

On Trail



Northwest Explorer »

Hikers head up-canyon to Buckskin Gulch in the Paria Canyon region of Utah. Spring backpacking trips here lead hikers into stunning red rock slot canyons and narrow gorges.

Photo by John D'Onofrio

Deep in the Canyons

Utah's Paria Canyon offers a trek into some of the world's most amazing slot canyons

Springtime can be a frustrating time for backpackers in the Pacific Northwest.

The high country is still inaccessible, buried in the winter's snow and the weather is (even by our standards) notoriously wet. But I am happy to report that I have found an immensely satisfying strategy to indulge my trail lust. During these times I tend to find myself in the canyonlands of southern Utah, a backpack on my back and a smile on my face. I love the Colorado Plateau and have visited this remarkable country more times than I can count, starting with a first eye-opening trip back in 1978. I am happy to report that in the canyons and slickrock country, not much has changed.

I was astonished then and I am still astonished by the remarkable landscapes of the canyons.

On this particular morning, my companions and I are loading backpacks for a five-day hike up Paria Canyon, a world-famous trek that will take us south out of Utah and into Arizona. Along the way we plan to spend plenty of time exploring Buckskin Gulch, often described as the world's deepest, darkest slot canyon.

We've checked the weather report to make sure that there's no rain in the forecast (the bottom of Buckskin is not where you want to be should a flash flood come calling), and after last-minute pack adjustments, we hoist our

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cumbersome packs and start off down the canyon. The usually sporadic Paria River is flowing opaque and muddy, and we slosh through it constantly, cutting from bank to bank. Around us the canyon walls begin to grow taller as we hike deeper into the Paria narrows, wading down the river between echoing stone walls.

We reach the confluence of the Paria and Buckskin Gulch, which feels like an intersection in a city of high-rise stone, and turn up Buckskin. Around a meander we find a sandy bench perched above the glistening canyon bottom—a perfect place to camp. After setting up the tent, we load our day packs with empty water bags and hike up the gulch, looking for a possible water source in the shadows of the gulch. The Paria, with its viscous load of chocolate milk-colored silt, is not drinkable. A short hike brings us to a few 6-inch-deep pools, and we return to camp with an ample supply of all-important water. In the desert, water is everything.

After a fine dinner of potato porridge, we take a stroll down to the confluence. Ravens swoop through the narrow canyon over our heads, their wing beats echoing off the walls. Somewhere high above us, other ravens cry out in their raspy, Tom Waits voices. The sound echoes among the canyon walls and ends up sounding like a pack of howling monkeys. More harmonious is the soft glissando of the canyon wren.

Returning to camp in the gathering dusk, we notice vast legions of bats out for their evening meal of insects. A dirty job, but somebody's got to do it. We wish them *bon appétit*. Back at camp, we relax amongst the trees and watch stars appear in the ribbon of sky between the canyon walls. As the ravens fall silent, a pair of frogs entertains us with a complicated call-and-response duet, their voices magnified and multiplied by a chorus of echoes. We sit in the darkness and enjoy the sweet music of the canyons.

We awake to blue sky and the melancholy singing of the canyon wrens—a beautiful morning in our little green nest of box elder above the canyon floor. Exploration of Buckskin Gulch is on the agenda for today, so we load our day packs and plunge into the slot, walking reverently through the great stone galleries. The canyon walls are sculpted with artful grace and abandon. The deep shadows of the canyon's depths give way overhead to blazing orange turrets.

We reach a big rock jam and wriggle through,

Left: Some of the slot canyons in Buckskin Gulch soar as high as 800 feet.

Opposite: Springs nourish everything from fish to cottonwoods to ferns within the canyon's depths.

squeezing between the rocks and on up the gulch. We encounter several knee-deep pools of icy-cold black water and slog through them in our Tevas, alert for quicksand. The canyon walls are chiseled and smooth, streaked with wild rainbow-hued patterns formed by desert varnish. The slot opens up into a massive alcove lit by reflected light, and the air itself seems to be neon orange.

We enter the “dive,” the deepest part of Buckskin. The canyon walls soar still higher above us, blocking out the sky altogether in places. As the afternoon fades to evening, the already dim light in the depths grows even dimmer, and we return through gloomy corridors, occasionally emerging into open alcoves, lit by the low evening sun.

