

# THE NATIONAL PARKS V-8 TOUR

This National Tour will visit the spectacular red rocks and canyon country of Western Colorado and Eastern Utah, with a few high mountains thrown in for additional flavor. The following is a “brief” outline of the tour that you will definitely not want to miss. There is rather a lot to see, do, and experience in this part of the world, but even with everything planned, we will hardly be scratching the surface. The timing will be in mid-September of 2019 (as shown below), driven primarily by (Moab) lodging availability, as well as the conclusion (for the year) of Ranger led tours of key Mesa Verde National Park attractions. If you want to register for the Tour, please do so early. As noted, lodging availability is tight and the information that you will need will be supplied after registration.

**Arrival Day -- Saturday, September 14:** Plan to arrive in Grand Junction today. The primary activity will be to check in and receive your Tour materials, including the formal “Tour Book”. You’ll need to know what we are doing, where we are going, as well as how to get there, so you will need the book. Plan on investing a bit of study time reading and digesting the information. In the early evening, there will be an (more or less) informal but fun meet and greet gathering --- where we can get to know each other. Why? Because we will be traveling together for the next week or so, we need to meet our traveling companions.

**Day 1 -- Sunday, September 15:** We start the Tour in the **Grand Junction, CO.** area. This will essentially be a local touring day (there is much to see and do), or maybe just kick back and relax a bit --- after the travel time to get there. Colorado National Monument, wine, and dinosaurs can all make a claim on your time, not to mention the highest flat top mountain in the world. The Grand Valley (especially the Palisade area) has developed into a major grape growing and wine making area (18 wineries are in the immediate vicinity), with plenty of tasting opportunities. Colorado National Monument (and its great 23-mile Rim Rock Drive) will be your introduction to the red rocks, sandstone, and the deep, sheer-walled canyons of the massive Colorado Plateau (which covers parts of four states). This plateau is also home to some of the other parks we will be visiting, but each is a very different experience. Dinosaurs once flourished in this area, and if you are interested, there is a very informative museum and educational/research facility available to visit. How about a very scenic drive up and over a 10,000’ flat top mountain (called a mesa in these parts), just to get started. And these are just some of the thing to see and do. Running around Grand Junction, the Grand Valley, Grand Mesa, and visiting some of the many attractions can involve up to **125 miles** of travel (or more if you really get into it).

**Day 2 -- Monday, September 16: Grand Junction, CO. to Moab, UT.** Today will primarily be a driving day, but with lots of great views appearing in front of your windshield to keep you focused and attentive. The first part of the trip involves traveling west on I-70 for approximately 70 miles. It will be a visually interesting drive with relatively light traffic and few big trucks. There are places to stop to take in the vistas. There used to be a more or less parallel alternative available, but the road (which was U.S. 6/U.S. 50) has deteriorated badly (especially in Utah) --- to the point that I would not be willing to drive even a modern vehicle on what used to be pavement. Your Club car would certainly not be happy.

The major attraction for the day will be the Colorado Riverway Recreation Area (and canyon). You will first drive over a bit of tableland, the Upper Colorado River Scenic Byway. But hang in there, because things will get really interesting as you drop down into the deep gorge of the Colorado River. This will be the Colorado River Canyon at its finest. The rugged canyon and river are fabulous, and there will be numerous places where you can stop, stretch your legs, and marvel at what you are seeing. You will enjoy and be impressed by the scenery and the drive. Red rocks, rushing water, steep canyon walls, side canyons merging into the main canyon, and blue sky --- all intermixed with open areas that can provide the long view. What more could you want? Did I mention the great drive? Grand Junction to Moab is about **130 miles** (more if you partake of some of the possible and interesting side trips).

Moab awaits and is a very interesting (used to be) small town with lots of tourist facilities and services. There are two major National Parks (Arches and Canyonlands) in the immediate vicinity, not to mention the equally impressive Dead Horse Point State Park, as well as a short, scenic drive along the river near town, which is complete with numerous petroglyphs, rock climbers, and dinosaur tracks captured in stone. How about a boat trip on the Colorado River, or back-country 4-wheel drive expeditions? Maybe a bi-plane ride over the ever-changing countryside? It is all here.

