

Monument Valley Trail – Colorado National Monument

by Dave Cooper

“What a great hike!” – this was the spontaneous comment made by one of my friends as we neared the end of this week’s hike.

On our annual Thanksgiving pilgrimage to the Southern Utah desert we stopped off to hike a trail that had been on my list for a long time – The Monument Valley Trail in the Colorado National Monument. After looking down into this stunning canyon on several occasions over the years, it was time!

Stunning views looking down into Monument Valley



Getting to the Trailhead: From Exit 19 on I-70 (Fruita), head south on SH340 for 2.4 miles to an intersection (Waypoint INTERSECTION), the right fork signed to the Colorado National Monument (West Entrance).

To reach the lower trailhead (Waypoint SH340 TH), continue on SH340 for another 2.2 miles. Just past a house with street number 1901 is a dirt road leading to the right, marked with a hard-to-see sign for the Monument Valley Trailhead. Take this road for one tenth of a mile to the parking area.

To reach the upper parking area, from Waypoint INTERSECTION, turn right towards the West Entrance to the Monument (Monument Road) and drive 8.5 miles on this road to the Upper Trailhead (Waypoint UPPER TH). This parking area is two tenths of a mile past the Coke Ovens Overlook.

Hike Description

This hike works equally well in either direction, or best as a round trip. It depends on whether you can arrange a car shuttle or not. I prefer to start at the lower elevation and hike uphill. This way, if you run out of time or energy, the return is downhill. The hike will be described thus.

Hike Statistics: From the lower trailhead, the trail has an elevation gain of 1900 feet in 5.6 miles, one way. (Moderate one way, Strenuous for round trip).
USGS Quads: Colorado National Monument, CO

Entering the canyon - The Independence Monument can be seen in the distance

From the parking area off SH340, follow the trail as it skirts around a development before heading up into the canyon in 0.65 miles.

The excellent trail takes you below the very picturesque cliffs that bound the right side of the canyon. These cliffs are a popular rock climbing destination. As you continue up the trail a prominent tower becomes obvious – this is the Independence Monument, named by John Otto, the person responsible for

developing the trails in the monument and who was instrumental in having the area declared a National Monument. Otto inscribed a part of the Declaration of Independence on a flat rock near the tower. Though the soft sandstone has eroded significantly over the years, some of the text can still be deciphered.

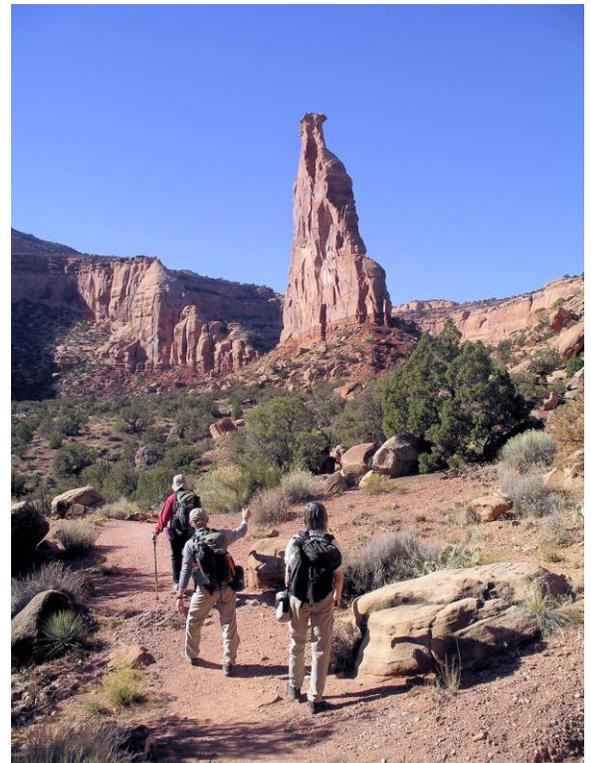


Part of the Declaration of Independence can still be seen inscribed into this rock

Look for the rock to the right of the trail close to where the trail divides at the tower after 2.4 miles of hiking. (Waypoint INSCRIPTION). It's a bit of a stretch to scramble onto the slab to view the writing.

Approaching the Independence Monument

John Otto is also famous in climbing circles for creating a route to the top of the Independence Monument by chipping steps and drilling holes for steel pipe. This must be one of the earliest examples of route modification. Because of the different ethics in place in 1911, the route is usually considered historic rather than destructive – this kind of rock modification would not be accepted today.



