

# Zion National Park: Rock Canyon (July 2015)

Beta courtesy [CanyoneeringUSA.com](http://CanyoneeringUSA.com)

A Sweet Little Gem.

Rock Canyon is a sweet little gem of a canyon, with difficult access. It drops into the East Fork of the Virgin River a few miles east of the Park boundary, from the south side – a dune-sand area known generally as Elephant Cove. All access roads cross long stretches of soft dune sand, requiring a fully-capable 4x4 vehicle to reach the trailhead. Even with good vehicles, the drive from Springdale is long and will discourage many.

OK, how about the good news? Rock is a great little canyon with a four rappels, including one spectacular 110-foot rappel into a dramatic alcove. Close to the East Fork, Rock Canyon goes all riparian on us, with large cottonwood trees, grasses, and horsetail creating a lush, green contrast against the sandstone. Sweet! Once at the East Fork, you can climb a short rock step and return to your vehicle quickly... but why not enjoy the East Fork by sauntering down "The Barracks" section of the East Fork to an exit canyon on the left? This variation leads to a moderate up-climb to the rim, about a mile from your vehicle. There is a lush garden of poison ivy in the exit canyon, so some might want to wear long pants for this section.

Do not underestimate the driving challenges. The drive to the trailhead from Springdale is about two hours twenty minutes. This canyon works out better, logistically, if coming from the St George/Hurricane/Washington area, or from Kanab.

## GPS WGS84 12S:

French Canyon Exit Top: **336507mE 4114707mN**  
Park for Canyon: **337579mE 4114324mN**  
First Rap: **337625mE 4113737mN**  
Quick Exit Turn Pt: **338119mE 4114969mN**

## LOGISTICS

**Rating** 3A III  
**Season** All year  
**Time Commitment** 3 to 6 hours  
**Longest Rappel** 110 feet (34m)  
**Access** Requires HC real 4WD vehicle to negotiate soft sand roads.  
**Permit Required?** NO  
**Emergency** Kane County Sheriff  
877-644-2349 Ext 1

## Drinking Water

the East Fork, there is wading to knee-deep and much of the hike is in the stream, so wading-compatible footwear is advised.  
Water from the East Fork could be filtered/purified. There are cattle grazing upstream and several towns.

## EQUIPMENT

**Essentials** Helmets, rappelling gear, webbing and rapid links. Navigation can be challenging: a GPS is recommended for this hike, at least for finding the start.  
**Cold Water Protection** The canyon does not have much potential for holding water. If you proceed down

## DIFFICULTIES

### Flash Flood Risk Skills Required

Moderate Challenging navigation for the drive. A rarely-done canyon. Poison Ivy avoidance.

### Anchors

Natural and bolted anchors.

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## SEASONAL COMMENTS

Canyon runs north, so snow in winter and spring could make the canyon unpleasant. The roads tend to get softer during hot, dry weather. Hiking down the East Fork to the exit canyon could be difficult or impossible if the East Fork is in flood.

## APPROACH

### Driving

The roads are exceptionally soft and require a fully capable vehicle. In some conditions, airing down will be a good idea. As of July 2012, the maze of roads was well-marked with route numbers, but this could change.

The Soft Sand Adventure Drive begins at the Elephant Cove Kiosk on the Sand Dunes Road, 4.0 miles west of the Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park entrance road. The Kiosk is a sign on the north side of the highway and a parking lot suitable for about 10 cars, and the road we seek there is Road 20.

### From Springdale

Drive into the Park and up through the tunnel and out the East Entrance on Highway 9, to Mt Carmel Junction. Fill up the gas tank here. Head south toward Kanab and up the hill. 3.5 miles from the Junction, turn right on the road marked for the Coral Pink Sand Dunes. Follow this road 16.0 miles to the Elephant Cove Kiosk. Allow about one hour ten minutes driving time (to HERE) from Springdale, or 30 minutes from Mt Carmel Junction.

### From Hurricane

Take Route 59 east and south from Hurricane to Hildale. As the road crosses into Arizona, the road is renumbered as Hwy 389. 4.5 miles south of Hildale, turn left on the Cane Beds Road, County Highway 237. At about 5 miles, the road turns to gravel. Continue up this road, cross the border and it turns back to pavement. A few more miles puts you at the Elephant Cove Kiosk.

Mileage from the turn off Hwy 389 to the Kiosk is 12.5 miles. Allow one hour 10 minutes from Hurricane.

