

MOAB, Utah—There is so much to see in the relatively compact Arches National Park that a friend of mine says: “You always have to be looking in six directions.”

The park sits atop an underground salt bed, which is the basis for the arches, spires, monoliths and other formations that compete for a visitor’s attention in all directions. They were formed as the rock debris left behind by receding oceans put pressure on the salt below and pressured the salt into the unique shapes, usually domes. Then came the wind and ice and extreme temperatures to finish the sculpting. The arches were created when sections of the domes dropped out and left cavities that are today’s visual wonders. The Colorado River forms the park’s southern boundary on the way to another—and different—geologic wonder, Canyonlands.

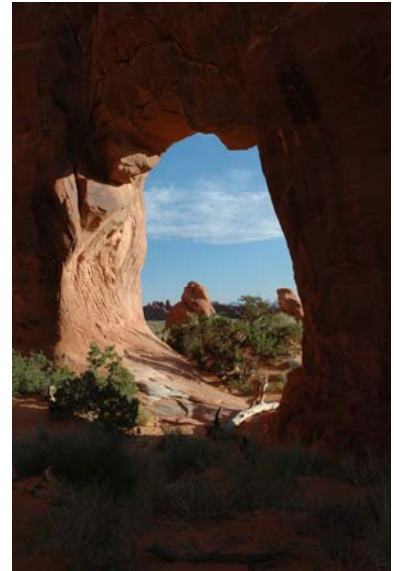
At first glance in Arches National Park, you will be taken by the colors and then the vistas and then the shapes—and this is just within two miles of entering the park that occupies 118 square miles just north of Moab, which was named by Mormons after the biblical land that was just next to the Promised Land. At two miles, you haven’t even seen any arches yet.

You can drive from the entrance 18 miles to the end of the park, stop at all viewpoints for 10 minutes and take two side roads in 4.5 hours. But a drive-by tour of this park would be a mistake. Given that so many of the arches are within a mile of any stopping place, it is worth the time to walk to the accessible ones. (Some arches are off limits.)

Make sure you’re wearing your most rugged walking shoes. There are trails, but they respect the contours of the land and where the National Park Service has put in steps, the rises can be bone-jarringly inconsistent and can slow you down. Take your time; don’t push yourself too hard even if you’re feeling vigorous. Conserve your energy. Carry water for your walk and pack snacks because there are no restaurants in the park, just restrooms.

However, campsites for tents, recreational vehicles and trailers can be rented for \$10 a night. They struck me as good places to spend a few days and get to know the park at your leisure, perhaps even by bicycle. Tables, grills, water and flush toilets are available, but campers must bring their own charcoal. Wood-gathering is not allowed. Some sites require reservations; others are doled out on a first-come, first-served basis and the best way to find out is to check www.nps.gov/arch or call 1.435.719.2299.

With a population of 8,000 Moab is a manageable town. It’s geared toward tourists so there are plenty of hotels and restaurants, stores that sell southwestern items such as kokopellis (whose flute playing supposedly brings rain), and friendly people. Although Utah is a very conservative state, we learned that you may have a waiter re-cork your



unfinished bottle of wine and take it with you. (I did not see any unfinished bottles of wine, however.)

The park's visitor centre is worth taking the time to go through. If you ask, a ranger will show you a 15-minute film that explains how the park was formed. Ask. Visitors learn a lot about geology and biology and how fragile the biology is and why you must not go off designated trails. The film will help you understand how the arches were formed, a process that continues today as some erode or collapse and others slowly appear. (The last dramatic change occurred in 1991 when a slab of rock about 18 meters long and 3.3 meters wide dropped for the underside of Landscape Arch.)



Starting near the entry point, visitors can walk through Park Avenue and enjoy Courthouse Towers, Three Gossips, the Organ, Tower of Babel and Sheep Rock. Back in the car, the next viewpoint is Petrified Dunes followed by Balanced Rock. There are viewpoints for Salt Valley and Fiery Furnace. The road ultimately turns around at Devil's Garden, where you can walk to see

Tunnel, Pine Tree, Landscape and other arches that are about 7 kilometers away on rocky footing.

The most prominent formation of them all is Delicate Arch, which you can see up close and personal by walking 4.8 kilometers and gradually rising 146 meters without any shade. The National Park Service says this trip is best at sunset. We took the shorter 1.2 kilometer trail, which the Park Service says is easy with some loose sand. We found not only sand, but a change in elevation and rocks and an OK view. We will do the longer trail on our next trip. The longest hike in the park, by the way, is 6.8 kilometers to Double O Arch near Devil's Garden. The next longest is 5.5 kilometers to Tower Arch. Both have sand and elevation changes, which add to the challenge.

For me, the undesignated formations were the real treat. Walking out to Pine Tree Arch, I saw three rocky lumps side by side. They looked like submarines tethered to each other at a dock. Another unnamed formation looks like the Sphinx. Elsewhere, visitors can see what they might mistake for petroglyphs intentionally done by humans until they get close and see it is the random handiwork of nature.

The sun, of course, is a major determinant on when you visit the park. Since the park is at 1500 meters, you're closer to the sun and more susceptible to burning. When my wife and I visited in July, we toured the park in the late afternoon and the early morning. When we returned in November, we got a late start and I feared that I would not have good light for taking photographs and that sunburn would be an issue. Actually, windburn turned out to be more of a concern.

In fact, the mid-day November sun cast shadows that revealed cleavages in formations that were otherwise hidden from the naked eye. An early morning light trick on a formation in Arches outlined a shadow deer that would not be there later. On the other hand, we could not see Landscape Arch from a distance because it was in the shadow of a mesa.

The park not only stimulates, but over-stimulates. Any half-serious photographer would want to tour Arches over a period of months just to shoot in the changing light of day and the changing seasons of the year.

On my first visit, I got so frustrated driving then stopping to take photographs that I turned the wheel over to my wife, opened our sunroof and poked myself with camera out the top. She drove and I just kept taking photographs in six directions.



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