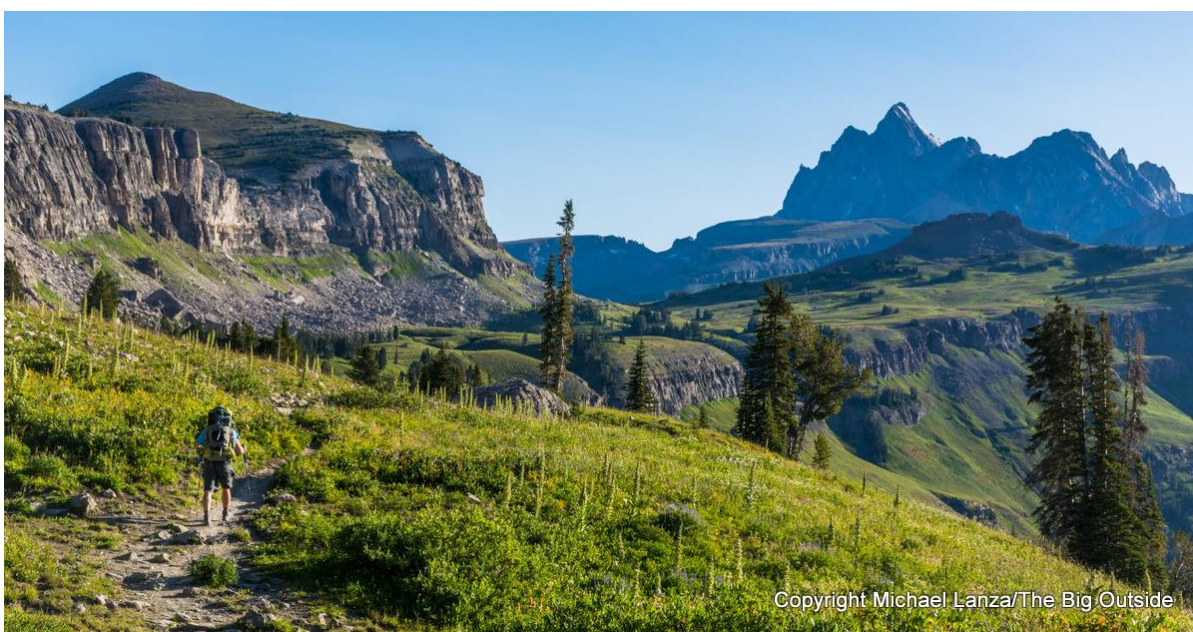




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The Big Outside Complete Guide to

Backpacking the Teton Crest Trail in Grand Teton National Park



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Cover photo: David Gordon backpacking the Teton Crest Trail in the North Fork Cascade Canyon in Grand Teton National Park.

Title page photo: Jeff Wilhelm backpacking the Teton Crest Trail across Death Canyon Shelf.

Dear Backpacker,

Congratulations, you have just downloaded the most helpful guide you'll find to one of [America's premier backpacking trips](#), the incomparable Teton Crest Trail in Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park.



This e-guide will show you how to plan and pull off one of the most scenic and memorable multi-day hikes you will ever take—and one you might take repeatedly, following different variations, as I keep doing. After multiple trips on it—and about 20 trips backpacking, taking long dayhikes, climbing, and backcountry skiing throughout the Teton Range—I'm always eager to get back on the TCT again. (This photo of me was taken on Death Canyon Shelf when I backpacked the Teton Crest Trail in August 2019.)

In fact, this e-guide describes so many variations of the TCT that it's effectively a guide to backpacking most of Grand Teton National Park.

In responding to innumerable questions from readers planning a trip they read about at my blog—and, of course, through many years of planning my own—I've acquired a strong sense of what information people like you are looking for. I believe you simply want to know what a trip is like, and how to pull it off successfully and safely in a way that allows you to customize the trip to suit your party's style of backcountry travel. Whether a family outing or a group of friends, complete beginners or hard-core experts, this e-guide will clarify what you must do to properly prepare for this hike.

[**CLICK HERE NOW**](#) for a full menu of my e-guides at *The Big Outside*.

In the pages that follow, I will describe this trip's character and highlights, and provide details on its total distance and elevation gain and loss, difficulty, and the degree of solitude you can expect to find along it during the peak season. I will give you extensive advice in Section 1 on how to plan this trip, including tips about seasons, getting a permit, travel logistics, gear, and what you need to know regarding safety and other issues specific to this trip. And finally, in Section 2, I give you my expert guidance on how to execute this trip, including primary and alternative hiking itineraries.