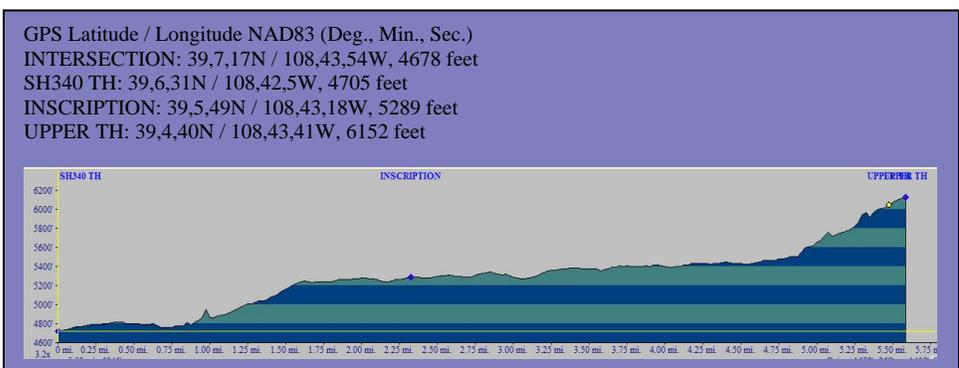
The main trail heads to the left of the monument and continues on up-canyon, passing the feature named the “Kissing Couple” before turning west in front of the “Coke Ovens”.



