



Horseshoe Canyon



Horseshoe Canyon contains some of the most significant Archaic rock markings in North America. Other impressive sights include spring wildflower displays, sheer sandstone walls, and mature cottonwood trees that shade the canyon floor.

Cultural History

The archeology of Horseshoe Canyon spans thousands of years of human history. Artifacts recovered from sites in this area date back as early as 11,000 years ago, when Paleoindians hunted animals like mastodons and mammoths across the southwest.

During the Late Archaic period, 4,000 to 1,500 years ago, nomadic groups of hunter-gatherers made Horseshoe Canyon their seasonal home. They created the rock markings known as the “Barrier Canyon” style.

The Great Gallery is the best known and most spectacular of the Horseshoe Canyon panels. This well-preserved site includes both pictographs (painted figures) and petroglyphs (figures etched in the rock). The tapered, life-size figures, lacking arms and legs and frequently containing intricate designs, are characteristic of the Barrier Canyon style.

During later periods, the Fremont and ancestral Puebloan cultures left their own distinctive markings in the canyon. They left this area about 700 years ago.

Though Horseshoe Canyon is most famous for its ancient rock markings, the canyon’s

history has more modern chapters. Outlaws like Butch Cassidy made use of Horseshoe Canyon in the late 1800s, taking refuge in the confusing network of canyons, especially those around Robbers Roost to the southwest.

Later, in the early 1900s, ranchers built several stock trails into Horseshoe so cows and sheep could reach water and feed in the canyon bottom. Eventually, the ranchers constructed a pumping operation to fill water tanks on the canyon rim. Many of these modifications are still visible today.

Prospectors explored the area in the mid-1900s, improving many stock trails to accommodate vehicles and drill rigs. Though they searched the rock layers for oil and other minerals, no successful wells or mines were ever established around Horseshoe Canyon.

After Horseshoe Canyon was added to Canyonlands National Park in 1971, grazing and mineral exploration in the canyon stopped. Today, people descend the old stock trail and marvel at the history of this magnificent canyon.



Preserve the Past

Help us protect archeological resources. American Indians consider these cultural sites critical to the education and survival of their communities. Rock markings are extremely fragile and can be destroyed by the oil in human skin. Please do not touch or chalk around figures. All prehistoric artifacts and ruins are irreplaceable treasures. Walking through ruins, sitting on walls, handling artifacts, and leaving modern graffiti destroys a site's scientific and aesthetic value for future visitors.

Activities

Camping

You may camp at the west rim trailhead on public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management. There is a vault toilet, but there is no water. No overnight camping is allowed in Horseshoe Canyon within the park boundary.

Hiking

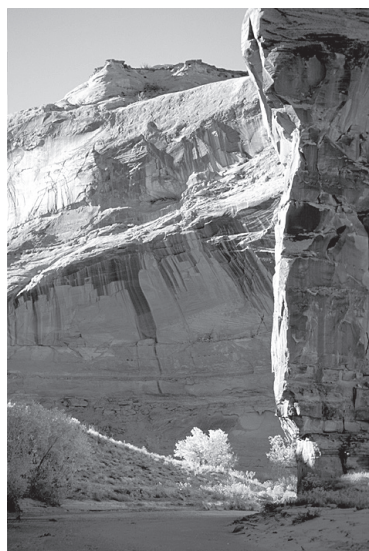
From the west rim trailhead, the strenuous hike to the Great Gallery is 7 miles roundtrip (11.2 km), with an elevation change of 750 feet (228 m). The hike requires about six hours. **Pets are prohibited below the rim of Horseshoe Canyon.** Group size is limited to 20 people. Bring your own drinking water.

There is no water above the canyon rim and water sources are unreliable within the canyon. You should purify any water you find in the canyon.

