

Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument

Coyote Gulch

A Hidden Desert Tributary of Life

On September 18, 1996, to the surprise and consternation of many Utahans, President Bill Clinton declared that 1.7 million acres of public land in Garfield and Kane Counties would be set aside as a national monument, now known as Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument. This is not a place of stairs or escalators; it is a land with strata revealing a staircase of 200 million years of geographic journaling.

Virtually untouched for hundreds of years, it holds undisturbed remains of the Ancestral Puebloans: granaries, pictographs, petroglyphs, and tools that expose much about their civilization. Escalante is a rough area of mostly unimproved roads that are impassable at times. Entry into this land of soaring colorful cliffs, plateaus, mesas, buttes, pinnacles, and canyons is a bit more than just a walk in the park. This is a land of real adventuring.

Coyote Gulch is the most popular hiking destination in the Escalante Canyons, and justifiably so. Soaring red cliffs tower above a ribbon of water, rich with strands of green in the form of trees, willows, grasses, and flowers. The stream is a product of underground seepages and springs. It flows into the Escalante River 13 miles down canyon, where the Gulch ends.

Highlights of the trip include two arches, a natural bridge, dripping springs, and several waterfalls. Each day is a delight as you hike below gorgeous red canyon walls. Despite its popularity, this is a wonderful wilderness retreat.

Because of the remote nature of the Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument, the approach is not easy. You'll have to drive 30 to 35 miles on a rutted washboard road to get to the trailhead. Low-clearance cars make the trek out every weekend, but you'll be more comfortable in a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

SPORT: Backpacking, backcountry camping

RATING: The terrain in Coyote Gulch is relatively flat, with little to no elevation change except for the first drop down into the Gulch. Trudging through the sand can become difficult and will give your legs a good workout.

DISTANCE: 26 miles round trip

TIME: Four days is plenty of time to fully explore the Gulch if you cover 6 to 6.5 miles a day at a good pace. This gives you two days in and two days out. Depending on your stamina and backpacking experience, you can shorten the trip to two or three days. Just keep in mind that if you cut it too close on time, you may have to head back without visiting the best parts of the Gulch. The trail gets better the farther in you go and all of the primary arches, waterfalls, and bridges are found within the last 7 miles of the trail, so plan adequate time if you wish to experience the full wonder of Coyote Gulch.

GETTING THERE: Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument is located in the south-central portion of the state. Final access to the monument is via UT 12, a scenic byway. There are a number of possible routes to UT 12, and the one listed here includes two more scenic byways. From Salt Lake City, head south on I-15. Just past Cove Fort, after approximately 168 miles, take Exit 132 toward I-70 East. Follow I-70 for 23 miles to Exit 23 and then head south on US 89 for 65 miles before heading east on UT 12.

Highway 12 takes you through the town of Escalante and connects with Escalante State Park, the Grand Staircase National Monument, and its visitors' center. Travel time from Salt Lake City is about five hours (a total of 314 miles).

Once in Escalante, continue along UT 12 for 6 miles to Hole-in-the-Rock Road. Signage for the road is ample, and it heads off to the right. Follow this road for 30 miles to the Red Well Trailhead. A small sign marks the turnoff. Proceed another 1.5 miles to the trailhead. The 30-odd-mile stretch took us one hour and 45 minutes in a car because of the washboard ruts.

TRAIL: A number of trailheads lead into Coyote Gulch. Here I'll focus on Red Well because you drop into the Gulch rather quickly and have less cross-desert travel time. The length of this trip also creates a pleasant backpacking experience, with full exposure to the Gulch.

Coyote Gulch is pure backcountry. Always pay attention to landmarks, because once you leave the trailhead sign-in box the only markers along the trail are occasional cairns. The good news is that the trail is well worn and primarily follows a wash. Just remember to keep your bearings and use the landmarks. GPS coordinates will help you pinpoint specific sites, but once you hit the stream you simply follow it to the confluence with the Escalante River.

The trail is a combination of sandy riverbed, packed trail, and wet stream crossings. The water is seldom more than ankle deep, but you cross it often. You can't help but get wet. I have hiked it in both sandals and boots, but I prefer boots because the sandals don't provide much support on the sandy sections of trail. I've seen other hikers do it in sandals, and even bare feet. The water is deepest during spring runoff in late April and May. Keep an eye on the trail and the main streambed. I've found that though there is always a trail to follow, sometimes it wanders up a side canyon, up a tributary feeding into the main gulch, or simply off at an angle. When in doubt, always stick to the primary stream.