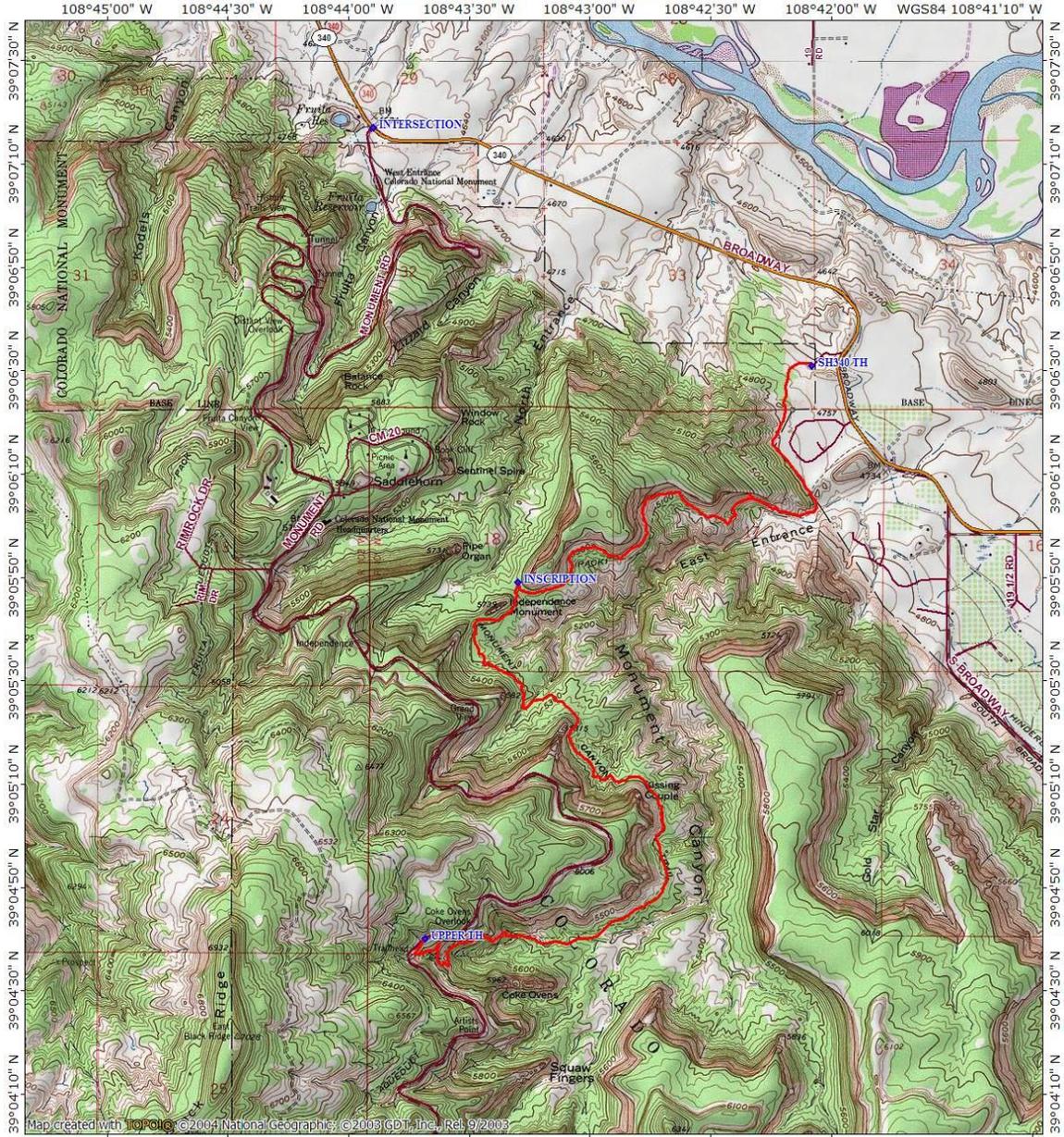
Starting up the switchbacks

The trail finally climbs more steeply on a well-constructed trail to reach the rim of the canyon and the road after a total of 5.6 miles.

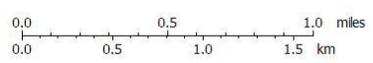
Heading up the last section of the trail



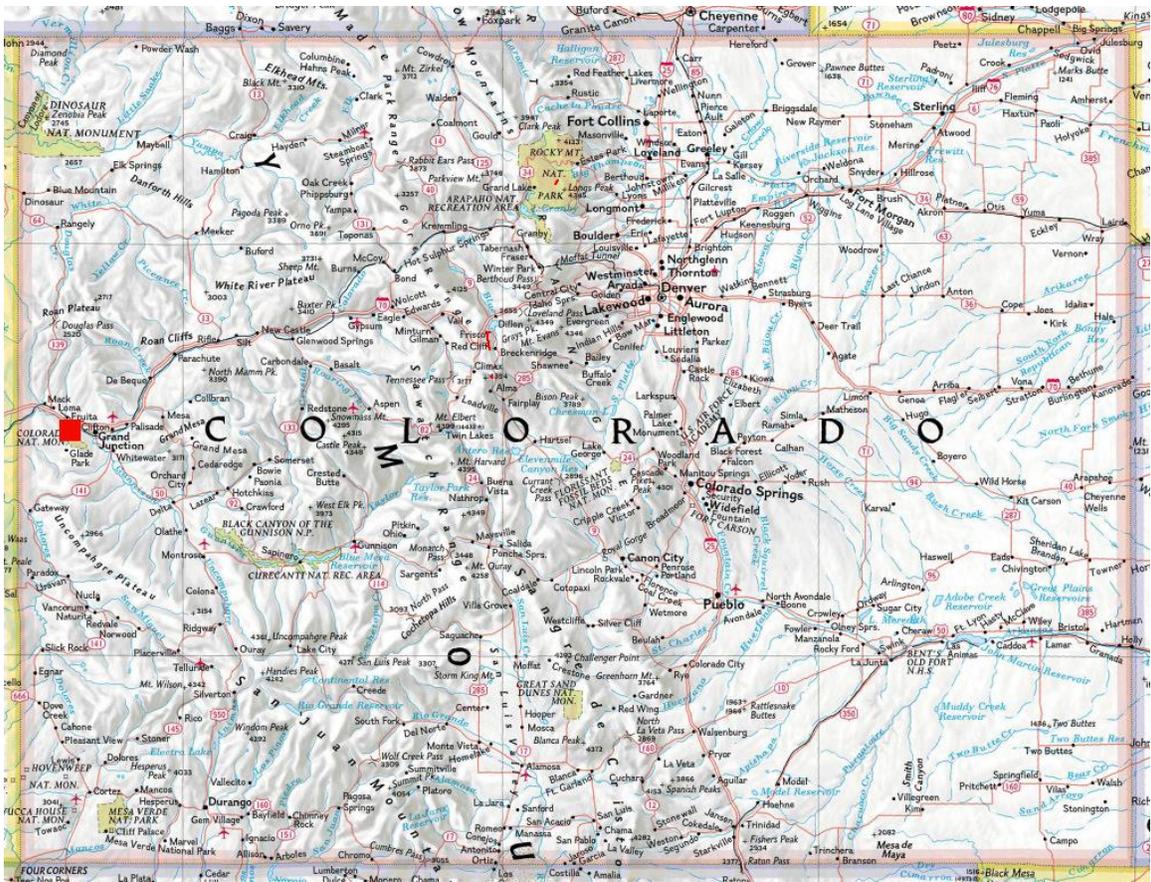
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Colorado Locator Map