

RETRACING THE STEPS OF THE UNDAUNTED PIONEERS

Introduction

To be in the actual places where great or tragic events have taken place can deeply move us intellectually, emotionally, *and* spiritually. The green fields of Gettysburg and the forested glades of the Sacred Grove are good examples of this. Elder Boyd K. Packer once made this interesting observation: “Inspiration comes easier when you can set foot on the site related to the need for it” (*Brigham Young Magazine*, November 1995, 47). This “spirit of place” becomes a unique part of the travel experience.

In addition to crossing some of the most spectacular landscape in North America, the Hole-in-the-Rock trail features several spots that carry that spirit of place. Following in the footsteps of those courageous pioneers can not only fill us with awe but strengthen our own determination to follow their example as we face our own adversities.

This portion of the website is not designed to be a comprehensive trail guide to the Hole-in-the-Rock trail. It will provide only a brief introduction about the trail and offer links to other Internet sites and resources that will be helpful to those who desire to retrace the steps of those original pioneers.

Since some of the places are not marked with signs, or are off the beaten track, GPS coordinates have been included in the photo album on this site. Also, a larger scale map (such as the DeLorme atlas and gazetteer series) for Utah and Arizona will show roads and locations not found on a typical state highway map. You can also find a Google Earth file here on the website with many of the locations marked so that potential travelers can get a better idea of the area for each site.

Hole in the Rock, by David E. Miller (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 1959), is the most definitive history of the expedition. He gives much information about the trail and its relationship to current roads or landmarks. Those who want more information will find it profitable to take his book and a larger scale map and trace the route for themselves.

The trail is divided into five segments to facilitate this discussion:

- § **Exploring Expedition**
- § **Parowan to Escalante**
- § **Escalante to the Hole in the Rock**
- § **The Hole in the Rock to Salvation Knoll**
- § **San Juan Hill and Bluff City**

The entire trail from Paragonah to Bluff can be done in four or five days (not counting time traveling to southern Utah). Those in closer proximity to the area may choose to do it in two separate experiences, one for the west side and one for the east. The following information assumes doing it all in one trip.

Caution: The desert country of southern Utah is not a hospitable place. Words like *remote*, *dry and brutally hot*, and *unforgiving* are used to describe this country. The heat in the summer can be dangerously fierce, and thunderstorms or prolonged rains can swamp the many washes and canyons. Flash floods are a real possibility even if it isn't raining right where you are. Cell phone coverage, even between established towns, is spotty at best and all but nonexistent when off the beaten track. When going deep into desert country, it is wise to have more than one vehicle traveling together. Plenty of water is critical, especially if you are spending time outside in the heat. It is always wise to check with local residents about road conditions and other possible concerns before departure.

Exploring Expedition

In April 1879, a party of about two dozen men and two families, with four children each, left Parowan to explore a southern route to the San Juan River country. Even their small party soon realized that the Navajos did not like the idea of that many white men and their stock crossing their land and competing for the scarce water resources. On two occasions, violence nearly erupted. By the time they reached the San Juan River, Silas Smith, the leader of the expedition, realized they could never take a much larger party with hundreds of head of stock across that route.

Leaving the two families in simple homesteads at Montezuma Creek, the men of the exploring party returned home via a northern route through Moab, Green River, Castle Valley, and down Salina Canyon. They arrived back home in September, six months after they left. Based on their report, the Church leadership abandoned the idea of a southern route and determined to find a central route across the uncharted red rock country south of the Colorado River.

Since the route the exploring party followed was not used by the main company, no details for traveling that way are given here. Those interested in doing so can map the majority of the route from Miller's chapter on the exploring party (pp. 17–33), where he details their journey and often ties it to modern roads. It can also be seen with specific GPS coordinates on the Google Earth file found here on the website.

Parowan to Escalante

Since families were called from many different settlements in southern and central Utah, everyone did not start from the same place. However, there was a large contingent from Cedar City, and they joined up with another significant number of people and wagons from Parowan (about 20 miles north) and Paragonah (6 miles farther on from that). Here the three groups joined into the largest single company, consisting of about 60 wagons and about 150 people.

Their route to Escalante followed established wagon roads and was for the most part quite uneventful. Much of the route they took is close to or on modern paved highways or well-graded gravel roads. These can be traversed easily by automobile.

§ A short distance north of Paragonah is the entrance to Little Creek Canyon, which begins the road they followed. A gravel road going north from Paragonah parallels the mountain. Turn east on Forest Road 077, Little Creek Canyon Road. Six or seven miles up

the canyon, the road forks. The left fork is Upper Bear Valley Road (FR 077).

