Black Canyon Blog

Planning

I saw one picture of Black Canyon on an internet forum and knew right away I had to go there at some point, sooner rather than later. On a Monday in July 2019, I threw up a Facebook event for a trip there that Saturday to give my friends some sort of notice in case they wanted to go on the adventure as well. My cousin Matt was the only poor sucker who committed.

I was fairly busy that week, so I put off my planning until Friday night. When I finally got down to researching, I went all out. I started out with researching the trails down into the canyon and the legal requirements to hike down them. I scoured google maps satellite imagery of the valley to figure out what parts of the river I could cross or not. The Narrows are one place that is entirely uncrossable by foot. The river is sandwiched by sheer cliff on both sides. This told me I had to take a trail downstream of the narrows if I wanted to get below the painted cliff.

I watched what fishing videos and blog posts I could find on the internet to watch the background and get a feel for the river and trails. These clued me into the fact that the river was bigger than I thought. I spent a while googling until I found the live data of the river’s flow rate. It was 2000 cubic feet per minute at the time, or 10x as much water as I had heard from my previous sources. There was no chance I could cross the river anywhere on this trip. My options for exploring the interior of the canyon were decreased dramatically. I’d have to take S.O.B. Down, famous for its poison ivy.

Descent

The drive was 5 hours from Colorado Springs. Fortunately, it was a beautiful drive through the mountains and flew by. We knew we were close when the road starting winding along the upstream stretch of Black Canyon. It started at Gunnison lake and then plunged down to 500 feet deep. We cruised at 30-40mph along the turns of the North canyon wall as the South canyon wall gradually withdrew and the valley sank out of sight. The canyon walls turned a beautiful marbled red right before we arrived at the North Rim Ranger Station.

We spoke with the Rangers about the S.O.B. Draw and its poison ivy for 20 minutes or so and then set off. I had heard there was a sign marking the beginning of the Draw. After 20 minutes or so, there was clearly no sign. I pulled up Google Maps and compared our location to the paper maps I had printed out. Eventually we settled on a valley and decided it was our trail down. The trail was rough from the very beginning and did not get better.

Eventually we started to encounter a plant with a lot of the characteristics of poison ivy. We avoided it as long as possible, but eventually you had to wade through it. We ultimately decided we could trust it when there were specimens with 12-inch diameter, bark-covered trunks. I’d never heard of poison ivy trees. The actual poison ivy started to fill the valley further down. See pictures:

We eventually got to where the rapids of the river were close enough that we had to raise our voices to talk. We knew we were nearly there.

Accent