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A TALE OF TWO JOURNEYS

Putting perks to the test **E4**

VANCOUVER SUN SATURDAY, JUNE 10, 2017

SECTION E

SOUTHWEST UNBOUND

Camping and hiking adventure tour explores some of America's natural wonders



The sun rises above Thor's Hammer, left foreground, at Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah. The park is filled with tall, thin, limestone spires known as hoodoos **GETTY IMAGES**

MARK SISSONS

Perched on the lip of the Grand Canyon's North Rim, I gaze vertiginously down upon stratum upon stratum of multihued rock lie stacked beneath me, each representing a geological epoch. Dating back over two billion years, they reveal more dramatically than anywhere else on earth how our world was formed, while two miles below, the Colorado River snakes through the gorge, carving ever deeper into this iconic symbol of the American Southwest.

"The wonders of the Grand Canyon cannot be adequately represented in symbols of speech, nor by speech itself," wrote John Wesley Powell, an early explorer of the American West credited with leading the first group of Europeans down the Colorado River through the Canyon. After cycling for hours over sharp rocks and washboarding down a dusty track to reach this remote viewpoint called Toroweap Overlook, I have to agree — the stupendous view leaves me speechless.

The North Rim only sees a tiny fraction of Grand Canyon National Park's visitors. Fewer still venture to Toroweap Overlook, the ancestral home of the Southern Paiute people. On this scorching September morning I have this jumble of volcanic cinder cones and lava flows on the edge of one of the world's great natural wonders briefly to myself before my companions arrive. It's the climax of our week spent visiting some of the American Southwest's most impressive parks and historical monuments on Idaho-based ROW Adventures' Southwest Unbound hiking, biking and camping tour. Launched to mark the centennial of the US National Park Service, Southwest Unbound showcases the most beautiful parts of Southern Utah and Northern Arizona.

VIRGIN TERRITORY

After departing from St. George, Utah, we first stop in Zion National Park, a canyon oasis of astounding natural beauty famous for its massive rock walls of red and white Na-

vajo sandstone that rise over 2,000 feet into the desert sky. Meaning 'heavenly city' in the vernacular of Utah's predominant Mormons, Zion is a breathtaking blend of high plateaus, sheer canyons, and monolithic cliffs, their sheer walls carved by eons of wind, rain, ice and the waters of the Virgin River.

Getting your feet wet is the best way to explore Zion's most popular backcountry area called the Narrows, a slot canyon significantly deeper than it is wide. Here, the North Fork Virgin River runs beneath thousand-foot walls of Navajo sandstone sculpted by eons of erosion into some of the most beautiful rock formations in all of the American Southwest.

Navigating the Narrows feels as much like a canyoneering adventure as it does a hike as we slosh through cold water that sometimes rises to our waists. Crossing back and forth across the river at shallow spots, we press on for a mile and a half before retracing our steps. Looking up, I spot rock climbers clinging like house flies to

the zebra striped cliffs. Up ahead, a group of hikers take turns reverently submerging themselves like baptismal subjects. Flash floods occasionally occur here, but luckily none arrive today. The frigid water feels refreshing as I scramble over slippery rocks, pressing my hands along the canyon's cool, moss covered walls.

THE SILENT CITY

After a hearty campsite dinner of wild salmon and lasagna, campfire stories and a blissful sleep inside our spacious dome tents, we set off early the next morning for Bryce Canyon National Park, a short drive away from our campsite pitched round a local rancher's cattle pond. Bryce is renowned for its spectacular natural amphitheatres containing the world's largest collection of hoodoos — thin, flame-coloured limestone spires protruding from arid badlands that can rise as high as a ten story building. Spread over many miles, they resemble a 'silent city' of stone. **SEE CANYON ON E2**



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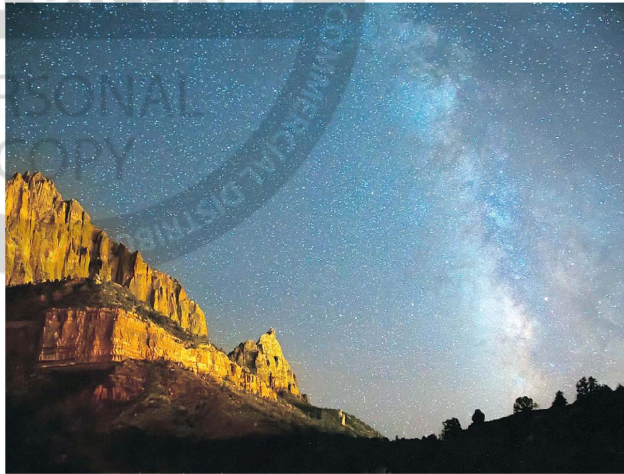
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'IT'S A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE'

