Quest Club

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The Wonders of Southern Utah

By Thomas Cain

Having visited 44 of the 50 US states in my life (so far), any topic assigned to me regarding travel in the US would come relatively easy. I have enjoyed geography from an early age, when, as a kid, my Dad assigned me to be map reader and navigator on our long driving vacations. We saw Wall Drug and the Corn Palace in the Badlands of South Dakota. We saw the endless boring farm fields of Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska. We drove the majestic Rockies, the endless deserts of Arizona, and the lush salad bowl of central California, where Dad was from. As an adult, I have explored the California coast, the deep South, the Mid-Atlantic, and New England. I have never been to Utah.

So, when I received the topic “The Wonders of Southern Utah”, I realized I was going to actually have to do a bit of work. My initial thought was “I wonder what are the wonders of southern Utah?”. Are there things there of awe and wonder? Is there anything there worth wondering about?

In the minds of many who have never wondered much about Utah, let alone its southern reaches, it is widely known for a huge salty lake, a single large city on the shore of that lake, Mormons (properly known as Latter Day Saints), and a lot of dry desert. And most of that is in the northern quarter of the state. In fact, 90% of Utah’s population of about 3.5 million (and rapidly growing) lives in the Salt Lake City vicinity, on 10% of the land. The remainder of the state, nearly twice the size of Indiana, has 10% of the population, at only about 350,000. Even less of that is in southern Utah.

Naturally, I had to wonder why so few people made this place their home.

Prior to displacement by Americans, ten tribes of the Paiute people inhabited and still inhabit the band of mountains in the southwest part of the state. The Goshute were in the western area just north, with the Ute people occupying the majority of the east part of the state. The Navajo people held a small bit of the very southeast corner of Utah, as part of their territory covering adjacent New Mexico. I had never wondered how the state got its name. Now I know it was based on the name of some of the indigenous peoples. At least it’s genuine. Indiana is named after a group of people Columbus thought he had discovered when he thought he landed in Asia.

Generally, this population sustained itself with a nomadic lifestyle, spending summers in the cooler mountains, where they hunted elk, deer, bighorn sheep, and antelope, plus gathered berries, roots, and grasses to sustain them upon returning to lower, more mild elevations in the winter. After meeting with early Spanish explorers, and stealing their horses, their lives changed and used horses to raid other tribes. Pressures by American settlers in the 19th century forced these peoples off of their ancestral lands and into reservations in the eastern part of the state. Only around 7000 of the Ute people still live on their reservations in Utah, out of about 75,000 total indigenous people in the state.

That isn't a lot of people. The rugged landscape of south-central Utah, and the rest of the land being desert and desert-like make sustainable agriculture difficult. Without resources to make a living, this area stayed unattractive to settlement well into the 19th century.

That unattractiveness to most American settlers is exactly what attracted LDS leader Joseph Smith to the shores of the Great Salt Lake. Granted, this is outside our focus area, but the Mormon way was not based on land development and greed. It focused on planned harnessing of natural resources, including water from the mountains, the Green and Colorado rivers, to make the desert bloom, using their ingenuity to implement their faith in creating a sustainable community, the new Zion, as they called it. These strategies, later in the 19th and into the 20th century, saw the construction of dams, reservoirs, and transportation systems to make hay (literally) from the desert, and on an unprecedented scale in US history. More on that later.

The industriousness of the Mormon people also tapped into natural resources, including coal, gas, and petroleum, manufacturing, and now information technology and healthcare, allowing the population in the Salt Lake City area to explode in recent decades.

But, little of that extended into southern Utah, where few people continue to live.

So, I wondered, what other wonders were out there?

Well, it turns out that southern Utah has a big tourism industry, something like 8-10 million visitors annually. Those difficult desert landscapes? They have some extraordinary places of beauty, created over several billion years. Speaking of billions, in 2023, visitors spent an estimated $1.9 billion in southern Utah.

So, I wondered, what were they seeing?

The dramatic landscape of Southern Utah has ancient roots that started out as not all that dramatic. Let me summarize half a billion years in a minute or two.