A few points:

- I'm a big believer that *much* of the success of any outdoor adventure is determined before you leave home, so you'll find abundant information in Section 1: Planning the Trip. I think you will find that my unique and thorough trip-planning advice is what most distinguishes my e-guides from other guides.
- I don't rate trips for quality or scenery. Instead of a dry, numerical rating, this e-guide will describe for you the trip's unique character. Plus, every trip that I've created an e-guide for is excellent and highly recommendable, period.
- I don't provide GPS waypoints or tell you precisely where to take photos or pitch your tent every night, because I believe that excessive hand-holding sucks the mystery out of the wilderness and robs you of the joy of discovery. Instead, this e-guide suggests itineraries and, in general, the best camping areas and other highlights, with specific tips on how to maximize enjoyment and safety.
- Please be aware of and always follow low-impact backpacking guidelines; learn about them at lnt.org. They ensure that we all have as pristine a wilderness experience as possible. Also, respect park regulations, they exist for good reasons.
- Hold down your keyboard's Control key when clicking on hyperlinks in this e-guide, and the link will open in a new window. If you don't hold down the Control key, any link will open in the same window. (You could then click the back arrow in the upper left to return to the e-guide.) Alternatively, open this e-guide twice, to have one copy constantly open while clicking on hyperlinks in the second copy to view them, and using the browser's back arrow to return to this e-guide and open other links in the second window.
- If you find any inaccuracies or typos—or to simply drop a note to tell me what you think of this e-guide—please email me at michael@thebigoutside.com.
- Lastly, you have purchased one electronic copy of this e-guide for your personal use only. I retain all rights to its content, and I ask you to respect my legal rights and not distribute it by any means or for any purpose, including for illegal profit.

Thanks again for purchasing this e-guide. I hope it helps make your backpacking trip on the classic Teton Crest Trail in Grand Teton National Park very special. If you would like personalized trip-planning help, or you have questions about how to safely and successfully pull off this or any trip I've written about at my blog, I can help you. See my blog's [Custom Trip Planning page](#) for more details. If you want personalized help with this trip, I will deduct the price of this e-guide from my fee.

Please be sure to follow my stories about my adventures at [The Big Outside](#).

Have fun and be safe out there,

Michael Lanza

Creator of [The Big Outside](#)



Me on a perch above the Schoolroom Glacier and the South Fork of Cascade Canyon.

Backpacking the Teton Crest Trail, Death Canyon to Paintbrush Canyon

Location: Central Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

Primary Route: 35.8 miles/57.6 km

Cumulative Elevation Gain and Loss: 13,350 feet/4,069m

Difficulty for the primary route, on a scale of 1 (easiest) to 5 (hardest)



4—Strenuous at times, with significant elevation gain and loss, a maximum elevation near 11,000 feet, steep terrain, possible severe weather (mostly afternoon thunderstorms in summer, possibly snow in September)—but there are no extraordinary navigational challenges or need for technical skills. Good fitness and intermediate-level backpacking skills and experience recommended. See the Need to Know section below for specific details and my blog story “[Training For a Big Hike or Mountain Climb](#).”

Overview

The 35.8-mile hike from Death Canyon Trailhead to String Lake Trailhead via Paintbrush Canyon on the Teton Crest Trail will always hold a special place in memory for me. When I first backpacked this route, more than a quarter-century ago, it was only the third backpacking trip I'd taken in a Western national park. (The first was in Yosemite, a route described in [this e-guide](#); the second was in Denali. I aimed high.) I also, later, took my kids on it when they were in grade school.

There are very good reasons it pops up on the radar of so many backpackers and routinely appears on lists of America's best backpacking trips. ([Here's my list.](#))

Few wilderness trips in the country measure up, step for step, to a multi-day trek along the Teton Crest Trail and the feeder trails that access it. Setting aside that Grand Teton National Park arguably ranks among the top five parks for backpackers, the TCT delivers a consummate backpacking experience.

Frequent views of the Teton skyline and cliff-flanked canyons get better every day (when hiking south to north). Campsites range from really nice to gorgeous. The wildflower displays, which follow the snow melting away in July and last into August, are superb. You'll enjoy mountain lakes and creeks and have a pretty good chance of seeing moose, elk, marmots, pikas, mule deer, and black bears. On top of all that, the summer weather remains mostly stable and predictable—although intense afternoon thunderstorms are common.

The primary route described below crosses one of the highest points on any trail in the park, 10,720-foot Paintbrush Divide, hits two of the prettiest areas to camp, Death Canyon Shelf and the magnificent North Fork of Cascade Canyon, and passes by Lake Solitude, ringed by cliffs at over 9,000 feet. While no variation of the TCT disappoints—and I describe several below that I've done, all of which have merit—I consider Death Canyon to Paintbrush Canyon the most scenic way to hike the Teton Crest Trail.

Read my blog stories "[American Classic: Backpacking the Teton Crest Trail](#)," "[5 Reasons You Must Backpack the Teton Crest Trail](#)," and "[Walking Familiar Ground: Reliving Old Memories and Making New Ones on the Teton Crest Trail](#)." And see all of my [stories about the Teton Crest Trail](#) or Grand Teton N.P. on my [All National Park Trips page](#).

Solitude

Okay, this is *the Teton Crest Trail*. It's justifiably one of the best-known trails in America. Perhaps the biggest challenge of hiking it is simply getting a permit. (See more on that below). Besides encountering other backpackers—especially in backcountry camping zones in mornings and evenings—you can expect to see dayhikers in popular areas like Cascade and Paintbrush canyons and Lake Solitude.

