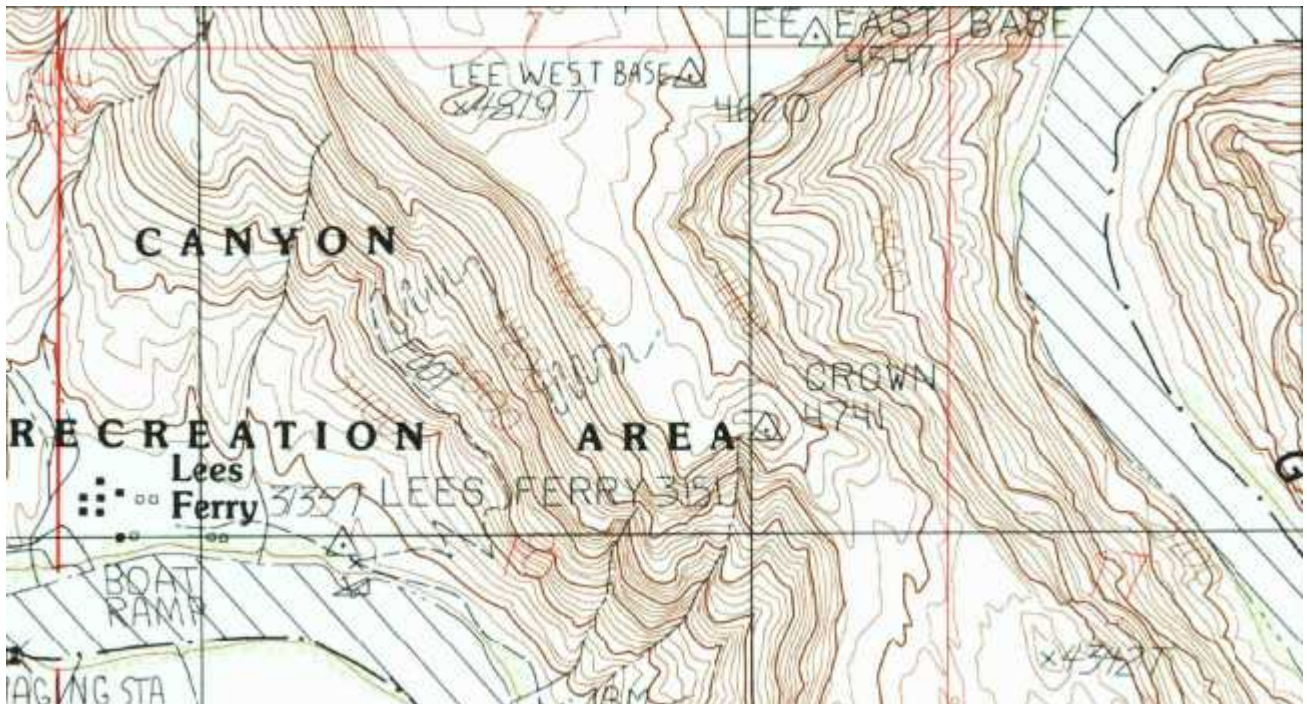


Vermilion Cliffs Region of Arizona
Spencer Trail to Horseshoe Bend Hike – March 17 2020
Evan Rose

While staying in the Marble Canyon / Lee's Ferry area, I had already hiked Spencer Trail twice before deciding to hike to Horseshoe Bend. I noticed that Spencer Trail afforded access to Horseshoe Bend by a route that would easily fit in one day. For this hike I used topo maps that I downloaded into Backcountry Navigator. For this report I downloaded a selection of maps from USGS Topoview. <https://ngmdb.usgs.gov/topoview>

Drive to Lee's Ferry and park upstream from the boat launching dock. Follow a trail along the Colorado River that takes you to the Spencer Trail trailhead. Climb that well-marked trail to the top. The trail is about two miles long with 1700 feet of elevation gain. There is significant rock debris on the trail, but no blockages.

I started my hike around 9:30 AM and finished around 7 PM. Once at the top of Spencer Trail, I depended on Backcountry Navigator to find my way. There are some rudimentary tracks in this area, but they are difficult to follow and don't go to Horseshoe Bend. The key to the route is to hike northwest away from the top of Spencer Trail and then to hike northeast toward a side canyon of the Colorado River. The complication is that this side canyon has cliffs to the south. One must hike far enough north to find a place to cross the canyon. In hiking north, however, one increases the distance to Horseshoe Bend.



