



Calf Creek Falls, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah.

Southwest Serenity

Overflowing with Zen-like beauty, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument offers solitude, sandstone-shrouded landscapes and wide-open vistas

Text & Photography By Larry Lindahl

Overshadowed by Bryce and Zion National Parks, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument sits in the last corner of the American Southwest to be mapped. Tucked away in southern Utah, it remains wild, rugged and challenging, in ways that most national parks or monuments forfeited decades ago.

Roads are often only dirt byways, rough and unforgiving. Signage is scarce. Trailheads are often unmarked. The cross-country route to a special scenic haven may only be indicated by “cairns,” a few rocks stacked atop one another. And you’d better like rock—this place has an overabundance.

The term “Grand Staircase” is inspired by a series of massive geologic layers, each photogenic in its own right, that stairstep southward from Bryce Canyon to Grand Canyon. Each stairstep reveals a unique color in the aptly named Pink, Grey, White, Vermillion and Chocolate cliffs.

The namesake of “Escalante” is

Spanish missionary Silvestre Vélez de Escalante, who traversed this territory in 1776. Escalante, Utah, situated at 5,812 feet elevation, is named for him, along with the canyon-entrenched Escalante River nearby. This gently flowing waterway meanders in hairpin curves through the enchanted Coyote Gulch. It continues on toward Lake Powell, what was once the free-flowing Colorado River.

For excursions into the heart of the national monument, the town of Escalante is the hub. Home to about 800 residents, it has a few outfitters, small hotels, restaurants and the Escalante Interagency Visitor Center, located on the west end of town.

Inside this modern headquarters building, the knowledgeable staff from the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Forest Service and Glen Canyon Conservancy offer a wealth of information. Ask about weather, road conditions, trip and hike planning, plus

see interpretive ecology exhibits and an introductory video. Call ahead for the latest conditions.

FINDING YOUR WAY

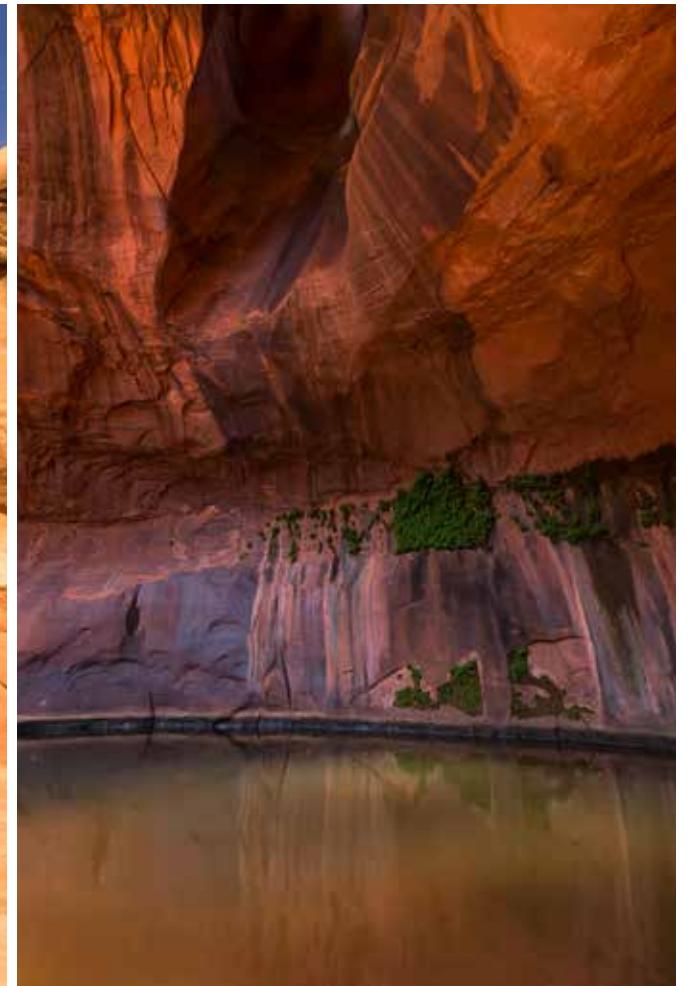
Not all locations here will be difficult to reach, but always be able to orient yourself. Bring a GPS device, mapping phone apps such as GAIA GPS, a portable phone charger, printed maps and a compass.