That said, the park manages the number of backpackers in all camping zones to minimize impact and try to protect a wilderness experience. And while no spot on the Teton Crest Trail lies more than a long day's hike from the nearest road, while on the trail, you may spend much of each day with only the company of your companions.



Backpackers on the Teton Crest Trail on Death Canyon Shelf, Grand Teton National Park.

Section 1: Planning the Trip

Season

The peak summer backpacking season in the Tetons generally begins in early or mid-July, when higher elevations and passes become mostly snow-free, and runs well into September. Paintbrush Divide can remain snow-covered and potentially dangerous into late July (depending on the depth of the previous winter and spring's snowpack and the temperatures in spring and early summer); ask rangers about snow conditions there right before your trip. They may recommend using ice axes and crampons, in which case beginners or children may not have the skills to use them safely. If that's the case, play it safe and change your plans; see the alternative itineraries below. If Paintbrush Divide is safely passable, Hurricane Pass and Mount Meek Pass won't likely pose any problem.

By August, even Paintbrush Divide is usually passable and often dry. Afternoon thunderstorms are common in July and August; avoid high ground when storms threaten.

Insider Tip

The first half of September can offer excellent backpacking weather in the Tetons, with comfortably mild days and cool but not always freezing nights. But watch the forecast, because early-season storms can also dump fresh snow on the Tetons even over Labor Day weekend. If you make a permit reservation, understand that you may have to change your plans. It's also easier to get a first-come, or walk-in permit at this time of year. See more about that below.



A bull moose in the North Fork of Cascade Canyon, Grand Teton National Park.

Permit

Backcountry permits are required for camping in the backcountry of Grand Teton National Park. There is a permit fee. Applications for advance permit reservations are accepted from the first non-holiday Wednesday in January (starting at 8 a.m. Mountain Time) through May 15; after that, all permit requests are handled first-come, first-served.

Popular backcountry camping zones along the Teton Crest Trail—including Marion Lake, Death Canyon, Death Canyon Shelf, the South and North Forks of Cascade Canyon, Holly Lake, Upper and Lower Paintbrush—get booked up very quickly, often within a few days after the park starts accepting them, sometimes within hours. Plan your route in advance and go online to make a reservation at the minute the park starts accepting applications.

The park accepts advance reservations for permits for up to one-third of campsites in each camping zone. The other two-thirds of campsites are held for backpackers seeking a first-come, or walk-in, permit no more than one day in advance.

Find more information at nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/bcres.htm, and read my “[10 Tips For Getting a Hard-to-Get National Park Backcountry Permit](#).”

2 Insider Tips on Getting a Permit

If you fail to get an advance permit reservation, you can try for a first-come, or walk-in permit. Show up outside a park backcountry office at least two hours before it opens the day before you want to start hiking; a line will form early. Your chances are better if you start a trip midweek than on a weekend and after Labor Day.

Also, if you're having trouble getting a permit for all of the necessary campsites on your desired itinerary, consider fitting in a night mid-trip in Alaska Basin (north of Death Canyon Shelf), which has nice campsites and, being outside the park, does not require a permit. For instance, you might be able to reserve camping for night one in Death Canyon and night three in South Fork of Cascade, and have camping for the rest of your itinerary, but have nothing for night two; Alaska Basin would be the logical stop that night. Keep in mind that Alaska Basin often sees heavy use on weekends in peak season.

Management

This hike lies mostly within Grand Teton National Park, nps.gov/grte, but passes through Alaska Basin, in Caribou-Targhee National Forest, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/ctnf>.

Getting There

The Jackson Hole Airport, on the outskirts of the park, receives regular flights. Other regional airports are located in Idaho Falls, Idaho (driving time about two hours), and Salt Lake City, Utah (five to six hours).

To reach the String Lake/Leigh Lake Trailhead, from Moose Junction on the Rockefeller Parkway (US 187/89), turn west and follow Teton Park Road about 10 miles to North Jenny Lake Junction. Turn left and the String Lake/Leigh Lake Trailhead is just down the road.

To reach the Death Canyon Trailhead, from Moose Junction, turn west and follow Teton Park Road about a half-mile. Turn left onto Moose-Wilson Road and follow it about three miles to a right turn signed for Death Canyon Trailhead. The trailhead is two miles up that road; the first mile is paved, but the last mile gets rugged, though it's often passable for cars. The park recommends a high-clearance vehicle; there's also parking for cars where the pavement ends, and you can walk to the trailhead.

You need a shuttle for this hike. There are several commercial services offering trailhead shuttles. We used one and it cost a little over \$100, in August 2019, for four of us to go from Leigh Lake Trailhead, where we left our car, to Death Canyon Trailhead.

Reservations are not needed for the boat shuttle across Jenny Lake (which is not necessary to complete this hike, but convenient if you finish by descending Cascade Canyon). Find more information at jennylakeboating.com.

