

A photograph of Bryce Canyon National Park in winter. The scene is dominated by numerous hoodoos, which are tall, thin rock spires, covered in patches of snow. The lighting is warm, suggesting a low sun, which casts long shadows and highlights the textures of the rock. In the background, a canyon amphitheater is visible, with its tiered rock walls also partially covered in snow. The overall atmosphere is serene and majestic.

# Southern Utah Parks

*Fresh Snow in the Bryce Canyon Amphitheater*



Wallace Stegner once wrote “National parks are the best idea we ever had.” This quote is sometimes discussed and debated, but there can be no doubt that the five national parks running southwest to northeast across southern Utah are a very good idea.

We’re going to take a photography road trip through these parks and see some of the best spots for images. The parks lie roughly in a straight line running 200 miles, each about 50 to 75 miles apart, in this order from the southwest:

- Zion
- Bryce
- Capitol Reef
- Canyonlands
- Arches

But before we get to images let’s cover some trip logistics. The closest major airports to these parks are in Salt Lake City, about 250 miles from Zion or Arches, and Las Vegas, about 150 miles from Zion. There are park lodges inside Zion and Bryce. Canyonlands is a bit lonely, but the other parks all have a variety of motels and places to eat near their entrances. Zion (nearby towns of Hurricane and Springdale) and Arches (nearby town of Moab) have the most choices. At Arches, pick a motel near the north end of

Moab to reduce the long driving times in and out of this park.

All these parks can be visited and photographed in all four seasons, but there are both photographic and travel matters to consider. Some of the most striking images have been made in winter, but snow can cause travel problems. At 8,000 feet in elevation Bryce will most likely be very cold. Summers will be very hot and crowded. There may be brilliant fall color from mid-October to mid-November. Think through your timing carefully.

### Zion

On to the parks! First up is **Zion**. The core of this park is a long, deep canyon formed by the Virgin River and perhaps best known for the Zion Narrows. Many impressive images have been made in the narrows, and good photographic spots can be reached quickly from the trailhead at the end of the shuttle bus route. But you will get wet at least up to your knees, so unless you are there on a hot summer day rent a dry suit at one of the outfitters in Springdale. You will need a tripod to use slow shutter speeds that will give the Virgin River its best look. The yellow and occasional red leaves on the trees in early November will add nice highlights.



By Peter Scifres, GPSA

Photos ©  
Peter Scifres, GPSA



Mesa Arch in Canyonlands National Park





A Crow Enjoys a View of Delicate Arch in Arches National Park



Sunrise from Dead Horse Point

In Zion there are a few “grand landscape” shots, especially of The Watchman at sunset from one of the bridges over the river, and the Towers of the Virgin, from behind the Human History Museum at sunrise. Nice detail images are possible at the Emerald Pools, and stunning views of the canyon can be seen from the top of Angels Landing. I have had a lot of fun hiking across the Checkerboard Mesa area and looking for images with colorful ripples in the foreground.

### **Bryce Canyon**

Bryce Canyon is one of the smallest national parks and basically consists of a large amphitheater filled with colorful, striped hoodoos. Sunrise here on a clear morning can be a life-altering experience! If you can manage to be here after a fresh snow, better yet. There are several well marked overlook points that are easy to get to and photograph from. In addition to images of the entire amphitheater, don't forget close ups with your 70-200 lens of the individual hoodoos.

### **Capitol Reef**

Right in the middle of our road trip lies Capitol Reef. Although a wonderful park, it lacks a singular iconic location the other parks are known for and unfortunately can get passed over. There are many exciting hikes and colorful rock formations in this park such as The Castle, Chimney Rock, and Twin Rocks. If you can, try to hold out for a day with a dramatic sky, which will be more common in the summer.





*Deep in the Zion Narrows a Hiker Makes Their Way Up The Virgin River*

## Canyonlands

Canyonlands is known for its magnificent overlooks and Mesa Arch. Both broad landscape sunrise and sunset images can be made of the former depending on your location. A creative decision you will have to make is do you go for first/last light, or when the broad canyons below you are mostly lit, either after or before best light. Light will be harsher if the bottom areas are lit but the image will likely be more interesting. As at Capitol Reef a nice sky is important. The most iconic overlook image is actually in adjacent Dead Horse Point State Park at Dead Horse Point. This one is more of a sunrise shot but could also be done at sunset. Within Canyonlands itself try the Green River Overlook and the Grand View Point Overlook.

Mesa Arch at sunrise is an iconic southwest location. The area in front of the arch is small and it can be very crowded, so try it mid-week and not in September or October. No matter what time of year, get to the trailhead a full hour ahead of official sunrise to be sure you get a good spot for your tripod. You will be aiming into the rising sun and most likely will want to come home with an HDR sequence. Most photographers will want at least one image with a classic sun star, so set your camera to F22 and partially block the rising sun with either the distant ridgeline or the inside top of the arch. Shoot an HDR sequence being sure to have one image—the brightest—with the histogram pulled



*Fall Color in the Zion Narrows*

well away from the left side and one image—the darkest—with the histogram pulled well away from the right side.

## Arches

Our last stop is **Arches**. The park service's website says there are over 2,000 arches in this park! Like Zion, road-wise it's a long, linear park with a single road running in this case roughly south-north, and it will take at least 45 minutes with no stops to drive from the visitor's center near Moab to the north end. There is a lot to

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*Bryce Canyon Amphitheater at Sunrise*



*Turret Arch Through North Window Arch Under A Near Full Moon*



photograph here so allow a few days. Because of the large number of photography locations, I would consider buying a very good book—*Photographing Arches National Park* by Bret Edge—to help you make your choices.

