



Nankoweap Trail

During his famous early explorations in the region, John Wesley Powell became fascinated with the area's complex geology. His continuing interest ultimately prompted him, in the 1880s, to send a geologist and trail crew to improve an old Native American route to the river. Subsequently, the trail became the northern terminus of the "Horse Thief" route. It's difficult to envision a horse traveling this trail now but, according to legend, outlaws would steal horses in Utah and drive them to the bottom of Grand Canyon, then across the river and out the Tanner Trail to ultimately sell them in southern Arizona.

This is a mostly waterless trail, with significant exposure in places. This trail is not recommended for people with a fear of heights. The majority of hikers take two days to complete the journey, spending the night on the way down at either Marion Point or Tilted Mesa; to do so requires carrying plenty of extra water. Hikers up to the challenge are rewarded with magnificent views, excellent chances for solitude, and fascinating human history.

Locations/Elevations

West Access via Kaibab Plateau

Highway 67/FR 610/Trail #57 (8800 ft / 2707 m) to Nankoweap trailhead (7640 ft / 2351 m): 3 mi (4.8 km)

North Access

Highway 89A/FR 445/Trail #57 (6800 ft / 2092 m) to Nankoweap trailhead: 3.5 mi (5.6 km)

Nankoweap trailhead (7640 ft / 2351 m) to Colorado River (2760 ft / 849 m): 11 mi (17.6 km)

Mileages

Maps

7.5 Minute Nankoweap Quad (USGS)

Trails Illustrated Map, Grand Canyon National Park (National Geographic)

Water Sources

A very small seasonal seep is located just above the trail approximately 150 yards past where the trail passes Marion Point. Permanent water sources include Nankoweap Creek and the Colorado River. **It is advisable to cache one half to one gallon of water per person along the trail for the hike out.** Be sure to label all caches with names and dates and place in a location that is not visible from the trail. Remove all caches when you leave the canyon.

Campsites

Camping is available in the Kaibab National Forest near the National Park Service trailhead, at Nankoweap Creek (AE9), and at the Colorado River. There are 4-5 small sites located along the trail in the Supai rock layer between Marion Point and Tilted Mesa. For more river privacy, camp near the delta in the smaller beach areas and you won't be invaded by raft trips.

Trailhead Access

The Nankoweap Trail can be accessed from the west via Forest Road (FR) 610 (4.6 mi / 7.4 km north of the North Rim entrance station) or from the north through House Rock Valley via FR 445 (south of Lees Ferry along Highway 89A). FR 445 is a lower elevation access and more reliable year-round. Note that both trailheads are called Saddle Mountain AND that both USDA Forest Service trails are numbered 57.

Trail Description

FOREST SERVICE TRAILHEADS TO NPS BOUNDARY

Both Forest Service trails #57 merge at the canyon rim, National Park Service boundary (trail 57 actually connects the two trailheads). The trail from FR 610 is straight forward. Long pants are advised because of dense, thorny brush. The trail from FR 445 leaves the parking lot and follows an old road south (uphill). It soon becomes a proper trail and descends into a deep ravine. At a fork in the trail at the ravine bottom, bear right to follow the creek. The trail crosses the creek several times over the course of about a half mile, then exits the creek bed to the south and travels continuously upward through forest toward the saddle.

NPS BOUNDARY TO MARION POINT

As you enter the canyon you enter the Supai Formation. The trail turns south and descends quickly through the uppermost Supai cliffs (Esplanade Sandstone). At the bottom of the switchbacks you begin a lengthy traverse, remaining immediately below the Esplanade for the next five miles or so. On a map it appears to be fairly level, but in reality the trail continuously ascends and descends and there is much exposure. The trail is often only one footprint wide, loose and gravelly, with a 10-150+ feet of drop off.

This trail is not recommended for people with a fear of heights. One place that may be confusing is where the trail passes Marion Point. Here it makes an immediate turn to the north continuing the traverse and does **NOT** continue out to Marion Point. Just beyond where the trail passes Marion Point, near the head of a canyon, it passes just below a very small seasonal seep under a ledge.

MARION POINT TO TILTED MESA

The traverse continues in a rising and falling pattern until it approaches the ridge leading down to Tilted Mesa. There it begins a gradual descent through the remainder of the Supai and becomes more steep on the ridge. Two short cliffs are descended with the aid of a couple of trees. Excellent campsites are located at the top of each of these cliffs. The trail soon reaches the top of the Redwall limestone on the isthmus between Nankoweap and Little Nankoweap Canyons. The trail continues on or near the ridge until dropping off to the southwest and beginning the descent through the Redwall.

TILTED MESA TO NANKOWEAP CREEK

The trail in the upper Redwall is clear and relatively well constructed. Where it is gravelly, the rocks are angular and large enough to be stable. Things deteriorate when the trail makes a couple of loose traverses, then a couple more, then descends straight down a loose ridge of yellow shale. A walking stick is helpful. At the base of this distinctive yellow shale slope, the trail then turns back to the northwest and onto a plunging ridge of semi-stable, conglomerate boulder debris. Though more stable than the shale, the trail down this ridge is **VERY** steep. When it approaches a large colorful knob the trail turns back to the southeast onto another narrow and loose traverse through the Bright Angel shale. This lasts about 1/3 to 1/2 mile.

After traversing the lower reaches of Tilted Mesa, the trail continues a mild descent down the top of a wide, round, stable ridge. It goes through the Tapeats Sandstone via a few switchbacks and some multiple trailing. Then it drops into a small saddle and off to the southwest down a ravine separating the gray Nankoweap Formation and Black Cardenas Lavas. This ravine empties onto a large alluvial terrace above Nankoweap Creek. The trail stays on the terrace until dropping down to the creek.

NANKOWEAP CREEK TO COLORADO RIVER

There are large springs above and below the point where the trail meets the creek. Those upstream provide tastier drinking water (this must be treated of course) than those below. There is an excellent campsite here but watch out for flash floods. From the campsites at the trail's first junction with the creek, the remainder of the trail follows Nankoweap Creek to the river. Once you reach the river, please stay on the established trails to decrease the erosion and confusion (beach trails are outlined by rocks).

Important Notes

This trail is classified as MOST difficult of the named trails in Grand Canyon. It has the largest total rim-to-river drop (5640 ft / 1735 m) and is one of the longest trails. Hikers must be experienced in canyon route finding; this trail is not recommended for inexperienced or solo hikers. The Nankoweap Trail is not enjoyable as a summer hike as there is no water and little shade until Nankoweap Creek. The hike will require a minimum of 4 to 6 liters of water per person, per day.