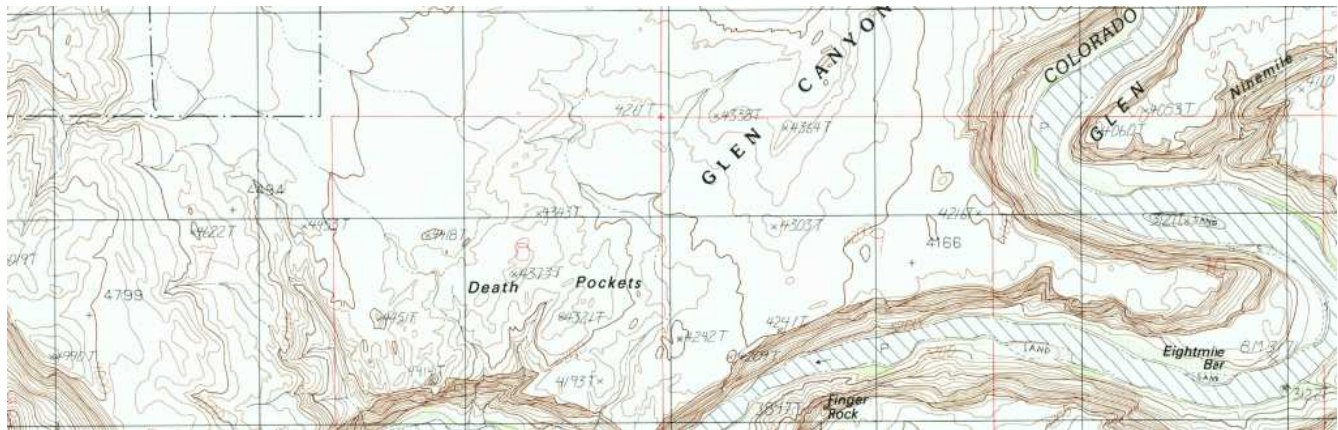
This map shows the route of Spencer Trail from the boat ramp to the top of the plateau. Note that the trail fades away after reaching the top of the plateau. (Lee's Ferry quad topo map)



Spencer Trail and a view south to the Lee's Ferry Boat Ramp.



Here is more of the same topo map, showing the large bend in the Colorado River to the southeast of Spencer Trail. This area might also make for a good hike with views of the Colorado River from above.



This map shows the area north of Spencer Trail. The area just north of Eightmile Bar is Horseshoe Bend. The small canyon just west of Death Pockets must be crossed. (Ferry Swale quad topo map)



Evan Rose at the top of Spencer Trail.
The cairn consists of a pile of rocks with an upright pole.



The view looking southeast a short walk from the top of Spencer Trail.



Looking back to the top of Spencer Trail. This photo is useful for finding Spencer Trail on the hike out, because there is no established trail.



Looking north from the top of Spencer Trail toward a bend in the Colorado River.



Rock formations seen on the early part of the hike close to the small side canyon.



This is the small side canyon, which I crossed. To the left (north) is the head of the canyon. To the right (south) is a deep portion of the canyon with steep walls, becoming cliffs. I crossed to the right side of the sandy area in the center of the photo, then proceeded beyond and up a gully. The area to the left becomes much flatter, but represents a significant detour,

taking one north, when one really needs to go east to reach Horseshoe Bend. The hike down into this canyon is steep, but easily negotiated. The hike out on the other side is also easy.

On my return, I encountered this canyon again to the right (south) of this photo, where it was too steep to cross. I worked my way to the left (north), descending by way of the rocks to the right of the gully I climbed on my inbound hike.



This screen shot of my GPS (Backcountry Navigator) shows the canyon region. I hiked north to get around the deep and steep part of the canyon, stopped at Horseshoe 11:52 to take a photo of the canyon, then hiked across the canyon to Horseshoe 12:19. Walking east, I intersected a road at Horseshoe 12:28 Road, and I followed that for a short distance south, then continued walking east. On my way back, I took a more southerly route, passing Horseshoe 16:12 and then skirting hill 4400.

The Death Pockets portion of the hike was delightful, providing interesting geology for photos and easy hiking on rolling topography. I enjoyed seeing the cross bedding in the sandstone and pools of water. The photos in the following section are from the Death Pockets region.



Cross bedding in the eroded sandstone.



Two caverns in the rock.



Water pockets adorn the landscape. I didn't see any aquatic life in these water pockets.





I enjoyed seeing these cavities in the sandstone.



Here is a variety of textures in the cross bedded sandstone.



A cactus garden appears in a pocket of soil resting on the stone.