§ About 12–13 miles from the fork, the gravel road joins Utah Highway 20. Turn right and follow Highway 20 to US 89 at Bear Valley Junction. Turn right again and go to Panguitch.

§ In Panguitch, follow the signs for US 89. About 8 miles southeast of Panguitch, take Utah Highway 12 (which is the main road to Bryce Canyon and on to Escalante). All of this paved road follows the original trail for the most part.

§ The current highway passes through Red Canyon, just as the pioneers did. There is a visitors' center just inside Red Canyon and some pleasant hiking trails—a good place for children to get out and stretch their legs.

§ Turn left at the junction near Ruby's Inn onto Utah Highway 22 to Antimony. (A right turn takes you into Bryce Canyon.) About 11 miles north is Widtsoe Junction. (Note: If you were to continue north past Antimony to Highway 62 and bear to the right, you would pass through Grass Valley, where the three Navajo braves were murdered by white men as described in chapter 15 of the novel).

§ Turn right at Widtsoe into Escalante Canyon (FH 17). It is 7 to 8 miles to the top and a beautiful mountain drive. At the top (which is over 9,000 feet) there is an overlook where you can see across to the Escalante Desert and the Straight Cliffs in the distance. The pioneers hit snow across Escalante Mountain, but passed on without much difficulty.

§ Continue on FH 17, which becomes Main Canyon. This leads all the way down and rejoins Highway 12 just 3 or 4 miles west of Escalante.

§ For more information on Escalante and the area around it, see www.escalante-cc.com; www.utah.com/escalante/; www.goutah.com/escalante. By searching on Google or Yahoo using Escalante Utah, Panguitch Utah, and so on, other sites can be found.

Escalante to Hole in the Rock

By the time they reached Escalante, a few other small groups were beginning to join the main company. Stopping only a day or two to rest, repair, and restock, the pioneers turned southeast into the Escalante Desert. At this time, Escalante was the farthest settlement to the east; there was nothing now between them and the Four Corners area. That hasn't changed much since then. Once you leave Escalante, there are no farms, no homes, no restrooms or other facilities along the trail.

What follows is a description of how to reach the Hole in the Rock by vehicle. The Hole can also be accessed from Lake Powell and hiked up from the bottom.

§ There is an excellent visitors' center for the Grand Escalante Staircase National Monument on the west end of Escalante on Highway 12. In addition to providing maps and other brochures, they are an excellent source of current conditions in the area. Ask specifically for the map that includes the Hole-in-the-Rock Trail.

§ One Web site that is particularly valuable for the trail is the Grand Escalante Staircase site (www.ut.blm.gov/monument). Another excellent source of information is www.americansouthwest.net. From the main page, follow the links to Utah, then Grand Staircase Escalante, then Hole-in-the-Rock Trail.

§ Since traveling to the Hole and spending enough time to hike down it and to visit the other sites along the way is a full-day experience, most travelers will want to travel to

Escalante and stay there the night before.

§ The turnoff to the Hole-in-the-Rock road is about 5 miles east of Escalante on Highway 12 and is clearly marked. (It is BLM road 1862.) From the highway to the Hole is about 55 miles.

§ The road is well graded and maintained and easily passable by automobile to Forty Mile Spring. The next 10 miles pass through numerous deep washes, and the road is somewhat rougher. Lower vehicle clearance might be a problem in a few places.

§ For the last 5 miles to the Hole, the road is not regularly maintained and crosses long stretches of hard pan rock base, which are very rough and may take close to an hour to traverse. Several short stretches along that last portion require a high-clearance, 4WD vehicle to traverse.

§ There are numerous trail markers—wooden stakes with a white covered-wagon symbol—along the route, many alongside the road, indicating that much of the way down you are close to or actually on the trail. In a few places along the way, by walking a short distance out into the sagebrush, you can actually see faint remnants of the two-trace trail.

§ The pioneers camped at springs along the way, which are found at about 10-mile intervals (and which are named Ten Mile Spring, Twenty Mile Spring, and so on), but most of these are not accessible to vehicles.

§ There are three basic sites connected to the pioneers that should be visited: Dance Hall Rock (about 40 miles in), Forty Mile Spring (another mile to the southeast), and the Hole in the Rock itself.

§ Dance Hall Rock and Forty Mile Spring both have road signs marking the turnoffs. Dance Hall Rock has a good interpretive marker at the small parking area. The final drop into Forty Mile Spring is somewhat steep and may cause an automobile to high center, but it is an easy walk down to the spring, where the stockmen have fenced off the water source.

§ The Hole in the Rock is a spectacular site to visit. There is an interpretive marker at the top with a small turnaround and parking area about fifty to sixty yards from the top of the cleft itself.

