

16 Wire Pass Slot Canyon

General Description: An easy hike with some rock scrambling into a magnificent slot, often very narrow and deep, canyon.

Trailhead Access (Roads) and Vehicle Recommendation: Most of the drive is on paved highways. The last eight miles is a good dirt road which standard sedans can navigate. However, to be safe and ensure getting to the trailhead, I strongly suggest a high clearance and a 4-wheel drive vehicle.

Average Hiking Time: Four hours at a leisurely pace.

Distance: About 3.4 miles round trip.

Fee and Permits: While no permits are necessary for day hiking, there is a \$6 fee per person and per dog paid at the trailhead. Wire Pass Canyon is located in the Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness, part of the Vermilion Cliffs National Monument. The wilderness and national monument are managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Elevations: The trailhead elevation is 4,810 feet with less than 200 feet elevation change from the lowest to highest points on the trail.

Best Season: September through May.

Trail Rating (Difficulty): Easy with some rock scrambling. If it has rained recently, you will encounter some stinky, sticky mud pits

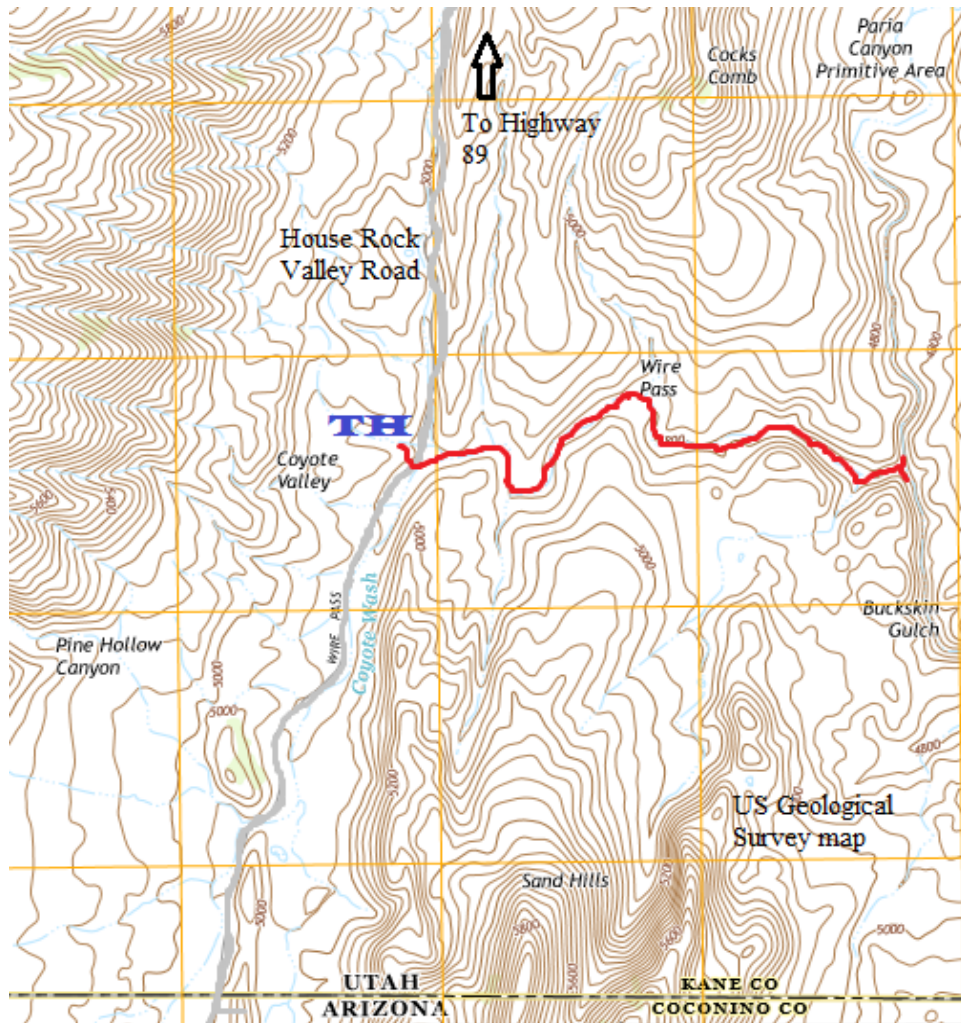
Type of Hike: Out and back.

USGS Topographic Map(s): Pine Hollow Canyon, Utah-Arizona Quadrangle: 7.5 minute series, 2014.

Finding the Trailhead: From St. George pass through Hurricane on Highway 9 and then on to Fredonia, Arizona via Highway 59 (Highway 389 in Arizona). In Fredonia turn left (north) onto Alternate Highway 89 and a few miles later entered Kanab—means “place of willows” in Paiute. This leg of the trip is approximately 78 miles depending upon your starting point in St. George. (You can get to Kanab through Zion National Park via Highway 9 east and then Highway 89 south. While it is a bit shorter, the drive takes longer due to Park traffic and you must pay the \$35 Park entrance fee per vehicle.)

In Kanab, at the intersection of Alternate Highway 89 and Highway 89, set your trip odometer to zero, turn right and continue east on Highway 89. At 38.2 miles from the intersection (or .2 miles past milepost 26) turn right (south) onto a signed dirt road, House Rock Valley Road (aka BLM Road 1065). This is a good dirt road and passable for regular sedans barring severe runoff damage. However, to be safe and ensure getting to the trailhead, I strongly suggest a high clearance and a 4-wheel drive vehicle. The road ascends for 2.5 miles and then descends to cross Buckskin Gulch Wash after 4.4 miles. Stay on the main road (do not take the signed turnoff to Buckskin Gulch Trailhead) and reach the spacious signed Wire Pass Trailhead and parking area on the west (right) side of the road 8.4 miles from the Highway 89 turnoff.

