



Royal Arch Loop

Loop hikes are always popular with backpackers, beginning and ending at a single trailhead and offering new horizons each day. Unfortunately, the Grand Canyon does not offer many loop possibilities – the canyon is linear and so are most of the routes. The Royal Arch Loop, commencing and concluding at the South Bass trailhead, is a classic exception. The Royal Arch Loop is appropriate for experienced canyon hikers only, walkers who have paid their dues and acquired the appropriate wilderness skills, whose experience allows proper rigging of rappel anchors, and who can easily and safely rope down vertical cliffs. For such people the Royal Arch Loop offers a top drawer canyon adventure, replete with more natural beauty than humans can absorb. For those lacking the required skill and judgment this hike offers about a million ways to get into serious trouble in a remote part of the Grand Canyon.

Locations/Elevations

South Bass trailhead (6650 ft / 2027 m) to Royal Arch (3200 ft / 975 m):
Royal Arch (3200 ft / 975 m) to Toltec Beach (2100 ft / 640 m):
Toltec Beach (2100 ft / 640 m) to Copper Creek (3150 ft / 960 m):
Copper Creek (3150 ft / 960 m) to South Bass trailhead (6650 ft / 2027 m):

Mileages (approximate)

14 mi (22.4km)
3 mi (5km)
9 mi (14.4km)
9 mi (14.4km)

Maps

7.5 Minute Explorers Monument and Havasupai Point Quads (USGS)
Trails Illustrated Map, Grand Canyon National Park (National Geographic)

Water Sources

Flowing water appears on the surface in the Redwall gorge of Royal Arch Creek. The Colorado River can be accessed at Toltec Beach. During cooler weather seasonal water is sometimes available from Seep Spring (between Chemehuevi and Toltec Points), from temporary pools along the Esplanade and in the bed of upper Royal Arch Creek, in Copper Canyon at the Tonto Trail crossing, and from potholes in Bass Canyon below the Tonto Trail. Garnet Canyon occasionally has water, but mineral content is extremely high and the water may be undrinkable. Lack of water in the Tonto Trail section of the loop makes this route hazardous in hot weather.

Campsites

Elves Chasm is day-use only, closed to overnight camping. With this single exception, the Royal Arch Loop is contained within "at-large" Garnet Use Area (BR9).

Trailhead Access

Walk the South Bass Trail about two miles to the Esplanade and watch for the cairns marking the route to Royal Arch Creek. For more details on the South Bass Trail and driving directions to the trailhead please reference the South Bass Trail description.

Trail Description

A cliff that can only be passed by a short rappel located near the midpoint of the route dictates that the Royal Arch Loop be walked in a clockwise direction, that is along the Esplanade Platform, down Royal Arch Creek and back to the South Bass Trail via the Tonto Trail. Walk west from the South Bass Trail on the Esplanade at the top of the Supai Formation, passing Chemehuevi, Toltec, and Montezuma Points. South of Montezuma Point the route starts down the long, eastern arm of upper Royal Arch Creek. Just before the eastern arm joins the main stem of the drainage hikers are presented with an impassable pouroff. This obstacle can be circumvented on either side but it's safer on the right (north). Follow a series of ledges along the north side of the canyon to a talus slope and descend to the bed of the drainage below the fall. If you chose to bypass the pouroff on the left side prepare for a thrilling traverse along an exposed ledge only a few inches wide. Both bypasses are cairned at the top and bottom of the pouroff so choose wisely.

Conditions ease somewhat after making the turn north into the main stem of Royal Arch Creek. In wet years pools of water might impede progress in the Redwall gorge and there is plenty of scrambling around to pass minor obstacles, but normally this section offers something like hassle free hiking. Hikers descending the drainage to see the natural bridge should note the large cairns that mark where the route climbs away from the creek on the east side before continuing down the watercourse. Royal Arch itself is spectacular, Grand Canyon's largest natural bridge. A huge fall below Royal Arch presents tantalizing views down into Elves Chasm, but cuts off any possibility of additional progress downcanyon. Retrace your steps about ½ mile to the cairns marking the trail up through the Tapeats Formation and follow the path north and east to the top of the infamous rappel that gives passage to the Colorado River. The trail gradually descends toward the river and just short of the unnamed drainage that falls below Toltec Point the route drops over a little 20 foot cliff. Rig an anchor worth betting your life on and rappel. Beware of old webbing or rope of unknown origin. The rest of the way to the shoreline is steep, but straightforward, coming to the river at the mouth of the Toltec Point drainage.

It would be a pity to come this far and not detour downriver to see Elves Chasm. This little nook is a rare gem and worth the time and effort. Follow the immediate shoreline or take the trail across the slope above the river about 1.5 rough, rocky miles downcanyon. The climbing becomes increasingly difficult as one follows Elves Chasm up from the river so be careful. This idyllic oasis has been the scene of several gruesome accidents.

The main trail between the Toltec Point drainage and Garnet Canyon starts upcanyon about 100 yards above the river. It is possible to walk the shoreline as well but eventually this route is forced up to join the upper trail. The trail gradually gains elevation and finally tops the Tapeats Sandstone at the mouth of Garnet. Garnet Canyon marks the western end of the Tonto Trail.

Follow the Tonto Trail upcanyon. Most of the side canyons are small, but Copper and Bass Canyons require significant detours to cross. The Tonto Trail intersects the South Bass Trail in the bed of Bass Canyon. Climb the South Bass to the rim to complete this classic Grand Canyon loop hike.

Important Notes

The Royal Arch Loop is considered by many to be the most difficult of the established south side routes. The rappel near the river and the lack of reliable water along the Tonto Trail combine with the remote setting to make this hike significantly more hazardous than other canyon trails. As previously stated, this route is for canyon experts only.

The required rope, webbing and hardware adds an additional burden to already heavily laden walkers. Plan on carrying a minimum of a 40 foot rappel rope, 20 feet of webbing for the anchor, additional webbing to tie a harness, and a locking carabineer.

The large and complex Aztec Amphitheater offers several challenging route possibilities for adventuresome canyon hikers. Point Huitzil and Apache Point offer more difficult rim-to-Esplanade routes and a few of the many arms of Royal Arch Creek go through to the bed of the drainage.