

The Narrows, Top-Down Day Hike • Zion National Park

Rating: Non-technical, strenuous hike.
Best Season: Summer, Fall
Length: 16 miles (25.7 km)
Time: 10-14 hours
Access: Hike starts at Chamberlain's Ranch, 2 hours from Springdale and finishes at the Temple of Sinawava. Most hikers opt for a shuttle from a local company.

Permit: Required, available online and Visitor Center.

Seasonality: Spring— Spring is a great time of year in Zion, but not in The Narrows. The river is high and cold, fed by melting snow in the headwaters to the north. River levels are unpredictable - a lot depends on the upper level snowpack, and when and where the sun comes out. March and April are also the rainiest months in Utah. Toward the end of May, Zion changes over to summer conditions. Though the water is chilly, if the snow has melted out, the river gets down to a reasonable level and the hike is great.

Fall— The fall is a lovely time in Zion, and The Narrows is at its most spectacular. The slanting light can be amazing, and the colorful leaves complement the colorful walls. Fabulous.

The water level tends to be very low, and hiking in the river is at its easiest. Air and water temperatures are lower and care must be taken to be properly attired to avoid a chill. The days are shorter, early starts more difficult.

Winter— Winter is a great time to visit The Narrows, though specialized equipment is required to stay warm. With few visitors in the lower reaches, hiking up from the bottom has a wilderness feel to it lost in the summer crowds. A dry suit and thick neoprene socks can make hiking a very reasonable proposition - equipment can be rented in Springdale.

A through-hike in the winter is difficult. The road to Chamberlain ranch is often closed in the winter, even to 4WD vehicles. The water is frigid, requiring dry suits and thick neoprene socks from the start. If the sun is out and snow is melting in the high country, the river level can rise rapidly. Ice falling off the walls can also be a hazard.

Equipment: **Poles** - a hiking staff or hiking poles are invaluable for maintaining balance while hiking in the river. Downhill ski poles work fine, but take a beating.

Footwear - imagine walking through knee-deep murky water with a bunch of roughed-up bowling balls hidden in the murk. This is what hiking the Narrows is like, and sandals, even Tevas or Keenes, do not provide protection for the feet. Specialized water shoes such as

Five.Ten Canyoneers and La Sportiva Exum Rivers are by far the best, but any sturdy sneaker or light hiking boot that is made from 100% synthetic materials will work fine. Neoprene socks or synthetic hiking socks work well. Neoprene socks provide warmth and padding, AND keep fine sand away from your feet. Canyoneers and Exum Rivers can be rented in Springdale.

Shorts - long pants are never in fashion in The Narrows. Get yourself a nice pair of quick-drying, synthetic hiking shorts and you will be happy. Any trip through The Narrows is likely to include wading to at least waist deep and your shorts will get wet.

Shirts and Sweaters - some people find the classic cotton t-shirt works well in the middle of the summer, but most times of the year, hikers will enjoy a quick-drying, lightweight synthetic top such as those made from Patagonia's Capilene. All hikers should bring a synthetic sweater to ward off the chill. Even in the hottest weather, it is cool and damp in The Narrows and a bit of warmth can be very welcome. Through hikers will want to carry a warm hat.

Keeping Stuff Dry - anything valuable - wallet, camera, car keys - ought to be fully protected from immersion, as even the most nimble hiker can trip and fall into the river at any time. Those with a river-running background will have drybags or Dry Kegs to use, or these can be purchased for about \$25.00 at many outdoor stores, including those in Springdale. The frugal hiker can make do with large plastic bags - use the thicker, trash-compactor bags - double sealed. When using plastic bags, it is important to get everything INSIDE the pack - plastic bags on the outside quickly spring leaks.

Pack Light - for all Narrows trips, keep the pack as light as possible. The rugged terrain and in-stream hiking exact a toll on the over-burdened. A tent is not necessary, nor is excess camping gear like camp chairs. There are a few campsites that have a few mosquitoes - bring a bit of repellent, rather than a tent. A pair of cheap flip-flops are nice for loafing around camp and letting your shoes dry out.

Winter Wear - in winter, a dry suit and thick neoprene socks are a necessity. These can be rented in Springdale, but call ahead as outfitters may not keep regular hours in the off-season.

