

MINOR CANYON TWO NORTH OF ARTISTS PALETTE (JUST SOUTH OF DESOLATION CANYON)

We did this hike on what probably was one of the windiest days in Death Valley of winter 2017. That morning, we had driven up towards Dante's View, but the winds were so strong that we had to hike elsewhere. Fortunately, this area near Artists Palette turned out to have almost no wind. Later in that day, we drove to Stovepipe Wells through a particularly nasty sandstorm. Between the parking area for the Mesquite Sand Dunes and Stovepipe Wells, the lines on the road were barely visible due to the blowing sand. Thus we were lucky to have been able to do a hike in a location with very little wind.

There are two relatively major canyons between Desolation Canyon and the Artists Palette area. Back in the spring of 2009 or thereabouts, we had hiked the canyon just north of Artists Palette, with the idea to find another route into the area behind Artists Palette, below Borax Benchmark (the other route is from the southern side of Artists Palette). This canyon just north of Artists Palette has a minor impasse which appears to be bypassable by a long workaround, but we were not able to complete the hike at that time and determine if this indeed gives a route into the area behind Artists Palette.

The canyon covered in this report is the second of these two canyons, the one just south of Desolation Canyon. From Google Earth imagery, I expected the canyon to reach a major impasse relatively quickly. However, I was hopeful that one could bypass this impasse and reach the middle canyon, which appears to potentially have some nice narrows. Unfortunately, a major impasse is reached in this canyon just where it reaches the mountains, and I could not see a reasonable bypass for this dryfall.

There are some interesting natural formations in this area. Near the major impasse in this canyon, on the north side of the canyon wash, there are multiple "slots" which are short and too narrow to walk into. And, on the way back, we spotted a nice false natural bridge in a side-canyon of this canyon.

For this hike, we parked along the Artists Drive Road just beyond the first major bend after the Artists Palette turnoff. As of our visit to this area (December 20), there is a big, unpaved turnout where one can park fully off the main road. (Never park so as to block any part of the main road!). Note that this is not where the canyon wash meets the Artists Drive Road, and there may (or may not) be a closer place to park, where the canyon wash meets the Artists Palette Road.

[Note: I would like to refer to this canyon as "Gates of Argonath Canyon," since the impressive canyon walls near the major dryfall remind me of artists' renderings of the "Gates of Argonath," but I will not use this name in the report as I realize some readers may not be Lord of the Rings fans.]

Google Earth map of this canyon and the one south of it.



Looking over towards this canyon (left of center) and the canyon just north of Artists Palette (right of center) from where we parked.



A short distance up the wash we parked at, we spotted this very narrow slot on the left side.



This slot is (much) too narrow to walk through, but I climbed up on the ridge above it and took a photo looking down into it.



Notice how narrow this slot is, and also how narrow the wall between it and the more major wash is. There are some small conglomerate rocks wedged in this slot, as well.



One more photo of this slot, looking into it from below.



Once the wash we were following turned towards the east and made a sharp bend, we ascended the ridge to the south. This is a panorama from that ridge, with the canyon we are heading towards just left of center, the other canyon in this area (between this one and Artists Palette) to the right of it, and Artists Palette to the far right.



Zooming in on where the northern canyon we were heading towards joins with a side canyon.



Looking back down this minor drainage we had been following towards where we had parked.



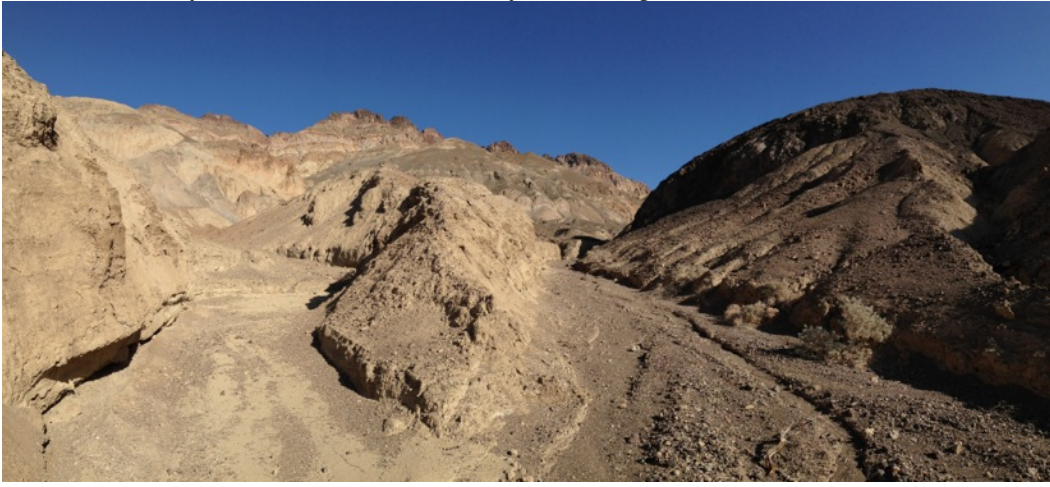
This is the view towards where the wash of the canyon we were heading to meets the Artists Palette Road. I am not sure if there is a better parking location at where this wash meets the road.