**Day 3 -- Tuesday, September 17: Moab -- Arches National Park.** Just north of town is the entrance to the park and visitors center. Arches are a visually spectacular, world famous area that you absolutely must see in person. The rugged area contains brilliantly colored natural stone arches, red rock canyons, spires, fins, massive buttes, petrified sand dunes, balancing rocks, and more. The main park roads have one set of unparalleled views after another, unfolding in a steady procession in front of you as you drive. Many of the arches are reasonably close to the road and can be viewed or visited via relatively easy short hikes. The park contains something more than 2000 arches, but most are remote, and would require some serious hiking to reach. However, a number of the more impressive and eye-filling arch formations are readily accessible from parking areas via short walks. The famous and absolutely spectacular Landscape Arch is

a bit more of a hike, but well worth the effort. You will not be disappointed visiting Arches National Park, but plan on arriving **early** (when the park opens) and spending most of the day in order to take it all in. The Park has been discovered, so expect it to be busy. This will not be a day with lots of road miles, but plan on stopping early and often.

Either today or tomorrow (depending on the time you have available and interest), you may want to take a short side trip before heading back to town. The road (also known as the Lower Colorado River Scenic Byway) runs along the north side of the Colorado River. Why would you want to do this you might ask? Because it is a very interesting drive, but perhaps not in the ways you might think. Naturally, there are close up views of the Colorado River (want to dunk your toes?), but how about petroglyphs on the sheer rock panels right beside the road? Or maybe you'd like to see rock climbers working their way up the vertical cliff faces of the canyon walls. And they start their climbs from right beside the road (the local name for this area is "Wall Street"). A bit further on is an area with dinosaur tracks frozen in the rock (somewhat near the road, but a fit of a walk is involved). The total driving distance today will probably not be more than **60 or 70 miles**, but that depends on how adventurous you want to get.

**Day 4 -- Wednesday, September 18: Moab -- Canyonlands National Park --- Islands in the Sky.** Today is another National Park, but a totally different experience than Arches. Canyonlands is huge, and is divided into three vast sections --- the Needles, the Maze, and the Islands in the Sky. We will be visiting only the latter section. It will be a lot less busy than Arches, but no less interesting --- just quite different. Canyonlands (the Islands in the Sky section we will be visiting) is also north of Moab, and you will probably be traveling about **100 miles or so** today. The route planned quickly takes you up thru deepening canyons and out of the ordinary. You will quickly learn why the park is called Canyonlands, and why the part we will be visiting is aptly named Islands in the Sky. You will be headed first to the visitor's center, and then to Grand View Point, an overlook very high above the now distant Colorado River and the fantastic (huge) canyons landscape it has formed. This entire drive will be great, and this is one place where the old saying "getting there is half the fun" is absolutely correct. Bring binoculars --- you will really need them to be able to take it all in. And there will be plenty of other places, both coming and going, to stop and savor the views. Also consider visiting the Green River Overlook (the Green River joins the Colorado River in the park), and/or Upheaval Dome.

Up this same route is Dead Horse Point State Park (an **additional 50 miles** will be added to your drive if you do both parks). The Park provides a striking panorama of the pinnacles, buttes, and sandstone cliffs surrounding the Colorado River, now some 2000' below you. The overall view is somewhat the same as from Grand View Point, but --- at

the same time --- is somehow quite different. Are things perhaps a bit closer - or do the canyon walls drop away more steeply? You will have to see for yourself. One or both --- you choose.

If you want to experience an authentically dark night (the way the heavens used to be), before city lights washed out the sky, Canyonlands is the place. The International Dark-Sky Association has awarded Canyonlands National Park Gold Tier status, an honor reserved for only the darkest of dark skies. Imagine the most stunning display of stars imaginable and the Milky Way like you've (probably) never seen it. It is also possible to enjoy this experience in Arches National Park, but the name of the game is the same --- to get far away from lights (i.e. Moab). In either case, just find a quiet place, park, and wait for your eyes to adjust to the darkness, and then look up and be in awe!

And there is much more to do in Moab --- depending on your time, budget, and interest. Want to float the Colorado River --- in a tour boat? It is certainly possible (and interesting). There are several options. Want to float the river on an inflatable raft, and get a bit wet? That is also possible. Would you like to get out into the back country, but are not up for hiking? How about a jeep tour or a Hummer Safari (with experienced drivers) taking you up and over the big rocks and on back country trails --- to places that you would not otherwise be able to reach. You can ride along and be amazed. There are numerous Moab outfitters and tour services that would be glad to take care of your needs. And did I mention the bi-plane rides and sightseeing flights?

