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See it now

ANNE Z. COOKE, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENTS
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"If you want to see Zion, don't wait much longer," said Sam, the counter clerk at a gas station in St. George, in Utah's Washington County. "You can't beat the scenery, and the river's fantastic. But what'll it be like when a half-million more people live around here, every dang one taking a shower?"

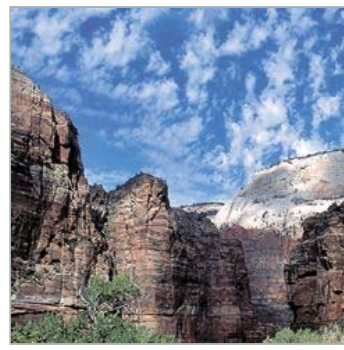
Right now, the North Fork of the Virgin River, one of the last remaining natural waterways, runs wild and free through Zion Canyon in Zion National Park. But for how long? Land speculators, conniving with lobbyists to loot your heritage, have bought up cheap desert land around St. George, population 40,000, to build tract houses for another 500,000 people. The scheme depends on water, so they're proposing 16 dams north of Zion National Park, dams that will suck the life out of the river.

We hesitated, torn between should and shouldn't. On the horizon, the park's sandstone cliffs and towers glowed brick-red against the sky, as seductive as the Pied Piper's flute. In less than an hour we'd be passing Route 9 to the south entrance, gateway to one of the most spectacular canyons on the Colorado Plateau. We'd never be closer.

On the other hand, a detour through Zion meant another night in a motel and a late arrival at our vacation destination in Colorado. What would our family, gathered for an annual reunion, say when we phoned?

For the 40 million American families who take to the highways this summer, the challenge won't be budget-busting gas prices, whiny kids in the back seat or motels with lumpy mattresses. The biggest hurdle is down-shifting from work to play, and doing it in time to stop, smell the wildflowers and reconnect with our country's last best places.

If it's speed that counts, stick to the interstate highways. But if it's personality and a sense of place that matters, take that short cut by the lake, turn left at the fork, drive down Main Street instead of around town, and listen to your instincts. For us, road-



trekkers since our parents packed up the station wagon and hit the road, it's been the unexpected detours and quirky surprises we've remember most fondly.

Our heads are filled with images, some as small as the café in Spokane, Wash., where they served us big slices of juicy huckleberry pie, a la mode, of course. Or the metal merry-go-rounds at grammar schools in Nebraska, the ones you pushed and jumped on for a whirly-twirly ride, all gone now, eliminated as insurance risks.

It could be as large as the restored, three-story colonial mansion on the Hudson River in New York, the one that just happened to be open for tours when we drove by. Or it could be a national treasure, like Zion National Park.

For intrepid spirits -- campers, hikers, backpackers and visitors with time to spare -- Zion's 146,598 wild and rugged acres belong to you, free and accessible on foot or by horseback. As it happens, however, some of the most impressive geology is easy to see from Zion Canyon Scenic Drive, in lower Zion Canyon.

Here the North Fork of the Virgin River rushes down through the narrow upper canyon and into the lower canyon, eroding away softer shales and siltstone, and leaving sandstone peaks and walls towering 2,000 feet over the valley floor.

Along the river banks, feathery waterfalls seeping through porous sandstone water the grassy meadows, shaded by groves of cottonwoods, ash, box elders and bigtooth maples. Vista points and short trails begin here too, winding along the river or climbing into side canyons.

Having made up our minds, we called ahead to the Desert Pearl Inn in Springdale, on the park border, and booked a room. By noon we were at the south entrance, parking at the visitors' center. From November through March, you can drive the canyon in your own car. But in summer, the free sightseeing shuttle buses that loop from the visitors' center -- six miles to the Temple of Sinawava and back -- are the only traffic permitted.

