

Desolation Canyon Trip Report
Sept 8-15 2008
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Most raft trips through Desolation and Gray Canyons of the Green River begin in the middle of nowhere at an old dried up spot on the map named Sand Wash. Doing a “Deso” trip, as many refer to it, had been on my to-do list for a number of years. As we planned the trip, my wife and brother and I had two trips on the Yampa River, an upstream tributary of the Green, so we were well aware of the amazing canyon scenery that Utah has stashed away in its backcountry vault. But the Desolation trip presented us with some scheduling challenges before we could enjoy its 84 miles of wild scenery. While the Green is dam-controlled and never really gets too high to run, spring time weather can be flaky. Then, in late May, the bugs come out and the first 25 miles are said to be nearly unbearable for most of the summer. The summer is also prone to strong afternoon upstream winds. While wind will keep the bugs down, the current is so slow in spots that you would simply not make progress.

So September is recognized as a great time of year to do a Deso trip. To obtain a permit you must call 5 months ahead of your desired launch date, on a rolling, day by day basis. I was surprised to get right through on my first call, and picked up a permit for Sept 8. Then as the launch date approached, I bought a permit from the Ute Indian Tribe for hiking and camping access to the tribal lands. The tribe owns the left bank for much of the distance we would travel. Thankfully, the tribe has made it possible to purchase the \$30 permit online in a rather painless process.

As September finally rolled around, 8 of us set off for a 7 night trip. Five of us drove south from Seattle to Salt Lake City where we picked up the other 3 at the airport. We had a gloriously clear weather and the usual pre-launch excitement was in the air as we drove east from Salt Lake City.

We were taking this trip based mostly on Desolation Canyon’s reputation. While I had not been terribly impressed with the photos I’d seen of Deso and Gray Canyons posted on the web, the trip has many evangelists and a great reputation. And the road into Sand Wash has its own reputation. I had given only a passing glance at the warning printed on the shuttle company’s liability form about the need for excellent tires. I’ve been to many a river put-in, and have driven my share of miles on sketchy dirt roads. But the 35 miles of dirt road into Sand Wash rank right up there with the worst road surfaces I’ve ever dragged a boat trailer across. Not long after you leave Highway 40, and turn south for Sand Wash, the pavement ends and the desolation begins. The first 12 miles or so are though what is referred to as an “oil patch”. This section of Utah is flat, dry, dusty, rocky, and empty, except for the fact that it’s an actively producing oil and natural gas field. There are oil pumps and drill rigs every 1000 feet or so, on a grid that stretches out in every direction, and pipelines zigzagging between each one. There is nothing but grimy industry and rock and a few clumps of grass as far as you can see. It’s about as attractive as an asphalt parking lot.

The road gets progressively worse as we passed beyond the active wells and proceeded literally off the map. Finally, after what seemed like forever, the road turned east and began a long descent into a dry creek bed that eventually terminated at the edge of the Green river at Sand Wash. In fact, the creek bed **is** the road for many miles. As we descended we passed not one, but two cows that had fallen to their deaths and lay at the base of the canyon walls. This is hard country and not a place to be stranded with car trouble. We abruptly realized that they call it Sand Wash because that is what it is – a sandy gully and little else. And to make matters worse, we could see that the creek had been running ferociously not long before we arrived. The last few miles went very slowly as our passengers walked beside the vehicles moving rocks out of the path and scouting the best of the braided channels through the bushes.

Eventually, we arrived at the boat ramp, a muddy riverbank, with just a couple hours of daylight left. We rigged the boats until dark and then had a short and fire-less evening before crawling off to our tents. As expected, we encountered just a few mosquitoes. Sand Wash has some very nice enclosed shelters that can be rented during the insect infested months for those souls brave enough to do this trip during the summer. They stand as testimony to how bad the bugs can get.

Next morning, a Ranger named Paul checked us in promptly by 7:30 am, and informed us that the other group scheduled to launch that day had cancelled. So we would have no competition for campsites and could expect to have the river to ourselves. I should note that the Bureau of Land Management, for whom Paul works, is particularly strict about required gear. I find it interesting that the US Forest Service in Idaho is particularly interested in your toilet, fire pan, ash can, and strainer and such; the equipment to protect the environment. They must figure that if you're persistent enough to get a rare permit for an Idaho river, you must be able to take care of yourself. But the BLM pays only passing attention to those items and instead carefully counts and inspects life jackets, wants to inspect, literally, your first aid kit, and be convinced that the glue in your repair kit has not passed its shelf life. They also check to see that each boat has an extra oar, and every two IKs have an extra paddle. I'm not sure what this says about either agency, but you do need to have your equipment in order to do a Deso trip. And the penalty of not making the grade is an 'out and back' drive to Vernal, Utah to obtain missing items; one heck of a penalty indeed.