Route-finding skills and self-reliance are advantageous. Preparation is vital, not only for your safety but also for using your time wisely. Carry extra supplies in your vehicle such as a 3-gallon water jug, especially in summer, to survive the unexpected.

This is territory that can test you, stir your soul and give you stories for years to come. If you like solitude and sandstone-shrouded landscapes with wide-open vistas, then this is your place. It’s a quiet, primal, barren landscape overflowing with Zen-like beauty.



Zebra Slot Canyon, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah.



Left: Devil's Garden, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah.

Right: Neon Canyon, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah.

LOWER CALF CREEK FALLS

Those who are inspired to follow a sun-drenched, clear-running creek to reach a captivating riparian paradise will certainly find it worth hiking this roughly 6-mile roundtrip. The treasure at the end of the trail is an enchanting waterfall dropping 126 feet.

Partway down, the ribbon of free-falling water splashes onto a mossy landing then slithers into a wide and shallow pool. The waterfall hypnotizes the eye, and to a landscape photographer's delight, it's gracefully framed within a substantial amphitheater of honey-colored sandstone cliffs.

Highlights along the way include a beaver dam and lodge, a small ancient ruin and distant Fremont pictographs. Across the creek, you'll also see lavish vertical stripes of black-and-white desert varnish painted on tall, salmon pink cliffs. These dramatic patterns, reminiscent of

abstract modern art, then descend behind vibrant-green cottonwood trees in a stark contrast that seems to visually oscillate.

If you plan to photograph this sylvan oasis mid-day, bring a multi-stop neutral-density filter. The slow exposure time will give the waterfall a silky blur. And better yet, the bright ambient light of the open shade at that time of day will add more vibrancy to the colors.

To get here from Escalante, head south-east on Utah Scenic Byway 12 toward Boulder. You'll cross the Escalante River bridge, and the turnoff to the trailhead will be about 15 miles from town on the left. Coming from Boulder, travel south about 11 miles. A fee is required at the parking lot.

ZEBRA SLOT CANYON

The nearly 6-mile round-trip hike to this beautiful yet short striated slot canyon is a route-finding journey. And discovering

the opening to the slot, near the end of the hike, is just the beginning of the adventure.

On the cross-country hike in, don't miss the tall, orange sandstone slopes off to the far left, featuring sweeping, layered patterns of bizarrely angled waves. This slope is best photographed up close, with a wide-angle lens, and it's better to wait until the return hike, when it will be in afternoon shade.

Speaking of shade, there's none along the way, so bring several liters of drinking water. And speaking of water, the entry to this slot canyon is often guarded with waist-deep cold water.

When you first enter the slot canyon, the slanting cliff walls meet underwater in an ankle-straining V-shaped junction of stone. It's so narrow that you'll need to



Yellow Rock, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah.

from the Escalante Visitor Center before you go. The unmarked trailhead is on the Hole-in-the-Rock Road, and the trail follows cairns with the possibility for confusion in a sandy wash near the end of the hike. The route to and from the slot canyon is all in open sun. Temperatures can be stifling in summer. Again, bring several liters of water.

DEVIL'S GARDEN

This moonscape of oddly shaped arches and stone monoliths looking like alien life forms is a virtual playground—both visually and physically. It's easy to get to and stroll around, making it an ideal side trip. To make the best photographs here, consider stopping to scout for locations early in the day on your way along Hole-in-the-Rock Road to other sites. Then, on your return trip to town, stop for golden hour with a “shot list” already in mind.

In late afternoon, the stone comes alive with magical honey-gold colors. The scenery already looks like you're on another planet, and just before sunset, you'll find it hard to believe you're not walking on Mars.

One of the best features is that you are entirely free to wander. There are no designated trails, so roam about without hesitation. The relatively small expanse of outcrops and shifting sands is vegetated with grasses, stunted shrubs and scattered junipers. It would be difficult to get lost here.

