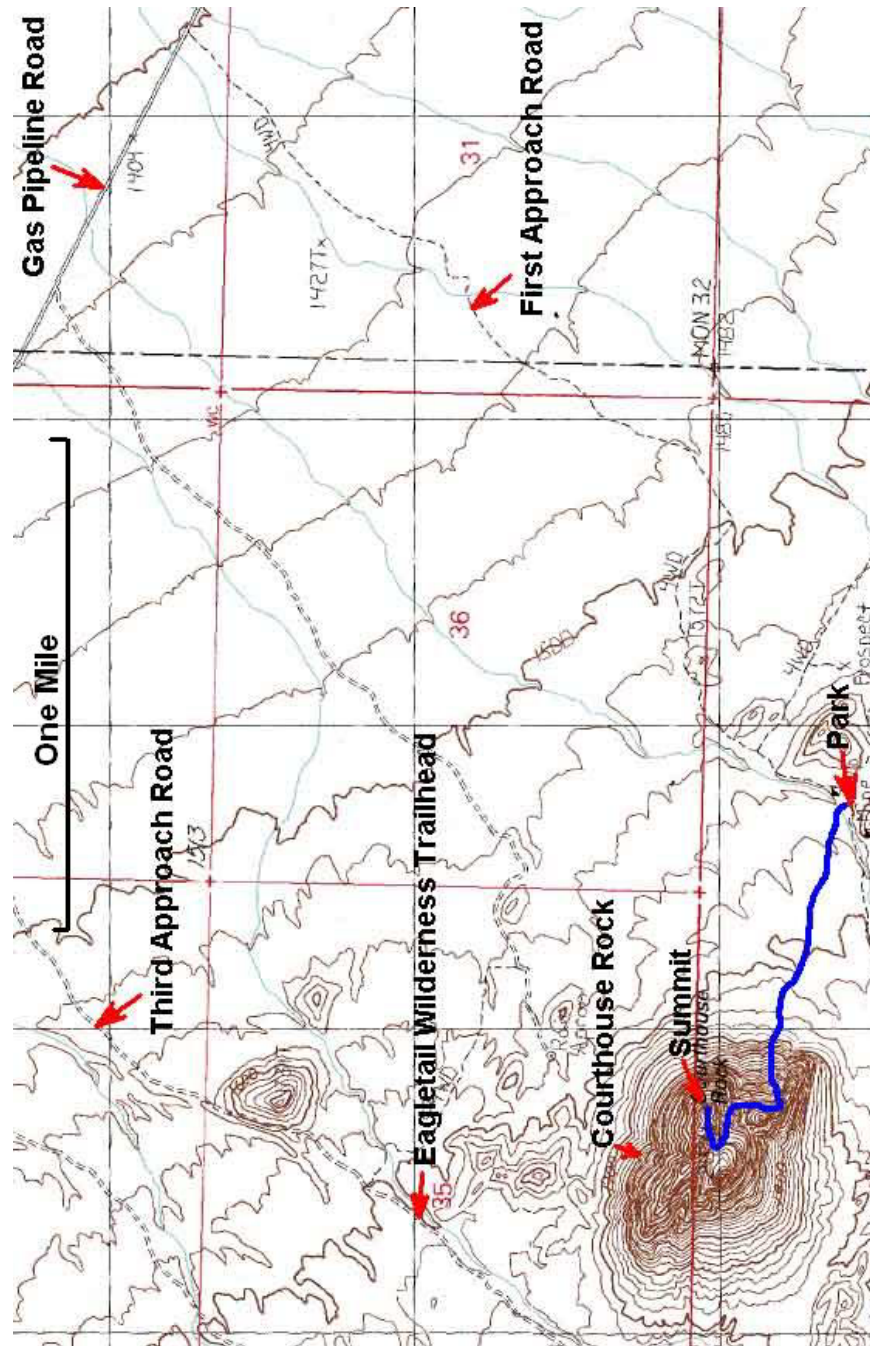
while carefully noting the features of the summit block wall on your right. One final pitch of roped climbing will take you to the top of this wall but careful navigation is needed to locate that pitch. As you near the top of the gully, look carefully for a series of class 3 ledges, the first of which traverses back to the right from near the top of the gully. A second switches back to the left for a short way and the third, back to the right, accesses a broad platform at the base of a prominent dihedral with a squeeze chimney behind it to the right. (An old rappel webbing wrap around the base of a large rock on this platform may help confirm that you are in the right place.) The chimney is the start of the last roped pitch (40ft, 5.4). Climb up the chimney to a recessed platform with a single bolt, and continue up on a small arete above the recess. A small ledge leads to a place where there is an exposed and awkward boulder step-around to the right. The three bolt belay station is just above this step-around.

It is just a few steps from the belay station to a broad and shallow saddle that leads to the summit block. Leaving your equipment at this saddle, climb directly up the rocky apex of the summit block (class 4) to a false summit. Then descend a short way to the left in order to walk around a spectacular slit in the summit block. The short trail to the cairn at the top is obvious. You should reach the 2874ft summit (33°27.86'N 113°21.65'W) about 5hr 20min after the morning start.

The view from the summit is truly spectacular. Off to the southeast you can see the distinctive Eagletail pinnacles; the range of that name skirts around to the south. In other directions the seemingly endless desert is strewn with random rocky peaks and small mountain ranges. To the north the ribbon of Interstate 10 seems in constant motion. Closer at hand and thousands of feet below, the vehicles parked at the Eagletail Wilderness Trailhead (off to the NNW) seem tiny. Even more dramatic sights are visible to the south and west if you venture to the south edge of the summit platform. From there you can trace your ascent up the five-pitch gully, across the shoulder, up the hard rock gully and the sixth pitch to the summit ridge.

The descent follows the same route except at the sixth pitch, where you can rappel about 190ft (including about 50ft of free rappel) from the belay station at the top of the sixth roped pitch to the ledge just above the hard rock gully. Hiking back to the five-pitch gully, you follow the ascent route on the top three rappels measuring about 120ft, 160ft and 160ft. The penultimate rappel (50ft) begins and ends at the end points of the second ascent pitch but takes a straighter line while the last rappel (170ft) proceeds down over the front of the prominent platform rather than following the ascent route that came up on the left. Perhaps the trickiest rope pull is at this last rappel where the bolts are at the back of the platform; the last rappeler needs to be careful not to lay the ropes down in one of several notches that can trap a knot.

You should reach the bottom of the great gully about 9hr after the morning start. The hike back to the vehicles should only take about 25min.



Map of Courthouse Rock Hike



## 2.6 Flatiron Plus

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5 miles
- Elevation gain: 2930 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Goldfield
- Difficulties: Some small free climbs, some route finding
- Special equipment: None
- ACA Rating: 1A III

As you head east from Phoenix across the desert flats of the valley of the sun, a great massif looms up ahead of you, like an ocean liner in a sandy sea. These are the Superstition Mountains, rugged peaks of water- and wind-sculpted rock, a land of steep cliffs and deep canyons. The face that the Superstitions present as you drive toward them is one of huge, seemingly insurmountable cliffs topped by a labyrinth of pinnacles. One particular summit juts out from the massif like the prow of a great ocean liner. This is Flatiron, one of the few summits to have its own name. It looks impossible to reach the flat top of that landmark. But this hike takes you up that imposing face of the Superstitions to the top of Flatiron and, if you wish to the higher summit just behind it. From that summit there is a magnificent view of the desert to the west and of the Superstitions to the east.

This hike is best for March or April when the wild flowers are in bloom and the heat is moderate. It is also good during the rest of the fall, winter or spring but best avoided during the heat of summer. Also avoid climbing during or shortly after rain when the rock can be slick. I recommend starting early in the morning (6am to 7am is good) so that you can accomplish most of the climb while still in the shadow of the mountains.

### Trailhead

From Phoenix follow Highway 60 east for about 40mi to Idaho Road in Apache Junction. Go north on SR88 (Idaho Road) for about 3mi where you turn right following the Apache Trail. About 5mi past the turn look for the signs for the Lost Dutchman State Park. Turn right into the park, pay the \$5 entrance fee and follow the signs for the Siphon Draw trailhead (33°27.22'N 111°28.81'W). Park at the trailhead.

## Hike

From the trailhead ( $33^{\circ}27.22'N$   $111^{\circ}28.81'W$  and elevation 2090ft), follow the Siphon Draw Trail as it rises first gently and, later, more steeply on a relatively straight course southeast toward a wide gap in the frontal cliffs of the Superstition massif. The well-worn trail contours into the Siphon Draw valley and climbs into the Superstitions along the left side of the canyon. Now unmaintained, the rough trail eventually reaches the stream bed at the bottom of a bare rock gully or basin ( $33^{\circ}26.48'N$   $111^{\circ}27.58'W$ ) at an elevation of 3100ft, 1.6mi and 50min from the start.

This is where the casual hiker turns around. Just a few yards into this rock-walled basin, there is a vertical, 40ft dryfall on the left. To bypass the dryfall, climb the sloping rock to the right and continue to follow the use-trail straight up the steep slope to a crest overlooking the stream bed above the dryfall. You should reach this 3360ft crest about 1hr 10min from the start. Take time here to survey the scene on the other side of the crest. Above you to the left are the steep, unbroken cliffs of Flatiron, whose prow-shape is unmistakable. Two steep gullies ascend to the saddle to the left of Flatiron, the right-hand gully being the ascent route. A well-used trail contours across from the crest into that gully.

It is a long, steep climb up the bed of the gully to the saddle high overhead. Follow the white dots up the bed and avoid the temptation to climb out of the gully on any of the small trails that seem to climb to the right. Though steep and long, this part of the hike is straightforward. However, near the top, there are several places where a little careful climbing is needed, particularly just before the top where there is an easy 12ft vertical step. The top of the gully ( $33^{\circ}26.31'N$   $111^{\circ}27.05'W$  and elevation 4540ft) is just a short distance below a



*Siphon Draw with Flatiron overhead.*

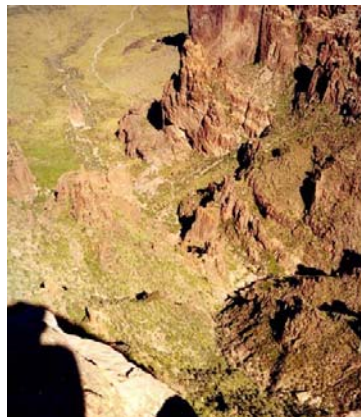
broad saddle and you should reach this point 2hr 10min from the start.

From the top of the gully, an easy level trail turns sharp right and contours across to the top of Flatiron. You should reach the apex of the “prow” at  $33^{\circ}26.27'N$   $111^{\circ}27.26'W$  and elevation 4640ft just 5min later. It is a 2.5mi hike from the trailhead to this point and well worth the effort for the view to the west is spectacular. Peering over the edge you can see the trail winding up Siphon Draw far below you.

Those who have had enough at this point should return the way they came. The return hike to the trailhead should take about 2hrs. However, an even more spectacular view awaits those who are willing to do a little more climbing. When you look back in an easterly direction from the prow of Flatiron, you will see two nearby pinnacled summits above your present elevation. The left-hand summit is the higher, indeed at 5024ft it is the highest peak in the vicinity. We are bound for that summit.

After returning to the top of the gully, hike the short way up to the broad saddle ( $33^{\circ}26.31'N$   $111^{\circ}27.02'W$  and elevation 4700ft) between the two clusters of pinnacles. At the saddle, note the opening in the higher globular rock mass to your left. You should be able to find the use-trail that climbs into this opening, negotiating several small climbs before reaching a saddle in the middle of the rock mass. From the saddle an opening in the rock gives you a preview of the marvelous view you will enjoy at the summit. From the saddle, proceed up to the right following a use-trail just to the right of a ridge. The route climbs rocks in places but, by following the ducks, you can reach the summit with only modest difficulty. It should not take more than 30min to reach the 5024ft summit ( $33^{\circ}26.36'N$   $111^{\circ}26.92'W$ ) from the top of the gully.

The view from the summit is expansive and spectacular. Five miles due east you can see the twin towers of Weaver’s Needle and further south but nearer, the highest peak in the range, the 5057ft Superstition Mountain. If you come in the spring, you will be surrounded by beautiful desert flowers and flowering

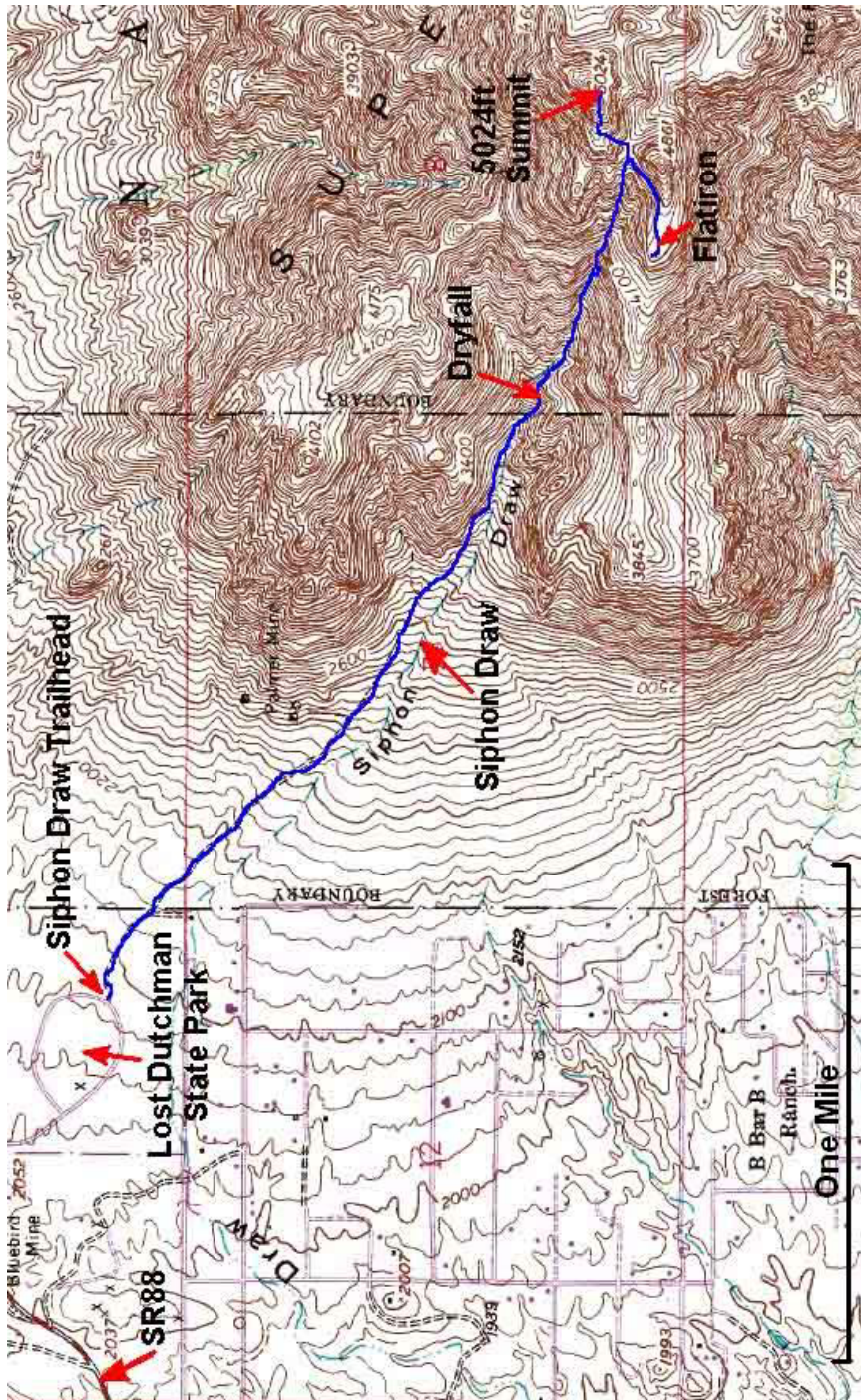


*Left: The basin. Right: View of Siphon Draw from Flatiron.*

cacti. It is a place to drink in the beauty of the desert and bless those who have preserved this wilderness.

When you must leave, retrace your steps down to the broad saddle and from there down the long steep gully. It should take just over 2hr to descend from the summit to the trailhead.





Map of Flatiron Hike

## 2.7 Fish Creek Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 8.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 300 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Weavers Needle, Horse Mesa Dam
- Difficulties: Some bouldering, modest down climbing and wading; some route finding
- Special equipment: Gaiters and gloves
- ACA Rating: 2A III

The Superstition Mountains, 40mi east of Phoenix, Arizona, are a mix of grand desert scenery, tortured canyons and rugged peaks, all spiced with Indian legends and tales of lost gold mines. Fish Creek flows through one of the most spectacular desert canyons in these Superstitions on its way north to join the great Salt River. About five miles before this confluence, Fish Creek Canyon widens briefly and there the rugged dirt road known as the Apache Trail descends to the bottom, crosses Fish Creek and proceeds east on its way through the Superstitions. Thus the Apache Trail facilitates access to this marvelous gorge and makes possible an adventure hike through the deepest part of the Fish Creek Canyon.

At its deepest Fish Creek Canyon is over 1000ft deep with great towering walls of tortured rock. Where there are high ledges, they are dotted with giant saguaro cacti, seemingly standing watch over your progress. The shade and stream in the canyon bottom have created a rich foliage quite different from the desert higher up. I recommend that you go in the spring (though not within a few days after rain when the risk from floods is high) when the stream still has some substance and the wild flowers are still blooming.

This adventure hike through upper Fish Creek Canyon does not require technical equipment. Even the downclimbing is moderate. However, as described here, the hike is long and even modest downclimbing can become arduous over an extended period of time.

### Trailhead

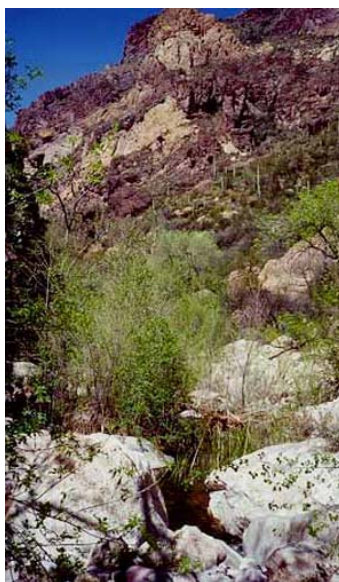
A car shuttle is advisable for this hike. From Apache Junction on Highway 60 east of Phoenix, drive east on the Apache Trail (SR88) past Canyon Lake and through Tortilla Flat. Several miles beyond Tortilla Flat the road turns from asphalt to dirt. Shortly thereafter, you pass a tourist viewpoint on your

left and then begin a steep descent into Fish Creek Canyon. The road crosses Fish Creek on a bridge in the apex of the canyon. Park the return vehicle by the side of the road near the bridge ( $33^{\circ}31.49'N$   $111^{\circ}18.43'W$ ). Then, in the other vehicle, drive 2.4mi back up the Apache Trail to the Tortilla Trailhead parking area ( $33^{\circ}31.58'N$   $111^{\circ}19.16'W$ ) on the left side of the Apache Trail. Park here.

Parenthetically, we note that you might chose to drive rather than hike along the next section that proceeds along the very rough Tortilla Trailhead 4WD road. The first few hundred yards of this road are very rocky and may challenge even the best 4WD vehicle. If you chose to try this and you manage to ascend the large rock steps in the first section, the rest of the three mile road from the Apache Trail to the ultimate trailhead beside Tortilla Ranch is easy 4WD driving. However, I do not recommend this since it is almost as easy to walk the road once as it is to drive it three times.

## Hike

From the parking area beside the Apache Trail ( $33^{\circ}31.58'N$   $111^{\circ}19.16'W$  and elevation 2880ft), hike southeast up the rough, rocky road that soon reaches flatter ground on the top of the mesa. In the spring the land here is covered with beautiful wild flowers, another reason for hiking rather than driving this section. After 30min or 1.7mi the road reaches a minor summit (elevation 3200ft) where a rustic wooden arch across the road marks the entrance to the long-abandoned Tortilla Ranch. You then begin a gradual descent into the flat valley where the ranch was located. High cliff bluffs on the left separate this valley from the



*Left: Unnamed gully. Right: In Fish Creek Canyon.*

Fish Creek drainage to the northeast. About 45min and 2.6mi from the start you pass through the corrals that mark the remains of Tortilla Ranch (3080ft) with an old windmill off to the right. Ten minutes later, a road forks off to the right to a second old windmill. Proceeding straight here you immediately arrive, 55min and 3.2mi from the start, at the official Tortilla Trailhead ( $33^{\circ}29.57'N$   $111^{\circ}17.56'W$  and elevation 3140ft) with a fence, rudimentary gate and sign indicating that vehicle travel beyond this point is prohibited. Proceed straight on and follow the trail as it crosses a shallow creek bed and climbs gradually up a gentle open slope.

About 0.6mi beyond the first gate and 3.8mi (1hr 10min) from the start, you come to a rudimentary second "gate" consisting of large wooden posts connected to a fence. This is a critical navigational point (elevation 3300ft). Proceed through the gate and veer left off the trail to a high point where you can survey the open land to the east that leads gradually down toward Fish Creek Canyon in the distance. On the left hand side of this vista you should be able to discern the start of a shallow gully ( $33^{\circ}29.24'N$   $111^{\circ}17.15'W$ ) leading in a ENE direction down toward Lost Dutch Creek. There are some faint remains of an old mine at the head of this gully. Head down towards this gully; initially the bottom is choked with brambles and it is easier to make your way downstream by contouring along the left bank. Soon, however, the gully deepens (and, in the spring, water appears) and travel in the gully bottom becomes preferable. Downclimbing rocky dryfalls becomes necessary in places. This is a lovely little valley with no sign of human passage. In the spring, I saw turtles in the stream pools.

The off-trail route down this unnamed gully is slow going. It takes over an hour before the creek turns north and meets the often dry creek bed in Lost Dutch Canyon that comes in from the right at  $33^{\circ}29.50'N$   $111^{\circ}16.51'W$  and elevation 2800ft. Now the dry creek bed flattens into a boulder-strewn bottom that makes for easier and faster going as you proceed downstream. Half an hour later, 3hr and 5.3mi from the start at an elevation of 2760ft, you come to the junction of Lost Dutch Creek with Fish Creek ( $33^{\circ}29.93'N$   $111^{\circ}16.67'W$ ), usually a substantial stream. On all sides the 1000ft canyon walls are beginning to close in here as the stream enters the dramatic Fish Creek Canyon. But, for a while, the canyon bottom is still relatively broad and flat. The going is quite easy though wading becomes inevitable in places. Ten minutes later the canyon narrows further with rugged cliffs of tortured rock, dotted with narrow shelves populated by giant saguaro cacti. Here there is a curious pool in a cavern on the right side of the stream. Downstream of the cavern, progress gets progressively harder and you begin to have to find your way through a canyon bottom jammed with huge boulders. Further on you will need to downclimb in places and route finding becomes harder.

You are now in a spectacular narrow canyon with towering 1000ft walls on both sides. Here in the depths, the stream and the shade support a rich canyon-bottom foliage. The stream in the spring brings clear and beautiful water to the many lovely cascades and pools, some of which make for a delightful swim. In other places, progress is only possible by wading though, when I came this



way, the water never came much above my knees.

There are few readily identified landmarks during this 3.5hr transit through the deep lower gorge though you may recognize one particular obstacle about 1hr from the end where it is necessary to find a high rock shelf on the right in order to bypass a huge boulder jam. Finally after the canyon makes a sharp left turn, you arrive at a gravel flat where the road bridge is seen ahead and above you. But, except during the hot summer, between you and the end of the gorge is a deep pool between vertical rock walls. In order to bypass this pool you should follow the well-worn track that climbs about 50ft to a large cave on the left. From there, a high trail contours over to the road where you parked your return vehicle (33°31.49'N 111°18.43'W and elevation 2290ft). You should reach the end about 6.5hrs after the morning start. It is a 2.4mi drive back up the Apache Trail to the return vehicle.



Map of Fish Creek Canyon Hike

## 2.8 Weavers Needle

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 10.7 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 10 miles
- Elevation gain: 2150 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Weavers Needle
- Difficulties: Cross country hiking and navigation in the desert with no water available; technical rock climbing, a short, 15ft section with an estimated rating of 5.6 and much climbing rated 5.4 and lower
- Special equipment: Full rock climbing gear, harnesses, helmets, rappel devices, one 60m rope, 30ft webbing, about six 4ft slings, six quickdraws, two small nuts and assorted carabiners; hats and sunscreen, head lamps and lots of water
- ACA Rating: 4A IV

The wild and rugged Superstition Mountain Wilderness east of Phoenix, Arizona, will thrill any visitor with its landscape of legends, of sweeping desert mountains, of lost gold mines and of Apache Indian hideaways. The famous Apache Trail (still a rugged dirt road) runs from southwest to northeast through this wilderness and allows the vehicle-bound visitor to get some taste of this magnificent place. But to really appreciate its natural beauty, you have to leave those vehicles behind and take to the trail. This rock-climbing adventure takes you to the top of the symbolic peak of the Superstition Wilderness, the awesome Weavers Needle. Situated in the middle of the Superstitions, Weavers Needle is a thousand foot high column of rock that rises majestically from the desert floor and dominates the land for thirty miles around. A weathered volcanic plug with a summit elevation of 4553ft, Weavers Needle is set in a desert landscape of cactus and mesquite bush, with towering Saguaro cacti particularly prominent.

The Superstitions are rife with legends of gold and greed, among the more famous being the tale of the Lost Dutchman Mine. Reputedly discovered by Don Miguel Peralta in 1842, its location was lost when Peralta and his men were murdered by the Apaches. One of the miners did survive to inform the “Dutchman”, Jacob Waltz, of its fabulous wealth and its location but Waltz took that information to his grave in 1891. Since then hundreds have searched in vain for those riches and many have died in the effort. It is said that the shadow of Weavers Needle reveals the location on a particular time and date.

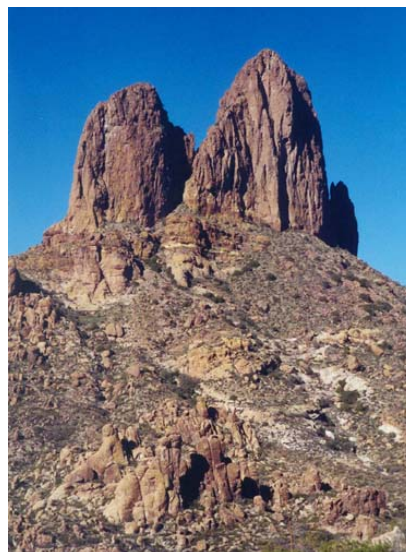
It is a tough, all-day adventure to get to the top of Weavers Needle and get back out before dark. Since the hike is most comfortably undertaken in the

winter when the days are cool but short it is important to be on the trail as soon as it is light. When we did it in late December, we ended up hiking the last few miles back to the trailhead in the dark.

The adventure divides naturally into three parts. The first section is a four mile trail walk; the second (and in some ways most challenging) is a cross-country hike to the base of the rock face; and the third is the technical rock climb up the column itself. But the rewards are a spectacular view in all directions. If, like us, you are very, very lucky two great golden eagles will circle right above your head, soaring on the morning thermal rising up the side of the peak; you will stand in awe of the seven foot wing span of the female and recognize that this moment is worth all the gold that might be found in the Lost Dutchman's Mine.

## Trailhead

The hike begins at the popular Peralta Trailhead ( $33^{\circ}23.85'N$   $111^{\circ}20.89'W$ ) at the entrance to Peralta Canyon on the southern boundary of the Superstition Mountains. Drive about 30mi east from Phoenix, Arizona, on Highway 60 toward Globe. About 4.5mi beyond the end of the freeway at milepost 204, you turn left following the signs for the Peralta Trailhead. After about 5.5mi of good dirt road you will come to a Peralta Trailhead sign where you should fork left. (Near here a pack of about six coyotes casually crossed the road ahead of us on their morning hunt.) Continuing another 0.6mi, you fork right and drive another 0.9mi to the well-developed trailhead with restrooms and a machine that dispenses parking permits. They cost \$4.00, but you can even pay by credit card!



*Left: Peralta Canyon from trailhead. Right: Weavers Needle from the low saddle.*

## Hike

Several trails emanate from the Peralta Trailhead ( $33^{\circ}23.85'N$   $111^{\circ}20.89'W$ ) and two of these will access Weavers Needle. The Peralta Canyon Trail (#102) proceeds up the left side of Peralta Canyon to its head at Fremont Saddle (3766ft) and can be used to access the western side of Weavers Needle. We chose the alternate route and headed up the Bluff Springs trail (#235, labeled incorrectly as the Dutchman's Trail on the topo map) on the right side of Peralta Canyon. Very quickly you arrive at a trail junction where the Dutchman's Trail (#104) forks off to the right. Taking the left fork or Bluff Springs Trail you quickly climb out of Peralta Canyon and briefly ascend the ridge separating it from Barks Canyon to the east. At  $33^{\circ}24.27'N$   $111^{\circ}20.79'W$  and elevation 2950ft an unmarked use-trail forks off to the left and continues up the ridge to Geronimo's Cave. However the main trail contours right into Barks Canyon and follows that to a marked trail junction at  $33^{\circ}25.36'N$   $111^{\circ}21.02'W$  and elevation 3000ft (2.1mi and 1hr 15min from the start) where you leave the Bluff Springs Trail and fork left onto the less well-developed Terrapin Trail (#234). The Terrapin climbs over a series of small, false saddles eventually reaching the 3420ft Bluff Saddle 2.8mi from the start. Bluff Saddle ( $33^{\circ}25.60'N$   $111^{\circ}21.51'W$ ) occurs just after a flat and sandy section of trail and is rather inconspicuous except that the trail now starts downward. Below the saddle the trail turns left and within a few hundred yards crosses from the right to the left side of a small stream bed. Stop at this point and you will see Weaver's Needle to your northwest on the other side of a small ridge immediately in front of you. Leave the trail at this point ( $33^{\circ}25.70'N$   $111^{\circ}21.59'W$ ) and climb toward a low saddle ( $33^{\circ}25.72'N$   $111^{\circ}21.70'W$ ) just above you to the left of a block of rocks on the ridge line. On the way up the shallow wash to this low saddle you should pick up a ducked trail. There is also a metal stake at the saddle itself to mark the way.

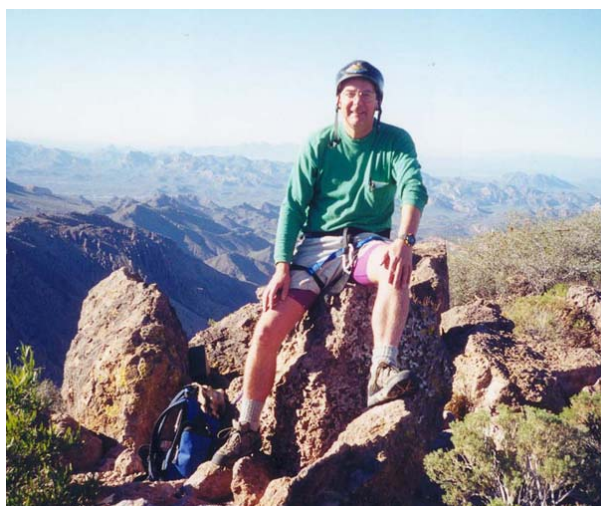
You should reach the 3480ft low saddle a little less than 2hrs after leaving the trailhead. Stop here and take time to absorb the route ahead of you. From this vantage point Weavers Needle is a spectacular structure and you should readily discern the notch that separates the main monolith from the smaller spire to the south. Below the notch is the chute whose ascent will be the first technical part of the climb. Chances are it will be in dark shadow. The next substantial task is to cross the valley below and climb up the rugged and increasingly steep wash that leads directly up to the base of the chute. We actually ascended to that point by a different route further to the north and climbed a scree slope over to the left, accessed a prominent shelf that is readily visible and then walked along the shelf to the base of the chute. However, we descended by the more direct and more traveled route and concluded that this would also be preferable for the ascent. It proceeds as follows. You follow the ducked trail down from the low saddle to the flat sandy valley floor and head directly toward the wash leading straight up to the chute. On the valley floor you hike around the right side of a rocky prominence and follow the use trail as it proceeds up the wash deviating a little to the left to pass another rocky outcropping on the



lowest slopes. Then you ascend a low ridge behind this second outcropping and gradually contour right into the main ascending wash where you proceed up the wash itself. Increasingly you must clamber up dryfalls and circumnavigate obstacles as you proceed straight toward the base of the chute. As you climb you will note some difficult dryfalls near the top of the wash. To bypass these you should contour over to the flat open slopes to the right of the wash and climb toward the base of a substantial cliff (the cliff below the aforementioned shelf) that represents the last major obstacle on the approach hike. This can be ascended by contouring back into the wash on your left that you left just a few minutes ago. If you are in the right wash, you will be able to clamber up to the shelf top using a convenient sloping rock ledge within the wash. If not, I recommend contouring left to the place where you can ascend the scree slope to the end of the shelf; then follow the shelf back left to the base of the chute. Either way, it will be clear when you reach the point at the base of the chute where the technical rock climb begins. You should reach this point (elevation 3970ft) about 3hr 10min from the start.

From this vantage point, the technical route up the chute looks quite formidable. In fact the first 30ft or so represent the most difficult section of the entire ascent and require the expertise of someone with good rock-climbing experience. A word of warning before you start. Between this point and the notch there is some danger from falling rocks if others are climbing above you. Rocks dislodged above tend to be funneled down into the chute from high overhead. Consequently helmets are essential. Note, however, that the rock you will be climbing is generally excellent with many good hand and foot holds.

The climb begins about 30ft to the right of the middle of the chute where there is reddish composite rock with good hand and foot holds. The first place



*Left: On the summit of Weavers Needle. Right: Rappeling down the chute.*



where a protective sling can be installed is a large rock about 30ft up just a few feet to the right of the middle of the chute. During this first 30ft, the lead climber can be incompletely protected by a belayer standing as high as possible in the middle of the chute. Beyond the first sling, there is another awkward move of about 10ft followed by an easier section leading to a set of anchor bolts in a hollow a little off to the right side. While these bolts could be used as the belay station at the top of the first pitch it is best for the lead climber to continue up, climbing easily to a rock prominence about 30ft higher. Setting up a belay station by slinging this rock, allows the notch to be reached at the top of the second pitch with a 60m rope. The climbing from the belay station to the notch is quite easy. When you reach the notch there are several large rocks (as well as a number of bolts and webbing complexes) that can be used as anchors. You should reach the notch (elevation 4230ft) just under 5hr from the start of the hike.

The view from the notch is spectacular. To the west you will see the Peralta trail and the approach up a wash to the western base of the notch. The climb up the western side of the notch is technically more difficult and requires the use of several cams to set up appropriate protection. The two routes converge at the notch.

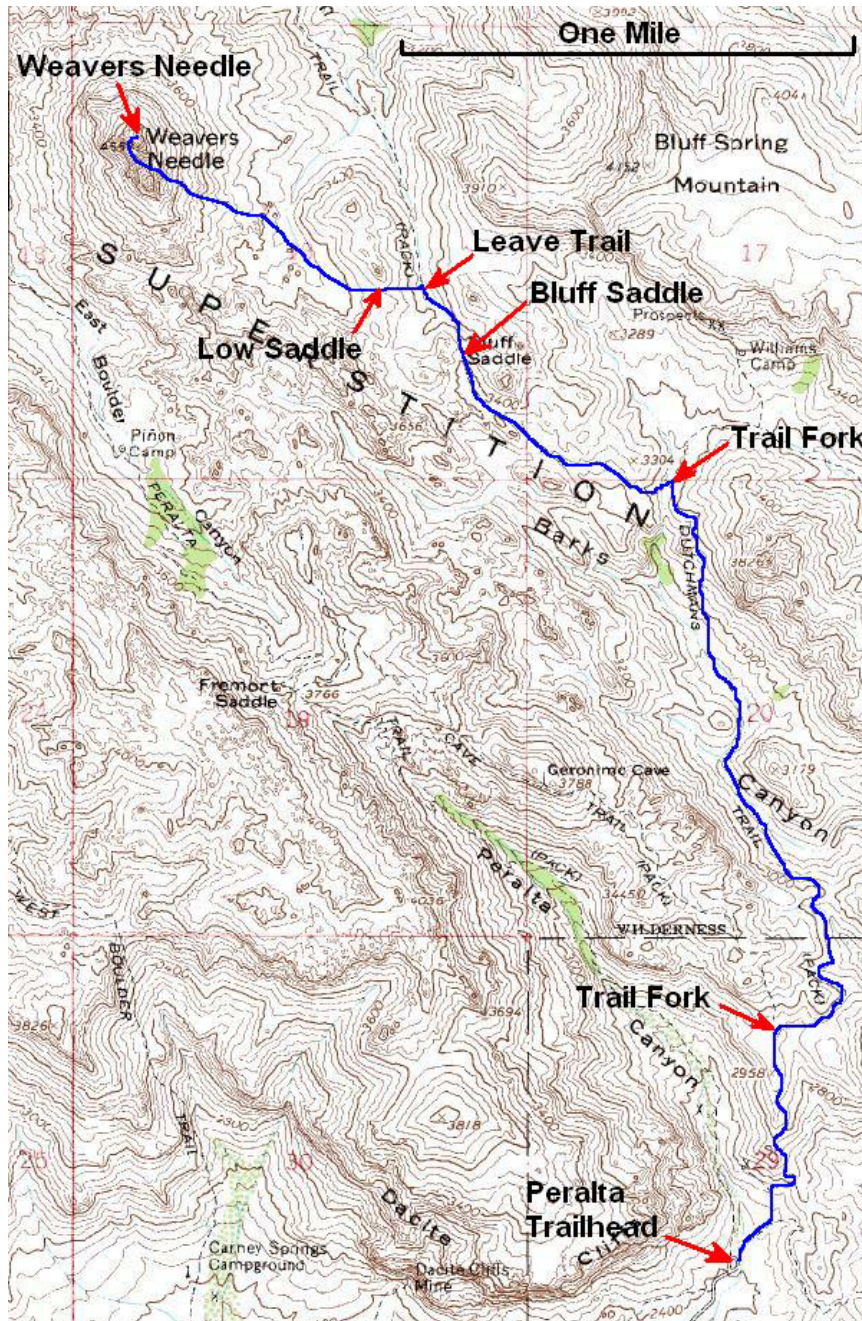
From the notch you climb up a self-evident 12ft step to the right (north); some good holds make this fairly easy and safe to do without a belay. Above the step the going is quite easy and you can climb about 300ft following the obvious use-trail that ascends the west side of the ridge of the main spire. This part does not require a belay on the ascent though we found it quicker and more comfortable to rappel the middle section on the way down. A prominent tree near the top has several webbing anchors to facilitate a belay for those who wish it. At this tree the trail veers left, passing between an outcropping and the main massif. This leads to a large flat shelf on the west side of the monolith at the bottom of the last 50ft technical section. Roping up here, the lead climber should ascend a small arete on the left, use a sling on a rock prominence at the top of the arete and then proceed further over to the left toward an obvious, small chute. There are marvelous hand and foot holds just to the right of the chute that allow you to climb easily to the top of this last technical section. At the top there is a convenient rock prominence that can be used to belay up the following climbers. From this point the top is just a short walk away. As you take these last steps note the two-bolt anchor, webbing and rappel rings off to your right that you will use for the first part of your descent. You should reach the summit ( $33^{\circ}26.00'N$   $111^{\circ}22.25'W$  and elevation 4553ft) a little over 6hr after leaving the trailhead.

The top of Weavers Needle is a short narrow ridge with a truly awesome view in all directions. The other outcroppings in the desert floor below you look tiny from this perspective and there is a marvelous toy-like quality to all the details that lie below you. As we enjoyed this unique view, a helicopter, barely visible, flew past far below us. To compensate for that intrusion I looked for the eagles but without success; it would be hard to see their silent flight against the background of the desert. Clancy and I shook hands and signed the register.

Not much else needs to be said at moments and places like these.

The first part of the descent is an 80ft rappel from the afore-mentioned anchor down to the platform at the base of the uppermost technical section. From there you might wish to rappel the part of the use-trail below the prominent tree but it is relatively easy to descend to the notch without any further use of the rope. The notch should be reached about 7hr from the start. From there a long rappel using a 60m rope and a webbing wrap on one of the large boulders will take you all the way down to the bolts in the chute noted on the way up. From those bolts it is a shorter rappel to the bottom of the chute. We ended this technical descent 7hr 40min after the morning start.

From the base of the chute you should take note again of the cross-country route straight down wash below you to the valley floor and then back up to the low saddle above the Terrapin trail. During the descent it is wise to pause frequently to review this route since things often look different as the perspective changes. We reached the Terrapin Trail about 9hr after the start. Light was fading fast as we passed over Bluff Saddle and forked right onto the Bluff Springs Trail. We had to get out our head lamps for the last mile or so back to the Peralta trailhead ( $33^{\circ}23.85'N$   $111^{\circ}20.89'W$ ), reaching there 10hr 45min after the morning start.



Map of Weavers Needle Hike

## 2.9 Salome Jug

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.1 miles
- Elevation gain: 650 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Armer Mountain, Greenback Creek
- Difficulties: Much swimming, some downclimbing, one large (30ft) rappel into a deep pool and one small rappel
- Special equipment: Harnesses and rappeling gear, 80ft rope, 20ft webbing, one rappel ring, drybags
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Out in the Arizona wildlands, beyond the end of the Apache Trail, on the far northeastern side of Roosevelt Lake, is the remote Salome Wilderness. It is rugged mountainous country, a land of rock and cactus where the summer temperatures soar into triple digits and all man's ingenuity is needed just to survive. Water is king here and the winter storms create ribbons of life that manage to survive through the baking heat of the summer sun. The rain funnels down into Salome Creek, a river that drains a large area in the Sierra Ancha mountains and flows southwest into Roosevelt Lake. On its way there, the creek has had to cut its way round the base of the great rock monolith known as Dutchwomen Butte and, in doing so, has carved deeply into the pink and white granite to create a fantastic, mile-long ravine known as the Salome Jug. This narrow, vertical-walled jewel of a canyon makes for one of the most marvelous canyoneering experiences anywhere in the world. The descent requires almost continuous wading and swimming through ravine-filling pools, interrupted by numerous waterfalls and cascades. Most are readily downclimbed though one spectacular 30ft drop near the end requires either a rappel or a scary jump into a deep pool.

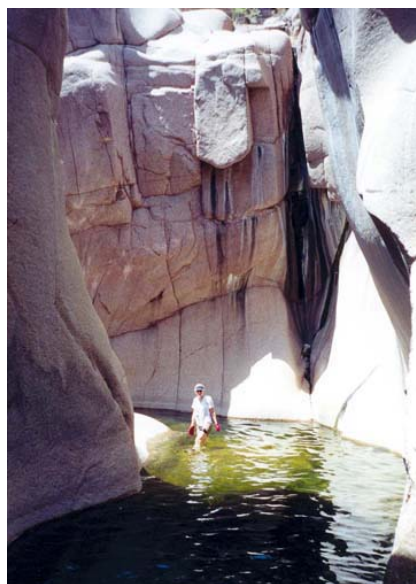
This adventure is not possible in the winter because of the high water flow rate. On the other hand the river tends to dry up as the summer progresses and the pools accumulate a surface scum of green slime. Consequently the best time is either May or June when the flow is moderate, the water is clear and not too cold, and the air is warm enough to allow one to dry out and warm up in the sun.



## Trailhead

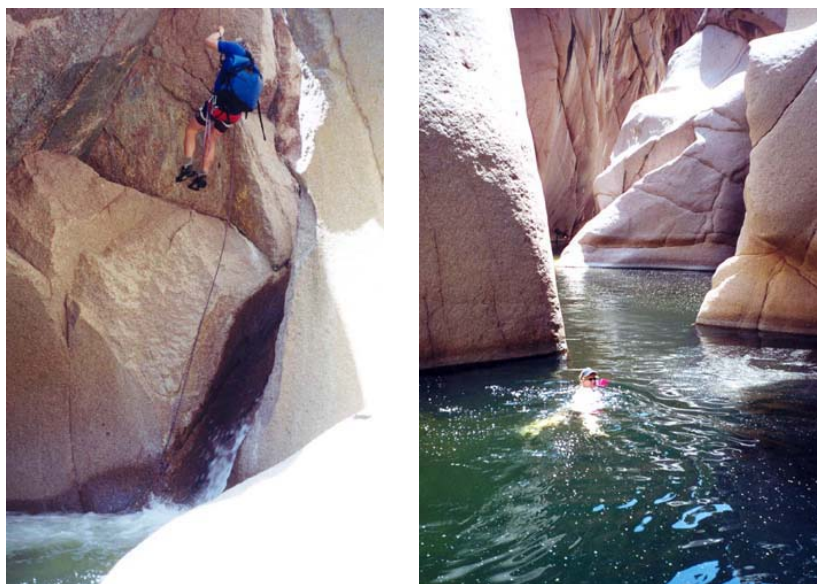
From the intersection of State Highways 87 and 188 about 60mi northeast of Phoenix, Arizona, drive southeast on SR 188 for 19.4mi through the hamlet of Punkin Center to mile post 255. Turn left following the sign for the A+ Cross Road and note the odometer reading. The dirt road drops down into the wide river valley and, after about a mile, crosses the stream at a broad ford where the water is usually only about six inches deep. On the other side continue on the good dirt road following the posted sign for Salome Creek. At a fork where dirt roads go left continue straight as the road becomes asphalt. This asphalt road ends at a boat ramp and campground but, about 1.8mi before that (and 2.3mi from SR188), you must turn left onto a dirt road signposted A+ Cross Road. This turn is easily missed but if you arrive at the boat ramp just backtrack 1.8mi. The dirt road winds in and out of various drainages as it climbs episodically along the southern slopes of Victoria Peak. Soon the imposing mass of Dutchwoman Butte comes into view ahead to the east. As you come to the last ridge between you and the Butte, you will easily find the A+ Cross Trailhead, 10.1mi from SR188 at 33°46.24'N 111°8.17'W. The parking area is on the left side of the road. Except in winter, the ford and the dirt road are passable in a 2WD vehicle but a high ground clearance, 4WD vehicle is preferable.

## Hike



*Left: Salome Creek just upstream of the Jug. Right: In the upper Jug.*

The trail that heads east from the A+ Cross Road was previously an old jeep road. From the trailhead ( $33^{\circ}46.24'N$   $111^{\circ}8.17'W$  and elevation 3200ft), it begins by winding in and out of three large gullies. With each successive headland you get closer to the shadow of Dutchwomen Butte. Though sparsely vegetated, the land is populated with cacti including giant saguaro, prickly pear, ocotillo and many smaller varieties. In May or June, many of them may be in bloom, an added delight on the morning start. As you contour into and out of the gullies, the trail begins a gradual descent until, just after the fourth headland and about 1.8mi from the trailhead, it starts a steeper switchbacking descent down a shallow draw. Below you here you can see the edges of the ravine known as the Salome Jug. As you reach the flatter ground above the rim of the ravine, the old jeep trail turns north and begins traveling upstream, paralleling the gorge. Soon it passes through a barbed wire fence and gate ( $33^{\circ}46.23'N$   $111^{\circ}7.22'W$ ) and just beyond this you will encounter a flat rock shelf to the right of the path that has marvelous views of the creek. Looking upstream you see a series of waterfalls and pools as the stream begins its drop into the ravine. You can also look straight down into a ravine-filling pool within the Jug. You should reach this point (elevation 2840ft) about 2.4mi and just under 1hr after starting out. From here continue up the trail for about another 40yds to where there is a flat area to the right of the road that looks as though it has been used for a campsite. From here take a short spur track toward the ravine at the end of which ( $33^{\circ}46.30'N$   $111^{\circ}7.18'W$ ) you should be able to find a way to climb down to the stream at a point where there is a series of pools and cascades.



*Left: Bottom of the rappel. Right: In the upper Jug.*

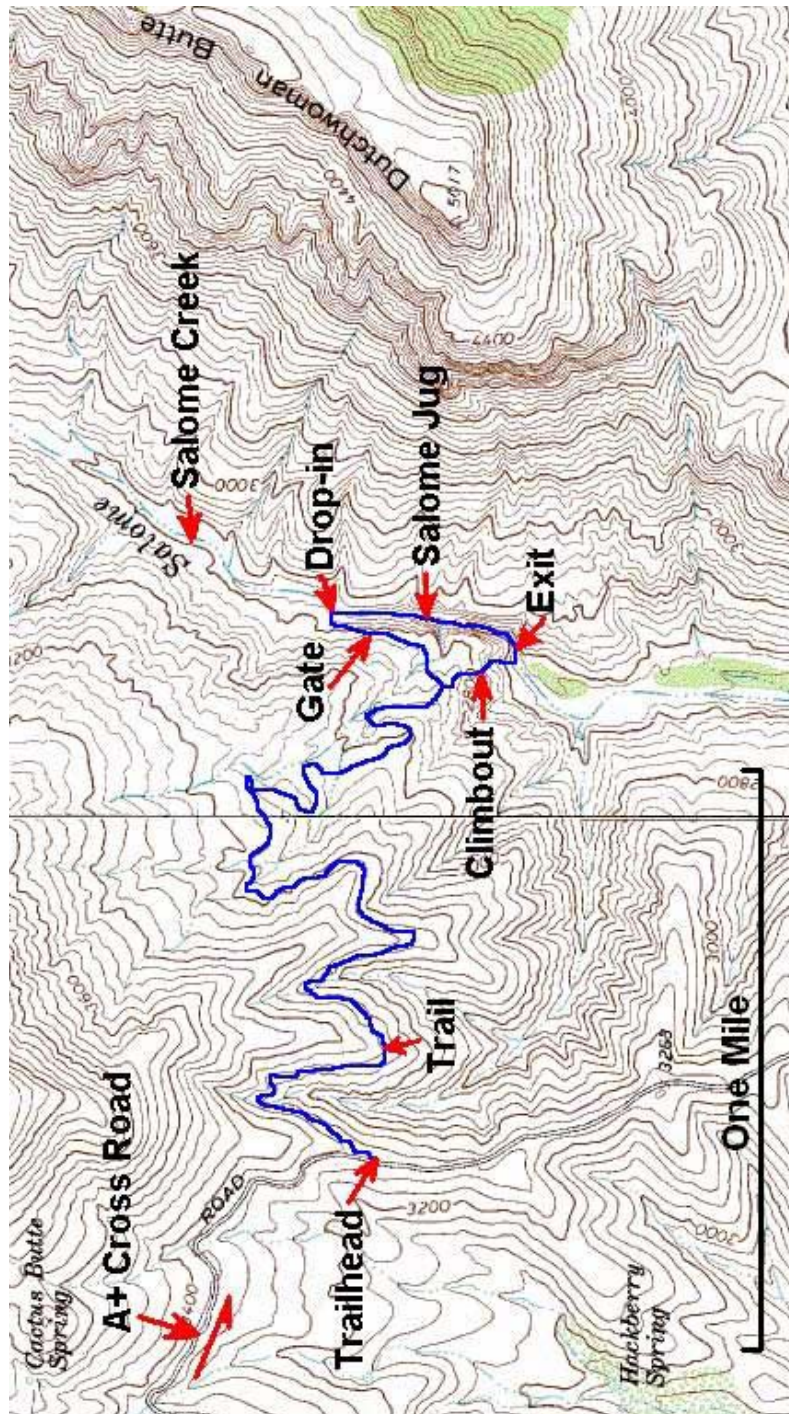


Immediately you must take to the water, swimming and wading, in order to progress downstream. The ravine walls rapidly grow in height and the gorge narrows to about 20ft. The first couple of cascades are awkward and slippery to descend but soon you get used to swimming, wading and downclimbing. The polished granite walls rise vertically on all sides and have been sculpted into spectacular shapes by eons of rushing water. Some distance into the gorge, there is an awkward 10ft drop where the stream splits on two sides of a huge, canyon blocking boulder. We rigged a small rappel here rather than attempting the slippery downclimb. A succession of pools and swims follows. We stopped for lunch on a warm boulder beside the only tree we encountered in the gorge - though there are many similar boulders on which to rest and warm up.

Nearing the end, where the walls of the gorge are reaching their maximum height, you come to an alarming obstacle where the stream drops through a narrow slot to a large pool that stretches away down the gorge. Because there are few features of recognizable dimension, it is hard to judge the magnitude of this drop. In fact, it is not as big as it seems from the top. A shelf about 6ft up the rock face on the right allows you to traverse over to a point where there are anchor bolts in the rock high above the pool in the cavern below. This traverse is nervy since the rock face is sloped and can even be a little slippery. However, there is another bolt fixed in the rock where the traverse starts and, when we came this way, a 20ft length of webbing was stretched across between this bolt and the rappel anchor. This webbing provided an essential handrail for the traverse over to the rappel anchor. If the webbing is not there, you should set up a belay using the anchor. The drop from the rappel anchor to the bottom of the waterfall is about 30ft; it allows a vertical descent with some free rappel and an awkward swimming disconnect in the churn at the base of the falls. From there you swim just a few yards to the broad rock shelf in a recess on the far side of the ravine where you can rest and monitor the descent of the others. As an alternate to the rappel, you may decide to use a rope to descend 5ft from the rappel anchor point to a small platform where you can jump 25ft into the deep pool below. Though I do not recommend this, it is clear that many do it.

After resting on the shelf in the recess, the next hurdle is a swim downstream of about 50yds, negotiating a deep pool with vertical walls on all sides. This leads to several more long, deep swims interspersed with bouldery downclimbs. In the last of these you swim out of the gorge between vertical walls. The Jug ends abruptly, the stream emerging into a broad valley on its way down to Roosevelt Dam several miles away. You should reach the end of the Jug ( $33^{\circ}46.02'N$   $111^{\circ}7.26'W$  and elevation 2660ft) about 3hr 45min after the morning start.

As you emerge from the Jug, turn right immediately, leave the stream and follow the use-trail up the steep slope in a shallow recess. The trail transitions onto a bluff and leads directly back to the old jeep trail at the bottom of the previously mentioned switchbacks ( $33^{\circ}46.13'N$   $111^{\circ}7.33'W$ ). From here it is a relatively easy return hike of 2.2mi back to the trailhead ( $33^{\circ}46.24'N$   $111^{\circ}8.17'W$ ), though this may be the hardest part of the hike due to the hot afternoon sun. The complete adventure should take less than 5hr and cover about 5.1mi.



Map of Salome Jug Hike

## 2.10 Devil's Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5 miles
- Elevation gain: 880 feet
- Topo Map: Superior
- Difficulties: Five rappels up to 60ft, deep pools to swim and some class 4 climbing
- Special equipment: 160ft rope, 60ft rope, 30ft webbing, 5 rappel rings, harnesses, helmets and drybags
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Devil's Canyon in the Tonto National Forest of Arizona gathers strength in the Pinal mountains northeast of the town of Superior and slices through the high desert on its way south to join Mineral Creek and eventually the Gila River. In the process it has cut a rugged high desert canyon lined with great balustrades of sculptured pinnacles and decorated with magnificent Saguaro cacti. Here you will see a full spectrum of desert wildlife from golden eagles to havolinas to Gila monsters. Where water flows the canyon bottom is lush with sycamores and alders that provide welcome shade from the blazing desert sun. It is a beautiful place unfortunately not yet fully protected from possible destruction by the mining companies.

This adventure takes you down Devil's Canyon to a remote and spectacular place where the canyon narrows dramatically and drops several hundred feet in a few hundred yards through a series of beautiful waterfalls and cliff-rimmed plunge pools. It is an exciting technical challenge to descend through this hanging gorge by rappelling and swimming. Fortunately there is also a reasonable route by which to climb back to the top of the falls and thus to return by the same route to the trailhead. It is an adventure that is best for a spring, summer or early fall day when the temperature is high enough to enjoy spending much time soaking wet.

### Trailhead

From Superior, Arizona, drive east on Highway 60, climbing into the Pinal mountains and the Tonto National Forest. Just 4.0mi east of Superior turn right onto the Oak Flat Campground road (Forest Road 469). Drive down this asphalt road passing the Oak Flat campground on your left. About 1.5mi from the highway look for an unmarked dirt road turnoff on the left that is gated.

Open the gate, proceed through and close it after you. After just about 100yds you should pass a small reservoir to your left (you may need to ford a small stream on the way). About 1.7mi from the gate you will have descended a slope into a small meadow with a cow tank. You are now in the Rancho Rio Creek drainage at 33°16.94'N 111°3.01'W and it is possible to hike down Rancho Rio Creek to access Devil's Canyon. But the author recommends that you park here and continue hiking along the road that is very rough after Rancho Rio Creek. The road climbs steeply up to a ridge and descends into the next drainage, known as Hackberry Creek. Proceed down into the Hackberry Creek drainage to the corrals and the windmill at the south end of the meadow in the creek bottom; these are 2.5mi from the asphalt road. The times and distances hereafter assume that you are starting at the Hackberry Creek windmill (33°16.50'N 111°2.42'W). Note that it takes an additional 20min to hike from the Rancho Rio Creek trailhead to this starting point.

## Hike

From the Hackberry Creek windmill (33°16.50'N 111°2.42'W and elevation 3920ft), hike down the road for about 100yds and then continue down the drainage. The going here is easy with lots of bedrock and only a little brush. Soon the sides of the canyon close in, decorated with great columns of sculpted rock and a maze of hoodoos and sprinkled with statuesque Saguaro cacti. This is not only a beautiful canyon but also an outstanding climbing venue with many bolted routes; it is well documented in the climbing guide, "Queen Creek Canyon" by Marty Karabin published by Chockstone Press. After just 25min you arrive at the top of a 40ft dryfall, the only real obstacle in Hackberry Creek. Climb down the ledges and narrow slot on the left side until about 6ft above the large pool and then follow a broad ledge all the way across to the right to avoid the pool. Continue down this lovely little canyon. After contouring around to the left of another pool at the end of Hackberry Canyon, you will arrive at the forested junction with Devil's Canyon (33°16.42'N 111°1.65'W and elevation 3540ft) about 45min and 0.8mi from start. Though the junction is already marked by many cairns, pause to take note of the surroundings so that you will readily recognize it upon your return.

At the junction turn right and hike south (downstream) through a very pleasant wooded canyon. Devil's Creek normally has running water all the way to our destination. There is a faint use trail on the right side of the canyon and the going is initially easy with little brush. Soon, however, there are more boulders and pools to negotiate and about 90min from the start you come to the first significant obstacle, a slot waterfall with a 15ft downclimb in midstream. Thereafter the route continues to be rugged with much boulder hopping and some bushwhacking. The use-trail (actually a cow trail since cattle run in this canyon and do significant damage) mostly follows the right side of the canyon bottom though there are several places where you detour a little higher on the right side to avoid deep pools. About 2hr 20min and 2mi from the start the broad and open canyon makes a sweeping left turn. Just beyond the turn, at

33°15.41'N 111°1.35'W, an elevation of 3380ft and 2.3mi or 2hr 30min from the start, Devil's Canyon suddenly narrows and drops precipitously through a series of dramatic waterfalls and deep plunge pools. These are the Devil's Canyon cascades you have come to see. You need to don your harness and helmet, store your belongings in a drybag and prepare for much swimming and rappeling.

At a wide rock gate, the first waterfall drops 12ft vertically into a large and deep plunge pool. There is a bolt anchor on the left wall at the lip; usually a knotted rope hangs down from this anchor and, since there are many good footholds, this allows an easy downclimb on the left to a broad, flat shelf just above the level of the pool. If the knotted rope seems unsafe, install your own short rope here and leave it for your later return. Then swim about 15yds across this first deep pool to another wide and flat shelf at the top of the next drop. However, before tackling the next drop, you should inspect the left wall of the canyon directly above you in preparation for the return trip. Notice a shallow crack below a shelf about 35ft above you. The crack has a small, sturdy bush growing at the top. The preferred return route descends from the shelf down this broad crack. The first section of this descent is a little exposed but the rest is easy with many good footholds and ledges. If you identify the crack you may wish to prepare for the return by climbing up to the bottom end of the crack to familiarize yourself with the class 4 downclimb. Once this is done you are ready to resume your descent.

Slide down a short chute below the wide and flat shelf into a small pool and climb out onto a small platform to the left of the next falls. The bolts for the



*Left: Dryfall in Hackberry Creek. Right: Second drop and swim pool.*



next short rappel are in the wall at the back of this small platform. There is often a permanent rope installed here but it is better to set up your own 12ft rappel. You drop down into a large deep pool; there is a good submerged step just beside the waterfall that avoids a swimming disconnect. Once off-rappel swim about 20yds across the pool to a rock platform to the left of the next lip. If you have a 160ft rope in addition to that which you used for this small drop you may wish to leave the rope in place at the 12ft rappel for the return trip. At the end of the 20yds swim, clamber up the steep rock onto the top of a platform that is about 4ft above the top of the next waterfall. The next drop is a spectacular 50ft vertical falloff into a huge round plunge pool almost completely surrounded by vertical cliffs. The anchor is a pair of solid bolts on top of the platform. The 50ft rappel is free for part of the descent but drops onto a shelf near the bottom. You can either disconnect and climb down from this shelf into the pool or rappel all the way into the pool and do a swimming disconnect. The last person should pull the rope and transport at least one end across the pool for the next rappel. It is an awesome 30yds swim across this cliff-encased pool to a broad lip at the far side.

The next rappel is currently anchored from a small tree on the left side of the lip. If this tree perishes, new bolts will be needed for there are no other solid anchors. It is a two-stage, 50ft descent on the left side of the falls, first dropping about 15ft to a sloping and slippery shelf and then a 30ft vertical descent into a deep pool where a swimming disconnect is unavoidable. Again the last person needs to pull the rope. Another 30yds swim across a large deep pool brings you to a narrow and sharp lip that is followed by a 10ft drop onto a broad shelf.



*Left: First big drop and swim. Right: Second big drop and swim.*

There is a stout little tree on the right side of the lip that can be used with a piece of webbing or rope to descend the 10ft to the shelf. Leave the rope or webbing in place for you will need to ascend again to this lip. (There is also an easy downclimb just to the left of the 10ft falls). If you wish to get all the way to the bottom of the Devil's Canyon gorge there is an obvious route on the right where you can descend over boulders to the wooded bottom where the canyon veers right and broadens (elevation 3030ft).

You should complete this spectacular series of descents about 4hr 30min from the morning start. The return is also challenging. To begin climb back up to the broad shelf and then back up to the narrow and sharp lip. To avoid confusion we now switch and use right or left as one looks upstream. On the right side of the lip there is a shelf on the downstream side of a steep rock ridge. Follow this to the right and climb up onto a wide wooded ledge. At the back of this ledge you will find a steep route up a gully that begins with a climb up the roots of a tree. Proceed up the steep wooded slope for about 50ft and then veer left across a steep earth slope toward a notable shoulder. Climbing up over a notch on the shoulder will bring you to a comfortable shoulder slope. From here you should be able to see two options. Option one is to descend down that slope to the shelf above the 50ft rappel but downstream of the 12ft rappel and pool. This route would then require a swim across the pool and a prussik ascent of the 12ft rappel. Option two is a little more exposed and was described earlier. From the shoulder slope proceed a short way along a shelf to the bush at the top of the descent crack that takes you down to the rock shelf at the top of the 12ft rappel; this option avoids the awkward prussik ascent.

The final step in the ascent is to swim across the top pool to the shelf at the bottom of the 12ft knotted rope. The last ascent using that rope is quite easy because of the numerous footholds. You should complete the ascent in about 30min and thus return to the top about 5hrs after the morning start. The hike back up Devil's Canyon and then up Hackberry Creek to the trailhead (33°16.50'N 111°2.42'W) should take about 2hrs 30min. The total duration of the adventure is about 7hrs 30min during which you cover about 5mi.



Map of Devil's Canyon Hike

## 2.11 Cibecue Creek

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.4 miles
- Elevation gain: 450 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Mule Hoof Bend (AZ)
- Difficulties: One moderately challenging 50ft climb, two rappels of 50ft, one with white water, some swimming and an optional, challenging white water ascent through a 6ft wide narrows.
- Special equipment: Harnesses and rappeling gear, 160ft rope, 100ft rope, 20ft webbing, drybags, wetsuit and non-slip soles
- ACA Rating: 3C III
- Guide and Permit: This hike requires a permit from the White Mountain Apache Tribe and, in addition, hiking above the lower falls is not permitted unless accompanied by a tribal guide

This gem of a canyon on the White Mountain Apache Reservation in eastern Arizona only has a few technical challenges but they are spectacular and varied. Because the land belongs to the tribe you must be accompanied by a tribal guide and this needs to be arranged ahead of time.

It is an up and back hike in a tributary of the Salt River known as Cibecue Creek; Cibecue is Apache roughly translated as “surrounded by red cliffs”. The name is appropriate for you ascend through layers of sandstone cliffs sculpted by the year-round river. Though you will not be in the river very long, it would be wise carry a wetsuit for the water can be cold and deep in places. Two rappels, one in white water, and a challenging narrows provide the excitement in this neat canyon.

### Trailhead

This hike is located in the White Mountain Apache Indian Reservation and you must therefore obtain a day hiking permit from the tribe before venturing off the paved highway. A permit allows you to hike up Cibecue Creek to the bottom of the Lower Falls. But to climb above the Lower Falls and proceed further upstream you *must be accompanied by a licensed guide* from the White Mountain Apache Tribe. Our guide, Greg Henry, was excellent and can be contacted at (928)-207-5727. For more information see the White Mountain



Apache website at <http://www.wmat.nsn.us/> or contact the WMA Wildlife and Outdoor Recreation Division at (928)-338-4385.

The White Mountain Apache Indian Reservation is located in eastern Arizona. Drive 38mi northeast from Globe or 48mi southwest from Show Low on Highway 60 to the Salt River Canyon. From either direction the road drops dramatically about 1400ft into this spectacular canyon to cross the Salt River by way of a bridge at the southern boundary of the White Mountain Apache Reservation. At the southern end of the bridge there is a parking area where we met our guide, Greg Henry, and completed the necessary formalities for the day-long adventure. The day hiking license will cost \$15.00 per person at the outset and you should add a generous tip at the end of the day. Greg was particularly helpful, technically competent and friendly.

From the parking area at the south end of the Highway 60 bridge over the Salt River ( $33^{\circ}47.83'N$   $110^{\circ}30.11'W$  and elevation 3400ft) we drove across the bridge, up a grade for 300yds and then turned left onto a dirt road. We drove west on this good dirt road for about 4.5mi, paralleling the Salt River. Some distance past the Second Campground, we arrived at a shallow ford through Cibecue Creek that enters the Salt from the north. Immediately after the ford we turned right up into the trailhead parking area.

## Hike

From the trailhead parking area at  $33^{\circ}50.30'N$   $110^{\circ}33.32'W$  and an elevation of 3160ft, the ascent of Cibecue Creek involves easy boulder-hopping and stream-wading. After about ten minutes you pass the gaging station and after twenty a



*Entering Cibecue Canyon.*



large canyon enters from the west. Gradually the walls close in and interesting rock formations appear such as an alcove on the east side after about 40min. The rock here tends to fracture into rectangular features and so the overhanging walls are worn into rectangular subway-like features that become more evident as you near the Lower Falls. There at  $33^{\circ}51.32'N$   $110^{\circ}32.78'W$  and an elevation of 3390ft the walls close in completely forming a spectacular 50ft vertical waterfall that is recessed in a sunless grotto and plunges into a deep pool. You should reach this point 1.6mi from the start after a 1hr hike.

The walls on both sides of this recess are vertical but 50ft up on the east is a broad ledge that allows passage past the Lower Falls. However the vertical climb up to this ledge requires some rock-climbing experience. About 100yds south of the falls there is a reasonable climbing route where the best climber in your group should be able to get to the ledge without technical assistance and thus be able to belay the rest of the party up to that point. The most difficult move is around the left side of a rock projection about half-way up; once on the ledge above this projection the rest of the climb is easy.

Given time to admire the falls and complete the climb it will be about 2hrs from the start before you are ready to proceed beyond the Lower Falls. The falls are easily bypassed along the broad ledge on the east side. However, once past the falls you should climb onto the shelf on the west side and follow that side for the next mile or so. The river below you on your right proceeds over many small falls and through some lovely pools. It is a broad canyon walk for the next mile or so before the canyon begins to close in again. About 1hr and 1mi above the Lower Falls the canyon narrows to the point where you must

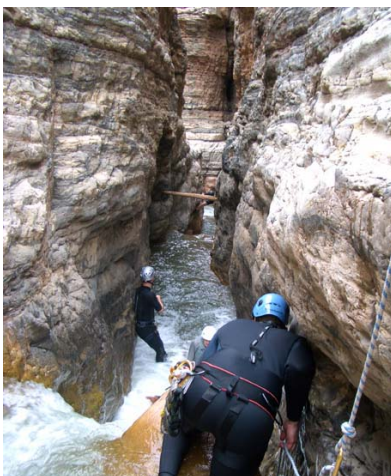


*Lower Falls.*

wade and you are now close to the bottom of the section of Narrows for which Cibecue Creek is well known. At this point at 33°51.73'N 110°32.02'W, 3540ft and 2.6mi and 3hrs from the start there are two options for you to consider:

Option One is to forego trying to ascend the Narrows, the most technically demanding and physically exhausting part of this adventure. After all you can get a close look at them on the descent. Instead you can cross to the east side before any wading is needed, climb onto a shoulder and find a rough use-trail on the east side that proceeds up on a shelf that bypasses the Narrows and the Upper Falls and descends to the canyon bottom above the falls. Along this trail you will get an excellent view of both the Narrows and the Upper Falls but it is sketchy in places so proceed with care.

Option Two is to proceed upstream against the water flow. The wade begins easily. Then, for about 50yds the canyon narrows to about 10ft in width and you have to pick your way along underwater ledges and through shallow sections. After this the going gets tough. The canyon narrows to about 5ft in width so that the depth and water velocity make it impossible to progress without using purchase on the walls. If you are limber and long-legged enough you may be able to stem upstream above the water with one foot on each wall. You can also stem in the water where you don't have to hold your full weight but you do have to fight the current. After about 30yds there is a 6ft waterfall to overcome and here it is necessary to stem up above the water surface. Fortunately there are adequate footholds on both walls. Above the waterfall is another 20yds of stemming before you arrive at the last and most difficult obstacle, another 6ft waterfall around a big chockstone that creates a substantial overhang. Your best climber may be able to ascend this by stemming though it is more difficult than the previous falls. Alternatively you may be able to lasso the chockstone with a loop of webbing and provide a foothold for the climb. Once one person



*Left: Narrows below upper falls. Right: Guided rappel of the upper falls.*

has ascended, that person can rig a rope or webbing from a bolt on the left hand side to aid the remaining climbers. Above this obstacle the canyon widens and you find yourself at the base of the Upper Falls. Climb the sloping cliff face on your right up to the aforementioned use-trail in order to get above these Upper Falls (it is also possible to climb and bypass the falls on the left).

Whichever option you choose you will now be above the Upper Falls at 33°51.69'N 110°31.93'W and an elevation of about 3600ft having traveled 2.7mi after about 4hrs of hiking. The Upper Falls are preceded by a series of attractive pools and, on a warm day, one particular deep pool just before the falls is bound to invite a jump and a swim.

The anchor for the rappel descent of the Upper Falls (assuming that you don't choose to return along the use trail) is a set of bolts on the right side just above the lip. The 50ft sloping rappel from there to the bottom of the Upper Falls is not as fierce as it looks provided you keep your footing in the crashing stream. Another possibility is for the first descender to set up a guided rappel using the anchor bolts at the bottom on the right. Whichever method you choose to descend the Upper Falls, the rappel leaves you back at the top end of the Narrows. The descent through this maelstrom is much easier than the ascent. First you can rig a rope to the anchor bolts on the right to rappel or handline down the first 6ft waterfall. Then you can go with the flow to the top of the second 6ft drop, jump that and float on out of the Narrows. You will arrive at the end of the Narrows about 5hrs from the morning start.

The 1mi return hike to the Lower Falls should take about 40min and here again you have a choice, whether to rappel down the 50ft cliff by the dry route or the more daring wet route. The wet route uses an anchor bolt in the rock about 40ft downstream of the main falls and deposits you in the deep pool at the bottom where a swimming disconnect is necessary. The dry route utilizes a stout tree anchor about 70yds downstream of the falls and leaves you on a gravel bed beside the river.

From the bottom of the Lower Falls it takes about 50min to hike back to the trailhead and complete the day's adventure. The total duration will be about 7hrs during which you will cover about 5.4mi.





Map of Cibecue Creek Hike

## 2.12 Crystal Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 6.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 700 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Sontag Mesa (AZ), Bronco Gulch (AZ)
- Difficulties: Two rappels of 40ft and 70ft in heavy water flow with swimming disconnects; a navigational challenge to find the canyon entry point
- Special equipment: Harnesses and rappeling gear with personal belay runner, wetsuit, drybags, carabiners, 160ft rope and 30ft webbing, GPS device
- ACA Rating: 3C III

Out in the flat mesas of the southwest one often finds that a river has cut a deep canyon through an otherwise featureless landscape but that the presence of that great rift is unseen until one gets very close to the rim. Such is the case with the canyon that the San Carlos River has cut through the flat highlands where the San Carlos Apache Tribe run cattle on their reservation in east central Arizona. This adventure begins with a hike across that flatland to the rim of the canyon and then a steep 400ft descent to the canyon bottom. From there a boulder-hopping hike downstream brings you to a short but exciting technical section known as “Crystal Canyon” because of the large quantity of white crystal laced through the bedrock. The technical section involves challenging rappels in heavy water followed by deep pools and can be done several times if desired. You return the way you came.

### Trailhead

This hike is located in the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation and you must therefore obtain a hiking day permit from the tribe before embarking on it. We obtained our permit on the way to the hike from a gas station/convenience store that is located next door to a Country Kitchen restaurant on the north side of Highway 60 at the east end of the city of Globe. This gas station is just about 200 yards west of the intersection where Highway 60 turns north and Highway 70 heads east. Recreation permits cost \$10.00 per person. For additional information contact the San Carlos Apache Tribe, Recreation and Wildlife Department, P.O.Box 97, San Carlos, AZ 85550 or telephone (928)-475-2343 or see the website [www.scattrw.com](http://www.scattrw.com).

Finding the trailhead for this hike is a little challenging so careful navigation and use of a GPS is recommended. From Globe, Arizona, drive east on Highway



70. About 19mi from the Highway 60 turn-off, you will pass the turn-off for the San Carlos Apache tribal town of Peridot and 5.2mi beyond that turn-off you should come to the junction with Route 8 at 33°17.17'N 110°22.20'W that is signposted "Point of Pines Road". Turn left here and drive 11.7mi to a rough dirt turn-off and gate at 33°23.63'N 110°14.42'W. Proceed through the gate and down the dirt road; after 0.2mi make a left turn where you see a large pond on your right, the South Summit Tank. Proceed another 0.8mi along this rough and rutted dirt road to where you make a sharp, right turn at 33°24.20'N 110°15.04'W. Follow this improving dirt road for 2.1mi to its end at 33°25.43'N 110°13.79'W. You should see the large pond known as the Summit Tank off to your right just about 50yds away. Park here in some convenient place in this sparse cholla forest. [Note: If you make a right turn rather than a left at the South Summit Tank you will also reach your destination at the Summit Tank by way of a better road but one that does not appear on the topo map.]

## Hike

From the slight rise on which you parked (33°25.43'N 110°13.79'W and elevation 4300ft), a flat plain lies before you to the north. Though you cannot see it from this vantage point the canyon of the San Carlos River cuts deeply through this plain a little over a mile to the north. To find the recommended entry point into this steep canyon, the Petroglyph Entry, it is recommended that you use a GPS device to navigate across this featureless flat plain directly to that entry point. The Petroglyph Entry (elevation 4170ft) is at 33°26.08'N 110°15.64'W (WSG84) and lies 2.2mi roughly WNW from your Summit Tank parking place. The hike across this flat plain is easy, the terrain varying between low grass and sparse cholla forest. The canyon comes dramatically into view only when you come within a few hundred yards of its precipitous edge. The uppermost 50ft to 100ft of the canyon wall is almost everywhere vertical. There are only a few places along the sharp rim where it is possible to descend without a rope and therefore considerable care needs to be taken to find the accessible



*Left: View from Petroglyph Entry with waterfall below. Right: The 20ft waterfall.*

descent route (that also allows ascent at the end of the day!). Viewed from the rim, the Petroglyph Entry is fairly obviously descendable for the first 60ft or so. One location confirmation is the substantial waterfall (about 20ft high) in the canyon bottom almost directly below that point on the rim. In addition, the entry point can be identified by the spiral petroglyph on a rock surface facing you at the most obvious point where you begin the descent. Even if you do not have a GPS it should be possible to find the Petroglyph Entry using these clues if you head directly northwest from the parking area and walk west along the rim until you see the waterfall and then the petroglyph. On the direct approach it should take you 1hr to get to the Petroglyph Entry from the Summit Tank.

Begin the descent by clambering down about 60ft over boulders and then contouring west along the bottom of the rim cliff for about 100yds. There you should be able to discern a boulder-filled shallow gully that you can descend all the way to the canyon bottom. You should reach the bottom (elevation 3760ft) about 1hr 30min from the start. The waterfall is about 100yds upstream of where you reach the river and is worth a visit for several reasons. On a hot day the pool below it is a beautiful swimming hole. In addition it is worth seeing the crystal-laced rock on the sides of the pool.

[Aside: If you feel you have lots of time you might wish to drop into the canyon further upstream at the Alternate Entry point marked on the map. This way you will see more of the San Carlos River Canyon. The Alternate Entry is a steep boulder-filled gully that begins at 33°26.08'N 110°14.47'W and an elevation of 4200ft and drops down into a small side canyon that is evident on the map. The first part of the descent involves clambering down boulders but about half way down you will need to traverse left over a small shoulder into the next gully and then traverse beyond that to access an inclined ledge that takes you to the bottom. The descent of the side canyon involves climbing around or wading a series of about 8 pools before you emerge into the main San Carlos River Canyon. From the start to the Alternate Entry takes about 35min, the descent to the main canyon about another hour. The subsequent hike down the main canyon to the 20ft waterfall then takes another hour so this alternate route adds approximately 1hr to the day's adventure.]

From the 20ft waterfall it is a straightforward boulder-hopping 40min hike downstream to the short technical section known as Crystal Canyon. Just before you reach this destination, there is an interesting cave and a huge debris woodpile on the left wall that gives some idea of the magnitude of the flash floods that can come through this canyon. The short technical section begins at 33°26.45'N 110°16.22'W and an elevation of 3680ft; you should reach this point about 2hrs 10min after the start. It begins with a short section of rapids that reputedly can be slid and that carry the river down into a large rock enclosure and pool. The exit from this pool is a vertical 20ft waterfall that drops into an even larger pool. If you decide to descend the rapids you are committed to jumping this 20ft waterfall and swimming the larger pool to the exit between this upper technical section and the lower one. However, this upper section is readily bypassed along the shelf on the right if you are not keen on jumping.

The lower technical section follows almost immediately and is much more dramatic and challenging. You can leave your backpack and gear at the top and take only what you need for the two rappels since you will be returning to this point when the fun is done. Once fully wetsuited, harnessed and helmeted you should also equip yourself with an easily reached belay loop complete with carabiner for the challenge that lies ahead. The descent of the lower section begins with a 40ft vertical rappel down alongside (and perhaps in) a plunging spout to a deep cliff-ringed pool that is readily viewed from the ledge overhead. There is a loose bolt just under the left side of the lip that could be used to anchor this first rappel but ought to be backed up by webbing around the boulder about 20ft back from the lip. You can recover this webbing on your return trip. It is likely that this 40ft rappel will deposit you behind the waterfall on the right side where there is also an underwater ledge that will allow an easy disconnect. Then with your belay carabiner in hand you should swim along the right side of the pool where there are a few slippery underwater ledges that you can use to pause and plan the next move.

The discharge from this pool exits through a narrow, 3ft wide slot and crashes down another 70ft or so into a very large pool at the exit from the technical section. The anchors for this second rappel are two solid bolts in the cliff-face just to the right of the slot discharge. The problem is to climb up and hook your belay line into this anchor that is about 4ft above the water surface when there are only some very slippery underwater ledges to use to elevate yourself while at the same time the current is carrying you toward the lip. Once elevated there is a small and not-so-slippery ledge right at the water surface level that allows

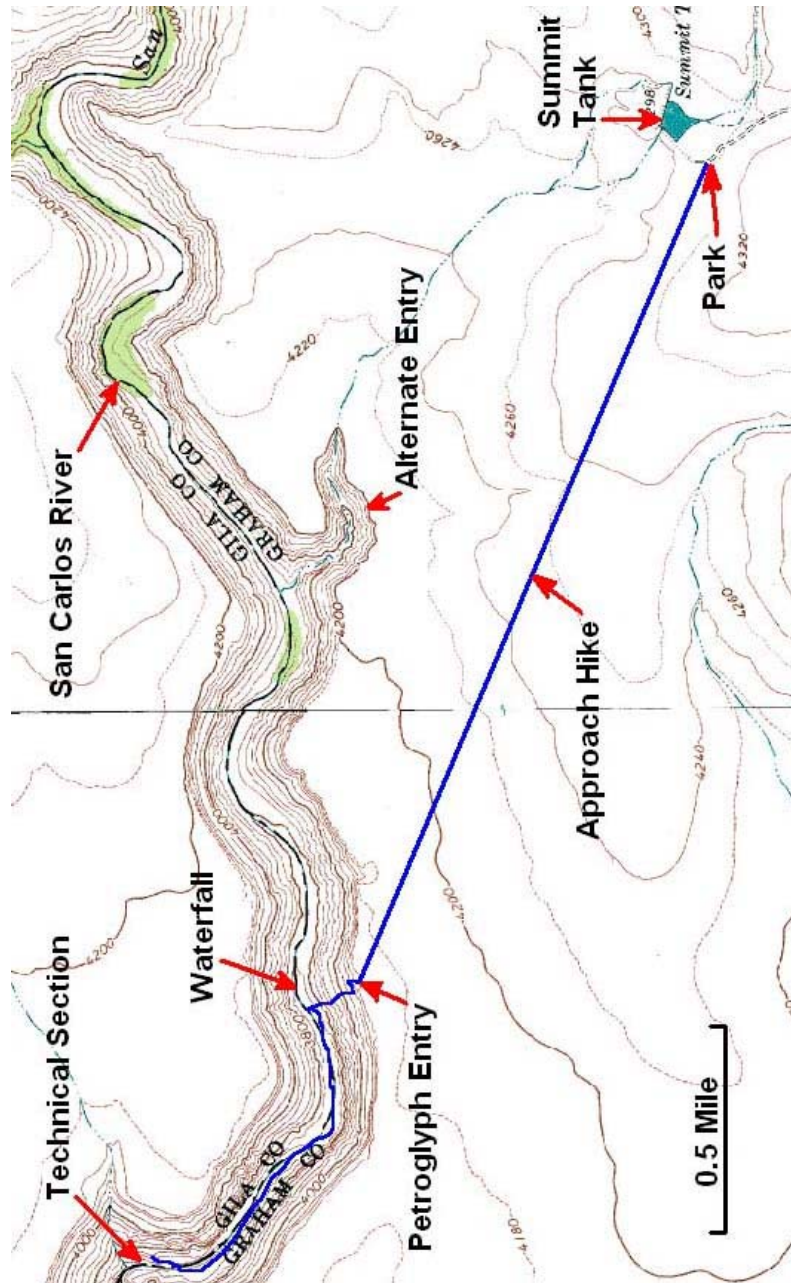


*Left: The first rappel from above. Right: The lower technical section from downstream.*

a comfortable position from which to deploy the rope for this second rappel. It would be a good idea for the first person descending the first rappel to use the rope from that first rappel as a safety line until secured at this anchor for the second rappel. When secured the first descender can then help secure his/her companions.

Once on rope the second rappel is more challenging than the first for it is harder (almost impossible) to avoid a pounding from the roaring stream. The best you can do is keep close to the right wall and then slide around a corner out of the mainstream about halfway down. The last part is a slide down a gently sloping chute in the raging water and then a swim part-way across the pool to a convenient ledge on the right. Once you have all descended you will swim the last 40yds of the pool to where the slot opens up completely.

This then completes the technical section and you must climb up a scree slope under an overhanging cliff on the right to access a ledge high above the lower technical section. This allows you to traverse back to the top of the lower technical section along a rough use trail. Some choose to go through a second time before heading home. It is likely that you will spend about 2hrs in the technical section and therefore start the return trip about 4hrs after the morning start. It will then take about 40min to hike back to the 20ft waterfall, 30min to climb back to the rim at the Petroglyph Entry and about 50min to hike back to the Summit Tank and your vehicle. Thus the adventure should take about 6hrs during which you will travel 6.5mi.



Map of Crystal Canyon Hike



## Chapter 3

# SOUTHEAST UTAH

The southeastern corner of Utah is a scorched wilderness of sandstone rock, crevassed by the movement of the earth, wind and water and baked by the searing summer sun. Not much lives there: a few hardy shrubs and small animals capable of finding coolness deep within the ground. Some pioneers survived their travels through this land; virtually none stayed for it was not possible to live here. When the Glen Canyon Dam was completed, Lake Powell flooded a spidery maze of canyons and men came by boat to enjoy the beauty of the rock and the water. Roads were cut and paved to allow access to marinas within this network and the beauty of the wilderness surrounding Lake Powell began to be appreciated and enjoyed.

It is a landscape of huge vistas with great redstone cliffs and flat mesas as far as the eye can see. The relief is dominated by the enormous canyons cut by the Colorado river. But that great river also has thousands of tributaries. Each of these has its own canyons, often extremely deep and narrow because of the special way in which the storm water runs off this bare land and cuts deep slots through the slick rock. And so for a huge area, this land is riven through with narrow slot canyons, places of special beauty and adventure. In this collection, we include descriptions of several of the slots accessible from Utah Highway 95, the road that runs from Hanksville down to the Hite crossing of the Colorado.

On the eastern side of Lake Powell, White Canyon begins high on Cedar Mesa a short distance west of the town of Blanding and flows west for about 40mi, eventually emptying into Lake Powell near the Hite marina. This is a parched land of tortured rock, crenelated and crevassed by the movement of the earth, the wind and the water. Baked dry by the scorching summer sun, it nevertheless sees downpours from summer storms and winter rains. When that happens, the catchment area of White Canyon is so large that great flash floods crash through the canyons, eroding through the layers of rock and creating great gullies in the soft sandstone. This chapter includes a number of descents of White Canyon



**Southeast Utah region.**

and its tributaries.

For further information on these and other slot canyons in southeast Utah the reader is referred to Kelsey (2003) and for information on Lake Powell, Kelsey's (2001) book on that subject is also very valuable.

## 3.1 Maidenwater Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 8 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3.7 miles
- Elevation gain: 560 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Black Table
- Difficulties: Much downclimbing often requiring belays, seven rappels up to 30 feet, some waist deep wading
- Special equipment: 60 feet rope, 30 feet webbing, 8 rappel rings, full rappeling equipment, gloves, dry bag, head lamp
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Maidenwater Canyon originates in the foothills of the Henry mountains and joins Trachyte Creek on its way to Lake Powell. It is accessible because Utah Highway 276 branches off from Highway 95 to service Bullfrog Marina on the shores of the lake and crosses Maidenwater on the way. The canyon is narrow in places, sometimes no more than 2ft in width. The descent requires about seven short rappels and a great deal of downclimbing with chimneying, stemming and body-jamming. Some of the downclimbing is quite challenging and many will want a belay to prevent any mishaps. It is useful to keep a 30ft piece of webbing available for this purpose. Because of all this downclimbing, it is advisable to wear old clothes.

The hike is best undertaken in the spring or fall in order to avoid the 100 degree plus heat of the summer (though it is cooler in the shaded sections of the canyon). However, the danger of flash floods is extreme and so you should keep a sharp eye out for thunderstorms, particularly late in the day. Even in summer, there are waist deep pools to wade and there may even be a swim so a small dry bag for valuables is recommended.

### Trailhead

From the junction of Highway UT 276 and Highway UT 95 (26mi southeast of Hanksville, Utah), drive south on UT 276 for 9.4mi to where the road dips down to cross an embankment over the South Fork of Maidenwater Canyon. Mile marker 9.4 is nearby. Park in one of the small dirt turn-offs just south of the crossing of Maidenwater (37°53.62'N 110°34.17'W).

## Hike

Access to the South Fork of Maidenwater Canyon is gained by hiking up the ridge and rim on the north side of the canyon. From the point where the road crosses the canyon by means of a substantial rock-filled embankment, hike north along the road for about 400yds, counting the low ridges on the left or west side. Though it is not critical, the third low ridge provides the best route ( $37^{\circ}53.84'N$   $110^{\circ}34.28'W$ ). Hike up the apex of the ridge. It merges into a more significant ridge separating the South Fork of Maidenwater from the Middle Fork that soon becomes visible on your right. A small sub-fork of the South Fork is evident on the left but you soon contour around the head of this. Passing up over a broad flat shoulder while following the rim of the South Fork, you find yourself hiking a wide shelf between the canyon and a line of pock-marked cliffs. About 1hr and 2mi from the start at an elevation of about 5210ft you will come to the obvious head of the canyon, defined almost everywhere by a 50ft plus cliff. Walk around the head of the canyon to the south side and then continue along that side for about 150yds to where there is a break in the cliff and a dead tree ( $37^{\circ}53.53'N$   $110^{\circ}35.74'W$ ). An easy downclimb and a single cairn will bring you to a small but steep slickrock downclimb whose descent places you on a sand and scree covered shelf. Turn left and hike along the shelf to the canyon bottom.

Heading downstream in the canyon bed, the downclimbing starts immediately and, within minutes, you come to the first rappel, a 20ft drop from a deadman anchor (elevation 5090ft). The canyon is narrow right from the start

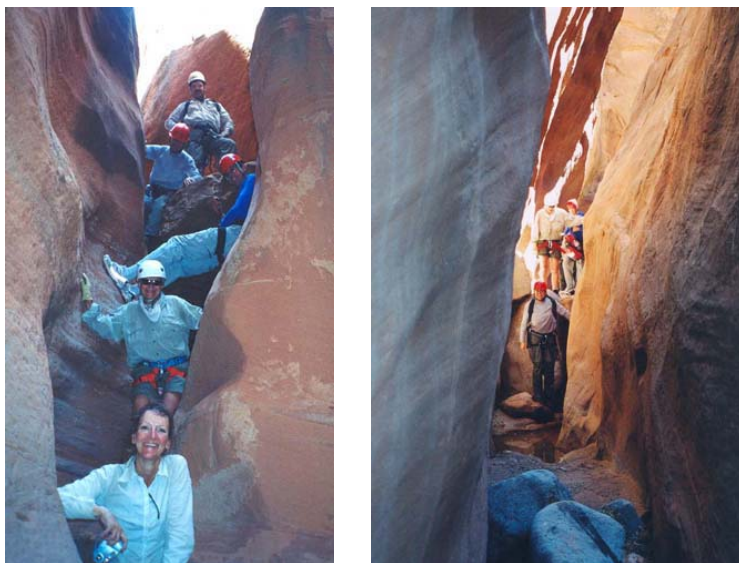


*Left: View of canyon from road embankment. Right: View of Maidenwater near canyon head.*

but never becomes a really narrow slot like the nearby Irish canyons (see Blarney and Leprechaun Canyons). Maidenwater does, however, have lots of downclimbing, some of it quite challenging. Many will want frequent belays and it is useful to keep a 30ft piece of webbing available for this purpose. Note that the tough downclimbs occur more often toward the end of the canyon.

A little over 2hr from the start and not far below the first rappel, you will encounter the second, a 15ft descent using a chockstone anchor. Note that when we passed this way all the rappels had webbing and rappel ring anchors that were in fair condition though the webbing may need replacement. The third rappel is not far distant and is again provided with a chockstone anchor. It is a short 12ft drop but has a very awkward entry. More downclimbing and then, 3hr from the start at an elevation of 4960ft, you arrive at the fourth rappel, a 15ft drop from a deadman anchor. The fifth rappel follows shortly and comprises a 20ft drop from a chockstone anchor. Just below this point there is a pretty downclimb in a twisting slot that ends in a cool and normally dry pothole that makes a pleasant place for lunch.

Downstream of the dry pothole, the downclimbing gets tougher and more frequent. At 4890ft and a net 4hr from the start you will encounter an awkward 12ft downclimb. About 30min later there is a tough 20ft chimney downclimb into a pool. Then a little over 5hr from the start there is some welcome variation as the canyon broadens briefly with a large amphitheater on the left. But the walls soon close in again and there is a 15ft downclimb to negotiate, followed by the sixth rappel at 4770ft elevation. This is a 25ft rappel from a chockstone anchor into a 4ft deep pool that turns right and disappears before ending.



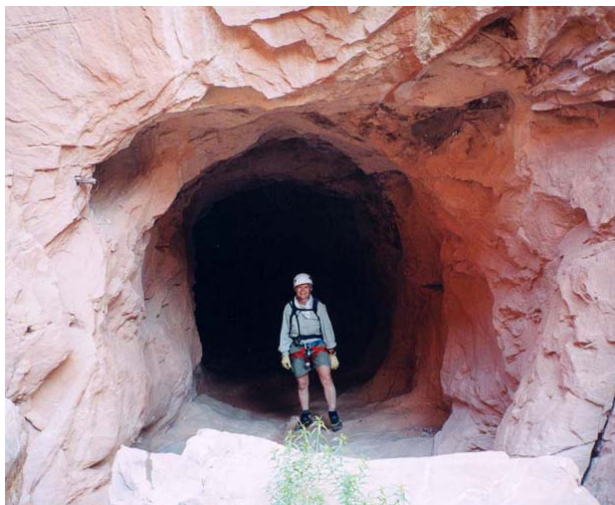
*Left: Group in twisting slot. Right: Near the end of Maidenwater Canyon.*



This wet rappel is followed by an easy stretch free of substantial downclimbs at the end of which the canyon opens up and you catch your first view of the road embankment about 100yds ahead of you. Soon however, you drop down into the final section of slot that contains three tricky downclimbs including one of about 20ft where most people will want a belay. It is just a few yards from this downclimb to the top of the seventh and last rappel.

You should reach this last rappel about 7.5hr from the start. There is a webbing anchor fixed behind a big boulder on the left side; the drop is about 30ft down into a dark slot. The slot contains several more downclimbs and one dry but potentially deep pothole before you arrive abruptly at the entrance to the tunnel through the road embankment ( $37^{\circ}53.69'N$   $110^{\circ}34.20'W$ ). The tunnel is only about 100yds long and plenty high enough to walk through without stooping. However, even though you can see the light at the other end, it is important to don your head lamp before proceeding since the tunnel floor is rough and there is a 4ft deep trench on the right side about 2/3 of the way through. Upon exiting the tunnel turn immediately left and climb the scree to the road and the end of the hike.

Though the hike covers only about 3.7mi it will take a moderate group about 8hr of hiking to complete.



*Tunnel under the road.*



Map of Maidenwater Canyon Hike

## 3.2 Blarney Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 2.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 340 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Turkey Knob
- Difficulties: 3 rappels up to 40ft, narrow slots as small as 15in and many downclimbs
- Special equipment: 80 feet rope, 40 feet webbing, 3 rappel rings, full rappeling gear, gloves and protection for knees and elbows
- ACA Rating: 3B II

Just past the junction of Highway 95 with Highway 276 there is a group of readily accessible slot canyons on the north side of the road that are called the “Irish Canyons”. These run down into the North Wash, the stream bed that the road follows. These canyons include Shillelagh, Blarney and Leprechaun Canyons. Each of these have several forks. Here we describe a descent of the Left Fork of Blarney Canyon.

Like the other Irish canyons, Blarney is very narrow in places, sometimes no more than a foot in width. Consequently it is not for those with a heavy build nor for those who suffer from claustrophobia. Though the hike is quite short, squeezing through this defile can be both exhausting and very hard on clothing. Wear old clothes and cover your elbows and knees otherwise you will leave copious skin in the canyon. Blarney Canyon requires three short rappels and much downclimbing with chimneying, stemming and body-jamming.

The hike is best undertaken in the spring or fall in order to avoid the 100 degree plus heat of the summer (though it is much cooler in the slots). The danger of flash floods is extreme and so you should keep a sharp eye out for thunderstorms, particularly late in the day. Even in summer, there may be foot deep pools to wade so be prepared for wet feet.

Note that the approach hike described below is also the approach for the neighboring canyon to the northwest, known as Shillelagh Canyon (pronounced “Shill-ay-lee”). Shillelagh is also an excellent canyoneering venture. In Ireland blarney means talk/chat/stories while a shillelagh is a club/weapon/walking stick cut from a blackthorn bush; we chose Blarney “because talk is better than war”.

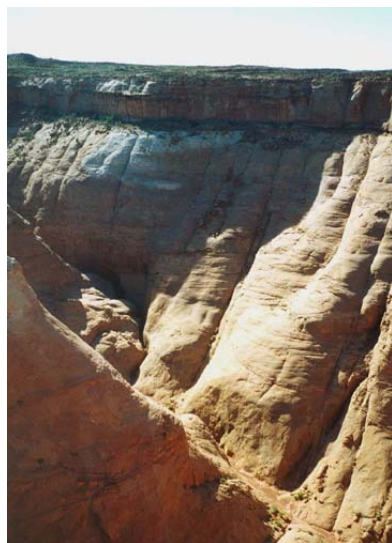
## Trailhead

The trailhead for Blarney Canyon ( $38^{\circ}1.27'N$   $110^{\circ}32.90'W$ ) is a short dirt road spur on the northeast side of Highway UT 95 just southeast of the junction of Highway UT 276 and Highway UT 95 roughly 26mi southeast of Hanksville, Utah. Drive southeast down Highway UT 95 from that junction to mile post 27.6 and look for the short dirt spur on your left. Drive about 50yds and park in the shade under the slickrock bluff.

## Hike

From the dirt turnout (elevation 4520ft) you will see Blarney Canyon immediately on your left and defined on the other side of the narrow wash by a slickrock nose. Hike across Blarney Wash to that nose and begin to ascend the ridge, staying close its apex. As you climb Blarney is the canyon on your right; the canyon on your left is Shillelagh Canyon.

The hike up the apex of the slickrock ridge is easy but steep. As you near the top go left around a cap rock bluff and then follow the use-trail up onto the mesa top. Here you will get a fine view of Blarney Canyon on your right with its Left and Right Forks (there is a short additional fork closer to you) and Shillelagh Canyon on your left. The use-trail on the mesa is quite evident and about 30min from the start at an elevation of 4860ft it proceeds across a narrow isthmus ( $38^{\circ}1.79'N$   $110^{\circ}32.60'W$ ) between Blarney and Shillelagh Canyons. On the far side of the isthmus, the trail forks. The left fork goes to the head of Shillelagh Canyon. You take the right fork and proceed along close to the rim



*Left: Looking down into Blarney Canyon. Right: View into head of Blarney Canyon.*

of Blarney Canyon. About 50min and 1.2mi from the start at an elevation of 4860ft, you will arrive at the head of Blarney Canyon, or rather at a small hanging fork just before the head ( $38^{\circ}1.99'N$   $110^{\circ}32.40'W$ ).

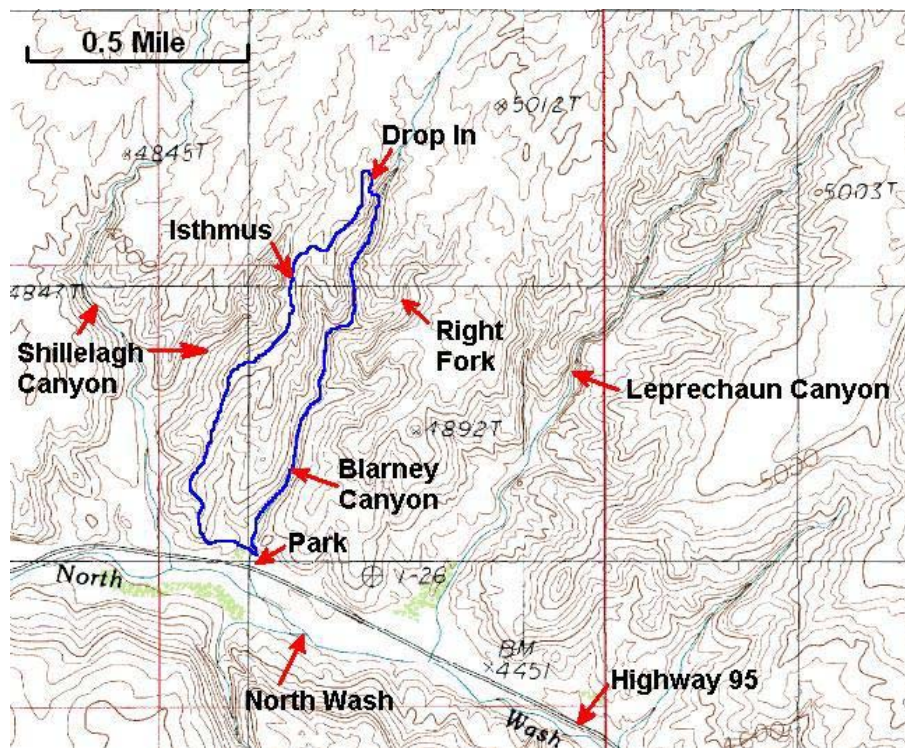
The descent into the bottom of Blarney Canyon is a two step process. The first step is to find the only place that allows easy climb down into the small hanging fork; that place is around the far side of the head of the fork. A short slickrock downclimb brings you to the top of the first rappel, a 40ft vertical drop into the wide Left Fork from an anchor around a large boulder (you should be able to see this webbing from the rim above and thus confirm your location before beginning the descent).

Just 50yds down canyon from the first rappel, the stream bed drops into a narrow slot in the middle of the broad canyon. This requires the second rappel, a 30ft drop from a wrap around a large boulder at the head of the slot. Note that this drop can be downclimbed by accessing the slot through a hole at the back of the large boulder. Downstream of this second rappel, the slot is narrow and very interesting. At 4690ft and about 2hrs from the start, you arrive at the top of the third rappel in a narrow slot; this is a 40ft drop from a wrap around a rock into a dark and narrow defile. Just around the corner from this descent there is a neat room. From there the slot continues very narrow with many neat downclimbs frequently requiring friction jams. About 3hrs from the start at 4630ft the slot opens up and you arrive at the confluence with the Right Fork of Blarney Canyon. Continuing downstream in a broad wash you encounter one last short slot cut into the bottom of the wash. Beyond this it is an easy walk to the trailhead ( $38^{\circ}1.27'N$   $110^{\circ}32.90'W$ ). It should take about 3hrs 20min to complete the hike.



*Left: At the first rappel. Right: In Blarney Canyon.*





Map of Blarney Canyon Hike

### 3.3 Leprechaun Canyon

#### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3.0 miles
- Elevation gain: 500 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Turkey Knob
- Difficulties: 4 rappels up to 30ft, many downclimbs and narrow slots as small as 15in wide
- Special equipment: 80 feet rope, 50 feet webbing, 4 rappel rings, full rappeling gear, gloves and protection for knees and elbows
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Just past the junction of Highway 95 with Highway 276 there is a group of readily accessible slot canyons on the north side of the road that are called the “Irish Canyons”. This includes Shillelagh, Blarney and Leprechaun Canyons. Each of these have several forks. Here we describe a descent of the Left Fork of Leprechaun Canyon; the Middle Fork is longer and more arduous; the Right Fork is similar to the Left but bypasses a particularly interesting section below the junction of the Middle and Left Forks.



*Looking down into Leprechaun Canyon.*

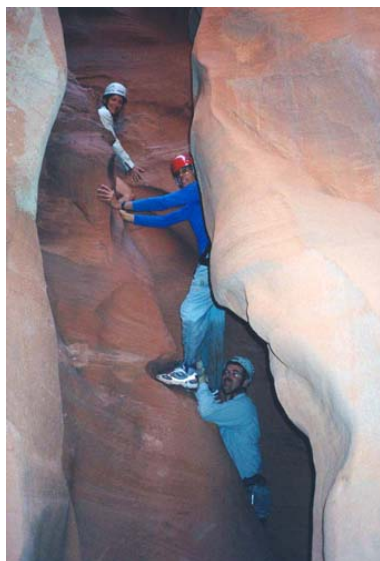
Leprechaun Canyon is very narrow in places, sometimes no more than a foot in width. Consequently it is not for those with a heavy build nor for those who suffer from claustrophobia. Though the hike is quite short, squeezing through this defile can be both exhausting and very hard on clothing. Wear old clothes and cover your elbows and knees otherwise you will leave skin in the canyon. The Left Fork requires four short rappels and much downclimbing with chimneying, stemming and body-jamming.

The hike is best undertaken in the spring or fall in order to avoid the 100 degree plus heat of the summer (though it is much cooler in the slots). The danger of flash floods is extreme and so you should keep a sharp eye out for thunderstorms, particularly late in the day. Even in summer, there may be foot deep pools to wade so be prepared for wet feet.

## Trailhead

The trailhead for Leprechaun Canyon ( $38^{\circ}1.06'N$   $110^{\circ}32.19'W$ ) is a short dirt road spur on the northeast side of Highway UT 95 just southeast of the junction of Highway UT 276 and Highway UT 95 roughly 26mi southeast of Hanksville, Utah. Drive southeast down Highway UT 95 from that junction to mile post 28.1 and look for the short dirt spur on your left. Pull in a few yards and park.

Note that it is particularly important to identify Leprechaun Canyon correctly. Though the canyons to the northwest (Blarney and Shillelagh) provide excellent canyoneering adventures, the next canyon to the southeast, known as Sandthrax Canyon, is much harder and is dangerous for all but the highly ex-



*Left: Team downclimbing. Right: At junction with Right Fork.*

perienced. However, if you park in the right spur road, Leprechaun Canyon is almost directly ahead of you and an error is highly unlikely.

## Hike

From where you parked (elevation 4450ft) hike along the dirt spur road as it veers a little left. The road quickly becomes a rough use-trail that follows the wash into Leprechaun Canyon. As you hike up the wash, look for a large side canyon on the left about 20min and 0.7mi from the start. You want to climb up the apex of the slickrock nose ( $38^{\circ}1.51'N$   $110^{\circ}31.97'W$ ) separating this side canyon from the main canyon. While steep in a few places this ascent is quite straightforward though it takes a little route finding to avoid steep places or substantial exposure. Make sure that you can access the ridge top even though you may veer left or right to pass some high points. You should detect a use-trail in places. About 4750ft elevation you should begin to get a good view of Leprechaun Canyon and all of its forks below you on the right. As you near the mesa top just a little further on (about 1hr from the start) at 4830ft, follow the use-trail to the right of a low bluff and you should encounter an old 1922 Survey Marker. This spot must have been truly remote in 1922! There is another great view from the rim beside the survey marker.

Now on the mesa top, it is easier to discern the use-trail. Follow it along the canyon rim for several hundred yards and you will come to the first of two small forks that form the start of the Left Fork of Leprechaun Canyon. Contour around this first small fork to the apex between the two forks. You should



*Left: In Belfast Boulevard. Right: Zigzag slot at end of Leprechaun Canyon.*



reach this drop-in point (38°2.08'N 110°31.71'W and elevation 4940ft) about 1hr 20min and 1.5mi from the start.

Before beginning your descent check carefully to ensure that you have found the right place. The two small forks are both about 100yds long and have one small, easily descended step at the rim followed by a 20ft cliff that is mostly undownclimbable. The descent of this step is just to the left of the apex between the two small forks. From there you should be able to easily walk down the slickrock to the junction of the two small forks and the start of the Left Fork of Leprechaun Canyon.

At the slickrock junction of the two small forks, the stream bed drops about 30ft into a narrow slot. This necessitates the first rappel. The anchor is a deadman in a small water-filled pothole just a few feet back from the lip. You should rebuild the deadman to ensure its viability. In doing so it is wise to extend the webbing all the way over the first edge of the lip. While this may make the entry to the rappel a little harder it greatly eases rope recovery. You will note the grooves in the rock worn by the ropes of previous visitors. From the bottom of this first rappel it is but a short distance to the top of the second, a 20ft drop from a sling into a shallow pool. During our descent we found webbing anchors at all of the rappels though you should be prepared to replace the webbing. There followed some great narrows with a number of challenging downclimbs.

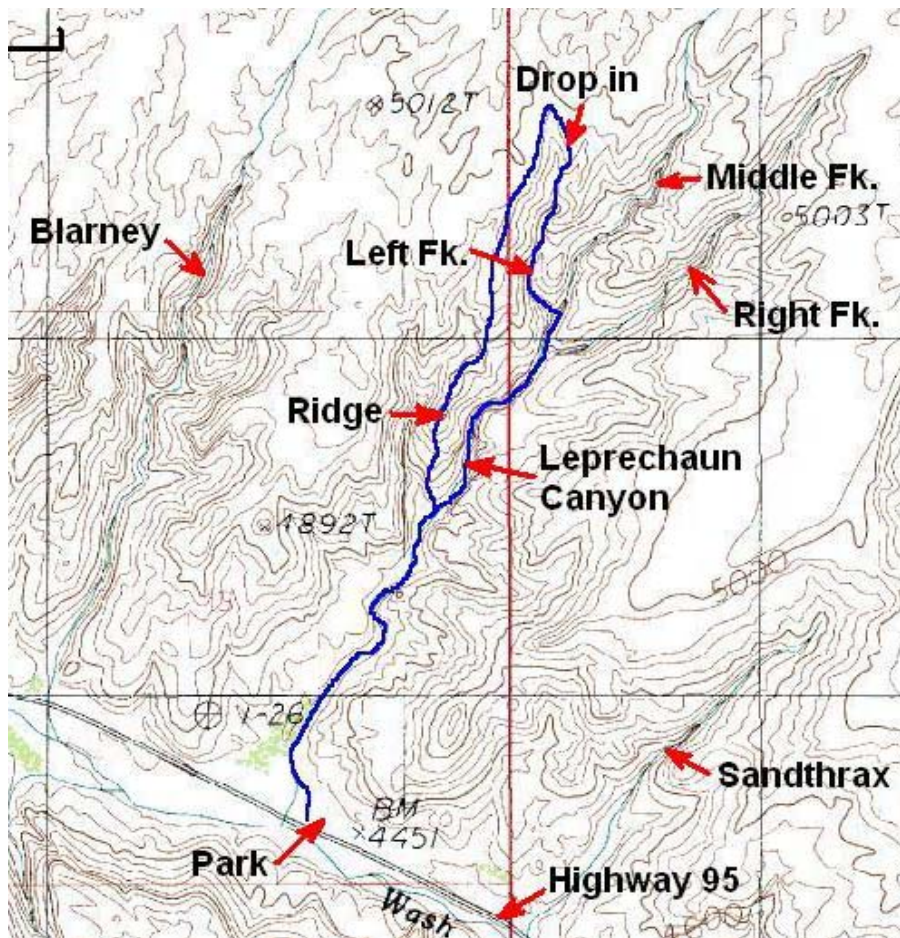
About 3hrs from the start at an elevation of 4680ft you will arrive at the top of the third rappel, a 30ft drop from a deadman anchor into a knee-deep pool. It is possible to climb around this drop on the left side but the rappel is safer. More narrows follow. The canyon broadens briefly before closing in again and here you come to the awkward fourth rappel, a 15ft descent using a webbing wrap around large boulder. About 20min later and 3.5hrs (and 1.9mi) from the start at an elevation of 4580ft you will come to the obvious junction of the Left and Middle Forks of Leprechaun Canyon (38°1.82'N 110°31.73'W). Take a few minutes to explore up the Middle Fork that is very narrow (about 1ft wide) and, as mentioned earlier, is an arduous descent. Downstream of the confluence, the canyon also becomes very narrow and you begin the most challenging section of this hike. Not only is it physically exhausting but it is also quite damaging to your clothing. Few people escape with intact shorts!

The challenge begins almost immediately with a section of inclined slot that is only about 15in wide. The inclination makes it surprisingly difficult to move forward. Then the slot drops deeper and you may want to get out your head lamp for it will get even darker. Next you come to a place where a substantial rock fall has blocked progress along the slot. Depending on the deposition of sand in the canyon bottom you may have to climb over this rock fall, but we were able to crawl and squirm underneath it in the dark. Here you do need your head lamp. The crawl ends at a 12ft downclimb where you chimney down in the dark. This is followed by more 15in narrows that open up a little before you abruptly arrive at the end of the very narrow slot and at the junction with the Right Fork (38°1.76'N 110°31.76'W).



The junction with the Right Fork (elevation 4540ft) is marked by many names scratched into the sandstone. You should arrive here about 4.5hr after the morning start. You might take a moment to climb up the Right Fork but your way is soon blocked by a substantial drop that is the last rappel in the Right Fork.

While the junction marks the end of the super narrows, just downstream there is a spectacular, broader slot including a section known as “Belfast Boulevard”. Here a broad tunnel down below (often with a shallow pool) allows passage but has a high and very narrow slot up above it. Belfast Boulevard suddenly opens up into a beautiful broad canyon where you feel able to breathe again after hours of constriction. After a few hundred yards of easy hiking there is one last section of narrows cut into the canyon floor. These short narrows have an interesting zigzag section but soon end as one returns to broad canyon. From here it is an easy walk in the wash down past the nose where you began the ascent earlier in the day. You should reach the trailhead ( $38^{\circ}1.06'N$   $110^{\circ}32.19'W$ ) a little over 5hr from the morning start having covered a total distance of only 3mi.



Map of Leprechaun Canyon Hike

## 3.4 Black Hole of White Canyon

### Important Warning

The descriptions and ratings listed here refer to the conditions prior to the year 2004. In that year a major flash flood in the White Canyon radically altered the conditions in the Black Hole, depositing very large quantities of wood and creating large woodpiles that have made travel through the Black Hole much more difficult and dangerous than suggested in this account. The revised ACA Rating is 4BR/X III.

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 5.2 hours plus 40 minutes back along road
- Estimated hiking distance: 5 miles plus 2 miles back along road
- Elevation gain: 350 feet plus 320 feet back along road
- USGS Topo Map: Copper Point
- Difficulties: Long swims in a narrow slot, some downclimbing
- Special equipment: 60 feet of webbing or rope, wetsuit and dry bags
- ACA Rating: 3B II

Because of the nature of the rock, in one place not far from its terminus, the eroded gorge of White Canyon is particularly narrow and the water-filled slot within it is a dark and forbidding place known as the Black Hole of White Canyon. This adventure descends through this section of the canyon. To do so it is necessary to swim several hundred yards down narrow water-filled slots in which the sun is almost blocked out by the black, overhanging cliffs. It is an awesome experience, likened to entering a cave. But one that should be taken with great care for to be caught in the Black Hole during a flash flood could and has meant death for some hikers. Even a rainstorm far away can funnel down and cause a flash flood in this lower section of the canyon. Consequently, this adventure should not be undertaken if there is any sign of rain anywhere within sight or any sign of flowing water in the canyon at the point where you descend to the gravel floor. The hike is best undertaken in the summer when the danger is less and when the water through which you must swim has been heated to a pleasant temperature.

## Trailhead

The trailhead for the Black Hole is about 8mi southeast of the Hite marina on Lake Powell or 14mi northwest of the Fry Canyon Lodge on Highway 95 in southeastern Utah. Park in the dirt clearing on the north side of the road just north of mile post 57 on highway 95 ( $37^{\circ}47.93'N$   $110^{\circ}18.31'W$ ). If you wish to leave a car or bicycle at the exit point on highway 95, then drive northwest to mile post 55 where there is another dirt clearance on the north side of the road ( $37^{\circ}48.67'N$   $110^{\circ}20.26'W$ ). This will save you the two mile hike back along the road.

## Hike

From the parking area ( $37^{\circ}47.93'N$   $110^{\circ}18.31'W$  and elevation 4605ft) walk about 150yds northeast along a well-trodden and ducked trail to the head of a side canyon ( $37^{\circ}48.04'N$   $110^{\circ}18.19'W$ ) that leads down into White Canyon. Descending this you should find yourself in the main stream bed of White Canyon just 20min from the start. The sand and gravel floor of White Canyon (elevation 4250ft) should be completely dry at this point. For the reasons given above, if there is even a hint of water flow, you should abandon the hike and return to your vehicle.

Turning left and hiking downstream, the going is initially very easy in the gravel bottom of White Canyon. After about 20min the canyon begins to close in, the walls being eroded into great black bread loaves. About 40min from the trailhead there is a notable black chamber in the right wall. A little later you



*Looking down the entrance gully into White Canyon.*

come to the first awkward boulder obstacle 60min from the start and the first wade about 5min later.

The first of the two downclimbing challenges in this adventure occurs roughly 1.5hr from the start. The drop is about 15ft from a broad, flat ledge on the canyon right onto a sloping rock shelf. Look for the shallow chimney that has good hand and foot holds and provides the best route for descent. There are several large boulders just above the chimney that you could wrap with webbing if you wish to set up a rappel. But the best method of descent is probably to use a short piece of rope or webbing as a belay or handline for all but the last (and best) climber and then to spot that person from below. Immediately below this first downclimb you may choose to descend about 6ft into a narrow slot; however you will soon climb back out again to the left to avoid a stinky pool beneath the boulders.

A short distance downstream you come to the entrance to the Black Hole ( $37^{\circ}48.71'N$   $110^{\circ}18.39'W$ ). This is a good spot at which to prepare for the swimming ahead by donning your wetsuit and making sure your belongings are sealed in your dry bag. From a ledge on the left many young people jump across to a small depression in the rock on the right side of the canyon and, from there, downclimb into the slot itself. The jump is about 3ft. Those averse to jumping (like the author) should slide/downclimb in a very narrow crack on the left side of the canyon just upstream of the jumping point. This drop of about 8ft (the second of the two downclimbs in the Black Hole) deposits you into a pothole with deep water. Swim 8ft across the pothole to a broader vertical crack on the canyon right and climb 6ft up to the landing point for the jump. Whichever route you take to this point you should now downclimb into



*Left: Start of the Black Hole. Right: In the Black Hole.*



the water and begin swimming through the narrow cave-like slot. Initially you cannot discern the end of the swim for you round corners only to encounter yet another stretch of waterway. In two spots you swim under chockstones just a few feet above the water. In several places, there are tree and branch debris piles high overhead that indicate the depth of the flash floods that barrel through this canyon. There are, in fact, several substantial swims interspersed with beaches and small downclimbs, but the longest swim is probably no more than about 40yds.

Eventually you emerge onto a more substantial gravel beach and the canyon broadens somewhat and resumes its gravel-lined floor. You should come to this lower end of the Black Hole about 2hr 45min from the start of the hike. Do not, however, take off your wetsuit just yet for there are several more short swims and a number of deep wades yet to come. Another 45min of hiking brings you (3.5hr from the start) to a spot with green benches on both sides of the canyon. This pretty place marks the end of the water and you can shed the wetsuit and start to dry out. The next section of canyon is lovely and the easy going provides you with time to relax.

About another 1hr of easy hiking brings you near the exit point at an elevation of 3930ft and 4.5hr from the start. Look for the unmistakable narrow canyon that enters on the left at the canyon floor level; there is none other like it. Pass this and continue down White Canyon for another 200yds. You should see a large cylindrical column about 100ft up on the left side of the canyon. Start your ascent out of the canyon at  $37^{\circ}48.97'N$   $110^{\circ}20.24'W$  by traversing back and forth up ledges to the left of the column until you are at the level of its base. Then follow the trail around the base of the column (proceeding downstream) and continue on around a small outcropping to where the trail climbs up a broken gully. Follow the well-ducked trail up this gully, climbing and traversing up to the left. The trail enters another small gully that takes you up to the canyon rim. The road is now just 8min from here. Follow the trail heading due south to the parking lot ( $37^{\circ}48.67'N$   $110^{\circ}20.26'W$  and elevation 4280ft) where you parked the return vehicle. You should reach this point a little over 5hr after setting out. If you have no car shuttle, the 2mi hike back along the road should take about 40min.



## 3.5 Gravel Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7.5 hours plus time to explore the ruins
- Estimated hiking distance: 7 miles
- Elevation gain: 960 feet
- USGS Topo Map: The Cheesebox
- Difficulties: Two rappels up to 35ft, a 30yd swim and much wading and boulder climbing
- Special equipment: Rappeling equipment, 100ft rope, 30ft webbing, 2 rappel rings, harnesses, helmets and dry bags
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Gravel Canyon is a deep gorge that feeds into White Canyon just north of Highway 95. Within its length Gravel contains sections of slot canyon just a few feet wide, sometimes filled with water that require you to swim. In other places there are collections of boulders that present route finding challenges and drop-offs that must be rappeled.

This adventure descends a section of Gravel Canyon some distance upstream of the confluence with White Canyon. Known as the Middle Narrows of Gravel Canyon, it is a strenuous, all-day adventure that is best undertaken in the summer when the water in the deeper slots is not too cold. However, even in the summer, there is a very real danger of flash floods that are created by sudden rain storms and the runoff that funnels down to a torrent in these slot canyons. Do not enter the canyon if there is any sign of rain or of runoff from a recent storm.

Added attractions in this canyon are the Anasazi ruins on ledges near the point of exit from the canyon. With some climbing ability, these can be approached but you should be very careful not to damage any of these precious remains.

### Trailhead

Gravel Canyon is accessed from a rough dirt road known as the Cheesebox Road that branches off Highway 95 17.5mi south of Hite and Lake Powell or 4.5mi north of the Fry Canyon Lodge. The unmarked junction (37°41.00'N 110°13.24'W) is just 200yds north of mile post 67. Note that this road can be quite rutted and so a high clearance vehicle is advisable; though it could be traveled with 2WD, a 4WD vehicle is to be preferred.

