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Cool off under the dribbling flow of Maidenhair Falls, in Anza-Borrego's Hellhole Canyon.

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In the midst of what is regarded as one of America's hottest and driest deserts, it seems a bit surprising to find a place where mosses, ferns, sycamores, and cottonwoods flourish around a sparkling waterfall. Maidenhair Falls in Hellhole Canyon is such a place, and it lies not far from Borrego Springs and the popular Anza-Borrego Desert State Park visitor center. One caveat before you set off: Wear sturdy footwear if you choose to engage in the painstaking scrambling over rocks and brush needed to explore the area around the falls.

Start hiking at the large trailhead parking area on the west side of Montezuma Highway (S-22), 0.7 mile south of Palm Canyon Drive in Borrego Springs. Aim west-southwest on a wide, well-beaten path -- formerly a dirt road -- across the upper (south) margin of Hellhole Canyon's broad alluvial fan. The sandy surface of the fan supports a variety of vegetation, stratified according to elevation. Indigo bush, chuparosa, cheesebush, burroweed, creosote bush, desert lavender, and buckhorn cholla are the common plant species of the lower fan. They're largely replaced by jojoba, brittlebush, ocotillo, and teddy-bear cholla on the upper fan. Here and there jackrabbits flit among the bushes, startled by your approach.

After 1.2 miles, the walls of the canyon begin to close in. You thread your way up the narrowing gorge, generally avoiding the vegetation-choked canyon bottom. Try to avoid encounters with the rosebush-like thorns of the catclaw bushes.

You'll soon find yourself threading a path near the flowing water -- the flow being highly dependent on the amount of rainfall our region gets before your visit. The remnants of trees that litter the canyon are a result of past wildfires. Fan palms -- the signature tree of the Anza-Borrego Desert -- begin to appear.

About 200 yards past the densest cluster of palms, the canyon walls pinch in really tight. Tucked away in a corner of the canyon bottom, you'll discover the grotto containing Maidenhair Falls. The falls plunge about 20 feet into a shallow pool. Tiers of maidenhair fern and sopping wet moss adorn the sides of the grotto.

Further travel up-canyon from Maidenhair Falls involves much battle with boulders and underbrush -- slow going on a day hike, and slower if you're backpacking. Ambitious hikers have explored the remote higher reaches of the canyon in a long day or weekend.

This article contains information about a publicly owned recreation or wilderness area. Trails and pathways are not necessarily marked. Conditions can change rapidly. Hikers should be properly equipped and have safety and navigational skills. The *Reader* and Jerry Schad assume no responsibility for any adverse experience.

