

Utah's *Mighty 5*, two trips, one year.

All five Utah national parks in 2019, split across two long weekends — Zion in April from Las Vegas, then Capitol Reef, Bryce, Canyonlands, and Arches in May from Salt Lake City. Hotels, daily plan, drive times, and what I'd change.

DATES	April + May 2019
TRIPS	2 (Zion, then the southern four)
PARKS	5 — Zion · Capitol Reef · Bryce · Canyonlands · Arches
DAYS	3 + 4 = 7 driving days
BASES	Las Vegas (Zion) · Salt Lake City (May four)

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Zion — three days, *Angel's Landing*.

APRIL 2019 · VEGAS → HURRICANE → SPRINGDALE · ANGEL'S LANDING · NARROWS · KOLOB

Zion is the gateway to Utah's parks but worth its own trip — the shuttle system in the main canyon means you're not driving all day, and Angel's Landing eats half a day on its own. We flew into Vegas, drove up via Hurricane, and used Springdale as the base for the canyon and Kolob.

STAY

Hurricane (Night 1) · Springhill Suites Springdale (Nights 2-3)

Hurricane is the cheaper Zion-adjacent town; Springdale puts you walking-distance to the shuttle.

~\$150/night avg

DAY 01 THURSDAY · ARRIVAL

Vegas → *Hurricane*.

- Late evening flight into LAS, pick up rental
 - Drive Vegas → Hurricane (~2.5 hrs, mostly I-15)
 - Sleep in Hurricane to position for an early Zion start
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DAY 02 FRIDAY · ZION CANYON

Angel's *Landing*, Emerald Pools, Milky Way.

- 6 AM start — Visitor Center, first shuttle of the day
- Angel's Landing — 7:30 AM start, the chains section is no joke (5 hrs round trip)
- Lunch at Zion Lodge restaurant — 12:30 PM
- Emerald Pools — 3 PM (Lower, Middle, Upper if energy holds)
- Weeping Rock — 4 PM (closed in recent years from rockfall, verify before)
- Big Bend Viewpoint, Temple of Sinawava, Riverside Walk — 5 PM
- Canyon Junction Bridge — 8 PM, Milky Way and the classic Watchman shot
- Springhill Suites for the night

Angel's Landing now requires a permit lottery (added April 2022, post-our trip) — book ahead via recreation.gov.

Checkerboard Mesa and *Kolob Canyons*.

- 9 AM start — east side via the Mt. Carmel Highway
- Checkerboard Mesa pullout (east entrance, ~10 AM)
- Canyon Overlook Trail — 1 mile round trip, dramatic east-canyon views
- Drive north to Kolob Canyons via I-15 (separate park section, ~1 hr)
- Kolob Canyons Visitor Center, viewpoint at end of 5-mile scenic drive
- Optional: cottonwood canyon road on the way back
- Evening drive back to Las Vegas via Cedar City

Capitol Reef — half day, *scenic drive*.

MAY 2019 · FRIDAY · OREM → TORREY · 8-MILE SCENIC DRIVE · GIFFORD HOUSE PIE

Capitol Reef is the quietest of Utah's five parks and the easiest to underestimate. The 8-mile scenic drive is the best half-day you can carve out of a four-park sprint — fruit orchards in spring, the Gifford House for cash-only pie and ice cream, slot canyons hiding off side roads. We did it Friday afternoon as the bridge between flying into SLC and the heavier Bryce / Arches days.

STAY

Orem (Thursday) · Torrey (Friday)

Orem after late SLC arrival; Torrey is the closest base to Capitol Reef's western entrance.

~\$110/night avg

DAY 01 THURSDAY · ARRIVAL

SLC → *Orem*.

- Late evening flight into SLC, pick up rental
- Drive ~45 min south to Orem, sleep there to shorten the next day's drive
- Pack food and water for the next day — Capitol Reef has minimal services in the park

DAY 02 FRIDAY · CAPITOL REEF

Orem → *Capitol Reef*, scenic drive, sleep in Torrey.

- 9 AM leave Orem — drive ~3.5 hrs to Capitol Reef (Hwy 24)
- Quick stop: Hickman Bridge trail (2 mi round trip, natural arch)
- Capitol Reef Visitor Center — noon
- Fremont Petroglyphs — quick roadside stop
- Gifford House — pie + ice cream + cash. Closes around 4:30 PM
- Scenic Drive — 8 miles, ~2 hours with stops
- Capitol Gorge Trail head → pioneer register (1 mi each way)
- Sliprock Divide on the way back from Capitol Gorge
- Panorama Point, Goosenecks Overlook, Sunset Point (0.5 mi) for evening light
- Dinner in Torrey, sleep there

Gifford House is cash-only. Hit it before you do the scenic drive — once you're past the visitor center area, options drop to zero.

