



Utah's National Parks and Lake Powell, June 2021

Description

In June of 2021 we loaded up my truck and drove off to Utah for some adventure in the parks and on the water. Our goal was to visit the remaining four of Utah's national parks after visiting [Arches](#) the year before and to go boating on Lake Powell.

While I had been to Bryce Canyon and Zion a couple times (and Shelley once in the winter), for the kids this would be an entirely new experience. And none of us had been to Lake Powell.

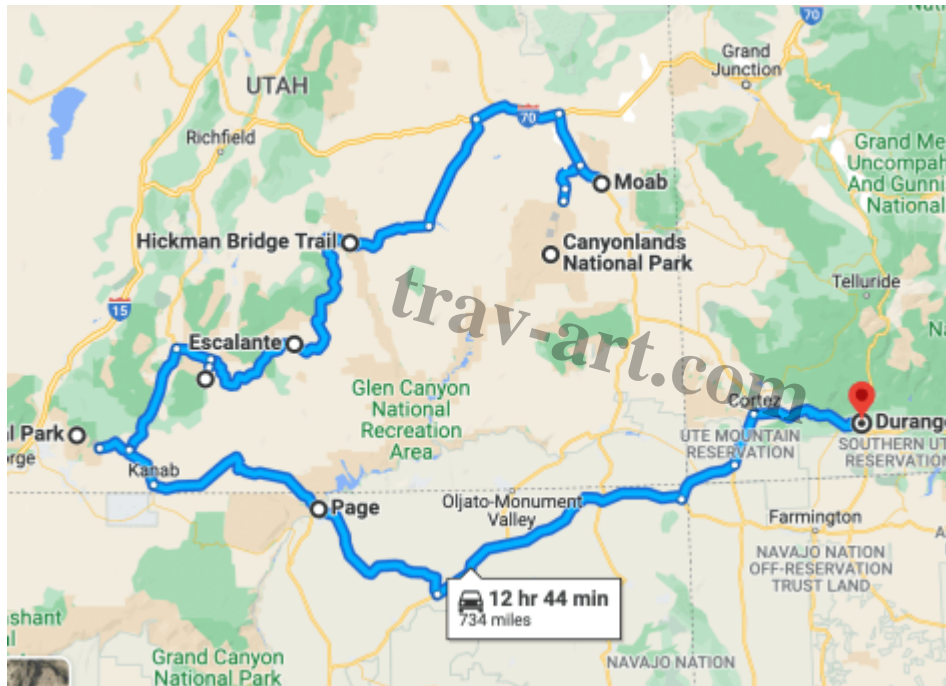
A heat wave across much of the west at the time meant we would be experiencing 110+ F degree days throughout the trip. And in the year following COVID, with international travel still largely shut down, we expected big crowds and prices in the places we were going. Still we had a great time and never let anything slow us down.

Highlights: Canyonlands, Capitol Reef, Bryce Canyon, and Zion National Parks, Lake Powell, Highway 12, Bryce Canyon Mule Rides, Mahogany Inn Restaurant in Durango

LowLights: Antelope Point Marina

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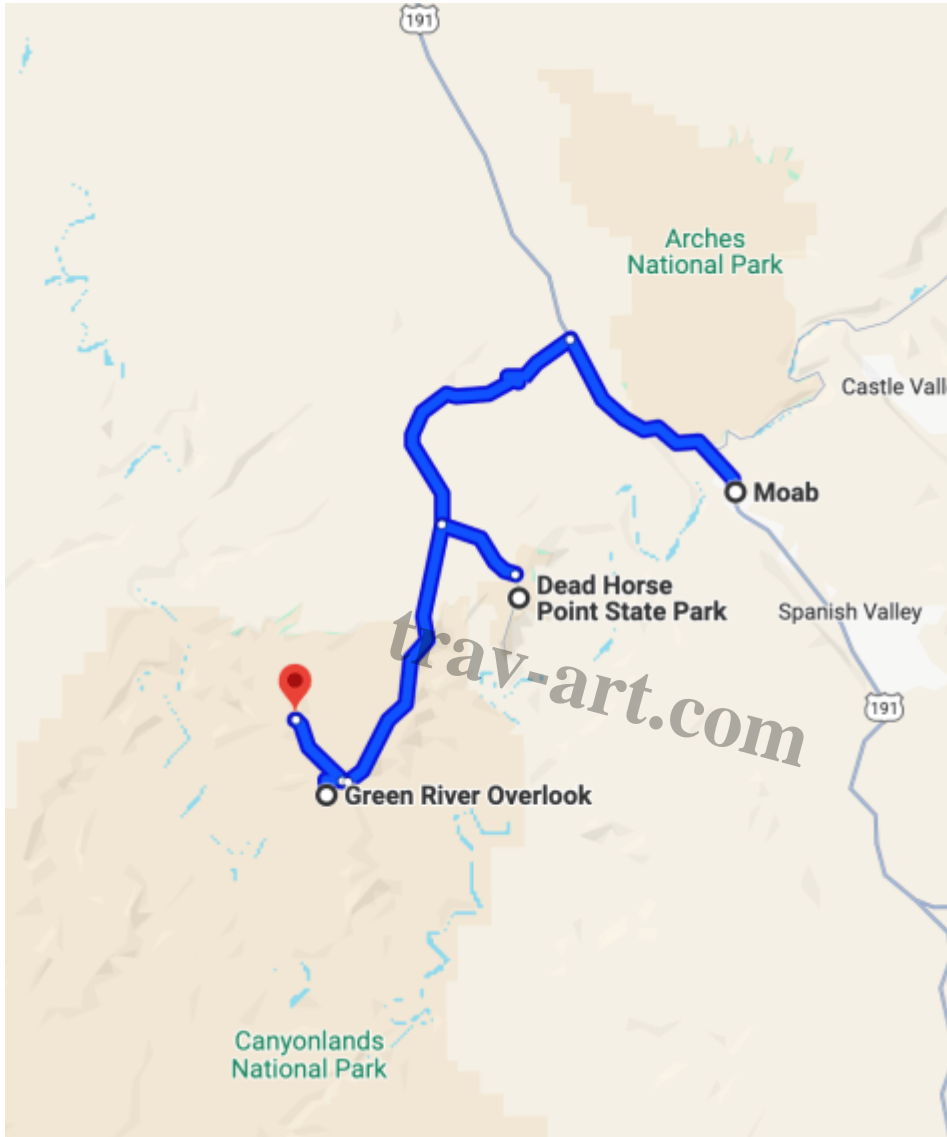
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Day 1: Moab, Dead Horse Point SP, and Canyonlands National Park

We left our home in Colorado and drove the four hundred miles to Moab in the usual eight hours on the I-70. It's a drive we had done the prior year and we had traveled that route many times en route to California. Still, this was the first time we had planned for activities the same day after arriving.

We had lunch on the way and our intention was to have dinner in Moab that evening. But first we were going to visit Moab's world-renowned canyon country at Dead Horse Point State Park and Canyonlands National Park.



Dead Horse Point State Park









Dead Horse Point State Park was a park I visited way back in 1996 and a place I wanted to take my family before venturing into Canyonlands National Park. The last time I was there I was with my older brother and both of us were in our twenties on a roadtrip into the southwest.

Now in my forties and with the family in tow, I was back. We first stopped at a pullout a few miles from the visitor center where the majestic canyon was visible. I quickly realized this awesome viewpoint

came with no fences and a sheer drop-off of a couple thousand feet.

After nervously enjoying the jaw-dropping views while my kids got too close to the canyon edge for comfort, we returned to the truck and drove onward to the visitor center. Here, not only did we find more viewpoints to enjoy, but a fence protected young and old from the precipice below.

We stopped by the gift shop and bought some much-needed souvenirs (like a Dead Horse Point water bottle with GPS coordinates) and the twenty-something kid working the cash register asked if we were in Utah to "Do the Five". "Yes we are", I replied.

