

# Zion National Park

*... and down dizzying windings of the road into the canyons depth... and away again along the canyon and the Virgin River (how sweet to see sweet water flowing here between these dizzy soapstone blocks of red) and around the bending of the River by the soapstone walls of blank fierce red and into the valley floor and trees (a little like Yosemite, this valley, yet not so lush, so cool, nor so enchanted, nor cooled by the dunblanket of towering pines, but an oasis here ...)."*

Thomas Wolfe, *A Western Journal*

● **Elevation:** 1,300 m (4,265 ft) at the bottom of Zion Canyon; surrounding cliffs rise to over 2,100 m (6,889 ft); about 1,800 m (5,905 ft) on the Mesa plateau to the east; 1,550–2,350 m (5,085–7,709 ft) in the Kolob Canyons area to the north

● **Visitors:** Approximately 4.6 million per year

● **Main Visiting Month:** August

## How, Where, What

From time immemorial, Zion Canyon, the park's heart of steep cliffs and jade-green waters, has exerted a powerful impression on people: Native Americans considered it the abode of demons and avoided it after dark. The white pioneers, mostly devout Mormons, on the other hand, saw in its manifold forms the perfect beauty of creation and joyfully gave them biblical names. This early recognition led to the establishment of Utah's first national park. A park of the river, the Virgin River, which fashioned it and has yet to complete it. With its great energy and consistency, it is still driving the gorge deeper into the Markagunt Plateau.

Three sections make up Zion National Park: Zion Canyon in the south, now well developed, bears the brunt of visitor traffic. Most people arrive via the dry mesa plateau to the east. In contrast, comparatively few visitors experience the Finger Canyons in the northern part from the short park road.

## Directions

Approaching Springdale and Zion Canyon from St. George via Rt 9, the canyon announces itself from afar: rocks grow taller, their red hue intensifies, and the cream-colored West Temple stands prominently above the road.

Springdale, at the park's gates, retains charming corners. Houses and stores along Zion Park Boulevard are photogenic against the canyon's

rocky backdrop, though rising visitor numbers have spurred hotel development.

From Springdale, Rt 9 enters Zion Canyon at the southern entrance, becoming the Zion Canyon Scenic Drive at the park boundary. At Canyon Junction, it branches east to join Rt 89 at Mt. Carmel Junction, a route open to vehicles year-round. The Scenic Drive's northern



View from Scouts Lookout into the southern half of Zion Canyon

section, from Canyon Junction into the canyon, is closed to private vehicles from late March to early November due to infrastructure limits since 2000. During this period, the free Zion Canyon Shuttle provides access to points along this section, recording about 6.3 million boardings annually. The shuttle operates on two routes:

- Springdale Circular Service: Connects Springdale to the park entrance. Summer schedule (May 19–September 15): 07:00–20:00; spring and fall: 08:00–19:00 or 18:00. Buses run every 15 minutes.
- Zion Canyon Loop Service: Connects the Zion Canyon Visitor Center to all viewpoints along the Scenic Drive up to the Temple of Sinawava Parking Area.

The round trip takes 90 minutes. Summer schedule (May 19–September 15): 06:00–20:15; spring and fall: 07:00–19:15 or 18:15. Buses run every 5–10 minutes.

The earliest sunrise, at 06:11 on June 15, aligns with the first bus, allowing photography of the initial light on formations behind the Zion Human History Museum. The shuttle schedule supports photographic needs, as the driving ban begins at the Zion-Mt. Carmel Highway turnoff, permitting year-round vehicle access to the museum. Parking at the Visitor Center fills quickly, so park in Springdale and board the shuttle there to avoid long queues at the entrance station. The free park newspaper details bus stops, parking, and schedules.



The Watchman glows in the evening sun.



Large vehicles (e.g., RVs taller than 11 ft or wider than 7 ft) face restrictions in the Zion-Mt. Carmel Tunnel on Rt 9. Traffic must be stopped for them to pass on the median, incurring a fee.

