

# Cottonwood / Marble Canyon Loop

Death Valley National Park  
California / Nevada



**Difficulty:** Strenuous. Route finding skills required. The 26mi (42km) long cross country route has no signage. Elevation gain is 3882ft (1183m). Scrambling down an 8ft (2.4m) dryfall is required.

**Location:** Enter Stovepipe Wells Campground. Turn left on the Cottonwood Canyon Road marked by a sign for the airport. Check road conditions prior to travel.

- **Cottonwood Marble Road:** 10.5mi (17km). The first 8 miles (13km) is typically passable to a high clearance vehicle. After the 8 mile point, the road drops steeply into a deep wash where 4x4 is required due to pockets of deep gravel and small boulders for the next 2.1mi (3.4km) to the junction with Marble Canyon Road.
- **Cottonwood Canyon Road:** The 8.5mi (13.7km) road requires a 4x4 vehicle due to deep sand, rocky washes, tight corners, and small boulders.
- **Marble Canyon Road:** The 1.8mi (2.9km) road requires a 4x4, high clearance vehicle due to small boulders and tight corners through the rocky wash. Great spot to cache water if you are willing to drive a little extra.

**Water Sources:** Check conditions prior to your trip. Water sources are seasonal and subject to change at any time. Springs are usually reliable between from December through March. Filter or treat all water.

- **Cottonwood Canyon:** Seasonal. Running water is typically visible at the end of the Cottonwood Canyon Road (469127E, 4043912N) with additional periodic access locations as you hike up the canyon.
- **Cottonwood Springs:** Seasonal. The most reliable source (466273E, 4040786N). Stock up here, this could be the last water source for your trip.
- **Deadhorse Canyon:** Seasonal. Known to dry up first. (466486E, 4047804N).

## Regulations:

- **Group Size:** Limited to 12 individuals, 8 pack animals, and 4 vehicles. Groups larger than 12 must split up into smaller groups and must camp, hike, and eat at least a half-mile apart.
- **Camping:** Dispersed camping is permitted beginning 8mi (13km) from Stovepipe Wells on Cottonwood Marble Road. Camping is prohibited within 100ft/30m (100 yards for pack animals) of all water sources. Please practice *Leave No Trace* principles. Camp in a pre-disturbed area.
- **Fires:** Open fires are strictly prohibited for resource protection. Portable gas burning stoves are allowed.
- **Waste:** Human waste must be packed out or buried (cat holed) at least 400 feet (about 150 adult steps) from water, trails and camp. Select an inconspicuous site where other people will be unlikely to walk or camp. Dig a hole 6-8 inches deep and cover it up when done.
- **Permits:** Free backcountry permits are available at visitor contact stations. The information on the permits greatly improves the safety of park visitors while enabling the park to gather valuable visitation information.

**Before You Go:** Check the weather and road conditions prior to your trip. There is no cellular coverage in the area. Bring a map, compass, and GPS device to assist with navigation. Get free GPS files: [nps.gov/devalplanyourvisit/hiking.htm](https://nps.gov/devalplanyourvisit/hiking.htm)

**Hiking Route:** Numerous seasonal water sources and dramatic canyon narrows make the loop the most popular backpacking route within the park. Most backpackers will park at the intersection of Cottonwood & Marble Canyon Roads and then hike the loop clockwise completing the trip in two to three nights. For consistency, this guide has been written to follow this popular format.

## Cottonwood/Marble Junction -> Cottonwood Canyon Rd End: 8.5mi (13.7km)

The rough but scenic road makes for a great hike as it starts out as a flat, easy to follow route before winding through deep canyons framed by dramatic cliffs. The road ends within a grove of cottonwood trees with great camping near the first seasonal water source. Camp at least 100ft/30m (100 yards for pack animals) from all water sources.

## Cottonwood Canyon Road End -> Cottonwood Springs: 3.5mi (5.6km)

The hike up the canyon is generally easy to moderate as you make your way through the cottonwoods and over numerous water crossings. Near the end of the canyon at approximately 3.3mi (5.3km) from the end of Cottonwood Canyon Road, a steep and narrow path up the south (left) wall leads you up and over a rocky outcropping and then down the other side into a beautifully forested area with old growth cottonwood trees. Continue up the canyon, but pay close attention as the canyon opens up and vegetation becomes less prevalent. If you've reached a large rock cairn, you've gone too far. This confusing area is where you need to look for a faint footpath to the north (right side) up the hill and out of the shallow drainage toward the dense vegetation surrounding Cottonwood Springs. Signs of burro and wild horses in the area are good indicators that you are in the right area. Stock up with water here, as this may be the last source depending on spring flow. Filter or treat all water and look for fantastic campsites nearby just north of the springs. Camp at least 100ft/30m (100 yards for pack animals) from all water sources.

