

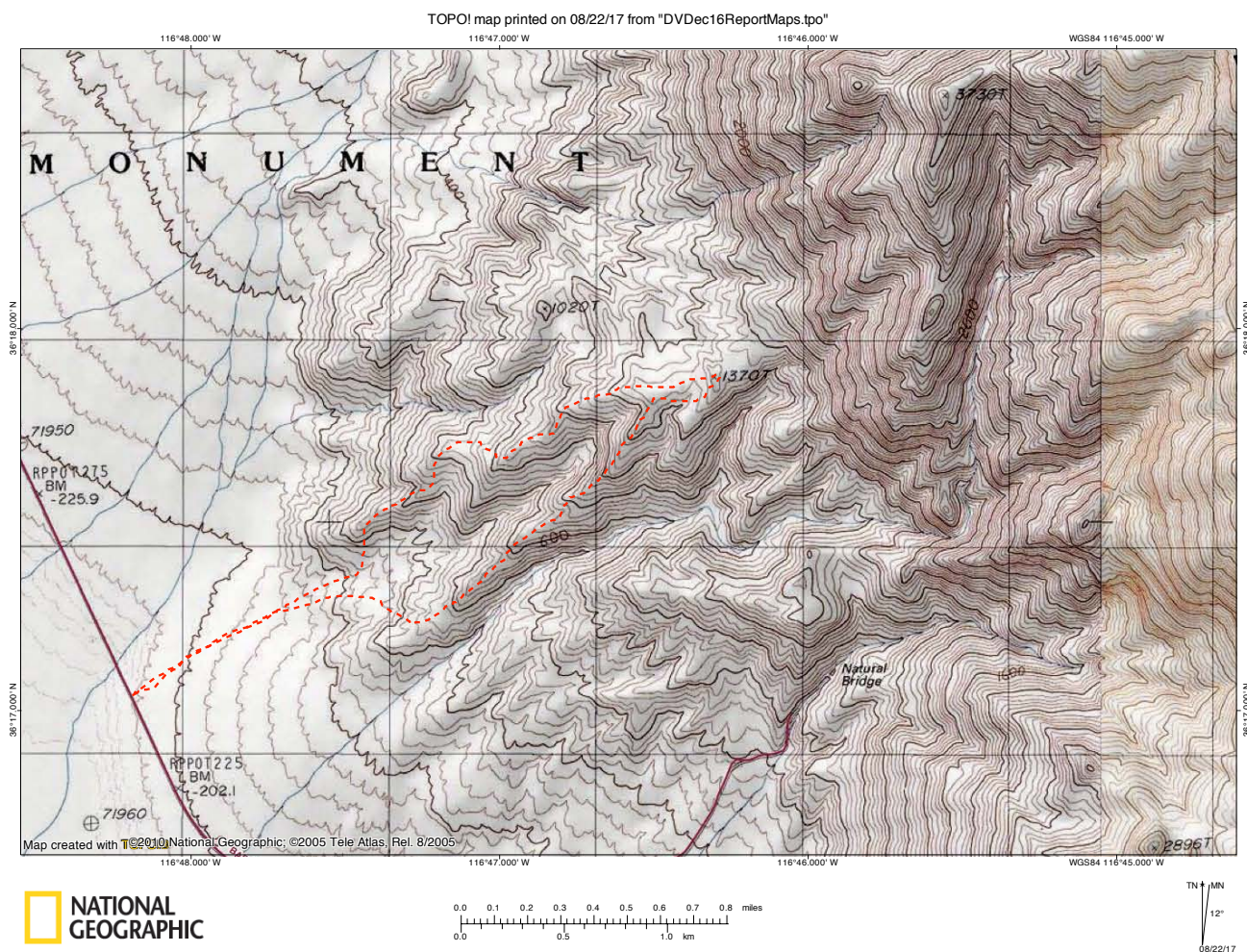
RIDGES NORTH OF HELLFIRE CANYON, AND VIEW INTO A NORTHERN SIDE CANYON OF HELLFIRE CANYON

In January of 2009, we hiked what is known by canyoneers as "Hellfire Canyon," which is the first major canyon north of Natural Bridge Canyon. It has some nice narrows as it cuts through the foothills in which Natural Bridge is located, before reaching a series of dryfalls in the Black Mountains. It also has a side-canyon, which takes off to the north about halfway to where most hikers will need to stop. Unfortunately, there is a crumbly, although not particularly tall, dryfall which prevents hikers from getting more than a short distance up this side canyon. Since it looked like this side canyon would have some nice narrows, I was hoping to be able to access it from the northern ridge. However, as is typical for canyons in the Black Mountains, the terrain is much steeper than it appears from Google Earth, and we felt fortunate to at least be able to see down into this side canyon.

