

Utah Road Trip: 9-Days, 5 National Parks



Day 1

Fly to Las Vegas, the closest major airport to southern Utah. Pick up your rental car and you are on your way.

First stop: Valley of Fire State Park. After an hour's drive, get out and stretch your legs in this beautiful desert landscape, with fantastic, 4000-yr old petroglyphs and sculpted red rock formations.

Once you see Valley of Fire State Park, jump back in the car and make your way to Zion. Check into your accommodation in Springdale just outside the Park. We loved Flanigan's Inn, which provided a really comfortable, welcoming stay really close to the entrance of the Park so we could get ahead of the morning rush.

Note: The \$10 State Park entry fee per vehicle for Valley of Fire State Park is not included under the aforementioned National Parks Pass, so you will need to pay this separately.

Driving distance: Las Vegas to Valley of Fire State Park 78km (49mi) 1hr. Valley of Fire State Park to Springdale (right outside of Zion National Park) 207km (129mi) 2hrs 20mins.

Day 2

Spend a full day in Zion National Park. Start early, grabbing breakfast and a packed lunch before hopping on the Park shuttle.

Adventurous spirits can't go past the lure of Angel's Landing hike and the earlier in the day you start, the better (even in winter) – it's a popular trail and the up-canyon hike is a killer in the desert sun.

Whatever you choose to do in the Park, make sure you hit the Canyon Overlook Trail a couple of hours before sunset, for impressive views before the Canyon walls begin to cast shadows across the valley.

Overnight in Springdale.

Driving distance: Local driving distance depends on accommodation location and chosen activities.

Day 3

Spend the morning seeing more of what Zion has to offer, then after lunch, drive to Bryce Canyon National Park. Aim to get into the Park an hour before sunset, and enjoy last light from the Rim Trail and aptly named Sunset Point.

Driving distance: Zion National Park to Bryce 136km (85mi) 1hr 50mins

Day 4

Spend a half-day exploring Bryce Canyon National Park before making your way to Capitol Reef National Park. Be sure to take Scenic Byway 12 for a very scenic drive. Along the way you'll witness some of the stunning landscapes of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Though you can make it between the National Parks in under 3hrs, I recommend allowing a full afternoon to enjoy the views from various overlooks and pull-offs along the road.

Check into your accommodation in Torrey (the closest town servicing Capitol Reef). We stayed at Capitol Reef Resort to be as close to the Park entrance as possible. The Resort has modern, comfy rooms with a decent restaurant and great views of the rock formations. If there is any daylight left after you check-in, head directly to Sunset Point down a 0.65km (0.4mi) trail—the shortest in the Park—to enjoy the spectacle. If not, save this for the end of Day 5.

Driving distance: Bryce to Torrey via UT-12, 182 (113mi) 2hr 30mins without stops.

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Day 5

Take in Capitol Reef National Park with a full day of scenic driving and leisurely hikes. Begin with the Scenic Drive, and then explore the various canyons and valleys on foot. We experienced winter storms during our day in the Park, so our hiking was limited. The weather cleared long enough for an enjoyable hike to Hickman Bridge. This trail has great views of the Park's namesake "Capitol Dome".

Driving distance: Local driving distance depends on accommodation location and chosen activities.

Day 6

Cruise the exquisite UT-24 from Torrey, through Capitol Reef and on towards Moab. The section between Torrey and Hanksville is possibly the best Scenic Byway I have ever had the pleasure of driving (or rather being driven, since James was behind the wheel). This is one case of the journey (or part thereof) being equal to the destination so allow more time on this road to really enjoy it.

Note: There aren't many official pull-offs on this road, so be careful where you decide to stop for photos - cars tend to hurtle along this remote highway and we got bogged on the side of the road. Thanks to friendly passers-by and people of Hanksville who helped haul us out of the muck.

Check into your Moab accommodation which will be your base for the final days of your trip. We stayed in the Fairfield Inn and Suites to be closer to the two Park entries, with a short drive into town for restaurants etc. This is more pertinent in summer months when traffic jams into the Parks are more likely.

Driving distance: Torrey to Moab 251km (156mi) 2hrs 35min without stops.

Day 7

Next on your Utah road trip, head to the Island in the Sky section of Canyonlands for a full day of short hikes overlooking incredible vistas. Make your way along the Scenic Drive, taking advantage of the many overlooks and tackling the trails to get an overview of what Canyonlands is all about.

If you only do one trail, make sure it's the Grand View Point Overlook—it's fairly easy and the views are unbelievable. Dead Horse Point is a highly recommended spot for sunset however I can't give you any personal recommendation because we experienced a very stormy end of day in the Park.

Driving distance: Local driving distance depends on accommodation location and chosen activities.

Day 8

Your final Utah National Park for this road trip is Arches National Park. Make your way around all of the paved park roads in the Park, ensuring you visit The Windows Section, Devil's Garden and Delicate Arch Viewpoint.

If you're fit and prepared to return in the dark, take the Delicate Arch Trail for the most amazing end to your day. Time your departure to reach Delicate Arch a good hour before sunset, because there will be a queue for photos under the Arch and you'll want to get some daylight photos of the rock formation. I recommend staying beyond sunset for a little twilight too.

Note: Make sure you have a flashlight or headlamp and warm clothing with you for the climb down.

Driving distance: Local driving distance depends on accommodation location and chosen activities.

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Day 9

Departure day. You may be flying out of Salt Lake City (SLC), Grand Junction (GJT) or even Denver (DEN). There is an airport in Moab (CNY) that only offers flights to Denver. So if you are sick of driving at this point, you can take this short-haul to Denver and make your way home from there.

We chose to drive through to Denver, which I wouldn't recommend in the colder months. We were travelling Thanksgiving Week (end of November) and storms shut the Vail Pass for several days leading up to our departure and we only just got through to make our flight.

Drive distance:

Moab to Salt Lake City 376km (238mi) 3hrs 46mins.

Moab to Grand Junction 182km (113mi) 1hr 45mins.

Moab to Denver 570km (354mi) 5hrs 30mins.

Places to eat, drink & be merry

Springdale

Café Soleil – breakfast, lunch & coffee - for a little extra they'll wrap your sandwich appropriately to take hiking.

King's Landing Bistro – dinner - delicious upscale food, ingredients sourced locally.

Escalante

Escalante Outfitters Café – breakfast, lunch and coffee along UT-12 – they were not only open when everyone else was closed but they made great coffee and sandwiches.

Torrey

Rim Rock Inn & Restaurant – dinner – casual dining with a local vibe.

Hanksville

Duke's SlickRock Grill – breakfast, lunch & dinner (help us say thanks to the people of Hanksville for getting us out of the mud by supporting local businesses, including Duke's where we ate a fresh and filling breakfast after our wayward adventure).

Moab

Moab Garage Co – lunch - great sandwiches and ok coffee.

Desert Bistro – dinner - delicious, upscale dining that I highly recommend as a treat after a day of hiking.

Important notes

- 4WD or AWD are required if you are going off-road even a little bit.
- Pay the extra to book the vehicle category you want to rent. Most rental companies won't guarantee you a 4-wheel-drive, but by booking and pre-paying for a vehicle in the right category, you have a much better chance of getting what you need.
- Double-check your vehicle's specs. If you are unsure, ask your car rental company.
- Lastly, off-season is a great time to see Utah's National Parks but be prepared for some closures.
- Save money by purchasing an Annual National Parks Pass. At \$80 it will save you money considering each individual Park charges \$10-35 each for a 7-day entry ticket (based on private vehicle prices).