With a very small amount of scrambling on talus, we descended into the more major wash and began heading up towards where the main canyon joins with its side canyon. Notice the somewhat colorful hillsides in the background here.



Panorama of the fork, with the main canyon to the left and its side canyon to the right.



We expected that we would quickly reach a major impasse in this canyon (from looking at Google Earth maps), but we were not sure how soon that would be.



The canyon has a long, straight stretch, with nearby hillsides which reminded me of the hillsides near the major dryfall in nearby Desolation Canyon.



On the north side of this wash, there are an impressive number of short, narrow slots (much too narrow to walk through), like the one we had seen earlier in this hike (in a different wash). This one had a bridge of sorts, which appears to have been formed where part of the wall fell over onto the other side.



Taking a closer look at this interesting formation. The slot is about 4 feet tall, and the top piece is about 8 inches tall.



Up ahead in the canyon we could see that, unfortunately, the canyon does not have any narrows before reaching a major impasse. The rock formations around the dryfall reminded me of the Gates of Argonath in LOTR.



Just below the major impasse, the canyon has two minor dryfalls. The first one can easily be walked around. Also, dirt and rocks have rolled down from the canyon walls, forming a sort of bowl-shaped area where water might collect, if there were a lot of rain (lower right side of photo).



This is the second of the small dryfalls; I think it is about 6 feet tall.



Looking up at the major impasse, which occurs where the canyon begins to cut through the mountains.



Looking back out towards the valley from here. Notice the minor hoodoo-like formation in the center of the photo.



This large boulder overhang and the rocks on top of it made me a bit nervous when I was standing underneath it looking at the small dryfall just beyond.



From here, we headed back down the canyon wash. This is the tallest of the mini (micro?) slots on the north side of the canyon; if I recall correctly, it is almost 6 feet tall, but still narrow enough that I couldn't walk into it.



The scree to the south of the canyon may look climbable, but the rocks are sharp and loose, and I am doubtful that this ridge would be a successful workaround for the major dryfall anyway.



Looking back down the long straight stretch of canyon towards the valley. This was a very windy day in the valley (Dec. 20, 2017), and it was difficult to see the Panamint Mountains from here because of all the dust blowing in the valley. Fortunately, it wasn't windy here.



Looking back at the dryfall and the pinkish hillsides above it. It would be interesting to look down on this canyon from the ridge north of Borax Benchmark.



As soon as it was possible, we scrambled up on the ridge to the south a little further down-canyon. I immediately noticed this false natural bridge in a minor side drainage of the side-canyon to this main canyon.



Looking southeast across the side canyon and towards the canyon between us and Artists Palette. It appears a hiker may have descended the large mound just to the right of this canyon; notice how visible the tracks are, even from this distance.



Looking over towards Artists Palette from here, and a "Hidden Palette" just behind the main Artists Palette.



This is the view back down this canyon wash towards the main Artists Drive Road. Notice how the view towards the Panamint Mountains is somewhat hazy due to the dust in the air.



Looking up the ridge towards a potential bypass of the dryfall, which may not work as the terrain appears to be too steep. Also notice that the hillsides are still colorful here, even at this distance from the Artists Palette. (In particular, notice the green patch just barely visible above the major dryfall in the center of this photo.)



Panorama from this ridge, with the canyon we had just visited to the left and Artists Palette to the far right.



The major dryfall is to the far left in this photo, and the ridge we had just ascended is to the right.



I spotted this interesting rock with tiny colorful rocks embedded in it in the canyon wash near here. I don't recall ever having seen anything like it in Death Valley before.



From here, we hiked a short distance up the side canyon, to check out the false natural bridge. Notice how small the entrance is to this false bridge.



This opening is too small for me to crawl through without accidentally dislodging rocks on the canyon walls.



Looking through this tunnel, I could just barely see daylight through the other side (orange glow in the center of photo).



From here, we began heading back to the main road. It would have been nice to explore the side canyon further, and revisit the nearby canyon just north of Artists Palette, but, with the strong winds in the valley and all the blowing dust, we were concerned about getting back to Stovepipe Wells and getting dinner. Here we are looking towards the small mound just north of where we parked.



This darker colored ridge is probably made up of the same rock as in the Mars Hill area, but I'm not sure.



Looking south towards the main Artists Palette area from the ridge between the canyon wash and the wash we had followed up from the main road.



Panorama from this small ridge, with the canyon we just visited to the far left, and the Artists Drive Road to the far right.



This is the view looking up where the wash we would follow back to the road goes, after we crossed the small ridge between this wash and the wash of the canyon we had just visited.



Looking over at the blowing sand by Tucki Mountain on our drive back to Stovepipe Wells.



According to one of the staff at the Badwater Saloon, the sandstorm had been bad enough earlier in the day that one could not see the General Store from the saloon window.



We were fortunate enough to be just finishing dinner at the saloon before Stovepipe Wells Village temporarily lost electricity.