Back at camp we enjoy another canyon symphony courtesy of our friends: the ravens, wrens, frogs and bats—a sweet and gentle counterpoint to the still of evening.

It's another glorious morning in the gulch as we load our backpacks, return to the confluence and turn right, heading south, further into Paria Canyon. Overhead the grandeur expands: sheer faces of soaring rock 800 feet high, rising to great stone monuments as impressive for their girth as for their height. We pass through a series of vast alcoves and walk beneath overarching flying buttresses 300 feet above our heads, walking out of Utah and entering Arizona.

Rounding a bend in the river, we enter the biggest amphitheater I've ever seen. At its base a small spring bubbles from the canyon wall. It's the perfect campsite. There are a few small trees for hanging muddy gaiters to dry—and even a little patch of grass to lend a touch of verdant green to the palette of red and orange. We pitch the tent on a sandhill beneath the enormous curve of stone and relax in the cool of the alcove's gigantic shadow.

Barb takes a nap as Rich and I explore further down the canyon. We discover another spring, a real gusher with maidenhair ferns and tiny fish. According to our map, this is Big Spring, the best water in the canyon. We fill our water containers directly from the spring. It's a rare treat to be able to dispense with the filter pumping. The late-afternoon breeze blows up between the cliffs, carrying with it the scent of distant sage. The situation, we readily agree, is ideal.

The evening sun bathes the canyon with majestic light; streaks of desert varnish appear as cool patinas against the brilliant color of the canyon walls—neon orange, the burning red of glowing embers, otherworldly magenta. No painting has ever captured colors such as these.

Back at camp the slice of sky is much bigger than it was in Buckskin and soon fills with stars. I lean back in my Therm-a-Rest chair and savor the evening. Moments like these are my

Hike Details

Paria Canyon– Buckskin Gulch

Location: east of Kanab, Utah

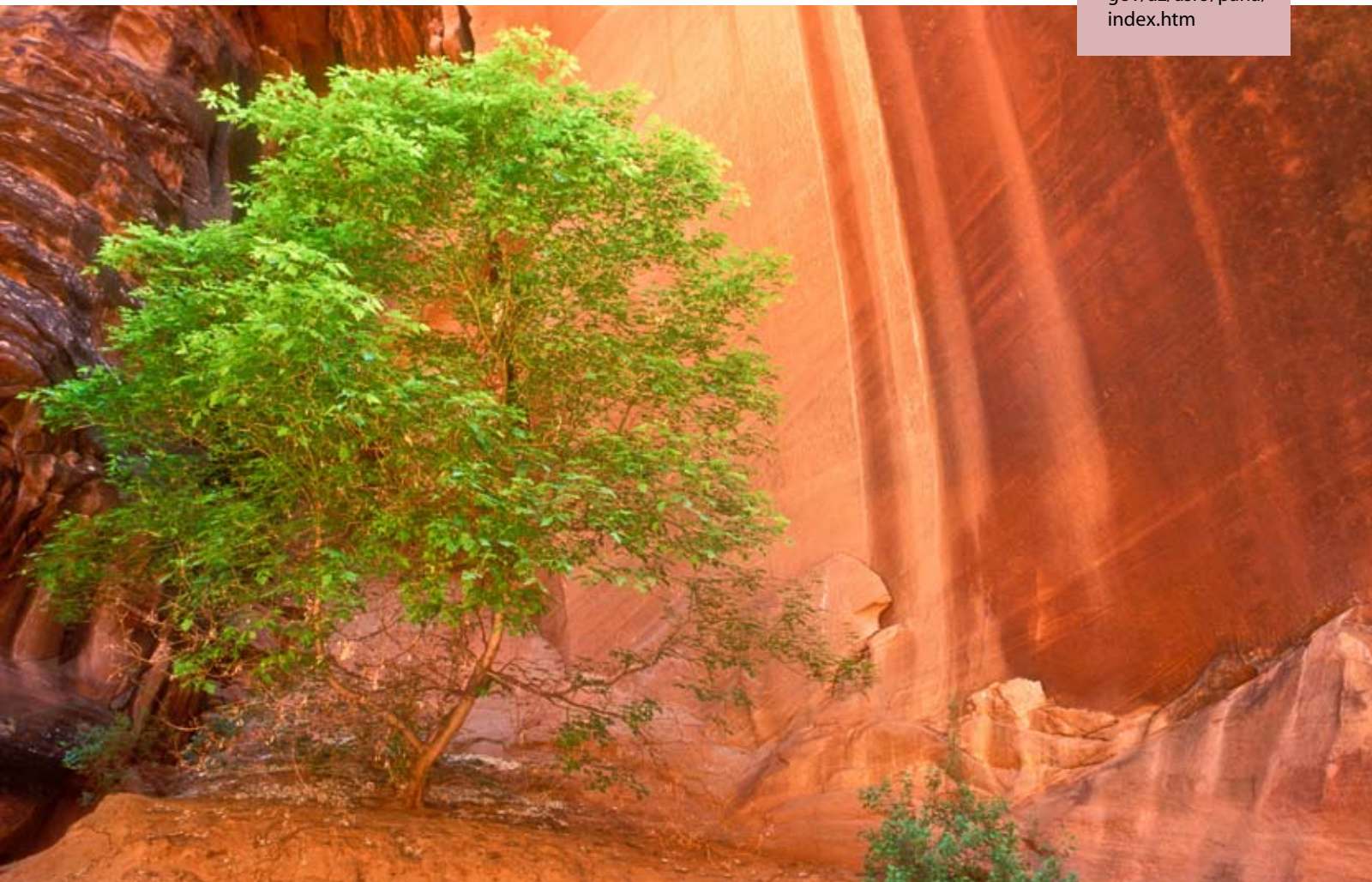
Distance: 21 miles one-way (leave cars at each trailhead)