More than 500 million years ago, Utah was on the western edge of the North American continent, with half under water and half a wet, shallow coastal plain, where sandy sediments began to build. Over the next couple of hundred million years, the Pacific and North American Plates began to collide, pushing against each other, creating mountains in California and raising the whole sandy plain to a plateau. These California mountains cut off the moisture to Nevada and Utah, leaving all that sand to dry out and blow around for another hundred million years. This created the thick layers of Navajo Sandstone that is seen today in its greatly eroded and sculpted forms. Dinosaurs are part of the act around this time, and they got fossilized in this developing sandstone.

Then, volcanoes, although more to the northern part of the state, leaving a lot of minerals in their churned up lava. Then an inland sea comes in to cover the eastern part of the state from about 60 to100 million years ago, leaving behind swamps and coal deposits. As the land continues to rise, glaciers come down from the north, leaving a major water drainage system running from the new Rocky Mountains, southwest toward northern Arizona. First as ancient Lake Flagstaff, and then the genesis of the mighty Colorado River system.
It is mostly the water erosion of the sandstone deposits, over the last hundred million years that has shaped the landscape that now both renders so many areas inhospitable to human

sustainability, yet is such a contemporary draw for all these tourists. Getting into and recreationally experiencing nature is big business for southern Utah.

Well, tourism requires people knowing about this dramatic and wild landscape. As I mentioned earlier, the Mormons sent pioneers all over Utah, where fertile river valleys and access to water, either on the surface, or in the springs and deposits in the porous sandstone provided sustainability to nascent towns. Some of these towns were mining valuable metals and minerals, surviving until the mines gave out. Others, more favorably sited along transportation routes, flourished, with tourism becoming the latecomer to the economic game.

Most towns in southern Utah have fewer than 40,000 people. Actually, the majority of towns here have only a few thousand residents. The big exception, in the very southwestern corner of the state, is St. George, with about 111,000 residents, and growing. It is by far the biggest urban place in the whole southern 2/3 of Utah, and is a jumping off point today for much tourism in the area. Brigham Young and his wife (well, one of them) moved here for a winter home in 1870 to oversee the construction of the St. George temple. The frontier was closed. Railroads now connected across the nation, through Utah.

Anyway, word gets around, and in 1909, Theodore Roosevelt created Natural Bridges National Monument to preserve the three stone spans, a scientific wonder. A year later the Mukuntuweap National Monument was ordered by William Taft. The name means “Straight Canyon”, and was the name preferred by river-runner and explorer John Wesley Powell. The LDS community later petitioned a name change to Zion National Monument.

In 1918, two years after creation of the National Park Service, Zion became a national park, providing it with further protections.

As a sidebar, National Monuments and Forests are created by Presidential Executive Order and can be undone by later presidents. It takes an act of Congress to establish a National Park, and they are much more difficult to dissolve.

By 1928, Utah National Park became Bryce National Park. Arches followed in 1929. Capitol Reef in 1937. Lastly, Canyonlands in 1964.

Part of the reasoning for establishing these parks, along with other National Monument lands, was to protect them from looting and defacement of native artifacts, going back to the Anazazi as far as 2000 years ago. Locals complained, especially about the establishment of Canyonlands, claiming their rights to mine, drill, and graze were being infringed upon.

In the early 20th century, tourism was heavily promoted by the Union Pacific Railroad and the Utah Parks Company, by building railroads, roads, and lodges to access these dramatic and scenic places, unknown to Easterners.

Tourists flocked to these “Mighty Five” national parks. Again, I wondered what was so wonderful?
Let’s take a quick trip to the Mighty Five, to give you a taste of some pretty darn wonderful places in Southern Utah.

Zion National Park

About 30 miles northeast of St. George is Zion National Park. These 232 square miles encompass some of the most scenic canyon country in the US. It features the 2000 to 3000 foot deep Zion Canyon, plus The Narrows slot canyon along the Virgin River and its tributaries, and numerous Navajo sandstone cliffs. Sitting between 3666 and 8726 feet above sea level, it hosts a diversity of habitats, including desert, riverbank, pinyon-juniper, and conifer woodlands. From cactus to cottonwoods, there is habitat for everyone, including endangered California condors and threatened Mexican spotted owls. Those sand dunes I mentioned from a couple hundred million years ago? This is how they turned out, with a bit of help from the rain and snow.