Bryce — sunrise to *sunset*, the rim.

SATURDAY · TORREY → BRYCE → PANGUITCH · YOVIMPA TO SUNRISE POINT · QUEENS GARDEN + NAVAJO

Bryce is small but dense — the rim drive from Yovimpa Point at the south end back up to Sunrise at the north hits every hoodoo amphitheater the park is famous for, and the Queens Garden + Navajo loop is the single best 3-mile hike in Utah.

STAY

Panguitch (Saturday night)

Cheap motel town ~25 min from Bryce, well-positioned for the next day's Canyonlands push.

~\$90/night

DAY 03 SATURDAY · BRYCE, ALL DAY

Bryce — *sunrise* at Inspiration Point, hoodoo loop.

- 4:45 AM leave Torrey to make Inspiration Point for sunrise (6:12 AM)
- Stop at Bryce Visitor Center on the way in
- Bryce Point and Paria View — early light, first thing
- Sunrise Point (8 AM) — different angle, different light
- Queens Garden + Navajo Loop combined (1.5 mi each, 3 mi total) — best hike in Bryce, ~3 hrs
- Wall Street section is often closed for rockfall — start from Queens Garden if so
- Yovimpa and Rainbow Point — bristlecone loop trail, 1 mi (south end of park)
- Drive the rim back: Black Birch, Ponderosa, Agua Canyon, Natural Bridge, Fairview, Swamp Canyon
- Late afternoon: Kiva Coffee House on the way back from Bryce — closes 4:30 PM
- Optional add-on: Kodachrome Basin SP + Willis Creek slot canyon (south of Bryce, dirt road)
- Cedar Breaks National Monument is a fallback if the road's closed
- Sleep in Panguitch — early start tomorrow

If you only have time for one hike at Bryce, do Queens Garden + Navajo. Sunrise Point is the better-known sunrise spot but Inspiration Point's amphitheater is wider — easier to compose.

Canyonlands — *Island in the Sky*, half day.

SUNDAY · PANGUITCH → CANYONLANDS → MOAB · MESA ARCH · GRAND VIEW · DEAD HORSE POINT

Canyonlands is three districts; Island in the Sky is the one most visitors see. It's a 2,000-foot mesa with viewpoints in every direction. The Needles and the Maze are separate trips. We did Island in the Sky as a half day, then crossed over to Dead Horse Point State Park for sunset before driving into Moab.

STAY

Moab (Sunday + Monday nights)

Base for Canyonlands, Arches, and Dead Horse Point — book ahead, fills up fast in May.

~\$160/night

DAY 04 SUNDAY · CANYONLANDS + DEAD HORSE

Panguitch → *Island in the Sky*, sunset at Dead Horse.

- 7:30 AM leave Panguitch for the long drive to Canyonlands (~5 hrs via I-70)
- Island in the Sky Visitor Center — 11:30 AM
- Mesa Arch — 0.5 mi loop, the iconic Canyonlands shot (better at sunrise)
- Grand View Point — 2 mi out and back, the southernmost viewpoint of the mesa
- Green River Overlook — best afternoon light
- Buck Canyon Overlook, Candlestick Tower
- Upheaval Dome / Crater View Trail (1.5 mi) — odd geologic anomaly
- Shafer Canyon Overlook on the way out
- Dead Horse Point State Park — 4 PM, 30 min drive from CL
- Sunset at Dead Horse Point (the U-shaped Colorado River bend)
- Drive into Moab, dinner — Moab Brewery, Eddie McStiff's, or Zax's Pizza
- Stock up at Village Market for tomorrow

Mesa Arch is technically a sunrise shot — the underside glows orange. We went mid-day; if you can arrange a Canyonlands sunrise, do it instead of an Arches sunrise.

Arches — full day, *Delicate* at sunset.

MONDAY · MOAB BASE · DEVIL'S GARDEN · WINDOWS · DELICATE ARCH SUNSET · NIGHT SKY

Arches packs more than 2,000 named arches into 119 square miles. The hits — Delicate, Landscape, the Windows — are all reachable in a single full day if you start early and time Delicate for sunset. Bring water; the park has fillers only at the visitor center and Devil's Garden trailhead.

STAY

Moab (Monday night, second of two)

Same Moab base as Canyonlands night — easy access to Arches' main entrance just north of town.

~\$160/night

DAY 05 MONDAY · ARCHES, FULL DAY

Devil's Garden, the *Windows*, Delicate at sunset.

