

Night Hiking Adventure In Horseshoe Canyon - Canyonlands National Park

By Mandy Wong

Sept 20, 2008

This article is dedicated to the people who missed this wonderful hike (Ah Chen, Derrick, Stella, Chi, Sunny, Koti) and our amazing driver Gordon, who drove us there and then waited there for our support. Also, thanks to George for leading us and getting us there right on time before dark so that we could enjoy this amazing “Great Gallery”. And then, too, a thank-you to all my teammates for all their support: Nancy, HY Lee, Ah Shuo, Marji, Cindy, Paul, Cherry and Ben Lee.



Goblin Valley State Park

The day we went to Horseshoe Canyon we settled one night in the Goblin Valley State Park campground. Goblin Valley State Park is located at a very remote area that lies at the edge of the vast San Rafael Desert, 12 miles from the small village of Hanksville but far from any town of significance. This camp site contains thousands of orange–brown mushroom-shaped pinnacles, the result of millions of years of the combined effects of wind and rain. I found this park really fascinating; we were totally in a desert without any living plants. Finally we settled down and set up our tents. However, we encountered a lot of difficulties because of the heavy wind, and I really experienced what a desert climate is like. My face was so dry and my hair was such a mess without my showering for 3 days. I really became either a tomboy or a cowboy. Usually I do not like to set up the outer shield for my tent because the chance of raining in the desert is very rare, and besides, I like to look up at the sky from the roof of my tent. However, it was necessary to set it up in this camp ground because the strong wind kept blowing a lot of sand inside my tent. When I came back from Horseshoe Canyon, Derrick told me my outer shield had been blown away and he helped me reset it. Thanks, Derrick, for taking care of everybody in the campground while we were having this great adventure, and thanks, too, to my tent mate Cherry, who spent hours sweeping the sandy tent after returning from the Horseshoe Canyon night hike. Some folks just cannot tolerate the messy sand inside their tent and they’d rather sleep in the car. The really good news was that I had my first nice shower after my 3-days trip, so Tomboy became Mandy Girl.

Hans Flat Ranger Station

We had a quick lunch and weren't in a mood to stay here longer because of the harsh wind and high temperature. However, in this camp ground hot showers are available, a real plus since this was the first time we were able to shower after a day staying overnight in the parking lot and our 2-days camping trip in Arches National Park. Showering is really a luxury in most of the Utah national parks. I understand that they want to preserve the environment and its natural beauty, and soap and chemicals can pollute the land. We eagerly started driving to the Hans Flat ranger station to register and get our permit to go to Maze for backpacking for our next 2-days visit. Everybody was so excited visiting this remote ranger station because we wanted to ask many questions about our backpacking trip, considering that for most of us it was to be our very first backpacking experience. Miss Ranger very patiently explained to us all the rules and regulations and the important things that you need to pay extra attention to. I was not an attentive student, and wandered around the gift shop, where I bought a souvenir patch with "Great Gallery" that one of the spiritual figure was being embroidered on it. George explained that we would visit an amazing display of natural art inside the Horseshoe Canyon. Named the Great Gallery, it is like having a Metropolitan Museum of Art made by nature. He also told me that this is one of the biggest and well preserved examples of natural artwork among all the national parks. Ah Shuo mentioned to me that this is the one he always wanted to see. He had traveled a few times to Canyonlands National Park but had missed this outstanding sight.



Dirt-Road Driving

After we had spent some time in the ranger station, George decided that we should head to Horseshoe Canyon. It was already around 4:30pm. Two drivers chose to go, but Derrick's team decided to head back to the windy Global Valley campground. Driving to Horseshoe Canyon is not an easy job; it is located in a remote section of Canyonlands National Park. A four-wheel-drive road leads to the east rim of Horseshoe Canyon from the Hans Flat Ranger Station. George emphasized that it would be a good experience for the drivers to practice on that dirt road because we would have a difficult drive to the Maze area for our upcoming two-day trip there. The way to the Horseshoe Canyon trailhead is all dirt roads; also, it has open ranges on the way with different colored cows wandering about. Sometimes they stay in the middle of the road, and so we had to be very careful passing them. They had beautiful eye lashes and were so peaceful as they gazed kindly at us. We had a good time just looking at them.



