

AMERICA

Taking the leap at Goblin Valley State Park, Utah.



# Reach for the skies

The other-worldly desert landscapes of Arizona and Utah are as dramatic as they are vast. Mark Daffey sets off in a campervan to the land of Thelma and Louise and Indiana Jones.

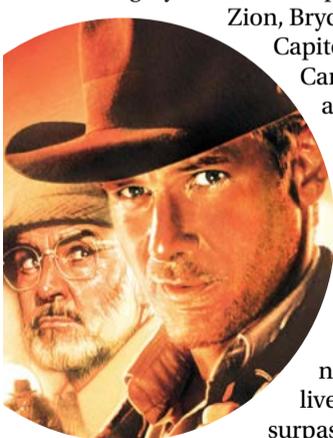
**T**ake a road trip through the landlocked American states of Utah and Arizona and you'll lose count of the number of times you find yourself stopping in your tracks.

It's the landscape of many a Hollywood western and the home of Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner. The opening scenes of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* were shot amongst the vast arches, red rock towers and sandstone bridges of Utah's high desert. When Thelma and Louise drive off that cliff in their T-bird, it is the stunning Canyonlands you see.

The region's views are immense and the sheer number of outdoor activities is mindboggling. But therein lies the problem: unless your trip is open-ended, you'll return home feeling disappointed you didn't allow more time in each place.

That's how I felt last year, following a month-long family holiday driving a motorhome through America's south-west.

For years, I'd longed to visit, photograph and hike some of the country's most iconic national parks. So we mapped out a circular route from Las Vegas, Nevada, that took in Utah's Mighty Five national parks –



Zion, Bryce Canyon, Capitol Reef, Canyonlands and Arches – and Arizona's Antelope and Grand canyons. Every one of those national parks lived up to – or surpassed – our expectations. But the

biggest surprise was the state parks and reserves we knew nothing about and found just as spectacular. And they weren't as crowded or as expensive.

That said, visiting any of the parks was not overly costly; the average national park entry fee is a reasonable \$53 per vehicle. But state parks fees are often a fraction of that price.

## FUN FACT

**A favourite among Hollywood's location scouts, the mighty panoramas of Arizona and Utah are the star attractions in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Thelma & Louise*.**

One tip that will save hundreds of dollars is to purchase an America the Beautiful national parks membership pass for about \$120. The pass is valid for 12 months and allows entry for up to four adults (children under 15 are free) to more than 2000 federal recreation sites. Buy one online or at most park entrances.

Now that I know every park on the map is worth a stop, here's what you'll find when you get there. Zion National Park is 80 per cent wilderness but most of the 4.5 million annual visitors confine themselves to the 24-kilometre-long Zion Canyon – home to some of the tallest sandstone walls on Earth. Some of the gnarliest day hikes are also found in the park, including Angels Landing and The Narrows.

Further on at Bryce Canyon, you could just confine your hiking to the many viewpoints along the rim trail above Bryce Amphitheatre. Its uninterrupted views over a heavily wrinkled bowl are best seen in the warm light of sunrise or sunset. Better is to follow well-worn walking trails weaving between brittle hoodoos (also known as fairy chimneys or earth pyramids) that look like they could crumble at any moment... but won't.

Follow the Scenic Byway 12 from Bryce Canyon to Torrey, just outside Capitol Reef National Park. The route links two national parks, three state parks, a national recreation area, a national monument and a national forest.



Capitol Reef is the most remote of Utah's national parks and receives fewer visitors. It got its name from the white rock domes that resemble the Capitol Building in Washington DC, and a sheer 150-kilometre cliff barrier that early prospectors referred to as a reef. Don't miss the hike through the Grand Wash, passing between 250-metre-high canyon walls that are just five metres apart at their narrowest point.

Further east, Goblin Valley could easily double as an alien planet in a Star Wars film. Kids will have a ball at this state park, scrambling over countless mushroom-shaped rocks that, together, are surely the weirdest sight in the American West.

Canyonlands is the largest national park in Utah and is home to the spectacular landscape of Island in the Sky, a rolling plateau high above the desolate valleys, and the photographer's favourite, Mesa Arch.

More than 2000 rock arches have been catalogued in Arches National Park. Delicate Arch is the signature landmark regularly seen on numberplates. And the distinctive Double Arch is easily recognisable from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. But as well as arches, there are sandstone towers, fins, hoodoos and precariously balanced rocks.

At Natural Bridges National Monument, the first International Dark Sky Park, the three rock arches inside White Canyon are free of the crowds found in Arches National Park. All are accessible on foot.

Further south, the soaring buttes and mesas of Monument Valley are now preserved inside the boundaries of the Navajo Nation's reservation, the valley straddles the border and may only be visited on a tour. A cheaper alternative is to savour this quintessential American West landscape from lookouts along Highway 163 and then visit the Valley of the Gods – often described as a "mini Monument Valley".

Make a stop between the two at Goosenecks State Park. When we visited, the sight of the San Juan River cutting a serpentine path through rocks that are millions of years old prompted six burly, ponytailed bikers to launch into a philosophical argument over our planet's geological evolution.

And finally, the Grand Canyon stretches for 450 kilometres, following the course of the Colorado River. The classic view is from the South Rim, where walking trails descend to the riverbanks below. The North Rim viewpoints are not as busy. Scenic helicopter rides from Las Vegas land inside the West Rim, where a glass-bottomed Skywalk extends out over the canyon. 📍

## Take me there

 **Fly:** Flights to Las Vegas travel via Los Angeles, San Francisco or Dallas Fort Worth. Qantas has return airfares from \$1810 (ex-Syd) and \$1794 (ex-Melb).

 **Drive:** Cruise America campers and motorhomes sleep up to seven people and cost from \$45 per day (low season). See [cruiseamerica.com](http://cruiseamerica.com)

 **Pets:** are allowed in most national parks in the US, so don't be surprised by how many Americans tour with their dog.

 **Explore more:** [nps.gov](http://nps.gov); [stateparks.com](http://stateparks.com); [freecampsites.net](http://freecampsites.net)