



Hermit Trail

Much pioneer period history of northern Arizona revolves around various schemes of development designed to promote and capitalize on the indescribable but undeniable magic of the Grand Canyon. The Hermit Creek basin was the scene of one of the most aggressive of these improvement efforts. Initiated by the Santa Fe Railroad in 1911, this program involved much development on the rim and also included the construction of what was, at the time, a state of the art rim-to-river trail. The Hermit Trail was built to serve a luxury campsite near Hermit Creek. Hermit Camp predated Phantom Ranch by 10 years, and in its heyday was complete with a tramway from the rim, a functional automobile for transportation within the facility, and a Fred Harvey chef. Operations ceased in 1930, but for two decades Hermit Camp was the last word in gracious tourism below the rim. As is always the case at Grand Canyon, time and erosion have taken a heavy toll. The old Hermit Trail is today a mere shadow of its former self, but for experienced, knowledgeable canyon backpackers the walk offers a direct link to the excitement and romance of the early days at Grand Canyon.

The “hermit” of the Hermit Creek basin was Louis D. Boucher who lived in the area for 20 years. Boucher built the Boucher Trail (west of the Hermit Trail) and seasonal residences at Dripping Springs and near Boucher Creek. Labeled a hermit because he lived alone, Boucher was in fact socially active within the South Rim community.

Locations/Elevations

Hermit trailhead (6640 ft / 2024 m) to Santa Maria Spring (5000 ft / 1524 m):	2.5 mi (4 km)
Santa Maria Spring (5000 ft / 1524 m) to Tonto Trail Junction (3210 ft / 978 m):	4.5 mi (7.2 km)
Tonto Trail Junction (3210 ft / 978 m) to Hermit Creek, BM7(2900 ft / 884 m):	1.2 mi (1.9 km)
Hermit Creek (2900 ft / 884 m) to Colorado River at Hermit Rapids (2300 ft / 701 m) :	1.5 mi (2.4 km)
Hermit trailhead (6640 ft / 2024 m) to Hermit Rapid, BM8 (2300 ft / 701 m):	9.7 mi (15.6 km)

Mileages

Maps

7.5 Minute Grand Canyon Quad (USGS)
Sky Terrain Trails Map, Grand Canyon (Sky Terrain)
Trails Illustrated Map, Grand Canyon National Park (National Geographic)

Water Sources

Santa Maria Spring, 2.5 miles below the rim usually offers a trickle of water, but it is not considered permanent, so don't bet your life on it. Hermit Creek is a permanent water source that flows all the way to the Colorado River. All water sources require purification.

Campsites

The only legal places to camp within the Hermit Creek drainage are the designated campsites at Hermit Creek (BM7) and Hermit Rapids (BM8).

Trailhead Access

A numerical code is required to open the gate giving access to the Hermit Road at the Hermit Transfer. The keypad used to enter this code is mounted on the steel post that supports the swinging arm of the gate. Backpackers **with a valid backcountry permit for the Hermit Trail** will be given the code by the Backcountry Information Center and can drive eight miles west along the Hermit Road to Hermits Rest. Continue beyond the end of the pavement on the dirt road ¼ mile to the trailhead. (Note: During winter Hermit Road is open to all and no code is required for access.)

Trail Description

The upper section of the Hermit Trail is steep and sustained, dropping almost 2000 vertical feet in the first 2.5 miles. Passage through the Kaibab and Coconino Formations is via well-defined switchbacks. Most of the Hermit Trail was originally surfaced with large hand-fitted rock slabs that created a smooth walking surface. Ongoing erosion has claimed much of this remarkable labor-intensive paving, but a few isolated fragments survive, especially in the Coconino. Fossilized animal tracks in the Coconino Sandstone have

been noted in many locations, but were first studied in detail along the Hermit Trail. A few of these fossilized lizard-like tracks can be seen by observant hikers in the lower half of the Coconino.

Pass the Waldron Trail junction at the bottom of the Coconino and the Dripping Springs Trail near the top of the Supai Formation (taking the right fork at both junctions) and drop into the Hermit Creek gorge. Santa Maria Spring is not considered permanent, but there is usually a trickle of water and the masonry shelter offers welcome shade.

Between Santa Maria Spring and Cathedral Stairs the Hermit Trail is characterized by long traverses connected by short, sharp descents. The trail runs across an angle of repose slope, crossing high gradient drainages at roughly perpendicular intersections. As the result, the Supai section of the Hermit Trail has been badly damaged by the same erosional forces that shaped the larger canyon. Hikers must scramble across chaotic jumbles of rocks washed down or fallen from above every time the trail crosses a gully. It is possible to lose the trail entirely where breakdown has covered the original route so pay attention at these crossings. The most dramatic detour up and around a deteriorated area comes at the bottom of the Supai just above Cathedral Stairs. The uncertain footing as well as the impression of exposure presented here has caused inexperienced canyon walkers to conclude that they are engaged in a truly hazardous enterprise.

The descent becomes unrelenting at Cathedral Stairs. An endless series of rocky switchbacks eventually leads hikers through the Redwall cliff and down the talus below Cope Butte to the intersection with the Tonto Trail. The Tonto Trail is an important transcanyon route that allows access in both directions, east to Monument Creek, west to Hermit Creek. Turn left (west) and follow the Tonto Trail about a mile to the Hermit Creek campsite. Be sure to walk downstream a short distance during your stay at Hermit Creek. The little Tapeats gorge is a real gem.

The Hermit Trail continues another 1.5 miles beyond the established campsite at Hermit Creek to the Colorado River and Hermit Rapids. Follow your nose down the bed of Hermit Creek or take the cut-off from the Tonto Trail that drops to the drainage bottom below the campsite. A little of the original trail construction shows in the Vishnu Formation, but today the lower section of this once impressive trail is mostly a little foot path winding quietly through riparian vegetation to the shoreline. Hermit Rapids is a big one, well worth the trip if time and energy allows.

Important Notes

Legions of small animals (squirrels, mice, ringtails, ravens) will devote much attention to separating you from your food during your stay at the designated campsites. Animal proof food storage containers are a real necessity.

The Hermit Trail is unmaintained, the ruins of a pathway that hasn't seen a trail crew in 80 years. If your Grand Canyon hiking experience is limited to the Corridor trails the Hermit Trail will represent a major step up in terms of physical difficulty and potential hazard. It is important for any serious canyon hiker to learn the names and be able to recognize the primary rock layers within the geologic cross section of Grand Canyon. Increasing your canyon knowledge can be its own reward, the more you know about the place the more you will take from the experience, but there's more. When experienced canyon walkers discuss routes they locate themselves vertically within the canyon by referring to the rock layers. If hiker A said to hiker B: "I was at the top of the Redwall on the Hermit", hiker B would understand without further discussion exactly where hiker A was. The Grand Canyon has created its own jargon, and it's a language wilderness walkers need to know both for emergencies and personal satisfaction.

The site of Hermit Camp retains many artifacts, please leave what you find for others to discover. The stable area, the lower terminus of the tramway, and numerous foundations and cisterns are still in place for students of Grand Canyon history to locate and enjoy.

Revised 2/08 MJS