§ As you reach the top of the narrow defile, note how the white sandstone ridge cliff had to be blasted away to make way for the wagons. This is very narrow and very steep. A short distance into the cleft, on the left side, a drill hole is still visible among the graffiti there. About 40 to 50 feet down, the rock descent ends in a cliff face about 10 feet high on one side and 6 on the other.

§ It has been about 130 years now since the road was made, and erosion has washed out much of the original fill that provided a smoother base for the wagons. There are also places where rocks have fallen from above and partially blocked the way, so there is no way that a wagon could go down the cleft now.

§ Much of the path down through the Hole is quite steep (a 40- to 50-degree grade), and some places are narrow and difficult to climb over in either direction. But it is well worth the effort.

§ About two-thirds of the way down, the remains of “Uncle Ben’s Dugway” can be seen. The road builders ran into another vertical drop. They were short on black powder and couldn’t blast a road through it. So a Welsh coal miner by the name of Ben Perkins devised a way to literally tack a road built of logs, brush, and fill dirt onto the side of the cliff face. (For

the story of the Dugway, see chapter 60 in the novel.) Look for the narrow “shelf” track cut into the side of the cliff for the inside wagon wheels, the spots where rocks were stacked to build up the road to the required level, and some of the holes drilled to hold the supporting posts.

§ There are two other sites along the Hole in the Rock road worth mentioning, though the pioneers make no reference to either. But for those traveling with families, these are fun places to spend some time.

§ The first is Devil’s Garden. This is an area with two arches and unusual rock formations (similar to Goblin Valley in Utah). There is a picnic area at the site. The turnoff is about 12 miles south of Highway 12 on the west side of the road and is clearly marked.

§ About 26 miles in from the highway, a short road to the east provides access to two delightful slot canyons known as Peek-a-Boo and Spooky Canyons. The sign says Dry Canyon, Trailhead 1.7 miles.

§ There are other popular places to visit in the Escalante area, including Calf Creek Falls. See the national monument Web site noted above. Lodging, food, and other services in Escalante can be found by searching on Google or Yahoo under Escalante Utah.

The Hole in the Rock to Salvation Knoll

SPECIAL NOTE OF EXPLANATION

When the pioneers descended through the Hole in the Rock, then ferried across the Colorado River, they continued on eastward through even rougher country than before. It was a hopeless tangle of precipitous gorges, twisting canyons and washes, and endlessly undulating sandstone hill country.

But we are going to skip the next 30-mile portion of the trail in this section. While it is unquestionably as spectacular and astonishing as what we have covered so far, no detailed travel information for that part is given here. That requires some explanation.

Unlike the other parts of the trail described here, this stretch can be traversed only on ATVs or in specially equipped, high-clearance, 4WD vehicles. The trail is ranked by ATV experts as a 6, which is “difficult.” It is grueling, demanding, and can even be dangerous if one is not properly prepared. You will be out of cell phone range for virtually the entire time. It is not unusual to spend two or three days out there and not see anyone else, so you should never do it with only one vehicle. If you have a breakdown, get lost, or experience a medical emergency, getting help is a challenge. Even those who know the trail best occasionally miss a turn and have to backtrack because so much of the trail is over hard rock surface and is not easily discernible.

Due to the risks involved for the less experienced traveler, we strongly recommend that you explore this part of the trail *only* with someone who is an experienced guide. If you need a commercial guide service, the only one we know of that offers such services over the trail is Black Hawk Transportation in Blanding (follow the “Tourism” link on www.blandingutah.org). They provide escorted tours, including overnight experiences with meals, as well as ATV rentals. You may wish to check Moab rental and guide sites as well, but Moab is over 100 miles away, and we could not find any that advertised escorted trips to the Hole in the Rock.

For further information on the individual sites along that part of the trail, see David E. Miller’s excellent book on the Hole in the Rock, or visit the Hole in the Rock Foundation's Web site (see www.hirf.org). We have also marked the key places and the trail itself in the Google Earth file located on this website. GPS coordinates can be taken from Google Earth as well, and can be found in the list at the end of this part of the website.

Since visiting the Hole in the Rock and the sites along the way is a full-day experience, staying a second night in the Escalante area is the usual procedure. Upon departure, head north from Escalante to Boulder on Highway 12 (about 25 miles). This highway is considered one of the premier scenic routes in North America. The trip over the “Hogsback” is spectacular though

a bit of a stomach-twister.

