

Zion National Park: Behunin Canyon (2015)

Beta courtesy CanyoneeringUSA.com

Big Drops.

Behunin is one of the more straightforward and more popular of Zion's backcountry canyons. Those with good rappelling skills will find it pleasant and easy; for those without, this is not a good choice. Many rappels provide opportunities to get the rope stuck, and the backcountry nature of Behunin means you are on your own. This is not a good canyon for groups larger than six, and DEFINITELY not a place to teach beginners how to rappel.

In 1863, Utah pioneer Isaac Behunin built a small cabin near the current location of Zion Lodge, across from the Emerald Pools cirque. He grew melons and tobacco during the summer, and wintered in Springdale. A narrow canyon that drops into that cirque was named for him, and it is a fine canyoneering adventure. Two hours of hiking up the West Rim trail takes the intrepid canyoneer to the head of the canyon. Eight rappels and a bunch of fun hiking lead to a final precipitous drop of 165 feet (50 meters) into the Emerald Pool cirque. Behunin is a great backcountry canyon, with mostly fixed anchors and one short swim.

Behunin has become popular in winter and spring, because people think it is dry. Sometimes it is, but in winter and spring, melting snow vastly complicates the descent. At least one canyoneer spent a few hours stuck on a rope under a waterfall, contemplating his fate. Luck was in his favor, as the Zion SAR team responded in time to save him.

The popularity of Behunin is also its curse - it showcases the impacts canyoneers can have in the fragile desert environment. As you descend, note eroded social trails in several places, cutting around drops and pools. Where possible, avoid further erosion by travelling in the watercourse, rappelling and downclimbing rather than scrambling around. Many of these eroded areas are returning to a natural state now that canyoneers have stopped using them.

LOGISTICS

Rating 3B III
Season Early summer or fall
Time Commitment 5 to 9 hours
Longest Rappel 165 feet (50 meters)
Access Hike starts at Grotto Trailhead, ends at Zion Lodge. Use of Park shuttle required April-October.

Permit Required? Yes
Zion Wilderness Desk: 435-772-0170
Zion EMERGENCY: 435-772-3322

EQUIPMENT

Essentials Helmets, rappelling gear, webbing and rapid links.
Protection Wetsuits/drysuits advisable in cold weather.
Drinking Water Bring plenty, water is generally stagnant in this canyon.

DIFFICULTIES

Flash Flood Risk Low/moderate - The collection basin is small, and there are few sections of continuous narrows without escapes.

Skills Required Experience rappelling is important, as many of the rappels are long. The ability to get up early and on the trail is valuable for this one.
Anchors All anchors are fixed, from bolts and trees.

SEASONAL COMMENTS

Fall - The bestest season, nice temperatures and great fall colors.

Winter - The high altitude tends to make winter use impossible after the first snow.

Zion National Park: Behunin Canyon (2015)

Beta courtesy CanyoneeringUSA.com

Spring - Snow and ice might block the last part of the trail to Behunin Pass. Melting snow in the upper basin can create flowing and freezing water in the canyon. Can be wet to flowing and wet in the spring.

Summer - HOT! The canyon faces south and has almost zero shade. Make sure to get up early and bring plenty of water for the day. Not recommended on really hot days.

APPROACH

From the Grotto shuttle stop, head up the West Rim/Angels Landing Trail to the top of the Scout Lookout ridge. Turn left (north) toward the West Rim. The trail follows the crest of the ridge with spectacular views, then cuts left and down to cross a branch of Telephone Canyon. Follow the trail around the north end of Mount Majestic. The trail crosses slickrock and works its way into a steep-walled north-facing canyon, then up to a pass, Behunin Pass. The West Rim Trail continues to the right, switchbacking up the steep sandstone on cut steps. The canyon over the west side of the pass is Behunin.

The approach is 3.8 miles (6.0 km) with 2000 feet (600m) of altitude gain. Allow two to three hours.