Decision Making

During the ride to Horseshoe Canyon our group had some hesitation as to whether we should go or not. Only a 6.5 miles round trip, it was considered an easy hike for most of the CMC hikers, but we were concerned about hiking at night because most of the group had never hiked in the dark. Finally, however, our good team spirit prevailing, we decided to go. Luckily we were all well prepared and had proper head lights. Also, we had made up our minds to go because this canyon is so remote, not being contiguous with the rest of Canyonlands National Park, that if we had to come back again we would have wasted one day and delayed the rest of our itinerary. Once my mind was set for the challenge, I happily looked forward to arriving at the trailhead, ready for my first nighttime hiking experience. Like the rest of the group, I wondered what wonderful things there would be to see. The information that George and Ah Shuo gave me made the canyon sound so very attractive that like a magnet it drew me to it. Besides, I felt very safe and confident going with a group of responsible and knowledgeable hikers like George, Nancy and Marji.

The Great Gallery

When we arrived at the trailhead, it was already 5:30pm, but actually it was a great time to start any hike in the desert because soon the sun would set and the temperature would drop a lot. From the west-rim trailhead, the hike to the Great Gallery is a round trip of 6.5 miles, with a steep descent of 750 feet. Hiking down would be fast for us and it was not difficult with daylight. On the way down into the valley, we met a few hikers that were heading back up and chatted with them. They told us that the ancient paintings we would be seeing were really worth the long drive and the effort. The trail is fairly well marked with rock cairns that made the hike along the base of the canyon pretty easy and comfortable so that we were able to concentrate on pictograph hunting without worrying about our footing. Along the way we also saw this well preserved dinosaur footprint that is encircled in rocks. We took a group picture and started heading down the canyon. However, in rushing to get to the real prize, The Great Gallery, we also missed many of the pictographs on the way. At the end of the trail after a hike of 3.25 miles, all of a sudden we saw on the huge wall at the right of the canyon a large panel of well-preserved, life-sized figures along with numerous smaller figures with intricate designs. The whole area is roped off to discourage further destruction and graffiti from visitors. It is very important to respect and preserve these pictographs; visitors are not supposed to touch any of them because oils from the hand can damage the fragile images. The area is 200 feet long and 15 feet high, and contains dozens of intriguing red, brown and white pictographs. The paintings are at least 2,000 years old, thus dating as far back as the Anasazi and Fremont cultures. Those figures loomed over me and they seemed to embody some supernatural or religious purpose. I felt like an archaeologist exploring this remote site and going back to ancient times in order to experience their culture and art. It was so fortunate there were no other people there when we arrived; we were thus able to photograph all the figures, and I could enjoy their presence in relative silence. I sat down to one side, admiring these amazing pieces until the dark came. The group then rested and ate some snacks. We were very lucky to have made it before dark in order to enjoy those great expressions of ancient art. Edward Abbey captured the spirit of Horseshoe Canyon in his work, *Desert Solitaire*. "These are sinister and supernatural figures, gods from the underworld perhaps who hover in space, or dance, or stand solidly planted on two feet carrying weapons - a club or sword. Most are faceless but some stare back at you with large, hollow disquieting eyes. Demonic shapes, they might have meant protection and benevolence to their creators and a threat to strangers: beware, traveler, you are approaching the land of the horned gods...."



Examples of the Pictographs and Petroglyphs: The Great Gallery



“From the picture we can see some of the figures are mere silhouettes while others have more extensive detail. There are figures hunting, what appear to be standing figures with horns, such as a shaman might wear, and even one penguin-shaped creature. Both Petroglyphs * as well as pictographs* are found here. There are also lines of animals as if on migration, and a variety of other symbols. Most of the pictographs found in the canyon were thought to have been painted between 2000 BC to 500 AD by groups of hunter-gatherers who pre-dated the Anasazi and Fremont.”