We weren't visiting Arches on this trip, but we had the year before. By the end of the trip we'd have visited all five of the Utah national parks. Thus, we'd complete the enviable "Utah Five".

Canyonlands National Park

After Dead Horse Point we drove south into Canyonlands National Park. This is a large, sprawling and somewhat complex park to visit with two primary areas of visitation: Island In the Sky which is entered from the north and the Needles District which is accessible from the Southeast.

The two areas are separated by the canyons carved by the Green and Colorado Rivers and you cannot drive from one to the other.

We decided to visit Dead Horse State Park before entering Canyonlands and in retrospect I would have chosen to go into Canyonlands first and save DHSP for either the next morning or another trip. Canyonlands is huge and there are dozens of viewpoints and trails to cover. Since we only had time for the Island in the Sky area we pretty much knew we were relegated to a couple viewpoints and a short trail.

















In terms of sheer magnitude, Canyonlands is really only surpassed by the Grand Canyon. The canyon views extend for hundreds of miles in every direction. We made our first stop at the Green River Overlook and spent about 45 minutes taking in the views and watching lizards scurry on the sandy terrain nearby. We also did our best to ignore the sweltering heat. 112F is really, really hot.

After visiting the Green River Overlook we drove west toward the Whale Rock trail. I had read about this trail and felt it would be a good family hike. Well, under normal conditions. My wife and youngest son opted out which I felt was also advisable because we didn't want anyone passing out. My teenager, Daniel, however was eager for the challenge of Whale Rock.





Daniel and I made our way to the top of the Whale formation and took in the views. I really wished we could see the confluence of the two rivers, because I knew this would be our last stop in Canyonlands. The family was simply too tired, too hot, and too hundry to drive further south to the Island in the Sky.

Reluctantly it was agreed that we would now head back to Moab for some cold drinks and indoor air conditioning.

Moab

We had actually gone to Moab Brewery a few years before in the low season of November when the temperatures outside were below freezing. We had enjoyed our visit then and expected to have a similar experience this time.

Unfortunately, high tourist season tends to change things. The restaurant was crowded, the service was slow, and the food lackluster too. The beer was refreshing, however. Don't worry, we'll go back again in the lower season.

After our meh visit to Moab brewery, we drove onward to our hotel. The summer of 2021 happened to be at a time when domestic travel was at an all-time high and the parks of Utah were particularly busy. Therefore lodging prices were double and triple what they might have been in other years.

Our hotel for the night was **The Aarchway Inn**. The price was \$250 for one night in a nice, clean, standard hotel with comfortable rooms and a nice pool. It was one of the better options, however and prices at other places were much higher.

My rule of thumb is to stay close to where you want to be and the Aarchway Inn provided that opportunity for us in Moab.

Day 2: Moab, Capitol Reef, and Bryce Canyon

Dinosaur Footprints and Anasazi Petroglyphs

I'm always the first one up in my family and since the others were tired from the night before I decided to take a quick drive out to Corona Arch. The only problem was I took the wrong turn amid the confusing signage and ended up at the "Poison Spider Trail".

This mistake, however, turned out to be unexpectedly great.

I got there just as a tour group was being led by a local guide to see both dinosaur footprints and Anasazi petroglyphs on the edge of a steep rock wall trail.

They let me join their group and it helped to have them point out the locations of the footprints and petroglyphs. I likely wouldn't have noticed them otherwise.



PROWLING PREDATORS

Tracks of theropod dinosaurs are relatively common in the Early Jurassic rocks of the Navajo Sandstone and occur in several places around the Moab area. The tracks from this site represent up to 10 different individual animals. The rocks containing the tracks fell from the cliffs above, splitting along the bedding plane where they were preserved. Both the original tracks and the layer that filled them are present on the slabs.

From these larger tracks, called *Eubrontes*, we can tell that the animal was just over 5.0 feet tall at the hip. There are several small tracks preserved on these two slabs as well, which are named *Grallator*. Some of the animals leaving them behind would have been as small as a modern-day turkey, just 1.5 feet tall at the hip. We can tell that these small animals were moving at a speed of ~3 miles per hour. How many tracks can you find?

Name of Tracks: *Eubrontes* and *Grallator*
Early Jurassic (~190 million years ago)
Navajo Sandstone

Eubrontes

Grallator



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After thanking the friendly group, I proceeded on alone upward and onward, still believing that the Corona Arch might be somewhere further on ahead. The higher I went, the better the views of Moab's canyon country became, but alas Corona Arch remained elusive.

After traversing the trails a bit I decided I better get back to the rest of the family before they became concerned or annoyed or both by my prolonged morning absence. On the drive out I saw the real turnout for Corona Arch and a full parking lot at the site. Doh! Anyway, we needed to eat breakfast and get ready to tube on the Colorado River.

Colorado River Tubing

We had actually done this the [year before](#) and so enjoyed it as a great way to relax and cool off in the scorching heat that we decided to do it again this year. **Canyonlands By Night and Day** rents tubes

and will drive you up to a spot upriver to allow you to slowly, gently float your way back to their riverside dock. We rented an extra tube to hold a cooler of drinks and snack for the journey. We highly recommend bringing umbrellas for shade along the way.

The float takes about an hour and a half, and we were careful as before not to miss the white dock that juts into the river at the tubing rental location. This time, fortunately, we also had a much easier time exiting the tubes and didn't make the mistake of stepping off into the water (the muddy bottom of the river will suction your feet, and the extreme temperature differential can cause horrible muscle cramps).







Moab

After our float we were ready for lunch before driving onward to our next destination: Capitol Reef. **The Spoke** had good reviews on TripAdvisor so we decided to give it a shot since it wasnâ??t crowded at noon.

There was a line to be seated, which didnâ??t bother us since it wasnâ??t terribly long. What did bother us was the people in that line.

Sometimes restaurants can't help the people that patronize them and honestly the people that were in line immediately behind us were truly obnoxious people. I accidentally stepped on a woman's foot when I was moving aside for a staff member to pass through a side doorway, and the woman made a theatrical wail far in excess of anything she could have felt.

My wife quickly apologized before even I could, and then they began to verbally accost her until I made sure they knew we were not going to be bullied and treated like inferior people. I assume they thought they were of a higher socioeconomic class. But they were nothing but embarrassments to themselves.

Truthfully, in a tourist town like Moab there are always people visiting not because they enjoy the outdoors, but to make Instagram-like appearances of enjoying the outdoors. They are really just pathetic people who need to feel important, but fail to actually accomplish it.

Luckily, once we were seated and eating, things were better and we enjoyed ourselves more. But sadly this restaurant is one place where the crowd alone can be a turnoff.

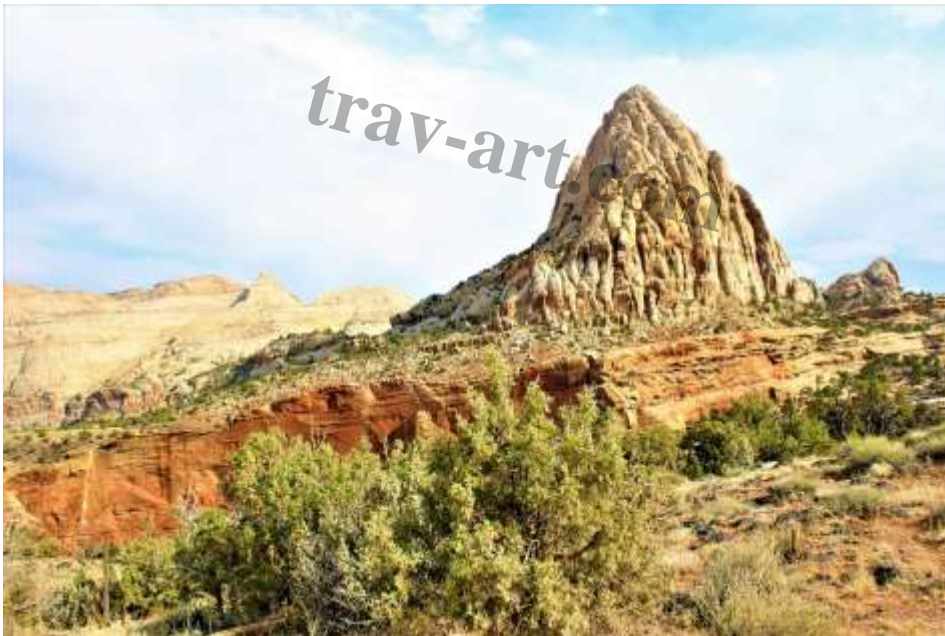
After our lunch and a little souvenir shopping in town, it was time to get onward to Capitol Reef. Time was of the essence because I wanted to get a hike in before we continued on from there to Bryce Canyon. Yes. All this in one day.

