

EXPLORATION

Get Out! By Paul McFarland

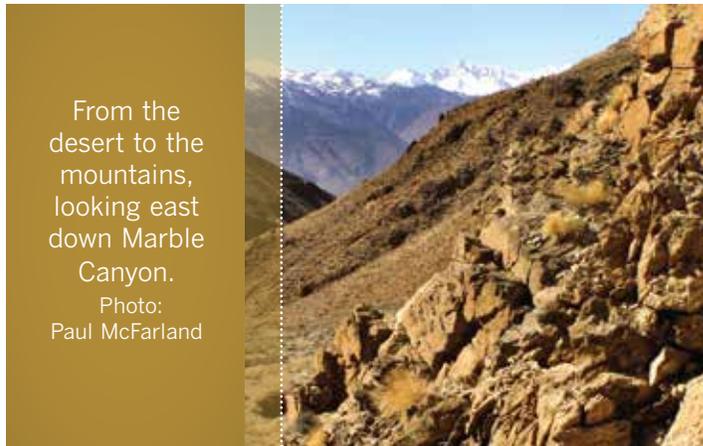
An expedition up Marble Canyon embodies what makes exploring the Eastern Sierra second to none: Close enough to town for a day trip, but far and rough enough to yield a meaningful four-wheel drive tour (or really long pedal!); easy enough to walk, but just challenging enough to keep your mind off your in-town troubles and on your feet, the rocks, and the desert creek; diverse enough to contain plants from the Mojave Desert, Great Basin, and Rocky Mountains all in one desert canyon. And it's accessible and inviting year-round.

I first stumbled into Marble Canyon over a decade ago while mapping the Black Canyon Inventoried Roadless Area for potential inclusion as part of the White Mountains Wilderness. Honestly, it was the name – Marble Canyon – printed on the topo map that first captured me. Marble? Really? Sounds meander-full!

That first trip – from astonishing scarlet locoweed (in February!?) to fern-draped dripping springs to peaceful pinyon forests – didn't disappoint. As with nearly every corner of our Eastern Sierra, a little exploration yields great rewards.

Getting There

Head east out of Bishop on East Line Street over the Owens River towards the White Mountains. Follow the paved road around a sweeping right turn, head south on Eastside Road. Turn left onto Warm Springs Road. Follow Warm Springs first east then south to Black Canyon Road. Turn left and follow Black Canyon Road south and then east into the mouth of Black Canyon. Once in Black Canyon proper, the road becomes much rougher. Moderate to high clearance four-wheel drive is recommended for the final two and a half miles winding up



From the desert to the mountains, looking east down Marble Canyon.

Photo: Paul McFarland

canyon to the parking spot. As you bounce up the canyon floor, watch for a thick white layer of rock stacked in the cobbled wall to the south. Dated to around 760,000 years ago, this layer is Bishop Tuff - rock formed by deposits of molten ash erupted from the massive Long Valley Caldera atop the Sherwin Grade.

As the road begins to sweep left into the dark defile of Black Canyon, turn right towards to mouth of Marble Canyon to a nice flat parking area right at the mouth of the canyon.

Being There

From the parking area, the Sierra shimmers in the west across the Owens Valley while sheer, twisting walls of Marble Canyon beckon to the east. From this point, at around 5600', it's two and half miles and 1200' of gentle walking, light scrambling, some slogging and some brush bustin' to make it to the final spring at the head of the canyon. Usually, water can found within the first half mile up the canyon.

While there is no difficult climbing involved if you follow the canyon bottom, there is no trail up Marble Canyon. This is wild country where you will be on your own. In winter be mindful of ice that can form where water runs over usually dry marble falls. Only travel as far as you are comfortable. A walk of nearly any distance rewards with that unique stillness only found in desert canyons. Rather than provide a play by play of natural wonders you'll run into up this canyon, I'll leave you to discover your own moments of "oh cool!" as you wander between twisting walls of 500 million year old white dolomite (a form of limestone rich in magnesium) and listen to the symphony of the desert.

JOIN US
for an exploration of
Marble Canyon
SATURDAY, DEC. 7TH
visit friendsoftheiny.org
for hike details,
maps and more
information.



Scarlet Locoweed, late winter 2003 in Marble Canyon.

Photo: Paul McFarland