§ At Boulder, turn right on the Burr Trail, which is marked. Travel that across to Highway 276. The Burr Trail is 68 miles long and passes through portions of Grand Escalante Staircase National Monument and Capitol Reef National Park, providing some spectacular scenery. The upper end is paved, but the rest is well maintained and easily traversed by automobile. A series of steep, sharp switchbacks at Waterpocket Fold is not recommended for motor homes or trailers of substantial length. Weather conditions can close the road anytime during the year, so local inquiry should be made. (Search on Burr Trail Utah or Boulder Utah for several sites giving excellent details on Burr Trail.) Both ends of the Burr Trail have been marked on Google Earth, and the appropriate GPS coordinates are given below.

§ The Burr Trail joins Highway 276 just 4 miles above Bullfrog Marina and Hall's Crossing. Take the automobile ferry across Lake Powell. The ferry at Hall's Crossing runs on a set schedule, which varies with the season. Weather may cancel or delay crossing times. The ferry is operated by the Utah Department of Transportation, and more information can be found by searching on "Hall's Crossing Ferry" on www.udot.utah.gov. Also see www.nps.gov/glca/planyourvisit/lake-powell-marinas.htm. See the list of GPS coordinates below for exact locations.

§ NOTE: If the Burr Trail is not passable, you can go around to Bullfrog by continuing north on Highway 12 to Torrey, then turning east on Highway 24 east to Hanksville, then taking Highway 95 south to Highway 276, then going on to Bullfrog. If the ferry schedule is not convenient (or it isn't running), stay on Highway 95 and cross the Colorado River via the bridge at Hite Crossing. However, this latter option will require that you backtrack about 30 miles on Highway 276 to see some of the pioneer sites.

§ There are three sites on the route from Hall's Crossing to Blanding that involve the Hole-in-the-Rock pioneers. All are next to the paved highway and easily accessible. The GPS coordinates for each of these sites are given in the chart at the end of this section.

1. *Castle Ruins*. As the four scouts sent to find the road to San Juan made their way eastward, they discovered some impressive Cliff Dweller ruins, which they named Castle Ruins. They stayed here overnight, then continued on following the old Cliff Dwellers' trail. The ruins are about 12 to 13 miles east of Cal Black Airport on the left, or north, side of the highway (about 30 miles from the junction with Highway 95 if you're coming from the east). They are easy to miss if the light is not just right, but there are places to pull off the road, and it is worth the short, easy hike over to see them.

2. *Clay Hill Pass*. This pass provided the only way for wagons to cross through to the east, but it was steep and especially treacherous because of the clay in the soil, which becomes very slippery when wet. It is just 3 to 4 miles east of the ruins. A turnout at the top of the pass allows a short hike down to see the remnants of the pioneer road. Look carefully, and you can see several trail markers. There is also a large stone a short distance down with the inscription "Make Peace with God." It is not known who made the inscription or when it was made. There is a spacious turnout on the south side of the road a short distance below the pass itself, with an interpretive sign that briefly describes what happened here.

3. *Salvation Knoll*. Near the junction of Highways 276 and 95 is a small, conical knoll

beside Highway 95. Here the four scouts sent to find a road ran out of food and were totally lost in heavy snowstorms. They despaired of surviving, and their demise would have created a crisis for the main company as well. On Christmas Day 1879, after praying for help, and with clear weather at last, the scouts climbed the knoll and from there saw the Blue Mountains and Comb Ridge, which were the landmarks they needed to find their way through. There is a turnout on the south side of the highway with an interpretive sign. It is worth the climb even partway up to see the vantage point it provides for the country around it.

§ Once your visit to Salvation Knoll is completed, continue on to Blanding via Highway 95. Blanding, which is the largest town in San Juan County, has several food and housing options. Even before you reach Salvation Knoll, you have passed the point where the pioneers turned south, so the rest of the way into Blanding does not follow the pioneer route. That portion of the trail which you will miss is marked on the Google Earth site.

San Juan Hill and Bluff City

Up to this point, we have followed the trail basically in the same order as the pioneers did. Now, however, we will do the last portion in the opposite direction.

The first exploring party, which took the southern route to the Four Corners area, left two families at Montezuma Creek, which is about 17 miles east of Bluff. So the intended destination of the main company was Montezuma Creek. But after being on the trail nearly six months (when they had planned on six weeks) and building roads through some of the roughest terrain on the continent, they were utterly spent and exhausted by early April 1880. Crossing Comb Ridge at San Juan Hill sapped the last of their strength and determination. When they reached the flat bottom country along the San Juan River at the current site of Bluff, they simply stopped there and decided that would be where they made their settlement. They sent someone on to Montezuma Creek to let the two families know they had arrived.