I admit the drive from Moab to the entrance to Capitol Reef left me a bit disappointed. The landscape between Moab and the eastern entrance of Capitol Reef is just not very scenic. Along the way you really begin to question whether or not you will be disappointed with the park itself. But don't worry, once you enter Capitol Reef National Park it's a whole different story.

Capitol Reef

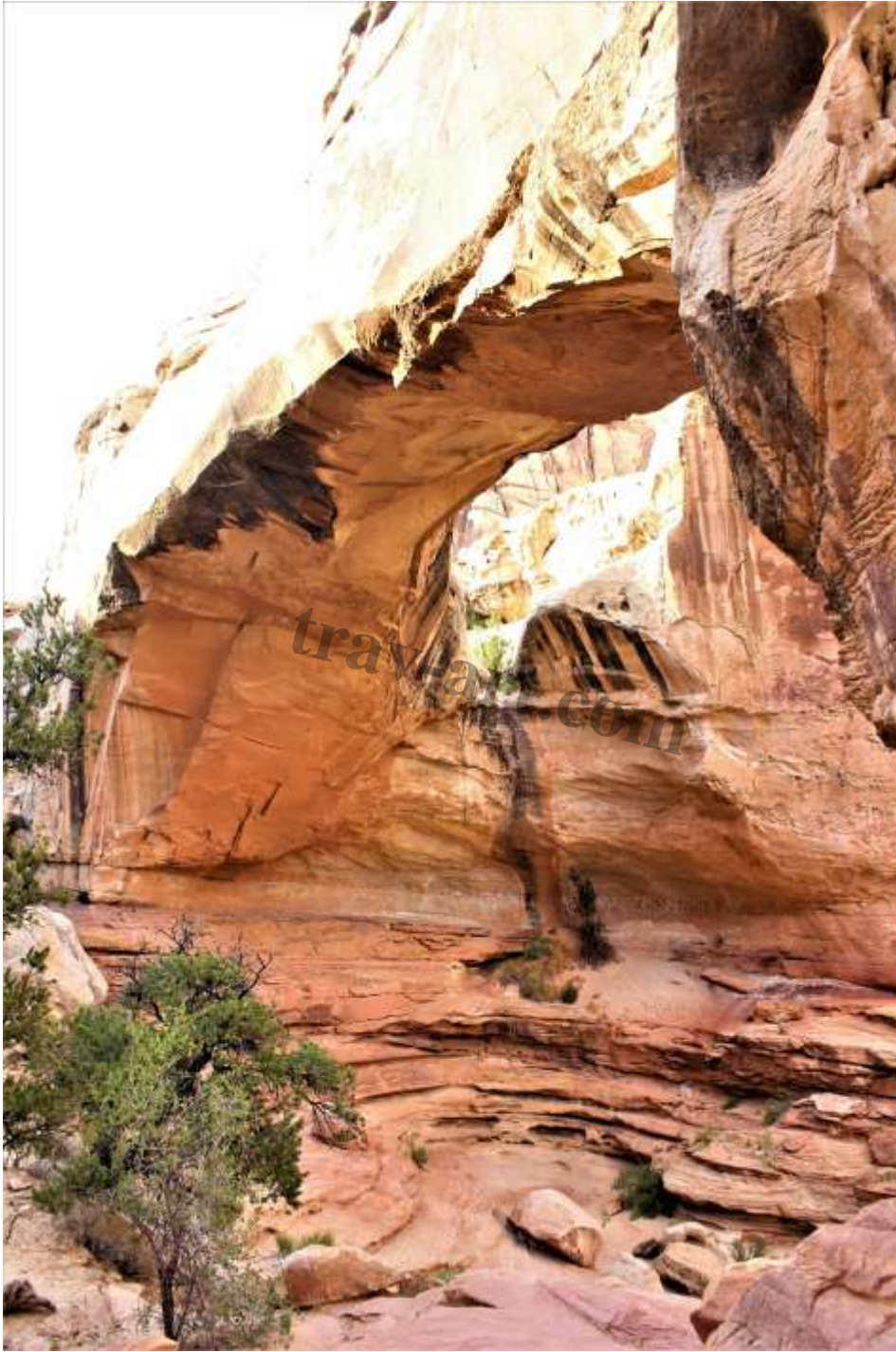
I had decided in advance that the **Hickman Bridge** trail would be a perfect 1 mile journey for the family. Unfortunately a few things were true.

It was still over a 100 F despite a slightly higher elevation at Capitol Reef, and Shelley and 8-year old Evan were now getting genuinely exhausted (and my wife was still feeling somewhat upset by her experience at the restaurant). They both hiked a little way on the trail before turning back to the AC in the car.



