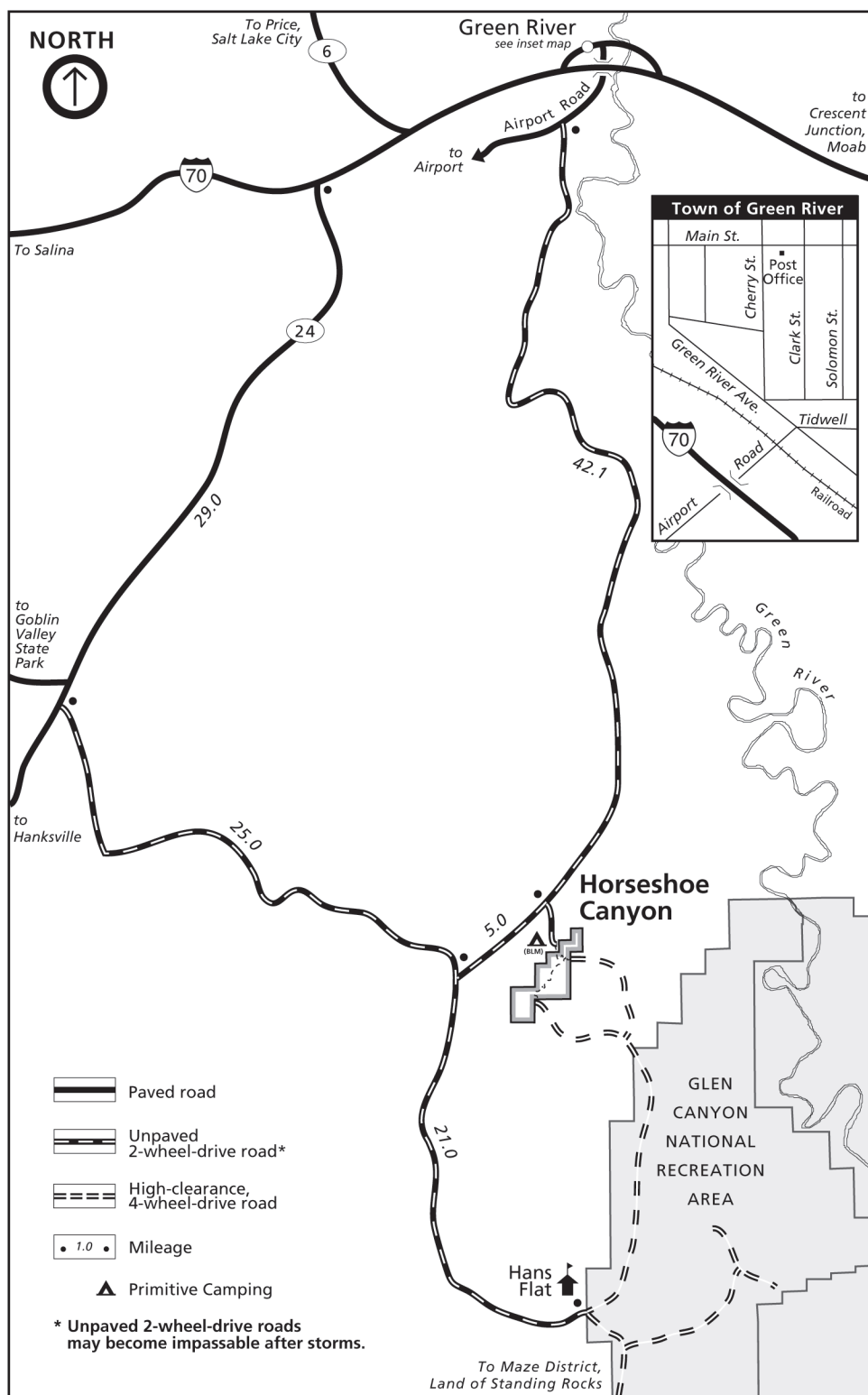
Guided Hikes

Rangers lead guided hikes in Horseshoe Canyon when staff are available. Contact Hans Flat Ranger Station at 435-259-2652, or visit www.nps.gov/cany for current schedules. You can arrange special hikes for educational or other large groups by contacting Hans Flat Ranger Station. Hikes usually depart the west rim parking lot at 9 am.

Map



The sheer sandstone walls of Horseshoe Canyon



How to Get There

Do not use a GPS to get to Horseshoe Canyon—use a map instead. Two-wheel drive vehicles can get to Horseshoe Canyon via a 30-mile graded dirt road off UT 24 or a 47-mile dirt road from Green River. Drive time is roughly 2.5 hours from Moab or 1.5 hours from Green River. A four-wheel-drive road leads to the east rim of Horseshoe

Canyon from Hans Flat Ranger Station. All roads may become impassable during storms. For road conditions, call Hans Flat Ranger Station at 435-259-2652 between 8 am and 4:30 pm, or visit go.nps.gov/canyroads. Most visitors reach the canyon from the west side.

More Information

Maps of Horseshoe Canyon include the Trails Illustrated series topographic map for Canyonlands National Park (The Maze & NE Glen Canyon), and the USGS 7.5-minute series Sugarloaf Butte topographic map. You can purchase these maps and other publications from Canyonlands Natural History Association at 435-259-6003, or online at www.cnha.org.

Additional Reading
Cowboy Cave Jennings, 1980, 223pp.
Glen Canyon Revisited Geib, 1996, 223 pp.
Indian Rock Art of the Southwest Schaafsma, 1980, 379pp.
Legacy on Stone Cole, 1990, 279pp.
Prehistory of Utah and the Eastern Great Basin Jennings, 1978, 263 pp.
Rock Art of Utah Schaafsma, 1971, 170pp.
Sacred Images Kelen & Sucec, 1996, 112pp.