§ A departure out of Blanding by 8:00 A.M. will allow you to accomplish all of what is described below by mid-afternoon if you wish.

§ Travel from Blanding down to Bluff via U.S. 191 (about 20 miles). As you enter Bluff, to the right you will see the Navajo Twins, a unique rock formation near the local trading post.

§ Historic Bluff is on the west side of town right on the highway. Here you can see the remains of Fort Montezuma, a replica of the meetinghouse built by pioneers, and several cabins reconstructed by various descendant groups of the original pioneers. The original Barton cabin still stands, and one of the wagons that came across with the first pioneers is nearby. There are numerous excellent interpretive signs on the site.

§ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints maintains a small visitors' center on site that has an excellent video on the Hole-in-the-Rock experience. The site of Old Bluff City is well worth a stop and children will have an enjoyable time here.

§ Also in Bluff you can see Jens Nielson's home and several grave sites of the original pioneers in the Bluff Cemetery, which is on a hill on the northwest of town. (Inquire at the visitors' center for more information if you need directions.)

§ Continue west on U.S. 191. Three miles west of Bluff, 191 turns south, whereas U.S. 163 goes straight. Take U.S. 163 by going straight on. In another few miles, the highway

takes a dramatic cut through Comb Ridge and drops down into Comb Wash. As the pioneers came down from the flanks of Elk Mountain, they ran into the natural barrier of Comb Ridge. They followed Comb Wash south to the San Juan River, hoping to find a way where the river had cut through the ridge. But the water was too high, and they had no choice but to make one last road up and over. They called it San Juan Hill. (See the information on the interactive map for more detail.)

§ As you reach the bottom of the cut through the ridge, there is a BLM road to the left where vehicles can pull off and unload ATVs. However, it has limited space, and after about another half a mile, another road takes off to the left and leads to a much larger parking area.

§ San Juan Hill is only about 4 miles south of the highway. However, the majority of the BLM road follows Comb Wash. In wet weather, this can easily become impassable. In dry weather, it is filled with areas of deep sand. ATVs or 4WD vehicles are required. (One short stretch coming up out of the wash is rough and typically requires that you be in 4 low if you're driving an SUV. (Lower ground clearance SUVs, such as "crossovers," will have difficulty there.)

§ The base of San Juan Hill is a short distance up and out of Comb Wash. There is an interpretive sign there. A hike to the top is recommended and can be done even with children as young as age five or six if accompanied by adults. It is well worth the effort. Watch for where the pioneers built up the road with masonry to level it out, and one place where they cut pick marks into the rock to provide a better grip for the teams.

§ Near the top, in the rock wall to the right, an inscription cut into the stone reads, "We Thank Thee Oh God." It is not known for sure when that was made or who made it. Some think it was done much later, but it so perfectly represents the spirit of these pioneers that it is worth seeing. It is much eroded and difficult to see at first. Putting a little water on it helps make it more legible. (See the photos included with the interactive map to see what you are looking for.)

§ About half a mile east of San Juan Hill is another beautiful, well-preserved cliff dwelling. On the overhanging rock above it, there are numerous petroglyphs. Once you reach the main dwellings, continue along the rock shelf to the left another fifty yards or so to see a smaller ruin.

§ Southern Utah contains a treasure trove of wonderful places to visit, especially for families. In addition to the better-known places (Zion, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Arches, and Capitol Reef National Parks, and Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument), there are other sites that should be mentioned. All of these are found on the Google Earth file found in this website and/or have the GPS coordinates listed in the table below. These include Goblin Valley, Natural Bridges National Monument, Devil's Garden, Calf Creek Falls, Valley of the Gods, Monument Valley, Goosenecks of the San Juan, and the Four Corners Monument.

OTHER NEARBY TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

These include lesser known sites and not the National Parks like Arches, Canyonlands, etc.

Goblin Valley	38 34 22.99	110 42 50.12	This is a great place for kids of all ages.
Goblin Valley turnoff Hwy 24	38 37 47.82	110 34 07.43	
Natural Bridges Natl. Mon.	37 36 34.11	109 58 43.97	Visitor's Center
Nat. Bridges Natl. Mon (turnoff)	37 34 53.65	109 54 51.44	This is Hwy 275
Valley of the Gods	37 18 52.17	109 51 20.82	This is a beautiful drive through red rock canyons and has hiking trails as well
Valley of Gods (east entry)	37 14 05.81	109 48 51.52	
Valley of Gods (west entry)	37 15 48.30	109 56 02.32	
Goosenecks of the San Juan	37 10 77.98	109 55 38.31	Spectacular views of the San Juan River Gorge
Four Corners Monument	36 59 58.44	109 02 45.72	