

"BALANCING ROCK CANYON"

(MINOR CANYON BETWEEN BRIMSTONE CANYON AND ARTISTS DRIVE FIRST DIP CANYON)

What I'm referring to as "Balancing Rock Canyon" is the major drainage south of the "First Dip Canyon" along the Artists Drive Road, and north of Brimstone Canyon. This is an unofficial name for this canyon. As of our visit to this canyon on December 19, 2017, I am not aware of any other hikers having visited this canyon and posting photos online afterwards; however, we did find footprints on the ledge north of the canyon, so other hikers have certainly been to it. Therefore, there may be other unofficial names for this canyon.

The most prominent feature of this canyon is the balancing rocks on the north wall of the canyon, hence the name "Balancing Rock Canyon". However, there are other interesting features in this canyon which also make it worth a visit. Near the beginning of the canyon, in a small side-drainage coming down the southern wall of the canyon, we spotted a formation which has the structure of a nice natural bridge, except that it is only 1.5 feet tall and therefore classifies only as an "interesting formation." Further up the canyon is what I think must be a natural tunnel, except that I was unable to crawl through it and find the other end. There are also many impressive mud-drip formations on the canyon walls, especially in the upper part of the canyon.

We parked for this hike at the first major turnout on the Artists Drive Road. Note that we did this hike in December of 2017, after another repaving of the Artists Drive Road. There is a (now paved) turnout on the right side of the road, long before reaching the parking area for the First Dip Canyon, and a use trail which tourists can walk up to an overlook of the valley to the south. I recall that just over 10 years ago this use trail was not in existence and there was no sign of anyone parking alongside the road here. Over the years, this view spot seems to have become more popular.

To reach this canyon, we crossed the small ridge which the use trail follows, and headed directly for the canyon mouth, which was then visible. Upon reaching the cliffs above the canyon wash, we found a safe place to descend into the canyon. After about 1.5 miles from the Artists Drive Road, the canyon reaches a tall impasse which is too steep and unstable to climb. (Note that there are two small boulder-jams which must be climbed before reaching this point.) From here, we returned back down the main canyon to a small side canyon which takes off to the south. We ascended this side-canyon/drainage (which is approximately 0.3 mile), and I was able to get a view into the upper canyon from the end of this side-drainage. Please be aware that extreme caution is required for this part of the hike. This is because the terrain in the side canyon becomes slippery and unstable, and the overlook of the main canyon drops off rather sharply and unexpectedly.

Google Earth overview map of the hike to this canyon.



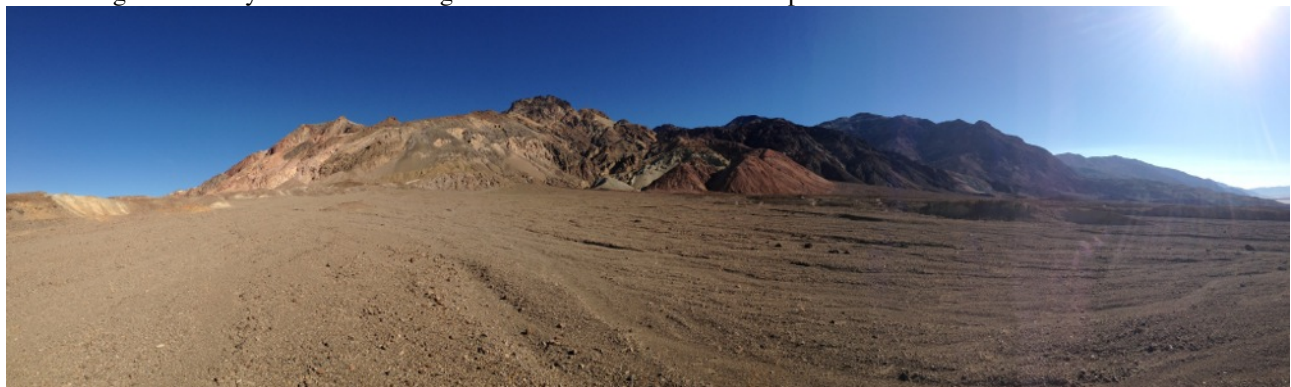
More detailed Google Earth map of the route we took up this canyon, and to the overlook of the upper canyon.



From the parking area, we crossed the small ridge to the south and began walking up the major wash. Note that the hiking terrain here is quite nice. The canyon we are heading towards can be seen in the center of this photo.



Panorama of this area as we are getting closer to the canyon mouth. Artists Drive is to the left in this photo, and the mouth of Brimstone Canyon is to the far right. The canyon we are heading towards is in the center of this photo.



It was a longer walk from where we parked to the canyon mouth than we had expected, but the terrain was much easier to walk across, so I would not recommend parking further up the Artists Drive Road as the nearby hills would be much more difficult to cross.



