GRAND TOUR

Exploring the Southwest

At least once in your life, you should visit certain places. The Southwest is one of them. Join Sunset on a 10-day tour of red rock wonders in Zion, Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon, and beyond.

By Matthew Jaffe • Photographs by Owen Kail
I could live a thousand years and never grow tired of sunset on sandstone. Colors invisible under noon's hot light emerge as reds fleeting as flames, the ancient rock transforming by the second, before darkness takes hold of the day.

My friend Tom and I have nailed it, catching the last light at Valley of Fire State Park near Las Vegas. We're barely an hour out of a casino, where we watched the false sky on the ceiling progress from hot pink to deep purple as it mimicked the changing desert day. Now we're seeing the real deal—sunset perhaps, but the beginning of a 1,050-mile loop into the heart of the Southwest.

If you were going to choose one drive to capture the West, this journey into the Colorado Plateau might be it. For Tom and me, the drive into this epic terrain, home to such American shrines as the Grand Canyon and Zion, is the ultimate road trip. Our route takes in four national parks and nearly a dozen national monuments, recreation areas, and state parks; it ranges 10,000 feet in elevation, from desert to above timberline.

Along the way we'll meet cowboys and Navajos. We'll follow mountain-lion tracks and watch from remote plateaus as distant puffs of cloud build into towering thunderheads. And so we drive, usually hundreds of miles a day, seeking the right place at the right moment—like this Nevada sunset. Because, as Tom likes to say, "Now is now."

Las Vegas to Bryce Canyon

From Las Vegas, we head northeast on Interstate 15, making a brief stop to view Zion National Park's Kolob Canyons. At Parowan we break away onto the two-lane roads that are to be the essence of this journey. Cottonwood seeds drift through the truck's windows as we head up the 15 percent grade on Utah 143 toward Brian Head. Aspen trees, green with their new spring leaves, marble the spruce forest. Atop 11,307-foot Brian Head Peak, we look southeast over the Colorado Plateau. The torn cliffs of Cedar Breaks National Monument create a splash of red in the foreground. The Paunsaugunt Plateau stretches to the horizon, its most famous landmark, Bryce Canyon National Park, concealed to the east.

At Bryce, Tom and I take the 8-mile hike that starts from Sunrise Point. While the Grand Canyon and Zion have an almost divine grandeur, Bryce feels more mercurial. Instead of formal, templelike bluffs, the forces of erosion have produced a complex of towers and turrets. The Paiute Indians thought that these hoodoos were humanlike creatures turned to stone by an angry coyote god. Despite the fierceness of its creation legend, Bryce is burdened with cutey place names more appropriate to Disneyland: the hike we're taking is the Fairyland Loop.

To be fair, this dreamlike labyrinth of color and shape is not the easiest place to put into words. When asked what Bryce was like, early settler Claude Sudweeks kept it simple: "Oh, just a hole in the ground—but you should see it."
Bryce Canyon
to Capitol Reef

Few places in the
United States remain
as wild as the Colo-
rado Plateau; few
have resisted settle-
ment for so long.
We take Utah 12 east from Bryce
toward Escalante, Utah—a town of
818 residents that sits at the northern
boundary of Grand Staircase-Escalante
National Monument. This is one of the
most isolated pockets of the United
States, so secluded that the nearby
Escalante River was one of the last
rivers mapped in the Lower 48 states.
And yet isolation can be liberating—as I found out when I talked to
furniture maker David Delthony and his
artist wife, Brigitte. A few years
back, while on a Southwest vacation,
this couple from Berlin passed
through Escalante. On a whim, they
brought an old sawmill as an invest-
ment. The next year they returned,
camped on their property, and began to think
that they could make the improbable move to Escalante
from a world capital of more than 3 million.

Says Brigitte, “It was almost like moving to
the moon. It was challenging to do all at once. And
although I haven’t totally figured out what it was
all about, I do feel that it was destiny for me.”

Chain-sawed, shaped, and sanded from laminated
wood, David’s pieces, with their flowing lines, recall
the contours of the Escalante region’s eroded sand-
stone formations and canyons. “The visual language of
my work fits perfectly with the countryside,” he says.

