

Trip Report - Canyonlands backpack April 2017

Vigorous Hikers Tom Kloster, Dave Green, Steve Brown and Carol Christensen recently completed their 19-day trip out west, broken up into three separate backpacking journeys of 4-5 days. The report below describes our first backpack in the Needles section of Canyonlands National Park. We noted a few differences from Eastern hiking, in that the trails are not regularly signed, and water scarcity can be an issue. However, during our spring visit water was more plentiful than at other seasons, and GPS and tracking apps helped us find our way. We did not have significant elevation gain on most days, but walking in soft deep sand and climbing in and out of dry washes is hard work with limited views. This convinced us to avoid all future hikes with the word “wash” in the title, and to be wary of the word “gulch.”

Getting to our backpacking start point from the Denver airport proved to be an unanticipated adventure. Our plan had been to meet at the airport, where Tom and Dave would pick up two cars for our shuttle hikes, and then we would make the 6-hour drive to Canyonlands. But all went awry when Dave’s flight was endlessly delayed, forcing Carol, Steve and Tom to cram into Tom’s little rental car with their giant duffels and suitcases. Dave would pick up his rental car when he arrived and meet us later in the evening in Utah. Alas! Who would have predicted a snowstorm on Colorado I-70 that shut down the road below Vail Pass for 3 hours? There we sat, Carol gloomily listening to Tom and Steve debating politics while Tom periodically received cryptic text translations of voice messages from Dave such as “I guess my trip has ended.” This turned out to be a mistranslation of Dave’s actual words, which explained that his flight never arrived in Denver until the evening, that the road behind us was closed due to rockfall, and that he would not be able to leave Denver until the following day. We finally linked up with Dave the next day at Canyonlands, where we placed the end car and picked up stove fuel, as well as the dreaded WAG (Waste Alleviation & Gelling) bags.

The following morning, we began the first of our backpacks, dropping into Canyonlands' Salt



Creek Canyon after a hair-raising car ride to the trailhead on a road described as being navigable by 2-wheel-drive vehicles. YEAH, if everyone gets out of the car and directs the tight-lipped driver clenching the wheel with white knuckles through 9-inch creeks of water and over steep drops and rock shelves in the gravel road. . . . After completing the 17-mile gravel obstacle course while miraculously not destroying the rental car, we started hiking north up the Salt Creek trail from the Cathedral Butte trailhead. After descending into the canyon on a steep trail, we walked mostly on the flat through tall grass and low brush, gradually traveling up-canyon but not often in sight of the creek. Our first day took us past the surprisingly cozy Kirk Cabin built out of cottonwood logs by a settler who ran an 80-acre ranch here from 1895-1905. Although the roof was no longer rain-tight, the stone fireplace was in great condition. We also saw the nearby Kirk and Wedding Ring arches, unimpressive to Tom and Carol, who were “arched out” following their trip last fall to Arches National Park, where they hiked every single trail and saw at least ten billion arches.

The



highlight of our first day was finding The All-American Man, a 5-foot pictograph made by the ancient Anasazi people. It is hidden in a small cave about 12 feet off the ground in one of the sandstone Salt Creek Canyon walls. The Man looks like a bowling ball with small faint head and Gumby-style legs. The ball torso is decorated with red and white stripes as well as blue patches, hence the name, and he is very well preserved due to his sheltered environment. After we all climbed up to look at it, Carol and Dave discovered it is a lot harder to climb down from a hidden cave than to clamber up into it. A short distance from The Man we found another piece of rock art, the 700-year old Four Faces Panel. Because there was no one else around when we came upon these pictographs in their out-of-the-way environments, it almost seemed as if we were the first to discover these images, and it made the experience special in a way that visiting the site in a tour group could never be.

The following day we moved camp just a few miles north, dropped our packs, and hiked through an overgrown, sometimes marshy, and often hard to follow trail to the impressive Angel Arch. This largest arch in Canyonlands perches atop the canyon's pink and red striated sandstone rim, approached from the bottom of the bowl and unreachable except by technical means. On this hike, Steve "traveled to the beat of a different drum", so that he joined us somewhat later at the arch after a few false wanderings. We all agreed that, as impressive as this arch is, it looks more like a sewing machine than an angel. But face it, folks, no one is going to hike 8 miles out and back to see the Sewing Machine Arch. The following day we again moved up-canyon, where we saw absolutely nothing remarkable. We camped that evening on a wide sandy creek bench, where the highlight of the afternoon was Tom's successful attempt to get a bombardier beetle to go into defensive mode with his butt in the air. Like babies, we are so easily amused. It was quite cold that night, below freezing, as we surmised by the ice formed overnight in our water bottles.



We hiked out of Salt Creek Canyon the following morning, emerging through a rock window at the top of the canyon rim and descending into Peekaboo Camp. From here on we encountered the drier slick rock terrain typical of Canyonlands, a contrast to the green trail of Salt Creek. This day was a long one, over 13 miles, and, while not rigorous by Vigorous Hiker standards, the constant rock scrambling with packs into and out of successive canyons wore us down, so that the 1800 feet of ascent felt more like 18,000 by day's end. We followed the Lost Canyon Trail, which had plentiful water, eventually climbing up and over into Squaw Canyon. Although the views into the canyon from high above on the rim were spectacular,



this route proved to be more difficult than expected. After climbing up the rim to what felt like the tippy-top of the world on striped pink and red slick rock, Carol was dismayed when she could find no way down into the next canyon that did not involve writing a suicide note. However, Tom saved the day by scouting around on the rim, where he spotted a ladder immediately below Carol but only visible from a different viewpoint. All descended this sturdy metal aid, which was followed by a more gnarly descent, face into the wall, on toe-holes cut into the rock face.



A final obstacle involved squeezing through a narrow 20-ft long crack high up on the rim, with some of us needing to take off packs to hand them forward while others wedged themselves higher along the crack where it was slightly wider. Finally descending into Elephant Canyon, we traversed it and made the final scramble of the day over the far rim of Elephant Canyon into Chesler Park, our destination for the evening and a dry camp. Steve carried a heroic seven liters of water to our site!

Chesler Park is a wide lovely grassland surrounded by sandstone spires (“needles”) and ridges. After setting up camp in our assigned site against a rock fin shaded by cottonwood trees, we strolled along the trail, visiting the other 3 widely dispersed campsites. Along the way, we discovered an abandoned winter Cowboy Camp situated in a wide recess in the rock wall. The wall was covered with graffiti describing a notorious 1920s African American outlaw, complete with drawing (“Nigger Bill, never worked, never will”) and the signatures of “Silver Dick” and “Gold Dick.” Artifacts in the camp included a rusted wood stove, broken up shelving, bullet casings and the remains of tin cans. After dinner, we watched the sun set over the western ridge of the park, illuminating the canyon’s spires in a rosy glow, while the tall blue-gray grass waved in a gentle wind. It was a peaceful end to an arduous day.

Our final day in Canyonlands involved hiking out through the pass overlooking Chesler Park and then looping around the Park’s outer edge. Part of the trail goes through The Joint, a slim subterranean corridor through fractured rock that is somewhat reminiscent of a slot canyon. The passage was only shoulder-width, requiring some sideways slithering and pack shifting. We came out at the Elephant Hill Camping area, where our end car awaited us. We then retrieved the start car and retired to a motel for showers and beer.