

Little Wild Horse Canyon

A SLOT CANYON HIKE, POST FLASHFLOOD Little Wild Horse Canyon By Senor Rojo To be caught hiking in any of Utah's many slot canyons during a flash flood can be, more often than not, catastrophic. To brave a slot when spring, summer or fall thunderstorms are predicted to occur anywhere nearby is indeed not bravery, but stupidity. Anyone who has viewed the aftermath of a flash flood through a narrow, steep-walled canyon, or has witnessed the event from high ground, knows the raw power and incredible hydraulics created by onrushing rainwater funneling into the slot from miles away. Huge rocks rolled downstream. Large trees snapped like twigs. Sturdy, gnarly tamarisk growth bent ninety degrees, their roots clinging to the riverbank.

Not a good place for a hiker to be.

After a flood, one of the best places for a hiker to be.

Senor Rojo and Senora Karina, his wife of many hiking seasons, accompanied as usual by Koko, their faithful Golden Retriever, were fortunate to schedule a hike into Little Wild Horse Canyon in the San Rafael Swell a few days after violent thunderstorms and torrential rains created major flash floods in washes, canyons and arroyos throughout central and southern Utah.

Overnighting in the central Utah town of Green River to assure an early start, Rojo and Karina arose to a glorious and sun-drenched mid-September morning. No storms in sight. A severe clear with no chance for improvement! Koko, a strong trail runner, (when we go ten miles, she goes fifteen) was hyped and rarin' to go. After spending the night in the pickup, she sensed a day of adventure.

Most, no, all Utah slots are beautiful, mystical. After a flash flood, they are even more so. This day, Little Wild Horse was exceptionally beautiful and mystical. The rocky washes leading into the canyon were moist and cool. Rushing water had scoured the canyon floor. No footprints. No dry sand or hot slickrock underfoot. Koko could run forever without the fear of burning pads. And clear, clean rainwater in pools every 50 yards in which she could laze, wallow and drink. Canine paradise! The patterns in the sand created by the rushing waters a few days before were truly a work of nature's art. The desert foliage clinging to canyon walls contrasted a brilliant green against the red rock. Little Wild Horse on this day had been transformed into a new landscape, and we three were the fortunate first to see and experience the transformation.

Located in Utah's Castle Country, Little Wild Horse Canyon and the connecting Bell Canyon are within a wilderness study area where no vehicles or mountain bikes are allowed. Most slot canyoneers, boulderers and narrows aficionados head to the better-known venues; Zion National Park, the slots outside Moab, and the Paria River canyons. But Little Wild Horse and Bell, when hiked together form a loop, provide some great entry-level canyoneering terrain suitable for families, kids and groups with limited or no climbing skills. No ropes required, no rappelling. Some pool crossings at certain times of the year, but nothing extreme except the extreme beauty. The loop route is just less than nine miles and can easily be completed in about five hours. Go, if you can, on a picture-perfect day after a major flash flood.

A FEW WORDS OF CAUTION

When hiking, canyoneering or mountain biking in Utah's backcountry, two extremes can ruin your day, or worse; too much water or not enough water. The former refers to flashfloods, the latter to what you need to drink.

Some guidelines regarding flash floods:

1. Check the weather the night before, and again the morning of your planned adventure. If the forecast calls for thundershowers or storms any time near when you will be in a slot canyon, don't go.
2. Summer storms usually (that means not always) build up in the afternoon. If possible hike early in the day.
3. It can be clear as a bell in the canyon where you're hiking, but danger lurks many miles away if thunderstorms crop up. If you hear thunder even from a distance, get out or get to high ground immediately.
4. Best not to go it alone, but if you choose to, tell someone where you'll be, when you're going, and what time you're expecting to be out, and call them when you're out. Cell phones don't work very well in canyons and slots.
5. Know where the nearest high ground is at all times, behind or ahead. Flash floods can put in 20 or more vertical feet of water into a slot in minutes. Rushing water and debris can crush anything in its path. Don't even think about outrunning or swimming through a flash in a narrow section of a slot. Nobody, nobody, is that fast or that strong.
6. Carry enough food, water and gear to survive until the flood subsides, which leads us to:

Some guidelines regarding drinking water in Utah's arid canyons, deserts and backcountry:

1. A gallon a day per person is a good guideline, plus or minus depending on the person, route, duration of the adventure, heat of the day. When in doubt, err on the plus side.
2. Know in advance if there is water along the route, and carry a portable, lightweight purifier. You can catch a common backcountry disease called giardia from drinking unpurified water. Giardia sucks! Many good and reasonable priced purifiers are available at outdoor stores. However, that being said, only in an extreme emergency should you disturb rainwater that has collected in a pothole in slickrock or cryptobiotic soil. It is the lifeblood of plant and animal life in the desert, and they were there before you.
3. If you have consumed about 40% of water you are carrying, and you don't have certain knowledge of any potable water down the trail, turn back. It's probably getting hotter with less shade, you may be going back uphill, and your body probably needs more fluids.
4. Check from time to time on how much water your buddies have. Same goes for other trail users you meet along the way. Share, if necessary.
5. Use common sense. Remember when packing that one can survive a lot longer stranded in the backcountry without food than without water. Even if you think that you have enough, never "dump" water until you're back out, your car starts, and you're back on your way to base camp or home.