Wire Pass Slot Canyon Trail



Our lives are pretty much defined by boundaries. Some are physical such as the inability to lift an elephant due to limited strength. Or knowing that without Spiderman hands and feet we will never climb a 100 foot vertical cliff. Other boundaries are psychological. We shy away from new experiences because, well, they are new.

Don't let comfortable boundaries define you. At least occasionally push the limit and live on the edge. Bungee jump out of a hot air balloon. Engage in a random act of kindness. Push the limit of daily, routine life and explore a slot canyon.

My wife, Deb, and I tend to lead a boundary-challenging life. We moved to St. George, Utah in 2009 without knowing a soul in the city or having jobs. (And we were not spring chickens, both in our late 50s at the time.) Neither one of us are especially fond of heights (mild acrophobia), but several times a year find ourselves hiking trails with exposed ledges. Take a risk.

Exploring a slot canyon can be a boundary challenge. There is always the possibility an earthquake or rockslide will produce a rocky tomb with you as the tombee. Or the chance rainstorm, even many miles away, creating a flash flood that sweeps you to nirvana. Perhaps a rattlesnake is waiting around the next bend. Small risks for a huge payoff.

Our challenge is Wire Pass Canyon located in the 112,500 acre Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness, part of the Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, about 45 miles east of Kanab. Wire Pass is an easy 1.7 mile one-way hike, including a nearly 1/2 mile long narrow and deep slot section, giving access to the longest slot canyon in the country (some say the world), Buckskin Gulch.

The wilderness and national monument are managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Over millions of years erosion turned waterborne sediments and windblown sand into distinct rock formations dominated by red Navajo sandstone. Some of the best slot canyon hiking on the Colorado Plateau is found here.

Our outing began in mid-September. Our troop included me and Deb and our friends Jim and Julie Kuhn and their dog Kona. Leaving St. George we went through Hurricane on Highway 9 and then on to Fredonia, Arizona via Highway 59 (Highway 389 in Arizona). In Fredonia we turned left (north) onto Alternate Highway 89 and a few miles later entered Kanab—means “place of willows” in Paiute. This leg of the trip is approximately 78 miles depending upon your starting point in St. George. (You can get to Kanab through Zion National Park via Highway 9 east and then Highway 89 south. While it is a bit shorter, the drive takes longer due to Park traffic and you must pay the \$35 Park entrance fee per vehicle.)

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While no permits are necessary for day hiking, there is a \$6 fee per person and per dog paid at the trailhead. The trailhead elevation is 4,810 feet, the temperature was in the high 70s, and the sky a deep Utah blue as we embarked.

From the parking area we crossed the road and following the signs headed east. The first mile is mostly in a wide meandering streambed between low red cliffs and sandy slopes. The trail is mostly soft sand, not my favorite hiking surface. The drainage is home to colorful lizards and birds. As we walked along the cliffs gradually become higher and closer together, signs of a slot ahead. At about the one mile mark we saw a slit in the rock walls ahead—the narrows opening. From afar it does not look passable.



Deb in a narrow section of Wire Pass Canyon Trail

As we entered the first narrows (at 1.2 miles) our world vastly constricted—we were small humanoids in a convoluted stone labyrinth. The first section is enclosed with 100 foot tall sculpted and scooped orange-grey walls. We soon encountered an eight foot drop, studied it for a while, and made our way down. It helps to have four people assisting from above and, after the first one down (me), below. (If you cannot negotiate the drop, backtrack to the opening of the narrows and follow a prominent rock arrow up and over the south side of the first slot.) In spots, evidence of the power of past flash floods loomed above us, a tree trunk jammed between the two to three feet space between the walls.

All too soon we entered a relatively open boulder-strewn segment. I love these inter-slot sections with colorful red Navajo sandstone jutting into an impossible blue Utah sky.

The second, deeper narrows twisted and beckoned us forward. Parts of both slots narrow to less than three feet wide. Prominent features of the second narrows are three 10 to 15 feet long stinky, sticky mud pits. Knowing this was a possibility, we packed in water sandals to exchange for our hiking shoes.

The first was almost dry and we scampered across strategically placed rocks, the second not dry but also crossable across some rocks. For the third we eased in and waded across—it came up to my knees and I'm six feet, one inch tall. It was sort of cool to wear long mud socks (until putting your socks and shoes back on).



Alcove at the junction of Wire Pass Canyon Trail and Buckskin Gulch

At the end of the second narrows the gorge opens suddenly at the confluence with Buckskin Gulch. On the south wall is a huge, deep, bright orange alcove. The cliffs on the south (right) side of the convergence also have some faint big horn sheep petroglyphs.

If you want to explore Buckskin Gulch, I suggest heading downstream (south) toward a deep narrows. While not as tight as Wire Pass, the gulch is still narrow and stays that way for miles.

This is an easy hike with less than a 200 feet elevation change and some not too difficult rock scrambling. It took us about four hours for the approximately 3.4 mile round trip—we walked slow, took many photos, and had a leisurely lunch at the confluence. Along the way we encountered about 15 other hikers (it was Saturday), a mob scene since we most often have the trail to ourselves. (Deb and I prefer out-of-the-way hikes where we most often encounter no other people.)

Slot canyons are the average person's space visit—exploring spectacular and exotic environments. In my humble opinion, slot canyons are the most alluring type of terrain around. Exploring them challenges us to, at least for a short time, live on the edge in a bizarre world.

This story was first published online under the title “Wire Pass Slot Canyon: Beyond the Boundary” by the *Southwest Beta* website on June 5, 2017.

Resources

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