

# Utah's Rock Stars

MILLENNIA-OLD FORMATIONS AND THE COMFORT OF AN OLD FRIENDSHIP COLOUR A HIKE IN ARCHES NATIONAL PARK

*By Charukeesi Ramadurai*

The Delicate Arch is Utah's biggest draw. The 46-foot-tall sandstone monolith features on a stamp and on the state's licence plates.

**I**t was a short, easy hike to the viewpoint. But my friend Sunitha and I had been walking on and off for hours, and even the mild spring sunshine felt sharp on our heads. As we trudged along the red rocks of Utah's Arches National Park, putting one foot in front of another was beginning to feel like a mammoth task.



The Windows section in the Arches is also its most dramatic. It features the North (in picture) and South Windows, which resemble a pair of spectacles when seen from a distance.

But the minute I set eyes on that exquisite stone arch I'd come to see, I felt heady, instantly recharged. I squinted at Delicate Arch far ahead—a ruddy, 46-foot freestanding monolith that seemed to have sprouted in the middle of tableland—and understood why it is the most distinctive landmark of the region; why it features on a postal stamp and on Utah's licence plates.

Standing there, I thought of a lovely book called *Rainbows Around Us* by Dixie Dawn Miller Goode, which introduces children to colours. This is what it says about red:

"If I could tell you about Red  
I would sing to you of fire  
Sweet like cherries  
Burning like cinnamon  
Smelling like a rose in the sun"

That's what red is like in Arches National Park, right in the heart of America's wild southwest. Bursting like a fiery flame from the rocks, sometimes gleaming a muted russet, sulking and simmering resentfully if the sun hides even for a moment.

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After years of talking about it Sunitha and I had finally decided to take a hiking holiday in Utah, starting with Arches in the southeastern corner, close to the Colorado River. It is one of the state's 'Mighty Five' national parks. My school friend is a geologist and an avid hiker, and it was she who suggested we skip the crowds at Utah's more famous parks like Zion and Bryce. We sought geological magic amid Arches' 76,519 acres of bare, red earth. For this land is where the master sculptor herself has created the world's largest concentration of sandstone arches—2,000—with just wind and water for tools.

The base for all adventures in the area is a charming town called Moab, a two-hour drive from Colorado's Grand Junction airport. The roads were empty and vegetation sparse; only the rare prickly shrub or flowering plant soldiered on in the desert. In the distance, peaks of the La Sal range clung on to the last vestiges of snow even that late into spring. As we drove, I thought of a book I'd recently read on Arches: *Desert Solitaire*. In 1968 Edward Abbey, who had worked as a ranger at Arches National Park and was perhaps its most vocal champion, published this passionate, profound treatise on its landscape. I played his lines in my head: "You can't see anything from a car; you've got to get out of the contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail, you'll see something, maybe." If Abbey had had his way, there would be no cars allowed, no throngs of tourists at Arches. I can imagine his despair if he knew that 1.5 million visitors now troop in here every year.

Heeding his words, Sunitha and I decided that as we drove the 39-kilometre loop starting from the Visitor Center, we would get off the vehicle and hike along a few of the walking trails branching towards the arches and viewpoints. We started with a half-kilometre loop on fairly flat ground, towards Sand Dune Arch. It was during these short hikes that I got my Geology 101 lessons from Sunitha: how the striking red colour around us came from iron oxide deposits for instance. She also decoded the puzzles of the land for me, naming each of the strange, ethereal rock formations that had been simply clubbed together as "red rocks" in my head. Mesas: the freestanding flat-topped hillocks with steep sides;

In addition to sandstone forms like the Skyline Arch (bottom), the park is also home to petroglyphs (top left) carved by American Indians between A.D. 1650 and 1850, and critters like the western fence lizard (top right).



bins: the residual walls of sedimentary rock that remained after erosion. The thin spires of sedimentary or volcanic rock were goblins or—bless their heart—fairy chimneys.

Sand Dune Arch was small but not unimpressive, basking in the sunlight falling moodily through slots in the surrounding fins. Every nook around me was burnished to a soft golden pink. We walked back to our car for a five-minute drive. An easy shrubby trail led us to Skyline Arch, scooped out of a high wall. Arches are constantly shape-shifting in this 65-million-old landscape; while much of the process is slow, some changes can be instantaneous and rather striking. In 1940 for instance, a large boulder fell out of Skyline Arch and almost doubled the size of its opening.

