Park and ride
A rootin’, tootin’ trip through America’s rugged southwest
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Come join the cowboy posse on a road trip through America’s wild and ruggedly beautiful southwest, says Yvonne Gordon.

We’re on horseback and have just cut along a red dirt path lined with dry brush and are wading through a shallow creek. It’s not long since we left the ranch but it feels like we’re already in the middle of nowhere.

“This is Onion Creek,” says our wrangler Madeline Daly, appropriately attired in denim jeans, shirt and cowboy hat. “We can let the horses have a drink.”

All I can see for miles around the valley is red earth with patches of green scrub and, in the distance, rocky red mesas and buttes – the flat-topped mountains with steep sides, typical of the American southwest. Under the hot sun, we climb up steep rocks on the horses for a better view.

We’re in Castle Valley in Moab, Utah, and the setting feels like a cross between Westworld and a western. If the unique rock formations around us look familiar – some are shaped like castles and towers – it’s because so many movies and TV shows were filmed here, including the John Ford classic Rio Grande (with John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara), Westworld, Thelma & Louise, and even Marlboro cigarette ads.

The setting seems so perfect, I start to imagine that Madeline is, in fact, a... Continued on page 17→
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River. Layers and layers of rock are exposed, more colourfully than I expect, laying bare some of the Earth’s geological history. There are different viewing points around the park from which to take it all in.

At Antelope Canyon, we tour a slot canyon, a narrow crack in an area of red Navajo sandstone, forming a series of ethereal red chambers, illuminated by shafts of sunlight. Later, on a boat tour of the blue waters of Lake Powell, we learn it’s my first experience of the American southwest, its wide open roads lined with desert and red rocks, all set under blue skies, and I’m in awe.

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Leaving Arizona for Utah, we drive up a remote dirt road at Canyon Point. There’s a fence, a rusty-looking gate and a metal post with a tiny intercom, which I press. The gate opens and we drive up a tarmac road, surrounded by white sandstone rock formations. It feels otherworldly. We show me how to prepare the rope, loop it over my head and then throw it over the cow’s. This cow is perfectly behaved, being a plastic “cow” head and shoulders, and I manage to rope it in a few times. From Scottsdale, we drive to Sedona and get a feel for the relaxation of the open road — passing a town called Carefree and spotting signs for ramps for “runaway trucks”. The desert is in bloom, with flowering prickly pears, ocotillo and giant saguaro lining the way.

Sedona is also home to more of those iconic red rocks, said to be energy vortexes, and as we settle into our accommodation, I find it hard to take my eyes off the views of Bell Rock and Courthouse Butte in the distance.

We drop into the Grand Canyon where we take in vistas of the 446km long, 1.6km deep wonder of nature, carved out over millions of years by the Colorado River. Layers and layers of rock are exposed, more colourfully than I expect, laying bare some of the Earth’s geological history. There are different viewing points around the park from which to take it all in.

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By the time I do the trail ride in Moab, I’ve got the hang of horse riding, but it started badly with a half-day at cowboy boot camp, Arizona Cowboy College in Scottsdale, east of Phoenix, where I had to catch, groom, saddle and ride a horse. I did manage to catch a 15-hander called Q and get his bridle on, but when I lead him through the stables to be saddled, he decides to go the opposite direction and veer into a fence, and I panic.

Rocco Wachman, the ranch’s cowboy, has spent the half-hour beforehand filling me in on the dangers of being around horses and all the things that can go wrong, so my guard is up. After semi-reconciling with Q, I take a short ride around the outdoor arena and we come to a silent agreement — I won’t try to lead him, and he won’t walk us into a fence.

I fare much better at catching a cow with a lasso. School founder Lori Bridwell

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I am my first experience of the American southwest, its wide open roads lined with desert and red rocks, and I’m in awe.
soon arrive at a low, concrete bunker-type building; the exclusive Amangiri resort, with just 34 rooms, hidden away on 600 acres, tucked under a rocky escarpment, and surrounded by desert and sandstone rocks that seem to go on for miles. Our room has a view of sand, rock and brush. That otherworldly feel is enhanced when we take an evening hike into the desert and the guide shows us cryptobiotic soil—dirt formed by living organisms.

At Moab, we stop at Sorrel River Ranch, a peaceful setting on the Colorado River under a giant red mesa, where we can soak up the surroundings. Our wooden dock looks on to the river and mountain, and on the first evening, we watch as three Canadian geese chicks, chaperoned by their parents, peck around the grass.

We sit by the campfire for a while, and later fall asleep with the windows open, framing a blanket of stars. I wake early to the sound of birdsong. In the morning, a deer wades past in the river.

From here, we go on a UTV (utility task vehicle) off-road drive up Onion Creek, with Andy Damman from the ranch at the wheel. We turn off Highway 128 onto a red dirt road, with the iconic red Fisher Towers on the left and Castleton Tower on the right. We splash through the grass streams, drive up and down hills and across more streams, and as we climb, the canyon and the red rocks around us get steeper. Andy points out a pink claret cup cactus, and a lizard scurries across the red dirt.

The road steepens and we slow down—it’s narrow and eroded in parts, and there’s a sheer drop on one side. As he takes the corners, while we grip with white knuckles, Andy is in his element. “I love disappearing into the desert,” he says. “You can drive 10 miles and you are really out there. It seems like you’re hundreds of miles away from everything, except the mountains and the canyons.”

As we reach the top, we see snow glisten on the peaks of the La Sal mountains, even though it’s early summer. The La Sal are visible, too, from Antelope Canyon, a narrow crack in an area of red Navajo sandstone that forms a series of ethereal red chambers.

Arches National Park, where we explore the massive sandstone arches, whipped into shape by millions of years of erosion. All along the park’s roadway are mesmerising rock formations in the shape of spires and pinnacles, a parade of elephants and one called three gossips. We pull in at viewpoints over petrified dunes and distant mountains. At Bryce Canyon, we see thousands of sandstone pillars called hoodoos, which look like church spires as we walk among them.

One of the most memorable experiences is a hike up the Narrows, a river canyon at Zion National Park, where giants of rock loom over the smooth red roads. Here, the Virgin River has carved a narrow groove in the sandstone walls and you can hike up to 25km along the Narrows river canyon, crossing and wading at times through deep, fast-flowing water, while admiring the high walls and coloured rock faces.

After a few days in Utah, we drive over the mountains to Colorado, stopping at the Gateway Canyons Resort before a morning trail ride up into the hills from Palisade Ranch. It’s greener than Utah, and part of the trail leads through trees and forest. As we drive further into Colorado, the rocky mesas disappear and the roads are lined with trees. For part of the drive, the Colorado River, which has carved so much of the landscape of our trip, rushes along by the road.

Our last stop on the road trip before reaching Denver is the ski town of Vail in Colorado, at the base of Yuli mountain in the Rockies. The snow has melted but it’s all a world away from sandstone rock formations, as we are surrounded by rich forest, river walks and biking trails. It’s beautiful but I have left part of my heart in the red rocks.