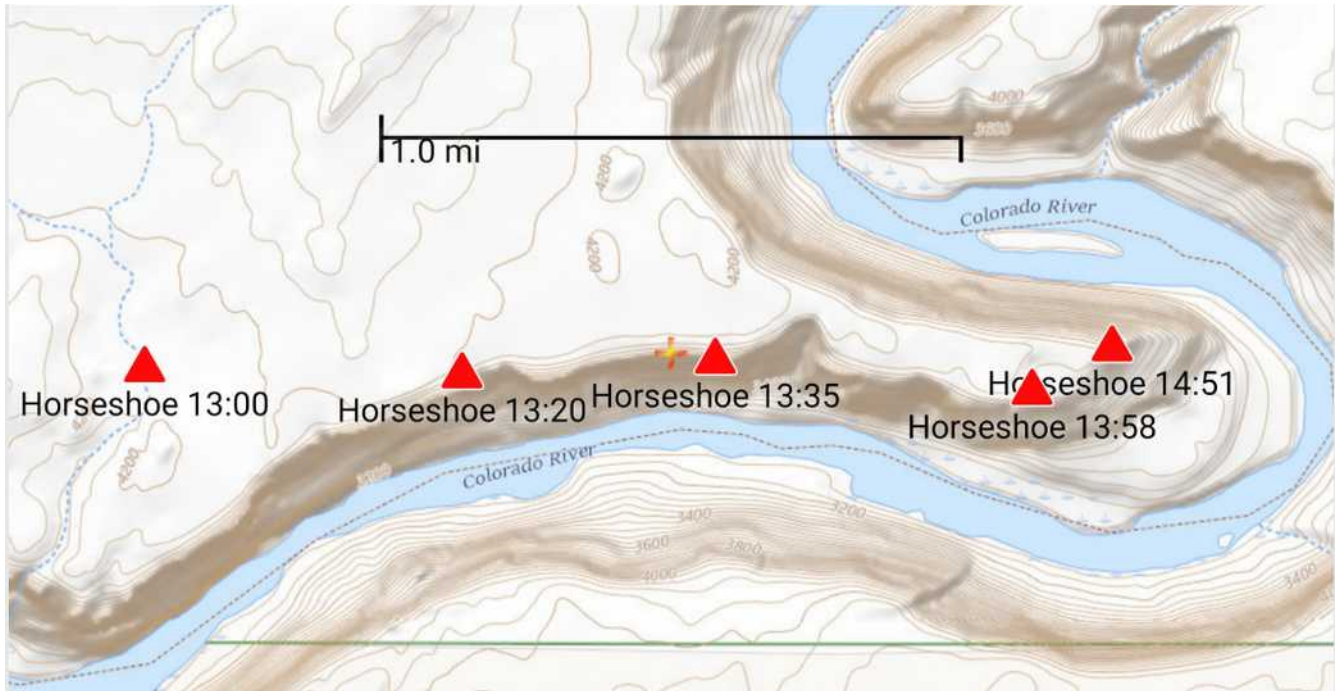
The textures in the stone were intriguing and attractive.



The mineral inclusions in this stone resemble fibers.



Another cactus garden in a soil pocket, this time in a landscape with a linear pattern.



Continuing east, I followed the cliffs to the north of the Colorado River, catching views of the river and approaching Horseshoe Bend. I spent some time at Horseshoe 13:58 eating lunch and enjoying the view. Because I had enough time, I decided to complete the hike to the tip of the bend at Horseshoe 14:51.



The view east toward Horseshoe 13:35



An extreme example of wind erosion on sandstone.



This view of Eightmile Bar combines the river view with cross bedded sandstone.



Here is a closer view of Eightmile Bar.



The clear water of the Colorado River below Glen Canyon Dam allows the growth of algae. At Horseshoe Bend the algae forms streaks in the river that parallel the direction of flow.