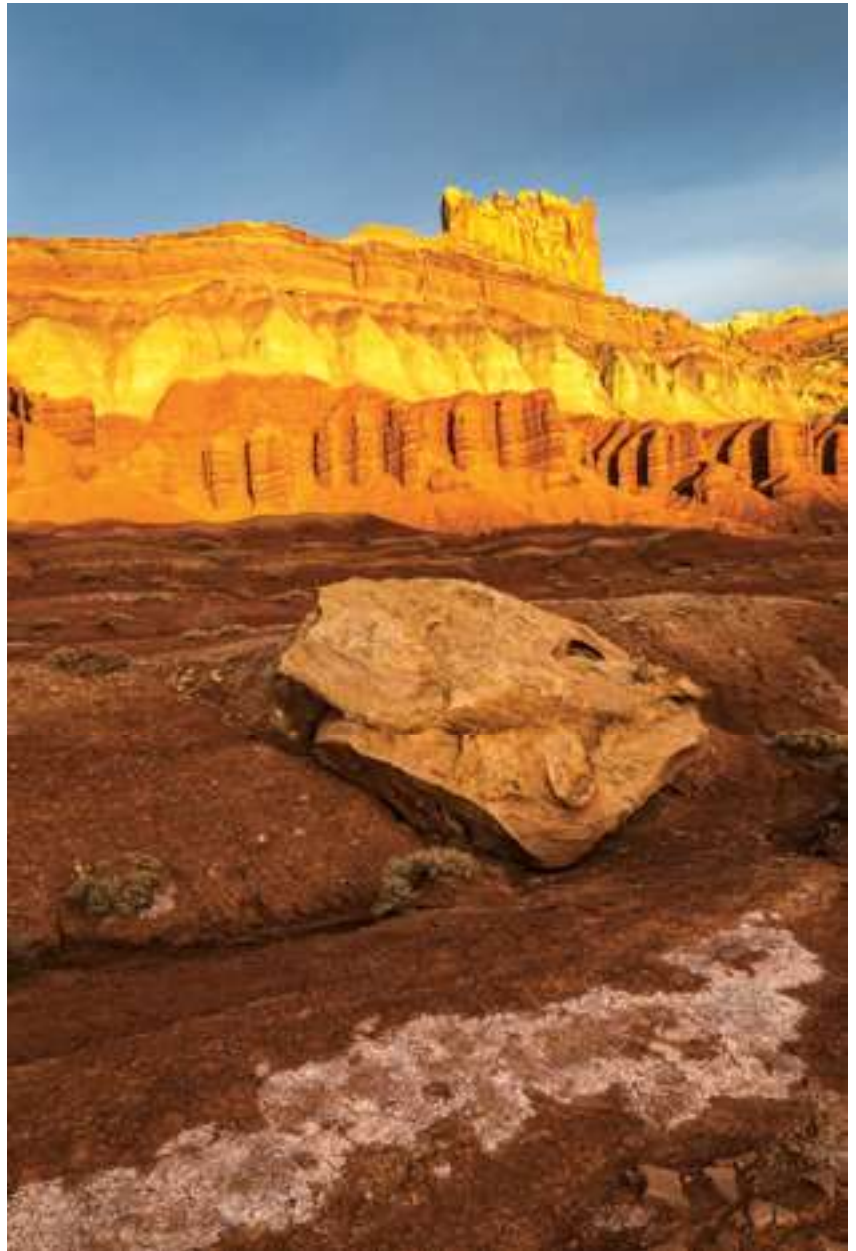
Delicate Arch is the most famous place in this park if for no other reason than it's on every license plate in Utah. Many good images have been made here, and your challenge is to come up with something a little different. The biggest issue is physical because the arch is about 2.5 uphill miles from the trailhead, and if you hold out for good evening light you will be walking back to your car in the dark. Bring a headlamp and a friend, maybe a GPS device, and look carefully at the trail on your way to the arch and you will be fine. Try to include some other element(s) in your image beside the arch such as a person. There is a very good area for more distant and less commonly shot images at Upper and Lower Delicate Arch Viewpoints.

The Windows Section is well known for sunrise images, especially Turret Arch through North Window Arch. If there is some moon out, this is also a great nighttime image, as is nearby Double Arch. I'm a big fan of Broken Arch. In addition to arches other formations such as Balanced Rock, the Three Gossips, and the Courthouse Towers are interesting image possibilities.

At Arches National Park we conclude our road trip. Get yourself (and maybe a few photography friends) to some or all of these wonderful parks, enjoy the scenery, and make images. Maybe it will be one of the best ideas you ever had. ■



*The North End of the Milky Way Looms Over Balanced Rock in Arches National Park*



*A Colorful Cliff in Capitol Reef National Park*

### **Peter Scifres, GPSA**

Pete is no stranger to the *PSA Journal*, having written several articles in the past. Pete says, "Although I had taken pictures—mostly on vacations—occasionally for most of my adult life, I didn't get serious about photography until my retirement was approaching in 2006-07. Then I bought a Canon 40D, joined the Thousand Oaks Photo Group, and took some classes at the UCLA Extension."

He enjoys photography education and has taught at a local senior center. At the Thousand Oaks Photography Group he served in a number of roles including president and field trips chair. Pete provides workshops and some occasional judging at other local camera clubs and has published two photography eBooks: *Under the Night Sky*, *Your Complete Guide to Landscape Astrophotography* and *Photographing Patagonia*. Pete can be found presenting his work at local art shows and the Ventura County Fair in California.