

San Rafael Desert Loop Auto Tour



**Moab Area Travel Council
Internet Brochure Series**
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Desert Loop Auto Tour. The loop drive will take you through a wide variety of terrain in the San Rafael Desert. The route includes spectacular overlooks hundreds of feet above the smoothly flowing Green River, shifting sand dunes, sculpted rock, and miles of open desert spaces with a background of distant mountain ranges. The desert is a harsh area where plants and animals struggle to survive. It is also a place of quiet beauty.

The route begins by paralleling the Green River as it flows south into Labyrinth Canyon. Along the way, there are several side trips with overlooks of the river. After veering west and away from the river, the loop takes you through Antelope Valley and then turns north to follow the spectacular San Rafael Reef via Utah Highway 24.

The total driving distance for this loop without side trips is approximately 100 miles, and a minimum of 4 hours is needed to complete the tour. South of the private land near the City of Green River, most of the country you will travel through is public land managed for multiple use by the United States Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the State of Utah's Division of State Lands and Forestry.

Road conditions will vary considerably along this route, depending on weather and maintenance, so find out about travel conditions at the Green River Visitor Center (located in the John Wesley Powell River History Museum) before

heading out. The main road is generally easily traversed by two-wheel-drive vehicles, except during and immediately after rainstorms. If you should find yourself in the middle of a downpour and the roads get muddy, simply stay put for a few hours.

The roads normally dry out in a few hours due to the low humidity of the area, but huge pools in the road that form during storms often do not dry out for days and can "swallow" vehicles, especially low clearance two-wheel-drive. Sand dunes are common along the route much of the year, particularly between the Keg Knoll turnoff and Highway 24. Don't stop in the middle of them! Keep your speed up and you should not have any trouble. During the winter months, precipitation can render the clay impossible for days and snow drifts also occasionally pose problems. Unless you have a four-wheel-drive vehicle, you should turn back. The side roads are generally for high-clearance or four-wheel-drive vehicles, unless stated otherwise.

Visitors to the San Rafael Desert should be prepared for very dry, remote conditions. Only 6 inches of precipitation fall annually and the dry air can cause rapid personal dehydration with little warning. Bring plenty of water (at least one gallon of drinking water per person per day), particularly if you plan to spend several days camping and exploring the side canyons. The only motor fuel available in the area is in the towns of Green River and Hanksville. Be sure you start with a full tank and a vehicle in good working condition.

There are no designated campsites or campgrounds along this tour. A few of the areas conducive to car camping are noted and described here as undeveloped campsites. Several wells and springs are also mentioned, but these waters have not been tested, so they should not be relied upon for drinking.

To find the starting point for this loop from the town of Green River, turn south from Main Street onto Broadway Street. As you approach the railroad tracks, turn left along them on Green River Avenue, and look for a sign marking the road to the local airport. This road will be your first opportunity to turn right and cross the

tracks. The road crosses under highway I-70 and the hard surface road soon turns into a gravel road. At a major fork, a BLM sign will direct you to take the left fork toward the San Rafael River. (The other fork goes to the airport.) This junction is the starting point of the tour. The circled numbers on the map correspond to the numbers that head the paragraphs in the following narrative, which describes side trips, junctions, and other points of interest. (In the first 15 miles there are several side roads that lead toward the Green River. These roads are not described here, however, because they traverse private property.)

- 1 -

Approximately 7 miles from the start, you will see on both sides of the road many varicolored hills and valleys shaped by years of erosion. These are claystones and mudstones that comprise part of the Morrison formation. The Morrison formation is the prime repository of Dinosaur fossils in that section of Utah known as the "Dinosaur Triangle." As the road passes through this area, it rides on the dam that forms Horsebench Reservoir. The reservoir provides a source of water for the cattle that graze the area during the fall and winter months.

- 2 -

As you round a bend approximately 7.5 miles from Horsebench Reservoir, you will come upon an expansive view of Dry Lake Wash, Dry Lake Meander, and the Green River, with the La Sal Mountains in the distance. The Dry Lake Meander is a large, well-defined, abandoned meander of the Green River that formed when the river cut through its bank. The cut-off portion of the river formed an oxbow lake, which eventually silted in and resulted in the basin you see today. The size of the meander scar indicates that abandonment must have occurred during either the early or late Pleistocene periods, when the volume of water in the river was much greater than it is at present.

The road descends from this ridge and squeezes through a small pass in the rock. The red Entrada sandstone cliffs to the south and west between here and point 4 offer a chance to stretch your legs and explore the many small coves formed by

the rock. These coves also provide interesting undeveloped campsites, accessible by several sidetracks.

