

The Subway aka the Left Fork of North Creek from the Top

The Subway is Zion's second most popular backcountry hike, after The Narrows, for good reason. In a park of exemplary beauty, The Subway is one of the most diverse and beautiful canyons -- NOT to be missed. A few short rappels and a couple of short, mandatory swims add spice to the adventure.

The Subway is a short, spectacular section of the Left Fork of North Creek. The canyon system is called the Great West Canyon, including both the Left and Right Forks. The Subway section is not marked on maps, but is where the Left Fork tightens up and twists sharply, between North Guardian Angel and Guardian Angel Pass. The hike is also known as "The Left Fork".

The route starts at the Wildcat Canyon Trailhead and descends to the Left Fork via a cross-country route that crosses Russell Gulch, walks out a ridge and descends a steep gully. The Left Fork is followed through The Subway, then downcanyon a few miles. A steep trail is then climbed to the road, ending at the Left Fork Trailhead.

Due to its popularity, The Subway is managed under a quota system. Reservations are distributed by lottery several months in advance and are highly recommended. Surf over to the Backcountry Desk Website for the latest information and to enter the lottery. After lottery assignments are made, the remaining reservation spots can be booked over the Internet – though the system became more complex (and fairer) this year. More information: <https://zionpermits.nps.gov/>

If you do not have reservations, don't fret - permits may be available one day in advance of, or the day of, your hike at the Main and Kolob Canyons Visitor Centers. Be flexible and plan ahead to avoid being denied.

Those interested in adding some excitement to their Subway day should check out the Russell Gulch and Das Boot variations.

LOGISTICS

Rating	3B III ★★★
Season	Summer or fall
Time Commitment	6 to 12 hours
Longest Rappel	40 feet (15 m)
Access	Requires car spot, shuttle service or short hitchhike.
Permit Required?	YES, and permits are hard to get.

EQUIPMENT

Essentials	Helmets, rappelling gear, webbing and rapid links.
Cold Water Protection	Wetsuits or drysuits in all but the hottest weather. Drybags for your gear.
Drinking Water	Clear spring water available to filter once in the drainage.

DIFFICULTIES

Flash Flood Risk Moderate – There are only a few sections of sustained narrows.

Skills Required The Subway is a strenuous and demanding backcountry hike with rappels and swims. Good navigational skills and a map are required - straying into the more difficult terrain on either side of the approach trail, or missing the exit trail, is hazardous. There are three short drops that most people will want a rope for. Folks should know how to rappel, and how to set up and use conspicuous anchors. For the swims, you will need drybags for your gear, and if it is not stinking hot out, you might want a wetsuit.

Anchors

The first rappel uses a natural anchor; the two other raps are bolted.

SEASONAL ADJUSTMENTS

- Summer** - In hot weather, The Subway can be enjoyed without a wetsuit for all but the skinniest. An early start (trailhead at 8 am) will allow the sunny approach to be completed before it becomes sweltering. The hike out can also be very hot, and taking a siesta at the end of The Subway part is often a good idea.
- Fall** - In cooler weather, wetsuits add to the enjoyment of The Subway. The short days of late fall can mean starting or ending by headlamp. AWESOME with red leaves floating in the water.
- Winter** - If clear of snow, The Subway CAN be a reasonable venture. Lots of headlamp hiking is to be expected. With snow, the road closes at the base of Mahoney Hill, adding at least 45 minutes to the approach. The route can be difficult to follow if obscured by snow. Snow and ice in the canyon can make downstream travel difficult or impossible! The red ledges at the bottom of The Subway can be slabs of ice requiring crampons.
- Spring** - In Zion, spring occurs sometime in March, April, May or June. For several weeks in that time period, the basin feeding The Subway melts off and The Subway floods, with too much water for safe passage. There is no gauge on the stream so water level information is not available remotely. Winter conditions may apply, and access to the trailhead might be blocked with snow. The route can be difficult to follow if obscured by snow. Snow and ice in the canyon can make downstream travel difficult or impossible! The red ledges at the bottom of The Subway can be slabs of ice requiring crampons.

