

Zion National Park in southwestern Utah, a 'place of quiet sanctuary', features a soaring, awe-inspiring landscape

A wonderland of geology

4 HOT DEALS



Mike Yardley

NO MATTER how hard you try, Zion National Park's exalted magnificence won't quite fit inside your camera.

Zion's sandstone cliffs and drop dead gorgeous rock faces are some of the tallest in the world and fawned over by big wall climbers.

If you get up early enough, you'll notice climbers will sleep overnight halfway up a rock face, in a bid to conquer the climb.

In this rarefied place you're best to just look up, tilt your head and let your eyes trace the soaring landscape.

This wonderland of geologic time, bathed in a mosaic of colour, is characterised by red and white sandstone monoliths, rock towers and mesas.

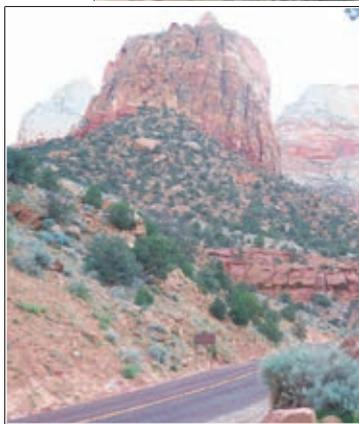
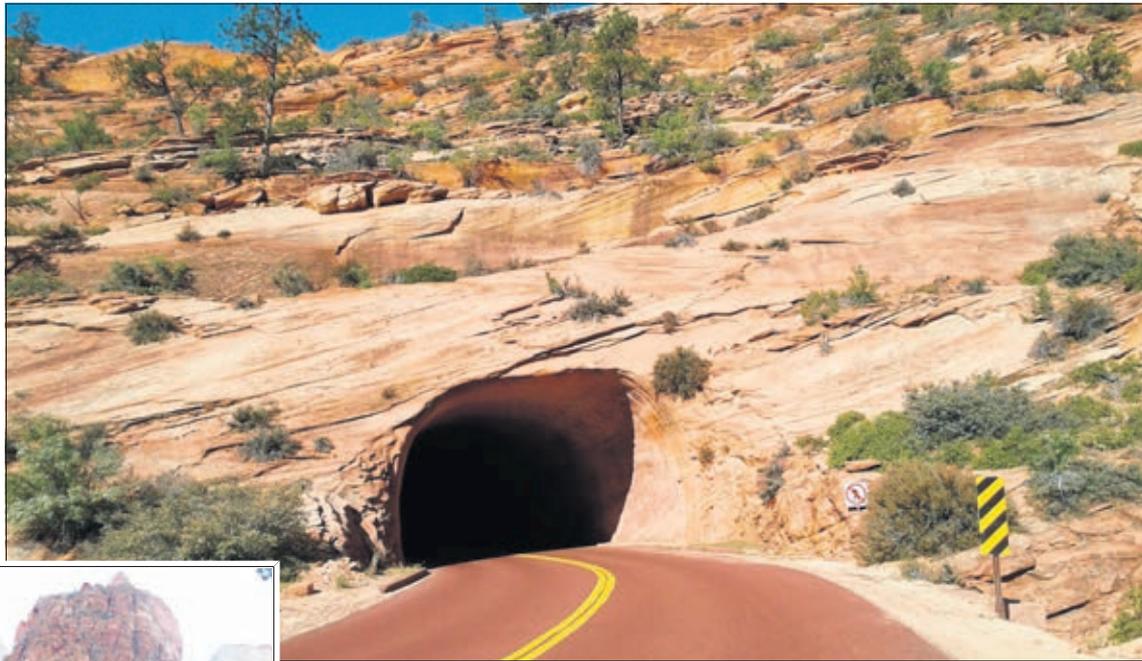
In addition to Zion Canyon, which is still carved and sculpted by the Virgin River, there's a honeycomb of deep and narrow slot canyons, throughout the park.

I entered the park from its eastern approach, on the famed Zion-Mount Carmel Highway, punctuated by a one-mile long tunnel, blasted out of solid sandstone.

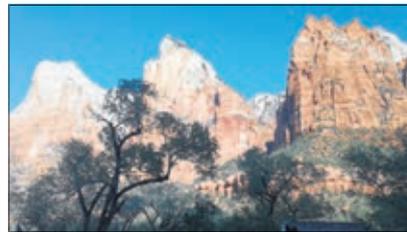
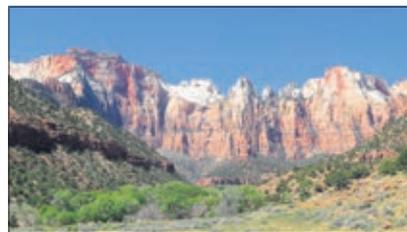
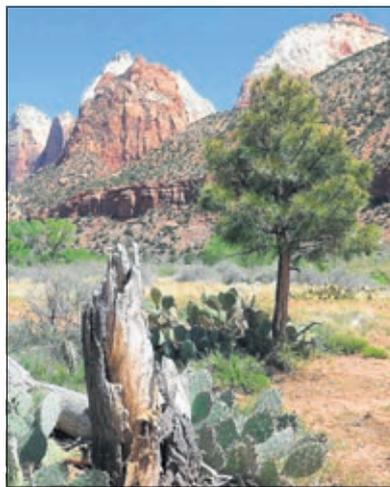
The three-year guts and glory project was finally completed in 1930, and hailed across America as an engineering miracle. Eight hundred feet high, a sequence of open air "galleries" were built into the side of the tunnel, which early sightseers would stop at, to gasp at the elevated alpine vista across the national park. That's no longer allowed.