Just 100yds down this road you will come to a fork where a spur off to the left leads to the graves of two soldiers who were apparently ambushed and killed while in pursuit of some Paiutes. Continuing along the right fork, the road immediately descends into and then climbs out of the other side of White Canyon. It then follows a fairly flat bench off to the northeast, between White Canyon and a prominent redrock cliff known as Found Mesa. You drive for 12mi (45min) to where another road branches off to the right. Park at this intersection ( $37^{\circ}42.98'N$   $110^{\circ}3.61'W$ ) in the middle of juniper forest.

## Hike

From the intersection ( $37^{\circ}42.98'N$   $110^{\circ}3.61'W$  and elevation 6650ft) hike on up the Cheesebox road for another 0.4mi or 8min. Then leave the road at  $37^{\circ}43.24'N$   $110^{\circ}3.43'W$  and cut left through the juniper forest. Here you will notice the cryptogamic soil that makes up most of the floor of this open forest. Treading on this soil does serious damage to the delicate communities of organisms that create this soil so, to avoid unnecessary damage, try to stay on existing beaten paths or on the patches of slickrock.

Skirt to the north of some smaller drainages before starting to drop down into one of the maze of branches of a larger drainage at  $37^{\circ}43.34'N$   $110^{\circ}3.62'W$ . If you have skirted far enough to the north then, after descending for a while, you should end up on the benches on the north or right side of the larger drainage. Here travel is easier and you will probably find use-trails. Near the bottom of the descent, the stream bed route contains several optional rappels but the route along the ledges on the right is easier and quicker. Work your way back



*Left: In Gravel Canyon Narrows. Right: First rappel.*



and forth until, a little under 1hr (and 1mi) from the start, you descend to the gravel floor at a junction with a large canyon coming in on the right ( $37^{\circ}43.36'N$   $110^{\circ}3.91'W$  and elevation 6360ft).

Downstream of this confluence is a beautiful section of green and open canyon with a sculptured sandstone floor. After about 10min you will come to the first substantial drop in the stream bed that would require a 30ft rappel. However, the ledge on the right leads to an easy trail descent. A little further and you follow the stream bed through a neat triangular “mineshaft”, a passage through the boulders. Another deep slot that would require a 50ft rappel is encountered about 35min from the confluence (or 1hr 25min from the start) but, again, it is easily bypassed on the right. Just a couple of minutes later you will arrive at the confluence with the main fork of Gravel Canyon that enters on the right at  $37^{\circ}43.21'N$   $110^{\circ}4.73'W$  and an elevation of 6080ft. You should reach this junction about 1hr 30min from the start having covered about 2mi.

Now in the main channel of Gravel Canyon, the going gets rougher. You encounter the first serious boulder jam just 10min below the junction and a second one after another 10min. Thereafter the canyon narrows and deepens and 35min from the junction (a little over 2hr from the start) you come to a long section of 6ft wide narrows. Emerging from this, the canyon widens again and there is a stretch of open canyon where the going is easy. This ends at the first rappel that you should reach a little under 3hr from the start at an elevation of about 5800ft.

You arrive at the top of this first rappel just a short distance into a narrow slot. The floor drops about 20ft into a deep round pool. This is a good place to don your wetsuit as well as your rappelling gear. The anchor for the rappel



*Left: Swimming after second rappel. Right: Anasazi ruins from canyon floor.*



is on the left side. Climb out of the slot onto a shelf on the left and then down through a hole between boulders to a space that opens onto the rappel. The anchor is an overhead webbing wrap that allows an easy entry to a 20ft rappel descent. However the water in the pool underneath is at least chest deep and may require a swimming disconnect and a short swim to the nearby gravel beach.

You are now deep in the Middle Narrows of Gravel Canyon and the obstacles arrive with increasing frequency. A short way down canyon from the first rappel, you must climb down about 8ft into a 2ft wide slot with 4ft deep water. Then about 40min from the first rappel you come to the second at a place where an attractive narrow canyon enters on the right. At this junction there is a deep slot in the floor of the main canyon and the second rappel descends about 35ft into the water-filled bottom of this slot. You should reach this point about 3hr 40min from the start. The anchor for the rappel is a small rock-horn in the canyon floor about 12ft to the right of the head of the slot. At the bottom of the rappel, you must effect a swimming disconnect and then swim about 30yds down the slot and around a right turn. This is followed by a couple of smaller swimming pools. Just after this the canyon broadens and there is a beautiful long section with greenery and high overhanging walls on both sides. It is now time to shed your wetsuit and begin to dry out though there are still some wades to come.

You are now approaching the end of the Middle Narrows of Gravel Canyon, having covered a little over 3mi in almost 5hr. At this point you should keep a sharp lookout for the beautiful Anazasi ruins high on the right wall (37°42.60'N 110°6.27'W). There is a particularly impressive ruin directly ahead just after the canyon makes a turn to the right. Downstream of this there are several slots with waist-deep wades before you reach the end of the canyon-bottom route. This occurs at a point where the canyon opens up and you encounter a scattered grove of about six trees with low ledges on both sides of the canyon. This grove of trees marks the end of the canyon descent; you should reach this point (37°42.26'N 110°6.62'W and elevation 5640ft) about 5.3hr (and 4mi) after the morning start. The exit route is on canyon left but you may choose to take time out here to explore the Anazasi ruins on the right side of the canyon.

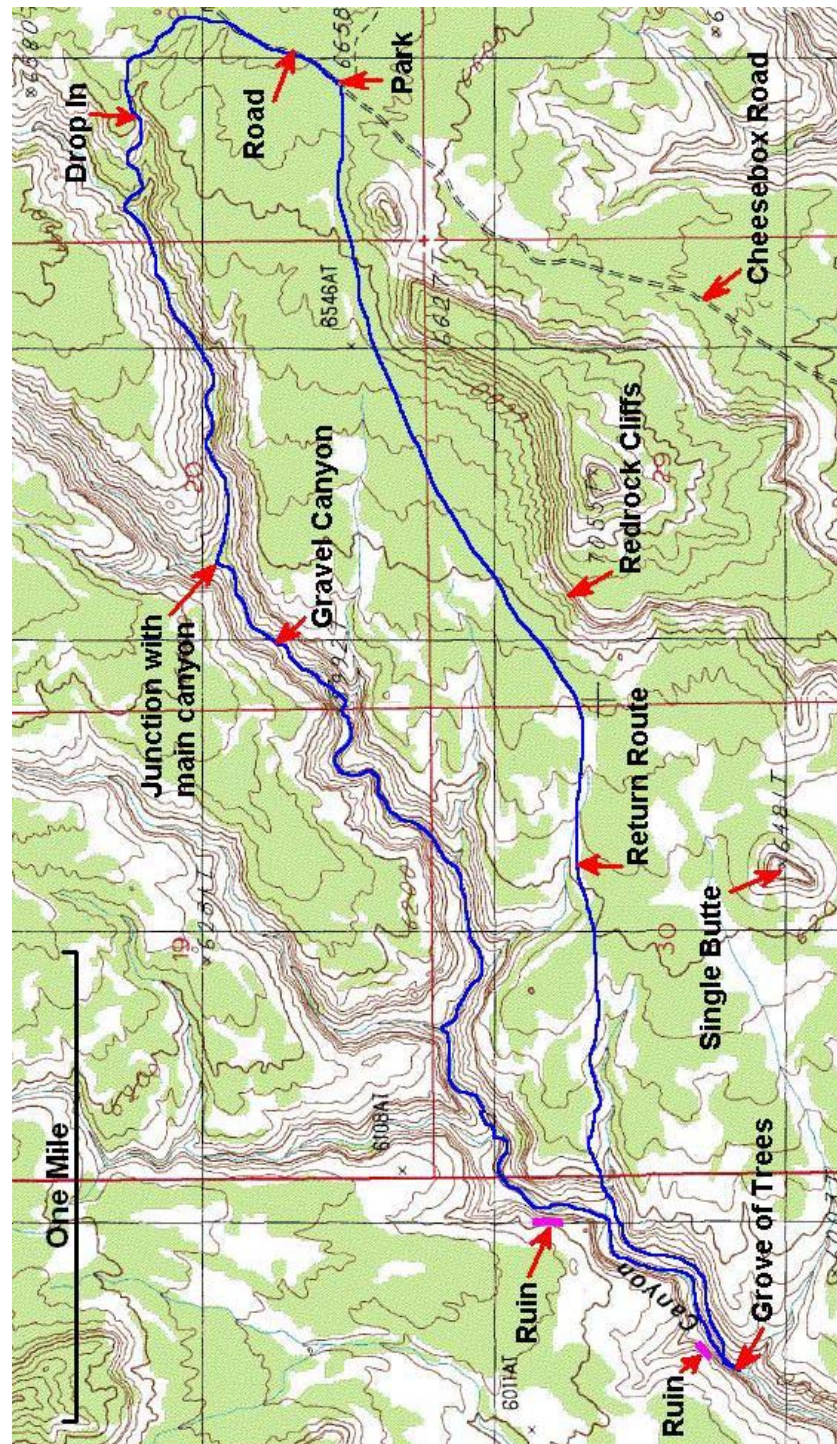
**Side trip to the ruins:** Accessing the Anazasi ruins requires some route finding along the ledges on the canyon right as well as several places where there are significant climbing challenges. There are two sets of ruins, both some distance upstream from the grove of trees exit point. The more modest ruins (37°42.32'N 110°6.57'W) are closer and easier to access. But, if you have time, you should try to get to the second set of ruins that are further upstream at 37°42.60'N 110°6.27'W and more difficult to get to. They are better preserved and more extensive, a real thrill to see.

To get to both sets of ruins, the first step is to climb the rock fall about 30yds downstream from the first tree in the grove. This accesses a narrow ledge. Proceeding back upstream along this ledge there is a small 4ft climb with some exposure before the ledge broadens and allows easy access to the small

first set of ruins about 300yds upstream. To access the more extensive ruins you must make your way a further 400yds upstream to a point on a ledge below the ruins, then continue 100yds further to where you can climb up to the ledge containing the buildings. Finally backtrack down canyon into the ruins.

**Canyon exit:** The grove of trees ( $37^{\circ}42.26'N$   $110^{\circ}6.62'W$ ) is also where you will begin your climb out of Gravel Canyon using ledges on left side of the canyon. Start the climb out by hiking in an upstream direction along the low, slowly rising ledge on the south side of the canyon. In places, you will be tempted to climb to higher ledges, but stay on this lowest ledge for about 600yds to where there is a large shallow gully in the side of the canyon at  $37^{\circ}42.50'N$   $110^{\circ}6.21'W$ . Here you should have a good view of the more extensive ruins on the opposite side of the canyon. Then work your way up the side of the canyon on the north side of the shallow gully. You should reach the canyon rim about 40min from the grove of trees.

From the canyon rim it is a fairly flat, 2mi hike back through the juniper forest to your vehicle. Hike ENE keeping Gravel Canyon on your left and the redrock cliffs of Found Mesa on your right. Aim for a promontory in that band of cliffs about 2mi away. Near the start you should pass well to the left of a prominent and much closer redrock butte that is off to the ESE. On this cross-country route, you will probably find a beaten path through the cryptogamic soil for much of the way. Try to stay on this path or on the patches of slickrock to avoid unnecessary damage to the cryptogamic soil. After 2mi you should pass close to the left of the redrock promontory and then pass another single butte, the very northeast end of Found Mesa. From here hike due east for a short way to the road. It should take 2hr to hike from the grove of trees back to the car ( $37^{\circ}42.98'N$   $110^{\circ}3.61'W$ ).



Map of Gravel Canyon Hike

## 3.6 Cheesebox Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 360 feet
- USGS Topo Map: The Cheesebox
- Difficulties: Three rappels up to 40ft, many small downclimbs and a cold section of narrow slot swimming
- Special equipment: Rappeling equipment, 120 ft rope, 40 ft webbing, 3 rappel rings, harnesses, helmets and dry bags
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Cheesebox Canyon is a deep gorge that feeds into White Canyon just north of Highway 95. Within its length Cheesebox contains sections of slot canyon just a foot wide, sometimes filled with water that requires you to swim. In other places there are collections of boulders that present route finding challenges and drop-offs that must be rappeled.



*At the head of Cheesebox Canyon.*



This adventure descends a section of Cheesebox Canyon a short distance upstream of the confluence with White Canyon. It is a strenuous, all-day adventure that involves swimming deep narrow slot pools that seem buried in the depths of the earth. Since they are far from the sun, the water remains cold even in the summer so a wet suit is very valuable. Even in the summer (the best time for this adventure) there is a very real danger of flash floods, created by sudden rain storms and the runoff that funnels down to a torrent in these slot canyons. Do not enter the canyon if there is any sign of rain or of runoff from a recent storm.

## Trailhead

A car shuttle is highly desirable on this adventure and cuts 2.9mi of road hiking off the end of the day. Drive to an unmarked junction ( $37^{\circ}41.00'N$   $110^{\circ}13.24'W$ ) just 200yds north of mile post 67 on highway 95 at a point about 17.5mi south of Hite and Lake Powell or 4.5mi north of the Fry Canyon Lodge in southeastern Utah. The rough dirt road that leaves the north side of the highway here is known as the Cheesebox Road and is the access route for both Cheesebox Canyon and Gravel Canyon. Note that this road can be quite rutted and so a high clearance vehicle is advisable; though it could be traveled with 2WD, a 4WD vehicle is to be preferred.

Just 100yds along Cheesebox Road you will come to a fork where a spur off to the left leads to the graves of two soldiers who were apparently ambushed and killed while in pursuit of some Paiutes. Continuing along the right fork, the road immediately descends into and then climbs out of the other side of White Canyon. It then follows a fairly flat bench off to the northeast, between White Canyon and a prominent bedrock cliff known as Found Mesa. From highway 95, drive 7.9mi (30min) to a place where the road crosses a large flat area of slick rock ( $37^{\circ}40.38'N$   $110^{\circ}5.64'W$ ). Park the return vehicle here and, in the other vehicle(s), continue along Cheesebox Road for another 2.8mi to a nondescript point in the juniper forest ( $37^{\circ}42.42'N$   $110^{\circ}4.07'W$ ). The precise point does not matter. Park by the side of the road.

## Hike

Start by hiking due east through the sparse juniper forest while attempting to follow previously beaten pathways or slickrock in order to avoid excessive damage to the cryptogamic soil. In just a few minutes you will come to the western slickrock rim of Cheesebox Canyon, a broad and impressive vista. The key to the route to the canyon floor is to descend at about  $37^{\circ}42.42'N$   $110^{\circ}3.90'W$  to a ledge just below the rim and then contour around to the left, crossing a drainage in the head of the canyon and accessing the same ledge on the east side of the canyon. The ledge then proceeds south for several hundred yards, crossing through another small canyon and arriving at a large drainage entering from the left. Here, 25min from the start, you descend sloping ledges just beyond the turn into the large drainage and work your way down aiming directly for the



confluence of this drainage with the main canyon off to your right. The final step down to the stream bed is at the very apex of this confluence ( $37^{\circ}42.01'N$   $110^{\circ}3.72'W$ ) where you step down some steep slickrock.

Here, 30min from the start, you are in the gravel bottom of Cheesebox canyon. Immediately you enter a very narrow slot that is less than 2ft wide in places; you must turn sideways as it snakes back and forth. The floor of this slot is mostly dry. Just after it opens up again, you arrive at a large drop-off with substantial overhang. This is bypassed on the ledge on the left from which you climb down to the floor where two large drainages meet. This junction leads into a deep and narrow slot.

About 30min down canyon you come to a steep place with a wide shelf on the left. You must downclimb from this shelf into a narrow, convoluted slot with beautiful sculpted narrows that are mostly dry. These lead to the first rappel, a 20ft drop within the narrows that descends into a knee-deep pool. Though the deep wades and swims are still some distance downstream, this is a good place to put on your wetsuit with your rappeling harness. The anchor for this first rappel (elevation about 5990ft) is a webbing wrap around a small chockstone right at the lip. The convolutions continue in this spectacular section of the canyon and there is one place where the slot is only about a foot wide. The canyon then opens up again and about 40min later at an elevation of 5930ft you come to a wide location where the second rappel descends into a deep, dark slot whose entrance is clogged with boulders. The anchor is a webbing wrap around a large horn boulder right in the slot. On rappel you must squeeze between boulders before the slot opens up and you descend 35ft to a dry, sandy bottom.



*Left: In slot near the start. Right: The second rappel.*

Downstream is a wide water-filled slot that is mostly a chest deep wade though we had to swim the last 10yds. Then, 15min from the second rappel, you come the third rappel into another deep and narrow slot in the middle of a sculpted sandstone floor. Here there is a beautiful natural theatrical stage on the left side with a large thin overhanging roof and fun acoustics. On canyon right is a broad shelf for the audience. We had lunch here accompanied by some impromptu entertainment performed in this natural theater.

The third rappel is almost identical to the second though a little longer, a 40ft drop into a dark and narrow slot. The entrance is a hole between boulders and the anchor is a webbing wrap around a large boulder just upstream of the hole. Again the bottom is usually dry. Downstream is another spectacular, contorted narrows with some small downclimbs and several very narrow places. This slot exits suddenly into a broad, muddy pool that could require swimming.

Here at an elevation of about 5680ft, 3.5hr and about 2.5mi from the start, you come to the junction with a major fork of Cheesebox that enters on the left. Just past this point there are several awkward downclimbs and the canyon becomes dark and narrow. Just ahead is the most physically challenging part of this adventure, the three swimming slots. The first slot begins with a steep, featureless drop of about 6ft into a water-filled slot that requires immediate swimming. A handline around one of the chockstones is useful here. Use a combination of stemming and swimming motions (stswimming?) to progress downstream in this 2-3ft wide slot. Swim around several corners before clambering out onto a rock ledge at water level. There is then another vertical stemming downclimb of about 10ft into the second swimming pool (again a handline is



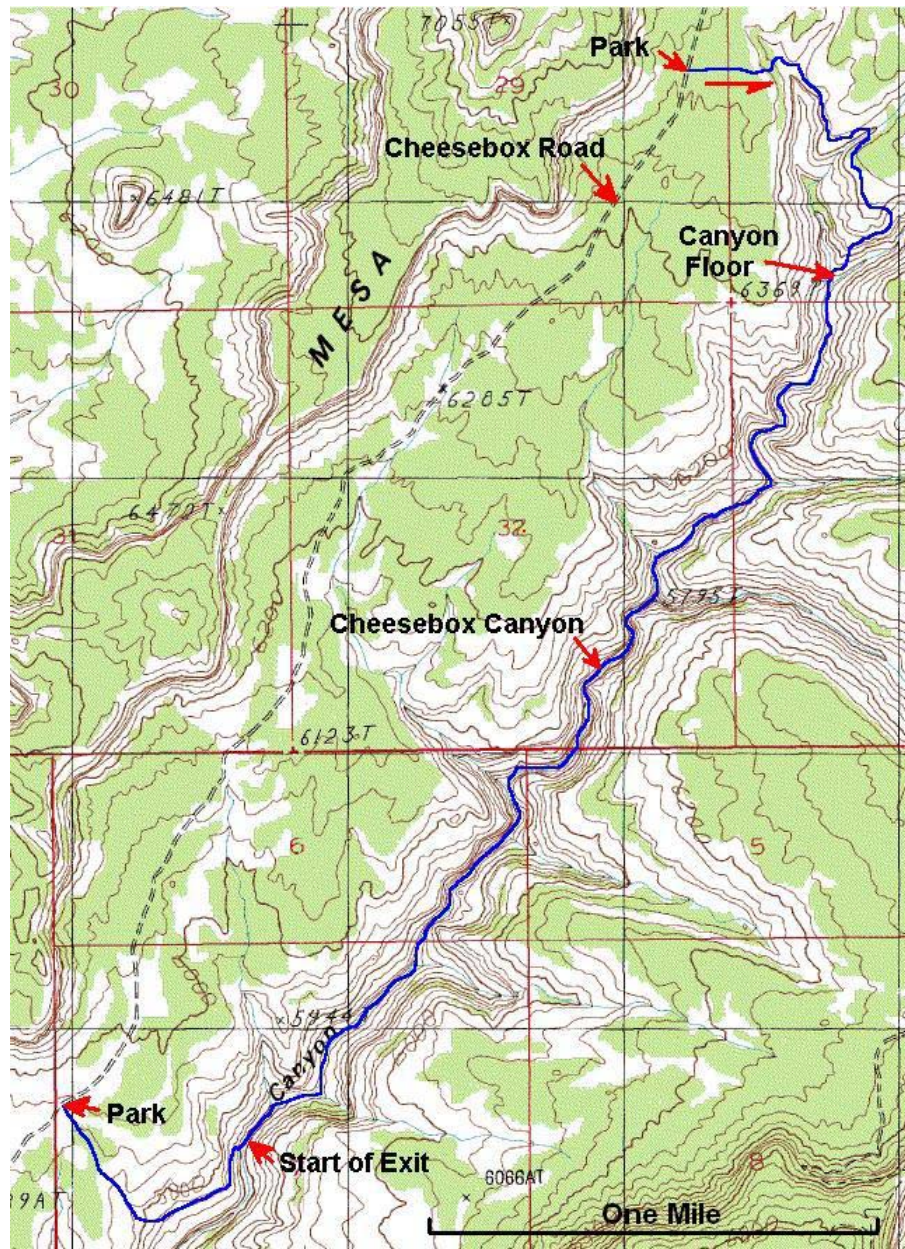
*Left: A deep wade and swim. Right: Slot exit and muddy pool.*

helpful) that is even narrower than the first but shorter. You exit this second swimming pool on a small gravel beach that leads to a short drop into the third swimming pool. At the exit from this last of the three deep and cold slots, the canyon immediately broadens and you should be able to find a sunny spot in which to warm yourself. You should reach this point about 4hr 20min from the start. You could also take off your harness and wetsuit here though there is yet another waist-deep wade to come.

There follows a long and lovely section with quite a bit of greenery and much easy hiking. It takes about 50min before you come to the last water, a shallow slot with a waist-deep wade. From other accounts we know this pool can sometimes be very putrid. Once through it you can shed your harness and wetsuit if you have not done so before. You should reach this point about 5hr 20min from the start. Another 20min of easy gravel-floor hiking brings you to the exit point from the canyon. During this time count one short, dry slot that is easily bypassed. When you come to a second, longer dry slot you have reached the start of the exit hike about 5hr 40min from the start at an elevation of 5600ft.

At this exit point (37°40.32'N 110°5.19'W), the rock to the right of the slot entrance should be in the form of inclined slabs. Do not enter the slot but contour and climb gradually right following a few cairns and hints of a trail. Continue downstream around a bluff and into a shallow recess where you continue to climb ledges. Above a prominent ledge, double back toward the right for the last part of the ascent and climb a steep slickrock drainage up to the rim. Once over the rim, head directly northwest toward the redrock cliffs. A few hundred yards of easy hiking should bring you to the large area of bare slickrock where you parked the return vehicle (37°40.38'N 110°5.64'W and elevation 5960ft). It should take just over 6hr to complete the 4.5mi hike.





Map of Cheesebox Canyon Hike

## 3.7 Fry Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3.25 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4 miles
- Elevation gain: 180 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Jacobs Chair
- Difficulties: One 80ft rappel, a 30yd swim and some muddy wading
- Special equipment: Rappeling equipment, 50 meter rope, harnesses, helmets and dry bags
- ACA Rating: 3B III

When the Glen Canyon Dam was completed, Lake Powell flooded a spidery maze of canyons and men came by boat to enjoy the beauty of the rock and the water. Roads were cut and paved to allow access to several marinas within this network and the beauty of the wilderness in the areas surrounding Lake Powell began to be appreciated and enjoyed. But there are still very few human settlements. Fry Canyon Lodge on US95 at 37°38.09'N 110°9.41'W (about 23mi southeast of the Hite marina on Lake Powell) is the only human habitation for nearly 50mi.

Fry Canyon itself is a small tributary of White Canyon, a fissure that parallels US95, running northwest to join Lake Powell. There must be tens of thousands of gullies like Fry in this vast wilderness. But unlike most this one is readily accessible because of US95. It makes for a short and enjoyable adventure hike, perhaps a break in a journey across this land.

Fry is typical of the small canyons in this area. The rock does not permit the long deep slots one finds, for example, in Zion National Park. Because of the variations in the horizontal strata, the canyons are wider where the water has scoured the harder layers. But where it encounters softer rock in the watercourse, the water can cut short sections of much narrower slot canyon before broadening out again. And in the cool, sunless depths of these slots there are often deep, year-round pools of water, some so deep they must be swum. Fry Canyon has two such sections of narrows within a couple of miles of the US95 road bridge. This adventure drops into a slot just upstream of the bridge, continues on down to a second section that requires a rappel and a swim, joins the much larger White Canyon and then exits White for a rim-top hike back to the bridge.



## Trailhead

Park at the side of US95 at either end of the bridge over Fry Canyon (37°38.16'N 110°9.04'W and elevation 5280ft). The bridge is about 200yd east of Fry Canyon Lodge, the area being about 23mi southeast of the Hite Marina on Lake Powell and about 60mi west of Blanding, Utah.

## Hike

The first of the two sections of narrows in Fry Canyon lies below and just upstream of the road bridge and so it is wise to examine the slot bottom from the vantage point of the bridge before venturing into it. Then hike about 50yds up the west bank and drop in a short distance below the start of the slot at a place (37°38.09'N 110°8.98'W) where you can easily reach the stream bed. This is just upstream of the first deep pool. Downclimb to the lip upstream of the pool and wade the thigh-deep, 20yd long pool to the sandy slot bottom beyond. After crossing another mud patch or wading pool, the slot proceeds under the road bridge and you reach the end of the first narrows. It is then easy going for about a mile along a sand and gravel bottom in a broad 20-30ft wide canyon. There are several places on the left side and one or two on the right where you can climb out if you wish. About 0.8mi and 40min from the start, a large tributary enters on the left (37°38.53'N 110°9.35'W). This branch originates in the vicinity of Fry Canyon Lodge and is used for a short round trip hike by adventurous lodge guests. Downstream a couple more large tributaries enter on the left (one at 1.3mi) and could also be used as exits.



*Left: Pool in first narrows. Right: Second slot in bedrock.*

Then, 1hr and 1.6mi from the start, you arrive at a place (37°38.94'N 110°9.53'W) where a narrow and deep vertical slot has been cut into the bedrock of the canyon bottom. You can walk along either side of this slot for some distance and peer into its murky depths. Ominously you will spy much water in the bottom and the downstream end of this cannot be seen. After seeing all that can be seen, look for a solid two-bolt anchor on the shelf on the right side of the slot (there is also a single bolt a few yards further downstream and a little further back from the slot). Rappel into the slot off the two-bolt anchor and descend about 60ft (mostly free rappel) to a shallow pool. The pool is just upstream of a lip that was jammed with logs when I came this way. Continue your rappel downstream of the logs, descending an additional 20ft down a sloping slot to a small lip just above a large deep pool. Fortunately there is just room to stand here to pull the rope and prepare for the swim to come. The pool in front of you is deep, dark, cold and muddy and there is no end or light in sight. There is only one option but to swim for it. After about 20yds you swim around a corner and can see the end. I swam about 30yds before encountering bottom. I then waded another 50yds, often with difficulty because of the very soft footing in the pool bottom. It is probably easier to swim. You will reach the end of this second narrows about 1hr 40min from the start.

Fry Canyon opens up abruptly at the end of the swim, allowing you to warm up in the sun. Stow your harness and rope for this is the end of the technical section of the hike. Ahead of you down the canyon you will see a beautiful little Anasazi ruin in a horizontal niche high on the right wall of the canyon (37°39.05'N 110°9.58'W). It is hard to see how they could have reached this place without a very long ladder. Proceeding on down the sand and gravel



*Looking back into second slot.*

bottomed canyon, the walls heighten and within a few hundred yards you come to the end of Fry Canyon and its junction with the much larger and majestic White Canyon. You should reach this junction ( $37^{\circ}39.22'N$   $110^{\circ}9.76'W$  and elevation 5100ft) 2.0mi and just under 2hr from the start.

White Canyon is a great rectangular cross-sectioned fissure with a mostly flat sand/gravel bottom and vertical 100-200ft walls. It runs for more than 50 miles toward its junction with Lake Powell. Though it is easy to hike along the canyon bottom there are relatively few places along its walls where you can climb out. On this hike we turn right and proceed up White Canyon to find such a place. About 10min or 0.3mi from the junction, there is an escape route on the right or south side of the canyon. It is hard to miss the many ducks (cairns) that mark the start of this ascent route ( $37^{\circ}39.40'N$   $110^{\circ}9.48'W$ ) that climbs up to the rim using a series of ledges. As you ascend be sure to follow the ducks and the use-trail, for there is only one easy way up. You should reach the rim (elevation 5250ft) about 1hr 25min from the start. From here follow the sparsely-ducked trail for 1.5mi back along the rim to the bridge where you left the car ( $37^{\circ}38.16'N$   $110^{\circ}9.04'W$ ). The completed hike should take about 3hr 15min.



Map of Fry Canyon Hike

## 3.8 Grand Gulch

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 2 or 3 days
- Estimated hiking distance: 22.8 miles
- Elevation gain: 660 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Cedar Mesa North, Pollys Pasture, Kane Gulch
- Difficulties: None
- Special equipment: Water and a water filter
- Permit: Obtain permit from Kane Gulch Ranger Station
- ACA Rating: 1A IV

Cedar Mesa is a beautiful, juniper and pinon pine-forested flatland of thousands of square miles in the southeast corner of Utah. It is a remote and unpopulated land at an elevation of about 6500ft, high above the desert to the south. Over geological time, water runoff from this plateau carved great canyons through the soft sandstone of Cedar Mesa, and so its most attractive features lie below the elevation of the mesa itself, in the network of deep canyons that intersect the high plateau. Many (though not all) of these canyons join to form Grand Gulch, a majestic fissure that flows southwest, eventually emptying into the San Juan River which itself joins the Colorado some distance to the west.

What makes the canyons of Cedar Mesa so beautiful is the magnificent high altitude flora and fauna that embellish the sculpted sandstone gorges. The same fecundity attracted ancient man and so although, modern man only built paved roads through this land in the last 30 years, it was a very popular place for Native Americans for thousands of years. So popular that the canyons abound with the buildings and remains of the Anasazi culture, mostly constructed during the Pueblo periods from 700AD until they were abandoned shortly before 1300AD.

Cedar Mesa's twin attractions, magnificent scenery and largely unspoiled remains of an ancient and resourceful culture, have led to an explosion in visitors over the past decade. We feature it here because the hiking is still quite primitive and adventurous. Though there are many possible hikes within the Cedar Mesa or Grand Gulch area, we have chosen to feature one particular example, one of the most popular because of the interesting variety of Anasazi ruins that can be visited along the way. From the Kane Gulch Ranger Station you hike down Kane Gulch to where it joins Grand Gulch and then descend Grand Gulch to the intersection with Bullet Canyon. You then hike back up Bullet Canyon to the trailhead on the mesa at the top of that canyon. Thus the hike requires a car shuttle. Because the summers are very hot and the winter nights are very



cold this is a hike best done in the spring or fall. It is a 23mi long, two or three day hike depending on how fast you travel and how much time you spend inspecting the ruins and enjoying the scenery.

Day hikes in the Grand Gulch Primitive Area require a permit that can be obtained at the trailheads. Permits for overnight hikes must be obtained in advance by phoning the BLM office in Monticello, Utah, at 435-587-1532. However, about half of the quota of permits are held for walk-ins. These are available at the Kane Gulch Ranger Station on a first-come, first served basis from 8.00am until noon on the day that you wish to start your hike.

## Trailhead

Kane Gulch Ranger Station ( $37^{\circ}31.54'N$   $109^{\circ}53.75'W$ ), operated by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), is the key starting point for any overnight exploration of Cedar Mesa or the Grand Gulch National Primitive Area. It is located on Utah State Route 261, 4mi south of the junction with US Highway 95, about 37mi west of Blanding, Utah and about 35mi east of Hite, Utah where US 95 crosses Lake Powell. Alternatively, if you are driving up from the south along SR 261, you will have the pleasure and thrill of climbing about 1100ft up onto the Cedar Mesa via the Moki Dugway, a series of dirt road switchbacks that cut into the steep rock cliff that bounds the mesa on the south.

To leave a return vehicle at the Bullet Canyon trailhead, drive 7mi south from the Kane Gulch Ranger Station along SR 261. Turn right at  $37^{\circ}25.87'N$   $109^{\circ}56.05'W$  onto County Road 251 (packed dirt) following the signs for the Bullet Canyon trailhead and drive 1.5mi to the well-marked trailhead ( $37^{\circ}25.82'N$   $109^{\circ}57.71'W$ ). Leave the return vehicle here and return to the Kane Gulch



*Left: In Bullet Canyon. Right: Stepped narrows in Bullet Canyon.*

Ranger Station. Park the other vehicle, cross the road and head west down the trail into Kane Gulch.

## Hike

The author has planned to complete this hike in the near future. To date he has only explored the last 3mi in Bullet Canyon on a brief day hike. What follows are some pointers mostly gleaned from other accounts.

From the Kane Gulch Ranger Station (elevation 6420ft), cross the road and head west down the trail into Kane Gulch. The 4.0mi route to the junction of Kane and Grand Gulch drops about 600ft. At the junction (elevation 5820ft) you will find a nice campsite with much cottonwood shade and a cliff dwelling called Junction Ruin in a huge alcove on the right wall of the canyon. There is a spring 0.25mi downstream from the junction and within a mile of the junction you can also inspect Turkey Pen Ruin on the right at 4.7mi and Stimper Arch on the left at 5.0mi. Continuing down Grand Gulch you pass Fortress Canyon on the right at 5.6mi, Todie Canyon on the left at 7.2mi, a spring at 7.5mi, a pour-off at 8.8mi, Lion Tracks Spring at 9.6mi, Split Level Ruin (one of Grand Gulch's largest ruins) at 10.0mi, Coyote Canyon on the left at 12.8mi, the Thumb at 13.7mi, Shieks Canyon (much rock art) on the left at 14.2mi before arriving at 15.6mi at the junction with Bullet Canyon ( $37^{\circ}26.74'N$   $110^{\circ}2.59'W$  and elevation 5740ft). There is a spring at the junction and a good camping site.

After about 2.2mi of easy hiking up Bullet Canyon, you will encounter another spring called Jailhouse Spring. On the left just 0.2mi further (and 18mi from the start) is the name-sake antiquity, Jailhouse Ruin, given that name because of the barred window. Across the canyon from Jailhouse Ruin is another good campsite. Another 0.3mi will bring you on the left to Perfect Kiva, the only undamaged ancient kiva ever discovered. It even had its roof in place (since replaced to withstand hikers!).

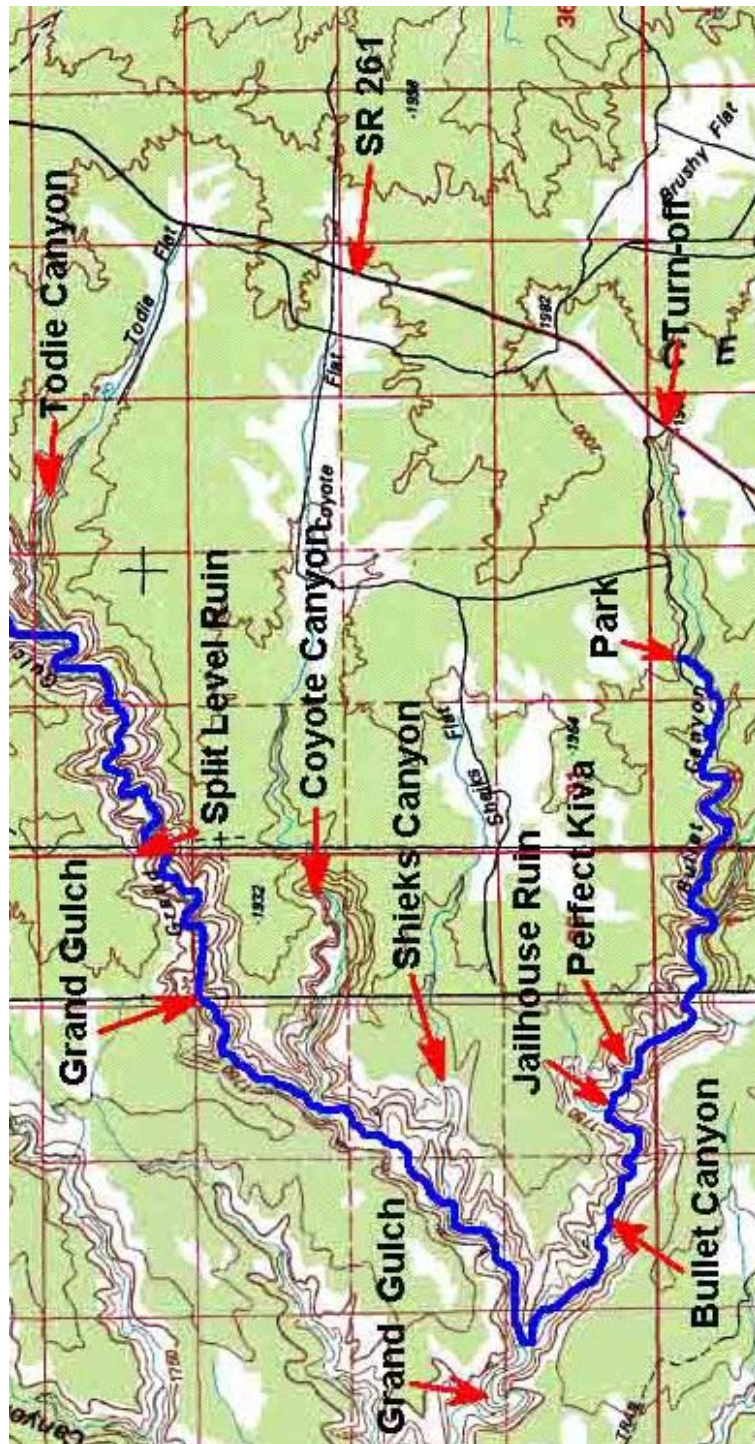
It is 4.5mi from Perfect Kiva to the end of the hike at Bullet Canyon trailhead. About 2.5mi from the end, the canyon narrows and you encounter a boulder jam where the trail climbs around to the left using a prominent shelf on the left wall. Just a short distance upstream (about 1.5mi from the end) the stream bed ascends steeply over bare slickrock, climbing 300ft. Near the top you fork right and continue to climb through a stepped narrows before the canyon flattens out again.

Here the canyon walls are less than 100ft in height and you should watch for the ducked trail that climbs the left wall to the mesa top. It is just a hundred yards across the mesa to the Bullet Canyon trailhead ( $37^{\circ}25.82'N$   $109^{\circ}57.71'W$  and elevation 6400ft) and the return vehicle. The hike covers a total of 22.8mi.



Map of first part of Grand Gulch Hike





Map of second part of Grand Gulch Hike

## Chapter 4

# ESCALANTE

Some of the most remote terrain in the United States is located east and north of Lake Powell in the southeast corner of Utah. Now the site of the Grand Staircase/Escalante National Monument and the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area this is a parched land of mesas and escarpments, flat at the higher elevations but worn away at the lower into steep canyons and red and white slickrock. Southeast of the small town of Escalante in Utah lies the lower canyon of the Escalante River as it winds its way down toward its junction with Lake Powell and the Colorado River. Numerous tributaries feed their storm water into the Escalante and many of these have carved fantastic sculpted canyons through the red Navajo sandstone. The Egypt Slots and Neon Canyon featured in this collection represent just three of hundreds of examples of these slot canyons. The reader is referred to Kelsey (2003) for other slot canyons in the Escalante. [I am grateful to Steve Ramras and his family for their guidance in the Escalante region.]



Escalante region.



## 4.1 Egypt Slots

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 820 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Egypt (UT)
- Difficulties: One rappel of 230ft at start plus one 40ft rappel; much down-climbing and upclimbing, long sections of very narrow slot, some possible pothole escapes and swimming.
- Special equipment: Rappeling equipment, leave 300ft rope at start, 80 ft rope, 20 ft webbing, 1 rappel ring, harnesses, helmets, dry bag and small packs
- ACA Rating: 3B III

The Egypt Slots described here are examples of incredibly narrow and deep stream courses, so narrow in fact that a relative thinly built person will have to squeeze through many tens of yards of slot canyon about 10in wide. More



*Head of Egypt2.*

heavily built individuals should NOT attempt the Egypt 3 slot unless they are agile enough to climb higher and stem past these narrow sections. There are also hundreds of yards of slot about 1ft wide and these can tear away at skin and clothes so you need to come prepared. It is also not a place for those who may feel claustrophobic.

We describe here a hike that takes in both the Egypt 2 and Egypt 3 slots by descending the first to near their confluence and then ascending the second. The hike is done in this direction because a drop in Egypt 2 that must be rappeled can not readily be ascended. But each slot can be descended individually with return legs on the slickrock ridge tops to the east of each of the two canyons.

## Trailhead

To reach the trailheads for the Egypt 2 or Egypt 3 canyons starting in the town of Escalante, Utah, you drive east along the paved Highway 12 for about 5mi to the well-marked turn-off to Hole in the Rock Road. Turn right onto this high-quality dirt road and drive 16.7mi southeast over a gently rolling mesa to where there is a turn-off on the left to the Egypt Trailhead. Turn left and drive down this less developed dirt road. You might note a nice campsite on the left just 0.5mi down this spur road, a useful stop after the long drive to get here.

The Egypt road gradually worsens as you proceed and is recommended only for high clearance vehicles though a regular car can make it with a little careful obstacle avoidance. It is 8mi to the Egypt 2 trailhead where you can pull off onto the slickrock on the right at 37°34.86'N 111°14.55'W and an elevation of 5360ft. It is only a few yards from there to the top of the dramatic 230ft drop



*The 230ft rappel into Egypt 2 (photo by Sonny Lawrence).*

into the head of the Egypt 2 canyon. If you wish to leave a second vehicle at the point where you exit Egypt 3 then continue up the road for another 1.5mi to the where the dirt road forks and park the return vehicle there. Your probable exit point is a few yards back down the road at  $37^{\circ}35.63'N$   $111^{\circ}13.76'W$  and an elevation of 5610ft.

## Hike

The drop-in to Egypt 2 is immediately beside the slickrock parking area at  $37^{\circ}34.86'N$   $111^{\circ}14.55'W$  and an elevation of 5360ft. Probably the most comfortable place to set up the first big 230ft drop-in rappel is a few yards to the west of the head of the canyon where you can back a vehicle up to within a few yards of the lip and use it to anchor the rappel (see photograph). Rappel down 230ft into this deep slot, leaving the long rope in place until you return from the hike. If you wish to bypass this rappel you can do so on canyon left by walking about 0.3mi around the rim on the left to a large gully where you can walk down into Egypt 2.

Once in the slot bottom, there are a number of downclimbs to negotiate in addition to some narrow slot. About 1hr from the start you come to a “tunnel” at 5080ft and, shortly after, to the second rappel, a 40ft drop from a chockstone anchor in a narrow slot. Downstream of the rappel more slots and the downclimbs continue. In addition at 4900ft and 1hr 40min from the start, there are several small but potentially troublesome potholes followed by several hundred yards of shoulder width slot. The narrows are almost continuous in this



*Left: In lower Egypt 2. Right: Tight squeeze in lower Egypt 3. Photos by Mark Duttweiler.*

lower section of Egypt 2 but 2hrs 20min from the start at about 4790ft they finally open up into a broader wash that will continue down to the confluence with Egypt 3.

However, this hike exits Egypt 2 before that confluence. Shortly after Egypt 2 opens up you will encounter a short, narrow slot in the bottom of the broad wash and 100yds beyond this slot this hike exits Egypt 2 on the left at  $37^{\circ}33.71'N$   $111^{\circ}14.83'W$  and an elevation of 4780ft. Here you will be about 1.5mi and 2.5hrs from the start. The exit is up moderately sloped slickrock where the canyon turns left. There is a notable, single 3ft boulder perched alone on the slope about 20ft up this slope. Climb about 100ft up this slickrock to a shoulder between Egypt 2 and Egypt 3 and then contour upstream (left) into the relatively broad wash of Egypt 3. [Note that there is a rappel downstream of your point of entry into Egypt 3 that prevents you from simply proceeding to the confluence of Egypt 2 and Egypt 3 and entering Egypt 3 at that confluence.]

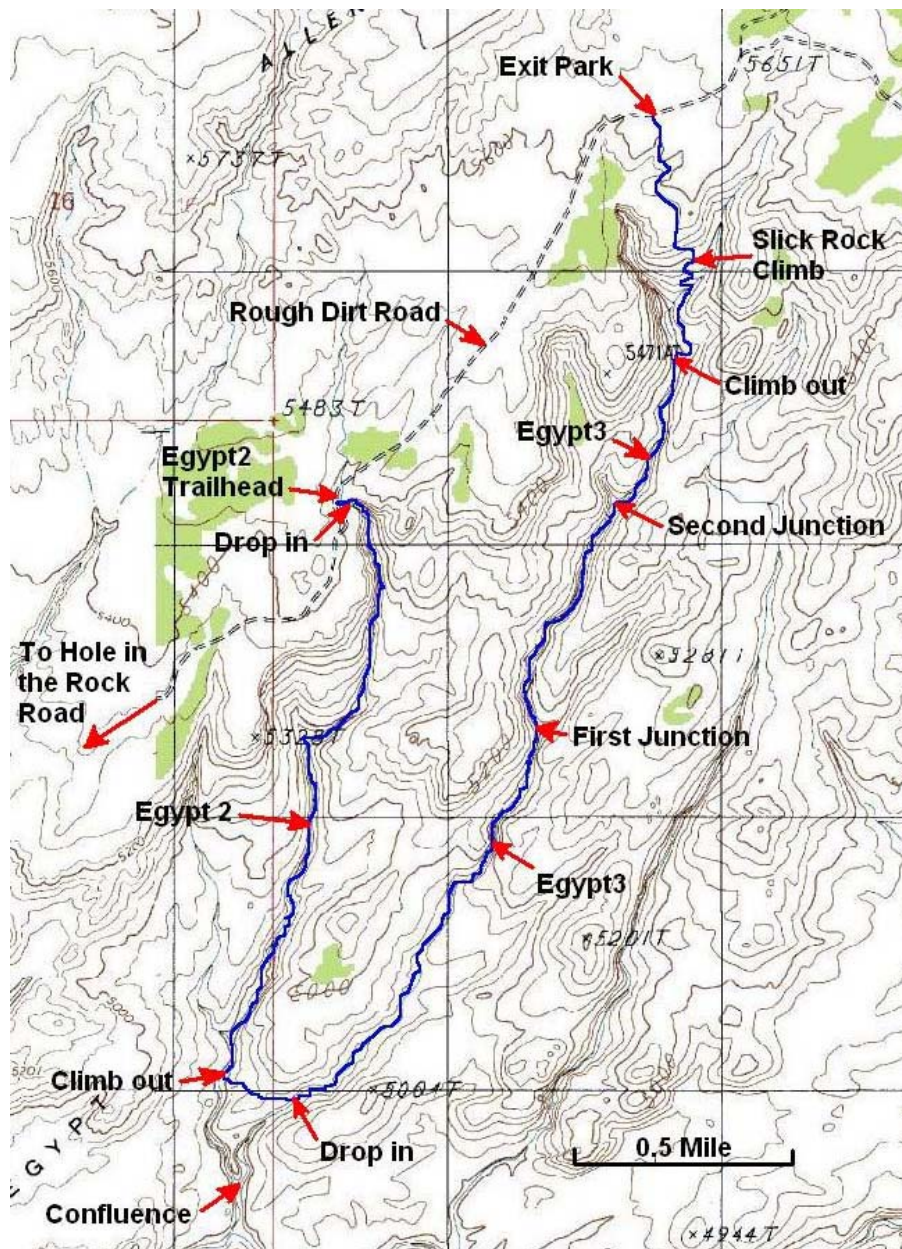
The first part of the ascent of Egypt 3 from the access point is a relatively easy hike up a broad shallow valley. This suddenly changes at 4830ft and 3hrs (2.2mi) from the start where the canyon shrinks to an extremely narrow slot, a place where only the thinner people can make it through without ascending to stem across at a higher level. This is where a small pack is really advantageous for you will probably have to carry it overhead. A number of these very narrow sections (width about 10in) are interspersed with only slightly wider stretches. After about 0.3mi you will come to the end of this first narrow section where the canyon forks at  $37^{\circ}34.41'N$   $111^{\circ}14.04'W$  and an elevation of 4940ft (2.5mi and 4hrs from the start). Turn left here at this first fork where there is a brief, slightly more open section. However the canyon soon narrows again though never to the narrow width of the earlier section.

About 25min from the first fork you come to a second fork at  $37^{\circ}34.86'N$   $111^{\circ}13.86'W$  and an elevation of 5020ft. Fork right here (less obvious than the first fork) and enter a lovely sculpted section of Egypt 3 with lots of contorted slot and a number of small potholes. A fair amount of upclimbing is demanded here and some will need a partner assist in places, especially if you try to avoid getting wet. Finally, about 5hrs 10min and 3.4mi from the start at an elevation of 5160ft you emerge from the slot onto a wash. Directly ahead in the distance you should see a broad and tall slickrock wall rising up to the horizon. This is the exit route. To get there continue up the wash until you come to a small climb past a chockstone. Then backtrack about 30yds to where you will see a small steep gully on the right (looking up canyon). This should also be marked by several cairns on the shelf overhead including one neat arch cairn. You should reach this exit point at  $37^{\circ}35.15'N$   $111^{\circ}13.70'W$  and an elevation of 5170ft about 3.5mi and 5hrs 15min after the morning start.

Begin the exit climb by ascending this gully for about 50ft and then contouring left along a broad ledge and into a much larger gully coming down from the right. Cross this gully and begin switchbacking up the aforementioned slickrock choosing easy traverses until you reach the rim at a place where rock falls have made the last step fairly easy. Once above the rim follow the use trail that proceeds up some minor benches to reach the rough dirt road. Your return

vehicle should be just a few yards along the road to your right at  $37^{\circ}35.63'N$   $111^{\circ}13.76'W$  and an elevation of 5610ft. The total hiking time is about 6hrs during which you travel about 4.2mi. If you did not leave a return vehicle here the hike back down to the Egypt 2 trailhead is a fairly easy 1.2mi jaunt.





Map of Egypt Slots Hike

## 4.2 Neon Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 8.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 10.8 miles
- Elevation gain: 1440 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Egypt (UT)
- Difficulties: Five rappels up to 80ft, a potential keeper pothole, possible slot swimming
- Special equipment: Rappeling equipment, 100ft rope, 100ft pull cord, 40ft webbing, 5 rappel rings, harnesses, helmets, wetsuits and dry bags
- ACA Rating: 3B III

### Hike

Neon Canyon is a magnificent little canyon that fully rewards the effort it takes to reach it. The short version of the canyon descent described here has a marvelous short and wet slot, followed by an amazing (but potentially troubling) pothole and then the magnificent Golden Cathedral, a natural light show that



*Neon Canyon from its entrance ridge top.*

alone is worth the trip. But all of this takes some getting there, a drive to one of the really remote areas in the contiguous United States, a rough dirt road to a trailhead and then a substantial hike down to the Escalante River.

There are several ways to plan this adventure. One is to start early from the trailhead and to return there at the end of the day. If Neon Canyon is your sole objective in the area then this is probably the best plan and this is what is described herein. However, there are other adventures in the same area (for example, Choprock Slot) and if you plan to do these as well then it makes sense to backpack down to the Escalante from the trailhead and camp, for example at the site where Fence Canyon joins the Escalante.

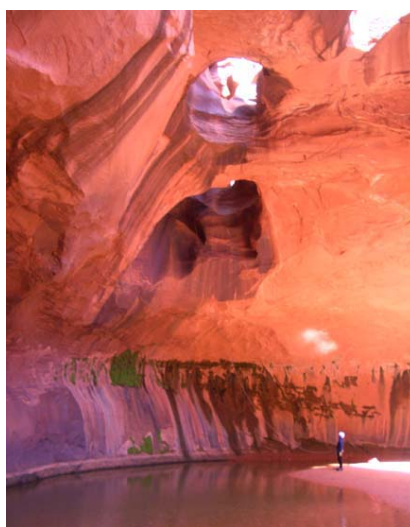
The best time of the year for hiking in this area is either the spring or fall when the weather is warm but not too hot.

## Trailhead

To reach the trailhead for Neon Canyon starting in the town of Escalante, Utah, you should drive east along the paved Highway 12 for about 5mi to the well-marked turn-off to Hole in the Rock Road. Turn right onto this high-quality dirt road and drive 16.7mi southeast over a gently rolling mesa to where there is a turn-off on the left to the Egypt Trailhead. Turn left and drive down this less developed dirt road. You might note a nice campsite on the left just 0.5mi down this spur road that is useful after the long drive to get here.

## Hike

The Egypt road gradually worsens as you proceed and is recommended only for high clearance vehicles though a regular car can make it with a little careful



*Left: Keeper pothole from exit. Right: The Golden Cathedral.*

obstacle avoidance. It is 9mi to a fork in the dirt road. Turn right here and drive just 0.5mi to the Egypt Trailhead at the end of the road. Park here at 37°35.59'N 111°13.06'W and an elevation of 5620ft and complete a free trail registration.

## Hike

From the Egypt trailhead at 37°35.59'N 111°13.06'W and an elevation of 5620ft follow the trail as it drops over the rim and soon begins a steep descent on the bare slickrock. The pack animals who frequent this trail have left their distinctive white shoe marks on the slickrock and, as a result, made the trail easy to follow. After almost 500ft of descent the trail reaches the bottom of the escarpment and begins a gentle, sandy traverse across a wooded bench above the north side of Fence Canyon. Eventually the trail comes to the heights at the apex of two forks of Fence and switchbacks down into the southern fork. Just below this, Fence Canyon meets the Escalante at 37°36.75'N 111°10.72'W and an elevation of 4540ft. It should take about 1.5hrs (2hrs with an overnight pack) to reach this point, 3.3mi from the start. There is a popular camping spot here because springs in Fence Canyon produce a reliable rivulet of clear, silt-free water.

From Fence Canyon, you have to briefly wade in the Escalante in order to proceed downstream, and then cross to the left bank after about 0.3mi. You should then traverse across the Escalante flood plain to the left wall and follow it downstream for another 0.6mi or so to the entrance to Neon Canyon. A little before reaching Neon you will see extensive array of petroglyphs (mostly old but some modern) on the cliff face above you. You should reach the entrance to Neon Canyon at 37°36.40'N 111°10.03'W and an elevation of 4540ft after a 40min and 0.9mi hike from Fence Canyon (2hr 15min and 4.2mi from the trailhead). At the entrance note the iridescent blue sheen to the canyon wall on the right that may have given this canyon its name.

About 100yds into the canyon note the part scree/part slickrock slope ahead of you on the left side of the canyon and the trail that climbs this slope. Follow this as it veers left and climbs about 140ft to reach the ridge top between Neon and the Escalante with marvelous views of both. The ridge top is at 37°36.47'N 111°10.07'W and an elevation of 4680ft. Having enjoyed this rest stop, you should then follow the use-trail that proceeds along the bench at the same elevation as the ridge top, contouring up the left side of Neon. The trail continues on that broad bench, contouring into and out of several washes with spectacular overlooks of the dramatic Neon canyon below you on your right. It is clear that below these upper level benches the raw slickrock falls off precipitously into the canyon bottom. The normal drop in from the trail is 1mi from the ridge top at 37°37.11'N 111°9.78'W and an elevation of about 4900ft, 2.2mi from Fence Canyon or 5.5mi from the trailhead. Here a GPS is useful to locate the drop-in route though it is the first place where a downclimb into the canyon bottom looks remotely possible from above. There are a few green trees in the canyon bottom nearby. The drop-in route is a broad broken



gully in the corner where the canyon turns right (looking upstream). Climb down ledges in the gully to within about 25ft of the canyon floor where there is a final, vertical drop down to the canyon floor. A webbing anchor around a boulder atop this final drop allows completion of the descent. Here you are at 37°37.025'N 111°9.690'W and an elevation of 4700ft. You should reach this point about 2.5hrs and 2.2mi from Fence Canyon or 4hrs and 5.5mi from the trailhead.

Turn downstream and within about 100yds you will arrive at the top of a slot cut in the canyon bottom (it is visible from the trail overhead). Here you should don your wetsuit and prepare for swimming in the cold water of the slot. The descent into the slot requires a 25ft rappel from a chockstone webbing wrap down into a pool that maybe be 0-5ft deep. From there it is ten yards to an interesting blind corner with a 4ft climb (or swim out). Proceeding under a wedged boulder, this is followed by several more pools in convoluted slot that may be swimmers. These lead to a 12ft drop down under a wedged boulder that has an anchor wrap for those that might want a rappel or handline down. More pools and slots follow before you arrive at the convoluted start for the famous Neon keeper pothole. This begins at the top with an amazing maze of small multiple holes and potholes that you climb through to reach a ledge about 25ft above the water level of the keeper pothole that is about 20ft across. In times past this pothole has been completely filled with sand so that the drop is a simple rappel from an anchor threaded through the holes at the top, descending to a sandy bottom that opens up into a wide canyon area. However at other times such as when we went through there is a deep pothole that gets dangerously wider with depth so that it is overhung all the way around. This



*Author descends the Golden Cathedral (photo by Sonny Lawrence).*

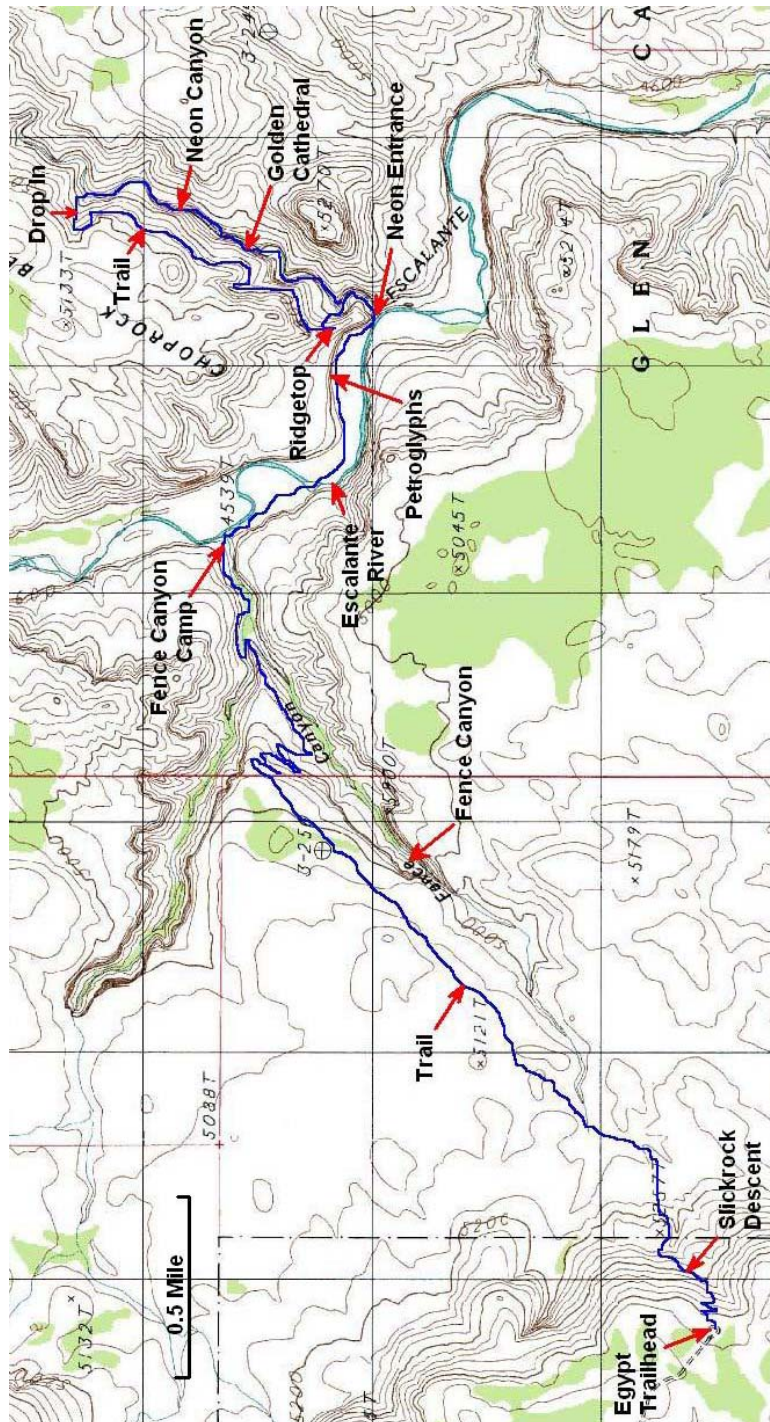


means the lip is substantially overhung and difficult to climb out of. Moreover there is a steep gravel bank above the lip so that there is nowhere for a toss-bag purchase. This pothole can therefore present a very serious obstacle. When we descended the water level in the bottom was only about 3ft deep and the exit lip was about head height so that a partner assist allowed climb out. However in the recent past, the sand level has also been substantially deeper, creating even more overhang and making the exit extraordinarily difficult. Go with a party of at least three and do not pull the descent rope until one climber has managed to climb out of the pothole.

From the pothole it is just 50yds through a broad canyon to the top of the Golden Cathedral rappel. This begins as a narrowing that leads to a small slot with a long webbing anchor around a boulder that snakes down the slot that leads to a hole overlooking the Golden Cathedral. You rappel down through that hole and descend 80ft (about 40ft of free rappel) through a magnificent, multicolored cavern with two great holes in the roof, one you descend through and another further out on the overhanging roof. The pool beneath could be a swim but is often chest deep. If the sunlight is right ripples on the surface reflect to create glitter off the golden roof, a fantastic natural light show.

You should reach the bottom of the Golden Cathedral (elevation about 4500ft) roughly 3hrs 45min after leaving Fence Canyon or 5hrs 15min from the trailhead. Here you can shed your wetsuit and prepare for an easy exit hike. It is a beautiful 25min hike down the rest of Neon Canyon to the Escalante where you then retrace your steps to Fence Canyon. The hike back up from Fence Canyon to the trailhead is a tough end to this adventure and should take about 2hrs (closer to three with an overnight pack).

It should take a total of 8hrs 30min for this adventure (5hrs from Fence Canyon camp and back there) during which you travel 10.8mi (4.2mi from Fence Canyon and back there).



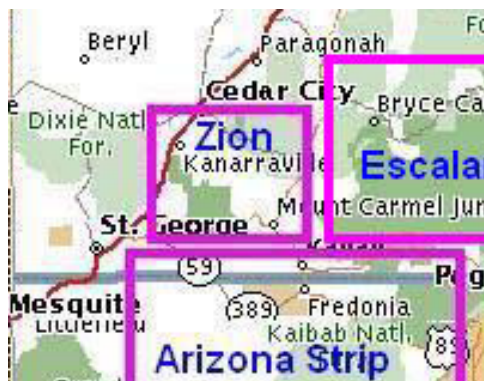
Map of Neon Canyon Hike



## Chapter 5

# ZION NATIONAL PARK

Zion National Park in southwestern Utah is one of loveliest places on earth. But if you visit it in the usual way, by driving up into the main canyon and if you do not venture far from the road you will only have seen a fraction of this beauty. Beyond the asphalt, lie magnificent sculptured canyons, luxurious grottoes and awesome carved sandstone ravines that can only be reached on foot and, sometimes, only by swimming and rappeling. It is small wonder that Zion National Park is considered the home of American canyoneering and a mecca for adventure hikers. This chapter includes descriptions of descents of some of the classic slot canyons of Zion National Park while omitting some of the most extreme adventures. For these and other Zion canyons the reader is referred to Brereton and Dunaway (1996), Kelsey (2003) and Jones (2006).



Zion region.

## 5.1 Zion Narrows

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 13 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 15.7 miles
- Elevation gain: None
- USGS Topo Maps: Straight Canyon, Cogswell Point and Temple of Sinawava or Zion National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: Many miles of hiking in the river, several pools requiring chest deep wading and, perhaps, swimming. Some boulder climbing
- Special equipment: A stout hiking staff. Pack all belongings in waterproof bags
- Permit: Obtain permit from Backcountry Desk in Zion National Park Visitor Center.
- ACA Rating: 1B IV

The North Fork of the Virgin River begins high on the 7000-8000ft Markagunt Plateau in southwestern Utah, about a hundred miles north of the Grand Canyon. In these early reaches there is little that distinguishes it from hundreds of other streams that gather water from the summer thunderstorms and the winter snow melt and help irrigate the rolling hills, meadows and forests of the sparsely populated, open sky country of that high plateau. The spectacular nature of the North Fork only becomes apparent if you follow it to the edge of the plateau, where it has carved a chasm 2000ft deep into the Markagunt and created the truly spectacular canyons of Zion National Park. For 16 meandering miles that chasm is an incredibly narrow “slot” canyon, in places only 20 to 30ft wide with vertical walls rising out of sight on both sides. Later it broadens to form the wider, yet still awesomely vertical canyon visited by those who drive up from the south entrance to see Zion National Park by automobile. But to really experience the magnificence of the North Fork of the Virgin, you must venture into the narrow, storm-sculpted sandstone gorge they call the Zion Narrows. With its raging rapids, its soaring, fluted walls and hanging grottoes it is a rare and awesome place.

The best way to make this pilgrimage is to begin high up on the Markagunt Plateau, north and east of the Park, and to follow the river all the way down through the Narrows to the point where it emerges into the broader canyon of Zion National Park. Though it is marginally possible to accomplish this in one very long day hike, it is clearly preferable to overnight in the canyon. This requires a permit from the Park Service and the allocation of one of the ten



small campsites that are located along a central stretch of the canyon where there are occasional spots of accessible high ground.

There is, of course, danger involved in this adventure for the storms that sculpted the Zion Narrows still occur and the slot canyons still focus the runoff and create raging flash floods that crash through the canyon sweeping all before them. The bare rock of much of the surrounding land does not absorb much water and the steepness of the terrain accelerates the runoff. And, worse still, there are miles of canyon in which there is little or no accessible high ground where hikers can seek refuge from these floods. The Park service posts stern warnings about this danger and issues flash flood alerts but these efforts cannot eliminate the risk. During a flash flood the water level rises almost instantaneously - within minutes or even seconds. The hiker must not only find high ground in any local rainstorm but must also be aware of the flood potential of quite distance storms. Thus he or she must be alert to the other signs of a possible flash flood such as rapid increase in the muddiness of the water or the roar from the upstream flow. Because of the danger in the Zion Narrows, the Park Service does not issue permits to hikers until the day before the intended hike and suspends the process when thunderstorms are imminent.

A second, less obvious danger in this adventure is the possibility of hypothermia. For more than half of the length of the hike, there is no alternative but to hike in the river itself. While this is usually no more than about a foot deep, there are places where it is necessary to wade through chest deep pools and once or twice you must swim. This means that the hiker is wet for a substantial fraction of the time ("wicking" clothing of polyester or similar material is essential) and, since the sun does not penetrate the depths of the Narrows very often, prolonged coldness can lead to serious hypothermia even in mid-summer. At other times of the year, a wetsuit is essential.

A permit is required for all through-hikes in the Zion Narrows. Camping permits for the recommended two-day, overnight hike are limited and you must arrive at the Visitor's Center in Zion National Park early in the day preceding your hike in order to obtain a permit. In this process you will be allocated one of the small campsites midway along the route.

## Trailhead

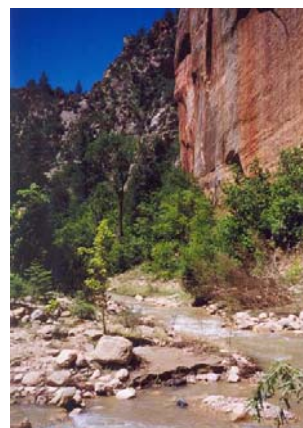
The starting point for the Zion Narrows hike is quite some distance from the Park at Chamberlain's Ranch (37°23.11'N 112°50.34'W) so the hike involves either a long 4WD vehicle shuttle or a ride in a commercial van shuttle to the trailhead. To set up the car shuttle park one vehicle at the Zion National Park Visitor's Center (37°12.02'N 112°59.24'W). Then, in the other vehicle, drive north along Zion Canyon Road, turn left at the road junction in the Park and follow the spectacular Zion-Mt.Carmel Highway as it climbs the east wall of Zion Canyon before exiting the Park. About 2.5mi beyond the East Entrance to the Park, turn north on a paved road that changes to dirt after several miles. The road winds its way across the plateau and then descends to cross the Orderville River, climbing again and cresting a ridge before descending to a bridge that

the crosses the North Fork of the Virgin River. The distance from the main highway to this bridge is about 18mi. The dirt road turns right after the bridge ( $37^{\circ}23.43'N$   $112^{\circ}49.55'W$ ), but you turn left and, after 0.25mi arrive at the gate to Chamberlain's Ranch ( $37^{\circ}23.38'N$   $112^{\circ}49.79'W$ ). Proceed through the gate and drive another 0.5mi to a rough open area just before the road fords the river. Park here at the trailhead ( $37^{\circ}23.11'N$   $112^{\circ}50.34'W$ ).

## Hike

The remote ranch land where the hike begins is delightfully bucolic, a gentle river valley with a stream and rolling pastures surrounded by low, tree-covered ridges. You follow the rough dirt road as it crosses and then parallels the North Fork on its route eastwards. About 50min from the start you pass an old wooden structure, Bullock's Cabin ( $37^{\circ}22.30'N$   $112^{\circ}52.10'W$ ), that may have once served as home to some proud pioneer but has long since been converted to a shelter for the ranch cattle. Soon the pasture land and the road ends and the valley sides begin to close in as the Virgin River cuts more deeply into the Markagunt Plateau. This stretch provides a beautiful and serene hike on a bright summer day. A well-worn use trail makes progress easy though the river crossings increase in frequency and difficulty.

About three hours from the trailhead, the walls become vertical and the valley is transformed into a classical "slot" canyon with fantastic sculptured walls and cool grottoes. Shortly thereafter (3.5hrs from the trailhead) the width between the walls closes in so that, in places, they are as close as 20ft. You have arrived at the first narrows. But, the bottom remains quite flat. For much of the way, the river occupies most of the width of the canyon bottom and the sediment carried by its frequent flash floods is apparently sufficient to even out the longitudinal grade to one that only produces small cascades. Even these seemed temporary having been formed by logjams. When we traveled this way

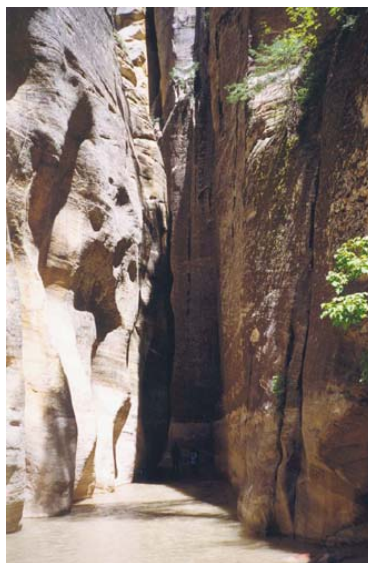
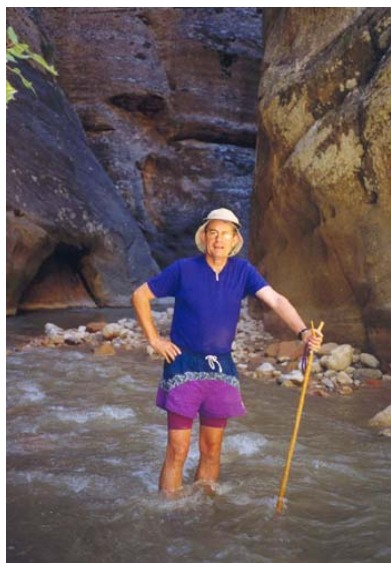


*Left: Bullock's Cabin. Right: Upper Canyon.*

the first substantial logjam occurred about 5hr from the start; it was easily climbed. But the pool downstream of the jam was murky and therefore of uncertain depth. It turned out to be just over waist deep. Just a short distance beyond the logjam, you encounter the only substantial waterfall (37°21.75'N 112°56.86'W) on this hike, a vertical drop of about 15ft in a very narrow section. Fortunately, a crack in the rock off to the left provides an easy passage around this otherwise difficult hurdle. A short distance downstream of the waterfall, there is a deep pool that you have to swim. You then immediately arrive at the readily recognized junction (37°21.57'N 112°57.11'W) where Deep Creek joins the North Fork from the right. There is a broad beach in the middle of this cathedral-like junction, towering vertical walls on all sides. It takes about 6.5hr to travel from the trailhead to this junction.

Deep Creek has a significantly larger volume flow rate than the North Fork and so the river downstream of the junction is notably deeper and harder to hike through. The numbered campsites also begin at the Deep Creek junction. Number 1 lies in a slight rise just to the south and you can count your way down as you approach your assigned site. About 40min below the Deep Creek, you will pass the junction where Kolob Creek (37°20.97'N 112°57.05'W) enters from the right. Our campsite, Number 7 or “Boulder Camp” was a particularly pleasant one just a few minutes south of Kolob Creek. It even had a large overhanging rock that would provide excellent shelter in the event of rain (we had chosen not to carry a tent since the weather forecast indicated little chance of rain).

Resuming the hike the next day, the canyon becomes quite rugged downstream of Boulder Camp. Regular stretches of white water require a prac-

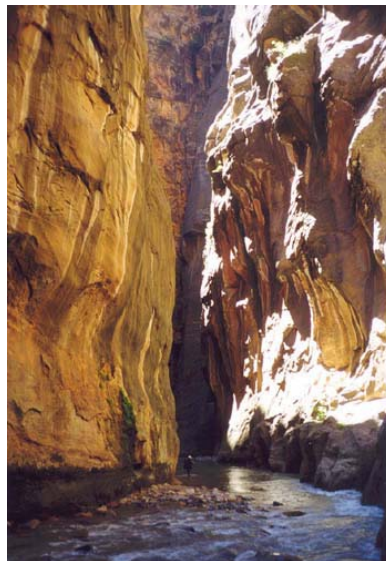


*Left: Entering First Narrows. Right: First Narrows.*

ticed eye for navigation. You pass other numbered camps, finally passing Number 12 (“High Camp”) and, 300yds later, arriving at Big Springs ( $37^{\circ}19.87'N$   $112^{\circ}57.43'W$ ), a notable feature in which a very substantial stream issues from springs in the right canyon wall. Ferns and other greenery adorn these springs and make it a pleasant place to stop. You should reach Big Springs about 1hr 30min after Boulder Camp.

Up to this point, though the towering walls soared over 2000ft on all sides, there were still occasional places where the canyon widened and small, sloping benches of trees and ferns were scattered along the sides of the river. Often these provide the easiest route of passage downstream. More importantly, they could serve as refuge in the event of thunderstorms or flash floods. Indeed, like all the other overnight sites, Boulder Camp had been situated on such a sloping, wooded bench. However, downstream of Big Springs, the canyon walls close in even further and the river and its beaches fill the entire width of the base of the slot. For more than three miles there are no benches on either side. No greenery, no refuge, and no direct sunlight except for a few minutes around noon. Just awesome vertical walls, running water and the gravel it carries with it. The memory of that majesty will last a lifetime. Even in mid-summer when the desert high above boils in the midday sun, down here in the depths of the Zion Narrows it is cold and wet and you must keep moving to prevent hypothermia. Because the risk of unexpected thunderstorms and flash floods is least, it is optimal to pass through the Zion Narrows during the morning hours.

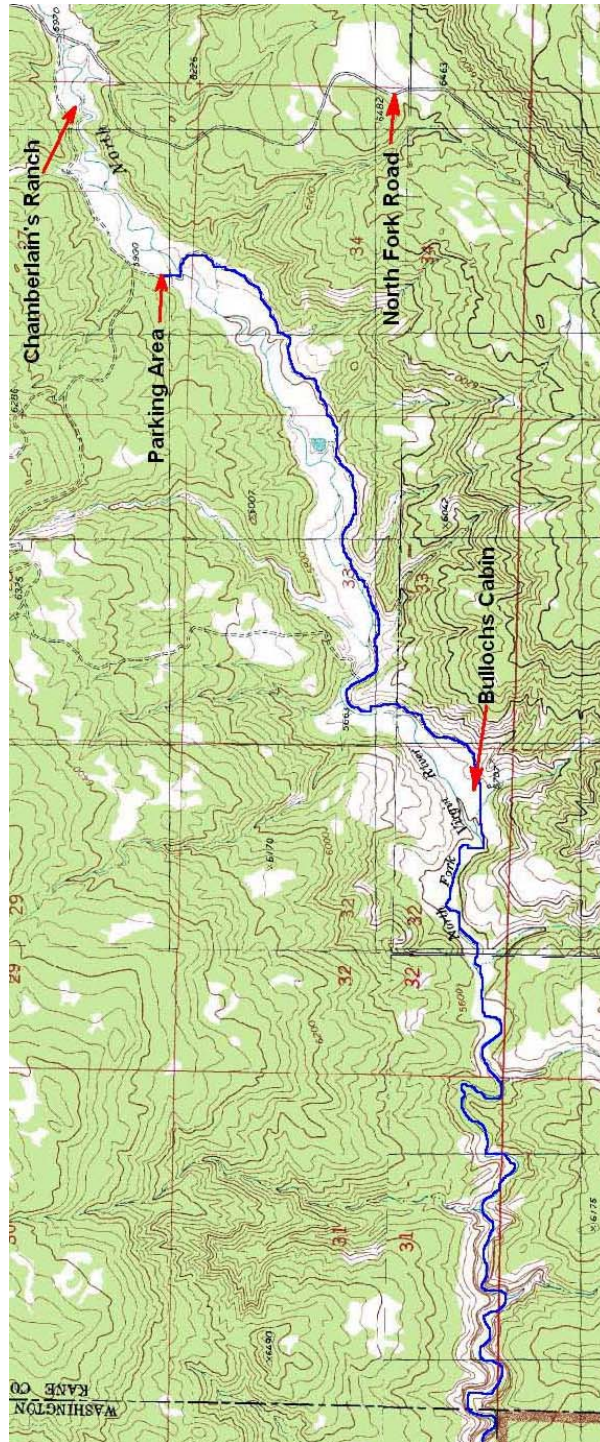
It takes a little over 2hrs to travel through the heart of the Zion Narrows. In all that time, you will enjoy no direct sunlight. But, just upstream of the junction with Orderville Canyon, the Narrows widen a fraction and, on the inside



*Left: Big Springs. Right: Zion Narrows.*

of a left-hand turn, you may come, as we did, to a marvelous sunlight beach where we warmed ourselves and rested. There we encountered the first hikers coming upstream from the Temple of Sinawava; they had set out early that morning to explore the Narrows from below. Downstream of the sunny beach, you are again plunged into the shade of the Narrows. Almost immediately you will encounter the junction with Orderville Canyon ( $37^{\circ}18.49'N$   $112^{\circ}56.81'W$ ), a narrow slot entering on the right. The previous day you crossed the upper reaches of Orderville on your drive to Chamberlain's Ranch and the descent of Orderville Canyon is an adventure described elsewhere in this book. A short distance downstream of Orderville junction, the canyon broadens a little and the wooded benches appear again. Sunlight penetrates and it is a beautiful hike downstream to the point where the concrete Riverside Walk begins ( $37^{\circ}17.80'N$   $112^{\circ}56.90'W$ ). By this stage there will be crowds of people enjoying the canyon and the adventure of a short hike up into this wilderness. It takes about 5hrs 20min to travel from Boulder Camp to the Riverside Walk and just about another 20min to reach the Temple of Sinawava ( $37^{\circ}17.11'N$   $112^{\circ}56.86'W$ ). From here, board the Zion Shuttle Bus for the trip back to the Visitor's Center ( $37^{\circ}12.02'N$   $112^{\circ}59.24'W$ ) and your return vehicle.





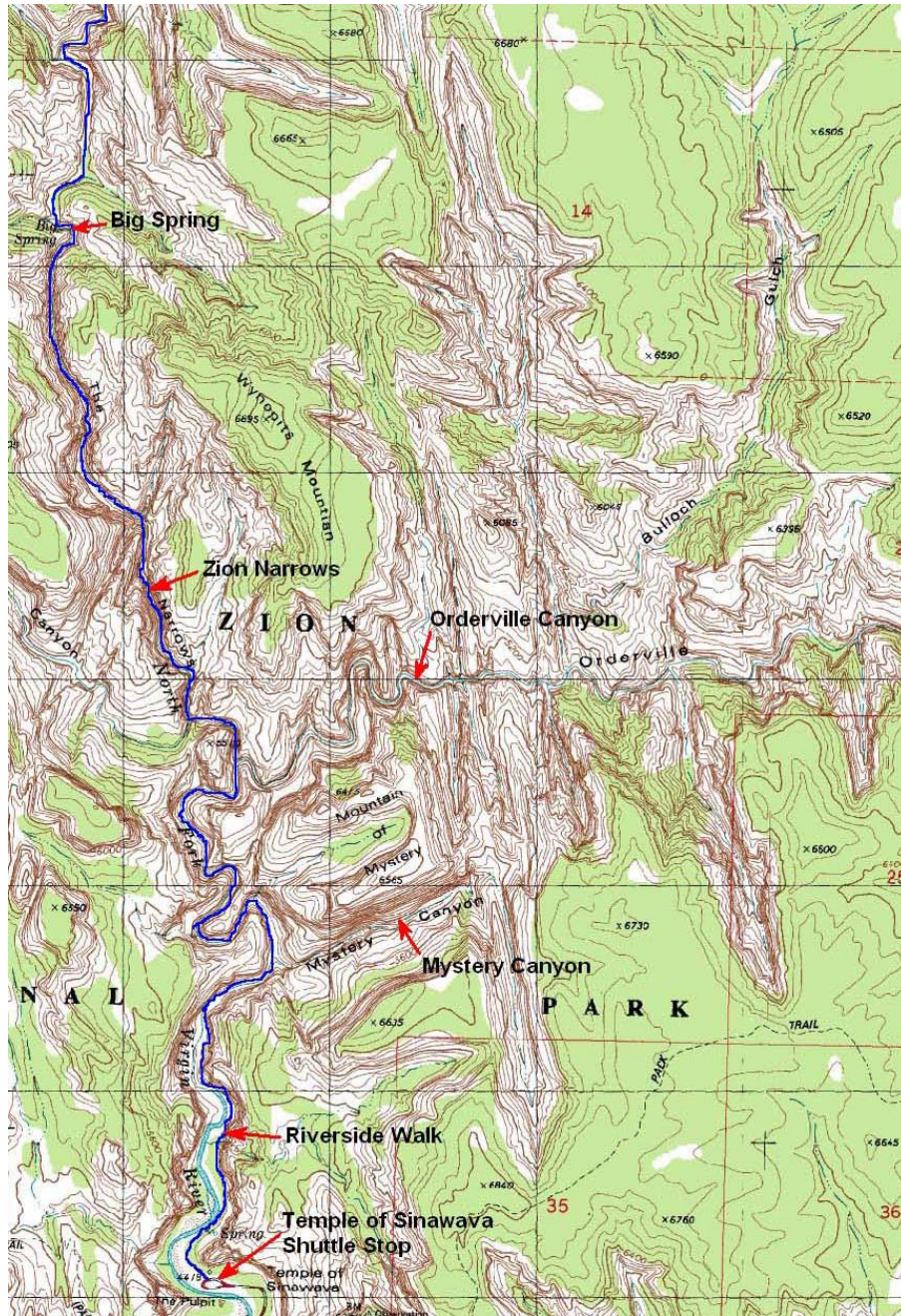
Map of first part of Zion Narrows Hike





Map of second part of Zion Narrows Hike





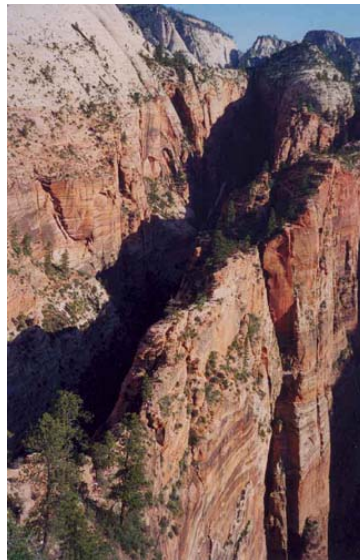
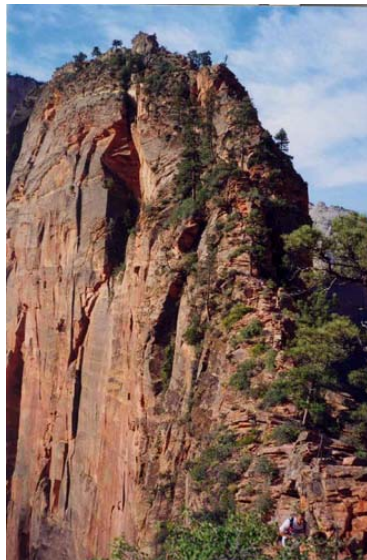
Map of third part of Zion Narrows Hike

## 5.2 Angels Landing

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5 miles
- Elevation gain: 1488 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Temple of Sinawava or Zion National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: Rough trail with considerable exposure
- Special equipment: Leather gloves
- Permit: None required
- ACA Rating: 1AR II

This popular hike climbs from the floor of Zion Canyon to an awesome perch that sticks out into the middle of Zion Canyon in Zion National Park. Angels Landing is the appropriate name given to this enormous sliver of redrock that has almost 1500ft of sheer cliff on all sides. Just south of the Temple of Sinawava



*Left: Angels Landing ridge from below. Right: Angels Landing ridge from the top.*

where the Virgin River emerges from the Narrows the river winds back and forth in the widening canyon and surrounds this sliver on three and almost four sides. Indeed its only connection with the massive west wall of Zion Canyon is an even narrower backbone whose demise can only be a geological instant away. This hike climbs the west wall to the beginning of this backbone and then ascends it to the top of Angels Landing. The first part of the hike follows a well-developed park trail; the last 0.5mi along the apex of the backbone is a mental challenge from the huge exposure on both sides. The chains that line the route help to ease the fear as one clambers along the rough route to the summit.

This hike should not be tackled when there is ice or snow on the ground or in high winds. In the hot summer months it is best in the cool of the early morning. A pair of leather gloves will be useful when clambering along the backbone.

## **Trailhead**

Park at the Visitor Center in Zion National Park and catch the Zion Canyon Shuttle Bus to the Grotto parking area (37°15.56'N 112°56.99'W).

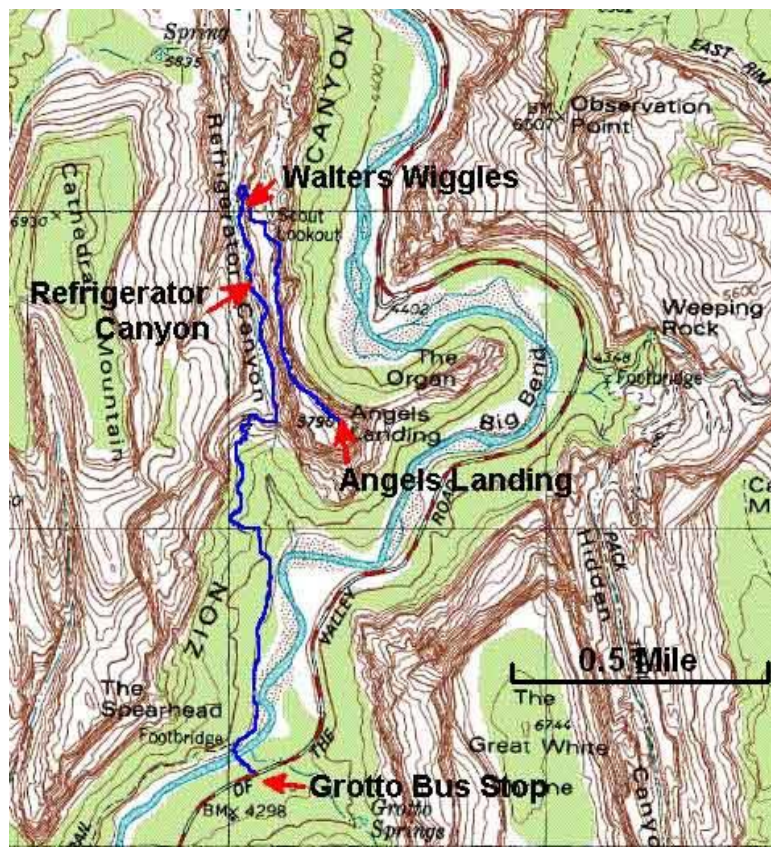
## **Hike**

Cross the Virgin river by the footbridge (elevation 4300ft) and turn right following the signs for Angels Landing. After a brief stretch along the river bank, the trail switchbacks up the west wall of the main canyon, traveling through grooves blasted from the vertical rock face by the trail makers. About 30min from the start, the trail contours into Refrigerator Canyon at an elevation of about 4930ft. In the heat of summer the cool, relatively level hike into Refrigerator Canyon will be a welcome but brief respite. About 45min from the start and deep within Refrigerator Canyon at an elevation of 5150ft, you will come to the bottom of Walter's Wiggles. This set of steep switchbacks climbs precipitously up the right wall of Refrigerator Canyon to the top of the main wall of Zion Canyon. You emerge at a place called Scouts Lookout (37°16.50'N 112°57.04'W, elevation 5350ft) where there is a breath-taking overlook onto the main Zion Canyon and up into the Narrows to your left. Pause here 2mi and 50min from the start to absorb the spectacular views from this aerie. The backbone trail to the top of Angels Landing is readily visible to the south and you can usually discern other hikers making their way along the ridge to the summit.

The trail proceeds south and immediately you encounter chains that line the route around the west side of a large outcropping. Having surmounted this you will come to the narrowest section of the trail. Here you descend a short way to a point where the exposure is 1500ft on both sides of a route that is only a few feet wide. Focus on your footing to avoid being overwhelmed by the drop-off. Thereafter, the ridge climbs steeply but you stay mostly on the apex following the chains all the way to the flat summit ridge. Make your way to the end of this summit ridge for a truly awesome view looking south down Zion



Canyon or north into the Narrows. It is indeed an Angels Landing (37°16.17'N 112°56.87'W). You should reach this 5790ft perch 1hr 30min and 2.5mi from the start. The return along the same route should take about 1hr 15min.



Map of Angels Landing Hike

## 5.3 Orderville Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 12.5 miles
- Elevation gain: None
- USGS Topo Maps: Clear Creek Mountain and Temple of Sinawava or Zion National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: Two short rappels, several wet cascade descents, two pools to swim, hiking in the river
- Special equipment: 60ft rope or webbing and rappeling gear, dry bag, a stout hiking staff
- Permit: Obtain permit from Backcountry Desk in Zion National Park Visitor Center.
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Like, its larger sister, the North Fork of the Virgin River, Orderville Gulch begins high on the 7000-8000ft Markagunt Plateau just outside Zion National Park in southwestern Utah. As it flows west it drops into a narrow slot canyon cut up to 1000ft deep into the Markagunt and creates Orderville Canyon, one of the spectacular canyons of Zion NP. Toward the end the slot is filled with water in a number of places and these require wading in chest-deep water and, in one place, a short swim. Downstream, it joins the North Fork of the Virgin in the middle of the Park just at the lower end of the famed Zion Narrows, providing a taste of what it is like to hike those Narrows.

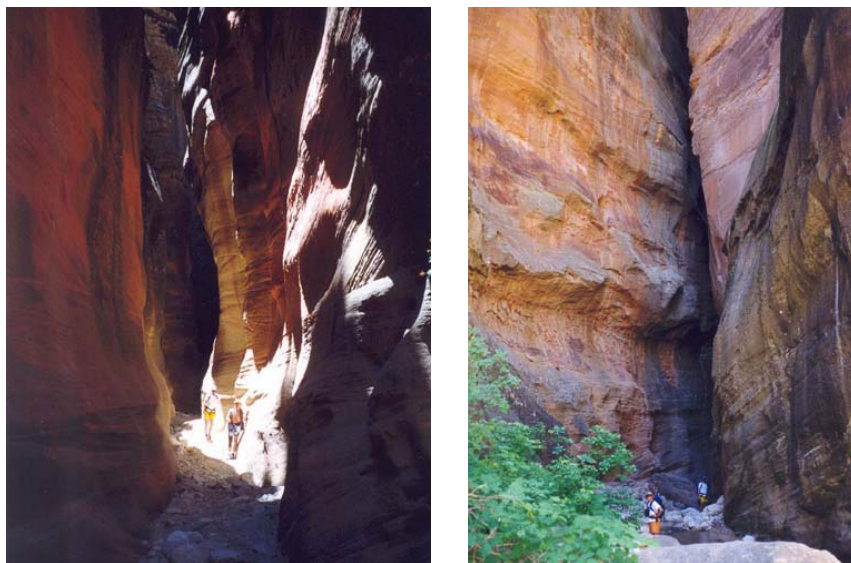
### Trailhead

This hike requires a long 4WD vehicle shuttle. Deposit one vehicle in the parking lot at the Visitor's Center in Zion National Park (37°12.02'N 112°59.24'W). Then, in the other vehicle(s), drive east out of Zion National Park on Highway 9. About 2.3mi past the entrance station, turn left on a good paved road at a point just beyond the top of a small rise. There is a sign indicating the North Fork. About 5mi from the turnoff, the asphalt ends and you continue on a dirt road that is fairly good when dry. It may, however, be impassable when wet. About 11.5mi from the turn-off, the dirt road crosses Orderville Gulch, after descending alongside that distinctive feature. Turn around here and go back 0.8mi to where a narrow dirt road proceeds off to the west (37°20.23'N 112°49.84'W) at the crest of a small hill. About 100yds down this road you

come to a broad corral surrounded by a wire fence ( $37^{\circ}20.09'N$   $112^{\circ}50.07'W$ ). This is where you should park if you are driving a two-wheel drive vehicle. A gate leads to a rough and steep dirt/rock road that descends to the bottom of Orderville Gulch. This is the route whether you are on foot or in a four wheel drive vehicle. It may be passable in a four-wheel drive vehicle though the road is easier to descend than ascend. About 0.7mi from the corral you reach the flat bottom of the gulch; here the road crosses Orderville Creek and follows the right bank on a flat bench for perhaps 0.5mi. It then crosses the stream again and proceeds for a similar distance on the left side. The dirt road ends in a broad, flat clearing ( $37^{\circ}19.96'N$   $112^{\circ}51.70'W$ ) in the low brush where, if you can get this far, you should park.

## Hike

From the clearing ( $37^{\circ}19.96'N$   $112^{\circ}51.70'W$  and elevation 5700ft), a rough trail descends to the creek and you should follow the almost dry stream bed for about 0.5mi as it winds its way across a broad, flat bottom. About 20min from the start at an elevation of 5360ft, there is a dramatic change in the landscape when you arrive at the sudden and steep 120ft dryfall ( $37^{\circ}19.52'N$   $112^{\circ}52.23'W$ ) that marks the beginning of Orderville Canyon. You may choose to follow the course of the stream bed and rappel down the dryfall in two or more stages. Or you may choose to rappel down an even steeper chimney about 60ft to the left of the main stream bed. But this is a long hike and the much simpler and faster route is to backtrack and find the use-trail about 50yds to the left of the top of the dryfall. We came upon this automatically by following the use-trail on the

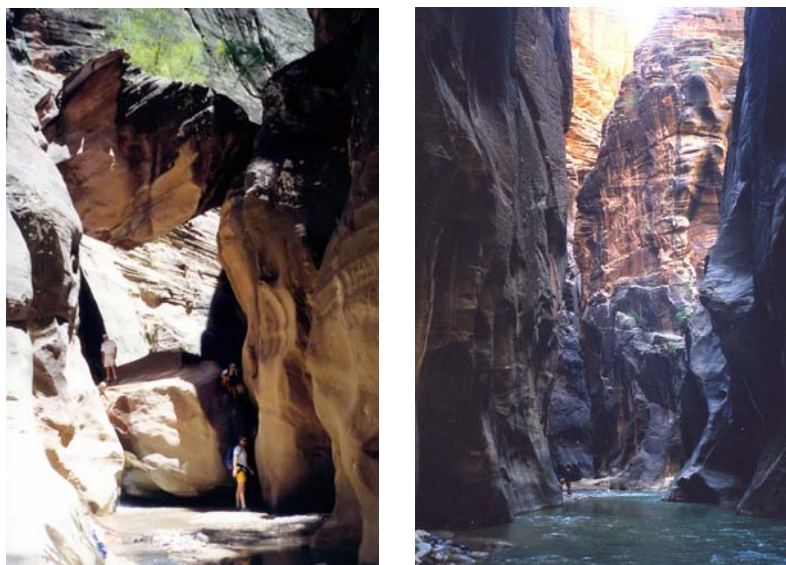


*Left: Orderville Narrows. Right: Orderville Narrows.*

left bench. (An unusual conifer stands beside the trail just where it reaches the lip.)

The use-trail then descends a steep dirt slope to the canyon bottom that is narrow for a brief stretch but then broadens to provide fast and easy going in a rapidly deepening canyon. This is a lovely walk on a bright summer morning and the colors of the trees, rocks and sky are heightened by the crystal air of this high plateau country. About 0.6mi downstream of the dryfall (and 40min from the start) you will encounter Birch Hollow, a sculpted rock-cavity on the left with a spectacular dryfall; a descent of Birch Hollow is described later in this chapter.

The next 2.2mi continue to provide easy going along a gentle grade. The canyon walls steepen and, in places, begin to close in. Then at one particular narrows you encounter the first substantial obstacle, a large, canyon-blocking boulder (37°19.01'N 112°54.08'W) with a steep 15ft drop on the downstream side. It is wise to use rope or webbing to rappel or downclimb this obstacle. The narrow slot on the right can be chimneyed fairly safely given boots with reasonable traction but some protection or belay would be wise. When we came this way the bottom was covered in a layer of very gooey mud. It should take about 3hr to get to the bottom of this boulder obstacle. Thereafter, the going remains easy for the next two miles and along this stretch we had lunch. Then, roughly 3hr 45min from the start, Bulloch Gulch enters on the right and brings with it enough water so that, downstream from the confluence, a stream runs in the canyon the rest of the way. Just downstream of Bulloch Gulch, you enter a spectacular narrows crossed by fractures in several places. Then,



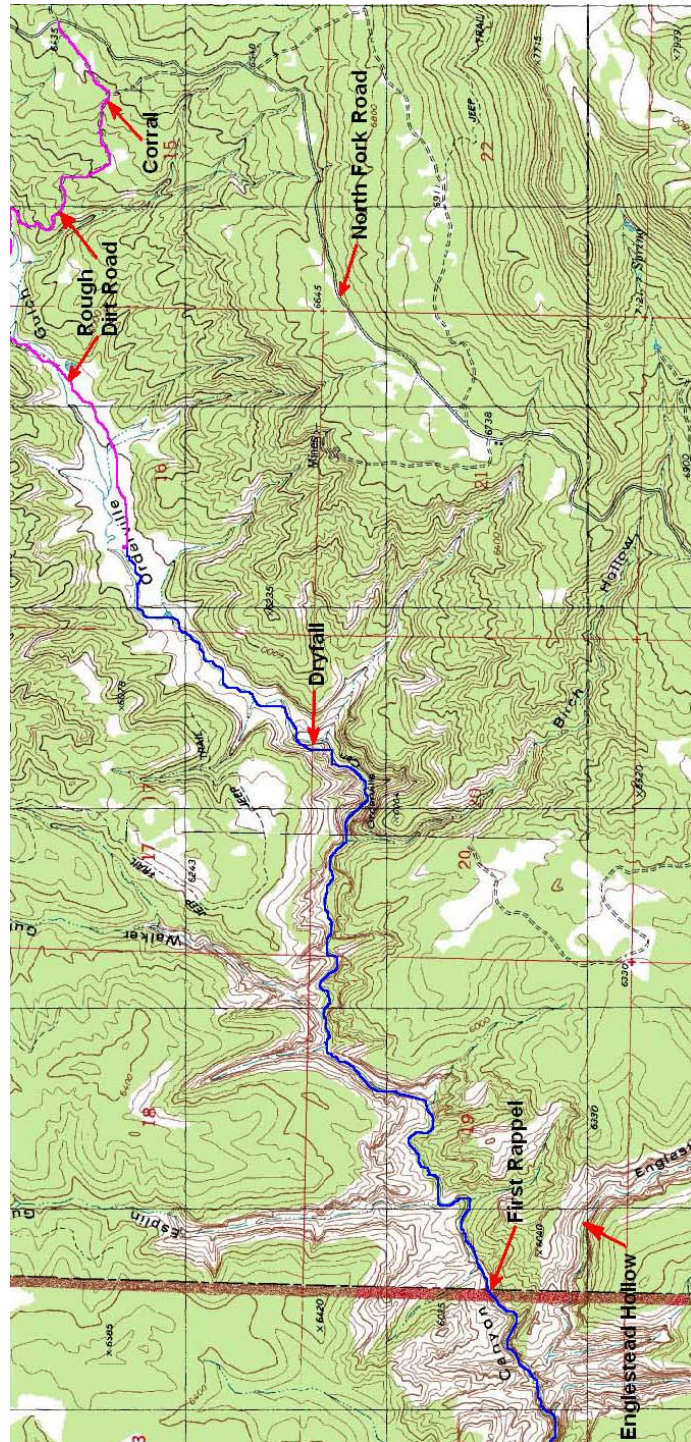
*Left: Suspended boulder with tree. Right: Zion Narrows just below junction with Orderville.*

a mile below Bulloch Gulch, a second fantastic obstacle presents itself. This consists of two huge chockstones, one of which blocks the canyon and requires another downclimb or short rappel. The other huge chockstone is lodged directly overhead forming a massive arch. There is even a tree growing on top of this upper chockstone. We used webbing to rappel about 12ft down the slot on the left though the falls on the right could also be downclimbed using the logs wedged in its face.

At this stage, you enter even more spectacular narrows. The going is also harder between here and the Virgin River and you will need to negotiate a series of small waterfalls and pools some of which require swimming. Here we began to encounter groups of young people who had come up from below to enjoy this water wonderland. Just a short distance downstream of the huge chockstones the canyon narrows further and you must chimney down a small waterfall to the right of a large boulder. Then a series of pools and small waterfalls require chest deep wading and even some swimming. Another short distance downstream, you arrive at the top of an 8ft waterfall dropping into a deep pool. We jumped into this pool since others were present to confirm the depth; if this had not been the case we would have had to arrange a belay or rappel. A similar obstacle occurs a short distance further downstream but here it is easier to slide down from the shelf on the left into the end of the pool.

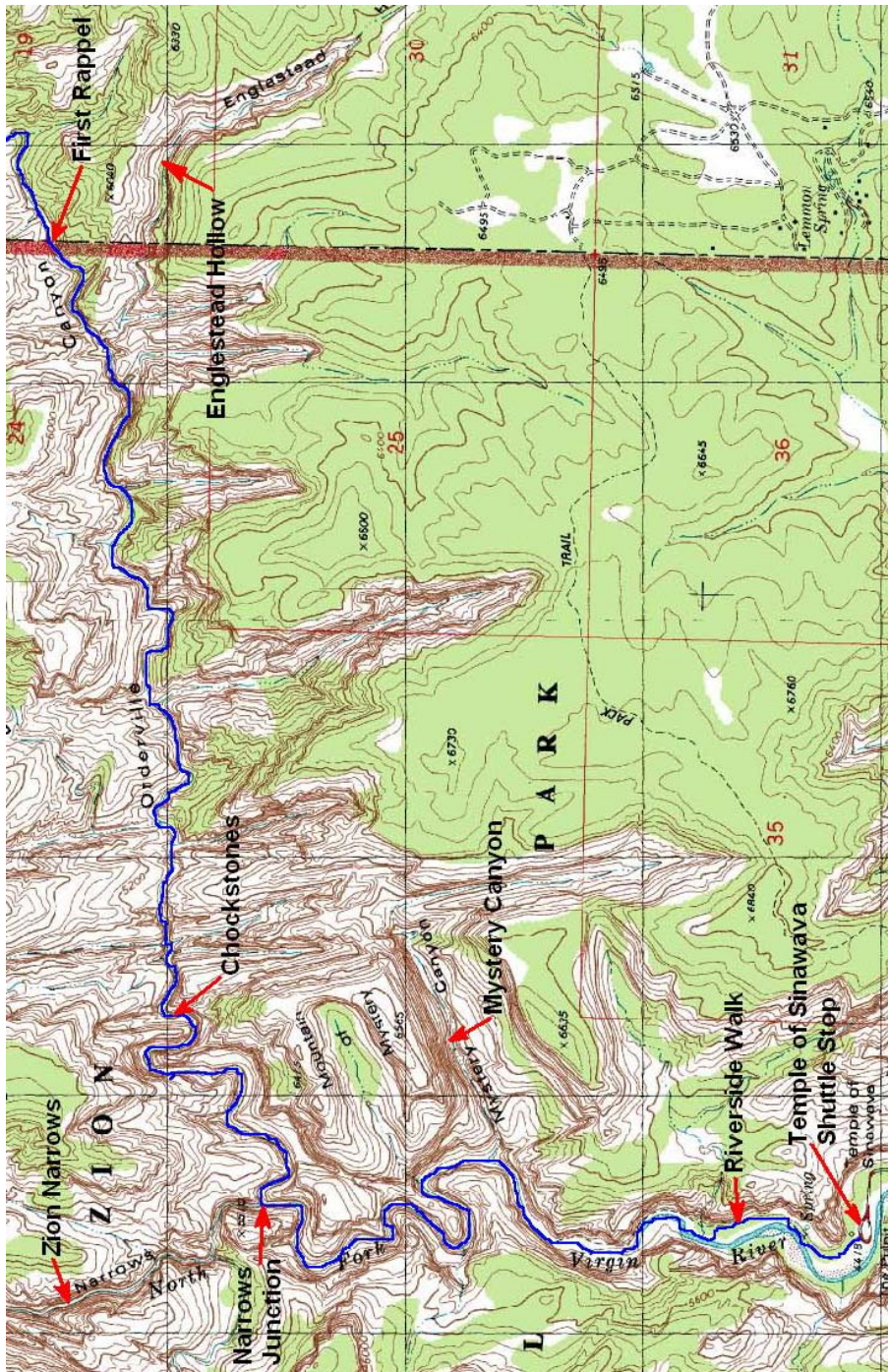
A series of more modest obstacles in the form of pools and falls are encountered before a last stretch of narrow, deep and barren canyon. This leads directly to the junction at 37°18.49'N 112°56.81'W and elevation 4568ft (and 5hr 30min from the start) with the awesome Zion Narrows where the North Fork of the Virgin River flows through an incredible 1000ft slot canyon whose bottom is filled with Virgin River cascade. Stop and savor this awe-inspiring cathedral of a place. Though you will only travel the last 100yds of this great gorge, it provides a taste of the Zion Narrows adventure described previously in this chapter. The exit of the true Zion Narrows is just about 100yds downstream of the Orderville Canyon confluence. There the canyon broadens and pretty wooded benches appear again. Sunlight penetrates and it is a beautiful hike downstream to the point where the concrete Riverside Walk begins. By this stage there are usually crowds of people enjoying the canyon and the adventure of a short hike up into this wilderness. The terminus of the concrete and asphalt Riverside Walk (37°17.80'N 112°56.90'W) is usually crowded with people peering up into the drama of Zion Narrows. From there it is but a 20min walk to the parking lot at the Temple of Sinawava (37°17.11'N 112°56.86'W and elevation 4411ft) and the conclusion of this marvelous adventure about 7hr after setting out from the mesa now high above and far behind. Catch the free shuttle at the Temple of Sinawava for the ride back to the Visitor's Center.





Map of first part of Orderville Canyon Hike





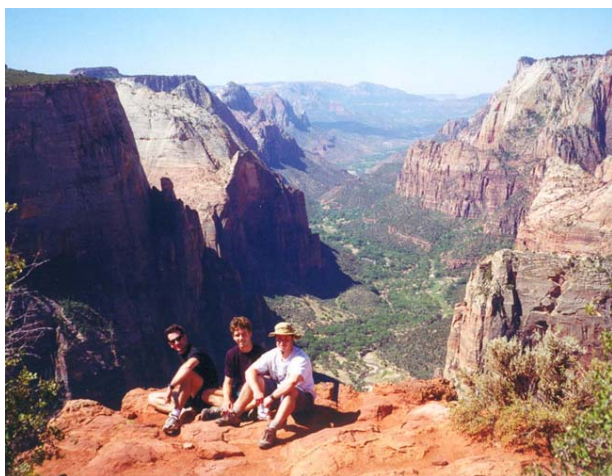
Map of second part of Orderville Canyon Hike

## 5.4 Mystery Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 9.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 8 miles
- Elevation gain: 2400 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Temple of Sinawava or Zion National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: About 12 rappels, two measuring 150ft and 120ft; two swims; flash flood danger.
- Special equipment: 60m rope, 60m recovery rope, harnesses and rappeling gear; dry bags.
- Permit: Obtain permit from Backcountry Desk in Zion National Park Visitor Center.
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Mystery Canyon is one of the more challenging canyoneering adventures in Zion National Park. It is a demanding, all-day hike with about a dozen rappels including one with a 150ft descent into a deep pool. But for experienced adventure hikers Mystery provides a stunning example of a moderately sized slot canyon.



*Left: Zion Canyon from Observation Point. Right: Mystery Canyon from drop-in viewpoint.*



After climbing 2400ft up the trail from Zion Canyon bottom to the Markagunt Plateau and visiting the magnificent views at Observation Point, the hike proceeds to the head of Mystery Canyon and drops steeply into the upper, wooded part of that ravine. Part of the way down you drop into a very narrow slot with many rappels and sculpted sandstone walls. Near the end there are a couple of large rappels and, downstream of Mystery Springs, several swimming holes. Mystery ends in a 120ft drop into the Zion Narrows and the Virgin River. From here it is a short hike back to the road.

## Trailhead

Park at the Visitor Center in Zion National Park ( $37^{\circ}12.02'N$   $112^{\circ}59.24'W$ ) and catch the Zion Canyon Shuttle Bus to Weeping Rock trailhead ( $37^{\circ}16.27'N$   $112^{\circ}56.33'W$ ). At the end of the hike catch the Shuttle Bus back to the Visitor Center from the Temple of Sinawava ( $37^{\circ}17.11'N$   $112^{\circ}56.86'W$ ).

## Hike

Start the long ascent from the Weeping Rock trailhead ( $37^{\circ}16.27'N$   $112^{\circ}56.33'W$  and elevation 4360ft) up the east wall of Zion Canyon by following the signs for the East Rim Trail. An early start is recommended not only because this is a long day hike but also because, early in the morning, most of the climb will be in the shade of the East Wall. As you rise there are spectacular views of the canyon features on the West Wall particularly Angels Landing. At one switch-back the trail to Hidden Canyon rises off to the right. A few more switchbacks,



*Left: 80ft rappel. Right: Mark on rappel.*

and the trail passes around a bluff and contours into the pretty Echo Canyon. After crossing the stream bed it then climbs the north wall of Echo, finally contouring out and reaching a trail junction where the right fork is the East Rim Trail. You fork left toward Observation Point. Another series of switchbacks and the trail finally reaches the rim of Zion Canyon and the edge of the Markagunt Plateau. It then levels out and follows the rim another half mile or so to the trail junction where the spur to Observation Point branches off to the left (elevation 6400ft). You should reach this point about 2hr from the start having covered 3.6mi. Though a side trip, it is well worth the extra effort to follow the level, 0.35mi trail over to Observation Point ( $37^{\circ}16.70'N$   $112^{\circ}56.44'W$  and elevation 6500ft), a side trip that adds about 30min to the hike. The reward is a spectacular view down Zion Canyon from high overhead.

Back at the junction where you now turn left (the right fork when approaching from below), study the topo map and note the time. From here it is 0.9mi to the use-trail turn-off for Mystery Canyon so it should take just about 20min to hike to that point. First the trail passes the head of a large canyon on the left. Shortly thereafter it contours around the head of a large canyon on the right. The trail then proceeds around a long turn to the left at the end of which you should be able to find a clear use-trail branching off to the left. After a few yards this takes you to a magnificent view high above Mystery Canyon slicing off to the north. (If the trail is longer than a few yards and if the view is not clearly Mystery Canyon then you followed the wrong use-trail.) You should reach this drop-in point ( $37^{\circ}17.33'N$   $112^{\circ}55.81'W$  and elevation 6760ft) about 2hr 45min from the start.

From this overlook, a steep, well-worn dirt trail descends into Mystery Canyon. After about 45min you begin to transition into a stream bed and, almost immediately, encounter a small, 20ft rappel for which you can either use the bolt anchor on the rock in midstream or the small tree on the right. From here you travel along the stream bed in a long stretch of narrow but open, wooded canyon with growing walls of rock on either side. Scattered along this section are five small obstacles all of which can be bypassed by short use-trails on the right. Finally the walls close in and you find yourself in a dramatically descending slot. Quickly you encounter the first large rappel, an 80ft descent into the deepening canyon. Good bolts on the left wall make the entry fairly easy and the descent down a geometric groove is straightforward. You are now in a deep and narrow slot canyon with bare rock walls and a gravel, sand and rock bottom. About 7 other rappels follow in rapid succession as the slot canyon deepens still further and you can only see patches of sky high above you. All the rappel anchors have two good bolts and many are so close that you can feed the rope from one to the next. This part was also dry when we passed this way. The second rappel has a drop of about 40ft and an anchor in the right wall. The third is about 50ft and is followed by the small 15ft fourth. The fifth is a multistage 45ft rappel. During this series the canyon makes a 90 degree turn at  $37^{\circ}18.20'N$   $112^{\circ}55.97'W$  and now heads west instead of north. After the fifth rappel it opens up very briefly before you again drop into a slot with a small 15ft rappel followed by a two-stage descent with a 40ft and then a 30ft drop.



Once again the canyon opens up though the vegetation is more desert like than it was higher up. You then proceed down a long stretch of relatively open canyon that can be very hot on a summer afternoon. A flat-bottomed sandy stretch signals your approach to the Devil's Pool, a large muddy canyon-spanning pool of very variable depth that was formed by backup behind a huge rock slide of relatively recent making. Before you come to the rock slide itself you may have to wade through the Devil's Pool though it was completely dry when we passed this way. You should arrive at the rock slide itself about 6hr 45min into the hike. The easiest route up, over and down the rock slide is on the right hand side. At the base on the other side there is a small dryfall that must be bypassed by a use-trail on the right. A brief section of open canyon follows; this has one 20ft rappel in the middle with a bolt anchor in the flat rock on the right.

Shortly thereafter the canyon narrows again to bare rock and you arrive at the top of the largest and most dramatic rappel in this adventure, a drop of about 150ft in a grand vertical chamber to a deep pool far below. The best anchor for this descent both in terms of its multiple bolts and in terms of the rappel trajectory it produces is off on an inclined ledge on the left. The bolt on the chockstone in midstream leads to a trajectory that could get awkward because of another large chockstone that is barely visible far below. To reach the preferred anchor on the left you may choose (because of the exposure) either to hook into the bolts placed at intervals along the 30ft ledge or to set up a belay. But, on a dry summer day, reasonable care on the friction rock is all that is needed to make it over to the anchor. Unlike the preceding rappels, this is a single strand descent with your 60m rope so you will need to set up a recovery



*Left: Big rappel. Right: Descent into Zion Narrows.*

cord. You may wish to do as much rope assembly as possible before venturing out onto the ledge. Then all the first person needs to do is to feed the rope through the rappel rings. The descent then takes you down about 110ft onto the top of the previously mentioned chockstone and then down another 40ft into a very pretty pool at the bottom. Here you will need to make a swimming disconnect. This was the first water we encountered and it was great to cool off in the pool. Fed by Mystery Springs, the water was fresh and filterable and so we could finally replenish our water supply. You should reach this point about 8hr 15min from the start.

The character of the canyon is now greatly changed by the continuous water supply. In contrast to the desert-like vegetation higher up, the canyon is now lush and cool. Downstream from the Springs there are several small pools and one 12ft drop into a beautiful, deep pool with crystal water. This can be jumped or rappeled using a tree anchor a short distance upstream of the lip. Finally, 8hr 45min from the start, you arrive at the last rappel, a drop-off of about 120ft directly into the Zion Narrows (37°17.98'N 112°56.68'W). The anchor is a tree on the left and, again, you will need to set up a single strand rappel with a rope recovery cord. Moreover, because of the narrow cracks in the rock where the rope crosses the lip, the last person down needs to make sure the rope lies down to the right of those grooves and cracks. Otherwise it may be very difficult to pull down the rope. The rappel is wet and the mossy rock is slippery so extra care is needed. You may choose to do a sliding, free rappel. You are also most likely to have an audience from the crowds who wade upstream from the Riverside Walk to this point in the Narrows. So, finally, 9hr into the hike, the technical descents end here in the Zion Narrows. It is just a 400yd walk downstream to the end of the concrete Riverside Walk (37°17.80'N 112°56.90'W). Another mile or so along the Walk brings you to the Temple of Sinawava (37°17.11'N 112°56.86'W) and the stop for the shuttle bus that will take you back to your vehicle at the Visitor Center.



Map of Mystery Canyon Hike

## 5.5 Behunin Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 8.7 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.9 miles
- Elevation gain: 2320 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Temple of Sinawava or Zion National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: Eight rappels up to 165ft, some wading
- Special equipment: Rappeling gear, harnesses, helmets, 60 meter rope, 30ft webbing, and 200ft recovery cord
- Permit: Obtain permit from Backcountry Desk in Zion National Park Visitor Center.
- ACA Rating: 3A III

Behunin Canyon is one of the more challenging canyoneering adventures in Zion. It is a demanding, all-day hike with about 8 rappels including the last, a 165ft free rappel down the main Zion Canyon wall to the Emerald Pools area. Unlike some of the other advanced canyoneering adventures in Zion, Behunin Canyon is almost dry and hotter than the others because of the exposure. Consequently this adventure may be best in the spring or fall.

### Trailhead

Park at the Visitor Center in Zion National Park and catch the Zion Canyon Shuttle Bus to Grotto parking area (37°15.56'N 112°56.99'W). You will return directly to this same parking lot.

### Hike

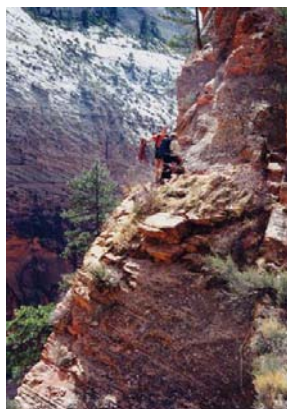
Cross the Virgin river by the footbridge (elevation 4300ft) and turn right following the signs for Angels Landing. After a brief stretch along the river bank, the trail climbs the west wall of the main canyon and contours into Refrigerator Canyon at an elevation of about 4930ft. In the heat of summer the cool, relatively level hike up Refrigerator Canyon will be a welcome but brief respite. Soon, the trail climbs precipitously up the right wall of Refrigerator utilizing the famous Walter's Wiggles to reach Scout Lookout (37°16.50'N 112°57.04'W). Pause here 2mi from the start at an elevation 5350ft to absorb the breath-taking views from this aerie. The trail to the 5790ft Angels Landing proceeds south,



climbing the apex of the ridge to an awesome perch high above the main Zion Canyon. If you choose to make this side-trip it will add about 1hr to the adventure. Otherwise proceed in the other direction, north from Scout's Lookout. The well-marked trail climbs a much easier ridge to a broad, flat shelf whose top (elevation 5860ft) is mostly bare rock. It then descends to a wooden foot-bridge across a small but deep gully. You should reach this bridge (elevation 5520ft) about 2.7mi and 1hr 45min from the start. From this low point the trail climbs across the north face of Mount Majestic and up into the narrowing canyon between Mount Majestic and the mass of the West Rim. The drop-in point for Behunin Canyon ( $37^{\circ}16.96'N$   $112^{\circ}58.18'W$ ) is the saddle at the top of this climb; you should reach this 6280ft elevation about 2hr 20min or 3.5mi from the start. The West Rim trail turns right and continues to climb toward the plateau high overhead. However, the head of Behunin Canyon lies below you to the west, easily recognized by its spectacular headwall, a massive and bright sandstone cliff painted by eons of water runoff.

The drop-in is quite easy. After hiking down through the manzanita turn left and traverse the slickrock toward the towering headwall. Then descend the scree slope under the headwall to the start of the stream bed. The going is quite easy for the next mile or so with only occasional obstacles, all of which are readily circumvented or downclimbed. The walls on either side are steeply sloping but not vertical, allowing for more sunshine to penetrate and more vegetation to thrive. But after a mile Behunin suddenly turns left and drops off precipitously ( $37^{\circ}16.31'N$   $112^{\circ}58.07'W$ ). It is a drop of almost 500ft that takes 4 dramatic rappels to descend. You should reach the top of this challenge (elevation 5700ft) about 3.5hr or 4.2mi from the start.

The two-bolt anchor for the first, 70ft rappel is out along a ledge on the right. Descend from there to the obvious large tree slightly off to the right. Using that tree as anchor, rappel straight down about 120ft over sloping slickrock to a smaller tree on the edge of a substantial precipice. The third rappel uses the



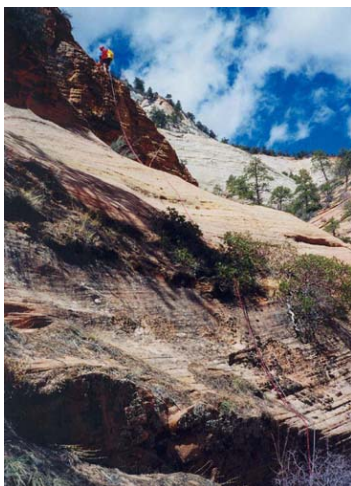
*Left: Behunin Canyon from drop-in saddle. Right: Top of first rappel.*



small tree as anchor and dramatically descends 160ft to a flat-bottomed recess in the cliff. The rope recovery from this third rappel can be a little difficult so the last person down should try to avoid laying the rope down in one of the grooves in the sandstone cut by previous canyoneers. The fourth and last rappel in this big-wall series is anchored by a set of bolts at the edge of the recess. It descends about 100ft to the sandy canyon floor (elevation 5200ft). You should reach this point a little under 5hr from the start. It is a good place for lunch and a brief rest.

