

A Day Hike in Sand Canyon

Sand Canyon is part of Canyons of the Ancients National Monument. Administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Monument is substantially less finished than many other parks. There are few facilities, a minimal number of signs, and hardly any rangers or interpreters. Skeptics might attribute these limitations to budgetary constraints, but others see them as part and parcel of the Monument's unique character. Unlike Mesa Verde where back country areas are closed and visitors are shepherded along paved trails by rangers, Canyons of the Ancients is designed to encourage exploration.

The spirit of adventure is well pronounced along the Sand Canyon Trail. Once you leave the parking area, its easy to pretend you are one of the first people to visit since the Anasazi departed. Few sites have been "hardened" and many appear to be little more than overgrown piles of stone. With a sharp eye, you can find sites that have never been fully described as well as pottery sherds, stone fragments, and other artifacts.

With the freedom to explore comes a responsibility to help preserve the unique features of the Canyons.

- Feel free to explore and record sites you discover, but **do not** share the information with others who may have less than noble motives.
- **Do not** climb on standing walls or stand on rubble piles. All are fragile and there is no one close at hand if you fall.
- **Do not** dig in middens, move stones, or displace beams. Every disturbance compromises the archeological record and reduces what we can learn from and about the Anasazi.
- Feel free to handle and photograph artifacts and then return them to their original locations. Removing artifacts is a **federal crime** and deprives others of the joy of finding them.

Sand Canyon is a generally North-South gash in the heart of an area that was densely populated during Pueblo III and earlier Anasazi eras. The well defined trail is maintained by the BLM and runs continuously from Sand Canyon Pueblo on County Road N in the north to a slightly primitive parking area on County Road G in the south.

With two vehicles and drivers you may park a vehicle on one end, drive to the other end for your hike, and retrieve the extra vehicle when you finish. I prefer in-and-out hikes and have worked from both ends. I find the North end less engaging—it's steeper with less to see—and this guide focuses on day hikes beginning from the South.

However you choose to visit, there is plenty to entertain you. The main trail traverses an engaging landscape featuring rocky buttes, colorful cliffs, native vegetation, and spectacular views. Spurs guide you to Anasazi sites, geologic features, and other points of interest. Explore at your leisure! Don't rush and take you time to enjoy the beauty and sense of isolation.

The Sand Canyon trail is mentioned in *The Anasazi Guide* and this pamphlet provides some more detailed information.

Before You Go

The Sand Canyon Trail is well marked with stone cairns, occasional signs, and worn patches of grainy soil bordered by shrubs, native grasses, and junipers. There is little chance of getting lost, if you stay on the trail and marked spurs, but you need to be prepared to deal with a few contingencies.

- The trail is moderately strenuous. Take your time and do not attempt the hike if you are not physically capable.
- Parts of the trail are rather steep and there are areas of slick rock along with broken stone surfaces. Good shoes with substantial ankle support are a must.
- Temperatures can change rapidly and it is not unusual for temperatures to change as much as 40° in an hour. Carry lots of water and layer your clothing so you can shed as temperatures rise or relayer when they drop.
- Bright sun and altitude can produce a nasty burn. Wear a broad brimmed hat and long sleeves along with plenty of sunscreen. Gnats, biting flies, and other unpleasant creatures can be a problem at times and insect repellent should be included in your pack as well.

Getting There

Begin your visit at the Anasazi Heritage Center in Dolores, Colorado. The Center serves as the Monument headquarters and houses a superb museum. Center staff can provide directions and information about current road conditions.

Getting to the trailhead is a little tricky because there are no Monument signs along the route. The drive is on well-paved county roads—so you don't need to be concerned about the weather—and the scenery is part of the joy of visiting. The route carries you through a broad, well-watered valley, largely in cultivation. There are occasional signs of less pleasant development, but mentally blocking them out allows you to see the landscape much as earlier visitors did.

The northern edge of the valley is defined by multi-colored sandstone cliffs. Deep reds share the face with soft tans and deeply pocked surfaces. As beautiful as the drive is, remain alert and pay careful attention to posted speed limits. The roadway is shared by agricultural machinery and occasional trucks, some of which claim more than their share of the paved surface. Be prepared to yield right of way to oversized vehicles and inattentive drivers.

Here's how to get to the southern trailhead:

1. From Cortez, Colorado, drive south on Highway 491 (formerly Highway 666).
2. 2.8 miles south of Cortez—measured from the intersection of Highways 491 and 160—turn right (west) on County Road G. The county road sign is easy to miss,

but there is a stop light and a white on brown sign pointing to Hovenweep National Monument.

3. 12.3 miles from the intersection of Highway 491 and County Road G, you will see a distinctive stone house on your right. Begin slowing down because the trailhead parking area is just ahead around a gentle curve.
4. 12.5 miles from the intersection, turn right into an unsigned parking area. The parking surface is UNEVEN and may hold several vehicles parked in a random fashion, so proceed with caution. Once you are in the parking area, you will see a BLM sign identifying the trail and enumerating the ground rules for your visit.

There are no facilities at the trailhead and overnight camping is prohibited.

The Hike(s)

The trail is well marked as are spurs and branches. Novice hikers should stay on the marked trails while the more experienced may choose to explore off trail. Both groups will find they can spend countless hours without retracing their steps or exhausting the richness of the Monument.

