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Zion National Park



The State of Utah is blessed with outstanding natural features. In a territory of 220,000 km² (13th biggest state in the U.S.) there are 13 national and 42 state parks. Among these Zion National Park is probably the most famous and one of the most beautiful.

The name Zion was given to the area by Mormon pioneers in the 1860s. They wanted to stress the feeling of safety and refuge that the place evoked in them. This impression is shared today by over 2,5 million people who visit the park each year.

Photo © Bozena Piłat

The history of this park goes back to 1909 when Mukuntuweap National Monument was established. Ten years later, in 1919, it was transformed into Zion National Park, and in 1937 the Kolob section was added.

A list of features which account for Zion's uniqueness is too long to be mentioned here, so let us only highlight the two most significant ones: sandstone cliffs which are among the highest in the world, and one of the last free-flowing river systems on the Colorado Plateau.

The first inhabitants of the area were Anasazi Indians who lived here 2,000 years ago. Paiutes, who established a settlement about 800 years ago, still live in the area, while Mormons, who arrived in the 1860s, form the most numerous population.

Most visitors who come to explore the canyon, plan a two- or three-day stay. A lovely calm resort at the entrance to the canyon, Springdale, provides accommodation facilities.

Like in other National Parks there is a wide range of activities to engage in, trails to explore, and things to learn. Visitor centers offer professional help from park rangers who give presentations on geology, plants, animals, and human history.

A free shuttle bus service provides transportation. It is a good introduction to the topography and helps the first-time visitor get oriented.

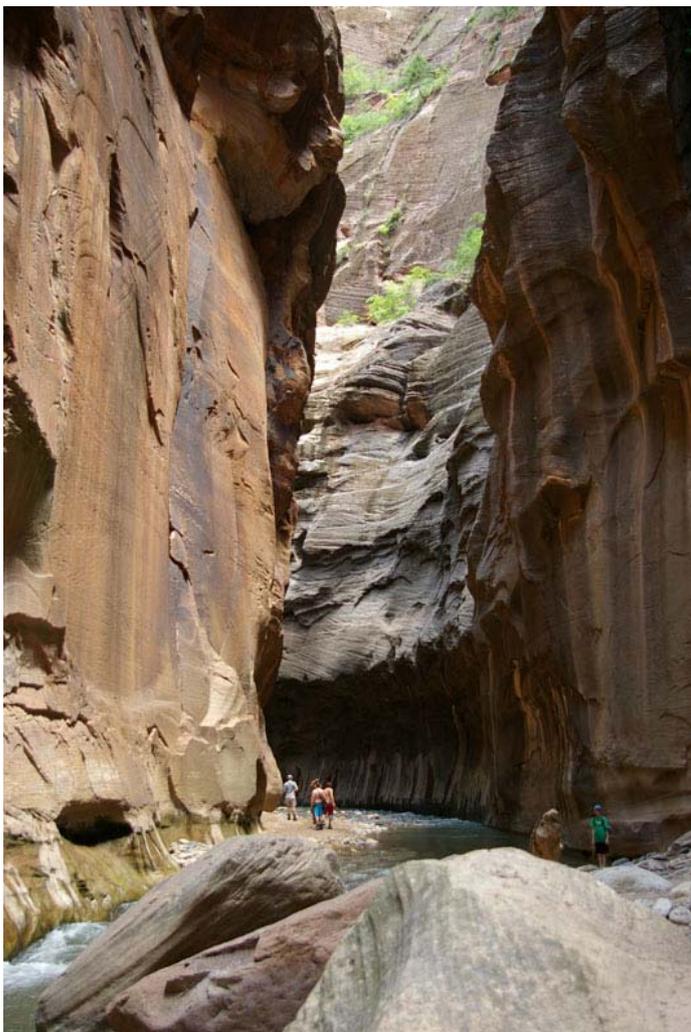


Leroy Spotted Eagle, left, of Paiute tribe, and John Bear, right, of Zuni tribe, march to the victory drum song during a ground blessing ceremony. The ground blessing ceremony is an ancient American Indian custom to purify and bless undisturbed land prior to occupation.
Photo © AP Images

A 90-minute canyon round trip scenic drive is ideal for those who do not have enough time for hiking and exploring the canyon on their own.

However, it is always best to hike on a trail and get first-hand experience. The choice is wide: short hikes of less than three hours, such as Weeping Rock trail with springs continually dripping from overhead, Court of the Patriarch, a steep trail opening to views of the Sentinel and the Three Patriarchs, to longer hikes like Lower Emerald Pool trail, which guarantees finding a waterfall, a riverside walk along a path that follows the meandering Virgin River right up to a high-walled canyon, the Watchman Trail offering views of the West Temple and lower Zion Canyon, to a strenuous five-hour round hike to Observation Point, which rewards hikers with spectacular views of the peninsula and the valley.

Some hikes require a backcountry permit and so do camping trips. It is therefore advisable to visit a visitor center prior to the actual hike, to get appropriate information.