Panorama from here with "Balancing Rock Canyon" to the far left. Since the sun was in the south, the morning sun angle was not good for photography looking towards Badwater.



We reached the canyon mouth a bit too far towards the mountains and encountered a cliff.



Looking down the canyon drainage from here.



Looking across at a nearby smaller drainage (to the right in this photo), which I think is too small to really call a canyon.



Panorama looking out at the Panamint Mountains from above this canyon.



Looking back towards the Artists Drive Road. The viewpoint near where we parked is in the exact center of this photo.



We were able to hike up the ridge a short distance and drop into the canyon down a small drainage. This is a smaller slot-like drainage we passed. Note that we could see from here a small "wannabe natural bridge" at the base of this slot-like drainage, and we would see a second "wannabe natural bridge" just below it on our hike back out the main canyon.



Looking at the upper end of this slot, which is quite narrow and ends at a crumbly dry-fall.



Looking straight down into this short (but deep) slot, which would be a tight fit to get through.



From here, we descended another drainage into the main canyon wash. Just up-canyon from where we dropped into the wash, we spotted this tiny natural bridge. It is only about 1.5 feet tall, but the structure of it reminds me very much of Moonlight Bridge.



There is a very small slot behind this "mini-bridge".



Looking at this neat side-drainage to the main canyon with the mini-bridge and micro-slot canyon. It appears the water used to flow out the drainage to the right (which is shallower), but it then cut through the wall to form the mini-bridge.



Just up-canyon from here, the wash splits. We explored the left fork first, and used the right fork on the way back to get a view into the upper reaches of the left fork.



Shortly past the fork, we spotted these interesting divots/craters in the cracked mud on the canyon floor. I'm guessing that a light rain caused these mini-craters to be formed.



Looking back down-canyon from near a major bend in the left fork.



Looking up-canyon at this bend.



These two small side-drainages look interesting from here, but they didn't go very far before reaching boulder impasses.



At this point, we began seeing numerous "balancing rocks" on the left (north) wall of this canyon. (Unfortunately, with the sun angle and the light colors of the rocks and canyon walls, the balancing rocks aren't showing up as well in this and the following photos as I would have liked them to.) These "balancing rocks" are like the rocks balanced at the tops of hoodoo formations, but they hadn't successfully eroded into full hoodoos.



Continuing up this nice straight section of canyon, we saw that there are more "balancing rocks" on the left side of the canyon wall up ahead.



The canyon itself is also quite nice, and (not surprisingly) reminiscent of the four canyons in the Artists Drive area.



Notice all the balancing rocks up ahead and to the left in this photo.



Here, some bigger rocks have rolled into the wash, and we will have to climb over one up ahead.



Looking up at the cliffs above us and to the north, and at the large rocks balanced at the top of the cliff.



Continuing up-canyon, the walls are now getting taller and the canyon is becoming more impressive.



There are two large boulders in the canyon wash, if I recall correctly, which require care in climbing. Here is the view looking down from the top of one of them.



There are a few balancing rocks on the south wall, but nowhere near as many as are on the north wall.



Hoodoo far up on the south wall.



Another photo of the impressive balancing rocks on the north wall of this canyon.



Notice the prominent balanced rock to the right of center in this photo.



I have seen balancing rocks in many other canyons in Death Valley, but not nearly the quantity and concentration that is here.



We continued up this very nice (although short) canyon, hoping that we would not be stopped by a major impasse just around the corner.



Many large balanced rocks on the cliff here. I think it was at this point in the hike when I started to unofficially think of this as "Balancing Rock Canyon".



Panorama showing the balancing rocks on the cliffs to the north of this canyon.



Notice the rock balanced on a pointed outcropping just above center in this photo.



Up ahead and around a corner we spotted this narrow crack in the canyon wall.



Here is another narrow crack, which doesn't go as far as the one in the previous picture.



We turned the corner and saw this impressive little slot and what might be a natural tunnel. This is where the crack/chute seen two photos above drains into the main canyon.



To the left is this very narrow slot, which is about 9 feet tall and is too narrow in places to walk through.



Looking up and out of this slot.



Fortunately, I happened to have a good flashlight, so I checked out the potential natural tunnel to the right first. This is looking up once inside the tunnel. It looks like water could drain down here, but I'm not sure.



The tunnel started to lose height about 6 feet in. Notice the conglomerate boulder in the background.



I went a few feet further, but it became difficult to stand in the tunnel. I am not sure how far this natural tunnel continues, and how the water drains into it.



Looking up again from further back in this potential natural tunnel, at one location where water may drain into it.



Back out of the tunnel, I looked up towards the chute spotted earlier and noticed this large boulder stuck on top of a conglomerate dryfall.



I ascended the slot by crawling through it lower down, where it is less narrow. Here is a closer photo of the impasse further on in this chute. Notice all the large rocks in the walls here.

