

The Ultimate MOAB ASTRO TOURISM Guide

2026

Premier Edition

Where the Milky Way meets red rock -- the densest concentration of certified Dark Sky Places on Earth.

*11 Best Stargazing Locations * Astrophotography Gear Guide Included

WELCOME

Utah's Dark Sky Capital

Moab sits at the center of the densest concentration of certified International Dark Sky Places anywhere in the world. Arches, Canyonlands, and Dead Horse Point are all within a 45-minute drive, and the City of Moab itself is now a certified Dark Sky Community.

This guide covers exactly where to go, when to go, and how to see it right -- whether that's a guided astronomer with a research-grade telescope or your own camera and a tripod.

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A LOOK INSIDE

Three Real Pages From the Full Guide

The following pages are pulled directly from the 21-page premium guide -- no filler, no fluff. This is exactly what you get.

3 The Windows, Balanced Rock & Double Arch

Arches National Park -- closest major dark site to Moab

5-11 mi
FROM ENTRANCE

2019
DARK SKY SINCE

No Permit
FOR NIGHT ACCESS

Easy
ACCESS

Arches is only five miles from downtown Moab and, as of 2026, requires no timed-entry reservation to enter -- day or night. Balanced Rock and Double Arch are the two most popular foreground subjects for Milky Way shots, both with the La Sal Mountains as a backdrop. The Windows Section amphitheater offers a wide-open sky with three arches to frame compositions around.

Insider tip: Expect company after dark -- these are the park's most accessible pullouts, and several guided tour companies bring groups here nightly. Arrive early to claim your spot.

4 Devils Garden & Landscape Arch

Arches National Park -- the darkest, most remote corner of the park

18 mi
FROM ENTRANCE

45 min
WALK TO ARCH

No Permit
FOR DAY HIKE

Moderate
ACCESS

At the far end of Arches' 18-mile scenic drive, Devils Garden sits noticeably farther from any residual glow than the Windows Section. A flat, 0.9-mile walk on a sandy trail reaches Landscape Arch, the longest natural arch in North America -- a dramatic foreground for a wide-angle Milky Way shot in one of the darkest pockets of the park.

Insider tip: There is zero cell service and zero lighting on this trail after dark. Download offline maps, bring two headlamps (with a spare), and never hike it alone at night.

5 Castle Valley

BLM land -- a favorite of professional astrophotographers, no entrance fee

16 mi
FROM MOAB

Free
NO ENTRANCE FEE

No Permit
ACCESS

Easy
ACCESS

A dramatic valley of red rock buttes and spires 16 miles northeast of Moab, anchored by the unmistakable silhouette of Castleton Tower and the formation known as the Priest and Nuns. Because it's BLM land rather than a park, there's no entrance fee and no closing time -- just pull off and set up. It's a regular stop on professional Moab astrophotography workshops for exactly this reason.

Insider tip: The valley floor faces the formations to the south, which works well for framing the Milky Way's summer arc directly behind Castleton Tower.

What You Actually Need to Reserve

The good news: casual stargazing and tripod photography require no special permit anywhere in this guide. The situations below are the main access and permit considerations worth knowing about.

Activity	Permit?	Details
Stargazing / tripod photography (any location in this guide)	No	Standard park entrance fee only. No astrophotography-specific permit exists for personal use.
Fiery Furnace (Arches)	Yes	Ranger-led tour or self-guided permit at Recreation.gov. Unrelated to night access, but affects planning if combining with a day visit.
Devils Garden Campground (Arches)	Yes	Required if you want to base overnight inside the park near the darkest corner of Arches. Book at Recreation.gov.
Dead Horse Point after 10 PM	Yes (indirect)	Requires a campground or yurt reservation, a spot on a ranger program, or a booking with a special-use-permit tour operator.
Filming, photography, or audio recording	Usually no for groups of 8 or fewer	Commercial and noncommercial photography are treated the same under current NPS rules. A permit is generally not required for groups of eight or fewer people using hand-carried equipment in areas open to the public, provided the activity does not require exclusive use, negatively affect park resources or visitors, or create additional administrative costs. Larger or more complex productions may require a permit. Check with the park if unsure.
Drones	Not permitted	Drones are banned in all U.S. national parks, including Arches and Canyonlands. There is no permit that allows recreational drone use inside these parks. BLM land outside park boundaries (Castle Valley, Fisher Towers) has different rules -- check current BLM regulations before flying.