Map

Trails Illustrated Grand Teton map no. 202, \$14.95, natgeomaps.com.

Digital maps can be obtained from various online sources, including:

caltopo.com

mytopo.com/maps

natgeomaps.com/trail-maps/pdf-quads

nationalmap.gov/ustopo

While planning this trip and reading through this e-guide, consult the interactive online map of the park (it's not a topo map) at nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/maps.htm, the descriptions of backcountry camping zones at nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/bczones.htm, and nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/upload/BC_2009.pdf, and information about some park trails at nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/hike.htm.

Services

The gateway town of Jackson, Wyoming, has all needed services, including numerous options for lodging and restaurants, gas, supermarkets, and gear stores. For information on campgrounds, see nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/camping.htm. I've camped many times at Gros Ventre Campground without a reservation; it's quiet with well-spaced sites.

Resources

The blog tetonclimbing.blogspot.com posts updates on backcountry conditions.



David Gordon hiking to Paintbrush Divide on the Teton Crest Trail; Grand Teton at right.

Need to Know

- Black and grizzly bears inhabit the Teton Range. Although encounters are rare, the usual precautions are recommended, including proper food management and storage in camp (keeping nothing in or near your tent), and staying together in a group so that bears are more likely to hear you. The park recommends carrying pepper spray.
- Moose inhabit the canyons in the Tetons, particularly wetter, lower-elevation canyon bottoms. They are large and can be aggressive and dangerous, especially during the fall rutting season. Never approach a moose.
- Bear canisters are required when camping below 10,000 feet—essentially in all park backcountry camping zones except a few very high camps typically used by climbers. Canisters are available on free loan from the park, or you can bring your own park-approved model. See the canister I use in my [“Review: Essential Backpacking Gear Accessories.”](#)
- The North and South Forks Cascade, Death Canyon, Marion Lake, and Phelps Lake camping zones have shared bear boxes for food storage. But you’d have to hike long days on this route to have a bear box available every night.
- This hike ranges in elevation from 6,800 feet to 10,720 feet. If you’re coming from sea level, spend a night or two before your hike above 6,000 feet either in Jackson or at a campground, to begin acclimating. If possible, take a dayhike before your backpacking trip, too. I have several favorite dayhikes in the Tetons, including [Garnet Canyon](#) and the hikes I describe in [this story](#).
- Violent afternoon thunderstorms with lightning hazard are common from late June through August. Check the forecast right before your trip, and time your crossing of Paintbrush Divide for morning or clear weather. These storms can be intense but short-lived; sometimes it’s best to take shelter, if possible, to wait them out, because the sun may return within an hour.
- In July and August, average daytime high temperatures reach nearly 80° F and nighttime lows average around 40° F, but that can vary—and the temperature can drop 10 degrees or more in minutes when a storm rolls in. By September, nights often drop below freezing, while daytime highs average in the 60s, but snow occasionally falls. See more at nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/weather.htm.
- There’s generally no more than about two hours of hiking between reliable water sources, and water is only potentially sparse on the highest stretches, such as from Marion Lake to Death Canyon Shelf and going over Paintbrush Divide. On Death Canyon Shelf, two spring-fed creeks, each about a mile from either end of the shelf (thus, these creeks almost divide the Shelf in thirds), often flow throughout summer, though their flow can diminish greatly, and there’s a creek near the Shelf’s southern end that’s seasonal and dries up often by mid-summer. There are creeks and lakes in Alaska Basin and may be small creeks crossing the TCT where it climbs northbound out of Alaska Basin. In late August in a dry summer, we found good water running off of large snowfields near Paintbrush Divide, too.



Jeff Wilhelm at Lake Solitude in the North Fork of Cascade Canyon.

Gear

No specialized gear is needed, other than a bear canister. During July and August, given the generally dry weather in the Rocky Mountains and nighttime lows that average around 40° F, you can use lightweight to ultralight gear, including your pack, tent, bag, and footwear.

Here are some gear tips for backpacking in the Tetons—but this should not be considered a complete packing list:

Shoes or lightweight to midweight boots that fit well and are comfortable, light, and reasonably breathable. See my [“Pro Tips For Buying the Right Hiking Boots”](#) and all of my reviews of [backpacking boots](#) and [hiking shoes](#).

Trekking poles are indispensable for this route’s steep descents and ascents. See my [reviews of trekking poles](#).

A backpack of 50 to 65 liters will have adequate space for water, food, and clothing, and you will be happier with as light a pack as possible. See my picks for [“The 10 Best Backpacking Packs”](#) and my picks for [the best ultralight backpacks](#).

A lightweight sleeping bag rated around 30 degrees is all you’ll need in typical July and August weather, and it will help keep your pack lighter. See all of my [reviews of sleeping bags](#) and my [“Pro Tips for Buying Sleeping Bags”](#) at The Big Outside.

I always prefer **an air mattress** to a foam pad for sleeping on the ground. I sometimes bring a short or cutoff foam pad that’s only as long as shoulders to mid-thigh, for extra cushion and to sit on in camp. See all of my [air mat reviews](#).