Archaeological and historic sites are fragile, non-renewable resources. Do not touch rock art or climb in ruins. Leave everything as you find it. Collecting artifacts is prohibited. Services and water are not available in the Monument. When heading into the backcountry make sure you have a permit and that others know your plans. Don't travel or hike alone.

All roads within the Monument's interior, except portions of the Burr Trail and Johnson Canyon Road, are unimproved. Most roads are dirt or gravel and can get rough and rocky. Some roads traverse areas of deep sand and require high clearance or four-wheel drive. Gasoline is available in the communities surrounding the Monument, but not within. Be prepared so that adventure doesn't turn to disaster.

OPTIONAL DAY HIKE: The Calf Creek Trail is a desert oasis managed by the BLM. Well marked, it runs beside Calf Creek, so called because pioneers once used the box canyon area to keep weaned calves in the natural pasture. One of the best-known trails in the Grand Staircase– Escalante National Monument, the hike ends at a 126-foot waterfall that cascades down a reddish-brown face covered with Christmas green moss. The falls collect in a large pool at the base. Water flows year-round, coming from large seeps and springs, helping animals and plant life to thrive.

The trip to Lower Calf Creek Falls takes three hours for the average hiker to complete and covers 5.4 miles round trip. Make a day of it by taking along a picnic for lunch and your bathing suits for a swim in the pool beneath the waterfall. The BLM provides a written guide at the trailhead that points out areas of interest along the trail, including well-preserved petroglyphs, beaver dams, and other flora and fauna. White and pink Navajo sandstone surrounds the trail and much of the path is covered with this sand.

We began this hike in late afternoon and made it back just before dark, taking time to watch an illegal rappeller descend the waterfall. Because of our late start we didn't have time to take a swim, and the April evening was a bit chilly anyway. But if you're hiking in the heat of the day, a quick dip will cool you off.

To reach the trailhead, drive east from the visitors' center in Escalante toward Boulder on UT 12 for 16.3 miles to the Calf Creek Campground. The trail is located at the back of the campground, less than a half mile from the highway.

MAXIMUM GROUP SIZE: Regulations allow 12 people per backcountry permit.

CAMPING: In Coyote Gulch all backcountry camping is free but requires a permit. A couple of backcountry toilets are set up in the Gulch (GPS coordinates: UTM 12 S 0496330/4141449 and UTM 12 S 0496320/4141519).

If you wish to day-hike and car camp before heading out into the backcountry, the campground at Escalante State Park comes complete with nice showers, modern bathroom facilities, and Wide Hollow Reservoir, which offers canoeing, fishing, or motorboating. Canoes are available to rent for \$5 an hour, \$10 for four hours, or \$20 for the day, and life vests and paddles are included. Reservations can be made by calling 1-800-322-3770. Campsites at the state park run \$14 per night. If you make a reservation you'll be charged an additional \$7 reservation fee, for a total of \$21. Firewood is \$3 an armload or you can bring in your own. The Escalante State Park campground is also the access point for the Petrified Forest Trail.

Another popular camping area is the Calf Creek Campground, but no reservations are allowed and it fills quickly. Campsites are only \$7 per night, but you must haul out your garbage because no trash bins or collection is available. This campground is also the trailhead for the popular Calf Creek Falls day hike.

SEASON: Spring and fall are the most popular and pleasant times on the trail, though there are occasional rainstorms in the spring. If you're in the Gulch during a heavy rainstorm you'll be afforded the great pleasure of watching the waterfalls cascade from the cliff walls. Summer temperatures reach 90 to 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and the arid windy heat makes June, July, and August a miserable time to haul a pack in the desert.

Flash floods are possible at any time of year, but the rainy season lasts from July through September. If you're looking for seclusion, it's worth noting that fewer people visit in September and October than during the spring. In flash flood season hikers must camp on high ground and watch for storm alerts.

PERMITS: A permit is required but is currently free and can be secured at the visitors' center upon arrival. Visitors' center hours are 7:45 am–4:30 pm.

