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Southern Utah's National Parks and Small Towns

By [Zaida Rios](#)

- Route distance:
1,013 km
- Suggested Time:
1-2 weeks

Utah will steal your heart or at the very least take your breath away with its colorful deep canyons and starlit skies.

Marvel at the grandeur of landscapes shaped by wind and water. Celebrated for its majestic landscapes, Southern Utah is home to five national parks with unique beauty and boundless wonders, hence the name The Mighty 5®. Begin your trip by flying into McCarran International Airport (LAS) in Las Vegas, Nevada, then rent a car to make your way to Southern Utah.

Epic Gorges in Cedar Breaks National Monument

A 2½-hour drive brings you to [Cedar City](#), a quaint college town near ski resorts. Dixie National Forest and Cedar Breaks National Monument, only 37 kilometers away, is a moment to scan the horizon as limestone arches, towers and hundreds of rock spires come into view. Explore by taking one of the wonderful hikes. The 6-kilometer trail from Spectra Point to Ramparts Overlook Trail rewards you with bristlecone pines, wildflower meadows and awe-inspiring geologic rock formations. From an elevation of more than 3,000 meters, the view dips into an almost 1-kilometer gorge resembling a geologic amphitheater. If you prefer to camp, there's a campground with 25 sites, but be sure to reserve your space ahead of time. In the winter months, head to nearby Brian Head Resort, a popular spot for cross-country skiing and snowmobiling with an annual snowfall of over 914 centimeters.

More information

- [Cedar Breaks National Monument](#)

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Experience

Cedar City and Brian Head: Outdoor Family Fun in Utah

96 km

1.5 hours by car

02

Natural Amphitheaters in Bryce Canyon National Park

Next, hop on Scenic Byway 143 traveling past Panguitch, near [Bryce Canyon National Park](#). Established in 1928, Bryce Canyon National Park quickly became popular for its beautiful, primitive and rugged landscape. Natural erosion over time sculpted rock spires, known as hoodoos, in this famous canyon. Ancient Indian lore tells the story of the hoodoos' creation. The Coyote god petrified the greedy Legend People into stone, transforming them into lovely rock spires scattered across the canyons. Streams carved the rock into horseshoe formations that resemble outdoor theaters, the crown jewel being the Bryce Amphitheater. Take the easy route into the canyon on the Queen Garden's Trail, which begins at Sunrise Point and stretches almost 3 kilometers. If you're an expert and fit hiker, try Rigg Springs Loop, a 14-kilometer trek past red rock formations and pristine forests.

below the plateau. Next, drive from the visitor center to Rainbow Point for views of the entire park and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Admire the spectacular array of hues – pink, gray, white, pale yellow and cocoa brown – coloring the sandstone canyon walls. In the winter months, the park offers unique excursions such as free ranger-led snowshoe hikes. You can also cross-country ski on park trails above the rim in Dixie National Forest. In the summer months, stay at the Bryce Canyon Lodge, where you'll spot hoodoos from the comfort of a rustic, historic mountain retreat. Insider tip: To avoid traffic getting into the park, leave your car at a station on Highway 63 in **Bryce Canyon City** and board the Bryce Canyon Shuttle. Shuttle stops include the park, visitor center, lodge, campground and scenic overlooks.

More information

- **Bryce Canyon National Park**

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Experience

An Insider's Guide to Bryce Canyon National Park

179 km

2 hours by car

03

Desolate Beauty in Capitol Reef National Park

Cruise along All-American Road Scenic Byway 12 – a Michelin-rated three-star route that's considered one of the prettiest roads in the USA for its pine forests, canyons and gorges – into Boulder. The off-the-beaten-path town is known for Boulder Mountain Lodge, beloved for its Western décor and award-winning restaurant, Hell's Backbone Grill & Farm.

