



St. Louis Post-Dispatch

# Through the back door at two of Utah's 'Mighty Five' national parks

By Katherine Rodeghier Special to the Post-Dispatch

October 9, 2022



NAVTEC's four-wheel-drive vehicles often leave marked roads on backcountry tours. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier



Eye of the Whale Arch is one of more than 2,000 natural sandstone arches in Arches National Park.  
Credit: Katherine Rodeghier



A bighorn sheep stands watch as a vehicle on a backcountry tour passes a flock of ewes and lambs.  
Credit: Katherine Rodeghier



Guide Justin Joseph drives back roads on tours of Arches and Canyonlands national parks. Credit:  
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I tried not to look, really I did, but couldn't stop peering over the edge of the road to the bottom of the canyon far, oh so far, below. "That's messed up," said guide Justin Joseph spotting a muddy tire track perilously close to oblivion. "No, that's crazy."

Hearing him, I offered a silent prayer of thanks for being in Joseph's steady hands and felt glad it was him, not me, driving the White Rim Trail in Canyonlands National Park.



The steep switchbacks of the Shafer Trail connect the canyon floor and the rim in Canyonlands National Park. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier

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Last year visitors swarmed Moab, Utah, for day trips to Canyonlands and Arches, two of "The Mighty Five" national parks in the state. Drivers waited in long lines at their entrances and competed for spots in their parking lots.

Not me. On an off-road tour with NAVTEC Expeditions last August, five of us piled into a four-wheel drive vehicle, bypassed entry gates and entered both parks through the

back door. We jostled over rutted dirt paths and had access to red rock backcountry only a small percentage of visitors see.

To curb overcrowding, Arches required reserved timed tickets to enter the park this past summer, but those who booked tours with official park service concessionaires, such as NAVTEC, can skip the tickets.



Guide Justin Joseph points out a dinosaur footprint in the red rock country around Moab, Utah. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier

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## Backcountry adventure

Soon after leaving the main road, Joseph skidded to a stop. “Want to see some dinosaur tracks?” he asked. Sure enough, three-toed footprints formed depressions in the sandstone. This part of Utah has the world’s highest concentration of dinosaur tracks, including these going back 165 million years when the beasts lumbered along the tidelands of an inland sea. Some 100 million years later, the area had become a dry seabed of sandstone. Geologic forces caused it to warp, crack and rise, then erode into the shapes we came to see.

Balanced Rock looked like it might topple at any time, but the 128-foot-tall boulder is attached to its pedestal, not balanced atop it. Still, erosion eventually will take a toll as it

did nearby when a smaller formation, Chip-Off-the-Old-Block, collapsed in the winter of 1975-76.



Hikers follow a trail past Park Avenue, a canyon with sheer walls some say resemble a big-city skyline. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier

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The park's namesake arches get the most attention from red-rock lovers. At popular ones, such as Delicate Arch — the one on Utah license plates — hikers may wait in a long line to take selfies. Rangers have had to break up fistfights, Joseph told us. We saw Delicate from a distance but went four-wheeling right up to Eye of the Whale Arch. A short hike led us inside the 12-foot-high opening. We had the place to ourselves for about 15 minutes until a Jeep pulled up and its passengers clambered up beside us. No worries; the park has plenty of arches to go around, more than 2,000, the largest concentration of natural sandstone arches in the world.

But there's more to see than these graceful curves. We detoured back to the main road for a stop at Park Avenue viewpoint and a hike into a canyon with sheer walls reminding early visitors of a big-city skyline. The massive monoliths of Courthouse Towers rise another mile farther down the trail.

## En route to Canyonlands

Leaving Arches on Utah Route 279, we pulled over for a look at ancient rock art made by prehistoric Native Americans on a red-rock wall. Painted pictographs and etched

petroglyphs depicted animals, human forms and abstract designs. What did they mean? Hunting grounds, astrological symbols, religious rituals? No one knows for sure.