FEES: No fees are required to hike in Coyote Gulch.

CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT: Spring and fall temperatures fluctuate between cold and comfortable. Because of this, I recommend hiking with light layers that can be added or removed as needed. During the heat of summer, lightweight clothing, sunscreen, and a hat are all musts, but be prepared for cold nights. Bug spray is necessary to keep the mosquitoes and deer flies at bay after the hatch (usually May). Bring a pair of sandals as well as hiking boots. Sandals give your feet a breather after a day in the boot, and come in handy for streams and waterfalls. In winter, desert areas can be covered in a light blanket of snow and dirt roads may be impassable. Visitation is low at this time.

No fires are allowed while backcountry camping so bring a headlamp or flashlight. Aside from the usual camping and packing supplies, you'll also need a camp stove if you intend to cook. Bring a rope to string food up in a tree, which will keep rodents from chewing through your tent and backpack.

Backcountry camping regulations require that you haul out your own trash. This includes all toilet paper. Bring bags for this purpose. Fortunately, Coyote Gulch follows a stream so you won't have to pack in all your water, although you'll need a good purifier. The visitors' center can supply free maps for the areas around Escalante, so there is no need to secure those ahead of time. A tent and sleeping pad are good ideas, too. We woke up one morning to find a baby scorpion keeping itself warm beneath our sleeping bags.

SUGGESTED ITINERARY

DAY 1: Secure your permit from the Escalante National Monument Visitors' Center. Follow Hole-in-the-Rock Road to the Red Well Trailhead. Park, sign in on the register, and strap on your pack and head to the right on the old red-sand road. At 0.57 mile the trail descends into a dry wash that you follow down into the Gulch. Depending on the time of year, water will start to appear between 0.9 and 1.5 miles. Once you reach water, the trees, rabbitbrush, weeds, and flowers transform the dry brown desert into a green oasis.

Approximately 2 miles in you come across the first slot falls (UTM 12 S 0490848/4142361), although they are difficult to see. You can hear them, but to get a look at them you'll have to top a sand hill—the first of the Gulch. When you drop down the other side you'll see a mucky iridescent pool of water in front of a small slot canyon to the right. You must remove your boots and squeeze into this slot, which is just large enough to walk through, and then follow it back through successive pools to find the four curvaceous red rock levels down which the water cascades.

When you're ready to leave you'll see more than one trail. Head to the far side of the mucky pool and follow the trail over the red mound of sand. In April the water is warm and the pools are full of tadpoles, frog eggs, and water skeeters. It's a great resting spot.

While the Gulch starts with some pretty unimpressive scenery, after a few miles towering red walls appear reaching so far into the sky you can get drunk on their height. A new one seems to loom at every turn. At 8 miles you come to Jacob Hamblin Arch, the first of a number of absolutely magnificent desert arches and bridges that make the trek through Coyote Gulch worth every step. From here the scenery becomes ever more inspiring.

Make camp under the massive waves of cliffs, and enjoy a night of stargazing far from any man-made light.

DAY 2: The last part of the trail is filled with the arches and waterfalls for which Coyote Gulch is famous. At mile 9 you reach Coyote Natural Bridge, an arch formed by water. A set of large red and white pictographs can be found approximately 0.5 mile past the natural bridge (UTM 12 S 0498071/4140879). They are up on the cliff face off the left side of the trail. A number of trails lead up the mountain to the cliff, and you must climb one of these to see the pictographs up close.

Cliff Arch is 10.5 miles in, and at mile 11 you hike across one of several waterfalls. The trail ends at the stream's junction with the Escalante River. If you are squeezing the trip into three days you may want to hike back to Jacob Hamlin Arch today. (If you are definitely doing the three-day version and will be returning to the Jacob Hamlin Arch area to camp a second night, there is no reason to carry your backpack on the second day. Just day-hike down to the Escalante on day 2.)

I have camped near the stream and towering walls, the sounds of water resonating through the night. It sounds as though the stream is running quietly right next to the tent, although it's really the echo of the river 30 feet away.

DAYS 3 AND 4: Backtrack down the trail, enjoying a second view of all the wonders Coyote Gulch has to offer.