A method of water treatment. Bring a very lightweight and compact treatment, like a collapsible filter bottle. On my last TCT hike, because water sources were rarely

more than an hour apart, I rarely bothered filling my bladder with water, simply carrying a [Lifestraw Go filter bottle](#) and quickly refilling it when I wanted a drink. See the ones covered in my [review of backpacking accessories](#), and all of my [water filter reviews](#) at The Big Outside.

A **waterproof-breathable rain jacket** with a full-coverage, adjustable hood is invaluable in heavy thunderstorms or extended rain. See my review of “[The 5 Best Rain Jackets for Hiking and Backpacking](#).”

Clothing layers adequate for the temperatures and wind predicted. See my reviews of “[The Best Base Layers for Hiking, Running, and Training](#),” my “[The 10 Best Down Jackets](#),” and all of my [reviews of insulated jackets](#).

An **ultralight headlamp** (four ounces or lighter) with good brightness that’s variable and fresh batteries or a full charge. See my review of “[The 5 Best Headlamps](#).”

Want to make your pack lighter and all of your backpacking trips more enjoyable? See my “[10 Tricks for Making Hiking and Backpacking Easier](#)” and “[A Practical Guide to Lightweight and Ultralight Backpacking](#).” If you don’t have a [paid subscription to The Big Outside](#), you can read part of both stories for free, or download the e-guide versions of [the 10 tricks here](#) and the [lightweight backpacking guide here](#) without having a paid membership.

Find categorized menus of gear reviews, best-in-category reviews, and buying tips at my [Gear Reviews page](#) at The Big Outside. See also my “[Essentials-Only Backpacking Gear Checklist](#),” and these reviews for my top recommendations (including a bear canister in the review of backpacking accessories):

“[The 7 Best Backpacking Tents](#)”

“[22 Essential Backpacking Gear Accessories](#)”

Other articles at The Big Outside that may be useful in preparing for a Teton Crest Trail hike include:

[5 Tips For Staying Warm and Dry While Hiking](#)

[7 Pro Tips For Keeping Your Backpacking Gear Dry](#)

[Training For a Big Hike or Mountain Climb](#)

[8 Pro Tips For Avoiding Blisters](#)

[How to Prevent Hypothermia While Hiking and Backpacking](#)

[10 Pro Tips For Staying Warm in a Sleeping Bag](#)

[Are You Ready For That New Outdoors Adventure? 5 Questions to Ask Yourself](#)



Jeff Wilhelm backpacking the Teton Crest Trail across Death Canyon Shelf.

Section 2: The Hike

The Primary Route: Death Canyon to Paintbrush Canyon

There are several ways to backpack all or much of the Teton Crest Trail. Technically, the trail's southern terminus is the Phillips Pass Trailhead, about 1.5 miles east of Teton Pass on WY 22, and from there the TCT runs north for about 39 miles to the String Lake/Leigh Lake Trailhead in Grand Teton National Park. I offer that classic, full length of the TCT as an alternative hike because, in my opinion, the 35.8-mile hike from Death Canyon Trailhead to String Lake Trailhead via Paintbrush Canyon is the most scenic way to hike the Teton Crest Trail.

The primary route described below might be looked at, in terms of difficulty, in these somewhat oversimplified terms:

Hiking it in either direction, the first day entails a large climb into the mountains, and the last day promises a big descent out of them; although either day can be split into two days, you're still going a long way up or down. The middle days involve significantly less elevation gain and loss because the route mostly stays in high country, dropping significantly only into the forks of Cascade Canyon.

In other words, the primary route is not appreciably harder hiking northbound or southbound. In either direction, you start with a big climb and end with a big descent. However, by hiking northbound (starting at Death Canyon Trailhead), you'll have a few days to acclimate before attempting the route's high point, 10,720-foot Paintbrush Divide.

The route follows well-maintained, obvious trails. Some sections are moderately steep and rocky, but for the most part, the trails offer good footing.

The daily mileages in the itineraries below are based on known distances between named places and/or trail junctions; your daily mileages will depend on your choice of campsite location. Bear in mind that trail mileages can vary between different maps, guidebooks, and other sources, including trail signs.

Insider Tip: The Best Campsites

One highlight of the Teton Crest Trail is its crazy-gorgeous campsites. Death Canyon Shelf and the North Fork of Cascade Canyon grace my list of 25 all-time favorite backcountry campsites. I highly recommend building them into your itinerary, and virtually all of the established sites in both zones are quite nice.

But the South Fork of Cascade, Upper Paintbrush, and Marion and Holly Lakes may all rank among the nicest spots you've ever slept outside. You can't really go wrong grabbing an available site in any of those zones.

In the South Fork of Cascade, the nicest sites, in my opinion, are the first ones you encounter hiking northbound (or descending from Hurricane Pass), at the upper (higher) end of the camping zone.