Bryce Canyon National Park
Another 84 miles up the road is Bryce Canyon National Park. It was named after shipbuilder Ebenzer Bryce, who travelled west with Brigham Young, and settled here in 1870.

The same sand dunes of Zion came to a different fate here in Bryce, where they were sculpted into broad, horseshoe shaped amphitheaters filled with “hoodoos”, those irregularly shaped rock spires. Although found elsewhere on this planet, Bryce is the largest concentration of these formations in the world. Other formations carry names like Gulliver’s Castle, The Pope, Fairy Castle, Hindu Temples, Wall of Windows, Chinese Wall, and Sinking Ship. Bryce Point is a tad shorter than the high spot in Zion, at 8304 feet and is a great observation point over this majestic landscape.

Capitol Reef National Park
Capitol Reef is next in line, up the road another 112 miles from Bryce, in the heart of red rock country. The Waterpocket Fold, a 100 mile long wrinkle in the Earth’s crust, defines the park, and has created more sandstone formations, including cliffs, massive domes, canyons, and undercut bridges. It was named for the white sandstone domes, similar to domes topping US capitol buildings, and for those rocky cliffs, which are a barrier to travel, like a coral reef.

This park also includes some human cultural history, ranging from ancient petroglyphs of the Fremont people, there from about 200 to 1250 CE, to more recent pioneer orchards and a schoolhouse at the Gifford Homestead. The Fold reveals nearly 200 million years of geological history in its sedimentary layers, including rivers and swamps, sand deserts, and shallow oceans that once covered this area, before the great land uplift. As these are sedimentary layers, they are rich with fossils of the plants and animals that once inhabited these landscapes. Similar to the hoodoos in Bryce, Capitol Reef also has freestanding monoliths in Cathedral Valley, including Temple of the Sun and Temple of the Moon.

Today, this area is true desert, receiving only about 6 inches of rain per year.

Canyonlands National Park
Now about 320 miles out from St George lies Mighty park #4, the 520 square mile Canyonlands National Park. Carved by the Colorado and Green rivers into the sandstone, this land is now covered by hundreds of canyons, mesas, buttes, and arches. Picture a big flat plain over the sandstone layers that underlie the other parks. Now, over millions of years, as pressures from below raised these stone layers, snowmelt and rain from remote watersheds carved a web of deep, steep canyons, leaving behind mesas and buttes, some accessible only by rock climbers and helicopters. Now desert, these lands are among the most inhospitable in the US, receiving only a few inches of rain per year. Top stone landmarks include Mesa Arch and the Upheaval Dome. Collectively, the Needles (stone spires) and The Maze (of canyons) form substantial

areas of this park. Culturally, Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch Gang frequented this area, inspiring the Robert Redford film Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Being incredibly remote, with incredible night darkness, and incredibly dry, clear skies, you can see stars you will never see from Fort Wayne without a telescope. It is one of the best places for stargazing in the US.

Arches National Park

Only another 20 miles out from Canyonlands lies the last of the Mighty 5 National Parks, Arches National Park. It's not as remote as it sounds, since it is only 5 miles from Moab, Utah, on the east side of the state, and only 50 miles from Colorado. This park, covering about 120 square miles, contains the world's greatest concentration of natural stone arches, with over 2000 cataloged. Again, water and wind have carved a fantasyland in sandstone, with the iconic Delicate Arch, Landscape Arch, the Windows section, and the 128 foot Balanced Rock (at least until some moron decides to push it over). Other creatively named features include the Devil's garden, where the 290 foot span of Landscape Arch resides, the maze like passages of Fiery Furnace, and Park Avenue, a canyon flanked by cliffs resembling a high rise city skyline, with towering monoliths like the Three Gossips. Part of what distinguishes this geology of Entrada sandstone is the eroded underlying salt beds which have caused some of the overlying rock to collapse. Culturally, the Anasazi people left wall artworks during their time here, until 1250, when they left, likely from a severe, 20 year drought. It is thought they migrated south, becoming the ancestors to the modern Hopi, Zuni, and Rio Grande Pueblo peoples.

