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UTAH | ADVENTURE

PACKING IT IN

A week really isn't long enough to capture all that an adventure-laden state like Utah has to offer, but *AG Outdoor* Editor Justin Walker and photographer Mark Watson give it a serious crack.

WORDS JUSTIN WALKER
PHOTOS INCITE IMAGES & JUSTIN WALKER

It is amazing what you can accomplish in 36 hours ☒ and where that much time can take you.

FLY FROM SYDNEY to LA then on to Las Vegas before jumping in a hire car at midnight US time, then crank out a three-hour drive to your seemingly unassuming hotel in Springdale, right next to world famous Zion National Park, and — a day-and-a-half later — you too can have the pleasure of waking up surrounded by dramatic, craggy mountains, topped with blue-bird skies. And that's just the beginning.

Next morning, take your jetlag, around three-hours sleep and a sometimes-cantankerous photographer, and join a guide to explore one of the area's many famous slot canyons — in this case, The Huntress — and you'll be, quite literally, transported to a world of winding, water-smoothed canyon walls and sandy terrain that provide the perfect antidote to all that travel through time zones.

Initially, I thought this sensation was a one-off; a result of said jetlag and lack of sleep. But as photographer Mark Watson and I discovered, as we chased a super-tight itinerary of road trip and exploration, the richness of adventure in Utah had the welcome but unnerving effect of keeping us moving forward, always on to the next epic experience, totally overriding our constant lack of sleep and many kilometres of driving.

In short, when it comes to the ability to cram the maximum amount of adventures into a not-nearly-long-enough five days, Utah rules the roost. Globally. Our always-maniac week of driving from one eye-boggling natural adventure playground to another is all the proof you'll ever need. Take it from us...

WHERE THE ANGELS ROOST

First day in, exploring the winding route through The Huntress with guide Jon Ritz of

Zion Adventure, was a crackerjack way to start our week in Utah. If anything signifies the outdoors in Utah it is the prevalence of slot canyons, and The Huntress is a near-perfect — and easily accessible — example of these amazing formations. The walls of The Huntress are nearly butter-smooth to the touch, with millennia of floodwaters having carved their way through the stone, leaving these solid wave-like canyon walls behind. The Huntress is a slot canyon for anyone, regardless of age, with only a few middling abseils and plenty of slow walking through a stone wonderland to take it all in. It is also mostly downhill, which is always a bonus... Popping out the end as the canyon widens dramatically felt like re-entering the real world. The slog back up the valley reminded us of our lethargy but was only a brief feeling; there was way too much to see even on the ascent back to our vehicle. Any tiredness was banished totally on the spectacular drive back through Zion NP's main road to Springdale; we were shadowed by rugged mountains all the way back to town.

A full night's sleep can overcome any amount of jetlag; that was our belief as we headed out early the next morning to explore Zion National Park's main attraction: the trek up to the lofty heights of Angels Landing. As the name suggests, this high peak is, er, high. The 4km walk up — or the majority of it — belies the dramatic name by being a well-paved pathway that starts off at the valley floor, following the Virgin River before starting to ascend more dramatically, zig-zagging up the side of the mountain via a series of switchbacks (21 of them, dubbed Walter's Wiggles) before entering a narrow chasm that separates the 1760m-high rock formation of Angels Landing from the adjacent range. The wide, paved path finishes at a plateau area, named Scout ▶



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Clockwise from top Watto surveys the amazing Bryce Canyon National Park and its vast collection of spires and towers; starting the hike to the top of Angel's Landing, following the Virgin River along the valley before the big ascent to the top of that magical peak.





Clockwise from above The desert country is full of life –this raptor was scouting for prey; The Narrows is one of Utah’s most popular destinations for visitors to Zion National Park; entering The Huntress, a spectacular canyon that is easily accessible.



Lookout, which is often the turnaround point for those who don’t want to keep ascending to the summit of Angels Landing itself. You’d think most folks would be keen to go right to the top but one look at the narrow ridgeline you have to scramble up, with only a link-chain at various points to hold on to, and it’s easy to understand why most view Scout Lookout as “far enough”.

So that’s where I stopped as well; I was just happy to kick back at Angels Landing – the thought of some inattentive tourist losing their grip on the chain – or the track – and falling down and taking me with them on a 400m free fall to the valley floor just didn’t appeal. So I exercised my Editor’s privilege and sent the photographer instead. It was well worth the still-continuing ribbing... Watto’s efforts in reaching the true summit were rewarded with uninterrupted 360-degree views of Zion Canyon and, somewhere in among that incredible vista, the famous Narrows, the national park’s most accessible (and most popular) canyon.