To get here from Escalante, head southeast on Scenic Byway 12. After a few miles turn southeast onto Hole-in-the-Rock Road, a dirt road suitable for passenger cars—unless wet. After about 12 miles, look for the turnoff on the right, and in a half mile the parking area offers



Toadstool Hoodoo, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah.

hold your backpack overhead and shuffle through sideways. Remember, it's not an adventure if it's easy.

Once beyond the water, you continue by bracing yourself up and through the angular canyon walls, encountering the sensation that you're navigating the anatomy of inner Earth. To reach the most photogenic sections, you'll wriggle still deeper through the sculpted striations of this trance-inducing chamber. At some point, you'll begin to notice dark Moqui marbles, spherical concretions of iron

oxide, a surprise anomaly embedded in the striking sandstone. Ranging in size from tennis balls to ping pong balls, they're the pictorial adornment to the already-extravagant slot canyon.

As you've probably guessed by now, this hike is for experienced route finders and agile scramblers only. If you're new to this type of experience, then canyoneering terms like “chimneying,” “stemming” and “manteling” will begin to be part of your adventure lexicon.

Get detailed directions for the hike

picnic tables and a restroom.

With the easy access, less than a half mile down from Hole-in-the-Rock Road, it's also an ideal location for night photography. Learn more about the planets, star clusters and our Milky Way at the Annual Astronomy Festival held at Bryce Canyon National Park, about an hour away.

NEON CANYON

The topo maps don't label Neon Canyon, and maybe that's its saving grace. This is a place for well-conditioned and self-assured hikers. The nearly all-day venture using Fence Canyon for access has river crossings and is longer but more scenic than the alternative route. The most direct route, for experienced route finders only, is a beeline across a gigantic expanse of nothingness where only the occasional cairn marks the way.

We took the straight-in route with our bearings set on a distant rock formation called Round Dome. With some

trepidation, we forged ahead for several hours, keeping the landmark in sight, which becomes more difficult the closer you get to Neon Canyon. We followed the directions we had researched and printed before the trip, and they led us directly to our goal. Be forewarned—a compass or GPS is mandatory to find your vehicle on the return hike if you use this direct route.

Either route leads you to Neon Canyon, and this tributary of the Escalante River slowly evolves into a glowing chasm of heightened color saturation. Eventually, you'll reach the sizeable sandstone alcove, filled with magical light, called the Golden Cathedral.

The overhanging ceiling of this treasure reveals round openings that cast beams of sunlight, creating sensational effects of luminosity and shadow on the water-stained orange sandstone. A large reflection pool sits below the dome. Technical rock climbers often rappel through the openings in the ceiling. We were there on a day with only hikers,

giving us plenty of time to photograph from numerous angles.

Walking barefoot across the damp sand, one feels connected with the elements in the back of the cavern. Simplifying my focus, a meditative section of the dark, moody pool roused my attention. Here, indirect light interacted with the depths of the water and the cavern walls. An apparition of light existed in the moment. Then the sun angle slowly shifted, and, just as silently, the magic vanished.

Get detailed information about hiking to Neon Canyon from the Escalante Visitor Center before you go. This is a challenging hike and should only be attempted with proper gear and supplies. Tell someone where you're going and when you're expected to return.

YELLOW ROCK

The approach to this wonderland of



slickrock feels like it must be either a bad shortcut or temporary detour. It's not. The initial climb up a very steep, extremely loose trail is like a gateway of determination. Once you make it past this obstacle, you're on a much easier route to a mountain of angular, cross-bedded white sandstone stained with pastel oranges, red-browns and bountiful yellows.

Approaching it later in the day is preferable, as the forthcoming summer sun strikes it with an intensity you'll want to avoid in mid-day. There's absolutely no

shade on this mountain. Plus, the quality of light isn't good until the low angle of the sun brings out the subtle hues.

