

Rugged, remote, otherworldly Utah

Photography and text by Lena Stevens for CNN

Sure, you can go on a week's safari in Africa or spend seven days cycling in New Zealand, but one of the world's most spectacular spots is closer than you think.

Frequently and unfairly overlooked, Utah is a "state of mind ... sculpted by wind, water and time," its tourism slogans tout.

That apt description only hints at the natural force and geological artistry shaping southern Utah's jaw-dropping national park landscapes.

100 national park travel ideas

Last year, the area's five national park headliners -- Zion, Bryce Canyon, Capitol Reef, Canyonlands and Arches -- collectively drew about 7 million visitors from around the world.

From ancient petroglyphs and shooting stars to hiking, kayaking, biking, backpacking, mule riding and river rafting, there's no lack of intriguing pursuits in southern Utah.



Zion National Park – Zion National Park is often the first stop for visitors on the Grand Circle tour of national parks in Utah and Arizona. The National Park Service offers a shuttle service within the park, so you don't have to worry about finding parking at trailheads or viewing locations.



Walter's Wiggles – The strenuous hike to Angels Landing is about a five-mile round trip from the Grotto parking lot shuttle stop. During your ascent to Angels Landing along the West Rim Trail, you'll encounter several steep switchbacks known as Walter's Wiggles.



Angels Landing ascent – The West Rim Trail leads into the comforting shade of Refrigerator Canyon and continues past Scout Lookout, veering to the right toward Angels Landing. Then you'll scramble over several camel humps until you reach the top of Angels Landing, where breathtaking views of Zion Canyon await



The Subway – Another strenuous hike takes adventurers through The Subway (a narrow canyon carved by the waters of the Left Fork of North Creek). The nine-mile round trip from the bottom up doesn't involve the rappelling skills required to go from the top down. Permits are required in either direction.



Bryce Canyon National Park – About 90 minutes from Zion National Park is Bryce Canyon National Park. You'll need at least two and a half hours to drive through the park to visit Bryce Amphitheater viewpoints and at least another couple of hours to hike in the canyon.



Calf Creek Falls – While not in a national park, Calf Creek Falls are about 16 miles east of Escalante, Utah, and about an hour south of Capitol Reef National Park. The six-mile Lower Calf Creek Falls hike is about a three-hour round trip if you spend some time at the waterfall and walk at a comfortable pace.



Mesa Arch – Located in Canyonlands National Park, Mesa Arch is an iconic sunrise photography spot. It might be crowded, but it's an unmissable sight. It's best to get there an hour before sunrise for viewing and at least another 90 minutes earlier if you want a good spot for photos.



Shafer Trail – After your sunrise visit to Mesa Arch, the Shafer Trail is a marvelous morning hike in the Island in the Sky section of Canyonlands. It leads to the fork between Potash Road and White Rim Road. Not up for a hike? Shafer, Potash and White Rim are all four-wheel drive roads.



Flightseeing – For a bird's-eye view, flightseeing tours over Canyonlands and Arches afford magical views of Island in the Sky, Fisher Towers and Devil's Garden, all stunning landscapes in the parks.



Corona Arch – Corona Arch, just outside of Canyonlands National Park on Potash Road, features a 140- by 105-foot opening.



Delicate Arch – Delicate Arch is a symbol of Utah. It's on posters, signs, logos and the state license plate. You'll understand why on the steep three-mile round trip hike in Arches National Park. Starting the hike 90 minutes before sunset delivers views of the arch at its absolute best.



Windows – The Windows area of Arches National Park features several arches within easy reach of one another. Going in the early morning or right around dusk cuts down on crowds. The one-mile round trip Windows Trail includes the North and South Windows and Turret Arch.

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Photos: Southern Utah's natural wonders

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