CANYON FROM EZI

The best way to experience Bryce's natural wonders is on foot. Over sixty miles of trails weave through the Canyon's maze of sunburnt stone hoodoos. Reaching elevations approaching 9,000 feet, a stroll through these 'streets' is breathtaking in more ways than one. As we amble along the popular Navajo Loop Trail, we encounter famous hoodoos with names like Three Wise Men, Indian Princess, The Rabbit and even ET. The Paiute Indians who once hunted here were the first to describe Bryce's Hoodoos in anthropomorphic terms. Later European settlers simply added their own monikers to prominent hoodoos like Queen Victoria, which resembles a plump woman wearing a crown. Others fire the imagination in other ways, bringing fairy chimneys and goblins to mind.



A host of shining stars fill the night sky above Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah. *GETTY IMAGES*

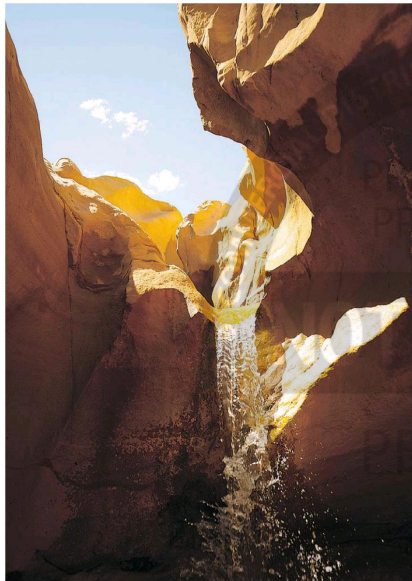
STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Before crossing into Arizona, we visit another of the Southwest's natural wonders — the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument — named for its series of plateaus that descend from Bryce Canyon south to the Grand Canyon. Designated a National Monument in 1996, Grand Escalante protects nearly two million acres of land in southern Utah. This rugged, desolate terrain is a stairway to hiker heaven, as we discover in its dramatic slot canyons meandering beneath towering ochre cliffs and grooved grottos. Rock climbers and technical canyoneers also flock here, drawn to this place of few roads, a vast desert backcountry that fills me with a welcome sense of solitude and serenity.

After stopping to play in the mountains of sand at Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park, followed by a leisurely picnic at Pipe Spring National Monument, an isolated outpost that served as a water oasis for Puebloan Indians and Mormon ranchers and a refuge for persecuted polygamists, we enter Arizona — and the culmination of an extraordinary week of southwestern exploration. Over barbecued steaks on the star-spangled desert eve of our ride to Toroweap Overlook, I get to chatting with veteran guide Dan O'Brien, who has a special affection for these parts.

"When you see these towering, majestic monoliths and red rocks, you feel a little bit small, and a little bit young. It's a spiritual experience. A chance to reflect. And to grow as a person," he muses by the firelight.

I have to agree with O'Brien. This journey through the American southwest — one of Nature's most awesome art galleries — has fostered plenty of healthy introspection. And amid our high-tech culture's obsession with faster, newer and shinier, a rejuvenating chance to briefly become 'bound' again.



Occasionally, small waterfalls form after heavy rains. Below: Dome tents set up in private camping sites are often the night's accommodations.



Hiking through the cliffs and slot canyons of Utah's Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument. *PHOTOS: MARK SISSONS*

IF YOU GO

ROW Adventures' six-day, fully-catered Southwest Unbound National Parks Tour of Bryce Canyon, Zion and the Grand Canyon starts at USD \$1,949 per person. Departures run May through the end of June, beginning and ending in St. George, Utah. Delta offers regular connections from Vancouver to St. George Regional Airport via Salt Lake City. Or you can fly direct to Las Vegas, a two-hour shuttle ride from St. George. This family-friendly camping and driving tour involves moderately challenging daily activities like hiking and cycling.
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