Once revived, proceed down the sandy-bottomed canyon for several hundred yards until you arrive at the top of a 50ft dryfall. Here, some have downclimbed the sandy and rock-filled watercourse but then have had to rappel the last 20ft from a small tree. It is much easier to locate the set of bolts on the broad shelf on the right and to rappel the whole way from there. After this obstacle the bottom of Behunin continues flat and sandy and the vertical walls close in to form a classic section of deep narrows. Soon, you come to a short, very narrow section with a thigh-deep pool. It is probably best to wade this pool though some have climbed around on the left using a sketchy rim about 6ft above the water. This wade is immediately followed by a much larger pool below a 6ft drop that would require a 15yd swim but is better bypassed by following the use-trail up a steep wooded bank on the right. This descends to the canyon floor downstream of the pool. Shortly thereafter you arrive at an awkward 10ft drop that is best negotiated using a bypass very similar to the pool bypass of a few minutes before. Climb the steep wooded slope on the right and descend a few yards downstream.

Just a short distance downstream you will arrive, 6.5hr and 4.8mi from the start, at the beginning of the final series of rappels. The top of the first rappel, still inside the canyon, is an awkward area of broken boulders and steep sandy

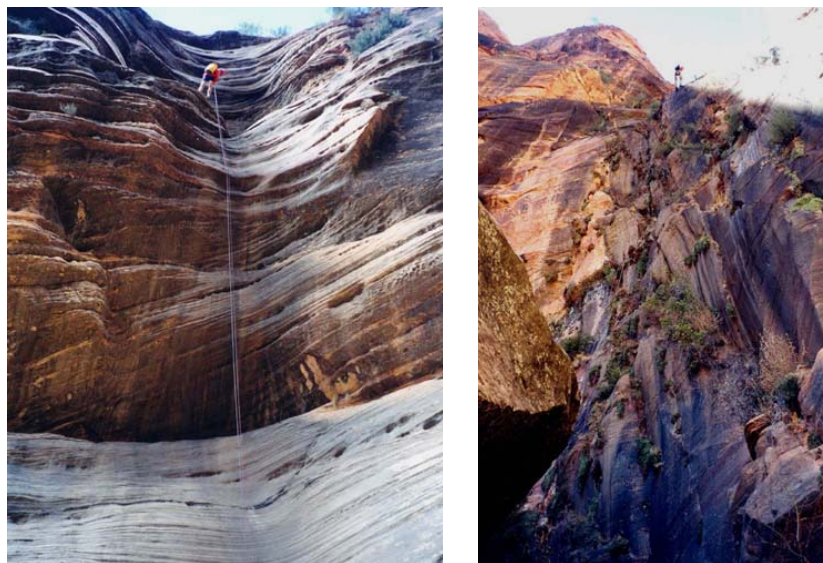


*Left: The first rappel. Right: Looking down second rappel.*

gullies. There are two trees one about 25ft above the other that have been used as anchors. From the lower tree it is a 50ft rappel down to the canyon floor. Before pulling the rope you may choose to continue the rappel down an awkward 10ft slot drop in the watercourse that is much undercut. Alternatively there is a narrow ledge on the right that bypasses the slot drop.

Just a few yards beyond the slot drop you will come to the end of Behunin Canyon at an elevation of 4900ft having traveled for 6hr 50min and 4.8mi. A spectacular panoramic view of this part of the main Zion Canyon opens up before you. Below is the great amphitheater on the west side of Zion Canyon that contains the Emerald Pools, a very popular and short hike for Zion tourists. Two trails, one above the other, lead up to the lower Emerald Pool from the south, from Zion Lodge. Another trail that is not visible since it is directly below you leads to the Lower Emerald Pool from the Grotto Parking area. It is, however, a 300ft vertical drop from where you are standing to the top of the scree slope in the main Zion Canyon, an awesome and daunting prospect. A little downclimbing and two big rappels are required to make the descent. The first task is to climb around a large canyon-blocking boulder. This is best done on the left side of the boulder and it is wise to belay each other since the shelf on the downside of the boulder is sloping and exposed. The anchor for the penultimate 120ft rappel is under the canyon-blocking boulder. From here you first rappel down a section with about 40ft of free rappel to a shelf and then continue past a logjam (probably temporary) to a large, flat, recessed shelf of rock, a comforting rest stop before the final challenge.

The bolted anchor for the final big rappel ( $37^{\circ}15.61'N$   $112^{\circ}57.73'W$ ) is found by dropping down from the flat shelf into the gully on the left and following



*Left: Fourth rappel. Right: The last 165ft rappel.*

that short gully under a small chockstone to where the stream plunges straight down the cliff. The bolted anchors are just to the left of the lip. From here it is a 160ft rappel to the scree far below. The entry is easy and the first 20ft are sloped. The last 140ft are free and you will be some considerable distance from the cliff, hanging in mid-air in Zion Canyon. It is indeed an awesome experience; take your time and enjoy the view. You will touch down between the cliff and a large block that separated from the cliff some time in the past. You should reach this point (elevation 4600ft) about 8hr after the morning start.

From the touchdown point, there are some bouldering challenges ahead as you continue down the stream bed. However, when you see a good use-trail you should leave the stream bed and traverse left for an easier descent down a brushy slope. This will intersect the trail that leads from the Lower Emerald Pool to the Grotto Parking Area. Turn left, take the high trail at several junctions and follow this, the Kayenta trail, back to the Grotto Parking Area about 1mi away. You should arrive back at the starting point 5.9mi and 8hr 40min after starting out.





Map of Behunin Canyon Hike

## 5.6 Pine Creek

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 4.3 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 1.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 100 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Springdale East or Zion National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: Seven rappels, one a descent of 120ft mostly free rappel, much bouldering and several wades through waist deep water; flash flood danger.
- Special equipment: 50m rope, 50m recovery rope, harnesses and rappeling gear, dry bags.
- Permit: Obtain permit from Backcountry Desk in Zion National Park Visitor Center.
- ACA Rating: 3B II

Pine Creek is a readily accessible slot canyon with several really spectacular sections of sculptured and contorted sandstone. It is a strenuous adventure hike that is only for the experienced canyoneer, and includes some 7 rappels. The last of these involves a drop of about 120ft down into the middle of the sandstone cathedral; all but the top 10ft of this descent is a free rappel. The last part of the hike in the shadow of the Great Arch requires much scrambling and bouldering as you descend a steep but open stream bed with year-long water and several fine swimming pools.

### Trailhead

The drop-in for this hike is the small parking lot at the upper or east end of the Zion Mount Carmel Tunnel in Zion National Park (37°12.79'N 112°56.44'W). First, however, you must leave your return vehicle at a switchback overlooking Pine Creek on the way up to the tunnel from the South Entrance or campgrounds in the Park. From the vicinity of the Visitor Center in Zion National Park drive north to where the closed Canyon Road branches off and then east on Highway 9. The first switchback is the bridge over the river. Drive to the third switchback, park your return vehicle in the pullout on the inside of the curve (37°12.88'N 112°57.48'W) and check that the switchback overlooks the river by just about 100ft. Then drive the other vehicle on through the tunnel and turn into the small parking lot immediately on the right as you exit the

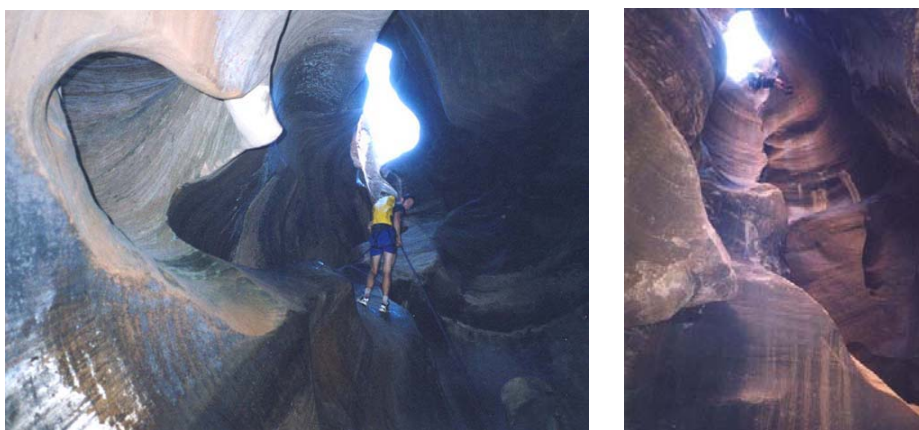


tunnel. The ranger on duty at that end of the tunnel will probably ask to see your permit.

## Hike

Proceed down the steep trail from the parking lot (elevation 5120ft) into Pine Creek Canyon which is a narrow slot at this point. As you continue downstream and pass under the road bridge, it narrows further and after just 50yds there is an awkward 8ft downclimb that is followed by the first rappel, still within sight of the bridge. A good bolt anchor in the right wall allows you to rappel down the first 30ft drop and then continue through a narrow slot and on down the second 20ft stage. This is the start of a series of rappels that are so close together that the rope can be fed directly from one to the next. Just downstream from the first is a small 15ft rappel into a shallow, circular pool, followed immediately by the first of the really spectacular rappels on this adventure. This is a 50ft descent into a gorgonzola-like chamber with holes to the sky in several directions. You can not help but feel a strong sense of wonder as you descend into this make-believe place. Take your time and enjoy this extraordinary experience and its photo opportunities. There may be a pool in the bottom of the chamber but it was dry and sand-filled when we came this way. You should reach this point about 1hr from the start.

Pine Creek has now become a deep, narrow and twilight slot. Continuing 50yds downstream you will come to a logjam fall that requires a 20ft rappel using a large log anchor just upstream. The rappel entry here is tricky because of the overhang and the lack of a foothold below the lip. Note however that both log anchors and jams caused by logs can change radically from one year to the next. It is just a few yards from the bottom of this rappel to a series of waist deep pools with very cold water. Again, the depth may change considerably from year to year. The narrow slot continues downstream of the pools and after



*Left: Third rappel. Right: The Sandstone Cathedral.*

about 100yds there is an easy 30ft free rappel from a bolt anchor on the vertical right wall. Thereafter, the canyon widens but with towering walls on both sides. Here the bottom is strewn with large boulders, a preview of things to come. As the canyon turns to the left one of the road-tunnel windows comes into view high on the left wall. It is bizarre to hear the sound of vehicles passing as you negotiate this wild place. However, before you reach the canyon bottom under the window, there is an easy 80ft rappel from a bolt anchor in the rock on the right side on the canyon. This anchor took us a few minutes to find amongst the boulders. You should reach the bottom of this rappel about 2hr 15min from the start.

From the bottom of the previous rappel, you pass through a narrow slot and arrive, right under the tunnel window, at one of the most spectacular rappels anywhere, anyplace ( $37^{\circ}12.70'N$   $112^{\circ}56.73'W$ ). The stream falls about 120ft down through an amazing golden cathedral into a beautiful circular pool. Much of this is not visible from above; but you get to enjoy it during the descent. The anchor for the rappel is on the left side and is most readily found by climbing up about 10ft onto the large shelf on the left. From that shelf you can safely descend a small groove in the rock to the multiply-supported anchor. Note that there are bolts elsewhere but these will not give you the same spectacular and easy descent trajectory through the chamber below. All but the top 10ft - in other words the bottom 110ft of the descent - involve a free rappel through this awesome cathedral of a place. It is a truly wondrous and unique experience.

As you enter the rappel note the deep grooves cut into the rock by the passage of many, many ropes. The last person down should make sure that the rope does not lie down in one of these grooves for that may severely hamper rope recovery. The pool at the bottom was only waist deep when we passed this way.

When you finally prepare to leave this place (about 2hr 50min from the start), the harnesses can be stored away for there are no further rappels on this adventure. Downstream of the sandstone cathedral the canyon is littered with huge buick-sized boulders that make for slow going. You must make your way around, over and under this maze that is physically and navigationally challenging. The stream flows year-long here in this canyon in the shadow of the Great Arch and there are some marvelous swimming holes along the way. It takes more than 1hr 20min to negotiate this obstacle course but gradually the going gets easier. Along the way you should catch glimpses of the vehicles on the switchbacks high on the right slope. As you get toward the end, the retaining walls for the switchback where you left the return vehicle come easily into view and there is a well-worn use trail that leaves the stream at  $37^{\circ}12.88'N$   $112^{\circ}57.44'W$  and climbs the 100ft or so up to the road. The hike should take about 4hr 15min.



Map of Pine Creek Hike

## 5.7 Keyhole Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 2 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 0.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 200 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Springdale East or Zion National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: Three short rappels, much scrambling, some swimming, flash flood danger.
- Special equipment: 100ft of rope, harnesses and rappeling gear, dry bags.
- Permit: Obtain permit from Backcountry Desk in Zion National Park Visitor Center.
- ACA Rating: 3B II

Keyhole Canyon provides a short technical, slot canyon experience with three easy rappels and some swimming in very cold water. It is a brief and valuable test for those who contemplate tackling some of the more ambitious technical canyoneering adventures in Zion like Mystery Canyon or Pine Creek.

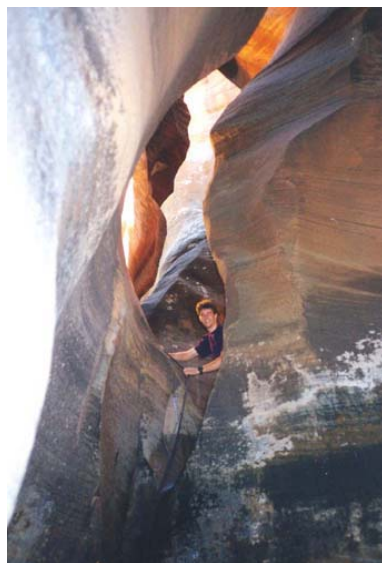
### Trailhead

From the Visitor Center near the south entrance to Zion National Park drive north and then east on Highway 9 up through the Zion Mount Carmel Tunnel. Continue on to a second short tunnel. Precisely 1.8mi beyond the exit from that tunnel there is a bend to the right with two small pullouts on the right (37°13.49'N 112°54.16'W). Park in one of those.

### Hike

Hike about 200yds around the next corner to where a depression on the left side of the road marks the passage of a small wash (37°13.44'N 112°54.03'W). Head up this wash veering left and following a use-trail in the sand. Climb the slickrock toward a saddle with several hoodoos. There are several other, higher saddles visible to the right of the one you want so be sure to veer left. The saddle is reached after a climb of just about 200ft and you should be able to discern a clear use trail across the top and down the steep, sandy descent on the other side. After this descent, you will be in the narrow bottom of Keyhole Canyon about 15min from the start.

Turn left into an even narrower slot. This first section of Keyhole is shoulder width but dry and with a few straightforward downclimbs. Chimneying is the recommended method of descent for most of these obstacles. After about 15min (and 30min from the start) you exit the first section of slot onto a broad, open wash. But just 20yds downstream the route turns abruptly left and disappears into another narrow slot. Right at this entrance there is an interesting 30ft rappel into an enclosed bowl that usually has a shallow pool in the bottom. The anchor for this first rappel is a stout tree on the other, right side of the broad wash. This descent is immediately followed by a second, shorter rappel (using anchor bolts in the wall) and then by a tricky but short downclimb into a waist deep pool (use the webbing on the chockstone to help with the descent). Another short rappel follows for which there are bolts in the left wall. After some more downclimbing you will come to a long, 3ft wide and deep pool in a narrow, inclined slot. A mixture of chimneying and/or swimming is needed here as well as a dry bag for any belongings you may have brought. When we came this way there were three sections of pool separated by short gravel sand beaches. However, each year the configuration will change with the passing storms. What seems to remain constant is the very cold water. Fortunately it is not far from the cold pools to the exit. A few more small downclimbs and sections of narrow slot canyon and you arrive at the exit about 50yds from the road and the place where you parked your vehicle (37°13.49'N 112°54.16'W). It should take about 2hrs to complete this hike.



*Keyhole Narrows.*





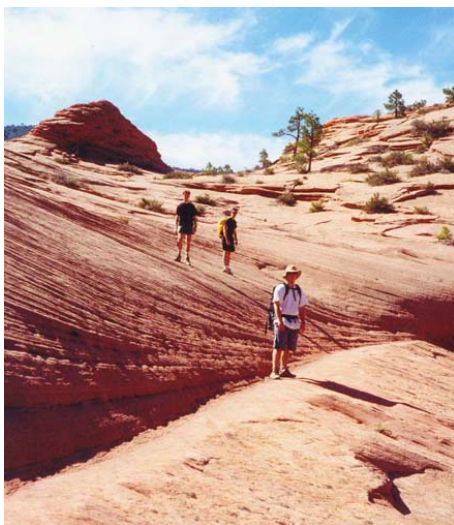
Map of Keyhole Canyon Hike

## 5.8 The Subway

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 9.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 380 feet
- USGS Topo Map: The Guardian Angels or Zion National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: Some route finding, several short rappels, much scrambling and bouldering, some swimming, flash flood danger.
- Special equipment: 70ft rope and rappeling gear, dry (waterproof) bags.
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Many adventure hikers would rank “The Subway” as their all-time favorite canyoneering experience. The Subway is the name given to a section of canyon in the Left Fork of North Creek near the western boundary of Zion National Park. The name derives from the fact that along one stretch of the Left Fork where it has carved a deep slot canyon into the red sandstone, the bottom of the slot opens up into a circular, tube-like shape. But there is much more to the Subway than just this odd feature. The hike begins at an elevation of



*Left: Approaching Slickrock Saddle. Right: Slickrock Bowl.*

7000ft, high on the Markagunt Plateau that surrounds Zion except on the south. It descends through spectacular carved sandstone scenery before dramatically climbing down into the slot canyon. There the adventurer is treated to a marvelously varied sequence of natural sculptures and physical challenges. The hike can be completed quite easily in a day.

A permit is required even for day hikes through the Subway. These may be obtained a day in advance from the Visitors Center in Zion National Park. Advance reservations can be made by telephone.

## **Trailhead**

This hike requires a car shuttle. It is probably most convenient to overnight in Zion National Park. If you do so then you can reach the trailhead by driving back out of the Park and west to the town of Virgin about 14mi away. There you turn north on the Kolob Reservoir Road and travel 8.5mi to the Left Fork Parking Area on the right side of the road (37°17.14'N 113°5.78'W). Leaving one vehicle in that sandy parking area, continue another 7mi up to the Wildcat Canyon Trailhead (37°20.38'N 113°4.52'W and elevation 7000ft), located a hundred yards or so down a dirt road on the right. Parking the second vehicle there.

## **Hike**

The trail proceeds eastwards over a gentle, partly wooded mesa. After about 1mi, the Hop Valley connector trail comes in on the right but you continue on for another 200yds or so to the junction with the trail to Northgate Peaks (37°20.56'N 113°3.43'W). Fork right and follow the Northgate Peaks trail for about 50yds to the top of a small rise. A use-trail forks off to the left and you follow this to the top of a broad expanse of slickrock. Follow the series of ducks that lead down the slickrock while angling to the right. At the bottom of the slope, the ducks lead to a well-traveled trail that enters the brush and trees alongside a small creek. This is a pretty section with luxurious ferns contrasting with the raw slickrock higher up. After several hundred yards, the trail emerges again onto the slickrock and the route down to a creek crossing is again marked by ducks.

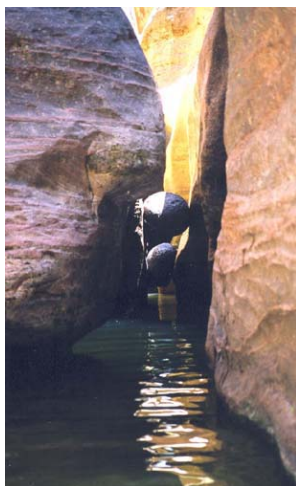
You should reach this stream crossing at an elevation of about 6300ft about 35min after leaving the trailhead. The trail on the other side of the creek continues to be well-ducked as it crosses some rough rocky ground and traverses over toward Russell Gulch. Just before the Gulch you arrive at a section of steep descent that leads to the Russell Creek crossing (2.6mi and 1hr from the trailhead at 5800ft).

On the other side of Russell Creek, the route climbs the slickrock toward a bare rock saddle where there are two prominent hoodoos. Only a few ducks mark this section but it is hard to miss the saddle. Once the saddle is broached, there is a spectacular view south into a broad slickrock bowl. Before descending, it is wise to pick out the trail in the distance as it snakes through the trees on the

far side of the bottom of the bowl. The route descends straight down into the bowl following the ducks and continues contouring through the woods toward the manzanita slopes high above the left side of Russell Gulch. At this point the Gulch is out of sight in a gorge off to the right. As is the case throughout this hike, the trail is well worn and easily followed; it is particularly important not to lose the main trail during the next stretch.

About 3.7mi into the hike at an elevation of about 5600ft, the trail quite suddenly arrives at a spectacular viewpoint high above the junction of Russell Gulch and the Left Fork of North Creek. The view here is quite awesome; you can look both upstream and downstream into the vertically walled Left Fork ravine and, simultaneously upstream into the canyon of Russell Creek. It is hard to visualize how you will be able to make the descent into the canyon below you. However, just around to the right, you will find the top of a steep and narrow gully by which to make the descent with some Class 3 downclimbing. In this gully you drop over 200ft, arriving at the bottom beside a large pool in Russell Gulch. The confluence with the Left Fork ( $37^{\circ}19.07'N$   $113^{\circ}2.44'W$ ) is just 20yds downstream at an elevation of about 5300ft.

This marks the start of a beautiful transit through the scenic and wondrously sculpted gorge of the Left Fork of North Creek - known throughout the hiking world as "The Subway". In contrast to the reflected heat of the slickrock higher up, it is cool here in the canyon depths and you should take your time over the next few miles to truly enjoy this marvelous canyon. About 200yds from the Russell Creek junction, a small boulder field leads to the first serious obstacle, consisting of a large canyon-blocking boulder forming a 15ft drop. The easiest descent is to chimney down the gap on the right between a huge boulder and the canyon wall. A large log in the chimney currently allows relatively easy descent by straddling and sliding down it. A short distance further on the canyon closes



*Left: Chockstone boulders. Right: The Subway.*

in and you arrive (4.3mi from the start at an elevation of 5240ft) at two deep pools in a section of canyon only about 6ft wide. At the ends of the pools (30ft and 15ft long) are small cascades that are easily negotiated. However, both pools can be deep enough to require swimming. There is a sunny little beach just downstream of these pools that you will reach about 2hrs into the hike; it is a fine spot for lunch.

Just about 100yds further and you arrive at a more challenging and interesting obstacle where the stream flows through a very narrow slot only about 2-3ft wide. The less challenging route is to bypass this slot by climbing to a ledge on the left about 12ft above the stream at the entrance to the slot. Though somewhat wet and slippery due to water seepage, this ledge can be used to travel (crawl) downstream to the end of the slot; there you can descend to the canyon floor by rappelling or downclimbing a tricky and steep rock slope (a conveniently placed tree provides a good anchor for the recommended 30ft rappel). However, it is more fun to take the direct route and proceed down the narrow slot in which the water is initially only a few feet deep. However, you quickly arrive at a small two-stage waterfall by which the water falls into a small cavern with chest deep water. The waterfall can be downclimbed using several convenient footholds. Downstream of the cavern you may need to swim across several pools and through two very narrow restrictions - about 18in wide. The second restriction has two round chockstone boulders jammed between the slot walls, one above the other. The best way through is to place your pack on top of the lower boulder and then slide under it almost completely underwater, retrieving the pack after you emerge on the other side. The end of this intriguing obstacle is just beyond the chockstone boulders.



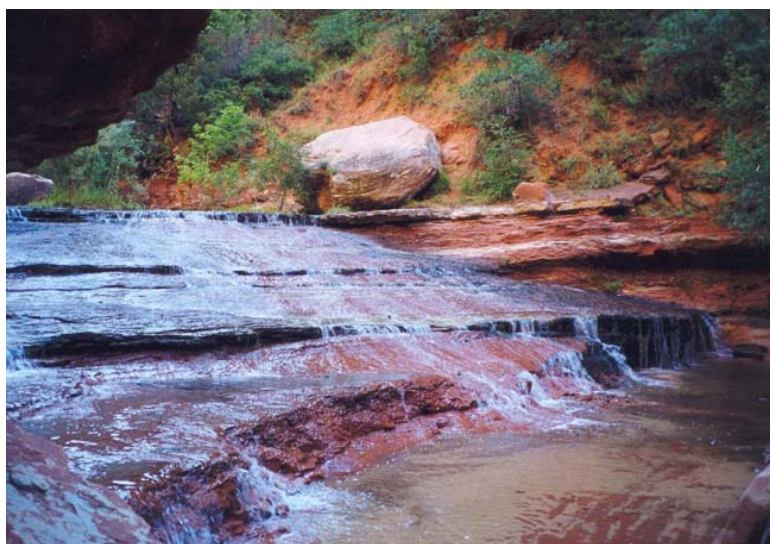
*The Subway.*



Downstream the canyon widens again but the walls seem to grow in height. About 0.3mi from the chockstone boulders (and 4.9mi from start), the canyon again narrows to a slot and you arrive at Keyhole Falls, a 10ft drop easily recognized by the hole in the rock just above the lip on the left. Bolts in the rock on the right provide a convenient anchor for the rope or webbing used for the small downclimb or rappel. You should reach this 5250ft elevation about 3hrs 15min into the hike.

The Keyhole Falls lead to a narrow slot that continues for about 50yds with some curious geometric shapes in the rock. It then widens, the walls steepen and the overhangs and ledges characteristic of a subway appear. This spectacular subway shape (37°18.59'N 113°3.10'W) proceeds for several hundred yards until you arrive at another place where the stream drops into a narrow slot in the canyon bottom as the canyon makes a right turn. A series of contorted pools in the bottom of this slot mean that it is easier to descend a short distance downstream of the falls by following the prominent ledge on the left to a place where bolts have been installed on the sloping rock face. This is the longest rappel on the hike, a descent of about 35ft that requires a 70ft length of rope for a safe double-rappel. Here at an elevation of 5200ft you will be about 4hrs from the starting trailhead.

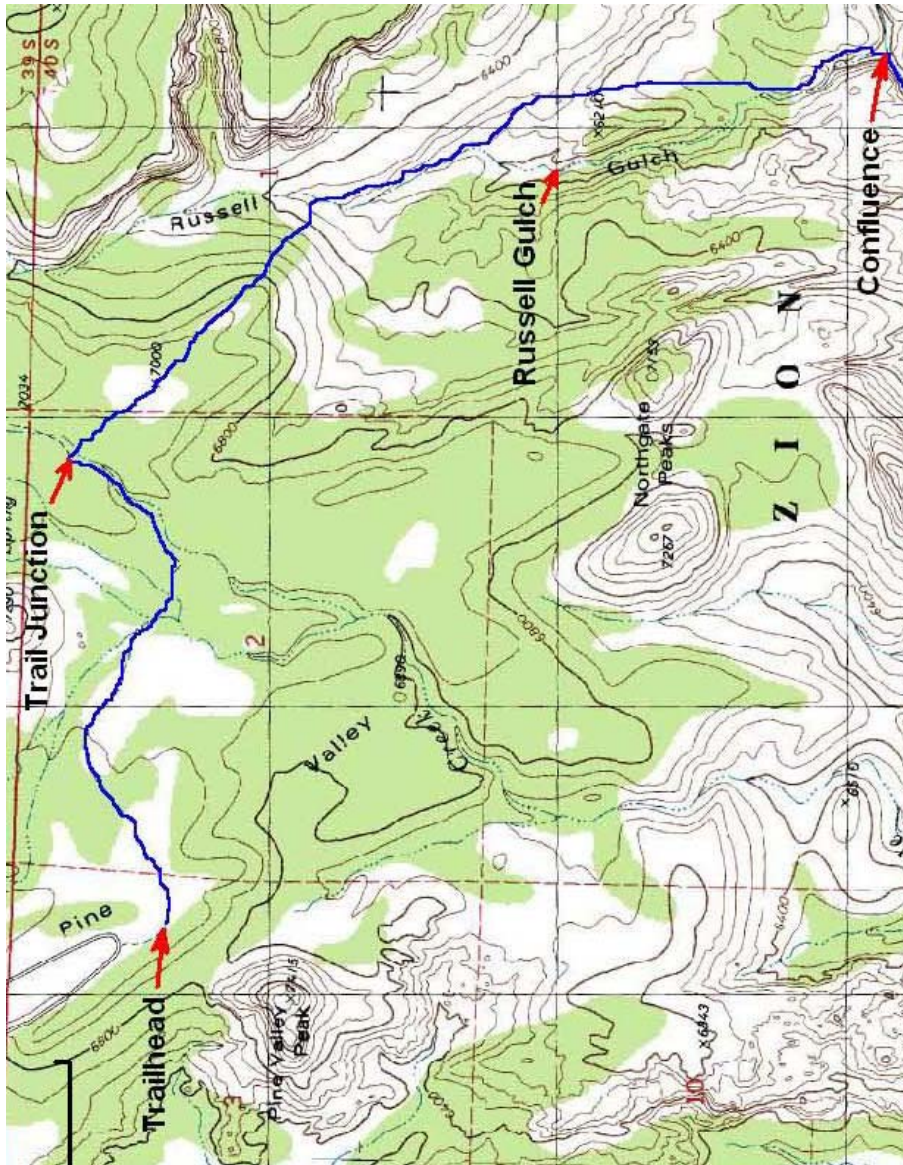
There is a short but magnificent section of subway downstream of the rappel before the canyon opens up into a more conventional shape. This marks the end of the technical descents. The rest of the hike only requires negotiation of boulder fields. In the next half mile there are a series of beautiful and gentle cascades over red sandstone. This rock surface is less slippery than one might guess at first sight and it is relatively easy to walk down the water-covered rock.



*Red stone cascade.*

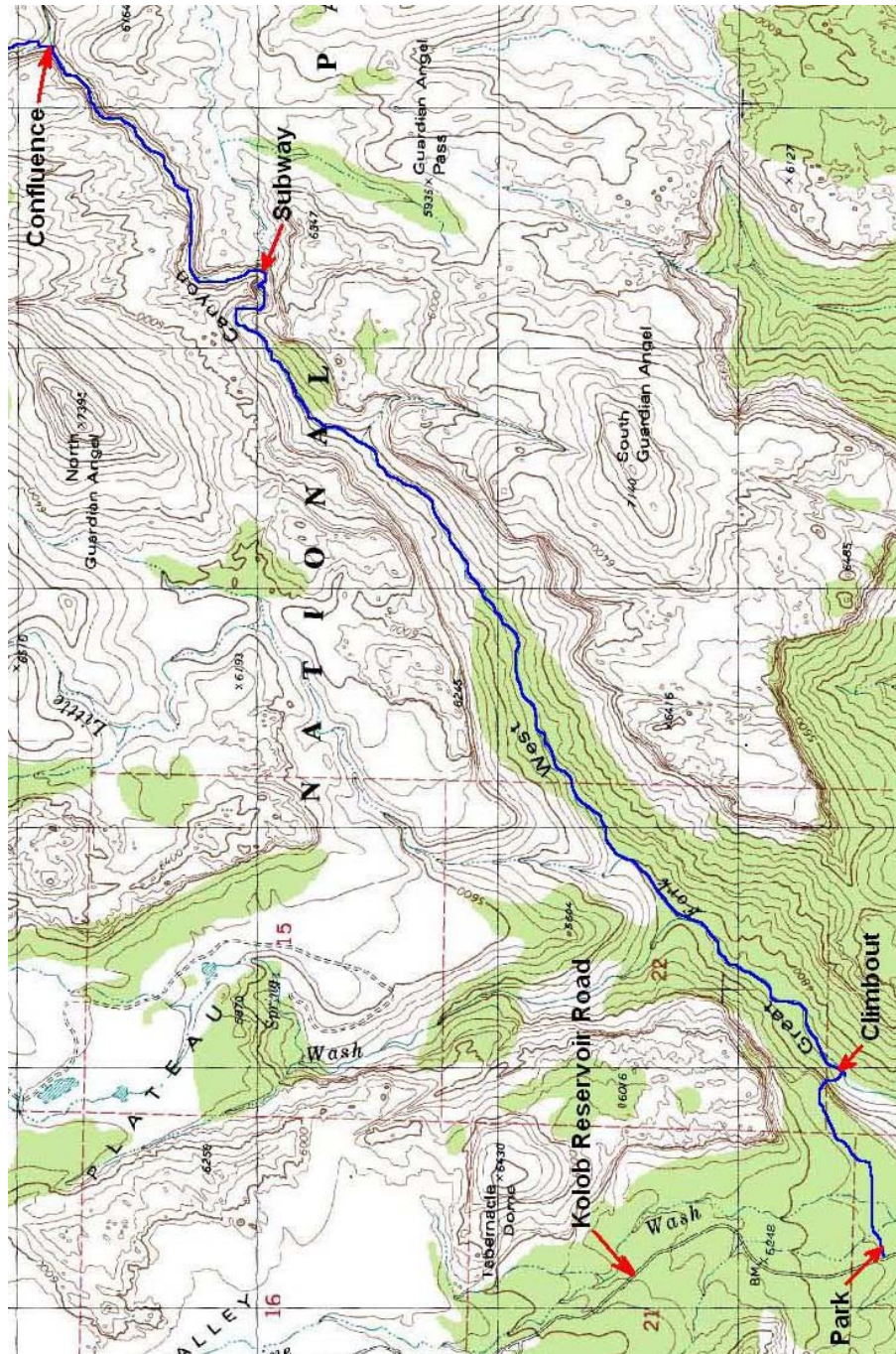
In several places it is necessary to follow the use-trails through the vegetation on the left in order to circumvent larger falls formed by boulders. The canyon bottom gradually becomes more benign and soon the use-trail is almost continuous, mostly following the right side. There are a number of nice swimming holes along the way that can provide a delightful refuge from the summer heat.

The next challenge is to recognize where to begin the climb out of the canyon up the steep right wall. There are some faint trails where others have begun the ascent too soon and you need to avoid following these. It is useful to look for two tributary streams that enter on the right. Just beyond the second stream, you should notice a prominent black lava outcropping high above you on the right rim of the canyon and from the bottom you should be able to spot in the recess just before the prominent outcropping one of the few breaks in the upper cliff that could allow escape from the canyon. The beginning of the ascending trail ( $37^{\circ}17.29'N$   $113^{\circ}5.22'W$ ) is about 8.3mi from the start of the hike at an elevation of 4700ft. It proceeds straight up a shallow gully before steepening, traversing to the left and proceeding through the aforementioned gap in the cliff. The climb to the plateau is about 400ft. Once at the rim, it is an easy and relatively flat hike of about 0.8mi along a well-worn trail back to the lower trailhead ( $37^{\circ}17.14'N$   $113^{\circ}5.78'W$  and elevation 4900ft) and the parking area. The total length of the hike is about 9.5mi and takes about 7hrs.



Map of the first part of The Subway Hike





Map of the second part of The Subway Hike

## 5.9 South Fork of Taylor Creek

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 2 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 300 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Kolob Arch
- Difficulties: None
- Special equipment: None
- ACA Rating: 1A II

The northwestern part of Zion National Park, the Kolob Canyons Section, is quite separate from the rest of the park and thus receives only a fraction of the visitors who crowd into Zion Canyon itself. Yet the Finger Canyons of the Kolob are magnificent, with massive great red cliffs, arches and canyons of Navajo sandstone. The three forks of Taylor Creek are all accessible from the single road that climbs up into the canyons from the flatland below and each is worthy of exploration. Indeed, they are so convenient that this adventure is included here not only because of its simplicity and beauty but also because it can be enjoyed anytime you have a couple of hours to spare while traveling the busy



*South Fork Taylor Creek.*



Interstate 15 just outside the park. The hike up into the South Fork of Taylor Creek is easy, mostly trail leading to a dramatic narrows where the canyon width decreases to about 6ft with sandstone walls towering high overhead. Along the way, you get to enjoy a verdant canyon bottom with abundant wildlife. When I did the hike I saw no-one else the entire time.

## Trailhead

Leave Interstate 15 at the Kolob Canyons exit (exit 40) about 17mi south of Cedar City, Utah, and pause at the Visitors Center just beyond the end of the off-ramp. The trailhead for this hike ( $37^{\circ}27.32'N$   $113^{\circ}11.16'W$ ) is a parking area just before a hairpin bend 3.1mi from the Visitors Center along the single road into the Kolob Canyons Section of Zion National Park.

## Hike

From the parking area ( $37^{\circ}27.32'N$   $113^{\circ}11.16'W$  and elevation 5950ft) cross the road to the evident use-trail that drops down from the road into the canyon on the north side of the hairpin. This well-worn trail is easily followed as it winds through the bushes in the canyon bottom to the north of the stream bed. After several hundred yards you begin to climb a huge earth dam caused eons ago by a huge rock slide that filled the canyon and is now overgrown with Gambel Oak and other canyon bottom vegetation. You climb about 250ft and, in the process, get some marvelous views back down the canyon.



*Left: Canyon closing in. Right: Second Chockstone.*

About 30min from the start you reach the top of the earth dam. After the rock slide occurred, a large canyon-filling lake was formed behind it. The ancient lake ( $37^{\circ}27.23'N$   $113^{\circ}10.40'W$ ), that geologists refer to as Lake Beatty, then filled with sediment, creating the modern environment, a lovely wooded and flat meadow that provides a delightful walk. Keep an eye out for the abundant wildlife that lives in this meadow. I saw a group of wild turkeys and a large buck deer bounded across my path. The flat meadow contrasts with the massive vertical walls on the sides that gradually close in as you progress eastwards. Note that, for some reason, the southern or left wall is black in contrast to the bright red northern wall. Just east of the rock slide, the trail passes a grassy hollow and then proceeds east through the meadow before petering out in the flat stream bed. You then continue upstream in this stream bed that mostly runs alongside the base of the wall on the right side.

Finally the walls narrow to about 15ft apart and progress upstream is suddenly blocked by a huge chockstone ( $37^{\circ}27.11'N$   $113^{\circ}9.77'W$ ). This chockstone is 1.6mi and 50min from the start. You may choose to turn around here for you cannot get much further even by climbing. However, it is relatively easy to climb around the left side of the huge chockstone. At the top the way is blocked by a rock slab that is a little harder to ascend. Then you can only progress about 20yds further before the canyon narrows still further to about 6ft and the way is blocked by a second chockstone that is much more difficult to surmount. I turned around here.

The return hike across the meadow is another pleasure. As you are hiking down the creek bed about 100yds west of the first chockstone, you may notice a fun overhang climbing route part way up the southern wall. If you have time and if you brought your climbing gear this would be an enjoyable challenge. Though overhanging the route is well-bolted and has lots of big handholds, footholds and ledges. If you pass on this you will get back to the parking area ( $37^{\circ}27.32'N$   $113^{\circ}11.16'W$ ) about 2hrs after starting out.



Map of South Fork of Taylor Creek Hike

## 5.10 Englestead Hollow

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 8.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 7.5 miles
- Elevation gain: None
- USGS Topo Map: Temple of Sinawava or Zion National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: About 10 rappels, one measuring 280ft; several swims; some flash flood danger.
- Special equipment: Two 60m ropes (or one 90m and one 60m rope), harnesses and rappeling gear; wetsuits and dry bags.
- Permit: Obtain permit from Backcountry Desk in Zion National Park Visitor Center.
- ACA Rating: 4A IV

The highlight of this adventure is a descent of Englestead Hollow, a tributary of Orderville Canyon that lies partly outside the eastern boundary of Zion National Park. The hike continues down Orderville Canyon and then through a short stretch of the Zion Narrows, both of which are described elsewhere in this collection of Zion Canyon hikes. The descent of Englestead Hollow is an advanced technical adventure that is only for experienced canyoneers. But for those with such experience it is a spectacular hike, with a particularly challenging initial rappel measuring 280ft into an awesome and vertical slot at the head of the canyon.

Before embarking on this adventure, two strategic decisions should be made. The first concerns your plan for the descent of the initial, 280ft rappel; whether or not to leave a 300ft rope in place for later recovery or to stage the rappel from some airy anchors. The second concerns whether or not to bring wetsuits; the author recommends that you do so except in the heat of summer.

### Trailhead

This hike requires a lengthy car shuttle. Drive first to the Zion National Park Visitor Center (37°12.02'N 112°59.24'W) where you will leave the recovery vehicle. (At the end of the hike you will catch the Shuttle Bus back to the Visitor Center from the Temple of Sinawava.) Drive north and then east through the park, following the spectacular Zion-Mt.Carmel Highway as it climbs the east wall of Zion Canyon before exiting the Park. About 2.5mi beyond the East

Entrance to the Park, turn north on a paved road signed North Fork. Drive across the plateau for 5.2m to the turn-off to the left to the Zion Ponderosa Ranch and Resort (this turn-off is just before the North Fork road turns from asphalt to dirt at  $37^{\circ}16.39'N$   $112^{\circ}52.40'W$ ). The Resort is the collection of buildings below you on the left and is a good place to stay or camp prior to this adventure. From the entrance gate continue along the dirt road that swerves to the right past the resort. After 0.6mi fork right following the sign to Observation Point; then 1.4mi from the highway you will come to a tee junction where you turn right, forking right again about 100yds further on. The road deteriorates here; follow the most used track for 1.4mi beyond the tee junction, ignoring various spur roads and tracks. This brings you to a fork with equally used tracks to both the left and the right. After just 0.1mi the left fork would take you to a trailhead next to the park boundary (a barbed wire fence) that accesses a trail into the park. You take the right fork that, after 0.5mi ends in a small clearing ( $37^{\circ}18.13'N$   $112^{\circ}53.95'W$  and elevation 6500ft) with some room to park. This rudimentary trailhead for Englestead Hollow is the furthest north that this maze of dirt roads penetrate.

## Hike

From the unmarked trailhead ( $37^{\circ}18.13'N$   $112^{\circ}53.95'W$  and elevation 6500ft), there is a narrow and rough ATV track proceeding east. Follow this for a short distance until you come to an overlook into a wooded gully. A faint use-trail descends into this gully. Leave the ATV trail and follow the use-trail down a short way - but then begin contouring left in order to exit this gully and access the next one to the south. You should soon detect that this second gully descends into a large canyon that is, in fact, Englestead Hollow. Stay close to



*Looking down into Englestead Hollow (photo by Scott Smith).*



the watercourse in this shallow gully until forced to traverse left to downclimb a short section of slickrock. Just below the slickrock you will come to the awesome slot near the head of Englestead Hollow. Move right or left a short way to access the head of the slot where the stream bed drops almost 300ft. You should reach this point (37°18.32'N 112°53.50'W and elevation 6000ft) about 30min and 0.5mi from the start.

To locate the precise entry point for the descent into the slot, go to the head where the stream bed drops over the edge (a very good vantage point). Then proceed around the north (left) side for about 20yds to the conifer at the lip that has the webbing anchor for the first, big rappel. The drop to the bottom of the slot measures 280ft and there are several ways to descend. If you own a 300ft rope the best strategy is to leave that rope in place after the descent and to walk back from the trailhead and recover it at the end of the day. Though this involves a little extra hiking, it has the advantage that you will not have to carry excessive rope through the rest of the hike. If you choose this alternative, then all you will need for the rest of the day is one 200ft rope (plus a short 60ft rope for the convenience of leapfrogging at the many small rappels further down the canyon.

Without a 300ft rope you can descend the initial drop with two 200ft ropes as follows. The first descender uses a 200ft single strand to descend 80ft to a bolt station with a narrow ledge in a corner. Have a companion observe this first descender from the far side of the canyon to ensure that the first descender does not inadvertently bypass this midway belay station that is a little off-vertical to the descender's right. The first descender should also bring one end of the



*Left: Beginning the big drop into Englestead. Right: Second rappel. Photos by Scott Smith.*

second 200ft rope while a companion plays out that rope from the top. Once secured to the belay station with a etrier or sling the first descender should use the second 200ft rope to set up another single strand rappel from that point on down the wall. The first descender should transfer to it and proceed down about 180ft to a broad ledge near the bottom of the wall. Other members of the party then descend to this ledge. The penultimate descender should wait at the intermediate belay station to aid the last descender. At the top the last person should change the upper rope to a double strand rappel. Once he/she reaches the belay station, the last two people should pull the upper rope and rig it to allow recovery of the lower rope. Once all are on the broad ledge the lower rope can be pulled and a 30ft double strand rappel should be set up using the nearby bolt anchor to complete the first big drop. Note that all this procedure will take more time than coming back after the hike to recover a 300ft rope.

You should reach the bottom of the slot (elevation 5700ft) about 1.5hrs from the trailhead. The big rappel is immediately followed by a 40ft drop from a webbing anchor wrapped around a large chockstone. A pool at the bottom could be knee deep. This is immediately followed by a short 20ft rappel from a webbing anchor around another chockstone. On this descent you will pass a large log to which is attached a long webbing anchor that reaches about 10yds towards the top of the next drop. Do not try to shorten this; replace it with a similar or longer webbing length if you wish to renew the anchor because the next drop takes the full length of a 200ft rope. It uses the long webbing extension as the anchor and is an awkward but beautiful two-stage rappel. You first descend about 15ft into a pool that may be as deep as 3ft. Then climb onto a lip at the exit from the pool and descend another 70ft down an almost vertical



*Left: Fourth rappel. Right: Near the end of Orderville. Photos by Scott Smith.*

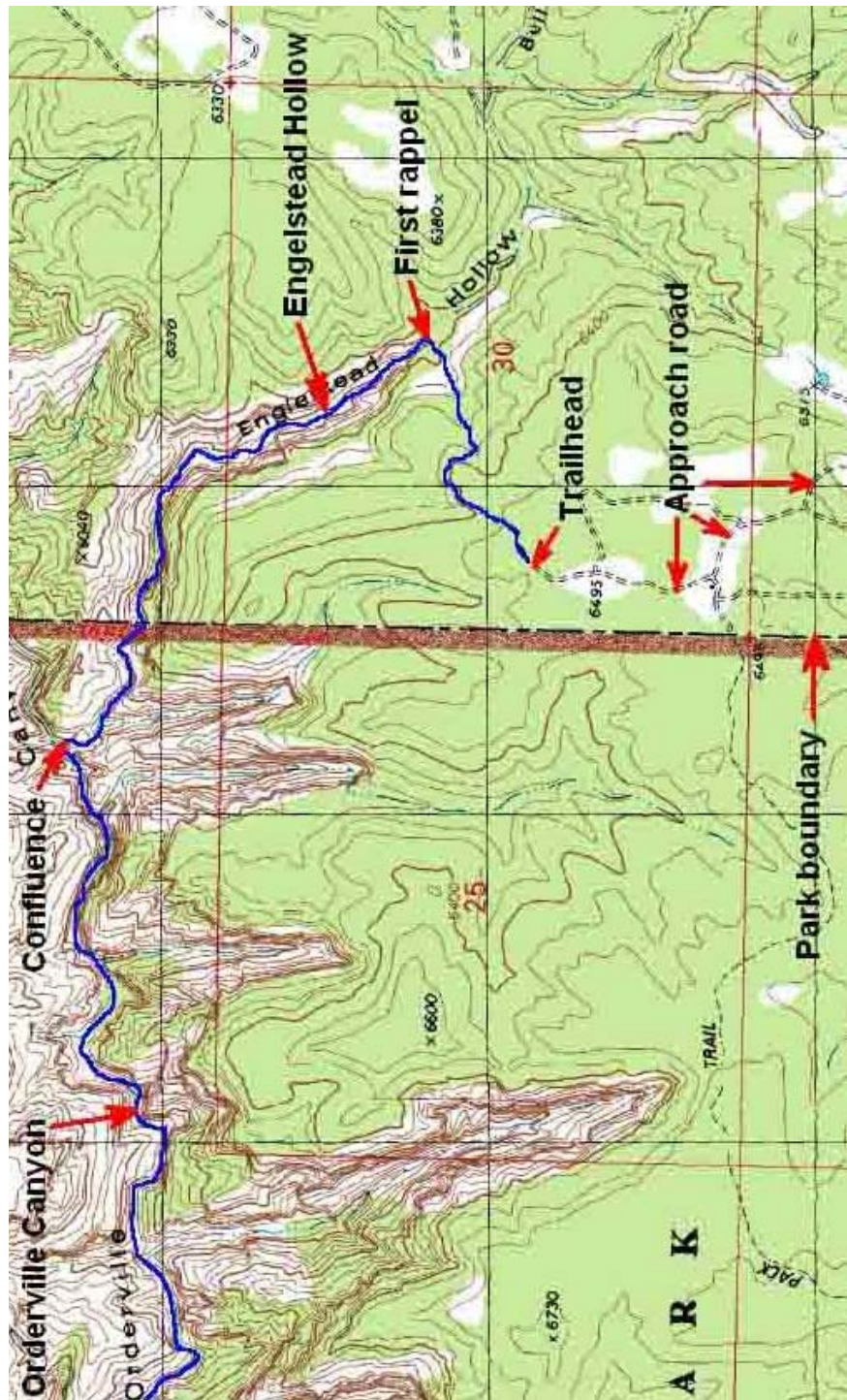
wall with a deep groove. Your 200ft rope may not quite reach the bottom but you should not have to drop more than two or three feet. At this point (elevation 5560ft) you have come to the end of the first set of rappels. You should reach this location about 2hr 10min from the morning start.

The first series of rappels is followed by a mile of flat bottomed slot, extending most of the length of Englestead. There are many small downclimbs and about 6 or 7 short (less than 20ft) rappels, several down logjams that have awkward rappel entries. All had webbing anchors when we descended the canyon. At the mouth of Englestead Hollow where it joins Orderville Canyon, there is a larger drop of about 30ft with no obvious anchor. But you can climb about 6ft up on the right to a ledge that has an easy downclimb into Orderville. You should reach the Englestead/Orderville confluence ( $37^{\circ}18.89'N$   $112^{\circ}54.37'W$  and elevation 5080ft) about 4hrs 15min from the morning start.

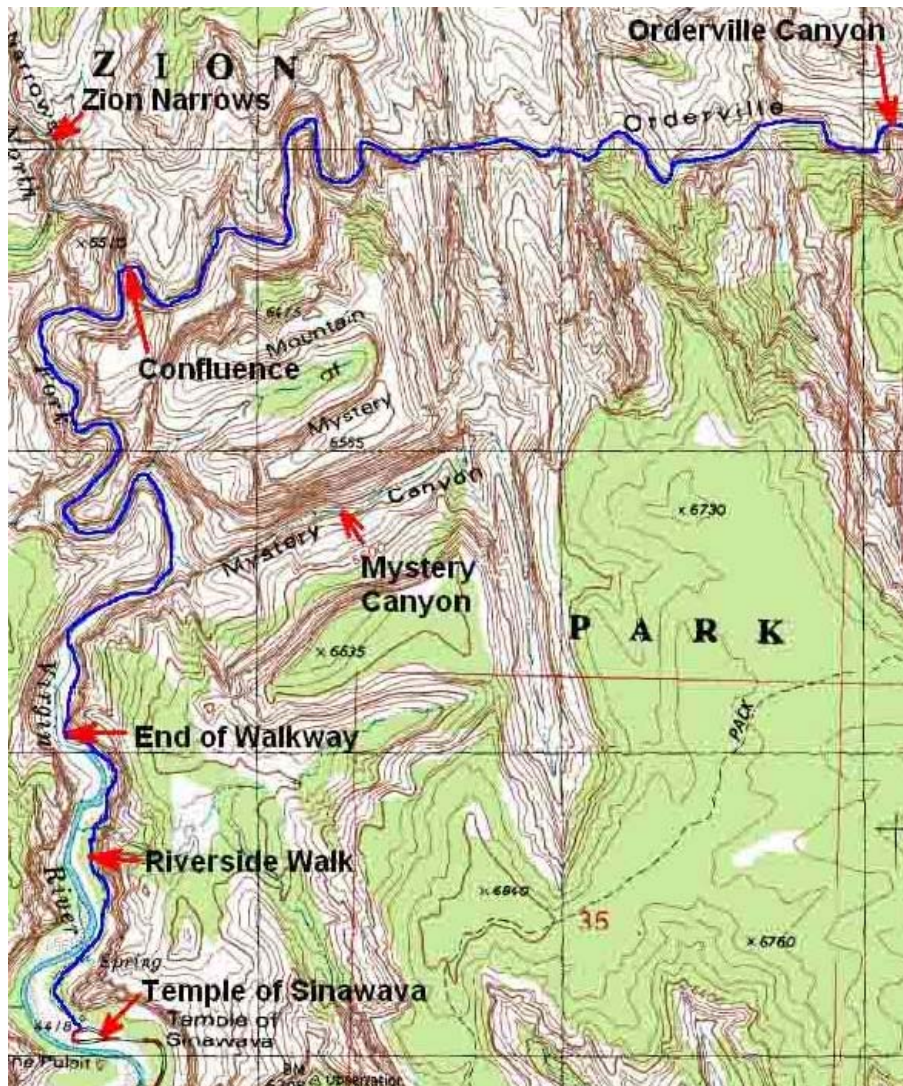
The descent of Orderville Canyon is described elsewhere and need not be repeated here. It is 3.4mi from Englestead to the confluence of Orderville and the Virgin River or Zion Narrows ( $37^{\circ}18.49'N$   $112^{\circ}56.81'W$ ). All but the last mile or so is fairly level going though in spring or fall you may encounter many muddy pools and some quicksand. Over the last mile the stream becomes more established; there are awkward downclimbs, several into pools that require swimming. In spring or fall a wetsuit is recommended especially for this section. You should reach the Virgin about 7hrs after the morning start.

From the confluence you turn left and head down this, the last few hundred yards of the Zion Narrows. Here the stream fills the entire width of the gorge and together with the immense vertical walls make for a majestic and awesome spectacle. From the Orderville confluence it will take you about 1.5hrs to reach the end of the hike at the Temple of Sinawava, a distance of 2.3mi. After a few hundred yards of the true Zion Narrows, the route consists of many river crossings interspersed with a well-worn trail along benches to one side or the other. About ten minutes after you pass another brief stretch of Narrows where Mystery Canyon enters on the left ( $37^{\circ}17.98'N$   $112^{\circ}56.68'W$ ), you will come to the start of the Riverside Walk, a concrete tourist path that leads down to the Temple of Sinawava ( $37^{\circ}17.11'N$   $112^{\circ}56.86'W$  and elevation 4410ft). Here you catch a Zion National Park tram that will take you back down the canyon to the Visitor Center and your return vehicle. The hike from the trailhead to the Temple of Sinawava should total about 8.5hrs during which you will cover about 7.5mi.





Map of first part of Englestead Hollow Hike



Map of second part of Englestead Hollow Hike



## 5.11 Spry Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3 miles
- Elevation gain: 820 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Springdale East or Zion National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: 13 rappels, one measuring 150ft; some downclimbing and deep wading; some flash flood danger.
- Special equipment: Two 50m ropes, 50ft webbing, several rappel rings, harnesses, helmets, rappeling gear and dry bags (wetsuits in colder conditions).
- Permit: Obtain permit from Backcountry Desk in Zion National Park Visitor Center.
- ACA Rating: 3B III

A classic Zion canyon, Spry provides a lovely, moderate canyoneering adventure with 13 rappels, a number of downclimbs and several deep slot wades, one up



*First rappel (150ft) in Spry Canyon.*

to chest high. Despite these wades you will not need a wetsuit except on cold days in the spring or fall. Spry is located close to the Zion-Mt.Carmel Highway which allows for a convenient and short car shuttle. The ascent to the pass that accesses the top of Spry Canyon has some 4th class slickrock sections for which sticky-rubber-soled shoes are very valuable. In the summer it can be very hot both during the ascent and during the last part of the descent so this canyon is best on a cooler spring or fall day.

## **Trailhead**

This hike requires a short car shuttle. First drive north into Zion National Park and 0.5mi past the turnoff that goes to the Lodge and the inner canyon. There the road switchbacks via a bridge over Pine Creek. Leave the return vehicle in the turnoff on the left just before the bridge (37°13.01'N 112°57.93'W) and then, in the other vehicle, proceed up the Zion-Mt.Carmel Highway and through the long tunnel. Emerging from the tunnel, drive 0.2mi and park in the small turn out on the outside of a left hand turn (37°12.89'N 112°56.28'W, elevation 5120ft).

## **Hike**

From the pullout (elevation 5120ft), continue east along the road for 200yds to where the broad wash of Pine Creek crosses under the road. Leave the road and hike north up the sandy bottom of Pine Creek. Continue up the wash for 0.6mi or 20min to a where the canyon narrows. You should find a place where there is a steep but slight slickrock gully on the left at 37°13.41'N 112°56.29'W and an elevation of 5210ft. This exit point is often marked with a cairn. Climb up the slight gully that angles off to the northwest as you ascend and flattens out onto a broad bench. Follow the bench north for about 60yds and proceed into the obvious slickrock bowl on your left. Ascend the bowl toward the right side using a steep, 4th class indent. At the top follow a small flat bench around to the left and, at a vertical wall, veer right and ascend another steep indent to reach the saddle between Deertrap Mountain off to the north and the East Temple to the southwest. This saddle (37°13.63'N 112°56.65'W, elevation 5950ft, 1.1mi and 1hr from the start) is a good place to pause and get your bearings. To the east southeast you will see the deep gorge between the East Temple and Twin Brothers that is Spry Canyon and the route of this hike. Also, off to the northwest you should be able to see the gap between Twin Brothers and Deertrap Mountain that leads to Employee Canyon. The views in all directions are marvelous and worth taking a break to enjoy.

Next you need to drop down into the gully directly to the west but the steep slickrock requires a short diversion. Hike about 100yds north to where the gully is much shallower and descend there. Then follow the gully downstream, bypassing one steep drop by a brief bypass on the right before joining the main wash of Spry Canyon just before it enters the gorge between the East Temple and Twin Brothers (elevation 5740ft, 1.4mi and 1hr 40min from the start).

Hiking down this sandy wash is easy going. Then about 2hrs from the start you will arrive at the top of a 150ft rappel down sloping slickrock. The anchor bolts are on the left side of the lip and there is one pothole to avoid near the bottom. The floor may also be water-filled but a narrow ledge just before the bottom allows you to keep your feet dry just a little longer.

More sandy wash follows with some lovely meadows and a little bushwhacking in places. Then, about 2hr 40min from the start, you come to the first narrow slot that begins with a 15ft rappel from a tree anchor on the right. This is immediately followed by a 10ft rappel drop into a dark, covered slot with an old stump as the chockstone and anchor. Here you will have to wade through the pool in the bottom of the slot. It is then just a short walk to a 20ft rappel into a very narrow slot with water though you may be able to stem your way across this. This is followed by a 30ft rappel through a narrow gap from bolt anchors on the right wall that are a little difficult to reach.

Here, about 3hr 40min from the start, the canyon widens and descends rapidly down some ledges on the left of the watercourse to the top of a dramatic drop into a deep slot. The anchor for the 90ft rappel into this vertical slot is at the end of the ledges on the left. Try throwing the rope (or rope bag) over to the left of the slot in order to avoid the rope (or rope bag) ending up in a pothole that is on the far side of the slot at the bottom. The exit from the slot is just downstream and has a neat divide near the end. Just a few yards downstream the watercourse turns sharp right and you rappel down a narrow slot using a webbing anchor around an overhead chockstone. It is a 70ft drop into a small pothole/ledge, the exit from which is a 45ft rappel using a log across the narrow slot exit as the anchor. This accesses a larger sandy clearing from which the stream course exits through a dramatic narrow slot with a spectacular view. Bolts on the left wall of this slot exit anchor a short 20ft rappel down to a shallow pool that should be continued with another 15ft drop down to yet another small sandy area.



*Left: Fourth rappel (20ft). Right: The sixth rappel (90ft) (photo by Ira Lewis).*

You should reach this point about 4hrs 40min from the start and it is a good place to stop for a break since the rappels continue without pause. The route of the canyon is turning southward as it prepares to exit the gap between the East Temple to the east and Mount Spry to the west. This is the canyon exit that is visible from the Zion-Mt.Carmel road on the other side of Pine Creek Canyon; indeed you should soon be able to glimpse that road through the narrow canyon openings. Continuing downstream the canyon jogs right through this sandy area and then turns abruptly left. Here there is a 60ft rappel down into a vertical slot from a bolt anchor over on the right wall (though there is another anchor about 20yds away along a very steep ledge on the right side of the top of the slot; the very exposed traverse over to that anchor is not recommended). The 60ft rappel deposits you in a small, mucky pool that can with some agility be avoided. Still in the slot, this places you at the top of a steep and very narrow 15ft slide down into a larger pool that cannot be avoided. The wade is usually about chest deep and leads to yet another steep and narrow slot perch after which the canyon finally opens up. However, the exit requires a 60ft rappel down to a large sandy area from a bolt anchor in the left wall of the slot.

Another drop follows immediately; to access the anchor climb up the short, boulder-filled chute on the left to a rock platform about 12ft above the sand. There you will find a webbing anchor around a tree. The 70ft rappel from this platform is the last within the canyon itself and deposits you in a boulder-strewn watercourse at the top of the slope down to Pine Creek. You should reach this point (elevation 4940ft) about 6hrs from the start having covered about 2.4mi.

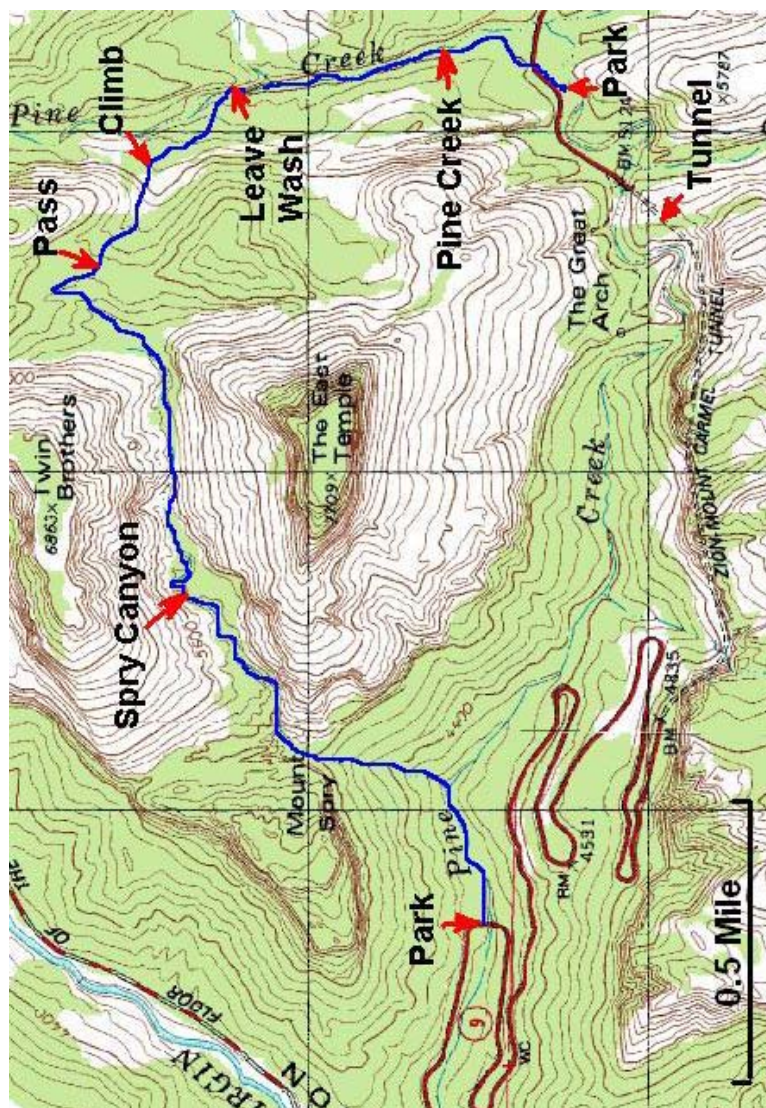
Though there is a use-trail that descends from here to Pine Creek over on the right, the Park requests that, to avoid excessive erosion, you descend the boulder-filled stream course. More than halfway down this arduous descent you encounter the dropoff that is readily seen from the road on the other side of Pine Creek. This drop-off requires a 90ft rappel from a tree anchor in the middle



*Left: Ninth rappel, 20+15ft. Right: Tenth rappel, 60ft (photo by Ira Lewis).*



of the watercourse. Most of this drop is free rappel. You then continue down the boulder-filled stream course to the running water in Pine Creek. Here there are some lovely small swimming holes that are great on a warm summer day. The one immediately below Spry is known as the Spry Pool. From here you hike downstream; a trail is very soon evident on the right side of the stream and leads directly to the pullout where you left the return vehicle ( $37^{\circ}13.01'N$   $112^{\circ}57.93'W$ , elevation 4070ft). The hike can be completed in 7.5hrs or less during which you travel about 3mi.



Map of Spry Canyon Hike



## 5.12 Misery Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 9.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 8.8 miles
- Elevation gain: 2420 feet
- USGS Topo Map: The Barracks
- Difficulties: About 5 rappels up to 70ft and much downclimbing and deep wading (swimming under some circumstances); some flash flood danger.
- Special equipment: One 50m rope, harnesses, helmets and rappelling gear, 50ft webbing, several rappel rings, dry bags (wetsuit on colder days), water filter.
- Permit: None needed.
- ACA Rating: 3B IV

Misery Canyon is one of many nameless canyons on the map that lead down into Parunuweap Canyon wherein flows the East Fork of the Virgin River. This is rugged wilderness at the southeastern corner of Zion National Park with no roads worth the name between the Zion-Mt.Carmel Highway (Utah Highway 9) that leads east from the Park and Arizona border far to the south. The East Fork of the Virgin rises in the Long Valley north of Mt.Carmel and slices through the Markagunt Plateau by way of this deep canyon that John Wesley Powell first explored and named Parunuweap, the Paiute Indian name meaning “roaring river canyon”. Parunuweap is a spectacular, vertical-walled abyss, up to 2500ft deep, that rivals the Zion Narrows. The river runs year round and mostly fills the breadth of the canyon bottom so one must hike in the opaque water that can be up to chest deep in places. This hike is one of the very few ways in which one can enjoy Parunuweap because the section of the canyon further downstream in Zion National Park is closed to public access; the section accessed by this hike is just outside the Park on BLM land and therefore open to the public.

However, Parunuweap is just one of the delights that this hike provides. The first part is a lovely cross-country hike across some of the loveliest scenery in Zion. Then it drops down into the West Fork of Misery Canyon where you descend a number of stretches of classic and winding sandstone slot with some rappels, many short downclimbs and a number of thigh deep wades. After joining the East Fork of Misery, you enter a slot with deeper pools and eventually a fantastic subterranean grotto with a double arch and many pools. There used to be a tight squeeze here that led to the name “Fat Man’s Misery” and

hence to Misery Canyon but that feature is now gone. The grotto leads to the Parunuweap where you will need to travel downstream for 0.3mi to find the start of the climb back out of the abyss. The hike out involves a long, tough trail climb that can be very hot in the middle of the year.

Note that wetsuits are not necessary except on colder days. Note also that this hike does present some navigational challenges both on the outward and return legs so that a GPS and waypoints would be valuable though not necessary. A good map and compass are, however, essential.

## Trailhead

The parking area for Misery Canyon is close to the larger parking area on the Zion-Mt.Carmel highway where people stop to view the Checkerboard Mesa (this is only about 0.3mi mile west of the National Park Entrance Station). Drive 0.5 miles west of the Checkerboard Mesa parking area to a place just west of Checkerboard Mesa itself where there is a small turnout on the right or north side of the road ( $37^{\circ}13.60'N$   $112^{\circ}53.11'W$  at an elevation of 5500ft).

## Hike

From the turnout (elevation 5500ft) hike down the road (west) about 100yds to where it crosses the wash emerging from the large canyon to the west of Checkerboard Mesa. Hike up this sandy stream bed as the canyon emerges from the steep gorge separating Checkerboard Mesa from the cliffs to the west. After about a mile of gentle upward gradient, the canyon bottom steepens suddenly



*Left: Exiting short slot in Misery Canyon. Right: Between two potholes in Misery.*

and you climb a sandy trail to the right of the stream course eventually reaching the saddle at the top of the pass (37°12.73'N 112°53.00'W). The elevation of the pass is 5900ft and you should reach this point 1hr and 1.1mi from the start.

A rough trail that avoids the stream course descends the other side of the pass; you will locate this over to the right of the saddle. After about 0.3mi this trail descends to the canyon bottom and crosses over to a low ridge on the far side. The trail that is fairly clear and often marked by cairns where it crosses slickrock, then contours around the base of the south side of Checkerboard Mesa. It descends gradually to cross the wash exiting the canyon on the east side of Checkerboard Mesa (2mi from the start at 5600ft) and then continues eastward to cross another wash (about 2.3mi from the start at 5560ft) exiting the next canyon to the east. From this second wash climb the ridge to the east. Just a short way up the ridge you may notice a cairned trail veering south. This is the return route and you should not follow this but proceed straight on in an easterly direction over the top of the ridge to where, on bare slickrock, you will encounter the steep drop-off into the West Fork of Misery Canyon. You should reach this drop-off about 2hr 15min and 2.5mi from the start.

The drop-off is substantial (about 300ft) and, in order to reach the canyon bottom, it is advisable to veer south along the edge and over a small bluff to where a slickrock bowl on the west side of the canyon makes the descent easier. In this descent we did make one 40ft rappel from a tree anchor. You should reach the bottom of the West Fork of Misery Canyon (elevation 5150ft) 2hr 40min and 2.8mi from the start.

Hiking downcanyon you soon come to the first of the many short sections of slot narrows that occur at intervals during the descent of this canyon. This first slot begins with a 20ft rappel from an old, single overhead bolt (better to use some other anchor) into a neat, narrow slot with lots of twists and turns.



*Left: In Misery Canyon Grotto (photo by Ira Lewis). Right: Parunuweap Canyon.*

After 15min you will exit this slot and after another 15min you enter the second, shorter slot. Another 30min will bring you to yet another section of slot, this one containing an awkward 10ft drop that may require a partner assist. Then about 4hr from the start at 4770ft you arrive at a 20ft rappel from a deadman anchor down into a broad slot area. This is followed by two large water filled potholes either or both of which could be keepers. The first was shallow for us and led to a short slot opening before the drop into the second pothole that looked difficult to climb out of. However a short climb to a ledge on the right allows you to bypass this pothole. From there it is just a few yards to the confluence with the East Fork of Misery Canyon. However, the West Fork has a substantial drop-off at the confluence and this necessitates a climb up to a tree anchor on the left that anchors a 70ft rappel down into the wash of the East Fork. You should arrive at this confluence with the East Fork of Misery Canyon (37°11.30'N 112°51.46'W, elevation 4700ft) about 4hrs 30min from the start having covered 3.9mi.

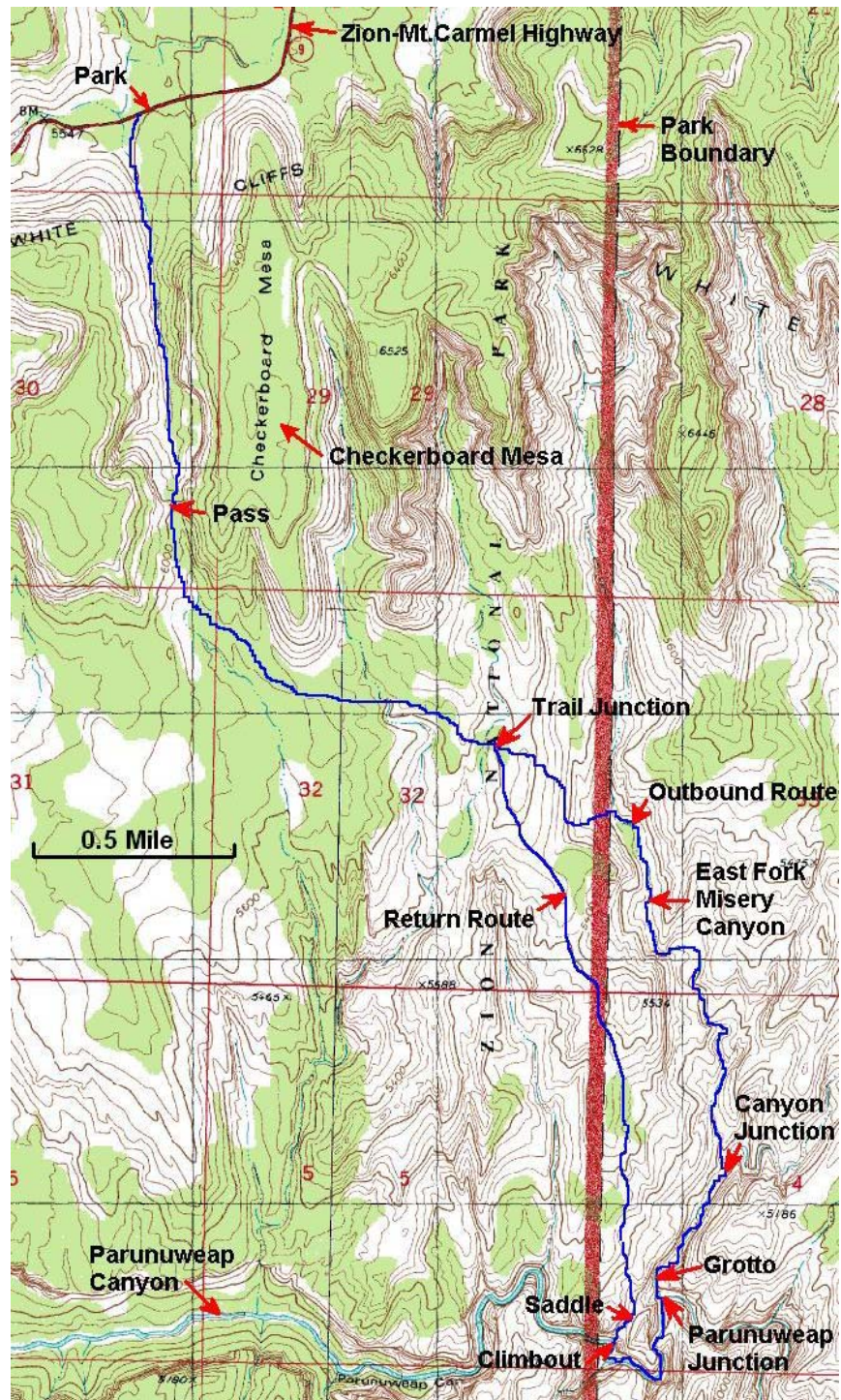
It is only about 100yds down Misery Canyon to a 40ft, two-stage rappel down into a deep slot from a boulder anchor on the left side. This leads to many wading pools (often very mucky) and finally to a deep grotto with a double arch. The water suddenly changes to a lighter color as you approach the confluence with the Parunuweap. This grotto is a special place. The pools were just wadeable when we went through but could be swimmers at other times. Then, at one short and narrow 6ft downclimb you encounter a warm spring emerging from the rock face on the left. Just a few short pools later you arrive at the Parunaweap (37°11.00'N 112°51.64'W), a spectacular vertical-walled canyon with a substantial stream flow that spans the entire canyon bottom in many places. You should arrive at the Parunuweap (also known as the East Fork of the Virgin River) at an elevation of 4610ft) about 6hrs from the start having covered 4.3mi.

Once in the Parunuweap, hike and wade downstream for about 0.3mi to a point (37°10.87'N 112°51.76'W) where there is a steep, broken, brushy slope on the right that is the beginning of the return route. You may notice a cairn about 30ft up on a ledge on the right side. The trail starts up behind this rock. Before beginning the climb out of the canyon you should stock up with filtered water for the hike out can be very hot. Also, before leaving the Parunuweap, you may wish to proceed on downstream past the brushy slope where there is a plaque commemorating the exploration of the Parunuweap by Major Wesley Powell in 1872. The plaque reads: *Memorial. Major John W. Powell (1834-1902), explorer-scientist. Stephen V. Jones (1840-1920), teacher-topographer. Pres. Joseph A. Young (1829-1873), Mormon pioneer leader. Descended Labyrinth Falls 1/2 mile below - Mon. Sep.30, 1872 during first Parunuweap Canyon traverse. Powell named this canyon from the Paiute Indian word Parunuweap that means "Roaring River Canyon". Dedicated Sep.30, 1972.*

Returning to the exit trail, the climb out is very steep in several places and takes you to a broad saddle at 37°10.96'N 112°51.73'W and 4790ft. At the far side of this saddle you also look down on the river. From the saddle, contour and climb the slickrock on the left side and proceed up to the trees overhead to find

the trail again. The exit trail proceeds in a generally northerly direction and is marked fairly well by cairns though you may have to search for it several times. The readily recognized form of the south end of Checkerboard Mesa provides a welcome target though you should aim a little to the right of this. Eventually the trail rises to a broad and bare slickrock summit where it proceeds around to the left and joins the outgoing trail at about  $37^{\circ}12.20'N$   $112^{\circ}52.13'W$ . Follow that back to the trailhead. It should take about 3hrs to complete this return hike during which you will cover about 4.1mi so that the total duration of the hike is about 9.5hrs and the total distance is 8.8mi.





Map of Misery Canyon Hike

## 5.13 Birch Hollow

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3 miles or 5.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 220ft or 820ft
- USGS Topo Maps: Temple of Sinawava, Clear Creek Mountain
- Difficulties: 11 rappels, one measuring 120ft
- Special equipment: Two 60m ropes (or one 60m and one 40m rope), harnesses and rappeling gear
- Permit: No permit required for exit up Orderville
- ACA Rating: 3A III

The highlight of this adventure is a descent of Birch Hollow, a tributary of Orderville Canyon that lies outside the eastern boundary of Zion National Park. The hike continues up Orderville Canyon to a return vehicle placed before the hike.

Just a few hundred yards before its junction with Orderville Canyon, Birch Hollow contains a spectacular series of vertical descents through a narrow, fluted and sculpted slot that is still negotiable by an inexperienced canyoneer. The



*View from top of the first rappel in Birch Hollow (photo by unknown).*



highlight is the last couple of rappels with the iconic wedged boulder high overhead. Prior to this last segment is a descent of a lovely wooded canyon interrupted by two large drops of 120ft and 50ft. We describe here the return up Orderville Canyon to return Vehicles parked prior to the descent. However, some may choose to descend Orderville rather than ascend it; this involves a long, wet hike through Orderville and the Zion Narrows as well as a long car shuttle. It also requires a permit from Zion National Park since the descent takes you into the Park.

## Trailhead

This hike requires a car shuttle. If you have two 4WD vehicles you can set up a longer shuttle that significantly shortens the hike out. Without such vehicles a car shuttle is still needed; the car shuttle is shorter but the hike out is substantially longer.

Traveling east out of Zion National Park on Route 9 toward Mt. Carmel Junction you pass through the East Entrance to the Park and about 2.5mi east of the entrance station turn north on a paved road signed North Fork. Drive across the plateau for 8.2mi passing the turn-off to the left to the Zion Ponderosa Ranch shortly after which the pavement turns from asphalt to dirt. About 8.2mi from Route 9 look for a dirt turnout on the left at  $37^{\circ}18.587'N$   $112^{\circ}51.324'W$  (elevation 6760ft) just before the road crosses Birch Hollow. This is where the hike starts but first you should set up the car shuttle by proceeding north another 3mi along the North Fork Road to a signed turn off on the left to “Orderville Canyon” at  $37^{\circ}20.222'N$   $112^{\circ}49.777'W$  and an elevation of 6440ft. Proceed down this dirt road turnoff for about 1/4mi to a corral at  $37^{\circ}20.096'N$   $112^{\circ}50.048'W$  and an elevation of 6380ft. Here you should leave the return vehicle if it is 2WD. If you choose the 4WD option then proceed through the gate (closing it



*Left: Second rappel in Birch Hollow (photo by unknown). Right: 100ft sixth rappel in Birch Hollow (photo by Johanna Turner).*

afterwards) and drive down the steep, rough and highly rutted dirt road that descends into Orderville Canyon. At the bottom you must negotiate several deep gullies before the road flattens out and you can drive along a smooth dirt road to the trailhead, about 2.5mi from the corral at 37°20.030'N 112°51.527'W and an elevation of 5780ft. Leaving the return vehicles in place return to the North Fork Road and thus to the Birch Hollow turnout at 37°18.587'N 112°51.324'W and an elevation of 6760ft.

## Hike

From the trailhead turnout at 37°18.587'N 112°51.324'W and an elevation of 6760ft adjacent to where the road crosses Birch Hollow, simply drop into the shallow canyon and begin the descent of Birch Hollow. Initially the use-trail down the gully is potentially brushy but it is now well worn and soon begins to level out into an easy hiking route. After about 20min you pass through a section with speckled-white walls containing gypsum. Another 20min begins you to the top of the first rappel at 37°18.966'N 112°52.324'W, and elevation of 6160ft and 1.4mi from the start. This first descent is a 120ft drop off a broad shelf. It can be bypassed by proceeding around the shelf to the left to a steep and loose trail that drops to the canyon bottom.

From the bottom of this rappel, you resume hiking down a pretty, wooded and broad canyon. About 1hr 10min from the start you will arrive at the top of the second rappel, a 50ft drop from log anchor just upstream of the lip. This rappel has a large undercut just below the lip that makes for a tricky rappel entry and a further undercut near the bottom. Below this second rappel is the



*Left: Dan Creveling on 40ft seventh rappel. Right: Last rappel in Birch Hollow. Photos by Johanna Turner.*

first set of narrows in Birch Hollow. Here the first obstacle is a small, 10ft downclimb or rappel from bolt anchors in the right wall (we call this the third rappel) and this is followed by the fourth rappel, a 10ft drop from bolts on the right, and immediately by the fifth rappel, a 15ft descent from bolts on the left wall. After this the canyon opens up again and you hike through a pretty wooded section that leads to the start of spectacular last section of Birch Hollow. You should reach this point about 2.5hrs from the start.

This last section begins with a beautiful, vertical 100ft rappel into a narrow slot from a convenient tree anchor on the left. This is immediately followed by the seventh rappel a 40ft drop down the continuing fluted slot using bolts on the right and by the eighth rappel, another 40ft drop from bolts on the right.

A short, narrow section of canyon leads to a 6ft downclimb and then to the ninth rappel, a 40ft drop from bolts on the right. You should reach this point about 3hrs 20min from the start. The tenth rappel follows immediately and consists of a spectacular 80ft vertical drop from bolts on the left. Look up when you can see around the corner to the right to see the iconic chockstone wedged high overhead between the canyon walls. This is a marvelous section of fluted sandstone. You drop down to a small sandy platform where the next and last rappel is just yards away. This eleventh rappel is a 60ft vertical drop from bolts on the left with the chockstone now directly overhead. Take time to relish this beautiful grotto with the chockstone a full stop in this awesome place. The junction with Orderville Canyon is just a few yards down the canyon from the last rappel.

The junction with Orderville Canyon is at 37°19.408'N 112°52.522'W, and elevation of 5560ft and 1.8mi from start and you should reach this point about 4hrs from the start. Take a break here to remove your harness and prepare for the much warmer hike out up Orderville (a right turn!). The hiking is easy though and, after about 30min, you should look for the trail climbing the mud banks on the right at 37°19.510'N 112°52.190'W and an elevation of 5600ft. Follow this steep trail as it ascends to a rim to the right of some pretty fluted rock chimneys. From the top of this rim an easy, fairly level hiking trail leads back to the 4WD trailhead in the now-flat bottom of Orderville Canyon. You should reach this point at 37°20.030'N 112°51.527'W, an elevation of 5780ft and 1.2mi from the junction of Birch Hollow and Orderville Canyon about 5hrs from the morning start having traveled a total distance of about 3mi.

If you chose the 2WD option you should continue to hike along the dirt road as it first proceeds up Orderville on a relatively flat, smooth road and then ascends the side of Orderville on a rough and rutted 4WD road eventually arriving at the gated corral at 37°20.096'N 112°50.048'W and an elevation of 6380ft where your 2WD return vehicle was parked. It takes about 45min to complete this extra hiking leg and about 20min to drive it. The total distance from the start to the corral is about 5.5mi.

The last task is to drive back the short distance from the corral to the North Fork Road at 37°20.222'N 112°49.777'W (elevation 6440ft), turn right and drive back to the starting point.





Map of first part of Birch Hollow Hike



Map of second part of Birch Hollow Hike



## Chapter 6

# ARIZONA STRIP

In northern Arizona and southern Utah there is a vast area of rugged high desert that is mostly uninhabited wilderness. It is a rugged and parched landscape of desert and mountains where thunderstorms bring deluges of rain that tear the land apart and gouge deep and narrow gullies in the soft Navajo sandstone. These slot canyons, sometimes thousands of feet deep and yet only a few feet wide, are a ubiquitous feature of this landscape and journeys through them in Zion National Park and elsewhere are described in other chapters of this book.

The strip of land that forms the northwestern section of Arizona is cut off on the south and east by the Grand Canyon and partially isolated on the north by the Utah border, the rugged mountains of Zion National Park and their eastern continuation. It is known as the Arizona Strip and has achieved some notoriety because of the extremist Mormon communities that took up residence there beyond the jurisdiction of the State of Utah. However, it also contains some wild and beautiful high desert country that allows some special adventures, a few of which are described in this chapter.



Arizona Strip.

## 6.1 Buckskin Gulch

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 9.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 20 miles
- Elevation gain: 220 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Pine Hollow Canyon, Bridger Point, West Clark Bench
- Difficulties: Some thigh-high wading and one 12ft downclimb
- Special equipment: A walking staff and 30ft rope or webbing
- ACA Rating: 2B V

One of the longest, deepest and yet technically easiest of the slot canyons in northern Arizona is known as Buckskin Gulch. It lies along the Arizona/Utah border about midway between the communities of Page, Arizona and Kanab, Utah, and is part of the Paria Canyon - Vermillion Cliffs Wilderness Area managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This adventure takes you down the entire length of Buckskin Gulch and back out along the canyon of the Paria River. Though very long (just over 20mi), this hike is easier than might be envisaged due to the mostly excellent and easy footing in the canyon bottom. During much of the recommended season, the only difficulties are maybe a dozen thigh deep pools that must be waded and one 12ft downclimb caused by a boulder jam. Many of the hikers that tackle this route do it as an overnight adventure. However, in my judgment, it is more enjoyable to travel light and thus faster. Most experienced hikers will easily complete it in a day provided they get an early start.

As in all slot canyons, flash floods pose a lethal danger. Consequently it is very important to gauge the flash flood potential before beginning this hike. In addition to listening to the local weather forecast, before setting out you should check at the BLM Paria Ranger Station (between mile markers 20 and 21 on US89) for the flash flood danger and for other conditions in the Gulch.

This adventure requires hot weather on the land above the canyon for it can be 15 degrees cooler in the depths of the slot. But you should also avoid the thunderstorm season in late July, August and early September. Consequently, the best time of year for this hike is in May or June after the slot dries out and before thunderstorm season. Note, in contrast, that there is very little water in the Gulch and that you should plan to carry all the water you will need, say four quarts for the day hike.

**Permits:** If you tackle this adventure as a day hike you will not need to obtain a permit ahead of time; it will only be necessary to purchase a parking

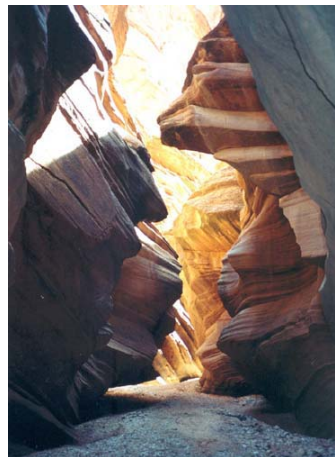
permit at the Wire Pass Trailhead as you start your hike. However, if you decide to overnight, you will need to obtain a wilderness permit from the BLM. Information on permits can be found at the website <http://paria.az.blm.gov> or at the BLM Paria Ranger Station.

## Trailheads

Buckskin Gulch lies just south of US Highway 89 between the cities of Page, Arizona, and Kanab, Utah. The hike described here requires a car shuttle, set up by turning south off US89 just east of mile marker 21 (and just east of a bridge over the Paria River) about 30mi from Page and 44mi from Kanab. The Ranger Station is not open all the time but, if it is open, stop and check on the conditions in Buckskin Gulch and on the weather forecast. Then continue south on the dirt road to the White House trailhead ( $37^{\circ}4.72'N$   $111^{\circ}53.40'W$  and elevation 4320ft), approximately 2mi from the highway. Leave the return vehicle in the parking area and, for later purposes, take note of the landscape of the wide Paria River wash south of the trailhead.

Then drive back to the highway, and proceed west for 4mi, up a steep grade and through a large cutting where the road turns right. The dirt road you seek leaves the highway on the left just at the end of this curve. Looking backwards you can see the dirt road proceeding up a shallow valley. This turn-off west of mile marker 25 on US89, has no signpost and care is needed not to miss it. In the Ranger Station they call it the House Rock Valley Road. Under dry conditions it is easy to drive in 2WD vehicles. When wet it can become impassable.

About 4.2mi south of the highway you will pass the Buckskin Trailhead on your left; 3.7mi further on you will finally arrive at the Wire Pass Trailhead (elevation 4860ft) with a broad parking area and a restroom on the right side



*Left: Wire Pass from the Buckskin confluence. Right: Midway down Buckskin Gulch.*



of the road. The actual trailhead is on the left side of the road. The total distance from the White House Trailhead to the Wire Pass Trailhead ( $37^{\circ}1.19'N$   $112^{\circ}1.48'W$ ) is about 14mi. Many people choose to overnight at the Wire Pass Trailhead in order to get an early morning start.

## Hike

Having completed the formalities at the Wire Pass Trailhead registry across the road from the parking area ( $37^{\circ}1.19'N$   $112^{\circ}1.48'W$ ), you begin hiking down the broad wash of the Buckskin tributary known as Wire Pass. Here there is little indication of the narrowness ahead as the wash meanders back and forth in a shallow valley. Around you are the typical red rocks and sparse vegetation of this high desert country. After 0.5mi or 10min you will pass the trail that climbs out of the wash on the right bound for the Coyote Buttes. But continuing down the wash, about 1mi and 30min from the start you enter the first of two sections of slot canyon in Wire Pass. The stream bed narrows to about 4ft with walls climbing as you go. A short way into the slot you encounter a boulder jam with a 6ft downclimb and several more like this follow. Ominously you will note the logs jammed high overhead. But it does not take long to transit Wire Pass and, 1.7mi and 40min from the start at an elevation of 4700ft, the slot broadens abruptly and you arrive at the confluence of Wire Pass and Buckskin Gulch ( $37^{\circ}1.34'N$   $112^{\circ}0.85'W$ ). These confluences are grand, cathedral-like places with towering walls on all sides. To your right as you leave Wire Pass, there is a large partial arch in the canyon wall and, just beyond this you will find some Indian pictographs etched on the wall about head high.



*Left: Just below the boulder jam. Right: In Paria Canyon.*

As you start down Buckskin Gulch, the stream bed narrows again and there is a long section of moderately deep narrows. The going is easy on the flat, sandy bottom. At one point there is a whole array of logs jammed between the walls high above you. Then, about 30min from the Wire Pass junction, the canyon suddenly broadens as it turns left and you find yourself in bright sunlight in a grand, red-walled canyon. Here there are large high benches, first on the right and then on the left. These could be used as a camping place or a refuge if flash floods threatened. Indeed there are many such benches in the wider sections of Buckskin Gulch though almost none of them allow one to climb out of the canyon.

About 20min later and 1hr 30min from the start, the Gulch narrows again and you enter an extended section of slot canyon with only a few short, wider areas. Some distance into this section, there is a peculiar knobby rock head on the left, and just beyond this you encounter a rock fall where you will need to scramble over and around boulders that have yet to be ground down by the flash floods. Beyond this I first began to encounter dried up mud pools. Though easily bypassed these were evidence of wetter passage to come. This is a long section with many beautiful, sculpted rock walls that shine orange and brown where the sun penetrates.

Roughly 3hr from the start, I encountered the first pools of water to the side and, shortly thereafter, in a section only 3ft wide, the first slot-spanning pool that had to be waded. In this narrow and dark section, there were a succession of about 12 quite short, muddy pools up to about 3ft deep. A walking stick was useful here to gauge the water depth and to determine the shallowest passage. After about 20min the Gulch widened again and the last of the wading pools was passed. Note that the depth and number of pools can vary greatly from year to year.

The canyon broadens again just downstream of this series of pools and here there appears to be a climbing route out of the Gulch on the left or northern side at 37°1.88'N 111°55.28'W. It is a ledge or slot on the left wall, inclined back upstream so that you cannot see it without turning around. It would be a steep and exposed climb but not too difficult. It was marked by a large cairn in the gully bottom. This escape route is just about 6mi from the end of Wire Pass and about 8.6mi or 3hr 40min from the trailhead. Downstream of here the canyon is relatively broad and, 20min beyond the escape route, you pass a place where there are large earth slopes with vegetation on both sides. The going is open and easy here and I was struck by the number and variety of animal tracks in the sand. Mule deer, cougar, bobcat, coyote and raccoon all seemed to have passed this way quite recently; they must know more ways in and out of the Gulch than we do. Presumably they seek the water in the canyon bottom. Near where this broad section begins to narrow, someone has recorded the "13 Mile" mark (37°0.94'N 111°53.97'W) by laying the letters out with rocks on the left side. It actually represents 10mi from the Wire Pass Trailhead, almost exactly the midway point of this hike.

Then, 5hr and 10mi from the start, you enter another narrow and dark section, sometimes just a couple of feet wide. At a place about 20min into this

section where the canyon broadens slightly, you encounter another rock fall and here the large fallen boulders have created the only climbing challenge in the entire canyon, 11.3mi from the trailhead at 37°0.84'N 111°52.64'W. The drop on the far side of the boulders is only about 12ft and a large tree stump wedged between two of the boulders provides a good rope anchor. A 30ft length of rope is sufficient to descend. Loop it around the stump and use the doubled rope and the logs propped against the rock to downclimb the obstacle. Several old ropes have been left in place here but you should not trust them. A short distance down canyon from the boulder jam, the floor of the slot changes from dry sand to moist, presumably due to accumulating seepage. A few minutes later a trickle of a stream appears. It is very interesting to observe how this added humidity has affected the environment of the slot. The walls change color from orange and brown to beautiful blue, red, black, and green hues and stains. The moisture in the sand also makes it firmer to walk on.

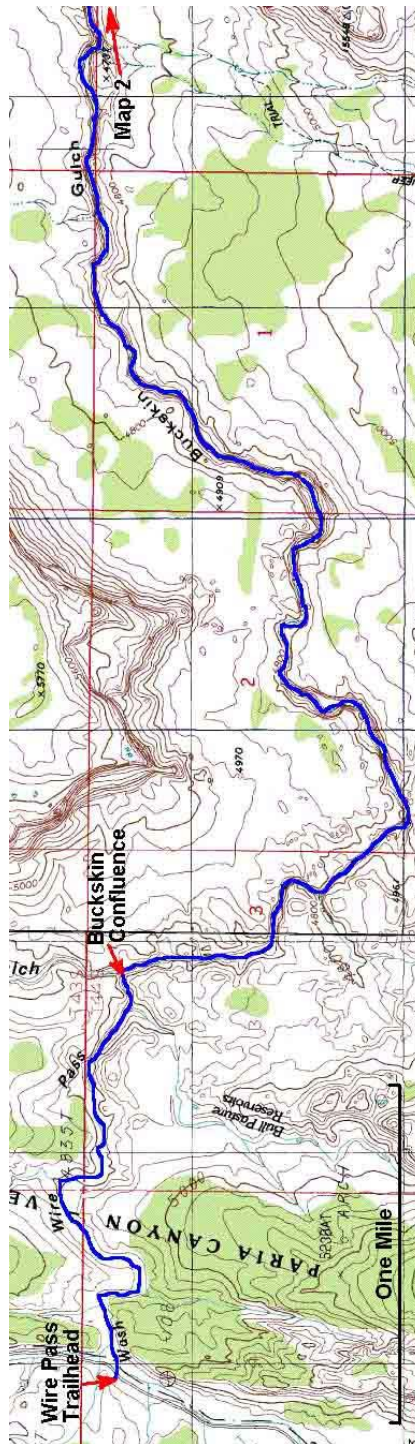
For those overnighting, the first day's journey is almost done for the camping places upstream of the Buckskin/Paria confluence are a short distance ahead. The canyon broadens and, on both sides of a large meander, are large, wooded benches that clearly have excellent camping spots (37°0.16'N 111°52.11'W). There are no signs indicating these camping areas but they are easily identified. Only the scarcity of water could be a problem. On a day hike I reached this point 12.8mi and 6hr 10min from the start.

Downstream of the campsites, the canyon narrows again to a simple flat, moist sandy bottom with towering vertical sandstone walls on either side, a very elemental and majestic place here in the depth of the wilderness. Then, 300yds below the campsites and 13mi from the start, you finally arrive at the confluence of Buckskin Gulch with the Paria River (37°0.10'N 111°51.95'W) at an elevation of 4100ft. The Paria River whose water is yellow in contrast to the red mud of Buckskin, comes in somewhat inconspicuously on the left. Almost precisely on the Utah/Arizona border, this confluence is a great cathedral of a place, a 500ft gorge in the Navajo sandstone. It is inspiring to sit here in the soft sand and enjoy the silence and the remoteness. This is also the end of a marvelous transit of Buckskin Gulch; the rest of the way lies up the canyon of the Paria River.

The Paria River drains a large section of this Utah/Arizona wilderness, flowing southeast to eventually join the Colorado River at Lees Ferry. Mormon settler John D. Lee was probably the first Anglo-American to travel down the length of Paria Canyon and subsequently established his ferry and outpost at its terminus. But, as evidenced by the many pictographs and other artifacts in these canyons, the Anasazi and other Native Americans traveled these canyons many centuries before Lee. Today another very popular multi-day hike follows the Paria from our destination at the White House trailhead all the way down to Lees Ferry.

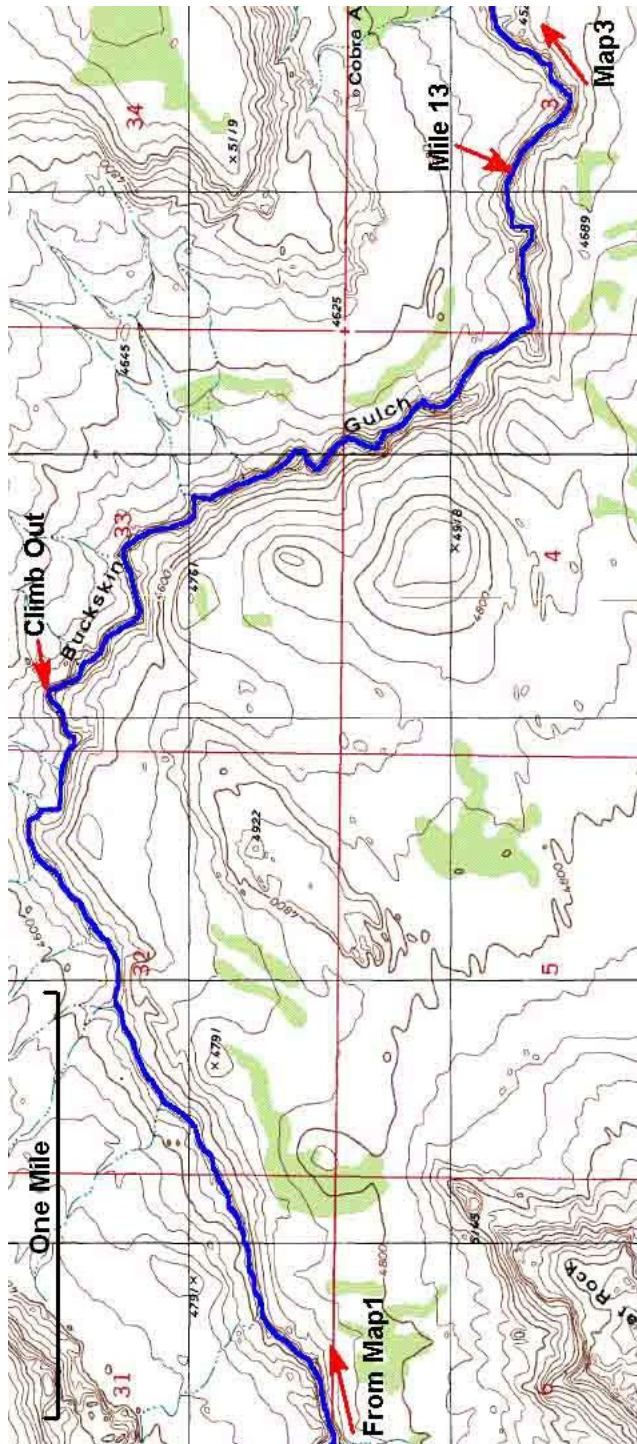
After lunch, I left the confluence and started up the Paria about 6hr 40min after the morning start. Though broader, Paria Canyon has similar towering walls and perhaps a little more water than Buckskin, but this dried up about 100yds above the confluence. All the way up Paria Canyon, the going is fast

and easy though you are very gently climbing. About a mile from the Buckskin junction, you will encounter Slide Rock Arch ( $37^{\circ}0.40'N$   $111^{\circ}51.96'W$ ), where a huge block of sandstone has broken off the right wall and plunged to the canyon bed, coming to rest with the top leaning against the canyon wall and thus forming an arch. The floods are however gradually eating away at the base of the great boulder and will eventually cause it to fall. Beyond the arch, the narrows gradually widen and the walls decrease in height as you proceed upstream. About 5mi up the Paria (and with 2mi yet to go) you pass under power lines and by this point you are traveling in a broad flood plain. Finally, within few hundred yards of the White House trailhead, you emerge from the Navajo sandstone onto an even wider flood plain. Off to the right you will see rock bluffs with marvelous red and white striations. The White House trailhead ( $37^{\circ}4.72'N$   $111^{\circ}53.40'W$ ) is just under these and a small trail marker on the right bank of the stream bed indicates the way up to the campground and the White House parking area. The hike from the confluence to this trailhead is readily accomplished in three hours. The complete day hike will take about 9.5hr during which you will travel 20.2mi.

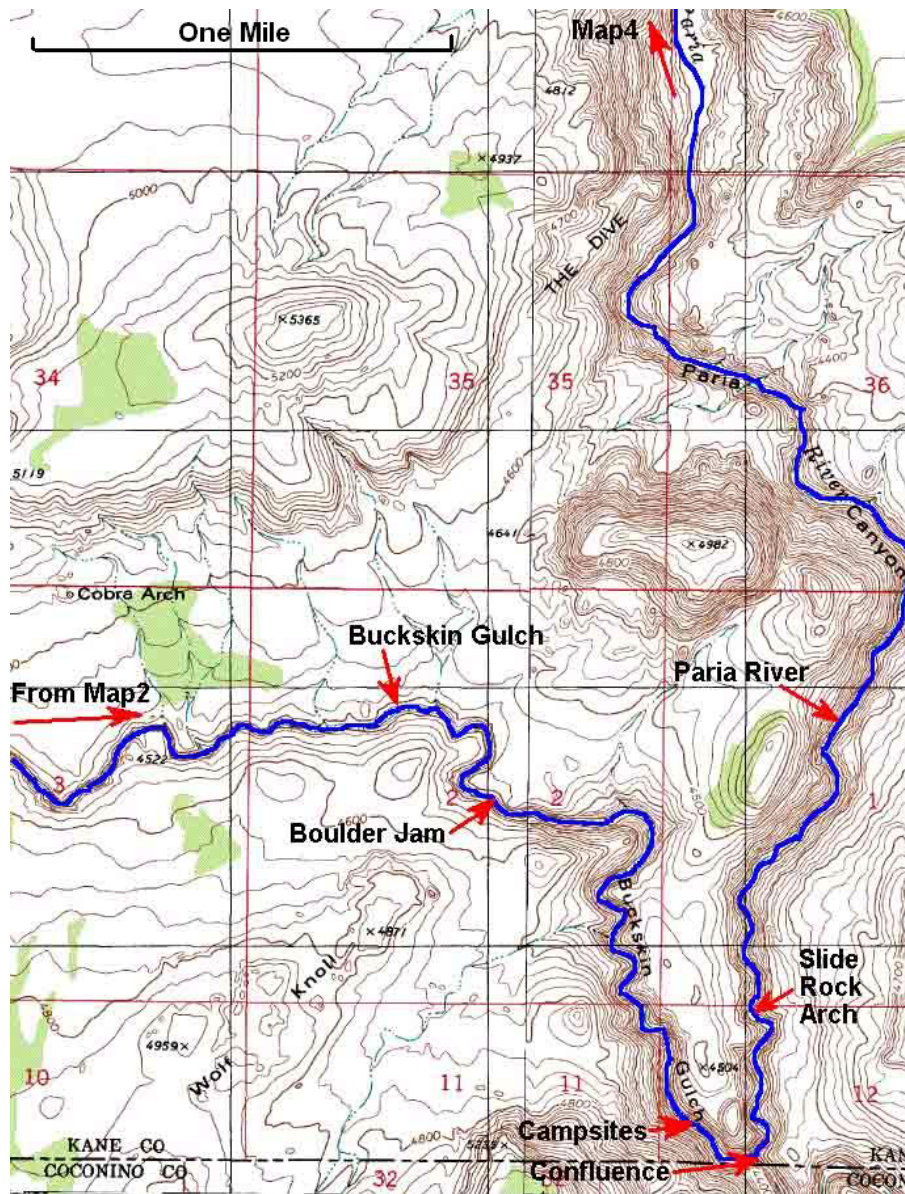


Map of first part of Buckskin Gulch Hike



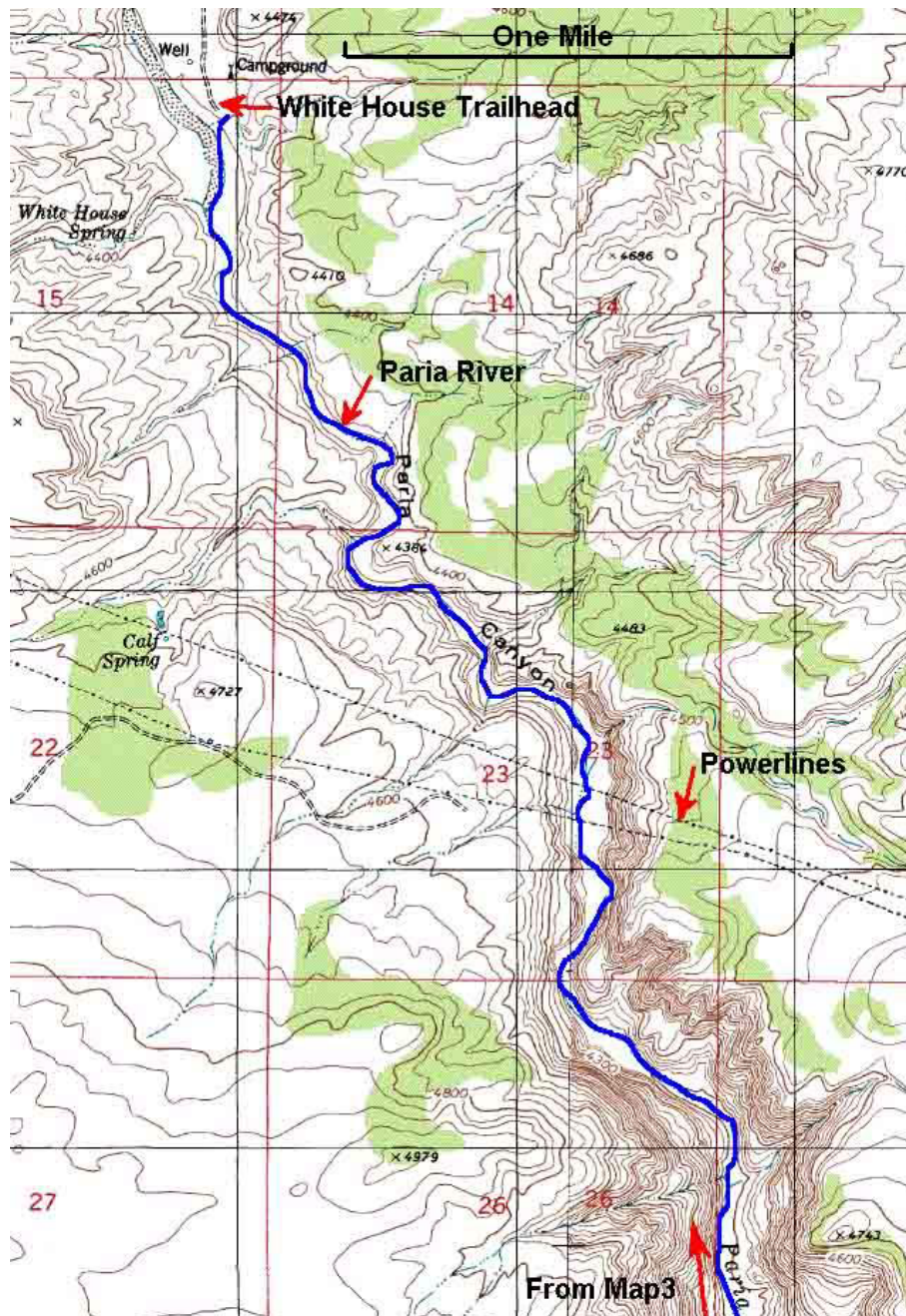


Map of second part of Buckskin Gulch Hike



Map of third part of Buckskin Gulch Hike





Map of fourth part of Buckskin Gulch Hike

## 6.2 Coyote Buttes/The Wave

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 6 miles
- Elevation gain: 340 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Pine Hollow Canyon, Coyote Buttes
- Difficulties: A modest navigational challenge
- Special equipment: A compass and topo map
- ACA Rating: 1A II

Within the wilderness of the Arizona Strip are many places of awesome grandeur and beauty. One of the most remarkable is a rock formation known as “The Wave”, a psychedelic contortion of sandstone rock that lies on the slopes of the Coyote Buttes in the Paria Canyon - Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness Area managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Close to the Arizona/Utah border, this Wilderness is just south of US Highway 89 approximately midway between Page, Arizona, and Kanab, Utah.

This adventure takes you across a trail-less, rocky landscape from the Wire Pass Trailhead (the same trailhead as used for Buckskin Gulch) to “The Wave”. Apart from some modest navigational challenges, it is a relatively easy hike across some marvelous and barren desert mountain terrain to a spectacular geological oddity.

We note that “The Wave” and the hiking route to it are protected areas and can only be entered with a special permit (just ten are issued for each day). Permits (\$5 per person) can be obtained in advance (see the website <http://paria.az.blm.gov> ) or, on the day before your hike, from the BLM Paria Ranger Station between mile markers 20 and 21 on US89. With the special permit will come a parking permit for the Wire Pass Trailhead (for other day hikes, you purchase the parking permit at the trailhead itself). You will also be issued a crude copy of a topo map indicating the route to “The Wave”.

### Trailhead

Coyote Buttes and “The Wave” are south of US Highway 89 between the cities of Page, Arizona, and Kanab, Utah. The hike begins at the Wire Pass Trailhead in the Paria Canyon - Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness managed by the BLM (Bureau of Land Management). The turnoff from US 89 is unmarked but is located between mile markers 25 and 26 approximately 34mi west of Page or

40mi east of Kanab. It is 4mi west of the Paria Ranger Station where you may have obtained your permit for this hike. You turn off onto a dirt road known as House Rock Valley Road; it is a good quality road easily passable in a 2WD vehicle under dry conditions. When wet it can become impassable. About 4.2mi south of US89 you will pass the Buckskin Trailhead on your left; 3.7mi further on you will finally arrive at the Wire Pass Trailhead ( $37^{\circ}1.19'N$   $112^{\circ}1.48'W$  and elevation 4860ft) with a broad parking area and a restroom on the right side of the road. The actual trailhead is on the left.

## Hike

Leaving the Wire Pass Trailhead you follow the Wire Pass wash eastwards (downstream), initially following the same route you would take to Buckskin Gulch. After about 0.5mi or 10min of hiking down the broad, open wash you will come to a gentle curve to the right where a broad, well-worn trail (actually an old dirt road) veers up and off to the right at  $37^{\circ}1.24'N$   $112^{\circ}1.09'W$ . Here a sign in the creek bed indicates that others should proceed straight on in the wash if bound for Buckskin Gulch. But you start up the old dirt road that climbs up to the top of a low ridge, turns south and levels off, heading toward a horizontally striated butte.

About 25min or 1mi from the start, the trail ends just after crossing a wash and arriving at the bottom of a low, bare-rock ridge. Veer left a short way and climb an easy gully up to a saddle at the top of the ridge ( $37^{\circ}0.75'N$   $112^{\circ}0.62'W$ ). From the saddle contour around to the other, eastern side of the ridge and proceed south paralleling the ridge top without losing elevation. The ridge to your right rises and you continue to head south up and over a low rise. From here you should recognize two prominent twin cones almost straight ahead of you on the flank of the ridge. Climbing somewhat, you should head for the left side of these cones. There, about 70min and 2mi from the start at  $37^{\circ}0.35'N$   $112^{\circ}0.49'W$ , you will cross the border between Utah and Arizona, marked by a rather desultory barbed wire fence. Here it is very important to identify the landmark that will guide the rest of your way to “The Wave”. In the distance, almost due south of you, are the buttes where “The Wave” is located. On those buttes there is a prominent black crack running vertically down from the summit toward the base of the mountain. From here on you head almost directly toward the black crack.

Leaving the twin cones, you proceed across relatively flat, bare rock and arrive about 20min later at a flat rock bench overlooking a wash with the black crack buttes on the opposite side. Descend to the sandy wash heading directly for the black crack and cross the wash ( $36^{\circ}59.98'N$   $112^{\circ}0.38'W$ ) by a prominent black marking on the rock in the creek bed. On other side, climb the moderately-sloped rock face veering a little right toward a shallow, steep gully heading up toward the black crack. Stay in this shallow gully as the slope eases, and it will lead you directly to the bare rock entrance to “The Wave” at  $36^{\circ}59.77'N$   $112^{\circ}0.40'W$  and an elevation of 5200ft. You should arrive there about 1hr 20min after leaving the trailhead.



The area covered by “The Wave” is not large but you should take time to explore the various gullies where this unusual psychedelic phenomenon is most prominent. It is as though the rock has been smoothly folded almost back upon itself and several times over. The rock sides seem to be flowing in waves that almost break and that image will shimmer in the hot desert sun. You can also climb above the contorted, wavy strata into the bowl at the base of the black crack that served as your navigational beacon. High overhead on the ridge line there is a substantial natural arch.

You retrace your own footsteps on the way back to the Wire Pass Trailhead, a task made more difficult by the total absence of any markers other than those



*Left: The black crack in the distance. Right: The Wave.*



*The Wave.*

you registered on the outbound leg. Consequently, this is one hike where you should look backwards on your way to “The Wave” to pick out and memorize your own route markers for the return trip. The total time for the hike is about 3hr.



Map of The Wave Hike

## 6.3 Toroweap/Lava Falls

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3 miles
- Elevation gain: 2540 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Vulcan's Throne
- Difficulties: A steep, rugged and mostly trail-less route needing careful navigation; the heat is a serious difficulty on the return climb
- Special equipment: Protection from the sun, extra water and leather gloves
- ACA Rating: 2A III

The most spectacular viewpoint in the Grand Canyon is the remote and rarely visited outpost on the North Rim known as Tuweep or Toroweap. Here, from a dramatic shelf you can look straight down about 2500ft directly to the Colorado River. River rafters often choose to overnight at one of the beaches directly below the Toroweap viewpoint. But, at this elevation, you can only just see the rafts and the people are but dots. It is a truly awesome place, this overlook. What makes it even more special is that only a few people each day come to enjoy this magnificent view. So, like me, you may be alone at the edge. The price for avoiding the crowds at either of the other Grand Canyon sites, the North Rim or the South Rim, is that you must drive 60mi over a dirt road to get there. But it is worth every mile of it.

The hike down to the Colorado proceeds along what is known as the Lava Falls Route. It begins at a trailhead a mile or so west of the viewpoint. John Annerino in his classic guide, "Hiking the Grand Canyon", describes this non-trail as .. *an avalanche of a route waiting to throw you to your knees during the descent and to suck the last drop of moisture out of you during the debilitating crawl out. There is little more to say about the viper-plagued route snaking its way through the glass-black lava other than to follow the rock cairns ....* It is indeed a steep and rugged descent of 2540ft requiring careful route finding though there are cairns marking most of the way. In several places some modest climbing is required; for this and other protection against the sharp and sun-scorched lava rock a pair of leather gloves is highly recommended. Special care is needed for the rock is quite unstable in places and thus falls are common. In addition, it is advisable to get a very early morning start so that you can begin the return climb before it gets too hot. In the summer, the sun bakes this mostly shade-less south-facing slope and can make the ascent a grim experience. In the year 2000, 12 people had to be helicoptered off this route, mostly because of heat prostration.



Thus the hike requires some careful planning and preparation in order to avoid an unpleasant experience. The best time of year is April or May, after the rim temperatures have risen but before the midday temperatures on the lava field become too extreme. I also recommend that you obtain a copy of the typed sheet prepared by the Ranger describing in detail the Lava Falls Route and the important markers along the way. Stop at the Ranger Station to obtain this; otherwise there should be copies in the register box at the trailhead. Finally it is essential to carry lots of water and/or sports drink; I used four quarts for drinking and another couple of quarts for wetting down my head and body. In the heat I find that a broad-brimmed hat and a small, wet towel around my neck provide great relief.

## Trailhead

There are several dirt roads that access the Toroweap area from the asphalt roads (I15 or US389) to the north. The best choice is the Sunshine Route (BLM road #109) that leaves US389 about 7mi west of Fredonia, Arizona. The turn-off to the south is signposted Toroweap and most of the 61mi is well-graded dirt road that is relatively easy driving under dry conditions. When wet it may be much more difficult or impassable. Approximately 48mi from the highway, the road to Mt. Trumbull forks off to the right and beyond this the route has more washboarding. As you approach the Tuweep Ranger Station 55mi from the highway it becomes rougher still. Continuing on, note the turn-off to the right 3.5mi beyond the Ranger Station that is signposted Lava Falls Route. This



*Left: View from Toroweap Overlook. Right: From midway down looking upstream, Toroweap Overlook high on the left.*



is the road to the trailhead that you will take later. First you should continue another 2.8mi to the Toroweap Overlook itself, passing the left turn-off to the campground on the way. The last mile or so over the slickrock is the roughest part of the trip. You should allow 2hr to get from the highway to the overlook.

The best strategy for this adventure is to camp overnight at the scenic campground (8 sites) just a few hundred yards back from the Toroweap overlook. This allows for an early start the next morning, the early the better in order to minimize the heat on the return climb out of the canyon. To access the trailhead drive 2mi back north along the road to the left turn onto the rough spur road signposted the Lava Falls Route and known as Vulcan's Throne Route. This proceeds about 2.4mi around the north side of the hill known as Vulcan's Throne (summit 5102ft) to the Lava Falls Route trailhead at the edge of the rim. This spur road is rough in places and passes over the shallow and potentially muddy Toroweap Lake that normally dries up in the summer making vehicle passage possible. However, even dry it would be difficult in a 2WD vehicle. The trailhead parking area ( $36^{\circ}12.70'N$   $113^{\circ}5.02'W$  and elevation 4180ft) is just a few yards from the rim.

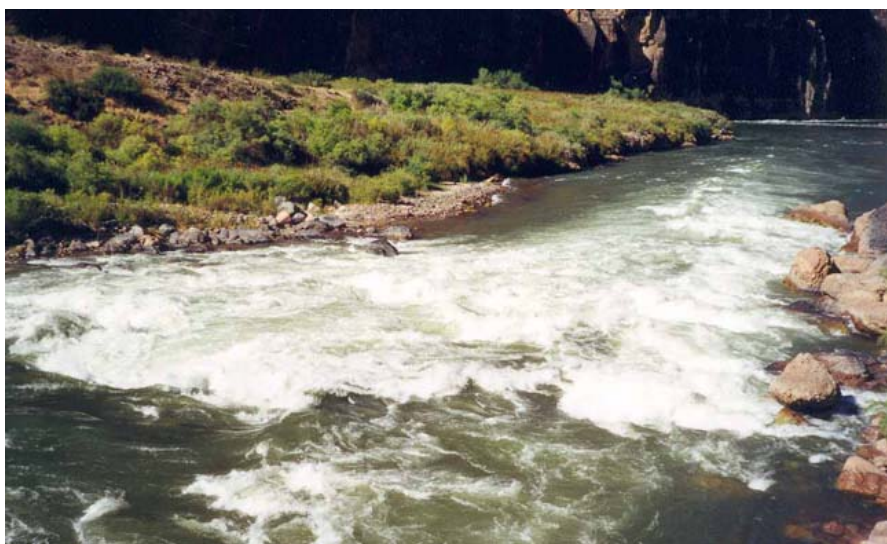
## Hike

Be sure to stop, sign in at the trailhead register ( $36^{\circ}12.70'N$   $113^{\circ}5.02'W$ ) and consult the route description mentioned above. The trail proceeds down a shallow gully that almost immediately drops off precipitously. The use-trail contours right and then drops down a steep ridge to the bottom of this gully called Vulture Valley because of the number of turkey vultures that like to cruise the skies overhead. During this descent note the bright red cinder slope



*Descent chute from below.*

off to the left ahead of you that makes up the east side of Vulture Valley. This contrasts with the black lava elsewhere and will serve as a useful trail marker on your return. In the bottom of Vulture Valley there is a small level area that terminates in another, broader drop-off (called a pour-off in the guide and Lava Falls in Annerino's book). There are only a few places where you can climb down this vertical step. Unfortunately, this is where the cairned trail is hardest to follow so look carefully for the ducks. Once you have started the descent of the pour-off via a steep gully look for cairns leading along shelves headed east for a short distance. Hopefully, after a steep descent, this will allow you to access a well-ducked and better established use-trail that leads straight down a steep and rough lava slope that begins at the base of the pour-off and heads for a prominent ridge of red cinders that can be seen about 1000ft below you. That ridge is called Finger Rock Ridge because of the obvious protruding rocks. While still high on the pour-off it is important to identify the red cinders and protruding rocks of Finger Rock Ridge. You may also be able to discern a smooth flat area on the ridge with a beaten path. Even if you fail to access the worn use-trail down the lava field you should head directly down toward Finger Rock Ridge ( $36^{\circ}12.25'N$   $113^{\circ}4.83'W$ ), reaching this objective about 1hr 20min after starting out. It is a good place to rest when coming or going; it is also a good place to cache water for the climb back up. Take time here to enjoy the partial view of the Colorado still far below you. The large valley you look directly into on the opposite side of the canyon is Prospect Valley and a route through this valley seems to take you up to the rim though no trail can be seen. Like the land on the south rim above it, Prospect Valley is in the Hualapai Indian Reservation. Above the rim, several short stretches of dirt road can be



*Lava Falls Rapids from upstream.*

seen.