In the spring of 2011, the melt-off was especially slow, and many parties entered the canyon unprepared for the conditions present, expecting summer conditions despite plain evidence to the contrary. The Backcountry Desk cannot continuously assess conditions in the canyon, so it is up to each party to make a decision, when they arrive at the canyon bottom. **ANY flow in the canyon at this point indicates serious Class C technical canyoneering conditions, and parties without sufficient knowledge, experience and equipment will be putting their own, and rescuer's, lives at risk by continuing forward when there is flow in the canyon. Proceeding downcanyon in the face of clear evidence that conditions are beyond your competence is foolish, and likely to result in injury, rescue and a citation for endangering others.**

Getting Started

The Subway starts at the Wildcat Canyon Trailhead on the Kolob Terrace Road, and ends at the Left Fork Trailhead. In the summer, it is easy to hitch a ride from the Left Fork Trailhead the further 7 miles to the Wildcat Canyon trailhead. If you have one car, leave the car at the bottom (Left Fork Trailhead) with water, food and clothing. Hitching a ride is easier at the beginning of the day, when you are clean and smell nice. Or, arrange a shuttle from the lower trailhead to the upper with a local company such as [Zion Adventure Company](#) for around \$25/person. In summer, get an early start to avoid the hot sun.

Spotting Cars

From Springdale, drive on Hwy 9 south and west 14 miles to the town of Virgin. Turn right (north) on the Kolob Reservoir Road (KR road, sometimes called the Kolob Terrace (KT) road). The paved KR road winds through town, then climbs a dramatic ridge in making its way to Kolob Terraces. Six and a half miles from Virgin, the road enters the park and three trailheads are soon encountered – the

Right Fork, Grapevine Springs, then the Left Fork. Park at the Left Fork Trailhead. The trailhead is not shown on many maps, but is close to the Bench Mark labeled BM 5248. Mileage from the town of Virgin is 8.6 miles. Driving time from Springdale is 45 minutes.

By car or thumb, continue up the road another 7.0 miles to the Wildcat Canyon Trailhead. Start your hike here. Toilets are available at both trailheads

The Approach

Heading east, the hike starts as a pleasant stroll across the open meadows of Kolob Terrace. Open areas are interspersed with stands of Ponderosa Pine. After 25 minutes, the signed Hop Valley Connector Trail comes in from the right. This trail is not shown on some maps. Continue straight. Five minutes later, the signed Northgate Peaks Trail comes in on the right - take this trail to the south. A few minutes down the Northgate Peaks Trail, take a trail left (east) to the top of a slickrock area. There is a sign: "Subway Hikers". The maintained trail ends here.

It is important to find and follow the unofficial trail that leads to the gully down to the Left Fork. For the most part, the path is clear, but there are a few places where it is easily lost. Make SURE you follow the trail. In 2002, two different parties strayed from the trail. One fell over a 30-foot cliff and broke both legs and some vertebrae. The other party spent a cold night on a small ledge.

Work your way down the slickrock into the drainage before you, trending right and following numerous small cairns. The trail traverses right to pass around a forested area and stay on slickrock as long as possible (this is new for 2012). Please stay on the new, cairned trail to minimize impact.

After a few minutes, the trail enters a rocky area with scattered bushes, and heads down and left into a shallow drainage. Follow the drainage, then walk a ridge to its end, and a good view of Russell Gulch below.