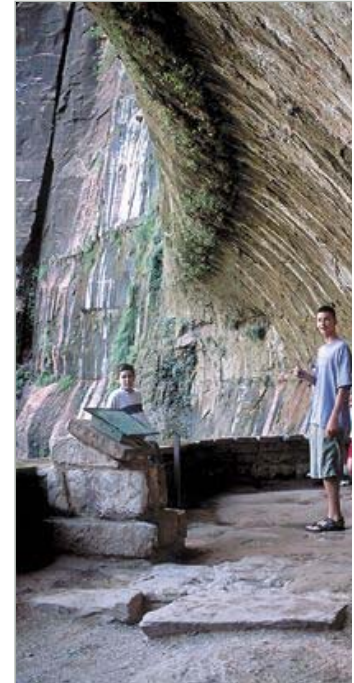
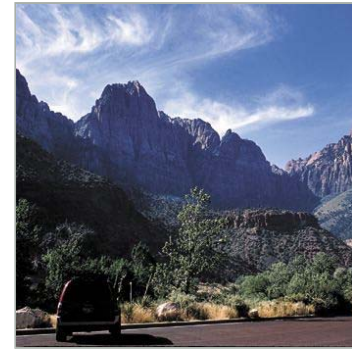
The buses run continually, as often as every six minutes, stopping at eight points of interest, incl Lodge, where you can eat lunch and dinner, or book a trail ride. Hopping on board, we gawked ou and got off near the north end, at Weeping Rock, where two easy trails begin.

The one-mile (one way) Hidden Canyon Trail was moderately steep and with some steep drop-off: some switchbacks, then turned toward a small stream, the banks sprinkled with wildflowers. The was hot, and the kids complained, but we'd brought water, essential in Zion's dry, deserty climate else on the trail, the sound of the shuttle buses soon faded away, leaving us alone with a slight br spectacular views.

Behind us, Cable Mountain rose to 6,496 feet, connected by another trail. "Another time," we saic headed back to the fork in the trail and the turn to Weeping Rock itself.

This half-mile trail, paved but a bit steep, was busier, with adults and kids on the path and hangir rock, which is actually a shallow cave at the base of a cliff. Formed when dripping water percolate sandstone, it was shaped when the outer layers fractured and peeled off. It was cool and moist th sun, with shade-loving grasses and flowers struggling to find a foothold in bits of dirt.

Our next stop was Zion Lodge, at an elevation of 4,276 feet, which is where we hope to stay whei the fall, when the trees splash the valley with yellow and red, and the days are cooler. The origin:



lodge, a rustic place built in the 1920s, burned in 1966, but has been since rebuilt to the original here you can cross the Virgin River on a bridge, and hike to the Lower, Middle and Upper Emerald

After making reservations for dinner, we reboarded the bus and got off at the Court of the Patriar look at the group of peaks called Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moroni, named by early Mormon pioi homesteaded in the valley from 1863 on.

We also stopped at the Human History Museum -- another shuttle bus stop -- open every day in t with exhibits and artifacts dating back an astonishing 8,000 years. The canyon may have seemed the first European explorers, following the Virgin River, arrived in the mid-1700s, but it was mere

The first visitors to leave evidence of their presence were hunter-gatherers who traveled through back as 6000 B.C. By 300 B.C., they were starting to farm, raising corn and squash near the river they had built villages and were farming full time, and by 1100 they were gone, probably because drought throughout the Southwest. Later, the Southern Paiutes and Utes hunted in the region.

By now we were ready for dinner. Hopping back on the bus, we went back to the Zion Lodge as th and the sun dropped behind a cliff. The twilight was fading to purple as we left, but we stopped lo watch the river gurgle past and to wish on the first star that appeared overhead. We can't tell you of course, or it won't come true. But you can probably guess.

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are Marina del Rey-based freelance writers.

IF YOU GO

About the park: Because Zion is 45 miles from St. George and 36 miles from Exit 16 on I-15, it g visitors a year, most between June 15 and late September. Call ahead for a reservation in Spring lowest elevation is 3,666 feet, at Coalpits Wash. The highest elevation is 8,726 feet on Horse Ran Route 9 crosses the southeast side of the park, from I-15 in the west, east to Mt. Carmel Junctior Information: 435-772-3256; www.nps.gov/zion.

Getting there: Take Exit 16 off I-15, north of St. George, and turn east on Route 9, for 36 miles t and Zion Park entrance. Route 9 continues across the park, exits at the east entrance and meets

Staying there: Zion Lodge, owned by the National Park and operated by Xanterra Corporation, is accommodation inside park boundaries. The original rustic lodge, built in the 1920s, burned in 19 lodge, rebuilt in 1990, re-creates the original, with a rock fireplace and knotty pine paneling.

Accommodations are in 40 rustic, tree-shaded cabins with porches, and in 75 motel rooms. All ha beds, full bath, air conditioning, telephone and hair dryer. Information: 435-772-3213; www.zion

The Desert Pearl Inn, on the Virgin River next to Zion Park entrance, has 60 Western-style rooms grounds, a pool and mountain views. Information: 888-828-0898; www.desertpearl.com.