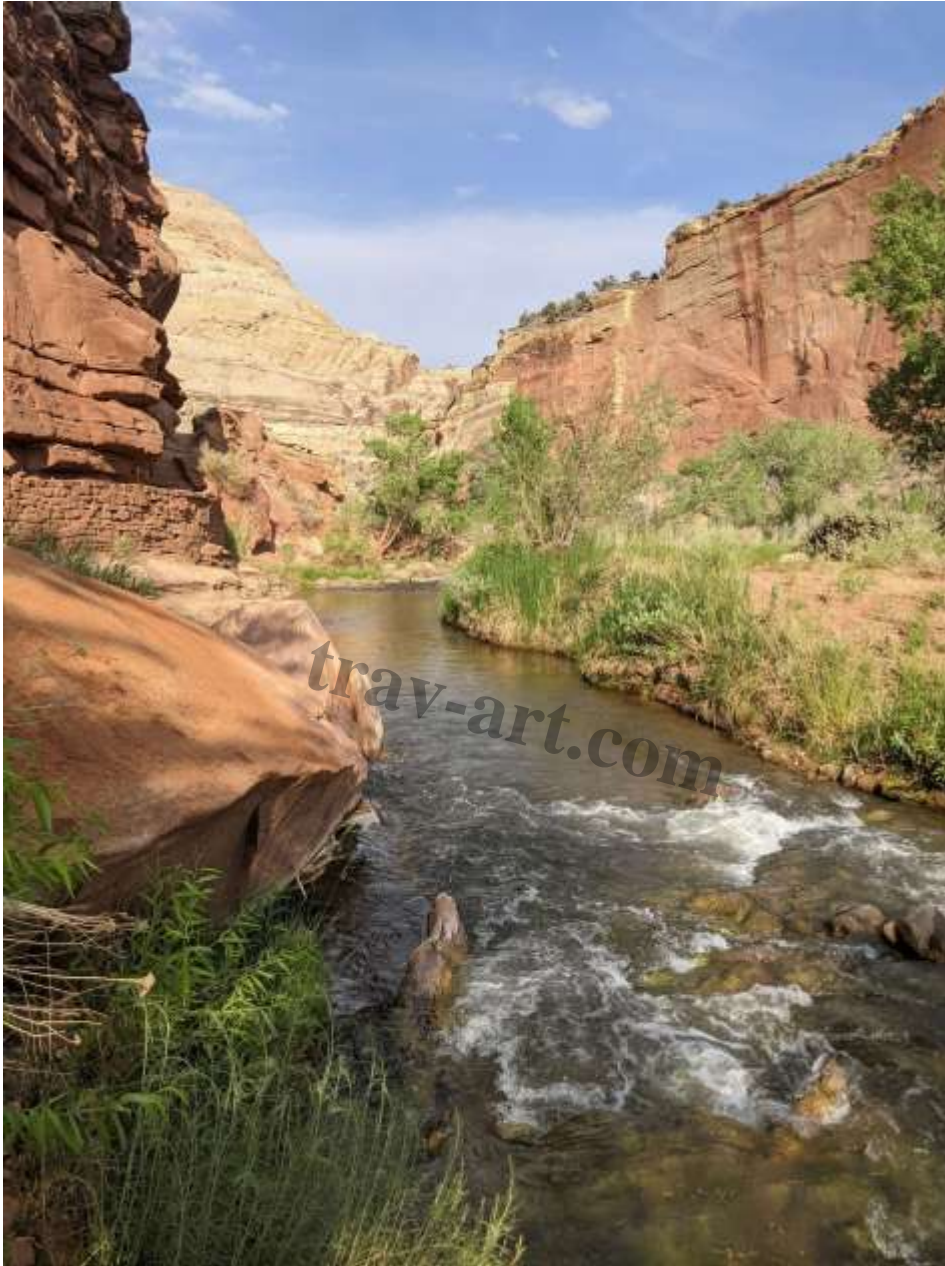














Fortunately they were willing to let Daniel and I make the hike to the bridge and it was every bit worth it. Hickman Bridge is a very impressive natural bridge and it is far from the only natural feature on the trail. The surrounding buttes are all colorful and photogenetic, as was a ground squirrel that hung out at an overlook.

Capitol Reef may have more variety in the color of its rock formations than anywhere I have ever been: yellows, pinks, black, reds.

After finishing the hike and enjoying a quick drink in the car, along with the air conditioner, we started off for our final destination for the day: Bryce Canyon.

Highway 12

If you let Google Maps decide how you will drive from Capitol Reef to Bryce Canyon youâ??ll probably not end up on what I think is one of the most scenic drives in the country. You must, and I repeat **MUST**, take Highway 12 to Bryce Canyon. This is one of the top five most scenic drives in the country.

Highway 12 travels through Escalante-Grand Staircase NM and the views are jaw-dropping. If you take this route, donâ??t be in a hurry. Pull off at the overlooks and take photos.

Unfortunately by now the family was hungry and very tired. They just werenâ??t in a good state of mind to stop at the overlooks and the desire to find dinner along the way (if we could) was top of mind. Additionally, the skies were darkening so I have no pictures from the drive. Youâ??ll need to see it for yourself.

Day 3: Bryce Canyon

If you want to stay near the park and canâ??t stay in the park than you canâ??t get any closer than **Rubyâ??s Inn** which is about 2 miles from the north entrance to Bryce Canyon. Outside of a Rubyâ??s property there is really nowhere else nearby.

Through a historic quirk of history, Rubyâ??s seems to own every acre of property on the north end of Bryce Canyon. They therefore have two Best Western lodges, restaurants, souvenir shops, etc.

The rooms are pretty basic but clean and you get the breakfast buffet with your stay which is better than the typical free breakfast hotels offer. We paid \$360 for 2 nights which wasnâ??t bad considering it was in 2021 (the year of inflated lodging prices) and itâ??s right outside of the park.

Bryce Canyon

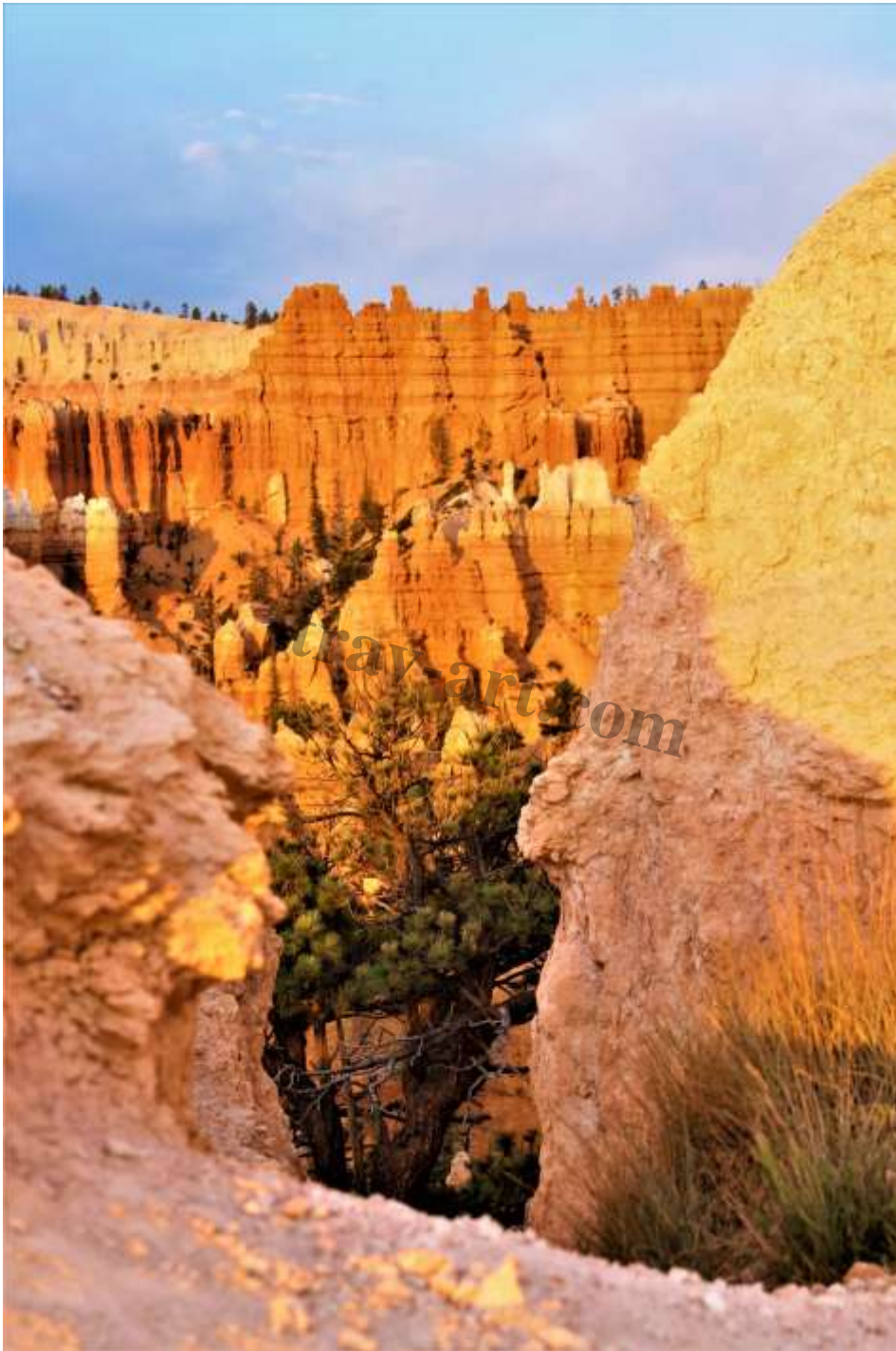
I woke up early to catch the sunrise over the canyon while the rest of the family got some much needed rest. I went to the aptly named â??Sunriseâ?? viewpoint and decided to descend a ways to get a more interesting view than the crowded rim area.







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After getting my photographs I returned to have breakfast with the family and then we drove in together to do some hiking and to see more of the canyon before lunch.

