

## Sand Canyon - Canyons of the Ancients National Monument by Dave Cooper

*One of the many archeological sites in Sand Canyon-small.jpg*

Ready for a long weekend getaway, without leaving Colorado? Consider visiting the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument, tucked away in the far southwest corner of the State. This amazing area boasts the highest known concentration of archeological sites in the nation. With year-round access, the best seasons to visit are Autumn through Spring (it can be very warm during the summer months). While temperatures can be cool during the winter months (especially at night), the sun seems to warm the canyon walls during the daytime, making this a good destination for those seeking respite from Front Range winter blues.

The Monument covers a large area (164,000 acres), where more than 5000 archeological sites have so far been recorded. A good place to start your exploration is to visit the Anasazi Heritage Center, 10 miles north of Cortez. Then head over to Sand Canyon for a day of hiking.

Sand Canyon, with well-signed trails and plenty of archeological ruins is an excellent introduction to hiking in the Monument. Some of the trails are also open to mountain bikes.

If you have a little extra time, a visit to Lowry Pueblo is also worthwhile.



*The Great Kiva at Lowry Pueblo-small.jpg*

**Getting to the Trailhead:** From the town of Cortez, drive approximately two miles south on Highway 160 to County Road G. Turn west (right) on CR G and drive 12.5 miles to a small parking area on slickrock on the north side of the road.

The Anasazi Heritage Center is located 10 miles north of Cortez, 3 miles west of Dolores, on highway 184. Check here on getting to the Lowry Pueblo site.

**Hike Statistics:** The trail gains 1280 feet and loses 150 feet in 4.7 miles one way. Taking all of the spur trails adds to these statistics.

**Difficulty:** Easy walking on the sandy and occasionally rocky trail. The last mile or so up to the canyon rim is steeper but the trail is well-switchbacked.

**Resources:** Camping is available at McPhee Campground, just north of the Anasazi Heritage Center, and at Hovenweep National Monument, just across the State Line in Utah.

**USGS Quad:** Woods Canyon, CO; Battle Rock, CO.

There are two ways to hike Sand Canyon. It is possible to set up a car shuttle and hike from one end to the other. This, however, requires two vehicles and takes quite a while to set up. Or you can just hike in from the south end, explore as much of the canyon as you care to, then retrace your steps back to the trailhead. If you hike all the way to the upper (north) end of the canyon, the round trip distance is 9.4 miles. The latter is what we chose to do.

### **Hike Description**

From the parking area walk north across the slickrock, following cairns and small signs to Sand Canyon. A trail post at mile 0.3 is where the East Rock Creek Trail takes off to the left. We stay straight here as the trail heads to the right of a rock outcrop, staying well above the canyon floor on a bench. Signs all along the trail indicate spur trails that lead to archeological sites. It is well-worth your time to explore these extensive ruins, which include cliff dwellings and kivas, of course being careful not to disturb any of the sites or artifacts.

*From the parking area the trail follows cairns and signs across the slickrock-small.jpg*



At mile 1.7 a sign to the right leads to a viewpoint, providing a nice overview of the canyon. At mile 1.9 pass another trail post where the East Rock Creek Trail re-joins our trail. Shortly after this junction the trail drops into the canyon, where the density of cliff dwellings increases. It is very pleasant walking along the canyon bottom, carefully looking for ruins built usually on south-facing cliffs, under overhangs that provided summer shade. Binoculars may be helpful in picking out these structures, some in quite good repair.

After wandering along the canyon for some time you will reach a sign at mile 3.7 which advises mountain bikers that the terrain ahead is rougher and suitable only for foot travel. Indeed, the trail does start to climb steeply on switchbacks as it leaves the canyon, reaching the rim at mile 4.7. Unless you're planning to continue on to the northern trailhead at Sand Canyon Pueblo, the rim is a good point to stop for lunch before heading back down.



GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)  
 PARKING: 37,20,29N / 108,49,4W, 5456 feet  
 TRAIL POST: 37,20,42N / 108,49,0W, 5584 feet  
 VIEWPOINT: 37,21,25N / 108,48,13W, 5797 feet  
 TRAIL POST2: 37,21,31N / 108,48,12W, 5784 feet  
 SIGN: 37,22,23N / 108,47,28W, 5837 feet  
 CANYON RIM: 37,23,5N / 108,47,18W, 6616 feet