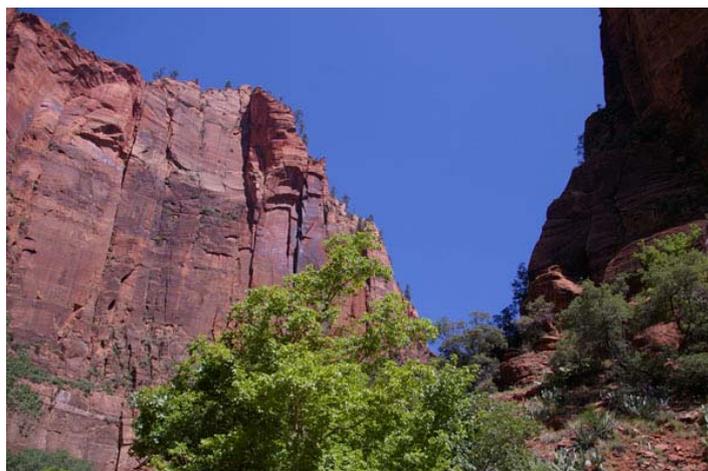


Photos above © Bozena Pilat

Wading Through Zion

To say that it was hot in St. George would have been an exaggeration. Well, in fact it was “boiling.” Normal day temperatures in July are 100 degrees F, but on July 8, 2008 it must have been at least ten degrees more. When I returned to the car after a short stop for a meal, it was impossible to put a hand on the driving wheel for more than a fraction of a second. The heat reflecting windshield cover that I was wise enough to buy and put on for any stop that exceeded a few minutes, had done little good this time. But a few minutes of air conditioning made the wheel touchable and the air inside the car breathable again. I sighed and considered the advice I got in one of the tourist centers in St. George recommending an over-night stay in Springdale, close to Zion Canyon where I was bound. Will it be any cooler there? I love the sun and warm weather, but the central European climate does not prepare you for an exceptionally hot summer in Utah. Well, there was no turning back. I remembered the morning heat in Las Vegas and headed east.

The moment I got out of the car in front of my hotel in Springdale, I understood that the advice was good. Springdale truly is a refreshing oasis. Canyon walls shield the valley in which it is located from the heat. Each hotel and house is surrounded with well-watered greenery, which provides shade and gives the air a refreshing scent. Nevertheless, preparing for the next day’s hike in the canyon I kept the ice box for a little cooler bag I carried with me to store my bottle of water (an absolute must for every-



one who hikes in the desert area) in the freezer all night.

The scenic drive on a shuttle bus convinced me that Zion truly is an exceptional place, but the moment I set out on a riverside walk along a paved, though a bit crowded path, I knew I had to stay longer. While it was a nice experience to inhale the fragrant mixture of hot air with the scent of trees and bushes, all cooled down by the vapor from the river flowing on the side, leaving the crowds behind and wading in the brisk current of the Virgin River at the end of the path was just unsurpassable.

This part of the hike is called the Narrows Bottom-Up hike and it can take from 4 to 10 hours. A walking stick is a must as you have to navigate the river. Those who plan the hike in advance come well-equipped not only with the sticks but with boots that have sticky soles. This is advisable as the river current is sometimes strong and the rocks can be slippery. Most often you wade in the knee or ankle-deep water, but there are deeper pools and you can end up in water up to your waist or chest.

The most scenic part of the hike is just above the junction with Oderville Canyon, which is the narrowest section where the walls squeeze to 25-30 feet wide. This is called “Wall Street”.

Knowing that a wrong step may cost me not only a wet lunch but worse still a dripping camera (not waterproof) with a thousand photos taken so far and not to be repeated, I was on alert throughout the hike. There were a few close shaves when my improperly shoed leg slipped dangerously on an invisible yet slippery pebble on the river bed, or my too short stick could not keep straight in the swift current, but I was lucky. There wasn’t much that could beat the experience of the high canyon walls narrowing so much that you felt you could touch them, if you stretched your arms. There you hardly see the sky above your head. The play of colors, bright sun rays filtering through slits among the rocks, the grey rocks that envelop you along the way, their lower part sometimes mossy green indicating changing water levels, the blueness of deeper ponds – a keep off warning sign - all make the trip unforgettable. What I enjoyed even more was a perfect temperature balance that your body gets on this hike. While the heat of the sun descends from above, you wade across the river from side to side and the coldness of water keeps you cool so that you never feel uncomfortable.



Photos © Božena Pilat

Activity Page

Exercise 1

Animal life in Zion National Park is numerous: 75 species of mammals, 291 birds, 32 reptiles and amphibians, and 6 native fish. Commonly seen animals include mule deer and lizards, while rare species include the peregrine falcon, Mexican spotted owl, southwest willow flycatcher, desert tortoise, and Zion snail. Read the dictionary definitions of some of the above mentioned animals and decide which ones they refer to:

- A powerful bird breeding chiefly on mountains and coastal cliffs.
- A nocturnal bird of prey with large forward-facing eyes surrounded by facial disks, a hooked beak and typically a loud call.
- A reptile that typically has a long body and tail, four legs, movable eyelids, and a rough skin.

(on the basis of The New Oxford American Dictionary)



Above: Four-year-old Trent crawls around the backyard with Tracy, his family's new desert tortoise, which they adopted through an Arizona Game and Fish program.

Right: A peregrine falcon takes a protective stance over one of her two chicks.

Photos © AP Images



Exercise Key: http://hungary.usembassy.gov/quiz_key.html

Zoom is available online at

<http://hungary.usembassy.gov/zoom.html>

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Exercise 2

Work in groups of 4-5 students.

Look at the map of Utah on which its major national parks are marked. Each student should choose a park and find some information about it in an encyclopedia, a reference book, or on the Internet, then present the chosen park to the other students in the group.

If you have Internet access, illustrate your presentation with photos and videos!

(map source: www.nps.gov/state/ut/index.htm)