- 3 -

Four-and-a-half miles past point 2 is a side road to the east that leads to the old Chaffin Ranch. The ranch has a dilapidated cabin surrounded by remnants of old vehicles and various types of farming equipment. Near the cabin is an old drill hole that became a mineral geyser, its waters spouting 15 to 25 feet into the air every 20 minutes. The cold-water geyser is powered by carbon dioxide and other gases. Multi-colored mineral deposits surround the opening.

- 4 -

Seven miles after the San Rafael River crossing is a junction for a possible side trip to Dugout Spring. The spring is 14 miles southwest from the junction on a two-wheel-drive road and it consists of a small pipe draining into a cattle trough surrounded by a corral. This spring is one of the few water sources in the area. To continue the main tour, head south or straight ahead at the junction, and follow the signs toward Horseshoe Canyon.

- 5 -

One mile past the Dugout Spring junction is a side road heading east to Tenmile Canyon Overlook. To visit this overlook, turn east onto the side road, bear right at all intersections in the first 2.6 miles, and then turn left on a four-wheel-drive, two-track road and continue 3 miles to a small slickrock point overlooking the Green River's Labyrinth Canyon and Tenmile Canyon. (A four-wheel drive vehicle is required to travel over the very sandy surface on the last 3 miles of this route.) From the end of this route, a short walk out onto the rocks brings you to a dramatic view of Tenmile Canyon entering a bend of the Green River directly across from the canyon. From this point you may be able to spot canoeists floating down the river 500 feet below.

This overlook is also the northern boundary of the Horseshoe Canyon Wilderness Study Area, a 20,500 acre area that the Bureau of Land Management has recommended for inclusion into the

National Wilderness Preservation System. Until it is designated as a Wilderness Area or is released from study by congressional action it is being managed to protect its wilderness characteristics. Please do not drive into this area.

To return to the main road, retrace your route on the 3 miles of two-track road, then keep left at the intersection for a 2.4 mile short cut to the main road at Lookout Point. From this point you can see the La Sal Mountains to the east, the Henry Mountains to the south, the San Rafael Reef to the west and the Book Cliffs to the north.

- 6 -

A side road to the left (east), located 3.7 miles south of Lookout Point, provides access to several hikes of varying difficulty. Main attractions include a natural five-hole arch sometimes called Colonnade Arch, and overlooks of Bowknot Bend and Horseshoe Canyon.

The landmark for finding the Horseshoe Canyon overlook area is Keg Knoll, the large slickrock dome located 2 miles from the main road. Park just past the knoll, then scramble along its east face, working your way south around the point. To enjoy closer views of Horseshoe Canyon, continue south from the point, finding your own route to the edge of the canyon. This canyon, from the National Park boundary on the south to the Green River, is the nucleus of Horseshoe Canyon Wilderness Study Area.

To find the five-hole arch and Bowknot Bend overlook, drive past Keg Knoll another 2.5 miles to where the road seems to fade out in the slickrock.

This is the approximate western boundary of the Horseshoe Canyon Wilderness Study Area. The arch is an easy 1 mile walk from here along a faint four-wheel drive trail, with some scrambling on slickrock the last few hundred feet near the arch.

A rock cairn marks the point where you should leave the trail and start heading southwest across progressively lower slickrock humps to a canyon edge, from where you work your way left (east) to the arch. The arch is in a solid rock wall

that faces the river and is not easily found until you are on the river side looking back. Hiking farther along the trail will take you to a spectacular overlook of Bowknot Bend, named by John Wesley Powell during his 1872 river expedition.

Campsites accessible by vehicle with good views of the area can be found at Keg Knoll and where the road ends at the slickrock.

After returning to the main road and continuing south, the valley you drive through is known as Antelope Valley, so named for its year-round abundance of *Antilocapra americana*, or pronghorn antelope. This herd is one of only a few in Utah that was not eliminated completely during man's settlement of the state.

- 7 -

A sign, located approximately 5.3 miles south of point 6, marks the two-mile access road to the National Park Service managed portion of Horseshoe Canyon. This detached portion of Canyonlands National Park was added to the park in 1971. The canyon offers some of the best Native American pictographs in the area. The rock art can be seen by making a 6 mile, strenuous (round trip) hike from the vehicle parking lot. No pets are allowed in the Canyonlands National Park section of Horseshoe Canyon, even on a leash. No camping is available in the canyon. Primitive camping (no water) is available on BLM land on the rim at the trailhead outside of the park. Access may be restricted as per backcountry management plan.

- 8 -

A signed junction, 5.5 miles from point 7, marks the turnoff to Hans Flat Ranger Station (another 21 miles south), the south side of Horseshoe Canyon, and the Maze District of Canyonlands National Park.