THE BUSINESS

Drop over the pass and follow trails down and right about 120' (40m), then cut right and carefully traverse across the top of steep slabs, then down to the base of a striped wall and the crease of the watercourse. Follow the bottom of the drainage, occasionally scrambling left to avoid the worst of the brush. After about 45 minutes, the canyon turns left and starts to descend. A scenic section of slickrock leads to pools and the first drop.

R1: from the lip of the drop, follow a narrow ledge left 60 feet (20 m) to a two-bolt anchor.

Rappel 100 feet (30 m) down a low-angle slab to a flat area.

(Var-1a: (useful in winter) from the lip, look up and left - find a large ponderosa pine with slings around it. Climb up and traverse over (4th class, exposed) to the pine, possibly belaying off an intermediate tree. Rappel 165 feet (50m) off the large tree to a flat area).

R2: from a large ponderosa pine, rappel slabs and a few short, steep walls 150 feet (45m) to a small tree and ledge at a rollover. Where the water runs can be slippery, so stay on-rope all the way to the tree.

R3: from a small tree, rappel 150 feet (45m) down a slab, then steeper down a banded sandstone wall to a bowl/ledge. When wet, this rap can be difficult to retrieve.

R4: rappel 10 feet (30m) from a bolted anchor to the canyon floor.

Hike downcanyon ¼ mile (400m).

R5: from a bolted anchor right of the watercourse about 50 feet (15m), rappel 90 feet (30m) to the edge of a pool.

Hike downcanyon ¼ mile (400 m). The watercourse comes to a complex small drop.

R6: A large rotten log would provide an anchor for a rappel into a pool, if it was not quite so rotten. Instead, pass the drop and climb a small trail into the woods. After 40 feet, a trail leads left and down to a tree with slings. Rappel 50 feet back into the canyon at the edge of the pool.

Hike downcanyon. A small drop is downclimbed directly - much easier than it looks. When wet, many will choose to follow a trail up right, then down to a single bolt for a short rappel or handline. Continue downcanyon through some nice narrows.

Zion National Park: Behunin Canyon (2015)

Beta courtesy CanyoneeringUSA.com

R7: the canyon turns left in a complex series of short drops and pools. Rappel 90 feet (30m) from a bolted anchor following the watercourse. The first part rappels to the edge of a pool. The second part rappels into a knee-to-waist-deep pool - take a few giant-steps right (rappeller's right) to avoid the deeper part of the pool, and to place the rope over a gentler edge. A 120 foot guided rappel can be used to avoid the deep wade (or swim, in winter and spring). (Do NOT take the trail up and left to a dirty and thoroughly annoying 2-stage rappel).

Avoid a pool by traversing a narrow ledge on the right. Continue downcanyon. The end of the canyon appears ahead. Scramble through large blocks to avoid pools, climbing to the top of a large boulder that blocks the end of the canyon.

R8: Rappel 150 feet (45m) from bolts atop the boulder down a steep wall, over some steps and down to a ledge above a slot on the left. (The final person may want to pull the rope from the ledge above the slot, then downclimb into the slot). This is a common place to get ropes stuck - be careful.

R9: Climb down into the slot, then under a chockstone to the front. Clip your safety tether into the bolt garden under the chockstone, then set your rope off a bolt anchor around the corner

EXIT

Pack up the gear and shoulder the packs. From the shallow pool or sand flat below the large rock, boulder-hop directly down the streambed to the Middle Emerald Pool and the trail. Turn left to return to The Grotto. Or...

The fastest way back to Zion Lodge is to take the trail left. After a few minutes, a trail junction is found among giant boulders. Turn RIGHT and follow the trail steeply DOWN to the lower Emerald Pool and behind the waterfall. Follow to Zion Lodge.

