



New Hance Trail

In 1883, "Captain" John Hance became the first European American to settle at the Grand Canyon. He originally built his trails for mining, but quickly determined the real money lay in work as a guide and hotel manager. From the very start of his tourism business, with his Tennessee drawl, spontaneous wit, uninhibited imagination, and ability to never repeat a tale in exactly the same way, he developed a reputation as an eccentric and highly entertaining storyteller. Shortly after his arrival, John improved an old Havasupai trail at the head of today's Hance Creek drainage, the "Old Hance Trail," but it was subject to frequent washouts. When rockslides made it impassable he built the New Hance Trail down Red Canyon. The New Hance Trail developed a reputation similar to that of the original trail; eliciting the following comment from travel writer Burton Homes in 1904 (he did not exaggerate by much):

There may be men who can ride unconcernedly down Hance's Trail, but I confess I am not one of them. My object in descending made it essential that I should live to tell the tale, and therefore, I mustered up sufficient moral courage to dismount and scramble down the steepest and most awful sections of the path on foot 'On foot,' however, does not express it, but on heels and toes, on hands and knees, and sometimes in the posture assumed by children when they come bumping down the stairs The path down which we have turned appears impossible The pitch for the first mile is frightful ... and to our dismayed, unaccustomed minds the inclination apparently increases, as if the canyon walls were slowly toppling inwards

Hikers and geologists alike will enjoy the colorful rock layers found throughout Red Canyon. These layers are referred to as the Supergroup, and collectively represent hundreds of millions of years of earth's history. Pockets of Supergroup, like those found in Red Canyon, are the last vestiges describing what occurred during the Great Unconformity (the gap of time missing between the Vishnu Schist and Tapeats Sandstone). In Red Canyon, the most immediately apparent layer is the brilliant orange Hakatai Shale, which can be seen throughout the area. Across the Colorado River at Hance Rapids there exists a notable basalt dyke intrusion. Beneath the Hakatai Shale, outcrops of Bass Limestone contain bulbous stromatolites (1.2 million year old bacterial mats), which are some of the oldest fossils in the world.

How Can You Help (topic of special concern)

With the privilege of being able to walk and camp in the footsteps of John Hance comes historical adventure but also a degree of responsibility. Sand dunes are special, the less we camp and walk on them the longer they will last. Never bury waste in the dunes. Appropriate locations to bury waste are located about 10 minutes up Red Canyon or 20 minutes west on the Tonto trail.

Vital Statistics

Locations/Elevations

Highway 64 (6982 ft / 2129 m)
Red Canyon Overlook (5000 ft / 1524 m)
Redwall Descent (4949 ft / 1509 m)
Creek bed (3250 ft / 991 m):
Hance Rapids (2560 ft / 780 m):

Mileages

0
2.0 mi (3.3 km)
3.0 mi (4.9 km)
4.9 mi (7.9 km)
6.5 mi (10.5)

Maps

7.5 Minute Grandview Point and Cape Royal Quads (USGS)
Trails Illustrated, Map 261 or 262, 2009 (National Geographic)
Sky Terrain Trails Map, Grand Canyon (Sky Terrain)

Trailhead Access

The New Hance Trail begins approximately 16 miles east of the junction of Desert View Drive and the South Entrance Road. Park at Moran Point and walk west, or park at the first pullout east of the Buggeln picnic area. This pullout is on the south side of the road and from here walk east, to the "No Parking" sign which marks the ¼ mile path that will take you to the trailhead proper.

Trail Description

Today's trail very closely follows the 1894 original alignment. Multiple scrambles and short down climbs are the norm as the trail traverses a series of ledges through the Kaibab and Toroweap. The Coconino is defined by obscurity; a stretch of trail which could be difficult to navigate at night and near impossible to navigate after significant snowfall. Below the Coco, at a grassy saddle, the character of the trail suddenly changes as it plunges into a dry wash through the Supai. Route-finding skills are required through the Supai section: a braided network of trails wander in and out of the wash. Any of these trails will take hikers to the top of the Redwall Limestone (Red Canyon Overlook), where it leaves the creek bed and starts a difficult traverse to the east, about one mile in length, through the lower part of the Supai layer. The trail has been obliterated by rockslides in shallow ravines through which the trail meanders during this traverse. A knob at the top of the Redwall Limestone marks the top of the descent.

Once through the Redwall, the trail runs down the nose of a rounded ridgeline that parallels the creek bed far below. Though the terrain appears gentle from above, don't be deceived: the trail angles down sharply with very few switchbacks until the crumbly rock layers allow access into the bottom of Red Canyon.

From the intersection with the creek bed to the Colorado River the dry creek bottom is the trail, with minor spur trails bypassing short pour-offs in a few places (all bypasses are on the east side of the creek). The creek bed terrain is a mix of gravel and boulders. A few yards before reaching the river, the Tonto Trail heading west intersects the New Hance Trail at the base of a large sand dune. The Escalante Route begins to the east. Both intersections are unmarked and can be difficult to find.

Water Sources

The Colorado River is the only reliable year round water source. When the river runs red (or brown) it is recommended that you settle the silt out prior to treatment and that you have a backup means of water purification. Spring water flows from where the trail meets the bed of Red Canyon except during the hottest months of the year.

Campsites

Sites can be found mid-canyon both above and below the Redwall, though dry, they offer wide-open fantastic views. An additional site can be found where the trail first descends into the bed of Red Canyon. Once you reach the river there are only two optimal locations to camp. First option, just upriver there exists a large sandy beach which is often used by boaters. If a river trip shows up at this beach, you will be sharing the camp with them. Second option, which offers a degree more solitude, are the downstream camps located between the boulder field and the foot of the dune.

All camping areas along the New Hance Trail are in the Red Canyon Use Area (BD9).

Important Notes

The New Hance Trail lies within a primitive use area and is thus recommended only for highly experienced canyon hikers. It is not maintained and may be the most difficult established trail on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon.

The lack of organic soil, riparian habitat, and nearby sand dunes are common traits to all camps in the area and this means there is no easy solution to the problem of proper human waste management. Waste buried in the dunes is quickly exposed by the wind. Desert soils above the dunes lack organic materials and the associated microbes which break down waste. Be prepared to either walk as much as a half a mile or, if you want the convenience to poop near camp, consider bringing a waste carry-out bag. All toilet paper must be packed out. When at the beach urinate directly into the river to prevent the build-up of nitrates (watch your step at night).