

Long weekend in Zion National Park

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This past October my wife and I had the opportunity to vacation in **Zion National Park** in southern Utah, following the **Adobe MAX conference** in Las Vegas that month. This was my first time in the Southwest USA, and while I'm not inclined to return to the **Las Vegas Strip**, I would love the opportunity to spend at least a couple weeks visiting Bryce, Arches, and the Grand Canyon. I've been very satisfied with the photos I've taken in Zion over the brief three day immersion, so I anticipate photographing much more from that region.

The **Wikipedia article on Zion National Park** begins with the following:

Zion National Park is a United States National Park located in the Southwestern United States, near Springdale, Utah. A prominent feature in the 229-square-mile (593 km²) park is Zion Canyon, 15 miles (24 km) long and up to half a mile (800 m) deep, cut through the reddish and tan-colored Navajo Sandstone by the North Fork of the Virgin River... A total of 289 bird species, 75 mammals (including 19 species of bat), 32 reptiles and numerous plant species inhabit the park...

Human habitation of the area started about 8,000 years ago with small family groups of Native Americans; the semi-nomadic Basketmaker Anasazi (300 CE) stem from one of these groups... The Kolob section was proclaimed a separate Zion National Monument in 1937, but was incorporated into the park in 1956.

The geology of the Zion and Kolob canyons area includes nine formations that together represent 150 million years of mostly Mesozoic-aged sedimentation. At various periods in that time, warm, shallow seas, streams, ponds and lakes, vast deserts and dry near-shore environments covered the area.

We rented a Chrysler Sebring **convertible** at the Las Vegas airport, and made **the trip** to Springdale, Utah in just 3 hours. The highway from Vegas to St. George is largely desolate and uninteresting, but as soon as you get past Hurricane the scenery begins a dramatic change. I won't be renting the Sebring again because my eye level was the same height as the visor and the top of the windshield, forcing me to turn my neck and slouch down in the seat in order to get a good view, and even with the top up I couldn't get past the visor's annoyance factor.

In Springdale, which sits just outside the park's entrance, we stayed at **Flanigans Inn**. The inn, or lodge, was friendly and clean with a rustic theme, blending well with nearly every other building in town which were also of the SouthWest rustic theme. Our room did not have a view to the towering spires in **the canyon** just outside our door, but it didn't matter since we were hardly ever there anyway. My travel guide



suggested that the Spotted Dog restaurant, adjacent to Flannigan's Inn, was the best in town, but we found it over priced and pretentious. The next night we tried the **Bit & Spur Mexican Restaurant & Saloon**. The place is just slightly quirky, but warm and very friendly. In the front is a bar and pub atmosphere, and in the back there's a slightly more sophisticated dining area in a photo gallery. Our portions were large and we had to take them home, and the deserts were creative and flavorful. I had the flauta verde and for dessert we shared a berries & ice cream dish that was fantastic. The next night we thought we'd check out **the other restaurants** including the Pioneer and Switchback Grille, but neither was very appealing so we returned to the Bit & Spur where the same waitress, Holly, greeted us very happily.



The **Zion Park Headquarters** are just a 1/2 mile up the road. There's a park shuttle that runs until the last weekend in October, and it has two lines - one that circumspects the town of Springdale and back, and another that's route is entirely within the park. We usually walked to headquarters and picked up the shuttle from there, after having breakfast at Sol's nearby. The headquarters has a series of outdoor exhibits explaining the sights to be found within the park, and a well stocked store inside with maps, books, posters, tshirts, film, and all the usual tourist necessities.

The park **shuttle** is free for use, provided you have purchased a pass for the park (good for a week). The route is just 6 miles long one-way, but along nearly all of that route cars are not permitted, only the shuttle. This has eliminated the traffic congestion which is said to have plagued the park for many years until the shuttle was introduced. The shuttle has **numerous stops** and you're free to step off at any of them and get back on when ever you choose. This way you can explore the many trails within the park without any inconvenience. The shuttles runs from 6:30am to 10:00pm, and every 5-10 minutes a bus will pass. The park road is generally usable by pedestrians and bicyclists, making way for the occassional shuttle bus. Stops include the Human History Museum, Canyon Junction, Court of the Patriarchs, Zion Lodge and the Emerald Pools trails, The Grotto, Weeping Rock and Hidden Valley, Big Bend near Angels Landing and The Organ, ending at the Temple of Sinewava with trails leading to the Riverside Walk and the Narrows.



Three full days within the park provided ample opportunities for hiking and exploring the many niches throughout the canyon. The best view of the canyon floor is said to be from the peak of Angel's Landing, but we never made that journey. **The views from the trail to Hidden Canyon** were amazing, and **the narrow paths** aren't as nerve-wracking as those on Angel's Landing. I found the best photographic opportunities were near the end of the park road where it curves around Angels Landing. It feels like a bowl, with curving panoramas. We walked along the river one evening from Sinewava back to Weeping Rock bus stop, spending hours photographing the blazing rock faces and glowing aspen trees until the pink sky gave way to total darkness. I found that the



lighting was nearly always very contrasty with bright areas getting the full sun as well as dark shadows within the canyon walls.



While its still possible to take great photographs in that light, I think I had the most success with **HDR photos of Zion**. To create HDR, or High Dynamic Range, photos first you must take a series of exposures with your camera, from too dark to too bright. If you have an SLR, set up autobracketing, which is usually in 3's where the camera will take a series of shots, each of them being about 1 stop apart (i.e. -1ev, 0ev, +1ev). So just point your camera at a scene and shoot a autobracketed triplet, then later in Adobe Photoshop CS2 look for File > Automate >

Merge to HDR. You'll go through a wizard where you can tweak various properties, but at the end you should have a 32 bit image which has less contrast where the lights and darks will be balanced to produce an image having more even lighting with good exposure for all regions within the shot. For more on HDR, read my tutorial on **How to create HDR images with Photoshop CS2**.

While still annoyed at the Sebring's low visor obstructing my view, the cool thing about Zion is that you don't look forward, you look up. (Even the shuttle bus has skylights.) Since our last day was the last Monday in October, the shuttle bus stopped running and it was again permitted to drive through the park. So **with the top down** we had a slow, brisk drive on a sunny morning through the park, admiring the painted red panoramas on all sides. One last feast for the eyes before the long drive through the isolated flatlands back to Vegas.



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