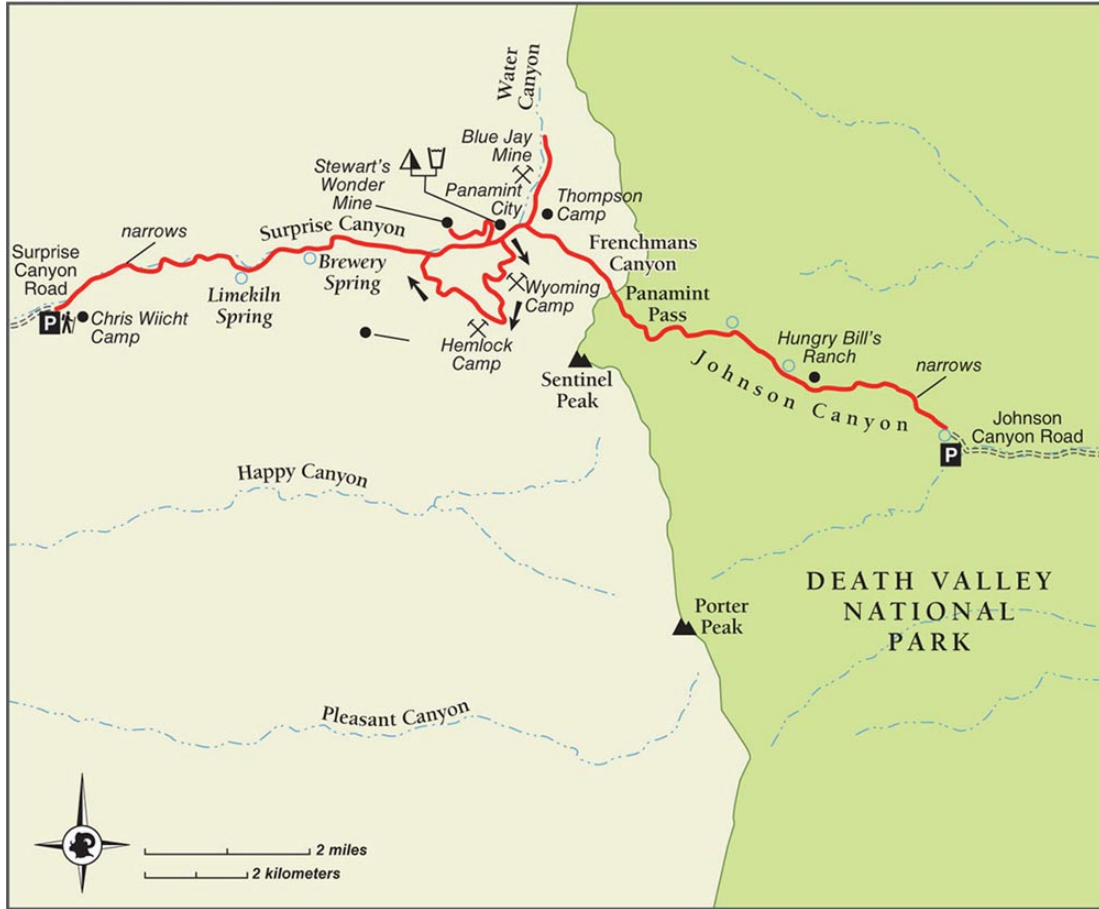


# Surprise Canyon



**SURPRISE CANYON****Michel Digonnet****DISTANCE:** 24.3 miles (point-to-point); 22.3 miles (out-and-back)**RECOMMENDED NUMBER OF DAYS:** 4**ELEVATION GAIN/LOSS:** 9,190' (point-to-point); 7,370' (out-and-back)**TYPE OF TRIP:** Point-to-point or out-and-back**SHUTTLE MILEAGE:** 123 if picked up at the mouth of Johnson Canyon (point-to-point); N/A otherwise (out-and-back)**DIFFICULTY:** Moderately strenuous**SOLITUDE:** Solitude**SCENERY:** 9**MAPS:** USGS *Ballarat*, *Panamint*, and *Telescope Peak***BEST SEASON:** March, April, May, October, and November. Avoid winter, as you need to walk in a creek, and there will likely be snow around Panamint City. From mid-June through September, days are hot but manageable thanks to the high elevations.**LOCATION:** Surprise Canyon Wilderness (Bureau of Land Management), and Death Valley National Park (National Park Service)**CONTACT:** National Park Service, 760-786 3200, [nps.gov/deva](https://nps.gov/deva)**PERMITS**

None required. Check with park ranger in case regulations have changed.

