

Experiences

TRAVEL + LEISURE

TRAVELERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR

Edited by LILA HARRON BATTIS and SARAH BRUNING

The Milky Way glitters above a juniper tree in Utah's Dead Horse Point State Park.

GALAXY QUEST

On a five-day road trip through the wilderness of Utah, encountering herds of bison and Native American culture, **BETSY ANDREWS** takes time to look up—and appreciate some of the darkest skies in our land.

THE ELEMENTS in your body—carbon, nitrogen, iron—came from a dying star,” said my guide Spencer Stokes. As he focused an Orion telescope onto one such celestial formation, the gym-weight-shaped Dumbbell Nebula—only 1,360 light-years away in space—he told me about how remnants of exploded supernovas eventually become building blocks for life—humans included. “We are literally stardust.”

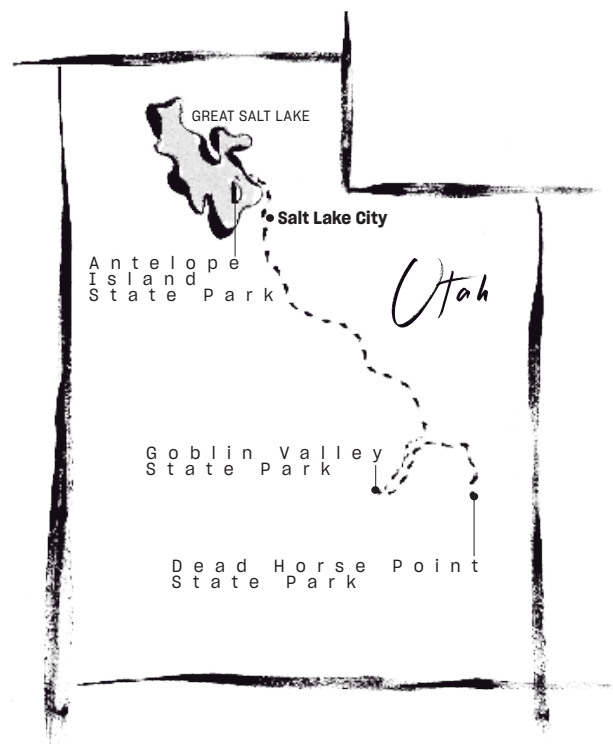
The sky over **Dead Horse Point State Park** (stateparks.utah.gov) sparkled with celestial bodies, and Stokes—a park ranger specializing in astronomy—was leading me around, riffing on Joni Mitchell’s “Woodstock” to explain our origins. *This place, I thought, is heaven.*

Utah is big and empty—the 13th-largest state by size, but 39th by population density. Three-quarters of it is public land, and most of that is protected from development. As such, it’s one of the best places in America to witness a night sky unobscured by artificial lighting.

That’s why Dark Sky Rangers like Stokes put on weekly or monthly “star parties” in the state’s reserves, where they set out equipment and invite the curious to catch glimpses of the universe. “At one recent party, we had a hundred people, and for fifty or sixty, it was their first time seeing the Milky Way,” he told me.

I could relate. Growing up in a Philadelphia suburb in the 1970s, I would often gaze at our galaxy’s hazy glimmer before bedtime. Half a century later, “skyglow” from artificial lighting

MARION FARIA PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES



PLAN A TRIP Brooke Garnett

(brooke@mayamaya.travel.com; 914-275-8820), an adventure specialist on T+L's A-List, can help plot out a dark-skies road trip in Utah and arrange all your accommodations.

brightens the city night, obscuring our view of the darkness beyond. In Brooklyn, where I live today, we count stars on one hand. I missed the universe.

Then I found out about the **International Dark-Sky Association** (darksky.org), which identifies and certifies parks and communities with minimal light pollution. Utah has a high concentration of dark-sky places: one-third of its 43 state parks have or are working toward official designation; they use shielded, motion-sensor lighting and feature astronomy programming. It was just the place to reacquaint myself with the Milky Way.

DAY 1: SALT LAKE CITY TO ANTELOPE ISLAND STATE PARK

I flew in to the state capital, Salt Lake City, where I was surprised to find an emerging culinary scene. I had a fabulous meal at

garden-to-kitchen restaurant **Table X** (tablexrestaurant.com; entrées \$22–\$32) and drank Japanese whisky cocktails at **Post Office Place** (fb.com/postbarslc), but I didn't linger. I was eager to get deep into nature.

