



Royal Arch Loop

This challenging five day loop is considered by many to be the most difficult of the established south side hikes, appropriate for experienced canyon hikers with basic canyoneering skills (ACA rating: 3A VI). The rappel near the river and the lack of reliable water along the Tonto Trail make this hike significantly more hazardous than other canyon trails. The Royal Arch Loop which begins and ends at the South Bass trailhead offers a top drawer canyon adventure, replete with more natural beauty than humans can absorb. For those yet to acquire off trail navigational skills and the ability to rig a rappel anchor, this hike offers about a million ways to get into serious trouble in a remote part of the Grand Canyon.

Vital Statistics

Location/Elevation

South Bass trailhead (6650 ft / 2027 m)
Esplanade Trail Junction (5400 ft / 1646 m):
Royal Arch (3200 ft / 975 m):
Toltec Beach (2100 ft / 640 m):
Copper Creek (3150 ft / 960 m):
Bass Canyon (3200 ft / 975 m):
South Bass trailhead (6650 ft / 2027 m):

Mileages (approximate)

0
1.4 mi (2.2 km)
12.6 mi (20.2 km)
3 mi (5 km)
9 mi (14.4 km)
3.3 mi (5.3 km)
4.3 mi (6.9 km)

Maps

7.5 Minute Explorers Monument and Havasupai Point Quads (USGS)
Trails Illustrated Map, Grand Canyon #262 (National Geographic)

We Need Your Help

Don't Bust The Crust. Please keep off the living soil crust. Walk on durable surfaces such as trails, flat eroded areas, dry washes, and stone. Water caches are acceptable but they must be removed from the canyon, PACK IT IN, PACK IT OUT. Cache must not be visible from the trail and include a 'use or remove' date. Remove all rope that you bring into the canyon. If you must leave webbing then remove an old piece and carry it out.

Water Sources

Perennial water sources include Royal Arch Canyon (Redwall gorge) and at the Colorado River. Seasonal water (during cooler weather or just after rains) is sometimes available from Seep Spring (between Chemehuevi and Toltec Points), from temporary pools in drainages and on the Esplanade points, in the bed of Royal Arch Canyon, in Copper Canyon, and from potholes in Bass Canyon (below the Tonto Trail crossing). Garnet Canyon is extremely mineralized and is considered undrinkable.

Campsite Planning

Garnet "at large" Use Area (BR9) includes the Esplanade (west of South Bass), Royal Arch Canyon, Toltec Beach, and the Tonto Trail. South Bass "at-large" use area (BQ9) includes the entire South Bass trail, nearby expanses of the Esplanade, and the small beach at the foot of Bass Canyon known as the "Ross Wheeler" beach. Elves Chasm is closed to overnight camping.

Trailhead Access

South Bass Trailhead is accessed via 25 miles of unimproved roads. Precipitation is most likely December through March; also July and August which can make roads impassable. For more details on the South Bass Trail and driving directions to the trailhead, please see the "South Bass Trail" description.

Trail Description

This hike is completed in a clockwise direction in order to avoid a 20 ft free climb. Descend the South Bass Trail 1.5 miles to a cairned intersection then walk west on the Esplanade (top member of the Supai Formation), passing Chemehuevi, Toltec, and Montezuma Points. South of Montezuma Point the route starts down the long, eastern arm of upper Royal Arch Canyon. Before the eastern arm joins the main stem of the drainage, walkers are presented with a 200 ft pour-off. This obstacle can be circumvented on either side, but it's much safer on the right (north side). Leave the bed of the canyon, follow a worn path (usually cairned) first slightly ascending and then level under an overhang. Work down over some easy to negotiate ledges to the talus slope below and back to the bed of the east arm.

The main arm of Royal Arch Canyon is just ahead, continue down canyon. In wet years, pools of water might impede progress in the Redwall gorge. Scrambling required, lowering of packs optional but helpful, as you negotiate car size boulders piled one on another. Spring water will eventually emerge prior to reaching the arch. In wet years prepare to swim or negotiate pool-side ledges. Hikers descending the drainage to see the natural bridge should note the large cairns that mark where the route climbs east and out of the drainage. Royal Arch itself is spectacular, Grand Canyon's largest natural bridge (technically it is a bridge because it is water-carved). A huge cliff below Royal Arch presents tantalizing views but cuts off any possibility of additional progress downcanyon. Retrace your steps upcanyon about ½ mile to the cairns marking the path up and out of Royal Arch Canyon. An hour long walk on a short section of Tonto-like trail ends at the top of the infamous 20 ft rappel. Rig an anchor worth betting your life on and rappel. Beware of old webbing or rope of unknown origin. The rest of the way to the shoreline is steep and sandy, but straightforward, coming to the river at the mouth of the Toltec Point drainage.

It would be a pity to come this far and not detour downriver to spend an hour at the splendid Elves Chasm. An easily missed path, not visible at river level, leads 1.5 rough, rocky miles downriver to Royal Arch Canyon. Elves Chasm is just a few minutes up the Royal Arch Canyon. Further exploration above Elves requires some degree of climbing skill. Prior to leaving the bed of the canyon consider the remoteness of your location. Return to camp the way you came.

The next phase of the hike will be away from the river on the Tonto Bench. It is possible to walk upstream along the shoreline but eventually this route is pinched out and hikers are forced up. The most efficient trail starts about 100 yards upslope from rivers edge. The trail eventually starts a gradual climb and works back into Garnet, crossing the salty creek and continuing west. A short ascent through the Tapeats leads to the Tonto Bench and its namesake, the Tonto Trail.

The Tonto Trail is pleasant walking with absolutely stunning views into the Shinumo Amphitheater. Camps are limited and water scarce. The Tonto Trail intersects the South Bass Trail in the bed of Bass Canyon. It is about 1 hour to the river or if you are climbing out it is about 4 hours.

Important Notes

Plan on carrying a minimum of a 40 foot rappel rope, 20 feet of webbing for the anchor, additional webbing to tie a harness, a locking carabineer, and, if so desired, your choice of an ascender.

At the South Bass trailhead, one has the rare opportunity to car camp within view of the canyon. SE3 is next to the trailhead parking lot and can hold large and small groups. SE1 and SE2 about a mile east of the trailhead hold one small group each. SE1 is near the rim. SE2 is on the rim (ranger favorite)! No fires please.

Request the "Technical Canyoneering" handout for more information on Grand Canyon's climbing policy.

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