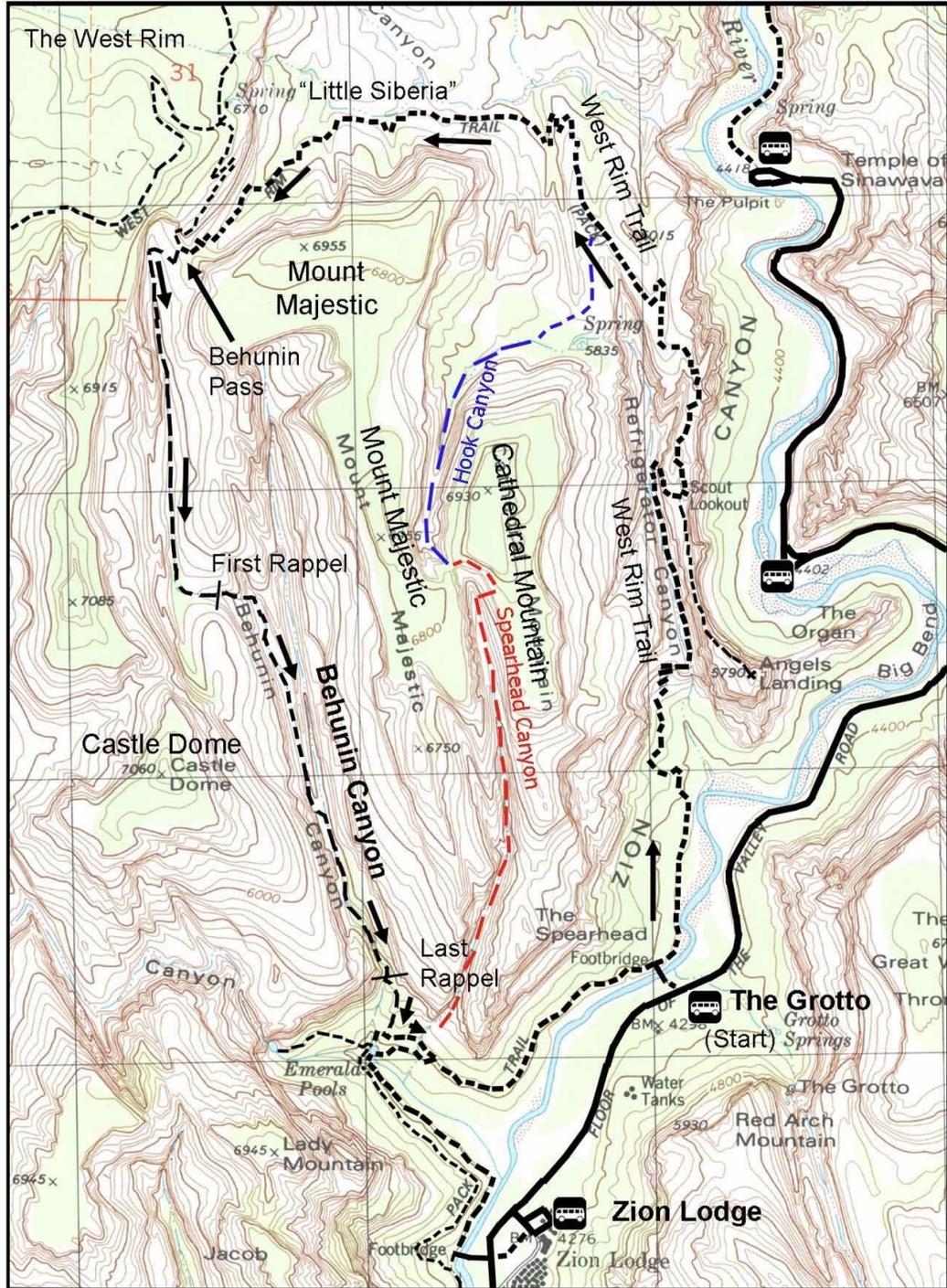
AUTHOR'S EXPERIENCE

I first descended Behunin in November 2000 with Brian Cabe, and have descended it about once a year since.

Zion National Park: Behunin Canyon (2015)

Beta courtesy CanyoneringUSA.com

BEHUNIN CANYON



↑ North

Scale of Miles

