



South Canyon

South Canyon is typical of hikes descending off the Marble Bench; steep and loose, minor route finding, lack of meaningful trail, and many miles of ankle-twisting drainage bottom walking. Hikers endure such tribulation so that they may camp along the Colorado River beneath the towering cliffs of the Redwall. Short excursions to the aptly named Vasey's Paradise and the infamous Stanton's Cave are an added benefit and a welcomed reward.

How You Can Help (topic of special concern)

The lack of available mineral soil, riparian habitat, and abundant sand are common traits to all camps in the area and this means there is no easy solution to the problem of proper human waste management. Never deposit waste in sand or near to camp. Carry out your toilet paper and urinate directly into the river.

This is a popular place for rafting parties to lay-over. If a trip pulls up you may end up graciously sharing the camp. The downside to sharing is a lack of solitude but the upside is good karma, a pooper box, and great food.

Vital Statistics

Locations/Elevations

Rim (5600 ft / 1707 m) to Colorado River (2875 ft / (877 m):

Mileage

6.5 mi (10.4 km)

Maps

Buffalo Ranch, North Canyon, and Tatahatso Wash 7.5' Quads (USGS)
Trails Illustrated, Map 262, 2009 (National Geographic)

Trailhead Access

Access is via the House Rock road from Highway 89A. At mile marker 559.5 you will come to a dirt road on the south side of the highway. It is prominently marked with a big sign "House Rock Buffalo Ranch 22 miles." This road is marked as 8910, but some maps may show it as Forest Road (FR) 445. From here it is about 22 miles to the trailhead. Follow this road south. At 10.7 miles the road splits. Take the left fork (the right fork is labeled entering private property and leads to the Kane Ranch). At 11.5 miles you pass through a fence over a cattle guard. A large sign on the right states that you are now in the Kaibab National Forest. Continue straight on FR 445 (8910) to mile 18.8 passing by FR 220 and FR 631. At mile 18.8 you reach the junction with FR 632 (labeled 3510 on some maps) marked by the sign "Wildlife HQ 2 Miles, Wilderness Access 8 Miles." Turn left at this fork toward South Canyon. Follow FR 632 1.9 miles to the South Canyon Trail sign and turn right. Cross a cattle guard and continue on this road for another mile to a parking area at the canyon's edge. A small trailhead sign marks the beginning of the South Canyon route.

Trail Description

Head southwest from the parking area towards the rim and follow the trail for about 90 yards (82 m) along the rim to a chute marked by a cairn. Hike and scramble down this chute. From here a series of tight switchbacks and short down-climbs covered with loose rocks leads to prominent outcrop of limestone. The route crosses the top of this outcrop and traverses up canyon across the top of a red and white slick rock gully (visible from the rim of the canyon). Descend this gully and contour down canyon below the limestone outcropping. Another set of tight switchbacks and down-climbs leads to the canyon floor. Head down canyon by boulder hopping, bushwhacking, and generally following the path of least resistance. Two 15 to 20 foot pour-offs will be encountered. These can be bypassed by following cairned routes around them to the right side (south side) of the drainage.

Bedrock Canyon enters South Canyon from the north (left side). From this junction continue approximately 125 yards (114 m) to a 40 foot dry fall. This dry fall can be skirted by following a cairned route along a shelf on the right side (south side) of the drainage for about 220 yards (200 m) to a junction with an unnamed canyon. Here the route descends back into the creek bed. Continue down canyon until reaching the top on the gray Redwall

Limestone. The limestone here is not “painted” red but gray which is actually its natural color. A cairned path leads up and around the Redwall narrows on the left side (north side) of the canyon. This traverse is loose and crosses several small ravines. Continue following the cairns across the Supai layer back down onto the limestone. Here views of the river and Vasey’s Paradise open up to you. Head left and around a corner and begin a steep descent. A 12 foot climb down leads to a large ledge. Head downriver along the shelf to an obvious break in the limestone and scramble down it to the beach area. Raft groups usually use the lower end of the beach so for more solitude find a spot along the upper, narrower section of beach to call home.

Water Sources

South Canyon is usually dry. Some water may be present after rain or snowfalls. The Colorado River is the main water source for hikers in this canyon so plan to carry enough water to reach the river. When the river runs red (or brown) it is recommended that you settle the silt out prior to treatment and that you have a backup means of water purification.

Campsites

Desirable campsites exist at the beach along the Colorado River. Small sites can be found along the way, but water is usually not available at these sites.

Important Notes

Vasey’s Paradise has slippery rocks slanted toward the river, exercise caution and beware of nearby poison ivy. Vasey’s Paradise was named by the first Powell expedition in 1869 for the botanist that traveled with Powell in 1868 through the Rocky Mountains. Stanton’s Cave (gated) has produced many important clues about the canyon’s past including 4,000 year old split twig figures and the 15,000 year old remains of a giant teratorn, an extinct condor-like bird that had a 12 foot wingspan. Archeological sites are protected by law and lose their significance when disturbed. Please do not disturb or take artifacts from any sites.