Flash Flood Risk: High—pay close attention to the weather report and current conditions.

One-day Through-Hike from the Top: 16 miles of difficult hiking in one day? Feels like 26 miles. For the athletic, this is a fine option and makes for a fine adventure. Bring a headlamp, and times are based on FIT hikers. A great introduction to Zion. Car spot or shuttle required.

Getting to the Start

The start is Chamberlain's Ranch – a small ranch on the North Fork of the Virgin River managed by the Chamberlain family, where they still run a few cows during the summer. It is about an hour and a half drive from

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Springdale to Chamberlain's, on a dirt road that is often heavily wash-boarded. Folks in passenger cars unused to driving dirt roads will find this challenging, and might take quite a bit longer to drive this stretch. The dirt road crosses clay soils and is impassible after rain or snow – even for 4WD vehicles. Paid shuttles to Chamberlain Ranch are available through outfitters in Springdale. Remembering that it takes 3 hours to fetch the car at the end of a through hike can make the cost of a paid shuttle seem much more reasonable.

Driving Directions to Chamberlain's Ranch

From Springdale, drive north into the park, then east through the Mt. Carmel tunnel to the East Entrance of the Park. Continue on Highway 9 2.3 miles east of the East Entrance, turn left (N) on the North Fork Road. This road is initially paved but turns to dirt at the Ponderosa Ranch, at 5.4 miles. Continue on the dirt road another 11.4 miles to the only bridge crossing a river. (Total mileage from Highway 9 is 16.8 miles). Turn left at the T, then left again and follow ¼ mile to the Chamberlain Ranch main gate. Enter and close the gate. Continue down the road, then follow the posted instructions for parking.

THE HIKE

The Hike - From the Top

Follow the small dirt road across the river and then west along the river. The North Fork is small here, and perhaps is better referred to as a stream. You are a guest on the Chamberlain Ranch – please stay on the trail and don't harass the cows. In an hour, the collapsing Bulloch Cabin is passed and the road ends as the canyon becomes a gorge.

The Bulloch Cabin was built in the 1890's, when the head of the North Fork was farmed in the summer by several families, and trees were logged and milled for delivery in the region. The families wintered over in Cedar City.

From here, the second of many stream crossings is made – the water is quite nippy early on a summer morning. Continue down the canyon, frequently crossing the stream, as the canyon becomes deeper and more interesting. This part of the hike can be quite hot in summer, so an early start is recommended. Another hour of hiking takes one to Simon Gulch coming in from the north, and the first real narrows section. An hour or less past Simon Gulch, the first designated campsite appears. Campsites are discretely marked by carsonite posts with decaled numbers.

What is a narrows? There is no formal definition, but usually any canyon with vertical rock walls that are at least twice as high as the canyon is wide is a narrows. If the walls are close enough to be both touched at the same time (about 5 feet), then it is a "slot canyon".

Shortly afterwards, the mighty North Fork Waterfall is found, where rocks and trees have dammed the river, creating a twelve foot (4 meter) waterfall. There is an easy slot to the left (left looking down-canyon) that bypasses the waterfall. Do not be tempted to jump the waterfall – while the pool downstream from the falls is 6 feet deep, the water directly below the falls is only about a foot deep. More than one leg has been broken at this spot.

Deep Creek

Continuing downcanyon, the hiker arrives at the confluence with Deep Creek in about 45 minutes. This is a major confluence, and hard to miss. The water of Deep Creek usually runs clear, and this is a good place to filter water for the journey ahead. Campsite 2 is tucked in the woods nearby. Ten more campsites are carefully sited in the next 2.5 miles from here to Big Springs. Prior to arriving at Deep Creek, the hiking is relatively easy, and a good pace can be kept. Below Deep Creek, much of the hiking is in the river, and picks its way around and through obstacles – so the pace slows considerably – for some, almost to a crawl. Travel times are given for the average fit hiker – many people will not be able to go this fast.

The river dominates and the gorge becomes more intense. Short sections of narrows are interspersed with pocket forests on one or both sides of the river. Pick your way downcanyon, staying on established paths when possible, or wading the edges of the river. Forty-five minutes below Deep Creek, Kolob Canyon comes in on the right, usually dry. A brief trip up the canyon makes for an interesting side-trip, but the really nice stuff is several hours up Kolob.

