

# FIVE NATIONAL PARKS

# Utah's

by Ted Cookson

Utah bills itself as “America’s National Parks Capital” in spite of the fact that it possesses fewer national parks than California! Perhaps this is because southern Utah has the greatest concentration of national parks of any U. S. state. Although the very large state of California contains eight national parks while Utah has only five, California’s national parks are very widely dispersed. On the other hand, all five of Utah’s national parks - Zion, Bryce Canyon, Capitol Reef, Arches and Canyonlands - are situated fairly close to one another in the southern part of the state.

This proximity makes it convenient for tourists to visit all five parks in a single trip. Las Vegas, Nevada’s McCarran Airport, the world’s eleventh busiest, provides a convenient starting and ending point for a circle trip to see southern Utah’s amazing natural wonders. Such a round-trip drive could be accomplished in as little as four days. A bonus on the return drive is the North Rim of the Grand Canyon in northern Arizona.

Spring and autumn are the best times to visit the national parks in Utah. However, for those unable to avoid the extreme heat and crowds of summer

or the frost and snow of winter, Utah’s national parks remain open year-round.

Three of Utah’s national parks are among the best the U.S. has to offer. Zion, Bryce Canyon and Arches are the state’s largest tourist attractions, accounting for more than 18 million tourists annually. The other two parks, Capitol Reef and Canyonlands, are much less visited.

235-square-mile (595-square-km) Zion National Park, established in 1919, is known for its impressive cliffs and monolithic rocks. The highlight is 2,400-foot-deep (732-meter-deep) Zion Canyon. In

order to eliminate extreme automobile congestion during the summer months, since 2000 the National Park Service has required visitors to ride a shuttle bus along the 6-mile-long (10-km-long) Zion Canyon Scenic Drive which follows the beautiful north fork of the Virgin River. Elevations in the park range from 3,666 feet (1,117 meters) to a mountaintop height of 8,726 feet (2,660 meters). The Kolob Canyons section in the northwestern part of Zion is also well worth a visit. There a much less-visited 5-mile (8km) drive providing spectacular views of the Finger Canyons. 58-square-mile (146-





square-km) Bryce Canyon National Park, originally set aside as a national monument in 1923, consists of a series of amphitheatres formed from pink-coloured cliffs. The eroded soft limestone in this area has created a maze of rock spires which radiate warm hues of reds and yellows. These unique geological features originated some 60 million years ago. An 18-mile (29-km) scenic drive south from the 8,000-foot-high (2,438-meter-high) visitor centre takes visitors past a number of overlooks. The drive, along which a non-mandatory shuttle bus operates, culminates at Rainbow Point at an altitude of 9,100 feet (2,774 meters).

122-square-mile (310-square-km) Arches National Park, a portion of which was originally set aside as a national monument in 1929, contains over 1,500 arches, many of which are visible from the 18-mile (29-km) paved scenic drive or after a short hike. Elevations in the park range from 3,960 feet (1,207 meters) up to 5,653 feet (1,723 meters).

Capitol Reef National Park boasts beautifully-coloured rock formations and impressive cliffs. Parts of this 387-square-mile (979-square km) park were set aside originally as a national monument in 1937. The central feature of Capitol Reef is 1,100-mile-long (1,770-km-long) Waterpocket Fold, whose origin dates

back some 70 million years. Visitors often wonder about the origin of the park's name. Early explorers, who found Waterpocket Fold an impediment to travel, compared it to an ocean reef. Furthermore, the park's rounded sandstone hills were likened to the dome of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Most visitors to Capitol Reef explore only a cross section in the north of the park along the Fremont River Valley and an 11-mile-long (18-km-long) scenic drive south from the visitor centre.

Portions of Canyonlands National Park, now 527 square miles (1,365 square km) in size, were first set aside in 1964. The Colorado River and Green River, whose confluence lies deep within the park, divide Canyonlands into three districts while providing ample opportunities for river running. "Islands in the Sky," the most popular district of the park, is a mesa which offers spectacular views over 1,300-foot-high (396-meter-high) cliffs. The less-visited "Needles" district in the south-eastern part of the park has paved road access and provides views of canyons, arches and various rock formations. On the other hand, the difficult-to-reach wild country of "The Maze" in the south-western part of the park is seldom visited by tourists.

A visit to Utah's five national parks provides



ample learning opportunities. First and foremost, visitors will be exposed to the unique geology of the region. They will also obtain an introduction to the native flora and fauna. In addition to seeing various types of trees and plants, they are likely to encounter mule deer, chipmunks, and other

mammals and many species of birds. The ruins, relics and graffiti left behind both by ancient inhabitants and by more recent Mormon settlers are also evident in many locations in these national parks and throughout southern Utah.

**ABOUT TED COOKSON:** Egypt's most widely-traveled travel agent, Ted has been to every country in the world! He has also visited 307 of the 317 destinations on the list of the Travelers' Century Club (visit [www.eptours.com](http://www.eptours.com) and refer to World Travel Club). A travel agent in Cairo since 1986, Ted manages EGYPT PANORAMA TOURS, a full-service travel agency, at 4 Road 79 (between Roads 9 and 10, near the "El Maadi" metro station) in Maadi. Contact Egypt Panorama Tours (open 7 days a week 9 AM-5 PM) at: Tels. 2359-0200, 2358-5880, 2359-1301. Fax 2359-1199. E-mail: [ept@link.net](mailto:ept@link.net). Web site: [www.eptours.com](http://www.eptours.com). The password for residents is eptcool. Both text and PDF versions of all of Ted's travel articles published since 2002 are archived online at [www.eptours.com](http://www.eptours.com) under "Ted's International Travel Articles." Some of the archived articles also contain video clips!