Day one: Death Canyon Trailhead to Death Canyon Shelf

Roughly 11 miles, about 3,100 feet uphill, 400 feet downhill

From the Death Canyon Trailhead at 6,807 feet, you'll climb over a low ridge at 7,200 feet, lose that 400 feet again dropping into the basin of Phelps Lake, then ascend steadily for 2,700 feet over nine miles to Fox Creek Pass at 9,570 feet, reaching the Teton Crest Trail. The two hard stretches are the grind from Phelps Lake to the mouth of Death Canyon—where the trail grows gentler for a few miles—and then another grind up the headwall of Death Canyon to Fox Creek Pass. Both of those sections are wearying in hot sun. Do at least the first as early in the morning as possible, for cooler temperatures.

From the pass, turning north to follow the Teton Crest Trail, the hiking gets easier again while traversing the 3.5-mile-long Death Canyon Shelf, a broad, relatively flat, boulder- and wildflower-strewn bench at roughly 9,500 feet with some of the best views and campsites in the park. Plan your itinerary to spend a night somewhere on the Shelf; otherwise, you'll hike across the Shelf wishing you had done that.

Today's precise hiking distance will depend on where you stop to camp (among several an established sites along the Shelf). The estimated 11 miles assumes a campsite roughly in the middle of the Shelf; you could camp sooner or later. There are springs feeding perennial streams about halfway along the Shelf and other small streams for water. Every established campsite on the open, largely treeless Shelf has incredible views in all directions, including of the Grand Teton and surrounding peaks several miles north. I've also stood on the rim of Death Canyon, a few steps from our tents on the Shelf, in early morning and (with binoculars) spotted moose feeding on the canyon floor far below.



Phelps Lake, below the mouth of Death Canyon in Grand Teton National Park.

Alternative day one: Death Canyon Trailhead to Phelps Lake

1.6 miles, 400 feet uphill, 400 feet downhill

I've spent this trip's first night at Phelps twice, once with friends (on my baptismal trip on the Teton Crest Trail) because our travel schedule had us starting the hike in late afternoon; and once with my family when our kids were 10 and eight, because doing so reduced the next day's climb up to Death Canyon Shelf enough to make that long day a bit easier for my kids. Both are good reasons to camp here. A first night at Phelps also gives you a little time to start acclimating before the big hike up to Death Canyon Shelf. (And you can grab a real dinner in Jackson or at Dornan's in Moose, with its outside deck view of the Tetons, and easily reach Phelps in the evening.)

But Phelps is also a beautiful, 750-acre lake enwrapped in dense pine forest. The cliffs of 11,241-foot Prospectors Mountain and 10,552-foot Albright Peak tower above the lake, whose surface frequently offers a mirror reflection of the forest and peaks in early morning. The forest here is excellent moose and black bear habitat; you could see some, especially on a dusk or early-morning hike of the 2.5-mile trail looping the lake (not included in this trip's distance, but a very pretty morning jaunt). You will almost certainly see deer.

Alternative day two: Phelps Lake to Death Canyon Shelf

Roughly 10.4 miles, 2,700 feet uphill

If you spend your first night at Phelps Lake, you will hike to Death Canyon Shelf on your second day (following this itinerary). Alternative days one and two simply split up the long day one described above, and add one extra night and day to the itinerary.

Day two/Alternative day three: Death Canyon Shelf to South Fork Cascade

Roughly 9.2 miles, 1,300 feet uphill, 1,000 feet downhill

From Death Canyon Shelf, today's hiking traverses an undulating plateau with 360-degree views and fairly easy hiking to Hurricane Pass and the South Fork of Cascade Canyon. Measuring from the middle of Death Canyon Shelf to the middle of the South Fork zone, today's hiking distance is about 9.3 miles, but that can obviously vary widely depending on the location of the campsites where you begin and end the day.

The gentle, 200-foot ascent to Mount Meek Pass, at over 9,700 feet, feels easy, as does the descent into Alaska Basin, where the trail passes some of the small lakes and tarns in this rocky basin. In Alaska Basin, you exit the national park and enter the Caribou-Targhee National Forest, which the Teton Crest Trail crosses for more than four miles.

The TCT gradually gains about 1,100 feet on the way to re-entering the park just before Hurricane Pass, at over 10,500 feet, which rewards you with one of the best vistas of the trip: gazing across the deep trough of the South Fork of Cascade Canyon at the enormous west faces of the Grand, Middle, and South Tetons, sheer cliffs soaring for thousands of feet. Descend easy switchbacks past the tiny Schoolroom Glacier and its glacial tarn into the South Fork of Cascade Canyon. The South Fork camping zone extends for about 3.5 miles along the trail, and sites are generally within the forest and fairly protected from strong winds.

Insider Tip: Avalanche Divide

Try to make time for the optional, 3.4-mile, out-and-back hike to Avalanche Divide. Depending on the length of your second day and where you camp in the South Fork, you could dayhike that afternoon to Avalanche Divide. I also deliberately made day three relatively short and easy, to allow you time that morning to explore the upper South Fork canyon and Avalanche Divide.