Remote, rugged and serenely gorgeous, Capitol Reef National Park features slickrock terrain, enormous domes, jagged cliffs and winding canyons. Domes shaped like capitols and cliffs that serve as barrier reefs aptly gave way to the name Capitol Reef. The Scenic Drive in Capitol Reef conveniently cuts through the heart of the park, so if you are pressed for time at least drive this route. Inside the park, 64 kilometers of peaceful trails with awesome views are yours to explore. This park is also home to a historic settlement named Fruita along the Fremont River. Once home to the Fremont Indians, the area was later settled by Mormon pioneers. Today, you can still find the original orchards planted by settlers producing delicious cherries, apricots, peaches and pears. For a reasonable fee, you can wander the groves and pick fresh fruit. Enjoy the peaceful atmosphere. You just might spot mule deer and bighorn sheep in this region of Capitol Reef. When you're ready, jump back on the Scenic Drive and head to Moab.

More information

- [Capitol Reef National Park](#)

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Experience

Utah National Parks: The Mighty Five

242 km

2.5 hours by car

04

Sandstone Arches and Canyons in Moab

What strikes you about [Moab](#) upon first encounter is its vast open spaces. Nothing can quite prepare you for the spellbinding scenery. Lucky for you, the entrances to the two national parks lie within 30 minutes of each other. First, explore [Arches National Park](#), about 10 minutes north of town. This park has the largest concentration of rock arches – 2,000 – in the world. Of course, you can discover some of these arches from the comfort of your car, but some of the most scenic ones require a hike, so bring hiking boots. The park has so many incredible arches that it's divided into various sections. Hike to Delicate Arch, a 5-kilometer trail or venture along a 11-kilometer loop at Devils Garden Loop. From the desert floor, you'll be in awe of the geologic wonders towering above you – dramatic natural stone arches deftly sculpted over time through the process of basic erosion. Next, it's time to explore more significant geological formations and natural wonders at [Canyonlands National Park](#). The most famous is the Mesa Arch, looming above a canyon that dips 244 meters below. Don't skip it – it's an easy trail less than a kilometer from the trailhead. Plus, Mesa Arch is an amazing photo op with vistas of neighboring buttes, canyons and red rock formations. Spend the night in a riverfront cabin at Red Cliffs Lodge before making the trek to Zion National Park.

More information

- [Moab](#)

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Experience

Moab, Utah: Natural Landscapes Only Found Here

496 km

5 hours by car
05

Iconic Slot Canyons in Zion National Park

Leave Arches National Park via Interstate 70 and travel five hours to your final destination, Kanab, where sagebrush flats, sandstone cliffs and rolling open spaces give this town its American West feel. A photographer's dream, Zion National Park is Utah's most-visited national park for a reason. Multicolored canyons in variegated pastel and burnt tones characterize the vistas on the Colorado Plateau with the Virgin River system jutting through it. Spot grottos, natural springs, hoodoos, domes and towers – there's so much beauty to behold. The park offers a shuttle that stops at various trailheads. Highlights include the trail to the Temple of Sinawava at the edge of The Narrows, a cavernous section of slot canyon where you may be wading in the river in certain sections. Other popular hikes include the Pa'rus Trail, Canyon Overlook Trail and Angels Landing. Backcountry hikers will be delighted by the abundance of trails. No doubt, rock climbing, hiking and exploring canyons are big pursuits in [Zion National Park](#), but spotting flora and fauna should be on your list as well. There are more than 800 ecosystems and more flowers than anywhere else in [Utah](#). Be on the lookout for a variety of animals such as the peregrine falcon and the Mexican spotted owl. Stay at the Cable Mountain Lodge, the closest accommodations to the park entrance that also happens to offer epic views and a spa. It's ideal for resting up after all that hiking before driving around 3 hours back to Las Vegas for your return flight.

More information

- [Zion National Park](#)

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Trip - 1-2 weeks

National Parks & Beyond: Canyons, Mesas and Hoodoos

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Trip - 2 weeks +

Craft Beer Trail

Trip - 2 weeks +

The Yellowstone Loop: 11 Stops to Make on an Epic Western Road Trip

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