We drove on to the Devil's Garden trailhead, and started our hike towards Landscape Arch—a more taxing, 2.6-kilometre loop over uneven ground and gradual incline. Towering fins rose all around us, and the sweet smell of Utah juniper lingered in the air. I walked carefully to avoid the thick, prickly pear cacti dotting the ground, once startling a couple of grey raccoons out of my path. It was totally worth the effort—with an opening stretching over 306 feet, Landscape Arch is one of the largest such formations in the world.

After a lunch of nuts, and chips and dip (with juicy peaches for dessert) in a picnic area, we headed to the lookout point for the Fiery Furnace, a stunning maze of sandstone canyons. Its narrow ledges and drop-offs make it a challenging terrain to navigate. Hiking here is permitted only with a ranger. On our return to the gate, we pulled up at the Windows section—a 5.2-square-kilometre area filled with jaw-droppers,



ALLISON HERREID/SHUTTERSTOCK

ALEX AVERY/SHUTTERSTOCK (LIZARD); DARREN J. BRADLEY/SHUTTERSTOCK (ARCHES)

including the North and South Windows that look like a pair of spectacles when seen from a distance. Turret Arch and my personal favourite, Double Arch, where two majestic arches are conjoined at a pillar.

That day it occurred to me that Arches makes the phrase “rock solid” sound risible. For when water plays with rock, it turns hard and unyielding earth into a pliant mould of wet clay. It is not surprising that even after two decades of work in geology, Sunitha finds these landscapes incredible—gigantic

resolutely out of sight.

Yet Abbey’s fears about how overcrowding might alter this fragile ecosystem forever were well-founded. Research has shown that rocks react not only to human activity but also to the frequencies of strong winds, subterranean earthquakes, even distance ocean waves. As one report I read in Science magazine claimed, “The Earth is constantly humming.”

The only humming I could hear though was that of my own heart.

Though hiking is the best way to discover Arches, stargazing remains a popular activity for its visitors; The town of Moab (facing page) lies eight kilometres away from the park and is an ideal base for exploring it.



# ESSENTIALS

rocks balanced delicately on a narrow monolith, as if a strong gust of wind would topple them over. Everything in Arches was new to me, each corner wonderful, taking my breath away.

It is impossible to arrive at an exact number of arches here since new ones keep getting formed, while old ones collapse or change form over time. This desert land may seem static, even dead, but it is constantly evolving, and nurturing a variety of life forms within its inhospitable embrace. On our hikes, we came across vividly coloured lizards and curious beavers, though larger mammals like mule deer, fox and bobcat stayed

At the end of the day, I lay down on a flat rock under the Double Arch, staring at the colours and patterns overhead. The buzz of human voices around me slowly faded away as I drifted into a meditative trance. Back home, much later, I reread *Desert Solitaire*, and understood exactly what Abbey meant when he wrote, “Standing there, gaping at this monstrous and inhumane spectacle of rock and cloud and sky and space, I feel a ridiculous greed and possessiveness come over me. I want to know it all, possess it all, embrace the entire scene intimately, deeply, totally.” ●

ARTHUR CAUTY/SHUTTERSTOCK

ILHAMCHEWADVENTURES/SHUTTERSTOCK

**GETTING THERE & AROUND:** Flights between Delhi and Mumbai and Colorado’s Grand Junction airport—the closest entry point to Arches—require at least two layovers in an European gateway city such as London, and American ones like Phoenix or Dallas. Moab, the closest town to Arches

National Park, lies 182 km/2 hr southwest of the airport, and is an 8 km/10 min drive south of the park.

**WHEN TO GO:** Arches experiences extreme temperatures. The best time to visit it is during spring (Apr-May) and fall (mid Sept-Oct)

when the average daytime highs are 15-27°C and lows fluctuate between -1 and 10°C.

While hiking is the most popular activity in the Arches, it is also ideal for biking, camping, stargazing, and landscape photography. Entrance fee to the park for a private vehicle is \$30/₹2,150

and one individual without a car is \$15/₹1,080.

**WHERE TO STAY:** The La Quinta Inn in Moab is a good option with complimentary breakfast and comfortable rooms ([www.wyndhamhotels.com/laquinta](http://www.wyndhamhotels.com/laquinta); doubles from \$75/₹5,340).