

UNITED STATES Canyon country

A journey through the Southwest reveals a land carved by time, with towering peaks, wind-sculpted dunes and ancient forests. Words: Brian Thacker

Across Utah, Colorado and Nevada, some of the US's most striking landscapes unfold. Seen from the comfort of a train seat, the shifting terrain feels cinematic — plains give way to mountains, deserts to canyons and forests to sculpted rock. Stretching from the 300-million-year-old chasms of Canyonlands to the otherworldly formations of the Valley of Fire, here are six of the Southwest's most remarkable parks to discover.

Canyonlands National Park, Utah **WHEN TO VISIT: SEPTEMBER TO OCTOBER**

The ground seems to fall away beneath your feet in Canyonlands, the largest and least visited of Utah's national parks. Divided into four districts, it's carved by the Colorado River into layers of scarlet and golden rock. In the north, the 12-mile mesa of Island in the Sky offers sweeping views from its rim, dropping more than 305 metres in places. For a closer look, the Lathrop to White Rim trail is a demanding 12-mile hike through sandstone ledges and grassland, taking five to seven hours.

Great Basin National Park, Nevada **WHEN TO VISIT: MARCH TO MAY**

In spring, Great Basin sheds its winter cloak to reveal vibrant wildflowers and glistening alpine lakes. Ancient bristlecone pines line the Interpretive Loop at 1,201 metres, but it's after dark that the park truly shines. Designated an International Dark Sky Park, it offers some of the clearest skies in the US, thanks to ongoing efforts to minimise light pollution. At the Astronomy Amphitheater, stargazers can spot the Milky Way, Andromeda Galaxy and planets such as Jupiter and Saturn.

Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado **WHEN TO VISIT: OCTOBER TO NOVEMBER**

Drawing nearly five million visitors a year, Rocky Mountain is one of the US's most popular outdoor sites. More than 350 miles of hiking trails wind past glaciers, crystal lakes and golden aspens that stand beneath craggy granite peaks. Moraine Park Campground stays open in winter, providing a base for cold-weather exploration. Expect road delays in autumn, when elk rutting season draws crowds hoping to spot these bold animals roaming through the alpine meadows.

Zion National Park, Utah **WHEN TO VISIT: APRIL TO MAY**

Located between the Mojave Desert, Great Basin and Colorado Plateau, Utah's first national park is filled with red-rock canyons, waterfalls and hanging gardens. Angels Landing is a five-mile trail with steep drop-offs and dramatic views. Permits are required for the final chain-assisted section beyond Scout Lookout. Alternatively, head to The Narrows, the narrowest stretch of Zion Canyon, to wade through the Virgin River. Spring is an ideal time to visit, with lower water levels and milder temperatures.

Great Sand Dunes National Park, Colorado **WHEN TO VISIT: MAY TO JUNE**

Backdropped by the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, this 30sq-mile park has some of the US's tallest dunes, rising 229 metres. Try sandboarding or sledding, with rentals available from Kristi Mountain Sports in nearby Alamosa. Beyond the sand, the landscape shifts from forests to tundra and cottonwood groves, allowing for hiking, biking, horse-riding and birdwatching. Alternatively, take a 22-mile drive along Medano Pass Primitive Road, winding through forests, dunes and wetlands.

Valley of Fire State Park, Nevada **WHEN TO VISIT: NOVEMBER TO MARCH**

Just 50 minutes from Las Vegas, this otherworldly landscape spans 46,000 acres of red sandstone formations, canyons and petrified trees. Far from the city lights, hiking trails reveal 150-million-year-old rock patterns, alongside 2,000-year-old petroglyphs. Follow the Mouse's Tank or Pastel Canyon trails to see them etched into pink and red rock. With average temperatures ranging from 14-18C, winter offers the most comfortable conditions for exploring.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

There are direct flights from Heathrow to Denver, Salt Lake City and Las Vegas. Canyon Spirit offers an elevated train journey departing from Denver, Moab or Salt Lake City, all gateways to some of the US's most iconic parks. For more information, visit [trailfinders.com](https://www.trailfinders.com)



The Canyon Spirit train follows the Colorado River. Below from left: A cyclist admires the view in Canyonlands National Park, Utah; a pair of hikers trek along the dunes at Great Sand Dunes National Park, Colorado