The road between points 8 and 9 passes the north side of a large sand dune that invites play and exploration on foot. The route then climbs to the top of a bench overlooking the red rock of Sweetwater Reef with expansive views of the San Rafael Desert to the north.

- 9 -

Approximately 13 miles from the Hans Flat turnoff a sign indicating that Dugout Spring is to the right. This road also connects back to point 4 of this tour.

- 10 -

In another 1.5 miles, the road squeezes between Little Flat Top and Big Flat Top. These small mesas are interesting in that the vegetation communities on top have not been influenced by the grazing of domesticated animals. There is a steep, narrow path on the southwest side of Little Flat Top (north of the road) along which you can scramble to the top.

- 11 -

Jeffrey Well is 3 miles farther along. The well was originally drilled by Des Moines Oil Company in 1913 in search of oil or natural gas. The well was subsequently developed to provide water for cattle and pronghorn antelope.

- 12 -

Another 6.8 miles brings you to highway 24. Turn right (north) to continue the loop tour. If you're low on gas, water, or food, the town of Hanksville is 19 miles to the left (south). The long line of rock cliffs that you have probably noticed to the west throughout the drive is the San Rafael Reef. The Reef is the eastern boundary of the San Rafael Swell, a large, kidney-shaped region that owes its fascinating topography to a structural uplift of the region 40-60 million years ago and subsequent erosion. The rock layers beneath the San Rafael Desert were abruptly tilted at the Reef and erosion has exposed the hard Navajo Sandstone that forms most of the exposed sections of this magnificent sawtooth ridge. Erosion has carved out many canyons and interesting shapes in the slickrock, making the Reef a popular destination for hikers and backpackers. The entire face of the San Rafael Reef, except for Temple Mountain, is included in the Crack Canyon and San Rafael Reef Wilderness Study Areas.

- 13 -

One-half mile north of the junction with highway 24 (approximately milepost 137) is the Goblin Valley turnoff. From highway 24, it is 14 miles to Goblin Valley on a two-wheel-drive road. At Goblin Valley State Park, the Entrada sandstone has been shaped by ages of erosion to form sculptures that call to mind visions of fairy-tale creatures. Goblin Valley is a fee area with a 21-unit campground, drinking water, flush toilets, and showers. There is a full-time ranger on duty throughout the year. The Goblin Valley road also provides access to Temple Mountain, which is the highest point along the San Rafael Reef and famous in the 1950's for its extensive uranium mining activity.

As you continue north on highway 24 paralleling the Reef, you will cross several washes, of which Iron Wash is the largest. In the days before the bridges were built, wagon freighters sometimes became stuck and remained there until help came with more horses. Blowing and drifting sand along this route also posed serious problems for early travelers.

- 14 -

Approximately 35 miles after crossing the San Rafael River (near milepost 157), you will have two options: to return to Green River, you can either turn right onto old highway 24 and follow this gravel road past the airport back to the starting point of the tour (11 miles); or you can continue north on highway 24 to highway I-70 (another 4 miles), then go east 11 miles to Green River.

SAFETY TIPS

Check at the Green River Visitor Center for current road conditions and weather forecasts. Many of the roads in this area cross soil types that get extremely muddy when wet and can be temporarily impassable even to four-wheel-drive vehicles.

Never camp or park your vehicle in a wash or stream bed, and avoid hiking in narrow canyons when rain is a possibility. A dry wash can flash flood in a matter of minutes, even when there are no visible clouds.

Make sure your vehicle has adequate fuel and is in good working condition.

Take plenty of drinking water—at least one gallon per person per day.

Take precautions to guard against heat exhaustion in warm weather. Avoid overexertion, drink plenty of fluids, and wear a hat.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**Bureau of Land Management**

