

## Colorado / Gunnison Gorge (Delta)

### Ute Trail

DISTANCE: 9 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 1200 feet

ROUTE TYPE: Out & Back

There are several Ute Trails in Colorado. This one is in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness Area. The trail begins on a ridge that overlooks the area around Delta, Colorado to the west, over 1200 feet below and the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness Area to the east with a similar drop in elevation to the level of the Gunnison River where it ends about 4.5 miles away. The ridge line forms the western boundary of the wilderness area as it passes through this area of the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area. The National Conservation Area designation leaves that area of the gorge open to all forms of travel while the Wilderness Area designation restricts that particular section to foot and horse traffic only.

The biggest obstacle to hiking the Ute Trail is getting to the trailhead. That is accomplished by following the Ute Road for 2.5 miles from where it turns off the Peach Valley Road. The Ute Road is listed as a 4x4 or jeep road. It is probably the steepness of the road that gives it that designation rather than vehicle clearance. That said our little Ford Ranger is only a 2-wheel drive. Our wheels were slipping in a few places but we were able to safely make it to the top. If the road would have been wet it probably would have been too slick for us. I'm not sure which route the Google 'Get Directions' function will plot but the one with the least amount of graveled road is to follow F Road all the way from Delta and continue straight on the Peach Valley Road until you get to the Ute Road.

The Ute Trail begins by walking right between the kiosk and trail register and picking up the path that leads into the canyon. There is a pay station next to the register where you can pony up the required fees. Be sure to carry one copy of the receipt with you and leave the other on your dashboard.

The upper portion of the trail descends at a moderate slope as it leaves the trailhead and rim behind.

The trail continues to descend as it wraps around the upper basin of the canyon then begins leveling off and following the drainage just past the 1 mile point.

After passing through an area between two hills the trail bends to the north and continues across a sagebrush flat where it follows a bench for an easy section of trail. Other than the section of trail along the river this is probably the most level part of the trail.

At the two mile point you find yourself standing at the edge of the black Precambrian granite cliffs where you are treated with the first good views of the Gunnison River toward where it leaves the confines of the Black Canyons of the Gunnison National Park. The end of the Ute Trail is along the Gunnison River another 2 1/2 miles away. For those that choose to turn around at this point the round trip distance will come out to 4 miles with an elevation change of about 500 feet.

The next half mile of the trail is the steepest section. At this point there are a number of tight switchbacks where you quickly give up about another 500 feet of elevation.

At the base of the granite cliffs the trail transitions to a much later sandstone base. The effects of the canyon widening processes are evident as the upper areas continue to erode away and work down the slopes until they can be carried away by the river. From here you can see sections of the remainder of the trail stretched out in front of you.

At about the 3 mile point of the trail you find yourself right above the river. There are a few places that look like they would be easy routes to the water but most of them lead to drop offs so be careful of what you try. Due to certain circumstances this post only goes to the 3.6 mile point of the trail where we turned around, without reaching any of the designated campsites, and headed back the way we came. We were coming down the mountain pretty fast to this point and it had only taken an hour and 15 minutes to get to this spot.

The hike back to the top of the Precambrian went much easier than expected. This was the 3rd hike of the day and since our legs were already tired when the day began we were worried about cramping up but I guess we kept hydrated enough because it never happened.

Besides the restroom there are two sheltered picnic tables with grills at the trailhead.

Designating this area of the Gunnison Gorge as a wilderness area was simply a matter of acknowledging the obvious. Once you drop below the rim you are met with the feeling that you have begun on a great adventure and the further you continue the more you immerse yourself in nature at its most rugged level. The Ute Trail is well worn and easy to follow so as long as you stick to trail the chance of getting lost is pretty slim. You might consider leaving your cellphone in the car or silencing it while in the canyon. There is a strong 4-5 bars at the trailhead that diminishes quickly as you lose elevation but even deep within the gorge a few spurious signals seem to find their way. If you would like to see it for yourself then all you have to do is 'Take a hike'.