Whatever approach you prefer, remember that the hiking trail is shared by bikers and horse riders. Most are courteous and friendly, but occasionally you will encounter bikers rolling along at excessive speed and unpleasant piles on the trail.

Exploring on your own is one of the unique pleasures of hiking the Sand Canyon trail. A step-by-step guide would be inconsistent with the Monument's design and I won't spoil things by giving you precise directions. Instead, I will add some background that may help you appreciate the sites you discover.



From the parking area, the trail runs north up a gently sloping area of slick rock. There is no shade along this stretch of the trail and this is a good place to check your protection from the sun. It looks a bit foreboding, but there is relief just ahead. The trail levels out and you will encounter a bit of shade as soon as you crest the first ridge. And, you will begin encountering archeologically significant sites almost immediately.

From this point forward, I won't be giving you directions to the sites. Instead, I'll build this guide around a series of photographs, ordered randomly. When you discover a spot that matches the photograph, read the accompanying text to see what's known about the site.

Unnamed Ruin

Many of the sites along the trail have never been formally excavated. This small house under a protective ledge is one of the "unnamed" ones and I've not found anything in the archeological literature about it. It appears to be a Pueblo III structure, but stabilization efforts obscure some vital clues to its age.

Although the structure appears to stand alone, rubble throughout the niche and along the ground below indicate that it is part of what was a much larger hamlet. The entire shelf was probably filled with structures and buildings may have spilled out onto the ground along the cliff face.



This hamlet is fairly near Castle Rock Pueblo. Although details are uncertain, archeologists suspect that many small sites in this area were part of the Castle Rock community. It is possible that an extended family lived here and joined their neighbors for important social activities at the Pueblo. It is also possible that this was just a summer

house where the occupants lived and worked during part of the year, and returned to the Pueblo during the "off" seasons.

What happened to the residents? There is little archeological evidence and any answer is pure guess work. I can see a couple possibilities. The residents may have simply left the area when Castle Rock Pueblo was destroyed. More likely, they ran to Castle Rock when danger threatened and were wiped out with the other residents. It is also possible, but unlikely, that they joined the group attacking Castle Rock and participated in the violence at the site.

Castle Rock Pueblo

Congratulations! When you see this bit of standing wall you are on the northern edge of the largest site in the immediate area.

The formal trail appears to end in front of this fragment, but the ground opens just a few yards past this point. At its largest, Castle Rock Pueblo, extended out onto the sandy area in front of you, filled the talus slope at the base



of the small butte to your right, and extended up the slope with a few structures on top. All told, the site covers nearly 3 acres.

Excavations in the early 1990s revealed at least 16 kivas, 40 surface rooms, two plazas, nine towers, and a D-shaped structure as well as remains of a wall enclosing the village. All structures were built with locally available sandstone, and some kivas were excavated as much as five feet into the underlying bedrock. The population was on the order of 75 to 150 people and the number of kivas indicates that it was a social and commercial center for the smaller hamlets in the immediate area.

Location is among the Pueblo's most impressive features. Towers appear to occupy key defensive spots while many room blocks are built against the butte face. Structures atop the butte were difficult to approach and provided ideal look out points. Elsewhere, natural barriers such as boulders limit potential attackers' approaches and free standing walls restricted access from other directions.

Ultimately, the residents' defensive precautions proved insufficient. Sometime between the final datable construction in 1274 and the early 1280s, the Pueblo was destroyed in a single attack. Kivas and other structures were burned and many of the residents were killed. Archeologists found unburied remains of at least 41 men, women, and children, many with defensive wounds and crushed skulls. The story here parallels that at Sand Canyon Pueblo and highlights the ferocity of the violence that engulfed the Anasazi near the end of the thirteenth century.

Saddlehorn Hamlet



Welcome to Saddlehorn Hamlet, a modest Pueblo III village. Today, you see one well preserved room and a standing wall in the alcove, but many other features are hidden from view. Excavations in 1990 revealed a kiva and two or three surface rooms in front of the alcove as well as two towers on the cliff above.

Tree rings and pottery sherds suggest that construction began around 1232 and finished shortly after 1256. Archeologists call this a “single component” site because there is no evidence of earlier occupation.

Excavators reburied the kiva and you don’t see much of it today. While it is hidden, the Kiva preserved features that tell us a lot about Saddlehorn Hamlet. Most importantly, the kiva is a relatively simple structure without complex features found at larger sites. This tells us that this was a family kiva serving needs of Hamlet residents and was not designed to attract other groups in the immediate area. “Integrative activities” were probably performed at Castle Rock and residents of Saddlehorn were no doubt members of a community centered on the Pueblo.

In addition, archeologists found that few artifacts were left inside when the kiva roof was burned. This leads them to believe that the residents did not abandon the hamlet in haste. Instead, it appears that they moved to another nearby site and took most of their material goods with them. This interpretation is consistent with the fact that no large roof beams were found in other excavated structures and suggests that burning the kiva was a ceremonial closing and not the result of accident or attack.

Further clues came from excavations in the midden areas. Although pot hunters have disturbed parts some of the deposits, archeologist found it to be “relatively thick.” This tells them that Saddlehorn Hamlet was occupied for a long time, probably almost three decades. This is consistent with tree ring and sherd evidence and points to a period of relative calm before the cataclysmic violence destroyed Castle Rock and Sand Canyon pueblos.

Mad Dog Tower

(coming soon)

