

Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area

Recreational Opportunities

The Visitor Center has indoor and outdoor exhibits, a gift shop, movie, and restrooms with running water. Bottled water and sports beverages can be purchased here.

The Scenic Drive is a one-way, 21 kilometer (13 mile) road that has many scenic parking areas/trailheads. Hiking trails, ranging from easy to strenuous, start at the various trailheads. Primitive toilets are available at various parking lots. There is no drinking water available on the Scenic Drive.

Red Rock Canyon is a world-renowned venue for rock climbers. There are bouldering, sport, and multi-pitched routes for all levels of climbing experience.

Jogging and road biking are allowed on the Scenic Drive. Please watch out for these users and wildlife.

Mountain biking is allowed near Blue Diamond and Cottonwood Valley.

Wildlife viewing is best done in the early morning and evening hours. Wildflower viewing is best during the spring and early summer months.

Horseback riding is permitted on select trails. Trailers can park at White Rock, Willow Spring, and the Scenic Drive Exit parking lots to access equestrian trails.

Permits are required for weddings, commercial photo shoots, and large group activities (more than 15 people). Contact the Visitor Center for more information.

Safety

Be careful around any wild animals you see. Do not feed the wildlife and do not turn your back to them, as they can bite, kick, sting, or hurt you. Watch where you put your hands and feet to avoid snakes, insects, spiders, scorpions, and lizards.

Do not touch or pick plants; many plants have thorns and spines that can cause you injury.

Have water with you before you go onto the Scenic Drive. Bring at least one liter of water for each person in your group. If you plan on hiking, bring several liters of water per person.

Read all the trail descriptions carefully and do not hike above your skill level. Wear a hat and sunglasses, dress in light layers, apply sunscreen, and wear sturdy shoes. Use extra caution when visiting during extreme summer heat.

Prehistoric Features

In contrast to the surrounding desert areas, Red Rock Canyon contains many small springs and natural water catchment basins (tinajas). This water allows plants and animals to survive in a harsh environment. Southern Paiutes, Ancestral Puebloans, and other groups of Native Americans used the area to collect water and food resources.

Roasting Pits

Roasting pits are depressed circular areas of burned limestone rocks that were used by Native Americans to cook plant and animal foods. They vary in size from small ground-level circles to huge piles several meters high. They can be found near Sandstone Quarry, White Rock, and Willow Spring parking areas/trailheads.

Rock Art

Rock art comes in two varieties: petroglyphs and pictographs. Petroglyphs are pecked or scratched markings into the surface of the rock. In contrast, pictographs are designs that were painted onto a lighter colored rock surface. You can view these rock art panels at the Red Spring and Willow Spring Picnic Areas. Please do not touch any rock art, as it is both enduring and fragile.

Euro-Cultural Features

Spanish Trail

The Spanish Trail was established between 1829-1830 as a trade route for Spanish explorers from Santa Fe to Los Angeles. Parts of it pass through Red Rock Canyon. Once the Spanish Trail was established, explorers, traders, miners, religious groups, and settlers used it to get to and from California.

Mormon Road

In the 1840s, Mormons transported goods and traveled along a trail that cut across Red Rock Canyon. This trail connected Salt Lake City to California and became a popular wagon road.

Ranching & Mining

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, people raised cattle and sheep and grew crops near First Creek, Pine Creek, and Calico Basin. Sandstone mining occurred in Sandstone Quarry while silver mining took place at La Madre Spring. Gypsum mining occurred near the village of Blue Diamond.

Geologic History

Under the Sea

Roughly 542 to 251 million years ago (Paleozoic Era), Red Rock Canyon was the bottom of an ocean. Many marine animals lived in those waters and left behind large deposits of shells and skeletons. These deposits formed thick layers of limestone.

Land Mass Formation

Tectonic forces raised the limestone ocean floor above sea level, creating dry land. These plate movements formed some of the mountains we see today.

Sand started to accumulate in the area roughly 180 million years ago, creating giant sand dunes. Rain helped solidify the dunes and turn them into sandstone rock. Iron gives these sandstone mountains their red and orange colors.

Thrust Fault Line

The Keystone Thrust Fault is a fracture in the earth's crust along which immense force folded rock layers. This resulted in older limestone rocks being found above the younger sandstone rocks, which is not normal in sedimentary layers.

Erosion

The combination of heat, freezing temperatures, wind, rain, and floods have an effect on the mountains. These forces, called erosion, break off smaller rocks from large rocks, create cracks, smoothen ridges, and continue to shape the mountains today.

Rock/Mineral Types

Bonanza King Limestone (gray mountains) is found throughout the area. It was formed on the ocean floor and made of calcium carbonate and the remnants of ancient sea life. This is why limestone is an excellent source of fossils.

Aztec Sandstone is found throughout the Southwest and is also known as Navajo Sandstone. This formation is quite hard and forms the prominent cliffs (red mountains) within Red Rock Canyon.

Concretions are naturally occurring deposits of iron oxide in the sandstone. They form into columns or spheres, and show up as red dots or brown rock balls on large boulders.

Fossils of corals, crinoids, blue-green bacteria, and sponges can be found at Red Rock Canyon. Footprints of dinosaurs, mammals, and insects have been found in the sandstone. Petrified wood can also be found. Please take pictures only and do not remove fossils or other relics.

Graffiti

Graffiti is against the law and is punishable by heavy fines and prison. Please do not draw on, scratch, or chip into rocks, signs, or trees.