

29 Upper Salt Creek

This two-day backpack in Canyonlands National Park leads to a large cliff dwelling, one of the most unique pictographs in the Southwest, many other archaeological sites, natural arches, and more.

Start: Cathedral Butte Trailhead along Beef Basin Road

Distance: 16 miles out-and-back

Approximate hiking time: 9 hours

Difficulty: Strenuous

Ground surface: Dirt

Seasons: Best in fall and spring

Other trail users: Hikers only

Canine compatibility: Dogs not permitted inside park boundary

Land status: National Park

Nearest town: Monticello

Fees and permits: Entry fee and backcountry permit

Schedule: Year-round

Maps: USGS maps: Cathedral Butte, South Six-Shooter Peak, Druid Arch, House Park Butte, UT

Trail contacts: Canyonlands National Park, 2282 SW Resource Blvd., Moab, UT 84532, (435) 719-2313, www.nps.gov

Finding the trailhead: From Monticello: From Center Street (U.S. Highway 491), drive north on Main Street (U.S. Highway 191) for 14.6 miles. Turn left (west) on Utah 211 and continue 12.4 miles. Turn left (west) on unpaved Beef Basin Road (depending which map you use, this is either San Juan County 104 or 107). Beef Basin Road is graded but has an early creek crossing that often requires high clearance. Follow Beef Basin Road for 17.4 miles to the southwest side of Cathedral Butte and the trailhead, which will be on the right (GPS: N 37 57.005 / W 109 42.396).

The Ruin and Pictograph

The Salt Creek area was occupied by the Mesa Verde branch of the Ancestral Pueblo people primarily between A.D. 1075 and 1150. The large drainage is the only place in present-day Canyonlands National Park with both arable land and perennial water. These benefits, combined with canyon walls that offer protection from the elements and have numerous alcoves suitable for holding cliff dwellings, resulted in a heavier prehistoric occupation of Salt Creek than surrounding areas.

Today, all you have to do to find cliff dwellings and rock art along upper Salt Creek is keep your eyes open. The more you look around, the more you'll find. Two particularly interesting sites are the Big Ruin cliff dwelling and the All American Man pictograph.

With twenty-four original structures, most of which appear basically intact, Big Ruin lives up to its name. The dwelling sits high on a rock ledge and is completely inaccessible to hikers, but you can see it well from the base of the cliff. The occupants used ropes and ladders to reach their lofty home.

Archaeologists have found the remains of corn and squash inside Big Ruin, revealing that Native Americans made good use of the nearby soil and water. Other artifacts included large woven baskets, turkey feather cordage, and cotton cordage. Today, decorated potsherds, arrowheads, and metates and manos can still be seen directly beneath the ruin.

Downstream from Big Ruin is one of the most unusual pictographs in the Southwest. Located in a small alcove, the 4-foot-tall image of a “human” stands out not for its size but for its color. The Ancestral Pueblo people created the image using red, white, and blue paint. The patriotic appearance of the artwork led to its name, the All American Man.

The pictograph is so striking that many hikers doubt its authenticity (the register near the site is full of skeptical comments). Archaeologists have also had their doubts, pointing out that while these Native Americans had a relatively easy time making red and white paint, they are not known to have used blue paint anywhere else and would have had great difficulty producing it. So researchers took a small sample of the blue material and ran radiocarbon tests on it, which confirmed that the pictograph is indeed of prehistoric origin. Scientists also looked at the blue “paint” under an electron microscope. They discovered that the “blue” is not blue at all but a gray color made with charcoal. When drawn over the natural orange color of the rock inside the enclave, the two hues mix to create blue. Furthermore, since modern Americans are accustomed to seeing red, white, and blue—and not red, white, and gray—their brains have a tendency to perceive the color combination with which they are more familiar.

In the center of the All American Man is a large circle that most hikers probably interpret as the person’s body. The circle is thought to actually be a shield. Shielded figures were common at Ancestral Pueblo sites and also on the Great Plains during the mid 1200s to early 1300s. This period is believed to have been marked by increased competition for resources, and pictures of shields may have been the Native Americans’ way of marking their territory and warning intruders.