At **Antelope Island State Park** (stateparks.utah.gov), a two-hour drive northwest of the city, I found my accommodations parked beside the Great Salt Lake. My well-appointed Spruce trailer from **Utah Camping Co.** (utahcamping.co.com; rentals from \$275) included two memory-foam queen beds, a leather couch, and a full kitchen with a farmhouse sink. As dusk fell, I climbed Buffalo Point, a grassy bluff behind my campsite, to watch constellations come alive: Ursa Major, the papa bear with the Big Dipper in his gut; zigzagging Cassiopeia; teapot-shaped Sagittarius.

DAY 2: ANTELOPE ISLAND STATE PARK

The next day, I sat on the island's highest point, Frary Peak, with Rena Pikyavit, an elder of Utah's Paiute Indian Tribe. Hundreds of massive bison rumbled past, followed by riders on horseback. We were witnessing the roundup of the Antelope Island herd, which is descended from 12 animals transported here in 1893. Volunteers were pushing the bison to a corral for their yearly checkups.

Pikyavit was moved to tears by the sight. "Bison are sacred to us," she said. "They were the old ones' food, shelter, and spiritual power. We're proud of our heritage and glad to see them protected here."

That night, a chill wind kicked up and clouds swept in, hiding the night

sky. The rangers canceled their star party; instead, I found a cozy spot by the campfire at the Friends of Antelope Island chili dinner. A Marlboro-smoking cowboy told me they don't bother to corral the male bison because "they're too big, old, and ornery." I remembered that when I woke to a crescent moon dipping below dawn's pink horizon and found an interloper in my campsite. The bison bull ambled by on legs improbably slender for his frame as I stood frozen on the trailer steps, not daring to move till he was safely out of sight.

DAY 3: GOBLIN VALLEY STATE PARK

Later that morning, I headed south, following Route 6 through the old coal-mining town of Helper, where Western-style storefronts house galleries filled with works by Utah artists and a restored 1940s Conoco filling station offers eye candy in the form of vintage cars. It was a four-hour

drive to reach Utah's southeastern desert, where I met up with Christopher Hagedorn, owner of **Get in the Wild Adventures** (getinthewild.com), for my first-ever rappelling lesson.

Hagedorn once aspired to be an astronaut, so it's no wonder that the Tennessee native was drawn to these ruddy canyonlands—the area is so rocky and remote that the Mars Society chose it for its Mars Desert Research Station. Hagedorn's technical precision, honed over a quarter-century as a climbing guide, put me at ease for my descent into a cavernous hole called the Goblin's Lair.

Suited up in harnesses and helmets, we hiked down to the chasm through a field of hoodoos: towering formations in layered pastels, with harder sandstone forming bulbous domes on top of columns of eroded shale. Looming like mythical creatures with outsize heads, these rocks lend Goblin Valley State Park its name.

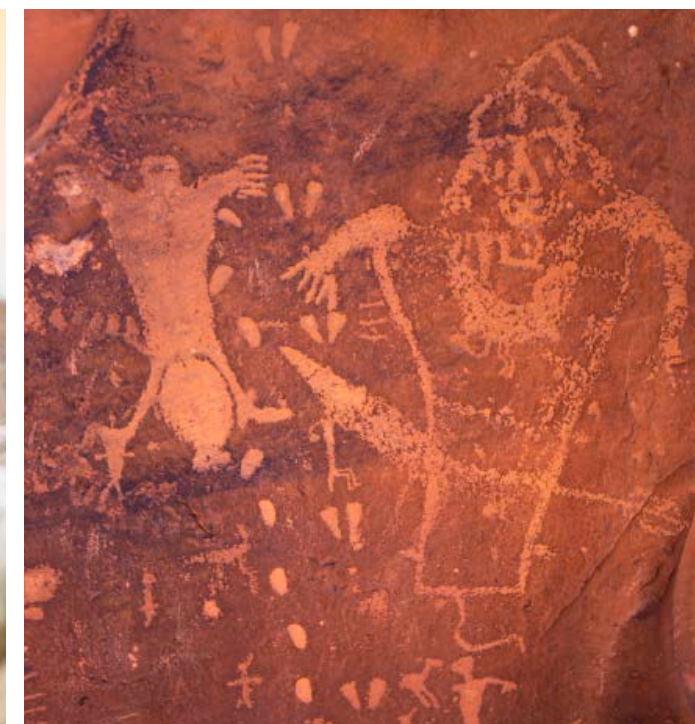
"Human nature tells us, if we're going over a steep drop-off, that's scary. It causes anxiety, so the mental challenge is great," Hagedorn said, walking me through all the safety redundancies he has built into the system. "The physical