RESOURCES

USEFUL WEB SITES AND PHONE NUMBERS

Camping reservations at state parks: 1-800-322-3770, 8 am–5 pm Monday–Friday;

www.ut.blm.gov/monument

Escalante Interagency Visitors' Center: 435-826-5499

TOURS AND GUIDES

View a list of licensed outfitters in the area at www.ut.blm.gov/monument.

A LITTLE HISTORY, GEOLOGY, FLORA, AND FAUNA

In the 1880s geologist Clarence Dutton described the high plateaus of southern Utah and northern Arizona as being “like a great stairway.” The staircase of Escalante extends 150 miles from bottom to top, rises 3,500 feet in elevation, and represents nearly 260 million years of geologic history. As each layer of sediment was deposited it preserved evidence of the oceans, sand dunes, coal swamps, and the streams and rivers that meandered across the land through the ages.

Each layer, whether sandstone, siltstone, mudstone, or limestone, records in rock the record of the past. As the Colorado Plateau slowly began to rise, it formed the cliffs and canyons of Escalante. The layers are named according to their color: Chocolate, Vermillion, White, Gray, and Pink. The first layer was laid in a warm ocean environment. Each consecutive layer reveals the past in a three-dimensional history book. One of the best places to view the Grand Staircase is from US 89 between Kanab and the Paria River.

The Monument is a treasure chest of history, with countless petrified shells, bones, leaves, wood, teeth, tracks, and subtropic vegetation fossils. Like the rocks, the fossils tell a story of the environmental changes and animal life millions of years ago. Scientists are especially interested in the rocks formed between 75 and 94 million years ago in the Cretaceous period of the Mesozoic era. This section of rock is a yellow band found three or four layers down from the cliff top.

Studies of the formations within the Monument have yielded more information about North America in the time not long before the dinosaurs vanished than any other place on the continent. Fossils of many new species of marine reptiles, dinosaurs, small mammals, birds, lizards, giant crocodiles, turtles, amphibians, plants, and invertebrates have been found here. Thanks to the vast store of remains and the exposed rock formations that make them accessible, this area is a haven for paleontologists and historians.

Escalante was named after two Spanish priests, Fathers Dominguez and Escalante, who led an exploration party through the Southwest in 1776. In 1886 the first European settlers to the area officially named the town of Escalante.

Hole-in-the-Rock was named for a Mormon expedition, which traveled the Hole-in-the-Rock Road in 1879. They lowered their 83 wagons 2,000 feet down through a hole in the rock wall and ferried them across the Colorado River to establish a Mormon settlement in southern Utah.

Because Escalante was one of the last frontiers to be explored, and due to the harsh environment, many of the animals in the area are much as they were in pioneer times. Efforts are ongoing to reintroduce animals that have been forced out of the area. Biologists at the Monument have successfully reintroduced desert bighorn sheep and pronghorn to their historic habitat on the open plains of Escalante, and there are plans to bring river otters back to the Escalante River.

I've heard the swish of lizards through the grass at every turn while hiking Coyote Gulch. Different sizes and colors, it seems that no two are alike. The biologist at Monument headquarters informed me that the sagebrush lizard and great basin collared lizard are the types most often seen along the trail.

During spring and fall, Escalante is a stopover for migrating birds like sparrow and finch that are making their way to and from Central America. In addition, there are a large number of raptors in the area. Golden eagles are year-round residents, and ravens, peregrine, and red-tailed hawks make Escalante their home as well. They prey on the many mice that you'll hear rattling the leaves as you hike. I once came upon a soft grassy knoll situated about 50 feet above my head at the base of a massive red cliff. Halfway up the sheer face sat a huge eagle's nest, its tan, dead grasses a stark contrast to the red stone face.

Always shake out shoes and clothes in the morning before dressing, as scorpions find their way into various crevices. Beware of rattlesnakes and watch where you put your hands when climbing. Poison ivy grows near water sources in the Gulch, so know how to identify it (leaves in threes) and then stay away.

On our last trip we saw frogs in all stages of maturation: adult, tadpole, eggs. Remember that all animals, plants, and minerals in the park are protected. Treat them all with respect. In the sparse desert, life has always come to the streams and rivers; it is the only way to survive. You walk where the coyote and fox, the pronghorn and burrowing owl, and generations of previous civilizations have walked before you. You become part of the history of these places that have given us life. Walk carefully and listen to the wind and the echoes of your own voice.