## Cottonwood Springs -> Deadhorse Canyon: 6mi (9.7km)

From Cottonwood Springs start hiking north up the long valley that parallels the mountain range to the east. As you hike up the valley, you pass a few old desert markers that helped point the way for miners during the mining boom of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the camps of Keeler and Goldbelt as well as water sources such as Cottonwood and Jackass Springs. Continue up the valley past the historic markers, but keep an eye on the ridgeline to the northeast looking for a low saddle that offers passage over the range. The base of this pass is approximately 3.5mi (5.7km) from Cottonwood Springs where you follow a moderately steep gully up to the saddle.

The saddle is perched between high hills and offers great views back down into the valley from which you came. The route from the saddle to Deadhorse Canyon is the most confusing part of the entire route. From the saddle, start heading northeast (downhill) for 1mi (1.6km) until you reach the head of a densely vegetated canyon. This canyon is not Deadhorse Canyon, which is the next canyon to the north. To access Deadhorse Canyon, head down the densely vegetated canyon for 0.1mi (0.16km) then hike uphill toward the saddle between two small hills on the northern side. From the saddle, hike down a steep gully which dead ends into Deadhorse Canyon, to find spectacular camping near the large cottonwood trees. A seasonal spring is located 0.25mi (0.4km) down Deadhorse Canyon to the north (right).

## Deadhorse Canyon -> Marble Canyon Road: 6.5mi (10.5km)

Heading down Deadhorse Canyon, the route crosses the seasonal stream numerous times as it flows over exposed bedrock through the scenic canyon. In less than 800ft (243m) a vertical 8ft (2.4m) dryfall must be climbed down. The left side of the dryfall may be the easiest due to the many handholds on the canyon wall. The right side is more of a gradual descent, but the footing is dangerously loose. Another 0.4mi (0.6km) beyond the dryfall is the often overlooked confluence of Marble Canyon. Upper Marble Canyon subtly joins Deadhorse from the northwest (left), and is worth a side trip if you're looking to explore additional sets of canyon narrows in this remote desert playground.

From the intersection on, heading downhill you are hiking in Marble Canyon. With its towering walls and deep corridors, Marble Canyon is home to some of the best narrows in the entire park. From the confluence with Deadhorse you pass through three separate sets on your way to Marble Canyon Road. The upper set less than 1mi (1.6km) from the intersection has uniquely colored walls of marble adorned with recurring black and white stripes in zebra like fashion.

The middle set of narrows are located another 2.5mi (4km) down the canyon and are the most impressive. The deep passageway winds tightly beneath high overhanging walls of smoothly polished limestone stained with caramel colored streaks. Spend some time here and enjoy the solitude and quiet of this remote canyon paradise. You may notice its character change with the angle of the sun providing excellent opportunities for photography. Lucky and quiet hikers may even catch a glimpse of life here in Death Valley in the form of the various owls that call the canyon home.

