



South Bass Trail

William W. Bass was the most noteworthy of the early pioneers that came to the rim of Grand Canyon in the 1880s to carve a life and a lifestyle from the wilderness. The contribution of this man to canyon history is difficult to measure. A list of his accomplishments during more than 40 years of living on the rim would fill a book. Among the most notable is the construction of more than 50 miles of inner canyon trail, most of which can still be walked today. The South Bass Trail was the foundation of this far-flung system of pathways and today it offers modern backpackers a doorway to a fascinating part of Grand Canyon, steeped in the history Bill Bass lived.

Hikers arriving at the beach at the bottom of the South Bass Trail can't help but notice an old boat chained to the rocks above the high water line. Abandoned by Russell and Tadge in 1915, the Ross Wheeler was built by Bert Loper, the grand old man of Colorado River runners, and named for a murdered friend. Loper died a romantic death in 1949 during a Grand Canyon river trip, suffering a heart attack at age 79 while at the oars of a Colorado River cataract boat. His remains were not recovered until 1975, 26 years after his death.

Locations/Elevations

Rim (6646 ft / 2026 m) to Esplanade Trail Junction (5400 ft / 1646 m):

Esplanade Trail Junction (5400 ft / 1646 m) to westbound Tonto Junction (3200 ft / 975 m):

Westbound Tonto Junction (3200 ft / 975 m) to eastbound Tonto Junction (3150 ft / 960 m):

Eastbound Tonto Junction (3150 ft / 960 m) to Colorado River (2250 ft / 686 m):

South Bass trailhead (6646 ft / 2026 m) to Colorado River (2250 ft / 686 m):

Mileages

1.4 mi (2.2 km)

4.2 mi (8.0 km)

0.1 mi (0.2 km)

1.8 mi (2.9 km)

7.5 mi (12.1 km)

Maps

7.5 Minute Havasupai Point Quad (USGS)

Trails Illustrated Map, Grand Canyon National Park (National Geographic)

Water Sources

The Colorado River is the only reliable water source. The river is often sediment laden and can be difficult to purify. Water can occasionally be found during or immediately after wet weather in potholes in the bed of Bass Canyon below the Tonto Trail or in sandstone pockets on the Esplanade.

Campsites

The Bass Canyon Use Area (BQ9) allows "at-large" camping. Serviceable sites can be found on the Esplanade, the Tonto Platform, and the beach at the Colorado River.

Trailhead Access

The South Bass trailhead is located in a remote area about 30 miles northwest of Grand Canyon Village. Access is via Forest Road (FR) 328 (the Kaibab National Forest). This unpaved byway is not shown accurately on most topo maps, so a road map of the Tusayan Ranger District of the Kaibab National Forest will be useful. FR 328 is rough and rocky and sections can become impassible during wet weather. A high-clearance vehicle is recommended, and four-wheel drive might be required if the road is muddy. Driving to the South Bass trailhead can offer almost as much adventure as the hike.

Access to FR 328 is via Rowe Well Road from Grand Canyon Village. Follow signs from Maswik Lodge toward the park kennel. Rowe Well Road continues past the Kennels, forks once (stay left) and then 1 mile further merges with FR 328. Alternate access: FR 328 can also be reached from Highway 64 about 1 mile north of Tusayan. FR 328 departs from the Westside of Hwy 64.

From the intersection of FR 328 and Rowe Well it is about 16 miles to a gate that marks entry to the Havasupai Indian Reservation. The Havasupai Tribe usually has rangers stationed at the gate so expect to pay an entrance fee (\$25 in 2016) to cross their land. This station is not staffed full-time, so if nobody walks out to greet you then simply pass through the gate and continue about 1.7 miles to a four-way intersection. Turn right (northeast) toward Pasture Wash, follow the road about 1.9 miles to the Forest

Service boundary fence. Continue another half a mile to the park boundary fence and cattle guard. Please help keep cows out of the park by closing this gate after passing through. Keep driving north and continue past the ruins of the Pasture Wash Ranger Station. This outpost on your left has not been staffed for many years and no assistance is available. Maintain the northerly heading for 3.6 rutted, rocky miles to rim. Be forewarned: The road north of the four-way intersection can be rendered impassible by deep mud during periods of heavy rain or snow melt.

Trail Description

A well-defined descending traverse gets hikers through the Kaibab and Toroweap formations. The trail passes an old fence and follows the rim of the Coconino a short distance north before starting down rocky switchbacks to the Esplanade platform at the top of the Supai Formation. The Royal Arch Route leaves the South Bass Trail and starts west where the trail comes to the Esplanade, the junction marked with a large cairn. Stay right at this intersection and follow the South Bass Trail north across the terrace east of Mount Huethawali. The route traverses near the Supai rim for about a mile to a steep break that allows passage to the slopes below.

Dropping below the Esplanade, the trail rounds a promontory and descends Supai ledges south toward the bed of Bass Canyon. Once established in the drainage the route follows the bottom of Bass Canyon through the Redwall. The path leaves the drainage and descends most of the Tonto Group rocks via the slopes east of and above the bed of Bass Canyon, eventually returning to the bottom of the canyon just above the Tonto Trail junction. The Tonto Trail is marked by large cairns. Below Tonto Trail the South Bass Trail continues down Bass Canyon, crossing and re-crossing the drainage as it winds around various obstructions. This section can be confusing, but the trail stays as close to the bed of the canyon as the terrain allows, so any disorientation shouldn't last long.

An impassable rock fall blocks access to the river at the mouth of Bass Canyon. Watch where the trail leaves the bed of the drainage, going west a short distance to a large cairn marking a shortcut that allows passage down a rocky ravine to the river below. The ravine route can be tedious and this shortcut may be bypassed by continuing another couple minutes west until a gentler path descends to the river opposite a historic fire place.

Important Notes

There are several other trails located in and near Bass Canyon. Shortcuts to the Tonto Trail continuing west toward Copper Canyon ascend the slopes from points low in the drainage. The trail that heads west out of the bottom of Bass Canyon continues downstream beyond the routes to the river and after a couple miles comes directly across from the mouth of Shinumo Creek. A short scramble allows access to the river. In route downstream watch for the site of a cable crossing that linked the North and South Bass Trails. This historic crossing created the first rim-to-rim trail system. The cable is gone, but these and other sites north of the river attest to the remarkable physical energy Bill Bass brought to his various projects in this lovely part of the Grand Canyon.

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