



Get your rocks off

Swapping peak summer for off-season means clients will have Utah's superlative national parks and ski fields almost to themselves, says **Mike MacEacheran**

Outside Moab, Dead Horse State Park is a place of stories bound in stone. The name fits for its scale-defying ridges and high desert mesas on which cowboys once corralled wild mustangs. Legend says many of the animals died of dehydration, with only the hardiest steeds cherry-picked for cattle-herding, but I'm here when there is no blazing sun or blinding sky. Instead, there is only soft light, it is bitterly cold and snow lingers on the ground.

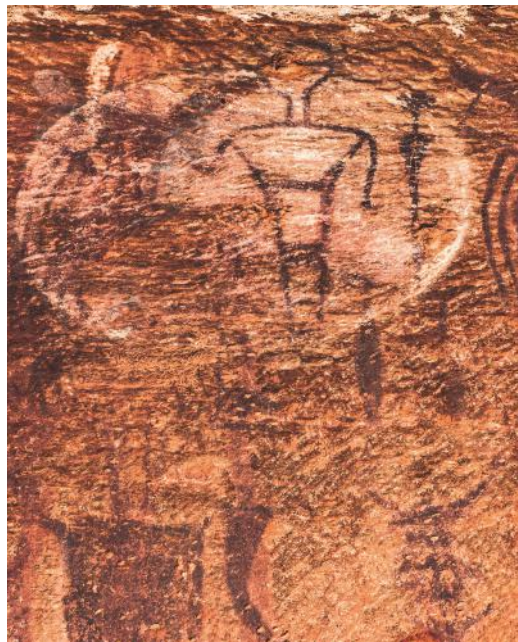
I'm on a canyon rim hike overlooking a looping bend of the Colorado River and I feel like I have all of southern Utah's table lands to myself. Far quieter than it is in summer, Utah's red rock desert empties in winter and spring, and off-season visits have ➤

Partition, Arch, Arches National Park, Utah

PICTURE: Shutterstock/LHBLLC

DESTINATIONS

THE US | UTAH



WIN A PLACE ON A FAM TRIP TO UTAH

The **Utah Office of Tourism** is encouraging travel agents to boost their knowledge of the state's dramatic landscapes via the new Utah Specialist Academy. Travel advisors who complete the Utah Specialist Academy course by the end of September will be entered in a draw to win a place on a fam trip to Utah in spring 2024. For more information and to register for the academy, visit: visitutahspecialistacademy.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Canyonlands National Park; pictographs, Arches National Park; Dead Horse Point State Park; viewpoint above the Colorado River PICTURES: Shutterstock/Injphotos, Abbie Warnock-Matthews; Shawn Mitchell; canadastock; Adam Wilding

been increasing in recent years. It's helping to reduce overtourism and lessen the pressure on national and state park infrastructure, but also to make the wilderness experience more sustainable. Crucially, it's more memorable and more personal too.

INDIGENOUS LEGACY

What draws me to these places of old stones and burial ground bones is not just the dizzying views of tombstone pillars from precipitous cliff edges, but also the terrific tales of Indigenous Americans who once thrived on the Colorado Plateau.

Utah owes its name to the Ute Indian warriors who lived in the area more than 700 years ago, and their story is depicted on canyon walls like Crayola graffiti. At Arches National Park, where a pre-booked timed entry ticketing system is now in place from April 1 to October 31 in response to surging visitor numbers, pictographs and petroglyphs of horses, bighorn sheep and hunter-gatherers are etched into millennia-old rock.

Despite the cold, there is wildlife by the ark-load too: desert cottontails, gopher snakes and kangaroo

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rats scurry and slither throughout the day, while hawks, eagles and ruddy-faced turkey vultures circle on the thermals above.

ROCK SOLID

On another morning, I take a bone-gnawing sunrise hike to Delicate Arch. Through a landscape that feels abandoned, fantasy rock stacks appear out of the dark as the ascending sun takes over from torch beams. In the light, there are only a handful of other visitors – a world apart from the coach-load crush so commonly experienced at America's epic parks in July and August – and the impact is profound. The luxury is seeing giant rock altars and golden bridges in silence, in the company only of shadows. There are sugarloaf nuggets, Biblical domes, ghostly hoodoos, schools of knife-edge shark fins – freaks of geology, every one. It is terrain that appears to disintegrate inwards upon itself.

Another major hook: Americans love a movie location, and southern Utah is one huge backlot. Arches National Park cast a spell on Steven Spielberg (I wander through the opening scene of *Indiana Jones* ➤



FROM LEFT: Powder Mountain ski resort; Snowbird Ski Resort in the Wasatch Mountains PICTURES: Shutterstock/jenny, Abbie Warnock-Matthews

and the *Last Crusade* at Double Arch later the same day) and the geological waltz of rock and river has inspired plenty of others. Tom Cruise, John Wayne and, in *Thelma and Louise*, Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis all battled mortality in Dead Horse State Park. Just a few miles away, Canyonlands National Park is where back country canyoneer Aron Ralston, played by James Franco in *127 Hours*, amputated his right arm with a penknife.

SNOWY PEAKS

Four hours away, the peaks of the Wasatch Range offer another winter high. The reward for an off-season visit is the opportunity to combine the awe felt when road-tripping through empty deserts with snow adventures on mountains that slip away towards the horizons of Idaho and Wyoming.

I'm not here alone – northern Utah experienced record snowfall this year – but with heavy flurries arriving every evening, it isn't hard to feel as if I'm in a world newborn every day. Near the town of Huntsville, the one-street resort of Powder Mountain is North America's largest ski area, yet one that is also framed by pistes falling away through woodland glades free of other skiers. At Snowbird and Sundance Resort, both to the east of Salt Lake City, I love the feeling of riding the lifts solo. In midweek, I find myself wonderfully alone.

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Come to Utah at the same time as everyone else and it'd be a travesty to miss all this calm. All this space. All this undisturbed excitement. Drop the temperatures and remove the crowds, and the state's empty landscapes formed by wind, rain, freeze and thaw seem like a new discovery. Wrap up warm and make yourself at home. **TV**

BOOK IT

America As You Like It has an 11-night Dark Skies and Winter Highs fly-drive from £2,740 per person, based on two sharing, including flights with Delta from Heathrow to Salt Lake City in March 2024, fully inclusive car hire, four nights at the Element Salt Lake City Downtown, three nights at the Compass Rose in Huntsville and four nights at the Hoodoo in Moab. americaasyoulikeit.com

Ski Independence offers a 13-night winter road trip itinerary exploring Utah's dark skies and winter highlights from £3,969 per person, based on two sharing. Price includes direct flights with Delta Air Lines, 13 days' intermediate SUV car rental, three nights at Le Méridien Salt Lake City Downtown, three nights' B&B at the Compass Rose Lodge in Huntsville, two nights in a Sundance Suite at Sundance Mountain Resort and five nights' B&B at the Hyatt Place in Moab. ski-i.com