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From left:
A bison grazing
on Antelope
Island; ancient
petroglyphs are
carved into a
canyon wall on
Kane Creek Road
in Moab.

On my last night, the clouds parted, and the bejeweled universe unfurled overhead. Seeing vast numbers of stars, where things beyond our knowing are happening, left me hopeful.

ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY

FROM LEFT: NICOLE MORGENTHAU/WONDERFUL MACHINE; JAMES CAWLEY



challenge is simple: it's like you're sitting in a chair and going for a ride. Put your faith in the rappelling anchor."

I tucked my nervousness deep inside, took a wide stance on the ledge of that craggy skylight, and inched my boots down until the wall fell out from under me. There I hung, 90 feet above the cavern floor. With Hagedorn's encouragement, I eased up on my brake hand, moving the rope out and forward from its full-stop position against the small of my back. I slid slowly downward, landing in no time with a *whoop!* "Can't get better than that," Hagedorn said.

Daylight was fading when we scrambled up boulders and out of the Lair. I drove to the campground in the pitch black. Lingered outside another trailer—this one a mod-looking Jaybird—a thick mantle of clouds separated me from the stars. I stood in a darkness so complete that it seemed tactile, almost furry like an animal.

DAYS 4 & 5: DEAD HORSE POINT STATE PARK

Dead Horse Point State Park, about 50 miles east, was my final stop. But there are few roads out in the desert, so the roundabout journey up Interstate 70 and down Route 191 took two hours. **Under Canvas** (undercanvas.com; from \$179) offers luxury glamping half an hour away, outside Moab, but I had chosen to book one of the park's BYO-bedding, shared-bathroom yurts (from \$140 per night) to be closer to the Dark Sky Rangers' next star party.



▲ Canyons like Goblin's Lair, in Goblin Valley State Park, are ideal for rappelling.

The first two nights were again overcast. Instead of stargazing, Stokes took me on new-moon treks and sunset hikes along the breathtaking rim of a Colorado River canyon. I filled my daylight hours with desert treks, after feasting my eyes on the crimson sunrise. I wondered at ancient petroglyphs etched between 1,500 and 4,000 years ago in the rock walls along the river and on Kane Creek Road—birds, scorpions, a woman giving birth. And I braved the

▼ Staying in a yurt at Goblin Valley puts star parties within close reach.



▲ The Colorado River carved much of the terrain in Dead Horse Point State Park.



FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE WILD ADVENTURES; KELLY PATRICK DUGAN

COURTESY OF UTAH DIVISION OF PARKS & RECREATION

traffic at Arches National Park to ogle massive sandstone windows, bridges, and pedestals.

On my last night, the clouds parted, and the bejeweled universe unfurled overhead. I joined Stokes in the parking lot at Dead Horse Point's visitor center, where he first aimed his scope at Jupiter, a big, bright circle with four dots around it. Then he showed me Saturn, its rings in sharp relief; the binary stars in Cygnus, one hot and orange, one cool and blue; the dusty patch in the Lagoon Nebula where new stars are being born; a double nucleus, like a pair of earrings filled with diamond chips; the trillion-star Andromeda Galaxy, 2.5 million light-years away.

Every sight was a dizzying thrill, but Stokes ended his talk with a warning: "Light pollution makes it hard to access this wonder, this

integral part of being human." It has also changed our ecosystem, he explained. For starters, birds, who migrate at night with help from the stars, get confused and run into lit buildings. "But we could pull light pollution back quickly, if we wanted—just by hitting the switch."

I remarked that, despite our earthling foibles, seeing vast numbers of stars, where things beyond our comprehension are happening, left me hopeful. Stokes agreed. "They make you feel small, which is important," he said. "Every time I've read too much news, I just come out here." 🌌