Resuming your descent, a well-worn and well-ducked trail goes to the left of the red cinder ridge-top, crosses the beaten trail on the flat red cinder area seen from above, and arrives at a small platform with a number of cairns and makeshift seats. The route then drops again to the left before contouring down and across to a narrow saddle, Black Lava Saddle. This is very important to identify since the last, steep 1000ft drop to the river begins here and there may only be this one viable route down. It is also an alternate place to cache water. You should reach Black Lava Saddle about 1hr 30min after leaving the trailhead.

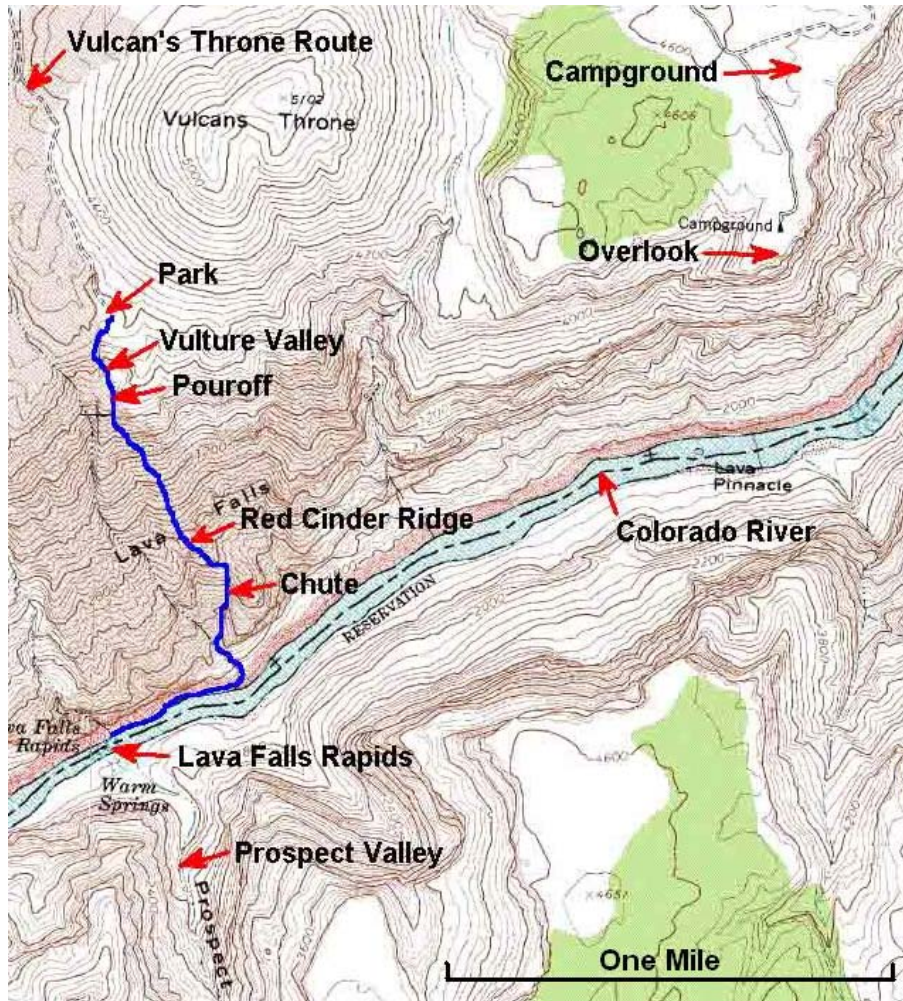
A steep ravine known as The Chute drops down from Black Lava Saddle to the river. The well-ducked trail descends a slope in the middle of The Chute avoiding an even more precipitous gully just off to the left. After several hundred feet the trail contours further right and then back left again to access the deep gully on the left bounded by a steep cliff on its east side. The descent proceeds down the steep loose scree in the gully bottom for several hundred feet and then contours to the right and out of the gully bottom, accessing and descending a smaller gully all the way to the banks of the Colorado ( $36^{\circ}11.99'N$   $113^{\circ}4.68'W$  and elevation 1640ft). You arrive at the river where there is a small shelf at the water's edge and several huge lava boulders just upstream. Make careful mental note of the boulders so that you will have no difficulty identifying the right gully when it comes time to start back. The total time for the descent should be about 2hr 15min.

Unlike the Phantom Ranch area 120mi upstream, the temperature of the Colorado is quite pleasant and invites immersion. However, the bed of the river drops off steeply so it is not as easy to immerse yourself as you might have wished during the descent. There are better beaches a short way downstream and you will want to head in this direction anyway in order to view the spectacular Lava Falls Rapids, about 400yds downstream. It is relatively easy to make your way along the shoreline, climbing over or around the few large boulders that lie in the way. There is also a use-trail higher up that avoids the boulders. It should not take more than about 15min to get to Lava Falls Rapids ( $36^{\circ}11.88'N$   $113^{\circ}5.00'W$ ). Along the way, some of the rafts that travel down the Colorado through the Grand Canyon may pass you by. Close to the Falls there is an excellent vantage point on top of a large boulder from which to view their descent of Lava Falls Rapids. The smaller rafts seem to land at a beach so that the pilots can inspect the rapids before running them. This human traffic has created a well-worn trail along this short section of the shoreline.

The Lava Falls Rapids themselves are quite spectacular and hurl even the largest rafts around like they were match-boxes. It is said that these are among the steepest and most difficult rapids in all of the Grand Canyon. The spectacle is well worth the effort to get here. I listened as raft pilots discussed the route they might be able to take in their smaller craft. Apparently on this day the left side was unrunnable and they would have to plot their course down the right side quite carefully.

It is hard to drag yourself away from the river and the shade along the shore but it is important to begin the return hike before the sun gets too high and

hot. The first leg of the ascent up to Black Lava Saddle can be done in the shade of the east wall of The Chute provided you leave while it is still early in the morning. But above Black Lava Saddle there is little or no shade for over 1000ft and this is where you will be glad of all the water you brought and of any other protection against the heat. The lava field seems particularly endless and I was so relieved to reach the pour-off that I temporarily lost my way. The red cinder wall in Vulture Valley allowed me to regain the correct route and reach the trailhead. On a day in late June it took me 4.5hr to complete the climb back to the rim. In cooler weather it probably could be accomplished quite a bit faster.



Map of the Toroweap/Lava Falls Hike



## 6.4 Water Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3.3 miles
- Elevation gain: 1260 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Hildale (UT,AZ)
- Difficulties: 9 rappels up to 170ft, some swimming
- Special equipment: Two 200ft ropes, harnesses, helmets and rappeling gear, 50ft webbing, several rappel rings, dry bags (wetsuit on colder days)
- Permit: None needed.
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Water Canyon is a great little technical canyon just outside of Hildale, Utah and a short way south of Zion National Park. It involves a hike up the trail in the canyon to the mesa rim with some spectacular views of the sculpted sandstone and slickrock topography. The subsequent descent involves nine rappels including two of just under 170ft. Not only is it a beautiful canyon but the descent has a little bit of everything, big drops, narrow slots, swimming pools, and an interesting pothole. Unless the weather is hot a partial (or even full) wetsuit is advisable for the swims.



*Left: First drop (photo by Ira Lewis). Right: At the top of upper 160ft drop.*

All of the rappels have existing anchors, either bolts or webbing wraps. Note that the canyon requires no permit and that it is often used for commercially-guided trips that are not permitted, for example, in Zion National Park. Visitors to Zion might want to keep this canyon in mind if they have difficulty getting a permit for a canyon within the Park.

## Trailhead

The town of Hildale in southwestern Utah is on Highway 59 (Arizona Highway 389) just north of the Utah/Arizona state line. In Hildale turn northeast at the Bank of Ephraim onto Utah Avenue and proceed east for about 1.8mi to a stop sign. Proceed straight on. The road soon turns north. At 2.8mi from the highway there are two dirt roads that take off on the right. The second of these dirt roads is Water Canyon Road; proceed up this road but note that it could pose a problem in the event of rain. About 3.5mi from the highway the road forks with a branch turning right to Short Creek. Continue straight on (left) and stay on the main road until you reach a parking area just beyond a small reservoir. This is the Water Canyon trailhead at 37°2.27'N 112°57.29'W and an elevation of 5200ft.

## Hike

From the parking area at 37°2.27'N 112°57.29'W and an elevation of 5200ft the well-trodden trail proceeds north through the brush on the left side of the canyon. As you begin to climb into Water Canyon you may be able to see the Water Canyon Arch high up on the left. The trail gradually ascends the brush covered slopes on the canyon left until the walls steepen and narrow and you contour into the Water Canyon Narrows where the watercourse has a subway-like feature. You should reach the canyon bottom here at an elevation of 5610ft about 45min from the start.

Ascend a few feet in the narrows before switchbacking to the left and climbing back up the side of the canyon. Here you are bypassing the long, 170ft last rappel. The trail soon contours back into the canyon bottom at the top of this last rappel. Then you follow the trail upstream alongside the stream course for about 100yds to where the trail again switchbacks up the left wall, leaving the canyon bottom for the last time. It is now a matter of following the steep trail as it continues to climb toward the mesa rim high on your left. As you climb the magnificent slickrock sculptures of Water Canyon are increasingly revealed and you may catch a glimpse of the bighorn sheep that live in this vertical playground.

You should reach the mesa rim at 6400ft just about 2hrs after starting out. Though the trail becomes a little faint at the very top, veer a little right and you will easily recognize Top Rock, the distinctive waypoint that marks the high-point of this hike at 37°3.13'N 112°57.90'W. After a brief pause to admire the marvelous views from the mesa rim, you begin the easy descent back down into upper Water Canyon which has curved around to the north of you. The

descent begins by following a worn path northwest down through some trees to a shallow gully that you can descend all the way to the stream course. You should veer left during the gully descent if you find your way blocked by a steep cliff. You should reach the bottom (elevation 6300ft) about 2hrs 15min from the start. Here you encounter a series of sculpted pools in the slickrock bottom. You should put on your rappeling gear here for the first rappel is just a few yards downstream.

The first drop is only about 20ft and can be rappeled from a tree on the left though it is also readily bypassed further to the left. This is immediately followed by the second rappel, a 60ft drop using a tree on the right as the anchor. There is a little shelf at bottom that, with a little on-rope pendulum at the bottom, will allow you to avoid the pool. At the bottom the stream course turns sharply right and enters a slot with two pools and two short drops. This section can be rappeled using the bolt in left wall. Alternatively you may choose to avoid the water by climbing the shoulder on the left before the slot and bypassing this short section by proceeding along the ridge and descending into the end of the slot using an easy sloping ledge.

At this point 3hrs from the start at an elevation of 6150ft you arrive at a point where the stream course proceeds over a large slickrock drop-off to your left. The first stage in the descent is a short 30ft rappel down to a broad ledge using a bolt in the right wall. Halfway down this short rappel there is a remarkably deep but small pothole in the stream bed. This is easily bypassed but worth pausing to examine and perhaps explore. Below it on the broad ledge you will find a two-bolt anchor for the 160ft rappel down to the bottom of the drop-off. Care needs to be taken here to avoid rope hang-up in the deep rope grooves cut into the lip of this rappel. The last descender needs to make sure



*Narrows in Water Canyon (photo by Ira Lewis).*

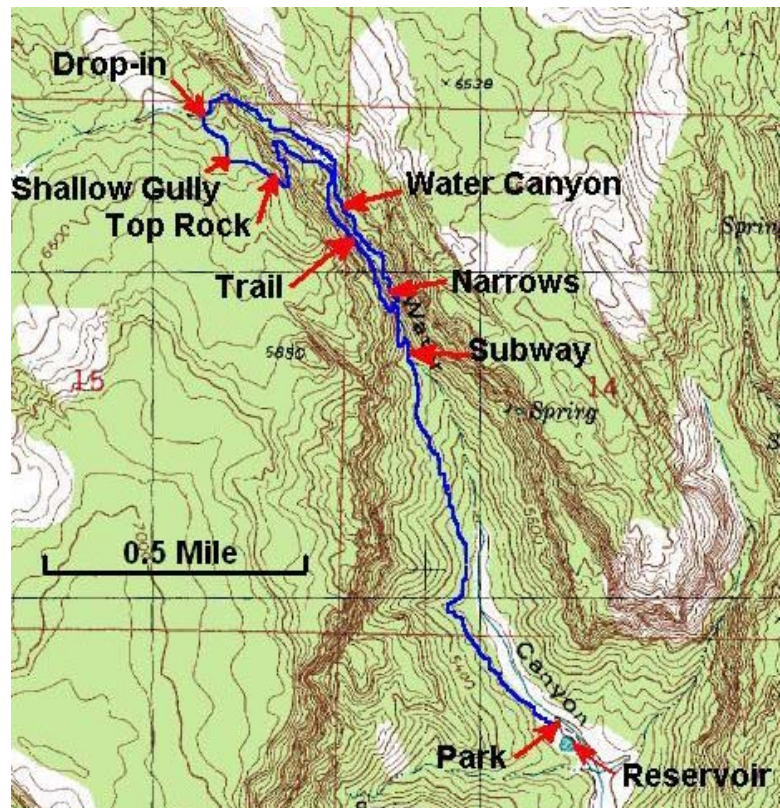
that the rappel rope and the pull line lie down into different grooves and that the pull line groove will allow the knot to easily slide through or over. The pool at the bottom is about waist-deep.

After this drop-off there is a nice section of extreme narrows where you may need to squeeze through sideways. Then the stream course opens up and you arrive at the top of a large swimming pool. This can be avoided by rapping off a tree to the left and then bypassing the pool using the ridge on canyon left. Alternatively it can be tackled directly by first climbing down into a stream course slot immediately above the pool and then rappeling down the rest of the slot for about 20ft using a webbing anchor around logs. This ends in a swimming disconnect. The swimming pool is immediately followed by a 15ft dry rappel from a low tree in the right center. From the bottom of this you then descend slickrock to a ledge on the canyon right above a 100ft drop-off on your left. The anchor is a tree on the ledge ahead and a little above the low point and this sets up a 100ft dry rappel down into a sandy slot. This leads to an attractive sandy corridor that slots up and leads to an awkward obstacle where there are two choices.

At the end of the sandy slot, the stream course turns sharp right and drops into a series of potholes, one with a deep pool that can be grimy. This series can be descended to a place where there is a longer drop (and a bolt anchor on the right wall to continue the descent). However, many may choose the alternate dry route that is to climb up onto the ridge to the right at the top of the potholes and then descend the other side of the ridge to a large tree that overlooks the longer drop. A sling around the tree allows an 80ft rappel down past the bolt anchor at the end of the potholes. There is also a larger pool at the bottom of the 80ft rappel that can be avoided using a small ledge to traverse to canyon left and then step back onto a large boulder.

At this point (elevation 5860ft) you should be about 4.5hrs from the morning start. From the bottom of the 80ft rappel, climb over the boulders on the canyon right to a ledge that avoids a narrow wet slot. Then a little further on climb up on the left to avoid another wet slot and rappel down about 60ft from a tree anchor to a sandy area on the canyon left. You will now join the trail that you used to ascend this section and it is only a few yards down canyon to the top of the last rappel. This uses two bolts in the left wall of the stream course slot (visible from the trail) to descend 170ft down to a swimming disconnect. Then you swim down the slot to rejoin the trail.

It only remains to exit the subway-like section and to follow the trail down the canyon to the parking area (37°2.27'N 112°57.29'W and an elevation of 5200ft). The hike should take about 6hrs during which you will cover about 3.3mi.



Map of the Water Canyon Hike



## 6.5 Yankee Doodle Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: Less than a mile
- Elevation gain: 240ft
- USGS Topo Map: Harrisburg Junction, UT
- Difficulties: Two rappels of 25ft and 70ft; many moderate downclimbs up to 10ft
- Special equipment: A 150ft rope; harnesses and rappeling gear.
- Permit: None required.
- ACA Rating: 3A II

The slick rock country of southwestern Utah is filled with places where runoff has cut narrow slot canyons through the rock and left an adventure land for the canyoneer. Though best known for the spectacular canyons of Zion National Park, there are many thousands of less well known slots that provide for adventure beyond the crowds of Zion. Yankee Doodle canyon (more precisely, Yankee Doodle Hollow Creek canyon) is one such place. Located in the Dixie National Forest, up on Cedar Ridge just west of the town of Leeds on Interstate 15, Yankee Doodle is within easy reach of Zion and makes for a short interesting canyon descent with a couple of rappels and a number of downclimbs. This is a good canyon for beginning canyoneers.

### Trailhead

To reach the trailhead take the Leeds exit from Interstate 15, 14m north of St. George, Utah. Coming from the south that exit ramp transitions into State Route 228N which you follow until you come to the intersection with Silver Reef Road. Turn right and follow Silver Reef Road westwards as it winds past houses and up toward the range of hills to the northwest. At the western border of Leeds you cross a bridge over Leeds Creek and the pavement turns from asphalt to a graded dirt road. Drive for 7.8m along that dirt road as it climbs up and over a ridge and down the other side. As you start the climb up to the ridge top there is one fork 1.7m from the bridge where you fork left following the road labeled OS1 (OS2 goes right). At the bottom on the other side of the ridge you pass by a deep canyon on your left.

At one point you will pass through a ranch with fencing along both sides of the road and a copse of shady trees. Shortly thereafter the road runs by

another large canyon on your left. The parking for Yankee Doodle is a turnout on the right ( $37^{\circ}14.244'N$   $113^{\circ}27.153'W$ ) just about 100yds down from a slight rise and 7.8m from the Leeds Creek bridge at an elevation of 4320ft.

## Hike

From the parking turnout at  $37^{\circ}14.244'N$   $113^{\circ}27.153'W$  and an elevation of 4320ft walk about 20yds further along the road looking for a faint trail on the left that leads to a small wash after about 80yds. Turn left and follow the wash just a few yards to the first drop into Yankee Doodle canyon at  $37^{\circ}14.198'N$   $113^{\circ}27.185'W$ . The abrupt drop is about 25ft down a narrow slot to a sandy bottom for which there are two alternative rappel anchors, webbing wraps around boulders just upstream of the lip of the drop and around a tree to the right of the slot.

That first rappel is almost immediately followed by a 8ft downslide to the top of the main rappel in Yankee Doodle Canyon, a 70ft descent from bolts in the left wall. The entry around a boulder is somewhat awkward but is rewarded by a spectacular descent down a beautiful fluted chasm with great convoluted walls on the right side. Just beyond this 70ft rappel there are three moderately challenging downclimbs in a narrow canyon that need careful chimneying technique; the third one proceeds around a boulder and ends with a knee-deep pool. You should reach this point about 1hr 20min from the start.

The canyon continues in a narrow slot with 5 or 6 more downclimbs of up to about 10ft in height with some pools about knee deep before the canyon finally begins to open up. About 2.5hrs from the start, you will arrive at the climb-out



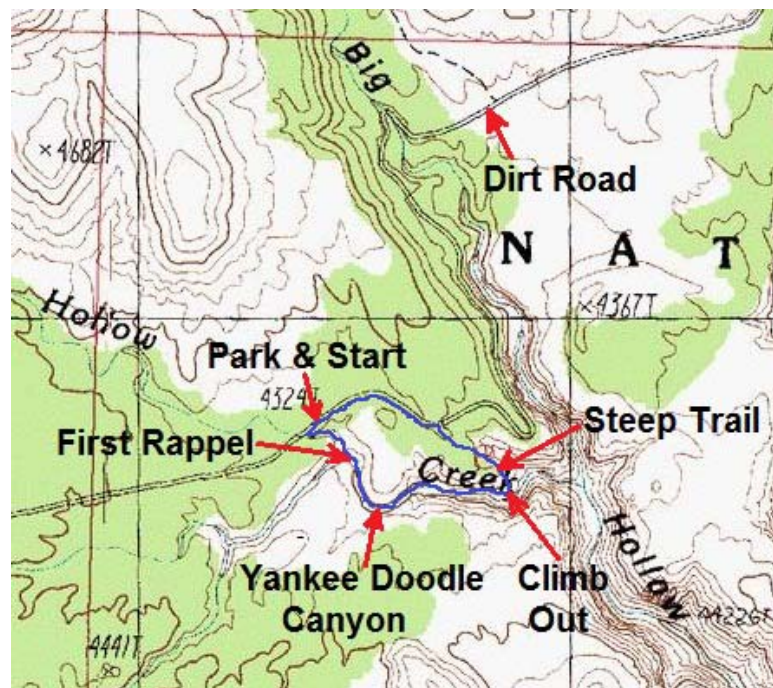
*Left: Author on the first rappel (photo by Felicia Bicknell). Right: Beginning the big rappel.*

point that is just past a lone pine tree on the left side of the canyon bottom and a short distance upstream of where the canyon turns right. This point is less than 0.5m from the start at  $37^{\circ}14.123'N$   $113^{\circ}26.902'W$  and an elevation of 4080ft. You should also be able to spot the Moki steps about 35ft up the left wall of the canyon.

Start the ascent out of the canyon by climbing up about 40ft beside low outcroppings on your left that has lots of convenient hand holds. This accesses a small ledge with some bushes. Proceed to the right to the bottom of a series of Moki steps up an inclined slab with some exposure but also several shallow horizontal outcroppings that provide hand and foot holds. The Moki step slab climb is only about 15ft up to a broken recessed ledge but some may need a hand rope for security so the best climber could go first to provide that belay. The climb proceeds up about 20ft to the right over fractured rock to a place where you need to veer up and to the left of what looks like the best route (but cliffs out). There is a awkward 8ft friction climb up a slab to some small ledges leading right to the safety of a trail in the wooded gully. Follow that trail up to the top of the canyon wall. There a broad trail leads just a few yards back to the road. Turn left and hike about 250yds down the road to the car. You should reach the car at  $37^{\circ}14.244'N$   $113^{\circ}27.153'W$  and an elevation of 4320ft about 3hrs 20min after starting out.



*Left: Yankee Doodle narrows. Right: Climb out past tree on left (photo by Felicia Bicknell).*

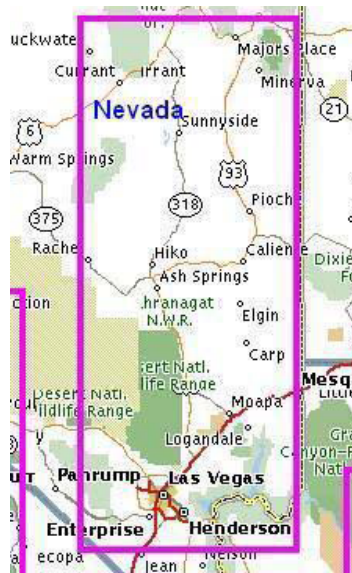


Map of the Yankee Doodle Canyon Hike

## Chapter 7

# NEVADA

The Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area just 13mi west of Las Vegas, Nevada, is a spectacular maze of dramatic red and white canyons, all sliced into the eastern edge of a great sandstone escarpment. The scenery is fantastic, a vertical world of stark and sheer slickrock with huge drop-offs in every direction. In the deep canyons and gorges, there are countless waterfalls, most of which are dry during the summer months when the sun bakes the desert all around. In contrast, the winter brings snow to the high ground adding yet another hue to this wonderland. The falls and pools often freeze over making progress difficult.



Nevada region.



But, during the fall or spring, this is a spectacular natural playground that is surprisingly little known beyond a group of local hikers and climbers.

Within this park are many marvelous adventure hikes, four of which are included in this collection. In one we describe a hike to the highest peak in the Red Rocks, the 7003ft Bridge Mountain; it is a beautiful day hike that could be undertaken at any time of the year when there is no substantial snow lying on the slickrock. Three others describe descents of Hidden Falls Canyon (also known as Lost Creek Canyon), Icebox Canyon and Icecube Canyon (also known as The Maze). Much further north, we also describe an ascent of the beautiful Wheeler Peak.

## 7.1 Bridge Mountain

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 6.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 2400 feet
- USGS Topo Map: La Madre Spring
- Difficulties: Some modest, class 3 climbing challenges with large exposure in a few places
- Special equipment: Leather gloves recommended
- ACA Rating: 2A III

Bridge Mountain (7003ft) is the highest peak in the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area just west of Las Vegas, Nevada. It is a naked block of white rock sitting above a maze of dramatic red and white canyons, forming the eastern edge of a great escarpment. The scenery is spectacular, stark and sheer slickrock with huge drop-offs in every direction. A narrow neck of slickrock joins the ridge to the west with the mass of Bridge Mountain and thereby allows one to reach the base of the mountain from the west. From afar that seems like the least of the problems, for the western face of Bridge Mountain consists of two substantial cliffs one above the other with a horizontal ledge in between. The lower cliff



*Bridge Mountain from the western ridge.*

rising up from the neck appears unscaleably vertical from a distance. Inspecting it from the escarpment ridge to the west, you can discern two vertical cracks or chimneys that might allow ascent for the skilled rock climber fully equipped with gear. In fact the left crack is readily ascended without gear but this is hard to believe until you get right over to it. In fact, the climb is Class 3 and can safely be accomplished without protection though the apparent exposure is intimidating. The climb up the lower cliff brings you to a lovely natural arch that can also be seen from the western ridge. Above the arch, the shelf contains a surprise, a hidden forest in the depression below the upper cliff. The upper cliff is readily climbed by means of a ledge that angles up from right to left and takes you to the summit ridge. The climb is fun and exhilarating; it provides breathtaking views of the maze of canyons around the mountain, of the flatland to the east with Las Vegas in plain view, and of the higher mountains to the northwest.

## **Trailhead**

The trailhead is at the summit of a pass (Red Rock Summit at 36°7.85'N 115°32.00'W) traversed by a rough 4WD dirt road that can be accessed either from the northeast or the southwest. The southwest approach proceeds as follows. From Interstate 15 about 8mi south of Las Vegas, Nevada, take the Blue Diamond/Pahrump exit onto Highway 160 and drive west for 24mi to Lovell Canyon Road. Turn right, following the paved Lovell Canyon Road for 7.5mi where you should turn right onto a rough dirt road. At this turn off there is a large camping area across the road on the left. If you are driving a 2WD vehicle you should park here and proceed on foot. In a 4WD vehicle, turn right onto the dirt road (there is a sign indicating road 549) and, ignoring two left forks in the first 0.3mi, proceed through a gate (usually open) and shortly thereafter fork left where a faint track goes right. About 1.5mi from Lovell Canyon Road, you descend into a wash that you follow for another, very rough 1.5mi to the trailhead at Red Rock Summit (elevation 6450ft).

The alternative approach is from the northeast. Drive about 13mi west from Las Vegas along Charleston Boulevard (Highway 159) to the entrance to the Scenic Loop through the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area. (Or you can drive north from the Blue Diamond/Pahrump exit on Interstate 15 along Highway 160 and turn north on Highway 159 to the Scenic Loop entrance). Pay \$5 to enter the Scenic Loop and follow it for 7.5mi to White Rock Picnic Area where you turn right and follow the rough 4WD dirt road known as the Rocky Gap Road for about 5mi to Red Rock Summit.

Though the Sierra Club guide opines that the southwest approach is preferable, the author found the northeast approach to be much less rough.

## **Hike**

From the Red Rock Summit trailhead (36°7.85'N 115°32.00'W and elevation 6450ft), proceed east following the well-worn trail through sparse juniper forest

for about 1mi. The trail climbs quite steeply to the crest of the dominant north/south ridge overlooking the canyons to the east. You should reach this ridge top ( $36^{\circ}7.92'N$   $115^{\circ}31.27'W$  and elevation 7120ft) after about 40min. Once there, you are treated to a spectacular view of the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation area, a slickrock maze of interlocking canyons. Rising above these, its white rock striking in the morning sun, is the great block of Bridge Mountain. You should be able to discern the narrow neck of rock between Icecube Canyon and Pine Creek Canyon that leads to the base of the lower cliff around Bridge Mountain. From this vantage point it appears to be a very serious technical mountaineering task to ascend this cliff. Just to the left of the end of the neck are several vertical cracks or chimneys in the cliff and this adventure will ascend the left chimney. From the western ridge, that climb looks impossible and appears to have enormous exposure.

After drinking in your first view of Bridge Mountain from the western ridge, you turn south and follow the trail along the crest, proceeding up and down and contouring west around a peak before climbing again to the ridge line about 55min from the trailhead. At this point, the trail turns back north and begins descending toward the slickrock. The view below you to the east is a magnificent maze of vertical canyons that eventually merge and empty out onto the eastern flood plain far below you. At this point you are looking down into the tributaries of Pine Creek and, as you descend further, you come to an overlook at 6630ft where there is a spectacular vertical drop-off of a thousand feet or more into Pine Creek Canyon. Just beyond the overlook you reach the slickrock where the trail only exists as a series of rock cairns or “ducks”. Note that the entire route to the summit is marked by ducks and, in places, by two black, parallel lines painted on the rock. Initially the slickrock descent is easy going but further down there is one steep section with substantial exposure where the use-trail descends a series of short chimneys. Here it is wise to follow the ducked trail.



*Left: Ascending the chimney. Right: The Natural Bridge.*

This series of chimneys brings you down to the flatter slickrock of the narrow neck that allows access to the block of Bridge Mountain. On the south side of the neck there is a huge drop-off into Pine Creek Canyon; on the north side there is a smaller though still dramatic vertical drop into Icecube Canyon. The green of the trees in the forested bottom of this branch of Icecube makes a nice contrast with the red and white of the bare rock all around.

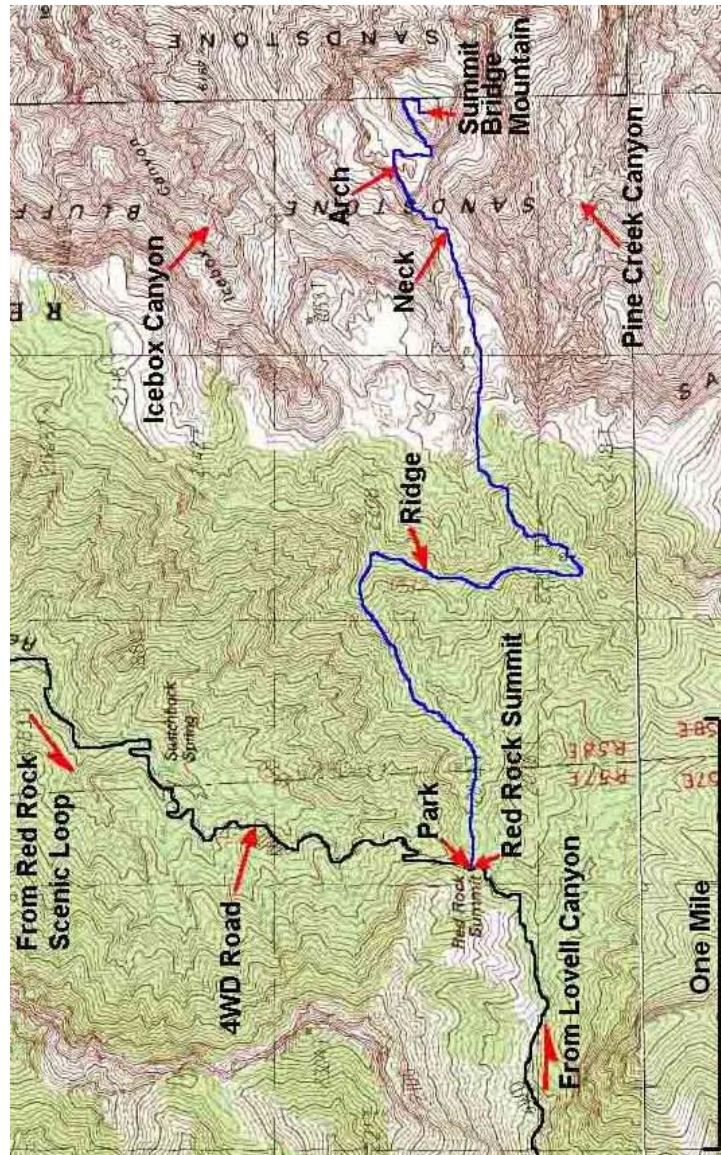
You should reach the low point on the neck ( $36^{\circ}7.87'N$   $115^{\circ}30.44'W$  and elevation 6200ft) about 1hr 50min after leaving the trailhead. From there, proceed up toward the base of the lower cliff, angling left so that you are just above the northern drop-off. As you ascend the slickrock here, it will become clear that the crack or chimney on the left is not as steep as it appeared from further away (in contrast, a crack further right is, indeed, vertical). Most hikers will want to ascend by staying in the crack itself. It provides easy climbing with little apparent exposure. Some may choose to ascend to the right of the crack where the face is replete with good hand and footholds but the exposure is more intimidating. After about 150ft you will come to a point where there is a broad, flat ledge on the left. Leave the crack here, and proceed about 15ft to the left where a wider gully climbs to the top of the lower cliff. This leads directly to the natural bridge for which the mountain is named. You should reach the bridge ( $36^{\circ}7.99'N$   $115^{\circ}30.23'W$  and elevation 6580ft) about 2hr 30min from the start.

After passing under the bridge, climb the steep rock slope on the left to get to the large bench that cuts across the whole west face of the mountain. A depression in the interior part of this shelf hides the trees of the hidden forest. Turn right and head for the saddle at the south end of the forest. At this saddle the drop-off into Pine Creek Canyon is enormous. From there a series of slabs and ledges angle south across the upper cliff and climb to the summit ridge. Once you reach that ridge, make a mental note of where the ledge emerged for it is harder to locate it on the way down. An easy stroll along the summit ridge will take you to the peak (elevation 7003ft) at  $36^{\circ}7.93'N$   $115^{\circ}30.10'W$ . You should reach the summit about 3hr 10min from the start.

The view from the peak is breathtaking. To the east the flat desert stretches off into the distance to Las Vegas and beyond. To the northeast you will see the striking bands of red rock that gave the park its name. All around below you, a maze of sheer-walled canyons that provide an off-trail hiking paradise. To the south one particular fork of Pine Creek stands out, featuring a glinting stream and several large waterfalls. That fork begins at a saddle west of Rainbow Mountain, the prominent peak south of Bridge Mountain.

The return trip follows the same route in reverse and takes about the same length of time. The climb from the low point on the neck to the western ridge line is, perhaps, the most demanding part of the hike but it allows marvelous afternoon views of Bridge Mountain and the canyon maze.





Map of Bridge Mountain Hike

## 7.2 Hidden Falls Canyon

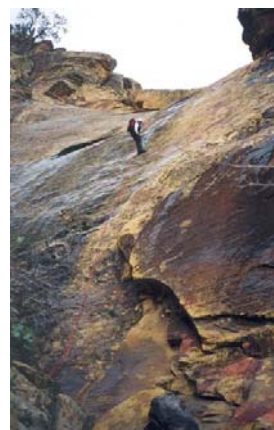
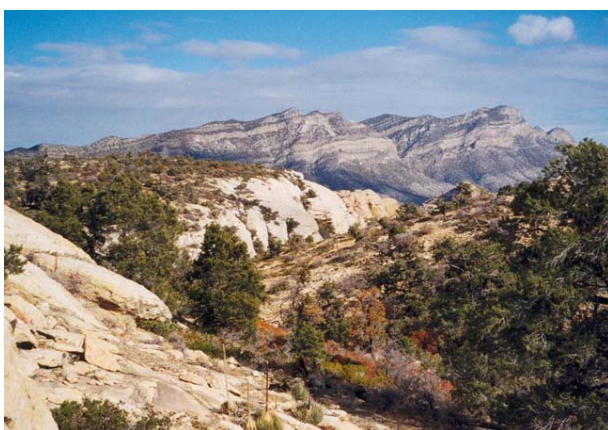
### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7 hours 20 minutes
- Estimated hiking distance: 2.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 1240 feet
- USGS Topo Map: La Madre Spring
- Difficulties: Seven rappels up to 110ft, much bouldering and downclimbing
- Special equipment: Rappeling equipment, 60 meter rope, 50 feet webbing, 7 rappel rings, 130 feet recovery cord, harnesses and helmets
- ACA Rating: 3A III

Here we describe a modest, but still challenging descent of Hidden Falls Canyon (also known as Lost Creek Canyon) in the Red Rocks National Recreation Area. The hike can be completed comfortably in a day. Unless there are substantial changes in the canyon it is not necessary to get wet, except perhaps to wade in shin-deep water in one narrows near the bottom.

### Trailhead

This adventure requires a shuttle using two 4WD vehicles. Drive about 13mi west from Las Vegas along Charleston Boulevard (Highway 159) to the entrance of the Scenic Loop through the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area. (Or you can drive north from the Blue Diamond/Pahrump exit on Interstate 15



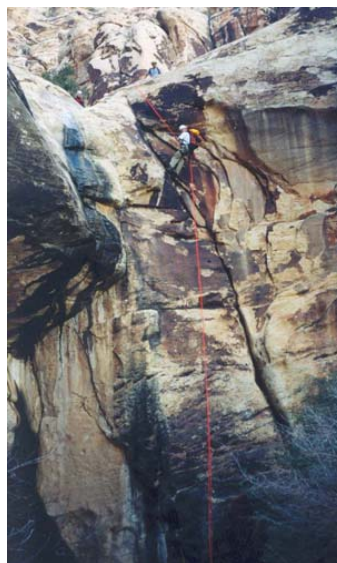
*Left: Drop-in to Hidden Falls Canyon. Right: Second rappel in Hidden Falls.*

along Highway 160 and turn north on Highway 159 to the Scenic Loop entrance). The Scenic Loop opens at 6.00am and the entrance fee is \$5. From the entrance follow the one-way Scenic Loop for 7.5mi to where a short two-way spur forks off to the right toward the Willow Springs Picnic Area. Just 0.5mi up this spur road you will come to the Lost Creek Trailhead (elevation 4460ft). Park the recovery vehicle here ( $36^{\circ}9.49'N$   $115^{\circ}29.68'W$ ). Then, with all the participants and their gear loaded into the ascent vehicle(s), continue on the asphalt road for 0.3mi to Willow Springs where the asphalt ends. Then proceed up the rough 4WD dirt road beyond the end of the asphalt (the road is called the Rocky Gap Road). About 2.3mi beyond Willow Springs you will come to a place where the road drops about 6ft to cross a wash coming down from the right. Park in the flat wash to the right where you can turn the vehicle ( $36^{\circ}9.07'N$   $115^{\circ}31.40'W$  and elevation 5500ft).

## Hike

The trail (starting elevation 5500ft) starts in the lateral wash on the opposite side of the road (southeast side) and is well marked by a cairn and by trailside rocks. After crossing the main wash it climbs to the apex of a lateral ridge coming down from high crest and ascends this all the way up to that crest, 1240ft above the trailhead. Near the top the trail proceeds over broken slickrock but is well marked by cairns. The 0.9mi climb to the 6740ft crest should take about 1hr 30min.

The view east from the ridge top ( $36^{\circ}8.71'N$   $115^{\circ}30.83'W$ ) is marvelous and you should take a moment to enjoy it before following the cairns to the left for



*Left: Downclimbing in Hidden Falls. Right: Last rappel in Hidden Falls.*

about 50yds. They lead to a shallow draw heading off in a northeast direction, the beginning of Hidden Falls Canyon (36°8.79'N 115°30.79'W). The draw drops slowly for the first few hundred yards until you arrive at the first rappel at about 6550ft, a modest 25ft drop using a small tree on the left as the anchor. Then continue in a deepening gully, past some friction downclimbing to an elevation of about 6300ft where you arrive at the second and highest rappel in this canyon. This is a 110ft sloping cliff where a larger canyon comes in on the right. The anchor is a stout tree on the left. You should reach this point about 2hrs 40min from the morning start.

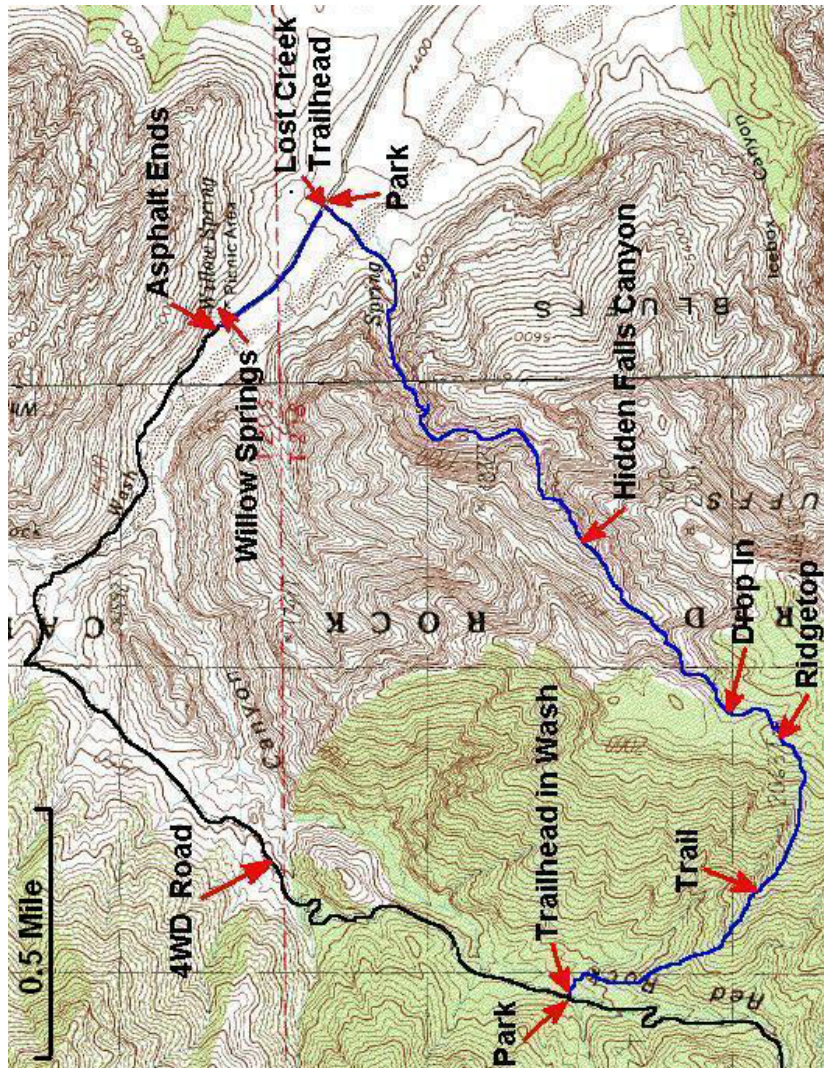
There follows a long section of modest downclimbing and bouldering; the canyon gradually narrows and the walls rise high above you on both sides. Then, just after a place where you climb down a slot on the left side while the stream course is by the right wall, you will arrive at the readily recognizable junction with the Left Fork coming in on your right. This junction is at 5470ft and you should reach here about 4hr after the morning start. It is a good place to take a break and prepare for more challenging terrain ahead.

Downstream of the Left Fork junction, the stream course drops more rapidly in a narrower canyon. Here the water has scoured the canyon to the bedrock and has created a section with much class 3 downclimbing. One class 4 downclimb at the bottom of a steep sloping rock, looks more difficult than it is though most people will want a belay line here. The route goes down steep steps just to the right of the stream. Much downclimbing and bouldering follows; in one spot at 5050ft a small 12ft rappel on the left side of a large canyon-blocking boulder can be avoided by climbing down through a hole under the boulder on the right side. The spot is recognizable by the Mettatica graffiti painted on the rock to indicate the location of the hole.

Then at 4810ft and 5hr 20min from the trailhead, you will come to the first of a series of rappels interspersed with downclimbs at the end of Hidden Falls Canyon. The first rappel (currently anchored by a webbing wrap around a large log) is a simple 25ft drop down an abrupt step into a pool that you may have to wade unless you adroitly cling to the rock on the right side of the pool. Just downstream is another abrupt 35ft drop; here a high shelf on the left, if followed around a corner, will lead to dubious piton anchor that needs to be replaced. From here you rappel down 40ft to the streamside. A very similar maneuver follows. Again climb to the left over slickrock and descend into a shallow groove where there is a small tree anchor for a 40ft rappel down into the stream bed.

The last rappel is just about 100yds downstream and can, reportedly, be bypassed by climbing over the bluff on the left. You should reach the top of this last rappel (36°9.36'N 115°29.89'W and elevation 4660ft) about 7hrs after leaving the trailhead. This last descent is a 90ft vertical drop into a nice desert grotto; the anchor is a webbing wrap around a large boulder in the stream bed. From the bottom of this last rappel, a well-maintained trail leads back to the road at the Lost Creek Trailhead (36°9.49'N 115°29.68'W and elevation 4470ft) where you left the recovery vehicle. The complete hike covers a total of 2.5mi and should take about 7hr 20min.





Map of Hidden Falls Canyon Hike



## 7.3 Icebox Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 11 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3.6 miles
- Elevation gain: 670 feet
- USGS Topo Map: La Madre Spring
- Difficulties: 9 rappels including one 200ft mostly free rappel requiring a pool swim at the top, perhaps 3 or 4 additional pool swims, much bouldering and downclimbing
- Special equipment: Rappeling equipment, 60 meter rope, 60 meter recovery cord, 150ft webbing, 9 rappel rings, harnesses, helmets, wetsuits with booties and gloves, dry bags
- ACA Rating: 4B IV

In contrast to the preceding section, this descent of Icebox Canyon is a very demanding canyoneering experience down one of the most spectacular canyons anywhere in the Southwest. It ends with an awesome 200ft mostly free rappel with a swim on rappel through a deep pool just upstream of the lip of the big drop. The free rappel descends through the huge “Icebox” undercut into the sandstone cliff. Some day before the hike, it would be wise to hike up to this point from below in order to understand the geometry of the place. This would also allow you to plot your downclimb past the pools and falls below the big drop.



*Left: View down into Icebox Bowl. Right: Upper Icebox Canyon.*

The length of this hike and the swimming obstacle at the end make this an adventure that is best undertaken in late spring or early fall. In the high summer the heat may be excessive.

## Trailhead

This adventure requires a shuttle using two 4WD vehicles. The trailhead is at Red Rock Summit, a 6450ft pass at  $36^{\circ}7.85'N$   $115^{\circ}32.00'W$  traversed by a rough 4WD dirt road. The approach is from the northeast. Drive about 13mi west from Las Vegas along Charleston Boulevard (Highway 159) to the entrance of the Scenic Loop through the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area. (Or you can drive north from the Blue Diamond/Pahrump exit on Interstate 15 along Highway 160 and turn north on Highway 159 to the Scenic Loop entrance). The Scenic Loop opens at 6.00am and the entrance fee is \$5.

From the entrance follow the one-way Scenic Loop for 7.5mi to where a short spur forks off to the right to Willow Springs Picnic Area. Continue on down the left fork to the Icebox Canyon Trailhead ( $36^{\circ}9.04'N$   $115^{\circ}28.84'W$  and an elevation of 4300ft) where you should leave the recovery vehicle. Then, with all the participants and their gear loaded into the ascent vehicle(s), back up the one-way road to the Willow Springs spur and continue up to Willow Springs (1.3mi from the Icebox Trailhead). Here the asphalt ends but you continue on up the rough 4WD dirt road, known as the Rocky Gap Road, for about 4.4mi to the obvious Red Rock Summit. Park here.

## Hike



*Left: The big rappel. Right: Below the big rappel.*

From the Red Rock Summit trailhead ( $36^{\circ}7.85'N$   $115^{\circ}32.00'W$  and elevation 6450ft), proceed east following the well-worn trail through sparse juniper forest for 0.9mi. The trail climbs quite steeply to the crest of the dominant north/south ridge overlooking the canyons to the east. You should reach the ridge top ( $36^{\circ}7.92'N$   $115^{\circ}31.27'W$  and elevation 7120ft) after about 50min. Once there, you are treated to a spectacular view of the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, a slickrock maze of interlocking canyons. Rising above these, its white rock striking in the morning sun, is the great block of Bridge Mountain, the subject of another adventure.

At the ridge top, the maintained trail goes right, but you turn left and follow a use-trail along the crest for about 300yds, around a rocky promontory to an overlook where you are treated to a spectacular view of the huge bowl at the top of Icebox Canyon. Beginning about 400ft below you, the Icebox bowl funnels down into a deep canyon that then flows down to the desert about a mile and a half away. It is unmistakable. From this vantage point on the ridge ( $36^{\circ}8.09'N$   $115^{\circ}31.09'W$ ) you descend for about 400yds down an easy earth slope through small juniper trees heading directly for the bare slickrock on the right side of the bowl. You should reach the edge of the bowl ( $36^{\circ}8.11'N$   $115^{\circ}30.80'W$  and elevation 6790ft) about 1.3mi or 1hr 20min from the start.

The descent into the steep-sided bowl requires multiple rappels; it is important to plan ahead, plotting your future rappel anchors as far in advance as you can. Then drop into the bowl where you can spot the easiest downclimbing route. Downclimb (or rappel) the steep side over broken rock and ledges. About 120ft below the rim, veer to the left for about 50yds to find the best descent route down to a group of pine trees about 250ft below the rim. Here you should discern a route straight down the bowl to its focus, rappeling from one large tree on a ledge to another. The rappels are down sloping slickrock that can, in places, be coated with ice during the winter months. From a large tree anchor, the first rappel slopes down about 100ft to a broad ledge with a single large tree. From there the second rappel descends a further 130ft to another single tree on a broad ledge. Here you are treated to a truly awesome view down into Icebox Canyon. You should reach this point about 3hr 45min from the morning start.

A short traverse to the left brings you to the stream bed and you begin a section of downclimbing in which several detours into the brush on the left of the gully make for the easiest descent. A little below the detour you climb down into a bedrock channel where, at an elevation of 6300ft there are two rappels, a 60ft drop from a boulder anchor on the right side of the stream bed and then a short 20ft descent from a webbing anchor under a large chockstone in the center of the stream bed. More downclimbing in a steep canyon stream course follows. About 6hr from the trailhead you come to the first of two class 4 downclimbs, a tricky 30ft descent on the left side of the canyon. This is followed shortly thereafter by a similar 35ft downclimb also on the left wall. Just a little later at an elevation of 5590ft you arrive at a 50ft drop into a large round pool about knee-deep. The anchor is a large tree on a shelf to the right where you rappel down onto a ledge just above the water level. From there you can just avoid

wading in the water by climbing along small ledges on the right side of the pool.

This is a particularly beautiful section of the canyon where the stream wanders down lovely sculpted and scoured sandstone bedrock. More downclimbing follows, and at 5400ft and 7hr 40min from the start there is a 20ft rappel around a large canyon blocking chockstone with much overhang; a stream bed boulder can be wrapped as the anchor.

You are now approaching the last and most challenging part of Icebox Canyon. At an elevation of 4990ft and 8.5hrs into the hike you will come to a 40ft two-stage waterfall, a small but deep hanging pool about 10ft below the lip followed by a 30ft drop into a waist-deep pool. Before beginning this rappel, it is a good idea to change into the wetsuit or other garments in which you intend to swim when you get to the big drop. Then descend using a tree high on the left as the anchor. A little further down canyon you arrive at the first place where swimming may be necessary; a 10ft slot that can be chimneyed leads to a 10yd swim.

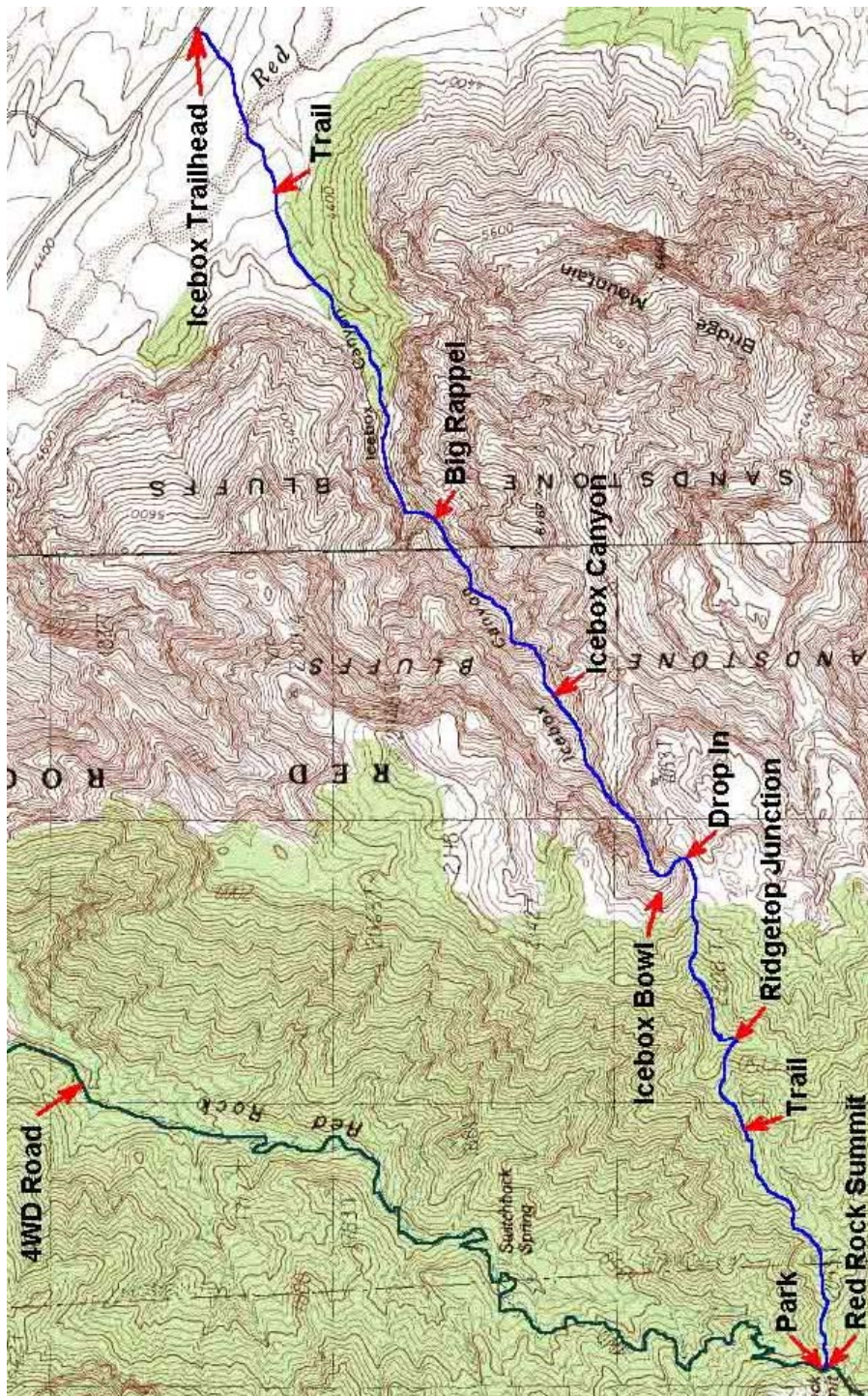
Just below this at 36°8.58'N 115°29.99'W and an elevation of 4920ft you finally arrive (9hrs and 2.3mi from the morning start) at the top of the crux rappel in Icebox Canyon. It will be first recognized by the very large dead tree propped up against the right-hand wall of the canyon about 30ft from the top of the slot at the start of the descent. If the tree is still there, a webbing wrap around it provides the anchor for the rappel. You need at least 200ft of rope to make a safe descent in daylight. Set up a single strand rappel with a 60m rope and a 200ft recovery cord. The descent then consists of rappeling down a steep 15ft slot into a deep pool and swimming 10yds across the pool while still on rappel to a smooth lip at the far end of the pool. The lip is broad enough to allow you to stand and feed the rope and recovery cord over the edge and down into the abyss below. Do this carefully to avoid tangles. The 160ft vertical descent from here is mostly a free descent down across the face of a huge cave (the "Icebox") where there is a massive undercut in the sandstone. It is a spectacular rappel experience. If the stream is flowing you will also be drenched from above as you descend. At the bottom you land on some steep and wet rock steps just above a large deep pool that is about 10yds long.

The next part of the descent is fairly easy in daylight. Going off-rappel you can bypass the first pool using a series of small ledges on the right side near the water's edge. This leads to a lip at the top of a 10ft drop into a small waist-deep pool about 5yds across. Cross over to the left side to bypass this second pool. This takes you to the top of a 50ft sloping drop into a shin-deep wading pool. Cross over again to the right and use a broad sloping bench to descend this 50ft drop. It should be noted that this series of obstacles after the big rappel is difficult to negotiate in darkness and, given the length of this hike, there is a possibility that you will arrive here after dark. It is then very valuable to have reconnoitered this part of the canyon from below. Moreover, if you carried a 340ft rope and recovery cord rather than the 200ft lengths it would be wise to continue the rappel down these obstacles below the big drop.

At this point you can remove your harness and stow the ropes since there are no more technical obstacles. This is a location that many people hike up to

from below. It is also a canyon junction for a large tributary enters on the left, a canyon known as Buffalo Wall Canyon. Below this junction there is a 10ft drop into a waist-deep pool but it is readily bypassed using a broad ledge on the right. From there follow the stream bed or the use-trail around boulders and pools until you spot a sign where, for easier passage, the maintained trail climbs up the bank on the left side of the canyon. The trail then exits the canyon and continues across a wash to the Icebox Trailhead ( $36^{\circ}9.04'N$   $115^{\circ}28.84'W$  and elevation 4300ft). It takes 1hr to hike the 1.3mi from the bottom of the big rappel to the trailhead. The total hike length of 3.6mi will take about 11hrs to complete.





Map of Icebox Canyon Hike

## 7.4 Icecube Canyon/The Maze

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 12 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4.3 miles
- Elevation gain: 670 feet
- USGS Topo Map: La Madre Spring
- Difficulties: A strenuous and technically demanding canyon, with advanced slot canyon challenges, 20 rappels including a final 190ft descent, and much swimming
- Special equipment: Rappeling gear including harnesses and helmets, two 200ft ropes, 200ft recovery cord, 200ft webbing, 20 rappel rings, a few pitons with hammer, drybags, wetsuits
- ACA Rating: 4B IV

In this section we describe perhaps the most technically demanding canyoneering descent in this whole collection, namely the journey down the canyon just to the south of Icebox, between Icebox and Bridge Mountain in the Red Rocks National Recreation Area. The canyon is unlabeled on the topo map; the area through which it descends is known by local climbers as “The Maze”; we called the canyon Icecube. It is so challenging that it should not be undertaken except by experienced canyoneers.

The first section of the adventure is the most technically challenging. It is the passage through the narrow slot of upper Icecube during which one must accomplish about 8 successive rappels down a narrow slot with few natural anchors while trying to stay out of the slot-filling pools of water. The very slippery rock under the waterline adds significantly to the challenge. Here you really need a wet suit (except, perhaps, when the temperature up above the slot is greater than 100 degrees) for it can get quite cold down in the dark cold water of the slot.

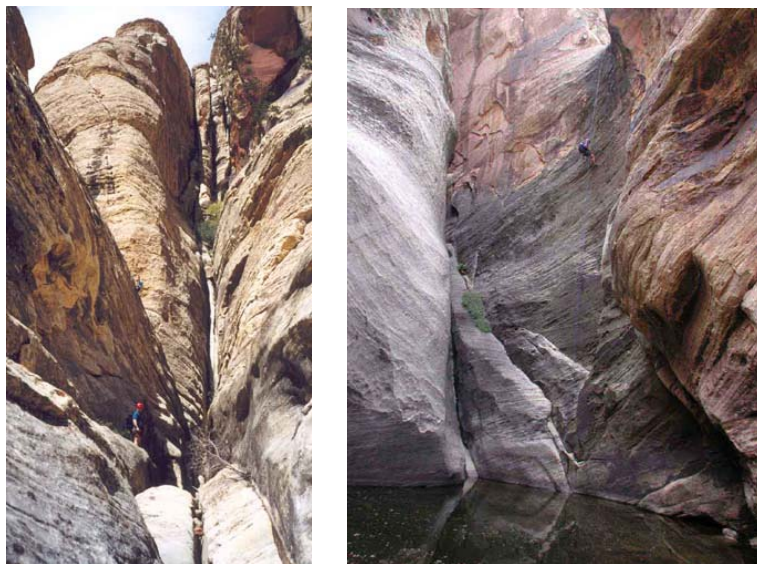
The second section is a relaxing stroll down the boulder-strewn stream bed in the bottom of a beautiful tree-lined canyon with sculpted red rocks on all sides. The third section is a long series of rappels as the canyon falls quickly toward its exit. This section has many large pools and several swimming disconnects. Except for the last, none of the rappels is over 100ft but finding good anchors is hard in some places. Like the first section this part can be quite cold. The final rappel, the climax, is a truly awesome 190ft descent that begins in a narrow slot and opens up into a substantial free rappel. It is a fitting end to this fantastic adventure.

Because the Icecube descent takes at least 12hrs it should be done in summer with a very early start. The cold in the first and third sections is such that the adventure is best undertaken in summer when the temperatures overhead are in the 90s or 100s. Such heat may mean that the second section is excessively hot but that seems the best overall choice.

## Trailhead

This adventure requires a shuttle using two 4WD vehicles. The trailhead is at Red Rock Summit (36°7.85'N 115°32.00'W and an elevation of 6450ft), a pass traversed by a rough 4WD dirt road. The approach is from the northeast. Drive about 13mi west from Las Vegas along Charleston Boulevard (Highway 159) to the entrance of the Scenic Loop through the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area. (Or you can drive north from the Blue Diamond/Pahrump exit on Interstate 15 along Highway 160 and turn north on Highway 159 to the Scenic Loop entrance). The Scenic Loop opens at 6.00am and the entrance fee is \$5.

From the entrance follow the one-way Scenic Loop for 7.5mi to where a short spur forks off to the right to Willow Springs Picnic Area. Continue on down the left fork to the Icebox Canyon Trailhead (36°9.04'N 115°28.84'W and an elevation of 4340ft) where you should leave the recovery vehicle. Then, with all the participants and their gear loaded into the ascent vehicle(s), back up the one-way road to the Willow Springs spur and continue up to Willow Springs (1.3mi from the Icebox Trailhead). Here the asphalt ends but you continue on



*Left: A wide place in the upper slot. Right: Author descends 100ft in the last section (photo by Willie Hunt).*



up the rough 4WD dirt road, known as the Rocky Gap Road, for about 4.4mi to the obvious Red Rock Summit. Park here.

## Hike

From the Red Rock Summit trailhead (elevation 6450ft), proceed east following the well-worn trail through sparse juniper forest for 0.8mi. The trail climbs to the crest of the dominant north/south ridge overlooking the canyons to the east. You should reach the ridge top (36°7.92'N 115°31.27'W and elevation 7120ft) after about 40min. Once there, you are treated to a spectacular view of the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area. Take a moment to examine the terrain before you. A steep juniper-dotted slope falls off steeply below you until it meets a line of bare slickrock. Beyond that you should be able to identify Bridge Mountain. Hopefully you can also spot the neck of slickrock that you would cross before ascending the crack up the face of Bridge Mountain. Icecube Canyon defines the left side of this neck.

To access the head of Icecube Canyon follow the ridge top trail south for about 500yds until you come to the sign where the Bridge Mountain trail forks right and a use-trail goes left. Follow the use-trail that contours briefly but soon begins to descend along a lateral ridge. The trail ends at the slickrock at the head of a small tributary of Icecube (elevation 6770ft); you should reach this point about 50min from the start. Descend the slickrock gully but, when you come to a sizeable drop, contour left to enter the main fork of the Icecube (36°7.85'N 115°31.04'W). Descending the deepening canyon you soon come to the first rappel, at 6460ft and 1hr 30min from the trailhead. This is a simple little 12ft



*Left: In the third section. Right: Mark on the 190ft rappel.*

drop from a good trapped-rock anchor in mid-gully. Shortly thereafter there is a bypass of another dryfall on the left; this is followed by several downclimbs before you come upon a large boulder in mid-canyon.

Forking to the left of the boulder you come to the start of the long and challenging technical descent of upper Icecube. It begins with a simple 30ft rappel from a small tree anchor on the left side of the big boulder. This is immediately followed by a two-stage 60ft rappel from a tree on a ledge on canyon right, where you first drop down to a pool in the canyon bottom and then continue down a slot to another pool with a ledge on the right side. It is deep and dark in here. The pool is followed immediately by a series of short downclimbs and small pools until the slot opens very briefly. From here you enter the most demanding slot canyon in the Red Rocks. The canyon narrows to a deep and very narrow slot. From above, it is impossible to tell where the slot ends. First, from a bush anchor, you descend 30ft into the narrow slot to where there is a large old tree stump logjam. Set an anchor on this tree stump and continue the descent another 80ft in several stages to where the slot makes a sharp right turn. Here, at the turn, the bottom is a chest-deep pool with a very slippery underwater rock surface. These very slippery underwater surfaces are almost universal throughout the canyon and make it very difficult to get any traction underwater. At this bottom, this feature makes it almost impossible to get out of the pool. You have to stem across above water and move laterally to get to dry ground. Just beyond this point you will come to a 30ft rappel where the only anchor is a deadman in a small pool just above the lip. This drop ends in a wading pool that leads to the next obstacle. The slot narrows again and turns sharp left. However, there is a 8ft drop into a water-filled trench just before the turn. The best route here is to descend into this trench and then climb the other side up onto a broad and warm shoulder up above and to the right of the slot. From this shoulder you can bypass the next section of slot by rappelling off a tree anchor (piton placements are also possible here) and down about 120ft to dry canyon bottom. Just beyond this landing area the canyon broadens and there is a sunny spot where you can pause to warm up. You should reach this resting area about 4hr after the morning start.

At this point where the canyon broadens there is a sloping ledge on the right where you can climb out up to the Bridge Mountain trail that runs along the ridge above you on the right. By this means you could return to the trailhead and thus complete a technically challenging half day adventure. The route is around to the left of a large rock mass with some exposure though you can also chimney up a short, wide crack to the right of the rock mass and thus avoid the exposure. You then keep going right to meet the Bridge Mountain route marked by cairns and two black stripes of paint.

Resuming the canyon descent beyond this escape point, there are two short 20ft rappels followed by a shallow slot that leads to a deep pool, the first of many swims in this day. Set up an anchor around the chockstone at the head of this slot so you can rappel through the next two pools. Then descend into and swim across the first pool. The main difficulty here is in exiting the pool because of the slippery underwater rock surface. This first pool is followed by another



short slot and another swimming pool that is again difficult to exit. Finally this long upper section of Icecube comes to an end and the canyon opens up into a broad valley right under Bridge Mountain and the Bridge Mountain neck. You should emerge from the upper Icecube slot at 36°7.93'N 115°30.46'W and an elevation of 5900ft about 5hrs from the morning start.

The Jekyll and Hyde character of Icecube now manifests itself for the next 0.7mi or so is a very pleasant walk down a boulder-strewn stream bed (usually dry) with many beautiful trees and high rock sculptures on both sides. Just after exiting the upper slot, the canyon turns northeast and proceeds in this direction for about 0.5mi. There are many nice spots for a lunch break. You will also find a number of cairns whose purpose is unclear but which show that there are other easier ways to access this central section.

The tranquil central section begins to turn east and steepen at 5500ft and 1hr from the end of the upper slot. Flowing water reappears and some downclimbing becomes necessary. Then, quite abruptly at 5350ft and just under 7hrs from the start you come to the start of the third, technical section of Icecube Canyon. This begins with an attractive, open 70ft vertical rappel from a bush anchor next to the right wall of the canyon. Veer right as you descend to avoid the deep pool at the bottom of this rappel; instead access the shelf on the right. Just beyond this is a rock gate opening out to an attractive triple canyon junction. Here, the main canyon turns left. The next rappel is just downstream and consists of an awesome 100ft vertical drop into a wading pool that is surrounded on three sides by magnificent vertical walls. This rappel uses a good boulder anchor a short distance upstream. It has a very awkward small pool right at the lip that makes the entry particularly difficult because the underwater surface in the pool is so slippery. You should reach this point (elevation 5150ft) about 8hrs from the start.

From here on the rappels have only short distances between them. The next is an awkward 20ft drop from a group of chockstones with overhang. It descends to a horizontal water-filled slot that you can traverse by stemming. This leads to a wider pool that can be partly bypassed on the left by a submerged ledge; but this is followed by a waist-deep wade. At the end of this slot the stream turns sharp left through a gate and drops 30ft. A small tree high up in the end of the slot provides an anchor for this drop. Just downstream is an easy downclimb (on the right) of a 20ft waterfall. A little further along there is a short 12ft rappel (from a small tree anchor) down a slot next to the right wall. This is followed by a 25ft rappel (from a tree anchor) that drops you into a deep and dark water-filled slot. For the first horizontal 20ft or so, you can avoid the water by using a ledge on the left. Thereafter you may be able to continue to stay out of the water by stemming at least the next 20ft. But most hikers will end up swimming the last part where the slot widens and turns left. There you can climb out onto dry land.

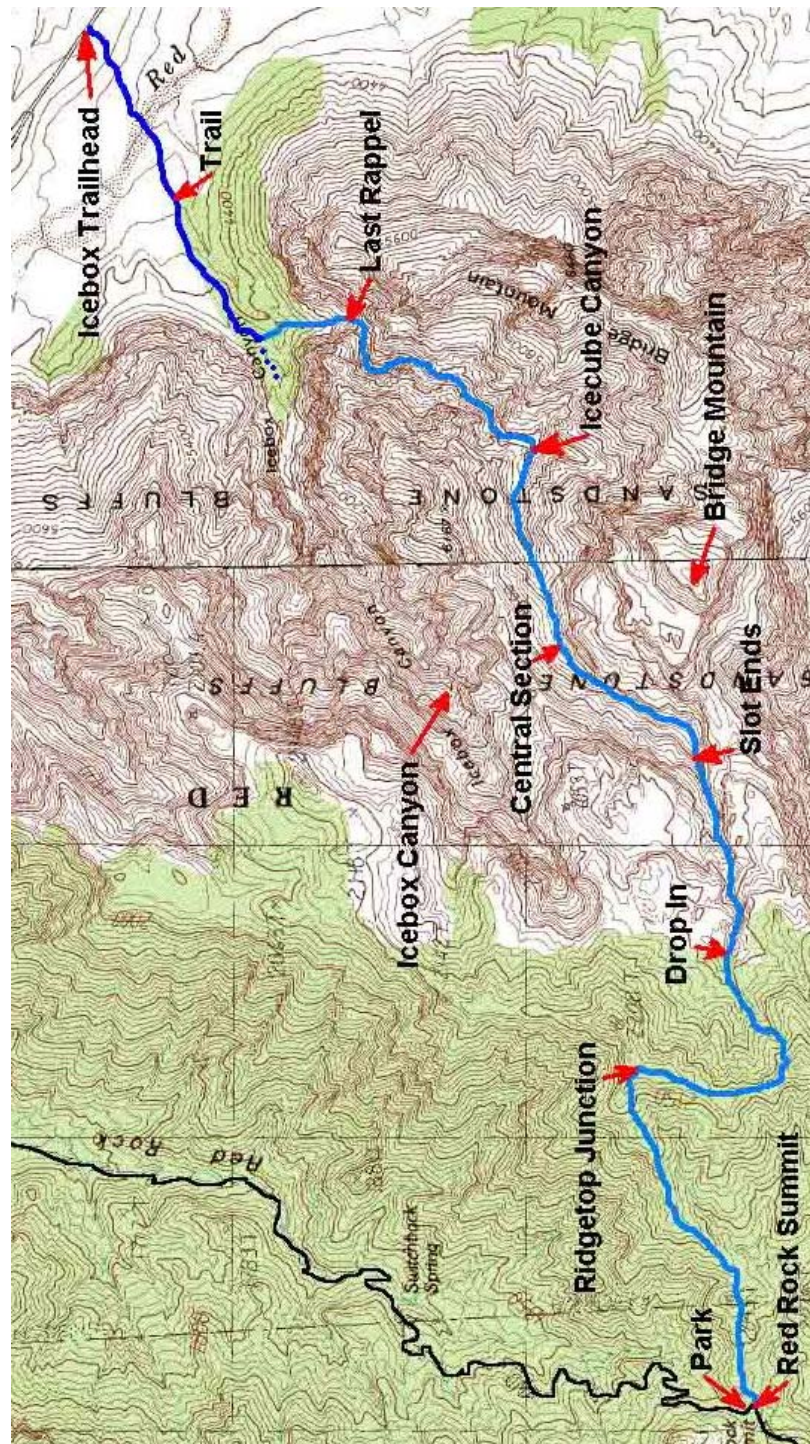
A short way downstream there is another short 20ft rappel through a gate at a canyon right turn. This uses a small bush anchor on canyon left. This rappel drops into a swimming pool from which the exit is made difficult by a very slippery bedrock bottom. The first person down may be able to aid the rest to

surmount this bedrock by pulling on the end of the rope. Just a few steps further on you must swim through a short deep pool that, for once, has a relatively easy exit. A stretch of bouldering follows where, in late spring, there are some big bushes with beautiful violet flowers. The next obstacle is a rappel into a deep swimming pool with a huge boulder sitting over the upstream end. Using a small tree anchor, rappel through the slot to the right of the big boulder and descend to the pool where a swimming disconnect is required. Just downstream you come to the penultimate rappel, a 30ft drop over a huge boulder and down into a narrow slot. We used a deadman anchor here though there are also large boulders you could wrap. The slot at the bottom contains some water that is easily avoided using the ledge on the left.

Here you have finally arrived at the top of the last rappel at 36°8.54'N 115°29.50'W, an awesome descent of 190ft, much of which is free rappel. From the landing point of the previous rappel, it is just 30ft along the narrow horizontal slot (about 2ft wide but narrower at foot level) to the chockstones in the slot bottom that provide a principal anchor for the last rappel. We set a webbing wrap around the chockstones but also set a nut in a crack about 10ft above the chockstones; this allowed us to rig the rappel ring just above the level of the chockstones thereby providing easier entry to the rappel and a much easier rope recovery. The first section of this final rappel is a challenge because it is very narrow and not easy to squeeze through. There is a secure footing, a secondary slot floor, about 15ft below the chockstones where the slot widens. You could have someone lower your pack to you once you have descended that far. Alternatively you could suspend your pack below you from your harness. Once that first section is completed, you move to the end of this second slot floor to where the continuation of the descent is vertical with long sections of overhang. This is a spectacular rappel during which you seem to float out from the narrow slot into a vertical, moss-strewn abyss. At the bottom you must swim or wade across an awkward pool to access the shelf on the canyon right. You should come to this point (elevation 4750ft) about 11hrs 30min after the morning start.

When you are all gathered, contour right on the sloping shelf to find an easy descent down a shallow slot to the boulder field. The final leg is the descent of a long boulder-strewn gully where the best route seems to lie on the right side. This descent brings you to the main wash emerging from Icebox Canyon. Climb out the other side of the wash to join the trail that leads up into Icebox Canyon. Descend this trail for 0.8mi to the Icebox trailhead (36°9.04'N 115°28.84'W and elevation 4340ft) and your recovery vehicle.

The descent will take about 12hrs and is just possible during daylight in the summer. The park rangers will ticket vehicles remaining in the parking areas after 8.00pm so this also constrains the timing of the hike. It is almost inevitable that the drive up to recover the trailhead vehicle and the subsequent descent will have to be completed in the dark.



Map of Icecube Canyon/The Maze Hike

## 7.5 Wheeler Peak

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 5.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 8.6 miles
- Elevation gain: 3000 feet
- Topo Map: Hiking Map and Guide, Great Basin National Park
- Difficulties: Perhaps the crossing of a snow field
- Special equipment: Crampons and ice axe if snow field crossing needed
- ACA Rating: 1A III

In a lonely corner of the Nevada/Utah desert, more than a hundred miles from a town of any size, there is a rarely visited national treasure called the Great Basin National Park. Dominating this park, soaring into the desert sky is a 13000ft mountain called Wheeler Peak. It is a beautiful place, a diamond in the desert and a marvelous summit adventure hike. For the night before the hike, there are a number of very nice campgrounds with sites among pinyon-juniper woodland, scattered aspen groves and beside a bubbling stream. I recommend rising early and allowing time to enjoy the spectacular Wheeler Peak Scenic Drive as you drive up through the park toward the trailhead, passing through several vegetation zones, from the pinyon-juniper woodland to a zone of mountain mahogany and manzanita to denser forests of Engelmann spruce and Douglas fir. The road ends in the shadow of the snow-scattered Wheeler Peak and the rugged crags around it. It is wild and beautiful mountain scenery, a marvelous surprise for the desert traveler. If you are lucky like me, you may even glimpse the fabulous flight of a golden eagle as it rises majestically above the forest in the light morning mist.

### Trailhead

The Wheeler Peak Scenic Drive in the Great Basin National Park ends in a parking area next to the Wheeler Peak campground. However, the trailhead (39°1.04'N 114°18.20'W and elevation 10161ft) for this hike is a turnout at the side of the road about 0.7mi before you reach this terminus. There is ample trailhead parking at the turnout on the west side of the road and the peak trail is well indicated.



## Hike

The initial section of the trail is almost level as it contours through the Engelmann spruce forest toward Stella Lake. About 1mi from the start you emerge onto a very pretty meadow and come to a trail junction at  $39^{\circ}0.47'N$   $114^{\circ}19.06'W$ . The trail to the summit switchbacks round to the right but, before starting in that direction, walk straight ahead about 100yds to the north shore of Stella Lake ( $39^{\circ}0.36'N$   $114^{\circ}19.12'W$  and elevation 10380ft). This jewel of crystal clear water surrounded by pine forest reflects the backdrop of Wheeler Peak looming high above its southern shore.

Returning to the trail junction, you follow the switchback that climbs toward the ridge off to the west. The trail is still easy here with a gentle gradient all the way up through light forest and open meadows to a saddle in the ridge at  $39^{\circ}0.32'N$   $114^{\circ}19.38'W$  and an elevation of 11000ft. This elevation coincides with the tree line and a number of ancient bristlecone pines dot the rock-strewn landscape. Beyond the saddle, the increasingly rough and faint trail switchbacks up the broad tree-less apex of the ridge to the south of the saddle. Soon only low alpine plants remain and, about 12000ft, the rocky ridge levels out for about 0.4mi before you arrive at the bottom of a steep talus slope. A rough use-trail winds through, around and over the boulders as you begin the climb up the last 1000ft to the summit. For most of this climb you stay on the apex of the ridge with steep drops not far away on both sides. To the right there unfolds an increasingly panoramic view of the valley far below to the west. To the left are the spectacular cliffs on the north side of Wheeler Peak. If you peer over that side you will see several small glaciers in the hollows far below, the largest being known as Wheeler Glacier. Back behind you are the lovely lakes, Stella and Teresa. After a breathless climb up this steep rock field, you approach the



*Wheeler Peak from Peak Road.*



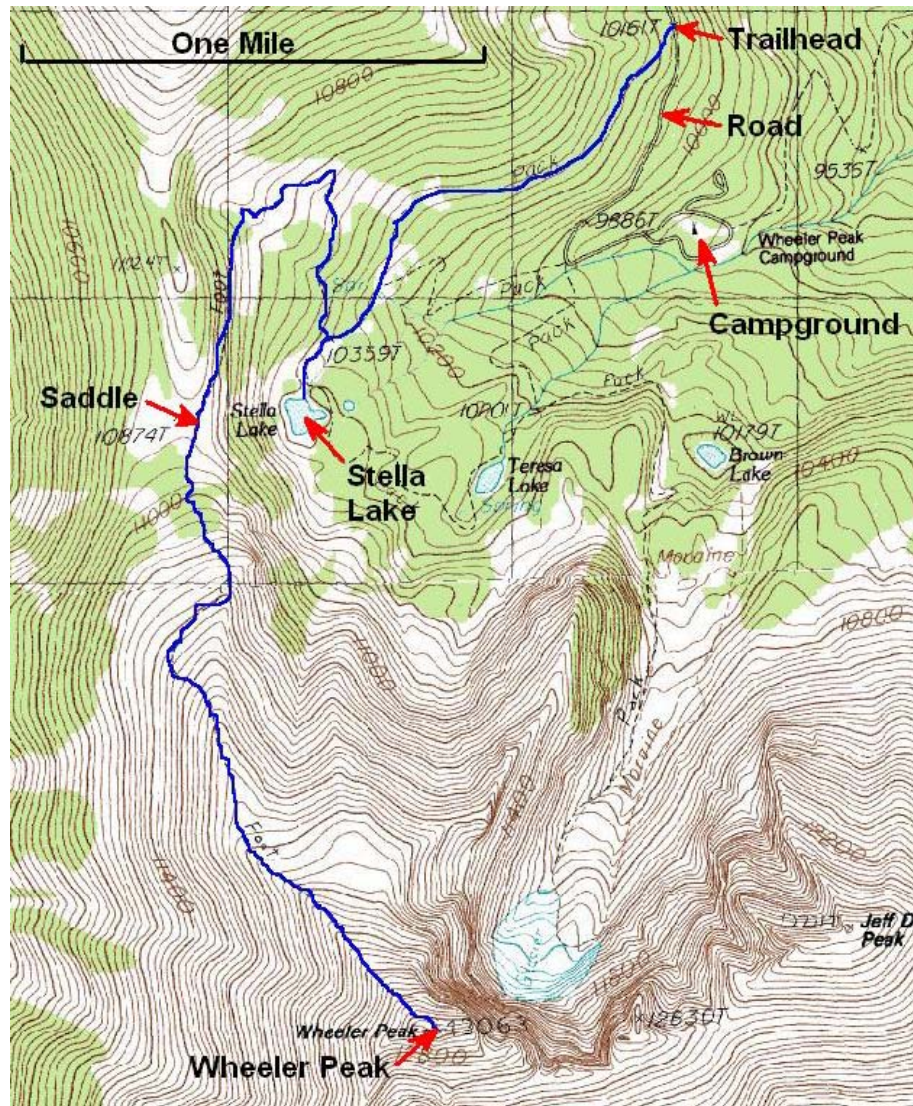
summit ridge. Almost at the top, there is, even in high summer, a fairly large snow field that you may be able to bypass on either the left or right. I went to the left and, beyond the snow field, a brief climb took me to the summit ridge.

Spectacular all around views welcome you to the 13063ft summit ( $38^{\circ}59.15'N$   $114^{\circ}18.85'W$ ) after a 4.3mi or 3hrs 15min hike from the trailhead. The summit itself is composed of great slabs of quartzite formed when some ancient sandstone deposit was heated, compressed and metamorphosed. The scenery is particularly magnificent at the far, eastern end of the summit ridge where the cliffs fall off all around and Jeff Davis Peak (12771ft) rises vertically on the other side of an enormous amphitheater or cirque. At the bottom of that awesome bowl, you look down on the ice and snow of the Wheeler Glacier. Turning around the view to the south is dominated by a much larger but gentler amphitheater framed in the distance by the 12298ft Baker Peak. Together these summits are part of the north-south running Snake Range whose boundary is the broad Spring Valley far below to the west.

The return hike to the trailhead ( $39^{\circ}1.04'N$   $114^{\circ}18.20'W$ ) takes about 2hrs 15min. In summary, a great, and moderately easy, adventure hike.



*Left: Wheeler Peak from Stella Lake. Right: View from the summit.*



Map of Wheeler Peak Hike

## Chapter 8

# DEATH VALLEY

Death Valley National Park contains some of the most rugged and fantastic landscape in the world and this makes for some marvelous adventures and canyoneering experiences. Though the heat in the summer is intolerable, the Park has the advantage that the mild winter weather allows outdoor activity when much of the rest of the southwest is too cold and wintry. While it does occasionally rain in the valleys and snow often covers the high peaks in the winter, at lower elevations the temperatures are perfect for exploring the many narrow, multi-colored canyons that line both sides of the flat valley bottom. This collection of adventures contains several in Death Valley National Park. Though the hike to the summit of Telescope Peak is a summer outing, the other, canyoneering adventures included in this collection are best suited for the late fall, winter and early spring. Moreover, if you plan to do much hiking in the Park, I strongly recommend you buy Michel Digonnet's excellent book "Hiking Death Valley".



Death Valley region.



## 8.1 Willow Creek

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4.4 miles
- Elevation gain: None
- Topo Maps: Gold Valley
- Difficulties: About ten rappels, one about 170ft, considerable downclimbing
- Special equipment: Two 200ft ropes, 200ft retrieval line, 40ft webbing, a few rappel rings, rappeling equipment, helmets and leather gloves
- ACA Rating: 3A III

One of the most challenging adventure hikes in Death Valley is a descent of Willow Creek. Though the very long car shuttle is a disadvantage, Willow Creek is one of the few bolted canyons in Death Valley. This speeds progress but removes some of the adventure. The upper section is a relative easy off-trail hike past a series of springs that each nurture a small oasis of willows, cane and tamarisk. Here is one of the refuges of bighorn sheep in the Park and evidence of their presence is ubiquitous. The second section is a dramatic and convoluted gorge with at least ten spectacular rappels usually with running water, a most



*Left: Spring in the upper canyon. Right: Telescope Peak in the distance (photo by Mark Duttweiler).*

uncommon feature in Death Valley. The last couple of miles are an easy walk out of the canyon and across a huge alluvial fan.

## Trailhead

The Willow Creek descent requires a very long and rough car shuttle. First you must deposit a return vehicle on Highway 178 close to the canyon mouth. The location is a short spur dirt road leading to a parking area at 36°3.96'N 116°44.69'W. The spur road leaves the east side of Highway 178 just north of Mormon Point, 14.3mi south of Badwater or 14.8mi north of the junction with the Harry Wade Road. It is probably best to deposit the return vehicle there the evening before your hike and then drive part of the way toward the trailhead. To get to the trailhead drive south on Highway 178 for 32mi to the turnoff left onto the dirt road signposted Furnace Creek Wash and labeled Greenwater Valley Road on many maps. Note that the southern turn-off onto Furnace Creek Wash is a surprisingly long way west of the northern turn-off, the one you want. Both have street signs. You may choose to camp at one of the many acceptable sites along Furnace Creek Wash though Park regulations demand that you camp at least two miles from the asphalt road. To continue to the Willow Creek trailhead, drive north on the good dirt surface of Furnace Creek Wash to a point 10.6mi from Highway 178 to find the left turn-off onto Gold Valley Road which is not signposted. This is a rough dirt road for which a high clearance, 4WD vehicle is probably essential.

It is 12.5mi along the Gold Valley Road to where the road ends at the Willow Springs trailhead. The road rises slowly to a 4460ft summit about 7.5mi from the Furnace Creek Wash Road (Greenwater Valley Road) and then descends



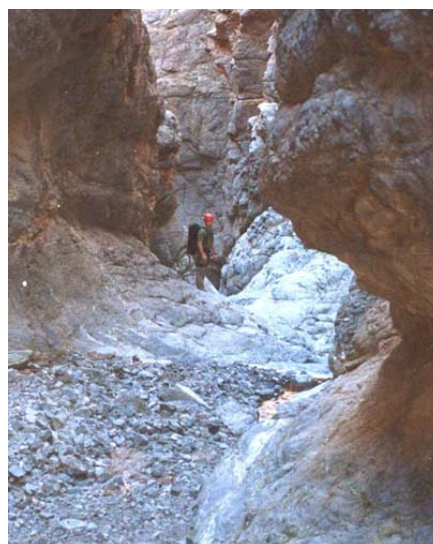
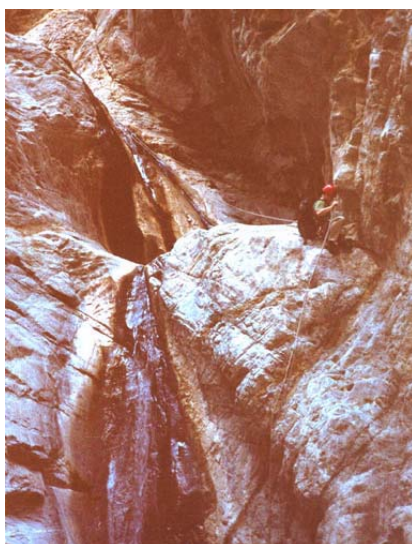
*Left: Entrance to Willow Creek Gorge. Right: Second two-stage rappel.*



gently to the 2635ft trailhead. The roughest sections are just before and after this summit with the road elsewhere being in fairly good condition. Immediately before the summit there is a little spur road that goes right at the bottom of a dip; stay left here. Then, after the summit at 8.2mi and an elevation of 4240ft the road forks; take the right fork (really straight on). The left fork rejoins the main route at about 11.3mi and 3250ft. Over the last quarter mile, the road descends the Willow Creek wash and the valley begins to deepen. At 12.5mi, the trailhead ( $36^{\circ}2.96'N$   $116^{\circ}41.32'W$ ) has a convenient turning loop. It should take about 20min to drive from Highway 178 along the Furnace Creek Wash to Gold Valley Road and another 50min to reach the Willow Spring trailhead.

## Hike

The trailhead ( $36^{\circ}2.96'N$   $116^{\circ}41.32'W$  and an elevation of 2635ft) is just upstream of the dense thicket of brush watered by Willow Spring itself. However, as with all the other brush thickets, the growth is confined to the canyon bottom and the surrounding slopes are almost devoid of vegetation. Therefore, as long as the canyon walls are not vertical the brush is easy to bypass on either side. In the case of Willow Spring the well-worn trail proceeds around the left side. The second, third ( $36^{\circ}2.10'N$   $116^{\circ}41.77'W$ ) and fourth springs all follow within 20min and are bypassed on the right. At the fourth spring, 0.8mi from the trailhead, the canyon narrows and the trail proceeds over a high shoulder on the right. This is the start of the wet narrows. We note that in winter when you should be undertaking this hike, the stream flows almost all the way down this canyon before disappearing after the last waterfall; it does however disappear underground for several gravel-filled stretches within the canyon.



*Left: Mark avoids a hanging pool. Right: Narrows in the lower canyon.*

After the fourth spring shoulder you descend to the canyon bottom and follow the wet narrows for about 30min to two easy downclimbs of small waterfalls, 12ft and 14ft high. The canyon is deepening and the walls are closing in so bigger drops are inevitable and, about 65min and 0.8mi from the start at an elevation of 2000ft, you arrive at a sloping 35ft waterfall (36°3.21'N 116°42.11'W). There is a high and lengthy route around this waterfall on the right side but it is readily rappelled from a tree anchor near the edge of the stream on a lower lip. About 10min later the canyon becomes so narrow it is almost a slot and, just after a tree-filled section, there is an awkward 13ft drop caused by a large chockstone. A belay-assisted downclimb or a short rappel is necessitated by the overhang. The canyon broadens again and there are several small and attractive cascades that are readily downclimbed as the canyon turns left and proceeds southwest. Here the stream disappears into the broad gravel-filled bottom.

But this gentleness soon ends. At 1.6mi and 2hrs from the start at an elevation of 1510ft you come to the fifth spring, a small canyon-spanning thicket where the flowing stream reappears. This brush can be bypassed using the trail over a high shoulder on the left though it is almost as easy to push through the short stretch of brush. Immediately beyond this thicket is the entrance to the main Willow Creek Gorge (36°3.12'N 116°42.56'W). Here the canyon turns sharp right, narrows and drops dramatically. At the entrance there is a series of small drops in a very narrow chute and this is followed by a 25ft waterfall that is readily bypassed on the far right. This is immediately followed by a 70ft drop that is best rappelled over the shoulder on the left using the large tree in center of the canyon as anchor. This is followed by an easier stretch of narrow canyon with a number of challenging downclimbs all of which have excellent foot and hand holds.

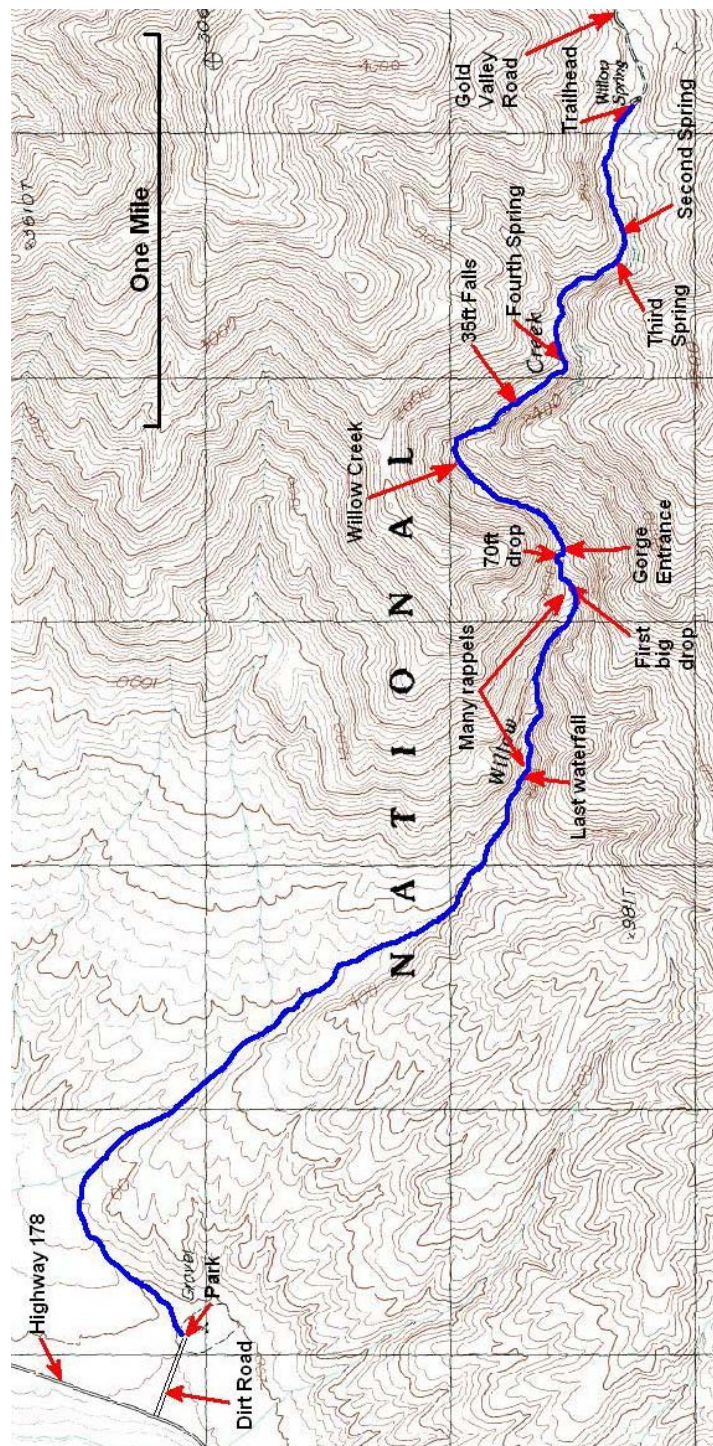
These lead to the top of the serious technical section, 3hrs and 1.7mi from the start at an elevation of 1360ft. From here there is a long series of substantial bolted rappel descents. The first drop-off is a two-stage 170ft rappel with a two-bolt anchor on the rock shelf on the right side. This can be done in a single rappel or in two rappels of 80ft and 90ft using the large shelf half-way down that has a piton anchor on the right side. The canyon is now continuously narrow with towering walls on both sides. Just a short distance downstream of the big double falls you come to the top of a very similar but smaller two stage drop (40ft and then 50ft for a 90ft total) with good double bolt anchors for both drops. Here there is a spectacular view down into Death Valley with Telescope Peak windowed in the distance. This is almost immediately followed by a 50ft rappel from a double bolt anchor in the left wall. This one has a hanging pool about half way down. Keep to the right to step over the pool. At the bottom you descend through the 1000ft contour.

Almost immediately (and about 4.5hrs from the start) you come to another 50ft rappel from a double bolt anchor in the left wall. This one also has a pool under an overhang about a third of the way down. It is a challenge to avoid this pool or a soaking in the falls that follow. This is followed shortly at an elevation of 820ft by a 45ft rappel down a narrow slot from a double bolt anchor on the left. It is hard to avoid the shallow pool at base of this descent.

This is followed by a few hundred yards of gravel-bottomed canyon with vertical and sometimes overhanging walls (reminiscent in places of the Subway in Zion) before you arrive at the top of the last rappel, a broad 80ft drop from a double bolt anchor ( $36^{\circ}3.20'N$   $116^{\circ}43.16'W$ ). The stream usually disappears into the gravel at the bottom of this last waterfall. You should reach this point (590ft elevation) about 5.5hrs from the start having completed about 10 rappels and come about 2.2mi.

Beyond the last waterfall the going is easy. The canyon turns sharp left and you proceed through a vertical gate that gradually decreases in height. About 0.2mi later at an elevation of about 490ft the canyon rather suddenly broadens and the wide gravel wash makes for easy walking. From here it is about 2mi to the return vehicle. As the canyon continues to widen Highway 178 will come into view in the distance. Veer left as you exit the canyon and begin to descend the broad alluvial fan that Willow Creek has laid down. Soon you will be heading almost southwest and the parking area with the return vehicle should come into sight. You should reach this end point ( $36^{\circ}3.96'N$   $116^{\circ}44.69'W$  and elevation -220ft) about 6.5hrs after the morning start having covered 4.4mi.

Note that although the descent can be completed quite readily in the span of winter daylight, the vehicle recovery will probably not be completed during daylight hours. The drive back along Highway 178 to Furnace Creek Wash Road and then along the Gold Valley road back to the trailhead will take about 1hr 45min. Then you still have to drive back out from the trailhead.



Map of Willow Creek Hike



## 8.2 Coffin Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 7.4 miles
- Elevation gain: None
- Topo and other maps: Dantes View, Badwater and National Geographic Death Valley National Park map
- Difficulties: About seven rappels, one of 190ft
- Special equipment: Two 200ft ropes, 200ft retrieval line, 100ft webbing, 7 rappel rings, rappeling equipment, helmets and leather gloves
- ACA Rating: 3A III

Coffin Canyon is one of a series of technical canyoneering adventures in the steep terrain of the Black Mountains south of Badwater on the east side of the valley. It is less demanding than Bad, Hades, or Styx Canyons, but has a number of dry rappels including one spectacular 190ft vertical drop in a deep cliff-ringed chasm. The main drawback is a long car shuttle including travel over some rough and poorly signposted dirt roads.

### Trailhead

Coffin Canyon has the same upper trailhead as Styx Canyon and therefore involves the same long, rough car shuttle requiring at least two high clearance vehicles. This is best initiated the evening before your descent beginning at a



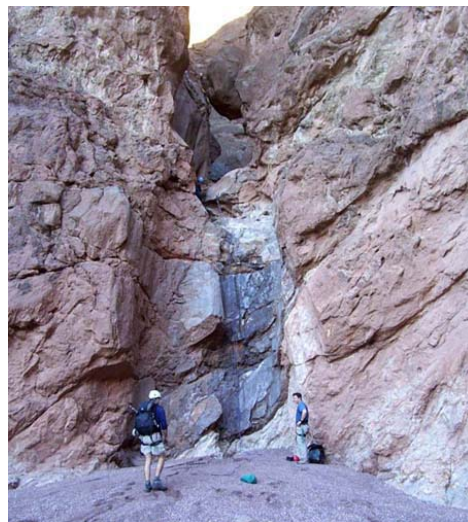
*Left: View of entrance to lower gorge. Right: Starting 190ft rappel (photo by Mark Duttweiler).*



point on Highway 178 roughly 24.7mi south of Furnace Creek, 8.0mi south of Badwater, and 21.3mi north of the Ashford Junction with the Henry Wade road. This point lies between the two large alluvial fans of Coffin Canyon and, to the south, Copper Canyon. Park the return vehicle here ( $36^{\circ}8.84'N$   $116^{\circ}46.01'W$ ) at some convenient spot along the highway.

Then drive 24.7mi north on Highway 178 to Furnace Creek; at the junction there turn right onto Highway 190 and drive 9.2mi south where you should turn right following the asphalt road to Dante's View. Just 7.5mi up this road from the Highway 190 junction, look for the dirt road that goes left labeled either Greenwater Valley Road (GVR) or Furnace Creek Wash. Follow the well-graded GVR for 2.8mi looking carefully for a much rougher road that branches off to the southwest from a point labeled 3480.9 on the topo map ( $36^{\circ}14.13'N$   $116^{\circ}38.24'W$ ). Note that it is permissible to camp along GVR as long as you are more than 2mi from the asphalt at either end and this may provide an alternative to camping overnight at Furnace Creek.

The rough dirt road portion of the approach to the trailhead begins at point 3480.9 ( $36^{\circ}14.13'N$   $116^{\circ}38.23'W$ ) and proceeds southwest for 3.5mi to the site of the encampment of Furnace ( $36^{\circ}11.48'N$   $116^{\circ}39.89'W$ , labeled 4770T on the topo map) where there may be several side roads joining. Continue on southwest and straight on through Furnace for about 0.3mi to a major fork at  $36^{\circ}11.32'N$   $116^{\circ}40.09'W$  where you fork right down into a gully. Follow the dirt road as it winds west up into the hills with many ups and downs. Finally the road turns north-northeast and descends again before turning up another gully at  $36^{\circ}12.61'N$   $116^{\circ}40.78'W$ . After another 0.3mi you reaches the top of a broad ridge where the road switchbacks north again. Park here at this second switch-



*Left: Looking up at 190ft rappel (photo by Mark Duttweiler). Right: The 25ft penultimate rappel.*

back where it is easy to pull off the road (36°12.43'N 116°40.91'W and elevation 4470ft). Note that the topo map shows a much quicker but rougher shortcut from the point 4140T (36°12.47'N 116°39.20'W) to the parking place but this has been closed by the Park Service.

## Hike

The terrain near the starting point (elevation 4470ft) is gently sloping and easily traveled. Start by hiking west and a little south, aiming to descend into the obvious shallow valley off to the northeast of the starting point. This is a minor fork of Coffin Canyon. After about 20min and 1mi you should drop into the wash at an elevation of around 4280ft. A short distance beyond this the short narrows of this minor fork begin with some small downclimbs. Then about 1hr from the start at 3620ft you will arrive at a 15ft downclimb where some may need a belay. The next obstacle is a 60ft vertical rappel where this fork meets the main branch of Coffin Canyon (36°11.77'N 116°42.39'W). For this rappel you can use a webbing wrap on the large boulder to the right of the lip. Note however that there is an easy downclimb in a gully just over to the right. You should reach the main wash of Coffin Canyon at an elevation of 3400ft about 1.7mi and 90min from the start.

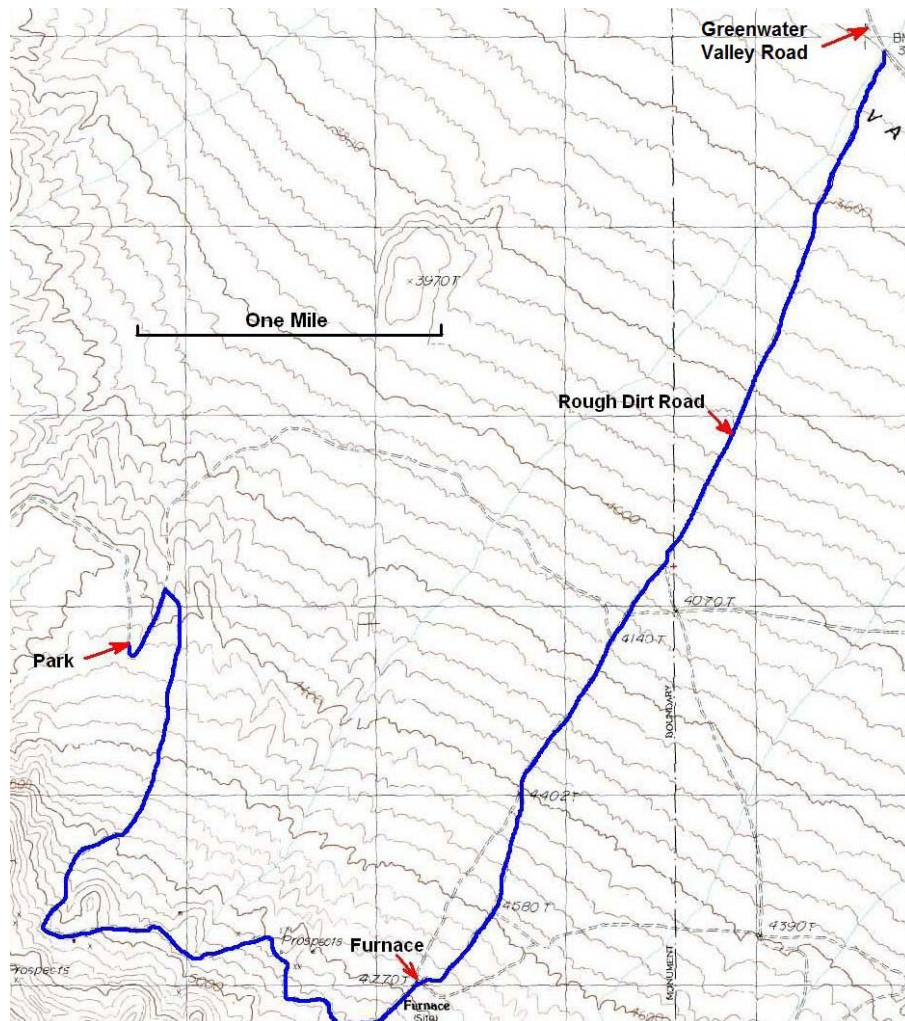
The gravel wash at this point is broad, flat and fast and you will make quick time over the next several miles. At 2920ft, 2hrs from the start you will pass the first of several low saddles that allow passage between Coffin Canyon and Copper Canyon, the next canyon to the south. Note however that access to Copper Canyon is restricted to protect the ancient mammal tracks that are being studied and preserved. Apparently ranger-led trips into Copper are sometimes organized and some have transitioned into Coffin Canyon via the saddle at an elevation of about 2100ft. You should pass this second saddle about 4.0mi and 2.5hrs from the start. There is yet another small saddle passage at about 1250ft just before you enter the lower gorge.

The colorful entrance to the lower gorge (36°9.24'N 116°44.84'W) is visible for sometime before the wash begins to narrow and you enter the narrows. The cliffs on the left side are grey-green and vividly contrast with the stark red cliffs on the right. You will begin to enter the gorge at 1150ft about 5.6mi and a little over 3hrs from the start. As you do so notice a neat but short slot canyon in the right wall. The sculpted and pockmarked walls of the canyon begin to rise precipitously on both sides and the floor begins to drop more rapidly. After several downclimbs at an elevation of 800ft and 3.5hrs from the start you will arrive at a 25ft drop that can be rappeled if you wish but can also be walked around on the right. Just 50yds further on there is another small 20ft drop that can be downclimbed or rappeled using an anchor rock in mid-canyon. Another short hike brings you at 650ft elevation to the awesome drop off in this canyon, a 190ft vertical drop into a cliff-ringed chasm that makes for a heart-stopping view from above. You should reach this challenge about 4hrs from the start. The anchor for this rappel consists of a set of two bolts in the solid bedrock

of the lip. Some portions of the descent are free rappel so some may prefer a fireman's belay from the first descender.

You are now in a deep narrow canyon and the steep drops come with little pause. Just a short distance downstream of the big rappel there is a 30ft rappel using a webbing anchor around a buried rock - an anchor that needs replacement. Beyond this there is a rapid series of short downclimbs in a narrow slot before you arrive at an elevation of 540ft at the end of the slot; here the canyon opens abruptly and at this opening there is a 25ft vertical rappel that is anchored by two bolts (one old, one new) in the vertical face below the lip but above a comfortable shelf. It may seem as though this is the end of the canyon, but just a short distance downstream there is a 25ft dryfall that could be rappelled using one of the boulders at the lip but can also be bypassed via a ledge on the left that leads to a steep but downclimbable gully. Round the corner from this downclimb you will arrive at the top of the last rappel, an 80ft vertical drop into a slot. This is anchored by a webbing wrap around a large boulder. During this last rappel it is amusing to know that you are passing through sea level.

From the bottom of the last rappel it is only 50yds to the abrupt and dramatic canyon exit ( $36^{\circ}9.16'N$   $116^{\circ}45.98'W$ ). You should reach the exit (elevation -20ft) a little over 6hrs from the start having traveled about 7mi. Turning left it is an easy stroll down the large alluvial fan of Coffin Canyon to Highway 178 and the return vehicle ( $36^{\circ}8.84'N$   $116^{\circ}46.01'W$  and an elevation of -240ft). The total hike length and duration should be about 7.4mi and 6.5hrs.



Map of Access Route to Coffin Canyon Start





Map of first part of Coffin Canyon Hike





## 8.3 Charon Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 12 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 7.6 miles
- Elevation gain: 1300 feet
- Topo Maps: Dantes View, Badwater
- Difficulties: 17 rappels up to 140ft, some anchor challenges
- Special equipment: One 300ft rope and two 200ft ropes (though three 200ft would do), 250ft webbing, hammer, 17 rappel rings or quicklinks, rappeling equipment, helmets and leather gloves
- ACA Rating: 4A IV

This collection contains a number of adventures in Death Valley National Park. Six of them are advanced canyoneering descents in the rugged Black Mountains just south of Badwater on the east side of the valley. Three are labeled on the topo map as Bad Canyon, Hades Canyon and Coffin Canyon. Two others, Styx and Cerberus, are not named on the topo map. This one, which is also unnamed but which we called Charon Canyon, lies between Styx Canyon and Coffin Canyon. It is shorter than the others in terms of horizontal length and so the approach hike is quite long. But it drops dramatically over its short length and therefore involves many rappels. Because of the lengthy approach and the many rappels it is a long and demanding canyoneering adventure similar in technical difficulty to Hades and Cerberus Canyons. As with Styx, the first part of the hike involves accessing the upper reaches of Coffin Canyon. This can be done either as described in the Coffin and Styx Canyon descriptions or, alternatively, by a route starting at Dante's View. The latter is described below; note that this alternative can also be used as alternatives for the Coffin and Styx Canyon descents.

### Trailhead

Charon Canyon requires a car shuttle that is best initiated the evening before your descent beginning at a point on Highway 178 roughly 23mi south of Furnace Creek and 5.2mi south of Badwater. This point is immediately north of the alluvial fan of Charon Canyon and just a few yards south of the alluvial fan of Cerberus Canyon. Here you should park and leave your return vehicle by the side of the road at 36°10.36'N 116°45.88'W. It is fairly easy to locate this parking area since it is at the start of the fifth alluvial fan south of Badwater (Bad, Hades, Cerberus, Styx and then Charon).

Then drive 23mi north on Highway 178 toward Furnace Creek; at the junction there turn right onto Highway 190 and drive 9.2mi south where you should turn right following the asphalt road to Dante's View. Follow this for 13mi to the restroom pull-out just below the vista point itself. Park here at 36°13.07'N 116°43.32'W and an elevation of 5160ft.

## Hike

From the parking area near the restrooms at 36°13.07'N 116°43.32'W (elevation 5160ft) you should hike toward a low saddle that is several hundred yards away to the WSW (at 36°13.04'N 116°43.53'W). As you reach this saddle veer left up the ridge and hike south along the apex of the ridge to a low summit. From that vantage point you will have an awesome view of the rugged terrain between you and the valley floor. Immediately below you on the right side of the ridge is the left fork of Cerberus. Veer right as you descend the light-colored ridge that drops down from your vantage point. You will see a saddle in this light-colored ridge about 450ft below you; it is a relatively easy hike down along the ridge line to this second saddle at 36°12.62'N 116°43.60'W and an elevation of 4860ft. From this saddle you need to descend into the shallow gully to left of the ridge and it is easiest to do this by contouring back to your left. Once in the gully bottom, hike down the gully to where another gully comes in from the left at 4338ft and 36°12.43'N 116°43.52'W about 1.24mi from the start. Turn left and follow that wash upstream and over a saddle at 36°12.49'N 116°43.29'W, 4567ft and 1.45mi from the start. Proceed down the wash on the far side of this saddle. You are now in Coffin Canyon.

The gravel wash of Coffin Canyon soon becomes broad, flat and fast and you can make quick time over the next 1.5mi to the point at 36°11.41'N 116°42.68'W and elevation 3120ft (3.37mi and 1hr 55mins from the start) where you should



*Left: Ridge hike to Charon Canyon drop-in (photo by Scott Smith). Right: The Charon Canyon slot (photo by Ira Lewis).*



find a moderate wash coming in on the right. There are several smaller gullies on the right just before this but the one you want is easy gravel traveling. Hike up the wash forking left at a junction and follow the natural runoff all the way up to a point just below Styx Saddle (the saddle is at  $36^{\circ}11.44'N$   $116^{\circ}43.01'W$  and an elevation of 3380ft). Just below the saddle there is an obvious steep ridge leading up to the left that clearly leads to the ridge between Coffin Canyon and Styx Canyon. Follow that ridge to the first high point on the Coffin/Styx Ridge that is at  $36^{\circ}11.30'N$   $116^{\circ}43.04'W$  and an elevation of 3625ft, 3.88mi and 2hrs 35min from the morning start. You should then proceed along the apex of that ridge, surmounting four or five high points but with easy, open hiking. The highest point to be surmounted is near the end of the ridge hike. It is a dark, rocky peak that visible for almost all of the ridge hike and requires some easy climbing. This summit (3532ft) is 5.13mi from the start at  $36^{\circ}10.58'N$   $116^{\circ}43.92'W$ . From that summit you veer right for the descent and then follow the ridge as it curves back to the left passing to the left of a substantial outcropping. At a second small summit note the start of Charon Canyon below you on the left. Descend a short way to the obvious saddle at the head of Charon Canyon at  $36^{\circ}10.46'N$   $116^{\circ}44.15'W$  and an elevation of 3296ft. You should reach this drop-in point 5.44mi and 4hrs 5min from the morning start. It is a good place to rest and prepare for the descent of Charon Canyon.

The descent of Charon Canyon begins gently but soon you encounter drops; within a few minutes there are small dryfalls at 3190ft and again at 3000ft that can be bypassed on the right or the left. The canyon steepens and about 25min from the drop-in you will encounter the first of two 10ft downclimbs, the first at



*Left: Descending the Charon Canyon slot (photo by Jeff Cheraz). Right: The Charon Canyon slot from below.*

2890ft can be descended using a vertical crack in the middle of the dryfall and the second at 2840ft can be downclimbed on the right side. The canyon begins to steepen further and at 2740ft and 4hrs 50min from the start you come to the first rappel, a 30ft drop from a big boulder anchor on the right. This is followed by yet another 10ft downclimb.

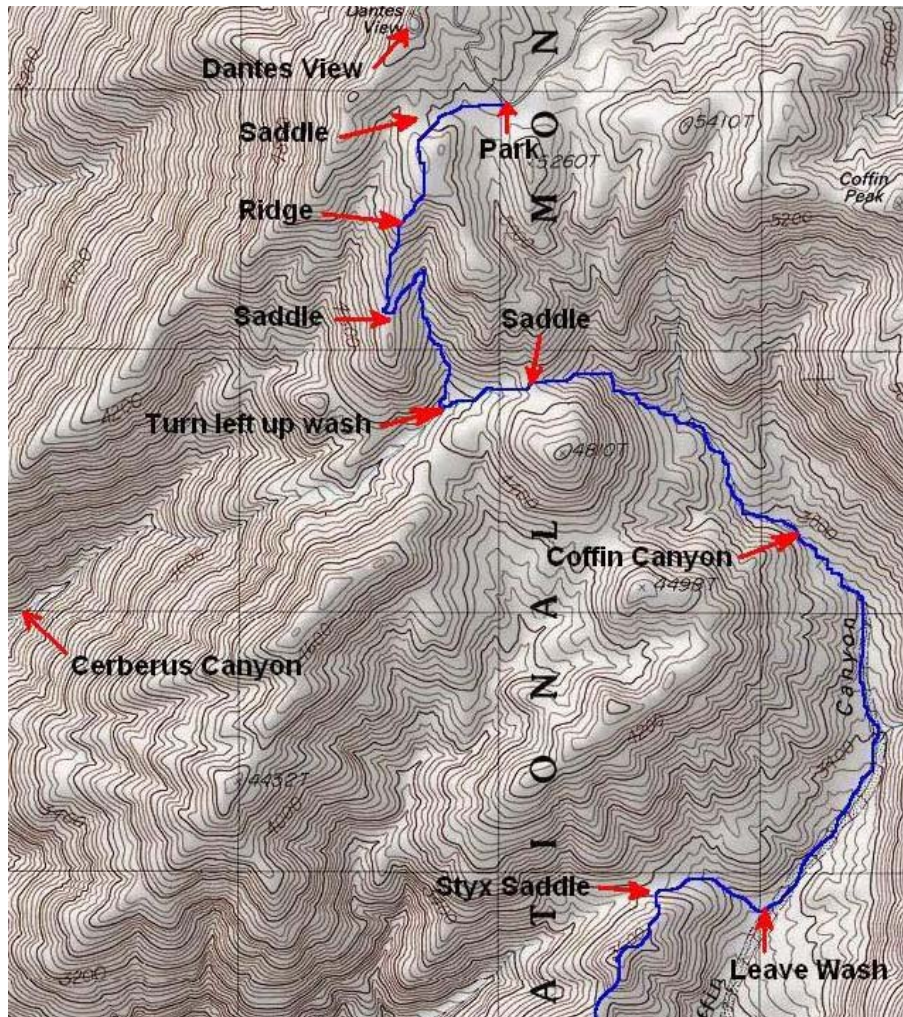
Shortly thereafter at an elevation of 2740ft and 5hrs 15min from the morning start you come to the top of a precipitous section of canyon with many rappels. The first is a big 120ft rappel from a boulder anchor on the left. After a subsequent 20ft downclimb, there is a second 120ft rappel down three ledges from a deadman anchor. The last in this series is at 2480ft and involves a 20ft rappel from chockstone anchor.

This series is then followed by a long bouldery section before the canyon begins another precipitous descent. Here the canyon narrows and deepens and you enter the most spectacular part of Charon Canyon. The steep descent begins at an elevation of 2140ft and 6hrs 20min from the start with an 80ft rappel followed by a 20ft rappel from a horn anchor in the canyon floor. The canyon narrows further and at 2000ft elevation you will come to one of the highlights of Charon Canyon, a narrows where trapped boulders have created several false floors above a 100ft high "cave". Climbing down from the first floor you can walk back under it on the lower floor to peer through holes at the 100ft drop. Further descent is by way of a 100ft rappel using a trapped boulder as anchor. A short distance further on, the canyon opens up again and there is another boulder hopping section.

The rappels resume at an elevation of 1510ft (7hrs 30min from the start) with a 20ft rappel from a boulder anchor, followed by a 60ft rappel from a big boulder anchor some distance up the slope on the left. You can then bypass several small drops by contouring across the rock slope on the left and descending again to the canyon bottom at the top of a larger 110ft rappel at an elevation of 1150ft (8hrs 10min from the start); this rappel uses a deadman anchor. This is followed by a boulder downclimb and then by a section of hiking and downclimbing culminating in another series of rappels as the canyon steepens again.