Well, that is certainly a wonderful and wonder filled bunch of national parks. But wait, there's more!

These National Parks are surrounded by numerous National Monuments, State Parks, and Recreation areas, including Coral Pink Sand Dunes, Sand Hollow, Quail Creek, Snow Canyon, all near Zion, plus, Kodachrome Basin and Escalante Petrified Forest near Bryce Canyon, plus Goblin Valley near Capitol Reef, plus Dead Horse Point near Arches.

Of particular note is the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, a 1.25 million acre area along the Colorado River, in Utah and adjacent Arizona. Completed in 1966, the Glen Canyon Dam became the second major dam along the Colorado River, after the Hoover Dam was completed in 1936. The resulting Lake Powell is the second largest man-made reservoir, with nearly 2000 miles of shoreline, creating a mecca for water sports in one of the driest places in the US. It resulted from a 1922 compact among southwest US states, governing collection, management, and distribution of water from the Colorado River. It serves primarily as a feed to Lake Mead, near Las Vegas, where the water is distributed mostly to California and Arizona.

Unfortunately, this reservoir put a landscape comparable to the Mighty 5 parks under water. Some have called it the Lost National Park. Native artifacts and billion-year-old geology and fossils are now under water, out of reach, except maybe to scuba divers. The engineering was overly optimistic in its precipitation levels, and now, in a drought, water levels in Lake Powell have dropped so low that they are having difficulty letting water through the dam and on into Lake Mead, where the Compact has minimum water volume requirements of the upper Colorado River states. Humans have made a mess of a pretty amazing place, all so we can have fresh lettuce from California in our salads.

The wonders keep piling on.

Some of the more minor wonders I discovered is that St. George and the Mighty 5 parks have become quite a movie hub. John Ford's Stagecoach, of 1939, was filmed in the nearby Navajo Nation's Monument Valley. Forrest Gump ended his famous 3 year+ run on US 163, on a hill looking toward this same Valley. Arches and Canyonlands stood in for New Mexico in Thelma and Louise. Butch Cassidy was filmed in northern Utah, at Snow Canyon, even though Butch hung out in the south. However, some scenes were filmed in the ghost town of Grafton, a mid-19th century settlement of up to 168 Mormons, who later got pushed out by the natives. Or floods. Film fantasies in a fantasy landscape. Who's not going to like that?

Lastly, since it's lunch time, and being a bit of a foodie, I had to marvel at a little gem of a seasonal restaurant, out in the middle of nowhere, near Capitol Reef, in the tiny town of Boulder, population 389, called Hell's Backbone Grill. This tiny restaurant follows Buddhist life principles, using ingredients grown on their own property and otherwise locally sourced, and has been finalists and semi-finalists for the prestigious James Beard Award for culinary excellence for three years in a row. Start with a Juniper Caesar salad or a Tea Cup of Three Sisters Posole. Continue with a Bison Braise with Polenta or Steelhead Trout and Herbs on Jasmine Rice. I'm sure the dessert options are wondrous too. Bring your money. Dinner will run you around a hundred bucks.

If you ever find yourself in this neck of the woods, bring your sunscreen (it gets into the low 100s in summer), your camping gear, and your four wheeler, since it's on an unpaved road, miles outside of Boulder.

Or, pamper yourself at some of the most luxurious resorts in the nation, surrounded by all this wonderful, impossible landscape. For only $4850 per night, you can stay at Amangiri, a true desert glamping resort where you can connect with your inner self and the Zen austerity of the rocks, or participate in a three day detox program, only two and a half hours from St. George or Flagstaff. Glamping is available in their ten tents, complete with gourmet chef and guided desert adventures.

The Sorrel River Ranch, near Moab, is a bit more accessible, at only $1000 per night, offering riding, hiking, exercise, spa treatments, meditation, and dining on the Colorado River shore at their River Grill. They describe their menu as elevated Southwest, using locally sourced goodies.

On the other end of the spectrum is the EconoLodge in Zion, for only $37. They may have some stale honey buns in the lobby vending machine.

When I set out on this journey to discover the wonders of southern Utah, I wasn't sure what I would discover. Now, I have a reason to make it the 45th state for me to visit. I hope you do too.

Thank you!

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