**Day 5 -- Thursday, September 19: Moab, UT. to Cortez, CO.** It is now time to move on and change our venue. We're headed to Southwest Colorado and Mesa Verde National Park. But first we have to get there, and that will be half the fun. Today will be mostly a (longish) driving day, but what a drive it will be, with constantly shifting vistas parading before your windshield. Once again, the country will be changing. South out of Moab the views are interesting, and get better the further south you go. When you come to "HOLE 'N THE ROCK" (you can't possibly miss it), plan on stopping. This is truly a first-rate tourist trap --- the kind you don't generally see much anymore. Even AAA mentions it in their tour book. Stop and soak up the ambience. It's funky and fun, even if you do not visit the house built into the cliff face. But give yourself a bit of time to wander. Take a picture of the big sign (is this original graffiti?) just to prove that you've actually been there.

Leaving the "Rock", we turn east toward the Colorado border. At first we're driving across what appears to be more or less flat tableland, but don't be misled. Soon we're back in mountain and canyon country. The 12,000' La Sal Mountains will appear on your left. The canyons then come up quickly, and they are deep --- and down the rock face we go. The road is fun and you will remember the views --- just don't be in too much of a hurry --- you can't anyway. Deep canyons, a broad valley surrounded by very high

hills, bright blue sky, and later, the road stretching out in front of you --- straight towards the 14,000' San Juan Mountains in Colorado. Your driving life will be good! Once we reach Naturita, a nice small town, this will be a good place to stop and stretch your legs. Now we're looking for the road to Norwood and beyond. We've been traveling thru deep canyons and broad valleys, but now we're headed towards some seriously high "hills" – otherwise known as mountains. Did you notice the tall, cone shaped mountain peak in the distance as we neared Norwood? Yes, it is a big volcano, complete with the classic shape. We will be continuing to drive more or less south and we're in some real mountains now --- the scenery will be great, and very different from earlier in the day. The road is now known as the "San Juan Skyway" ---- the road to the sky. It's up and over Lizard Head Pass (at 10,222', it is one of the lower passes in these parts). Stop and savor the high mountain scenery. Now we're headed to Cortez --- just continue to follow SR 145, and the river, and the trees. Just before you get there, you might want to consider visiting the Anasazi Heritage Center (also known as the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument visitors center). Just after Dolores (an interesting stop all by itself—narrow gage railroad stuff), the Visitor's Center is 2 miles west and presents very interesting historical material on the Native American presence (The Land of the Ancients) in this part of the Southwest. In addition, the stabilized ruins of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Escalante Pueblo are here. Today is a longish travel day, and will be **about 220 miles** total, but you will enjoy the drive and all the good stuff appearing in front of your windshield.

**Day 6 -- Friday, September 20: Cortez -- Mesa Verde National Park.** We've all heard about Mesa Verde (a World Heritage Site), but how many of us have actually been there --- especially recently? Or if you have, was it so long ago (riding in the back seat of your parent's station wagon), that you've mostly forgotten what you saw and experienced? It's time for another visit! Mesa Verde was home to the Ancestral Puebloans for more than 700 years, both on the mesa top and in cliff dwelling communities built into alcoves in the steep canyon walls. It is one of the nation's premier archeological sites, which includes more than 600 cliff dwellings, as well as more than 4000 other sites. The flat mesa top is cut by numerous steep and narrow canyons which feature deep alcoves in the cliff faces, home to some of the largest and best cliff dwellings. You can physically visit --- climb down and then back up the long ladders --- some of the best sites. It is a fascinating experience and well worth the effort. Tickets are required for the Ranger lead tours of the Cliff Palace and Balcony House --- to name just two. But these tours end for the year on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, so this reality drives (in part) the timing of the National Tour. Alternatively, you can view them from (less strenuous to reach) overlooks. Either way, it will be impressive. In addition, there are many interesting, impressive, and readily accessible mesa-top sites to explore. Once again, driving into the park and journeying to the numerous sites is a treat for the eye, and there are many

places to stop and savor the views. Plan on spending most of the day in the park. Travel today will only involve **about 70 miles** --- but you will want to stop often. As usual, there will be quite a bit to see, do, encounter, and understand.

The total Tour --- from Grand Junction to Cortez --- will involve about 750 miles of travel, perhaps a bit more, perhaps less, depending on what options (and side trips) you may choose. The more adventurous you get the greater the distance driven and the more you will see and experience. But that's the fun of a National Tour. The trip will leave you with a lifetime of memories --- not to mention lots and lots of pictures. It will also probably leave you with a thirst for more --- and there is much, much, more to see and do in this part of the world. It probably won't be all that long before you will really be ready for another visit to the Southwest.

If you want more information or have questions about the Tour, please contact:

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