

# Utah's Arches National Park



Utah's Arches National Park - Images by Lee Foster

by Lee Foster

Striking salmon-colored rock formations, including the greatest density of natural stone arches in the world, draw appreciators of erosive desert beauty to eastern Utah's Arches National Park.

Arches are literal stone spans created by water and polished by wind. Water, the stronger agent, wears out the softer center rock. In the park there are over 1,500 arches. The longest, Landscape Arch, is a ribbon of rock with a 434-foot span, according to re-measurement in 1984. Delicate Arch wins many votes as the most attractive arch. A section called the Windows (North and South Windows Arches, Turret Arch, and Double Arch) has the greatest concentration of large arches.

Each season brings a different appearance to Arches National Park. Summer temperatures can reach 110 degrees, so visitors during that period will find air conditioning a necessity. Spring and autumn months are cool and congenial. In winter, snow occasionally dusts the park.

The full beauty of Arches' 115 square miles is a subtle blend of color and form. The colors are the red and salmon of the iron oxide rock, the intense blue of the sky, the

deep but sparse green of pinyon pine and Utah juniper, and the pastel blue-green of many desert plants, such as sage. Into this palette of colors, which can be metamorphosed through the spectrum at sunset and sunrise, enter a full pageant of forms, including arches, cliffs, balanced rocks, canyons, pedestals, and pinnacles, to name a few.

## **Getting to Arches National Park**

Arches, sometimes described as a red rock wonderland, is southeast of Salt Lake about four hours by car. Arches is precisely five miles north of Moab, a spunky little traveler town started by Mormon pioneers. The nearest major fly-in town is Grand Junction, Colorado. To tour the region you need your own vehicle, which could be rented in Salt Lake or Grand Junction. Recreational Vehicle and camping travel is popular, with full hookup service campgrounds in Moab. More rustic camps are at Devil's Garden in Arches National Park. Moab also has many motels.

## **History of Arches National Park**

The human history story of Arches is less compelling than the geological story (a situation that is reversed at nearby Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado). The Anasazi Indians so prominent in the Colorado Plateau from A.D. 400-1300 left some petroglyph evidence of their activity at Arches, but indications of their presence is much more extensive elsewhere.

Arches is a forbidding place to live because of the high heat in summer and the absence of water. In recent times, only one primitive ranch, the Wolfe Ranch, survived in the region. Wolfe Ranch's crude log cabins can be toured.

Arches became a national monument in 1929 and was declared a national park in 1971.

The geological history of Arches is absorbing. Erosion is the key player in the drama. The most obvious question on a traveler's mind is: How are these stone arches formed?

Geologists have projected that first the earth warped in the area, creating deep cracks that penetrated to the buried sandstone layer. Then erosion wore away the exposed rock layers and enlarged the surface cracks, isolating narrow sandstone walls, called fins. Alternating freezing and thawing caused crumbling and flaking of the porous sandstone and eventually cut through some of the fins. The resulting holes were enlarged gradually by weathering and rock falls to form an arch. Eventually an arch will collapse, but the time span is hard for mere humans to imagine. An environment such as Arches National Park has arches in all stages of formation and decline.

Aside from the story of how arches form, plus an awareness of how wind, water, and extremes of temperature are the players in this geologic drama, there is one other force to reckon with: salt. In those early periods that geologists seem to comprehend so familiarly, about 300 million years ago, ocean beds covered the area, periodically, evaporating to leave salt. Thick layers of salt accumulated as a cushion below land forms. The instability of salt, which behaves like a liquid under pressure, has made earth movement here rather fluid, as if the ground were sliding on an underground glacier. The pressure of rock weight caused the salt under Arches to shift, buckle, and reposition itself. Whole areas dropped into cavities. The 2,500-foot Moab Fault was such a displacement, with the land sinking appreciably as the salt base was squeezed out to a less resistant area.

The main rock now visible in the park is salmon-colored Entrada Sandstone, colored by red iron oxide in the sand. Entrada sandstone was deposited by wind and streams. Entrada is offset visually by buff-colored Navajo Sandstone, with the two often positioned in layer-cake fashion. Between the layers is a third kind of stone called Dewey Bridge Tongue, a deep red stone that disintegrates more quickly than the stones either above or below it.