### From Kanab

Take Route 89 north 8 miles to a left turn on the Hancock Road. Follow this 9.5 miles to the Sand Dunes Road and turn left (south). Drive south 6.6 miles to the Kiosk. Allow 45 minutes to the Kiosk.

## YOUR SOFT SAND ADVENTURE DRIVE

Parking at the Rock Canyon "trailhead" The Rock Canyon "parking lot" Head north 3.4 miles on Road 20 to the gap between the mesas to the north. At the gap, go left on Road 25. Follow this for 4.5 miles to a road to the right, Road 29. (The sign for road 29 may be 50 feet further on, where road 29 used to be!) Follow Road 29 1.7 miles to where it ends on Road 18. Turn right. Follow Road 18 about 3.2 miles to the exit point of French Canyon. There are several rim-overlooks in this area, some with camping spots. The spot I am thinking of is the last one, with a rail fence, and where the road starts to turn right. It is possible to spot a car here, but the walk from there to the start is only one mile. Past the exit point, drive one mile and park. There is not a clearly-defined parking spot, but it is at the height-of-land point on this section of road.

## THE BUSINESS

From the car, head due south through scrubby pinon-juniper forest until you find a canyon. Follow the rim to the right to where a person can easily walk down slickrock into the canyon bottom. The canyon here is shallow. Follow the canyon downstream (which may be to the right) to the main drainage and the first drop, where the canyon cuts through a rock buttress.

**R1:** 66 feet (20m) Hop over a couple potholes (could hold water) and rappel 66 feet down a steep wall to the flat sand floor of the canyon. The anchor is a huge chunk of wood jammed overhead.

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**R1.5:** A few minutes downcanyon, turn the corner to discover a dramatic drop with a two-bolt anchor at the top. It looks scary, but... it turns out to be a very moderate 100 foot (31m) v-slot downclimb. Some people might like to set up a handline.

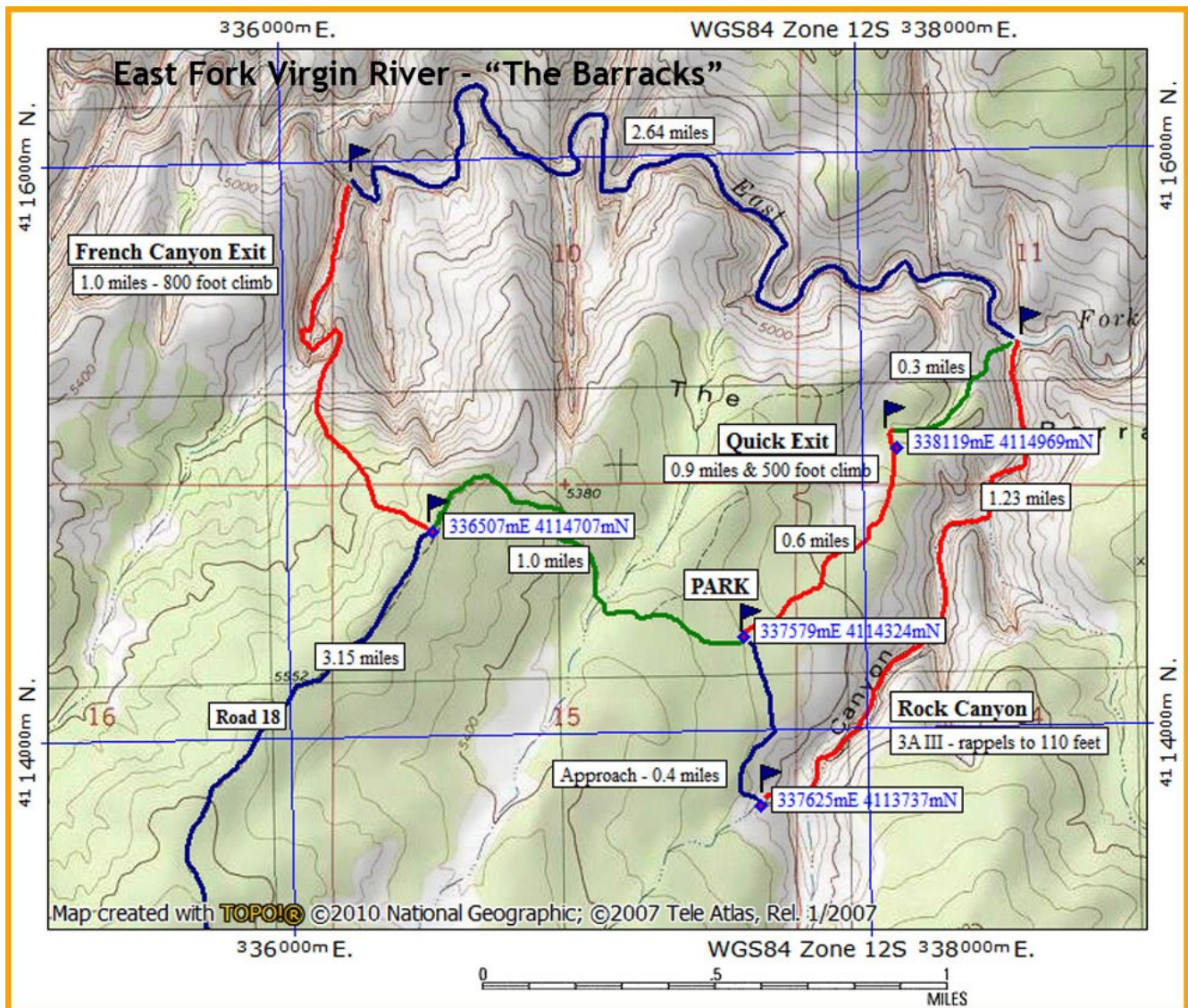
**R2:** 10 feet (3m) A few minutes downcanyon, a short drop can be rappelled off a sling stuffed through a hole in the rock.