TACKLING THE BIG SQUEEZE

In our squished itinerary, Angels Landing was on the agenda, but not the park’s other famous attraction: The Narrows. We simply thought that we wouldn’t have enough time. But, after a nice lunch back at the Zion Lodge and a bit of a doze on the lodge’s well-manicured grounds, it began; what would eventually become a daily chase for more time at each of our destinations. There was no way we could miss exploring The Narrows; after all, it was right there, just a shuttle bus away from our lunch spot. And The Narrows proved no waste of time, either; *National Geographic* rates it the Number 5 best adventure in US national parks. The hike can be as long or short as you like; most of it is spent walking through a canyon valley (roughly 20m wide in most parts, but often opening up wider) with towering sheer red cliff walls on either side. It is beautiful and amazing. Hikers spend most of the time walking through the shallow waters of the Virgin River – the route itself – and you can walk all the way through to a campsite right up the end of the Narrows, or you can turn around whenever you feel like it.

For me, the highlight was not only the terrain and the hike we did ourselves (we were about three hours up to our turn-around point and back to the bus pick-up point) but also the fact so many families were enjoying it. We spotted groups ranging from two adults and two babies in carriers, through to a couple of “well aged” gentlemen (in their mid 70s) enjoying the walk through water. We were kicking ourselves a bit that we didn’t have time to do the full over-



Hickman Bridge, in Capitol Reef NP, dwarfs photographer Watson. It’s only a short hike (45 mins) to reach this beautiful spot.

night version of the walk but even the three hours spent here, with plenty of company from other tourists, confirmed our snap decision back at the lodge was the correct one. I always love being near water, so spending the three hours shuffling through the Virgin River’s waters was reinvigorating – as were the surrounds – and just what we needed before we jumped back in the car for our next big drive and a continuation of what was shaping up as a fast, furious and seriously fun road trip.

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A DIFFERENT WORLD

Bryce Canyon National Park is around 115km from Zion NP, but you’d think it really was the other side of the planet, such is the difference in terrain. The gobsmacking landscape of weathered rock towers, fins and rock bridges was hard for us to take in, having just left the steep, high mountains of Zion the previous day. The word “surreal” just barely covers this park’s appearance; the many jagged spires that reach for the blue sky here are incredible. And,

winding through all this is a network of awe-some walking tracks, making Bryce Canyon NP deserving of more than a day’s (or, unfortunately in our case, a few hours) exploration. After wandering around the high viewpoints and trying to soak up this world-rated national park’s unique appearance, it was back into the car for more driving as we headed north toward Capitol Reef National Park.

This drive continued our road trip’s theme of dramatic landscape changes; gaining height slowly as we drove along Scenic Byway 12, the vegetation and terrain changed once again, reflecting the alpine region we were entering. At our highest point, surrounded by forest with red-rock canyons way below in a huge valley, we topped out at 3300m above sea level, before starting our descent back down into canyon country and that night’s accommodation in Torrey.

Before we could lay our heads down for some seriously needed sleep, we drove to Hickman Bridge, a huge stone arch that is one of Capitol Reef NP’s most famous natural attractions. The short hike (3.5km return) to Hickman Bridge climbs up gradually above the Fremont River and was a welcome chance to stretch our legs after a couple of vehicle-bound days. Standing underneath this huge rock arch after walking in was a more than fitting reward. The arch itself is massive, and loomed high above Watto and I. After numerous photos and some contemplation in the shadows of this giant, we did a quick exploratory walk further south along the track to a bluff that offered some grand views over the Fremont River and across to Cohab Canyon.

The frustration of not being able to explore each of these national parks we’d glimpsed so far was building, and grew even more after >

Watto tackles the last seriously exposed section of the track to the summit of Angel's Landing. No safety barriers here!





Sam and Watto enjoy the challenging riding found at Dead Horse Point State Park, just out of Moab.

...since the state park's trail network had been finished, visitation to the park had quadrupled, with most riders not only enjoying the trails, but staying longer to check out the park's other attractions.

with more rugged canyon country. We were soon rumbling through Moab's main drag. It was here that Watto had his "moment" of the trip. If I called him a coffee-snob, I would be — just maybe — doing him a disservice. But he does like his caffeine, and had spent the preceding days near-crying in my ear about the lack of what he called "good coffee", of which he claimed to have been deprived since arriving in Utah. So when we spotted the sign for Moab Coffee Roasters, his arm waving and loud exclaiming saw me pull a dramatically unexpected parking manoeuvre, in the hope he'd be rewarded and I'd get a rest. Thankfully — for both of us — the barista on duty nailed it: the coffee was brilliant, even allowing for our few days of apparent starvation of good stuff. It was so good, I must admit, we returned three times over our 36 hours in Moab.

We weren't at Moab for coffee though, so after savouring our caffeine hit we set off for an afternoon scout around Arches National Park, just south of town, back along the highway. This park is, as the name suggests, packed with a wide variety of natural rock arch formations, each different and each equally as spectacular as the last. Our afternoon timeframe only allowed a quick dash along the track to beautiful Rainbow Ridge before having to return to town for a dinner with Moab Area Travel Council's Elaine Grizler, at what we voted our favourite restaurant in Utah: the ultra-cool and quirky Moab Brewery Restaurant.