An art therapist who works primarily with clay,
Brigitte also finds inspiration in her natural
surroundings. “I just don’t know,” she says, “how an artist can
make a better sculpture than what is already here.”

That is one of this country’s secrets: the way, in un-
named side canyons, moments of perfection play out
for neither artists nor writers, but just because.

Not far from Escalante, Calf Creek is one of hun-
dreds of streams on the plateau whose flow eventually
makes it to the Colorado River. Tom and I hike along
the creek. Ponds created by beaver dams reflect the
banded cliffs, while brown trout swim in place,
pointed upstream and working lazily against the cur-
rent. The sound of rushing water builds, and as we
round a bend, Lower Calf Creek Falls comes into view.

Capitol Reef to Bluff, Utah

It’s strange how in a place where
the Earth’s processes are most evi-
dent, I look toward outer space for
a point of comparison. Such is the
case with the Waterpocket Fold, the 100-mile-long
gash that runs through Capitol Reef National Park.
Viewing it from the Strike Valley Overlook, I can’t
shake the idea that I have seen it before—but as some
anonymous planet of childhood sci-fi imaginings.

Rumbling south on the Notom-Bullfrog Road tow-
ard Lake Powell, there are no other cars in sight for
30 miles, just triangular formations, jagged as Cadillac
tail fins. The road is beautiful but trying. We are coated
in a layer of pale red dust, the fine, almost aerosol
remains of the layers of landscape we pass through.

Then, beyond a ripple of coral pink dunes,
improbably—impossibly—blue Lake Powell spreads
out where the Colorado River once flowed through
the desert. Dotted with jet skiers and houseboats, the
lake’s surface reflects the sun off a million facets,
and we drink in the breeze as we make the 25-minute
car-ferry passage from Bullfrog to Halls Crossing.

Our destination for the night is Bluff, Utah, the
town founded by a group of Mormons known as
the Hole-in-the-Rock Expedition. Sent by church
leaders to settle southeastern Utah, the group earned
its moniker by lowering wagons, animals, supplies,
and people 40 feet through a tiny gap in the sheer
cliffs above the Colorado River. They finally called it
Bluff, where Bluff now stands.

In this isolated part of the world, Bluff makes a
comforting home away from home—with the Cow
Canyon Trading Post and Restaurant in town.
Liza Doran and her husband, Jim Ostler, opened the
store in 1986, then started a restaurant a year later.
The moment you enter, you notice the quality of
the pottery, basketry, rugs, and jewelry, most crafted
by the Zuni and Navajo peoples of the Colorado Plateau.
“Where do we go here is the mix of cultures,”
Doran tells us. “It’s part of the sense of place.”

That sense of place extends to the restaurant’s
menu too. While the climate makes it impossible to
grow some types of produce, Doran does cultivate
herbs, tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants, and she keeps
the menu selections simple.

“I have to drive three hours to get romaine lettuce,
so if I don’t have an ingredient, I just deal with it,”
she says. “I’ll go out in the yard and work with what’s
there. It’s like Ruby Warren, a Navajo woman who
works at the restaurant. She can make spanakopita or
overhaul your truck. You learn to be resourceful
around here.”
Bluff, Utah, to Grand Canyon

From Bluff, we slide southwest into Arizona, past worthy detours: Goosenecks State Park and Valley of the Gods. Then the carmine mesas of Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park rise into view.

For generations of moviegoers, this is the American West. John Ford directed the film Stagecoach here in 1939, then followed it with My Darling Clementine and The Searchers. But for its Navajo inhabitants, the valley is no mere movie set. It is home. To spend time here is to suspend yourself between myth and reality in a way impossible anywhere else.

Not far away is another reminder of the deep roots of civilization in this land: Navajo National Monument, its Ancestral Puebloan dwellings worth the 5-mile hike it takes to see them up close. Then we veer northwest to Page, Arizona.

In Page, old West and new collide. The John Wesley Powell museum celebrates the man who led the first expedition down a wild Colorado River. Today, the Colorado has been tamed by the Glen Canyon Dam. The dam's curving white face rises 710 feet; beside it, high-tension power-line towers, looking like gigantic Hopi kaisina dolls, march across the desert to carry electricity to Phoenix and beyond.

