

A GUIDE TO OUR NATIONAL PARKS

**TOP 10  
MOST VISITED**  
**ZION  
NATIONAL PARK**  
WEST | UTAH



The morning sun lights up the sandstone cliffs known as the Court of the Patriarchs, one of the most famous formations in Zion National Park. GEORGE FREY/GETTY IMAGES



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Hikers enter the famous Narrows of the Virgin River, where Zion Canyon is only 20 to 30 feet wide, but the canyon walls rise a thousand feet. GEORGE FREY GETTY IMAGES

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Special to USA TODAY

In 1919, when it became a national park, just 1,814 people visited Zion National Park, Utah's red-rocked treasure. By 1990, more than 2 million people were coming every year. Soon, the crowds became swarms. Amid global trends that made travel more affordable and accessible, augmented by soaring public awareness via social media, visitation to Zion surged from 2.5 million in 2006 to nearly 4.5 million in 2019.

"Zion has been experienced and exponentially shared in the Digital Age such that visitation has escalated very dramatically in a very short period of time," says Lyman Hafen, executive director of the Zion National Park Forever Project, Zion's official nonprofit fundraising partner. "In many ways, that's awesome. But it's also a very daunting situation."

Accommodating the explosion in visitor traffic requires smart planning and creative thinking.

"Zion is a place of innovation," says Cory MacNulty, associate director for the southwest region at the National Parks Conservation Association. "Because of that, it often is out front on issues within the National Park Service."

Examples abound. In the 1920s, the National Park Service wanted to create a direct route between Zion and the nearby Bryce Canyon and Grand Canyon national parks. So it dug the 11-mile Zion-Mount Carmel Tunnel, which connects Zion's east and west sides through the bowels of a sandstone cliff and remains one of the park's signature features. In the 1980s, the tunnel was plagued by accidents involving buses, motor homes and trailers, which could not negotiate the tunnel's curves without crossing the center line. To ensure safety, Zion got creative again, posting rangers at both ends of the tunnel to convert two-way traffic to one-way for oversized vehicles — a practice that continues today.

Congestion is greatest in Zion Canyon, home to the park's most famous attractions. To address that problem, the park in 2000 established the Zion Canyon Shuttle, a free service that carries visitors to Zion Canyon from outside the park.

"The whole idea of requiring people to park their cars and get on a public shuttle to go up the canyon was a huge lift

### About the park

- **Size:** 146,597 acres.
- **Visitors:** 4.49 million in 2019.
- **Established:** 1919.
- **History:** The first human inhabitants in the region are believed to have arrived about 8,000 years ago. The first European explorers, two Spanish priests, visited in 1776. Mormon settlers arrived in the mid-1800s.
- **When visiting:** Stop by the visitor center in Hurricane, Utah. Info at 435-772-3256 or [nps.gov/zion](https://nps.gov/zion).
- **Of note:** Fall and winter are great time to visit. Campsites and lodges usually have more availability because there are fewer visitors. It's more peaceful, there are no lines and the trails are open. Of course, check first this year to see what's open and when.

politically, culturally and economically. There was a lot of pushback by people who felt, 'It's our park and we should be able to experience it however we wish,' " recalls Hafen, who says the shuttle transformed the experience inside Zion by making nature the focal point instead of traffic. "That was a really big pivot point in the history of the park. If the shuttle hadn't been instituted, the park today would be totally jammed."

Such solutions helped Zion become the fourth-most-visited national park in 2019, its centennial year. Now, a new pivot point is needed to ensure the park remains sustainable and enjoyable for another 100 years.

"The reason Zion was designated as a national park in the first place was for 'the benefit and enjoyment of the people,' " says MacNulty, quoting the law that made Zion a national park. "So when they're making decisions for the parks, park managers have to ask themselves: How are we going to make it so these places can be enjoyed for generations to come?"

Rangers' ability to keep parks enjoyable is severely limited by funding constraints, say MacNulty and Hafen, who point to Zion's deferred maintenance backlog, which currently stands at approximately \$70 million. "While visitation has been going up dramatically in parks like Zion, funding for the infrastructure that's necessary to accommodate all those people has not," MacNulty says.

Nevertheless, Zion is still innovating, including planning for a next-generation Zion Canyon Shuttle that runs on electricity instead of propane. "The shuttle system that is such a success story within the park is now 21 years old — 10 years past its expected life," MacNulty says.

Another effort, the East Zion Initiative, is a public-private partnership to establish infrastructure on Zion's less congested east side — including a visitor center, lodge and new trail network — to spread out park usage.

"Zion is located in one of the fastest growing regions in our country, so pressures on the park are only going to grow," MacNulty says. "Those of us who care about Zion need to work together to create a regional vision for how we protect it."