

Beautiful but unforgiving: Dramatic Utah is the secret star of the film 127 hours

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Utah is home to vast expanses of high-altitude desert and very little else — apart from Mormons.

Yet even those who have not been there will probably be familiar with it.

More than 800 films have been shot here, including *Thelma And Louise* and the new release *127 Hours*, the true story of Aron Ralston, who had to cut off his own arm after becoming trapped in a remote slot canyon.



Doorway to nature: Utah's landscape is dramatic and barren

He landed at the capital, Salt Lake City, then hired a convertible and headed south on Highway 15, then east to Moab, a typical American small town. In a diner straight out of *Pulp Fiction*, we sat in a booth and tucked into a *Desperate Dan*-sized hickory burger lunch, with free coffee refills served by a Rosanne Barr lookalike.

The Back Of Beyond bookshop had a first edition of Ralston's book, *Between A Rock And A Hard Place*, for \$25.

If you want to get close to the Bluejohn Canyon where Aron was trapped, you'll need a helicopter and a guide, but a similar experience (without the arm-trapping bit) can be experienced via a two-hour Hummer ride at Moab.

These black beasts drive into canyon country, to a place known as 'Hell's Revenge', going up huge boulders

bigger than a house at seemingly impossible angles so you really appreciate the unforgiving bleak terrain and the isolation.

At the half way point, we were shown some dinosaur tracks and took photos of the mesas and arches formed by the action of water and wind on the red sandstone.

I was scared and thrilled at the same time.



As you'd expect: Moab is a delightfully typical American small town

Tourism is important to Utah, and all the motels we stayed in were clean and tickety-boo.

Food is not gourmet or fussy, but simple fare, well-cooked. You won't go hungry, that's for sure.

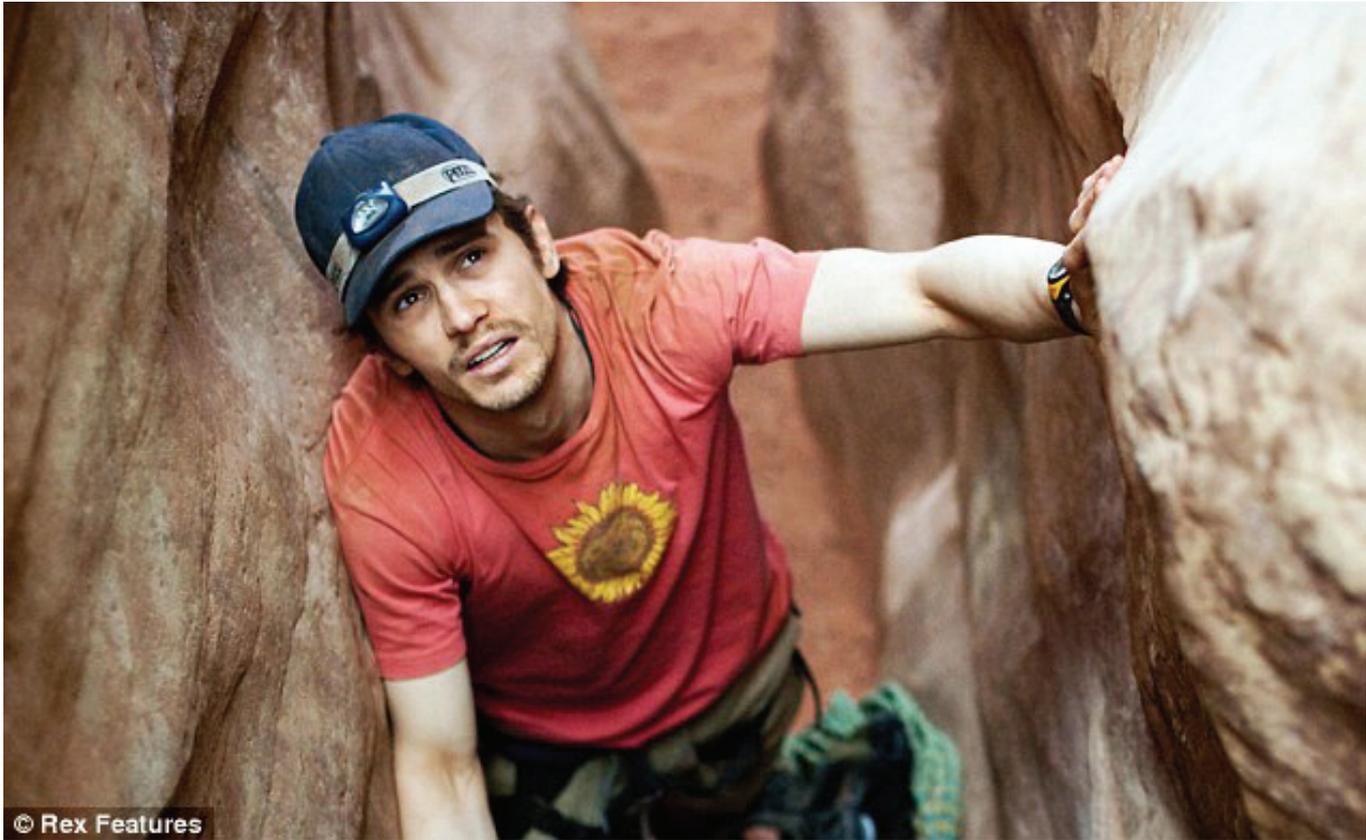
If you've time, you can divert south to Monument Valley and Kanab, where the old Westerns were made. This is Navajo tribal country, on the border with Arizona.