The Hike

Some people make this hike in one day, but there’s so much to explore that you really ought to make it a two-day trip. In addition to the Big Ruin and All American Man, you can find smaller cliff dwellings, many other pictographs including handprints, interesting rock formations, and more.

Wherever you venture on this trip, keep in mind that federal law prohibits entering archeological sites inside Canyonlands National Park. Visitors must stay outside and back from all structural walls at least a yard to look and take photos.

Backpackers must have permits and stay in designated campsites. The SC3 campsite is at the end of this hike, near the All American Man. SC1 and SC2 are halfway into the hike but still great locations, as you could easily set up camp there then continue with a lighter load to the ruin and rock art. Permits are available to walk-ins at the visitor center at the west end of Utah 211, but they’re limited so there’s no guarantee you’ll get one when you arrive. It’s a good idea to make a reservation, which you must do at least two weeks in advance. Contact the Park Service for details.

The hike begins on BLM land, high on the canyon rim, near Cathedral Butte, on the Salt Creek Trail (some old maps label this section as the Bright Angel Trail). From there, the Salt Creek Trail rapidly winds down into the canyon, dropping 1,000 feet in the first 2 miles. During this steep descent you cross into Canyonlands National Park.

Once you reach Salt Creek at the bottom of the canyon, the hike becomes easy as you turn onto the Salt Creek Trail and follow it downstream with no significant elevation change. Everything from sagebrush, milkweed and datura to juniper, willow and cottonwood grows along the creek. You may also see a variety of berries, especially in black bear droppings along the trail.

At 3.3 miles you encounter some “wetlands.” This marshy area thick with reeds, grass, etc., is the only place where the trail becomes visually difficult to follow. Keep two things in mind: 1) As soon as you reach the wetlands, the trail crosses from the west to east side of Salt Creek; 2)

Tall brown plastic delineator posts appear periodically as trail markers. Although a bit tricky, this section is short and if you follow the posts you'll get through it in no time.

After the wetlands you pass historic Kirk Cabin. Natural arches exist all along this hike but seem to become more prevalent after passing the cabin. Most of the sandstone wonders are high on the canyon rims. Slot canyons, if you can call them that, also penetrate the sandstone. They tend to be very small but some have interesting beams of sunlight shining into them.

Eventually Big Ruin comes into view on the west side of the canyon, on the opposite side of the creek from the Salt Creek Trail, 0.3 miles off the trail. If you venture to the ruin, take care not to step on the cryptobiotic soil. The black crust is alive with cyanobacteria and other organisms and is a fragile part of the ecosystem. In fact, avoid stepping on cryptobiotic soil any time you leave the trail.

Finally you reach the All American Man, about 15 feet above the trail in a small enclave. Entering the enclave is prohibited but you can easily see the pictograph from the trail, which passes right underneath it.

Photographers will want a telephoto lens for the Big Ruin and perpetually shaded All American Man since both are well above ground.

Miles and Directions

- 0.0** From the southwest side of Cathedral Butte, hike generally northwest down the canyon trail.
- 2.0** Reach Salt Creek at the bottom of the canyon. Turn right onto the Salt Creek Trail and follow it downstream. The creek flows more or less north for the rest of this hike.
- 3.3** Reach the wetlands. Follow the posts from the west to east side of Salt Creek.
- 4.1** Reach Kirk Cabin and just beyond that, a side trail on the right (east) leading to camp sites 1 and 2 (marked with short posts as SC1 and SC2). Continue down the Salt Creek Trail.
- 5.4** Look left to see the Big Ruin, on the west canyon wall, about 0.3 miles from the trail (GPS on the trail: N 30 00.114 / W 109 44.460). Continue down the trail.
- 8.0** Reach the All American Man (GPS: N 38 02.118 / W 109 44.965) and near that, camping site 3 (SC3). Turn around and return the way you came.
- 16.0** Arrive back at the trailhead.