

National Parks

THE GRAND CANYON AND OTHER NATIONAL PARKS

By Meagan Kusek

Nothing celebrates the American spirit like exploring the National Parks of the Wild West. The West is home to so many varied parks, in fact, that several of them are within a few hours' driving distance of each other.

While it's impossible to visit all the parks of the West in one trip, one route I recommend covers northern Arizona and southern Utah. Whether you choose to fly to Las Vegas, rent a car and complete the circle of parks to end up back in the City of Lights or you want drive from Alabama, "round the bend" through the parks and return home through the Midwest, here are four National Parks all within a few hours' driving distance from one to the next.

Let's start with the quintessential American National Park: The Grand Canyon. This northern Arizona park is so famous, in fact, that you may even be able to find cars from all fifty states (plus several Canadian provinces) just in the parking lot. Make a game out of it as you drive around looking for a parking space to see if you can indeed spot them all.

If you plan ahead, you can choose to do all sorts of activities at the Grand Canyon: hiking, rafting, riding mules into the canyon, bicycling, taking helicopter rides and even camping. If you want, you can camp on the North Rim while it's open for the season, but be warned that it's far less accessible than the South Rim — a 220 mile drive by car from the South Rim or a 21 mile hike through the canyon trails.

For those looking for an easier trek, stick to the South Rim. After you enter the park, you can either hike from one lookout point to the next or take the available buses. No view from any two points is the same. In fact, one stunning memory I have from visiting the canyon was gradually watching a storm approach from a distance and cross it. The canyon was so vast that while storm clouds and rain blanketed one part of the canyon (and one lookout point, unfortunately), the other half of the canyon was perfectly sunny. It created the perfect dichotomy for photos.

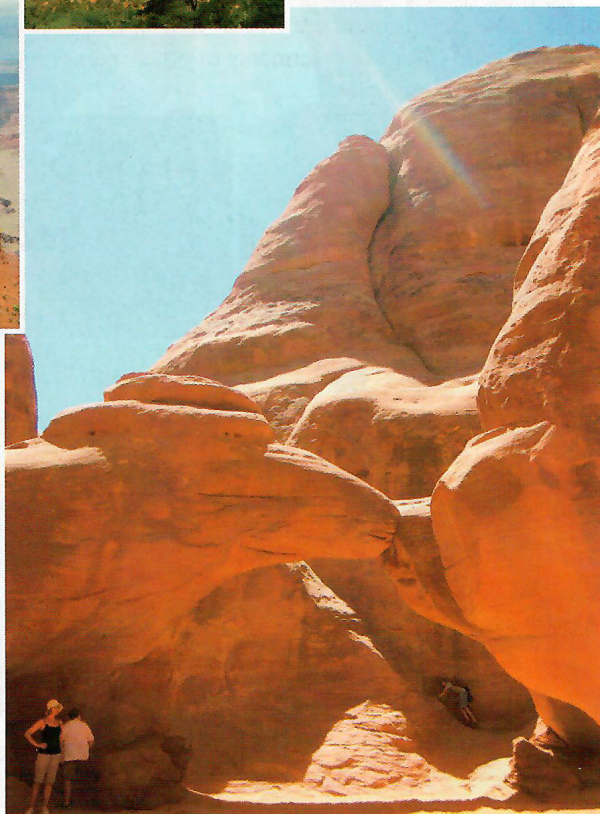
North of the Grand Canyon in southern Utah is Zion National Park. If you stick to just going along the South Rim of the Grand Canyon and looking down into it, Zion will give you the opposite experience. Trails in Zion take you between monolithic cliffs of stone, and you'll see all manner of wildlife as you walk and drive through the park — from bighorn sheep to various birds and lizards. This park has plenty of shady foliage along its trails, and depending on the time of day, some of the cliffs can block the sunlight, so even on those hot, midsummer days, the walk can be quite pleasant. Nevertheless, as with all hikes, be sure to bring water and stay hydrated.

Not far north of Zion is Bryce Canyon National Park, which is best known for its towering rock spires that create a forest of stone. As you drive around the edges of canyon, you'll move progressively higher in altitude with vaster views of the canyon from above. In fact, when it rains, the weather can actually get bitingly cold at the highest elevations, so be sure to have a jacket and an umbrella with you, just in case.

Finally, Arches National Park, as the name implies, is famous for its naturally formed stone arches in addition to other fascinating rock formations. While the first three parks I mentioned are canyons, Arches looks and feels more like a desert with hilly, rocky red landscapes and flat expanses of sand and scrub. There's no real cover here, aside from the occasional path between formations, and the blistering summer sun will beat down on you, so be sure to pack sunscreen and glasses.

One thing to remember about driving from one park to the next is that many of these areas are so remote that there is no cell service,

and rest stops and exits are few and far between. In an age where help is often only a phone call away, it can be a bit unnerving to drive hundreds of miles across the land and realize that such backup support is gone. Be prepared for any roadside emergency.



Left: The Grand Canyon
Top: Zion National Park
Right: Arches National Park