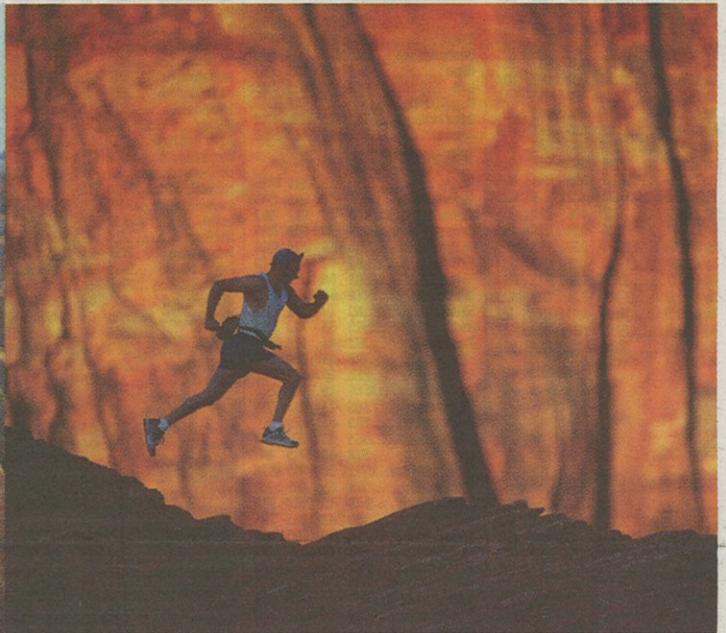


LIFE & STYLE TRAVEL

Utah: America's secret scenic wonderland



Main image: the spectacular spires of Bryce Canyon National Park. Below: Monument Valley, Arizona with its spectacular geological formations. Above: Man running on sandstone in Snow Canyon, Utah

FACTBOX

Leo Bear travelled to Utah with Abercrombie & Kent (0845 618 2102, www.abercrombiekent.co.uk/usa) and was a guest of Amangiri (www.amanresorts.com) Car hire from Las Vegas starts from £18 per day or £125 per week with Rhino Car Hire www.rhinocarhire.com www.visitutah.com

TOUCHING down at Las Vegas airport at 9pm, we made a classic mistake. Predicting we'd be fine to drive the two-hour journey to our hotel after a refreshing Diet Coke and a few rounds of Blackjack at the Mandalay Bay, we didn't expect to find ourselves deliriously sleep-deprived, jetlagged to the max and sans sat-nav, journeying through the Valley of Fire on a pitch-black freeway. It was a terrifying mission from Nevada into Utah, but the following morning we were rewarded when we whisked back the curtains to discover a breathtaking vista of red rocks against a cloudless blue sky. It was the great American West – Marlboro country, my friend.

Utah is home to five national parks, including Canyonlands (where 127 Hours was filmed), Monument Valley, the most photographed landscape in America, and the Grand Canyon. It would be tempting to take a road-trip, Thelma and Louise-style, across the whole state, but with limited time and no "po-po" to run from, our plan was to stick to the terracotta terrain of Southern Utah, taking in Snow Canyon State Park, Zion National Park, Bryce Canyon and, for the icing on the cake, two nights at Amangiri, one of America's chicest hotels on the lunar shores of Lake Powell. With each portion of the drive set to take only a couple of hours (apart from the

Utah is all deserts and trailer parks, right? Leo Bear discovers this couldn't be further from the truth in this varied US paradise

return leg which would be six hours), my other half (the driver) was happy, although I couldn't help worrying that the trip might be unchallenging, with little in the way of changing scenery. How wrong could I have been? What we encountered over the next six days was extraordinary. I have never seen such diverse terra firma nor experienced such dramatic changes in climate from one day to the next. Thank goodness we'd packed heavy: woolly hats, puffa jackets, snow boots, shorts and flip-flops.

But first the hiking boots went on for a stomp around Snow Canyon. This little-known 7,400-acre desert, boasting towering sandstone cliffs and a jumble of black lava rock, was just a short hop from our hotel. With 16 miles of hiking trails, it's a popular spot for rock climbing and horseriding.

The touristy one-road town of Springdale, perched minutes from the gates of Zion National Park, is a mecca for hikers. Hoards of cap-wearing outdoorsy types flock here each year (2.8m to be precise).

For our first proper hike, bright-eyed BJ at front desk suggested we ease into things with a medium-level 8km

round-trip to Angel's Landing. She impressed on us the importance of taking plenty of water, muttered something about chipmunks, and we were off.

After a slow start (we were overtaken by numerous small children), came several false summits, until, with our heads practically touching the clouds, the path tailed off at a bald rocky

📍 We could see for hundreds of miles across an amphitheatre filled with red spires

prow with a mind-boggling view over the prehistoric valley floor below. It's here that the men were separated from the boys. To continue required edging our way along a narrow exposed ridge with only chains to grip to for dear life. A sign reading "six people die each year attempting this climb" wasn't encouraging but there was nothing to warn us about the main hazard: chipmunks, of which

there are many. Cute, furry creatures with bushy tails were leaping here, there and everywhere. Talk about distracting. Then I recalled BJ's exact words back at the motel: "If you throw bits of food over the edge," she'd said with a giggle, "the chipmunks will jump off after them." Nasty. Of course, we didn't try this. We did however triumph to the top, and were greeted by a dizzying 360-degree view. Great gaping chasms yawned beneath us where the Virgin River had carved out a 2,000-foot-deep gorge.

After two days of non-stop hiking, squinting into the sun and guzzling dozens of litres of water, it was time to hit the road again, to the great relief of our glutes. As we wound our way out of Zion and climbed higher, the road gradually emptied and smatterings of snow began to appear curbside. Within an hour, the temperature had dropped by 20 degrees, and as we shivered over hot coffees, refueling the car, we started to get a sense of real Utah; a surprising and thoroughly unpretentious state, filled with awe-inspiring natural wonder. Even at the petrol pump, I was transfixed by the view in the background.

At Bryce Canyon, there is very little in the way of civilisation, beyond ramshackle ranches and roadside diners. There's isn't much choice when it comes to hotels, so we opted for the Best Western Bryce Canyon, a large brown-carpeted establishment with the atmosphere of a care home. We were given the honeymoon suite, which, although generous in size, did little to inspire romance. It was a gloriously sunny day. The air felt cold and clear and, emerging from a dense fir forest that seemed to go on forever, suddenly, bam! There it was, a clean drop-off into a massive void. Less of a canyon, more of a giant hole that could have been created by a monster meteorite. From where we were standing on the rim (note: there are no barriers), we could see for hundreds of miles across the giant amphitheatre filled with crimson spires, knobby fins and towering hoodoos, rising from Alpine depths like crumbling Burmese temples. A sprinkle of glittering snow only served to lend an extra-special touch to what was already a feast for the eyes. Our one day at Bryce was nowhere near enough (although staying wasn't really an option – there was only one open restaurant in the whole area: a low-season thing apparently).

And that is Utah in a nutshell – a many-varied, visual treat that belies its somewhat drab reputation.