



New Hance Trail

In 1883, "Captain" John Hance became the first European American to settle at the Grand Canyon. He originally built his trails for mining, but quickly determined the real money lay in work as a guide and hotel manager. From the very start of his tourism business, with his Tennessee drawl, spontaneous wit, uninhibited imagination, and ability to never repeat a tale in exactly the same way, he developed a reputation as an eccentric and highly entertaining storyteller. The scattered presence of abandoned asbestos and copper mines are a reminder of his original intentions for the area.

Shortly after his arrival, John improved an old Havasupai trail at the head of today's Hance Creek drainage, the "Old Hance Trail," but it was subject to frequent washouts. When rockslides made it impassable he built the New Hance Trail down Red Canyon. Today's trail very closely follows the trail built in 1894. The New Hance Trail developed a reputation similar to that of the original trail, eliciting the following comment from travel writer Burton Homes in 1904 (he did not exaggerate by much):

There may be men who can ride unconcernedly down Hance's Trail, but I confess I am not one of them. My object in descending made it essential that I should live to tell the tale, and therefore, I mustered up sufficient moral courage to dismount and scramble down the steepest and most awful sections of the path on foot 'On foot,' however, does not express it, but on heels and toes, on hands and knees, and sometimes in the posture assumed by children when they come bumping down the stairs The path down which we have turned appears impossible The pitch for the first mile is frightful ... and to our dismayed, unaccustomed minds the inclination apparently increases, as if the canyon walls were slowly toppling inwards

Hikers and geologists alike will enjoy the colorful rock layers found throughout Red Canyon. These layers are referred to as the Supergroup, and collectively represent hundreds of millions of years of earth's history. Pockets of Supergroup, like those found in Red Canyon, are the last vestiges describing what occurred during the Great Unconformity (the gap of time missing between the Vishnu Schist and Tapeats Sandstone). In Red Canyon, the most immediately apparent layer is the brilliant orange Hakatai Shale, which can be seen throughout the area. Across the Colorado River from the campsites at the mouth of Red Canyon the shale features a massive, basalt dyke intrusion. Local outcrops of Bass Limestone, located beneath the Hakatai Shale, contain bulbous stromatolites (1.2 million year old bacterial mats), which are some of the oldest fossils in the world.

Locations/Elevations

Rim at road (6982 ft / 2129 m) to Coronado Saddle (5900 ft / 1798 m):
Coronado Saddle to Red Canyon Overlook (5000 ft / 1524 m):
Red Canyon Overlook to top of Redwall Descent (4949 ft / 1509 m):
Top of Redwall to campsites on a conspicuous knob (4150 ft / 1265 m):
Campsites to Creekbed (3250 ft / 991 m):
Creekbed to Hance Rapids, BD9 (2560 ft / 780 m):
Rim (6982 ft / 2129 m) to River (2560 ft / 780 m):

Mileages

1.1 mi (1.8 km)
0.9 mi (1.5 km)
1.0 mi (1.6 km)
0.9 mi (1.5 km)
1.0 mi (1.6 km)
1.6 mi (2.6 km)
6.5 mi (10.5 km)

Maps

7.5 Minute Grandview Point and Cape Royal Quads (USGS)
Trails Illustrated Map, Grand Canyon National Park (National Geographic)
Sky Terrain Trails Map, Grand Canyon (Sky Terrain)

Water Sources

The Colorado River is the only reliable water source in the Red Canyon vicinity. In cooler seasons, water may be found in pools just north of where the trail meets the bed of Red Canyon. The water comes from ephemeral springs further up creek. Water from the Colorado River may have to settle for hours before you are able to treat or filter it.

Campsites

The best option for camping along the New Hance Trail is at the river on the east side of Red Canyon in a mesquite patch. Camping on the dunes is not a good idea as the dune vegetation is fragile. Please minimize the time you spend on the dunes and do your best to stay on the trail even though it is hard to follow across the top of the dunes. Few other campsites appear along the trail. The best of these sites are at the base and top of the Redwall Limestone. These are dry camps. The rest of the terrain is extremely steep and offers little to no camping opportunities. All camping areas along the New Hance Trail are in the Red Canyon Use Area (BD9).

Trailhead Access

The New Hance Trail begins approximately 16 miles east of the junction of Desert View Drive and the South Entrance Road. Park at Moran Point and walk west, or park at the first pullout past the Buggeln picnic area and walk east, to the "No Parking" sign. From here, walk the path to the rim.

Trail Description

This steep trail involves multiple scrambles and short climbs down as it traverses a series of ledges from the rim to the base of the Coconino. At a grassy saddle, the character of the trail suddenly changes as it plunges into a dry wash through the Supai. Route finding skills are required through the Supai section: a braided network of trails wander in and out of the wash. Any of these trails will take hikers to the top of the Redwall Limestone (Red Canyon Overlook), where it leaves the creek bed and starts a difficult traverse to the east, about one mile in length, through the lower part of the Supai layer. The trail has been obliterated by rockslides in shallow ravines through which the trail meanders during this traverse. A knob at the top of the Redwall Limestone marks the top of the descent.

Once through the Redwall, the trail runs down the nose of a rounded ridgeline that parallels the creek bed far below. Though the terrain appears gentle from above, don't be deceived: the trail angles down sharply with very few switchbacks until the crumbly rock layers allow access into the bottom of Red Canyon. It is very easy in this stretch to lose footing by slipping on the loose rocks.

From the intersection with the creek bed to the Colorado River the dry creek bottom is the trail, with minor spur trails bypassing short pour-offs in a few places (all bypasses are on the east side of the creek). The creek bed terrain is a mix of gravel and boulders. A few yards before reaching the river, the Tonto Trail heading west intersects the New Hance Trail at the base of a large sand dune. The Escalante Route begins at the east side of the camping area. Both intersections are unmarked and can be difficult to find.

Important Notes

The New Hance Trail lies within a primitive use area and is thus recommended only for highly experienced canyon hikers. It is not maintained and may be the most difficult established trail on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. Start early whether hiking up or down on this trail, as it is very steep and involves scrambling and route finding. Minimize the time you spend on the dunes and help protect this environment by camping on the east side of Red Canyon. When at the beach urinate directly into the river to prevent the build-up of nitrate smells. Feces must be buried in soil, not in sand, to prevent contamination of beaches and water sources. All toilet paper must be packed out.

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