About a half-mile below Hurricane Pass, in the South Fork of Cascade Canyon, a spur trail branches south off the TCT and ascends nearly 1,000 vertical feet in about 1.7 miles to Avalanche Divide, a pass at nearly 10,600 feet separating the South Fork from Avalanche Canyon.

The pass overlooks the emerald, often wind-rippled waters of Snowdrift Lake and the cliffs above it, and the west ridge of the 12,514-foot South Teton. (I once asked a park climbing ranger about scrambling the South Teton from Avalanche Divide. He said the ridge becomes crumbling cliffs higher up. I subsequently got a better look at it while hiking and scrambling the standard route up the South Teton, from Garnet Canyon. He was right.)

From Avalanche Divide, easy off-trail hiking leads down to Snowdrift Lake. There's no maintained trail through Avalanche Canyon, but there is a rugged, cross-country route that I describe in detail in my blog story "[8 Great Big Dayhikes in the Tetons](#)." I've hiked Avalanche Canyon in both directions and found the route-finding easier hiking up it than down it.

Day three/Alternative day four: South Fork Cascade to North Fork

Roughly 4 miles, 600 feet uphill, 900 feet downhill

Depending on where you camp in the South Fork and in the North Fork, this day comprises probably only two to three hours of easy hiking. As I noted in the Insider Tip box above, it may be a good day for the side hike to Avalanche Divide. You could even choose instead to hike over Paintbrush Divide today and camp in the Upper Paintbrush zone. But I've included the North Fork camping zone in this primary itinerary because it is so spectacular. (It's on my list of [the 25 best backcountry campsites](#).)

You'll enter forest in the lower South Fork, pass the junction with the trail heading east down the main stem of Cascade Canyon to Jenny Lake (a possible exit, if necessary), and hike easily uphill into the North Fork. There are numerous sites in this zone with views down canyon of the north faces of the 13,776-foot Grand Teton and the 12,000-footers Mount Owen and Teewinot soaring thousands of feet overhead.

Lake Solitude's popularity means a steady stream of dayhikers coming from Jenny Lake passing through the North Fork zone—a detriment to camping here, in the eyes of some backpackers. But they largely clear out by mid-afternoon, and you can have Lake Solitude almost to yourself in the evening light on a short walk from camp.

Day four/Alternative day five: North Fork to String Lake/Leigh Lake Trailhead

Roughly 11.6 miles, 2,200 feet uphill, 3,850 feet downhill

Following yesterday's short day, this is a big one with a significant climb and a really long descent that can become pounding. It's a reasonable distance, but obviously, you can elect instead to camp one more night at Upper or Lower Paintbrush or Holly Lake. The upper canyon is more open and scenic.

Besides the scenery, the other advantage of camping in the North Fork is a fresh and early start, in cool morning temperatures, for the more than 2,000-vertical-foot slog to 10,720-foot Paintbrush Divide, before the afternoon heat builds up. You will also see Lake Solitude in morning, possibly with its waters calm and glassy, and have morning light slashing across the North Fork for the amazing views as you hike toward the pass.

The highest point on the Teton Crest Trail, Paintbrush Divide's panorama takes in 12,605-foot Mount Moran, the 13,776-foot Grand Teton, and the 12,000-footers Mount Owen and Teewinot, with jagged peaks in every direction.

Descending Paintbrush Canyon, you pass below its tall, wildly striated cliffs. The trip ends at String Lake, which has a small beach and shallow, warm water for a post-trip swim.

Alternative Itinerary no. 1: Hiking the primary route north to south.



There's no reason you can't backpack from String Lake/Leigh Lake Trailhead to Death Canyon Trailhead—reversing the primary route. I suggest going south to north because the scenery keeps getting nicer; but it also may be easier to get a permit to start at Death Canyon Trailhead than at String Lake/Leigh Lake Trailhead, whether reserving in advance or trying for a walk-in permit, for a couple of reasons:

First, Leigh/String is the starting point for the supremely scenic and very popular, 18-mile Paintbrush Canyon-Cascade Canyon backpacking loop. (See my e-guide to that hike [here](#), and all of my e-guides [here](#).)

Second, there are a variety of possible starting points for backpacking the TCT northbound, which disperses the permit demand over a few different trailheads; whereas when many

backpackers hiking southbound start at String Lake/Leigh Lake Trailhead.

Note that hiking north to south means starting your trip with an ascent of nearly 4,000 vertical feet up Paintbrush Canyon; but you can split that over two days.

It boils down to this: A TCT permit is a hard catch, so enter both directions of this route as primary and alternate choices on your permit application, and hope you get one.

Above photo: Jeff Wilhelm backpacking to Paintbrush Divide on the Teton Crest Trail.

Alternative Itinerary no. 2: Death Canyon to Cascade Canyon.

For a shorter trip of 27 miles, or to avoid potentially dangerous snow conditions at Paintbrush Divide, follow the primary itinerary as far as Cascade Canyon, but then exit by hiking down the main stem of Cascade Canyon to Jenny Lake, where you can take the

boat shuttle (jennylakeboating.com). You can still camp in the South Fork, or even spend a night in the North Fork and then backtrack a bit to descend Cascade Canyon.