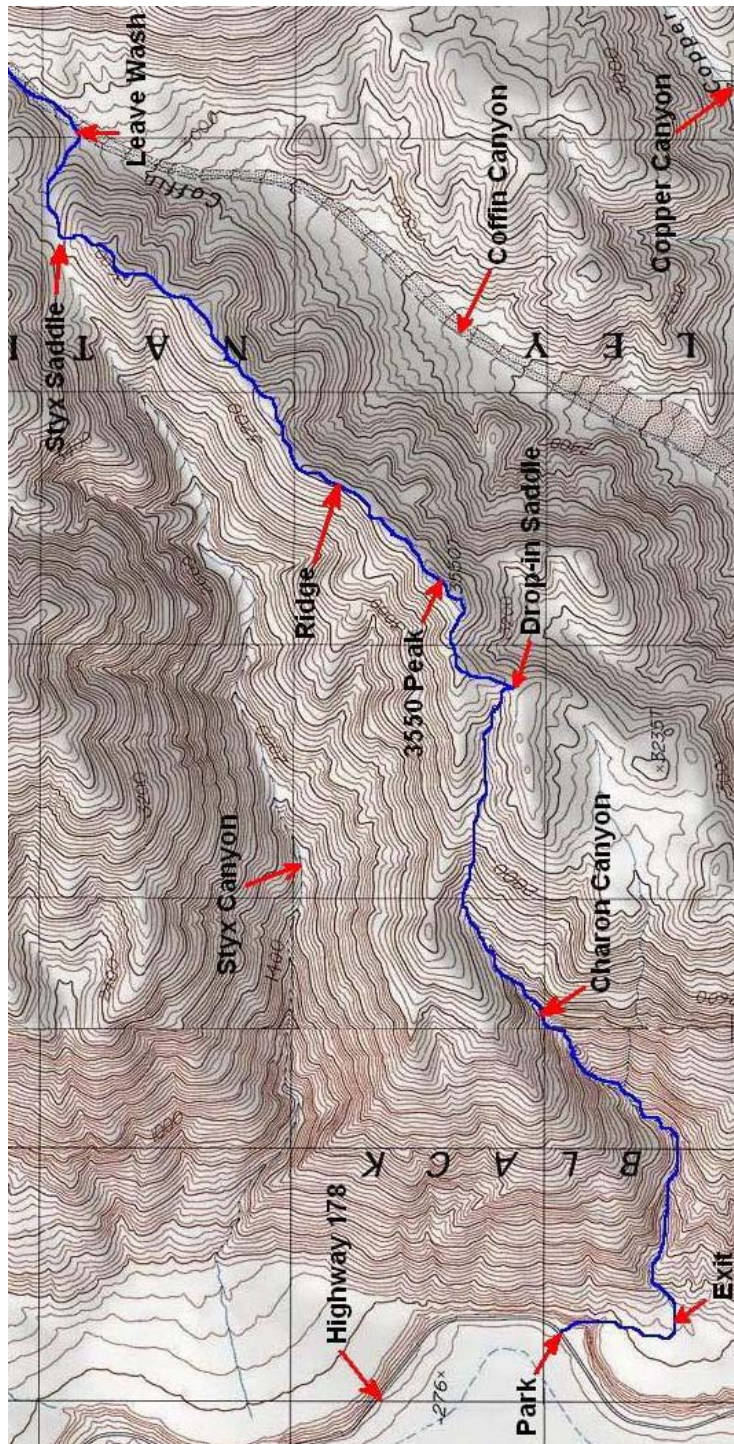
The first of this series is encountered at an elevation of 950ft (9hrs 10min from the start) and comprises an 80ft rappel from a boulder anchor. This is followed by a second 80ft rappel at 550ft, this one from a deadman anchor, soon followed by a larger 130ft rappel, also from a deadman anchor, that descends three large steps. Immediately below this at an elevation of 340ft (10hrs 10min from the start) is a 40ft rappel from a deadman anchor followed by a 25ft rappel from yet another deadman anchor. Then as you can sense that the canyon exit is close you come at an elevation of about 100ft (10hrs 55min from the start) to another narrow section where there is a series of small drops one after another. These are most readily descended by means of a long rappel though they could be taken in smaller steps depending on the length of your longest rope. We used a 300ft rope on a 140ft rappel to descend four of these steps using a deadman anchor at the top. Several of these steps had awkward overhangs with potential pendulums. A short distance downstream is the last rappel, a 25ft drop from a boulder anchor on the left, and just a short distance beyond this is the exit from

Charon Canyon at  $36^{\circ}10.12'N$   $116^{\circ}45.80'W$  and an elevation of -100ft. The exit is 7.27mi and 11hrs 40min from the morning start. You veer right after the exit and hike down the alluvial fan staying quite close to the steep slope on your right. You should easily spot your return vehicle on the road at the bottom of the alluvial fan at  $36^{\circ}10.36'N$   $116^{\circ}45.88'W$  and an elevation of -260ft. It is 7.56mi and about 12hrs since the morning start.



Map of first part of Charon Canyon Hike





Map of second part of Charon Canyon Hike

## 8.4 Styx Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 9 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.8 miles
- Elevation gain: 260 feet
- Topo Maps: Dantes View, Badwater
- Difficulties: 14 rappels up to 100ft, some anchor challenges
- Special equipment: Three 160ft ropes, 250ft webbing, some pitons, hammer, 15 rappel rings or quicklinks, rappeling equipment, helmets and leather gloves
- ACA Rating: 4A IV

This collection contains a number of adventures in Death Valley National Park. Four of them are advanced canyoneering descents in the rugged Black Mountains just south of Badwater on the east side of the valley. Three are labeled on the topo map as Bad Canyon, Hades Canyon and Coffin Canyon. This one, which we called Styx Canyon, lies between Hades Canyon and Coffin Canyon but is unnamed on the topo map. It is readily accessed from the upper reaches of Coffin Canyon but is more demanding than that canyon, similar in technical difficulty to Hades Canyon though perhaps a little easier and prettier. Like Coffin Canyon, a drawback is the long car shuttle including travel over some rough and poorly signposted dirt roads.

### Trailhead

Styx Canyon requires a long and rough car shuttle with at least two high clearance vehicles. This is best initiated the evening before your descent beginning at a point on Highway 178 roughly 22mi south of Furnace Creek and 4.3mi south of Badwater. This point lies roughly midway between the two large alluvial fans of Hades Canyon to the north and Coffin Canyon to the south though in both cases there is also a small intervening alluvial fan. In other words the deposit point is two large fans and one and a half smaller fans south of the Badwater parking area. You should leave the return vehicle at some convenient point near 36°11.02'N 116°46.19'W.

Then drive 21mi north on Highway 178 toward Furnace Creek; at the junction there turn right onto Highway 190 and drive 9.2mi south where you should turn right following the asphalt road to Dante's View. Just 7.5mi up this road from the Highway 190 junction, look for the dirt road that goes left labeled

either Greenwater Valley Road (GVR) or Furnace Creek Wash. Follow the well-graded GVR for 2.8mi looking carefully for a much rougher road that branches off to the southwest from a point labeled 3480.9 on the topo map ( $36^{\circ}14.13'N$   $116^{\circ}38.24'W$ ). Note that it is permissible to camp along GVR as long as you are more than 2mi from the asphalt at either end and this may provide an alternative to camping overnight at Furnace Creek.

The rough dirt road portion of the approach to the trailhead begins at point 3480.9 ( $36^{\circ}14.13'N$   $116^{\circ}38.23'W$ ) and proceeds southwest for 3.5mi to the site of the encampment of Furnace ( $36^{\circ}11.48'N$   $116^{\circ}39.89'W$ , labeled 4770T on the topo map) where there may be several side roads joining. Continue on southwest and straight on through Furnace for about 0.3mi to a major fork at  $36^{\circ}11.32'N$   $116^{\circ}40.09'W$  where you fork right down into a gully. Follow the dirt road as it winds west up into the hills with many ups and downs. Finally the road turns north-northeast and descends again before turning up another gully at  $36^{\circ}12.61'N$   $116^{\circ}40.78'W$ . After another 0.3mi you reaches the top of a broad ridge where the road switchbacks north again. Park here at this second switchback where it is easy to pull off the road ( $36^{\circ}12.43'N$   $116^{\circ}40.91'W$ ). Note that the topo map shows a much quicker but rougher shortcut from the point 4140T ( $36^{\circ}12.47'N$   $116^{\circ}39.20'W$ ) to the parking place but this has been closed by the Park Service.

## Hike

The terrain near the starting point (elevation 4470ft) is gently sloping and easily traveled. Start by hiking west and a little south, aiming to descend into the obvious shallow valley off to the northeast of the starting point. This is



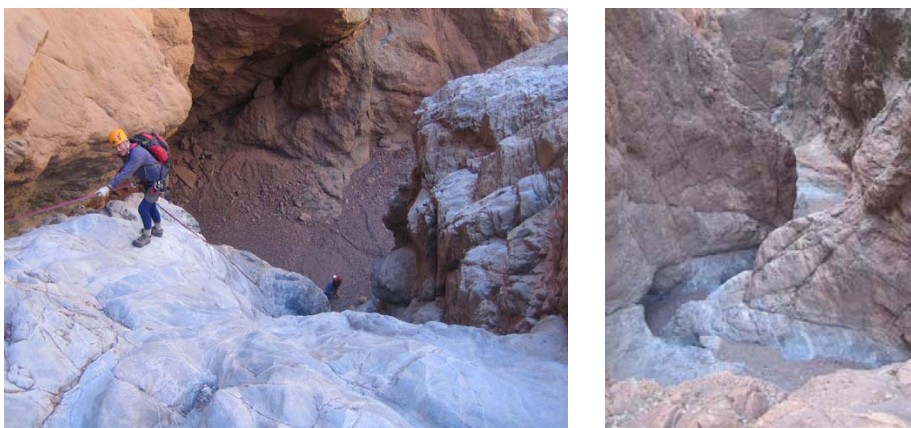
*In the upper Styx slot (photo by Scott Smith).*



a minor fork of Coffin Canyon. After about 20min and 1mi you should drop into the wash at an elevation of around 4280ft. A short distance beyond this the short narrows of this minor fork begin with some small downclimbs. Then about 1hr from the start at 3620ft you will arrive at a 15ft downclimb where some may need a belay. The next obstacle is a 60ft vertical rappel where this fork meets the main branch of Coffin Canyon ( $36^{\circ}11.77'N$   $116^{\circ}42.39'W$ ). For this rappel you can use a webbing wrap on the large boulder to the right of the lip. Note however that there is an easy but loose downclimb in a gully just over to the right. You should reach the main wash of Coffin Canyon at an elevation of 3390ft about 1.7mi and 90min from the start.

The gravel wash at this point is broad, flat and fast and you can make quick time over the next 0.5mi to the point at  $36^{\circ}11.41'N$   $116^{\circ}42.68'W$  and elevation 3120ft where you should find a moderate wash coming in on the right. There are several smaller gullies on the right just before this but the one you want is easy gravel traveling. Hike up the wash forking left at a junction and follow the natural runoff all the way up to Styx Saddle at  $36^{\circ}11.44'N$   $116^{\circ}43.01'W$  and an elevation of 3380ft. You should reach this point about 2hrs and 2.6mi from the start.

The initial descent from the saddle into Styx is quite gradual but at about 2950ft you come upon a slot in the stream bed that contains four rappels one after the other and drops you into a much deeper canyon. The first rappel (which can be bypassed on the left) drops down 25ft into a narrow grotto from a large boulder anchor. This is followed by a small 10ft drop that the young may jump but can also be aided by a rope through a natural rock hole to just up on the left slope. The canyon narrows again around the corner and there you encounter a vertical 50ft rappel anchored by a chockstone and rock pile to the right of the lip. Here the canyon is only about 4ft wide and this narrow slot immediately proceeds to yet another rappel, a 40ft inclined descent from another rock pile anchor in mid-slot. The slot ends just a few yards downstream



*Left: 100ft sloping rappel. Right: Winding canyon (photos by Randi Poer).*



as you emerge into a deep, vertical-walled canyon at an elevation of about 2760ft about 3hrs 20min from the morning start. There are several notable sights just after you emerge. First there is a remarkable hanging cave in the conglomerate rock high on the left side of the canyon. Also it is clear that this short stretch of canyon just downstream from the Upper Styx Slot saw significant human access at some time in the past for there are the remains of a mine shaft and some old access paths on the right side of the canyon and a number of cairns that seem to mark routes into and out of the canyon at this point. Access must have been to a ridge overhead for there was no sign of travel in the canyon either upstream or downstream of this point.

After the mine there is a long section of easy hiking down a gravel-bottomed canyon. This is interrupted at 2530ft and 3.5hrs from the start by one 40ft rappel from a rock pile anchor; here the lower 25ft of the descent is free rappel. Then the easy hiking resumes for another 45min. But the downclimbs increase in frequency. At 1760ft and 4hr 20min from the start you encounter a 30ft drop with a downclimb bypass around on the left. And 20min later at 1670ft there is a downclimb that ends with a very awkward 15ft featureless rappel slide for which there is no easy anchor. Here the best climber should belay the rest as they rappel/slide down; that climber can either friction traverse across to a good ledge on the right and/or be belayed from that readily accessible ledge. Downstream the canyon keeps narrowing and steepening with frequent downclimbs.

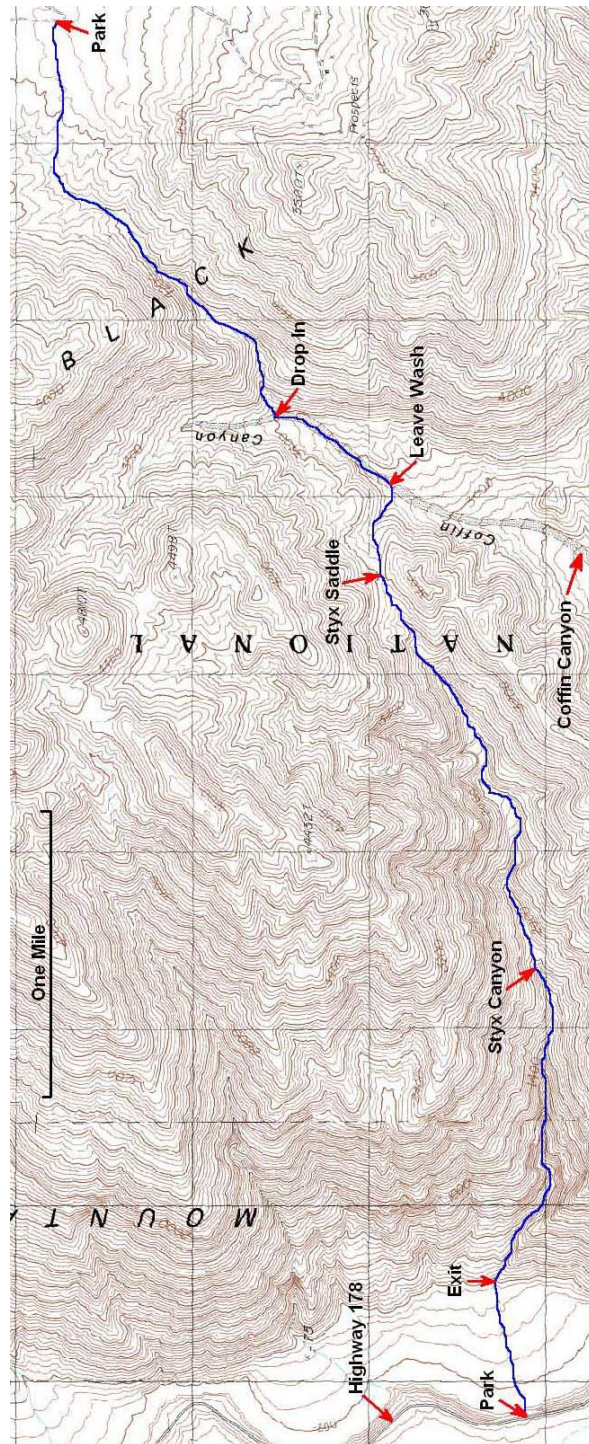
Roughly 5hrs from the start at an elevation of 1340ft you will come to a 90ft rappel from rock pile anchor on the right side and minutes later at 1190ft you will need to negotiate a 12ft belayed slide down smooth rock, a drop that a good climber, going last, could downclimb. This is followed 20min later at 1090ft by another awkward 10ft drop and, another 20min down canyon at 1020ft and 5hrs from the start, by a 100ft sloping rappel from a large chockstone on the left side of the lip. The rappels and downclimbs are now almost continuous and the next obstacle, 20min later at 810ft, is a small undercut 10ft drop where the last person should belay the others and then be helped down. This is followed at 680ft by a long two-step rappel in a narrow slot that needs 100ft of rope though the two drops are only 25ft and 15ft; this descent is anchored by a small chockstone behind a large boulder on the right. It is immediately followed by a 15ft belayed slide or rappel where, again, the last person who belayed the rest can downclimb the groove on the right.

This will bring you to the top of the even steeper section of Styx just before the canyon exit. The rest of the way is a continuous series of big drops. First, at 520ft and 7hrs 15min from the start, there is a 40ft rappel down into a narrow grotto from a two piton anchor on the right side. After a short hike with several downclimbs this leads to a 80ft sloping rappel from a large boulder anchor on the right side and, just 20min later at an elevation of 250ft, to a dramatic and vertical 100ft rappel down a smooth polished groove. Here we used a combination of a rock pile anchor with a backup piton but the piton came loose and should be replaced. This is immediately followed by another 100ft rappel from a midstream boulder anchor supplemented with a rock pile.



*Left: Nearing the end of Styx Canyon (photo by Randi Poer). Right: Hanging boulder above the last rappel (photo by Scott Smith).*

Finally, 8hrs from the start at an elevation of about 100ft, you will arrive at the top of the last, and perhaps the most dramatic rappel. A huge boulder sits perched above the lip bridging the gully that you descend. The anchor is a rock on the left side and the descent down under the perched boulder is a dramatic experience. At the bottom all that is left is a short friction descent to the alluvial fan. You should reach this exit from Styx Canyon ( $36^{\circ}11.11'N$   $116^{\circ}45.65'W$  and an elevation of about sea level) about 8hrs 40min and 5.4mi from the start. Hopefully you have been able to spot the return vehicle at the bottom of the alluvial fan during the last few rappels. If so it is an easy 20min walk down the alluvial fan to the road and the car. You should reach the car at  $36^{\circ}11.02'N$   $116^{\circ}46.19'W$  and an elevation of about 200ft below sea level roughly 9hrs from the start having covered 5.8mi.



Map of Styx Canyon Hike

## 8.5 Cerberus Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 12.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4.3 miles
- Elevation gain: 60 feet
- Topo Maps: Dantes View, Badwater
- Difficulties: About 24 rappels, 3 between 150ft and 300ft, some anchor challenges
- Special equipment: 300ft rope, two 200ft ropes, 100ft rope, 300ft webbing, some nuts and pitons, hammer, 25 rappel rings or quicklinks, bolt kit, rappeling equipment, helmets and leather gloves
- ACA Rating: 4A V

In Greek mythology, Cerberus was the “hound of Hades”, a monstrous three-headed dog with a snake for a tail and a serpentine mane. He guarded the gate to Hades (the Greek underworld), ensuring that the dead did not leave and the living could not enter. This canyon in the Black Mountains of Death Valley has at least three monstrous drop-offs that will challenge the most experienced canyoneer. It is one of a series (Bad, Hades, Cerberus, Styx, Coffin) that drop almost 6000ft from the spectacular overlook at Dante’s View down to the sub-sea-level area near Badwater in the valley floor. Among those five spectacular canyons Cerberus is the most demanding technically because of the number of rappels, the huge drop-offs and the anchor challenges.

The asphalt road to Dante’s View ascends the eastern slopes of the Black Mountains and provides a quite dramatic vista overlooking Badwater only 2.5mi away as the crow flies. On a sunny day, the view is otherworldly with the glistening salt in the valley bottom contrasting with the red and gray crags and cliffs of the slopes below you. From Dante’s View it seems almost impossible to make that descent. This hike heads due south to access the head of Cerberus Canyon which it then follows all the way to the valley floor. The canyon descent requires about 25 rappels with a number higher than 150ft, one dramatic 250ft vertical drop and one 300ft inclined drop near the end of the canyon. It is an adventure that is only for the very fit and able canyoneer with considerable experience fashioning deadman anchors. Finding and constructing safe anchors is very challenging in this canyon and you should take a variety of technical gear such as hexes, nuts, pitons and hammers as well as a large quantity of webbing.

Most groups will take 12hrs or more to descend Cerberus Canyon though existing anchors may somewhat speed the hike. Nevertheless it is a very long



hike and those wishing to complete it in one day should make a very early, pre-dawn start. Like the other Death Valley hikes this is a fall, winter or spring adventure though, in this case, spring days with longer daylight would be best. Whatever the plan, anyone attempting this descent needs to be prepared to rappel in the dark or to face an overnight stop. Note also that there is no water anywhere along the route.

## Trailhead

The Cerberus Canyon descent requires a long car shuttle. Perhaps the best base for this adventure is one of the campgrounds at the Park center in Furnace Creek. From there, the evening before the hike, you should drive south to Badwater (17mi away along Highway 178) in two vehicles in order to park the recovery vehicle. From the parking lot at Badwater continue south around three large and obvious alluvial fans, the first deposited by Bad Canyon, the second by Hades Canyon and the third by Cerberus Canyon. Leave the return vehicle on the south side of the Cerberus Canyon fan at about  $36^{\circ}11.36'N$   $116^{\circ}46.08'W$  and an elevation of -240ft.

Then, before dawn on the day of your hike, you should drive southeast on Highway 190, climbing gradually along the Furnace Creek Wash between the Amargosa and Funeral Mountains. Ten miles from Furnace Creek, turn right onto Dante's View Road and follow this almost all the way to Dante's View. Though you may choose to park at the view itself, the optimum place for this hike is the sharp right hand turn just before the last switchbacks up to the viewpoint. At this turn there is a turnout with restrooms and adequate room to park. This starting point is at  $36^{\circ}13.07'N$   $116^{\circ}43.32'W$  and an elevation of 4920ft.



*Badwater far below Cerberus Canyon.*

## Hike

From the parking area near the restrooms at  $36^{\circ}13.07'N$   $116^{\circ}43.32'W$  (elevation 5170ft) you should hike toward a low saddle that is several hundred yards away to the WSW (at  $36^{\circ}13.04'N$   $116^{\circ}43.53'W$ ). As you reach this saddle veer left up the ridge and hike south along the apex of the ridge to a low summit. From that vantage point you will have an awesome view of the rugged terrain between you and the valley floor. Immediately below you on the right side of the ridge is the left fork of Cerberus. The right fork, the route of this hike, is less obvious but begins on the left side of the light-colored ridge that drops down from your vantage point. You will see a saddle in this light-colored ridge about 450ft below you; it is a relatively easy hike down along the ridge line to this second saddle at  $36^{\circ}12.62'N$   $116^{\circ}43.60'W$  and an elevation of 4860ft. From this saddle you need to descend into the shallow gully to left of the ridge and it is easiest to do this by contouring back to your left. Once in the gully bottom, hike down the gully to where it emerges into a broad flat wash. This wash is the right fork of Cerberus Canyon. You should reach this wash at  $36^{\circ}12.43'N$   $116^{\circ}43.46'W$  and an elevation of 4300ft about 45min and 1.4mi after starting the hike.

Hiking down the wash is fast so that after another 30min the canyon narrows and at an elevation of 3950ft you come to the top of a series of rappels in a slot of red, crumbly rock. The first is a 20ft rappel from an anchor in the stream bed; this is immediately followed by a 60ft rappel from a horn on the left wall and then by a 70ft rappel from a boulder on the left side of the slot. The canyon then broadens but a short distance later you will come to a much bigger, vertical drop



*Left: In Cerberus Canyon. Right: 300ft rappel. Photos by Randi Poer.*

of 140ft that can be rappelled from a boulder anchor on the right. Another short walk brings you to the top of a second 140ft drop at an elevation of 3510ft. Here you rappel down into a broad grotto using a boulder anchor in mid-canyon. This second 140ft rappel is immediately followed by a two-step rappel of 30ft plus 20ft from a boulder in the wash. A short hike later there is a 50ft rappel from a midstream boulder before you arrive at the top of the last rappel in this series, a 100ft drop from a big boulder on the left side of the canyon. This last rappel deposits you at the broad and easily recognized junction of the two branches of Cerberus Canyon, the left fork coming in from your right. You should reach this junction at  $36^{\circ}12.19'N$   $116^{\circ}44.23'W$  and an elevation of 3100ft about 4hrs and 2.1mi from the start.

After the junction the going is easier for a bit though there is a small 20ft downclimb at 2870ft that is quite challenging and then a series of small rappels spread out over the next quarter mile. You will encounter a 15ft rappel from a boulder on the left followed by a small 12ft rappel from a boulder on the right. Then at 2500ft a 15ft rappel from midstream boulder followed a little later by 10ft drop using a horn built into the left wall. A short distance later at 2460ft you will arrive at the top of a 130ft rappel where the anchor possibilities are limited and awkward. There is a large vertical crack on the right side of the lip where we arranged a wedged knot anchor but a nut or hex might also be deployed. As with many of the other rappels in this canyon we used a human belay back-up for all but the last descender. This 130ft drop is almost immediately followed by a 40ft rappel in a narrow slot from a boulder anchor. Then, after a tricky 12ft downclimb in a slot on the right side, there is a longish gravel-bottomed section before, at 1880ft, there is a 20ft rappel from a boulder on the right down onto shelf followed by a 30ft rappel from a deadman anchor in the stream bed that brings you to an open, sunny area at a broad left turn. We paused for lunch here at 1750ft roughly 6.5hrs from the start.

Just beyond this lunch spot, the canyon opens up completely and you will arrive at the top of a huge drop-off with a spectacular view of the next section of canyon far below and of the salt flats in the valley even further below. It is a truly awesome sight that all alone is rich reward for your labors in this canyon. The approximate location of the top of this precipice is  $36^{\circ}11.90'N$   $116^{\circ}44.98'W$ . The first steps in this drop-off are two sculpted dryfalls of 40ft and then 100ft. In the interests of time, we choose to bypass these by contouring along high on the right side and then dropping down a gully to the edge of an even more spectacular drop-off where you can look down about 500ft to the canyon bed just a couple of hundred yards downstream. To descend, use the stream bed chockstone to rappel about 140ft vertically down to a gravel platform. From here there are two potential routes downstream. One is to follow the main stream bed. However, we chose the alternative which is to hike over a low, rocky saddle off to the left of the gravel platform. That leads to a small, steep rocky gully. Descending that gully requires a short 20ft rappel near the bottom using a boulder anchor in the gully; that places you in a steep, broad wash that rejoins the main channel about 300ft below. Fortunately, there are many anchors here and we used a large boulder in the middle of the wash to anchor a

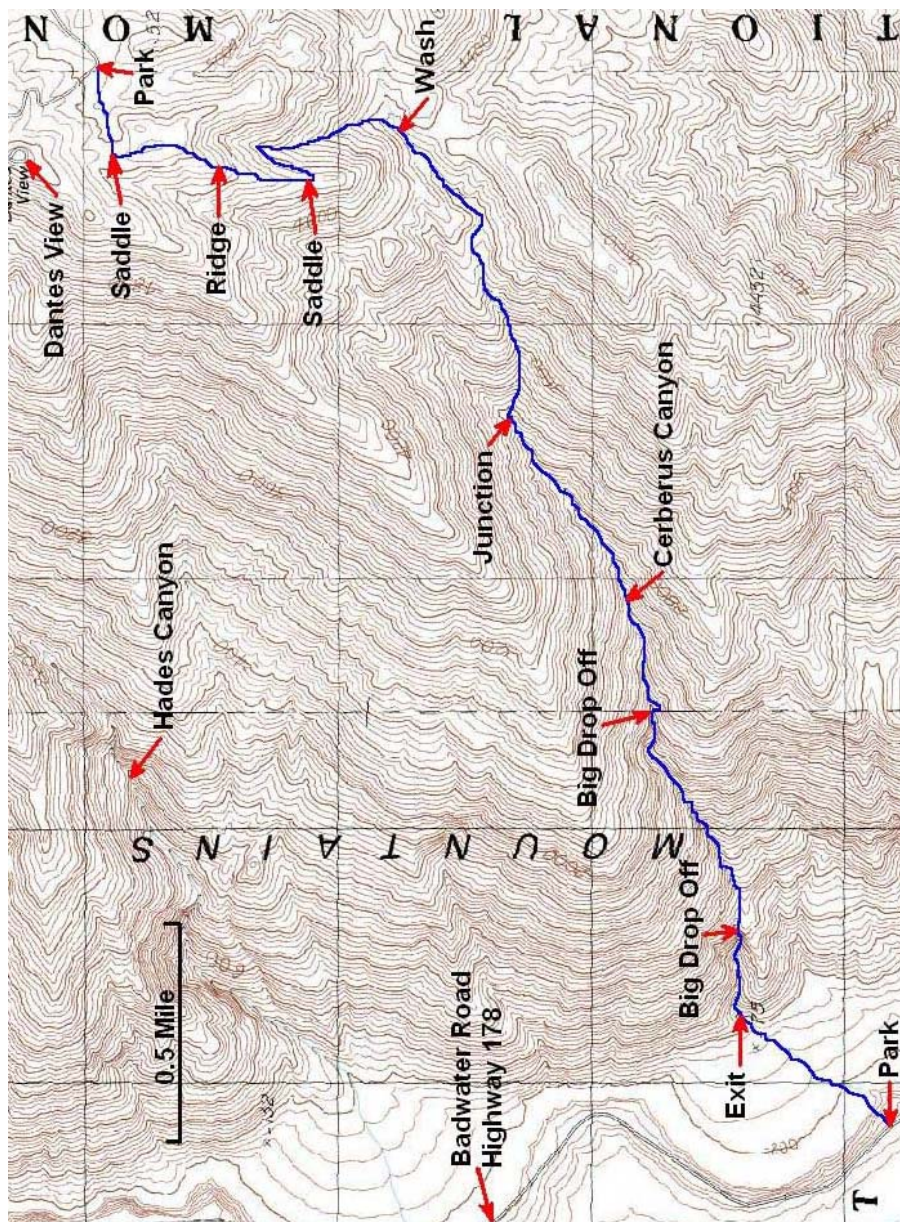
300ft rappel to the canyon bottom. There are several shelves where this rappel could be broken up and where there are boulders to rerig the descent if necessary. You should reach the bottom of this precipitous descent at 1040ft roughly 8hrs from the start.

But the easy gravel canyon bottom that leads away from the bottom of this precipice does not last long. Just a short distance downstream is a small and awkward 20ft rappel down the right side of a huge boulder. This leads to another large drop-off where the easy route is to proceed over a slight rise on the right side to a broad shelf with a couple of large boulders. One of these provides a good anchor for the 100ft rappel down to a short gravel flat. This, in turn, leads to another 100ft two-step rappel (with a large platform in the middle) from a large boulder in the stream bed. Then, unexpectedly, you come to the second great drop-off vista in lower Cerberus Canyon where again the canyon opens up and a gaping abyss appears before you. Here at 36°11.71'N 116°45.56'W and an elevation of 610ft you are at the second great drop-off that can be detected from the topo map. You should reach this point 3.6mi and 10hrs from the morning start.

The first step in descending this second precipice is a 240ft vertical rappel from a reassuringly large boulder/outcropping in mid-canyon just a little back from the lip. The fall line of this rappel eventually leads to a narrow projecting ridge jutting out from the main wall. The rappeler should aim to veer to the canyon right of this projection where the floor is maybe 20ft higher than to the left. This rappel leads to a gravel bottom followed by a small downclimb before you arrive at the top of the another large two-step drop that takes some careful planning. The first step is a 60ft rappel from a boulder anchor some distance back from the lip. This is readily accomplished but it places you on a narrow, recessed slot shelf with very few anchor possibilities. We used a deadman anchor against the left wall to rappel down the second 120ft step but perhaps this is one place where bolts or pitons are needed. After this only one rappel remains, a straightforward 50ft drop from a convenient large boulder at the lip. This places you in the wash within about a hundred yards of the canyon exit at 36°11.71'N 116°45.80'W, 3.8mi from the start at an elevation of about -100ft.

From the exit it is simplest to follow the stream bed down the alluvial fan in a southwesterly direction to reach your vehicle parked on the Badwater Road (it should have been visible since you arrived at the top of the first great drop-off). The vehicle should be at 36°11.36'N 116°46.08'W and an elevation of -240ft. It should take about 12hrs to complete the hike which is 4.3mi long.





Map of Cerberus Canyon Hike

## 8.6 Hades Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 12.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 6.4 miles
- Elevation gain: 470 feet
- Topo Maps: Dantes View, Badwater
- Difficulties: 18 rappels, 3 between 150ft and 200ft, many anchor challenges
- Special equipment: Two 200ft ropes, two 120ft ropes, 300ft webbing, some hexes, nuts and pitons, hammer, 20 rappel rings or quicklinks, bolt kit, rappeling equipment, helmets and leather gloves
- ACA Rating: 4A V

Perhaps the toughest adventure hikes in Death Valley are those that drop down from the heights of the Black Mountains to the valley near Badwater. One of those is this 6000ft descent from Dante's View through Hades Canyon. The asphalt road to the popular scenic viewpoint known as Dante's View ascends the eastern slopes of the Black Mountains and provides a quite dramatic vista overlooking Badwater only 2.5mi away as the crow flies. On a sunny day, the view is otherworldly with the glistening salt in the valley bottom contrasting



*Left: Badwater from Dante's View. Right: Hades Fault and Saddle from Bad Canyon.*

with the red and gray crags and cliffs of the slopes below you. From Dante's View it seems almost impossible to make that descent because cutting longitudinally across the direct route are the great chasms of Hades Canyon and, a little further away, Bad Canyon. But by hiking north along the ridge on which you stand, you can find a way to descend into Bad Canyon and then follow a remarkable earthquake fault line to transition into the head of Hades Canyon. This hike then follows Hades Canyon down to the valley floor. However, that canyon bottom route is interrupted by many dramatic dryfalls, about 18 of which require rappelling. It is an adventure that is only for the very fit and very experienced canyoneer and one with experience fashioning deadman anchors. Finding or making safe anchors is very challenging in this canyon and you should take a variety of technical gear such as hexes, nuts and pitons as well as a large quantity of webbing.

Most groups will take 12hrs or more to descend Hades Canyon though the presence of fixed anchors may somewhat speed the hike. Nevertheless it is a very long hike and those wishing to complete it in one day should make a very early start. It is possible to hike the use-trail along the ridge before sunrise and that should be part of the plan. It would also help to plan the hike for the spring when the daylight is longer. Whatever the plan, anyone attempting this descent needs to be prepared to rappel in the dark or to face an overnight stop. Note also that there is no water anywhere along the route.

## **Trailhead**

The Hades Canyon descent requires a long car shuttle. Perhaps the best base for this adventure is one of the campgrounds at the Park center in Furnace Creek. From there, the evening before the hike, you should drive south to Badwater (17mi away along Highway 178) in two vehicles in order to park the recovery vehicle. From the parking lot at Badwater continue south around two large alluvial fans, the first deposited by Bad Canyon and the second by Hades Canyon. Leave the return vehicle on the south side of the Hades Canyon fan about 36°12.24'N 116°46.41'W at an elevation of -240ft.

Then, before dawn on the day of your hike, you should drive southeast on Highway 190, climbing gradually along the Furnace Creek Wash between the Amargosa and Funeral Mountains. Ten miles from Furnace Creek, turn right onto Dante's View road and follow this for 13mi to the vista point. There are restrooms just before you reach the viewpoint and plenty of parking at the top. The Dante's View trailhead coordinates are 36°13.25'N 116°43.61'W and its elevation is 5475ft.

## **Hike**

The first part of the Hades Canyon hike follows the same route used to access Bad Canyon from Dante's View. You should start from Dante's View before sunrise to take maximum advantage of the daylight during fall or spring. Begin by hiking due north along the trail from the parking area (36°13.25'N



116°43.61'W and elevation 5475ft) to Dante's Peak (elevation 5704ft) just 0.4mi away and 230ft higher. Pause at the Peak to drink in the fantastic view. Then continue along the easy use-trail on the ridge top, passing another small high point before descending toward a saddle at 5210ft, some 1.3mi and 37min from the parking lot. At about 5230ft just before you get to the low point of the saddle you should be able to discern a low ridge that leads down to the west to a flat gravel wash about 500ft below you. There is a small rocky outcropping on this ridge about a third of the way down. Follow the ridge all the way down to the broad wash (elevation 4720ft). You should reach the wash about 50min after starting out. Then follow the wash for about 500yds until you reach a pour-off. Climb onto the low shoulder to the left of the wash and turn right to hike down in a northerly direction into the next gully. Once down at the head of this gully, hike up onto the ridge beyond the head. On the top of this ridge you should discern a steep but negotiable slope down into the wash of Bad Canyon itself. It is about a 200ft drop into Bad Canyon and you should reach the wash (elevation 3960ft) about 1hr 25min from the start having traveled about 2.5mi. The next 0.7mi is a straight and easy walk down Bad Canyon wash. Look ahead and you will see that the canyon makes an abrupt right turn. Straight ahead at this turn there is a clearly visible earthquake fault where the movement of the earth created a notable offset. This is the Hades fault that follows the line of Bad Canyon down to the sharp right turn and then proceeds over the ridge into Hades Canyon that it then follows down to the valley.

At the right turn (36°13.99'N 116°44.08'W, elevation 3480ft, 3.2mi and just under 2hrs from the start) start the hike up to Hades Saddle following a slight animal trail just to the left side. At the saddle (36°13.89'N 116°44.17'W and elevation 3710ft) you will get a spectacular view down into the rugged Hades Canyon; if it looks like a tough descent from here it gets a lot tougher.

Starting down the going is initially loose with some downclimbs before you come to the first rappel at 3510ft just 200ft below the saddle. This is an easy 60ft drop in a slot from a solid chockstone anchor. More downclimbing follows and



*Left: In the second dense series. Right: 190ft rappel.*



you soon arrive at a downclimb/rappel of about 20ft where the best climber might provide a belay and then free downclimb last. There are a number of similar drops in this canyon and this efficient method of descent will save time. Two more of these drops follow at 3290ft elevation (a 10ft drop) and at 2820ft elevation (a 12ft drop). Despite numerous smaller climbs this stretch is the easy part of Hades Canyon.

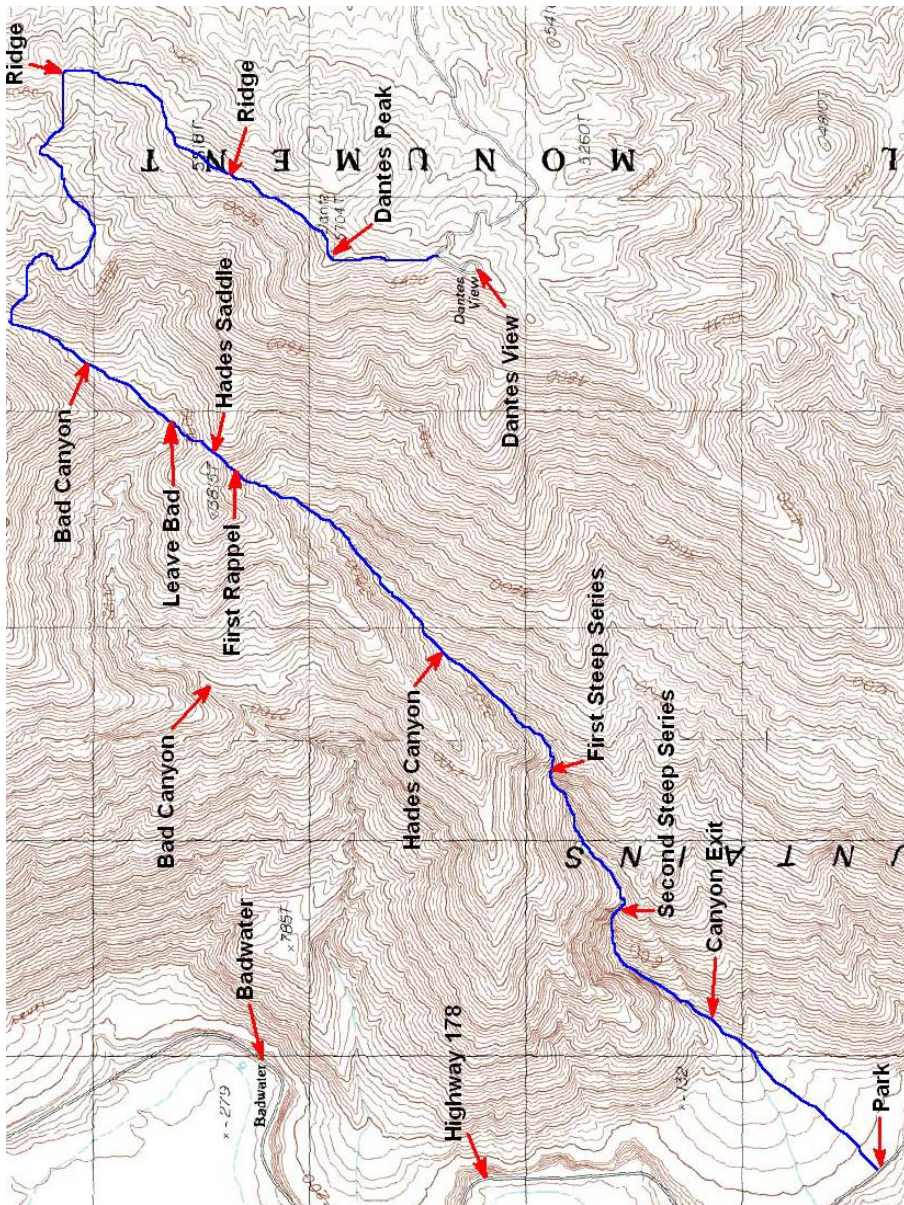
About 4hrs from the start at 2720ft, a large canyon enters on the left and it is worth a brief side trip about 100yds up this tributary to see the polished recess where two dry streams fall vertically about 200ft into a cathedral-like grotto. Downstream of this confluence the going continues fairly easy until about 2380ft where the slope increases and the rappels come thick and fast. About 4hrs 45min from the start at 2380ft there is a 40ft rappel down a chute from a boulder anchor and this is shortly followed by a double drop consisting of a 20ft rappel from a stream bed boulder anchor down to a large platform where a long piece of webbing around a stream bed outcropping anchors a 50ft rappel.

But these are just hors d'oeuvres for around 1800ft Hades Canyon really gets serious and between here and the canyon exit lie some serious canyoneering challenges. There are two sections, the first between about 1800ft and 1400ft and the second between about 1000ft and 700ft (both can be discerned on the topo map), where the drops are continuous and anchor fabrication is most challenging. These challenges begin at  $36^{\circ}13.05'N$   $116^{\circ}45.09'W$  and an elevation of 1840ft about 4.7mi and 6hrs from the start, where you arrive at the top of a 25ft drop down to a large recessed shelf. This rappel is readily accomplished using a stream bed boulder anchor. But what lies at the other end of the recessed shelf is enough to take your breath away for there is an awesome vertical chasm whose depth is difficult to discern without peering straight over the lip. It transpires the drop is about 180ft but it seems more. Moreover there were no natural anchors on the recessed shelf and we had to push boulders down from above the 25ft rappel in order to construct an adequate deadman anchor for the 180ft rappel. Just a short distance downstream you come to the next challenge a four-step drop where care must be taken with the sequencing. The difficulties can not be seen from the top where the entrance slot jogs left and then back right obscuring the view downstream. Moreover, there is no natural anchor for the first rappel. We installed two large hexes in a crack in the right wall at the top, rappelled down about 60ft around the corner to a large platform (devoid of natural anchors) and then continued the rappel down another 40ft step to a much smaller recessed platform. Because of the corners at the top the rope pull could be very tricky here so the last person down should manipulate any topside knots around the corner as he or she descends. The third in this sequence of four steps is a small 12ft drop that can be downclimbed (though the downclimb is not easy so the best climber should belay and go last). This downclimb places you on a 150sqft recessed platform with no natural anchors or good cracks. We installed a bolt in the right wall and backed it up with body belays for the final 60ft rappel in this series. It places you in a flat wash that leads to an easy but short section of canyon with a gravel bed.

At 36°12.86'N 116°45.55'W and an elevation of 1140ft, 5.2mi and about 9hrs from the start you will arrive at the top of the second dramatic series of rappels. Like the first, it begins with a right turn leading to an awesome 190ft rappel for which we constructed a stream bed deadman anchor. This takes you down to a large shelf that leads directly to a 60ft rappel for which we had to construct another stream bed deadman anchor. This, in turn, leads to an awkward third rappel for which we installed hexes in a slot on the right side of the lip. This rappel proceeds down a sloping lip and then drops to a recessed platform where it turns sharp right so the rope pull is awkward. At this point you have descended to 710ft but the continuous drops have not finished. The recessed platform ends in a slotted lip where we buried a deadman anchor in the bottom of the main slot and then rappelled down a two-step drop, the first step taking us down to another platform (with a right turn) and the second step completing this 130ft rappel. Again the rope pull could be tricky because of the turn.

After a short narrow section of canyon, you arrive at the top of the last big rappel at an elevation of 590ft and 11hrs 15min from the start. This is a three-step 150ft rappel from a very small platform with no natural anchors. We installed a good piton in the right wall (about shoulder high) and backed it up with body belays. This rappel is soon followed by a small 12ft downclimb and then by a real surprise. Here at an elevation of 460ft nearing the end of the canyon you will come upon a large aluminum aircraft fuel tank. At least that is what we guessed it was for upon the side was stamped "Refuel through this filter cap only". Just beyond the fuel tank you will arrive at the last rappel that proceeds down beside an awkward narrow sloping slot on the right from a stream bed boulder/deadman anchor. Though less in terms of vertical drop it takes about 50ft of rope for this rappel.

Just a short hike down a broadening gravel wash and you will come to the exit of Hades Canyon at 36°12.65'N 116°45.92'W and an elevation of 120ft, roughly 5.7mi and 12hrs 20min from the start. Follow the stream bed as it veers left exiting the canyon and begins the descent of the large alluvial fan. If you head roughly southwest you should have no difficulty locating your return vehicle at 36°12.24'N 116°46.41'W and an elevation of -240ft. The complete hike, about 6.4mi long, took us 12hrs 40min though others may be able to utilize at least some of our anchors and thus do it faster. Be aware, however, that flash floods could wash out or bury many of our stream bed anchors.



Map of Hades Canyon Hike

## 8.7 Bad Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 8 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 6.4 miles
- Elevation gain: 230 feet
- Topo Maps: Dantes View, Badwater
- Difficulties: Nine or ten rappels, three between 150ft and 200ft, some anchor challenges
- Special equipment: Two 200ft ropes, 200ft retrieval line, 200ft webbing, a few pitons and nuts, hammer, 10 rappel rings, rappeling equipment, helmets and leather gloves
- ACA Rating: 3A III

Perhaps the most rugged adventure hikes in Death Valley are those that drop down from the tops of the Black Mountains all the way to the area south of Badwater. This Bad Canyon hike involves a 6000ft descent from Dante's View (elevation 5475ft) to the valley bottom just south of Badwater. The asphalt road to the popular scenic viewpoint known as Dante's View ascends the eastern slopes of the Black Mountains and provides a quite dramatic vista overlooking Badwater only 2.5mi away as the crow flies. On a sunny day, the view is



*Morning from Dante's View (photo by Mark Duttweiler).*



otherworldly with the glistening salt in the valley bottom contrasting with the red and gray crags and cliffs of the slopes below you. From Dante's View it seems almost impossible to make that descent because cutting longitudinally across the direct route are the great chasms of Hades Canyon and, a little further away, Bad Canyon. But by hiking north along the ridge on which you stand, you can find a way to descend into Bad Canyon and then follow its tortured stream bed all the way to Badwater. However, that canyon bottom route is interrupted by many dramatic dryfalls, nine of which require rappeling. One of those rappels descends a jaw-dropping, 180ft vertical drop and two others measure more than 150ft. It is an adventure that is only for the fit and experienced canyoneer. Because there are no trees in this landscape, finding safe anchors is challenging in some places and you should take a variety of technical anchoring gear such as nuts and pitons as well as a large quantity of webbing.

## Trailhead

The Bad Canyon descent requires a long car shuttle. Perhaps the best base for this adventure is one of the campgrounds at the Park center in Furnace Creek. From there, the evening before the hike, you should drive south to Badwater (17mi away along Highway 178) in two vehicles in order to park the recovery vehicle in the parking lot at Badwater (36°13.78'N 116°46.05'W). Then, before dawn on the day of your hike, you should drive southeast on Highway 190, climbing gradually along the Furnace Creek Wash between the Amargosa and Funeral Mountains. Ten miles from Furnace Creek, turn right onto Dante's View road and follow this for 13mi to the vista point. There are restrooms just before you reach the viewpoint and plenty of parking at the top. The Dante's View trailhead coordinates are 36°13.25'N 116°43.61'W and its elevation is 5475ft.

## Hike



*Left: Steep descent into Bad. Right: First dryfall. Photos by Mark Duttweiler.*

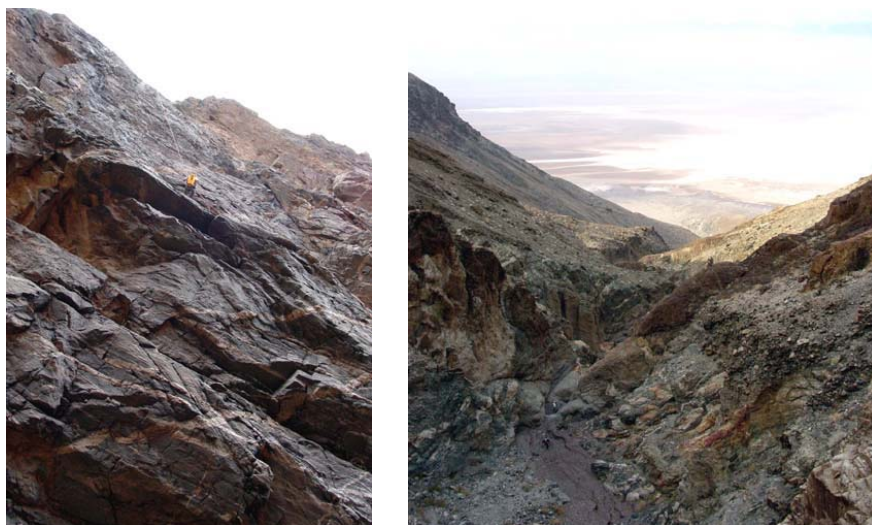
It is best to time your start to begin the hike just after dawn since the 10hrs of winter daylight does not leave much room for delay during the descent. Begin by hiking due north along the trail from the parking area (elevation 5475ft) to Dante's Peak (elevation 5704ft) just 0.4mi away and 230ft higher. Pause at the Peak to drink in the fantastic view. Then continue along the easy use-trail on the ridge top, passing another small high point before descending toward a saddle at 5210ft, some 1.3mi and 37min from the parking lot. At about 5230ft just before you get to the low point of the saddle you should be able to discern a low ridge that leads down to the west to a flat gravel wash about 500ft below you. There is a small rocky outcropping on this ridge about a third of the way down. Follow the ridge all the way down to the wash (elevation 4720ft). You should reach the wash about 50min after starting out. Then follow the wash for about 500yds until you reach a pour-off. Climb onto the low shoulder to the left of the wash and turn right to hike down in a northerly direction into the next gully. Once down at the head of this gully, hike up onto the ridge beyond the head. On the top of this ridge you should discern a steep but negotiable slope down into the wash of Bad Canyon itself. It is about a 200ft drop into Bad Canyon and you should reach the wash (elevation 3960ft) about 1hr 25min from the start having traveled about 2.5mi. The roughest part of the descent has now been completed for the rest is a combination of easy gravel hiking, downclimbing and rappeling.

The next 0.7mi is a straight and easy walk down Bad Canyon wash. As you go, look up at the high, looming cliffs on the left to appreciate why you took the long detour north to access Bad Canyon. Also look ahead of you and you will see that the canyon makes an abrupt right turn. Straight ahead at this turn there is a clearly visible earthquake fault where the movement of the earth created a notable offset. This is the Hades fault that follows the line of Bad Canyon down to the sharp right turn and then proceeds over the ridge into Hades Canyon that it then follows down to the valley. You may wish to take a brief side trip and hike up this linear feature to the ridge top where the fault has created a square notch. From there you get a good view down the rugged Hades Canyon. That canyon constitutes another canyoneering challenge.

After passing the Hades Fault and sharply turning right at 36°13.99'N 116°44.08'W, the canyon narrows and you come to the first dryfall, a vertical 25ft drop at an elevation of 2960ft. This is relatively easily passed by following a narrow ledge just to the left of the lip that takes you to the top of an easy downclimb. Here you are 3.2mi and 1hr 50min from the start. The easy gravel hiking resumes downstream of this dryfall and a few minutes later you come to a second 25ft dryfall that is bypassed on the right by climbing up and over the shoulder to access the downclimb in a gully. Another 30min of fast gravel hiking brings you to the first rappel, an 80ft vertical dryfall at an elevation of 2400ft. You should reach this point about 2hr 40min from the start. The anchor for the 80ft rappel is a ground level chockstone behind the large rock prominence in the middle of the lip. Use an extended piece of webbing to set the rappel ring near the lip of the rappel for an easier rope recovery. This rappel is immediately followed by a short 20ft drop rappeled using a boulder anchor on the right.

Not far downstream, at an elevation of 1800ft and 4.6mi from the start, you abruptly arrive at the top of a huge, narrow, jaw-dropping abyss. The bottom, barely visible, is about 200ft vertically below you. At the point where you first arrive at the lip there is little in the way of anchor possibilities. Instead you should continue straight on along the top of the left side of the ravine, descending to a large rock projection that can be slung with a long piece of webbing for the rappel anchor. From here, the bottom of the ravine is not visible, but it is a spectacular, 180ft rappel down a sheer cliff to the narrow slot floor. You should reach this 1580ft elevation (4.6mi from the parking lot) about 3.5hrs after the morning start.

Immediately downstream of this great rappel, you will encounter a 30ft dry-fall in the narrow slot floor. Though almost downclimbable, this drop-off has only one anchor possibility, a small round rock wedged in a crack in the left wall. Here a good strategy is for the best climber to add his/her body belay to the wedged-rock anchor, to allow the others to rappel or downclimb with that belay and then for the climber to downclimb it with a bottom belay using the wedged-rock anchor alone. From there it is a brief gravel hike to a short polished chute that, at the bottom, needs either a top belay or a long jump. Let a young jumper provide the belay for the rest of the party and then jump last. Just 50yds downstream of the short chute you come to another dramatic drop-off where the canyon broadens temporarily. From your perch at the top of this cliff there is a great view of the distant salt flats in the valley bottom and of the continuing, twisting narrows of Bad Canyon. Here you could rappel the 120ft vertical drop but to do so you would need to build a deadman anchor with the large boulders near the lip. We chose the alternative, an easy downclimb on the left: proceeding up and over the shoulder on the left you can descend into



*Left: 180ft rappel. Right: View from 120ft drop-off. Photos by Mark Duttweiler.*

a side gully that can be downclimbed all the way to the bottom. You should reach this point (elevation 1240ft) just under 5hrs from the morning start.

Though the bottom is broad and open, the stream bed immediately drops 60ft vertically into a narrow slot. The anchor for this rappel is a large boulder about 10yds upstream of the lip. The stream bed makes a sharp right turn at the lip making for an awkward rope retrieval. Moreover, the lip on the inside of this bend is severely undercut, making for a challenging rappel entry. Below this rappel there are two easy downclimbs before you arrive at a 40ft sloping drop-off. This can be downclimbed on the right though with some exposure; or it can be rappeled using a nut anchor in a slot on the left side of the lip. Then, following a short gravel hike, you arrive at the top of another awesome 150ft deep and narrow ravine. The boulder anchor for the rappel descent following the stream course is about 25ft back from the lip and you need a webbing extension to a point much closer to the lip in order to effect a comfortable rope retrieval. It is a marvelous 150ft rappel down into a deep chasm with a gravel floor. You should reach this 640ft elevation just under 6hrs from Dante's View.

From the bottom of this rappel, a short hike brings you to a vertical 40ft drop-off in a cavernous and winding section of the narrows. A solid nut in a crack on the left wall plus a webbing wrap around a wedged boulder in the floor at the bottom of the left wall should be webbed together to provide a backed-up anchor for the 40ft rappel. This is followed almost immediately by a steep 20ft downclimb on the left side of the narrow slot canyon and, beyond that, by the last rappel. This milestone (elevation 570ft) is about 5.3mi from Dante's View and should be reached after 7hrs of hiking.

The last rappel is a two-stage affair using a good deadman anchor in the stream course just upstream of the lip (check the deadman carefully in case it has shifted). The first stage is a 10ft drop onto a broad, flat platform followed by a 40ft drop down a steep sloping face to a gravel bottom. Looking back up at this drop you will note the prominent crack about 6ft to the right of the stream



*Left: 150ft rappel. Right: Deep in the narrows. Photos by Mark Duttweiler.*



course that Dignonnet climbed to access the narrows above this last rappel.

You can now pack away your harness and helmet for the rest of the way is easy hiking on gravel. The canyon gradually broadens, winding a bit before the last long and straight section. The vertical walls here are comprised of loose compacted sediment with a sprinkling of big boulders, just what you might imagine would be the consequence of debris flows. Indeed some of the partially exposed boulders are huge and seem ready to plunge down the vertical walls. The last straight section seems endless but the view of the valley floor ahead of you is intriguing, the salt flats of Badwater glistening brightly in the sun. Stay to the right side of the broad canyon as you approach the mouth. This is just about at sea level and 6mi from your starting point now high overhead. At the mouth (36°13.52'N 116°46.26'W) you will note the huge alluvial fan that spreads out over a half mile radius in all directions. Turn sharp right following a shallow gully in the alluvial fan and the Badwater parking area will soon come into view. It is a straight hike down the gentle gravel slope to the parking lot and your recovery vehicle. You should reach the parking lot (36°13.78'N 116°46.05'W, elevation -270ft and 6.4mi from the start) just under 8hrs from the morning start. It is a 17mi drive north along highway 178 to your base back at Furnace Creek.



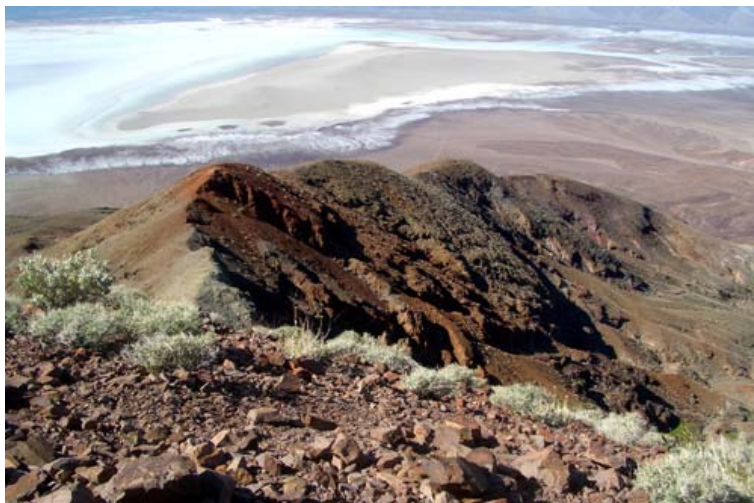
Map of Bad Canyon Hike

## 8.8 Natural Bridge Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 8 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 2740ft
- Topo Maps: Devils Golf Course, Ryan
- Difficulties: Long, steep approach climb, about 11 rappels up to 100ft, much downclimbing
- Special equipment: 200ft rope, 40ft webbing, rappeling equipment, including helmets
- ACA Rating: 3A III

There are numerous canyoneering adventures that begin at Dante's View in the Black Mountains and drop up to 6000ft down to the Badwater Basin. Many of these are best done by placing a return vehicle at the bottom along the side of Highway 178 and using a car shuttle to Dante's View. Most of the Black Mountain canyon descents described in this collection are best done this way. Some, however, would require a long traverse from Dante's View to the canyon head and are therefore more easily done as loop hikes with an initial ascent from the valley. This descent of Natural Bridge Canyon is one of these. It also features a visit to the popular Natural Bridge at the end of the hike.



*The ascent ridge from above.*

## Trailhead

This hike does not require a vehicle shuttle but is, instead, a loop hike with a long, steep approach hike. Park at the Natural Bridge Canyon trailhead by driving south from Furnace Creek on Highway 178 for about 13.5mi (or about 3.5mi north from Badwater) to the signed turn-off for Natural Bridge. Then drive 1.5mi up the dirt road to the Natural Bridge trailhead and park. Here the adventure begins and ends at 36°16.878'N 116°46.189'W and an elevation of 350ft.

## Hike

From the Natural Bridge parking lot (36°16.878'N 116°46.189'W, elevation 350ft) look due south at the ridges along the base of the Black Mountain range. You should see two darker, red-brown ridges, one of which is a large lump and another, nearer one that is flatter and lower. Hike across the flat but descending alluvial fan to the bottom of the lower, red-brown ridge at 36°16.523'N 116°46.092'W (160ft elevation). From there turn east and begin the long, steep ascent of this lower red-brown ridge. You follow the apex of this ridge, first hiking up a gravel-coated ridge and then transitioning onto rougher red-brown and orange rock. Continuing the steep climb, you encounter several small steep sections that require class three climbing and some route finding. As long as you stay on the apex you should reach the top of the initial steep climb about 2.5hrs from the start. This intermediate summit at 36°16.630'N 116°45.200'W and a elevation of 2320ft can be identified by the wire and posts of an old fence lying on the ground. The view from this vantage point is magnificent, south to the great salt lake expanse of Badwater, north over chocolate and red-brown hills toward Furnace Creek and West to the Panamint Range and the snow-covered Telescope Peak. Behind you to the east the Black Mountain range continues to rise with Dante's View out of sight and above you to the southeast. The climb may be arduous but it is richly rewarded.

A series of knolls or bumps range off to the immediate east south east. The route continues along the apex of the ridge now ascending this series of three or four knolls with small flat sections or minor descents in between. It culminates in a final steep ascent to the top of the last knoll, the high point of the loop-hike at 36°16.645'N 116°44.880'W and an elevation of 2870ft. You should reach the top of this steep approach climb about 3hrs from the start having climbed 2740ft. From this high point, you should see a saddle below you to the east (there is also one to the north-east) and the route lies down a slope of loose gravel to that eastern saddle at 36°16.665'N 116°44.791'W. Immediately to the left or north of this saddle is the drop-in to the south fork of Natural Bridge Canyon at 36°16.696'N 116°44.697'W and an elevation of 2750ft. You should reach this point about 3hrs 15min and 1.7mi from the trailhead. There is a short, steep drop at the start that is easily bypassed on the left.

As you begin your descent of Natural Bridge Canyon, you proceed down canyon for about 200yds before encountering a moderately long section with



small drop-offs. It is most convenient to bypass this section on the left though it can also be bypassed on the right. The bypass shelf on the left has an obvious point at which to descend again to the canyon bottom. From there it is a short distance to the top of the first rappel, a 30ft drop from a rock-pile anchor at 36°16.809'N 116°44.830'W and an elevation of 2440ft. You should reach the first rappel about 4.5hrs and 1.7mi from the morning start.

This first rappel is followed by a series of three modest 20ft downclimbs before you arrive at the top of the second rappel at an elevation of 2170ft. This second rappel consists of an 80ft drop from a deadman anchor; from the top there is a great panoramic view of the canyon below. Just a short distance downstream there is a rappel or downclimb of about 20ft that is perhaps best anchored by a good climber who can downclimb as the last descender. The rappels and downclimbs are now closely spaced and it is but a short walk to a 100ft sloping rappel at 36°17.014'N 116°45.053'W and an elevation of 2020ft. This is perhaps the longest descent in the canyon and is supported by a deadman anchor. Immediately below it is a downclimb/rappel of 25ft, then a short walk to another 20ft downclimb/rappel followed by yet another 15ft downclimb/rappel at an elevation of 1860ft. It should take a little less than 5hrs to reach this point.

It is but a short distance down canyon to the next series of rappels at an elevation of 1800ft. This consists of an 80ft rappel from a boulder anchor followed by a 65ft rappel from a deadman anchor and, a little further on, a 20ft downclimb through a slot on the right. Just below this you come at an elevation of 1710ft to a 60ft rappel from a rock pile anchor. This rappel follows an awkward inclined slot; it may be wise to take off your backpack for this one otherwise it



*Left: The author at the top of the second rappel. Right: In the lower canyon. Photos by Alicia Allen.*

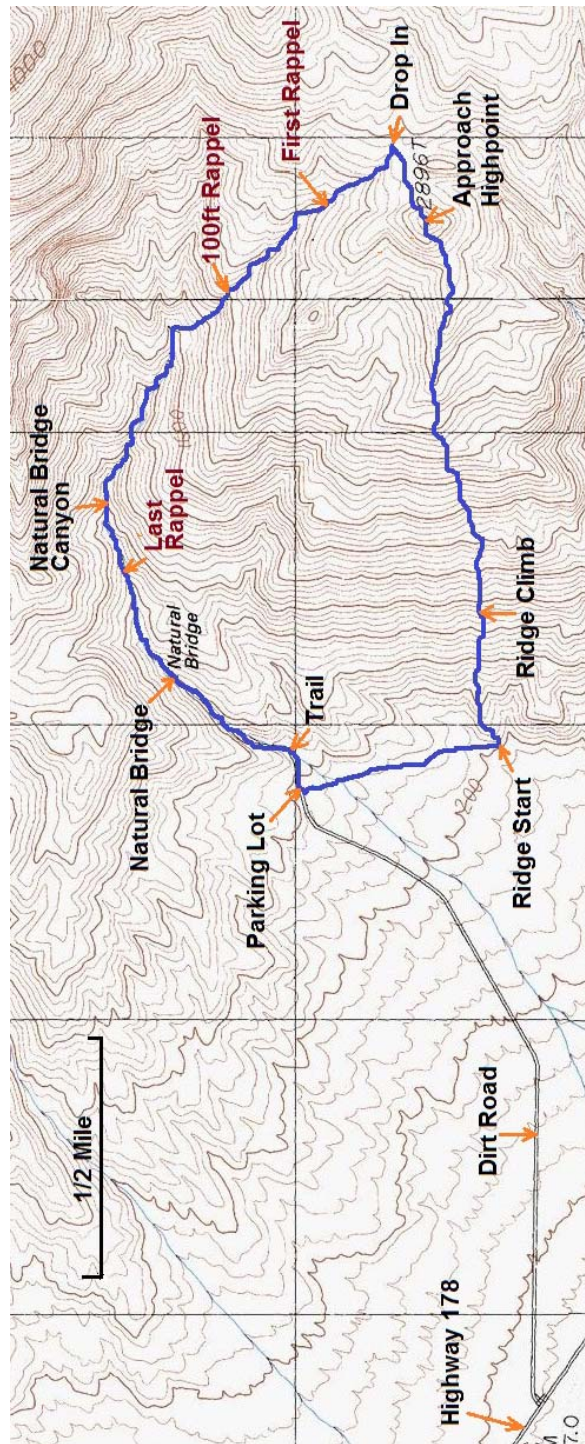
gets hung up on the ceiling of the slot. Just downstream is a large rock mass in the middle of the canyon that you bypass on the right. A short hike down canyon brings you to a 20ft vertical drop that can be bypassed using a broad ledge on the right. Just beyond this is a 20ft rappel from big boulder anchor. This difficult rappel has a very awkward entry with a large overhang where care is needed to avoid a dangerous pendulum underneath. This is shortly followed by a 20ft rappel from a rock pile anchor and another short hike.

You should reach the next rappel at an elevation of 1120ft a little more than 6.5hrs of hiking from the morning start. This consists of a 75ft rappel from a rock pile anchor with a small but awkward overhang near the top. The walls close in here and you descend into a half cave. A little easy hiking brings you to the top of an 80ft rappel from a big boulder anchor and then a readily recognized 30ft rappel from a rock pile anchor. This proceeds around a huge canyon-filling boulder and has an awkward entry with a big overhang. A short distance downstream you come to the last rappel at  $36^{\circ}17.194'N$   $116^{\circ}45.662'W$  and an elevation of 800ft after about 7hrs 15min of hiking. This is a simple 20ft descent from a rock pile anchor and is readily recognized by the old piton in the left wall (still part of the anchor!).

Down canyon from this last rappel there are obvious signs of upstream travel. After a few easy downclimbs, the canyon begins to broaden and, in the afternoon sun, there are some beautiful vistas of the red canyon walls. Now it is easy gravel hiking and, rounding a broad left turn, you get your first view of the canyon-spanning Natural Bridge at  $36^{\circ}17.083'N$   $116^{\circ}45.951'W$  and an elevation of 600ft. You should reach this point about 3.1mi from the start after about 7.5hrs of hiking. The Bridge itself looks quite temporary with large cracks in the loose conglomerate rock of which it is composed. Beyond the Natural Bridge it is an easy 10min hike to the end of the canyon and the trailhead parking area ( $36^{\circ}16.878'N$   $116^{\circ}46.189'W$ , elevation 350ft). Overall the 3.5mi hike takes about 8hrs.



*Left: Approaching the natural bridge (photo by Alicia Allen). Right: Natural Bridge.*



Map of Natural Bridge Canyon Hike

## 8.9 Keane Canyon

### Comment:

Please note that at the time of writing the National Park Service has closed the area around the Keane Wonder Mine because of mine safety hazards. Check with the Park Service before undertaking this descent.

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.3 miles
- Elevation gain: 640 feet
- Topo Map: Chloride City
- Difficulties: Seven rappels up to 120ft rappel, some downclimbing
- Special equipment: 200ft rope, 160ft recovery cord, 80ft webbing, seven rappel rings or quicklinks, rappeling equipment, helmet
- ACA Rating: 3A III

This particular hike combines two of the most attractive and interesting features of the Park. First it involves a moderate canyoneering challenge with about seven rappels up to 120ft in height (two of the larger drops are optional). But, in addition, the hike involves visits to some of the most interesting and extensive mining remains in the Park. In particular you will enjoy an extended visit to the remains of the Big Bell Mine and all its paraphernalia.

### Trailhead

This hike requires a long high-clearance (or 4WD) shuttle and the preferred strategy may be to place the return vehicle the evening before and to camp at the top that night. To place the return vehicle first drive to a point on the Beatty Cutoff 4.3mi south of the Hell's Gate entrance station on highway 374 (the road out of the Park to Beatty, Nevada). Here at 36°39.98'N 116°57.20'W you will find the marked turn-off to the dirt road that leads to the Keane Wonder Mine trailhead. Proceed north up this good dirt road for 2.7mi to the Keane Wonder Mine trailhead parking area at 36°40.06'N 116°54.58'W and an elevation of 1320ft. Leave the return vehicle(s) here.

Then, in the other vehicle(s), proceed back to the asphalt road, turn right and drive uphill to the Hell's Gate junction with route 374. Continue east on 374 toward Beatty (passing over the unmarked Daylight Pass) and 10.5mi from Hell's Gate you should come to the sign at the Nevada/California border



at  $36^{\circ}49.94'N$   $116^{\circ}52.81'W$ . Turn right here onto an unmarked dirt road (high clearance needed) and proceed south for 6.8mi to a tee-junction at  $36^{\circ}44.82'N$   $116^{\circ}49.88'W$  where you turn right and proceed southwest for another 4.0mi, re-entering Death Valley National Park along the way. The going gets better as you proceed along this section of dirt road. At the end of the 4.0mi you arrive at a road fork at  $36^{\circ}43.07'N$   $116^{\circ}53.03'W$  and an elevation of 4360ft.

The route for this hike climbs steeply for 1.8mi up the much rougher left fork at this junction and therefore requires 4WD. Since you would need to drive this three times, my recommendation would be to overnight (or park) at the junction and to hike rather than drive this last 1.8mi to the drop-in. If you decide to drive then subtract 1.8mi from the distances and 1hr from the elapsed times given below. However I note that the total time is about the same for the two modes of travel.

## Hike

From the junction where you parked ( $36^{\circ}43.07'N$   $116^{\circ}53.03'W$  and elevation 4360ft) hike up the left fork as it switchbacks up the hill for about 400ft elevation gain. It then levels out and contours around to the site of mining town of Chloride City. Continue on the obvious main route through Chloride City and follow the road as it climbs again toward a low saddle at  $36^{\circ}41.95'N$   $116^{\circ}52.66'W$  and an elevation of 5000ft. It will take about 1hr to reach this low saddle that



*Big Bell Mine.*

is 1.8mi from the parking junction. At the saddle roads go to the right, left and straight on. Go straight on and down 50yds into a shallow gully where you turn right and follow the trail down the gully. You are now in Keane Canyon.

The route down the canyon is littered with debris from the mining days when this whole area was overrun with activity. Empty, rusted food cans are particularly evident today along with the remains of many wooden structures. The uppermost section of this canyon was once a well-traveled trail though about 0.2mi down the canyon the trail leaves the canyon on the left. At this point the rocky trail foundation is particularly evident. Beyond this point the route down the canyon becomes a little harder with much downclimbing. After about 40min of down-canyon travel (1hr 40min from the start) at an elevation of 4100ft you will come to the most difficult of these downclimbs. The stream bed drops about 30ft but most of this is readily downclimbed; the last 10ft are trickier though there are many good footholds under the last lip. Alternatively you might choose to rappel using one of the good boulder anchors at the top.

About 20min later and 2hrs from the morning start you round a right hand bend and come to the marvelous remains of the Big Bell Mine at  $36^{\circ}41.56'N$   $116^{\circ}53.69'W$ , an elevation of 3720ft and 2.9mi from the start. On the left side of the canyon bottom stand the ball mill and the lower terminus of the aerial tramway that transported the ore from the mines high on the right or north side of the canyon. A trail on the right leads to the mine shafts where the ore (staurolite and biotite pelitic schist from the Crystal Spring formation) was extracted and conveyed by rail to an ore bin on the edge of the canyon. From there it was transported across the canyon by aerial tramway to the ball mill on the left or south side of the canyon. The milling complex is dominated by the remains of the ball mill and its ore bin. A little below are a number of



*Left: Second rappel (120ft). Right: 80ft rappel with overhead bucket.*

large water and cyanide tanks as well as a great array of equipment including a Mack truck that was used to transport the processed ore up the mountain to Chloride Cliff. The truck was winched up the cable road on the steep ridge behind the mill. Also worth visiting are the living quarters on the ridge top above the mine shafts on the north side. They consisted of a cluster of cabins and kitchens built on the terraced hillside and surrounded by a short stone wall for protection against the strong winds.

The Big Bell Mine has a colorful history. In 1904, two miners, Mike Sullivan and Johnnie Cyty, spurred by the success of the Keane Wonder Mine further down the mountain, recorded the ten claims that became the Big Bell Mine. Cyty was a particularly eccentric character known as “Johnnie-behind-the-gun” for his trigger happy tendencies. Work on the mine continued through 1907 until the fate of the Big Bell Mine took a sudden turn when Cyty lost his 250,000 shares in a night-long roulette game in one of Rhyolite’s gambling saloons. Cyty then turned his efforts to a mine further north but got in a dispute over that claim with a man named Kyle Smith whom he shot dead in a classic western gunfight. He was convicted of manslaughter but won his appeal and walked free. The Big Bell Mine was never really successful and remained idle for many years until 1935 when it underwent major development by the Coen Company. However, their returns were meager and the mine was finally shut down in 1937. (We spent about 45min at the mine and this time is included in the elapsed and hiking times.)

Downstream of the mine the canyon is fairly gentle until you rather abruptly come to two big vertical drops that make for fun rappels but can both be bypassed by following the trail on the left side. You arrive at the first of these vertical drops at 3390ft about 3hrs from the morning start. Several boulders just back from the lip can be used as anchor for this 100ft rappel. Below this it is only about 100yds to the top of the second of these rappels, again anchored by a boulder pile close to the lip. This second rappel drops about 120ft; the face of this rappel has much loose rock so watch for that while you are waiting at the bottom.

Below these two rappels the canyon gradient eases; the bypass trail comes down to the canyon bottom on the left and makes for easy traveling for a bit. Eventually, at 2780ft and about 4hrs and 3.6mi from the start you will come to the remains of a broken, loose rock dam and, just beyond that, a large canyon comes in on the left. Here a well-maintained trail begins to contour up the right wall of the canyon on its way to the Keane Wonder Mine. However, you do not take this trail but continue down the wash for a short way before contouring over to the right and using a lower trail to descend a short cliff in the canyon bottom. As you descend this trail look over to the left to see the remains of a stone dwelling under the short cliff.

Continuing down canyon at 2290ft and 4.5hrs from the start you pass below the remnants of the Keane Wonder Mine, one structure of which has been visible for some time above the right wall of the canyon. Moreover, from here on the remains of the bucket aerial tramway that carried the ore from the Keane Wonder Mine down to the Keane Wonder Mill at the canyon exit are

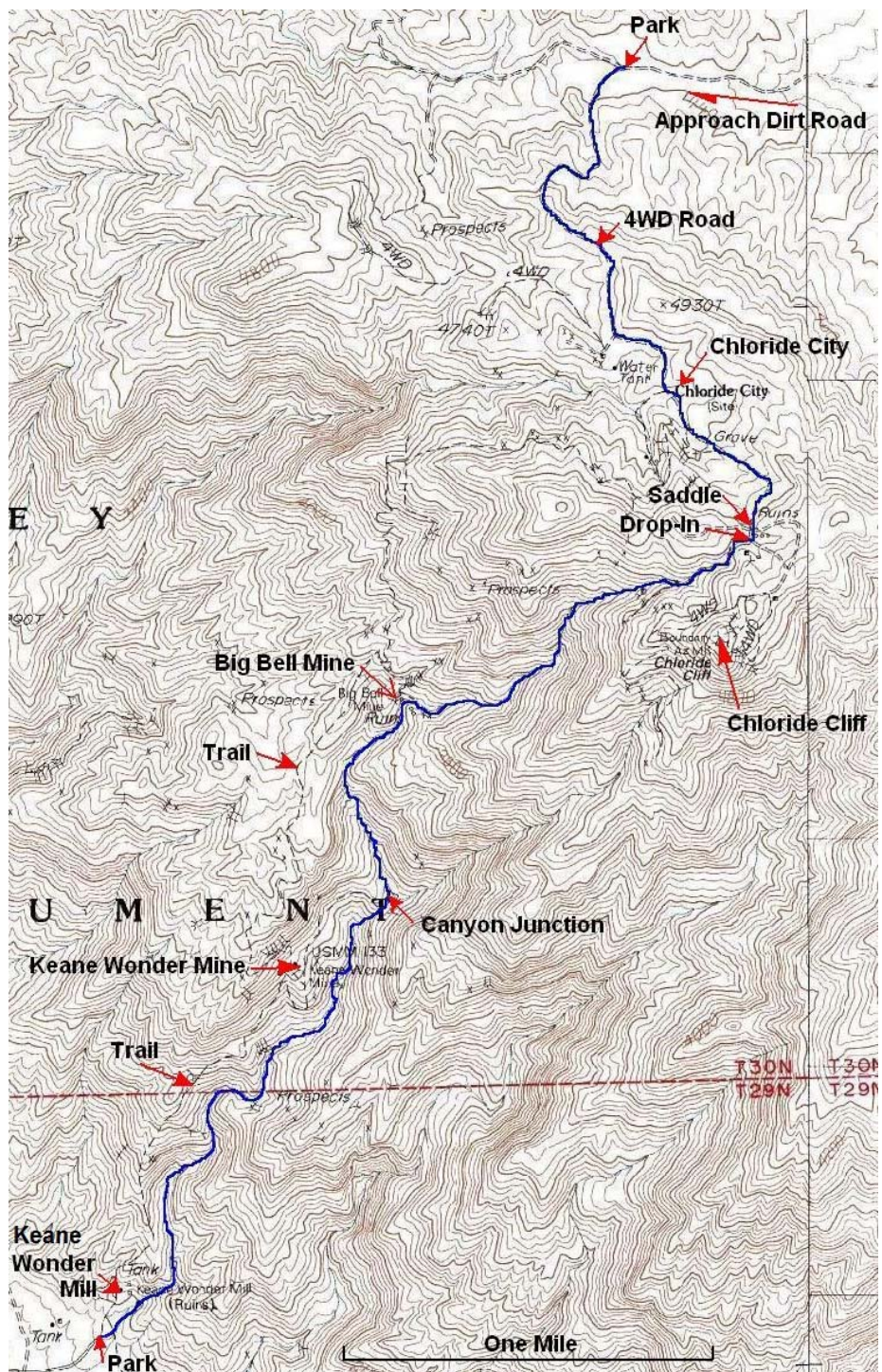
plainly evident and litter the canyon bottom. The Keane Wonder Mine was one of the most profitable mines in all of Death Valley. It was discovered in 1904 by partners Jack Keane from Ireland and Domingo Etcharren. When they uncovered a surprisingly rich vein of gold, they developed their claim and then sold it for around \$45,000. Domingo bought a store in Darwin. On the other hand, Jack Keane returned to his native Ireland. There he murdered a man and spent 17 years in prison.

Beyond the Keane Wonder Mine the canyon begins to become more precipitous. After a series of white bedrock downclimbs you will arrive about 4hrs 50min after the morning start at the top of an 80ft rappel at an elevation of about 1970ft. This 80ft rappel is anchored by a piton low in the left wall and, further back and higher, by a large chockstone in the left wall. Notice the bucket on the cable high overhead!

More rappels follow in fairly rapid succession. First at 1860ft there is a 20ft rappel in a slot that could be downclimbed on the left side. A good strategy is for the best climber to be last on this descent having body-anchored the other hikers. Just a short distance downstream at 1840ft you come to a 50ft rappel strewn with cables that can be anchored from a rock horn in the left wall. This is immediately followed by a 100ft rappel from a big boulder anchor on the right side of the lip. The polished rock here means a slippery entry to a rappel that is mostly overhung and free. A few hundred yards of gravel wash then lead to the top of the last necessary rappel at 1560ft, namely a 35ft drop from a boulder anchor on a shelf on the left side. There are two more drops left but both can be bypassed on the left. The first is a neat 40ft drop down a slot in polished white rock and the last is a short 20ft slot drop.

These last two bypasses bring you to the canyon exit where you pass the remains of the Keane Wonder Mill up on a rise on your right at 36°40.18'N 116°54.46'W. It is worth a short climb up the scree to see these ruins close-up. Finally, a short walk down the access road brings you to the trailhead parking area and your return vehicle(s) at 36°40.06'N 116°54.58'W and an elevation of 1320ft. You should reach this point about 6.5hrs from the start having covered 5.3mi.





Map of Keane Canyon Hike

## 8.10 Monarch Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 4 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4.6 miles
- Elevation gain: 100 feet
- Topo Map: Chloride City
- Difficulties: One challenging 180ft rappel, some bushwhacking
- Special equipment: 200ft rope, 200ft recovery cord, 10ft webbing, one rappel ring, rappeling equipment, helmet
- ACA Rating: 3A II

Monarch Canyon is a good half-day adventure in the northern end of the Funeral Mountains on the east side of Death Valley. It is an interesting canyon with the remains of a gold mine and a narrow gorge that is overgrown with cane in places as a result of perennial springs. That narrow section ends in a dramatic drop-off that constitutes a challenging and beautiful 180ft rappel down a slot containing a small waterfall, the runoff from the springs. Other than the drop-off, the going is easy though bushwhacking through the cane forests provides several interludes of fun.

### Trailhead



*Left: Indian Mine stamp mill. Right: Pushing through the cane. Photos by Mark Duttweiler.*



This half-day hike requires a short car shuttle. First drive to the Hell's Gate entrance station on highway 374, the road out of the Park to Beatty, Nevada. From the fork in the road at Hell's Gate, drive 0.7mi south along the Beatty Cutoff (the road to Furnace Creek) and park one vehicle at the side of the road ( $36^{\circ}42.86'N$   $116^{\circ}58.50'W$ ) in the middle of this flat, sloping alluvial plain. Before you leave this spot look over to the west at the prominent twin peaks of the Death Valley Buttes. The saddle between the twin peaks is quite distinctive and provides a readily recognized navigation aid for the last stage of the hike.

Then, in the other vehicle(s), drive back uphill to Hell's Gate and continue east for 3.4mi on highway 374 toward Beatty. Note the odometer reading carefully because the dirt turnoff from highway 374 is not prominently marked. The dirt road turn-off forks to the right and is currently only marked by a sign that reads "High Clearance, 4X4 recommended". Drive 2.3mi along this good dirt road to the readily recognized place where it crosses through Monarch Canyon ( $36^{\circ}44.23'N$   $116^{\circ}54.74'W$ ). You can drive further down Monarch for a short way but it is better to leave your vehicle(s) here and enjoy the hike down the deepening canyon.

## Hike

From the parking area ( $36^{\circ}44.23'N$   $116^{\circ}54.74'W$  and elevation 3520ft) hike down the dirt road that runs down into the canyon. The walls of the canyon rise quickly to an impressive height. Here as elsewhere in this canyon the rock and scrub have recently been scorched by fire, giving the land a stark and ominous appearance. About 0.7mi and 15min from the start a large side canyon enters on



*Left: Upper section of the rappel. Right: Lower section of the rappel. Photos by Mark Duttweiler.*

the left. As you approach this junction look up on the right canyon wall where there is an impressive hanging bowl that would be fun to access by rappeling down from the rim. At this canyon junction the stream bed quite surprisingly drops a dramatic and vertical 150ft; however an old mine road bypasses this obstacle on the left and takes you down to the flat gravel bottom downstream of the drop-off. From there it is an easy 0.3mi hike down to the remains of the Indian Mine ( $36^{\circ}43.48'N$   $116^{\circ}55.12'W$  and elevation 2900ft) that you should reach about 25min from the start.

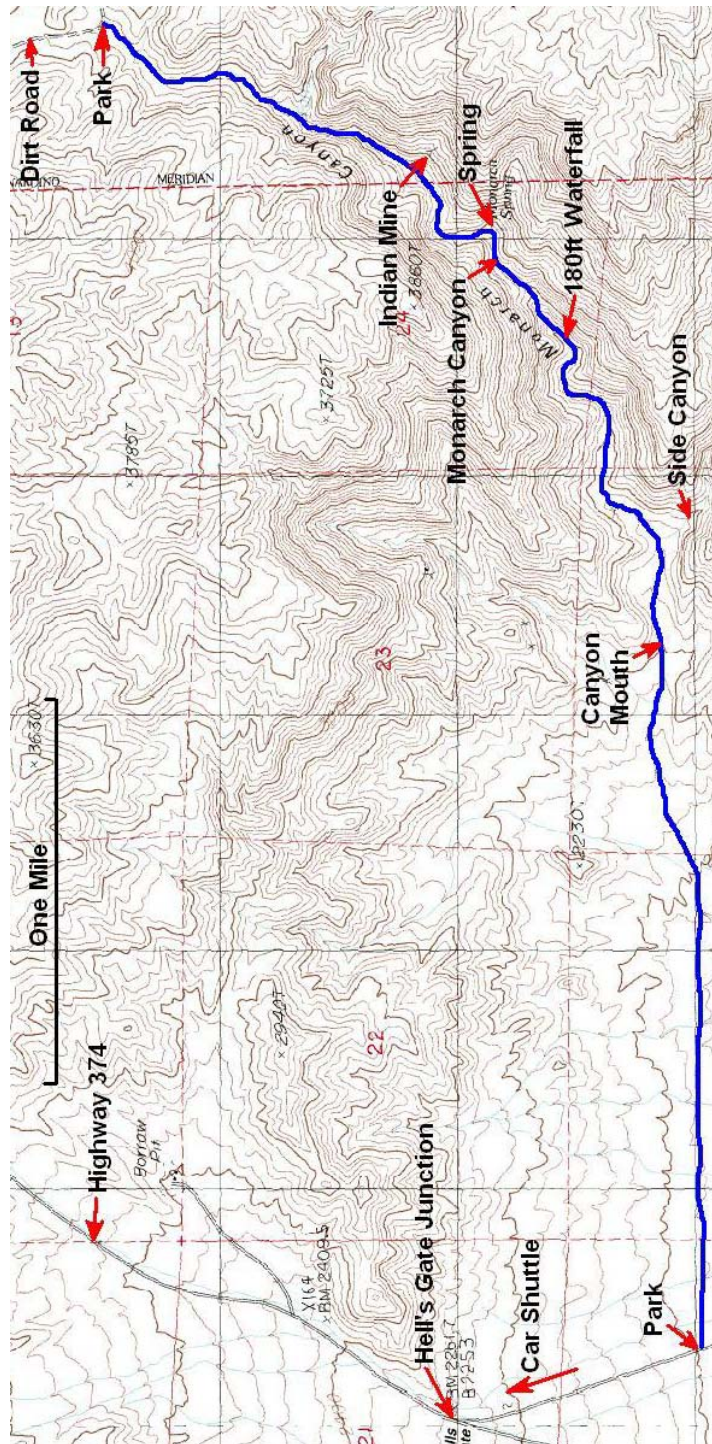
This small gold mine, known as Indian Mine, was worked off and on for about five years between 1905 and 1910 though only one shipment of ore ever left the canyon. The mine shafts are high on the left wall of the canyon and the ore was dumped down a wooden chute taking it to a two-stamp mill on the canyon floor. The ruins of the chute and the mill still remain and are interesting to examine. Further downstream are more mining remnants including a mine shaft in the left wall at the location of the first spring. As you leave the stamp mill and continue downstream, the canyon closes in and the next half mile of narrow gorge is a highlight of the day. The going is easy for 200yds downstream of the stamp mill until you come to that first spring (elevation 2940ft) where the perennial water has caused a profusion of cane to grow and completely block the canyon bottom for about 100yds. You can avoid the first section of thick cane brush by climbing up and over the low shoulder on the right but you then have to climb down and force your way through the cane for about 50yds. It is easiest to try and follow the path beaten down by previous hikers. Fortunately the cane is relatively benign and you can get a reasonably good footing by standing on clumps of bent cane. Once through the initial thicket you can find a relatively clear path around the patches of cane and bullrush. The spring water forms a small stream that flows down the canyon all the way to the rappel.

The narrow gorge ends abruptly at  $36^{\circ}43.16'N$   $116^{\circ}55.65'W$  and an elevation of 2700ft, 1.7mi and 1hr 20min from the start. The bottom drops out of the canyon; all you can see is the stream dropping about 25ft into a narrow slot and then disappearing around a corner where it clearly drops much further. You have come to the only technical challenge in Monarch Canyon and you should now don your harness and helmet and prepare for an exciting rappel descent. Though it is possible to make a dry rappel descent from the rock high up on the right, I recommend the stream bed descent that is both more exciting and prettier. It is, however, a long 180ft rappel with an awkward rope retrieval because of the corner. The anchor is a chockstone just below the level of the flat rock to the right of the slot. It is probably best to carry most of the rappel rope and the recovery line in bags since it is too far to throw them round the corner. The rappel has an awkward entry because of a sharp lip just a short distance below the anchor; the rock below the lip is severely undercut and therefore the 25ft rappel from there to the bottom of the slot is mostly free. The next stage is to walk along the water-filled bottom of the slot to the place where the slot turns to the right and plummets. From there it is a 110ft drop down the moss-covered waterfall to the large open area downstream of the drop-off. It is a spectacular and interesting rappel. You should be ready to continue down canyon about



2hrs 50min after the start.

The wide bowl downstream of the rappel leads to a broad canyon with massive great burnt cliffs that gradually lower themselves and spread out. Though there is an short downclimb just beyond the bowl, the rest of the hike is easy going over mostly flat gravel beds. About 30min from the rappel and 2.7mi from the start of the hike you come to the mouth of Monarch Canyon ( $36^{\circ}42.95'N$   $116^{\circ}56.50'W$  and elevation 2200ft). Just before that a large side-canyon enters on the left; reputedly there are some attractive dryfalls just a short way up that side-canyon. At the mouth you look out at miles and miles of flat alluvial plain stretching out into the distance. Though your recovery vehicle is visible in the middle of that vista it is so far away that it might be difficult to spot. You may first spot the occasional moving vehicle on the Beatty Cutoff that crosses the alluvial plain. In the distance and beyond the road you will recognize the twin peaks of the prominent Death Valley Buttes due west of the mouth. Head straight for the saddle between the peaks and follow this beacon for two miles across the plain to reach the recovery vehicle ( $36^{\circ}42.86'N$   $116^{\circ}58.50'W$  and elevation 1990ft). The total length of the hike is about 4.6mi and it should take about 4hrs.



Map of Monarch Canyon Hike

## 8.11 Grotto/Mosaic Canyons

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 8.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 7 miles
- Elevation gain: 3300 feet
- Topo Maps: Grotto Canyon, Stovepipe Wells Village
- Difficulties: Five to eight rappels up to 100ft, much downclimbing and some upclimbing, significant route finding
- Special equipment: 200ft rope, 150ft retrieval line, 100ft webbing, 6 rappel rings, rappelling equipment, helmets and leather gloves
- ACA Rating: 3A IV

This hike takes in two of the most interesting canyons in the park. Mosaic Canyon is both scenically attractive and relatively easy to ascend at least in each lower reaches. We then describe an ascent to the ridge top between Mosaic and Grotto Canyons and a subsequent descent through the entire length of Grotto. This begins with the upper section that is extremely difficult to access from the bottom of Grotto and is very rarely traveled. The descent involves many rappels up to 100ft in height and travels through some marvelous narrows and grottoes



*In lower Mosaic Canyon.*

in the lower reaches. It is, however, a long and arduous hike and requires a full day. The ridge top climb also demands some careful navigation.

## Trailhead

This hike requires a short but rough car shuttle with two 4WD vehicles. First deposit a recovery vehicle at the end of the Grotto Canyon access road. From Stovepipe Wells drive 2.4mi east along Highway 190 to where a rough dirt road goes south up the alluvial fan for Grotto Canyon. The turn off ( $36^{\circ}36.27'N$   $117^{\circ}6.34'W$ ) is not well marked but is the only one in this vicinity. Drive 2.1mi up this dirt road that starts on the fan and ends in the Grotto Canyon wash just downstream of the last narrows. Leaving the recovery vehicle there ( $36^{\circ}34.86'N$   $117^{\circ}6.22'W$ ), drive back to the highway and west to a point just past Stovepipe Wells where the better-graded Mosaic Canyon dirt road branches off to the south. It is 2.1mi up this road to the developed Mosaic Canyon trailhead (this access road is good for all vehicles). Park at this trailhead ( $36^{\circ}34.29'N$   $117^{\circ}8.66'W$ ).

## Hike

A decision needs to be made before leaving the Mosaic Canyon trailhead. Perhaps the easiest way to reach the high drop-in point for Grotto Canyon is to proceed directly up the ridge on the left side of Mosaic Canyon. The ridge top provides the smoothest terrain in this rugged landscape and is therefore the easiest cross-country route. Though the author did not follow this route, it was



*Left: Climbing out of Mosaic (photo by Ira Lewis). Right: Rappeling down the nose in Grotto (photo by Nathan Wozny).*

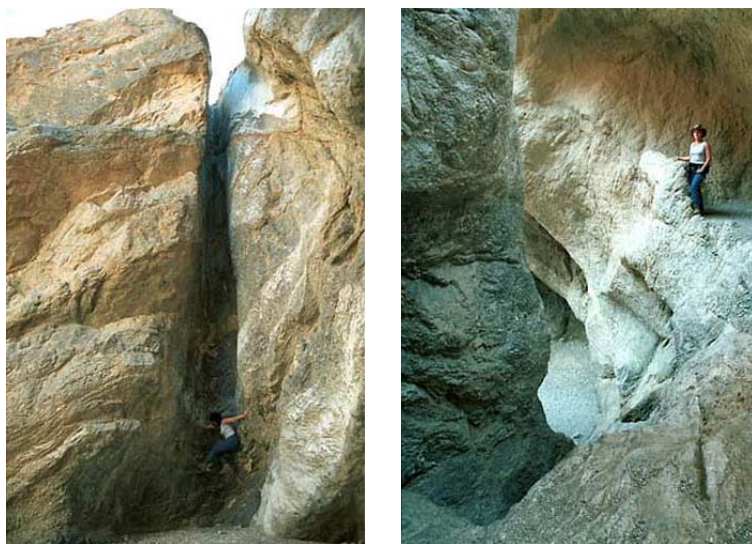


recommended by the experienced Park Ranger Charlie Callagan who has hiked the ridge top. If you choose this route then you should access the ridge top as early as possible and before proceeding too far into Mosaic Canyon. However, we describe here the route followed by the author who hiked up Mosaic Canyon before climbing to the ridge top.

From the Mosaic Canyon trailhead (36°34.29'N 117°8.66'W and elevation 950ft) it is just a short walk to the first narrows in Mosaic Canyon. Narrow but not very deep, this first defile is cut through white marble but also features the multicolored mosaic agglomerates that gave the canyon its name. After about 0.4mi the canyon broadens again and the gravel bottom makes for easy hiking. Looking up at the cliffs below the ridge line on the left you will wonder how you are going to get up there. About 25min from the start at 1370ft you will pass a marble island in mid-wash and shortly thereafter you come to the second narrows. These, in turn, end at an easy 18ft climb up an inclined rock slope with lots of hand and foot holds. You should reach this point (elevation 1700ft) about 40min and 1.4mi from the start.

Another open, gravel-bottomed section follows before you come to the second dryfall, a 25ft drop that can't be climbed. Backtrack about 100yds from the dryfall and look for a use-trail that climbs the slickrock on the left side of the canyon (36°33.51'N 117°7.75'W). This trail becomes a steep ledge trail that bypasses a deep slot in the main drainage just upstream of the 25ft dryfall.

[Note. At the low point where this bypass trail first descends, take note of a side canyon that rises steeply to the east. This canyon, if climbable, might be a quicker route to the ridge top; we believe we joined this gully for the last section of our climb described below.]



*Left: 80ft dryfall. Right: Last narrows. Photos by Lewis Shorb.*

The bypass trail briefly climbs again before descending to a broad wash upstream of the deep slot. Here, at 2100ft, you should be 1hr 20min and 2mi from the trailhead. Just about 100yds up this broad wash there is a fork where a major tributary joins Mosaic Canyon (36°33.37'N 117°7.58'W). Take the left fork and continue hiking up this tributary that has a gravel bottom making for easy hiking. About 20min up the tributary at 2450ft there is an 11ft dryfall that is easily climbed. Past this dryfall, keep surveying the left side of the canyon and about an elevation of 3100ft (and 2.8mi from the start) you should see a small, open gully that climbs steeply up to the north, angling up the overhead cliff. Leave the canyon bottom and start up this steep gully (36°33.09'N 117°7.09'W). Some distance up where the stream bed encounters a 10ft dryfall, you can climb the steep rock to the left of the stream bed and proceed through a gap to the point where the gully tops out at 3620ft. This last section needs care for the rock is very loose and fragile. Where the gully tops out you transition into a much larger gully that seems to be the same as the one noted earlier that could be entered from the bypass trail. Continue up this larger gully that provides safer and easier climbing. Fork left at the only major junction and you should top out of this gully at the bottom of a scree slope that leads, finally, to the ridge top. You should reach the ridge top (36°33.39'N 117°6.92'W and elevation 4300ft) about 4hrs from the start having traveled about 3.6mi from the start.

The ridge top is a good place for a lunch break since the view is spectacular. Looking north you are treated to an overview of the forks of Grotto Canyon and you can visually follow these all the way to where Grotto exits the mountains with a large alluvial fan. The road north of the fan is busy with tourists visiting the sand dunes that look like small ripples from this vantage point. The salt flats of the valley bottom shine in the sun and everywhere in the distance are the burnt mountains of Death Valley National Park.

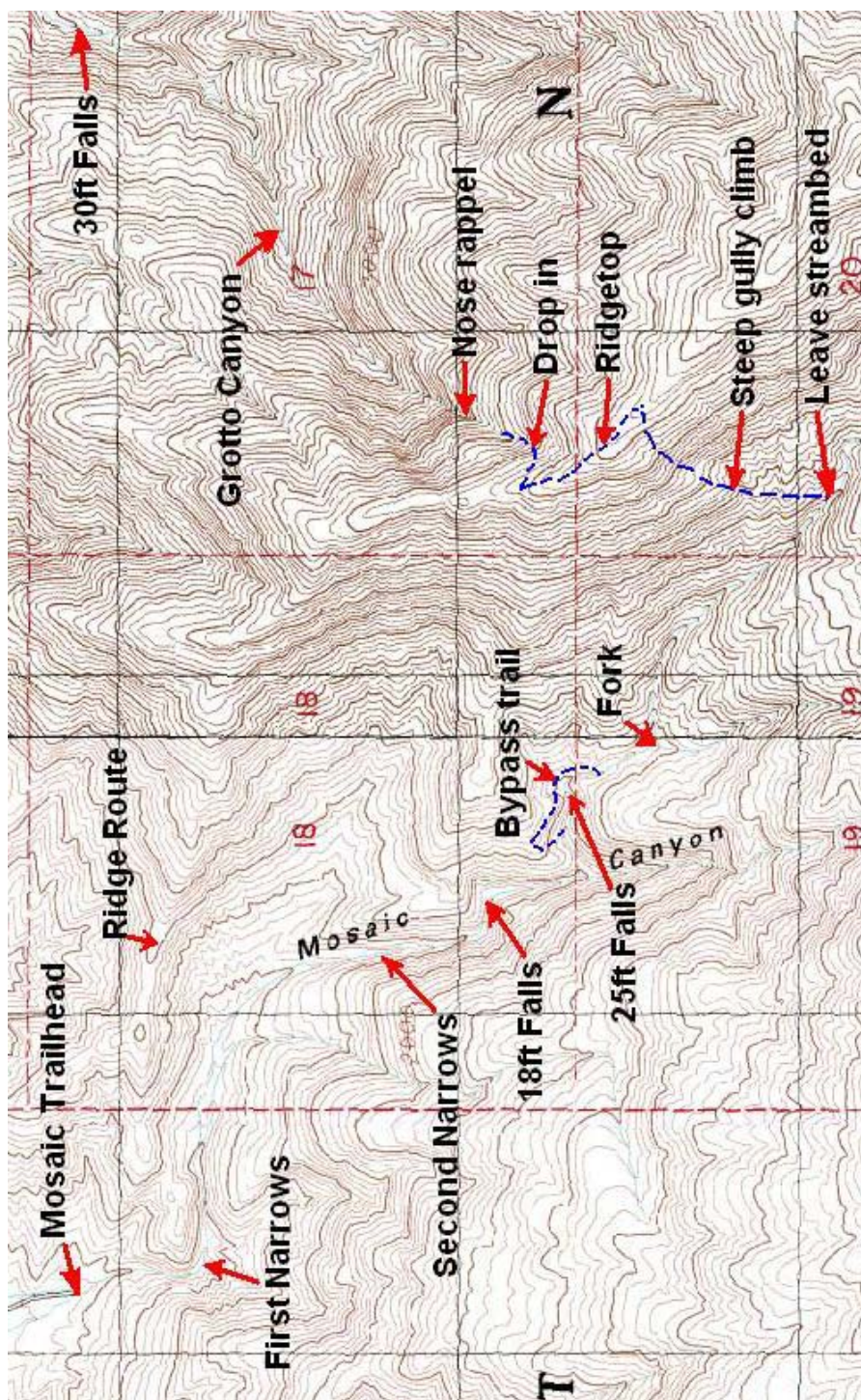
When ready to resume, you should take careful stock of your location in order to drop into Grotto at the right point. The route described above should bring you to the ridge top above the best drop-in point. Hike back down the ridge line to a saddle at an elevation of just under 4000ft where you should find the head of a broad canyon with a moderately steep but easy entry (36°33.63'N 117°7.08'W). This saddle is close to a ridge line junction: the main ridge line turns east just beyond the saddle and the ridge line from the Mosaic Canyon trailhead comes up to here from the west. Just to the west of the saddle there is a broad open area that is unusual in this steep terrain.

The descent into this west fork of Grotto Canyon is steady and easy, the terrain in marked contrast to the cliffs on the Mosaic side of the ridge top, the rock much more solid and mixed here with low brush. After a long descent to 3200ft (4.1mi from the start) you come to a big drop-off consisting of two steep canyons on either side of a prominent rock nose. Hike down the nose for about 100ft and then veer to the left side. Here we rappelled down 100ft to the base of the nose using a boulder anchor. You should reach the bottom of the nose about 5hr 30min from the start. Continuing down the stream bed at 2850ft you will encounter a 50ft rappel from a boulder anchor and, about 200ft below that, a small 20ft rappel from another boulder anchor.

The rough, rocky descent continues until, at about 1900ft and 7.5hrs from the start, you come to a substantial drop-off where the stream bed first descends four steps in a polished rock gorge before arriving at a large ledge. The first three steps are quite awkward, being about 10ft without few hand or foot holds and no easy anchors. The best strategy is for the best climber to belay the rest of the party and then spot him/her as they climb down or jump. The last step before the ledge is easily downclimbed over the right side. These descents bring you to a large ledge that overlooks a broad, rock-walled bowl that may be Digonnet's amphitheater though our altitude location was quite different. On the ledge we encountered a dramatic scene, the skeletons of a big horn sheep and a bobcat that seemed to have died together at the bottom of a cliff. To descend from the ledge there is a large boulder on the right side that anchors a 60ft rappel down to the floor of the amphitheater. Down canyon from here the floor consists of long sections of gravel between the drops and narrows.

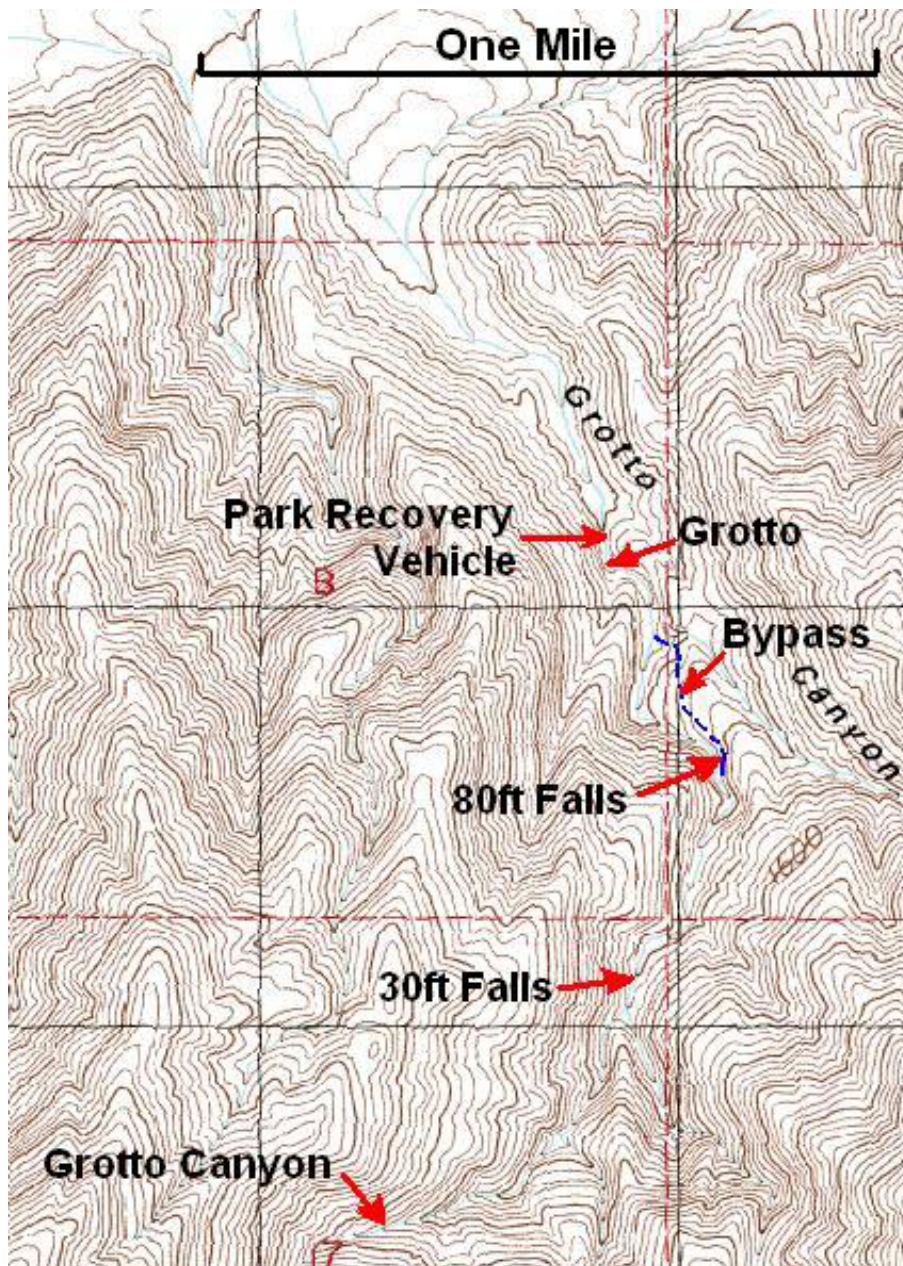
Shortly after the amphitheater a large canyon comes in on the right. After this be on the lookout for a very neat slot canyon through polished granite that also enters on the right just 30yds upstream of the next rappel. You should arrive at this next rappel at an elevation of about 1650ft roughly 8hrs from the morning start. It is a neat 30ft drop into a polished slot with a narrow exit at the bottom. There is an established webbing anchor here in a recess in the left wall of the canyon. This rappel can also be bypassed on the left using a ledge that leads to a faint ducked trail down a steep scree slope. More gravel flats then lead to another interesting section of narrows containing two drops, one 8ft downclimb followed by a awkwardly undercut 12ft drop for which there is a piton and nut anchor in the left wall. After the canyon broadens again, you arrive at 1350ft at the head of a 80ft deep slot ( $36^{\circ}34.55'N$   $117^{\circ}6.04'W$ ) that can either be rappelled or bypassed. The long bypass of the narrows downstream of this 80ft drop is up on a shelf on the right where a trail takes you down to a side canyon and hence back to the main wash. From here it is only a little distance to the short, last narrows that are wonderfully contorted. They contain two significant drops, both downclimbs with a belay. The first is an 8ft drop with overhang, the second is a sloping 12ft drop.

From this last descent it is just 50yds before the canyon broadens and you turn right to find the recovery vehicle ( $36^{\circ}34.86'N$   $117^{\circ}6.22'W$  and elevation 780ft). The total duration for the hike should be about 8.5hrs and the distance covered about 7mi.



Map of first part of Grotto/Mosaic Canyons Hike





Map of second part of Grotto/Mosaic Canyons Hike

## 8.12 Telescope Peak

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 14 miles
- Elevation gain: 2916 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Telescope Peak
- Difficulties: None in summer, steep snow slopes in winter
- Special equipment: Crampons and ice-axes when snow-covered
- ACA Rating: 1A III

Though included in this collection of adventure hikes, this ascent of the 11049ft Telescope Peak that towers over the west side of Death Valley, is a straightforward hike along a well-worn trail for the period, June through October. However, it becomes a significantly more challenging adventure when the mountain is covered in snow as is normally the case from November through April. Then, crampons and ice-axes and experience with snow climbing are required. Even quite late into May or June, the snow covering the steep slope immediately below the summit ridge can be quite a challenge.

The rewards for this effort are spectacular views of both the highest and lowest points in the contiguous United States, and the marvelous wildernesses surrounding them. The lowest point, Badwater (elevation -280ft) lies 20mi off to the east in the depths of Death Valley. Surrounded by salt flats and forbidding deserts it is, in the summer, one of the more frightening places on the face of the earth, with temperatures sometimes above 130 degrees Fahrenheit. The highest point, Mount Whitney, 70mi to the west is 14494ft above sea level, a magnificent, brutal incision in the sky, surrounded by some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in the world.

Logistically, the best way to tackle Telescope Peak is as a day hike, staying the preceding night at the Mahogany Flat campground (10 sites, no water) or at the Thorndike Campground. One additional delight is the spectacular view of the sunrise from Mahogany Flat. Note that this strategy may not be feasible when the Upper Wildrose Canyon Road is closed for the winter. Note also that no water is available either at the campground or on the trail to Telescope Peak so bring all you need with you.

### Trailhead

From California 178 between Trona and Panamint Springs on the west side of Death Valley National Park take Wildrose Canyon Road into the mountains.

Drive about 9mi along this mostly dirt road to the junction with Emigrant Pass Road. At this junction continue along Upper Wildrose Canyon Road, passing Wildrose Ranger Station. Alternatively, from Emigrant Junction on California 190 take Emigrant Pass Road south for about 21mi to the junction with Wildrose Canyon Road. Turn left onto Upper Wildrose Canyon Road, passing the Wildrose Ranger Station. From the junction drive east on the paved Upper Wildrose Canyon Road, climbing as you ascend into the high country that forms the west wall of Death Valley. After 7mi you pass the beehive-shaped Charcoal Kilns that are worth stopping to see. The asphalt ends just beyond the kilns and the road gets very steep and rough. After another 0.7mi you pass Thorndike Campground (8 sites) and, 1.6mi beyond the kilns you come to the end of the road at Mahogany Flat Campground ( $36^{\circ}13.81'N$   $117^{\circ}4.11'W$  and an elevation of 8133ft), the trailhead for this hike.

## Hike

From the Mahogany Flat trailhead ( $36^{\circ}13.81'N$   $117^{\circ}4.11'W$ ) you can see the switchbacking dirt road that climbs to the relay stations atop Rogers Peak. Instead of following that crest line, the well-marked trail contours around to the east of Rogers Peak, gradually climbing through sparse pine forest. After about 1mi you round a ridge and catch your first view of the distant Telescope Peak. You can also clearly identify the ridge line that you will ascend and then follow to the summit. Down below you on the left is the Middle Fork of Hanaupah Canyon; it leads away to the east down to the salt flats in the bottom of Death Valley. Perhaps you will be able to discern Badwater in the distance.

From this viewpoint, the trail continues to climb over increasingly barren terrain toward a 9630ft saddle in the main north/south ridge. This broad saddle



*First view of Telescope Peak.*



is 2.2mi from the trailhead and has a clump of trees known as Arcane Meadows ( $36^{\circ}12.80'N$   $117^{\circ}5.42'W$ ). From here the trail contours to the west of two moderate summits in the main ridge, the 9980ft Bennett Peak and another unnamed peak (9695ft). Here there are a few trees and the snow usually lies late in the year. Mostly the trail is rocky. Soon this circumnavigation is complete and you arrive at another broad saddle ( $36^{\circ}11.95'N$   $117^{\circ}5.44'W$  and elevation 9530ft) with great views to both the east and the west. Below you to the west Jail Canyon stretches off toward its junction with Panamint Valley. From this saddle, you continue the gradual climb up the crest of the ridge with the summit block now clearly in your sights.

Ancient bristlecone pines begin to appear above the 10000ft elevation. About the same point the ridge steepens rather abruptly and you start climbing through rocky, wooded terrain. Here the snow lies until quite late in the year. Approaching an elevation of 11000ft, the steep climb abruptly ends as you attain the summit ridge. It is a short and easy walk along the ridge to the summit of Telescope Peak ( $36^{\circ}10.21'N$   $117^{\circ}5.36'W$  and an elevation of 11049ft). Your time for the 7mi hike from the trailhead to the summit will depend on many factors, including the extent of the snow. In the absence of deep and extensive snow it should take about 4hrs.

On a clear day, the views from the summit are spectacular. On the east the salt flats and forbidding deserts of Death Valley, with the lowest point in the United States, Badwater at an elevation of -280ft. Further to the north you should be able to make out the oasis of Furnace Springs. And, on the distant eastern horizon, you may be able to see the summit of Mount Charleston. To the west, Panamint Valley; beyond that, the spectacular snow-clad peaks of the Sierra Nevada dominate the horizon. Highest among these is the highest

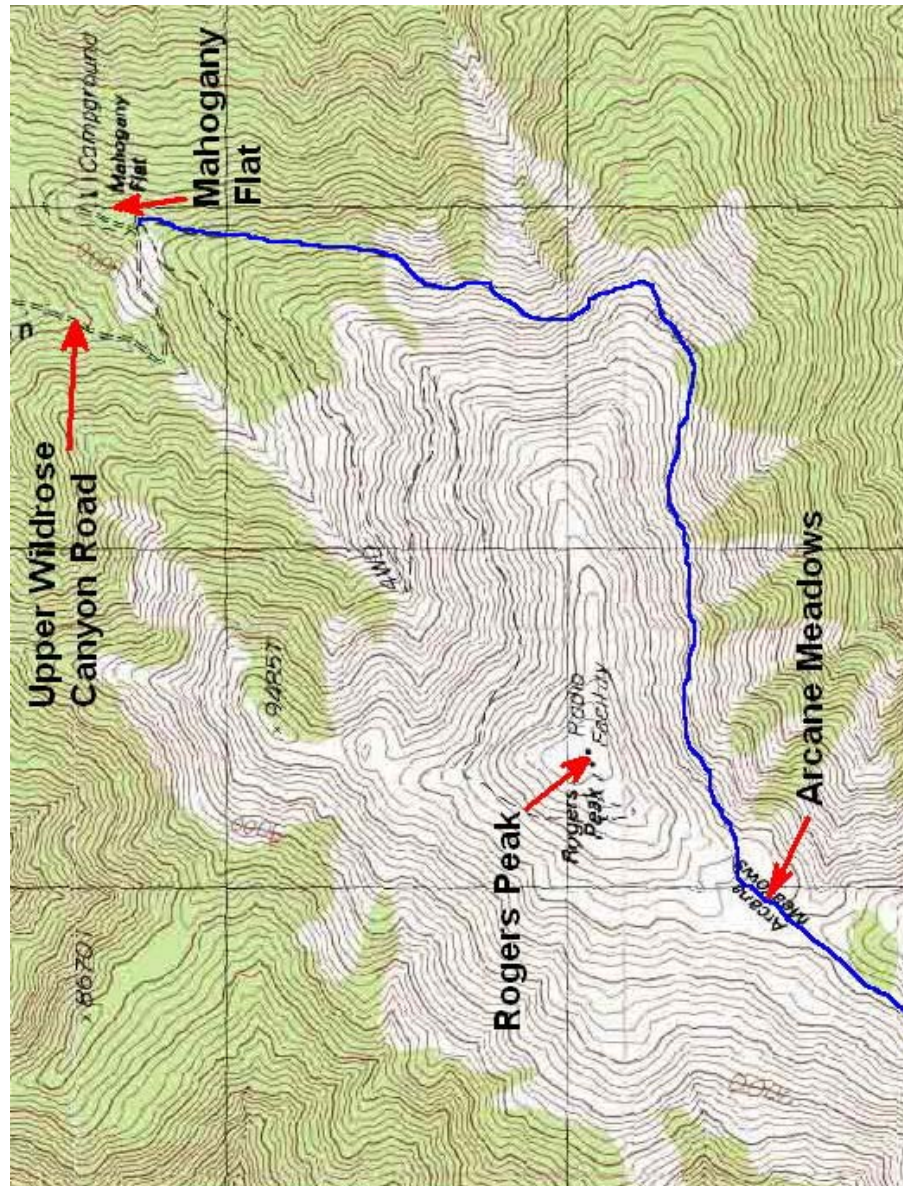


*Death Valley from the summit.*



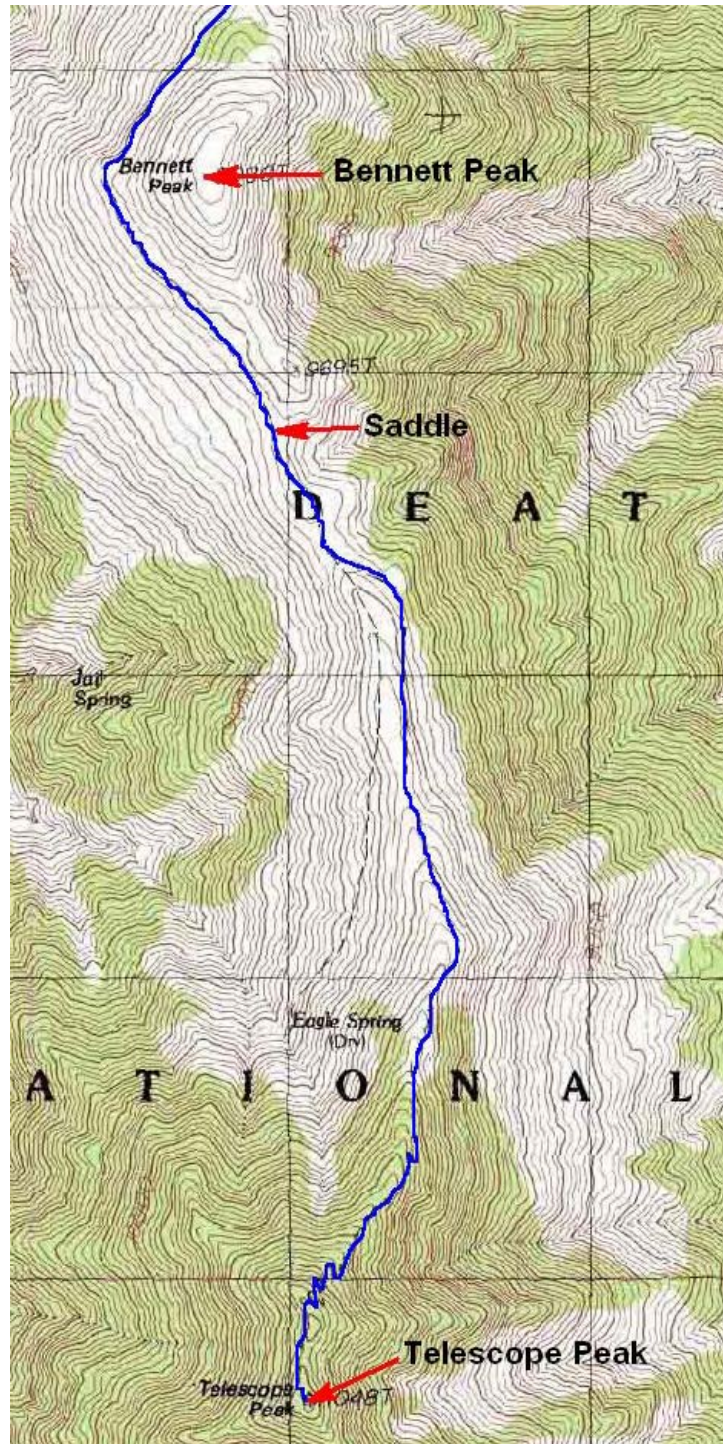
mountain in the contiguous United States, the 14494ft Mount Whitney. It is remarkable to be able to view both the highest peak and the lowest valley from the same vantage point. Closer to the summit, it is clear that travel to the south along a continuation of the north/south ridge is very rough and trail-less.

Return the way you came. The descent should take about 3hrs, again depending on the snow conditions.



Map of first part of Telescope Peak Hike





Map of second part of Telescope Peak Hike

## 8.13 Darwin Falls

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 2 miles
- Elevation gain: None
- Topo Maps: Darwin
- Difficulties: One to three rappels, up to 80ft, a little swimming and wading, bushwhacking
- Special equipment: 200ft rope, 40ft webbing, three rappel rings, rappelling equipment, helmets and drybags
- ACA Rating: 3B II

Perhaps the wettest canyoneering adventure in Death Valley is a descent of Darwin Creek. The profuse springs in the canyon create a year-round flow with waterfalls and pools that are a delight on a hot day. Located on the far west side of the park on the west side of Panamint Valley in the Argus mountain range, Darwin Canyon is close to the Panamint Springs resort. Dirt roads provide easy access to both the top and bottom of the canyon and allow for a short



*Left: 80ft Darwin Falls (photo by John Perry). Right: Second and third falls.*



but challenging half day hike with a spectacular 80ft rappel beside a beautiful waterfall. Prepare for bushwhacking and swimming.