The vegetation that these geological and climatic boundaries allow is water-thrifty and limited, surviving only a few steps ahead of its environment. Pinyon pines and gnarled juniper trees add a deep green to the red and buff stone environment. A host of pastel-colored desert plants add further blue-green shades. Wildflowers show prominently in spring. One interesting plant among the several displayed at the Visitor Center is Mormon Tea, whose stems the Mormons boiled to make a medicinal

drink. The leaves on the plant are so thoroughly adapted to prevent transpiration that they are almost non-existent.

Wildlife here is characteristic of the Great Basin Desert, with mule deer and jackrabbits the most visible examples to the daylight visitor. The effects of the porcupine are readily apparent. In its search for food and water, the porcupine eats through the bark of Utah juniper and pinon pine to the moist, tender cambium layer. A chewing porcupine sometimes girdles the tree and kills it. During the heat of the day wildlife generally stays out of the sun, sometimes hidden in the shade of the thin sandstone walls, the fins, so prominent at Arches.

The mobile animals have an advantage over the stationary plants in the desert struggle to avoid heat and dryness, but one of the more curious desert dwellers, the lizard, scurries alternately from sun to shade to maintain its desired body temperature.

## **Main Attractions of Arches National Park**

The main attractions of Arches are all the views, rock formations, and desert plants that you encounter. As a backdrop to this canvas you see the La Sal Mountains, Utah's second highest range, with 11,000-foot peaks. The major stops are clearly marked as you proceed north in the park. You enter the park at its southernmost point and take the single road to the far northern edge, then return on the same road. Be sure to stop in at the Visitor Center as you enter the park to orient yourself and benefit from their interpretive displays. Get a copy of their self-guiding booklet, *Auto Tour of Arches*, because it will alert you to the numbered stops.

Following are some of the major points of interest, all fancifully named by the early explorers of the park:

Park Avenue presents a panorama of balanced rocks, spires, and fins that the namer apparently compared to a city skyline. This is a city skyline in flux, of course, with a few grains of sand at a time disappearing.

Courthouse Rock is noted for its huge monoliths, especially those named Sheep Rock and Three Gossips. After the Courthouse there are ancient sand dunes fixed as rock,

known as Petrified Dunes.

Balanced Rock is a tour de force of a huge 55-foot boulder resting on a thin pedestal.

The Windows are four large arches, all visible from the roadway. North and South Windows, also known as the Spectacles, can be seen together from Turret Arch. The Windows section is the most accessible assemblage of major arches in the park.

Panorama Point presents a vista of the Salt Valley and Fiery Furnace rock formation. These vistas are among the most choice if you are collecting images of sunsets, when the golden late afternoon light hits the red oxide sandstone.

The turn into Wolfe Ranch alerts you to the limited human struggle here in recent memory. John Wesley Wolfe was a disabled Civil War Veteran who settled here with his son, Fred, in 1888. A weathered log cabin, root cellar, and corral are the remaining evidence of their primitive cattle ranch. They came here from Ohio and persisted in this alien environment for 20 years before abandoning the site. Some cattle grazing was allowed in Arches until 1982. The hundred-year cattle and sheep grazing history of parts of the park has had a decided effect on vegetation. Plants the cattle found tasty decreased. Those the cattle found distasteful increased.

From Wolfe Ranch a 1.5-mile trail, somewhat steep in ascent, leads you to the Delicate Arch, considered by many to be the most sensuous and photogenic arch in the park. Delicate Arch has become a kind of signature of the park in much of the literature. If you aren't inclined to make this rigorous walk, you can drive along a gravel road to the Delicate Arch overlook and see this red sandstone beauty from afar.

A close-up of Fiery Furnace is your next major stop. The red and white sandstone fins here are superb examples of erosive sculpture. Ranger-led walks escort you into the Fiery Furnace.

Skyline Arch is an example of an arch that has been greatly enlarged in recent times. Skyline Arch's size doubled in the 1940s when a huge rock fell out of the arch. Before and after photos are prominent in the descriptive literature.

Devil's Garden Trail, a two-mile walk at the end of the road, contains seven major

arches, including the famed longest span, Landmark Arch. There you can also see Double O arch.

## **Nearby Trips from Arches National Park**

Canyonlands National Park can be explored from Moab just as easily as Arches National Park. Arches is the first of Utah's five national parks running in a line southeast from Moab.

Moab is a popular site for Colorado River float trips. It is easy here to arrange a one-day float trip at short notice. Longer three or four day trips require more planning.

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## **Arches National Park: If You Go**

Start your trip research with the National Parks website for Arches at [www.nps.gov/arch](http://www.nps.gov/arch).