

Exploring Canyonlands National Park and the Moab Area

By Madison MacNichol

Whether you arrive in the Moab area by car or plane, you will begin to wonder if you've taken a wrong turn somewhere. The earth turns red and dry and stretches as far as the eye can see. The air is clean and fresh, and the blue sky contrasting against the red ground is truly stunning. If you

arrive on a sunny summer day, you will feel the heat lay on your skin like a thick wool blanket. Welcome to Canyonlands National Park in Utah! This is the home of red-dirt T-shirts, slickrock biking fanatics, hiking enthusiasts, and aeronautic adrenaline junkies. The center of activities in Canyonlands is the town of Moab. I

say "town," because it's year-around population is fewer than 5,000 people but triples in size during the warmer months. If you are driving from the north, 13 miles out of town you will pass the airport, then the small city will rise out of the horizon, and you know you've arrived somewhere truly spectacular.

Moab has something for everyone, but it is truly the hub of Utah backcountry flying. Canyonlands Field is a full-service airport, and the town has every amenity. Any kind of lodging is available, including multiple RV resorts conveniently located in town with full hook-ups and pull-through spots. Some of the most popular are Spanish Trail RV Park, Canyonlands Campground, and Moab Valley RV Resort, all centered in the heart of Moab with breathtaking views of the surrounding scenery. Many of the RV places also have camping spots for tent setup, as well as picnic tables and public restrooms, complete with showers.





If camping isn't your cup of tea, there are countless hotels to fit every budget. If you are traveling on a shoestring and are just looking for the basics, Inca Inn, Adventure Inn, and Kokopelli Lodge all boast comfortable clean rooms for less than \$100 per night. However, if you're in the mood for a little more luxury, look into a stay at Red Cliffs Lodge or Aarchway Inn, both with jaw-dropping views. Also, there are many familiar hotels, including Best Western, Super 8, Ramada, and Hampton Inn. If you do arrive in a private plane, Enterprise Rent-A-Car is located on site at the airport. It has a variety of day and week rentals to choose from, but keep in mind that the airport is located about 13 miles out of town. The closest hotel is Holiday Inn, but it would still be a long, tedious trek on foot.

Of course, Moab is packed with wonderful restaurants of every kind. Eddie McStiff's and Moab Brewery have some of the best burgers and brew in town, and a surprising variety of ethnic food can be found around every corner. Also downtown is one of the coolest supermarkets around. Exhausted from a long day of adventuring and not in the mood to eat out? Head to City Market. Whatever your palate desires can be found at decent prices. It has a superb deli, bakery, meat market, and

Mountain Canyon Flight Training



- Specializing in Advanced Aviation Safety Training for General Aviation and Commercial Entities – Including Military and Government Agencies
- Promoting safety in the mountains, canyons and jungles globally
- Improve your skills with experienced professionals

BACKCOUNTRY INSTRUCTION



SHOP OUR ONLINE STORE

McCall Mountain/Canyon Flying Seminars, LLC
P.O. Box 1175 • McCall, ID 83638

(208)634-1344

www.mountaincanyonflying.com

wine selection stocked with mostly fresh and local options.

There are so many activity options here, including hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, jeeping, four-wheeler touring, repel touring, and the list goes on. Head to the Moab Information Center on East Center Street, and grab a free pamphlet to read up on the most exciting adventures in the area. If you ask around, the local red-dirt junkies will tell you about the great mountain-biking trails. Or, they may suggest Arches National Park, where you can hike through and over rock arches formed over thousands of years. If adventures on two wheels are more your style, tune up your bike and head to Poison Spider Mesa Trail. It is one of the most famous biking trails in the area and boasts a 14-mile ride packed with exceptional photo opts and accessibility for all levels of biker. No gear?



No worries! Poison Spider Bicycles, Moab Gear Rentals, and Gearhead Outdoor Store can supply you with everything you'll need to get out and get started.

Now for the good stuff for pilots. First, pick up a copy of Galen Hanselman's book *Fly Utah!: A Pilot's Guide to Exploration and Discovery in the Red Rock Country*. It has detailed information on every strip in the area, is faithfully used by local pilots, and is a main source in this article. His book uses something called a Relative Hazard Index, which generates a difficulty rating, based on hazards associated with the environment, such as humps, slopes, trees, approach options, drop-offs, close canyon quarters, and runway surfaces. Also, be sure to plan your fuel stops carefully ahead of time, as there are not many options nearby. Southwest of Moab is Cow Black, Blanding is to the south, and Grand Junction is to



the northwest; all have fuel available. Be aware of skydivers! It's a popular sport in the area, and there are tours almost daily by Skydive Moab. So pay close attention to the radio and always be on the lookout!