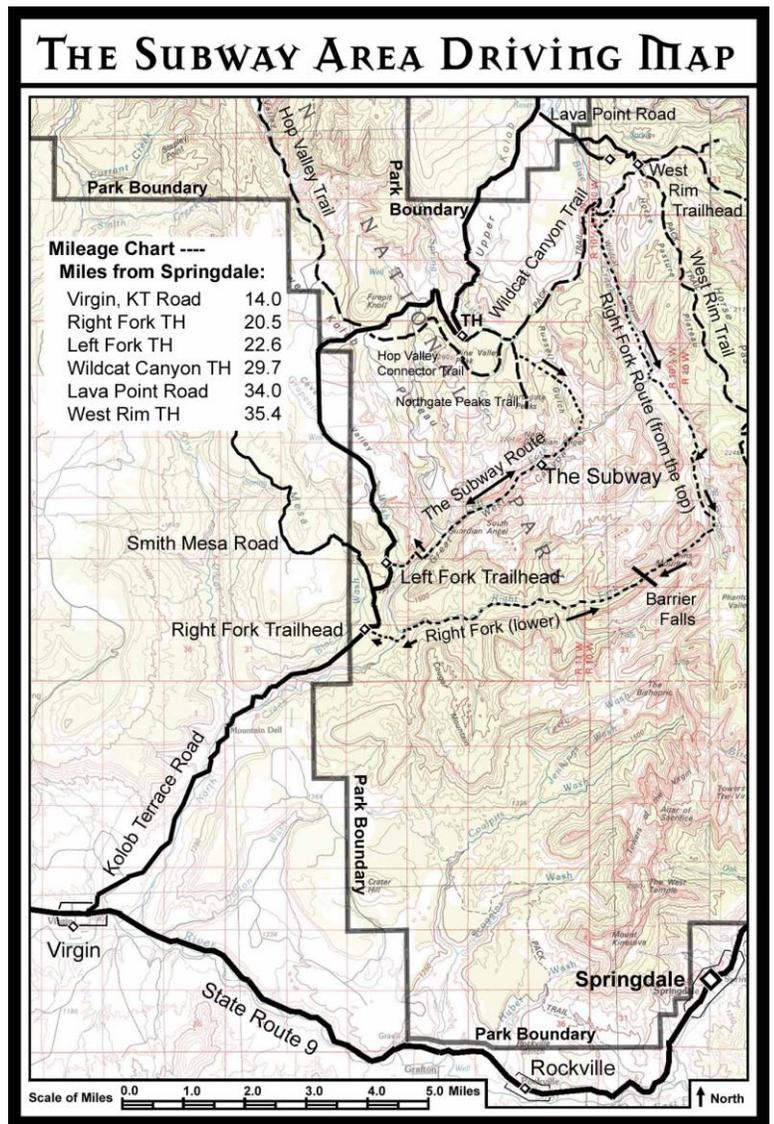
Take a good look at the terrain across the way. The trail can be seen below CROSSING the watercourse of Russell Gulch above a 30' drop, then making its way into the woods and toward a slickrock pass with a pinnacle in the middle. Descend a steep step and follow the trail across the slickrock streambed, through the woods and along a slickrock bench leading up to the pass. Descend the slabs on the other side and pick up a small trail that continues at the same elevation out to a wooded point overlooking the confluence of Russell Gulch and the Left Fork. Descend a steep, sandy gully to the bottom of Russell Gulch.

If, at any point on the approach, the trail is lost, backtrack to where you are definitely on the trail. Though unofficial, the trail is marked with cairns and heavily used, but it takes a few sharp turns that can be missed. Wandering off the trail is dangerous.

The hour-plus hike to this point is mostly in the full sun. At the bottom of Russell Gulch, a pool and shade offer respite from the heat – a good place to grab a bite to eat and a drink.
Entering the Canyon

The Business

Fifty feet from the bottom of the gully, Russell Gulch intersects the Left Fork. Turn right and follow the



dry canyon ten minutes to the FIRST OBSTACLE - a jumble of giant boulders. Scramble right to a 20-foot (6m) drop where a giant boulder sits against the right canyon wall.

First Obstacle

There are several ways to manage getting your group past this obstacle.

To the right, against the canyon wall, is a V-Slot with a small chunk of log at the top. This is not the way. Six feet (2m) back along the canyon wall from the V-Slot is a pinch, where a boulder leans securely against the wall, forming a place that can be slung for an anchor. It might have a sling on it. This is the anchor. To the left of the V-Slot is a giant boulder. The boulder has a large, flat face downcanyon - this is the face to descend.

Passing the First Obstacle

A. The recommended and most conservative method is to rappel the face of the boulder using the pinch as an anchor. This requires about 80 feet of rope, plus a sling and rappel ring. Run the rope over the crest of the boulder, making sure the rope does not slide to the side. Given the friction across the top of the boulder, it is imperative to use a rappel ring or retrieving the rope will prove difficult.