Temperatures at Bryce were a much more comfortable 80s F which was a bit of a relief. We drove all the way to the southern-most end at Rainbow Point, and then we planned to work our way back after hiking there. Unfortunately we found that much of the trail there was through a recent burn area which was a bit disappointing.

We stopped at the cool natural bridge and proceeded back to Ruby's for lunch (because there really was no other option). The Bryce Canyon Lodge dining room was closed because of Covid.









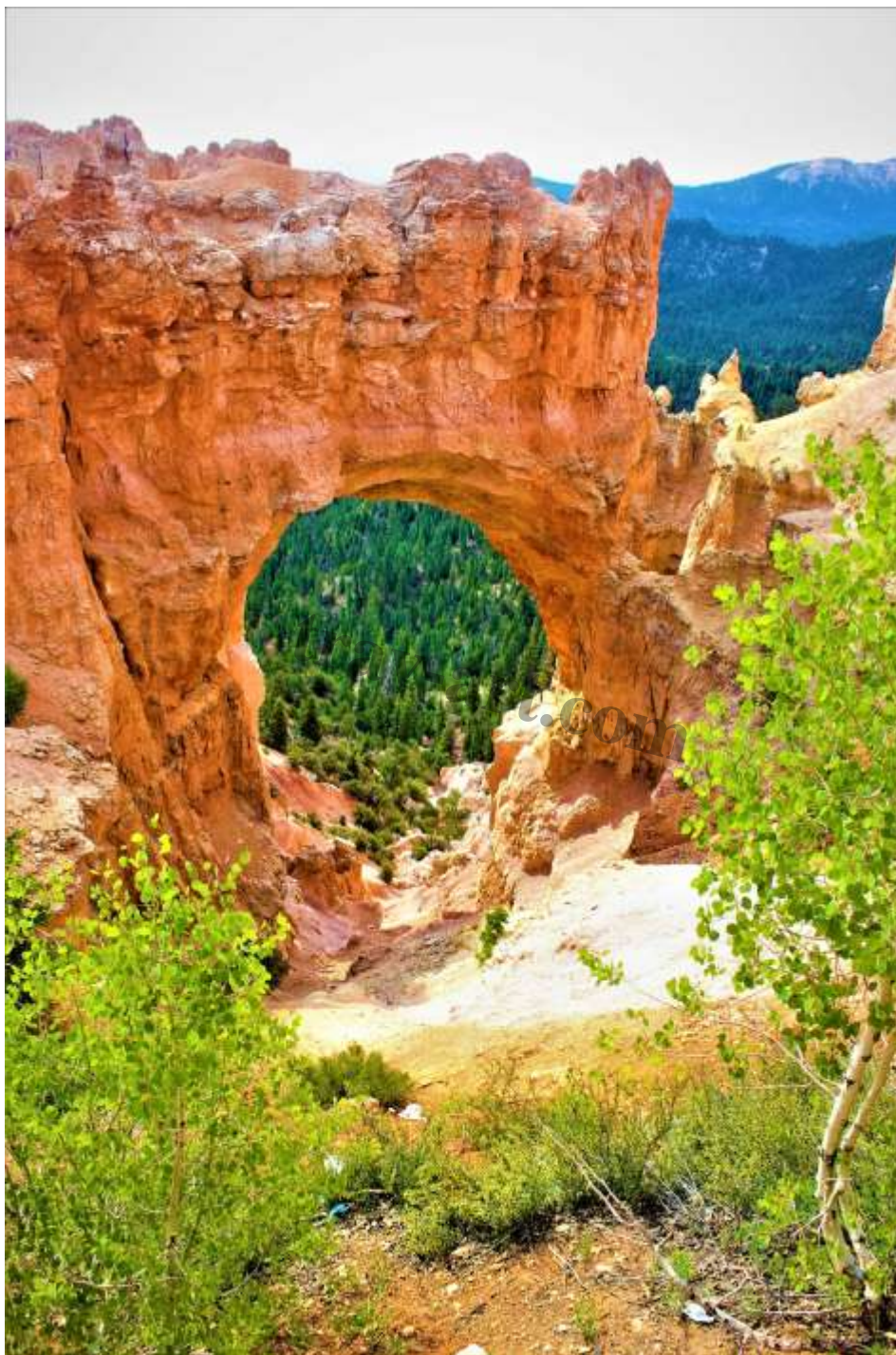


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Canyon Mule Rides

After lunch we had a scheduled mule ride at the stables inside the park.

The mule ride was two hours long and my kids thoroughly enjoyed it. I highly recommend this for anyone with kids, especially. The ride descends to the bottom of the canyon and the trail guides are pretty funny too. My 8-year-old liked it so much he asked if we could come back for his birthday. Unfortunately his birthday is in the winter when Bryce Canyon is full of snow











Day 4: Zion National Park

The next morning we started off for Zion National Park. The drive between Bryce Canyon is also very scenic, particularly the stretch through the eastern section of Zion National Park and the tunnels.

Years from now I'm not sure people will remember how insane 2021 was for domestic travel in the US, but nowhere could have exemplified it more than Zion National Park.

After we arrived at the eastern entrance to the park and made our way through the tunnels we were met by lines of traffic, parked cars on every stretch of open land on the roadside, and just tons and tons of people making their ways to even the less popular trailheads.

Our original plan was to stop in the park, take the tram into the canyon and hike until sometime in the afternoon. We saw the lines for the tram and knew that it was pretty much hopeless. Zion was so full of people that it was essentially inaccessible.

We left the park and decided to eat and check into our hotel and figure things out for the following morning.

Our hotel for the night was the \$400/night **Hampton Inn**. No, the Hampton Inn is not a 5-star luxury hotel. It's a very nice, clean, and satisfactory hotel with a nice pool that just so happened to be in Springdale, Utah. Right outside the park with eateries, shops, and public transportation into the park. We were paying for that accessibility.

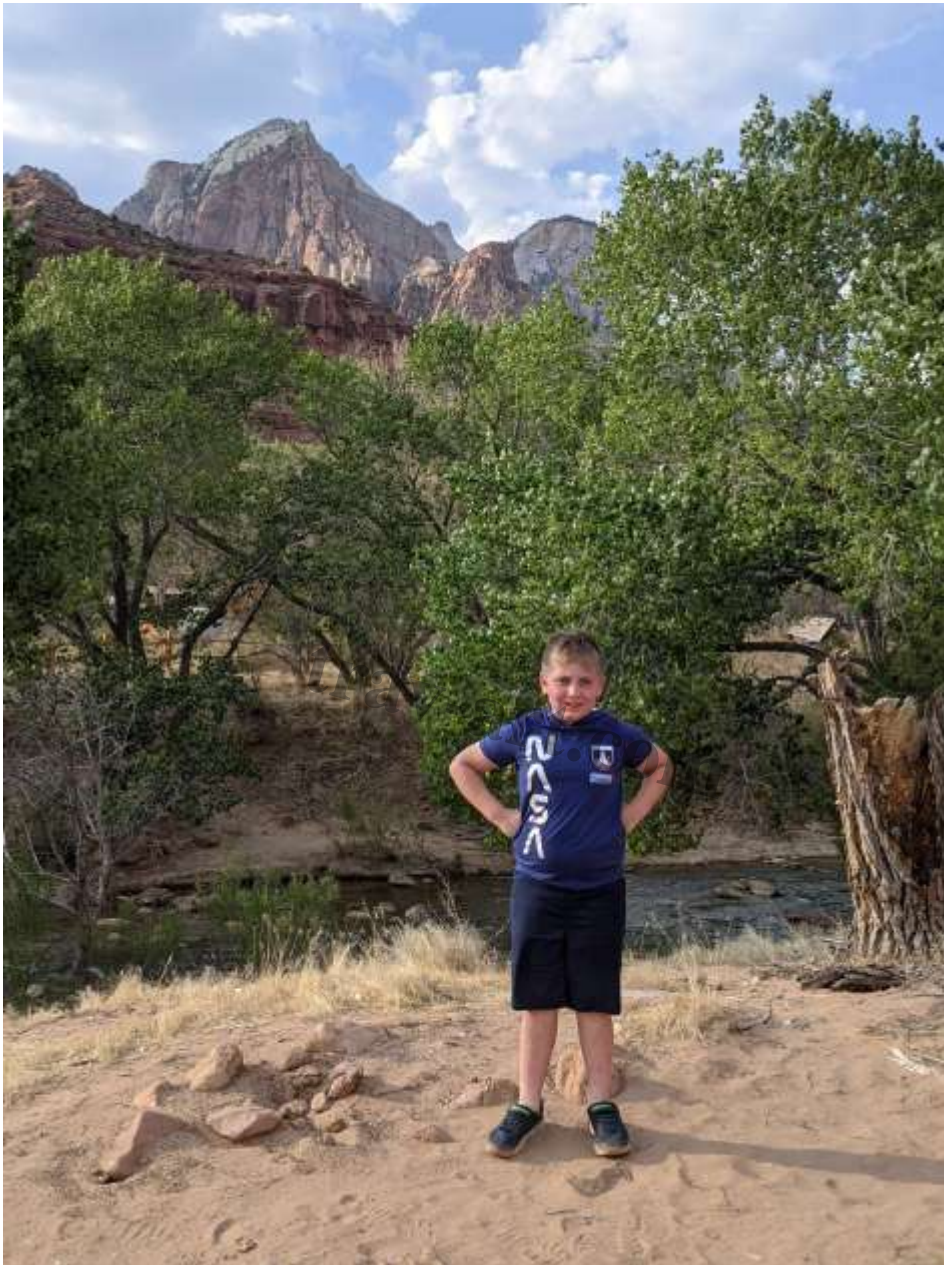
We decided to take some time to enjoy the pool and the surrounding Zion-like scenery surrounding Springdale. It was a refreshing swim.