Upon passing Paul's inspection and lubricating him with some Seattle coffee snob coffee, we launched our three rafts and two IKs under crystal blue skies. That first day passed slowly and delightfully, drifting along the mocha-colored water at 2-3 miles per hour. We were aware that the current for the first quarter of the trip would be especially slow, so we rowed constantly to get beyond those first miles. The scenery was excellent with vistas of plateaus and ridgelines, and cliff faces plunging into the river. The scenery would continue to improve from there, as we approached, over the next day and a half, the canyon section of the run.

Our first night's camp was on the point, river right, as the river bends 90 degrees right, just above the Rock House area. While this unofficial 'beach' campsite had been

recommended to us, it turned out to be pretty muddy and infested with insects until the sun went down. But during the evening we were treated to a view of wild horses grazing in the floor of the Rincon across the river.

The next day, we made our way downstream to Jack Creek, where we made camp early in the afternoon and spent the rest of the day napping, exploring, and playing poker. As we moved downstream, the river had fully descended into the canyon country, with more striking geology and colors appearing with each mile. Surprisingly, the deeper we got, the more vegetation appeared on the cliffs and mountainsides, adding shades of green and sage to the reds, tans, and oranges of the rock. Both the camps at Jack Creek are excellent, but we particularly enjoyed the sand and grassy meadows under the tree canopy of the lower camp. We pitched a tight camp due to late afternoon wind.

The next morning, we packed the boats with excitement as we knew the geological feature known as Mushroom Rock was just a mile downstream. I took hundreds of pictures of it that will eventually be uploaded to Microsoft's PhotoSynth website, where the wonders of Mushroom Rock can be enjoyed and explored by all in glorious 3D. The rock is, as the name implies, a relatively squatty tower in the middle of a boulder and sage strewn plain. And upon its base, directly on the 'shaft' of the mushroom, are pictographs left by the Fremont culture over a thousand years ago. Mushroom rock is the confluence of remarkable and striking geology and a set of wonderful ancient diagrams. And around the base are the remains of Fremont grain storage bins.

Back to the boats, a drenching water fight, and then on we went. By this time, we had left the bugs behind. We had lunch at the Flat Canyon pictographs, a great and broad panel of wild figures and Fremont designs. Unfortunately, the section of river bank above and including the area around these pictographs had burned three weeks earlier when a plane crashed beside the river. Paul had mentioned that the pilot survived and they had extracted the wreckage, but almost a mile of the river corridor is now scared and blackened in this area.

That day, we made it to Steer Ridge campsite, just below Steer Ridge rapid. In the afternoon the weather gradually deteriorated with the threat of thunderstorms as had been predicted.

Steer Ridge is a nice big sandy beach camp. However, at the water level we were running, about 2600 CFS, the beach transitions to mud right at the water level. So getting into and out of the boats became a pretty messy undertaking and all our gear suffered. While we had not pitched our big kitchen tarp (400 sq ft) to its maximum height because of the wind the previous night, we did so this night. We expected rain but not wind.

While we had been watching the sky all afternoon, the lightening started just as I put the chicken on the BBQ, under the shelter of the tarp. We were preoccupied by the fact that the meat was still completely frozen; we had forgotten to pull it out of our cold cooler earlier in the day. As I dealt with this issue, I remember everyone else standing out on the beach, watching the lightening show to the west of us. And then, to our growing concern,

we felt the breeze freshen. Just as we started to worry about the shelter, we realized a dark gray wall was rushing upstream at us from the south. In a moment it was on us, blowing sand horizontally, flattening the tents, and scattering our camp gear. The first blast was followed quickly by heavy horizontal rain. It was all we could do, with everyone holding onto an oar, to keep the shelter upright. Eventually, as the gusts continued to increase, and the rain poured down, the steel stakes started to let go, and we pushed the oar blades out and pulled the tarp down on our heads.

And we just hung on, and on, and on, for gust after gust. All the while I was sucking smoke, with the tarp across my back, and my chest bent over the BBQ, trying to save our dinner. Eventually, the wind let up and the rain stopped, but our camp was in shambles. One tent, staked and with gear inside, had been blown down the shoreline. Poles were broken and the fly was ripped. The big shelter had suffered a hole where an oar handle had pushed through it. A stream was now running under another tent. Everything was either sandy, soaked, or both. And we had one sprained ankle. Our tent, while it nicely withstood the wind, was full of fine sand and grit. And a new recipe was born: Sandy Thunder Chicken... hopefully, never to be repeated. The only thing I can say about it is that it can sharpen your teeth, if not your appetite.

The rain began again, and it poured all night. While the next day dawned OK, as we got back onto the river, the thunderheads were building once again. We stopped late in the morning to get water at Rock Creek. While some of us filled the jugs, the rest hiked the two miles up the creek to yet another pictograph panel. This one is said to be the best in the canyon. Unfortunately, I was on the filtering crew, but did hike up to meet the others coming down. Just as we got back to the boats, the second storm hit and we hid in the shelter of some rocks and made lunch in our rain gear.

Rock Creek is a gorgeous little canyon, very much like Jones Hole below where the Yampa joins the Green. If I were a Fremont Indian a couple thousand years ago, this is certainly where I would hang out, and they did. The ancients had excellent taste when it came to landscapes.