- 8:30 AM start — Arches Visitor Center, fill water before going up
- Devil's Garden trail — fill water at trailhead, 1.7 mi to Landscape Arch (2-3 hrs RT)
- Pine Tree Arch, Tunnel Arch on the way to Landscape (300+ ft span, longest in park)
- Optional extension: Partition, Navajo, Double O Arch (6.5 mi total)
- Skyline Arch — 0.4 mi, easy roadside
- Sand Dune Arch — 0.5 mi, kid-friendly, narrow slot
- Broken Arch + Sand Dune Arch combined trail — 2 mi flat loop
- The Windows section — North & South Windows, Turret, Double Arch (1 mi total, easy)
- Balanced Rock — 0.3 mi loop
- Garden of Eden, Park Avenue Viewpoint, Courthouse Towers Viewpoint
- Fiery Furnace Overlook (the maze itself requires a permit or ranger tour)
- Delicate Arch — 3 mi strenuous, 500 ft elevation, narrow cliffs near top, sunset shot
- Stay for Milky Way — North Window framing the galactic core is the night-sky shot
- Late dinner at Moab Brewery or Eddie McStiff's

Delicate Arch is the most photographed feature in Utah and crowded at sunset. Start the hike up no later than 90 minutes before sunset; the bowl below the arch fills with photographers.

Moab → SLC, fly home.

- Breakfast at Jailhouse Cafe or Moab Diner
- Sweet Cravings Bakery for road sandwiches if needed
- Drive Moab → SLC (~4 hrs via I-70 + I-15)
- Optional: Antelope Island State Park if you have time before the flight
- Return rental, fly home from SLC

Drive times & *essentials*.

Utah's parks are far apart but well-connected by good highways. The May trip is essentially a counter-clockwise loop from SLC: south to Capitol Reef, west to Bryce, east to Canyonlands/Arches, then north back. Distances are deceptive — the Bryce → Canyonlands stretch is the longest single drive day.

LEG	DISTANCE	DRIVE TIME	NOTES
SLC → Orem	40 mi	45 min	I-15, easy first-night positioning
Orem → Capitol Reef	200 mi	3.5 hrs	US-89 + Hwy 24
Capitol Reef → Bryce	120 mi	2.5 hrs	Scenic Byway 12 — drive itself is a highlight
Bryce → Canyonlands ISKY	320 mi	5 hrs	Longest single drive — start early
Canyonlands → Arches	30 mi	40 min	Both off Hwy 191, Moab is the bridge
Moab → SLC	235 mi	4 hrs	I-70 west, then I-15 north
LAS → Hurricane (Zion)	120 mi	2.5 hrs	I-15 — the Zion-trip starting leg
Hurricane → Springdale	25 mi	30 min	Hwy 9 — into the south Zion gateway

Pack *list*.

ITEM	WHY
NPS America the Beautiful pass	\$80, pays back at park 3
Hiking shoes	Slick rock + sand mix
Water bottles + fillers	Park taps are scarce
Layers (20–80°F swing)	Desert nights drop hard
Sunscreen + hat + sunglasses	Sun is brutal at altitude
Cash for Gifford House	Card not accepted
Tripod + camera	Milky Way at Arches

ITEM	WHY
Offline maps downloaded	No cell in most parks
Bug spray	Streamside in May
Rain jacket / poncho	Walgreens-grade is fine

What I'd *change*.

Honest notes from 2019 — what worked, what I'd reroute, what I'd give more time. The May trip was tight; the April Zion run was about right.

PACING

Capitol Reef deserves a full day.

We treated it as a half-day pass-through to position for Bryce. The scenic drive is fine in 2 hours but the slot canyons off Notom-Bullfrog Road and Cathedral Valley demand more time and ideally a high-clearance vehicle. If I redid it, I'd add a full day in Torrey.

BEST OF TRIP

Mesa Arch at sunrise is the single shot.

We hit it mid-day. The sunrise glow under the arch — the underside lighting up orange before the sun clears the rim — is the iconic Canyonlands moment. Worth a 5 AM Moab departure on a separate day.

SKIP

Bryce → Canyonlands in one day is too much.

Five hours of driving plus a half-day in Canyonlands plus sunset at Dead Horse plus the Moab arrival was 14+ hours awake. A night somewhere near Hanksville or Capitol Reef would have broken it cleanly.

ADD

Scenic Byway 12 is its own attraction.

Capitol Reef → Bryce via Hwy 12 (through Boulder, Escalante, Grand Staircase) is one of the great American drives. We didn't budget time to stop. Next time: a half-day on the byway with stops at Calf Creek Falls and the Hogback.

LOCK IN EARLY

Angel's Landing now requires a permit.

Added April 2022, after our trip. If you're going post-2022, enter the seasonal lottery on recreation.gov 2 months before, or the day-before lottery if you missed the seasonal. The chains hike is the trip without it.

STAY

Moab is the best Utah base.

You can sleep there for both Canyonlands and Arches — and the food/coffee scene is genuinely good. Panguitch is fine for one night but feels like a motel town. Springdale (Zion) is the second-best base.