Please note that this hike is more treacherous than I had expected it to be, and therefore I would only recommend it to hikers who are very familiar with the Death Valley terrain (and especially with the steep and sharp sides of the Black Mountains). Also, from a distance, hillsides often don't look as steep as they really are, so make sure you can get back down what you have ascended. Finally, I would recommend both ascending and descending the route which we descended (which is the ridge just north of Hellfire Canyon, that I'll call the "southern" ridge, not the ridge two north of this canyon, which I'll call the "northern" ridge), because there is one particularly steep and slippery stretch of the route we ascended which I would not like to do again.

The views from this hike, especially looking down the valley towards Badwater, were magnificent. I would consider ascending partway up the southern ridge to be a worthwhile hike, just for the view.

TOPO map of the route we took on this hike. Hellfire Canyon is the major canyon between the route we took (marked in red) and Natural Bridge Canyon.



View across at the Panamint Mountains from where we parked for this hike.



Looking at the colorful area just north of where we would be hiking. Brimstone Canyon is just barely visible in the center of this photo, and Artists' Drive is to the far left. The ridge we ascended, the "northern" ridge, is to the far right.



Looking over at where we would be hiking. The "northern" ridge is just left of center, and the "southern" ridge is just right of center. The mouth of Hellfire Canyon is to the right of this photo and is not visible. The upper reaches of both Hellfire and Natural Bridge Canyons, however, can be seen to the right.



Panorama of the base of the "northern" ridge. Our first goal was the small bump seen in the center of this photo.



The terrain is steep and rocky, but fortunately the ground is soft enough that we didn't have too much difficulty ascending this first part of the ridge.



Looking up towards the first goal mentioned two photos ago.



Upon reaching this first goal, our next goal was the high point seen in the center of this photo. To get there, we would need to follow the ridge as it bent north across a "neck" of sorts.



Panorama of this area between Hellfire and Brimstone Canyons.



Looking out across the valley at the Panamint Mountains, with Telescope Peak visible to the left of center.



This colorful area to the north looked interesting to explore.



Zooming in on a particularly interesting and oddly colored region north of where we were hiking.



The terrain is relatively straightforward hiking at this point, but it soon changes.



The "neck" we had spotted a ways back can be seen to the left in this photo, and is not as difficult as it had looked from a distance. The high point which was our second goal is to the right.



Panorama looking across at the southern ridge. The southern ridge seems to have a steady moderate elevation gain with a few tricky sections but nothing very bad. The northern ridge, however, has some sections of minor elevation gain, and some sections of major elevation gain (up ahead in this report) which are tricky to ascend and would be even more difficult to descend.



The views down the valley towards Badwater are excellent, especially in the morning lighting. I think the view may be better from the southern ridge, but I'm not sure.



Here we have reached the last saddle before our second goal. From here, we were able to get a good view looking towards the colorful area north of us, which is just south of Brimstone Canyon. I recall Brimstone Canyon also had some colorful areas; I hope to return to that canyon someday to get better photos of it.



Our second goal is the top of this peak. From this viewpoint, we could see that there wasn't really a good way to get to the top of it. The blue-colored mound on the left side in this photo is not a soft "mud-mound"; instead, it is slippery dirt with small ball-bearing like rocks. So, we determined that the best way to ascend would be to head up one of the drainage chutes between where the saddle meets the hillside and the blue mound (so, a little left of center in this photo). This was much steeper than I expected, and I would not recommend this route, as I ascended the last stretch of it at a run so as to avoid sliding back down faster than I could climb up.



Panorama from this saddle, with the Artists' Palette area to the left and Badwater to the right.