**CHALLENGES**

Although water is available along the route, you must still carry plenty, just in case, and therefore carry a heavy pack. Treat all spring water before drinking. Another challenge is bushwhacking at some springs in Johnson

Canyon, and possibly in Surprise Canyon. Except in summer, bring a warm sleeping bag, as nights are often surprisingly cold.

## **HOW TO GET THERE**

**CHRIS WICHT CAMP** N36° 06.756' W117° 10.542'

**WILSON SPRING** N36° 05.358' W117° 00.414'

To get to Surprise Canyon, drive to the junction of CA 190 and Panamint Valley Road in Panamint Valley. This is 2.5 miles east of Panamint Springs Resort, and 28 miles west of Stovepipe Wells. Stay on Panamint Valley Road 13.9 miles until it ends on the Trona-Wildrose Road, and turn right. Continue 9.4 miles to the Ballarat turnoff on the left. Drive this road 3.6 miles to Ballarat. From Ballarat's general store, head north on the graded Indian Ranch Road 1.9 miles to the Surprise Canyon Road on the right. This road first climbs 2.3 miles to the canyon. It ends 1.7 miles inside the canyon at the site of Chris Wicht Camp, the starting point of your journey. The canyon road is a little steep and is sometimes passable with a passenger car, but to be safe plan on driving a high-clearance vehicle.

The endpoint of your trip will be Wilson Spring in Johnson Canyon, on the Death Valley side of the mountains. It is accessed by a primitive road that starts on the West Side Road 20.9 miles from its north end or 15 miles from its south end. The Johnson Canyon Road climbs the fan 6.4 miles, then drops steeply into the broad canyon wash and continues up canyon for 3.7 miles to end at Wilson Spring. This route requires a high-clearance vehicle and four-wheel drive.

## **TRIP DESCRIPTION**

This hike starts with a bang. Irrigated by a lively stream and lined with lush vegetation, the lower canyon is a long idyllic oasis that holds some of the most beautiful scenery in the Panamint Mountains. You walk by the tree-shaded stream, crossing it repeatedly and getting your clothes wet—a rare treat in Death Valley country. The spectacular narrows half a mile in are enclosed in striking walls of white marble nearly a billion years old. Willow, grass, rush, and slender orchids border the banks. At the crux, the stream spawns seven waterfalls—slippery but not challenging to climb—an exciting place where water sluices down sculpted chutes and foams into dark potholes.

Past the narrows, the water fun continues for another mile to Limekiln Spring. The stream flows alternatively on the road and underneath large

willows. You will likely see butterflies, dragonflies, and little green frogs parked by the water. At Limekiln Spring, the stream comes gushing from under an impressive mat of grapevine. Above it, the road meanders along the open canyon. At Brewery Spring, 1.3 miles farther, it scoots through a shady tunnel formed by the spring's arching tree canopy. A swift creek floods the road, irrigating sidewalks of watercress and nettle. It is your last chance to fill up: the remaining 2.4 miles to Panamint City are dry.

Panamint City is beautifully situated in a valley enclosed by 3,000-foot mountains. The steep slopes are peppered with pinyon pine and juniper, and decorated with wildflowers from spring to early fall. The first signs of the ghost town will be dozens of stone ruins lining the wash, then the tall smokestack of Panamint City's famous smelter. A short distance beyond it is "downtown," a two-room plywood cabin nicknamed the Panamint City Hilton because of its glass windows and working tap, large workshop, and quarried-stone quadrangle. Good campsites are plentiful. Water is available at the main cabin, the workshop, and the largest cabin on the north side (if the taps still work), at Slaughterhouse Spring, in Water Canyon, and at the spring in Sourdough Canyon.

Start the next day with a stroll through Panamint City. Other than its isolation, what makes this ghost town so special is its many well-preserved structures spanning 150 years. This area was feverishly mined for silver from 1872 to 1876. The involvement of two Nevada senators and the large number of deposits triggered one of the region's biggest rushes. By 1874, Panamint City had a population of 2,000, by far the largest for 100 miles around. The company that controlled the mines completed its monumental mill in June 1875 and was soon shipping silver bullion by 20-mule team. To protect this tempting treasure from robbers, the silver was cast into 400-pound ingots, much too heavy to be lifted, and there never was a robbery! By 1876, the richest mines had mostly played out. A few dozen workers remained until 1882. Some claims were revived in the 1890s, 1920s, and 1940s, and as recently as the mid-1980s. But all in all, Panamint City returned only about \$600,000, most of it before 1876, for an investment exceeding \$1 million—for all its glamour, it was a spectacular loss.