The Colorado River makes a sharp turn at Gooseneck Bend, a favorite overlook on backcountry tours from Moab, Utah. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier

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At a lunch stop along the Colorado River, Joseph pulled chicken wraps and lemonade from coolers and we got to know one another. I should have guessed he majored in science in college because he had peppered us with facts about the natural world we'd traveled through, interspersing our education with corny jokes. When not teaching high school, he leads tours such as ours as well as canyoneering, rafting and multi-day combo trips.

We passed weathered buttes and a small flock of bighorn sheep — protective ewes and skittish lambs — on our way back to the meandering Colorado. We got out to stretch our legs at Thelma and Louise Point where a 1966 Ford Thunderbird went airborne in the final scene of the 1991 film by the same name. “Actually, it was two Thunderbirds,” said Joseph. “They needed two takes.”

If that cliff wasn't enough to give me a touch of acrophobia, our next stop did the trick. My stomach flipped when I tiptoed to the brink of a chasm at Gooseneck Bend where the river nearly doubles back on itself. Peering down, the Colorado looked like a muddy snake slithering around a flat-topped mountain.

## National park No. 2

A few minutes later, Joseph drove through an open metal gate where a rustic wooden sign announced: “Entering Canyonlands National Park.” Once again, we had the place to ourselves.



No lines, no manned gate at the backcountry entrance to Canyonlands National Park. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier  
Katherine Rodeghier

Canyonlands is vast, 337,590 acres divided into four districts. Driving among them takes several hours, so our tour stuck to the Island in the Sky district, a high plateau incised by canyons. We skirted one on the White Rim Trail, a narrow dirt road suitable only for high-clearance four-wheel-drive vehicles and a driver who’s not afraid of heights. I was glad to get out to walk to Musselman Arch. Unimpressive from a distance — more flat bridge than arch— its appeal became more apparent when I got close enough to see it span a seemingly bottomless abyss. For safety, Joseph told us the national park no longer allows anyone to walk across the arch. No need to tell me twice.





Buttes tower over vehicles on off-road excursions through the red-rock country outside Moab, Utah.  
Credit: Katherine Rodeghier

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Back on the White Rim, we joined the Shafer Trail at the bottom of a canyon and Joseph accelerated up a series of steep switchbacks sending us almost vertical. He told us the road closes in winter conditions—no kidding, I thought—and about the time the driver of a long truck ignored warnings and got stuck on a curve. Fool. Even our five-passenger vehicle barely seemed to clear these hairpin turns.

Suddenly we popped over the rim onto a flat mesa, and I realized I had been holding my breath. Back on a paved road, broad pastures stretched to the horizon giving no hint of the adventures in the red-rock canyons below.

### ***IF YOU GO***

**Getting to Moab:** Canyonlands Regional Airport, 18.2 miles from Moab, Utah, has flights to/from Denver, Colorado, and Salt Lake City, Utah, [grandcountyutah.net/274/Flight-Schedule](http://grandcountyutah.net/274/Flight-Schedule)

**NAVTEC Expeditions:** Arches & Canyonlands tour, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., \$279 adult, \$259 youth plus tax and gratuity, 800-833-1278, [navtec.com/combo-trips/arches-island-in-the-sky.html](http://navtec.com/combo-trips/arches-island-in-the-sky.html)

**Arches National Park:** [nps.gov/arch/index.htm](http://nps.gov/arch/index.htm)

**Canyonlands National Park:** [nps.gov/cany/index.htm](http://nps.gov/cany/index.htm)

[https://www.stltoday.com/travel/through-the-back-door-at-two-of-utah-s-mighty-five-national-parks/article\\_c9e902f8-c405-5bfa-9120-5669bbe6bb5d.html](https://www.stltoday.com/travel/through-the-back-door-at-two-of-utah-s-mighty-five-national-parks/article_c9e902f8-c405-5bfa-9120-5669bbe6bb5d.html)