

Slot Canyons, Northern Arizona (Page area)

This feature appeared in the *Boulder Daily Camera*.

Editors: For reprints, please contact [cmwalter@claire-walter.com](mailto:cmwalter@claire-walter.com). Photos are available.



Dramatic light shines into Canyon-X, which only a handful of hikers and photographers a day may visit Canyon-X. (Claire Walter photo)

## Hot For Slots

By Claire Walter

Copyright © Claire Walter 2006.

No. Not Black Hawk slots, but the magical, mystical slot canyons of the Southwest. These hidden treasures of canyon country are deep clefts through sandstone or limestone, scoured by water and wind into dramatic shapes and seductive curves of naked rock strata.

You'll find them in national parks, on Bureau of Land Management tracts and on the Navajo Nation's land. Regulations vary. Leaf through a guidebook, ask your friends or go to an informative website to find a suitable canyon. Then, ask whether you need to get a permit, pay an entry fee or go with a guide.

Some slot canyons are not far from a paved road. Others are at the end of a bone-jarring drive over rough roads and/or a desert hike. Some are virtual walk-ins, requiring no particular skill. Others are accessed via steep slopes of talus, rocks or sand. To reach still others, it is necessary to rapell down into them and climb out.

Some slot canyon bottoms are smooth as sidewalks, while others are chocked here and there with boulders or debris that hikers need to navigate, or with long stretches of river that must be waded. You might find a dry, sandy canyon bottom, an intermittent stream, standing pools or flowing water. Slot-canyon veterans recommend a sturdy inflatable mattress for floating packs on long stretches of water.

What you don't want to do is be in a slot canyon during a wild rainstorm, when dry washes became raging rivers. Remember that fast-moving flood water carves the rock over time and also carries with it branches, logs, even railroad ties from who-knows-where. Flash floods carry this debris in, and you don't want one to carry you out. So check weather reports and do not enter if rain or thunderstorms are predicted or suspected.

Another thing that you want *not* to do is explore a slot canyon alone. Aron Ralston, of self-amputation fame, was soloing Blue John Canyon in Utah's Canyonlands National Park when his arm was pinned by a boulder. He might not be as renowned, but he would likely be more intact, if he had been hiking with a buddy.

Slot canyon walls are anywhere from a hundred or so to a more than a thousand feet high. They vary in length, from a few hundred feet to Buckskin Gulch, more than 20 miles long and usually hiked over two arduous days. Located in the Paria Canyon-Vermillion Cliffs Wilderness, it is thought to be the world's longest slot canyon.

The commonality among these corridors snaking through bare rock is an incredible beauty – luminescent in the right light, almost spiritual when one is fortunate enough to be in one with just a few amiable and reverential companions. Some sections are so narrow that an adult can reach out both hands and touch both sides. Bands of color, ripples or streaks of desert varnish decorate the walls. A few sections are tunnels, but most are open to a slit of sky and illuminated by shafts of brilliant light. "Photographers' paradise" is an overused phrase, but it applies.

For accessibility and ease, it's hard to beat Antelope Canyon, bisected by Highway 98 in northern Arizona. In 1931, 12-year-old Sue Tsosie discovered what today is called Antelope Canyon while herding sheep. Located on Navajo land, its stunning beauty matched by unsurpassed popularity and must be visited with a guide. The Tsosie family operates Antelope Slot Canyon Tours, one of the five companies that conduct tours there.

Lower Antelope Canyon, longer, deeper and more challenging than the upper canyon, was closed for a time after 1997, when 11 hikers were killed by a flash flood. The Young family, which controls access to the lower canyon, has built ladders and added other safety measures. Access is limited to only a couple of hours per visit.

Nearby Canyon X, also on Navajo land, is at the end of a four-wheel drive road and past a locked gate. Just 15 miles from the town of Page, it is nevertheless remote, because Overland Tours brings in only a handful of people a day. Two segments of mesmerizing corkscrew passage between the rocks and an absence of Upper Antelope-type crowds make this a fabulous photographic opportunity.

When it comes to these rock-rimmed slots, everyone is a winner.

#### If You Go

- Where: Northern Arizona and southern Utah. Descriptions of dozens of slot canyons on public lands at [www.americansouthwest.net/slot\\_canyons/index.html](http://www.americansouthwest.net/slot_canyons/index.html).
- When: Some canyons accessible through much of the year, though safety is extremely weather dependent. Late summer storms must be monitored.
- Cost and permit policies: Vary by jurisdiction.
- Mandatory tours in some slot canyons: \$28.50 and up.
- Antelope Canyon Park Office, 928-698-2808, [www.navajonationparks.org/htm/antelopecanyon.htm](http://www.navajonationparks.org/htm/antelopecanyon.htm).
- American Canyoneering Assn., [www.canyoneering.net](http://www.canyoneering.net).

-end-

[www.americansouthwest.net/slot\\_canyons/index.html](http://www.americansouthwest.net/slot_canyons/index.html)