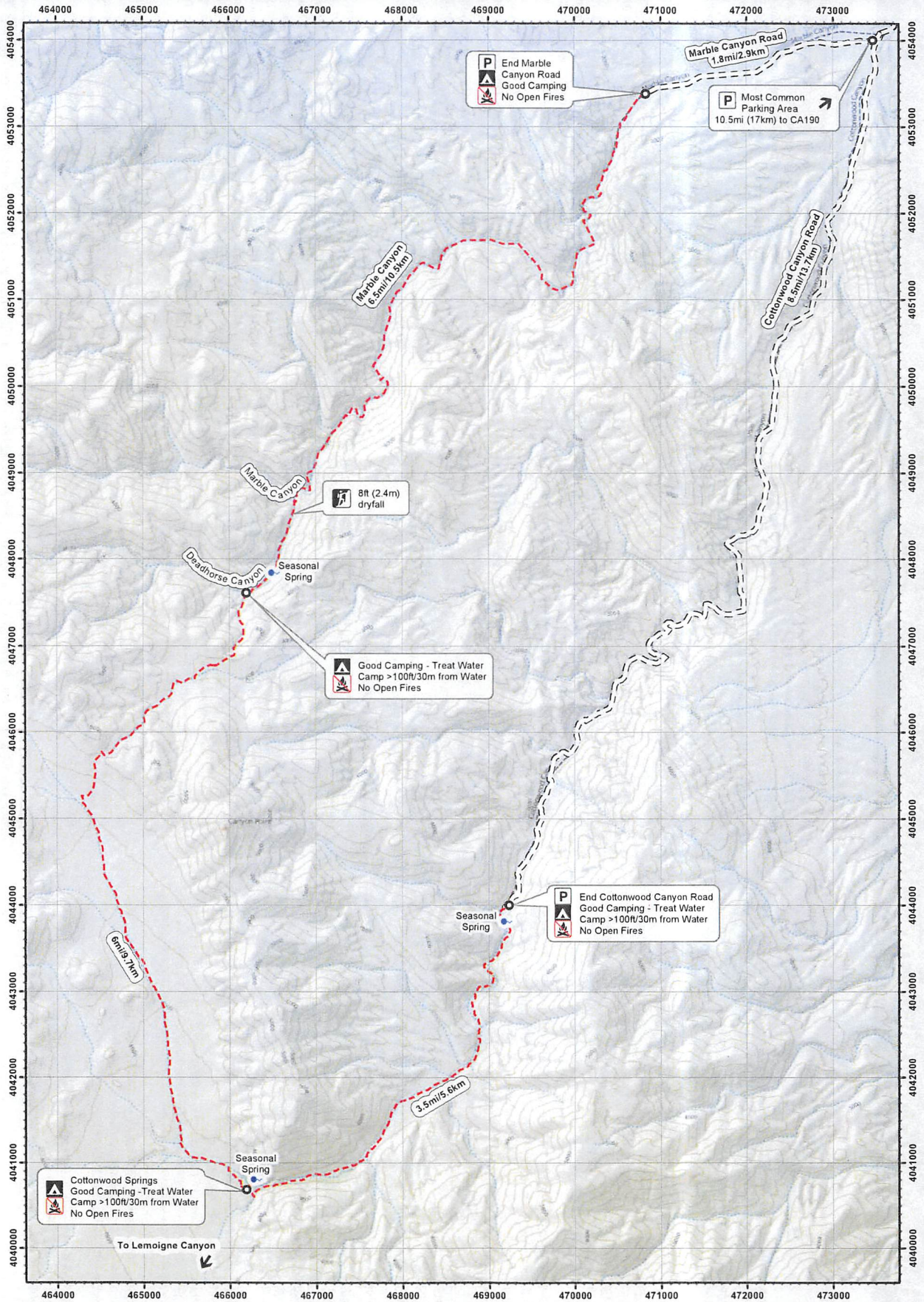
The powerful scenery in the canyon may seem indestructible and permanent, but it is in a constant state of change due to periodic flash flooding. During heavy rains, it's possible for flood waters to funnel large amounts of debris through the narrow canyon with incredible force. An enormous chokestone blocking the passage between the middle and lower narrows is a great example of the power of previous flash floods. Backtrack 300ft (90m) up canyon to take the clear bypass trail up the hill on the eastern wall past the chokestone then down to the canyon below into the lower and final set of narrows. Hikers seem tiny in comparison to the high majestic walls as they hike through the dark sinuous corridor. The area is popular with determined day hikers that have driven the rough road in order to access the famous narrows from below.

## Marble Canyon Road -> Cottonwood/Marble Junction: 1.8mi (2.9km)

The hike back to the intersection of Cottonwood Canyon Road is primarily through an open wash exposed to the sun, but it does pass through one more small section of scenic narrows on the way. From February through early April, look for wildflowers in bloom throughout the area as well as cacti upon the rocky slopes.

# Cottonwood & Marble Canyon Loop

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**P** End Marble Canyon Road  
Good Camping  
No Open Fires

**P** Most Common Parking Area  
10.5mi (17km) to CA190

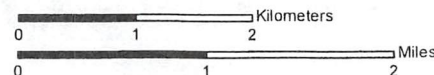
8ft (2.4m) dryfall

**P** Good Camping - Treat Water  
Camp >100ft/30m from Water  
No Open Fires

**P** End Cottonwood Canyon Road  
Good Camping - Treat Water  
Camp >100ft/30m from Water  
No Open Fires

**P** Cottonwood Springs  
Good Camping - Treat Water  
Camp >100ft/30m from Water  
No Open Fires

Scale = 1:40,000  
Contour Interval = 200 feet / 61 meters  
Datum = WGS84 / UTM Zone 11N



--- Hiking Route  
- - - - 4x4 Roads