



**The surf
cafe that's
on a roll**
Food: 7



**Kerry's
top peaks
and reeks**
Travel: 22



**A kart
kit for
the kids**
InGear: 31

Sunday



Park and ride

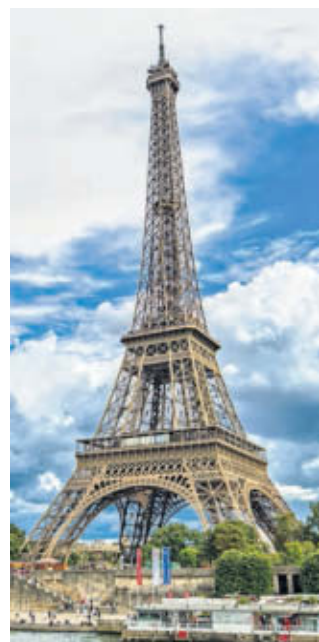
A rootin', tootin' trip through
America's rugged southwest
Page 15

YVONNE GORDON; EILEEN MARTIN; ALAMY

Travel

21

JUST CRUISIN'
FROM THE CITY
OF LIGHT TO
THE PALACE OF
VERSAILLES



Pale rider: Gordon was shown how to catch, groom, saddle and ride a horse at cowboy boot camp before exploring the rugged beauty of Onion Creek

Blazing saddles in the big country

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 →

UNFORGETTABLE ICELAND

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Unforgettable Iceland – One of Europe’s most unique destinations, an island where heaven and earth meet with volcanoes, glaciers, geysers and fantastic nightlife.

Much of Iceland is still taking shape before your very eyes — raw, dramatic landscapes born from volcanic eruptions and carved out by glaciers. Other parts have hardly changed since the first Viking settlers saw them more than 1,100 years ago. You’ll experience wilderness and wildlife, energy and total calm, within easy reach wherever you stay. Must sees include the Geysir area, Gullfoss waterfall, take a whale watching trip and you must try a snowmobile or jeep safari. No trip to Iceland would be complete without a dip in a natural hot pool and a night on the town in Reykjavik.

The Northern Lights, also called Aurora Borealis are one of the most spectacular shows on this earth and can frequently be seen in Iceland from September through April on clear and crisp nights. The Northern Lights occur high above the surface of the earth where the atmosphere has become extremely thin, in an altitude of 100-250km.

The Northern Lights are a natural phenomenon and sightings are subject to the correct atmospheric conditions.

Wallace Travel Group run regular weekend breaks to Iceland for more details see www.wallacetravelgroup.com or phone 01-8347888

Sunday Travel



Westworld android, taking us guests on our dream trip around a massive Wild West amusement park – without the murder and mayhem, hopefully.

It had felt like driving on to a movie set from my first glimpse of the huge red mountains. As we drive across Castle Valley, with some of the mesas lit up gold by the evening sun, they make so perfect a backdrop that it’s hard to believe they are real. We are on Highway 128, where the train scenes in Westworld were filmed.

I’m halfway into a two-week road trip from Phoenix to Denver with a friend, stopping to explore national parks and take in hiking, horse riding and other adventures, and to see some of the real-world settings that end up on the silver screen. 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.

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

A white-knuckle drive up Onion Creek, above; Moab’s giant mountains, top, dominate the landscape

shows 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.

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, and I’m in awe

how this area, Glen Canyon, was flooded in the 1960s to create a giant reservoir with 3,161km of shoreline, about the same length as Ireland’s coastline. The tour goes into canyons and past unusual shapes on the rock wall known as the Navajo tapestries. Along the road trip, we explore and marvel at canyons, valleys and national parks, and I see landscapes I never imagined.

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 **Continued on page 19 →**

Sunday Travel

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 deck 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



Antelope Canyon is a narrow crack in an area of red Navajo sandstone that forms a series of ethereal red chambers

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 rocky 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 Sals are visible, too, from



Antelope Canyon, left and top, is a sacred site for the Navajo; Moab, above, is home to two national parks

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 Vail 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.

THE BRIEF

GETTING THERE

Fly with Delta Airlines from Dublin to Phoenix and from Denver to Dublin, from €573 return including a checked bag (delta.com).

WHERE TO STAY

Red Agave Resort in Sedona, Arizona (doubles from \$191.22/€164 a night, redagaveresort.net); doubles at Amangiri at Canyon Point in Utah cost from \$1,901 including meals and hikes (aman.com/resorts/amangiri); doubles at Majestic View Lodge in Zion National Park, Utah, cost from \$90 (majesticviewlodge.com); Sorrel River Ranch Resort (doubles from \$534.63, sorrelriver.com); Red Cliffs Lodge (doubles from \$283, redcliffslodge.com); the

Sebastian hotel in Vail, Colorado (doubles from \$435, thesebastianvail.com).

THINGS TO DO

Moab horse riding (\$85.32pp, moabhorses.com); Cowboy College (\$485.78pp, cowboycollege.com); Antelope Canyon tour (\$45.50pp, antelopecanyon.com); Lake Powell boat tour (\$80.10pp, lakepowell.com); Moab Museum of Film (free, redcliffslodge.com); guided UTV tours (from \$300 per vehicle, sorrelriver.com); Rent waterproof gear for Narrows, from \$25pp (zionoutfitter.com). For more info, see visitarizona.com, visitstgeorge.com, colorado.com and discovermoab.com.