Overnight options in the south include Zion Lodge, South Campground (first-come, first-served), and Watchman Campground (with RV electric hookups). Springdale offers a private campground and hotels. The northern Kolob Canyons and Mesa plateau have only basic campsites at Lava Point.

## Geographical Orientation and Most Photogenic Times of Day

The orientation of Zion Canyon is primarily north-south, allowing the warm light of the low sun to illuminate the high cliffs in the morning (the Virgin in the west until one hour after sunrise) and evening (the Watchman in the southeast from late afternoon). However, the sun does not reach the interior of the canyon until about noon or even early afternoon in the fall and winter (see figure on next page). Where possible, include the river and the trees along its banks in the picture. If there are a few clouds in the sky, it is worth waiting for sunset at the Canyon Overlook Bridge near Canyon Junction and capturing the last light on the Watchman against this backdrop.

The area of the mesa along the Zion–Mt. Carmel Highway (Rt-9) makes no such demands because of its elevated position. Here, you can get good shots at all times of the day.

The Finger Canyons of the Kolob, as far as they are accessible via Kolob Canyons Road, run from west to east and also come into their own best in the flat light of the morning or afternoon.

## Zion National Park in the Seasons

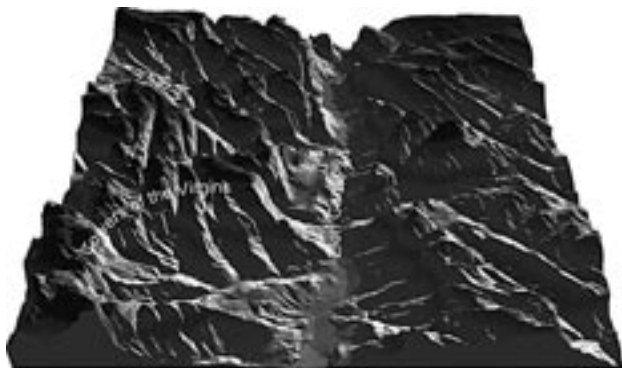
The highest point in Zion NP is Horse Ranch Mountain in the northern part with 2,659 m (8,723 ft); the lowest point is near the South Campground in Zion Canyon with 1,188 m (3,897 ft). So the maximum elevation difference is 1,471 m (4,826 ft). In the high desert zone of the park, between 1,100–1,500 m (3,608–4,921 ft), summers are hot and dry, and winters are mild. The transition zone between 1,600 and 2,300 m (5,249–7,545 ft) has moderate summer temperatures, but snow can remain there throughout the winter. In the mountainous zone above 2,400 m (7,874 ft), fir and aspen trees thrive thanks to the cold winters and excess water.

The wet seasons are spring and late summer (March and September). Then, violent thunderstorms have the potential to cause the Virgin River to overflow. Spring brings very varied weather, with storms and rain, but also pleasant temperatures and sunshine. Temperatures then average 7 °C (45 °F) at night and 26 °C (79 °F) during the day.

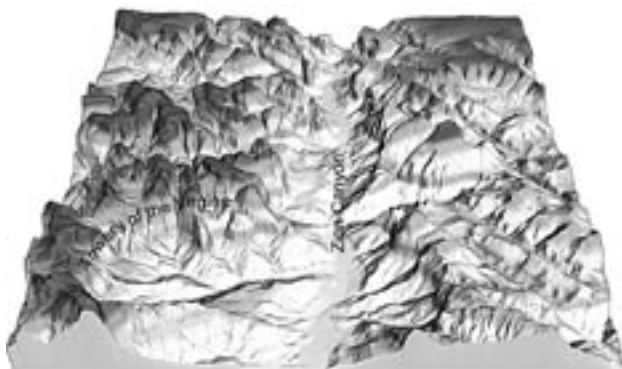
Wildflowers thrive between April and June. Their main flowering period is in May. At this time, yucca and cacti are already blooming in the higher dry zone of the mesa.