Price Field Office
125 South 600 West
Price, UT 84501
435-637-3600

Canyonlands National Park

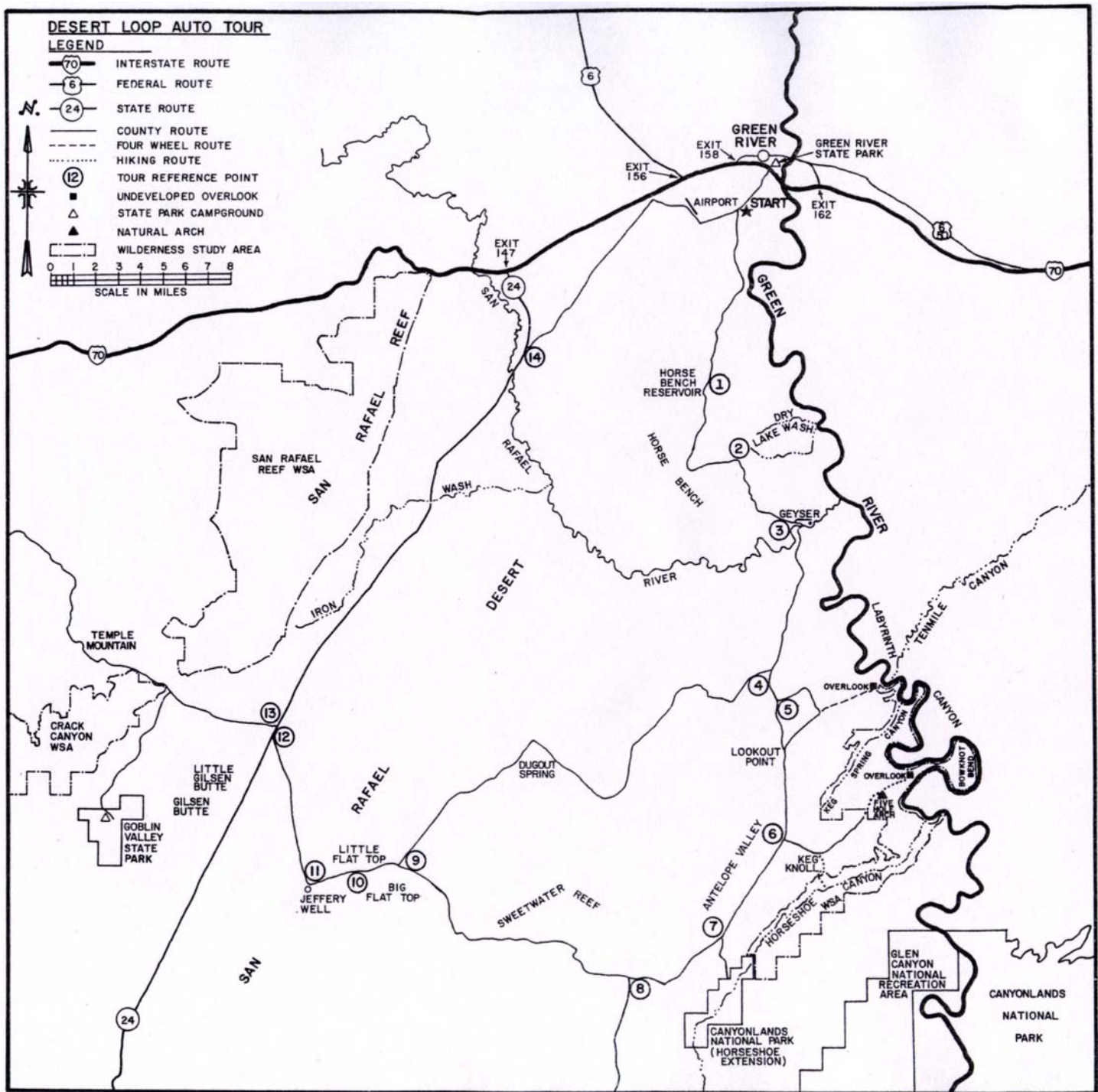
2282 S. Resource Blvd.
Moab, UT 84532
435-719-2313

Goblin Valley & Green River State Parks

405 S. Green River Blvd.
Green River, UT 84525
435-564-3633

DESERT ETIQUETTE

- Stay on existing roads and trails. Vehicle tracks on the desert are long lasting eyesores, and they intensify local erosion of the desert soils. Hikers should try to stay on trails, washes, or slickrock.
- Help preserve sensitive Native American artifacts and rock art by not moving or touching them. Even the oils from your fingertips can be damaging to delicate paints and chippings. Removing artifacts is illegal. Please leave them undisturbed for others to enjoy.
- Carry out what you carry in. While packing up, show your appreciation of the area by picking up trash left by less thoughtful people.
- Use existing fire pits and clean them after you are through. If you make a fire, let it burn to ashes rather than buying charcoal stumps. Make sure that it is out before leaving the area.
- Bury all solid human body waste in a six-inch-deep hole located at least a hundred feet away from water sources.



Visitor Centers

Green River Visitor Center

John Wesley Powell River History Museum
885 E. Main
Green River, UT 84525
435-564-3526

Castle Country Regional Information Center

CEU Prehistoric Museum
155 East Mian
Price, UT 84501
800-842-0789
435-637-3009

Moab Information Center

Main & Center St
Moab, UT 84532
800-635-6622
435-259-8825