From Kolob, it is about an hour to the next major canyon coming in on the right, Goose Creek. A lovely sand-floored alcove on the right – The Grotto, campsite #8 – is about halfway through this section, and is one of the

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nicest campsites.

Of the several options for side-canyon exploration, Goose is the most interesting side trip in the Upper Narrows. It comes in as a narrow, swampy canyon with a small flow, and is easily missed. Hiking up canyon, the source of flow is found in about 20 minutes, and interesting narrows continue up canyon a ways. Travel up the canyon is blocked by a 60-foot dryfall after about an hour's walk. The light in the afternoon can be remarkable. Watch out for quicksand.

Goose Creek is designated as a Research Natural Area, and even the easily accessible lower section might be restricted in the future.

Big Springs and Wall Street Corridor

A half-hour below Goose Creek, Big Spring bursts out of the wall on the right. There may be poison ivy on either side of the canyon in this area – keep watch. Big Spring marks the end of the Upper Narrows, and this is a good place to water up. Just up-stream from Big Springs is a short, pretty slot canyon called Corral Hollow. It makes for a nice, 10-minute side trip.

The section of Narrows below Big Spring is the most spectacular and continuous in the entire canyon, running almost uninterrupted for two miles. All campsites are above Big Spring for good reason – this long section of narrows offers no escape. Overnight hikers enter this section – the most dangerous in flashfloods – in the morning of their second day, when thunderstorms are least likely to strike.

Hiking is mostly in the river from this point onward, with steep walls close together. This dramatic section of wall to wall water is known as the Wall Street Corridor. Murky water allows seeing only a few inches into the flow – ski poles or walking sticks can come in real handy. Continuing down canyon, the intrepid canyoneer starts to meet dayhikers coming up from the Temple of Sinawava. The next landmark is more than two hours down canyon – Orderville.