B. The left side of the boulder's face (left looking downcanyon) provides a downclimb (5.5) for the experienced climber. The holds are fairly big, at least at the top, and the landing flat. However, it is still 20 feet to the ground, and extreme caution should be used. More than one leg has been broken in this spot - and the evacuation is difficult.

C. In many cases, all members of the party but one can rappel the face of the boulder, and the most agile member can downclimb the face, with spotting and encouragement from below. Leave the best climber for last.

Continue downcanyon. A few nice potholes are avoided by clambering around the sides, About 15 minutes below the First Obstacle, the Triple Pool presents the canyoneer with the first required swim. Make sure your gear is properly drybagged, and swim the three pools. Bonus style points are awarded for swimming an underwater arch on the left, just past the exit of the second pool. A few minutes downcanyon, small springs start to provide a fresh flow of water in the canyon. Fifteen minutes downcanyon, the canyon forms a slot filled with water. Downclimb a couple of short drops and swim under a chockstone, then out a long, cold corridor. (Var: The slot can be avoided by a high, awkward traverse on the left, followed by a short rappel).

To The Subway

The canyon in this section is exceptionally beautiful. Five or ten minutes downstream, the final section begins at Keyhole Falls. The stream drops through a slot with a small arch on the left. Rappel 10 feet from bolts on the right, into water that is usually waist deep. Downclimbing this waterfall is difficult because the landing is very uneven.

You are in an amazing corridor. Swim through an arch on the left for bonus style points. At the end of the corridor, the canyon turns sharply right and forms nice pools. The famous "North Pole" log is in this section. Downclimb a small drop and wind downcanyon. At a logjam, the stream plunges through the logs to make a waterfall. Carefully cross the top of the waterfall to the ledge on canyon left. Walk out this ledge 50 feet (15m). A bolt anchor allows a rappel 30 feet (10m) to the canyon floor, or a series of ledges before the bolts allows the more agile to downclimb and traverse ledges to drop to the canyon floor 20 feet (6m) close to the base of the waterfall. Duck under the waterfall to enjoy the Waterfall Room.

Continue downcanyon past some lovely pools. The rock can be slippery here, so be careful. This is the famous "Subway" section, the curving canyon walls and parallel cracks in the floor calling to mind underground trolleys. The canyon opens up and flattens out. Groups often remove their wetsuits and harnesses here, and warm up in the sun. If it is really hot out, take a siesta until the sun is lower in the sky.

The Walk Out

The exit continues down the Left Fork and is long and rugged. The first part descends marvelous and photogenic red ledges with waterfalls. A few minutes below the red ledges, a spring drops water into the stream on the right. Following paths on both banks and crossing the stream many times, make your way downcanyon. Most parties take a little more than two hours for the hike out. About one hour downcanyon, look for two large tumble-down boulders close to the water on the right. Their flat, gray faces hold many dinosaur tracks. Admire but do not touch these fragile remnants of the past.

The Exit

Another hour downcanyon and it's time to exit up to the road. Missing the exit is easy, so make sure you pay attention. Two streams come into the Left Fork from the north (right). One third of a mile (1/2 km) past the second stream, the exit gully will be in front of you. The north (right) wall of the

canyon is a 400-foot (120m), steep, tree-covered talus slope with 400-foot (120m) vertical sandstone walls above. Downstream, the sandstone at the top ends and a black lava flow replaces the steep talus. The trail out climbs the crease below the left edge of the vertical sandstone to where it meets the lava flow.

The climb can be extremely hot - the black rock traps afternoon heat. Take a final dip in the stream before starting up. Find the well-established trail on the right side of the creek that starts up a gully. Do not begin the climb up without finding the trail. At the top of the slope, the trail traverses left to the top of the lava flow and works its way left through ledges to the mesa top above. Follow the trail through the pinon-juniper forest 1/2 mile (800m) to the parking area. Enjoy the ice-cold beverages you left in your cooler.

In the (geologically) recent past, lava flowed over the edge and into the Left Fork, forming a dam. The creek gradually built a lake until it over-topped the dam and cut its way through. Soft sandstone from the lake deposits can be seen lying on top of the lava in a few places just after reaching the top of the steep climb out. Look for these thin-layered, soft sand- and siltstones.