Example of the Petroglyphs – The Newspaper Rock



***Pictographs & Petroglyph:** Pictographs were created by painting onto rocks using pigments made from powdered minerals, and are less common (partly as they are more susceptible to damage by erosion) than petroglyphs, which are produced by chipping away the weather-darkened surface of the rock to reveal lighter stone underneath. In the Canyonlands area, the best petroglyph panel is at Newspaper Rock along UT 211. The largest designs at Horseshoe Canyon date from the Late Archaic period of 2,000 BC to 500 AD, with later additions by the Fremont and Ancestral Pueblo cultures.”

The Oasis

Besides the wonderful Great Gallery, on the canyon bottom we also saw wildflowers, sheer sandstone walls and mature cottonwood groves along the occasional streams. It was totally different from my image and perception of a desert. Here there is an oasis, with greenery and flowers everywhere. A few places are permanently moist because of small seeps, where shallow water flows a short distance and allows willow and larger cottonwood trees to flourish. All of the canyon is wide enough to support a variety of bushes and desert plants growing on high sandbanks on either side of the drainage channel. That's why the early red Americans came hunting and gathering and left amazing art work here.



The canyon bottom – full of cottonwood groves



Some of the deserts' wildflowers

Hiking In The Dark

Because you have to hike into the canyon downhill at the beginning, the hike out is uphill and strenuous, and in addition we had to hike in the dark. We all had our head lights ready and supported each other on the way out. In the middle of the canyon valley we all decided to take a rest. Marji suggested that we should all turn off all our lights and look up at the sky in total darkness so that we could see the sparkling stars without distraction. We gazed up at the sky from the valley, and I understood then why it is named Horseshoe Canyon, because when you look from the bottom of the canyon, the shape of the sky you can see is exactly like that of a horseshoe. My imagination makes me think that Horseshoe Canyon might also be so named because the horseshoe is a charm that brings good luck.



Teamwork

My teammates were so supportive all the way, and I got to know them better because of this long trip. I knew they would look out for me if I got lost and would wait for me if I could not walk fast. They inspired me and taught me so much on the trails that I am able to apply in my everyday life. Indeed, life is an amazing journey with unlimited possibilities for exploration and enormous things to learn. We all fall, learn to stand up and face our problems, and not make the same mistakes again. My fellow hikers pointed out my mistakes and advised me how to improve myself in order to be a better, stronger, more responsible hiker. They taught me how to deal with emergencies without panic. In addition, I learned how to be a more generous person with a bigger, warmer heart and not to sweat over minor things. Thus I was very happy and grateful to be with my fellow hikers participating in our night hike and all our backpacking experiences. (A special thanks to George who got us an extra permit so we could experience the Salt Creek Canyon backpacking trip.) With all the support and confidence of my teammates, I was able to hike at a very relax pace with a grateful heart and cheerful smile. I really did appreciate being part of this wonderful group as well as experiencing the peaceful silence of the valley. In fact, everybody thoroughly enjoyed the peaceful sky and stars. I love camping and hiking in the dark, when I can enjoy the sky filled with galaxies without boundary. Human beings and the earth are so tiny when you compare them to the sky with all its stars. The stars that we see are just images from thousands of years ago, which may fade and disappear during the day, but still they are hanging out there with the moon decorating the sky. Hiking is wonderful when, in a beautiful night, you are with good people and a responsible leader, unafraid of getting lost and knowing you will all be united in finding a way out.

We returned to the rim at 9:30 pm. Cindy was happily reunited with her lovely husband, Gordon, who drove us there and waited there for our support. When we came back to the Goblin Valley State Park campground, it was already midnight.



To my fellow campers and hikers, thank you for your team effort. You made this a journey I'll never forget!