Camera Settings, Lenses, and Apps

You don't need professional equipment to come home with a real Milky Way photo -- but a few specific pieces of gear make a dramatic difference.

Gear	Recommendation	Why It Matters
Camera	Any DSLR or mirrorless capable of ISO 3200+	Higher usable ISO captures more light in a short exposure before star trailing begins.
Lens	Wide-angle, 14-24mm on full frame (10-18mm on crop sensor), f/2.8 or wider	Wide focal length keeps exposures shorter before stars visibly trail; a fast aperture gathers more light.
Tripod	Sturdy tripod, non-negotiable	Exposures run 10-30 seconds; any movement blurs the entire frame.
Shutter Release	Intervalometer or 2-second self-timer	Avoids camera shake from pressing the shutter button directly.
Extra Batteries	At least one spare, kept warm in a pocket	Cold desert nights drain batteries significantly faster than daytime shooting.
Smartphone Option	Recent iPhone or Android with Night Mode	Late-model phone cameras can capture a recognizable Milky Way image, especially braced on a small tripod.

A starting-point exposure: ISO 3200, f/2.8, and a 10-20 second shutter speed. Adjust based on your camera, focal length, and how much star movement you are willing to accept. Under the traditional "500 Rule," divide 500 by your lens's full-frame-equivalent focal length to estimate the maximum shutter speed before noticeable star trailing. Wider lenses generally allow longer exposures, while longer focal lengths require shorter exposures. Modern high-resolution cameras often reveal star trailing sooner, so review your images closely and shorten the shutter speed when needed. Shoot in RAW format for much more flexibility when editing exposure and color afterward.

Useful apps (download for offline use before you leave cell service): PhotoPills or Stellarium to plan exactly where and when the Milky Way's core will rise relative to your chosen foreground; a basic star chart app like SkyView for identifying constellations and planets in real time.

Light painting: A dim flashlight or headlamp (even your phone's flashlight through a t-shirt to diffuse it) can briefly illuminate a foreground subject -- an arch, a tower, a person -- during a long exposure. Use it sparingly and from the side for texture; a few seconds usually does the job.

What's Inside the Full Edition

21

PAGES

11

STARGAZING
LOCATIONS

2015

GOLD-TIER SINCE

2026

FACT-CHECKED

In the full guide, you'll get:

- 11 full location profiles -- from five-minute roadside pullouts to remote 4WD drives -- each with drive time, access difficulty, and what makes it worth the trip.
- The exact night-access rules for Arches, Canyonlands, and Dead Horse Point, including the 10 PM gate closure most guides don't mention and what it takes to stay past it.
- A season-by-season breakdown of when the Milky Way's core is actually visible, plus moon-phase and meteor-shower planning built in.
- A full permit picture covering Fiery Furnace, Devils Garden Campground, and the current NPS photography and filming rules -- current as of 2026, not outdated pre-2025 policy.
- A complete astrophotography gear guide with real starting-point camera settings, lens recommendations, and the apps locals actually use to plan a shoot.
- Guided tour operator picks, AstroFest details, DarkSky-certified lodging, and an hour-by-hour 3-day itinerary built around pairing night skies with your national park days.

ASTRO TOURISM GUIDE SERIES -- PREMIER EDITION

Get the Full Moab Astro Guide

21 pages. 11 best stargazing locations. The complete dark-sky, permit, and astrophotography system -- built by locals.

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