



ROCKANEERING: THE BLACK CANYON PROMISES TO TEST A WIDE RANGE OF YOUR SKILLS.

■ In the Black

The fall is the best time to take on the big walls of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

By Casey Flynn

The Black Canyon of the Gunnison is burly by any standards. This deep cleft in the earth houses the tallest wall in Colorado, the Painted Wall, at 2,250 feet from river to rim. Black Canyon climbing pioneer Leonard Coyne refers to what you do here as “rockaneering,” an activity that demands speed, guts and creativity. The routes are long and committing with no easy escape. You rap or hike down from the rim and must climb out to reach camp again. Many parties move too slowly and spend a sleepless night shivering in their harnesses. But if you’re seeking big walls in a wilderness setting, the Black is hard to top.

MAIDEN VOYAGE III 5.9

Maiden Voyage is the perfect route to get acquainted with the Black’s idiosyncrasies. It hugs the west edge of the Checkerboard Wall for five moderate pitches with a well-protected and brief bulging crux. Solid rock and rhythmic climbing along the precipitous prow finish on a picturesque summit block. Be prepared to do two fixed-line rappels down the Cruise Gully to get in and some Class 3 scrambling to get out.

COMIC RELIEF III 5.10-

Clean corners and cracks, straight-forward route finding and a splitter crux jam crack down low make Comic Relief a popular moderate ascent line. The route scales the western edge of North Chasm View Wall in eight pitches, with aesthetic 5.9 stemming and jamming and multiple quality variations. The dramatic, overhanging Lightning Bolt Crack, 5.11, on pitch six is a sharp and pumpy alternative if you’ve got some juice left over to spend on it.

THE RUSSIAN ARETE IV 5.9

Get ready for “Russian roulette,” as first ascensionist Layton Kor likened this beast. From the Gunnison River to the top of the North Rim, the Russian Arete packs multiple 5.9 cruxes over 1,600 feet of off-width, chimney and groove-style climbing. Demanding route-finding and the variable rock quality inherent to most Black climbs will test your fortitude and hone your skills on this full-day adventure.

JOURNEY HOME IV 5.10

Journey Home is a steep-and-sustained full-value classic. Nearly every pitch clocks in at 5.9 and 5.10 across all types of terrain: faces, dihedrals, chimneys, roofs, wide and narrow cracks. Gear placements are strenuous and there are few rest stances on the entire line. Add to that the dicey low-fifth-class approach ledge that takes you 500 feet above the canyon floor and the R-rated first

Don’t have the stones to attempt The Black on your own?

Southwest Adventure Guides based in Durango offers AMGA-certified guides who will show you the way on Maiden Voyage, The Russian Arete and The Scenic Cruise (starting at **\$395**). The company also offers a range of canyoneering trips on its home turf near Ouray—including wet rides down Oak Creek and Portland Canyon (trips run **\$338 for two**).

pitch and you have a climb that demands your full attention. Be solid on 5.10 to manage the mental strain of the first 45 feet, where you’ll only get two solid pieces on exposed 5.9 terrain with serious potential to deck on the ledge if you fall. Persevere through the sketchy start and you’ll enjoy seven bold pitches up the vertical wall.

THE SCENIC CRUISE IV 5.10+

Ever dream of climbing 1,700 feet of cracks? Damn straight you have! Have your jamming hands attached for The Scenic Cruise, one of the longest and most consistently difficult climbs in the state. Laying siege to North Chasm View Wall in 13 stout rope lengths, The Scenic Cruise will take everything you’ve got in your climber’s bag of tricks to top out. The psychologically taxing Pegmatite Traverse, which crosses one of the Black’s many smooth, white streaks of pegmatite rock, coaxes you out into space on sloping holds then up a runout 5.10 lieback flake. Shake the butterflies, commit and jam on. •