The smelter's smokestack is the town's crowning jewel. Built of 500,000 bricks, it is a magnificent tower tapering to an ornate crown. The oldest ruins are the dozens of rooms, walls, dugouts, and tent platforms

along the wash, once the houses and businesses of Main Street. Had you been strolling through here in 1875, you could have shopped for fresh food, garments, and medication; consulted a doctor; boarded a stagecoach to LA; or sipped wine at a French restaurant. The “downtown” buildings were put up during the 1970s–1980s revival. The town was then powered by the ingenious water wheel at the easternmost cabin. The milling complex up behind the smelter is the park’s best example of a modern mill. The large diesel generator inside the workshop generated its electricity. It might have exploited the long, straight tunnel behind it—at 750 yards, possibly the park’s longest.

The next destination is Water Canyon. Walk up the road, past the water wheel and tank at Slaughterhouse Spring, until it angles left into Water Canyon. A creek flows along the canyon’s willow-shaded wash, inundating swamps of rush and watercress. The canyon is dominated by its spectacular eastern wall, a 3,000-foot-high, mile-long tableau of granite fins. Thompson Camp, just inside the canyon, was named after the couple who lived and mined here in the 1930s. Its decrepit main cabin looks out to Sentinel Peak from under large cottonwoods festooned with vine. The camp’s water tank, hidden among willows along the road 130 yards above the camp, is a great place to relax to the sound of the overflow cascading below. The road continues, first along the creek, then up the west slope, to the five tunnels of the Blue Jay Mine. Even if mines leave you cold, come here for the views.

### **TAKE THIS TRIP**

If there is one place in Death Valley National Park that makes sense to explore with a backpack, it has to be Surprise Canyon. In a desert world famous for its extreme dryness, this anomalous canyon is blessed with several streams, and for a change you will not have to carry massive amounts of water. Surprise Canyon is also exceptionally beautiful. You first hike through a series of idyllic springs coursed by spirited creeks to Panamint City, one of the most remote and historically significant mining centers in the California desert. Within walking distance of perennial streams, this legendary site is a wonderful camping location

from which to explore the area on leisurely hikes for two days. Miles of roads zigzag up into the surrounding mountains to dozens of fascinating historical sites—cabins, mills, and tunnels—left over from Panamint City’s silver-mining boom of the 1870s. You will see lots of birds, run into burros every day, soak in cool springs, and walk through fragrant pine forests. You complete your trek by continuing up canyon to spectacular Panamint Pass then dropping along the famous “fresh vegetable route” into Johnson Canyon. This well-watered canyon takes you through verdant oases and the ruins of a Shoshone ranch all the way to the edge of Death Valley.

Another interesting site is Stewart’s Wonder Mine, the area’s third-largest producer. From the smelter, walk down Surprise Canyon 0.3 mile, and make a right on the Sourdough Canyon Road. In 0.2 mile, it reaches an eclectic camp of trailers, sheds, and trucks from the 1950s and ’60s. The side road to the right leads to a picturesque wood-and-stone cabin landscaped with pines. Visitors sometimes stay here overnight. The complex and well-preserved mill across the road is an interesting piece of machinery from the 1960s. The trail to Stewart’s Wonder Mine starts a few steps below the mill, on the west side. Supported by well-engineered walls and paved with flat rocks, it is almost perfectly level for 0.65 mile and offers plunging views into Surprise Canyon. After 0.5 mile, the trail angles into Wonder Gulch. Soon after, take the right fork where it splits, and then after it ends, scramble up the rocky slope to the historic mine. The impressive upper tunnel is a monstrous crack held open by tree trunks harvested 15 decades ago.

The third day can be spent exploring the loop of old roads on the mountainous south slope, a partly shaded and fragrant circuit that serviced the area’s two richest mines. Start on the Wyoming Mine Road, which heads up the slope just south of the workshop. At the fork 0.35 mile out, turn right. The road winds steeply among pinyon pines and offers good views of Panamint City. The first tunnel, two thirds of the way up in a sharp left turn, belonged to the Wyoming Mine, as did all remains along the next

0.7 mile. The plywood workshop next to it dates from the 1970s. It still houses the electric blower that circulated fresh air into the 1,000-foot tunnel. The Wyoming Mine tramway is hidden in the trees 50 feet to the west. Erected in the winter of 1874 and refurbished in 1925, its stocky towers of roughly hewn timber are simply designed but surprisingly sturdy.

The area at the end of the road has an interesting mix of modern and historic remains. The 350-foot tunnel was known as Tramway. A rail track links it to a trestle bridge, where the ore was dumped into the tramway terminal below it and lowered 1,100 feet to the 20-stamp mill. There is a deep shaft partway in, so stay out of it. Most of the Wyoming ore came from the Kennedy Tunnel and the Limestone Tunnel. The Kennedy Tunnel is about 250 feet higher up the slope, near the top of the ridge to the south. The Limestone Tunnel was a little higher up the slope to the east. It is now obscured by later mining, but this whole area is rich in old workings and colorful tailings.