RIDING THE DEAD HORSE

Moab is world-famous for mountain biking. The term "slickrock" has special meaning here; initially dubbed "slickrock" by early settlers due to the rock (sandstone) offering no grip for metal horse shoes, it now stands for the exact opposite: rubber mountain bike tyres stick to the abrasive surface (similar in texture to sandpaper) like glue, allowing riders to maintain grip on seriously steep and technical terrain. Of course, come off and you'll get the gravel-rash from hell...

Our experience of Moab MTB kicked off early the morning after probably a few too many beers at the Moab Brewery Restaurant; Sam from Rim Tours was our guide and we were heading south out of town to the memo-

rably named Dead Horse Point State Park to sample some of its MTB trail network, with a number of trails to choose from. The ride itself was pretty damn cool: we rode Intrepid, Pyramid, Big Chief and Raven Roll, with these trails taking us through a mix of sandy desert terrain, slickrock, and trail sections that ran close to cliff edges with incredible 800m drops. It was a blast and another bucket-list item ticked off, but also a huge tease, leaving us wondering what it would be like to spend a week or more here, picking and choosing from the hundreds of MTB trails in the area. It also showed just how lacking in MTB-based tourism Australia is; Sam mentioned to us that since the state park's trail network had been finished, visitation to the park had quadrupled, with most riders not only enjoying the trails, but staying longer to check out the park's other attractions. Seems like a win-win to me, but I reckon the ignorant who reside in parks management in Australia would never see the benefits... ➤

Watto stayed on in Utah for a few extra days of canyoning. The lucky sod...



Clockwise from right JW and Sam ride on the edge at Dead Horse Point State Park. The drop from this ridge is around 800m straight down; the Delicate Arch hike is the most popular in Arches National Park.



RETURN TO ARCHES

Our big ride had been exhausting so a recharge was in order back at our hotel before we headed out again for a return visit to Arches NP – this time for a longer stay. Watto had some evening/night photography planned at the famous 20m high Delicate Arch, probably the standout formation among the park’s 200 arches, and the most popular hiking destination (5km return) for all visitors to the park. Once we had arrived at the natural amphitheatre that wind and rain had carved out around the arch itself, I had the chance for a rare break so sat and watched the setting sun change the colour of the arch, all while listening to the many photographers on-site (mine included) cursing the tourists who kept on running under the arch for selfies.

The old adage of patience being a virtue was proved again though; no sooner had the sun set than the tourist hordes departed. We stayed on as there was “optimal light” for photography and scored a near-empty seat in which to watch an incoming lightning storm, which lit up the rugged desert country behind Delicate Arch. Long-exposure photos taken care of, we then did a mad torch-lit dash down the valley back to the carpark, trying – in vain, as it turned out – to beat the rain. We got wet, but it didn’t matter – we’d just had the near-perfect 24 hours in Moab.

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

Our second-to-last day was spent driving down to Bluff for a stay at the awesome Desert Rose Inn, nestled right on the border of Canyonlands National Park and its rich horde of walking tracks, canyons and bike trails to explore. The inn’s guesthouses were near-new when we stayed and fantastically plush – easily our most luxurious digs over the course of our trip. The area near Bluff is packed with adventure, too: Monument Valley is nearby, and there’s a cool drive you can do through the Valley of the Gods.

Bluff was all too short an experience – something we couldn’t say about our seven-hour drive to Salt Lake City the next day, via the Moab Coffee Roasters, of course. These last two days went by way too quickly, and even faster for me as I caught a stomach bug, so was laid-out in recovery mode once we got to Salt Lake City. It was a case of being unfortunate but also a tiny bit lucky, with Watto having to suffer through what sounded like an epic mountain bike ride with Shawn Stinson from Tourism Salt Lake City, as they traversed some of the city’s highest MTB trails. Listening to him recount it as I lay in bed still sick, I still



Arches National Park put on a mighty show for JW and Watto; a lightning storm finished off a fantastic evening at this amazing location.



managed to feel a bit sorry for him, but more envious: it would have been the ideal end to our week in Utah.

It was amazing to realise that was all it had been: just one week. Looking back at my notes, and the photographs, it looked like we’d been on a month-long road trip, such was the variety of adventures – and locations – that we’d experienced. Even though, every day, we kept on saying to each other a week was not long enough, we – and Utah itself – came through with a cracking experience that won’t be easily forgotten. And it certainly won’t ever be too much of a chore to come back to Utah for maybe a bit longer to jog our memory of what can only be termed one mighty road trip, through one of the world’s most adventure-dense destinations. All I have to do is make sure we manage a few well-timed coffee breaks in Moab...

THE ESSENTIALS

Getting there: Qantas flies to Los Angeles and then on to Las Vegas. See www.qantas.com.

The adventure: Utah is a large state and is genuinely packed with any number of adventure opportunities for all ages. Mountain biking, hiking, photography, paddling, canyoning and climbing are all here in abundance. Travel in-state is very easy: the highways and roads are well maintained and even the smallest café or coffee shop will be able to answer any questions you may have as you explore the state.

More info: For all things Utah, see www.visitutah.com

AG Outdoor was a guest of the Utah Office of Tourism.