**R3:** 110 feet (34m) The Big Event! A few minutes downcanyon, the canyon drops precipitously into a dramatic alcove. The rappel even has its own spring! The anchor is two bolts.

Walking downcanyon, the walls open out and the shade recedes. About 20 minutes of soft-sand slogging brings you to a short drop.

**R4:** 20 feet (6m) A short "nuisance" rappel is made off a two bolt anchor. The anchor is relatively new, but there are already rope-grooves forming!

Another half-hour of soft-sand slogging leads to a short drop, bypassed on the left via an easy trail, which takes you down to the nicely shaded riparian section of the canyon. Stroll down this about half an hour to the East Fork of the Virgin River.



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## **EXIT**

There are two possible exits: the Quick Exit; and a longer exit that descends the East Fork for a couple miles, then climbs out French Canyon back to the rim.

### **The Quick Exit**

From the confluence with the East Fork, look for an easily-scaled rock step a few feet up Rock Canyon on the west side (left side). Surmount the wall and hike up the ridge, then up a shallow wash on the right as it develops. Continue up as signs of vehicle travel (might) become evident. Fifteen minutes or 0.3 miles from the bottom, seek out a road/track/ATV path that climbs left out of the wash. Follow this track back to your truck. Total distance about .9 miles, with 500 feet of gain. (If you miss the turn onto the track, the wash soon becomes a large area of slickrock. Continue following the wash/slickrock and it will eventually intersect the same track short of your vehicle.)

### **French Canyon Exit**

From the confluence with the East Fork, stroll down the East Fork, staying mostly in the stream. Your impact on the environment is minimized by staying in the stream as much as possible.

The distance to French Canyon is 2.64 miles. At a casual pace this will take about an hour and a half. This section of the East Fork, called "The Barracks", has short, discontinuous cliffs on both sides that block easy escape from the narrow canyon.

A bit past halfway, a large canyon comes in on the left. From the first large canyon, a few more turns of the river and maybe a half hour of hiking leads to another large canyon coming in from the left. A hundred yards past that, as the walls of the Barracks become taller and smoother, a small, very green slot canyon comes in from the left behind a buttress. This is French Canyon.

Stroll up French Canyon. It is a delightful green grotto, until you get to the poison ivy section. Stay in the water to avoid the ivy as much as possible. Follow the canyon to the springs that feed the riparian. Climb up a short step and the

canyon becomes dry. Soon after, the canyon cliffs out – find a trail on the right that takes you above the short cliff. Ascend a slickrock bowl, cross the streambed and find a steep, sandy trail on the left up through a break in the cliffs, and up a chimney (3rd class) to the rim. Ascend near the crest of a ridge on a distinct path, to the higher rim above, surmounting a short, steep slab near the top. At the top are some old roads. Follow them left and up to the real road. Hike left along the real road one mile to your vehicle.

## **AUTHOR'S EXPERIENCE**

I did Rock Canyon with Dean Kurtz in 2006, taking the Quick Exit. More recently, I completed it with Kody Prisbrey and friends from Saint George, in July 2012, enjoying the East Fork and exiting out French Canyon.

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