Following our swim, we were ready to have dinner and call it an early night. We were really having bad luck with our restaurant choices during the trip. Would tonight change our luck?

Yes! We finally we had a good dinner in a cool place called The **Bit & Spur Restaurant**. Originally we had reservations for outdoor seating but since it was 110F in Springdale we chose the indoor AC. We had excellent food, delicious cocktails, and enjoyed the unique atmosphere of the restaurant. The bill was hefty, but at this point, we were pretty happy just to have a nice dinner.

After dinner we decided to take a chance to reenter the park while the rest of the crowds were thinning out. Evan and I found a short trail near the visitor center that followed the Virgin River a short distance. Since he wouldn't be accompanying me the next morning on the **Angel's Landing** hike, I was happy to take this jaunt with him. As you can see we paid special attention to the ants (Evan loves ants).













Before we left home we read warnings about high concentrations of toxic cyanobacteria in the Virgin River, and there were warning signs posted telling visitors not to enter the water (which sadly meant no visiting the Narrows).

The high concentrations were partly a result of the high temperatures and lower water levels. Flooding rains tend to scour the cyanobacteria (which is a type of algae) from the river.

Despite these warnings, we watched in alarm as uninformed or dismissive visitors played and splashed in the river water. I told my 8-year-old it was unsafe and he felt obligated to tell the people he saw in the river the same. They just smiled and nodded.

Following a visit to the souvenir shop at the visitor center, we returned to the hotel to get in a good night's rest. Tomorrow was a big day. Especially for Daniel and I.

Day 5: Zion & Page, AZ

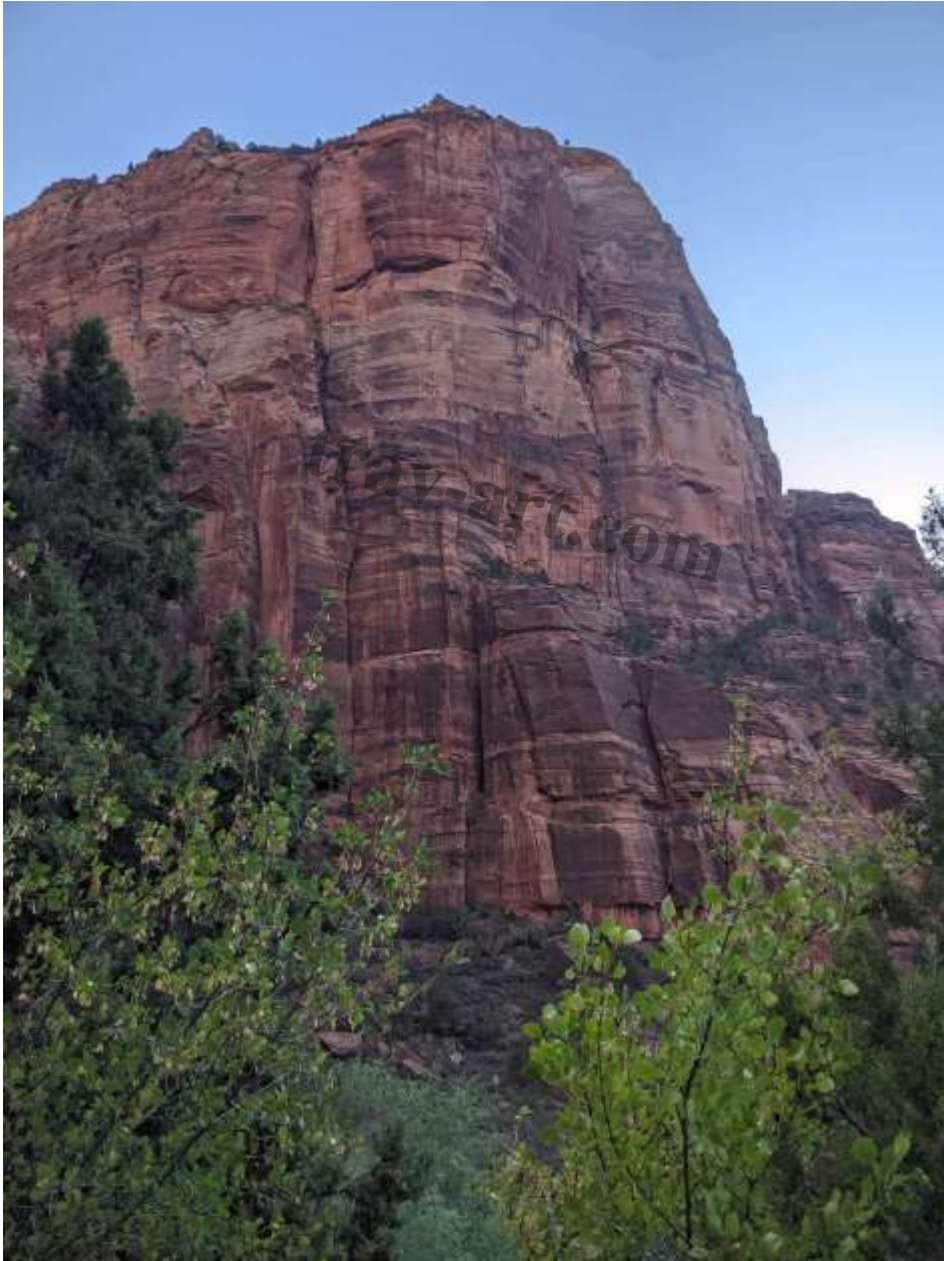
We didn't come all this way to be kept out of Zion by the crowds. And nothing was going to stop Daniel and I from doing the **Angel's Landing** hike. Shelley and Evan stayed back in the hotel, eschewing the early morning hike for some rest and relaxation.

We woke up at 5 AM and drove into the park to try to be among the first tram riders of the day. To enter Zion Canyon, it was necessary to ride the tram, since it was closed to vehicle traffic. When we arrived at the tram parking just before 6 AM, the lot was already mostly filled. Well, at least we found a spot to park.