NATIONAL PARK SERVICE PHOTO

Okay, so you made it to Moab, and you're wondering where you should start. The very first thing to consider, as in any kind of adventure flying, is getting checked-out in the environment. When I say "checked-out," I mean getting some flight training on how to operate your plane safely in the area. Quite a few entities offer instruction and, at the very least, helpful advice. Redtail Aviation is on site at the local airfield and offers day instruction with qualified local pilots, such as Levar Wells. Levar is a Utah pilot with more than enough experience who loves to show off his piece of heaven. Redtail also offers air tours of the surrounding national parks and river shuttles, if you're a river rat!

Probably the most in-depth option to get some dual training time is to take one of Lori MacNichol's Canyonland Safari courses. McCall Mountain Canyon Flying Seminars is based out of McCall, Idaho, is owner-operated, and is specially designed to accommodate Moab's finest. Two one-week-long courses are held in Moab annually. It is truly adventure flying at its finest! The structure of the course allows each participant one-on-one time with an experienced instructor followed by fun ground school presentations by Lori. Participants have the chance to safely push themselves from beginner strips in the first few days to more difficult

ones as the course goes on and leave with a strong sense of gratification and self-satisfaction. For more information, visit www.mountaincanyonflying.com.

Okay, so now you have some training under your hat and know how to handle you aircraft. Where are the best spots? Get some good detailed maps if you don't already have some, and, remember, winds pick up in the afternoon, so morning is the best time to head out. A solid way to plan is to allow for three to four days of flying, starting with a warm-up day on easier strips. A good place to start is Angel Point, with an elevation of 5,287 feet; it is 2,695 feet long by 20 feet wide and has a Relative Hazard Index of 20. But beware! This strip drops off abruptly at both ends! Fry Canyon, also with a Relative Hazard Index of 20, is 2,350 feet long by 25 feet wide and is slightly uphill. It is recommended to touch down after the dirt road that crosses the runway in the first quarter. Dolores Point is a local favorite with a 3,300-foot by 40-foot runway and a beautiful lookout. Caution! There are frequent game sightings here, so be on your toes. I call these "warm-up" strips, because they are long and wide, with not too many hidden obstacles and not as technical.

If you're feeling a bit more adventurous the second day, and your aim-point-air-speed skills are good, be sure to check out Happy Canyon.



With a Relative Hazard Index of 23, this strip is only 1,380 feet long, can be extremely muddy when wet, and has an uphill grade of 1.38 percent. Mineral Canyon has a lower Relative Hazard Index of 19, but don't let it fool you, as the river often floods the runway, making it unusable. Browns Rim is 1,468 feet by 40 feet and has a Relative Hazard Index of 26, because the west side of the runway is heavily eroded, and the strip has a 1.67-percent uphill grade. These strips are more technical and require more flight proficiency and preflight study.

On your last day, or last two days, you will be ready to tackle the elusive

advanced strips...cautiously, as always. Look on your map for Dirty Devil, which has a 2-percent uphill grade. At only 1,279 feet long, it is easy to see how it got its name. The runway is soft and is surrounded by steep canyon walls. Dark Canyon Plateau has a Relative Hazard Index of 29, and with good reason. It claims a 2.5-percent uphill slope with rather large humps at the east end. It is mostly overgrown with sagebrush, as well. Hidden Splendor is just under 2,000 feet and has a Relative Hazard Index of 23. It is known for its strong canyon winds and animal traffic. Be sure to keep in mind that these strips are short, highly technical, embedded in canyons with little go-around, and generally accompanied by high-density altitude problems. Most runways have no windsock and no tie-downs, so be sure to bring your own!

No doubts linger in the minds of those who have taken the journey. Every minute of it is filled with excitement and anticipation if conducted in a safe, well-trained manner. Check out the online Moab, Utah, images to get your inspiration level at max capacity, request time off work, and pack your bags. Not only will you discover a wonderful place, but likely also something about yourself. Take advantage of all the area has to offer, but be aware you'll likely be picking red dirt out of your sandals for weeks afterward. Make the trip. It's worth it. —