We camped that night at Lion Hollow and endured more rain, but no major wind. It poured rain the entire afternoon after leaving Rock Creek. But the scenery was gorgeous, especially the area around Three Canyon. (I will try to camp there and explore next time.) And all along the way we were treated to yet more geological wonders including hoodoos in the canyons and natural arches high up on the ridge lines. But we were a wet bunch as we made camp with our still-soaked gear from the previous night's storm at Steer Ridge.

Morning at Lion Hollow dawned with improving weather and it continued to clear up as we proceeded downstream. The highlight of the day was the recently enhanced rapid at Joe Hutch Canyon. Earlier in the summer, the creek had flashed and the river channel was now very constricted. To this point I haven't mentioned rapids because there really aren't any, at least by Idaho standards. But here was something to pay attention to. This rapid will change constantly over the next couple of years so there is no point in explaining or describing the details. One of our rafts did get stuck on a rock for a few

minutes, and one of our IK-ers swam. But it was fun to finally get some whitewater excitement.

That day, we easily made it to our goal, the second of the “Above Wire Fence” camps. Upon arriving, we dried our gear over a couple acres of sage brush and our spirits picked up. The Wire Fence area is strikingly beautiful, with vistas of tall rock towers and plateaus reminding me of Monument Valley near the Utah-Arizona border where many old western movies were filmed.

The next day was a short one, requiring only that we make 6 miles to Range Creek. But it started off with a bang with Three Fords Rapid, another of the more serious sections of the trip.

We soon arrived at Range Creek and set up camp just below the mouth of the creek. This site has a very nice sandy area under shade trees. We passed the afternoon bathing and hanging out and playing our usual games.

With weather fast improving, we set a goal of getting up early to catch the sun rise from the top of the Three Golden Stairs, which is a ridge behind camp. The ridge forms the south side of the Range Creek drainage and culminates at a peak that affords a wonderful 360 degree view of the surrounding territory, including a great vista back up into Desolation Canyon. Note that this is the same Range Creek that made national headlines a few years ago when rancher Waldo Wilcox sold his ranch on Range Creek to the State of Utah. His goal was to preserve its wealth of unique archeological sites that his family had protected from prying eyes throughout the twentieth century.

So my wife Carla, our daughter Lisa, and her buddy Rachel and I rolled out of bed at first light and hiked to the top of the stairs. We reached the peak just as the sun hit the top and enjoyed one of those “too bad for everyone else on the planet” sorts of moments, as we watched the awesome and lonesome landscape light up around us.

Range Creek is pretty much on the demarcation line between the Desolation Canyon and the Gray Canyon sections of the trip. To say this area is some sort of flat intermission between two canyons does not really do it justice. No sooner do you leave Deso behind, but the Roan Cliffs rise up and welcome you into Gray Canyon. While not nearly as deep, Gray Canyon is certainly wildly rugged and brings a whole new palette of colors, including black coal seams and deep shades of burgundy and gray.

We reached Nefertiti Rock at about noon and proceeded in the slowing current down to our last campsite, just above Sand Knolls. It was a nice little beach at the mouth of the Sand Knoll Canyon. But unfortunately we were back now in the grasp of civilization since a road follows the eastern shore all the way back up to Nefertiti. I don't care for camping where we can be waved at by passing vehicles!

Yes, Nefertiti Rock does look strikingly like the profile of the Egyptian queen. But my judgment is now forever polluted by my friend Duwain Whitis who points out in his new

RiverMaps Guidebook for Deso that a modern interpretation would be Bart Simpson. Yep, that too Duwain, that too.

In the morning, we made our way the last couple miles to the very nice BLM take-out facilities known as Swasey's, packed the gear, dumped the trash, and drove the 9 miles into the town of Green River Utah for a burger. As we headed back north to Seattle we began to plot our next Utah river trip.

As white water trips go, this one was pretty mild. But I could see how the few real rapids that there are could become much more formidable at certain levels. I will try to dodge the bugs but hit those levels next time by shooting for early May. Desolation and Gray Canyons provide a fine and mellow family river trip in September. Our IKs had no major problems with only one short 'out of boat' experience. But if there had been upstream winds, the situation would have been significantly different for the IKs and the rafts.

At this September level, it was a lot of work, requiring that we actively row maybe 80 of the 84 miles. Also note that this is a very remote trip, with relatively few other boating parties on the river. It is also a very muddy and messy trip. Be prepared to get dirty and there are not a lot of opportunities to get yourself or your gear particularly clean. And good water sources are pretty rare. We settled water from the river overnight and filtered it every morning. During our trip, the river was still very muddy from recent rainstorms (specifically the one that washed down the Sand Wash road prior to our arrival). But the scenery was outstanding and every bit as good as we had hoped for. In fact, my artist brother, who has run the Yampa, the Rogue, the entire Grand Canyon, as well as most of the Salmon system in Idaho declared Desolation Canyon to be the prettiest canyon he had ever seen. I wouldn't quite go that far, only because I just love them all.