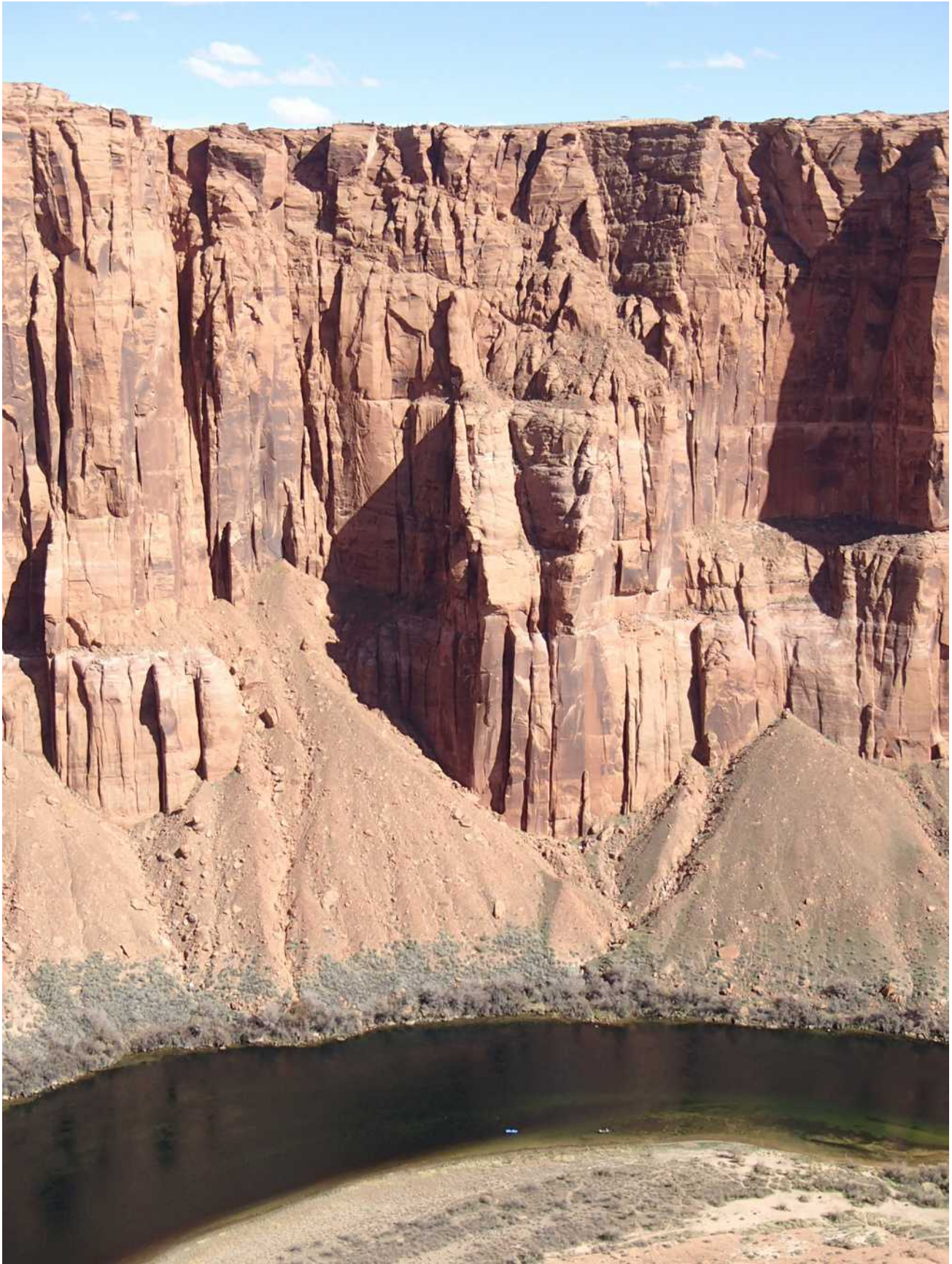


Looking east toward the standard viewpoint for Horseshoe Bend. People park and then take a short hike to the outside of the Bend. They can capture the iconic photo of Horseshoe Bend.

I wonder how many people have photos with me in them. Are they happy to get a unique photo with a person in it for scale, or did I spoil their shots? It's all in your sense of aesthetics, I suppose.



Looking down on Eightmile Bar from the inside of Horseshoe Bend.



Horseshoe Bend from the Inside with Boats



Viewing the Colorado River from Horseshoe Bend – downstream.

After enjoying Horseshoe Bend, I started hiking back to Spencer Trail. I walked west, but did not attempt to follow the path I took on the outward journey. I did not record a track on my smart phone, because I wanted to preserve my battery charge. Occasionally, I recognized my own footprints on the return hike. I did not see anybody else on this hike, although I did see the occasional footprint of a stranger.

On my return hike, after crossing the small side canyon and heading southwest, I went off course. I wasted time on this return hike, probably due to fatigue and loss of focus. The social trail leading back to the Spencer Trail was faint, and I was happy to walk in the general direction. The upshot was that I arrived at my car at 19:00 - about half an hour after sunset, but with enough twilight to walk without a headlamp. (I carried two headlamps.)

At the car, as I was changing my shoes, a ranger approached me. He was checking the parking lot and facilities. Overnight parking and camping is not allowed in the parking lot. I told him about my hike. He had not taken that hike, but was interested. He finished his patrol. I drove my car to the Lee's Ferry campground, where I was car-camping. (\$10 for seniors, toilets, but no showers).

I highly recommend this hike. It provides a full day's entertainment hiking through the photogenic landscapes. It has one bit of challenging route finding at the small side canyon. And it has Horseshoe Bend as its destination. One can reach a famous destination in a novel manner.