## Trailhead

This hike requires a 4WD drive shuttle though the canyon can be explored from the bottom with a single 2WD vehicle. Access is from Highway 190; one mile west of the resort of Panamint Springs a graded dirt road branches off to the south ( $36^{\circ}20.41'N$   $117^{\circ}28.82'W$ ). Crossing Darwin wash it follows the left or southeast side of this broad gravel wash for 2.5mi to a small parking area, the Darwin Falls trailhead ( $36^{\circ}19.68'N$   $117^{\circ}30.89'W$  and elevation 2500ft). Park one 4WD vehicle here (or the single 2WD car if hiking in from the bottom) and then proceed up the rougher dirt road in the other 4WD vehicle. The road climbs to a saddle at 3760ft and then descends to a wash that it follows that all the way to the end of the road at China Garden ( $36^{\circ}18.88'N$   $117^{\circ}31.95'W$ ). Park there. The distance from car park to car park is 5mi. At China Garden there is a small camping area under a grove of trees and the remains of a mining operation.

## Hike

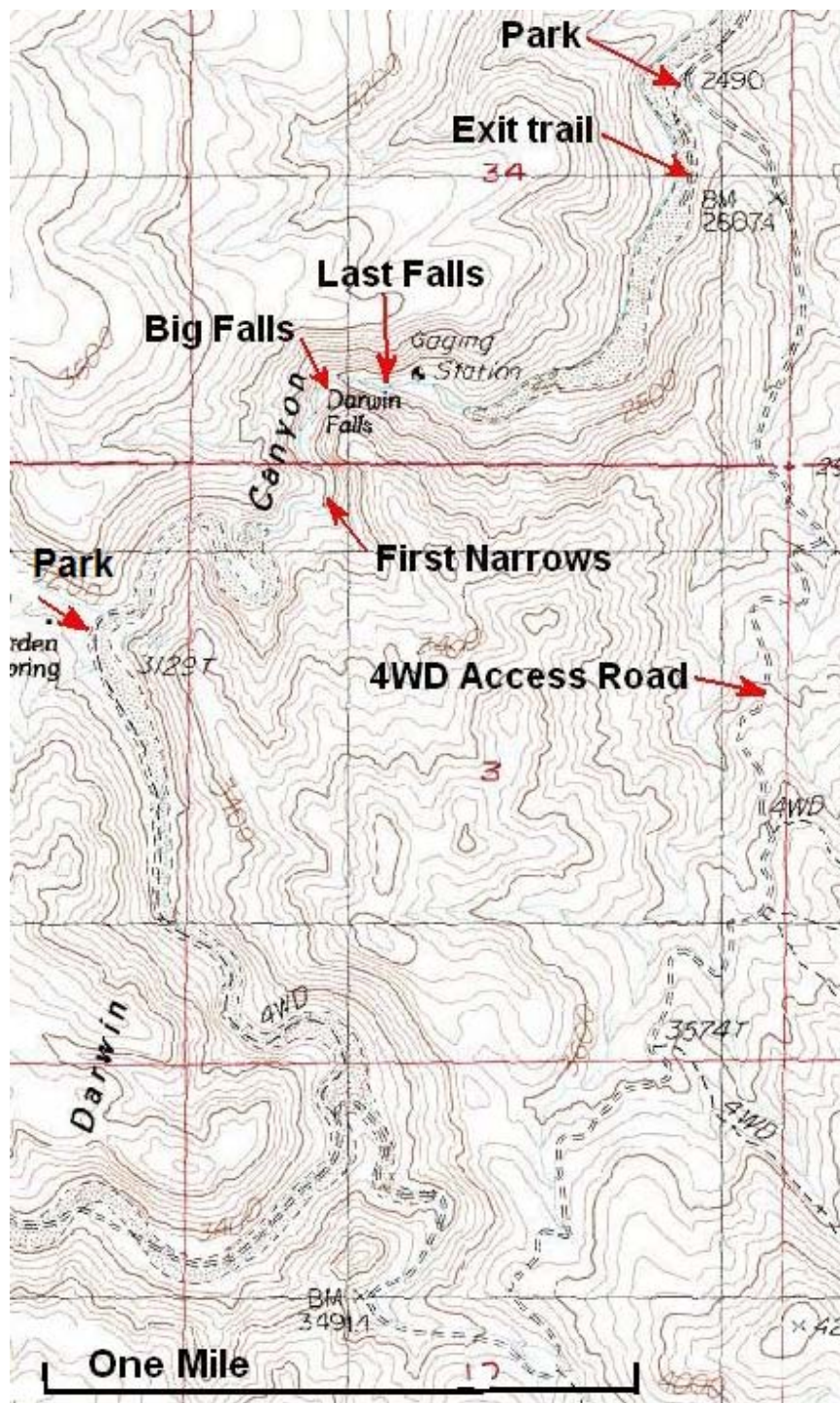
Hiking downstream from China Garden ( $36^{\circ}18.88'N$   $117^{\circ}31.95'W$  and elevation 3130ft), you pass through a metal barrier across the wash (labeled Darwin Falls Wilderness) and then continue along a broad gravel wash for about 0.6mi to where you encounter thick brush, the result of a regular near-surface water source. A trail on the slope to the right bypasses the first area of brush but soon descends to the canyon bottom just before the entrance to the first narrows. Follow the use-trail as it crosses to the left bank of the stream; on that side you can follow the rock ledge as the stream enters the first narrows ( $36^{\circ}19.08'N$   $117^{\circ}31.51'W$ ). The stream bed itself is choked with cane and, in places where the ledge disappears you have to push through the cane to make progress. At some point it is better to cross to the ledge on the right side until you arrive at a point where the canyon turns right and the stream drops through a series of small waterfalls. Here there are two alternatives. The driest is to continue to follow the ledge and use-trail on the right. This ends up crossing a somewhat unstable rock slide with exposure high above the stream before descending a break in the cliffs to the stream bed at a point below the small waterfalls. The other possibility is to cross to the left side of the stream above the falls and to work your way down with several small downclimbs or rappels. The last small waterfall is just a few feet in height but it empties into a canyon spanning pool that involves a deep wade or swim. You should reach this point (elevation 3000ft) about 1.3hr (and 1mi) after starting out.

Downstream of the first narrows follow the well-worn use-trail on canyon left for a short way and you will shortly come to a large drop-off where the stream drops vertically about 80ft into a deep slot with many pools and smaller waterfalls down below. This is Darwin Falls ( $36^{\circ}19.24'N$   $117^{\circ}31.53'W$ ). Using

the tree a short way back from the lip you can rappel down 80ft beside the falls to the edge of a plunge pool at the bottom. It is a spectacular rappel alongside a free-falling waterfall. Note that it is best to guide the rope into a prominent V-notch at the lip to avoid ending up in the water stream itself. From the landing area you must then wade or swim across the plunge pool to a rock platform in between pools. There are two more, smaller waterfalls in this grotto that can be rappelled if you wish using as anchor one of the rock horns on a ledge on the left side. Alternatively you may choose to bypass these by following the use-trail on that same ledge as it climbs up through a gap on the left. This leads to a talus slope with an easy downclimb to the base of this series of waterfalls (elevation 2800ft). Note that the descent through this grotto can be completely bypassed by climbing further up the talus slope to a broad ledge that contours around to just above the big drop; if you have difficulty with the rope recovery from the 80ft rappel this bypass could be very useful.

Downstream of this rock and water grotto, the canyon broadens a little and is overgrown with trees and brush. It is only about 100yds to the top of the last waterfall, an interesting 35ft drop into a knee-deep pool surrounded by trees. This is readily rappelled from a tree anchor. (There is also a well-worn high bypass around this waterfall on the right side of the canyon.)

From this last waterfall (36°19.25'N 117°31.39'W), there is a good trail that first winds through the lush canyon bottom (and a gauging station at 1.2mi) before the canyon broadens and dries out to a wide gravel wash. It is an easy hike down this wash to the trailhead (36°19.68'N 117°30.89'W and elevation 2500ft) where you left the recovery vehicle. The total time for the hike should be about 3hrs and the distance 2mi.



Map of Darwin Falls Hike

## 8.14 Rainbow Canyon Hike

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 7.3 miles
- Elevation gain: 860 feet
- Topo Maps: Darwin, Panamint Springs
- Difficulties: Four rappels up to 170ft
- Special equipment: 200ft rope, 200ft recovery cord, 40ft webbing, three rappel rings, rappeling equipment, helmets
- ACA Rating: 3A III

This collection contains two canyoneering adventures on the west side of the Death Valley National Park near Panamint Springs and close to Highway 190, namely Darwin and Rainbow Canyons. Rainbow Canyon, the subject of this descent, is visible to the north of Highway 190 for several miles west of Panamint Springs. It is a rugged 1000ft deep gorge with headwalls that require three long and dramatic rappels. However, after those initial technical challenges it is mostly an easy hike down the gravel wash in the bottom of the canyon. Along the way you are entertained by the multicolored walls that give this canyon its name. Toward the end we describe a short cut involving a hike out of Rainbow Canyon and back to your return vehicle on Highway 190.

### Trailhead

This hike requires a car shuttle along Highway 190. To deposit the return vehicle drive 1.8mi west from Panamint Springs up Highway 190 to a saddle at  $36^{\circ}20.77'N$   $117^{\circ}29.43'W$  and an elevation of 2410ft. Here there is a good parking area on the right side of the road that overlooks the wash to the north.

Then, in the other vehicle(s) continue west along Highway 190 as it winds its way up to the Darwin Plateau. On the way you will pass a dramatic overlook of Rainbow Canyon where you can look straight down over 1000ft into the canyon that you will be hiking later in the day. A short but rough dirt road leads down from this point to the Father Crowley overlook where the view is even more spectacular. Continuing west on Highway 190 you will come to a section around an elevation of 4500ft where Rainbow, the canyon on your right clearly runs out. Park here by the side of the road at  $36^{\circ}21.61'N$   $117^{\circ}34.78'W$  and an elevation of 4600ft. This point is 8.1mi from the return vehicle and 9.9mi from Panamint Springs. From the parking spot you should be able to discern an uninterrupted and gradual slope down to the head of Rainbow Canyon.



## Hike

From the starting point at 36°21.61'N 117°34.78'W and an elevation of 4600ft, hike northeast down over flat ground toward the head of Rainbow Canyon which should be visible in the distance. After 15min and 0.6mi you will come to the shallow wash at 36°21.98'N 117°34.27'W and an elevation of 4330ft, known here as the Santa Rosa Wash. If you encounter a cliff then contour left to find the wash.

It is just a short stroll down the wash to the first, dramatic drop-off and rappel. A horizontal layer of solid black rock rings the top of a great amphitheater that you don't really see until you are right upon it. Below the solid black layer are looser layers of yellow, red and brown rock, much more friable so that once the water managed to erode through the black it was able to dig much deeper quite quickly. You should encounter this rim about 20min from the start at 4260ft; the rappel is a 100ft vertical drop from one of several possible rock horns. It places you in a broad, boulder-strewn basin. If you wish this first rappel can be bypassed by descending a rough scree slope further around the rim on the left.

It is just a short walk down canyon to an elevation of 4150ft and the spectacular second and third falls, two rappels with vertical drops of 170ft and 90ft respectively. These take you down into an even larger amphitheater, now a massive 1000ft canyon whose walls of striped black, red and yellow rock led to the name Rainbow Canyon. The anchors for both rappels are large midstream rock piles. The 170ft rappel drops you into a large hole at the bottom and



*Left: First 100ft rappel in Rainbow Canyon. Right: Second 170ft rappel (photo by Michelle Nilles).*

this requires an 8ft climb to exit the hole. Then the lip of the 90ft drop is just a few yards away. Like the first rappel it consists of a strata of dense black rock overlaying a layer of crumbly red-yellow rock. This deposits you in a huge, fairly flat boulder field. You should reach this point (elevation 3900ft) about 2hrs from the start having traveled about 1mi.

Initially travel down through the boulder field is slow going though the stream bed gradually accumulates gravel and, as it does, this is the easiest route to follow. You feel insignificant and very alone in this huge, multicolored gorge though after about an hour you might spot the tiny silhouettes of tourists high on the southern rim at the Father Crowley Viewpoint. At about 3400ft, 1hr 10min from the rappels and 3hrs from the start, you will arrive at the top of the last rappel, a small 20ft drop where there are numerous big boulders for an anchor. After another hour or so the canyon begins to open up and the southern wall decreases in steepness and height. From this point you could continue all the way to the end of Rainbow Canyon, turn right at the exit and hike south across the desert to Panamint Springs. However, that is a long and less interesting hike and we describe here a short cut that substantially decreases the length and duration of this part of the hike and takes you back to where you left the return vehicle.

About 4.1mi from the bottom of the big rappels, 5.1mi and 5hrs from the start at 36°21.88'N 117°30.22'W and an elevation of 2200ft you should be able to discern a fairly easy climb up the right side of the canyon to a flat plateau on top. The actual climb is easier than it looks because the rocks make good footholds and are mostly very secure. It is a 420ft ascent up to the surprisingly flat plateau. If you are fortunate you may encounter a small and interesting dry lake on top.

Highway 190 should now be visible to the south and so you hike in that direction and descend into the next wash that runs below and just to the north of the highway. Cross the wash and choose a suitable route to ascend to the highway, another climb of about 440ft. The saddle where you left the return vehicle will have been visible for some time and so the last leg is a brief descent

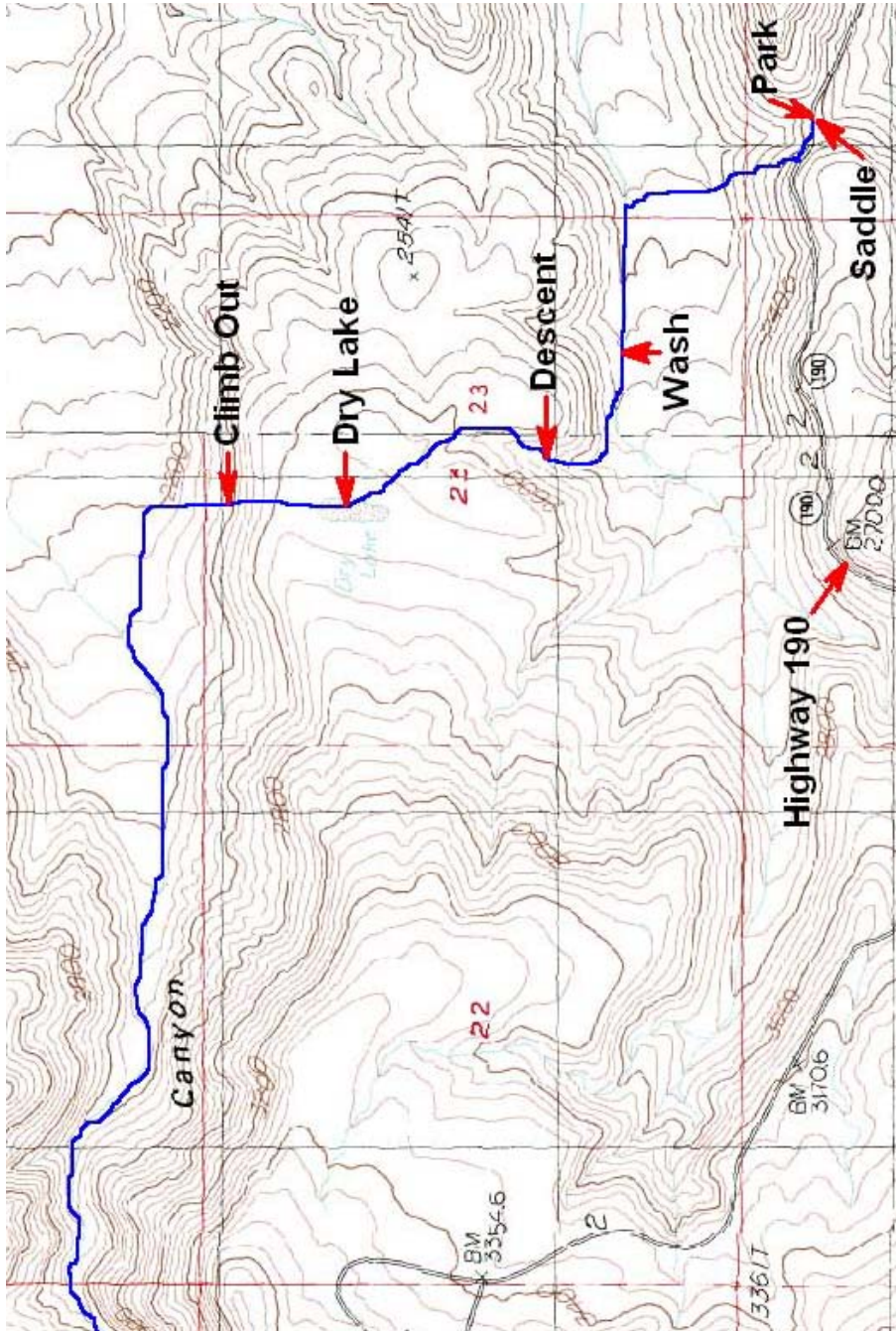


*Left: Third 90ft rappel. Right: Rainbow Canyon. Photos by Michelle Nilles.*

along the road to the saddle at  $36^{\circ}20.77'N$   $117^{\circ}29.43'W$  and an elevation of 2410ft. The complete hike should take about 6.5hrs during which you cover about 7.3mi.







Map of second part of Rainbow Canyon Hike



## Chapter 9

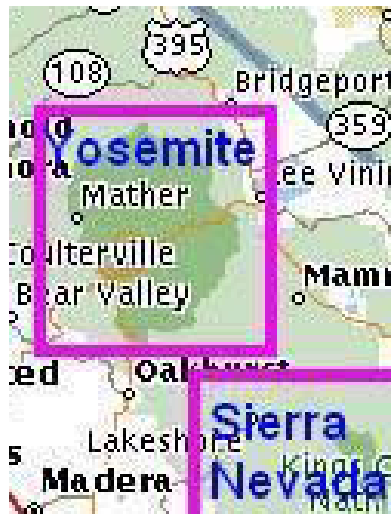
# YOSEMITE

It was Abraham Lincoln who set a marvelous precedent for the world when he signed the bill in 1864 establishing Yosemite as the nation's first state park; twenty six years later it became a National Park. Yet the magnificence was revered before the white man ever set foot in this land of spectacular natural beauty. The Yosemite Indians who lived on the floor of the valley created stories to explain the awesome monuments around them but could not have imagined how their reknown would spread all the way around the world.

That band of native Americans who called themselves the Ahwahneechees were living in Yosemite Valley (which they called Ahwahnee) when the white men first arrived. They were led by a shrewd old chief, Chief Tenaya, after whom Tenaya Creek and Canyon are named. Numbering about 200 the Ahwahneechees had already been ravaged by the white man's diseases that had preceded him. Sometimes the younger men would travel west toward the lowlands to poach from the white settlements and ranches there. But generally they lived peaceably on a diet of acorns, roots and game.

In the early 1850s, the white settlers decided to remove the Ahwahneechees to a reservation near Fresno and sent a battalion of men to effect this deportation. Needless to say the Ahwahneechees did not want to leave their valley. There followed a number of evasions and negotiations and escapes. Months passed and when a second battalion under a Captain John Boling entered the valley to resume the deportation effort, the confrontation turned violent. Several young Indians were captured and one was shot while trying to escape. This young man was one of Chief Tenaya's favorite sons. When the old chief was informed, he was enraged and during a confrontation with Captain Boling expressed that anger in laying a curse on the white man:

*"Kill me, sir captain! Yes kill me, as you killed my son; as you would kill my people if they were to come to you! You would kill all my race if you had the power. You have made me sorrowful, my life dark;*



Yosemite region.

*you killed the child of my heart, why not kill the father? You may kill me sir captain, but you shall not live in peace, I will follow in your footsteps, I will not leave my home but be with the spirits among the rocks, the waterfalls, in the rivers and in the wind; wheresoever you go I will be with you. You will not see me, but you will fear the spirit of the old chief, and grow cold.” (from Elizabeth Godfrey’s “Yosemite Indians”.)*

To this day, Yosemite Valley and Tenaya Canyon are haunted by the spirits of the murdered boy. Indians and white men alike tell tales of mysterious accidents and unaccountable deaths that they attribute to the curse of Chief Tenaya. Tenaya Canyon remains a particular focus of those legends. Among the adventures described herein is a descent of Tenaya Canyon.

The great climbing adventures of Yosemite National Park are legendary and well documented. In this book we focus on just a few, select adventures, some well-known such as Half Dome, some notorious such as Tenaya Canyon and some historic such as Cathedral Peak and Indian Canyon. Of course, wherever you go you inevitably encounter the spectacular monuments of this beautiful, national treasure, the incredible rock monuments of Yosemite Valley, the glorious vistas of the high country meadows and the awesome spires of towering rock.



## 9.1 Half Dome

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 15.7 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 29 miles
- Elevation gain: 3500 feet
- Topo Map: Yosemite National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: Steep climb up and down the Half Dome cable-way
- Special equipment: Leather gloves
- ACA Rating: 3A V

Half Dome adorns the great Valley of Yosemite like a crown jewel. Its symmetric shape and sheer polished walls are known throughout the world and people flock to this corner of California to see Half Dome and the other colossal monuments of Yosemite National Park. The Yosemite Indian legend of Half Dome tells the tale of a young married couple, Tis-as-ack and her husband Nangas, who disturbed the peace of the valley when he abused her and she retaliated. In retribution, the gods turned them into cliffs of granite that face each other silently and forever. The husband Nangas became the Royal Arches and his wife, Tis-as-ack was transformed into Half Dome. The Yosemite point to the dark streaks rolling down the great face of Half Dome and claim they are the tears of Tis-as-ack as she ran from her husband.

The geological story is nearly as dramatic and tells of a great projection of granite sheared in half by the glacier that formed Yosemite Valley. Today the 8836ft monolith continues to be weathered by the ice that sheds slabs off the surface in a process likened to the peeling of an onion. But this occurs over geological time. Over climbers' time the rock is quite stable (despite the occasional rock falls). Yosemite is often called the world center of big wall climbing. Many techniques developed on the awesome walls of El Capitan and Half Dome revolutionized the sport. In part this was due to the high quality of the granite for, embedded in the granite, are nodules of harder rock that provide excellent natural hand holds. So today Half Dome is a favorite with big wall climbers who regularly find their way up the sheer northern face of the monument, past the tears of Tis-as-ack. The other sides of Half Dome are less steep but still present a serious rock-climbing challenge. The easiest of the routes is up the eastern shoulder where the slope gets down to a still very steep 46 degrees. This route was first climbed by George Anderson in 1875; then in 1919 a system of cables anchored to the rock was installed and, for the first time, allowed the summit to be attained without technical equipment. The route, the

subject of this adventure, is still challenging and dangerous with breath-taking exposure. But it is within the capability of the experienced hiker.

But before Half Dome, this adventure hike begins in Tuolumne Meadows and travels through some of the most beautiful high mountain scenery in the world. It then follows a long, cross-country route to the back of Half Dome. After an overnight stay, you climb Half Dome early in the morning before the crowds arrive. Descending from the peak you then follow the popular trail past Nevada Falls and Vernal Falls down into Yosemite Valley.

## Trailhead

The hike requires a backcountry permit that you can obtain from the Backcountry Office in Yosemite Village. They will also supply you with a parking permit and a map showing the location of the parking lot for overnight hikers. The Backcountry Office also rents bear-proof food cannisters at a very reasonable price and I strongly recommend renting one of these for bear predation on backpackers food has reached epidemic proportions.

Then, early on the first morning of your hike at about 7.30am, after parking your vehicle in the appropriate lot (37°44.05'N 119°33.88'W), you should catch the valley shuttle bus to Yosemite Lodge. There you can breakfast in the Lodge cafeteria before catching what is known as the “hikers bus” bound for Tuolumne Meadows. Leaving from Yosemite Lodge every morning at 8.20am, the hikers bus first stops at Crane Flats gas station before proceeding along the Tioga Road where it stops by request at any trailhead on the way to its terminus at Tuolumne Meadows. The stops may include White Wolf, Yosemite Creek, Olmsted Point and both ends of Tenaya Lake before reaching the stop for this



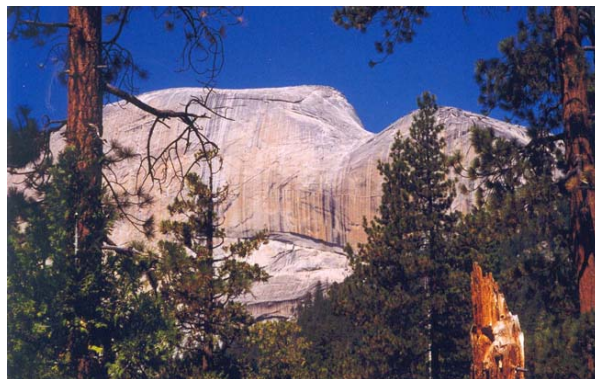
*Half Dome from Glacier Point with Nevada and Vernal Falls on lower right.*

hike, namely the Cathedral Lakes trailhead ( $37^{\circ}52.41'N$   $119^{\circ}22.97'W$ ) just a mile or so before the terminus in Tuolumne Meadows.

## Hike

Tuolumne Meadows (elevation 8600ft) and the surrounding high country is some of the most beautiful country in the world. The combination of buff granite monuments, conifer forest, lush natural meadows and crystal streams, cascades and lakes creates an environment that glitters in the summer sunshine and in the winter snows. There is an inevitable sense of exhilaration as you start up the trail south of the Cathedral Lakes trailhead ( $37^{\circ}52.41'N$   $119^{\circ}22.97'W$  and elevation 8560ft). From the meadows, the trail climbs gently through open conifer forest and across small alpine meadows as it rounds the western side of Cathedral Peak. Initially the view backwards includes Tuolumne Meadows but as the trail turns and rises there are some scenic views of Fairview Dome to the north. After about 1hr 40min and 3.1mi you come to the junction (elevation 9360ft) with the spur trail down to lower Cathedral Lake; keep to the left along the main trail and you will arrive at the beautiful upper Cathedral Lake (elevation 9585ft) about 15min later. This is a truly magnificent place and a delightful lunch spot. If you have time a circuit of the lake will provide some great mirroring views of the twin spires of Cathedral Peak (10940ft) and Eichorn Pinnacle towering over the eastern shore of the lake.

Leaving Cathedral Lake, it is a short climb to the shallow Cathedral Pass ( $37^{\circ}50.08'N$   $119^{\circ}24.94'W$ , elevation 9680ft and 2hr 10min from trailhead) where you enter a very pretty flat meadow, the starting point of Echo Creek which flows south into Little Yosemite Valley. This is gentle high country and the trail contours gradually along the right side of the meadow and the lower eastern slopes of Tresidder Peak as it rises slowly above the valley. Eventually it reaches the ridge and rounds the base of Columbia Finger before rapidly descending the other side of the ridge into another beautiful meadow, Long Meadow. Once in the meadow, it then meanders downstream beside the stream until, 7.1mi from



*Left: Cathedral Lake and Peak. Right: Half Dome from the back.*

the start, it arrives at the marked junction with the Echo Creek trail (at 9320ft). This fork is at the head of a lower section of the aptly named Long Meadow and you take the main trail that continues along the right side of this large meadow. After traveling south for a spell, the route leaves the main stream and follows the right edge of the meadow as it turns right up into a short side branch. Just after this right turn you pass Sunrise High Camp (37°47.72'N 119°25.96'W, elevation 9280ft and 8mi from start) built on the rocks a little above the meadows on the right. You will reach Sunrise (8mi from the trailhead) about 4hr 40min after setting out.

Beyond Sunrise, the trail rounds the head of this side branch of the meadow and arrives at a junction, the left fork being the way to Half Dome and the Valley. Beyond the fork, it climbs a short way to a saddle and crosses a stream with the last water for a few miles. There follows a long gradual climb along the side of Sunrise Mountain; eventually this culminates in a broad ridge saddle with the first spectacular views toward the monuments of Yosemite Valley. The trail then begins a steep switchbacking descent of about 1200ft beside a small creek. At the bottom of this tough descent, the trail flattens out into a welcome easy stretch through dense forest and then transitions into another long flat section in a natural trough along the top of an ancient moraine. This brings you (13.7mi from start) to two trail junctions in rapid succession: the first at 8200ft is the Forsyth Trail joining from the right and the second at 7880ft is the high trail left to Merced Lake. The main route then contours into the small valley of Sunrise Creek, a fine clear stream with great drinking water. You descend first along the left bank and later cross to the right. The proximity of the upcoming junction with the Clouds Rest trail can be judged by the increasing frequency



*Left: From the Half Dome trail. Right: Half Dome cable way.*

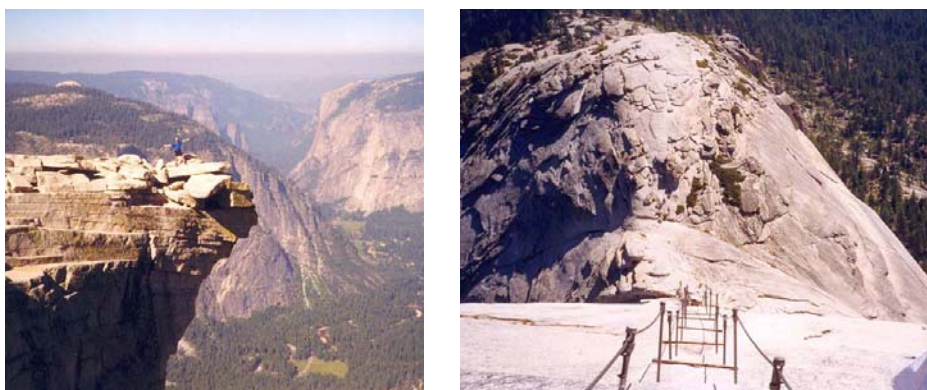


of obvious but unofficial backpacking campsites.

You should arrive at the junction with the Clouds Rest trail (7200ft and 16.4mi from start) about 7hr 40min after setting out. There are many attractive campsites scattered about in the forest around this junction including a number along the banks of Sunrise Creek. It is an excellent place to camp overnight. There is a particularly nice site atop the rocks just a few yards up and to the left of Clouds Rest trail. The only problem is that bears regular tour these sites looking for food. Thus it is wise to have a bear-proof container in which to store your food overnight.

Setting off the next morning, you travel down the trail toward Half Dome with increasingly spectacular views of the rock. After contouring along the east end of the base of Half Dome for about 0.7mi, you arrive 20min from the start at the junction with the spur trail that leads up toward the monolith. The junction at  $37^{\circ}44.72'N$   $119^{\circ}30.73'W$  and an elevation of 7000ft is 17.1mi from your Tuolumne Meadows starting point. Stow your pack out of sight of the trail and carry only your water bottle, wallet, camera and warm jacket as you hike up the steep trail toward Half Dome, 2.6mi away. The initial climb follows a series of switchbacks up a steep wooded slope that eventually reaches an overview of Yosemite Valley and Tenaya Canyon. Then it climbs the apex of a wooded ridge, approaching Half Dome from the east. This culminates in a broad level gathering site at the top of the wooded ridge. Here the trail makes an abrupt transition onto steep, bare rock and increased care must be taken on a number of accounts. Not only is there the danger of a substantial fall but also, as the signs warn, a very real danger from lightening when storms are threatening. Large signs warn you not to proceed any further if there is any sign of an impending storm.

Rock steps have been constructed on this steep rock slope and allow fairly easy though slow upward progress. You will now begin to recognize the increasing exposure and the increasing heights below this switchbacking stairway. Gradually the slope lessens and you climb onto a bare rock shoulder on the



*Left: On the "Diving Board". Right: Looking down.*

east side of Half Dome. This is the shoulder that is readily visible from far below and, looking down, you recognize just how far you have climbed up the monolith.

But this is nothing compared with the sight directly ahead of you as you broach the shoulder. Suddenly, the most amazing sight presents itself. On the other side of a shallow saddle separating the shoulder from the peak of Half Dome is a very steep “trail” straight up a seemingly smooth, vertical rock face to the summit about 400ft above you. It is awe-inspiring not only for its apparent verticality but also for its exposure and height. The “trail” ahead consists of two thick steel cables about 3ft apart. At intervals, these are anchored to bolts fixed in the rock face; they are also raised above the rock surface by passing through loops on the tops of steel posts loosely set in holes drilled into the rock. A two-by-four is laid across between the pairs of posts to act as a step for resting.

Before starting up this intimidating trail, you should rummage through the large pile of gloves at the bottom and try to find a pair in only a modest state of disrepair. Unless, of course, you had the excellent foresight to bring your own gloves. If so I strongly recommend a pair of leather workman’s gloves.

From the shoulder the trail up the cable way looks exceedingly frightening and quite vertical. Many decide not to proceed but to watch their fellow hikers tremble their way to the top. However, the ascent is not as scary as it looks. Despite the exposure it is a fairly easy, though tiring climb. In fact the slope is only about 46 degrees. There is a short, steeper section in the middle of the ascent and there it is preferable to have good soles on your hiking boots (sneakers would be much less secure). Near the top the slope eases and, all of a sudden, you are but a few yards from the 8842ft summit of Half Dome (37°44.77’N 119°32.00’W). This is right on the edge of the famous, vertical face you view from the valley below and in just a few yards you can look straight down 4800ft to the floor of Yosemite Valley. It is a truly awesome view. To the west you see busy Yosemite Valley and the prominent profile of El Capitan. To the northeast you look up Tenaya Canyon and Tenaya Lake can be seen in the distance. To both the north and south are breathtaking views of the rugged high country of Yosemite National Park.

There is one prominent rock projection that juts out from the summit over the top of the 4800ft vertical face. Known as the “diving board”, it makes for an awesome photograph. However, all too soon it is time to start back down. Some find the descent more frightening than the ascent because you must look down rather than up to see where you are going. The security of leather gloves and lug-soled boots are particularly reassuring. The rest of the descent to the trail junction is uneventful by comparison.

You should arrive back at the Half Dome trail junction (22.3mi from the start) about 3.5hr after the morning start. From there you proceed down the steep, rocky trail (2.2mi) to the floor of Little Yosemite Valley (6080ft). There the serene Merced River winds along the floor of Little Yosemite Valley, providing a fine rest spot and a place to fill up with enough water for the rest of the day. The trail follows the quiet course of the Merced for about half an hour

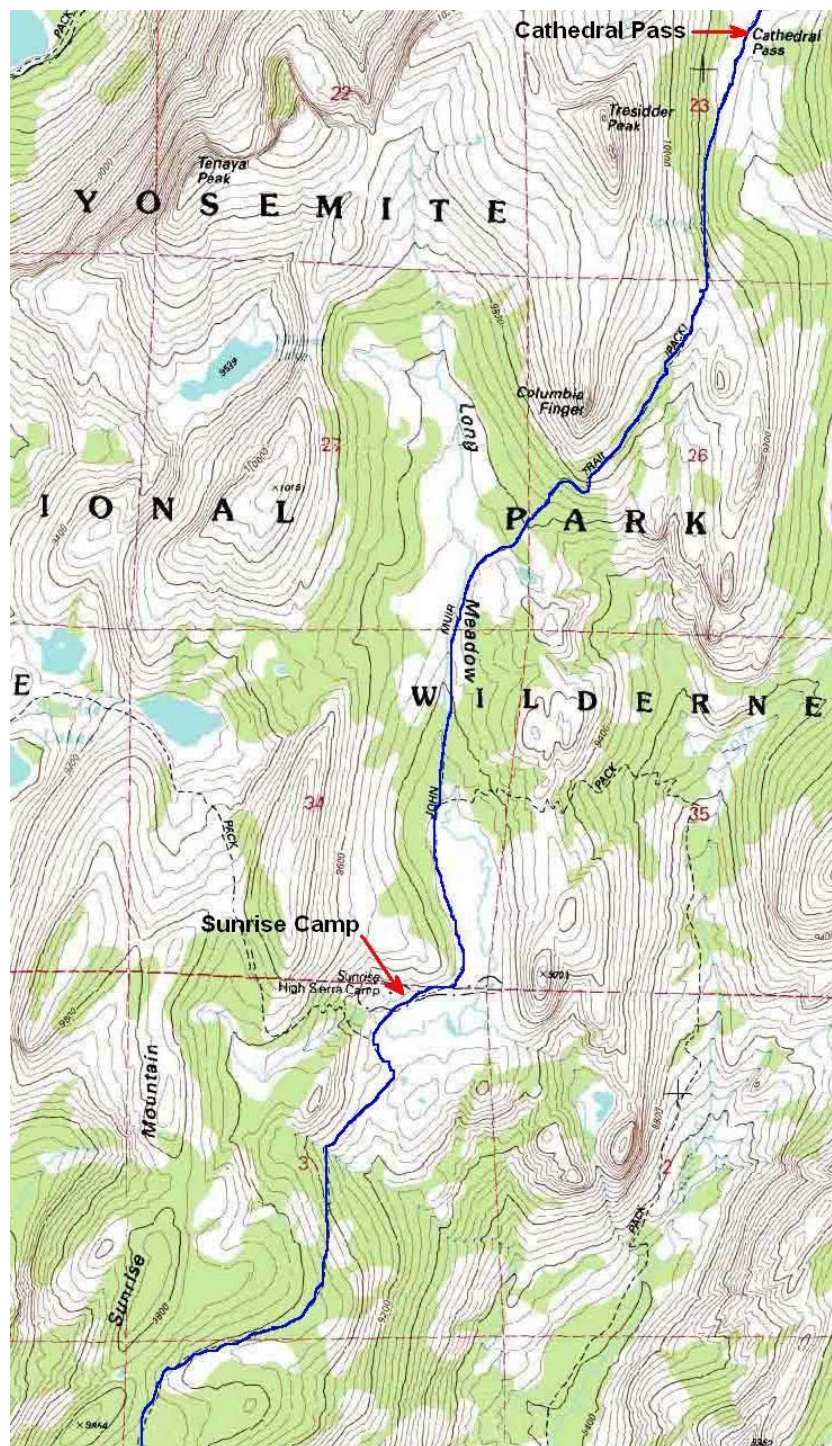
and then, about a mile from where it first came down to the valley floor (and 25.7mi from start), it begins a sudden and precipitous drop down a dramatic cleft to the left of main course of the river. A short way down this steep descent, a marvelous view of the spectacular Nevada Falls (37°43.51'N 119°32.05'W) is unveiled. The crashing spray and thunder of the falling water reverberates the rock and generates localized rainfall. It is a spectacular sight.

Below the base of the Nevada Falls, the trail crosses a bridge over a dramatic water chute and descends the left side of the river past a lovely little lake, a great place for a swim. Many tourists from the valley ascend this far and so the crowds increase as you progress. Shortly you will arrive at the top of Vernal Falls. The route around this obstacle is a steep staircase along the cliff wall on the left. A restroom and water fountain at the base of this descent cater to the now excessive crowds. Another bridge leads back to the right side of the canyon for the last leg down along an easy asphalt trail to the valley bottom at Happy Isles (37°43.96'N 119°33.52'W, elevation 4035ft and 28.8mi from the start). There you should cross to the left bank of the river and find the Happy Isles Shuttle Stop. The hiker's parking lot (37°44.05'N 119°33.88'W) is a short walk along the road toward Curry Village. You should reach there about 7hr 40min after the morning start.



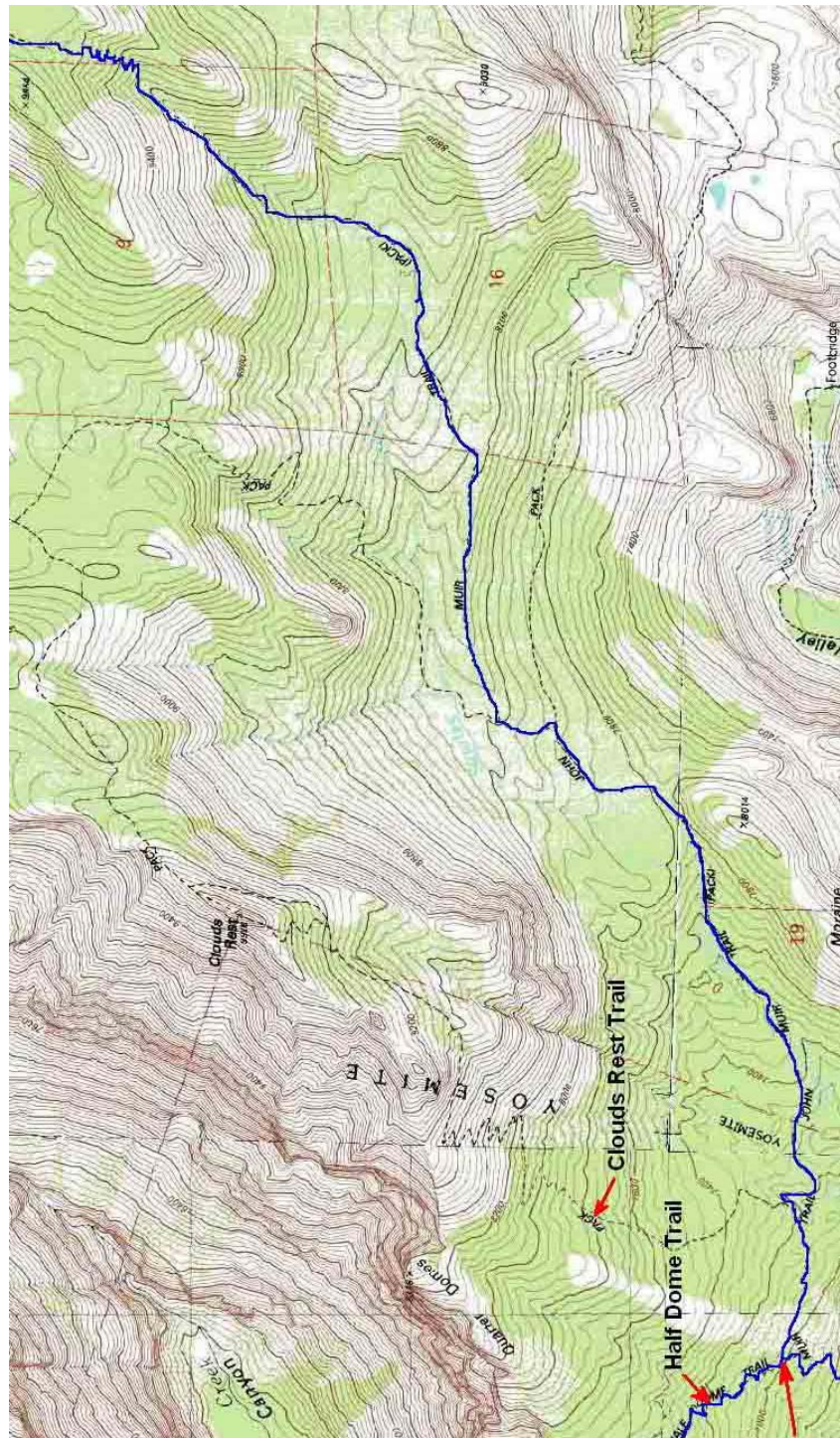
Map of first part of Half Dome Hike





Map of second part of Half Dome Hike





Map of third part of Half Dome Hike





Map of fourth part of Half Dome Hike

## 9.2 Indian Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 8 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 7.7 miles
- Elevation gain: 3300 feet
- Topo Map: Yosemite National Park Topographical Map
- Difficulties: Strenuous hike up, much rock scrambling and one tricky downclimb
- Special equipment: 25ft webbing or rope
- ACA Rating: 2A III

During the second military expedition against the Yosemite Indians in 1851, the force under Captain Boling camped in the valley for an extended period and, from there, they launched many sorties in search of the elusive Yosemite. One of the sorties took them up Indian Canyon to the high tableland where they suspected that the remnants of Chief Tenaya's band were hiding. The chief himself was a prisoner of Captain Boling's troop and was required to go along on the sortie. In his "Discovery of the Yosemite" (1880) one of the participants, Lafayette Bunnell, describes how the wily old chief, who continually tried to mislead his captors, attempted to dissuade them from the Indian Canyon climb, claiming that "the ravine was a bad one to ascend". They also severely underestimated the height of the climb. Indeed, Captain Boling, who had been ill, was unable to make it all the way and Bunnell was delegated to lead a small group to the top. But, Bunnell does not describe the canyon as presenting any major obstacles other than "wet mossy rocks". Elsewhere in his book, Bunnell expounds: "The ravine called Indian Canyon is less than a mile above Yosemite Fall; between the two is the rocky peak called the "Lost Arrow," that, although not perpendicular, runs up boldly to a height of 3030 feet above the level of the Merced. The Indian name for the ravine ... was Le-Hamite, and the cliff extending into the valley from the east side of the canyon is known as the "Arrow-wood Rocks". This grand wall extends almost at a right angle towards the east, and continues up the Ten-ie-ya Canyon, forming the base of the North Dome.."

In his book "Discovery of the Yosemite" Bunnell describes the view: "The grandeur of the scene was but softened by the haze that hung over the valley - light as gossamer - and by the clouds which partially dimmed the higher cliffs and mountains. This obscurity of vision but increased the awe with which I beheld it, and, as I looked, a peculiar exalted sensation seemed to fill my whole being, and I found my eyes in tears with emotion."



In 1869, eighteen years later, John Muir spent “My First Summer in the Sierra” in Yosemite. He used Indian Canyon as a way to get down into the valley from the high country to the north. On the first occasion he was motivated to meet Professor Butler and “I made my way through the gap discovered last evening, which proved to be Indian Canyon. There was no trail in it, and the rocks and brush were so rough that Carlo [his dog] frequently called me back to help him down precipitous places.”

This strenuous adventure hike involves an ascent of the famous Upper Yosemite Falls trail followed by visits to two of the most spectacular overlooks anywhere in the world. You then hike to a trail crossing of Indian Canyon Creek where you leave the trail and descend Indian Canyon. Though trail-less, the descent is not technical but involves much boulder scrambling and one tricky downclimb for which it is wise to carry a short length of webbing or rope. The hike is good for the summer or early fall but an early start is recommended in the summer to avoid the intense heat during the initial ascent. Take plenty of water or a water filter.

## Trailhead

This hike begins at the Upper Yosemite Falls trailhead located in the parking lot for the Sunnyside Campground in Yosemite Valley ( $37^{\circ}44.56'N$   $119^{\circ}36.15'W$ ). Most likely you will have to leave your vehicle in the Daytime Parking Area beside Yosemite Village. This is convenient for the end of the hike but about a mile from the starting point. You can either walk to the trailhead or catch a shuttle bus to Shuttle Stop 7 at Sunnyside campground.



*View from Yosemite Falls overlook.*

## Hike

From the Sunnyside Campground parking area ( $37^{\circ}44.56'N$   $119^{\circ}36.15'W$  and elevation 4000ft) follow the signs for the Upper Yosemite Falls trail. This rocky trail switchbacks back and forth in the shade of trees as it climbs to a wooded ledge about 1000ft above the valley floor. About 45min from the start you should reach an overlook at 5080ft that provides a great view of the valley, with El Capitan off to the right and Half Dome to the left. After this initial climb there is a welcome level or slightly downhill section as the trail contours east along the ledge. Turning a corner about 1hr from the start you are greeted by a fantastic view of the Upper Yosemite Falls. Yosemite Creek drops more than 1400ft from the valley rim to a ledge above the Lower Falls. During its descent the water splinters into showers generated by ballistic fingers, billowing curtains and wispy eddies. The Falls are most spectacular early in the season.

There are a number of different viewpoints along the trail each of which seem to demand a few minutes of wonderment. Too soon, however, as the trail moves into the corner to the west of the falls, the switchbacks begin again and you climb into a steep valley hidden in a cleft to the west of the falls. The last set of switchbacks is most exposed to the sun and represent the toughest challenge of the day. About 1.5hr and 3.6mi from the start you come to the top of this climb at a gate and trail junction at  $37^{\circ}45.58'N$   $119^{\circ}35.96'W$  and an elevation of 6540ft. Go right at this junction following the signs for North Dome; after just 0.1mi, be sure to fork right again in order to make a visit to the Yosemite Falls Overlook. Once there follow the steep and airy stairway down to the end of the overlook, where you can peer straight down the Upper Falls. It is an



*Left: Upper Yosemite Falls. Right: Looking down Indian Canyon.*

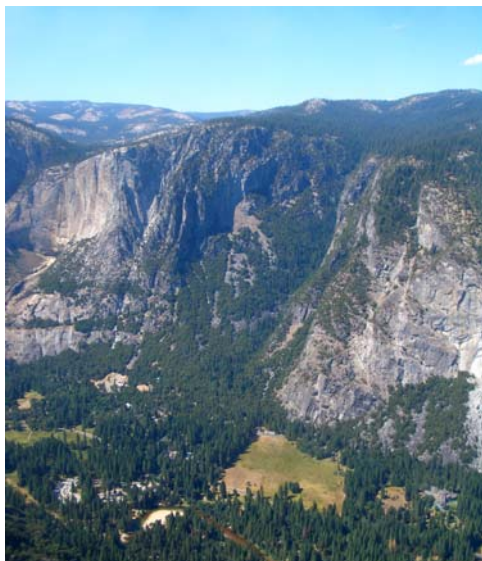
awesome spectacle, one that will make even the most experienced climber cling to the handrail.

Returning from the excursion to the overlook, turn right and follow the trail down to the bridge ( $37^{\circ}45.52'N$   $119^{\circ}35.80'W$ ) over Yosemite Creek just upstream from the Falls. You should reach this point about 3hr from the start. It is a beautiful place to rest and cool off.

Continuing eastwards, the trail switchbacks up the side of a low slickrock ridge and then contours out to where the ridge top meets the valley rim. This is the location of another great overlook, Yosemite Point, some 3000ft vertically above the valley floor. Here you get a great view of Half Dome, previously hidden behind the ridge. You should reach Yosemite Point (elevation 6850ft) about 3.5hrs from the start.

From Yosemite Point the last ascent of the day takes you up over the top of the ridge (elevation 7240ft) from where you begin a gentle descent down through forest into Indian Canyon. A little over 4hrs and about 5.9mi from the start, you arrive at the stream crossing of Indian Canyon Creek ( $37^{\circ}46.30'N$   $119^{\circ}34.87'W$  and elevation 6910ft), a bucolic spot in a small wooded valley. Take a break here and prepare for the rugged off-trail descent of Indian Canyon ahead of you.

As you leave the trail and start down along Indian Canyon Creek, the initial gradient is modest and the way is easiest some distance up the bank from the stream. Start on the left side, cross to the right and then back to the left. About 25min into the descent at an elevation of 6610ft, the canyon suddenly steepens and narrows. Ahead you get your first view of the valley far below you. Cross to the right side and work your way down the steep canyon using a faint animal trail along the rock and earth stream bank. At 6310ft and 5hrs from the start,



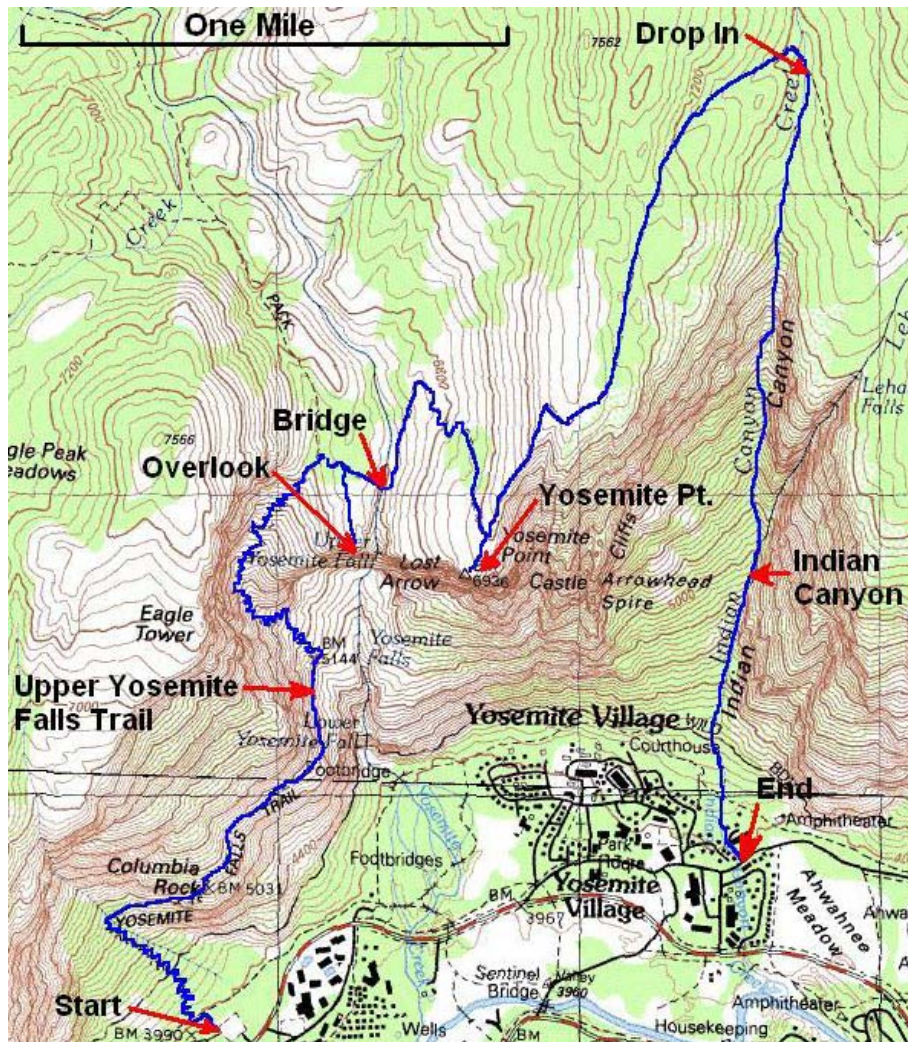
*Indian Canyon from Glacier Point.*

the canyon continues to descend steeply. About here the author followed a long detour on the right along an old, dry and somewhat overgrown stream bed that may have bypassed some tricky downclimbing in the main channel. At the end of the detour, I came to a narrow section in the canyon where I encountered a bear on his way up the canyon; we passed without incident.

At an elevation of around 5600ft the canyon becomes less brushy with more trees and larger boulders. Here a little route finding is needed in places. Shortly thereafter at 5350ft the canyon slope decreases though there are still downclimbing challenges. The stream continues to flow but do not count on it for it disappears underground at about 5150ft and 6hrs from the start. For the next 40min you must deal with quite a bit of bouldering that culminates at 4680ft and almost 7hrs from the start in the only real downclimbing challenge in Indian Canyon. A row of huge boulders has generated a drop of about 25ft in the stream bed. To descend find the gap on the far left and climb down through a slot onto a broad flat ledge with a 15ft drop all around it. Get out your webbing or short rope and follow the narrow ledge on the left out to a small but stout tree growing horizontally out of the rock face. Sling this with the webbing or rope to aid the downclimb using footholds on the apex of the rock face.

Downstream of this hurdle, the route becomes easier. The stream reappears at about 4450ft and a short distance beyond this the canyon broadens with easy going through forest on the left. At 4130ft and 7.5hrs and 7.7mi from the morning start you should come to an asphalt path that goes to the left of the medical center. This quickly brings you to a main park road at  $37^{\circ}44.90'N$   $119^{\circ}34.92'W$ . Turning right, the road will soon take you to Yosemite Village and the Daytime Parking Area. The total duration of the hike is about 8hrs.





Map of Indian Canyon Hike

## 9.3 Tenaya Canyon Hike

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 10 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 10 miles
- Elevation gain: Small
- USGS Topo Maps: Tenaya Lake, Yosemite Falls, Half Dome
- Difficulties: Descent of steep rock slab, four rappels up to 70ft, much bouldering and downclimbing, one pool swim
- Special equipment: 160ft rope, rappeling equipment, harnesses, 30ft webbing, leather gloves, dry bag, quick-drying clothing
- ACA Rating: 3B IV

The great glacier that carved out the spectacular monuments of Yosemite National Park began up in the high country east of the valley near the beautiful swathes of Tuolumne Meadows. Nowadays the tourist can only see a part of the glory which that process created for the road stops where the flat valley floor ends near Mirror Lake in the shadow of Half Dome. A short distance beyond that point travel along the bottom of the gorge becomes very difficult due to the ruggedness of the terrain. So difficult, in fact, that the trails terminate just a mile or so upstream of Mirror Lake and there are signs warning that travel beyond that point is dangerous. But nature's glory does not stop there. Between the valley and Tenaya Lake some 10 miles upstream is a magnificent canyon with enormous rock faces and spectacular scenery. This adventure hike down Tenaya Canyon traverses this rugged wilderness to explore the part of Yosemite Valley the tourists never see.

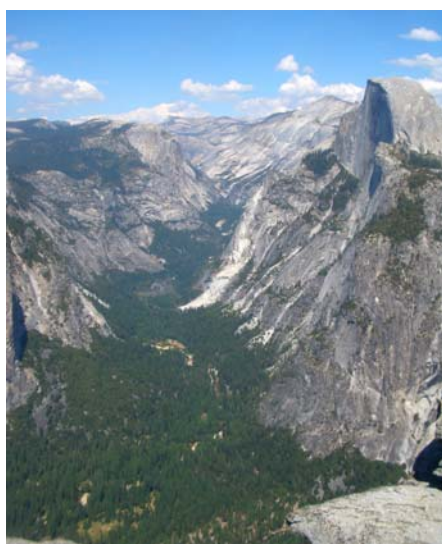
As described earlier, Tenaya Lake, Creek and Canyon take their name from the shrewd old chief of a band of native Americans who were living in Yosemite Valley when the white men first arrived. After soldiers killed his favorite son, Chief Tenaya laid a curse on the invaders, a curse whose echoes reverberate to this day and are particularly focussed on Tenaya Canyon and those who venture there. In summary, Tenaya Canyon got off to a bad start in recorded history. Moreover, the curse seemed confirmed during John Muir's exploration of the canyon, described in chapter 2 of "Steep Trails" (1918). Setting out to venture up into Tenaya Canyon from the valley, this intrepid mountain goat of a man fell for *"the first time since I touched foot to Sierra rocks"*. He describes how he was knocked unconscious and only saved from a life-threatening continuation of the fall by being wedged among short, stiff bushes. Recovering from his fall, Muir spent the next few days ascending the Inner Gorge, eventually *".. escap(ing)"*

*from the gorge about noon, after accomplishing some of the most delicate feats of mountaineering I ever attempted...*". The canyon's reputation continues today for every year exuberant visitors anxious to see what lies beyond the end of the trail, venture into Tenaya Canyon unprepared and have to be rescued by the Park Service. The standard guide map is marked in red "*Hiking in Tenaya Canyon is dangerous and strongly discouraged*". Park rangers refer to it as the "*Bermuda Triangle of Yosemite*".

But to the experienced canyoneer with good guidance (for there are several places where careful navigation is essential), Tenaya Canyon provides a rugged and spectacular adventure. It is best undertaken in late summer when the water is running low. We were fortunate to be accompanied by Bob Courtemanche. This was the 21st year Bob had traveled down Tenaya Canyon and his guidance made the trip particularly enjoyable.

## Trailhead

This hike requires a very long car shuttle that should be set up the day preceding the hike. Drive two vehicles to Yosemite Valley and leave one in the backpackers parking lot (37°44.17'N 119°34.01'W) that is about 1/4 mile east of Curry Village on the road to Happy Isles. This lot has bear boxes for food and I recommend storing any food there. Then start the long drive out of the valley and up to and along the Tioga Road. The hike begins at the Sunrise trailhead (37°49.55'N 119°28.22'W and elevation 8160ft) on the Tioga Road at the south end of Tenaya Lake. There are bear boxes here too to store food you may not wish to leave in your vehicle.



*Left: Tenaya Canyon from Glacier Point. Right: Tenaya Creek just after start.*

## Hike

Follow the Sunrise trail that immediately crosses Tenaya Creek stream bed though this has almost no water in the late summer when you should be embarking on this adventure. Though you can start down the creek bed from here, it is somewhat more convenient to continue on the Sunrise trail to where it starts to climb a little through rocky terrain. There, 15min and 0.5mi from the start, you should leave the trail and follow the stream bed, gradually crossing to the right or west side where the going becomes relatively easy over flat rock slabs interspersed with low forest. Above you on the right is a steep rocky ridge that now separates you from the Tioga Road (this ridge also prevents you from viewing the creek from the Tioga Road). About 40min from the trailhead, the canyon begins to deepen and you follow the stream bed boulders past an old Park Service sign on the right ( $37^{\circ}48.64'N$   $119^{\circ}28.24'W$ ) that reads:

### WARNING

This is not a trail  
Travel beyond this  
point is dangerous  
without climbing  
equipment. Return  
to Tioga Road.

A short distance beyond the sign, you arrive at a crest (elevation 8050ft) where the stream (if it is running) drops into a huge rock-lined bowl where it joins another coming from the left and then veers to the right. This bowl is an awesome, majestic sight with nothing for hundreds of yards but the glacier-polished rock edged with partly forested heights all around. This is where the big-time glacier began. To negotiate the rock bowl it is best to contour to the left, traversing along more gently sloping rock into the bottom of the huge expanse. Once you reach the stream you can then proceed down the rock-lined valley toward the west. Soon, at an elevation of about 7850ft, Half Dome comes



*Left: First rock bowl (photo by Clancy Rowley). Right: Yosemite valley from Lone Boulder.*



into view to the west and, about 1.5hr from the start, you encounter a flatter, forested valley bottom. It is simplest to stay to the right of the forest where the going on the rock slabs is easier. While covering this section, it is important to identify a large, single, prominent boulder called the "Lone Boulder" (37°47.15'N 119°29.17'W) that is up on the profile of the bare rock shoulder on the left side. Half Dome appears in the distance behind this boulder. When the forest peters out and the going becomes rougher move closer to the stream bed. The Lone Boulder temporarily disappears from view so if you have a mental picture of its location it will be valuable. Following the stream you come, at 7500ft, to a lovely little pool where you can swim if you wish but also filter water for the exertions ahead. You will now have traveled about 3.3mi from the trailhead in about 1hr 45min.

If not before this, you will become aware of a huge abyss ahead between you and the massive, sheer face of Mount Watkins to the north. Tenaya Creek proceeds northwest from here and drops about 1000ft over polished rock down into the deep valley ahead. This 1000ft stream descent is known as the Pywiack Cascades. Following the present safer and easier route you will not encounter the Pywiack Cascades. We note, however, that others have rappelled down beside the creek. Rather we will leave the stream and traverse over to the left to find a simpler way to descend to the valley below. From the pool mentioned above, start climbing the rock slab to the west. Soon the Lone Boulder will come into view and you should head directly for it. Once you reach the ridge on which it sits, you are treated to a spectacular view to the north and west. Tenaya Creek now lies a thousand feet below you at the bottom of a steep polished-rock slope. To the west the magnificent Yosemite Valley and its gigantic monuments, Half Dome, Glacier Point and the rest. The route of descent into the valley below lies to the southwest, down to the left of the slope directly below you. Here it is really important to follow the correct route. To stray too far to either side is to risk finding yourself on a steep polished rock slope with many hundreds of feet of exposure.

From the Lone Boulder (37°47.15'N 119°29.17'W) note the talus slope that drops down ahead of you. Then identify a substantial band of bushes running up and down the slope to the left or west of the talus slope. You should descend the talus slope veering to the left to find your way through this band of bushes, perhaps with some bushwhacking. On the far side of the band of bushes is another rock slide or talus slope. Descend this rock slide veering toward its left side. Here you should begin to discern that you are on the apex of a slight prominence in the otherwise flat rock slope (37°47.09'N 119°29.59'W). The prominence is characterized by patches of bushes interspersed with rock slopes all the way to the valley bottom. A single large pine tree should become visible near the bottom of the prominence and the route proceeds directly down to this tree. The steepness of the rock slab here makes for a nervous descent but if you maintain a route with a group of bushes directly below you it eases the discomfort. If you feel uncertain on your feet, it is quite practical to descend the steepest sections by sliding on your rear end gripping the cracks with your hands. Near the bottom you pass by the single large pine tree and follow the

rock slab down toward the left to a pool in Tenaya Creek at the bottom of an attractive sloping cascade. Here, at the end of the long descent you may choose to rest by the pool and have lunch. You should reach this point (elevation about 6250ft) roughly 2.5hr from the start.

Follow the boulder-strewn creek bed downstream from the pool. Soon you enter a quiet and level section where the stream meanders through a beautiful forest. Appropriately this is known as the Lost Valley ( $37^{\circ}46.87'N$   $119^{\circ}30.09'W$ ). After about 0.5mi, however, the going again becomes rugged with many stream bed boulders. And quite abruptly you arrive at the top of the inner gorge where a dramatic, vertically walled canyon has been cut into the valley floor. You will notice several flat ledges on the right side of the canyon. Your route is along the large, lower ledge. But before taking that path, it is interesting to climb a few feet up to the higher ledge and follow it about 60yds along to a place where S.L.Foster carved his initials in the wall ( $37^{\circ}46.75'N$   $119^{\circ}30.16'W$ ). Foster was one of Bob's predecessors in that he made annual trips down the canyon from 1909 to 1937 and this spot is now known as the "Initial Ledge". Someone has also installed a register in a plastic case in an alcove next to the initials. After this excursion, return to the start of the ledges at the head of the gorge and follow the lower ledge along to the rappel point beside a small pine tree growing out of the ledge lip. The knee-high anchor is relatively easily found and consists of two bolts with webbing and a rappel ring. From there it is a straightforward 40ft rappel into the bottom of the Inner Gorge. You should reach this point (elevation roughly 6000ft) about 5hrs and 5mi from the trailhead.

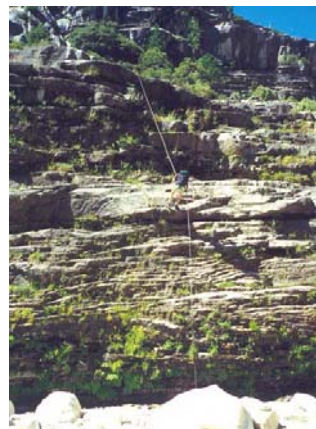
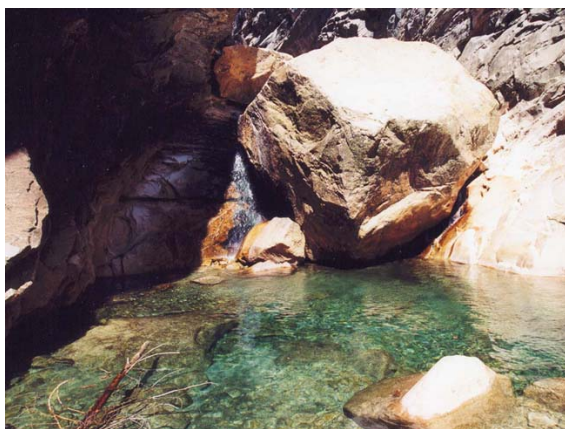
The transit through the bottom of the Inner Gorge is rough going. After one straightforward downclimb, you arrive at a 25ft drop with a large deep pool spanning the canyon below it. This obstacle was created by a huge rock (known as the Le Conte boulder) wedged between the canyon walls. You can downclimb the dry crack on the left side of the boulder though with some exposure. At the bottom you must then swim about 15yds to the downstream shore. The alternative is to rappel on the right beside the waterfall and then wade to the shore. Below the pool the canyon makes a dramatic descent through a very



*Left: Rock slab descent. Right: Rappel into Inner Gorge. Photos by Clancy Rowley.*

rugged section. Here there is much downclimbing. In general the easiest route is on the right, in one place crossing the top of a large rock slab holding onto the bushes for security. Just beyond this rock slab you descend the gully to the streamside only to be greeted by another steep cascade below you. Look to your right here and note what looks like a closed slot between two rock masses. However, if you proceed into this slot you will find a small hole that you can squeeze through to access the scree slope downstream of the cascade. From here stay up on the right side and some distance downstream you will find yourself on a large flat rock shelf with the stream in a deep gorge on your left. Continue on to near the end where the shelf peters out. There, near the edge of the gorge, you should find a rappel anchor consisting of two bolts with webbing and rappel ring. Using this anchor it is a straightforward 70ft rappel down into the bottom of the gorge. There is a non-downclimbable 70ft waterfall just upstream from this rappel so it is not useful to try to descend into the gorge before this anchor location. You should reach this point (elevation roughly 5500ft) about 7hr from the start.

Downstream of the second rappel the gorge proceeds through a narrow winding slot. The first obstacle is a waterfall that can be downclimbed in the slot on the right. This is followed by a sloping 40ft cascade that can be downclimbed but is much more safely rappeled using the bolt anchor installed in the rock face to the right of the stream. This cascade is notable for the large, deep hole in the rock face about two thirds of the way down. At the bottom of the cascade there is a pool that can be bypassed on the right. More boulder downclimbing follows until, quite suddenly, the slot ends and you emerge into a broad valley bottom at an elevation of 5250ft. This marks the end of the Inner Gorge ( $37^{\circ}46.21'N$   $119^{\circ}30.61'W$ ) and it was here that John Muir spent the night after his fall. There is no more technical climbing but you still have a lot of rough ground to cover before you reach developed trails. You should reach this point about 7hr

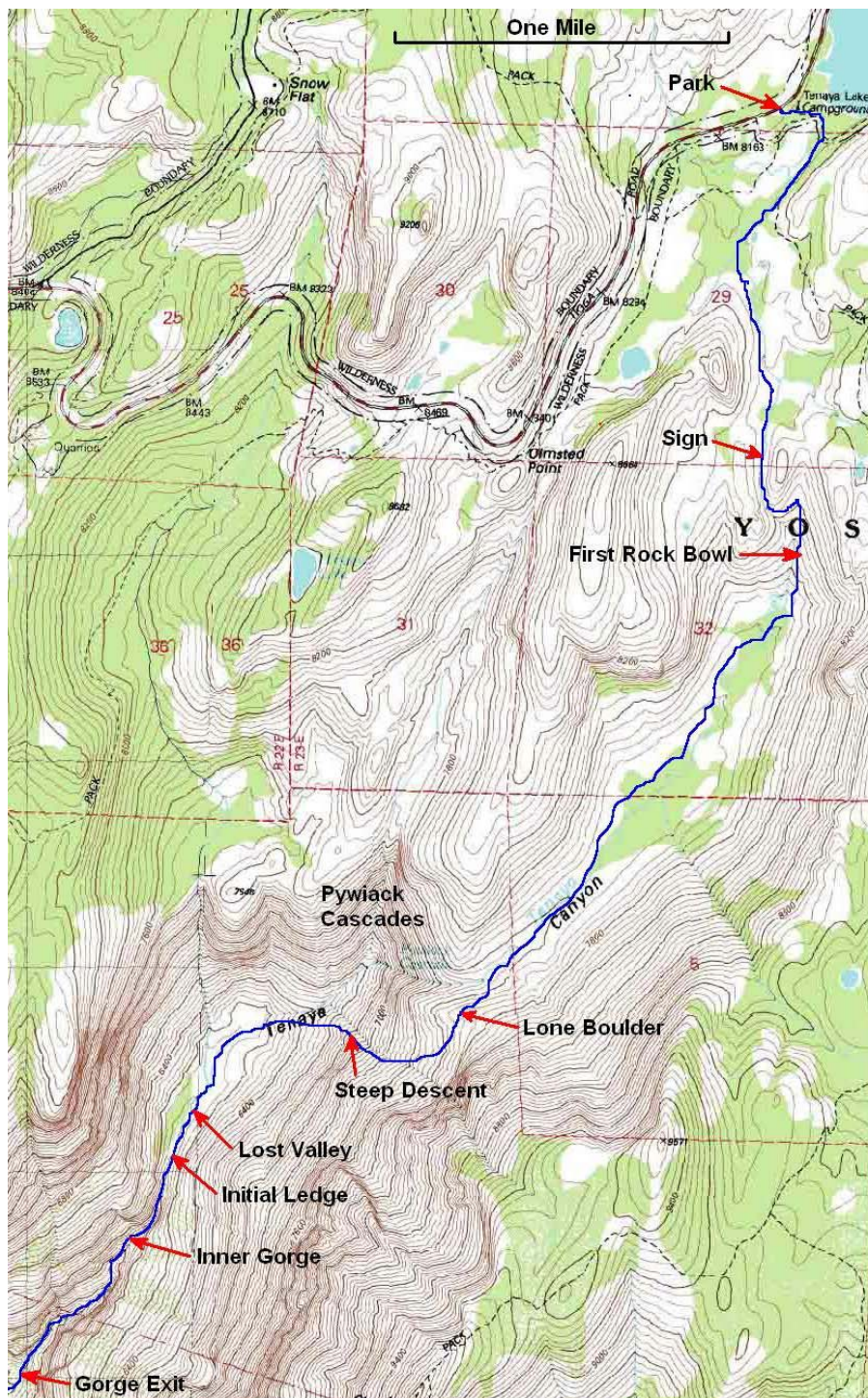


*Left: The swim in Inner Gorge (photo by Clancy Rowley). Right: The second rappel (photo by Don Caldwell).*

45min from the start having covered about 5.4mi.

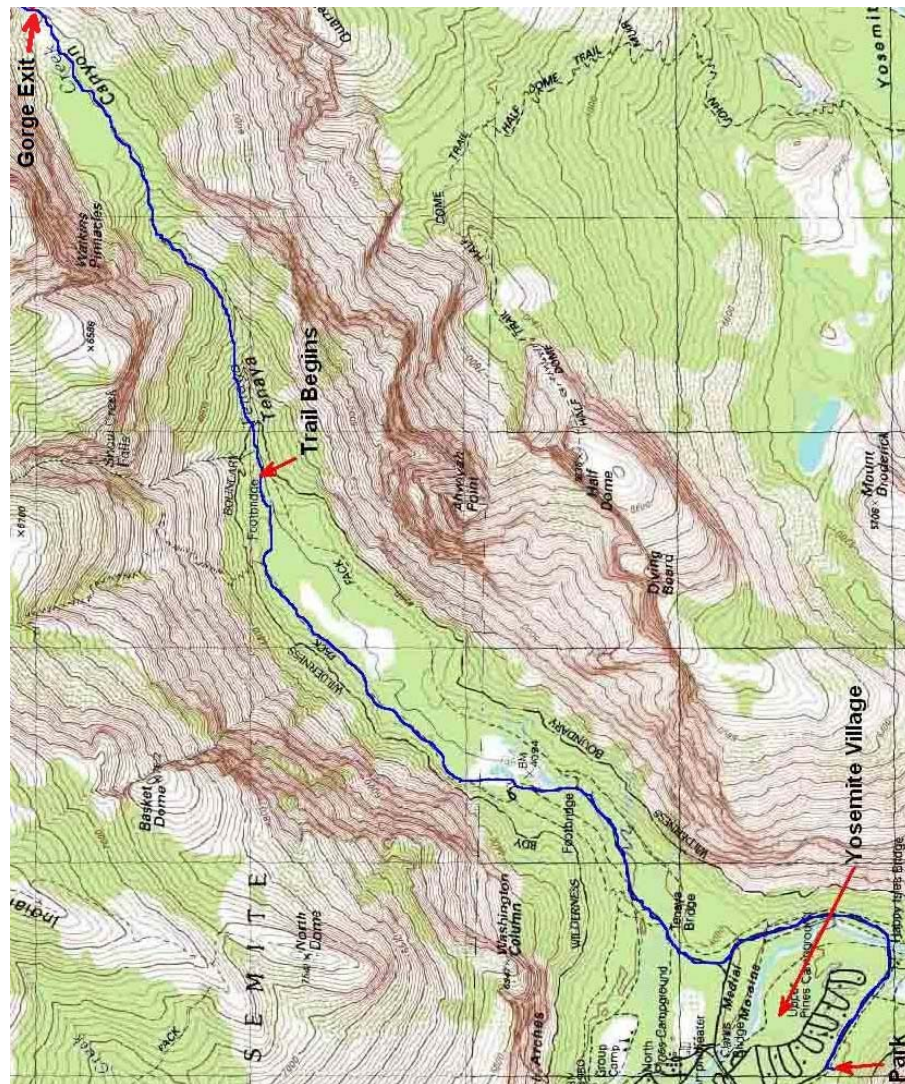
As you exit the gorge and follow the boulder-strewn stream bed, take the right fork where it splits for a short way. The stream bed gradually becomes flatter and the going eases. You pass under the dramatic Watkins Pinnacles high above you on the right and the Quarter Domes opposite them on the left. Continue to stay to the right and look for the faint start of a use-trail on the wooded right slope. The trail soon becomes clearer and easier to follow and continues for several miles until, eventually, it arrives at the place where a footbridge carries the Mirror Lake Loop Trail across the stream. Here you follow a developed trail along the right or north side of the canyon bottom, passing under Half Dome and along the north side of the site of the old Mirror Lake. At the Mirror Lake Visitor Center you begin hiking on asphalt road and follow the signs through the end of the Yosemite Valley development toward Curry Village. You pass over Clarks Bridge and around the west end of the North Pines campground to reach the Backpackers parking lot and your return vehicle (37°44.17'N 119°34.01'W and elevation about 4000ft). It takes about 10hrs to complete the 10mi hike.





Map of first part of Tenaya Canyon Hike





Map of second part of Tenaya Canyon Hike

## 9.4 Cathedral Peak

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 2350 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Tenaya Lake
- Difficulties: Class 3 climbing with substantial exposure; a 15ft section of class 4 climbing to get to the top of the summit block
- Special equipment (for the summit block climb): Harnesses, rope, rappelling gear, webbing and belay equipment
- ACA Rating: 3A III

This spectacular adventure takes you through one of the most scenic places in the world and provides a beautiful cross-section of the magnificent high country in Yosemite National Park. It climbs from Tuolumne Meadows up through the forest alongside Budd Creek to the base of the towering Cathedral Peak. It then climbs that glorious pinnacle, an ascent that requires only class 3 climbing until the very last phase that is class 4. Thus no special equipment or experience is needed except for the final phase, though the climbing is demanding and, in places, the exposure is frightening. The last, 15ft climb to the top of the summit block does require technical equipment and expertise; at least one member of the party should be experienced enough to lead climb that last phase and safely belay others to the top.

This is the land that John Muir explored during the summer of 1869. His account entitled “My First Summer in the Sierra” did much to bring the beauty of these mountains to the attention of the world. Part of this hike follows (in reverse) the route he took on the way from the valley to Mono Pass. On the way he took particular note of Cathedral Peak:

*“...the wonderful mountain called Cathedral Peak is in sight. From every point of view it shows marked individuality. It is a majestic temple of one stone, hewn from living rock, and adorned with spires and pinnacles in regular cathedral style. The dwarf pines on the roof look like mosses. I hope some time to climb it to say my prayers and hear the stone sermons.”*

Later in his narrative he comments

*"I never weary gazing at the wonderful Cathedral. It has more individual character than any other rock or mountain I ever saw, excepting perhaps the Yosemite South Dome."*

As his sojourn in Tuolumne Meadows was growing to a close at the end of his summer, it is clear that the urge to climb Cathedral Peak became overwhelming and so on September 7, 1869, John Muir left his Tuolumne Meadows camp at daybreak determined to get to the top. The first part of the present adventure follows the approach he took to the peak. Presumably he also followed roughly the same route to the summit, though he gives no detail. There is no doubt however that the experience affected him deeply:

*"No feature, however, of all the noble landscape as seen from here seems more wonderful than the Cathedral itself, a temple displaying Nature's best masonry and sermons in stones. How often have I gazed at it from the tops of hills and ridges, and through openings in the forests on my many short excursions, devoutly wondering, admiring, longing! This I may say is the first time I have been at church in California, led here at last, every door graciously opened for the poor lonely worshiper."*

And he continues at some length in this vein. Whether he actually climbed to the top of the summit block is unclear but he is given credit for the first ascent.

In the second phase of this adventure, you descend to the magnificent Lower Cathedral Lake where all will pause to enjoy the bucolic beauty of the lake and the country around it. The contrast with the rugged grandeur of Cathedral Peak towering high overhead is especially delightful. The hike then descends



*Cathedral Peak and Eichorn Pinnacle.*



the huge rock slabs by which the stream from Lower Cathedral Lake descends to Tenaya Lake. This involves some careful navigation to negotiate one large drop-off that interrupts the otherwise gradual descent over the bare rock.

This marvelous adventure is best for the late summer.

## Trailhead

Though there are clearly alternative routes, some of which would allow you to end where you started, the hike described here is a one way adventure that requires a short car shuttle along the Tioga Road in Yosemite National Park. As you are driving away from Tenaya Lake in a northeasterly direction toward Tuolumne Meadows there is a prominent rock dome on the right called Pywiack Dome. Park one vehicle at the side of Tioga Road about 0.5mi north-east of Tenaya Lake and about 400yds southwest of that dome ( $37^{\circ}50.57'N$   $119^{\circ}26.87'W$ ). Then, in the other vehicle, drive the six or so miles to Tuolumne Meadows and park at the well-used Cathedral Lakes trailhead ( $37^{\circ}52.40'N$   $119^{\circ}22.97'W$ ) on the south side of the meadows. There are bear boxes on the south side of the road beside the trailhead and you would be advised to use them, leaving no food in your vehicle.

## Hike

The hike begins at the Cathedral Lakes trailhead ( $37^{\circ}52.40'N$   $119^{\circ}22.97'W$  and elevation 8560ft) on the Tioga Road just west of the Tuolumne Meadows



*Left: Eichorn Pinnacle from the first saddle. Right: View of Eichorn Pinnacle and Lower Cathedral Lake from the summit of Cathedral Peak.*

Ranger Station. Follow the well-used Cathedral Lakes trail for only about 100ft and then bear left to follow the right bank of Budd Creek. The use-trail alongside Budd Creek may initially be faint but soon becomes easy to follow. It climbs the sparsely tree-covered slope to the right of the shallow gully cut by Budd Creek, sometimes crossing rock slabs. Eventually, about 1.5mi from the start, the trail crosses the creek and you follow the left bank for a short distance as Cathedral Peak becomes increasingly visible above the trees to the west. Soon, about 1.7mi and 1.5hr from the start, the gully opens up into a broad grassy clearing at about 9600ft. From here you get an unobstructed view of the peak and the slope you must climb to approach it.

Pause here at the lower, north end of the clearing to memorize the topography to your west. The dramatic rock pinnacle that is Cathedral Peak is readily recognized. Its left side is a steep rock slab known as the Southeast Buttress, a favorite rock-climbing route to the top. To the right or north side of the Peak is a saddle that is the next destination. Once the topography is clear in your mind, leave the trail, and head almost due west for the talus slope leading to the saddle. As we headed up through the thin forest on the west side of Budd Creek we soon picked up a few ducks and then a use-trail climbing the steep, rocky slope leading to the saddle. Along this way there are spectacular views of the summit high above you on the left. And, chances are, you will see climbers ascending the Southeast Buttress along a path that seems to parallel yours. Nearing the saddle the boulders get huge and soon you are on the saddle itself. The view to the west that opens up as you broach the saddle is spectacular with the dramatic Eichorn Pinnacle over to your left and Lower Cathedral Lake far below it. You should reach this 10700ft elevation about 3hr from the start.

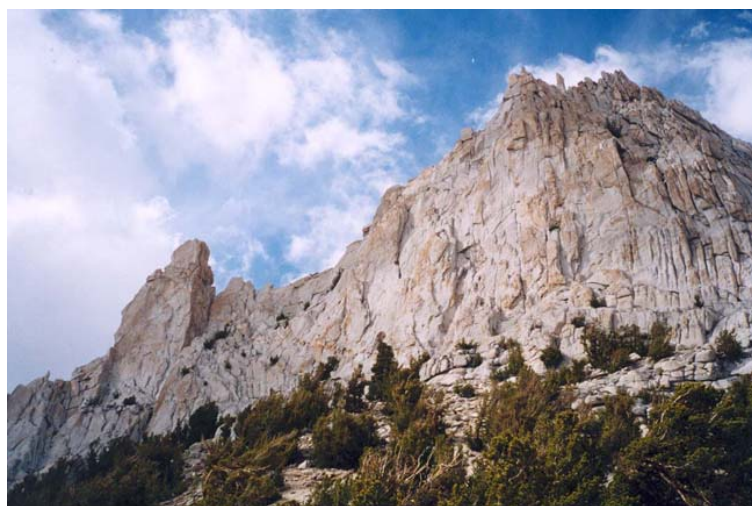
Having enjoyed the view, you should climb down over massive boulders on the other side of the saddle to a point about 30ft lower where you can see a straightforward traverse over to the low point or saddle in the ridge connecting



*Left: Clancy on summit of Cathedral Peak (photo by Don Caldwell). Right: View of Cathedral Peak from Lower Cathedral Lake meadow.*

the peak with Eichorn Pinnacle. Climbing up some boulders to this second saddle you are treated to yet another great view, this time to the south. Upper Cathedral Lake lies below you and, off to the southwest, are Half Dome and the other monuments of Yosemite National Park. The sheer south face of the mountain drops down vertically below you, a drop of about 300ft before the ground flattens out. (To me it appeared that there were some ledges with natural anchors that could well allow one to rappel down this south face.) From the second saddle you then begin the ascent along the ridge leading to the summit. The obvious route is just to the left of the ridge line and involves class 3 climbing over large boulders and rock slabs that have good friction and lots of hand holds. As you approach the summit you bear left onto a series of broad ledges that lie below the summit ridge. The summit block itself is the left most of the three pinnacles that loom high overhead but it is not visible until near the end of the ascent up the ridge. However, when you clamber up onto the left end of the topmost ledge, the summit block is readily identified and there is an easily ascended slot just to the right of the summit block that leads to the last, and most difficult phase of the ascent. You should reach this point about 3.5hrs from the trailhead.

You should pause in the safety of this slot to prepare your climbing equipment, to buckle on your climbing harnesses and to plan for the 15ft class 4 climb to the top. There are several large boulders at the top of the slot where you can prepare to belay the lead climber. That person will experience dramatic exposure of nearly 1000ft when they step out of the top of the slot to climb to the summit, so it is important to prepare a secure belay. From the top of the slot, the climber should traverse across the south face about 15ft using two horizontal cracks, one for hands and the other for feet. This leads to a shallow



*Southern aspect of Cathedral Peak.*

recess with two vertical cracks leading 15ft up to the summit. These two cracks provide good holds for the class 4 climb to the top. The summit surface is a flat platform that is only about 4ft by 6ft in size and can only comfortably hold four or five people at most. There used to be bolts at the top to belay the rest of the group to the top and to use for a rappel descent from the summit block. Unfortunately, someone chopped these bolts and so, unless they have been replaced, it is necessary to climb down the way you came up.

The 10911ft summit (37°50.87'N 119°24.35'W) provides a truly breathtaking view in every direction and it takes many minutes to absorb and savor the experience of sitting on top on this pinnacle. Every way you look the grandeur of the High Sierra landscape is spell-binding. All too soon you must descend. When the bolts were in place, the 30ft rappel down the northwest face to the broad ledge below the summit block was a spectacular moment. The climb down in the absence of the bolts is still quite exciting and requires a secure belay. From the broad ledge below the summit block, we chose a different route for our descent than the ascent. First we descended a short way to a ledge with a stout tree. From there we recognized that there were a series of modest ledges with small, stout trees (they look like bushes) and that several rappels straight down the northwest face or rock slab would take us to a point between the two saddles from which we could readily traverse over to the talus slope on the right. Three rappels totaling about 160ft accomplished this descent and soon we had traversed over to the talus slope. We reached this point about 5hr 20min from the start.

Once we reached the talus slope we descended northwest and then west, down the steep, rocky slope heading for an intersection with the Cathedral Lakes Trail that was visible below us. We were careful not to descend directly west from the end of the rappels for that would have led to some very steep rock slabs. On the route we did take, the footing for the descent was easier than we experienced during the ascent on the other side of the mountain. There are several sections where you must find a way down or around short rock slabs but this is fairly readily done. As you approach the bottom, you enter the forest and must bear due west to intersect the well-traveled Cathedral Lakes trail at an elevation of about 9500ft. You should reach the trail about 6hr 15min from the start.

From here head due south on the Cathedral Lakes trail to where it forks (37°50.93'N 119°24.93'W) and take the right fork down to the glorious Lower Cathedral Lake (elevation 9250ft). Take the use-trail around the north shore to the outlet from the lake but pause along the way to soak up the beauty and grandeur of this magnificent place. On a still day the water of the lake will reflect the shining white rock of Cathedral Peak soaring above the lake and contrasting with dark green of the pine forest and the light green of the meadows surrounding the lake. And glittering here and there are the bright colors of the mountain flowers, sparkling in the California sun. After the rugged grandeur and excitement of the Peak, this is a very special moment indeed.

At the far west side of the lake (37°50.77'N 119°25.69'W), it is simple to find the outlet that immediately flows over a broad rock ridge and down a wide



and bare rock slab. Here another great vista opens up. In the distance you can see a corner of Tenaya Lake. The dogleg route taken by Cathedral Creek on its way from where you are standing down to Tenaya Lake is clearly evident and, with sharp eyes, you should be able to discern your vehicle parked along the Tioga Road. You can descend the first part of the rock slab on either the left or right side of the stream. However, about 2/3 of the way down there is a steep, almost vertical drop-off that extends all the way across the face. Though there are several ducks on the right hand side it is dangerously steep there. Consequently, you should traverse over to the left at the top of the step and follow the top a short way into the forest. There the drop-off peters out and you can make an easy descent and return to the rock slab for the remainder of the way down. At the bottom, the stream bed makes an abrupt left turn ( $37^{\circ}50.81'N$   $119^{\circ}26.20'W$ ) and wanders through deep forest for a short way. Soon you can see that you can make easier progress on the right bank. Contouring right you access a broad, slightly sloping rock slab that you descend to the right of the stream. The dome on your right here is Pywiack Dome (explored and described by John Muir in his book) and the Tioga Road runs along the far side of that prominence. At the base of the rock slab, follow the stream bed again for a short time before the woods on the right open up. Then veer right through the woods, contouring around the south end of Pywiack Dome where you should pick up a use trail. As the noise of the traffic on the Tioga Road becomes clearer, you should veer west to intersect it and, hopefully, emerge on the road not too far from your parked vehicle ( $37^{\circ}50.57'N$   $119^{\circ}26.87'W$ ). The final elevation is about 8200ft and the total time for the hike is about 7.5hr.

## Alternative Return

After summiting you may wish to return directly to the Tuolumne Meadows trailhead. If so, an interesting and quick return route is to climb down the way you came to the saddle between the peak and the Eichorn Pinnacle and then to rappel down the steep south side of the mountain. This descent requires a two stage rappel. From a webbing wrap around one of the large boulders at the saddle (in the shadow of the Eichorn Pinnacle) first rappel down about 60ft to a large shelf with two substantial trees. One of these provides a solid anchor for the second stage, a 150ft drop using a 50m rope and a recovery cord.

The two-stage rappel places you at the top of a short scree slope. If you descend this and veer left at the bottom it is an easy hike around the mountain to the use-trail you used to hike up to the mountain beside Budd Creek.



Map of Cathedral Peak Hike

## 9.5 Eichorn Pinnacle

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.6 miles
- Elevation gain: 2200 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Tenaya Lake
- Difficulties: Class 5.4 climbing with huge exposure
- Special equipment: Harnesses, helmets, climbing shoes, 160ft rope, 160ft pull cord, slings, quickdraws, cams, 30ft webbing, rappeling gear, 3 quick-links or rappel rings.
- ACA Rating: 3A III

This spectacular adventure tackles the climb of the awesome Eichorn Pinnacle, a vertical projection on the side of Cathedral Peak in the Tuolumne Meadows area of Yosemite National Park. Elsewhere we have described the much easier climb of Cathedral Peak itself during which we passed by the base of Eichorn Pinnacle. In this adventure we climb the Pinnacle, a more technically challenging prospect than Cathedral Peak itself. Apart from two slightly tricky maneuvers, the Eichorn Pinnacle climb is not, however, hard by rock climbing standards. However finding the right route is not easy and dealing with the exposure at the first of the aforementioned maneuvers is very daunting.

### Trailhead

Though there are clearly alternative routes, the easiest approach to Cathedral Peak and the Eichorn Pinnacle begins at the heavily used Cathedral Lakes trailhead (37°52.40'N 119°22.97'W) on the south side of Tuolumne Meadows. There are bear boxes on the south side of the road beside the trailhead and you would be advised to use them, leaving no food in your vehicle.

### Hike

The approach begins at the Cathedral Lakes trailhead (37°52.40'N 119°22.97'W and elevation 8560ft) on the Tioga Road just west of the Tuolumne Meadows Ranger Station. Follow the Cathedral Lakes trail for about half a mile to where a fairly well-used use-trail forks off to the left (about 37°52.11'N 119°23.31'W). As long as you don't follow the Cathedral Lakes too far it is not a problem if you miss this turn off as long as you proceed upstream fairly close to Budd Creek but on its right bank. The use-trail follows that right bank for some distance

before it begins to climb higher above the Creek. In one place it crosses some flat bare rock and here you must be careful to follow the rock cairns. However as long as you head SSW and don't stray too far from the Creek you will be en route.

Eventually as the trail proceeds into more open ground the massive pointed Cathedral Peak will loom up ahead of you and somewhat to the right. Follow the trail over open ground as you pass below a large scree slope that ends at the steep rock slab known as the Southeast Buttress of Cathedral Peak. This Buttress is a favorite rock-climbing route to the top of the Peak. Proceed along the trail almost to the point where the scree slope meets the Southeast Buttress. You should reach this point about 1.5hr and 2.4mi from the start. Here you should be able to recognize a rough, steep use-trail that climbs the scree slope. Follow this use-trail as you ascend the scree slope, heading for the broad saddle above you. Chances are you will see climbers ascending the Southeast Buttress along a route that seems to parallel yours. Nearing the saddle the boulders get huge and you should veer to the right to get to the ridge top itself. The view to the west that opens up as you broach the ridge top (or first saddle) is spectacular with the dramatic Eichorn Pinnacle over to your left and Lower Cathedral Lake far below it. You should reach this 10700ft elevation about 2.5hr from the start.

Having enjoyed the view, you should climb down over massive boulders on the other side of the first saddle to a point about 30ft lower where you can see a straightforward traverse over to the low point or saddle in the ridge connecting Cathedral Peak to Eichorn Pinnacle. Climbing up some boulders to this second saddle you are treated to yet another great view, this time to the south. Upper



*Left: Eichorn Pinnacle from first saddle. Right: Starting point for the technical climb.*



Cathedral Lake lies below you and, off to the southwest, are Half Dome and the other monuments of Yosemite National Park. The sheer south face of the mountain drops down vertically below you, a drop of about 300ft before the ground flattens out. A descent of this face awaits you later.

Once you reach this second saddle it is time to prepare for the technical section of the climb (you can leave belongings here since you will be passing this point later) to the summit of the awesome Eichorn Pinnacle. Once helmeted and harnessed, you should contour downwards from the saddle along a sloping ledge that starts about 15ft below the apex of the saddle and leads to a recess with a comfortable stance that is the starting point for the technical climb (check the photograph for the view from the starting point). The climb is usually rated at 5.4. Though other descriptions of the climb suggest two pitches (and some even suggest just one), it probably best done in three short pitches. The first and hardest on the nerves is almost horizontal. Using an anchor around a large horn beside the starting point you should climb easily upwards to a tricky sloping ledge that has a fixed piton in the crack at the back of the ledge. Use a runner to fix the protection here. Then using finger holds in the crack ease your way down to the end of the narrowing ledge where you should reach down for the footholds below the level of the ledge. This is a nervy move but the footholds are large and solid. Then, once standing, step down again onto a short, small downward sloping ledge that leads to a comfortable stance in a small recess. Here, the rock horns just above you provide a comfortable belay station for the end of the first pitch. The last part of this first pitch is mostly made difficult by the huge exposure below you.

The second, vertical pitch has one slightly tricky move but is otherwise straightforward. There are also several bolts that have been installed to protect that move. From the belay station you climb above the rock horns and then up to the right to an increasingly easy chute that leads to a large crack or recess



*Author approaches the summit of Eichorn Pinnacle and celebrates on top. Photos by Bob Waymouth.*

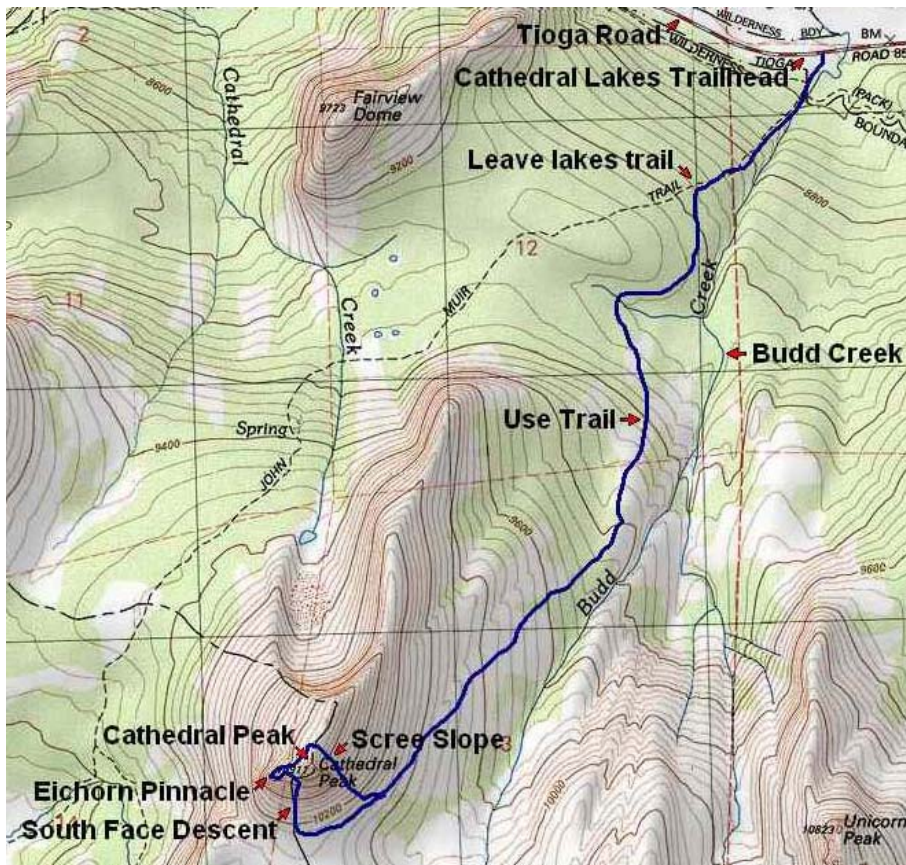


*Rappeling down the south face.*

that provides good anchors for the next belay station. The last pitch proceeds up a large sloping crack that leads obviously to the summit. The easiest ascent route is along the sharp ridge to the left of the crack and this brings you out on the spectacular summit of the Eichorn Pinnacle. You should reach the summit about 4hr from the start. The Pinnacle's name recognizes the first ascent by Glen Dawson and Jules Eichorn on Jul.24, 1931.

There are comfortable places for a number of climbers on the summit that is also equipped with a number of solid bolts. When you have finished admiring the magnificent view, it is straightforward to set up a rappel to descend the north side of the Pinnacle, aiming for the starting point of the first pitch. It is a rappel of about 60ft.

Once you have recovered your rope and your belongings at the saddle between the peak and the Eichorn Pinnacle, you can prepare for the rappel descent of the steep south face of Cathedral Peak. This descent requires a two-stage rappel. From a webbing wrap around one of the large boulders at the saddle (in the shadow of the Eichorn Pinnacle) first rappel down about 60ft to a large shelf with two small but solid trees. One of these provides a solid anchor for the second stage, a 150ft drop using a 50m rope and a recovery cord. The rappel descent places you at the top of a short scree slope. If you descend this and veer left at the bottom it is an easy hike around the mountain to the use-trail you used to hike up to the mountain. Return along this trail back to the Cathedral Lakes trailhead. You should make it about back 6hrs from the morning start having covered about 5.6mi.



Map of Eichorn Pinnacle Hike





## Chapter 10

# SIERRA NEVADA

Several adventures in Yosemite National Park were described in an earlier chapter, but, of course, there are a huge number of other adventures in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, some that have been experienced and some that remain to be explored. In this chapter we include two well-known mountain ascents and two classic canyoneering adventures.



Sierra Nevada region.

## 10.1 Mount Whitney

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 4 days
- Estimated hiking distance: 43.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 10800 feet
- Topo Map: Mount Whitney topographical map
- Difficulties: Possible altitude effects
- Special equipment: None
- ACA Rating: 2A VI

This four day hike takes you through some of the magnificent High Sierra landscape culminating in an ascent of Mount Whitney, at 14496ft the highest point in the contiguous United States. Most hikers who attempt Whitney do so by the direct route from Whitney Portal. The result of this is that the trail from there is so crowded as to be unpleasant. Moreover, it is difficult to obtain a permit to camp overnight on that route and, even if you are lucky in this respect the campground at Trail Camp is crowded and unattractive. This hike avoids all that by accessing the high country using the Shepherd Pass trail north of Mount Whitney. It is much easier to obtain a permit for this route. Moreover the three days spent approaching Whitney by this route not only treat you to some marvelous scenery but also allow acclimatization so that the ascent of Whitney will be made in much greater comfort.

Though you should call ahead to inquire about a wilderness permit, you may be able, like us, to obtain it from the Mt. Whitney Ranger Station in Lone Pine on your way to the trailhead. A limited number of permits are issued each day for entry to the wilderness through each of the High Sierra trailheads. Permits for entry at Whitney Portal must be obtained many months in advance but we had no difficulty obtaining our permit for the Symmes Creek trailhead to the Shepherd Pass trail on the day before our hike.

### Trailhead

This hike requires a car shuttle beginning in Lone Pine on US 395 to the east of the high line of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. After obtaining your permit, maps and other information from the Mt. Whitney Ranger Station in Lone Pine, drive up to Whitney Portal and leave one vehicle in the parking lot in order to allow you to exit the wilderness there. Then drive back to Lone Pine and north on US 395. In the center of Independence turn west and proceed 4.5mi along Onion Valley Road to Foothill Road where you turn left. After

1.3mi you fork right and pass an old corral on the left. After about 0.5mi fork right and then twice more. This accesses a sandy road that contours north into the Symmes Creek valley and arrives at a large parking area ( $36^{\circ}43.64'N$   $118^{\circ}16.73'W$  and elevation 6000 ft) where the Shepherd Pass trail starts. It is a good idea to camp here and get an early start the next morning.

## Hike

The Shepherd Pass trail is a long and, at times, arduous climb of about 6000ft. It begins with a series of switchbacks that ascend to a saddle at 9000ft between the Symmes and Shepherd creek valleys. This saddle provides the first of many truly exhilarating experiences on the trip for, quite suddenly, there unfolds a breathtaking panorama of the 14375ft Mount Williamson and the dramatic cliffs that surround it. The memory of this magnificence lingers long after one leaves the saddle and begins a brief descent into the valley of Shepherd Creek before the trail resumes its ascent up that valley. There you encounter several stream crossings and water sources just below Mahogany Flats, a good place for lunch.

Resuming the climb, you switchback up to and over a very large moraine blocking the valley. This can be exhausting especially on a hot summer afternoon and while you are still adjusting to the altitude. Finally you enter the forest on top of the moraine and shortly thereafter arrive at Anvil Camp ( $36^{\circ}41.51'N$   $118^{\circ}19.61'W$ ), 7mi from Symmes Creek trailhead. A very pleasant stream flows through the campground and this is a good place to camp at the end of a hard first day. But do not camp near the stream unless you enjoy the attention of the ubiquitous mosquitoes.



*Climbing toward Shepherd Pass.*

Resuming your hike the next morning, the views are magnificent as you climb through increasingly rugged and rocky terrain toward the 12050ft Shepherd Pass. The trail is well-ducked and should guide you to the last part of the climb up a quite dramatic chimney somewhat to the left side of the ring of cliffs at the head of the bowl. The climb up the chimney involves short switchbacks. As you emerge from the top you contour to the left and traverse a small snow field before reaching the top of Shepherd Pass ( $36^{\circ}40.34'N$   $118^{\circ}20.71'W$ ), 9.5mi from the Symmes Creek trailhead. The view of the High Sierra that opens up as you reach this summit is awe-inspiring. The mass of 14018ft Mount Tyndall lies to the south; this peak is named for the English scientist who first explained why the sky is blue. The northern skyline consists of the angular outline of Diamond Mesa. Off to the west are the gently sloping meadows where Tyndall Creek begins and, in the distance, a marvelous panorama of Sierra peaks. Shepherd Pass also marks the entrance to Sequoia National Park and, because of this, several posted signs greet you at the summit. One, in particular, I found puzzling. It read “No loose herding beyond this point”. “Loose herding” being undefined I was not at all sure how I could avoid an inadvertent transgression!

It is an easy walk down the gently sloping trail toward the junction with the John Muir trail near Tyndall Creek ( $36^{\circ}38.35'N$   $118^{\circ}23.27'W$ ) at an elevation 10920ft and 14mi from the Symmes Creek trailhead. You enter the woods at the point where several trails converge near the Tyndall Creek camping area. Here you may wish to make camp for the second night though there are also good wilderness sites further south beside the John Muir trail. I enjoyed a campsite just to the east of the John Muir Trail a short distance south of the last Tyndall Creek river crossing. A beautiful row of small lakes lay just to the east.



*Shepherd Pass.*



The Muir trail south of Tyndall Creek travels due south through beautiful, mostly wooded country highlighted by many magnificent views of the surrounding mountains. You climb gently onto the broad Bighorn Plateau (2mi from the Tyndall Creek) marked by a small lake a few hundred yards to the right of the trail. For the next seven or eight miles you do not gain or lose much altitude but drop down into and climb back out of the small valleys of Wright Creek (5mi from the Tyndall Creek) and then Wallace Creek (6mi from the Tyndall Creek). As you approach Crabtree Meadow ( $36^{\circ}33.56'N$   $118^{\circ}21.55'W$ ), you take the left fork through a tall pine forest as the Muir trail turns eastward and begins to ascend the valley of Whitney Creek. About 24mi from the start you pass the Crabtree Patrol Cabin (elevation 10700ft) and then proceed up a lovely wooded valley beside the inviting Whitney Creek eventually reaching the picturesque Timberline Lake (elevation 11080ft and 26.5mi from the Symmes Creek trailhead). This is a delightful place to stop, rest and perhaps fish. As you pause, take a moment to examine the massive bulk of Mount Whitney, looming above you, and the almost sheer cliff that extends south from the summit. The map tells you that the trail climbs this daunting cliff, though it is difficult to visualize that possibility from this vantage point. Just beyond Timberline Lake the trail climbs above the tree line and up to the larger Guitar Lake immediately below the mass of Mount Whitney. There are good camping sites around the shores of Guitar Lake and this would be a comfortable place to spend the third night. Guitar Lake is 27.5mi from the Symmes Creek trailhead at an altitude of about 11450ft.

The trail beyond Guitar Lake climbs through steeper and steeper rock-strewn terrain as it approaches the almost vertical wall of rock on the west side of Mount Whitney. It then begins a series of switchbacks that, despite earlier doubt, do indeed climb the necessary 2000ft to the top of the rock wall. There, at an altitude of 13500ft and 30.5mi from the start, you arrive at the junction with the busy trail that ascends Mount Whitney from Whitney Portal. It is a good idea to leave your pack at this junction, known as Trail Crest ( $36^{\circ}33.64'N$   $118^{\circ}17.58'W$ ), and climb the remaining 1000ft and 2.5mi to the summit of Mount Whitney with just a water bottle and a warm jacket. Along this last section of trail you will encounter many who are making the pilgrimage from Whitney Portal to the

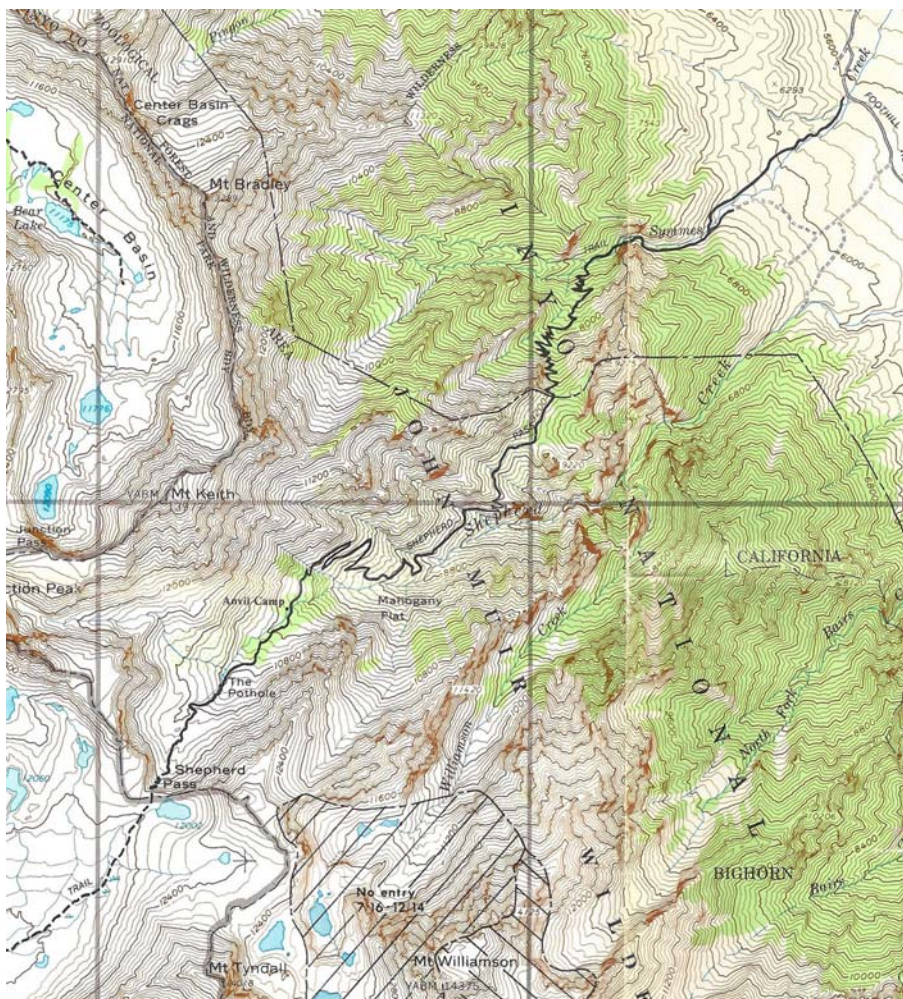


*Left: Whitney from Timberline Lake. Right: Looking south from the summit.*

highest point in the contiguous United States. Many will have climbed to this altitude too quickly, and so you will see quite a few in considerable discomfort, and some who have decided to try and sleep it off among the rocks beside the trail. Most will clearly be laboring compared with you, a clear demonstration of the advantage of several days of acclimatization.

The trail from Trail Crest to the 14496ft summit of Mount Whitney proceeds along a ridge, the route having been cut into the cliffs on the western side of the ridge. This part of the trail is quite spectacular. At intervals there are breaks in the ridge that form windows through to the other, eastern side and provide dramatically framed views of Owens Valley some 10000ft below. The last leg of the climb through a field of rocks seems endless until, suddenly, you surmount the last rise and there is the summit ( $36^{\circ}34.72'N$   $118^{\circ}17.55'W$ ) and the low stone warming-hut built as a refuge against the violent storms that can occur almost without warning on these mountains. And so you arrive at the highest point in the contiguous United States having traveled 33mi from the Symmes Creek trailhead. The view east from Mount Whitney is unforgettable. The immensity of the cliffs and the magnitude of the height are overwhelming. It is almost more than the mind can take in, enormous and brutal.

Soon it is time to begin the descent. The mood is usually subdued, as you descend to Trail Crest and collect your pack. There you take the route to Whitney Portal that begins with a series of 97 switchbacks down the most immense talus and rock slope. Even in summer, ice can make parts of this descent treacherous so proceed with care. At the base of this descent is the crowded campground that many use while climbing the direct route from Whitney Portal. Below this the trail proceeds down a steep valley often alongside a pleasant small stream and then arrives at Mirror Lake. By this time, fatigue will begin to grow and the last few miles to Whitney Portal may seem endless. Finally you arrive at the Whitney Portal parking lot ( $36^{\circ}35.23'N$   $118^{\circ}14.41'W$ ), at an elevation of 8360ft and having hiked 43.5mi from the start at the Symmes Creek trailhead. Hopefully you will locate the return vehicle without difficulty and then retrace your drive back to the Symmes Creek trailhead to collect the other car.



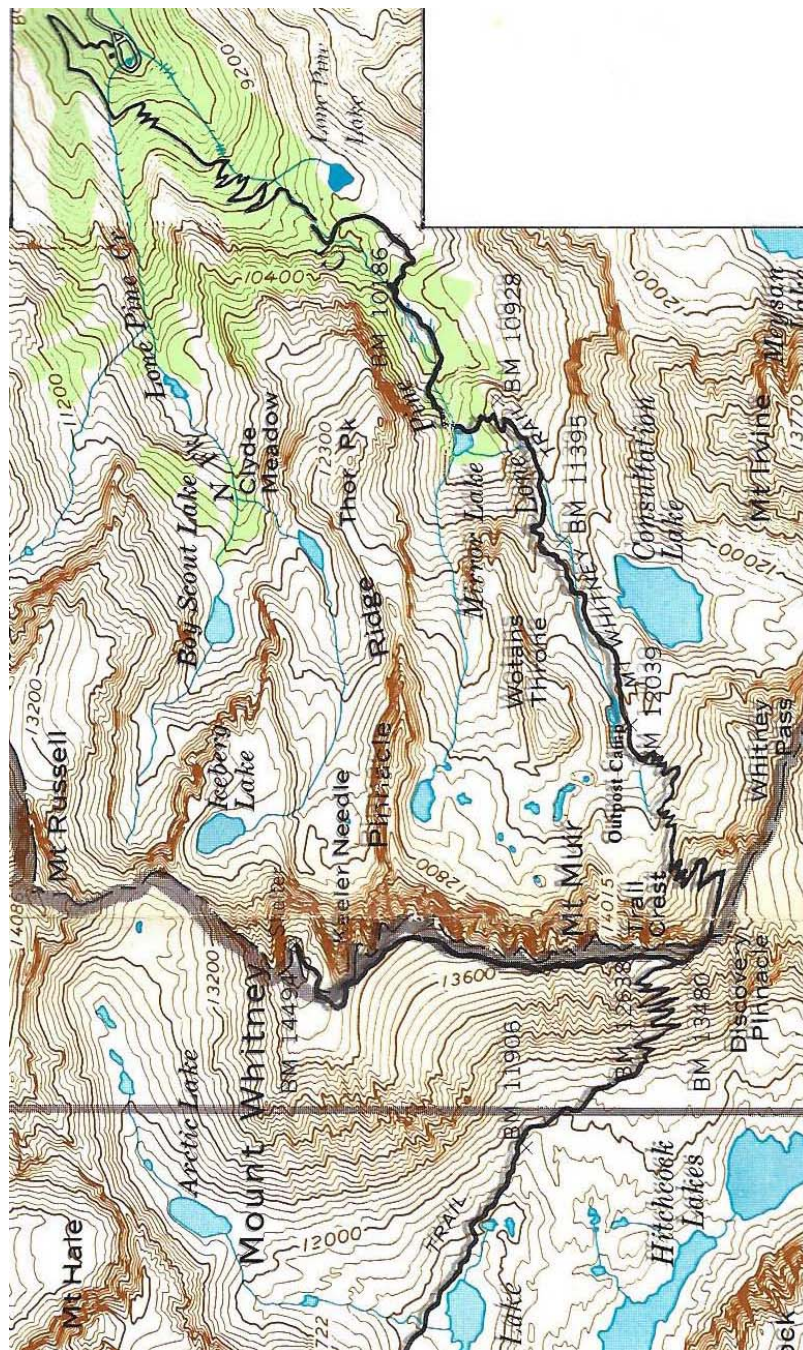
Map of first part of Mount Whitney Hike





Map of second part of Mount Whitney Hike





Map of third part of Mount Whitney Hike

## 10.2 North Fork of Kings River

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 11 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4 miles
- Elevation gain: none
- Topo Map: Patterson Mountain
- Difficulties: About 7 rappels over 30ft, most with swimming disconnects, many smaller downclimbs/jumps/rappels and much bouldering. Many long swims, several over 300yds long.
- Special equipment: Full wetsuit, helmet and rappel gear, drybag, two 50m ropes, 50m pull cord, some webbing, several rap rings.
- ACA Rating: 4CR IV

The Sierra Nevada mountains are riddled with wilderness canyons that promise extraordinary adventure and outdoor challenge. Here we explore just one such canyon, that of the North Fork of the Kings River. Over a stretch of about ten miles the North Fork winds through a deep canyon, one moment crashing down a steep and narrow gorge, the next moment flowing serenely through long deep pools. In the summer when the volume flow is low (and controlled by a series of small dams) the ten miles are a water wonderland with endless challenges for the experienced canyoneer. Here we describe a hike through the last three miles of the canyon; there are also several other stretches upstream that would be alternate (and somewhat shorter) adventures. All of the hikes are best undertaken during the heat of summer.

It should be emphasized that this adventure is only for the experienced and well-prepared canyoneer. Because of the length of time spent in the water and in the shade, a full wetsuit is recommended even in 100 degree summer heat. Moreover, the rock is Sierra Nevada granite polished by ice, water and the sun; it can be remarkably slippery and therefore shoes with sticky rubber soles are a must. Even well-equipped, this is a long, exhausting and physically challenging adventure. In many places one is faced with the choice between a slow rappel and a quick but potentially dangerous jump. The pools are generally deep, but the danger involved with jumping is still present. The timing described below assumes only small jumps where the pool depth is clearly adequate.

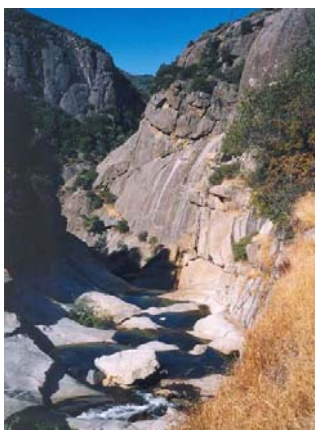
### Trailhead

The North Fork of the Kings River is deep in the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains of California. The last part of the approach is a long, narrow and twisting road that takes several hours to drive.

From the north or west, take the Jensen Avenue exit from US99 and drive east on Jensen for 12mi to Academy where you turn left. From the south take the exit onto Sierra Drive in Kingsburg, turn right, cross the railroad tracks and then turn left onto Academy. Drive north for about 17mi to the town of Sanger where both approaches merge. Continue north on Academy for 2mi and turn right onto Belmont. After a few miles Belmont becomes Trimmer Springs Road and you will stay on this road for many miles as it leaves the valley and climbs into the foothills. From the Belmont/Academy intersection, you will pass the hamlet of Piedra after 13mi (one of the last chances to fill up on gas and groceries). The road then begins a long and tortuous route along the north shore of Pine Flat Reservoir. The last restaurant is at the launch ramp in Lakeview, some 20mi from the Belmont/Academy intersection; some 5.6mi further you pass through the abandoned facilities in Trimmer. Another 16.8mi (total of 42.4 from Academy/Belmont) will bring you to the Kirch Flat campground, a pleasant shady location beside the Kings River. It is a good place to camp for the night.

Five miles beyond Kirch Flat campground (elevation 1130ft) you will come to Balch Camp (elevation 1270ft), the crossroads for this hike. At the first junction in Balch Camp ( $36^{\circ}54.17'N$   $119^{\circ}7.29'W$ ), fork right and follow the signs for the Balch Powerhouse. This is a private road but one that is open to the public. Two miles from Balch Camp the road ends at the Balch Powerhouse where a locked gate and a fence topped with barbed wire prevent access to the powerhouse compound. Park the recovery vehicle in the large dirt area ( $36^{\circ}54.57'N$   $119^{\circ}5.39'W$ ) about 50yds down canyon from the gate.

Then drive back down to Balch Camp, turn right and cross the bridge over the North Fork of the Kings River. Fork right at the next junction and begin the switchbacking climb up the narrow road toward the trailhead (Wishon direction). Very narrow and twisting, this road eventually contours around into the North Fork drainage. About 9mi from Balch Camp look for a dirt parking



*Left: View downstream from start. Right: Second of the set of three waterfalls.*



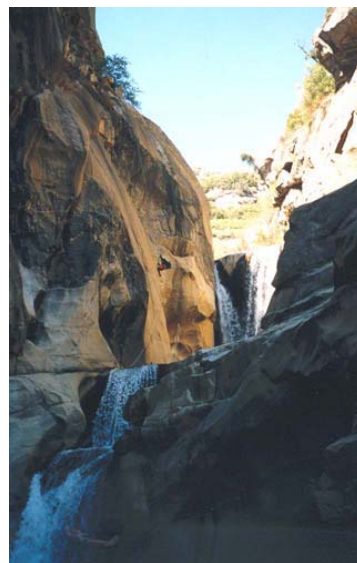
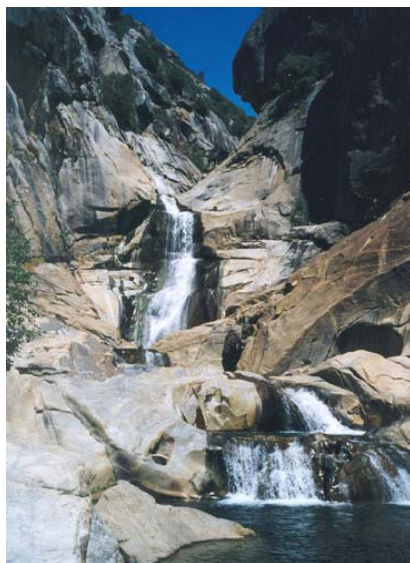
area on the right ( $36^{\circ}54.59'N$   $119^{\circ}3.21'W$  and elevation 3920ft) and the partially hidden dirt road that leads down to the river. Park in the dirt parking area.

