Zion
In a Haven of Habitats

Wrought by Water

Incomparable yet ever changing, the cliffs of Zion stand resolute, a glowing presence in late day, a wild calm. Melting ice waters course down disjointed ears, streams tumble over stones, water ions cascade from red rock cliffs, cow-tongued leaves dangle over the streams. But when lightning flashes waterfalls erupt from dry cliff faces. Melted water from down-waters canyon exploding log jams, hurling splintered wood, pylons of sand and granite, and dancing stone and water across the land. Zion is after all movement, a river of life always here and always changing.

Immersed in Zion life takes from the Virgin River’s ceaseless desert waters. Water flows, and solid rock melts into cliffs and towers. Landscape changes as canyons deepen to create forested highlands and chiseled deserts. A ribbon of green marks the river’s course as diverse plants and animals take shelter and thrive in this canyons deck. From the beginning geologists saw this place, this sanctuary in the desert’s dry realm. This very name Zion, meaning “promised land,” evokes its spirituality.

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More than the river’s music and the soothing heights alone, Zion’s nature multiplies with each slope, aspect, and soil type, with each minute change in precipitation or temperature. And to these influences superimpose from nearby ecosystems, and Zion becomes a mosaic of plants and animals. Of course, most of what we see today was created by wind and water. Other forces, such as fire, volcanos, and earthquakes still punctuate the Plateau’s minute cracks, loosening debris off the Plateau’s southern face and north, where Zion’s seemingly immense pressure and heat of accretion rare in deserts: terraces to immutable cliffs. Eventually, this likely desert harbor a mosaic of erosion, a Noah’s Ark to a pristine land.

Welcome to the one called Zion.

In a Haven of Habitats

People have occupied the landscape of what is now Zion National Park for thousands of years. Zion’s first residents traced mammoths, camels, and other mammals through open desert and wooded canyons. With climate change, disease, and overhunting, these animals died out 6,000 years ago. Hunters adapted by hunting smaller game and gathering food. As resources kept diminishing, people adapted to suit their location. One desert culture, evident here still, evolved over the next 1,500 years as a community of farmers now known as Ancestral Puebloans. The diverse ecological setting gave them a com

Geologic Contrasts Create Diversity

It’s ironic, in this seemingly unchanging desert, that water moves most of what we see. North of Zion, rain falling on the 11,000-foot-high Colorado Plateau comes down, while Zion’s relatively flat land, and pushes its demands off the Plateau’s southwestern edge. This edge is not abrupt, but it slopes down to a series of cliffs and slopes known as the Grand Staircase Above Zion, topping the Staircase, the southern edge of the Colorado Plateau races downhill, slices Zion’s Mead’s handmade basin before com

As resources kept diminishing, people adapted to suit their location. One desert culture, evident here still, evolved over the next 1,500 years as a community of farmers now known as Ancestral Puebloans. The diverse ecological setting gave them a combination rare in deserts. Zion’s rainfall is heavy, a river for water, and an adequate growing season. On the Colorado Plateau, crops grow best between 5,000 and 7,000 feet of elevation, which make Zion’s elevations nearly ideal. But drought, resource depletion, and migration eventually decreased the Ancestral Puebloans’ population. Zion’s beauty and bounty have beckoned to humans over a great span of time. This corn and its storage jar, found in the park, are over 1,000 years old.

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Westward expansion eventually brought new settlers to the canyon. In the 1860s, early Mormon pioneers came to this region and built small communities and farming the river. Through hard work and faith, the new residents ended up a landscape where flash floods de

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All this is the music of waters.

John Wesley Powell, 1895

John Wesley Powell, 1895.

Large photo: Towers of the Virgin and The Peek-A-Pool features

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Great canyons, canyons, canyons

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Zion National Park

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National Park Service

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John Wesley Powell, 1895.

Small Animal Society

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Tom Bean’s photograph of Towers of the Virgin and The Peek-A-Pool features

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Zion’s Natural Diversity

The Nature of Sanctuary

Tucked in niches, hidden in hollows, peaking from cliffs, or sprawling between our feet, an amazing array of plants and animals thrive in Zion National Park. Tiny pikas live, golden eagles, mountain lions—all thrive in Zion’s arid habitat. Plant elevations range from 3,600 to 8,700 feet and provide vastly different environments, fit provisions from rare species to widely distributed common plants and animals, and support unique overlapping communities in one location.

Part of Zion’s uniqueness comes from its geology. Great Basin Desert soils tend to be shallow and infertile. Zion’s soils were formed in an underground cavern of melted snow. As the ice melted, minerals were left behind, creating a soil rich in the poisonous mineral selenium. This selenium is the key to variation among species.

Individual and unconnected canyons grow on such odd soils and increase Zion’s diversity. Individual and unconnected canyons also increase diversity because isolation can lead to variation among species.

Zion is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America’s communities, visit www.nps.gov. Zion is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System, offering backcountry opportunities for solitude, and scientific, educational, and historical values.

Visiting the Park

Zion Canyon Visitors Center is open year-round. A 22-minute orientation film is shown regularly at the Zion Human History Museum. Spring through fall, Zion Canyon Shuttle Drive is open 6:00 a.m. to sunset. The visitor center, entrance stations, and on the park website. Service animals are welcome. For current regulations visit the park website or ask a ranger.

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More Information

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Be Prepared, Plan Well, Live Long

• Plan your trip. Choose trails that are within your ability.
• Fully inform places of interest and deaths at Zion.
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• Be careful in this zone.
• Fully inform places of interest and deaths at Zion.

• Avoid or get off high places when lightning threatens.
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• Wear a hat, sunglasses, and sunscreen.
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• Falls cause most injuries and deaths at Zion.
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• Plan your trip. Choose trails that are within your ability.
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• Your safety is your responsibility.
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• Cell phones don’t work in most areas and don’t make you invincible.
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Know the weather and flash flood potential before your trip. In case of flooding, do not enter narrow canyons.