We were fortunate to visit when a few red paintbrush were still in bloom. How these plants survive in the immense sea of sandstone seems a miracle. Cracks in the tilted waves of stone hold just enough moisture for the wildflowers to grow. Each marooned bouquet is a gift, and their scarcity was a delight to integrate into a photograph.

The late afternoon brought distant rain

Paria River Valley, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah.

clouds, their weightless virgas adding a pleasant contrast with the ancient stone world. We waited out the changing weather patterns, then finished the day capturing the various hues of stone bathed in a cascade of soft pink light. The last of the clouds spread across the sky like eagle wings as the sunset dissolved into twilight. We had our headlamps ready and began the inevitable descent knowing the torturous downclimb awaited us, the cost of passage.

To get here, take U.S. Route 89A, and just west of Big Water—between Page and Kanab—take the Cottonwood Canyon Road turnoff. Go north for about 14 miles to the parking area, where the hard-to-find trail begins. Get detailed directions for the trail before you go.

TOADSTOOL HOODOO

The hike is short to this other-worldly badlands, and before you know it you've reached the artful cluster of natural stone towers. It's about a mile in before the canyon reveals the namesake Toadstool Hoodoo. This mushroom-capped hoodoo is one of many oddly shaped peculiarities you'll find fascinating to ponder and start exploring.

The surrounding orange-brown stone is marbled, with crazy white lines running through the rounded mounds. Everything seems to guide the eye toward the prominent centerpiece hoodoo that juts gracefully skyward.

Explore further in toward the chalky cliffs in back. A gathering of stocky white hoodoos waltz across the badlands below a sleek skyline. As can be expected, colors are best in late afternoon, but plan to stay after sunset, too. The "Blue Hour" of evening twilight here is fantastic, and this place also lends itself to a night of artistic astrophotography.

From Kanab, it's 45 miles east (12 miles west of Big Water) to the trailhead

Canyon off Burr Trail Road, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah.

turnout located on the north side of U.S. Route 89A. The trailhead parking is near the turnoff for Cottonwood Canyon Road.

PARIA RIVER VALLEY

The steep drive into this extremely colorful valley literally takes you down into the Old West. The dirt road can seem a bit unnerving, and you can almost imagine a stagecoach throwing up dust as it descends.

Undulating, convoluted and richly striped cliffs across the gaping wound of a deep ravine will keep pulling your attention. But you should definitely be watching the road with its loose dirt shoulders and harrowing drop-offs.

The dusty old road leads you to the base of multi-hued mesas made up of purple, white, grayish-blue and red-brown. The reward of experiencing and photographing this location is just how easy it truly is. From the picnic area, you'll have a front-row seat to the most spectacular arrangement of natural colors you could imagine.

If this landscape looks familiar, you probably saw it in a Western movie, most notably the film "The Outlaw Josey Wales" with a young Clint Eastwood. The area is often still called the Paria Movie Set—though remnants of the movie set town are gone, the river valley is reasonably small and worth exploring. Look for the old cemetery.

In late afternoon, the brilliant color of the setting sun creeps slowly up to the top edge of the mesa before setting it aglow in flame orange. The striking palette of colors becomes subdued but no less magical after sunset. Without deep, dark shadows and strong highlights, the range of colors turn pastel in the lingering remnants of ambient light, giving a painterly finish to the day.

Traveling on U.S. Route 89, the turnoff



is about 31 miles east of Kanab, Utah, or about 40 miles from Page, Arizona. Take BLM Route 585, a dirt road on the north side of the highway, for approximately 5 miles to the parking area. Warning—don't use this road when it's wet.

EVEN MORE TO DISCOVER

It's the unnamed side canyons that keep people coming back to Grand Staircase-Escalante looking for one more treasure. For example, a short, unmarked side canyon off Burr Trail Road offers

not only an intimate world enclosed by stone canyon walls but also an intriguing lone tree that literally glows with afternoon backlighting. The only challenge for photography here is waiting for the breeze to calm down and quiet the shaking leaves.

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Find more stunning Southwest destinations in *Four Corners USA: Wonders of the American Southwest* by Jim Turner, photography by Larry Lindahl, LarryLindahl.com.