

COYOTE GULCH

Canyons of the Escalante

Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument

Southern Utah, United States

DISTANCE: 28 miles (45 km) round-trip

TIME: 3–4 days

PHYSICAL CHALLENGE: 1 2 3 4 5

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGE: 1 2 3 4 5

STAGING: Escalante, Utah

Even old desert hands, already well seduced by the allure of the American Southwest's canyon country, are blown away by this pretty little canyon as it flows from the desert of Scorpion Flat toward the mighty and enigmatic Escalante River. As if the ineffably beautiful Coyote Bridge, the only natural arch I've seen that still has water running under it, wasn't enough, there's Jacob Hamblin Arch, Anasazi ruins, and a litany of other amazing features. I can't stay away from Coyote Gulch, and so now just refine my strategy to give myself the best experience there.

The attraction of Coyote Gulch lies in its broad spectrum of temptations. Lots of minor canyons are pretty, but few have water; some have arches and bridges, but few have both those *and* Puebloan ruins; and, finally, the most interesting canyons seldom have good camping. Coyote Gulch has all of those elements, and for a desert walk this rich in experience comes with fairly easy access during much of the year. Ask any hiker who has been there, and what they all take home is how pretty this canyon is. Leave camp and start down toward the Escalante, past the waterfalls and hanging gardens, and the ineffable beauty of the place takes your breath away.

Coyote Gulch is situated on the edge of the nearly 2-million-acre Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, a controversial but epic piece of conservation that finally adds genuine protection to a stunning desert landscape that includes many of the

Escalante River canyons. If it did nothing else, saving the Escalante canyon system itself makes the relatively new monument a success, as this is a stunning landscape even by Utah standards. And none of the Escalante canyons has more appeal than Coyote Gulch, which, ironically, lies mostly within the Glen Canyon Recreation Area.

The fact that you get to Coyote Gulch via the famous Hole-in-the-Rock Road, a route of historical importance to the Mormons of Utah, adds both interest and difficulties to getting here. The route was discovered in the late 1800s, and then improved, to allow wagon traffic from the west side of the Colorado River to the east, down the steep walls of Glen Canyon. The "hole" in Hole-in-the-Rock is more accurately a natural notch that was deepened by blasting powder and made less steep by picks, chisels, and human labor, eventually creating a route to Mormon communities in southeastern Utah.

Today, the historic 62-mile Hole-in-the-Rock Road provides access not just to Coyote Gulch but to a number of Utah's most interesting slot canyons, and even to the Escalante River itself, where it empties into Lake Powell. The access, however, is problematic, with much of the road requiring a four-wheel drive vehicle, and even then in wet conditions it routinely becomes impassable. The road figures heavily in approach strategies.

But Coyote Gulch can be entered in varying ways, and in most conditions there's a way in. The classic





A hiker approaches the stunning formation known as Coyote Bridge. PHOTO BY PETER POTTERFIELD.

route is to start at its west end, and follow the gulch past its high points: Hamblin Arch, then Coyote Bridge, and eventually past Anasazi ruins and Cliff Arch to its confluence with the Escalante a few miles upstream from where the Escalante flows into Lake Powell. Reliable water, good campsites, and fascinating natural features make Coyote Gulch an increasingly powerful draw for canyon hikers.

As this once obscure canyon is discovered by more hikers, a confusing number of access options have arisen in the past few years that potentially can be dangerous. As with any hike in the deep desert, be careful how you go, but do your research and go. This is a canyon you do not want to miss.

LOGISTICS & STRATEGY

There are half a dozen ways to do this hike, all appealing, but many with serious potential desert-

travel dangers or problematic transportation issues. My recommendation is to do it as suggested below, which maximizes enjoyment, minimizes danger and psychological stress, and gives you two passes in opposite directions through this amazing canyon.

The hike is best staged from Escalante, Utah, a small town with a long, rich history that dates back to 1776, when Franciscan missionaries first arrived here. Its more contemporary heritage as a ranching center has given way in recent years to that of an important tourist town. Surrounded by wilderness, Escalante's laid-back cluster of cafes, grocery stores, and motels makes it a comfortable base for exploring the region. Its position at the very start of the Hole-in-the-Rock Road makes it the logical staging point for a hike in Coyote Gulch. Expect to drive six hours from Salt Lake City, or about five hours from Las Vegas, to reach Escalante.

From town, your strategy takes shape. The entrance to Hole-in-the-Rock Road lies a few miles