## Hike

The adventure begins as you pass by the gate and hike about 0.8mi down the steep dirt road to the river at  $36^{\circ}54.23'N$   $119^{\circ}3.08'W$  and elevation 3400ft. The view of the river from the end of the dirt road is a foretaste of the spectacular natural water world that lies downstream. You might wish to judge the stream flow at this point - if you feel that swimming the first few pools or being caught in the flow over the first waterfall would be a problem, you would be well advised to turn back for the hike ahead is a challenge even for expert canyoneers.

It is wise to don your wetsuit before entering the river for, even on the hottest day, you will need the insulation and flotation it provides almost immediately. Boots with sticky rubber soles are also essential for the polished granite of the Sierra Nevada can be remarkably slippery and you will find the sticky rubber traction very valuable in many places.

To begin the river descent, hike along the ledge on the right past the first waterfall to find the anchor for the drop into the pool beyond. A single bolt is backed up by a wrap around a stout bush. Rappel down about 30ft to a deep wade and swim. A short distance downstream you will arrive at a series of three 25ft waterfalls. You may choose to jump the first two or rappel them together from a bush anchor in a pothole above the first drop. The third drop may be



*Left: Looking up toward the 150ft waterfall. Right: The 80ft gorge descent.*



downclimbed on a ledge to the left. You should reach here (elevation 3220ft) about 1hr 20min from the start.

A little downstream, after several short swims, you will arrive at the top of a large 70ft waterfall. Climb up a steep gully on the right and contour along the top of a steep slickrock slope, past reassuring trees and bushes, before descending again to the water's edge. Beyond this the canyon narrows and there are slides to slide and pools to swim. Eventually, 2hr 40min from the start at 3040ft, the canyon narrows further and you must swim through a defile that ends at a dangerous lip. Stop before you reach the lip when you see a bolted anchor a short distance above the water level on the left. Because of the slippery rock, it would be wise to belay each canyoneer as they climb up to the anchor station. Once there you are treated to a spectacular vista of a tremendous drop downstream. The first step is a 50ft rappel into a huge hanging pool with a swim across to a second, similar bolt station. Again the short climb to the bolts is slippery so special care is needed. The drop on the other side is quite spectacular and looks greater than its 150ft. There are two ways to descend this drop. The direct route straight down from the top anchor will take you straight into the teeth of the waterfall - an exhilarating experience but a difficult one. However, unseen from the top, there is a second bolt station about 20ft below you on a ledge off to the left. If you rig at this second bolt station you can avoid the full force of the falling water. The pool at the bottom is large and very deep. It is a majestic waterfall whose beauty adds to the sense of accomplishment. You should climb out of the pool on the right. Two small drops follow, one 15ft rappel or jump and one downclimb. Here, there is a broad sunny area that makes a good place for a break. You should reach this point (elevation 2840ft) about 4.5hrs from the start.

The river now enters a narrow slot with a low ledge up on the right. Follow the ledge along to a short jump down into a pool below the falls in the slot. The canyon then turns sharp left and you need to be sure to follow another broad ledge on the right that takes you out to a bolted belay station (with webbing around a large boulder), about 100ft above a pool in the narrow gorge. Here you will also find a register in a metal ammunition box. The 100ft drop is mostly a free rappel. Below it you climb onto a ledge on the canyon left. This leads to a small and tricky 20ft drop that is best descended as a continuation of the 100ft drop. Here you can find yourself in a fierce spout so jumping may be a better option. This brings you to the end of the narrows and the canyon broadens substantially. Just after the 20ft drop you swim a large pool. Head for the left side of the next lip in order to avoid having to cross the stream at the top of a large waterfall. Climbing out of the pool you get a good view downstream of a series of large waterfalls. Bypass these by taking the brush covered ledges on the left around to a gully that can be downclimbed through the brush to the water's edge.

Here at 2800ft and 6hrs from the start, you begin transit through a more benign section of the canyon though with lots of downclimbs or small jumps and many long swims, some over 300yds in length. Eventually at 2360ft and 8hrs from the start, the canyon drops into a short section of difficult narrows. It is

important to recognize this location for you must climb to a ledge on the left to access a webbing anchor around a large boulder. This rappel descends about 80ft to the water's edge from where you continue with the swimming, bouldering and jumping. This bouldering is slow going and very tiring. Eventually you come to a long, open slickrock descent on both sides of the river. Take the left side and descend to a very broad flat lip about 50yds wide. You should reach this lip about 10hrs from the start.

At this broad lip, the river plunges an awesome 250ft into a deep canyon whose bottom is hard to view. But you should be able to find the use-trail through the bushes on the left that follows a sloping ramp all the way down to the river below these awesome falls. The last 30ft of this descent is equipped with fixed ropes to use as a handline. More slow bouldering follows until you finally see the Balch Powerhouse ahead of you. A final obstacle awaits: just before you reach the powerhouse there is a 20ft waterfall that necessitates a last rappel from a large metal anchor to the left of the falls. This descends to the rocks at the water's edge. From there you contour around to the left and clamber up the rocks to a dirt road that leads toward the powerhouse.

The grounds of the powerhouse (elevation 1740ft) are closed to the public and so you must find a way around them either by clambering up the hillside on the left outside the fence (the descent down to the road downstream of the powerhouse may be the hardest part of this maneuver) or by swimming past the powerhouse. PG&E have told the Forest Service that they will improve the route around the powerhouse but whether either of them will follow through on their obligation and desist from unnecessarily blocking passage down the canyon remains to be seen. Either way the parking area with your recovery vehicle (36°54.57'N 119°5.39'W) is just downstream of the powerhouse. The 3mi adventure through the gorge from the drop-in to the powerhouse will take about 11hrs.



Map of North Fork of Kings River Hike

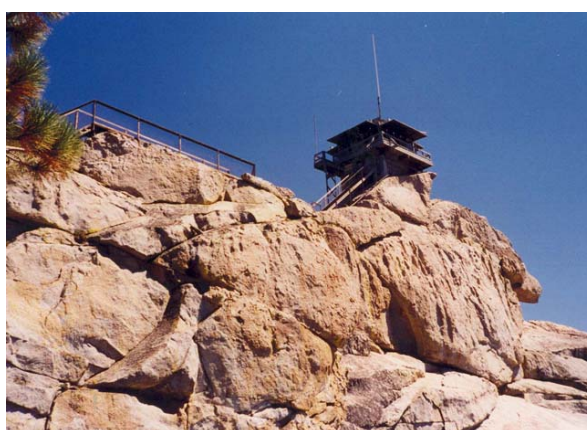
## 10.3 The Needles

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5 miles
- Elevation gain: 850 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Sentinel, Durrwood Creek
- Difficulties: None
- Special equipment: None
- ACA Rating: 1A II

This short and easy adventure in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada takes you through pine forest to a group of bare granite domes and spires known The Needles. On the 8245ft summit of the highest pinnacle is perched a classic fire lookout tower that is still manned at least part of the time. A series of wooden steps winds its way up steep rock to the lookout. The ascent of the stairway and the spectacular view from the summit represent the highlights of this short adventure. It should also be noted that The Needles is a first class rock climbing venue. There are many challenging routes with excellent rock on the spires and domes of this mountain.

This is a summer hike that can also be pleasant in the early fall. Deep snow covers the area in the winter and spring when the fire lookout is closed.



*Left: The Needles from the trail. Right: The Fire Lookout.*



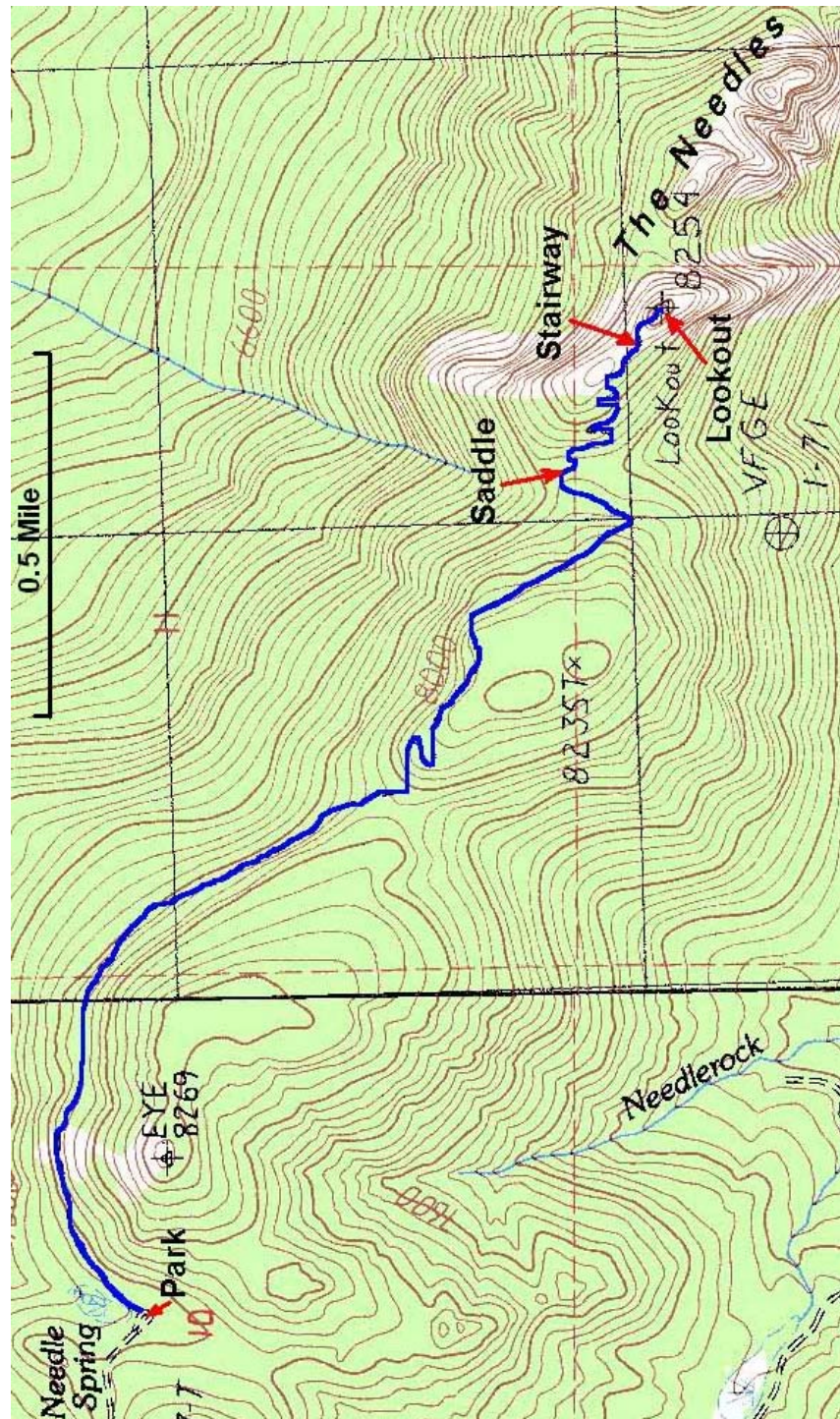
## Trailhead

From Porterville in the San Joaquin Valley take SR190 east into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Entering the Sequoia National Forest the narrow, winding road climbs steeply. About 12.7mi past the Camp Nelson turnoff, and just after Quaking Aspen Meadow turn left onto a dirt road following the sign for the Needles Springs trailhead. Drive 3mi to the well-marked trailhead (36°7.19'N 118°30.52'W).

## Hike

The gentle and easy trail proceeds southeast from the 7400ft trailhead at 36°7.19'N 118°30.52'W through woods on the northeast side of a ridge. To the east is the Kern River Basin and, beyond that the southern spine of the Sierra Nevada with its snow-capped peaks readily visible. Let your eyes follow the Kern River Valley far to the north and you may be able to pick out Mount Whitney on the horizon about 35mi away. The trail climbs 850ft to a trail crest where you get a good view of the ultimate objective, the rocky dome of The Needles topped by the fire lookout tower. The route first drops 400ft to Needles Saddle (36°6.68'N 118°29.32'W). There the switchbacking ascent of the rock begins, the view expanding with each switchback. Every so often you get a glimpse through the trees of the fire lookout tower perched precariously on the very top of the mountain. Eventually you come to the bottom of the wooden stairway and footpath that zigzags its way up the last part of the jagged spine to the summit and the tower. Brace yourself and ascend to the 8245ft summit (36°6.58'N 118°29.09'W), actually to the balcony around the tower. This balcony provides a magnificent 360 degree view of the beautiful high country of the western Sierra Nevada. When I was there the forest ranger was cooking a delicious smelling breakfast that further heightened the experience.

Return by the same route; the hike can be easily accomplished in five hours.



Map of The Needles Hike

## 10.4 Seven Teacups

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 5.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.1 miles
- Elevation gain: 460 feet
- Topo Map: Fairview, Johnsondale
- Difficulties: Five rappels up to 60ft, some in the waterfalls; some swimming
- Special equipment: 160ft rope, 20ft webbing, 3 rappel rings, harnesses, helmets and drybags
- ACA Rating: 3C III

The Kern is, perhaps, the most famous and the most notorious river in California. Born high in the Sierra Nevada where a group of icy lakes above the tree line feed their melt water into a rugged canyon, it gathers depth as it rages south past the western shadow of Mount Whitney, eventually sliding out of the southwestern end of that great mountain range. Near the end of this epic 170 mile journey, there are roads that penetrate some distance up into the Kern's massive gorge. The furthest reach is the road bridge over the Kern just a few miles east of the hamlet of Johnsondale. Just another mile up the Kern from that bridge a small tributary called Dry Meadow Creek drops down the west side of the gorge into the Kern. The final mile of this descent is precipitous and involves a long series of waterfalls in a spectacular, vertical canyon. The Seven Teacups are a succession of seven circular pools interspersed with small falls that form the first part of the descent.

This adventure involves a pleasant and easy overland hike to the head of the Seven Teacups, a descent down to the Kern, a crossing of the river and a trail hike back down to the bridge. It is a relatively short canyoneering adventure that is best for the late summer when the flow rate has ebbed. Not only is a low flow rate necessary for a safe and fun descent of the Teacups but it is also a prerequisite for a safe crossing of the Kern, perhaps the most dangerous part of this hike. My advice is to perform two important visual checks of the conditions. First, you should visually check the Kern upstream of the Johnsondale bridge before starting the hike. If you do not feel comfortable crossing the river just above the first corner then you should not proceed. Also, when you get to the top of the Seven Teacups, walk up onto the right shoulder for a view of the falls from above; if you feel the flow through the fourth falls (the narrowest of the cascades) is more than you could deal with, however briefly, then you should return to the car by the route you used on the approach.

## Trailhead

The trailhead for this hike is the parking lot at the west end of the bridge (35°58.17'N 118°29.24'W) over the Kern about 3.9mi east of Johnsondale and 20mi north of Kernville on Mountain Road 99. As you drive north from Kernville, the Johnsondale bridge, as it is called, is just beyond the junction with the road to Kennedy Meadows.

## Hike

Having performed the visual check of the Kern, start the adventure by hiking west from the parking lot (35°58.17'N 118°29.24'W and elevation 3880ft) up the steeply climbing road toward Johnsondale. Almost immediately, there is a view of the Kern through a gap on the right side of the road. This is followed by a lovely view of the South Creek waterfall just to the left side of the road. As it climbs the road switches back to the right and then to the left. About 0.3mi after the second switchback (30min and 1.2mi from the start at 4320ft) you should encounter a rough dirt road that branches off to the right (35°58.60'N 118°29.99'W). Follow this dirt road that rapidly peters out into a trail; even the trail disappears briefly as it enters a small gully. Continue up the gully but, when you come to a fork, the trail follows the ridge between the forks and becomes clearer. (If you lose the trail completely just hike northwest through this open country.) About 20min and 0.7mi from the highway you should come to a crest or saddle (35°58.85'N 118°30.25'W and elevation 4620ft) with an overlook to the north; just beyond the saddle the trail ends at a barbed wire fence running east/west. Climb over the fence and proceed down to the shallow



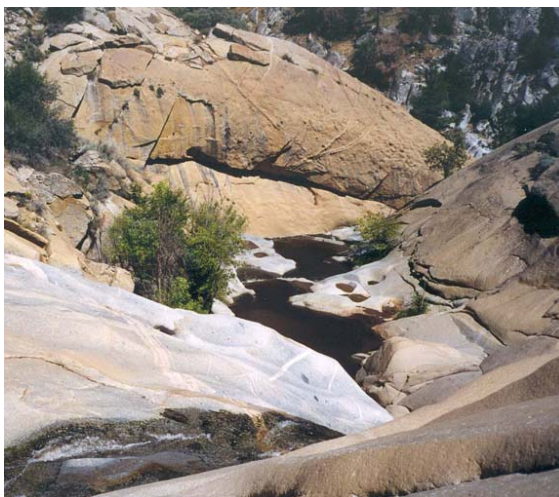
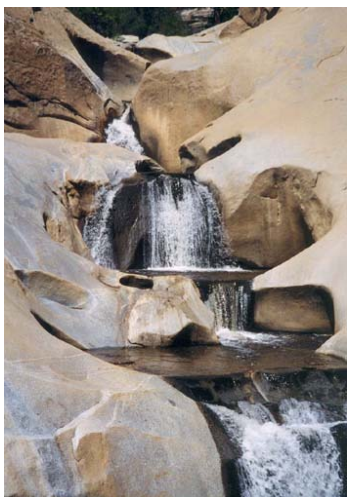
*The 4th to 7th Teacup from the right shoulder.*



gully off to the left that runs away to the north. You will follow that gully all the way to Dry Meadow Creek. Faint trails appear on one or both sides of this gully and are slightly easier to hike than the gully bottom. This is open, sparsely wooded grassland that makes for easy hiking. About 2/3 of the way down the gully and 75min from the start a dirt road comes in on the left but stops at the gully. Finally, 85min and 2.9mi from the start of the hike at an elevation of 4220ft you arrive at Dry Meadow Creek ( $35^{\circ}59.61'N$   $118^{\circ}29.32'W$ ), readily recognized by the white bedrock and the flowing water.

Turn right and proceed downstream along Dry Meadow Creek, negotiating the boulders and pools. The rock can be a little slippery so watch your step. Here there are several short sections where it is easier to take a route higher up the bank on the left. After about 30min (and a little under 2hrs from the start) you will arrive at a place ( $35^{\circ}59.61'N$   $118^{\circ}29.11'W$ ) where the ravine drops off dramatically on its final descent to the Kern, only a short distance away as the crow flies. The first part of this descent, the section immediately before you, is known as the Seven Teacups. Take off your pack and reconnoiter the challenge ahead of you.

The first few small pools can be easily bypassed on the right. The rest represent a canyoneering challenge that is great fun especially on a warm summer day when a wetsuit is not needed. Drybags are, however, essential for you will be thoroughly soaked as you make your way down through this waterworld. There are a number of ways to descend the Seven Teacups, some of which involve jumping into the pools. It is also possible to bypass the first series of falls by going up over a shoulder ledge on the left and then descending the steep slick-rock (be careful for this rock can be slippery in places). But, since the author does not jump, I describe here a rappelling descent without jumping and with



*Left: The 4th to 7th of the Teacup falls. Right: Looking down from top of the penultimate falls at the lip of last drop.*

only minor slickrock descent. Note also that the depth of the teacups varies considerably from time to time and from season to season. The author only had to swim a couple of times during the descent, most of the pools being no more than waist-to-chest deep. But before embarking on the descent I recommend walking up along the ledge on the left shoulder to review the challenges ahead. In particular examine the fourth waterfall, the one that proceeds through a narrow gap. If the spout here seems more than you can handle I suggest you return by the way you came.

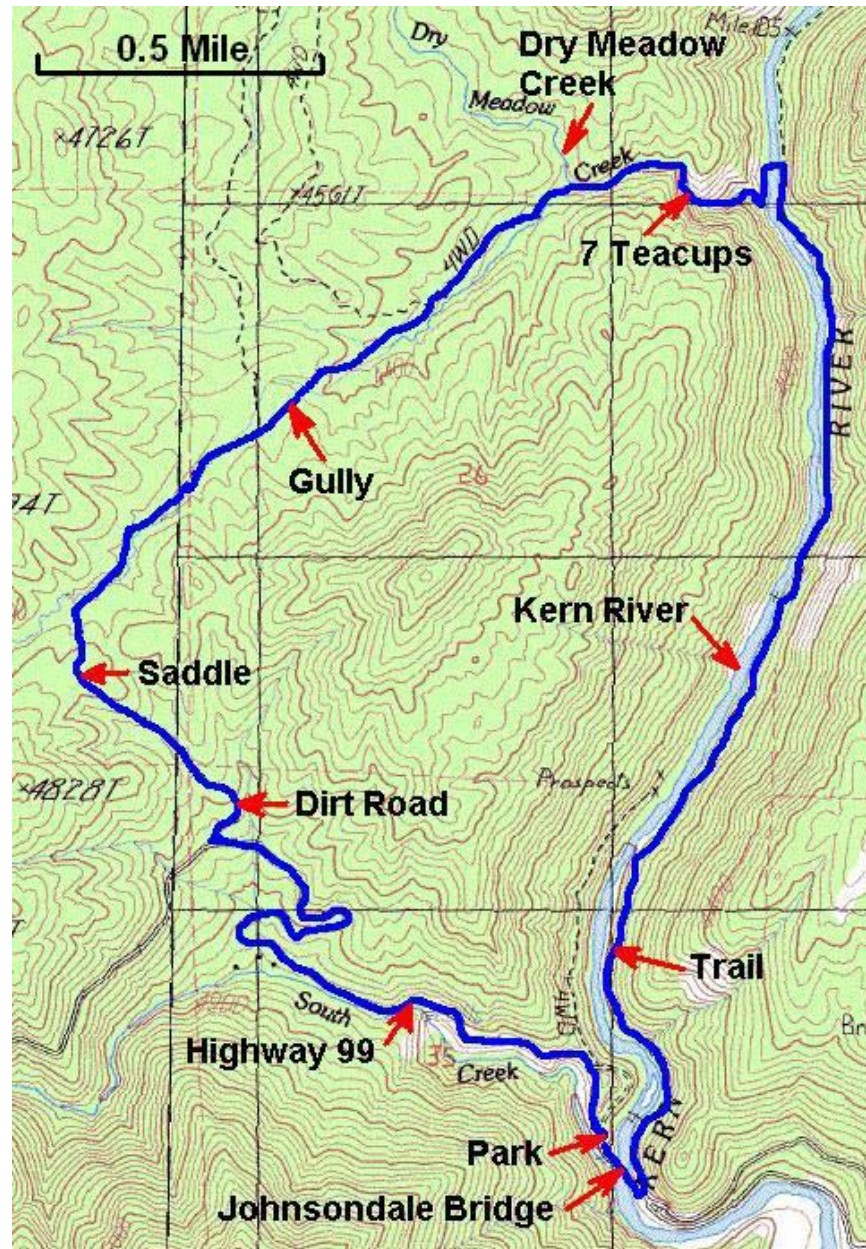
Back at the top descend to the pool before the first rappel. The flow into this pool proceeds through a small natural arch and this provides the anchor for the rappel down the first three waterfalls. Rappel down the sloping slab to the left of the first waterfall (about 12ft high) and then continue down the left part of the second and third drops (about 6ft and 8ft respectively). Then, here in the third teacup (counting one teacup at the bottom of each rappel), make sure you find the bolt in the right wall at the top of the fourth falls before you pull your rope. Set the rope through this bolt anchor and prepare to rappel down the next two falls. The first of these, a 20ft drop, is a challenge for one must rappel down through the concentrated spout that corkscrews through this narrow lip. Use your helmet to deflect the barrage. Quickly you will find yourself in the relative calm under and behind the waterfall. The next drop (about 15ft) is somewhat easier since it is broader but one must still content with a maelstrom at the bottom. The next sloping cascade is small (6ft) and is easily bypassed on the right. The one that follows drops into the last and seventh teacup; it is also small (10ft) and can be downclimbed using small ledges just to the right of the falls. You should reach the last teacup (elevation about 4110ft) about 1hr after leaving the top and 3hr after the morning start.

You will now be at the top of the tallest waterfall in the descent, a 60ft rappel using a tree anchor on the left side. This drops down into a narrow slot where there is just room to avoid the violent hammering of the main spout. There is a brief struggle against the flow in order to climb out of this slot and continue downstream where the water flows through another narrow slot before you come to a much broader rock ledge with a view down toward the Kern. You can bypass the next few cascades first, briefly on the right, and then by downclimbing a series of broken ledges on the left. This allows you to bypass a 40ft waterfall where the creek turns left.

This brings you to the top of the final drop before the Kern, now plainly visible below you. This final drop involves a two-stage rappel for reasons that are not clear from the top. The first rappel is from an anchor high on the right side of the lip. Climb up a somewhat exposed ledge with cracks to a narrow platform. One of the two possible anchors is a stout tree that is about 10ft above the platform. That tree is the preferred anchor but, if the final part of the climb is not to your liking, there is an alternative anchor: webbing placed in a small slotted nose close to foot level on the platform. From one of those two anchors rappel about 50ft into a large pothole pool on a broad ledge. The water flows out of this pool over a lip with a 12ft drop into a narrow slot going sharp right down to the Kern. With a 60m rope you could continue the rappel

into this slot. But it is much better to look up onto the rock face to the right of the pothole and find a solid two-bolt anchor within easy climbing distance. Pull your rope and set up a second rappel from this anchor. This allows you to descend about 20ft into the slot and, because of the placement of the bolts, it also allows you to descend downstream of a narrow and vigorous 6ft chute cascade within the slot. You will drop down into a narrow and deep pool just downstream of this chute where the water will likely be swimming depth. Do not disconnect yet but slide an extra 10ft of rope through your rappel device. The problem here is a strong back flow toward the chute. You will have to swim vigorously for about 3yds before escaping from this back flow; the slot is too wide and slippery to get much hand purchase on the walls. Continue on down the slot to where you can stand and pull the rope. It is then but a few steps to the ledge overlooking the edge of the Kern.

You should arrive at the junction with the Kern ( $35^{\circ}59.60'N$   $118^{\circ}28.95'W$  and elevation 3880ft) about 4hr 20min and 3.3mi from the morning start. The next challenge is to cross the Kern and this may be the most difficult challenge of the day. Conditions and flow rates vary greatly and you must exercise judgment in choosing where and how to cross. The author went some distance upstream along the west bank before finding a placid and wide place of his liking. At the end of the summer it is possible to cross with no more than waist deep water but, even then, storms can swell the river substantially. A rope assist and some experience with swift water crossings can be valuable. Once on the east bank of the Kern, climb to the well-constructed trail that runs along that side of the river (often quite high above the river) and hike 1.8mi downstream to the Johnsondale bridge ( $35^{\circ}58.17'N$   $118^{\circ}29.24'W$ ). At the bridge itself, there are stairs that take you up to the roadway. You should complete the adventure in about 5hr 30min having traveled 5.1mi.



Map of Seven Teacups Hike



## Chapter 11

# SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Many of the most popular and interesting canyoneering adventures in southern California can be found in the San Gabriel Mountains just north of the urban Los Angeles area. These are described in the companion volume entitled “Adventure Hikes and Canyoneering in the San Gabriels”. In this chapter we describe hikes and adventures in Southern California that lie outside the San Gabriels but within southern California.



Southern California region.

## 11.1 Rose Valley Falls

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6 hours
- Hiking distance: 4.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 1620 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Lion Canyon
- Special equipment: 250ft rope, 250ft recovery cord, rappeling equipment, 30ft webbing, 2 rappel rings
- ACA Rating: 3B/C III

The tallest waterfall in Los Padres National Forest is said to be the upper Rose Valley Falls in western Ventura County, a spectacular 250ft vertical cascade that careens down a limestone encrusted face. In winter when flowing fully this would represent an almost impossible rappeling challenge. But, in late spring, when the flow eases to a spray it makes for an awesome and spectacular descent. In the summer the falls dry up almost completely and the rappel is then less challenging and less fun.

The hike described here starts at the Rose Valley campground from which the upper Rose Valley Falls are readily visible. Bring a pair of binoculars so that you can evaluate the falls and the flow rate before starting out (if the flow is judged too great you might consider modifying your plan and taking the short, 20min and 0.5mi trail hike up to the bottom of the falls). The hike described proceeds up a fire road to the ridge above the falls and then descends a rough gully to the top of the upper Rose Valley Falls. Having descended this it is a short hike to the lower Rose Valley Falls, a 100ft rappel to the end the day.

### Trailhead

Drive north of Ojai, California, along Highway 33 through Wheeler Gorge to a point 14mi north of Ojai where the Rose Valley Road forks off to the east (right). Continue for 3.1mi along Rose Valley Road where you will turn right following the signs for 0.6mi to the Rose Valley Campground. Park at the far end of the campground loop at 34°31.91'N 119°10.99'W and an elevation of 3420ft.

### Hike

From the parking area at the top of the Rose Valley Campground loop at 34°31.91'N 119°10.99'W and an elevation of 3420ft, cross the stream and head

west along the fire road that soon starts to climb steeply. That vigorous rate of ascent continues all the way to the ridge top at  $34^{\circ}31.16'N$   $119^{\circ}11.84'W$  and an elevation of 5040ft. There, 2.1mi and 1hr 40min from the start, you will come to the junction with the Chief Peak fire road that runs along the ridge top. Your ascent is thankfully complete at this point. Turning left you proceed eastwards along the Chief Peak Road for another, relatively level mile to the drop-in point where you leave the road and start down the gully toward the falls.

You should reach the drop-in point at  $34^{\circ}31.07'N$   $119^{\circ}10.88'W$  and an elevation of 4990ft about 2 hrs from the start having covered about 3.1mi. As you are hiking along the road look for a small pond to the left of the road and drop down into the wash on the left just beyond the pond. At the start the hike along the wash requires some modest bushwhacking but the wash soon steepens and you enter a wooded area where there is little brush and the descent down the boulder strewn wash is quite easy. About the 4400ft level you may begin to see a small trickle of water and there are several moss-covered waterfalls that make for a good lunch stop.

At 4290ft (about 3hrs from the start) a large tributary enters on the right and the trickle becomes a small stream. Downstream of this confluence there are a number of small downclimbs and several drops that can be bypassed on the left or right. Then, quite abruptly, you arrive at the awesome drop-off at the top of the upper Rose Valley Falls. You should reach this point at  $34^{\circ}31.57'N$   $119^{\circ}10.78'W$  and an elevation of 3950ft about 3.5hrs from the morning start having covered 3.7mi. It is difficult to get a good view of the base of the falls in order to judge your descent route but the easiest way lies to the left. We anchored from a stout bush about 20ft up on the left side a little ways back from



*Left: Upper Rose Valley Falls. Right: Lower Rose Valley Falls.*

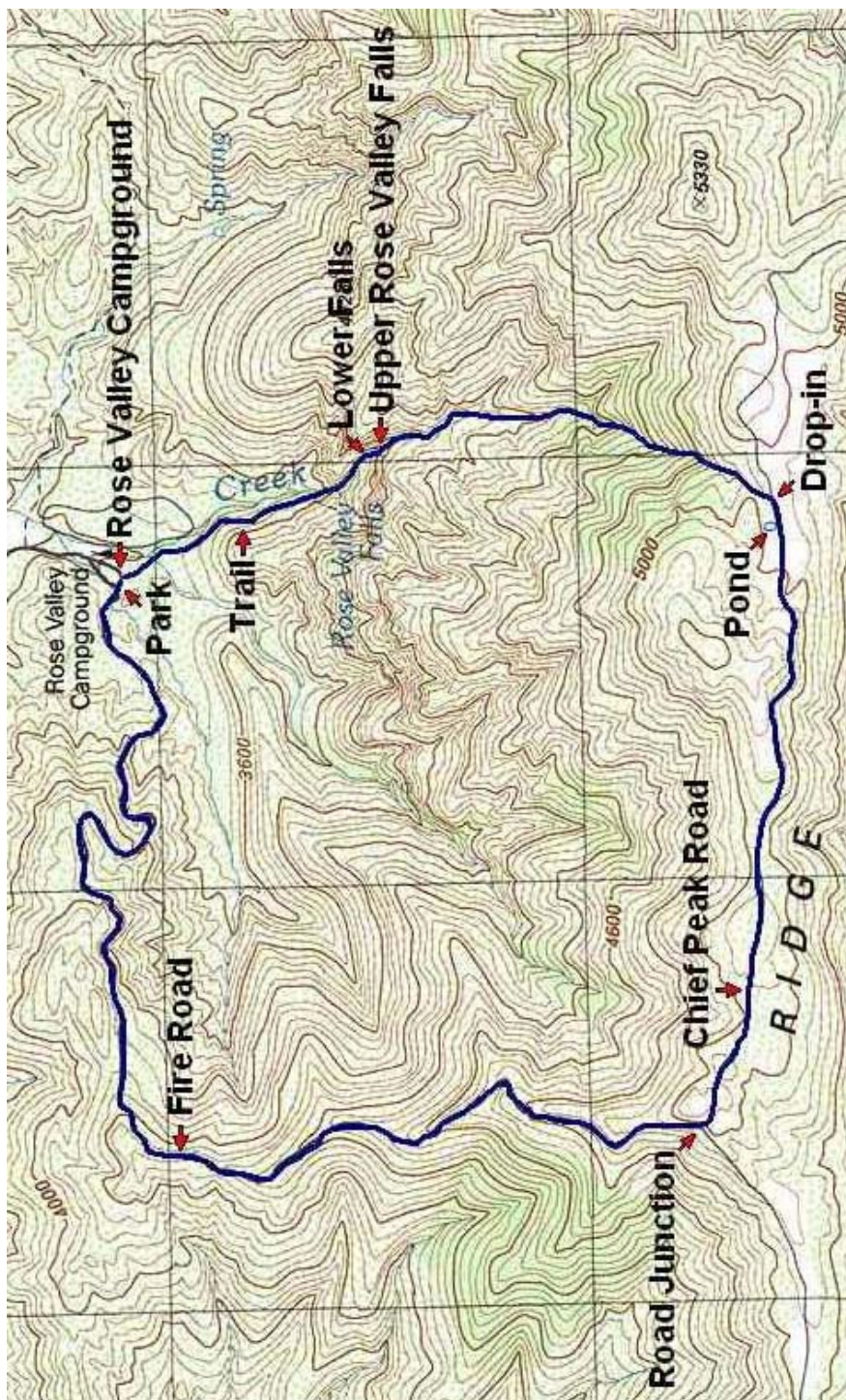
the lip and extended the webbing down to a point just around the shoulder to the left of the lip allowing for an easy entry to the rappel. With a 250ft rope and a 250ft recovery cord you can rappel all the way to the bottom of the falls. You will get wet from the abundant spray but this anchor avoided the main stream of the waterfall.

[For experienced canyoneers only: It is possible to descend with a 200ft rope and a 200ft recovery cord but only along the route described. A 200ft rope will allow you to just reach a narrow ledge to the left of the falls and you can traverse along this wet and slippery shelf to a scree slope on the left that allows an easy downclimb to the base of the falls. Stay on rappel while traversing the ledge. Make sure your ropes are 200ft; even if they are 10ft short you will be in trouble.]

Pause at the bottom of these magnificent falls to enjoy their splendor. Looking up you will note an overhanging limestone formation at the top that you just avoided by taking the suggested route. That formation creates the great broad spray that characterizes these falls in modest flow. You should reach the bottom of the upper Rose Valley Falls at an elevation of 3690ft about 5hrs from the morning start.

It is just a short steep clamber down the stream from the base of the upper falls to the top of the Lower Rose Valley Falls. This lovely 100ft waterfall cascades down a limestone-fluted and moss-covered face. There is a dry route from a tree anchor on the left side of the lip. Alternatively you may choose a wet route down the middle of the falls that uses as anchor the large tree a short way back from the lip. You should reach the bottom of the lower Rose Valley Falls at an elevation of 3530ft about 5.5hrs from the morning start. From there a well-maintained trail leads back to the Rose Valley Campground about 0.5mi away. You should reach the Rose Valley Campground (34°31.91'N 119°10.99'W and an elevation of 3420ft) about 6hrs and 4.2mi after the morning start.





Map of Rose Valley Falls Hike

## 11.2 Tar Creek

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: Option one 8.7 hours; Option two 10 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: Option one 9.3 miles; Option two 7.6 miles
- Elevation gain: Option one 1780 feet; Option two none
- USGS Topo Maps: Fillmore
- Difficulties: 2 or more rappels, 2 swims, much bouldering and wading.
- Special equipment: 190ft rope, 190ft recovery cord, rappeling equipment, 40ft webbing, 2 rappel rings
- ACA Rating: 3B III

This is a spectacular adventure that descends the rugged and tortuous Tar Creek and then has two options. The first phase, the descent through the Tar Creek ravine, requires two or three rappels and two or three swims through deep pools. There is also much route finding between, through and sometimes under huge boulders and tortuously sculpted rock before you arrive at the junction with the Sespe. Option one is to hike back to the starting point along a rough but easily followed trail. Option two, which requires a car shuttle, is to descend the larger but also difficult Sespe Gorge to where it exits the mountains north of Fillmore in Ventura County, California. This continuation of the adventure requires you to find your way through fields of more huge boulders and finally through the spectacular Devil's Gate. Option one is a day hike; option two is a very long day-hike and perhaps better done as an overnighiter. There are a number of good campsites in Sespe Canyon. Both options are best undertaken during warm weather since you will spend much of the time soaking wet. Late in the summer Tar Creek may dry up and lose some of its verdant beauty. When this happens the pools can become quite stagnant and the swimming less attractive. Consequently the hike is probably at its best on a warm spring or early summer day when the water is flowing but you can dry out relatively quickly.

### Trailhead

A car shuttle is required for option two of this challenging adventure hike. Thus one, two or more vehicles should be driven to the town of Fillmore, northwest of Los Angeles. From Highway 126 turn north on Highway 23 and proceed straight through a series of stop signs. After 1.5mi you will come to a tee junction where you turn right though, because of the way the roads bend, you are, in effect, proceeding straight on. You are now on Goodenough Road, driving past citrus groves. After 3.7mi you reach the end of the normal road at a junction at

34°26.91'N 118°55.35'W, where the left fork is gated private property and the right fork climbs steeply. It is signposted as Forest Road, 6N16.

The route proceeds up the right fork but for option two you should back up about 20yds and identify a straight dirt walkway along the northern edge of a citrus grove that runs down to the river on the left side of the road. This is the route option two will follow back to the road from the river at the end of the hike. Park one car just off the right side of the road directly in line with this pathway.

Then, in the other vehicle(s), proceed up the right fork that is just ahead (the Squaw Flat Forest Road, 6N16) as it climbs the east wall of a side canyon called Little Sespe. About 2.3mi up this road you will pass a set of oil pumps. Proceed straight on where a dirt road branches off to the right. Then after 3.3mi you will pass through Oak Flat where there are Forest Service structures. Again you proceed straight on where a road branches off to the right. Finally, 4.7mi from the start of 6N16, you will arrive at a broad open parking area from which dirt roads proceed in several directions. This is the trailhead (elevation 2500ft); park here at 34°28.82'N 118°55.03'W.

## Hike

From the trailhead (elevation 2500ft) follow the dirt road going northwest. After passing a locked gate and climbing briefly, this begins a descent into the Tar Creek drainage with good views northwest into Sespe Canyon. After 1.5mi the road passes a beehive farm and then degenerates into a trail that, after another 1.0mi arrives at the crossing of Tar Creek at 34°29.41'N 118°55.70'W



*Left: Tar Creek cascades. Right: Upper Tar Creek Falls.*



and an elevation of 1920ft. At this point you leave the trail and start downstream following Tar Creek. Note, however, that the trail then climbs up the other side of the creek following a disused dirt road and eventually descends to Sespe Creek north of Tar Canyon. That trail is the return route for option one and it is wise to fix it in your mind for later.

At the Tar Creek crossing, the off-trail hike starts and you begin to boulder hop down Tar Creek itself. This is a beautiful and initially gentle stream that is full of life. As you begin to encounter deeper water, look for the harmless water snakes that are abundant here and for the turtles that inhabit some of the larger pools. After about 20min of easy hiking, you arrive at the top of the Tar Creek Cascades (at  $34^{\circ}29.54'N$   $118^{\circ}55.99'W$ ), a magnificent series of small waterfalls and polished rock pools. On a hot day this is a great place for a swim. The first few steps in the cascade can be downclimbed on the left but you will probably elect to wade through the last broad pool.

Downstream of the cascades, the going rapidly gets much harder. You will need to find your way round, over and under huge boulders that fill the canyon; I recommend that you stay toward the left. At the end of this boulder section there is a large pool that, in turn, presages the first dramatic obstacle on this adventure. Just beyond it at  $34^{\circ}29.68'N$   $118^{\circ}56.21'W$  the stream plunges down into a deep ravine cut in the flat rock stratum on which you are standing. The water falls about 60ft into a deep pool at the bottom of the ravine. These are the upper Tar Creek Falls and should be reached about 1hr 50min from the start.

There are two ways of descending into the ravine. There is a use-trail that you can follow around the right lip of the cliff to a point where you can descend to a ledge that switchbacks to a point where the remainder of the descent can be made down the bare rock. A simpler and more exciting way to descend is to rappel down on the left of the waterfall using a convenient anchor between two



*Left: Lower Tar Creek Falls. Right: Falls in Lower Tar Creek.*



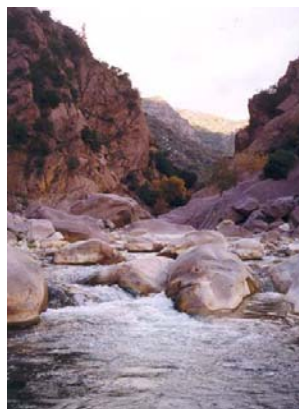
boulders near the lip of the cliff.

After the descent, you face a rugged, obstacle filled route along the bottom of the ravine. Though the first large pool at the base of the waterfall can be bypassed, there is no avoiding the swim through the second pool immediately downstream of the first. The discharge from this second pool falls about 25ft into the third pool. However, these falls can be negotiated on the left first by downclimbing a 10ft slot and then bypassing the third pool by climbing along a high ledge on the left side of the canyon. For the next 200yds the canyon presents a series of obstacles consisting of small waterfalls, rock ledges and pools with vertical cliffs on both sides. The going is slow but fun on a warm day.

This section ends in a huge vertical drop-off about 30yds wide that you should reach about 3.5hrs from the start. The stream disappears over this cliff at 34°29.61'N 118°56.40'W and plunges about 160ft into a large, deep pool. From the top of the drop-off the remaining stretch of Tar Canyon and its junction with Sespe Canyon are readily visible. There are two possible routes for the descent of the big waterfall. The more adventurous is a spectacular 160ft rappel down the big face just to the right of the waterfall. There is an excellent anchor around a rock trapped under a large boulder just a few feet back from the edge of the cliff. When the water is flowing fully this is a great rappel. The best place to dismount is at a broad ledge about 8ft above the pool at the bottom. You can descend from the ledge to the right of the pool.

The second and less dramatic method of descent is to follow a use-trail that leads along the lip of the cliff to the right. If you follow this as far as you can easily go, there are several rocks that can be used as anchors to rappel down about 70ft through the bushes into a steep gully on the right. Once in the gully itself, two more rappels are needed to descend to the edge of the big pool at the bottom of the main waterfall.

You should reach this point about 4.5hrs from the start. It is an idyllic place to stop for lunch and a swim. Few people ever manage to penetrate this far into



*Left: Sespe at Tar Creek trail end. Right: Devil's Gate from downstream.*

the wilderness and so it remains a special place.

The remaining short section of Tar Canyon between the big waterfall and Sespe Creek is slow going, consisting of an accumulation of huge boulders. Initially it is easiest to stay as far right as possible. Closer to the Sespe, a number of old dry channels of Tar Creek will become evident on the right. We followed a small dry channel in the middle that allowed us to reach the Sespe fairly easily. You should arrive at this junction with the Sespe (at 34°29.49'N 118°56.60'W and elevation 1280ft) about 5hr 45min from the trailhead having traveled only about 3.7mi in that time. At this point the two options proceed in different directions.

### **Option One:**

To find the trail back to the start, proceed right up the Sespe. There is no need to cross the river, because you can find your way around and over the few huge boulders you encounter on the west side. After just 15min you will come to several unofficial campsites on the right bank of the river, with sandy areas for bedding down and substantial fire rings. Large swimming holes nearby make this an attractive spot to spend the night.

The trail back to the start begins immediately behind these campsites at 34°29.52'N 118°56.68'W and is marked by several ducks. It follows the route of an old road built to service the long gone oil wells along this part of the Sespe. Above the river, there are two long traverses first to the left and then back to the right. This brings you to a steep section littered with rock falls before you go through a cutting in a projecting ridge. Just before the cutting there is a good but partial view of the big waterfall in Tar Creek. Beyond the cutting the trail climbs and then descends to the Tar Creek crossing that you passed earlier in the hike. It should take 1hr 45min to climb the 3.1mi from the Sespe to the Tar Creek crossing (at 34°29.41'N 118°55.70'W) and another 1hr to hike the 2.5mi back to the trailhead.

### **Option Two:**

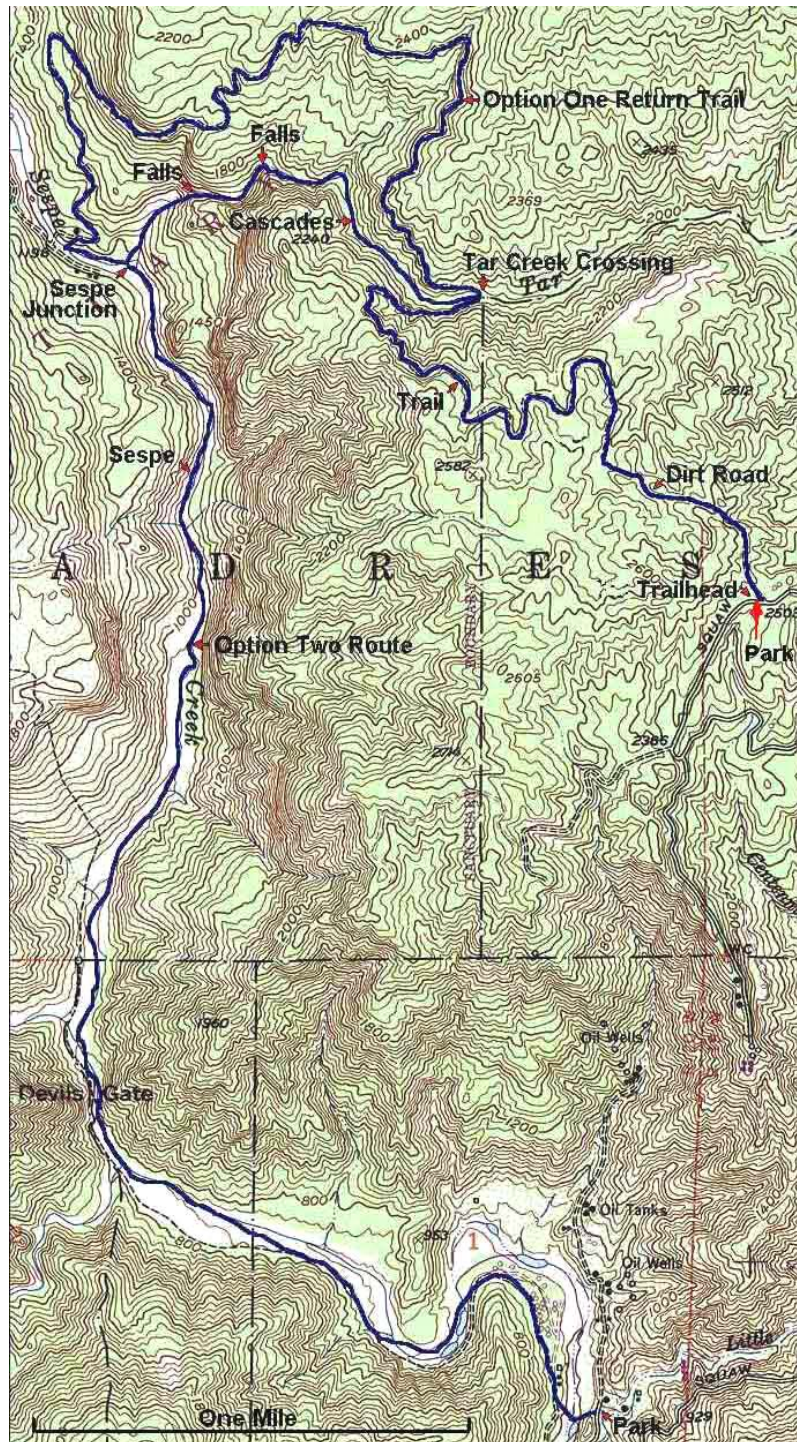
The junction of Tar Creek with the Sespe is a broad gravel flat and you should cross the river to begin your progress downstream along Sespe Creek. Just below the junction, the going deteriorates dramatically and you enter a particularly difficult section with huge, purple boulders blocking the way at every turn. We made our way down on the right but this involved much route finding and some swimming. A large red cliff on the left marks this section and, once past this cliff, the way gets progressively easier. About a mile downstream, it is possible to make significantly faster progress by crossing and recrossing the river, traveling on the flatter benches and avoiding the fields of large boulders. Here, in many places you will see tar oozing out of the ground or out of the side of the canyon and forming films of oil on the surface of the pools. This region was the site of some of the first oil wells in California and traces of those efforts

still remain. About two miles downstream of the Tar/Sespe junction is a fair sized lake and from there to Devil's Gate it is easiest to travel on the right.

The last major obstacle on this adventure is Devil's Gate, a narrow restriction in Sespe Canyon at 34°27.81'N 118°56.62'W. If you are in doubt about recognizing Devil's Gate, watch for a large tributary, called Coldwater Canyon, that enters on the right. The sediment carried into the Sespe by the Coldwater has created a large gravel bench just upstream of Devil's Gate. You should reach the junction with the Coldwater (elevation 850ft) about 8.5hr from the start having traveled 5.7mi in that time. About 100yds past the Coldwater, stay to the right as the canyon walls begin to steepen and close in. To find the use-trail through Devil's Gate high up on the right wall, it is necessary to climb the steep, rocky slope just before entering the Gate. There is a trail of ducks along this route; if you can find them, follow them. The trail becomes much more distinct once you have climbed the first rocky slope. It then follows the general route of the old road through Devil's Gate, built to service the oil wells mentioned earlier. Only vestiges of this road remain but the trail is not too difficult to follow and descends to the river downstream of the Gate. Incidentally, the large quantities of driftwood scattered along the trail throughout the Gate must have been deposited by an awesome flood some years ago.

Another large drainage, Pine Canyon, enters from the right just downstream of Devil's Gate and, at this point, it is wise to find one of the many use-trails along the broad flat bench to the right of the river. This allows rapid progress. Then, just after the canyon turns to the right, cross over to the left side until you reach the small, man-made reservoir that signals the fact that you are close to the end. Just downstream of the reservoir you may choose to follow the dirt road on a bench on the right. This passes some private property and may require you to negotiate a locked gate just beyond a house on the left side of the road. Just past the gate the road divides at about 34°27.21'N 118°55.52'W. Follow the left fork that descends to the river. Then hike along the river for about 400yds to 34°26.89'N 118°55.61'W to a place where two large cables in white plastic tubes are strung overhead across the river. If you climb the left bank about 20yds downstream of these cables, cross a narrow open field or citrus grove and climb another steep bank you will be in the citrus grove that is the very last part of this hike. Travel along the north side of this citrus grove back to the first vehicle and the end of the adventure at 34°26.91'N 118°55.35'W (elevation 675ft). It should take a total of about 10hrs to cover the 7.6mi of option two.





Map of Tar Creek Hike



## 11.3 Sespe Gorge

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 18 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 21 miles
- USGS Topo Map: Devils Heart Peak, Fillmore
- Difficulties: A very strenuous hike with up to four long swims
- Special equipment: Dry bags for all gear, 30ft of rope or webbing
- ACA Rating: 2B VI

Sespe Gorge is a magnificent and towering canyon in a remote wilderness just 60mi northwest of Los Angeles. The multi-colored layers of sedimentary rock that make up this land have been fantastically twisted and tilted by the frequent earthquakes of this region and the Sespe has had to cut through these inclined strata on its way to the sea. The result is a smorgasbord of layered walls, great inclined slabs of polished rock and a canyon bottom littered with enormous purple and yellow boulders. Along one awesome stretch of about 3mi, the walls of this Gorge soar over 1000ft above you and it is almost impossible to conceive that the LA conurbation is just a few miles away. Moreover, within this inner gorge, there are three places, identifiable on the topo map, where this huge gorge becomes particularly narrow. Eric Anderson has called these the Three Squeezes, an appropriate appellation. At each of these Squeezes, the narrow rock walls have created narrow, long and deep pools. Some of these pools are over 100yds long and at least one long one at the Third Squeeze must be swum. Most people will end up making four substantial swims. Consequently, this hike requires dry bags for your gear (and for flotation).

The Sespe Gorge is at least a two day hike. The first day you should be able to complete the cross-country hike from the Dough Flat trailhead to Alder Creek, travel down Alder Creek to the Sespe and then descend the Sespe to a point just upstream of the First Squeeze. The second day you then proceed through the Squeezes, down to Tar Creek Camp from where you will hike up out of the canyon. The hike is best for a hot summer day that will allow you to warm up and dry out quickly after each of the swims. The only problem with this is that the hike up the Tar Creek trail at the end of the second day can be very hot. It may be best to camp a second night at one of the attractive Tar Creek campsites and hike out in the cool of the following morning.

### Trailhead

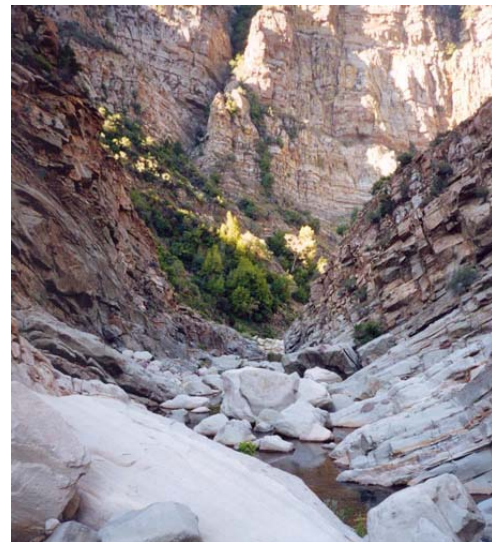
A car shuttle is required for this adventure hike. Drive to the town of Fillmore, northwest of Los Angeles. From Highway 126 turn north on Highway

23 and proceed straight at a series of stop signs. After 1.5mi you will come to a tee-junction where you turn right though, because of the way the roads bend, you are, in effect, proceeding straight on. You are now on Goodenough Road, driving past citrus groves. After 3.7mi you reach the end of the normal road at a junction (at  $34^{\circ}26.91'N$   $118^{\circ}55.35'W$ ), where the left fork is gated private property. The right fork, the Squaw Flat Forest Road signposted 6N16, climbs steeply up the east wall of a side canyon called Little Sespe. About 2.3mi up this road you will pass a set of oil wells. Proceed straight on where a dirt road branches off to the right. Then after 3.3mi you will pass through Oak Flat where there are Forest Service structures. Again you proceed straight on where a road branches off to the right. After 4.7mi from the start of 6N16 and 20min from Fillmore, you will arrive at a broad parking area from which dirt roads go off in several directions. This is the Tar Creek trailhead (elevation 2500ft). Park the recovery vehicle here at  $34^{\circ}28.82'N$   $118^{\circ}55.03'W$ .

In the other vehicle(s) continue along the only open road for 5.5mi and 20min to the Dough Flat trailhead at  $34^{\circ}31.34'N$   $118^{\circ}53.73'W$ . Along the way there are several forks off to the right, but all are marked as private. Park in one of the parking spaces distributed around the trailhead loop at Dough Flat (elevation 2825ft).

## Hike

From Dough Flat (elevation 2825ft) take the obvious trail that proceeds northwest up a shallow valley and then rises and falls as it transitions through several stream beds. About 1.3mi from the start you pass Squaw Spring and Squaw Flat (at  $34^{\circ}32.19'N$   $118^{\circ}53.90'W$  and elevation 3120ft) at which point



*Left: Second part of First Squeeze. Right: Second Squeeze from above.*

you begin a gradual climb to a pass (3690ft) about 2.4mi from the trailhead. Just beyond the pass is a marked trail junction at 34°33.07'N 118°53.93'W where you fork left (the right fork heads east toward Piru Creek) and begin a gentle descent to Cow Spring Camp (at 34°33.58'N 118°54.45'W and 3500ft) about 3.4mi from the start.

From Cow Camp the trail climbs gently through a shallow trough known as the Stone Corral because of the bare slickrock ramp that defines its left side. After several small ridges (high point 3670ft) you come to an overlook and the trail drops steeply down toward the Alder Creek drainage. At the bottom of a set of switchbacks you will pass a watery little glade known as Dripping Springs (elevation 3100ft) some 5.2mi and 2hr from the start. Some further contouring and descending takes you down to Alder Creek proper where you encounter a signed trail junction. The right fork is a trail that drops down along Alder Creek from Mutau Flat and a trail system to the north. You take the left fork and travel downstream for about a mile. There you will find Alder Creek Camp (at 34°34.61'N 118°56.39'W, elevation 2530ft and 6.4mi from the trailhead), a nice, big shady camp on a bench on the right bank of the stream; it has running water most of the year. Another mile beyond Alder Camp, after a number of stream crossings, you should be alert for a place ahead of you where the canyon turns left and narrows. As you approach, the trail is following a flat bench on the right side of a broad wash. Just after some prominent rock slabs high on the right side of the canyon there is a trail junction at 2410ft, 7.2mi and 3.2hr from the start. (We took a 15min lunch break here.) The established trail goes west toward the upper Sespe by continuing along this bench and then climbing up a tributary out of Alder Creek. Instead you take the left fork



*Second Swim in Third Squeeze.*

that crosses to the left bank of the wash and continues downstream for about 300yds to Shady Campsite (at 34°34.34'N 118°57.14'W, elevation 2400ft and 7.4mi from the start) whose precise location is not accurately shown on the topo map. Continuing on through Shady Camp it is just a few yards to the Alder Creek Narrows where the canyon flows through a narrow, vertical-walled gate. Here the trail ends and you hike off-trail down to the Sespe alongside Alder Creek. At the exit from the Alder Creek Narrows, there are two sections of boulder downclimbing that can be negotiated without much difficulty. At the first section start down on the left side of the stream; then cross over to the extreme right to find a slot that drops down most easily into a knee-deep pool. At the second section of boulder downclimbing the route is all on the left side. The rest of the way to the Sespe is easy going along the stream bed with, thankfully, very little brush.

You should reach the junction with the Sespe (at 34°33.88'N 118°57.27'W, elevation 2060ft) after 4hr and 8mi of hiking from the trailhead. There is a small campsite here, the first of many small, unofficial sites that you could use on the way down through the gorge. Just downstream of the confluence is a large pool, a welcome sight on a hot summer day. It is the first of many deep pools that you will have to negotiate during your transit through Sespe Gorge. This one is easily bypassed on the left along a faint trail in the bushes.

As you begin the descent of the Sespe, the going is typical of the trail-less route you will follow through the gorge, with much boulder-hopping, route finding and frequent river crossings. The river turns south and then southwest. About 1mi from the Alder you should recognize where Stone Corral Canyon enters from the northeast (at 34°33.43'N 118°56.60'W and elevation 1970ft). Here there are some beautiful waterfalls surrounded by lush vegetation. Turning south you pass another large pool after another 0.4mi.

Proceeding south about 2mi from the Alder Creek confluence, the canyon begins to narrow and the colorfully stratified left wall steepens impressively. Then, just about 7hr and 2.1mi of hiking from the start at an elevation of 1870ft, you will pass two sets of dryfalls dropping down the left wall. The second of these dryfalls is particularly pretty with large undercutting below the harder strata. At this point about 0.5mi upstream of the First Squeeze (10.1mi and 7.3hr from the morning start) there is a nice little campsite at 34°32.59'N 118°56.74'W on the right side where we found it pleasant to spend the night.

\* \* \*

You are now approaching the deep, central section of Sespe Gorge where route finding takes a little more time and effort. Just 0.5mi south of the campsite at 34°32.24'N 118°56.91'W and an elevation of 1840ft (10.5mi and 8hr from Dough Flat) you come to the First Squeeze, the easiest of the three narrows to negotiate. It begins just upstream of a point where the canyon turns sharp left. There are three places in the Gorge where the canyon becomes very narrow and you encounter deep and long, canyon-filling pools. They are readily identified on the topo map. You can avoid most of the water in the First Squeeze by



climbing along the sloping ledges on the right side. However this strategy ends and you must descend to the water and wade through waist deep water for the last 30yds. Virtually all the big pools have muddy banks at the downstream end and these banks are good places to look for the footprints of the many animals that call this wilderness home including bear, cougar and a myriad of smaller mammals. We followed the tracks of a large bear who could not have been far ahead of us.

Midway through the First Squeeze, the canyon turns sharp left and you find yourself in an awesome gorge with great tortured and stratified walls soaring over 1000ft above you. The second part of the First Squeeze occurs just after this turn. It requires either a tricky climb onto a ledge on the right or the first swim of the day, a short 20yd refresher early in the morning. The canyon then turns right again and broadens into easier going. A little downstream you pass another large pool that is marked on the topo map.

Now every turn reveals a new, spectacular vista. About 1.8mi from the First Squeeze and 12.3mi from Dough Flat, the canyon begins to narrow again and, after a slight left turn, you come to the Second Squeeze at 34°31.09'N 118°57.21'W and an elevation of 1610ft. From the top of a readily recognized large flat rock you look down over a series of cascades to the swim at the end of the Second Squeeze. It is another awesome, majestic place and one can only wonder what it must be like after the winter storms pass through. Descending the cascades you come to the narrow rock-walled passage where you must swim about 50yds to a muddy downstream bank. It will take about 10.3hr of hiking to get to this point from the Dough Flat trailhead.

Downstream of the Second Squeeze, the canyon turns sharp right and broadens. The going is briefly easy until it turns left again and, about 0.9mi below the Second Squeeze you encounter the Third Squeeze at 34°30.67'N 118°57.76'W. Here there are two long pools one after the other. The first is about 75yds long. This is followed by an intimidatingly long pool that is at least 110yds in length. A relaxed and easy swimming style is needed here. Those who are uncertain may want to carry a swimming aid. Along the way turtles will stick their heads up out of the water to inspect your progress.

You should emerge from the long swim at the end of the Third Squeeze after hiking for 11.5hr and 13.2mi from Dough Flat. This marks the end of the most spectacular section of Sespe Gorge. From this point on the canyon is still large but broader and often filled with huge buick-sized boulders. A short way below the Third Squeeze the canyon turns right and then sharp left at a place called Grassy Flat. A little later at an elevation of 1470ft and 5.8mi from the Alder Creek confluence, the West Fork of the Sespe enters on the right at 34°30.38'N 118°57.91'W amidst much greenery. Reportedly there is a remnant trail high on the right side that leads down from the West Fork to the Tar Creek area but we did not investigate that trail. Below Grassy Flat the canyon is still rugged and there are places where you must negotiate large boulder fields. About 0.6mi from the Tar Creek camp the canyon turns right and an unnamed stream enters on the left. The topo map also shows a group of former oil wells on the right side of the canyon at this confluence but it is hard to detect that they ever existed.

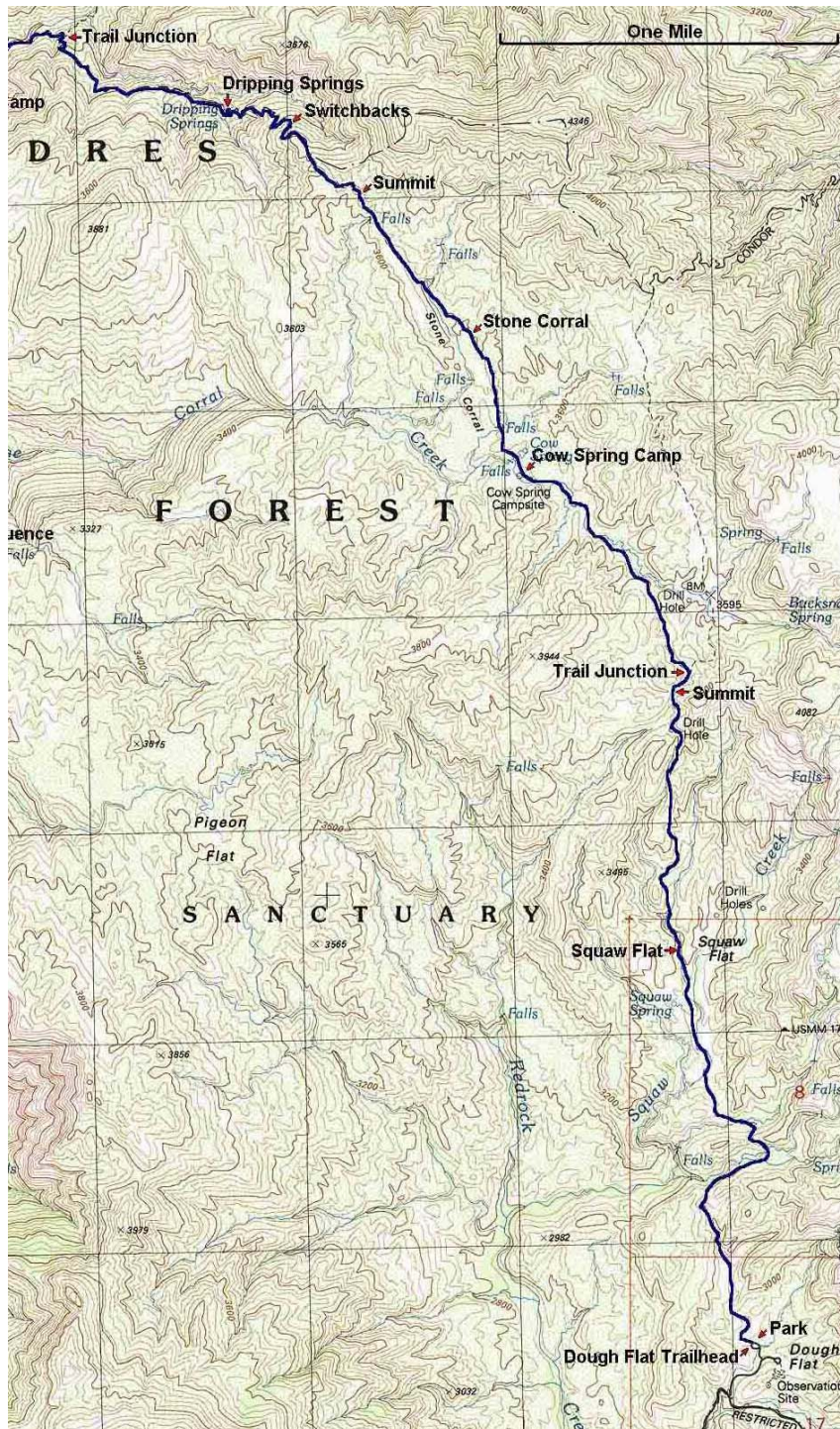
About 0.3mi beyond the unnamed stream the canyon turns left and just beyond this point you encounter the only required climbing of the whole trip. A line of huge boulders fills the canyon at this point at 34°29.77'N 118°56.83'W and the only passage is on the extreme left where you climb a short way up to a slot with a 12ft vertical drop at the exit. A log has been propped up in the slot to provide some footholds. Pieces of old rope have been left by previous hikers but it would be wise to bring your own 30ft rope (or webbing) to ensure a safe and easy descent.

Beyond the downclimb, you are closing in on Tar Camp, a fact that has been evident for the last mile or so because great splotches of tar litter the canyon bottom. Some look as if they had been dropped by some tar-eating bird but all have leached out of the ground and some carried by the river. Here it is wise to begin to take special note of the following landmarks since it is otherwise not easy to locate the Tar Creek trail. Below the downclimb you will negotiate some further boulder arrays with several large campsites scattered among the boulders (some with nice streamside beaches). High above you on the right side is a prominent rock outcropping that is opposite Tar Creek and has been visible for some time. Very soon you emerge onto a notable gravel bed at the far end of which is yet another row of boulders that almost block the canyon. However this row is easily circumvented along the left shore of the stream. Just after this look for a sandy campsite with a large fireplace up near the trees. The overgrown but passable trail leads off just behind this campsite at 34°29.52'N 118°56.68'W. If you encounter Tar Creek entering on the left or the large, deep pool just upstream of the Tar Creek confluence then you should backtrack along the east bank of the Sespe. The Tar Creek trail is about 200yds upstream of the confluence.

You should come to Tar Creek Camp (elevation 1270ft) after 15.5mi and 14.6hr of hiking from Dough Flat. Large swimming holes nearby make this an attractive spot to spend the night. To prepare yourself for the steep and hot hike out of the canyon, it would be wise to rest and refresh yourself here. Be sure to filter sufficient water for the climb ahead.

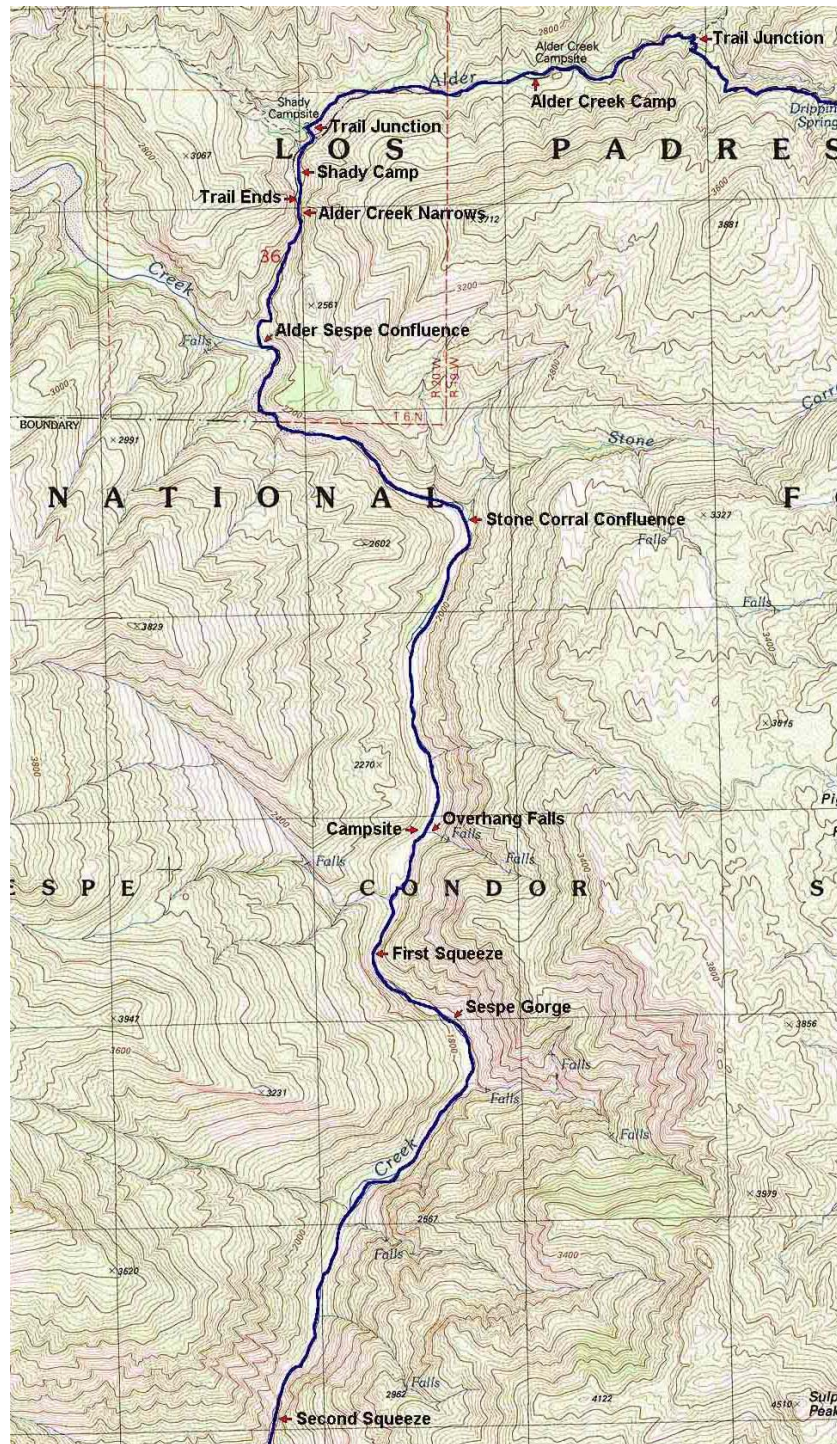
The Tar Creek trail follows the route of an old road built to service the long-gone oil wells along this part of the Sespe. Above the river, there are two long traverses first to the left and then back to the right. This brings you to a steep section littered with rock falls before you go through a cutting in a projecting ridge. Just before the cutting there is a good but partial view of the big waterfall in Tar Creek. Beyond the cutting the trail climbs and then descends to cross Tar Creek. It should take 2hr to climb the 3.1mi from the Sespe to the Tar Creek crossing and another 1hr to hike the 2.5mi back to the Tar Creek trailhead (at 34°28.82'N 118°55.03'W and elevation 2500ft) and the recovery vehicle.

The total length of the hike is just over 21mi and it should take the strong hiker a total of about 18hrs of travel to cover.



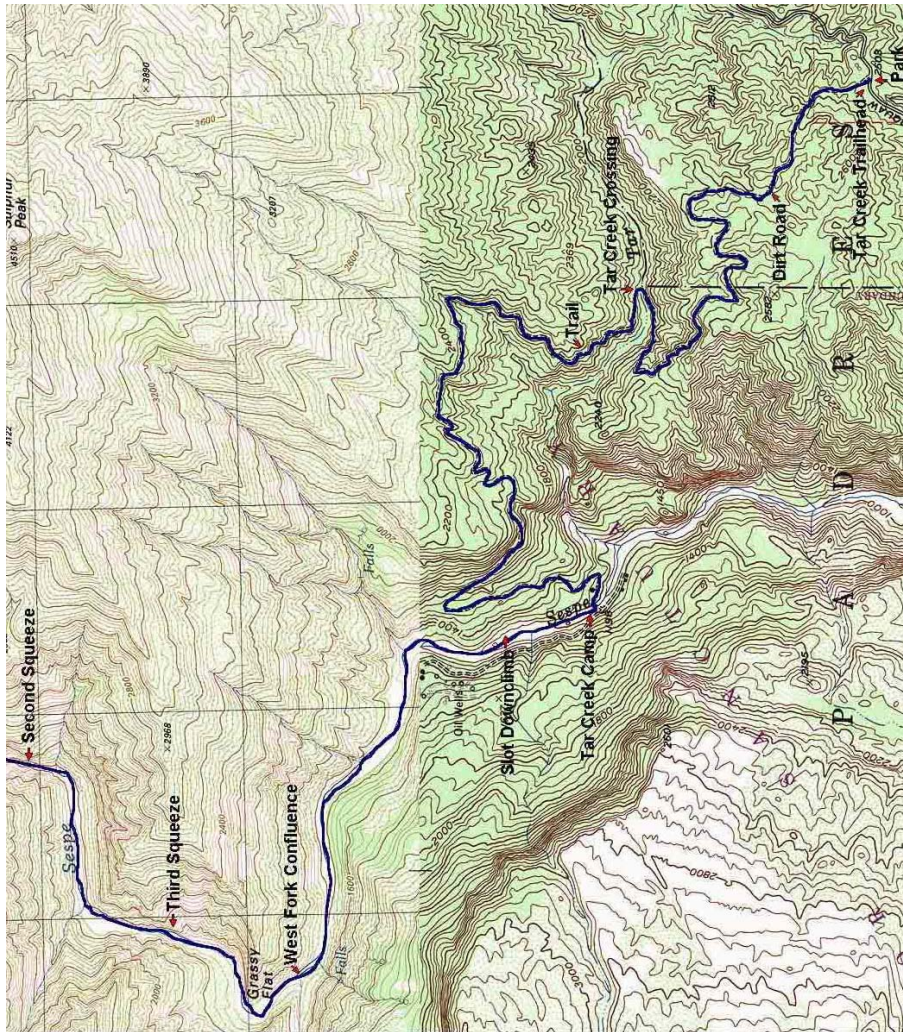
Map of first part of Sespe Gorge Hike





Map of second part of Sespe Gorge Hike





Map of third part of Sespe Gorge Hike

## 11.4 Malibu Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 4 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3.8 miles
- Elevation gain: 460 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Malibu Beach
- Difficulties: Much bouldering and some wading
- Special equipment: None
- ACA Rating: 2A III

Malibu Creek State Park extends down through the great gorge of Malibu Canyon to the Pacific Ocean. It is a rugged and spectacular canyon wilderness whose solitude is broken by the seemingly continuous procession of vehicles that travel the road through the gorge high above the canyon bottom. That road means that there are many places where this adventure can be foreshortened but the canyon walls are quite precipitous and the hiker would have to choose an exit route carefully.

Malibu Creek drains the largest catchment area in the Santa Monica mountains and therefore a substantial stream runs in it year round. This stream supplies a rich riparian canyon bottom with many delightful pools and cascades. Many species of birds call this canyon home so look for a wide variety of ducks. Undoubtedly you will stir at least one great blue heron into flight and be able to watch it soar up the canyon to the next large pool. It is one of those canyon sights that never ceases to thrill me.

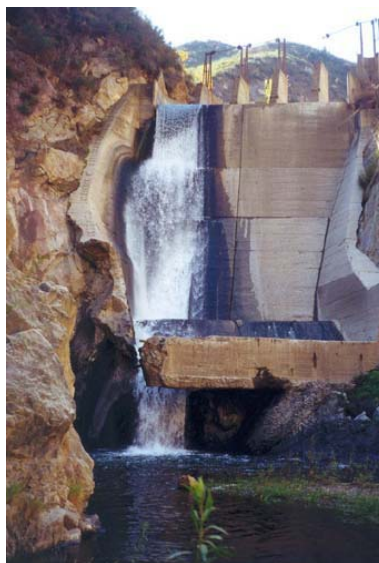
But every winter violent floods crash through this canyon, dislodging giant boulders, tearing out bushes and trees and leaving behind a very rugged canyon bottom. So the going is hard with much bouldering and a lot of non-technical climbing. Half-way through the hike you will encounter the Rindge Dam that is quite easily bypassed as described below. This now-abandoned relic is a prime example of the folly of the civil engineers who, during the first part of the last century, seemed determined to dam every canyon they could find. Built in 1926 by the Rindge family who believed it was their right to do whatever they wished with the land, the 574acre reservoir behind the 100ft dam completely filled with sediment and gravel in less than 25 years. Since 1950 the stream has flowed over those gravel beds and has fallen directly over the dam. Sooner or later, this monstrous and unnatural obstruction will have to be removed, a task that will result in enormous damage to this lovely place for between 800,000 and 1,600,000 cubic yards of sediment would have to be removed. The alternative,

which is to leave it to fail naturally, is unthinkable since the resulting debris flow would carry away most of the city of Malibu Beach. Thus an environmental nightmare is inevitable in Malibu Canyon. So I urge you to enjoy this lovely place before the disaster occurs.

The hike is best undertaken in the summer or fall before substantial rain has fallen. A sizeable stream flows year round in Malibu Canyon and during the winter or spring the swollen river could make the hike much more difficult.

## Trailhead

This adventure requires either a car shuttle or the placement of bicycles for the return along the road. The first trailhead is the Tapia Park section of Malibu Creek State Park at  $34^{\circ}4.91'N$   $118^{\circ}42.28'W$ . This is on the west side of Malibu Canyon Road (Highway N1), 5.1mi south of Highway 101 in Calabasas or 3.1mi north of Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) in Malibu. Leave a vehicle or bicycles there close to the road. Then drive 3.1mi south through Malibu Canyon to PCH; turn left, drive 1.3mi and turn left onto Serra Road. Follow Serra Road for 0.8mi and stay left at the fork. Proceed another 1.5mi and turn left onto Palm Canyon Lane. Drive 0.3mi to where Palm Canyon Lane turns right. Another 100yds or so brings you to the end of Palm Canyon Lane and the start of the Backbone Trail into Malibu Creek State Park ( $34^{\circ}2.77'N$   $118^{\circ}41.25'W$ ). The residence owners along this final section of Palm Canyon Lane have posted many no parking signs so you may have difficulty finding a place to park. Clearly the Park administrators will have to address the difficulty in accessing this south end of the Park.



*Left: Downstream of dam. Right: Left half of Rindge Dam.*



## Hike

A good dirt road/trail proceeds north from the end of Palm Canyon Lane (elevation 30ft) and in no time you are in real wilderness. After just 150yds the trail crosses to the left side of the creek. Here it is difficult to avoid getting your feet wet; it is just the first of many occasions where wading is unavoidable. Just 100yds beyond the stream crossing the well-maintained trail forks. The left fork switchbacks up to Malibu Canyon Road, just a few hundred feet up the canyon wall. Take note of this locale for we will return by this trail at the end of the day. We take the right fork that proceeds up the canyon, but soon doubles back since it is mostly used by local horse riders. From here the route up the canyon is mostly trail-less though occasionally there are short sections of use-trail that ease passage. As you proceed the going gets tougher and tougher, in places requiring bushwhacking, in others navigation around huge boulders. You will need to cross the river many times. Right up against the canyon walls you will sometimes find crude use-trails but these inevitably end at some impassable obstacle. It is slow going, but eventually, 1hr 45min from the start at an elevation of 170ft, the canyon abruptly turns left and, rounding this corner, you get an awesome view of the Rindge Dam.

A few minutes later you are standing near the bottom of the dam looking up at its sheer walls ( $34^{\circ}3.86'N$   $118^{\circ}41.94'W$ ). Actually there are two arch-like dams side by side with a great monolith of rock in between. Water flows through one of the old rusted and abandoned gates at the top of the left-hand dam and crashes majestically down about 100ft to the large pool at the base. The blue heron I had disturbed rose serenely from the pool and, high above me, made his way down the canyon. It is both a beautiful and terrible place.

On either side of the dam the rock walls of the canyon are vertical and unscaleable. It seems impossible that there would be an easy way to climb past this awesome obstruction. However, such is the case and to access the bottom end of this route you simply wade through the river to the first wooded gully downstream of the cliffs to the right of the dam. Climbing this gully, you should



*Left: Pool below narrows. Right: Malibu Canyon Narrows.*

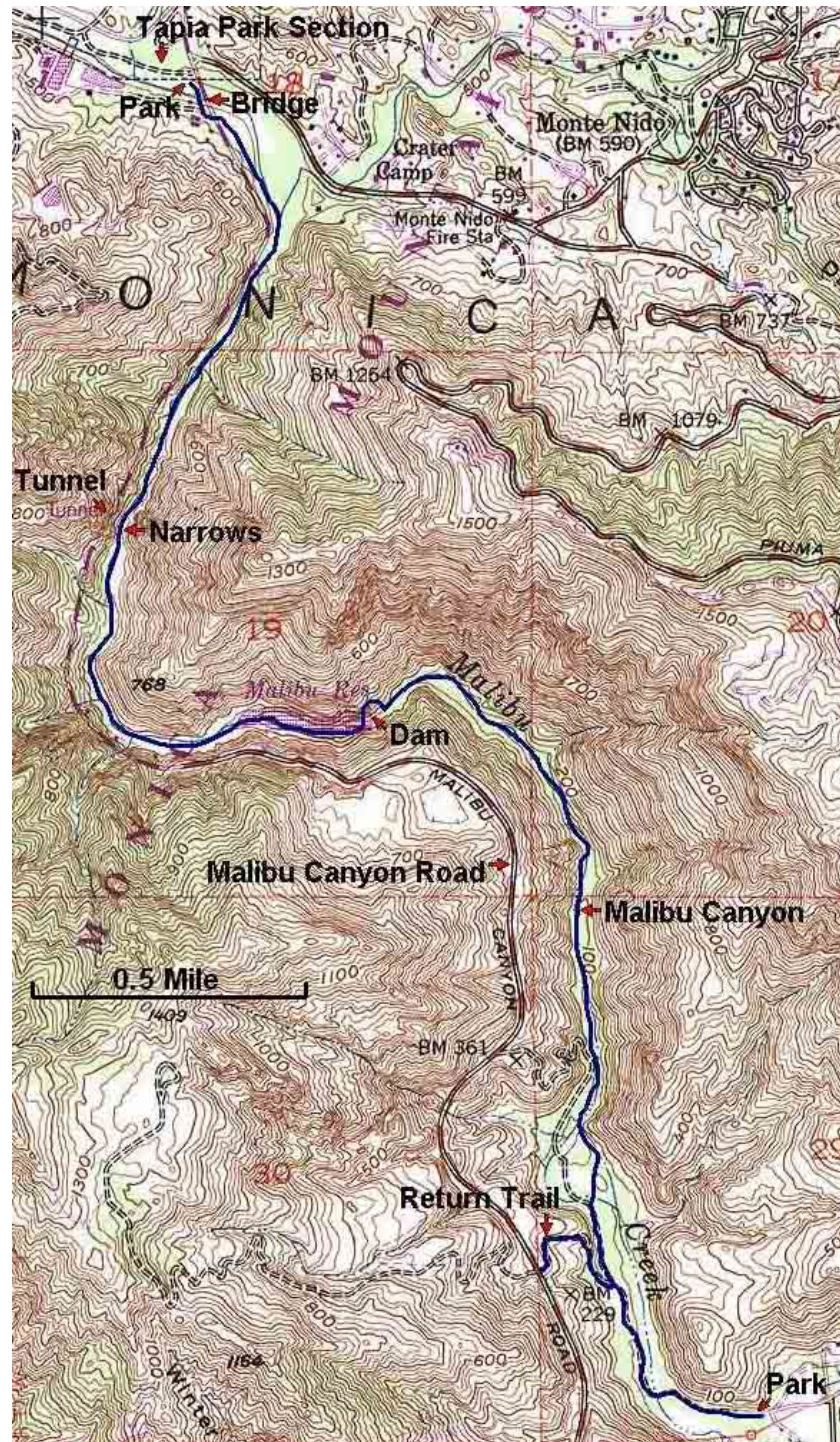


soon encounter a use-trail that veers to the left and ascends to a broad shoulder high above the north end of the dam. The trail then descends steeply to a point just upstream of the dam. You should reach this point about 2hr 15min from the start. From here you can easily access the 4ft wide concrete top of the northern dam and walk along to the top of the rock monolith in the center.

Once you have finished exploring the dam, the route upstream is an easy walk over the flat and mostly open gravel flats (elevation 290ft). These continue all the way to where the canyon turns north again. Then the going begins to get harder with more bushwhacking and bouldering. Approximately 3hr from the start at an elevation of 330ft you reach a point in the canyon directly below the south end of the tunnel on Malibu Canyon Road. Here there is an exciting stretch of bedrock narrows, extending about the same length as the tunnel. At the downstream end of these narrows at 34°4.18'N 118°42.40'W there is a long and deep pool, the largest encountered during this hike and, during the summer, a great place to pause for a swim. The rock shelf to the left of this pool is easily negotiated but you must then cross to the right to bypass the next pool. Having done this you arrive at the most challenging single obstacle encountered during this hike. A small, 10ft waterfall plunges over a steep rock shelf from one deep pool to the next. Though you may be able to climb the shelf on the right, I chose the left side and tightroped across the top of the waterfall to surmount the obstacle.

The narrows end here, but there is still a stretch of bouldering left before the canyon begins to widen and flatten, signaling that you are approaching the end of the hike. About 3hr 50min from the start at an elevation of 470ft, you will encounter a dirt road that crosses the stream at 34°4.65'N 118°42.11'W. On the left is an intact water gauge. If you have had enough by this time, it is a short way up the dirt road to Malibu Canyon Road. However it is also a short way through the bushes to an open meadow that makes for more pleasant walking than the highway. If you decide to continue in the canyon, make sure to stay to the left as the canyon opens up. You will soon encounter a dirt road that crosses the meadow and exits to Malibu Canyon Road just about 30yds south of the bridge over Malibu Creek. The return vehicles or bicycles are just across the bridge at 34°4.91'N 118°42.28'W.

If you deploy a return vehicle you should just follow the route to Palm Canyon Lane driven earlier in the day. If, however, you choose to bicycle back then, as mentioned earlier, there is a shorter and more pleasant return route as follows. Ride back down Malibu Canyon Road to the low point in the road just before you come to the built up area. Here, 3.1mi from Tapia Park at 34°3.00'N 118°41.60'W and an elevation of about 230ft, at a point overlooking the bottom section of the canyon, you should find a rudimentary gate leading to a dirt road or trail heading down to the canyon bottom. In a few hundred yards this emerges at the trail fork encountered just after the start of the hike. A few minutes of off-trail riding and a stream crossing will then return you to the trailhead where you started at 34°2.77'N 118°41.25'W.



Map of Malibu Canyon Hike

## 11.5 Zuma Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 4 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4.1 miles
- Elevation gain: 1430 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Point Dume
- Difficulties: Much bouldering and scrambling; some navigation
- Special equipment: None
- ACA Rating: 2A III

It still seems quite remarkable to me that, within a few miles of cosmopolitan Los Angeles venues such as Venice Beach, Santa Monica and Malibu, one can with only modest effort hike to almost pristine wilderness where there is little likelihood of encountering another human being. Such is the case in Zuma Canyon, a deep cleft in the Santa Monica mountains, that begins near the crest of that range and empties into the Pacific at Zuma Beach. Despite its ruggedness Zuma Canyon can be traversed without technical gear for almost its entire length. Only near the top are there several waterfalls that must be rappelled. Otherwise it makes an excellent, non-technical adventure hike. We describe here a route that avoids those rappels by entering or exiting through Newton Canyon. The hike can be done in either direction, but we proceed upstream here since route finding is slightly easier in this direction.

The hike can be undertaken at almost anytime of the year except after heavy rain when it could be dangerous. It is easiest in the fall when the stream almost dries up. But it is much prettier in the spring when the stream is running (there are a number of excellent swimming holes). The summer may be rather hot.

Note: This is one area in which the topographical maps are significantly out of date and could be misleading. There is an extensive dirt road system known as the Kanan Edison Road that was built to service the power line and pylons. This is not shown at all. In addition, there are trails that are not indicated, specifically the Backbone Trail and smaller trails connecting to the Kanan Edison Road. Moreover, the aforementioned power-line is not shown.

### Trailhead

This hike requires either a car shuttle or the placement of bicycles for the return along the road. The first trailhead is the Backbone Trail parking area at 34°4.56'N 118°48.93'W that is 1.8mi south of Mulholland Highway on the Kanan-Dume Road (Highway N9) that runs south from Agoura and Route 101



to the Pacific Ocean near Malibu. This parking area is on the west side of Kanan-Dume Road close to where it crosses Newton Canyon and just north of the southernmost road tunnel. It is heavily used by bicyclists who ride the Backbone Trail in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.

Having parked one vehicle or deposited bicycles at the Newton Canyon parking area, you should then drive 4.1mi south on the Kanan-Dume road to Pacific Coast Highway (Highway 1), turn right and drive 0.8mi, turn right again on Bon-sall Drive and drive north 1mi to where the road ends in a broad, dirt parking area. This is the Zuma Canyon trailhead. Park here at  $34^{\circ}1.89'N$   $118^{\circ}48.73'W$ .

## Hike

A broad, dirt road proceeds north from the parking area (elevation 90ft) and the hiking is easy over the flat Zuma Canyon flood plain. This is a pretty, wooded area with a number of marked trails to either side. Staying on the main trail as the canyon gradually closes in, the well-maintained dirt road abruptly ends beside the creek bed after about 20min or 1mi of hiking. Henceforth the route is through wilderness with only short sections of use-trail. However, the canyon is relatively free of dense brush and, at least initially, one can make progress quite easily. Just beyond the end of the dirt road is a small dam holding a shallow pond and, thereafter, you boulder-hop your way along the side of the stream with many pretty glades and pools. Soon you are in complete wilderness, less than three miles from crowded Zuma Beach. The canyon shrinks in width and you proceed through Zuma Narrows (at  $34^{\circ}2.96'N$   $118^{\circ}49.00'W$ ) though these do not have the vertical walls of other, better known narrows.



*Left: Zuma Canyon below Newton Canyon junction. Right: Waterfall above Newton Canyon junction.*



Along this stretch you should take note of the Edison power lines that cross the canyon high above you. About 1hr 25min from the start, you pass under these power lines.

About 15min beyond the power lines, look for a trail that joins the creek from the right; it enters near a large tree growing beside the stream bed. This trail climbs the canyon wall to meet the Kanan Edison dirt road (about which more later). Continuing upstream from the trail junction (elevation 480ft), you will arrive at a place where a large canyon comes in from the left. We hesitated here before being convinced that the route through the main canyon was to the right. Just beyond this junction you climb the first of the many rocky cascades you will encounter in the upper section of the canyon. After the first stretch of bouldering, the canyon flattens out temporarily and here, at an elevation of 800ft and 2hr 15min from the start, you come to the place where the aforementioned Kanan Edison Road crosses the creek at  $34^{\circ}3.98'N$   $118^{\circ}49.34'W$ . This dirt road was built to service the power pylons and connects to the east with the Kanan-Dume Road and to the left with a dirt road that runs along the top of the ridge to the west.

Beyond the Kanan Edison Road, there is a long succession of waterfalls that require some route finding to bypass. It is slow going but a spectacular wilderness with a lovely stream and many marvelous pools to swim in or picnic beside. About 25min beyond the dirt road there are some bright red cliffs, one on the left with a startling grey stripe. Then there are more waterfalls to negotiate, one of which requires a detour through the brush on the left. Just beyond this and about 1hr 15min from the Kanan Edison Road, the going abruptly eases, the canyon broadens and the floor flattens. Here, at an elevation of 1280ft, there is a lovely section of bedrock pools with sculpted rock and small cascades. It is a great place to stop, rest and enjoy the solitude. As you do so, take note of the fact that you can now see a highway crossing the hillside ahead of you. This is the Kanan-Dume Road and it provides a sure way of identifying the canyon junction ahead. Just beyond the bedrock pools, at an elevation of 1315ft you will arrive at the junction of Zuma Canyon with Newton Canyon. They meet in a tranquil wooded and relatively flat section of canyon bottom at  $34^{\circ}4.63'N$   $118^{\circ}49.12'W$ . Since Newton is a large tributary identification of this junction is straightforward.

Though our route takes us up Newton Canyon (the right fork at the junction), it is pleasant to embark on a brief detour and to hike a little further up Zuma Canyon (the left fork) to the waterfall that blocks further progress in that direction. It is a pretty, 30ft waterfall that cascades down into a series of broad, shallow pools in a vertically-walled gorge. It takes but 10min of easy stream bed hiking to get there from the Newton Canyon junction.

Back at the junction, you begin the ascent up Newton Canyon. Almost immediately you will encounter a 40ft waterfall that looks formidable but is readily bypassed using a steep (but airy) use-trail on the right. Several hundred yards upstream of this you come to a second obstacle, a 20ft waterfall. Here you should climb the steep, rocky slope on the left and proceed through the bushes to a well-worn trail. Turn left and this will join another maintained trail that

proceeds south across the head of Newton Canyon. Then it switchbacks up the hillside to the Backbone Trail parking lot where you left the return vehicle or bicycles at  $34^{\circ}4.56'N$   $118^{\circ}48.93'W$ .

It should only take about 25min to ascend Newton Canyon from Zuma Canyon to this parking area (elevation 1520ft). From there it took me just 35min of leisurely cycling to ride the 5.9mi back to the Zuma Canyon trailhead ( $34^{\circ}1.89'N$   $118^{\circ}48.73'W$ ), following the route taken earlier.



Map of Zuma Canyon Hike

## 11.6 Big Falls

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 7 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 6.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 1890 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Forest Falls
- Difficulties: Two large, wet and tricky rappels measuring 140ft and 100ft.
- Special equipment: Rappeling gear, harnesses, 200ft rope, two rappel rings, 30ft webbing.
- ACA Rating: 3A III

One of the most accessible and spectacular waterfalls in the San Bernadino Mountains is called simply Big Falls. When you leave Route 38, drive up the little spur road to Forest Falls and pass through that hamlet the waterfalls become readily visible cascading down the canyon wall on the opposite side of Mill Creek wash. If you have time it is valuable to reconnoiter the falls prior to the hike by parking at the Big Falls Trailhead at the end of the road. Hiking about 200yds back down the wash you can enter Big Falls Canyon via a short trail on the right. From the end of this trail it is a simple matter to clamber up to the base of the lower of the two big waterfalls. Big Falls consists of a series of waterfalls that, in total, drop precipitously about 400ft down the north wall of Mill Creek Canyon. The two at the top of this series represent the major technical challenges in this adventure. They measure 140ft and 100ft respectively and are spectacular, wet and tricky rappels that are only for the experienced canyoneer.

But the waterfalls called Big Falls are not the only attraction on this adventure hike for the stream descends to them through some beautiful mountain scenery that makes the access hike a real pleasure. The slopes are forested and, in the spring and early summer, are sprinkled with abundant wildflowers. After the hike up the mountain on maintained trails to reach the creek, high above the Falls, the off-trail hike down the canyon is a real delight. The crystal-clear, year-long stream cascades down over dozens of small and moderate waterfalls surrounded by pine forest. There are some lovely places to camp if you wish to spend more than a day on this hike.

### Trailhead

From Interstate 10 just east of San Bernadino take the Orange Street or Route 38 offramp. At Orange Street, turn under the freeway and drive north on



Route 38. After a few blocks Route 38 turns right. You drive east through Mentone and then wind your way up past the Mill Creek Ranger Station into the valley of Mill Creek. The spur road to Forest Falls continues up Mill Creek Canyon at a place where Route 38 makes a sweeping left turn. Drive up through Forest Falls to the Big Falls trailhead at the end of the road ( $34^{\circ}4.90'N$   $116^{\circ}53.57'W$ ). Leave one vehicle there and, in the other vehicle, drive back the way you came for 1.6mi to the parking area at the Momyer-Alger Creek Trailhead. Park here at  $34^{\circ}5.25'N$   $116^{\circ}54.99'W$  and an elevation of 5500ft.

## Hike

From the parking area ( $34^{\circ}5.25'N$   $116^{\circ}54.99'W$  and an elevation of 5500ft), the Momyer-Alger Creek trail (1E06) is indistinct as it crosses the Mill Creek Wash but if you head for the Wilderness Area sign on the far side you will soon pick up the maintained trail. This climbs steadily for 1790ft up to an unmarked trail junction just past a San Geronio Wilderness Area sign at 7290ft. You should reach this junction at  $34^{\circ}6.08'N$   $116^{\circ}54.64'W$  about 1hr 35min and 2.2mi from the start; do not go left but continue straight on. The trail contours around the valley of Alger Creek and then descends about 200ft to Alger Creek itself where there is a small trail camp. You should reach Alger Creek ( $34^{\circ}6.22'N$   $116^{\circ}54.16'W$  and an elevation of 7050ft) about 3.2mi and 2hr from the start. Continuing on, the trail contours out onto a prominent ridge where the topo map indicates an old trail climbed up from the valley below (this trail is now overgrown). After this it climbs about 390ft to a second ridge that overlooks the valley of Big Falls creek. It is important to identify the trail junction at  $34^{\circ}5.62'N$   $116^{\circ}53.53'W$  and an elevation of 7390ft on the apex of this ridge, 4.7mi and 2hr 50min from the start. There are signposts nailed to a tree. The



*Left: Canyon above Big Falls. Right: Descending the upper falls.*

main trail turns sharp left and continues up the apex of the ridge. But you follow the sign pointing to Dobbs and descend down the other side of the ridge, contouring toward the stream that you can hear below you. It takes just about 10min to reach Big Falls Creek at a beautiful spot ( $34^{\circ}5.67'N$   $116^{\circ}53.29'W$ ) where two streams meet. There is a rudimentary campground here at 7200ft called Dobbs Camp. It should take a total of 3hr to cover the 4.9mi to this drop-in point.

The off-trail hike downstream from Dobbs Camp is one of the most beautiful in this series. The sparkling mountain stream tumbles down over dozens of waterfalls as it makes its way through pine forest and around sculpted rock outcroppings. The going is rough but it is clear that others have passed this way for, in many places, there is a rudimentary use-trail that makes passage easier. Just 15min below Dobbs Camp you encounter a narrows with two lovely waterfalls in rapid succession, with drops of about 20ft and 25ft. A use-trail climbs the left bank and bypasses these falls fairly easily. There are many more small waterfalls as you continue downstream; all can be downclimbed or bypassed. About a hour downstream at 6700ft there is a substantial, ad hoc campsite in the trees on the left bank; other smaller campsites occur between here and the falls.

After about 2hr of hiking down the creek, you glimpse a dramatic exposure ahead and, quite suddenly, you arrive at the breath-taking top of Big Falls. (You should reach this point at  $34^{\circ}5.17'N$   $116^{\circ}53.73'W$  and an elevation of 6380ft about 5.8mi and 5hr 30min from the start.) As you peer through the rock gate at the top of the falls, all you can see are huge, bright ocher cliffs dropping down far below you. Further away, Mill Creek and the road to the trailhead



*The lower of the two big waterfalls.*

are plainly visible. But because the uppermost waterfall proceeds down a short chute before going into free-fall, you cannot easily make out where it bottoms out. To reconnoiter the situation, there is a narrow, exposed shelf about 10ft above the left side of the lip. On a belay you should make your way along this shelf to a small platform and a prominent rock horn. Peering over the horn you can get a good view of the descent and, about 140ft below you, the platform you will descend to.

The best anchor for this single rappel is a convenient tree on the right side of the lip where you should place the webbing high in the tree in order to ease rope recovery. Though there are other, larger trees in the center, this anchor location allows you to descend skirting the right side of the stream for about 30ft, and then transition onto the vertical face to the right of the falls. The footing is slippery for most of the way so care is needed and, as always, a helmet is recommended. The descent ends on a large rock covered platform that narrows on the downstream side to the lip of the second stage of Big Falls.

Since many folk clamber up to the base of the lower of the two big waterfalls you are likely to have an audience for this second rappel, a 100ft vertical drop into a rock-walled chasm with a rocky bottom. There are several large boulders on the right side of the intermediate platform that can serve as excellent anchors. Note, especially, that if you use one of the big boulders lower down on the right side of the platform, a double rappel with a 200ft rope will get you to the bottom with only a few feet of rope to spare. Rappel down the right side of the waterfall. If you go straight down you will be soaked in the mainstream of the falls; but you can avoid the worst of this maelstrom by using a dihedral to veer further right. You should reach the bottom of this second and last rappel about 6hr 45min after starting out.

From the bottom of the big waterfalls, follow the well-worn use-trail on the right side. This bypasses several smaller waterfalls, crosses to the left side and connects with the short maintained trail that takes you to the end of Big Falls Canyon where it emerges to join Mill Creek. At the exit, turn left and follow the wash upstream for several hundred yards. Crossing Mill Creek you will easily locate the Big Falls Trailhead parking lot (34°4.90'N 116°53.57'W) where you left the return vehicle.



Map of Big Falls Hike



## 11.7 Vivian Creek

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 4.2 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 1.8 miles
- Elevation gain: 1000 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Forest Falls
- Difficulties: Four large, wet cascades measuring 160ft, 90ft, 70ft and 120ft.
- Special equipment: Rappeling gear, harnesses, 200ft rope, 200ft recovery cord or second rope, five rappel rings, 50ft webbing, drybags.
- ACA Rating: 3B II

Some of the most accessible and spectacular adventure hikes in the San Bernadino Mountains can be found on the steep sides of Mill Creek near Forest Falls in southern California. These are beautiful wooded slopes of pine and cedar with lovely crystal streams and panoramic views. The Vivian Creek Trail switchbacks up the steep northern wall of Mill Creek Canyon. It is one of the most popular hiking trails in the San Bernadino mountains and leads eventually to the summit of Mount San Gorgonio. In this adventure you use this trail to climb 1000ft up to a place where you can easily access Vivian Creek itself. From there you follow the creek back down to Mill Creek wash. This descent involves negotiating four large and beautiful cascades using four or five exciting rappels. The water is cold and the flow may be excessive except during the summer. But on a warm summer day this is a glorious canyoneering adventure.

### Trailhead

From Interstate 10 just east of San Bernadino take the Orange Street or Route 38 offramp. At Orange Street, turn under the freeway and drive north on Route 38. After a few blocks Route 38 turns right. You drive east through Mentone and then wind your way up past the Mill Creek Ranger Station and into the valley of Mill Creek. The spur road to Forest Falls continues up Mill Creek Canyon at a place where Route 38 makes a sweeping left turn. Drive up through Forest Falls to the end of the road where there is trailhead parking for the Vivian Creek Trail. Park here at 34°4.91'N 116°53.47'W and an elevation of 6090ft.

## Hike

From the parking area (elevation 6090ft) at  $34^{\circ}4.91'N$   $116^{\circ}53.47'W$  hike east along the well-marked Vivian Creek Trail following the south bank of Mill Creek. After about 0.5mi the trail crosses the Mill Creek Wash; cross the wash and follow the trail as it switchbacks up the north wall of Mill Creek Canyon. The climb is steep and unrelenting but eventually begins to ease as you pass the sign entering the San Geronio Wilderness Area at  $34^{\circ}5.03'N$   $116^{\circ}53.05'W$  and an elevation of 7090ft. Just a few minutes later the trail approaches the east bank of Vivian Creek and you have reached the drop-in point just a little over 1hr and 1.24mi from the start.

This is a beautiful little stream in the woods with sparkling waterfalls and banks strewn with pine cones. Turning downstream, follow a use-trail on the left bank and very soon you come to the lip of the first awesome drop in Vivian Creek Canyon. It is a little difficult to see the extent of the drop because the lip is set back from the main falls by a small preliminary waterfall and hanging pool but the total drop is about 140ft. There are three ways to descend all of which use as anchor a webbing wrap around the large pine tree in the middle at the top: (1) The easiest, right-side route is to descend about 12ft into the hanging pool and then climb up the obvious shoulder on the right side of the lower lip; go behind the big tree at the top of the shoulder and continue your rappel down about 40ft to two large trees with a safe platform between them. Then rig a second anchor around one of these trees and continue your descent down the right side of the waterfall for 100ft to the first big ledge at the bottom. (2) A more demanding but more spectacular route is down the left side of the falls. From the hanging pool continue the first rappel over to the left to a substantial tree just a few feet below the lower lip. From a small ledge below this tree, rig a webbing anchor on the tree and rappel down about 120ft on the left side of the waterfall. Note that the small ledge at the intermediate station can probably



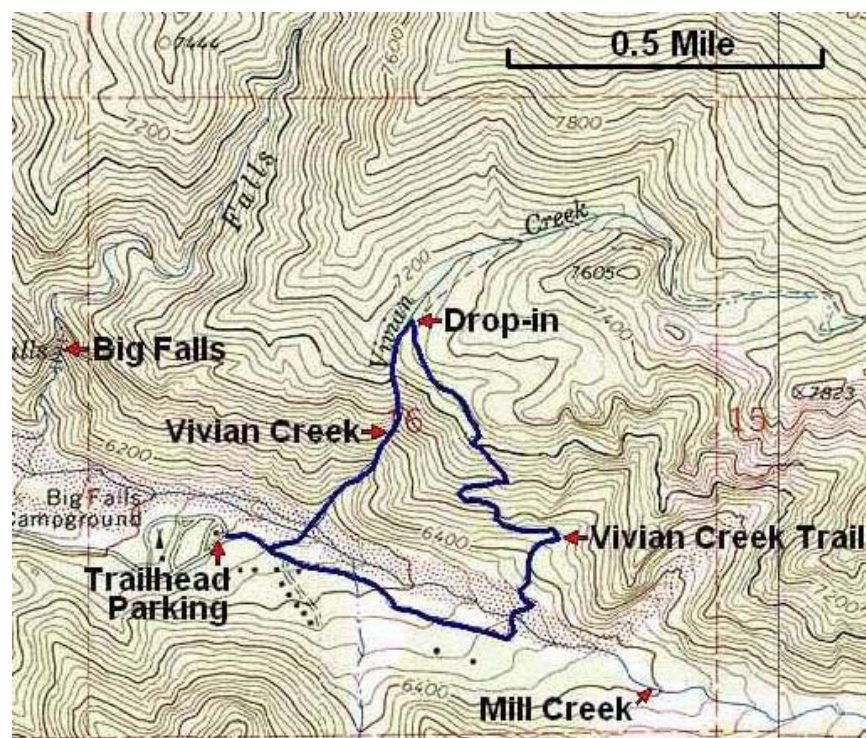
*Left: Descending the first falls. Right: The fourth falls.*

only hold three people (at most). (3) It is also possible to descend down the middle of the falls on a single rappel using a 160ft rope and a recovery cord of the same length. This is more feasible in late summer when the flow is reduced. You should reach the bottom of the first falls (elevation 6860ft) about 2hr 15min after the morning start.

Downstream of the first falls there are a number of small downclimbs and one more substantial drop that is easily circumvented by contouring over to the left and descending a lateral gully. Then, at 6760ft and about 2hr 40min from the start, you will arrive at the top of the second big falls, a 90ft cascade that is best descended using a webbing wrap around a big tree on the right side of the lip. This takes you down the right side of the cascade to a small, tree-lined platform. The third falls (elevation 6620ft) follow almost immediately; you should cross the stream to a large tree in the shade at the top of the left side of these third falls. It is difficult to discern this drop through the foliage at the top. A webbing wrap around the tree anchors the 70ft drop over some slippery boulders. You should reach the bottom of these falls about 3hr 15min after the morning start.

The fourth and last falls are just a short distance downstream at an elevation of 6530ft; these are a lovely vertical cascade of 100ft. The anchor is a stout tree just to the right of the lip. The descent is wet and has a section of free rappel. You can avoid the worst of the stream by rappeling down on the right of the falls.

From the bottom of these last falls it is an easy scramble down to the end of Vivian Creek where it emerges into Mill Creek at  $34^{\circ}4.94'N$   $116^{\circ}53.30'W$  and an elevation of 6210ft. Crossing the Mill Creek wash it is less than 100yds down to the trailhead where you left your vehicle at  $34^{\circ}4.91'N$   $116^{\circ}53.47'W$  and an elevation of 6090ft. It should take about 4hrs 15min to complete this hike of 1.8mi.



Map of Vivian Creek Hike



## 11.8 Tahquitz Rock

### Characteristics

- Hiking and climbing time: 8 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 2 miles
- Elevation gain: 1000 feet
- USGS Topo Map: San Jacinto Peak
- Difficulties: Six pitches of technical rock climbing with a few challenging moves and great exposure in places
- Special equipment: Climbing harnesses, shoes and helmets, 200ft rope, two sets of cams, nuts, slings, quickdraws and carabiners
- ACA Rating: 4A III

The great granite cliffs of Tahquitz Rock that loom high over the alpine village of Idyllwild in the San Jacinto mountains about 100mi east of Los Angeles were one of the birthplaces of rock-climbing in Southern California. Pioneers of the sport like Royal Robbins and Chuck Wilts honed their skills and invented new techniques on the high quality rock of this monolith. On the topographical maps it is labeled as Lily Rock though everywhere it is called simply, “Tahquitz”, the name of a Cahuilla Indian demon who ate people’s souls. Today there are many established routes on Tahquitz and its companion monolith across the valley, Suicide Rock.

Any list of adventures in Southern California would be incomplete without at least one visit to this storied rock and we describe here one of the easiest of the technical routes that ascend the face of Tahquitz, a six pitch technical climb known as the “Fingertip Traverse”. According to Glen Dawson it was the first climb he made at Tahquitz; he climbed it with Chuck Wilts who was also climbing at Tahquitz for the first time.

This is not an adventure for the novice, for it involves considerable exposure and therefore demands practiced skill at protecting a climbing route. Though the route known as “The Trough” is easier, we choose the Fingertip Traverse because, for the average climber, it is a spectacular route with some significant challenges. Fingertip Traverse is officially rated 5.3. However, the routes on Tahquitz seem very under-rated (“stiff”) compared with other rock-climbing locations.

This adventure is fun at almost anytime of the year except in the depths of winter when ice and snow at 7000ft change the face of the rock.

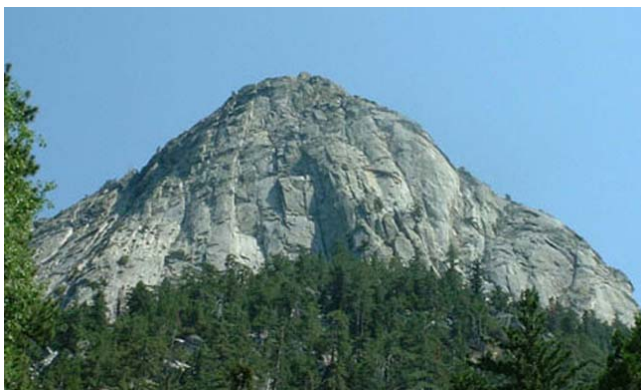
## Trailhead

From Highway 243 in the center of the village of Idyllwild, California, drive northeast up North Circle Drive. After about 0.8mi, make a right turn onto South Circle Drive and, shortly thereafter, a left turn onto Fern Valley Road, following the rather inconspicuous signs for Humber Park. After about 2mi and a switchback, you arrive at the parking loop in Humber Park (33°45.88'N 116°41.17'W). This is the trailhead for several paths into the forest. Park near the south end of the loop.

## Hike

From the south end of Humber Park loop (33°45.88'N 116°41.17'W), descend to a broad, well-trodden trail and follow it southwest for several hundred yards to where a rough climber's trail heads directly up a shallow gully (usually marked by a cairn). The climber's trail follows short switchbacks as it climbs steeply toward the cliff face that looms directly overhead. You climb southeast ascending about 500ft and pass under a large log before arriving at the base of the cliff at a local feature known as Lunch Rock (looks like a sandwich about 30ft up) at (33°45.63'N 116°41.09'W). Here use-trails go around the cliff to the left and the right. For Fingertip Traverse, go right for about 100yds, to where the use-trail climbs up a groove right next to the cliff. A short way up this groove, you come to a place where there is a sizeable pine tree on a ledge about 12ft above the trail (the tree may be a mountain mahogany). Climb up to the ledge at the base of the tree and prepare for the technical pitches ahead.

The first pitch, which is really just class 3, begins about 20ft to the left of the tree and climbs about 80ft up an easy gully to a stout tree in a recess at the top of the gully. This tree is the belay point for the second pitch (about 100ft) that, using the tree, climbs up onto the arete to the left of the recess and then follows a crack up to a sizeable platform with a number of bushes. Climb



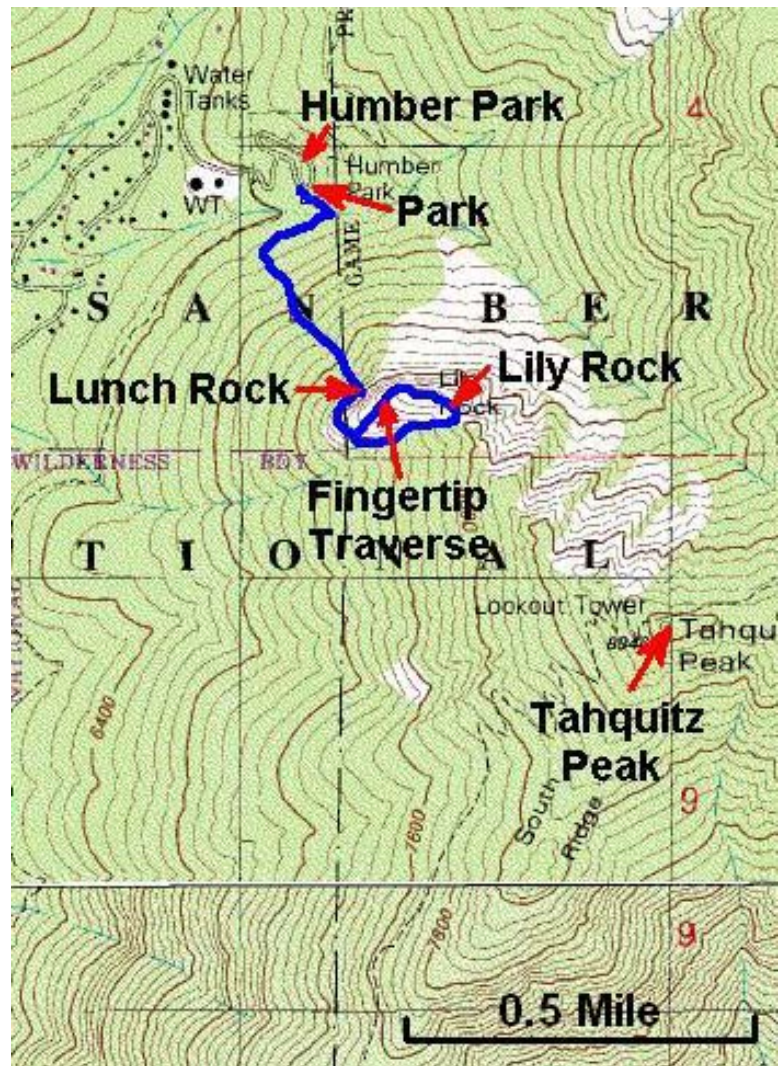
*Left: Tahquitz Rock. Right: Friction climb on last pitch. Photos by Dean Tower.*

a crack at the back of this platform to access a large spreading tree on another substantial ledge about 15ft above the platform and slightly off to the right. This tree is the belay point at the top of the second pitch.

The third pitch (about 120ft) presents a significantly greater climbing challenge; from the tree anchor at the top of the second pitch proceed left toward a corner with a crack and then either climb the corner or move onto the face just to the left for some nice face-climbing. The first move here is the hardest; after about 10ft the climbing becomes easier and you proceed straight up to a series of broken ledges that take you to the left for about 15ft. Here you move around to the left onto a face with considerable exposure and arrive at the section for which this route is named. It is a sloping horizontal crack that has excellent hand holds; proceed laterally for about 15ft using these hand holds and with your feet against the sloping rock below the crack. The belay station at the top of this third pitch is at the end of the traverse where the crack widens into a small ledge and additional security is provided by a gnarled tree growing on the ledge. From this perch, the short fourth pitch (about 50ft) proceeds almost straight up over broken slabs to a broad secure ledge known as Lunch Ledge.

The climb from Lunch Ledge to the top could be done as a single pitch, but, to avoid excessive rope drag near the top, is better done as two pitches. In that case, the short, 40ft fifth pitch climbs straight up from Lunch Ledge veering to the right to access a series of broken slabs. The first move climbing above Lunch Ledge is probably the most difficult of the route but once that is accomplished, the climbing is short and easy up to a recess that contains the next belay station, a gnarled tree at the back of the recess. On the sixth pitch (about 100ft) climb up to the right out of the recess onto an inclined face and follow a crack up to the left. This crack transitions onto a steep and quite smooth rock face with huge exposure. It becomes horizontal but very narrow and you must tightrope along this ledge crack to a very small tree growing out of the crack. The tree provides both an anchor point and marks where you should leave the crack and proceed directly up the rock face, friction-climbing the last 50ft to the top of the route. A third of the way up this friction climb you pass an old bolt installed in the rock. The top of the climb (33°45.63'N 116°41.01'W) is a broad shoulder on the top of Lily Rock where many other routes also terminate. Several large boulders provide ample anchor opportunities. The view from here is spectacular.

The descent is best accomplished by hiking up the spine of the ridge behind the belay point heading for the summit of the monolith some distance to the east. As you hike stay close to the edge of the cliff on your right until you arrive at a point where you can visualize a steep un-roped climb down a series of ledges to the bottom of the rock. You should reach the forested bottom in a shallow gully. From there follow the use-trail down the slope staying close to the base of the cliff. After about 40min of descent you should arrive at the point where Fingertip Traverse began. From there you retrace your steps down the use-trail to Humber Park.



Map of Tahquitz Rock Hike



## 11.9 Kelso Dunes

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5 miles
- Elevation gain: 560 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Kelso Dunes
- Difficulties: Blowing sand
- Special equipment: Goggles
- ACA Rating: 1A II

Out in the vastness of California's Mohave Desert, in a place where no-one lives and few ever venture, there is a 40 mile stretch of windblown sand dune known as the Kelso Dunes. Superficially there is nothing unusual or surprising about these dunes unless you happen to be nearby at one of those special times when these dunes emit the most amazing and other-worldly noise, a loud low-frequency rumble that, as yet, defies scientific explanation. In the geological literature they are known as "booming dunes"; the phenomenon occurs at only about 30 sites around the world and is the subject of much primitive legend and myth wherever they are found. What is known is that the noise is emitted when the steep slope on the leeward side of the crest is built beyond its maximum sustainable gradient and then fails, generating an avalanche of sand. Somehow this avalanche triggers a deep resonance within the dune that emerges as an eerie, single tone that can continue for several minutes and can be heard for miles around.

This adventure seeks to experience this incredible natural phenomenon. We climb to the top of the highest of the Kelso Dunes and set off the booming by creating our own sand avalanche. During the adventure we also get to experience the Mohave Desert at its wildest and most primitive. Though the trip could be taken any time during the year it is best during the winter months when the temperatures are moderate. Rain or moisture in the sand dampens out the booming so the trip is also best after a number of hot, dry days.