Elevation: trailhead at 4,875 feet, minimal gain

Maps: USGS West Clark Bench, Bridger Point and Pine Hollow Canyon

Permits: \$6 per person for day use, \$10 overnight

More Information: www.blm.gov/az/asfo/paria/index.htm





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Abstract red rock patterns within Paria Canyon. A combination of elegant geology, wildlife and fabulous weather are all reasons to trek Utah's canyon country in spring. Photo by John D'Onofrio

true elixir, my joy and, it sometimes seems, my salvation. There is something about the great, heartbreaking western night that seems to engender a sense of freedom and abiding peace. Life seems rich with limitless possibilities. The dark canyon is filled with poetry and starlight.

The moths are on to me so I switch my headlamp off and sit for a long time in the darkness. I roll my bedroll out in the soft sand and drift off into the reverie of contented dreams.

The morning sun is streaming through the canyon as we load our day packs and proceed down the magnificent corridor, following the muddy river. Around every bend, a new spectacle: great cathedrals of red rock, massive rippling terraces sweeping down from the heights, vast stone shelves littered with weather-tarnished boulders, enormous amphitheaters 600 feet high. Beneath a monumental vaulted ceiling, an elaborate white angel rises 50 feet high, painted in desert varnish. We go from being impressed to being humbled. We pass the miles in awe, and on the few occasions when we break the silence, we find ourselves speaking to each other in whispers.

We return to camp at the end of the day exhilarated and exhausted. On this, our fourth night in the canyon, it is beginning to sink in.

As usual, it takes some time for the rhythms of the wilderness to supplant the workday bustle but now they seem to be kicking in.

We eat magnificent garlic mashed potatoes and salmon (fresh from the pouch!) with considerable and justifiable zeal. Barb and Rich retire to the tent, and I lay my sleeping bag out and crawl in beneath the Big Dipper, enjoying every little breeze.

The next day, it's a glorious morning for eating oatmeal in the shade of a giant amphitheater. We enjoy a languid last cup of coffee and pack up camp. The river is greatly diminished, affording easy and expeditious passage back up the canyon. We stop at the confluence, drop our packs, and hike up Buckskin to top off our water bottles for the hike out, enjoying one last stroll into the magical slot canyon.

Our water bottles full, we shoulder our packs and continue up the trickling river into the narrows, emerging into more open country where the river is dry. It's dusk when we reach the trailhead with its lawn chairs and beer. We celebrate our good fortune as darkness falls and a thin moon rises above the mesa. A coyote howls somewhere in the night, a perfect coda to conclude our canyon adventure. ♦

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