To reach the Hemlock Mine, look for a level trail that heads southeast 0.6 mile to a sharp right bend at the Marvel Canyon wash crossing. Across the wash, the trail splits. The left fork, although locally faint, climbs a steep, forested incline to the top of the Hemlock Mine. At the top, be very careful: the trail comes dangerously close to a trench. The Hemlock Mine was the district's largest producer—and it shows. The trench is a long gash framed by vertical walls. The sheer height of the two tailings cascading down below it is impressive. The tunnel at the top of the lower tailing was the main producer.

To complete the loop, head down the ravine below the lower tailing about 100 yards to the upper end of the Hemlock Mine Road. After 0.25 mile, it angles sharply left, then wiggles down Marvel Canyon 1.3 miles to the Surprise Canyon Road. From this junction it is about 1 mile back to downtown.

On the fourth day, either hike back the way you came, or head east up the canyon road. Below Water Canyon, take the right fork in the wash up Frenchmans Canyon. This heavily forested drainage climbs steeply to Panamint Pass, a pronounced notch at the crest of the Panamints. The going is a little rough, but the reward matches the efforts: the views of Johnson Canyon and southern Death Valley are spectacular.

In the mid-1870s, in order to satisfy Panamint City's need for fresh produce, an enterprising man named William Johnson started a ranch he called Swiss Ranch in Johnson Canyon. He built terraces and irrigation ditches, and planted gardens of beans, squash, and corn, as well as a fruit and nut orchard. He made a profit on the vegetables, but the boom was over before the trees matured. By the spring of 1877, Johnson had moved on. Some years later, a Shoshone named Hungry Bill took over Swiss Ranch. He and his family lived here until Hungry Bill passed away, probably in 1919.

Below Panamint Pass's eastern rim, an aging trail drops into Johnson Canyon. This is the "fresh vegetable route," that Johnson used to haul his harvest to Panamint City. It switchbacks way down to the canyon floor, offering fine views of the range's pine-covered summits. At the bottom, simply walk down the wash. After a steep and bouldery stretch, the walking becomes easier, along partly shaded game trails wandering between granitic boulders. The scenery is beautifully rugged, dominated by a healthy conifer forest, livened by birds and rodents, brightened by cactus in bloom in late spring.

Johnson Canyon's four closely spaced springs make delightful rest areas. The highest one is a thick grove of willows. At the next one, near timberline, thick vines hang down the sheer canyon walls and willows choke the narrow wash. Bypass it on the little trail on the north side. The 10-acre field 0.2 mile farther on the south side was Swiss Ranch. Almost completely enclosed by walls, it is still lined with its orchard trees. Hungry Bill's Ranch is sprawled a little below on both banks. Its large cleared fields enclosed by monumental stone walls give this area an unexpected rural flavor. The last set of large walls, on the north side, is thought to have been Hungry Bill's camp.

The most exceptional part of Johnson Canyon starts right below the ranch: for the next 1.5 miles, you will be crossing one of Death Valley's most luxuriant springs. The narrow canyon is choked with vegetation. A strong stream flows under it, occasionally plunging over a waterfall. Avoid this jungle on the trails up along the gorge's rims. Stay on the south side, which has the most continuous trail system, except at the sharp jog in the canyon, where the creek must be crossed twice. It is a great hike, overlooking the lively ribbon of shrubs, grapevine, and trees that snakes



down the gorge, within earshot of the creek. Below the spring, a well-defined trail will take you 0.3 mile to the end of the canyon road at Wilson Spring, a cluster of willows and tall cottonwoods irrigated by the creek.

### **BUILD-UP AND WIND-DOWN TIPS**

At either end of your trip, camp in Ballarat and explore the remains of this scenic ghost town. It boomed around 1890 and before World War I, as a supply center for miners working in the Panamint Mountains. Check out the general store, the old cabins, the cemetery, and little-known Post Office Spring 0.8 mile south on the southern extension of Indian Ranch Road. The closest place for a good meal is Panamint Springs, a family-owned resort with a nice country atmosphere. Try to make the short detour through nearby Darwin. It is one of California's largest ghost towns, and its many old cabins, extensive mining camp, and funky residents will make you travel back in time well over a century.

<b>POSSIBLE ITINERARY</b>			
	<b>CAMP</b>	<b>MILES</b>	<b>ELEVATION GAIN/LOSS</b>
Day 1	Panamint City	5.5	3,660'/0'
Day 2	Panamint City		
	Side trip to northside mines	5.9	1,520'/1,520'
Day 3	Panamint City		
	Side trip to southside mines	5.4	2,190'/2,190'
Day 4	Out via Johnson Canyon	7.5	1,820'/4,230'