

📍 USA

Off-road oasis

Exploring the rugged terrain in an open-air Hummer, Lindy Alexander finds heart-racing excitement – and the luxury of some much-needed time and space – in the red sandstone canyons of Utah.



"I'm going to take it real slow," says JP. "We don't want to pick up too much speed going down this section." He slowly takes his foot off the brake and we creep forward. Then JP looks back at us and grins, putting his foot down on the accelerator. Hard. We hurtle towards the perilous drop, racing down a near vertical wall of sandstone. A passenger behind me who had been giggling up until this point, lets out an almighty shriek and the rest of us join in. We keep screeching until our nine-seater, open-air 4x4 Hummer comes to an abrupt halt on the valley floor. With my stomach like jelly and my heart pounding, JP looks at our faces and chuckles. "Welcome to Hell's Revenge," he says.

While the name may sound devilish, this 10-kilometre four-wheel-drive track on the

outskirts of Moab is one of the most thrilling and unique ways to experience Utah's otherworldly beauty. Renowned for its spectacular red sandstone canyons, big desert skies and majestic rivers unfurling across valley floors, the state is blessed with a "mighty five" national parks (Zion, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Arches and Capitol Reef).

We get glimpses of the nearby Arches National Park as JP manoeuvres our Hummer along narrow ribs of slick sandstone and revs up sheer walls of rock. The afternoon sun sends streams of light onto towering craggy outcrops, making them glow gold. Below us, the winding valleys darken into long shadows. While there are some hardy mountain bikers puffing their way over the terrain and

Hummers and ATVs in the distance, the landscape is so expansive that it never feels crowded.

JP stops by the side of a canyon where an enormous rainbow-shaped arch looks as though it has been pressed gently into the glimmering rock. "If you come back in about 70,000 years there should be a freestanding arch there," he says. I stand at the edge, marvelling at this prehistoric landscape.

We buckle ourselves back into the Hummer and over the next hour JP jolts and bumps us to the top of rounded summits and roars down precipitous slopes while we routinely have to stop shrieking with glee so we can take some deep breaths, and some photos. "I've never met a ravine that I haven't wanted to drive down," he tells us.

OPPOSITE: Utah's "mighty five" national parks – Canyonlands (pictured), Zion, Bryce Canyon, Arches and Capitol Reef – offer ancient landscapes and no crowds.
ABOVE: Hurtling along the sandstone in a 4x4 Hummer is an exhilarating way to explore the canyons of Utah.



Ready to
explore?



Stein Eriksen Lodge Deer Valley



This award-winning ski-luxe resort in Utah's Park City is renowned for its cuisine, from decadent fondue to exquisite seafood. Dine on sumptuous gourmet cuisine at Glitretind Restaurant or take in al fresco mountain views through the glass-walled Stein Alpenglobes. Savour wine from the onsite wine cellar, boasting a collection of more than 19,000 bottles, and enjoy relaxing massage treatments at the onsite spa.

ABOVE: The Rocky Mountaineer luxury train is the perfect way to travel to the national parks of Utah.

INSET: Year-round luxury awaits at the award-winning Stein Eriksen Lodge whether you are here for a summer hike or the winter skiing.

The most scenic way to arrive in Utah is on the Rocky Mountaineer train, via the Rockies to the Red Rocks route. The 570km journey connects Denver and Moab with an overnight stop at Glenwood Springs north of Aspen, and is the first US itinerary for the historic Canadian rail company. The train's spacious, glass-domed carriages weave through stunning remote wilderness areas, following the Colorado River on its way to meet the Pacific Ocean.

The Rocky Mountaineer shows that, while Utah may be a mecca for adventurous types (think rock climbing, mountain biking, sky diving and river rafting), it's also the ideal destination for off-road luxury. The train is a delightfully luxurious way to arrive in this corner of the United States, and offers a taste of things to come.

After the exhilarating Hummer trip in mother nature's playground, Brian from Utah Luxury Tours whisks me away to what he assures me is the "best kept secret in Utah". Canyonlands National Park is an epic landscape stretching over 800 kilometres where deep canyons, ridged mesas and sculptural arches have been carved by the mighty Colorado River and its tributaries over 10 million years.

While most people drive into the national park and gaze up from the valley floor, Brian tells me that the best view is found just outside of Moab, at Dead Horse State Park. "Not many travellers know to come here, so if you do, you'll have the luxury of time and space to explore without the crowds," he says.

Here, dramatic lookouts frame sweeping vistas of high desert woodlands, vermillion-hued buttes and terraced rock ledges. Two thousand feet below is the Colorado River with a wide fringe of greenery at the base of colourful striations of the ancient rock that rise sharply. Looking at the dramatic, sheer bluffs and plunging canyons, I get the distinct feeling that even JP would have met his match.