We found our way to the back of the line for the tram. The line snaked all over the place and there were probably one thousand waiting in line by the time we arrived. Just to avoid risking getting out of

line we took turns going to the bathroom. To lose your place in line would mean losing out on the hike altogether.

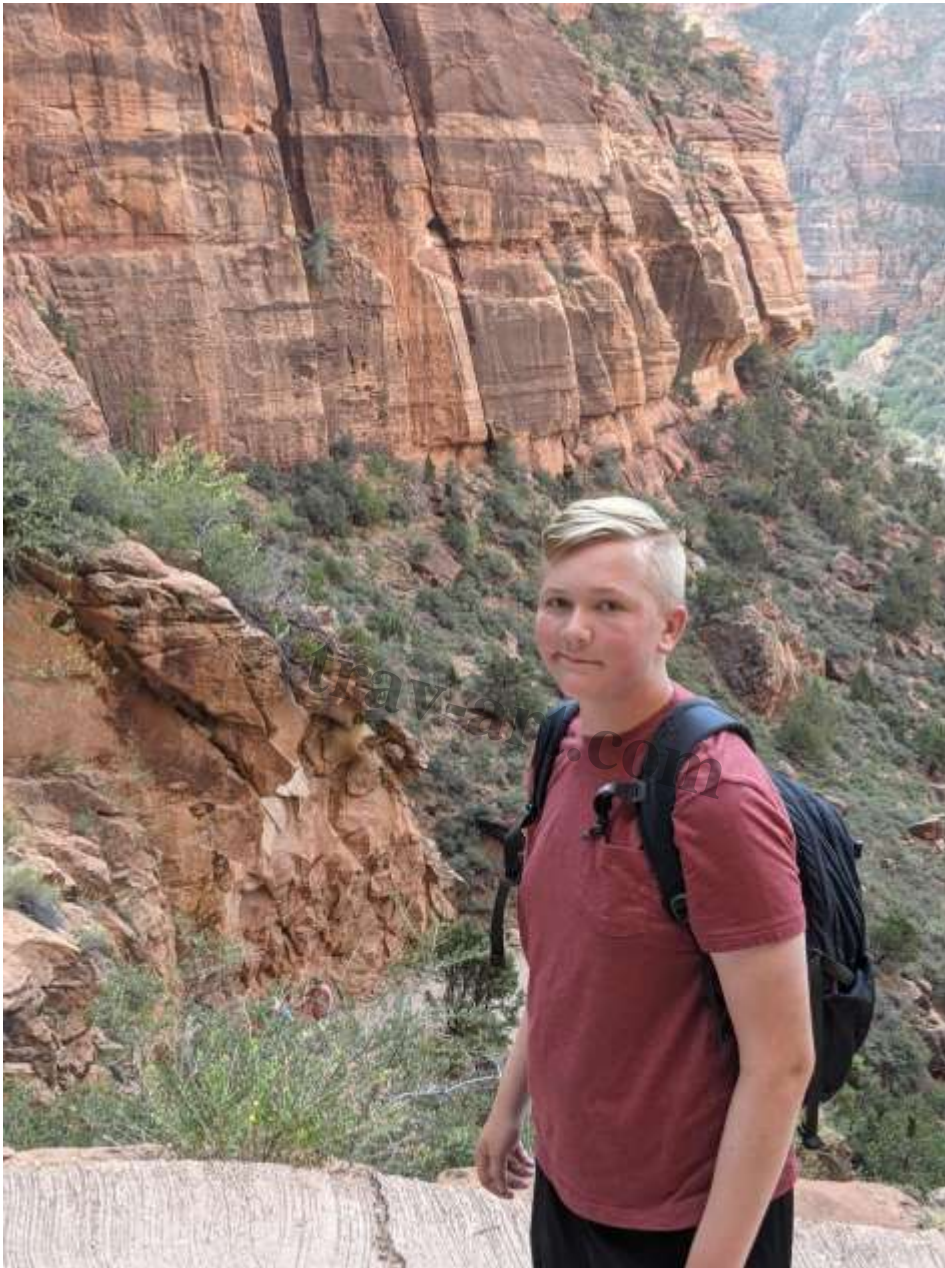
We ended up waiting almost two hours to just get on the tram before even starting the hike.





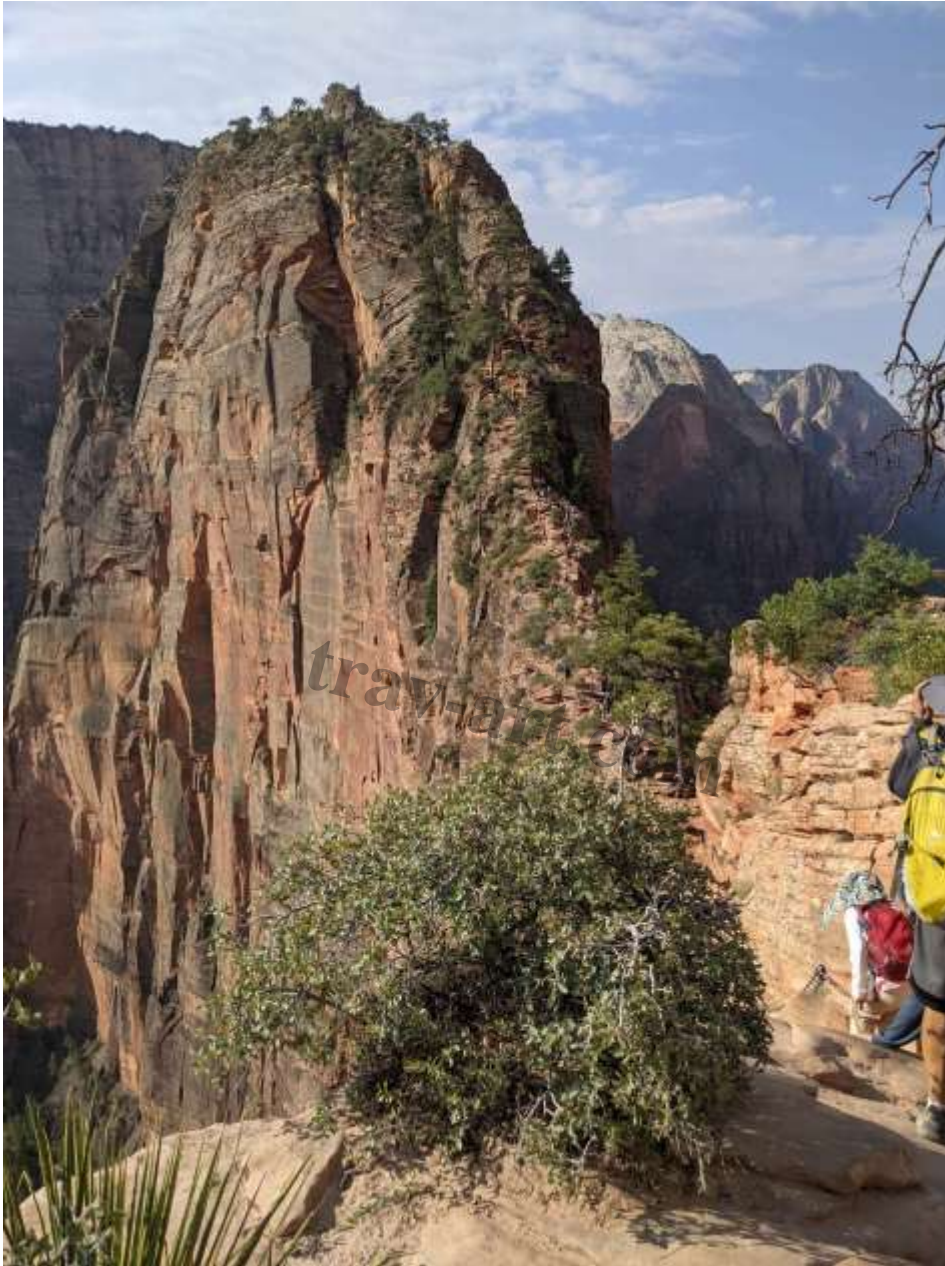


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It was a relief to make it just to the trailhead. From the trailhead it's a relatively short, but steep ascent of two miles to the Scout's Rest area, where the trail becomes most interesting. The scenery along the ascent was obviously beautiful and enjoyable.

