

Utah / Südwest

Snow Canyon Overlook

DISTANCE: 4.5 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 400 feet

ROUTE TYPE: Out & Back

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Directions: The Red Mountain trailhead has a large dirt parking lot with a restroom. From St. George, travel north on State Route 18. The turnoff for the trailhead is 11.4 miles past Snow Canyon Parkway. There is a large sign showing where to turn.

The 18,700-acre Red Mountain Wilderness provides some amazing views close to St. George without the scrambling and high ledges typical of so many other hikes. A popular equestrian and hiking trail, it's rare not to see at least one other person there. As this is the wilderness, the trails are not maintained or formally signed like they are in other sections of Red Cliffs. There are now two signs indicating the Red Mountain Trail and the Snow Canyon Overlook spur, but there are many unmarked side trails. People do get lost trying to find the overlook trail, but it's pretty easy to find if you pay attention.

The trail is clearly marked from the parking lot. The first section of the trail is rocky, uneven, and fenced-in. You'll come to a step-over gate at the wilderness boundary. Several trails branch off from this spot. You'll be looking for the middle trail, which is the most worn. You'll know you've picked the right one because you'll soon see a sign indicating the Red Mountain Trail. The trail becomes dirt and is much more pleasant from this point on. Pinyon pines and junipers surround the trail, creating an enclosed forest experience that contrasts the open desert in St. George. Bright spots of color pop out of the trees where the claret cups and prickly pears are in bloom.

Just under two miles from the parking lot, you'll reach the turnoff for the Snow Canyon Overlook Trail. The trail turnoff is clearly marked by a sign on the left side of the trail. The Snow Canyon Overlook Trail is pure sand. Thankfully, it's only a half-mile long, so it goes by quickly. It's also surrounded by thick carpets of truly amazing biological soil (cryptobiotic soil). Make sure to stop and take a closer look at the delicate towers and shapes created by the soil. These small formations are actually entire communities of organisms, like cyanobacteria, green algae, microfungi, and lichen. Up close, you can see the variety of color speckled through the soil.

Once at the end of the trail, you'll be greeted by a spectacular view of Snow Canyon. Make sure to go in the evening, when the golden hour lights up Snow Canyon and throws shadows across the rocks. The view is amazing during the day, but the evening light really takes it up a notch. During most of the hike back, you'll see the Pine Valley Mountains, and it's a beautiful view in the evening. Even on a day with an unimpressive sunset, the mountains turn a pretty purple, and the sand along the trail has a gorgeous glow.