Another alternative when you get back to Salt Lake City is to travel north to Antelope Island.

This remote, desolate and beautiful island with free-ranging bison has 35 miles of hiking and biking trails and sensational horse riding.

If you relish something energetic, head for Arches National Park, about five miles away. Here, a two-hour uphill struggle will reward you with a view of Delicate Arch, a spectacular natural sandstone monument, towering above the human ants below.

On the way back down make sure you view the petroglyphs — ancient rock carvings.



Art imitating life: James Franco is the film 127 hours

Bryce Canyon is another long-ish drive of more than four hours, but well worth it. Within 15 minutes' walk from the car park and up a steep path, you're on your own, with a deep, dry valley to one side, filled with tall hoodoos — towering thin spires, with what looks like cooled wax from thousands of giant candles, resembling a pink and orange fairy kingdom, stretching as far as the eye can see.

This area has some of the lowest levels of light pollution in the world. It's a wonderful place to view the stars. Sunset and sunrise are spectacular.

Our last stop was Zion Canyon, in Zion Park, that has three main trails. It is the most visited park in Utah and the oldest, but doesn't feel crowded.

The vegetation here is lush thanks to water from the Virgin River that cuts a swathe through it with steep cliffs to one side.

The path was pure sand, and on either side were willow, beech, oak and maple trees with yellow columbines, purple juniper berries and rabbitbrush flowers, cacti and purple torch.

In fact, more than 800 varieties of plants and trees are found in Zion.



Natural light: With so little light pollution places like Bryce Park offer beautiful sunrises and sunsets as well as amazing star-gazing

Unusually, we'd had rain the previous day. Not a gentle shower, but a downpour, so the river was a torrent and spontaneous waterfalls appeared on overhangs along the route.

On the most challenging hike, Angels Landing, you hold on to chains to help you walk along a narrow ridge with 2,000 ft sheer cliffs on either side.

At the end of the River Walk is an area called the Narrows, where the river has no path on either side. Some people like to walk upstream to remote canyons only accessible this way.

The Narrows were closed for safety reasons on the day we visited, yet still people were pulling on their wet gear, intent on walking the route.

Curt Anderson, a tour guide for Detours, shook his head in irritation.

'People are just dumb. They ignore warning notices and then expect to be rescued.'

Travel Facts

TrekAmerica, 020 8682 8920, trekamerica.com, and sister company Grand American Adventures, 0844 576 1434, grandamericanadventures.com, offer more than 90 different trips including Grand American Adventures' seven-day Canyons and Indian Lands tour from £1,549, including return flights and hotels, plus visits to Bryce Canyon, Zion and Grand Canyon National Parks.

Visit Utah Board of Tourism, goutah.co.uk or utah.travel. Hilton Hotel at Heathrow has rooms from £119, hilton.com.

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