Back on the road, we begin the drive to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Tom suggests a side trip to Vermilion Cliffs National Monument. He wants to see the observation station for the California condors; wildlife biologists have periodically released birds into this area since 1996.

It's getting late, so I veto the detour. "You know," I say, "I'm always in places where there are supposed to be condors, and I've never seen one. Not one."

By the time we reach the deck at the Grand Canyon Lodge, the air has taken on an energizing chill. There's a palpable serenity as people from all over the globe settle into the rough-hewn chairs to ponder the view of the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Heaven should be so mellow—and also serve cold beer.

Out on the Transept Trail, we edge along one of the rocky peninsulas that reach into the canyon's emptiness. We pause when a bird soars overhead, 20 feet above us. A huge bird, a primordial winged thing, with a bare pinkish head and white markings along the undersides of its wings. Apparently—but not definitively—a condor.

And so, on our way back home, we debate whether or not this beast of the skies was in fact a condor. In the end, we reach no conclusion, which is fine. Traveling through the red rocks and the rainbow canyons, you make a journey that is about potential, into a land still wild enough for a condor and empty enough to hold all your imaginings. "Now is now," my friend Tom says. And on this road, you never know what now will bring next. •
Southwest Grand Tour

Take the ultimate road trip through the West’s red rock wonderland.

Our Southwest Grand Tour leads from Las Vegas into the canyons and mesa that form the magnificent heart of the Colorado Plateau. Here you will find some of the best-known natural wonders anywhere in the world, including Zion, Bryce Canyon, and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Parks. But there are fewer crowds, and Las Vegas’ glitz and glamour are left behind as you embark on this 12-day trip that covers over 2,500 miles at moderate pace. 

With their array of nearby services, the national parks provide the stopovers along the way you’ll probably want to see in a day or two. The trip described in this story took us 10 days to complete, but we could easily have lingered longer. (For a four-day version, see our “Southwest Getaway” below right.) Except where noted, the entire drive took place on two-lane roads of the interstate.

Southwest essentials

Buy a car rental with over 100 per vehicle at the major national parks, consider a National Parks Pass ($50), a pass that covers all national parks, monuments, and recreation areas for one year for both first vehicle, www.nps.gov/crpr or purchase at any travel agent. 

Do your driving midweek. Plan to get your destinations in time to enjoy the dramatic light of morning or early afternoon. 

Pay attention to conditions. Weather is fickle, especially depending on elevation, which ranges from more than 11,000 feet in Zion to just a few hundred feet in Las Vegas. Spring and fall have the reliably temperate weather, at least at the lower elevations. 

Plan meals. Destinations are widely spaced. Make sure you keep your gas tank full and carry extra water and food in case you have problems.

Call for road conditions. National (888) 656-9721, Nevada (702) 385-8000, Utah (801) 223-2200.

Las Vegas

Frequent flights from just about anywhere make this a natural place to start your grand tour. Nearby attractions include the Valley of Fire State Park (702/333-9000) just west of town for two miles to Ladoga, which has some of the best views. 

Exploration of the Nevada desert is a must-do activity. 

Zion National Park

Zions towering red sandstone formations will be in your mind from now on. Begins with a scenic drive through Zion Canyon, where you’ll see some of the best rock formations in the country. For a different perspective, the 9-mile Timberline Trail to the summit of the park is a worthwhile outing. 

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Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument

The rock climbing, hiking, and scenic drives through the monoliths of the Southwest are some of the best in the country. 

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Great detours

Cedar Breaks National Monument
Reachable via Utah 148, this 10,662-foot limestone amphitheater is one of the highest points on the drive. Accessible by car from Memorial Day into October, www.nps.gov/cbr or (435) 586-9451.

Kodachrome Basin State Park
Brilliantly photographtable scenery earned this park its name back in the 1930s. The turnover is at Cannonville, Utah. (435) 679-8562.

Capitol Reef National Park
Our route runs along the park’s lower part, but to see its main arches and cliffs, go north 34 miles on the partly unpaved Notom-Bullfrog Road from the junction with the Burr Trail Road. www.nps.gov/cr or (435) 425-3791.

