

Burr Trail

Photography on the Burr Trail, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument and Capitol Reef National Park, Utah

This article should be printed in landscape orientation.

It may be possible to spend an entire season photographing on the Burr Trail and still see only a fraction of what is there to see. I've considered taking the job of campground host at the Deer Creek campground just to find out.

The Burr Trail, also known as the Boulder to Bullfrog Road, is a (mostly) paved road going from Boulder, Utah, to the middle of Capitol Reef National Park, then on south to Bullfrog marina on the shores of Lake Powell. It's about 60 miles long, and runs through some of the most desolate and beautiful land in the United States.

History of the Burr Trail

The Trail, named back in the 1880's when John Atlantic Burr used it to move cattle through the area, runs through the northernmost part of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The Monument is the largest in the US, and is divided into sections. At the North is the Circle Cliffs area, where the Burr Trail is found. The southern end of the Circle Cliffs is formed by the Big Brown Bench (among other benches and mesas) that separate it from the Canyons of the Escalante area. The canyons formed by the Escalante river and its tributaries contain some of the more interesting and accessible (as well as some of the most inaccessible) narrows and slot canyons in Utah, places like the Narrows of the Dry Fork of the Coyote, Spooky, Peek-a-boo, and Zebra slots. Here also is found the Hole-in-the-Rock road paralleling the Fifty-mile Bench, as well as the spectacular (though remote) canyons of the Escalante River. Bordering the southern end of the Canyons area is the Fifty Mile Mountain (which is itself only the northeastern edge of the magnificent Kaiparowitz plateau) that separates the Canyons from the Grand Staircase region.

In this article I will concentrate on the photographic opportunities along the Burr Trail itself, with only passing reference to the more popular photographic locations of nearby Boulder Mountain, Utah highway 12, and the Hole-in-the-rock road. Above I mentioned that the Burr Trail was paved. It wasn't always that way. In the late 70's and early 80's there was quite a raging controversy concerning who, if anybody, should pave the then dirt road. Garfield county wanted to pave the trail to increase tourism in the area, and they were joined by the national park service. They were, of course, opposed by environmental groups, hoping to keep the area as pristine (well, uncontaminated by tourists and hunters) as possible. The locals, hunters, RVers and miners wanted it paved, and for mostly one reason: the Burr Trail mud. Just out of the north end of Long Canyon there is a layer of orange clay, a layer that, when wet, becomes the stickiest and slipperiest natural substance known. I'm told by an old acquaintance who as a youth herded cattle through the area that not even shod horses could stand on the wet clay. In my youth our family drove over the Burr Trail after a storm, and the mud we picked up that day was still under the wheel wells and on the brake pedal 15 years later when we junked the car. I tell you this to reinforce the idea that besides the obvious dangers of flash floods in the canyons and washes, the unapproachable danger of driving the unpaved roads during or after a rainstorm (quicksand abounds in the wash crossings, which remain impassable until they dry), you may be forced to deal with the mud the moment you step off the pavement.

Well, the NPS switched sides in the debate when they realized that if Garfield county paved the road they would lose all right of way to the road, and after a lengthy court case, Garfield was given the right of way and they promptly paved the road in the early 90's. And it's been a godsend to those of us who desire access in inclement weather without endangering our lives. The road is paved through the Monument, but the paving ends at the border to Capitol Reef (I presume the NPS, having committed itself to opposing the paving, has never felt its way clear to paving its own roads). So even in inclement weather it is still possible to get a lot of very nice scenic views from the road itself, enough to occupy days of effort.

The Monument itself was created in 1996 by Clinton. Just a note: don't ask any locals about it if you like Clinton. Utahans generally are still pissed at him when he put 1.7 million acres of our state permanently under federal control, and didn't even bother to set foot in Utah when doing it (he made the announcement from the Grand Canyon).

Accommodations in Boulder

There are a couple motels in Boulder. Also a couple gas stations. And a couple restaurants. And a couple shops. And a couple of B*B's. Two of everything, in fact. Also in Boulder is the Anasazi State Park, with interesting information on the previous inhabitants of the area. The headquarters of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is in Escalante to the south, but they maintain an information desk at Anasazi State Park. Stop there and get their map and enquire about local conditions, weather, etc, before you head down the Trail.

There is one campground in all of the Monument. It is about seven miles from Boulder, located at the Calf Creek crossing. There are seven camping areas there (six during the tourist season, when one spot is occupied by the campground host), no reservations. Each campsite has a table, a fire grill, and a marker post. There is a vault toilet, but no water (other than Calf Creek itself, but that is laden with *Giardia*, so don't think of drinking untreated water; the creek runs year round). A word of advice on choosing campsites: if it is hot, avoid the side near the ledges. The afternoon sun turns those campsites into ovens.

See the links section below for lists of accommodations in Boulder.

The Burr Trail: Boulder to Long Canyon

So let's begin our little tour of the Burr Trail. At a 90 degree bend in SR-12 is the turnoff to the Burr Trail. At the corner you'll see two things of interest: an old and somewhat photogenic gas station, and the dumpsters. The gas station, and the old steers skull, can be photographed in an obvious manner.

Maps (click to download larger graphics, sorry about the large size of the .gif files.)

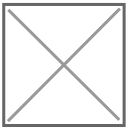
Boulder to Long Canyon:



Western Circle Cliffs area:



Eastern Circle Cliffs/Waterpocket Fold area:



Detailed maps:

Long Canyon:



Wolverine and Death Hollow:



Waterpocket Fold and Capitol Reef:



Revision #1

Created 3 October 2023 13:43:41 by bruce

Updated 3 October 2023 13:44:10 by bruce