

Traversing two national parks in one day with a backcountry tour in Utah



• Eye of the Whale Arch is one of more than 2,000 natural sandstone arches in Arches National Park in Utah. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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At the end of a journey through the Southwest, I found myself with one free day in Moab, Utah. What to do? Laze by the hotel pool? Binge-watch TV in my air-conditioned room? Both options seemed silly with not one, but two of Utah's "Mighty Five" U.S. national parks practically on my doorstep.

But I didn't have a rental car, nor the time to map out an itinerary for both parks in just one day.

NAVTEC Expeditions provided the solution with its Arches and Canyonlands 4x4 tour. Not only did I experience highlights of both parks in nine hours, NAVTEC's rugged vehicle took me on an off-road adventure through backcountry most national park visitors never see.

Bonus: No waiting in long lines at park entrances.

Travelers flocked to the national parks as the COVID-19 pandemic wound down and Arches was one of several that began requiring visitors to reserve timed entry tickets (this year April 1 to Oct. 31). Those traveling with official park service concessionaires, such as NAVTEC, however, skip the tickets.



Balanced Rock in Utah isn't balanced but attached to its sandstone pedestal. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

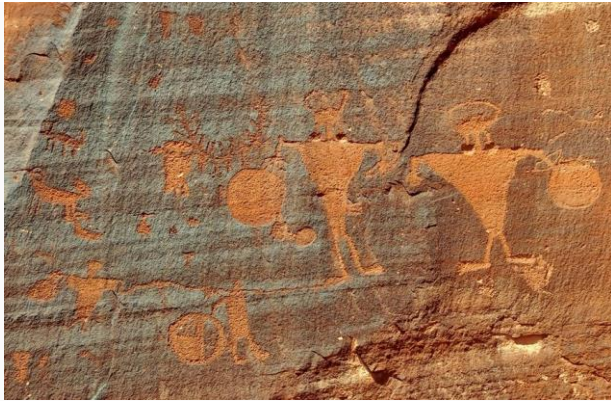
Through the back door

Soon after leaving Moab, our driver/guide turned off the main highway and onto a rough dirt road leading to Arches National Park. First stop: dinosaur tracks. Climbing out of the 4x4, our group of five walked a short distance to a stretch of red sandstone where three-toed footprints looked as if the beast had passed by yesterday.

The land around Moab contains the highest concentration of dinosaur tracks in the world, some as old as 165 million years. Once the tidelands of an inland sea, the area transformed into a dry seabed of sandstone some 100 million years later. The rock warped, cracked and rose before eroding into the odd shapes visitors come to these parks to see.

True to its name, Balanced Rock, our next stop, looked like it might topple at any moment. Standing 128-feet-tall, the boulder is attached rather than balanced on its pedestal. Still, Father

Time will eventually do its work as it did when a nearby formation, Chip-Off-the-Old-Block, collapsed nearly 50 years ago.



Pictographs and petroglyphs made by ancient people can be seen along Utah Route 279 in a wilderness area between Arches and Canyonlands National Parks. -

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

The park's namesake arches draw the most attention. There are more than 2,000, the largest concentration of natural sandstone arches in the world. At some, such as Delicate Arch -- you'll recognize it on Utah license plates -- visitors often stand in a long line for a turn at taking a selfie. We were content to view it from a distance, then go four-wheeling right up to Eye of the Whale Arch. We enjoyed having it to ourselves while standing inside its 12-foot-high opening.

Our guide made his way back to the park's main road for a stop at Park Avenue Viewpoint, one of the highlights of a visit to Arches. We hiked into a canyon with tall, steep walls crenelated in the shape of a city skyline. Another mile down the trail, the massive monoliths of Courthouse Towers rose in the distance.



Hikers follow a trail past Utah's Park Avenue, a canyon with sheer walls some say resemble a big-city skyline. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Between the parks

We left Arches on Utah Route 279, pulling over to peer at prehistoric rock art on a red-rock wall. We made out the shapes of animals, humans and abstract designs in pictographs and petroglyphs.

After a lunch stop along the Colorado River -- chicken wraps and lemonade our guide plucked from coolers -- we ventured out again in a red-rock wilderness between the two national parks.

At Thelma and Louise Point we got out to look into the chasm where a Ford Thunderbird went off this cliff in the final scene of the film by the same name. Our next stop continued to test our resistance to acrophobia. Standing on the edge of Gooseneck Bend, I was amazed to see the Colorado River nearly double back on itself as it carved a deep canyon into the red sandstone.

On to Canyonlands

Our backcountry entrance to Canyonlands was a simple wooden sign: "Entering Canyonlands National Park." No lines; nobody else in sight.

It would be impossible to see even a fraction of Canyonlands in a single day. Covering 527 square miles -- more than twice the expanse of Chicago -- it's divided into four districts and is the largest national park in Utah. We experienced highlights of the Island in the Sky district, a high plateau carved into canyons.

I held my breath as our driver confidently drove into a canyon on the White Rim Trail, a narrow dirt road suitable only for high-clearance 4x4 vehicles. Acrophobia kicked in big time when I peered over the edge of the road where a previous driver's tire track barely cleared the entry into oblivion.



NAVTEC's 4x4 vehicles often leave marked roads on backcountry tours. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

My legs still shook when we got out at Musselman Arch. From our parking spot it appeared to be more a flat bridge than an arch. But walking closer I could see the span ran atop a seemingly bottomless abyss. Visitors once crossed the arch on foot, but after some unfortunate incidents, the national park no longer allows it.

The White Rim Trail led us to the Shafer Trail at the bottom of a canyon. Our driver accelerated up several steep switchbacks on a road so narrow it seemed he could barely clear the hairpin turns. Some have not. He told us the driver of a long truck ignored warnings and got stuck on a curve, closing the road for an extended period.

Just when I thought we were going almost vertical, our 4x4 popped over the canyon rim onto a flat mesa. High desert landscape stretched to the horizon and we were back on a paved road, exiting the gate of the national park and heading back to Moab.

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If you go

Arches National Park: nps.gov/arch/index.htm

Canyonlands National Park: nps.gov/cany/index.htm

NAVTEC Expeditions: Arches & Canyonlands 4x4 tour, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., \$298 adult, \$288 kids 16 and younger, plus tax, fees and gratuity, (800) 833-1278, navtec.com/combo-trips/arches-island-in-the-sky.html

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