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area
Lake Powell boat tours run from Wahweap or Bullfrog Marina to Rainbow Bridge National Monument. There are also 15-mile mellow Colorado River raft trips from Glen Canyon Dam to Lees Ferry. www.nps.gov/glca or (928) 608-6404.

Natural Bridges National Monument
The monument’s three bridges can be visited on a 9-mile drive. 40 miles west of Blanding on Utah 95, take Utah 275 to the end. www.nps.gov/nabr or (435) 692-1234.

Valley of the Gods
Located 12 miles southwest of Bluff off Utah 163, a rough, 17-mile road takes you into a landscape similar to Monument Valley. (435) 587-1500.

Goosenecks State Park
Stunning overlook of the San Juan River canyon. From Utah 261, take Utah 316 about 3 miles to parking. (435) 578-2238.

Navajo National Monument
Betatakin Ruins is accessible on ranger-led 5-mile round-trip tours. Trips run once a day from late May through September and are first come, first served; try to be at the monument by 7:30 a.m. From U.S. 160, take Arizona 564 9 miles north. www.nps.gov/nava or (928) 672-2700.

Antelope Canyon
Navajo Tribal Park
Two beautiful canyons actually: The lower canyon demands rock scrambling. The upper canyon is easier to explore but requires a guided tour (around $27). Don’t miss the John Wesley Powell Memorial Museum (closed Sun; $2; 6 N. Lake Powell Blvd., Page; www.powellmuseum.org or 928/645-9496). Antelope Canyon entrance on Arizona 98 about 3 miles east of Page, $6 per person park entry, (928) 698-2808 or www.navajonationparks.org

Vermilion Cliffs National Monument
Within vivid sandstone cliffs, Paria Canyon offers good hiking (call for a permit); also visit the site where California condors have been released. (435) 688-3200.

Travel Resources
Dixie National Forest: www.fs.fed.us/dfsvi or (435) 865-3200.
Garfield County Travel Council: www.kayakeccanyon.co or (800) 444-6669.
Grand Circle Association: www.grandcircle.org or (888) 254-7263.
Kaibab National Forest: www.fs.fed.us/r1 or (928) 643-7395.
Lake Powell Resorts & Marinas: www.lakepowell.com or (800) 528-6154.
Page-Lake Powell Chamber of Commerce: www.pagepowellchamber.org or (928) 645-2741.
San Juan County Multi-Agency Visitor Center: (800) 574-4396 or www.southwestutah.com.
Utah Travel Council: www.utah.com or (800) 538-1030.
Lake Powell Ferry: For schedule, call Bullfrog Ranger Station (435) 694-7400 or visit the ferry website (www.nps.gov/glca/shuttle.htm).

Eat and sleep

Grand Canyon National Park, North Rim
With no nearby towns, lodging and dining choices are limited, so plan ahead.

Grand Canyon Lodge. Designed by Gilbert Stanley Underwood, the lodge is a nationa-park classic. It offers vintage cabins and some motel-style rooms. From $87. www.grandcanyonnorthish. com or (888) 297-2757.
Reservations are required for dinner and recommended for other meals at the lodge’s spectacular dining room. (928) 638-2611 ext. 160.

Jacob Lake Inn. Motel rooms, rustic cabins, and a dependable restaurant 45 miles from rim. From $25. www.jacoblake.com or (928) 643-7232.


Grand Canyon National Park, South Rim
The South Rim gets most of the park’s annual 4 million visitors, which means in-park lodging should be booked in advance (888/297-2757 or www.grandcanyonlodges.com). In-park options include: Bright Angel Lodge. These rustic, cabinlike lodgings were designed by famed architect Mary Colter. From $56.
El Tovar. Wonderful 78-room canyon-rim lodge was built in 1905; a must-see even if you don’t stay here. From $124.
Maswik Lodge. Modern motel units. From $63.
Yavapai Lodge. Large motel complex. From $90.
You’ll find other motels south of the park in Tusayan and more in Williams and Flagstaff, 60 and 80 miles south, respectively.