### Trailhead

Interstate 40 crosses the Mohave Desert in California from the city of Barstow to the town of Needles on the Colorado River, a stretch of 144mi with only a few small outposts of human presence. Traveling east from Barstow for 51mi you pass the wayside stop called Ludlow, where you should fill up with gas and other supplies. Another 26mi east of Ludlow, you should leave the highway at

the well-marked Kel-Baker Road exit and turn left to travel north on this good two-lane asphalt road. Almost immediately you enter the Mohave National Preserve. The Kel-Baker Road climbs gradually toward a saddle in the Granite Mountains which, once reached, reveals a broad vista to the north. The bright yellow Kelso Dunes are clearly visible in the distance; they are scattered over a flat plain and stretch away beyond the northwestern horizon. They end at the bottom of a long and gradual slope stretching down from the mountains you have just passed through. They do not appear to be piled up against those mountains. The Kel-Baker Road proceeds northwards from the saddle down the gradually sloping and flat alluvial plain. The turn-off to the Kelso Dunes viewpoint is 100yds past an easily recognized pumping station on the left side of the road. Turn left onto an excellent, smooth dirt road that heads west; after 3mi you come to the restrooms, sign boards and parking area ( $34^{\circ}53.48'N$   $115^{\circ}42.19'W$ ) that constitute the trailhead welcome at the Kelso Dunes.

## Hike

Though the wind direction often changes, the most common is a wind from the west that, far to the west, funnels down the wash of the Mohave River, through a narrow canyon and out onto a broad flood plain that stretches off to the ESE for almost 40 miles. The sand carried along this route over many eons has piled up in a series of dunes, the last and largest of which lies in an EW direction just to the north of where you are now parked. You see it as a dramatic ridge of dunes about 2mi out across the sand. The highest peak along the ridge bears about  $295^{\circ}$  magnetic from the trailhead. Since magnetic north is here about  $13.5^{\circ}$  east of north, the actual bearing from the trailhead to the highest peak is about  $308^{\circ}$ . Though it appears quite close, be warned that the summit is over 2mi from the trailhead and 560ft higher in elevation.



*Kelso Dunes from the trailhead.*

From the trailhead (34°53.48'N 115°42.19'W) a use-trail heads directly toward the peak; the trail peters out after just 200yds where you cross the quite distinct edge of the sand dune material. You then cross a series of low dunes most with sparse grass-like vegetation. These gradually increase in height and in elevation and the vegetation becomes thinner. Hiking through soft sand on steep slopes is not easy and so this is a more difficult hike than might have been imagined. Where the sand has been disturbed (for example along the trail) or recently deposited (on the steeper lee slopes of both the large and small dunes) it yields easily underfoot making it hard going when hiking. However on the tops of the small and moderately-sized foothill dunes where the surface has been scoured by the wind the surface is markedly different. First it is quite firm underfoot and therefore much easier to hike on. Second, it looks quite different, having more visible black grains (volcanic rock grains?) like the black sand in Hawaii. This gives that surface a gray color, sometimes in bands running roughly normal to the direction of sand transport. This coloration is in marked contrast to the light yellow color of the steep lee slopes. It seems that a process of sand sorting is occurring on these small and moderately-sized foothill dunes. The small grains (yellow colored) are being preferentially removed from the relatively flat tops and deposited on the steep lee slopes thus leaving a greater proportion of the larger black grains behind to produce the gray coloration.

The route steepens markedly as you approach the bottom of the steep slope leading up to the crest-line. There are clearly two common routes leading to the highest point. One is the direct route that necessitates a long and very steep final climb to the summit. We took the alternate which was to head for the saddle to the east of the highest point. By following the firmer, gray-tops of the foothill dunes we climbed to within about 20ft of the crest at a saddle about 75yds east of the summit. The last 20ft climb up to the crest was through very loose lee-side sand that made for hard climbing. My impression was that the sharp crest of the dune consists of a steep pile of very fine sand sitting like a triangular cross-sectioned dike on top of a lower ridge of firmer, less-mobile sand. The wind (from the north on the day we were there) seems to carry only the very smallest grains to the crest. There the particles become airborne and are deposited by falling onto the very steep lee slope. The ridge top geometry



*Left: Close-up of the crest. Right: View along the crest.*

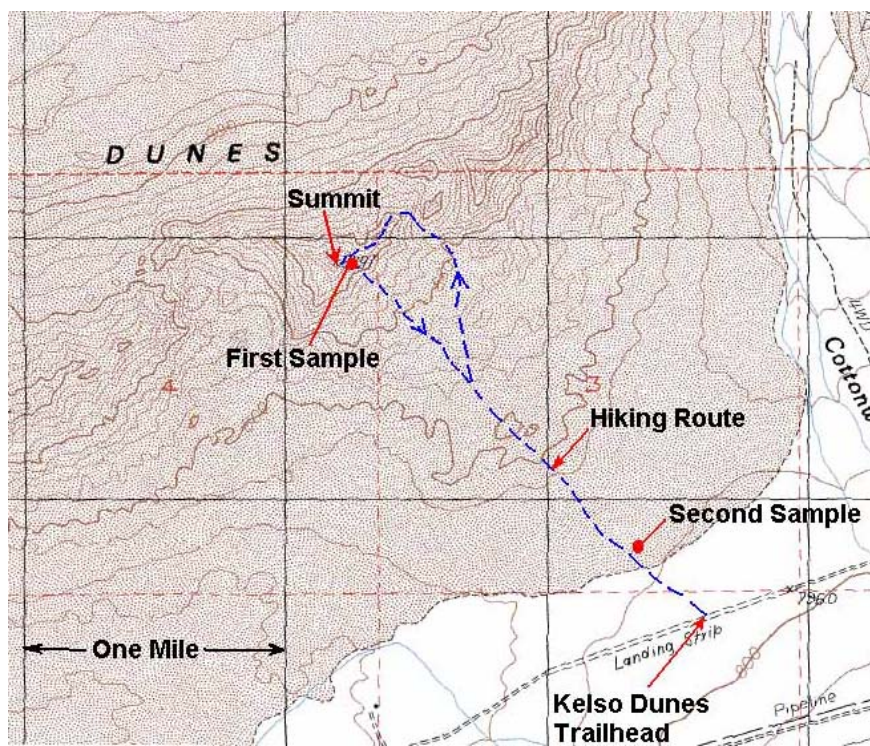
is extremely uniform and well-defined; it extends for miles in both the east and west directions. In cross-section the crest consists of a fairly steep windward slope, a small flatter area on the top, a sharp break and then the very steep leeward slope ( $30-45^\circ$ ). Once we reached the crest at the saddle, we trudged the additional 75yds to the highest peak, arriving there 1hr 20min after leaving the trailhead. The summit ( $34^\circ54.22'N$   $115^\circ43.10'W$ ) had the added feature that it was at the junction of the main crest and a subsidiary crest that proceeded steeply down the south facing slope in a southwesterly direction. This is caused by wind blowing both over and around the peak.

The wind on the crest was much stronger than we experienced even 100ft below the crest. Sand was blowing everywhere, getting into everything. When I sat down to rest the density of wind blown sand impacting my face was much greater than when I was standing. Thus I estimate that the thickness of the blowing sand layer on the windward side at the crest was of the order of 3-4ft. This sand is then projected (roughly horizontally) over the top of the lee slope and cascades down onto the steep leeward slope. This leeward slope at the ridge line is so steep that by kicking on the crest one could generate a small landslide (perhaps 2-3ft in width) that would proceed slowly almost viscously down the lee slope. The typical speed of this landslide was no more than about 1ft/s. But it would continue (unexpectedly) for minutes, usually until it reached the bottom of the lee slope. These landslides also occur naturally without human intervention. They produce lateral striations all the way across the lee slope. We also observed these landslides on the lee slopes of the foothill dunes. However, during our entire climb we could hear no sound from any of these naturally occurring landslides and so began to speculate on why we could hear no "booming". Perhaps, we thought, the day was too cold or damp for booming.

After a pause, we decided to head straight down the lee slope from the summit on our way back to the trailhead. The only way to do this was to sit down and slide. Within a few feet of descent we had set into motion a large area of sand and then it happened. There emerged from under us the most awesome rumbling tone, increasing in volume as we continued to slide and persisting as long as the mass of sand was moving. It was an eerie and other-worldly experience. The whole dune seemed to shake as though, deep within, there was a large resonating cavity. This sound continued as we descended the 150ft steep lee slope but became more muted as we neared the bottom. About 50ft down from the summit we encountered a slope with some vegetation but still very steep. Even on this slope we could still detect the booming though it had virtually disappeared near the bottom of the steep lee slope. From there we started the hike back to the trailhead.

On the way back to the trailhead we tried several times to make the lee slope of foothill dunes boom. We detected only very slight squeaking noise, never the low frequency boom that so awed us at the summit. The total time for the hike was about 3hrs.





Map of Kelso Dunes Hike

## 11.10 Afton Slot

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 1 hour
- Estimated hiking distance: 0.7 mile
- Elevation gain: 300 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Cave Mountain
- Difficulties: One tricky 25ft climb, several smaller, easier climbs, pitch black slot
- Special equipment: 100ft rope, 20ft webbing, helmet, harness, rappeling gear, head lamp
- ACA Rating: 3A I

Out in the vastness of California's Mohave Desert, in a place where no-one lives and few ever venture, there is a "river" with only occasional water that, over the eons, has carved its own canyon through this arid landscape. Known as the Mohave River, this peculiar feature is not only dry most of the time but leads nowhere, dwindling its essence in one of the larger salt flats of the Mohave Desert. In places the river has cut through the mountains and Afton Canyon is one such feature. Just a few miles from the narrow ribbon of "civilization" known as Interstate 15, Afton Canyon is unknown to virtually all those speeding along that highway.

In the canyon the wind and the rain have carved marvelous shapes from the loose conglomerate rock. The steep walls of the main canyon have also been sliced by the run-off from the surrounding mountains and one of these slices is particularly dark and cavernous. It is known as the Afton Canyon Slot and this brief adventure takes you up that slot as far as you wish on an out-and-back hike. Even if you climb all the way to the top, the hike should only take about an hour and so it makes for a brief side trip during travel across the desert. However, the climbs become increasingly challenging as one progresses and so technical equipment is advisable if you wish to get to the top. Moreover, the central section is so deep that it is pitch dark and a flashlight (preferably a headlight) is necessary.

This hike is suitable for the fall, winter or spring; in the summer it is too hot.

### Trailhead

Leave Interstate 15 at the Afton Road exit (Exit 221) between Barstow and Baker, 36mi from Barstow and 26mi from Baker (35°4.21'N 116°24.71'W).

Follow the good dirt road south as it proceeds toward and then drops down into the broad Afton Canyon through which the Mohave River flows occasionally. About 2.7mi from I15 the road approaches close to the railroad tracks and here there is a fork where the right-hand choice, marked Mohave Road, goes down under the railroad. Instead take the left fork that proceeds down canyon toward Afton Campground (35°2.28'N 116°23.05'W) which you pass 3.5mi from I15. Continue on the gravel road beside the railroad, crossing the stream at 3.8mi and then passing under the railroad and recrossing the stream at 4.7mi from I15. From here on it is wise to stick to the track close along the south side of the railroad and not wise to venture too far into the flood plain in the broad canyon bottom. Finally, 7.3mi from I15 at a point where the tracks are very close to the north wall of the canyon and where both turn left you will arrive at the readily recognized entrance to the Afton Canyon Slot. There is a bridge/tunnel under the railroad that leads directly into the Slot. Park anywhere off the dirt road to the south of the tracks (35°1.85'N 116°19.78'W) at an elevation of 1280ft.

## Hike

Proceed under the railroad and into the slot that immediately narrows to about 20ft. Initially the slot bottom is loose gravel that make for easy hiking but the slot quickly narrows to just a few feet and the conglomerate walls close in above you. Within a few minutes the light is gone and you will need your flashlight to find your way and to avoid hitting your head on the sidewalls. There are several easy sloping climbs up the bedrock bottom of the slot and, as always in this rock, there are many projecting nodules that provide footholds and hand holds. However, progress gets harder and at 1380ft you encounter the first serious climb, an easy 15ft ascent with lots of good holds. This is followed

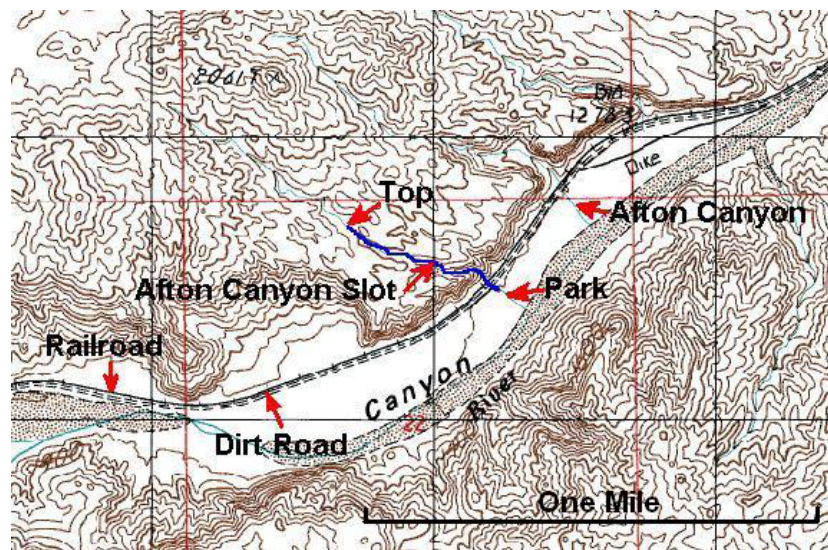


*Left: Afton Canyon Slot near start. Right: The 25ft climb in Afton Slot.*

by a similar 20ft climb that brings you to a small room at the base of the most serious obstacle in this adventure, a two-stage dryfall that is often equipped with a rope left by previous visitors. It would be wise not to trust this rope but to have your best climber free climb and then belay the rest of the party. The lower of the two stages is the tougher, a 25ft climb that is made difficult by the relative absence of holds near the top. This is followed by an easier 15ft climb. The rope is usually anchored to a solid boulder at the top of this upper stage; it makes for a good rappel anchor on the descent.

Once above this two-stage dryfall, you begin to emerge into the daylight and there are two more easy climbs of 12ft (at an elevation of 1490ft) and then 15ft, the latter again equipped with a dubious fixed rope. Several small climbs are then encountered over the next few hundred yards as the canyon becomes much shallower. Soon, interest will dwindle and about an elevation of 1550ft you will turn around and descend by the same route.

The total out and back time will be less than 1hr and the distance about 0.7mi.



Map of Afton Canyon Slot Hike



## 11.11 Wonderland of Rocks

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.5 miles
- Elevation gain: None
- USGS Topo Maps: Indian Cove
- Difficulties: Much bouldering and route finding
- Special equipment: 50ft rope as a precaution, leather gloves, sun glasses and a hat
- ACA Rating: 2A III

Joshua Tree National Park is renowned for two unusual natural features. First the cactus-like Joshua trees that give the Park its name. Second the truly spectacular rock formations that cover a significant fraction of the desert landscape of the park. These sculpted and multi-shaped rock formations protrude from the flat desert floor like great fossilized dinosaurs. Add a solid, high-quality rock surface with many pock-marks and small projections and it is easy to understand why Joshua Tree is a world-renowned mecca for rock climbing. The challenges for the climber are almost limitless and the documented routes fill a huge rock-climbing guidebook. Two regions of rock formations are particularly popular because they can be accessed by car: the Indian Cove area around a campground just about 3mi south of Highway 62 and the Hidden Valley area near the center of the park. Hidden Valley has a campground in a box canyon once used by cattle rustlers; it is the most popular destination for casual visitors. Lying in between these campgrounds (that are about 5mi apart as the crow flies) is a wild and fabulous wilderness known as the Wonderland of Rocks. While several trails penetrate a short way into the Wonderland and one trail leads around it, there is no conventional hiking route through it because the terrain is so rugged. But, to experience the true wildness and awesome wonder of Joshua Tree National Park it is necessary to embark on a traverse through the Wonderland of Rocks. That is what this adventure is all about. Though not long in terms of distance, it is a tough and demanding hike requiring much bouldering and route finding through a maze of rock masses. The traverse can be accomplished without technical gear unless you are most unlucky. However, to cover that remote possibility I do suggest you carry a 50ft rope and some webbing.

The hike should not be attempted during the summer because of the overwhelming heat and the high probability of hyperthermia. It is, however, ideal

for a dry winter day. Even then I recommend carrying at least two quarts of fluid per person since there is water at only one stop along the way and even that may not be safe to drink. Sunscreen, a hat and leather gloves are also a must.

## Trailhead

The starting points for this hike are the Joshua Tree National Park entrances along Highway 62, a road that closely follows the northern boundary of the park. Since the adventure hike requires a car shuttle, two or more vehicles should be driven along Highway 62 to the Indian Cove turnoff several miles west of the town of Twentynine Palms. The Indian Cove campground is about 3mi south of Highway 62. From the center of the campground, turn right following the signs to the picnic area that is about 1mi east and slightly south. Park one vehicle where the road ends ( $34^{\circ}5.18'N$   $116^{\circ}8.47'W$ ). While there it is also wise to try to fix in your mind the principal natural features surrounding this terminus of the hike. In particular notice the high ridge to the east of the picnic area. This runs roughly north/south and its rocks look distinctly different from those of the Wonderland to the south and southwest of your vantage point. We found the ridge a valuable navigational aid during our hike through the Wonderland since it is visible during most of the later part of the hike.

Having deposited the return vehicle, drive back out of the park and proceed east on Highway 62 to the town of Joshua Tree where you should turn south following the signs for the Park Entrance. About 6mi southeast of the town, you will pass the Park tollbooth. Another 6mi beyond the booth, just after passing



*Left: Entering the Wonderland of Rocks. Right: Willow Hole.*

the Quail Springs picnic ground on the right and about 2mi before Hidden Valley, you should be able to locate the Keys West backcountry trailhead ( $34^{\circ}2.44'N$   $116^{\circ}11.17'W$ ) on the left side of the road. Parking is limited since many rock climbers use this trailhead. Park in the small lot or by the side of the road.

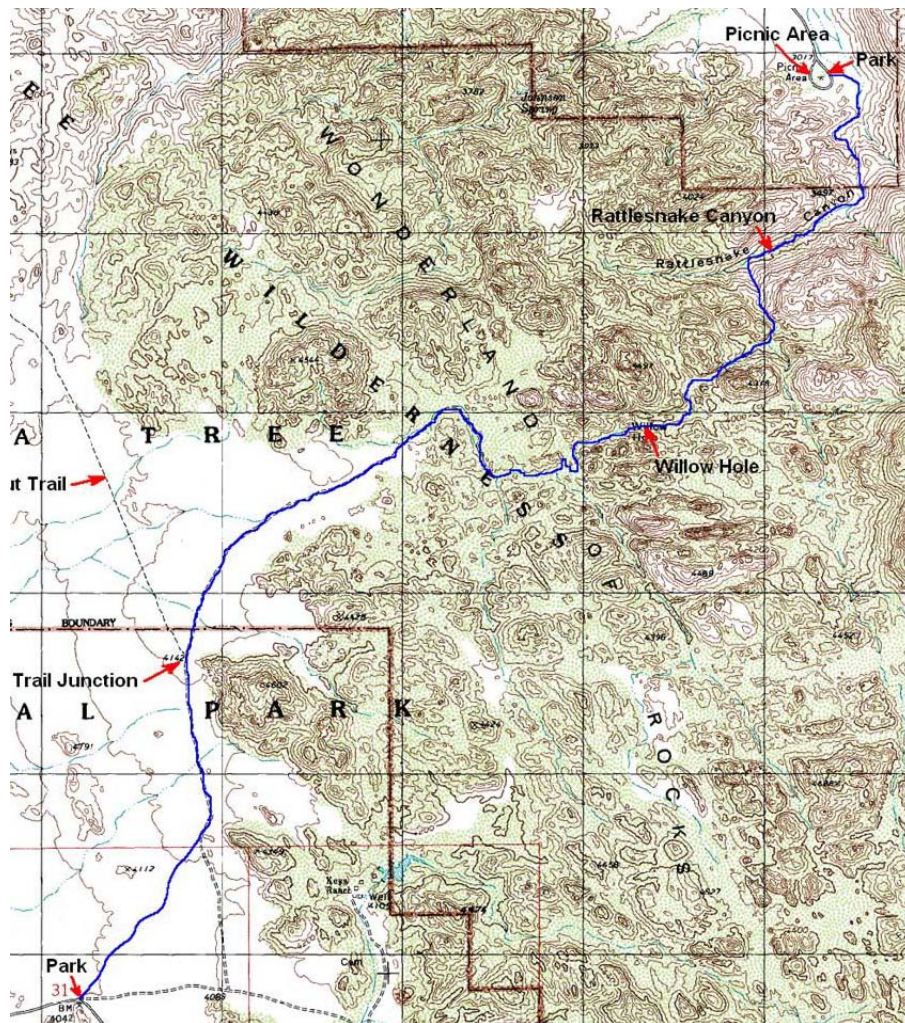
## Hike

From the Keys West trailhead ( $34^{\circ}2.44'N$   $116^{\circ}11.17'W$  and elevation 4037ft) the flat and straight trail proceeds slightly east of north toward the rock piles that stick out of the flat desert in the distance. Here the route is part of the Boy Scout Trail that proceeds around the west side of the Wonderland of Rocks to its destination at Indian Cove. But you are bound through the center of the Wonderland and so it is necessary to identify a trail fork ( $34^{\circ}3.47'N$   $116^{\circ}10.78'W$ ) about 1.3mi from the trailhead where the Boy Scout Trail forks right. Take the left fork that is clearly headed for a flat gap between two major rock piles. The heading soon turns east and the flat area you are traversing gradually narrows. Soon you reach an almost imperceptible crest and begin a gentle descent into a narrowing valley. Follow the dry water course that soon begins to snake back and forth between great blocks of buff-colored rock. Eventually as the rock formations on either side become higher and higher, the water course broadens into sandy flats and, about 3.3mi from the trailhead, you arrive at the verdant water pools of Willow Hole ( $34^{\circ}4.13'N$   $116^{\circ}9.10'W$ ). This is a very pleasant place to stop and enjoy, a great place for lunch. Many drooping willow trees surround surprisingly large pools of mostly clear water containing an abundance of special life. Great rock cliffs surround you on all sides. Take time to enjoy this marvelous place before the challenges that lie ahead.

It should take less than 1.5hr to reach this point and the map might lead you to believe that this is going to be a short and easy hike. However, be warned that by far the toughest and longest part of the hike lies between Willow Hole and Indian Cove and so you should not delay too long. The way ahead involves lots of bouldering. Moreover, from Willow Hole on it is considerably harder to find the route. Indeed it seemed clear to us that there were a number of alternative use-trails all of which would lead eventually to Indian Cove. Basically there are two major east/west ridges that separate Willow Hole from Indian Cove. The route first follows the water course that runs east from Willow Hole (veer to the south as you leave Willow Hole to avoid a particularly difficult boulder pile) and then turns north to make its way through a gap in the first ridge. You then emerge into the second east/west valley known as Rattlesnake Canyon ( $34^{\circ}4.64'N$   $116^{\circ}8.75'W$ ) and turn right to proceed east (downstream) along the water course to a gap in the second of the two ridges. Here you should begin to discern a more distinct trail. Follow the Rattlesnake Creek trail north through this gap and descend down a steep gully to the Indian Cove picnic ground ( $34^{\circ}5.18'N$   $116^{\circ}8.47'W$  and elevation about 3200ft). Throughout this cross-country route from Willow Hole to Indian Cove, the prominent north/south ridge to the east of Indian Cove should be visible. It provides a

valuable navigational aid; most of the time you should be proceeding toward it. However if you start climbing the ridge you are going the wrong way. It took us about 4hrs to cover the short distance (a little over a mile as the crow flies) from Willow Hole to Indian Cove.





Map of Wonderland of Rocks Hike

## 11.12 Deep Canyon

### Preamble

Please note that the Boyd Deep Canyon Desert Research Center located at the exit from the canyon claims to have exclusive right of access to Deep Canyon. Canyoneers are warned that they may be subject to prosecution if they enter this canyon. The author made the descent unaware of this restriction since there were no warning signs at the drop-in location.

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 630 feet
- USGS Topo Maps: Toro Peak, Rancho Mirage
- Difficulties: 6 rappels (some wet)
- Special equipment: Rappeling gear, helmets, 160ft rope, 160ft recovery cord, 80ft webbing, 6 rappel rings, drybags
- ACA Rating: 3B III

Just south of the retirement community of Palm Desert, California, in the scorching Coachella Valley, the contiguous San Jacinto and Santa Rosa mountain ranges rise precipitously from the valley floor. These rugged desert ranges present a formidable obstacle to travel southwestwards out of the Coachella Valley. One of the few roads that proceed over the mountains in this direction is Highway 74, the so-called “Palms to Pines” highway that switchbacks tortuously up a minor gap between the two mountain ranges. It is also one of the few ways to access the hidden beauty of these desert mountains.

The pass that Highway 74 follows between the two ranges was primarily cut by a drainage route that now takes the form of a huge deep canyon called, appropriately, Deep Canyon. Over 1000ft deep, this chasm is not readily visible from the highway, but is easily identified from the air (the author first noted it when flying from LAX to Washington, D.C.). Flash floods from the high plains around Pinyon Flat have cut this great desert gorge down to the white crystalline rock that sparkles in the bottom of Deep Canyon. Because of its ruggedness and relative inaccessibility, this land is still home to many desert creatures and to the Santa Rosa Mountains State Game Preserve. Though most of the visible surfaces of these mountains are dry, barren desert, hidden away in the depths of the canyons are verdant oases of cacti and palms and, in a few rare places, the magic of a running, sparkling desert stream. Deep Canyon is one such jewel.

This hike takes you down into the furthest recesses of Deep Canyon, accessing it by descending a steep side canyon called Hidden Palm Canyon. This approach requires several long rappels. Though Hidden Palm is normally dry, a small stream flows through Deep Canyon most of the year and there is a lovely little waterfall at the confluence that provides welcome relief on a hot day. Deep Canyon itself is a beautiful, white rock canyon decorated with the crystal stream and the green palms and cacti it supports. There are several wet rappels and a glorious section of narrows before the canyon opens up, the water dries up and you emerge into the hot desert. The climb back to the road is very arduous on a hot day. Consequently this hike is best for the late winter or early spring.

## Trailhead

Take the Monterey Avenue exit from Interstate 10 in Palm Desert, California, and drive south through Palm Desert. Monterey Avenue becomes Highway 74 (also know as the Palms to Pines Highway); continue south on this highway as it climbs into the mountains south of Palm Desert. Approximately two miles beyond where it first turns left to start climbing you will come to a switchback to the right where there is a large dirt pull-out on the right side of the road on the inside of the bend. Here at 33°39.33'N 116°23.73'W and an elevation of 1540ft is where you should leave the return vehicle. Before continuing walk to the east side of the curve where there is a guard rail. From this guard rail you should be able to look down the slope that represents the climb out of the canyon at the end of the hike.

After this reconnaissance, continue up the road in the other vehicle(s) for



*Left: First rappel in Deep Canyon. Right: Deep Canyon palm and side falls.*



5.3mi to a pull-out on the right side of the road beside the junction with the private drive signposted “Big Horn Drive”. Park here at 33°37.30'N 116°24.70'W and an elevation of 3130ft.

## Hike

From your vehicle at 33°37.30'N 116°24.70'W and an elevation of 3130ft cross to the east side of the road and start down the gentle sloping wash on the far side, heading due east. This is the start of one of the tributaries of Hidden Palm Canyon and its gentle beginning beguiles what lies ahead. After just 15min at an elevation of 2800ft you will arrive at the top of a dramatic vertical drop of about 100ft. This requires the first rappel. Using a small rock horn close to the lip you descend the 100ft into a clearing with several palm trees.

This rappel is followed by a number of easy dryfall downclimbs before you come to the second technical obstacle in Hidden Palm Canyon, namely a four-step dryfall at 2520ft and roughly 50min from the start. You can downclimb the first 20ft step by climbing up and over to the right, thus dropping into another large gully entering from the right. The second and third steps with drops of about 20ft and 30ft require a rappel that is readily anchored from a boulder in the stream bed. Finally, the fourth step is more easily downclimbed than might appear from above.

It is not far from the four-step drop to the last and largest rappel in Hidden Palm Canyon; you should reach this point at an elevation of 2330ft about 1hr 20min after the start. The rappel descends a 160ft vertical drop using a large



*Left: Deep Canyon narrows. Right: Third rappel in Deep Canyon.*



boulder anchor near the left side of the lip. Downstream of this excitement, a few easy downclimbs bring you to the confluence with Deep Canyon. Before you get there you should be able to hear the sound of running water in Deep Canyon and, on a hot day, the little waterfall at the confluence makes for a marvelous rest stop. You should reach the confluence at 33°37.28'N 116°23.87'W and an elevation of 2100ft about 1hr 40min from the start having traveled about 0.9mi.

Downstream of the confluence Deep Canyon narrows and there are many small downclimbs and waterfalls interspersed with small oases. It is just a short hike of 15min to the first technical obstacle, a small 10ft drop to a pothole followed by a 30ft waterfall. The downclimb to the pothole is awkward but ledges on the left lead to an overhang with a large boulder that you can use to anchor the 30ft rappel down beside the very pretty waterfall. Look up to the right to see a series of high waterfalls in a precipitous side canyon.

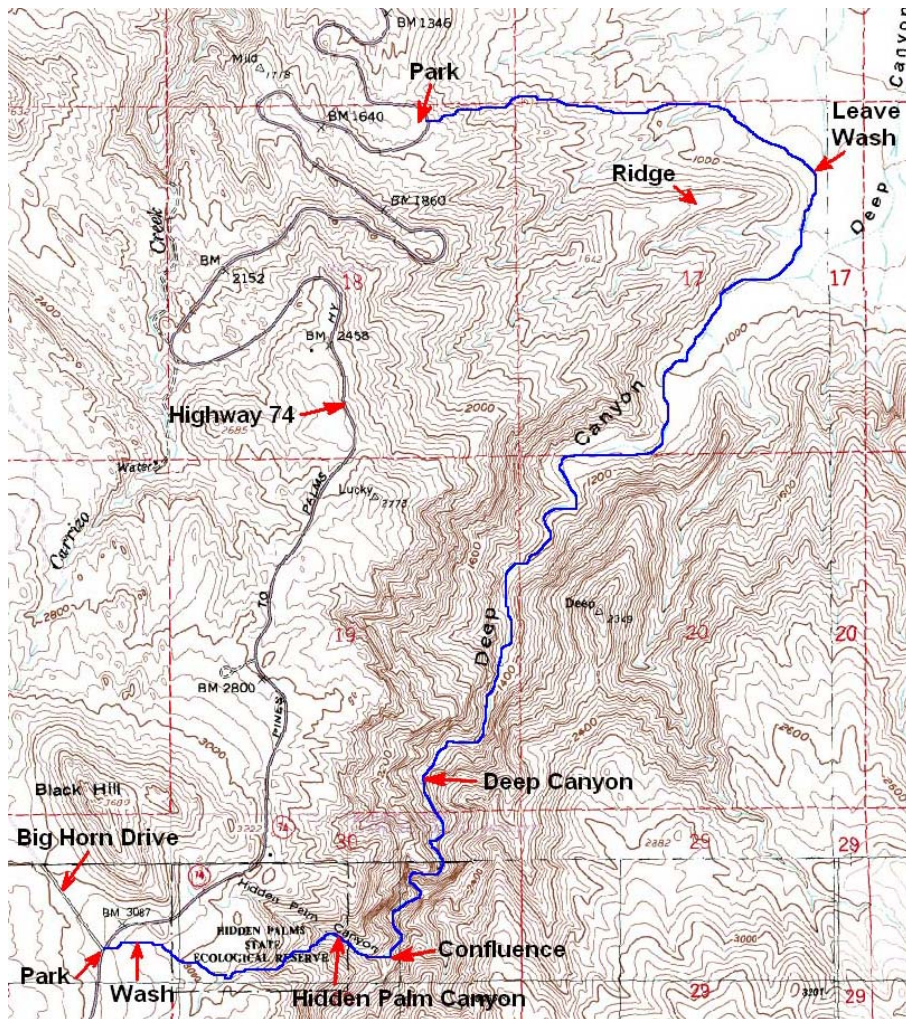
This is a beautiful section of canyon with frequent waterfalls and it is just a few hundred yards to a series of falls. The first two have no obvious anchor but are readily bypassed on the right by traversing a broad ledge and then downclimbing a steep gully to a sandy flat. You should reach this point at 1930ft about 2hrs 40min from the start. The sandy flat leads immediately to the second rappel in Deep Canyon a 40ft sloping waterfall where you will get wet. The anchor is a wedged rock in a recess up on a ledge to the right of the lip.

Downstream of this series the canyon gradient begins to ease though the downclimbs continue. Here the canyon becomes impressively narrow and deep with towering multicolored walls on both sides. This section culminates in the highest and most spectacular rappel in Deep Canyon which you should reach about 3hr 25min from the start at an elevation of 1750ft. The stream cascades through a small slot and then sprays down about 80ft into a recessed grotto. The anchor for the rappel is three pitons in the rock on the right though there are also boulders you could use. The rappel is gloriously wet.

This last rappel is not the end of the narrows for the slot continues and there are a number of downclimbs to negotiate. However, the walls gradually begin to decrease in height and the going becomes easier. There are several places where you will bypass small falls using ledges on the left and here you may begin to detect signs of a use-trail. Confirmation that you coming near the end of the narrows comes when you encounter a gauging station that you should reach about 4hrs 10min from the start at an elevation of about 1450ft.

Beyond the gauging station the going becomes much easier and faster in the mostly sandy wash and the canyon continues to open up. Eventually there is a wide open area on your right and you will pass under electric wires heading to the east side of the wash to a small encampment of buildings (a research station). The wash turns north at this point and soon you pass the end of a prominent lateral ridge on the left. This important waypoint is at 33°39.17'N 116°22.60'W and an elevation of 910ft, about 3.9mi from the start. Here you climb out of the wash and head up the gently sloping plain (avoiding the numerous chollas) to the north of the prominent ridge. You should head roughly west aiming for the lowest point on the ridge line in the distance. It is, however, a good idea

to veer slightly north of the obvious westerly line for you will find that you must transition north through a number of gullies and these traverses are more easily effected on a more northerly course. At some point about halfway up this slope you should be able to see a portion of the guard rail of the road ahead of and above you. On a hot day it is a particularly hard slog up the slope to the road but hopefully when you reach the asphalt it is indeed where you left the return vehicle at  $33^{\circ}39.33'N$   $116^{\circ}23.73'W$  and an elevation of 1540ft. You should complete the hike in about 6.5hrs having covered about 5.2mi.



Map of Deep Canyon Hike

## 11.13 Cougar Canyon

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 11.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 8.3 miles
- Elevation gain: Small
- USGS Topo Maps: Hot Springs Mountain, Borrego Palm Canyon
- Difficulties: A long adventure with 13 rappels (some very wet), much bouldering, downclimbing and bushwhacking; several chest-deep wades
- Special equipment: Rappeling gear, helmets, 160ft rope, 60ft webbing, 8 rappel rings, drybags
- ACA Rating: 3B IV

One of the many spectacular features of the vast Anza Borrego Desert State Park in California is the great escarpment separating the mountains in the center of the state from the flat desert to the east. Driving east from the California coast you climb over a distance of about 35mi through a series of modest mountain ranges to an altitude of about 5000ft before reaching the edge of this great escarpment, a sudden drop of about 4000ft to the desert floor. In doing so your surroundings change from farmland and forest to raw and beautiful desert. The escarpment itself is intersected by rugged canyons worn by eons of rainfall cascading down the steep slopes only to disappear into the desert. It is wild and inaccessible land where man ventures into the margins at the top and bottom, but rarely in between. Cougar Canyon is one of those precipitous canyons intersecting the escarpment and this adventure takes you down its entire length from the Los Coyotes Indian Reservation above its head to where it empties into the desert floor of the Anza Borrego State Park. It is a tough, demanding and lengthy adventure through a canyon unvisited by man except for short sections at the top and bottom. There are at least thirteen substantial rappels often with deep pools in addition to extensive downclimbing, bouldering, and bushwhacking. Only those with substantial canyoneering experience and considerable fitness should attempt this adventure.

But for those that do, the rewards are a fantastic wilderness experience through a beautiful canyon with spectacular waterfalls that feed glorious vegetation varying from open woodland at the top to exotic palm groves and spectacular cacti near the desert floor. Water flows through the canyon year round and so this essential element is assured. The main strategic difficulty with the adventure is the fact that the descent from the vehicle access point at the top to the vehicle access point at the bottom is almost 12hr. Some may choose to

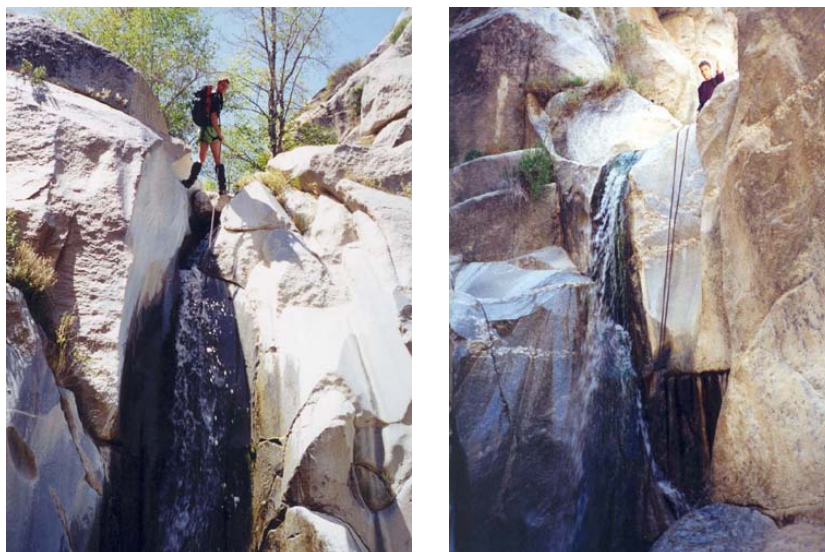


overnight in the canyon and split it into a two-day trip but this involves manhandling larger packs through the numerous rappels and downclimbs. My own preference would be for a one-day descent set up by preparations the previous day. These involve leaving a return vehicle at the bottom, driving around to the top and camping overnight close to the starting point. Then, by starting to hike as the dawn breaks, you should be able to make it to the return vehicle before sundown provided you embark on the adventure in the spring or fall. It follows that this is a springtime adventure best undertaken in April or May when the days have lengthened, the water is not too cold and the temperature in the desert is not too extreme.

## Trailhead

The adventure requires a long car shuttle that is best accomplished with 4WD vehicles. One or even two 2WD vehicles could be used though the hike may have to be lengthened a little due to the deteriorating roads as you venture into the wilderness from either the top or the bottom. As we recommend above, the car shuttle needs to be set up the day before. You should then car camp at the top end in order to start the hike just after dawn.

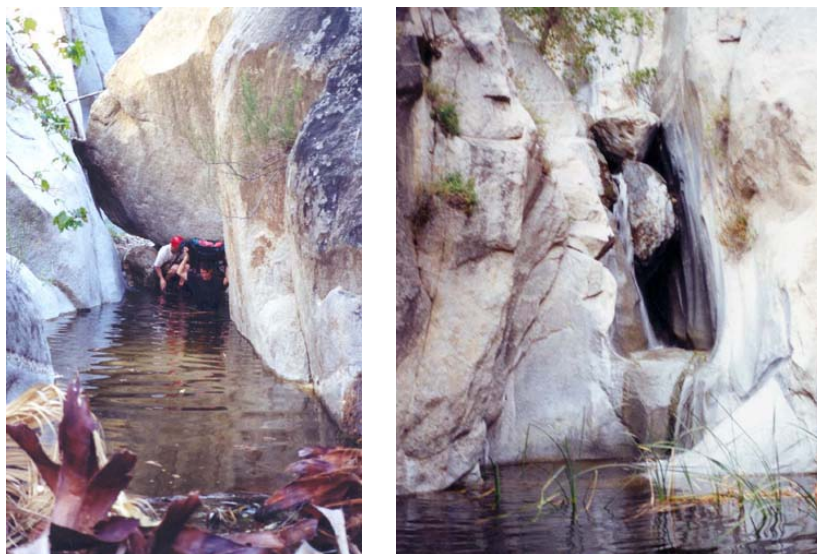
The lower trailhead is in Coyote Canyon north of the small town of Borrego Springs. From Christmas Circle in the center of Borrego Springs drive 0.5mi east on Highway 79 and turn left onto Di Giorgio Road. Then drive due north for 4.8mi to the end of the asphalt. Set the odometer to zero here and continue along the sandy dirt road through the desert garden known as Ocotillo Flats. Shortly after this the road crosses the normally dry First Crossing to the west side of the



*Left: Second rappel. Right: Rock-walled chasm.*

broad canyon. At 3.8mi you come to the first wet ford of Coyote Creek called Second Crossing where the depth of the water may be up to 18in. If one or both of the vehicles are 2WD, then you must park the return vehicle here. If both vehicles are 4WD you should proceed through this ford and continue about another mile to the similar Third Crossing. Just beyond this the road veers sharply west and enters the notorious “Boulder Alley” where it climbs about 400yds up a very rough boulder-strewn draw that has been improved in recent years. However, I recommend parking the return 4WD vehicle at the Third Crossing or at the bottom of the readily recognized Boulder Alley (33°22.48’N 116°26.11’W). Then, in the other vehicle(s), return to Borrego Springs with all your camping gear, hiking equipment and people.

To reach the upper trailhead drive about 27mi west on State Highway S22, west on S2 and then a short way north on Highway 79 to Warner Springs. Just south of the center of Warner Springs, locate the turn-off from Highway 79 onto Camino San Ignacio (there is also a signpost to Los Coyotes Reservation); set your odometer to zero here to track the mileages given below. Then follow Camino San Ignacio as it winds up the hill and veers right at the sign indicating the end of the county road. At 4.7mi you will come to the entrance station for the Los Coyotes Indian Reservation where they will issue you a permit and a small map for \$12.00. Shortly thereafter at 5.4mi, the asphalt ends and you proceed gradually uphill on a good dirt road reaching a campground at 7.2mi (marked by a round, stone-walled water tank with a conical roof). The road continues to climb, reaching a broad saddle at 8.7mi. Here, at an elevation of 5240ft, a panoramic view to the east opens up. Turn left and proceed downhill to an intersection at 10.5mi marked by a broad meadow and a corral on your



*Left: Chest-deep wade. Right: Last rappel and 2360ft pool.*

right (elevation 4950ft). Turn right around the far side of the corral and, almost immediately, fork left. The road climbs to a low saddle (elevation 5000ft) at 10.9mi where you begin your descent into the watershed of Cougar Canyon. Here the road begins to deteriorate and those with 2WD vehicles should find a convenient camping and parking spot. However, the next mile down the hill is quite easy in a 4WD. Descending to an open ridge at an elevation of 4530ft there are several good places to park and I recommend that you stop and camp here at 11.9mi (33°19.36'N 116°30.72'W). Thereafter the road begins a steep and very rough descent into Cougar Canyon.

## Hike

From the open ridge area (elevation 4530ft), the rough dirt road descends steeply into Cougar Canyon reaching the bottom after just 0.5mi or 10min. About 0.3mi downstream there is an open area to the right of the creek at 3900ft where an old Indian trail comes up over a saddle from Indian Canyon. That could possibly be a return route on a multi-day outing, an alternate not covered in this account.

Here, near its source, Cougar Creek flows through a gentle, wooded valley. Past the open area, the remnants of the old road make the first wet crossing of the creek and the going is easy as you follow it down through the trees. About 1mi from the start at 3680ft the road forks at a point where there are the remains of an old mine. The left fork crosses the stream and climbs to a 4490ft peak overlooking Sheep Canyon to the north. Our way forks right and continues down Cougar Canyon. The road soon ends by climbing a distance up the right hand side of the canyon for no obvious reason. Here at an elevation of about 3600ft and 1hr from the start (near 33°20.33'N 116°30.32'W), you move off-trail and proceed down through the bushes to the stream itself. Soon the water course drops into a narrow defile and you begin pushing through bushes and climbing around minor obstacles as you make your way down along this bushy upper section of the canyon.

After about 20min of bushwhacking, you will arrive at the top of the first technical section in Cougar Canyon (33°20.49'N 116°30.20'W). This occurs about 1.5hr from the start at an elevation of 3570ft and involves three wet rappels. If you have not done so already this is the place to ensure that your pack is adequately waterproofed since it is likely to get wet. The first rappel uses a midstream tree as anchor and drops 25ft down the stream course into an awkward slot pool that requires some agile negotiation. Clambering out of that pool, you continue the rappel down a 10ft drop into another pool. There you should pull the rope and feed it directly into the anchor for the second rappel just a few yards downstream at 3540ft. The anchor for this second rappel is a stout tree by the right wall. This facilitates a vertical 35ft descent into a knee-deep pool where the canyon turns sharp left. The top of the next and highest rappel in this first technical section is only about 60yds downstream and so you can just carry the rope loosely to that point. This third rappel involves a 50ft descent from one of two anchors (either a tree or a well-lodged rock) on

a narrow ledge to the left of the lip. It takes you down into a deeply wooded glade that marks the end of the first technical section. You should reach this point (elevation 3400ft) about 3hr 10min from the start.

This also marks the beginning of a long, relatively flat and open stretch of the canyon with some bushwhacking. Beyond this, about 1hr 10min after the last waterfall (4hr 40min from the start) at an elevation of 3250ft, the canyon narrows again and you enter a slot where there are two small rappels from tree anchors. The first is a simple 8ft drop. The second involves several steps with substantial pools in between. A rappel is needed for the first two steps (15ft and 10ft drops). A third, 20ft step is readily downclimbed.

A brief flat section follows before you arrive at the top of a much higher, 50ft vertical rappel. You should reach this 3170ft elevation about 5hr 15min from the start. The anchor is a stout bush growing out of the rock on the right wall. It leads to an awkward rappel down a slot beside a huge boulder below which you should watch for a pendulum underneath the boulder. The descent ends in a large pool where the canyon turns sharp left.

A short distance downstream, 6hr 20min from the start at an elevation of 2950ft, you will arrive at a dramatic ledge where you rappel out of a hanging pool down 30ft into a vertical rock-walled chasm. Here, we were surprised to find the first human artifact since we first left the road, namely an old anchor around a boulder to the right of the hanging pool. Those that installed it must have climbed down from the ridge high overhead. Supplementing that anchor, we descended to a pool and a gravel flat in the bottom of the chasm. A huge boulder almost completely blocks the exit from the chasm, but there is a small gap underneath it (perhaps worn by the stream), through which you can just squeeze. Immediately, you face a chest deep wade through a dark pool. This opens up into the first of the palm groves to be encountered during the descent of Cougar Canyon. Remnants of many fallen palm fronds and trees are strewn all over the canyon bottom and present an unusual obstacle. Just downstream is a great jumble of palm tree debris at the top of an ominous 100ft drop down into a narrow rock-walled hole where the canyon turns left and then right. Alarming, it is hard to make out the bottom. However, only two rappels are needed. You first rappel about 30ft from a tree on the left down to a gravel and rock platform in the middle of the water course. Then a sling around a large rock anchors a second rappel over a narrow lip and down about 50ft in a wet slot to a small platform. You should continue down another 8ft drop to where the rope can be pulled. Then proceed around the corner and downclimb a short drop to where the canyon opens up again.

This leads to a long, rough section with much bouldering and downclimbing. Here careful navigation is needed to minimize the difficulties. You encounter several more palm groves and, in one place, descend by sliding (carefully!) down a great pile of palm fronds. Then, at 2770ft you arrive at the top of a long and broad sloping rock face where you first downclimb a short way on the right and then use a small tree for a short 15ft rappel before setting up a long 70ft sloping rappel from another, larger tree in mid-canyon. This descent has two steps at the bottom. There follows another section of rough bouldering and



downclimbing.

Finally, 9hr from the start at 2470ft, you arrive at the top of the last technical section. From here the end of Cougar Canyon can clearly be seen, still some distance below you. The flat area at its terminus is part of the broad Indian Canyon. The last technical section consists of two rappels. The first is a 60ft drop using a sling around a large midstream boulder as the anchor. Here we noted an old piton and carabiner in the rock face on the left, clearly too old to use. Just downstream you come to the last rappel in Cougar Canyon ( $33^{\circ}21.17'N$   $116^{\circ}29.29'W$ ). A tree anchor on the right facilitates a 25ft rappel into a small pool leading to a large, deep pool with a chest deep wade.

This pool at about 2360ft marks the end of the line for those ascending Cougar Canyon from the bottom. In his marvelous book "Afoot and Afield in San Diego County", Jerry Schad describes a hike up from Indian Canyon to this pool and we note here Jerry's route down the canyon before describing the shorter but less scenic route we followed. Downstream from the 2360ft pool, a use-trail is clearly evident on the left side of the stream. This leads to a huge cottonwood tree that aids descent down a rocky section.

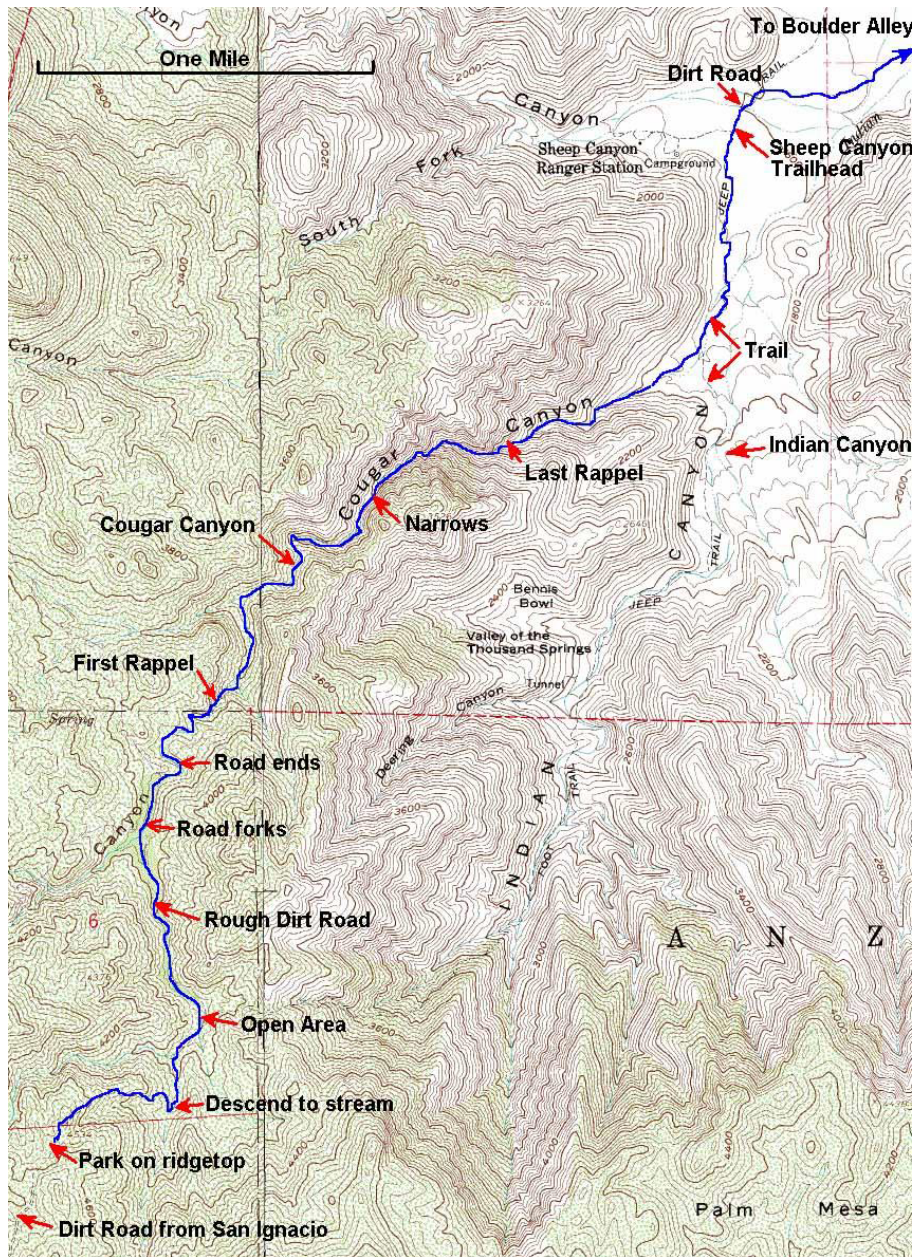
Schad's route then climbs up along the right or south wall to first bypass a feathery cascade of water flowing down a slab of banded rock. It then climbs over a series of rock buttresses and continues along the south wall to avoid a narrow section. Here it passes a deep, shaded pool below a silvery waterfall. Shortly thereafter a huge psychedelic eye can be spotted painted on a rock facing the bench you are traveling along. Just after this you climb down from the bench on the south side and come to a grove of palm trees. From the palm trees proceed down the stream for a way but look for the place where a use-trail climbs about 50ft up the north wall to bypass another section of narrows. This trail comes down to the stream again as the canyon opens up at 1800ft elevation. Downstream of this on a bench overlooking the stream is a rock cave reputedly used as an Indian temescal or sweat house. Finally, you emerge into Indian Canyon.

However, after the long descent of Cougar Canyon you may wish, like us, to take a shorter but less scenic route out of the canyon. Downstream of the large cottonwood tree we followed a faint use-trail high up the left side of the canyon and clambered over a boulder-strewn shoulder to where we could see into the large gully entering on the left. We then climbed down over the boulders to a palm grove in this gully where we picked up a good use-trail that first descends toward the bottom of Cougar Canyon and then contours along the left wall out of the Canyon to the junction with the trail in Indian Canyon at 1720ft.

Once on the flat bottom of Indian Canyon turn left (north). From here ( $33^{\circ}21.47'N$   $116^{\circ}28.69'W$ ) a broad and well-traveled trail descends 0.7mi to the Sheep Canyon trailhead ( $33^{\circ}21.98'N$   $116^{\circ}28.59'W$ ). You should reach this terminus (elevation 1610ft) on the left side of Indian Canyon about 10hr 15min from the start having covered about 4.9mi. From here one dirt road goes left or west to the Sheep Canyon campground. Our route goes in the other direction, due east along the desert floor. Be sure not to take any of the dirt roads going left or north. The correct route tracks along just north of the hills to the

south. It is an easy hike along the smooth sandy road to the margins of Santa Catarina Spring where you fork right and then begin a gradual ascent. Here you pass a monument commemorating the passage of the Anza party in 1774 and, shortly thereafter, reach a low, 1410ft pass before descending through Boulder Alley to where the return vehicle was parked at  $33^{\circ}22.48'N$   $116^{\circ}26.11'W$  and an elevation of about 1160ft. It is a 3.4mi hike from the Sheep Canyon trailhead to the bottom of Boulder Alley at Third Crossing. You should reach the return vehicle 11hr 30min after the start having covered 8.3mi.

Footnote: The author and his companions would like to express sincerest thanks for the active help and guidance so generously given us by Jerry Schad during our adventure in Cougar Canyon. We recommend his hiking books very highly indeed.



Map of Cougar Canyon Hike

## 11.14 Carrizo Gorge

### Characteristics

- Biking time: 5 hours
- Estimated biking distance: 22 miles
- Elevation gain: None
- USGS Topo Maps: Jacumba, Sweeney Pass, In-ko-pah Gorge
- Difficulties: Bike riding through dark tunnels
- Special equipment: Head lamps and spare inner tubes
- ACA Rating: 1A III

During the great era of railways in the early part of the 20th century, each city on the western seaboard of the North American continent needed a fast and reliable supply line from the east to ensure growth and prosperity. San Diego was no exception and its promoters decided that it would be wise to supplement the supply line from its larger, northern neighbor, Los Angeles, by a more direct line to the east. Such a route would access the Imperial Valley on the other side of the coastal mountains and proceed on to Arizona. So was born the San Diego and Arizona Railroad. Construction began eastwards from San Diego, ventured south into the Mexican border towns of Tijuana and Tecate, crossed back into the US and climbed into the mountains to a summit of about 2800ft near the border hamlet of Jacumba, California. Here the railroad engineers faced a major challenge for the land to the east dropped sharply down a steep escarpment to the floor of the Imperial Valley. The present day highway descends from 3200ft about a mile east of Jacumba to 400ft in Ocotillo over a distance of about 12mi, a grade beyond the capability of a railroad. The only route that seemed possible was to build the railroad high along the wall of the steep Carrizo Gorge and thus descend more gradually to Ocotillo and the floor of the Imperial Valley. But this contour down through the canyon presented a massive engineering challenge for it required the digging of numerous tunnels (17 in all ranging in length from 290ft to half a mile) and the building of many trestles in order to cross the numerous lateral ridges and canyons. Thus it became known as the “impossible railroad”, a name made more apt by the hostile desert terrain and climate, with temperatures in the summer soaring to over  $110^{\circ}F$ . But the railroad was built, the final spike being driven by owner John D. Spreckels on Nov.15, 1919.

Maintaining the Carrizo Gorge section with its numerous tunnels and trestles was a constant challenge, especially in this earthquake-prone country close to the monstrous San Andreas fault. When an earthquake collapsed one of the tunnels in 1932, the engineers chose an alternate route around the ridge which that



tunnel had negotiated. But the alternate route necessitated the construction of a bridge over a steep lateral gorge known as Goat Canyon. The wooden edifice they constructed was the highest, curved trestle in the United States, a spectacular structure over 600ft long and 180ft high in the center. That trestle still survives and represents one of the highlights of this adventure.

Though the last passenger train to travel the full length of the railroad left San Diego on Jan.11, 1951, the railroad continued to ferry freight through the Carrizo Gorge until September 1976 when tropical storm Kathleen dumped nearly 10in of rain on the area in a very brief period and washed out the impossible railroad in numerous places. The damage to the section through Carrizo Gorge was so massive that it remains closed to this day. That provides the opportunity for this adventure in which we follow the rails all the way from the high point in Jacumba down the gradient to Ocotillo. It is a spectacular journey of about 22mi through a stark desert landscape, dotted with the efforts of railroad engineers to tame this wilderness, an effort that came to nought. While it is possible to hike to the Goat Canyon Trestle from either the top or the bottom, the best way to experience this adventure is to ride mountain bikes down the length of the gorge. Clearly this is an adventure that is best for the winter months from November to March. I recommend that, as well as lots of water, you take several spare inner tubes and a head lamp to find your way through the tunnels.

## Trailhead

Drive east from San Diego on Interstate 8 for about 90mi to the Jacumba off-ramp. There are gas stations at the end of the off-ramp in case you need some last minute supplies. Then drive back west along a dirt road that runs



*Goat Canyon Trestle from north.*

parallel to and south of the freeway. Just 1.3mi from the gas stations, the dirt road goes under the freeway alongside the railway. This is the easiest place to park ( $32^{\circ}38.77'N$   $116^{\circ}11.16'W$ ) and the easiest place to access the route along the tracks.

To place a return vehicle at the bottom, continue east on Interstate 8 for about 16mi, descending the escarpment down to the floor of the Imperial Valley at the small settlement of Ocotillo. As you come to the valley floor take note of a small but prominent flat-top hill to your north. This is called Sugarloaf Mountain and serves as a valuable navigational aid when traversing this area later. The railway passes between Sugarloaf and the freeway. Just east of Sugarloaf you pass the Route 98 off-ramp and then leave the freeway at the Ocotillo exit. Cross under the freeway to the north side, drive through the village of Ocotillo continuing north on route S2. Beyond the village, 0.8mi from the freeway, S2 turns west; continue on this road for about 2.5mi (3.3mi from the freeway) to where the power lines cross the road.

At this point, it is important to emphasize that there are several options for parking the return vehicle, and therefore several options for the last part of the bike trip. Perhaps the best option is to park the car by the side of route S2 just under the power line pylons ( $32^{\circ}45.23'N$   $116^{\circ}2.94'W$ ). The advantage of this location is that it is readily found if you take a wrong turn on the dirt roads over the last part of the bike trip. However, if you arrive here early enough in the day and you have four-wheel drive vehicles, you may wish to shorten the bike ride by trying to locate the trailhead closest to the gorge.

Here are the directions for that objective. From the starting point where the power lines cross S2, drive south on the dirt road paralleling the wires for about 1mi and turn right at  $32^{\circ}44.18'N$   $116^{\circ}3.30'W$  to bypass Sugarloaf to the right. The dirt road then turns west and you proceed up the gently rising flood plain. The railway will become increasingly visible on your left. About 4.4mi from Sugarloaf the dirt road starts paralleling the tracks and a wooden water tower alongside the railway should come into view. This tower marks the location of



*Left: The first small tunnel. Right: The open half-mile tunnel; note the daylight at the other end.*

an abandoned engine servicing point called Dos Cabezas, that is 7mi from the highway. Dos Cabezas (32°44.80'N 116°8.42'W) is also an excellent place to park your return vehicle. However, if you wish, you can drive another 2.4mi up the dirt road (better surface here than earlier) to the limit of vehicular traffic where there is a makeshift trailhead and parking lot (32°45.92'N 116°9.95'W). The railway line is just about 50yds up to the left of the parking area. Note also that this would be the starting point for an out-and-back hike to the Goat Canyon Trestle.

Wherever you decide to deposit the return vehicle for the bike ride, you must then retrace your steps to Interstate 8, drive back west to the Jacumba exit and then park your vehicle in the freeway under-pass as described above (32°38.77'N 116°11.16'W).

## **Bike Ride**

From the freeway under-pass (32°38.77'N 116°11.16'W and elevation 2720ft) proceed north along the railroad tracks. For most of the ride, the best route is to the left of the tracks and this is true right from the beginning though the going is a little rough initially. Just north of the freeway you pass a nudist camp to the east of the railway but, very soon, you are in the desert wilderness with little sign of civilization other than the railway. Old signs warn you against trespassing and about blasting but these seem abandoned. After a little less than a mile, the Carrizo Gorge begins to form on the left. This is a lovely desert landscape with a wide variety of cacti many of which will be in bloom if you choose to come in the spring. After just 1.4mi you arrive at the first tunnel, a short one with the same marvelous wooden vaulting that characterizes most of the tunnels. Beyond this the Carrizo Gorge begins to deepen dramatically and, after another short tunnel, you arrive 45min and 3.8mi from the start at the entrance to the first long tunnel. Before you turn your attention to that obstacle, you probably missed seeing two ruined boxcars lying well below the rail bed just a few hundred yards behind you. Don't try to climb down to them. There are more accessible boxcar wrecks further on.

The first big tunnel is about 0.5mi long and, unlike, the other tunnels is equipped with a concrete-lined entrance and huge iron-barred doors. On the doors someone has written a message warning of deep water and a blocked tunnel, a message we failed to see. Thus we proceeded into the increasing darkness with no sign of daylight ahead and, after about 0.4mi, found ourselves wading through waist-deep water before we realized that the tunnel seemed totally blocked ahead and had to retreat. Thus, unless you wish to explore the darkness, you should follow the alternate route to the left of the entrance, an obvious use-trail that contours around the ridge this tunnel penetrates. Along the way you can look back and see the afore-mentioned boxcars. It is a little more than a mile before the trail returns to the railroad tracks at the other end of the blocked tunnel, a point you should reach about 1hr 10min from the start. There you can plainly see the rock slides that block the north end of the tunnel.

Resuming the ride along the railway, you pass through a pair of tunnels separated by a short airspace. Three more short tunnels follow at intervals. Then, about 1hr 40min and 6mi from the start, you arrive at the entrance to the second big half-mile-long tunnel. It is reassuring to see daylight at the other end though that makes the tunnel seem shorter than in fact it is. Fortunately the pathway to the left of the tracks is quite free of major obstacles. Emerging from the darkness at the other end it is not far to the short tunnel that immediately precedes the Goat Canyon trestle.

You should reach the Goat Canyon trestle ( $32^{\circ}43.75'N$   $116^{\circ}11.03'W$  and rail bed elevation 2360ft) about 6.8mi and 2hr into the bike ride. It is a spectacular structure whose curve gives it a special grace. Be sure to take some photographs from the southern end even though the other end has better photo opportunities. As with all the other trestles, you cross by walking or riding on the 3ft wide metal gratings beside the tracks. These gratings are safe though they might catch the tires of a regular bicycle and it is better to walk rather than ride. They are quite open and so the drop you see when you look down can be quite disconcerting.

On the other side of the trestle there is a spur with a tank car that was placed here to provide water in case the wooden trestle caught on fire. But the spur is interesting for another reason. It was the original route of the railway and led to a much longer tunnel in the ridge to the south. That tunnel was severely damaged in the 1932 earthquake. Indeed the crazy inclination of the surviving old tunnel entrance provides a mute testament to the power of that earthquake. The new route required the construction of the Goat Canyon trestle. Other railroad remnants survive including an old-style railroad signal for the spur switch. We lunched atop the tank car from which vantage point the view of the trestle is particularly good.

Moving on down the line, the next tunnel has collapsed so you need to take another ridge-contouring trail that provides excellent views in both directions.

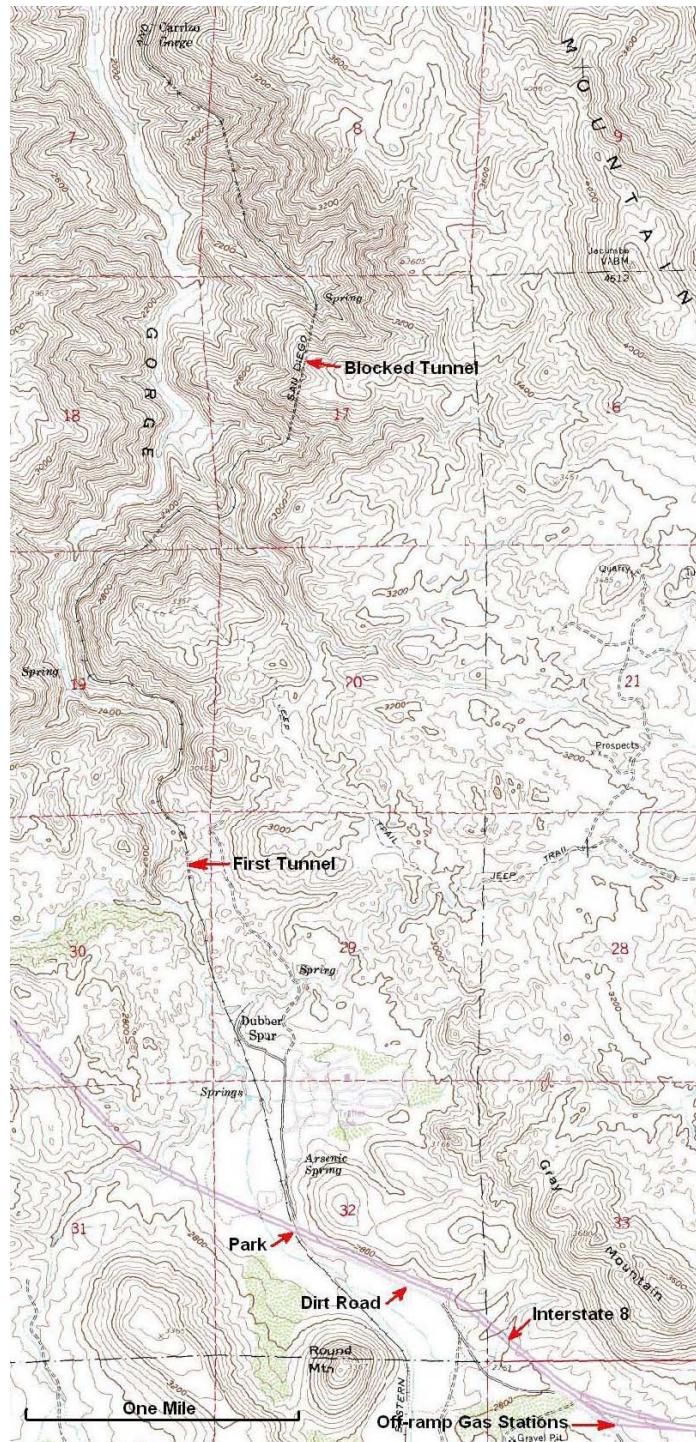


*Left: The Goat Canyon Trestle. Right: Tank car at the Goat Canyon Trestle.*



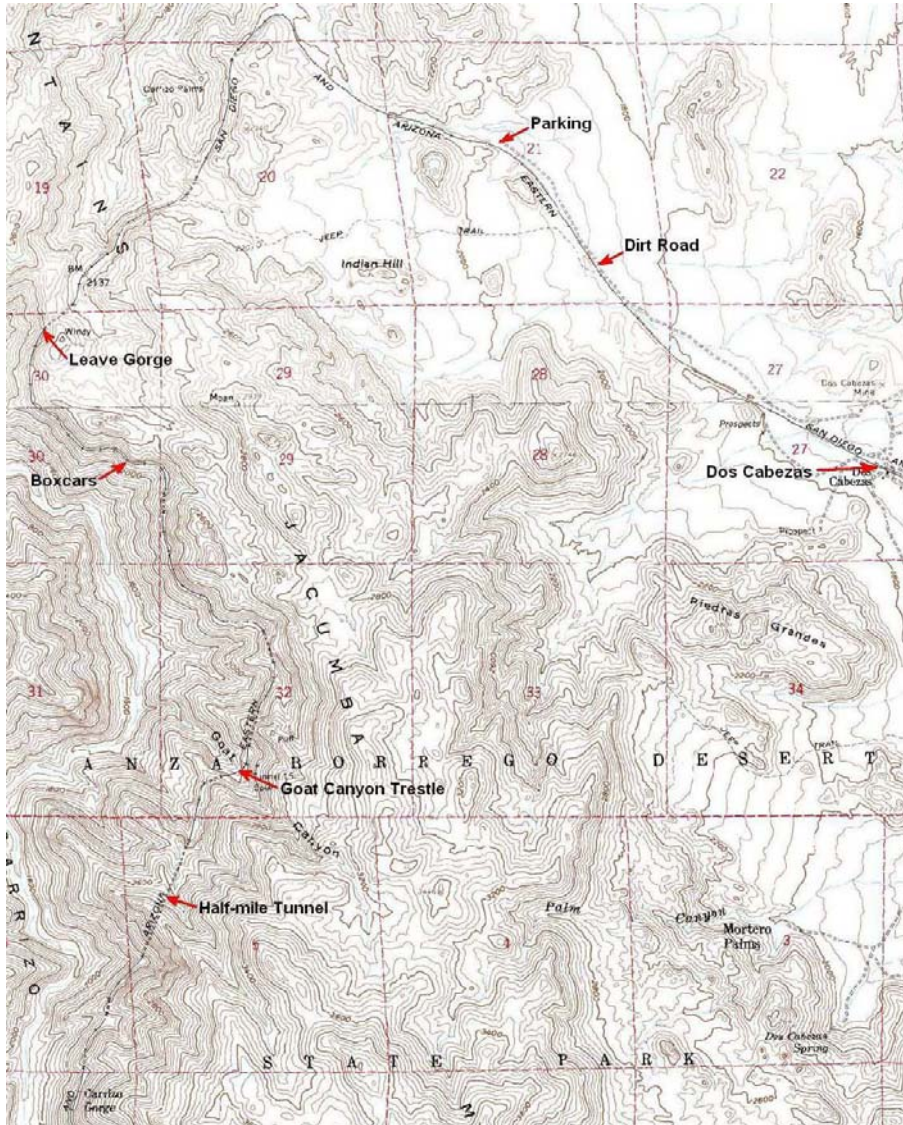
Returning to the rail bed you then proceed through a series of small tunnels interspersed with trestles as you contour down the side of Carrizo Gorge. Then, 2hr 30min riding time and 9mi from the start, you should look for two Southern Pacific boxcars that somehow got over the side and lie wrecked about 50ft below the rail bed. These are the ones to climb down to if you so desire.

About a mile further on the railway leaves Carrizo Gorge through a tunnel that leads to a smaller, lateral canyon. The section beyond that tunnel is quite scenic with sculptured mounds of orange rock. Two other small tunnels here have attractive entrances. And if you look down into the canyon bottom you will see two groves of palm trees, both labeled Carrizo Grove on the topo map. Then, 11.7mi from the start, the railway makes a 90-degree turn and heads southeast as it transitions from the canyon region onto the much flatter sedimentary terrain over which it travels to the floor of the Imperial Valley. About a mile further on, 12.9mi and 3.5hr of riding time from the start, you will come to the parking area at the limit of vehicle travel up the route of the railway ( $32^{\circ}45.92'N$   $116^{\circ}9.95'W$  and elevation 1940ft). Here it is easier to leave the railway and ride down the good dirt road that parallels the tracks. It takes just 20min to ride down the road to Dos Cabezas ( $32^{\circ}44.80'N$   $116^{\circ}8.42'W$ ), a train servicing station with a surviving wooden water tank at an elevation of 1740ft. Several dirt roads emanate from Dos Cabezas but you want the one that continues to run parallel (and north of) the tracks. As you descend along the next mile try to identify Sugarloaf Mountain which should be almost straight ahead. The surface of the road gradually gets worse with stretches of deeper sand and of washboarding. Moreover, the road veers off to the left of the tracks at one point though the railway comes back to the road as you continue to progress southeast toward Sugarloaf. This is a long and challenging part of the ride. However, about 5.3mi from Dos Cabezas you should come to a dirt road fork (elevation 860ft) just to the left and north of Sugarloaf ( $32^{\circ}44.18'N$   $116^{\circ}3.30'W$ ). From here you should be able to discern the pylons and power lines running north/south across the path in front of you. Go left at the fork and this will lead to the road running parallel to the power lines. One mile north beside the pylons will bring you to Highway S2 and your return vehicle ( $32^{\circ}45.23'N$   $116^{\circ}2.94'W$ ). It is 6.5mi from Dos Cabezas to the Highway and you should reach this point, 22mi from the start, after about 5hr of riding. The entire adventure can be accomplished quite easily in a day provided you get an early start.



Map of first part of Carrizo Gorge Hike





Map of second part of Carrizo Gorge Hike

## 11.15 Picacho Peak

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 5.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 1 mile
- Elevation gain: 1120 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Picacho Peak
- Difficulties: Some navigation in the desert with no water available; some technical rock climbing, including climbs up to the false summit block and rappels down the other side
- Special equipment: Full rock climbing gear, harnesses, helmets, rappel devices, one 50ft rope, about 20ft webbing, a few slings, quickdraws, and carabiners; hats, sunscreen and lots of water
- ACA Rating: 4A III

The land in the far southeastern corner of California, near the town of Yuma, Arizona, is one of the starkest desert landscapes in the world. Little or nothing can grow naturally in this arid land where the Colorado struggles to avoid complete evaporation before entering Mexico and the Gulf of California. The landscape has been flattened by eons of Colorado floods, now, of course, controlled by a multitude of upstream dams. But sticking up out of this flat desert are majestic rock monoliths that began as volcanic plugs and have been carved into wonderful shapes by the endless erosion of wind and water. About twenty miles north of Yuma, just to the west of the Colorado stands the most spectacular of these sculptures, the thousand foot tall monolith known as Picacho Peak. This can easily be seen from thirty miles away, glinting in the bright desert sun. Even from that distance it looks impossible to climb with its vertical and sometimes overhanging sides and its great cracks and ledges. This impression is enhanced as you drive across the desert toward the monolith and begin to recognize just how huge it is. Yet the climb to the top is not too difficult except for the freak factor introduced by the awe-inspiring exposure.

### Trailhead

From Interstate 8 about a mile west of Yuma, Arizona, take the freeway exit labeled “Winterhaven Fourth Avenue”, cross over the Interstate and proceed north about a hundred yards to where you make a sharp right turn onto S24 following the signs for Picacho State Park. Continue east and then northeast on S24, passing under the railway and onto a long straight section past farms and homes. About 3.7mi from the freeway you continue straight on where S24 turns



right. In a short distance the pavement ends and you proceed on a dirt road that climbs onto an embankment alongside a reservoir. The road turns sharply right onto a bridge and then right again at the other end of the bridge.

Though two-wheel-drive vehicles can continue on for many miles it would be wise to park them just off the road at some convenient point and consolidate in four-wheel-drive vehicles for the rest of the approach to Picacho Peak. From the bridge an excellent dirt road proceeds northwards for over 13mi to the entrance to the Picacho Mine on your left. Indeed, before you come to that entrance large hills of tailings will be evident on your left. All are surrounded by barbed wire fences with signs warning of cyanide. You continue on beyond the entrance (forking right) and the road drops down into a wash. Be careful to take note of the distance from the mine entrance and drive about 2.0mi to where the wash broadens and many vehicle tracks head up a branch wash off to the west ( $32^{\circ}59.63'N$   $114^{\circ}38.05'W$ ). You will need a four-wheel-drive vehicle from this point on - perhaps even immediately to surmount the dirt ridge along the edge of the main dirt road. The rough dirt road heading up the branch wash is well used and is even designated A278 according to the brown road markers you may encounter along the way. Drive west over good dirt road where the only difficulties may be deep gullies washed into the roadbed. After about 2mi the road drops into and proceeds up another sandy wash. Here a branch doubles back to the right and, on the way back, care is needed to avoid continuing the wrong way down the wash. The going in the sand is quite soft as you proceed about 1mi up the wash (it leaves the wash briefly on the left for a short stretch). One branch climbs steeply out of the wash on the right but you continue in the bed for just a short distance where there is a wide area used for camping on the left. You can only continue another 100yds or so up the wash to where a steep dryfall halts further vehicular travel ( $32^{\circ}58.71'N$   $114^{\circ}40.09'W$ ). Park here.



*Picacho Peak from the north.*

## Hike

Starting the hike at (32°58.71'N 114°40.09'W) at an elevation of about 800ft, you proceed southwards up the bed of the wash, footprints in the gravel bed indicating the passage of others before. After about 0.5mi, at a point (32°58.31'N 114°40.10'W) where the wash becomes quite shallow, watch for the worn use-trail that veers southeast into a tributary wash, and then climbs along the apex of the low ridge that defines the southwest side of that wash. At this point it is wise to look up at the imposing cliffs of Picacho Peak now high above you to the east. Actually, most of what you see are the cliffs of the west side of the lower, western block of Picacho Peak. What is hard to make out from this vantage point is that there is a substantial north-south crack or gully that divides that western block from the higher, main massif of Picacho Peak. Looking closely you should be able to discern the oblique south entrance to this huge crack. The trail up the lateral ridge is steep but relatively easy going; about half way up you should encounter a white vertical plastic tube that acts as a trail marker. Nearing the bottom of the cliffs at the top of this scree slope, the crack becomes self-evident on your left; within it is a steep, rocky chute. When you reach the bottom of the sheer cliffs at an elevation of about 1260ft (about 50min from the start) another use-trail from an alternate approach joins yours and you turn left to approach the chute. The climb up the boulder-filled chute is easy following a well-worn use-trail that stays mostly to the left. The chute ends in a narrow notch, the apex of the gap separating the two massive blocks that make up this mountain. Looking north, it is clearly not possible to reach the notch from the northern side because of steep cliffs below.

Having rested briefly and donned your harness and helmet, you now proceed to climb to your right (east) zigzagging up several convenient ledges, first to your left, then right through a near-window in the shelf and then back around to the left. These are mostly broad ledges, easily walked without protection and with a well-worn use-trail frequently visible. Helmets are most useful to



*Left: The western cliffs from the starting wash. Right: The ladder near the top.*

prevent banging your head on the overhanging rocks. Switch-back again to the right and then to the left. Here, 1hr 20min from the trailhead at an elevation of 1600ft, you should encounter the first significant obstacle, a 12ft step up onto a ledge going north. This step is currently equipped with an aluminum extension ladder, making the ascent trivial. Even without this artificial aid, the step could be quite easily climbed using the hand and foot holds in the depression to the right of the ladder. Just beyond the top of the step is the first real obstacle in the ascent, a gap in the shelf referred to in the Sierra Club annals as the “infamous step-across”. The gap or crack is about 18in wide at the rock wall (which it penetrates to a distance of about 6ft), broadens to about 4-5ft and then narrows again near the edge of the shelf. It would be quite easy to pass were it not for the exposure of several hundred feet below the crack. Some have just stepped across at the narrow point near the edge of the shelf, but most make use of the bolts set in the rock on either side to climb down into the crack near the cliff wall, cross over and then step up onto the other side. There are good hand and foot holds for this crossing and we belayed each other across using the bolts on both sides. [P.S. I later heard that these bolts had been removed so you may need to rig some other protection.]

Beyond the step-across, there is more easy shelf walking, first to the north, then zigzagging back up a steeper shelf going south and then back to the north. Now you are almost on the north end of the monolith. On a subsequent north-going ledge you come to a second 12ft step, this one with a little overhang. This too has been fitted with a ladder, presently a home-made wooden job that is strapped to bolt anchors at the top with a piece of webbing. This step could also be climbed to the right of the ladder and then a belay set up for following climbers using the bolts above. But the ladder is quicker.



*The summit ridge with the false summit block and the peak in the background.*

Once this step has been surmounted, you climb a short ramp to the left that brings you out at the northern end of the ridge-line at the top of Picacho Peak. Climb up the sloping rock face to where you can begin to walk along the ridge line and follow the use-trail southward. Now you can see the summit, the high point at the opposite or south end of the ridge. Halfway there, about 2hr 25min from the start, you encounter perhaps the most difficult obstacle in the whole hike, a false summit block that can be bypassed in one of two ways. The Sierra Club accounts tell of a way in which you can rappel down the east face of the mountain from a sturdy bolted anchor just north of the false summit block. A 30-40ft rappel down that east face will bring you to a shelf with a path that proceeds southward and allows you to walk to the summit through a window under some huge boulders. If you take that route (and I think I would if I climbed Picacho Peak again) then you must leave the rope in place for the climb up on return from the summit. However, we opted for the more common route and free climbed about 15ft to the top of the false summit block using as a belay point the same sturdy anchor that would be used for the rappel on the alternate route. The climb up to the top of the false summit is relatively straightforward except for the exposure and there are two bolts at the top to belay the following climbers. Once on the false summit block, we rappelled 15ft down the other side using two more bolts appropriately placed. It is very important to leave the rope in place here for the return trip. Moreover, since the return climb up onto the false summit block is difficult due to a substantial overhang, it is highly recommended that you install two 5ft etriers to use as footholds while re-ascending. Instead of etriers, we rigged makeshift chains of slings, webbing loops and carabiners.

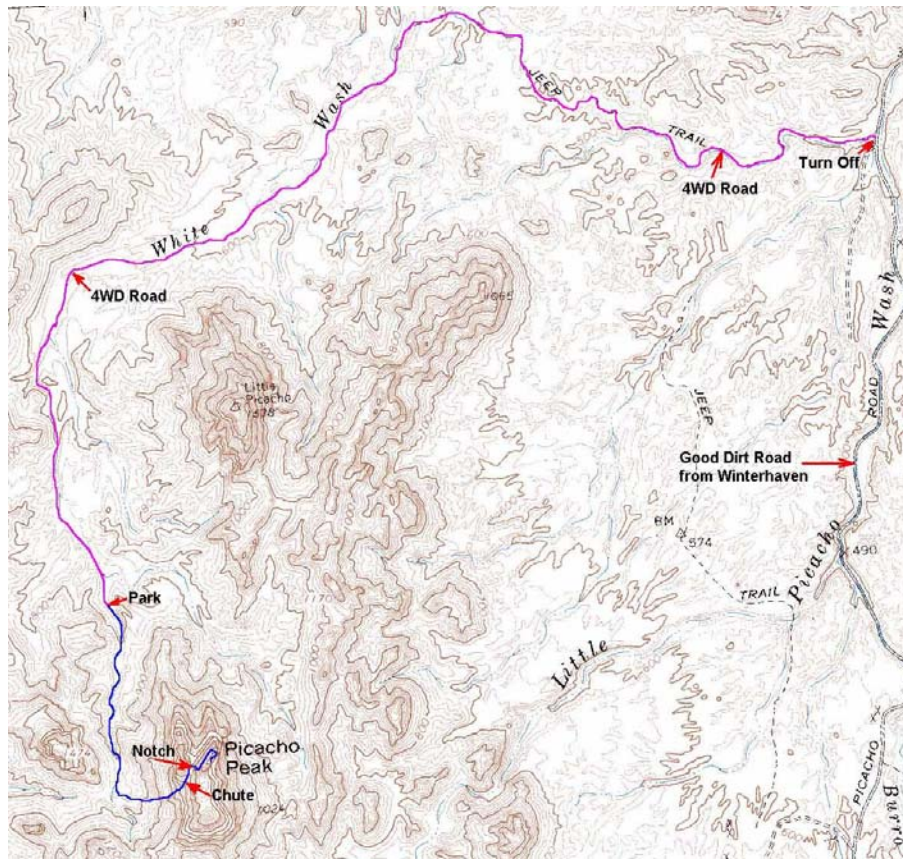
From the far side of the false summit block it is a short stroll to the spectacular 1920ft summit of Picacho Peak (32°58.37'N 114°39.84'W). You should reach the top about 3hr after starting out. The view in all directions is breathtaking and the few sights of the cliffs below which you dare to take are awe-inspiring. To the west the flat desert south of the California's Salton Sea. To the northwest, the Chocolate Mountains straggle off into the distance. To the north and east, the last vestiges of the Colorado River meander toward the Sea of Cortez not far away to the south. All around other smaller, vertical monoliths rise up from the barren desert. This is indeed a barren and stark landscape with little rainfall and less vegetation. But that starkness is majestic and the monoliths are awesome. The only blotch on the landscape is the ugly scar of the Picacho Mine below you to the east.

We lunched here on top of the world and entered our names in the register stored in a fancy metal pipe container cemented into the rock. Examining our immediate surroundings we noted a use-trail proceeding down the ridge to the south of us. This led to a shelf with bolted anchors and webbing some 70ft below the summit; presumably an alternate and technically more demanding route up the south side of the monument.

The most demanding obstacle of the whole hike is the 15ft climb back up the false summit block on the way north along the summit ridge. We made extensive use of our makeshift etriers to haul ourselves up above the overhang. Once up,



it is a simple rappel down the other side of the false summit block. Here you can stow the rope since it is not needed until you get down to the step-across, where we again belayed each other using the bolts on both sides. Then the rope can be stowed for good. The descent down to the notch is straightforward and you should reach that point about 4hr 45min from the start. Continuing down the chute and then down the ridge and the wash to the vehicle is easy and fast and you should be back at your vehicle 5hr 30min after you set out.



Map of Picacho Peak Hike

## Chapter 12

# CHANNEL ISLANDS

Reading from east to west, a line of islands in the Santa Barbara Channel off the coast of southern California are named Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel. They form the major part of the Channel Islands National Park whose Visitors Center is in Ventura Harbor. To allow public access to the islands a concessionaire, Islandpackers, runs ferries to all four of these Channel Islands from a jetty next to the Visitors Center. Though there are many possible adventure hikes on these largely unspoiled and wild islands, the opportunities are severely limited by the difficulty of access. However, we describe here four hikes. Though guided, they qualify as adventure hikes because of the uniqueness of the destinations and the adventure involved in getting to the islands.

Santa Cruz, the largest of the Channel Islands, lies about 25mi south across the Santa Barbara channel from the city of the same name. Though it had



**Channel Islands region.**

a substantial population of Chumash Indians during prehistoric times, it was home to only a few ranchers and their staff during the historic period. Now the eastern quarter is a part of the Channel Islands National Park while the western three quarters is in private hands, owned by the Nature Conservancy who severely limit access to their domain. Though only a quarter of Santa Cruz is open to the public, that part of this marvelously wild island is well worth a visit.

San Miguel is the westernmost of the Channel Islands and all of it is part of the Channel Islands National Park. This is a remote and wild place where you can only hike if guided by the Park Ranger. The island consists of a relative flat plateau ringed by coastal bluffs and cliffs. Until about 40 years ago, the island had been almost denuded of vegetation by the sheep that were raised on the island. The result was that much of the island was covered in driven sand blown in by the prevailing northwest winds. In the intervening 40 years much of the island has recovered some vegetation though there are still some sand-blown areas. There are, however, almost no trees and the island is largely covered by grass and low bushes. Unlike the neighboring islands to the east, San Miguel is not sheltered from the northwest winds by Point Conception and the mainland. Consequently the weather is rather different, being either foggy or windy.

Islandpackers operate roughly 10 visits a year to San Miguel with, typically, an out-bound trip on Friday and the return journey on Monday. The ferry usually makes stops at Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa on the way to San Miguel and it therefore takes about 5hrs to get to San Miguel. There are no accommodations on the island other than the campground so one must come prepared for rough camping for two or three nights. Because of the wind and fog, camping is rather more challenging than usual in Southern California. The lone campground has sites that are equipped with windbreaks (as well as food-boxes and tables).



*Cuyler Harbor beach, San Miguel Island.*



Moreover, there is no water available so that campers must bring their own from the mainland. Camping reservations must be made with the National Park before booking passage to the island.

Unlike the other islands, there is no jetty at San Miguel and the landing is an adventure in itself. The ferry anchors in the sheltered bay called Cuyler Harbor and then, aboard a Zodiac, passengers are ferried, six at a time, through the surf to the pristine beach that lines the bay ( $34^{\circ}2.83'N$   $120^{\circ}21.06'W$ ). Packs and other camping gear (including water) are similarly landed. Don't be surprised if a group of elephant seals are sunning themselves on the beach beside where you land! From the beach, a steep trail ascends the coastal bluffs by climbing up the side of Nidever Canyon just inland of the landing point. Climbing out of the canyon onto the island plateau the trail heads east to a small saddle where the campground is located, at  $34^{\circ}2.45'N$   $120^{\circ}20.95'W$ ), an elevation of 490ft and 0.7mi from the beach. Three hikes on San Miguel are listed in this collection; all three begin at the campground.



*East end of Cuyler Harbor beach.*

## 12.1 Pelican Bay, Santa Cruz

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 6 miles
- Elevation gain: 300 feet
- USGS Topo Map: Santa Cruz Island C
- Difficulties: Bureaucracy
- Special equipment: None
- ACA Rating: 1A II

This adventure begins with an Islandpackers voyage to Prisoner's Harbor, a bay on the north coast of Santa Cruz Island on the border between the National Park and the private land. From there, we join a guided hike conducted by Islandpackers that, by special arrangement with the Nature Conservancy, proceeds along the north coast to the idyllic Pelican Bay some 3 miles distant. It is an easy out and back hike with superb views of the Santa Cruz coastline. The trail proceeds along the bluffs through low forest mixed with grassland and includes a great variety of flora and fauna. It winds in and out of several verdant canyons where water often flows. The hike could be done at anytime of the year when Islandpackers run trips to Prisoner's Harbor, but late spring is probably best.



*Scorpion Bay.*

## Trail Access

Islandpackers run a regular daily service from Ventura Harbor and Channel Islands Harbor to Santa Cruz Island. The boat leaves the mainland at either 8.00am or 9.00am and stops first about 1.5hr later at Scorpion Bay on the east end of Santa Cruz. After disembarking most of its passengers it then proceeds along the north coast to Prisoner's Harbor. The first part of the trip to Prisoner's Harbor is quite spectacular as the boat rounds the steep cliffs of Cavern Point. Look for the sea caves after which this headland is named; they attract many kayakers. Look also for the spectacular Potato Harbor, a cove ringed with cliffs of tortured rock.

To the west of the cliffs is a broad bay with a lower island profile. Prisoner's Harbor lies at the far end of this bay, its jetty ( $34^{\circ}1.25'N$   $119^{\circ}41.06'W$ ) projecting out from the small flood plain created by the stream that descends from one of the largest canyons along the north coast, Canada del Puerto. One dirt road leads from the jetty area up Canada del Puerto to the old ranch house in the Central Valley, 3 miles away and on Nature Conservancy land. Another dirt road climbs to the ridge top on the National Park side of the border.

At the beach picnic area next to Prisoner's Harbor jetty, the Islandpackers staff usually conduct an orientation that includes information on the various hiking possibilities. They will then lead the guided hike to Pelican Bay.

## Hike

From the boat jetty, you hike inland along the dirt road that heads into Canada del Puerto, the canyon behind Prisoner's Harbor. You pass an extensive set of corrals and an old garage-like building (dated 1897). Just behind the garage is a convenient restroom. Shortly thereafter the road forks: straight ahead is the road that climbs to the ridge top and to the Del Norte campground



*Left: Prisoner's Harbor. Right: Pelican Bay.*

on Park Service land. For Pelican Bay, you turn right and, about 100yds further, just before the gate to the Nature Conservancy property, you will find the start of the trail to Pelican Bay on the right side of the road ( $34^{\circ}1.05'N$   $119^{\circ}41.02'W$ ). The trail first climbs to the top of a low bluff where there is a small folly containing descriptions of the island.

The trail continues to climb gently as it contours northwest toward Pelican Bay, negotiating five substantial canyons along the way. The first canyon is relatively small. The second is a large canyon with a high dryfall visible upstream from an overlook (number 11 of the guided tour stops). Several more canyons follow before you come to stop number 18 where you get a lovely view northwest toward Pelican Bay. From there the trail descends and crosses some grassland before following a ridge down toward the sea. Near the ocean it drops into a steep-sided gully that meets the sea at Tinker's Cove. Take a moment to enjoy the pebbly beach at Tinker's Cove. To view Pelican Bay, just over the next bluff, proceed up the canyon wash for about 100yds to where you will see the remains of an old wall above you on the right. A steep trail leads up to these foundations of a building where there is a beautiful overlook of Pelican Bay ( $34^{\circ}1.96'N$   $119^{\circ}42.18'W$ ). The foundations are the remains of Eaton Resort, a hideaway that Humphrey Bogart and his friends frequented during Prohibition. An old trail leads down to the water's edge where there is some delightful swimming. You return to Prisoner's Harbor by the same route. Normally the boat comes to collect you about 3.00pm which leaves plenty of time for the hike.





Map of Pelican Bay Hike

## 12.2 Point Bennett, San Miguel

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 6 hours in a 4 day expedition
- Estimated hiking distance: 13.8 miles
- Elevation gain: about 1500 feet total
- USGS Topo Map: San Miguel Island East, San Miguel Island West
- Difficulties: Access; hike must be accompanied by a ranger
- Special equipment: Binoculars

The principal attractions on San Miguel are the amazing spectacles of tens of thousands of seals resting, birthing and breeding on the beaches of the island. This hike to Point Bennett, the extreme western end of the island, involves a long, 14 mile round trip hike but one that is rewarded by the amazing spectacle of huge numbers of pinnipeds (seals, sea lions, etc.) basking on the long beaches that make up the point.

### Hike

The ranger-led hike to Point Bennett usually begins about 9am when the ranger meets you in the campground. The current ranger (2005) is the friendly Ian Williams. After a brief stop at the Lester Ranch House site about 100yds from the campground you proceed up to the airstrip and past the ranger station ( $34^{\circ}2.36'N$   $120^{\circ}21.01'W$ ) to the gently sloping trail up San Miguel Hill. In the spring this slope is a riot of wild flowers among the grass. After 45min of hiking you reach the 831ft summit of San Miguel Hill ( $34^{\circ}1.98'N$   $120^{\circ}21.87'W$ ) and its



*Left: Caliche forest. Right: Point Bennett.*

weather station structure about 1.1mi from camp. Descending into the shallow valley on the far side you will come to a turn-off ( $34^{\circ}1.99'N$   $120^{\circ}22.34'W$ ) to the Caliche Forest; take this excursion by forking right and hiking about 300yds to the edge of the Caliche Forest, the calcified remains of an ancient forest.

Returning to the main trail you descend further, cross South Green Mountain Canyon and then turn north, hiking up a ridge to the shoulder of Green Mountain. Your high point on this shoulder is at  $34^{\circ}2.23'N$   $120^{\circ}23.11'W$  and an elevation of 720ft, 3.1mi and 1hr 40min of hiking from the campground. From this high point you can see Point Bennett, the end of the island in the distance. Beyond this point the ground cover is mostly grass with a few low bushes.

From the Green Mountain shoulder, the trail descends gently following the route of a dirt road bulldozed out by the US Navy when they occupied the island and known as the "Road to Mandalay". Ascending a small rise it eventually reaches Dry Lake ( $34^{\circ}2.52'N$   $120^{\circ}24.73'W$  and elevation 380ft) where a dirt airstrip is maintained to service the Research Station at Point Bennett. Very occasionally Dry Lake actually fills with run-off to a depth of one or two feet. Dry Lake is 5mi from camp including the Caliche Forest diversion; it takes about 2.5hrs of hiking to reach this point.

West of Dry Lake the landscape becomes increasing sandy and, after another mile you crest a small rise to get the first, amazement-filling view of Point Bennett and the tens of thousands of seals hauled out on its beaches. Descending about 200yds and veering right you arrive at the wooden cabin of the Point Bennett Research Station ( $34^{\circ}1.95'N$   $120^{\circ}25.67'W$  and elevation 260ft). The Research Station is reached after 6.1mi and 3hrs of hiking though the various Ranger presentations at the Lester Ranch, San Miguel Hill, Caliche Forest, Green Mountain and Dry Lake add an additional hour to the total elapsed time. About 100yds beyond the Research Station is a cliff top observation point that makes a fine lunch stop.

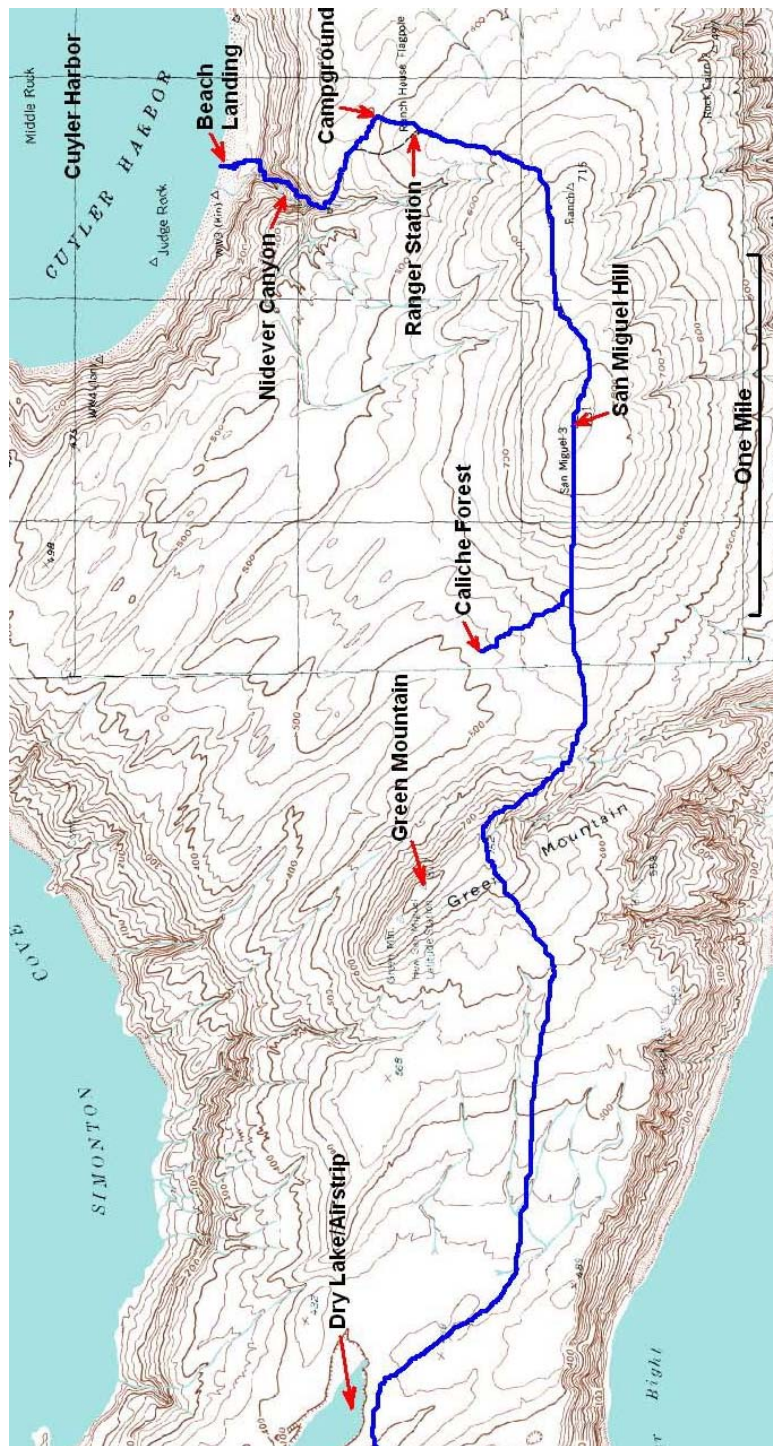
From the Research Station the trail veers northwest to access a ridge by which one can descend the bluffs and then turns south to end just behind the last dune before the beach ( $34^{\circ}1.96'N$   $120^{\circ}26.35'W$ ). This is as close as one can get to the seals and sea-lions that densely pack the long beaches. Especially with a pair of binoculars, one has an excellent view from behind this dune while the animals are not disturbed as long as they do not see standing human figures. You should reach this point 7.2mi and 3hrs 20min of hiking from the campground.

Aside from the sheer numbers of animals on these beaches, this pinniped (fin-footed marine mammals) rookery at Point Bennett is remarkable, indeed unique, in other ways and has been called the "California Galapagos" with some justification. Five different species of seals gather here regularly while a sixth is an occasional visitor. This is the greatest variety to be found in any one location anywhere in the world. The five regulars are the harbor seal, the California sea lion, the elephant seal, the northern fur seal, and the Steller sea lion while the Guadalupe fur seal is an occasional visitor. Three of these species mate and birth on the beaches while the others haul out to rest. In addition sea otters are increasingly frequent inhabitants of the surrounding kelp beds. It

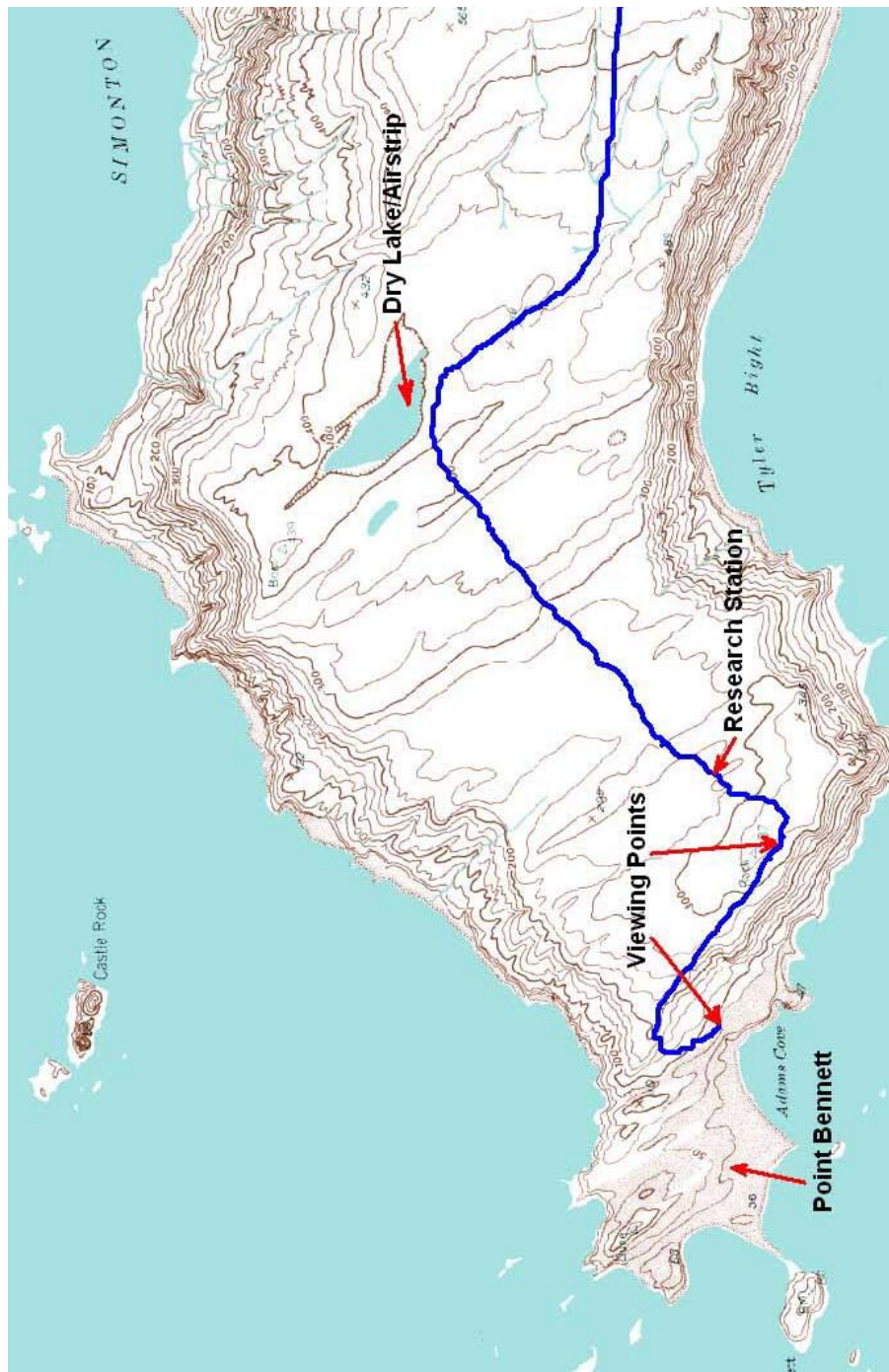
is a spectacular and amazing place especially considering its proximity to the huge metropolis just 100mi to the east.

It not easy to leave this remarkable place, but one must return to the campground ( $34^{\circ}2.45'N$   $120^{\circ}20.95'W$ ) before dark. The 6.6mi return hike takes about 2.5hrs.





Map of first part of Point Bennett Hike



### Map of second part of Point Bennett Hike

## 12.3 Harris Point, San Miguel

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 3.5 hours in a 4 day expedition
- Estimated hiking distance: 6.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 400 feet total
- USGS Topo Map: San Miguel Island East
- Difficulties: Access: hike must be accompanied by a ranger
- Special equipment: Binoculars

### Hike

This hike to Harris Point is one of the most scenic on San Miguel Island. The ranger-led hike begins in the campground (elevation 490ft) and starts down the trail toward the beach. Just after entering Nidever Canyon you will come to a trail junction, 400yds from the campground, whose only signs point up the way you have come. Leave the beach trail here and, forking left, proceed up canyon for about 70yds to the site of the first ranger station and the current water-pumping system. Here the trail crosses the stream bed and proceeds down canyon again, climbing over a bluff and descending into another branch of Nidever Canyon. Here you are close to the almost vanished remains of Nidever's old adobe homestead. Dropping down yet again to cross a third branch of the



*Secret Cove from Harris Point.*

canyon, you then climb to the edge of the high bluffs overlooking Cuyler Harbor. You should reach this overlook (34°2.82'N 120°21.53'W and elevation 420ft) about 40min after leaving the campground having covered about 0.75mi.

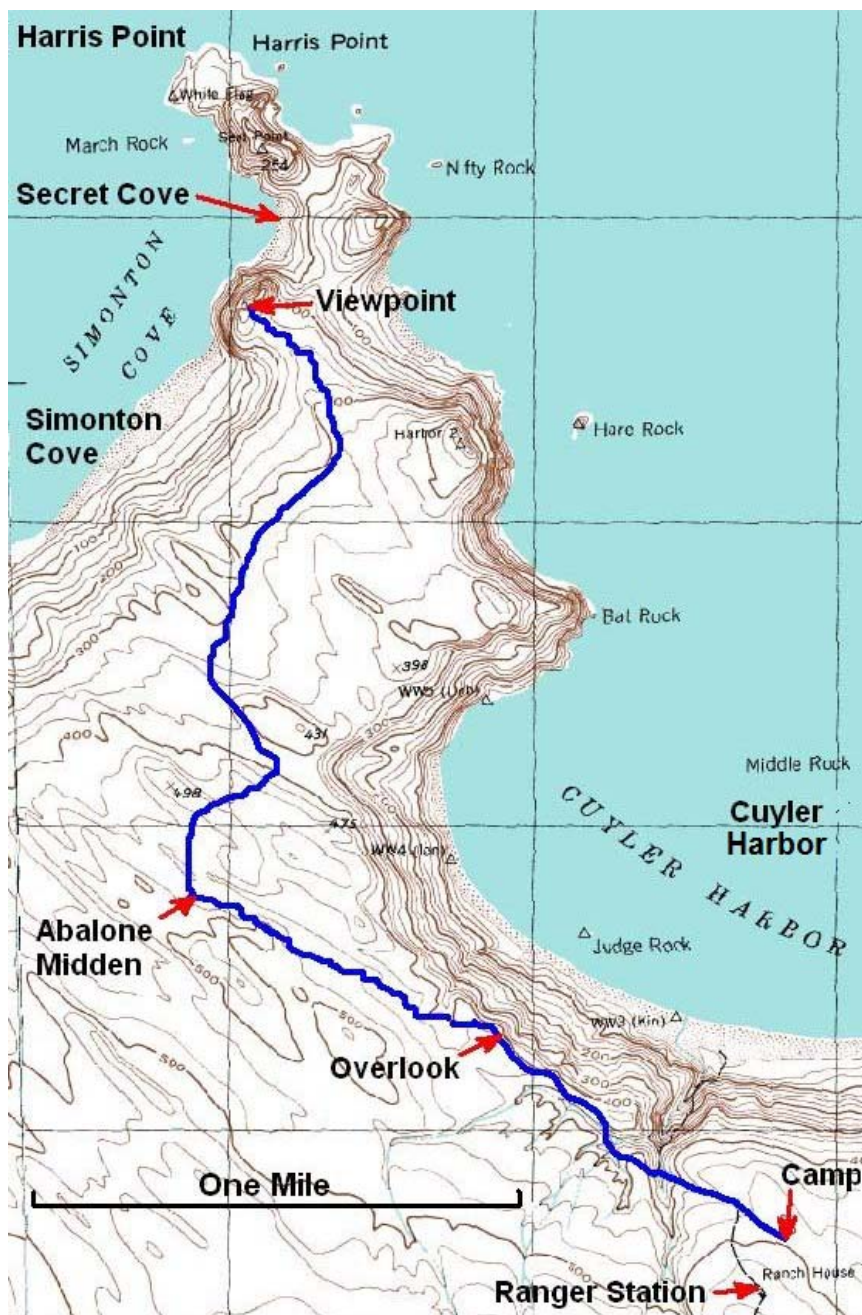
The view from this overlook is marvelous. The entire length of Cuyler Harbor beach stretches out below you, shimmering in the sun (hopefully!), while Prince Island stands guard over the entrance to this natural harbor. Below you are likely to see elephant seals basking on the beach and seals frolicking in the surf. It is a pristine seascape almost unmarked by man.

The trail proceeds along the edge of the bluffs for a short distance before veering inland and climbing gradually over the grassy plateau. Eventually you surmount a small summit (elevation 500ft and 1.4mi from the start) and 100yds beyond that the trail turns sharp right at a small rise. Looking around it is readily seen that you are on an ancient Chumash Indian midden with old abalone shells everywhere (34°3.08'N 120°22.19'W). Indeed the whole area north of here seems to be littered with middens.

As you proceed north the great sweep of Simonton Cove (Bay would be more appropriate) opens up on your left and you traverse across the sandy plateau just inland of Simonton before accessing the top of a gentle ridge that leads out to the twin-peaked headland that marks the terminus of this hike. It is not quite Harris Point which is a little further north. You should reach this destination (34°4.13'N 120°22.04'W and elevation 270ft) about 2hrs and 3.1mi from the campground. Climbing a short way up to the saddle between the two peaks of the headland, you get a marvelous view of the beautiful Secret Cove below your vantage point. This is one of the windiest locations on San Miguel so you may soon retreat to shelter back down the trail.

The return hike to the campground (34°2.45'N 120°20.95'W) takes about 1.5hrs.





Map of Harris Point Hike

## 12.4 Cardwell Point, San Miguel

### Characteristics

- Hiking time: 2.5 hours in a 4 day expedition
- Estimated hiking distance: 6 miles
- Elevation gain: 630 feet total
- USGS Topo Map: San Miguel Island East
- Difficulties: Access: hike must be accompanied by a ranger
- Special equipment: Binoculars

Cardwell Point at the east end of San Miguel has a beach that is often jam-packed with Elephant Seals. It is also within fairly easy hiking distance of the campground and therefore allows one to visit this amazing spectacle with relative ease.

### Hike

This ranger-led hike begins at the campground ( $34^{\circ}2.45'N$   $120^{\circ}20.95'W$  and elevation 490ft) and proceeds up to the airstrip beside the Ranger Station ( $34^{\circ}2.36'N$   $120^{\circ}21.01'W$ ). Hiking east along the airstrip, the trail forks off to the southeast near the end of the runway and, after cresting a very slight summit at 570ft), begins a long gradual descent toward the eastern end of the island. The landscape here is almost featureless grassland with just a few patches of



*Hiking toward Cardwell Point; Santa Rosa in background.*

low bushes. It is so flat that it is known locally as the “gangplank”. Ahead, at the bottom of the long slope, you can see the stretch of water between San Miguel and Santa Rosa (known as San Miguel Passage) and, of course, the island of Santa Rosa itself. For a time the trail follows the north bank of a shallow draw known as Willow Valley (the willows are much further downstream) before crossing ( $34^{\circ}1.58'N$   $120^{\circ}19.61'W$ ) to the south and veering off in that direction. Eventually you come to steeper descent near the coast and follow the remains of an old road with a bleached bed. Heading down toward the sea you veer south in order to reach the western side of a slight promontory that can be seen in the distance. We note here that the large sand spit shown on the topo map at the eastern end of the island is no longer extant and the coast now follows the first contour much more closely. The trail takes you to a low bluff on the eastern end of the cove that is just to the west of the slight promontory mentioned above. You should reach this destination ( $34^{\circ}1.21'N$   $120^{\circ}18.63'W$ ) about 1hr 15min and 3mi from the campground.

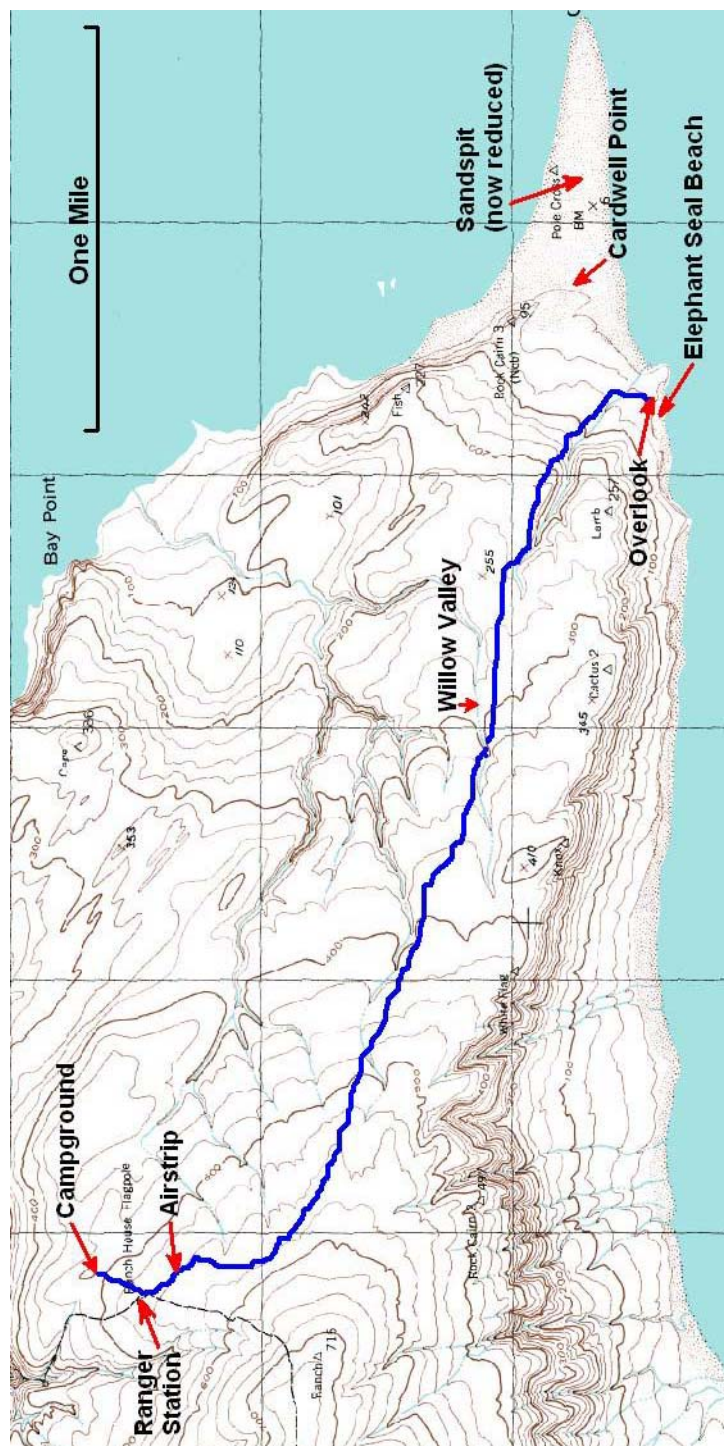
From this low bluff, you will get a close-up view of a beach that is literally packed with elephant seals. In order not to alarm them you lie along the edge of the cliff looking down on this mass of elephant seal. It is an amazing sight and one could spend hours watching their slow-moving interactions.

The hike back to the campground ( $34^{\circ}2.45'N$   $120^{\circ}20.95'W$ ) is a long uphill drudge usually into a strong headwind.



*Cardwell Point beach covered with elephant seals.*







# Bibliography

1. Allen, S. (1997) *Canyoneering 3*. Univ. of Utah Press.
2. Annerino, J. (1986) *Hiking the Grand Canyon*. Sierra Club Books.
3. Beffort, B. (2005) *Afoot and Afield Las Vegas and Southern Nevada*. Wilderness Press, Berkeley, CA.
4. Brereton, T. and Dunaway, J. (1996) *Exploring the backcountry of Zion National Park*. Zion Natural History Association.
5. Bunnell, L.H. (1990) *Discovery of Yosemite*. Yosemite Association, Yosemite, CA.
6. Digonnet, M. (1997) *Hiking Death Valley*.
7. Doll, P. (2000) *Day Trips with a Splash. Swimming holes of the Southwest*. Running Water Publications, San Diego, CA.
8. Godfrey, E. (1941) *Yosemite Indians*. Yosemite Association and National Park Service.
9. Hinchman, S. (1997) *Hiking the Southwest's Canyon Country*. The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.
10. Jones, T. (2006) *Zion: Canyoneering*. Canyoneering USA, Mount Carmel, UT.
11. Kelsey, M.R. (2001) *Boater's Guide to Lake Powell*. Kelsey Publishing, Provo, UT.
12. Kelsey, M.R. (2003) *Technical Slot Canyon Guide to the Colorado Plateau*. Kelsey Publishing, Provo, UT.
13. Leadabrand, R. (1963) *Guidebook to the San Gabriel Mountains of California*. The Ward Ritchie Press, Los Angeles, CA.
14. Martin, T. and Whitis, D. (2013) *Guide to the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon*. Vishnu Temple Press.

15. McKinney, J. (1987) *Day Hiker's Guide to Southern California*. Olympus Press, Santa Barbara, CA.
16. McKinney, J. (1992) *Walking Southern California. A Day Hiker's Guide*. HarperCollinsWest.
17. Muir, J. (1911) *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Penguin Books, NY.
18. Opland, G. (1996) *Phoenix Rock II*. Chockstone Press, Evergreen, CO.
19. Powell, J.W. (1961) *Exploration of the Colorado River and its Canyons*. Dover Publications, Inc., NY.
20. Roberts, L.J. (1991) *San Miguel Island*. Cal Rim Books, Carmel, CA.
21. Schad, J. (1986) *Afoot and Afield in San Diego County*. Wilderness Press, Berkeley, CA.
22. Schad, J. (1991) *Afoot and Afield in Los Angeles County*. Wilderness Press, Berkeley, CA.
23. Schad, J. (1988) *Afoot and Afield in Orange County*. Wilderness Press, Berkeley, CA.
24. Secor, R.J. (1992) *The High Sierra Peaks, Passes and Trails*. The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.
25. Spring, V. (1995) *100 Hikes in California's Sierra & Coastal Range*. The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.
26. Stienstra, T. and Brown, A.M. (1994) *California Hiking*. Avalon Travel, Emeryville, CA.
27. Thybony, S. (1996) *Official Guide to Hiking the Grand Canyon*. Grand Canyon Natural History Association.
28. US Army. (1976) *US Army Survival Manual, FM21-76*. Reprint of Department of the Army Field Manual, Dorset Press, New York.
29. Vogel, R. (1997) *Classic Rock Climbs, No.1. Joshua Tree National Park California*. The Globe Pequot Press, Guilford, CT.
30. Warren, S.S. (1996) *Exploring Arizona's Wild Areas*. The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.
31. Wheelock, W. and Condon, T. (1989) *Climbing Mount Whitney*. La Siesta Press, Glendale, CA.
32. Williams, T. (2005) *Canyoneering Arizona*. Funhog Press, Flagstaff, AZ.
33. Winnett, T. (1971) *High Sierra Guide Mt. Whitney*. Wilderness Press, Berkeley, CA.

34. Winnett, T. (1978) *Guide to the John Muir Trail*. Wilderness Press, Berkeley, CA.