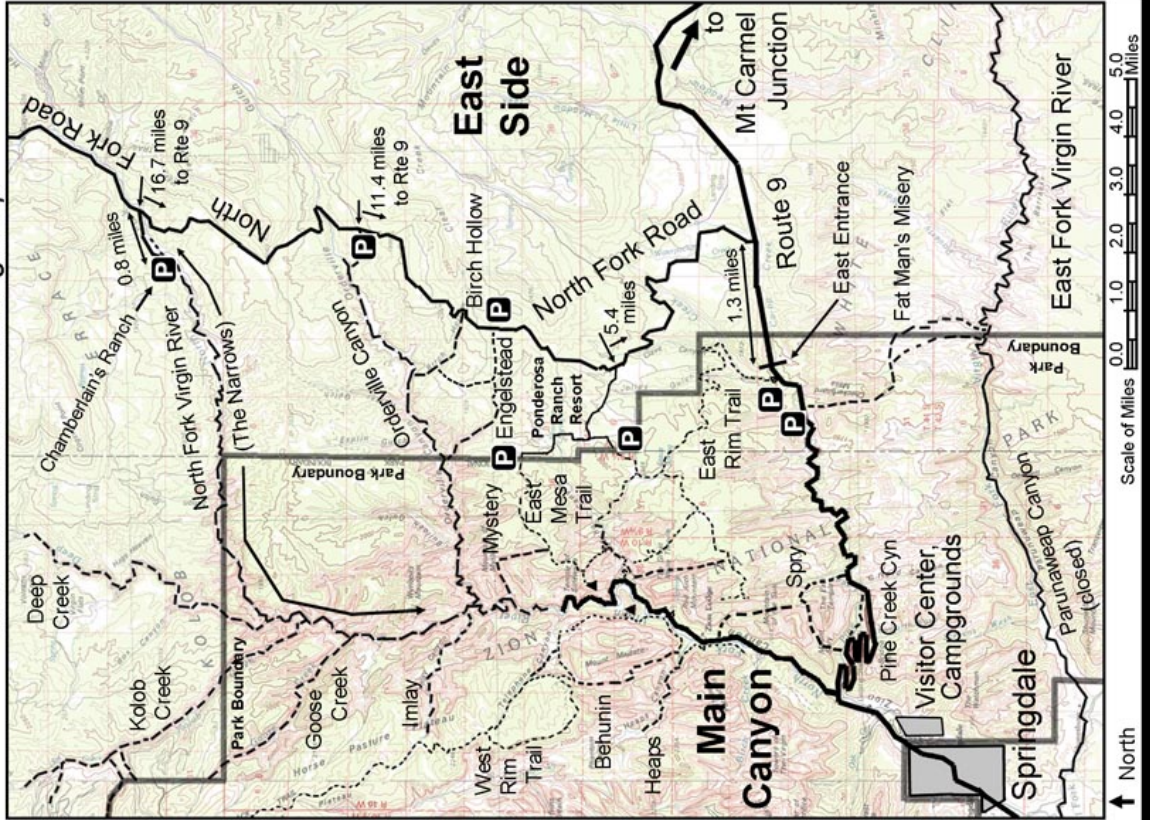
Orderville Canyon

Orderville enters as a spectacular twisting corridor on the left. It often has a stream coming out of it, sometimes muddy, sometimes aromatic. Orderville is a great side-canyon to explore as far as time allows. It offers a couple sunny spots, and respite from the rushing-water sound of the North Fork in the Narrows. Many parties will want to walk a few minutes up Orderville to have lunch.

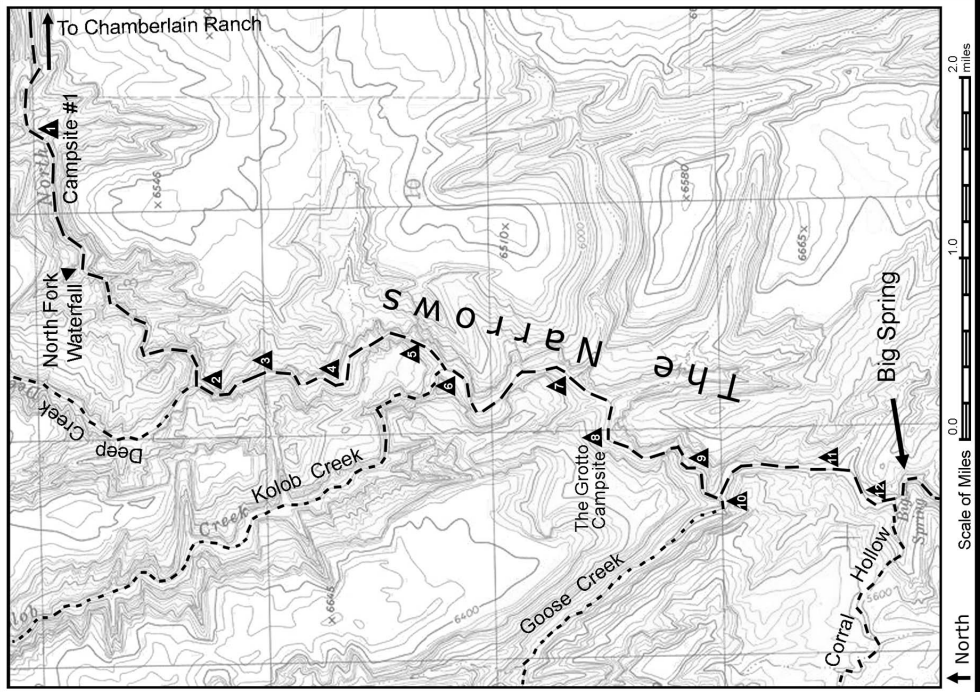
From Orderville down, the crowds thicken and the Narrows become less continuous. The canyon twists and turns, creating marvelous alcoves. The through-hiker will notice the canyon shows considerable wear and tear, where the heavily-used hiker trails have torn up the fragile desert environment. All the more reason to stay on trails close to the waterline, rather than climbing over the hills and contributing to the erosion.

After a few turns of the canyon, a lovely 120 foot (40 meter) waterfall marks the mouth of Mystery Canyon. This is Mystery Falls, the marker that says the end is near. Another 15 minutes, and a stone veranda appears on the left, along with trappings of civilization such as signs, a pile of hiking sticks and a paved trail. Hike one mile (1.4 km) on the paved trail to the Temple of Sinawava, bathrooms, benches, trash cans, and the shuttle bus stop.

Zion: Main Canyon & East Side and Zion Narrows Driving Map



THE NARROWS - MIDDLE PART



LOWER NARROWS & ORDERVILLE CANYON