The summer days are very hot, ranging from 35 °C to 43 °C (95–109 °F). The nights at 18 °C to 24 °C (64–75 °F) bring the desired cooling. Between mid-July and mid-September, afternoon thunderstorms are frequent, sending many small waterfalls gushing down the cliff walls and enlivening the sky with dramatic cloud formations.

Autumn beckons with clear days and consistently pleasantly mild temperatures. Foliage color begins at high elevations in September



View to the north of Zion Canyon on July 1 at 6 a.m.  
Sunrise is at 5:16 a.m.



View to the north of Zion Canyon on July 1 at 12:30 p.m.



View to the north of Zion Canyon on July 1 at 7 p.m.  
Sunset is at 7:47 p.m.

and peaks with the cottonwood trees in Zion Canyon in late October or early November.

Winter weather differs according to the low elevations of Zion Canyon and the high elevations in the northern part around Kolob Canyons. Zion Canyon sees mostly rain and very little snow, which, combined with the soft daylight of the low sun, makes for a wonderful contrast to the red rocks. The clear days can get more than 20 °C (68 °F) warm, while night temperatures range from 0 °C to -6 °C (32–21 °F). Kolob Canyons, on the other hand, experiences heavy snowfalls that can last several days and make the roads impassable. All roads in Zion NP remain clear during winter, with the exception of Kolob Terrace Road, which remains closed.

## Photographic Features

Zion Canyon creates extreme contrasts due to the surrounding 600–800 m (1,968–2,624 ft)-high rock faces. Thus, the peaks of the striking formations bathe in fine light in the morning and evening, while the flanks just a little below are already or still in dar-

kness. Only around noon does the sun reach the valley floor in the narrower section along the Scenic Drive. Nevertheless, it is these times of day that produce the best images. The analog photographer needs exact measurements with the spot meter and a set of graduated neutral-density filters to master them. His digital colleague can work with that, too, of course, but in principle, he has it better because he doesn't need to worry about exact values. He makes his life easier by quickly taking a series of shots with correct exposure and  $\pm 2$  exposure levels, then combining them on the computer using Dynamic Range Increase to create a pseudo-High Dynamic Range image (HDRI). "Pseudo" because it is stored in 8-bit, so there are only 256 brightness levels available for each color channel. However, in order to store the actual range of brightness available, as real HDR images do, more bits—that is, more brightness levels—are needed. Under- and overexposure should be realized by lengthening or shortening the exposure time, but not by stopping down or up. The latter also alters the depth of field, a change that is rarely desired.

If the subject is moving too much, the following trick also helps when developing the image in RAW: Develop once on the highlights and once on the shadows, so that you have two images that have drawings in the respective areas. The image processing program then combines both to create a single image with the desired characteristics.

In terms of focal lengths, Zion NP makes no special demands. Focal lengths between 20–28 mm serve the majority of overviews; 100–200 mm also bring up details on the canyon walls in a format-filling way. More far-reaching true telephoto motifs can be found at most on Kolob Terrace. Pack a macro focal length if you plan to photograph wildflowers. A tripod should not be missing if the described contrast treatments are to be used.

## Motifs in Zion Canyon

The viewpoints along Scenic Drive are fairly well spread out in time over a morning. Start at the Visitor Center for sunrise, and schedule the Riverside Walk and a possible hike through part of the Narrows itself for 12:00 p.m. This will ensure that you have enough light to navigate through this narrow section.

The area around the **Zion Human History Museum** is one of the two best places for sunrise. From there, you'll have a remarkable view of the Virgin formation directly behind the building, and you can take a picture similar to the one on the park brochure's cover. The first rays of the sun make the tops of the West Temple and the Virgin glow red, and the powerful black shadow area below adds a dramatic accent. Pay attention to the contrast range and use a moderate wide-angle lens in the 35 mm range to cut out the shadow zone in the foreground. Use a light telephoto to take isolated portraits of the mountain peaks. If the