We made pretty quick time to Scout's Rest where I decided that the crowded condition of the trail ahead was simply too unsafe for Daniel to continue with me.

From Scout's Rest the journey to Angel's Landing becomes a narrow walk and crawl along a precipice to the end of the towering monolith. On either side are drop-offs of two thousand feet, and the passage is both narrow and in some cases deadly. Chains along the route provide a measure of safety for hikers along the way.

The problem was that the chains were 3/4 miles of gridlocked hikers. People simply would not proceed and were holding onto the chains for dear life. This caused others to try to go around them and put those hikers into unsafe conditions.

As long as everyone continues in an orderly fashion, the trail is not that scary. But when people remain stationary, the trail becomes a nightmare. I simply could not allow Daniel to come with me as I made an attempt to negotiate my way through the throng for what I hoped would be a photo from Angel's Landing.

He dutifully waited for me at Scout's Rest and I made a commitment to not stay on the trail longer than a half hour. If I couldn't complete the rest of the trail in that time, I would return.

I made as good of time as I could and had to crawl and shimmy around people to get near the end. I made it about 3/4 of the way before deciding that going farther would be simply too difficult in the current conditions and would be unfair to my son. I took pictures from where I stopped and made my way back.

I was disappointed, but at least we had gotten close to the end. And Daniel was in good spirits having enjoyed the presence of the chipmunks at Scout's Rest. We hiked back down together and boarded a tram back to the visitor center where the truck had remained for nearly four hours.

Daniel and I drove back to the hotel to meet up with Shelley and Evan and check out. On the way out of town we stopped for some fast food and then set a course across the open desert of southern Utah on US-89 for Page, Arizona.

It was excruciatingly hot outside on the drive (hovering close to 115F) and somewhere along the way my front license plate frame fell off (I think the heat of the sun on the black plastic tabs loosened it enough to allow it to fall away). At any rate, it wasn't until we were at the hotel in Page that I realized it was missing.

Our hotel for the night was the least expensive of the trip: **The Country Inn and Suites** in Page. The room was comfortable and the air conditioning worked pleasantly, but the front desk staff were severely lacking in customer service skills. Just based on that I wouldn't stay there again.

I wrote a review on TripAdvisor and the manager had an attitude of "Well, what's the big deal. They were probably having a bad day." Uh, sorry, when you work in front of customers you have to keep your bad day to yourself.

Horseshoe Bend

I wanted to visit **Horseshoe Bend** as it is the most famous natural attraction in the area. Well, there is **Antelope Canyon**, and **Lake Powell** is just to the north, but because of COVID Antelope Canyon was closed to visitation and we were going to Lake Powell the next day.

Horseshoe Bend is a scenic bend in the Colorado River. The curve of the river is an almost perfect Horseshoe in a deep canyon carved by the river. Further south the river will enter Marble Canyon, and soon after, the Grand Canyon.

Before looking for dinner, we drove out to the overlook, which was just outside of Page. The skies were overcast, but it was maniacally hot. Not only hot, but now humid hot. Despite the heat, there was a surprising number of people at the viewpoint. And no one was going to be denied their time at the viewpoint.

We parked and hiked the one-mile trail down to the overlook, where we admired the stunning natural beauty of the Colorado River in the canyon below. Along the way, I also found the reddish-hued sand along the way interesting and picturesque.

After about an hour at the overlook, we decided it was time to enjoy some cold drinks and have dinner.









We ate at a place called **State 48 Tavern and Taphouse**. It was decent. It seemed to be a local favorite.

Day 6: Lake Powell and Durango, CO

The next morning we stopped off to get some supplies for a day on the open water. We bought a cooler bag, lots of drinks, some snacks, and PBJ and bread for sandwiches. Once we were out on the water weâ??d be far away from the typical amenities so we needed to be prepared.

Once that was finished and we had enjoyed a decent hotel breakfast, we checked out of the room, packed up the car, and drove to **Antelope Point**.

Antelope Point Marina Boat Rentals

If you don't believe what I say here go ahead and read the reviews on other sites like [TripAdvisor](#) (don't be misled by the supposed 4 out of 5 stars. Read the actual reviews starting with the most recent).

My advice: Don't rent from Antelope Point Marina, but instead choose one of the many other marinas or boat rentals. **You've been warned**. We narrowly averted a total disappointment.

We made the payment and deposit for a half day deck boat rental over a month in advance. \$500 for the rental and \$500 deposit. We arrived and found a line at the rental office that was simply not moving. At all. People inside were clearly frustrated with the staff but I didn't know why until finally after an hour I got to the front desk. Even though I had rented a boat they had no boat for me. What?

There was literally one sitting idle right outside. They claimed it was rented by someone else (I doubt it). I was there first, I let them know and my reservation was a month ago. Finally, another member of the staff walked in and said he'd look for another boat. After a half hour one with a torn awning was found and readied for us.

Finally we got in the boat and the guy who was supposed to give us an overview of the boat never showed up. We then asked for help and finally he came over and went over a couple things but left out a bunch of things that we had to specifically ask about like anchoring.

Clearly those running Antelope Point Marina have little interest in taking care of customers. Many of the boats are in disrepair, they don't take the time to be sure rentals are ready when people arrive, and they barely bother to give a necessary overview of the boat. So rent here at your own risk.

Lake Powell

You might think my review of APM above meant we had a lousy experience at Lake Powell. Well, once out on the water we had a great time even with reduced water levels from years of drought in the western US.

We had been having a great trip thus far, minus the incident at the marina rental and the scorching heat, but our time on Lake Powell was especially enjoyable. We were free to travel where we pleased on the lake. It was a lot of fun.























We scouted around for a place to anchor and then Shelley and the kids got to swim in the lake. Unfortunately I cut my leg that morning and didn't want to expose the wound to lake water so I stayed mostly on land and on the boat. We ate a picnic lunch from the beach before we shoved off the return to the marina.

Mahogany Grill, Durango, CO

It felt good to be back in the higher elevations of CO and out of the 112 F heat of Arizona. We had made reservations for Mahogany Grill a week before since it was Father's Day and even though we were late they got us in (and after experiencing the customer service of APM earlier that day it felt good to get great customer service at the restaurant). We are fans of historic buildings and the Old West so this place was perfect for a dinner after an eventful day.







Afterward we went to the Diamond Belle Saloon but we were there a bit late on a Sunday so they were starting to close down.

Day 7: South Park City

On our way home, we decided to make one last stop in the town of Fairplay, Colorado. The South Park City Museum is an interesting and fun look at a historic mining town of the 1800s.





We walked through the buildings and exhibits. My kids were especially interested in the trains as you can tell by the photos above.

While I think we enjoyed the trip and all that we did, I felt afterward like we needed to change up how we travel a bit to slow down and focus more on individual places.

I felt that every national park we visited got far too little of our time and left me wishing that we could have had several days of time. Zion in particular requires three days minimum to be really experienced. Yeah, we saw four national parks over the course of the trip, but we never really SAW these parks. Bryce Canyon came the closest to feeling satisfactory, but still there were many trails left for another day.

Second, if at all possible we need to try to travel in the offseason. I'd rather deal with less than optimal weather than crowds that make places almost unusable. Zion, Capitol Reef, Arches, and Canyonlands can all be visited in the spring and fall. Actually, I think they might be at their best.

So anyway, weâ??re not done with Utah by any stretch. Itâ??s one state over and one of my favorite states.

Category

1. Travel

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