Horseshoe Canyon contains some of the most significant archaic rock art in North America. Other impressive sights include spring wildflower displays, sheer sandstone walls, and mature cottonwood trees which shade the canyon floor.

Cultural History

The archeology of Horseshoe Canyon spans thousands of years of human history. Artifacts recovered from sites in this area date back as early as 9000-7000 BCE (Before Common Era), when Paleoindians hunted megafauna like mastodons and mammoths across the southwest.

American Indian rock art found in Horseshoe Canyon is most commonly painted in a style known as “Barrier Canyon.” This style is believed to date to the Late Archaic period, from 2000 BCE to 500 CE (Common Era). During this time, nomadic groups of hunter-gatherers continued to make Horseshoe Canyon their seasonal home.

During later periods, the Fremont and ancestral Puebloan cultures left their own distinctive rock art in the canyon, but their presence was brief in comparison and final abandonment had occurred by 1300 CE.

The Great Gallery is the best known and most spectacular of the Horseshoe Canyon panels. This well-preserved site includes both pictographs (painted figures) and petroglyphs (figures etched in the rock). The tapered, life-size figures, lacking arms and legs and frequently containing intricate designs, are characteristic of the Barrier Canyon style.

Preserving the Past

Help us protect archeological resources. Rock art is extremely fragile and can be destroyed by the oil in human skin. Please do not touch or chalk around figures. All prehistoric artifacts and ruins are irreplaceable treasures. Walking through ruins, sitting on walls, handling artifacts and leaving modern graffiti destroys a site’s scientific and aesthetic value for future visitors.

Activities

Camping
You may camp at the west rim trailhead on public land managed by the BLM. There is a vault toilet, but there is no water. No overnight camping is allowed in Horseshoe Canyon within the park boundary.

Hiking
From the west rim trailhead, the hike to the Great Gallery is 7 miles round-trip, descending 750 feet and requiring about six hours. Pets are prohibited below the rim of Horseshoe Canyon. Group size is limited to 20 people. Bring your own drinking water. There is no water above the canyon rim and water sources are unreliable within the canyon. All water should be purified.

Guided Hikes
Rangers lead guided hikes in Horseshoe Canyon when staff are available. Contact the Hans Flat Ranger Station at 435-259-2652 for current schedules. Special walks for educational or other large groups may also be planned by contacting Hans Flat. Walks usually depart the west rim parking lot at 9 AM.

BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) replace BC and AD.
The sheer sandstone walls of Horseshoe Canyon

How To Get There
Two-wheel-drive access to the west rim of Horseshoe Canyon is from UT Hwy 24 via 30 miles of graded dirt road, or from Green River on 47 miles of dirt road. Driving time is roughly 2.5 hours from Moab or 1.5 hours from Green River. A four-wheel-drive road leads to the east rim of Horseshoe Canyon from the Hans Flat Ranger Station. All roads may become impassable during storms. Most visitors access the canyon from the west side.

More Information
Maps of Horseshoe Canyon include the Trails Illustrated series topographic map for Canyonlands National Park (Maze & NE Glen Canyon), and the USGS 7.5-minute series Sugarloaf Butte topo map. These and other publications are available from Canyonlands Natural History Association at 435-259-6003, or on the web at cnha.org.

Additional Reading
Anasazi: Prehistoric Cultures Houk, 1989 15pp
Indian Rock Art of the Southwest Schaafsma,
The Origins of Pre-Columbian Art Grieder, 1982
Those Who Came Before Lister & Lister, 1993