The views of Artists' Drive from here are excellent.



Looking at the upper regions of the colorful area south of Brimstone Canyon. That would be an interesting area to explore sometime, though I'm not sure how best to access it, as there appear to be some dryfalls in the small canyon which drains from this area.



Panorama looking back out at the valley from the saddle, before ascending the nastiest stretch of the hike.



Looking down what I had recently ascended.



From here, a location to get a view into upper Hellfire Canyon was further than I'd expected it would be, but the view was excellent.



The colorful section of ridge seen to the left is where we are heading for next. The upper part of the southern ridge can be seen to the right.



Panorama of most of the upper part of the southern ridge; notice how even the descent looks compared to what we have been hiking on. Also notice Tank Canyon in the center of this photo, and how close the upper part of it is to the upper part of Natural Bridge Canyon. There are many dry falls in the upper reaches of both of those steep canyons!



We can now get a view into the many little forks of Brimstone Canyon (to the right in the photo). I think we could also see into Artists' Palette from here, but I'm not entirely sure.



Panorama looking towards the peaks of the Black Mountains, which didn't seem to be getting much closer.



Another view towards Badwater.



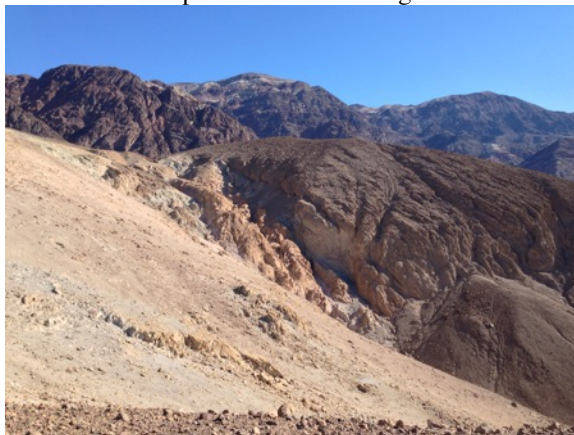
Looking northwest, with Mahogany Flat to the left of center. One could spend a lot of time on these ridges looking across the valley with binoculars (or a good zoom lens) at the many canyons in the Eastern Panamint Mountains.



Reaching the base of the lighter colored band of rock. Thankfully, this section of the hike was not particularly steep, although the temperature here was getting to be quite warm for a December day.



Looking across at an interesting craggy area below the top of the southern ridge.



Panorama of the nice view we had here.



Looking down the valley; we are now starting to get a better view of the southern Panamint Mountains.



Looking north, up the valley; the Grapevine Mountains are now visible above the Artists' Drive hills.



Looking back down the northern ridge; our "second goal" is the prominent bump left of center in this photo.



Looking across at where the north and south ridges join. Upper Hellfire Canyon can be seen cutting through the mountains to the left, and Natural Bridge Canyon is to the left of it.



View north from here; the colors on the hills showed up quite well in this photo.



Looking over at the hills north of Brimstone Canyon.



We are finally getting close to the mountains. I was surprised at how much it appears there is to explore in this area, but I'm not sure if it would be faster, easier, or even possible to get up here from closer to Brimstone Canyon rather than the route we took.



We kept continuing on in hopes of finally reaching a place where we could get a good view into the side canyon.



Panorama of this flatter area below the mountains.



Looking over at Hellfire Canyon, Natural Bridge Canyon, and Tank Canyon.



Notice the steep drainages coming off this peak.



Our final goal is the high point seen in the center of this photo.



Looking down a gully that drains into the side canyon. I'm sure it has many major dryfalls before it reaches the bottom, because of how high up we are here.



Panorama showing the high point we are headed for (right of center), and a colorful area to the left of it.



Looking up at the mountains from this high point.



Panorama of this area from the high point, which is labeled 1370 on the TOPO map above. (Recall we started this hike below sea level.) I don't think it is as easy as it may look to get up here by following the drainage seen to the left in this photo.



Looking down into the upper reaches of the main side canyon of Hellfire Canyon. It certainly would be interesting to check out what is there.



I was surprised by this area of white rock in the canyon below.



Looking across at the main Hellfire Canyon, and Natural Bridge and Tank Canyons.