Emerging from the tunnel, and before the engrossing sequence of switch-backs down into Zion Canyon, I stopped at the Canyon Overlook trailhead, which affords a prized panorama.

Once you enter Zion Canyon, the hallowed heart of the



WONDERLAND : Clockwise from above: The view while driving through Zion; the tunnels; National Park; the Patriarch; and Zion's landscape.



national park, you'll feel the sense of greatness. Clearly the first European settlers, Mormon scouts in search of terrain to grow cotton, thought so too, because the loftiest landmarks have all been bestowed biblical monikers, from Angels Landing and the Great White Throne to the Altar of Sacrifice and the Three Patriarchs.

The very name "Zion" describes a place of quiet sanctuary.

The main heart-piercing artery running through the park, Zion Canyon Scenic Drive, is off-limits to private vehicles between April and November, from Canyon Junction. Park officials wisely imposed the ban

to combat the absurdity of having such a majestic piece of protected wilderness log-jammed with fume-spewing lines of cars. So instead, complimentary shuttle buses zip the throngs of visitors to all of the major trailheads and points of interest, with nine designated stops along the six mile road.

It's a high-frequency, super-efficient service, plus you'll glean a few factoids from the on-board narration delivered by the friendly shuttle drivers.

It's a 90 minute round-trip on the shuttle from the visitor centre through all stops. If you're feeling lazy, y just sit back and soak up the park's beauty on the shuttle ride.

Where to stay

If you're more of a gl camper than a camper, Cable Mountain Lodge is a sensational boutique-style lodge, nestled below the cliffs of Zion National Park. My Centre Suite was gorgeously furnished and beautifully appointed with all of the contemporary indulgences you'd expect from a luxury hotel. The on-site swimming pool is a godsend after a long day's toil on the trails! cablemountainlodge.com

Art Deco Napier

Cruiseabout has a four-night trip onboard the Pacific Pearl from \$849 per person, twin share. Timed to coincide with the annual Art Deco Festival, it will depart Auckland and head to Napier, before returning to Auckland. Includes all onboard main meals, entertainment, gratuities and government and port taxes. Valid for sales until June 29. Departs February 16, 2017. Airfares additional. cruiseabout.co.nz, 0800 855 444.

Quilters' getaway

In 2017, Masters & Kent Travel Associates is hosting a 12-day tour designed for quilters. From \$4359 per person twin share, the tour includes 11 nights' hotel accommodation with breakfast daily, transport by air conditioned coach and tickets to the 2017 AQS QuiltWeek. Visit Memphis and Paducah, before finishing in Nashville. Valid for sales until June 30, 2016. Tour departs Memphis April 23. Airfares additional. travel-associates.co.nz, 0800 679 475.

Memorable cruise

Cruise South Australia's Murray River for three nights onboard Unforgettable 1. Cruise priced from \$259 per person, based on eight people sharing. Departs Mannum between July 1 and August 26, 2016 on Fridays. Sales until July 31, unless sold out prior. helloworld.co.nz or 0800 30 31 32.

Escape to Fiji

House of Travel has packages from \$3845 per person share twin, including return airfares from Auckland to Nadi, five nights at Tokoriki Island Resort, one night pre and post at Sheraton Fiji Resort, transfers and free Wi-Fi. Valid for travel between August 1 and September 21 and October 11 and November 30. Valid for sales to June 30, or until sold out. Conditions apply. houseoftravel.co.nz, 0800 838 747 or call in to House of Travel.

Cracker trails and fatal challenge

By Mike Yardley

Eager to hit the trails, I took the shuttle to the final stop on the circuit, Temple of Sinawava, which is the gateway to The Narrows.

The mile-long riverside walk is a cracker, quietly drawing you into the mystery of the narrowing canyon walls.

Along the way, playful squirrels and cheeky chipmunks scrounge for human food. Despite the bold signs urging hikers not to feed the wildlife, plenty of halfwits do.

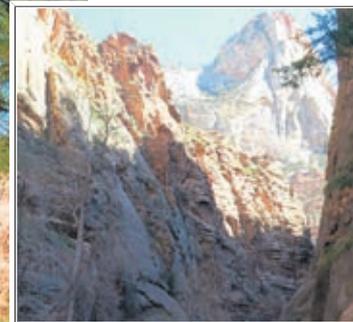
The walk culminates as the

Virgin River enters The Narrows, a pencil-thin passage where the vertiginous canyon walls nearly intersect.

Backdropped by soaring mountains, it's a ravishing setting.

If you're feeling extra-intrepid, you can walk further into The Narrows, but you'll be walking in the river, with the water level likely to be ankle-deep, as you wade upstream.

Hungry for something more strenuous? Angels Landing trail is the famous, thrilling and fatal path up to the summit of this towering fang of rock. It's



CHALLENGE: Angels Landing and Great White Throne (left) and The Narrows (above).

remarkable the national park created this nerve-rattler, which runs along a narrow rock fin with dizzying, unforgiving drop-offs on both sides. Rarely is such an intimidating trail so heavily trafficked.

I only went up as far as Scout Lookout before chickening out on venturing on. Beyond that, the path narrows as you ascend the final 400 feet to the bald, rocky summit. A section of chains to grab on to supposedly

provides hikers with a degree of comfort, as you negotiate the exposed vertical-drop edges.

Unsurprisingly, it is not uncommon for hikers to slip, fall and die. Tread carefully! zionnationalpark.com