As the name implies, Cascade Canyon has tall cliffs with numerous waterfalls pouring off of them. Backpacking the TCT with our kids when they were young, we finished down Cascade Canyon and saw two bull moose there.

In the conifer forest at the mouth of Cascade Canyon, watch for the marked trail leading to 200-foot-tall Hidden Falls, a short side trip (likely to be crowded with dayhikers who took the Jenny Lake boat over).

Alternative Itinerary no. 3: WY 22 to Paintbrush Canyon.

The Teton Crest Trail's true southern terminus is the Phillips Pass Trailhead, off WY 22 east of Teton Pass. From there, the TCT runs north for about 39 miles to the String Lake Trailhead in Grand Teton National Park.

It begins in the Jedediah Smith Wilderness of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest, passing through the less-traveled southern Teton Range—crossing Phillips Pass at 8,932 feet and the cliff-flanked headwaters of Granite Canyon's Middle and North Forks, passing by Marion Lake and the distinctive spire of Spearhead Peak, before reaching Fox Creek Pass and Death Canyon Shelf, and picking up the primary route itinerary.

I've done this entire stretch (on foot and on skis). The mountains here lack the cathedral-like spires of the central Tetons, but the countryside evokes a sense of classic, sprawling Western mountains, and much of this terrain is moose and elk country. The first 7.8 miles (hiking north, as I'd recommend) is outside the park, so no permit is needed, but from Phillips Pass at mile 3.5, it's all within designated wilderness. It enters the park in the Middle Fork of Granite Canyon.

The full Teton Crest Trail is a quite varied, great hike.

To reach the Phillips Pass Trailhead, from WY 22 about 1.5 miles east of Teton Pass, turn north onto FR 30972; the trailhead is about a half-mile up, on the left. If there's no room to park, you can usually park at a large turnout on WY 22 across from the end of FR 30972.



Jeff Wilhelm backpacking the Teton Crest Trail above the North Fork Cascade Canyon.

Alternative Itinerary no. 4: Granite Canyon to Paintbrush Canyon.

The 38-mile traverse from Granite Canyon Trailhead to the TCT to String Lake/Leigh Lake Trailhead offers a scenic variation that allows you to see another of the eastern canyons of the Teton Range and offers other options when seeking a permit. Granite Canyon is a popular route for backpackers hiking in nine miles to spend a night or a weekend at Marion Lake, which sits in a bowl at the base of the cliffs of 10,537-foot Housetop Mountain.

The 20.5-mile, Granite Canyon-Death Canyon loop gets you into high country, on a nice, if short stretch of the Teton Crest Trail, and into two big, deep canyons where you may see moose and other wildlife—at a distance you can knock off in a weekend.

The lower half of the canyon is largely forested, but the upper part of it opens up to reveal cliffs and crags framing the canyon. A half-mile before Marion Lake, the Granite Canyon Trail intersects the Teton Crest Trail; turn north and continue to Fox Creek Pass, where you join the primary route.

Granite Canyon Trailhead is on Moose-Wilson Road, about three miles south of the turnoff to Death Canyon Trailhead.

Alternative Itinerary no. 5: Death Canyon to Paintbrush Canyon via Mount Hunt Divide and Granite Canyon.

If you want to see some of the loneliest, scenic areas of the Tetons, this 40.3-mile variation from Death Canyon Trailhead follows the northwest shore of Phelps Lake, and then makes an arduous ascent of almost 3,300 feet up Open Canyon to Mount Hunt Divide, at nearly 9,700 feet. The trail ascends beautiful Granite Canyon to Marion Lake. Follow the Teton Crest Trail north to Fox Creek Pass, where you pick up the primary itinerary.

Alternative Itinerary no. 6: Death Canyon to Paintbrush Canyon via Static Peak Divide.

This roughly 32-mile traverse may begin as just as lonely as no. 5, and arguably even harder. The ascent of about eight miles and 4,000 vertical feet from Death Canyon Trailhead to Static Peak Divide at 10,800 feet is tough, and the innumerable switchbacks can make it seem endless—especially with a full pack on day one of a trip.

But the payoff here is the sweeping panorama of Jackson Hole and the southern Tetons from Static Peak Divide. There, an unmaintained but easy trail leads about 15 minutes uphill to the 11,303-foot summit of Static Peak, where the views expand, including the cliffs of 11,938-foot Buck Mountain. The high alpine trail leading from the divide over to Alaska Basin is a very scenic treat—a rare trail in the Tetons where you get a real alpine feel and may not see any other people. In Alaska Basin, pick up the primary route northbound.

Thanks again for purchasing my e-guide. I hope it helps you pull off an unforgettable trip. Email me at michael@thebigoutside.com and tell me what you think of it, or what's not in it that you wish it had. Thanks.

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Jeff Wilhelm on the Teton Crest Trail in the North Fork of Cascade Canyon.