

The Ultimate ZION Guide

2026

Angels Landing. The Narrows. Weeping Rock. Red canyon walls 2,000 feet high.
Utah's most visited national park. Know before you go.

* 2026 Fact-Checked

* Angels Landing Permit Guide

* Shuttle + New Tunnel Rules

WELCOME

Utah's Most Visited National Park -- And the Most Rewarding to Plan Well

Zion National Park is the most visited national park in Utah and one of the most visited in the entire United States -- over 4.5 million visitors annually pass through Springdale to enter a canyon carved by the Virgin River through Navajo Sandstone walls that rise 2,000 feet straight from the canyon floor. The colors shift from deep red at the base to cream and white at the rim. The scale is immediate and overwhelming. Standing at the bottom of Zion Canyon for the first time rarely leaves anyone neutral.

What separates a great Zion trip from a frustrating one is almost entirely preparation. The free shuttle system that runs through Zion Canyon from March through November changes everything about how you access the park. The Angels Landing permit lottery requires advance planning to guarantee access to the park's most iconic hike. And the 2026 large vehicle restrictions on the Zion-Mt. Carmel Highway are the biggest infrastructure change to the park in years -- RV and large vehicle visitors need to understand the new rules before arriving.

This guide covers all of it: the geology of the canyon, the complete shuttle system, every major hike with in-depth profiles, the Angels Landing permit process step by step, the Narrows gear and safety information, seasonal strategy, where to stay and eat in Springdale, and a complete 3-day itinerary that makes the most of every day in the park.

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A LOOK INSIDE

Three Real Pages From the Full Guide

The following pages are pulled directly from the 26-page premium guide -- no filler, no fluff. This is exactly what you get.

DISTANCE 3-9+ mi RT	ELEVATION Minimal (river level)	TIME 2-8 hrs	DIFFICULTY Moderate (water + flash flood)	FAMILY Older kids with dry suits in cooler months	SEASON May-October for warmest water
TRAIL OVERVIEW The Narrows is unlike any hike in this guide -- you are hiking IN the Virgin River, through a slot canyon where the walls rise 1,000 feet and the passage narrows to as little as 20 feet wide. The hike begins at the Riverside Walk (the flat, paved 1.1-mile walk to the river's edge) and then continues upstream in the water. You hike as far as you want -- most visitors go 1-3 miles before turning back, where the canyon dramatically narrows into 'Wall Street,' the most photographed section of the Narrows.			TRAILHEAD + LOGISTICS Shuttle Stop 9 (Temple of Sinawava) -- the last stop on the Zion Canyon line. Walk the paved 1.1-mile Riverside Walk to the river's edge, then step in. Water depth ranges from ankle to waist depending on season and recent rainfall. Waterproof boots, neoprene socks, and a walking stick are strongly recommended for traction on the slippery river cobbles. All of this gear -- including dry bags and walking sticks -- is rentable from Springdale outfitters (Zion Guru, Zion Adventures, Zion Outfitters) for around \$30-50/person.		
CROWD STRATEGY The Narrows is busy but the river route itself spreads people out naturally -- you are not on a trail with bottlenecks. The first mile upstream from the Riverside Walk sees the most traffic; beyond 'Wall Street' (about 1.5-2 miles in), the canyon quiets significantly. Start the shuttle at 7am (first shuttle of the season) to be in the river by 8am.			PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS Wall Street, at approximately 1.5-2 miles upstream, is the iconic photography section -- walls visible sky-only overhead, reflections in the calm sections of river, light beams entering from above. A wide-angle lens and waterproof camera case are essential. Early morning light penetrates the canyon; midday light is best for reflections in still pools.		
LOCAL INSIDER TIP Zion Guru (zionguru.com, code AFV10) is our local Springdale partner for Narrows gear rental -- they also offer guided Narrows tours for those who want expert canyoneering knowledge for the route. Highly recommended for first-time Narrows hikers. The staff will check flash flood conditions and advise on current water levels.			TRAIL TIPS + WARNINGS CRITICAL: Do NOT drink or submerge your head in the Virgin River -- toxic cyanobacteria has been detected in the river system. Check flash flood danger before entering -- the NPS posts current conditions at nps.gov/zion and the Zion Canyon Visitor Center. The canyon can flood rapidly from storms 30+ miles away with no rain in the canyon. If rangers say the river is closed, it is closed. Do not attempt in questionable weather.		

3 Observation Point via East Mesa Trail The highest viewpoint in the canyon -- and the quiet route to get there					NO PERMIT REQUIRED
DISTANCE 7 mi RT	ELEVATION ~300 ft net gain	TIME 2.5-4 hrs	DIFFICULTY Moderate	FAMILY Older kids (7+)	SEASON Year-round (dirt road may be muddy in winter)
TRAIL OVERVIEW At 6,508 feet, Observation Point is the highest accessible viewpoint in Zion Canyon -- higher than Angels Landing by over 700 feet, and looking directly down at Angels Landing from above. From here, the canyon layout is laid out completely: the Great White Throne, Cathedral Mountain, Big Bend, the Narrows slot canyon, and the entire length of Zion Canyon. The original Observation Point Trail from the Weeping Rock shuttle stop has been closed since a 2019 rockfall. The East Mesa Trail is now the standard route.			TRAILHEAD + LOGISTICS The East Mesa Trailhead is accessed from the east side of the park, outside the main Zion Canyon corridor. From Springdale: drive through the tunnel on SR-9 toward Mt. Carmel Junction, then turn onto North Fork Road (near mile marker 21 on SR-9), and follow about 5 miles on a dirt road to the East Mesa Trailhead. No shuttle service. A high-clearance vehicle is recommended after rain. Zion Ponderosa Ranch (code ADVENTUREFAMILY) is located near the trailhead and offers shuttle service to the trailhead for a fee.		

Angels Landing, The Narrows, Backpacking -- Explained Clearly

Zion has more permit requirements than most parks, but they are well-organized and manageable once you understand the systems. The Angels Landing permit is the most important for most visitors to plan around. Everything else is either free or straightforward.

ACTIVITY	PERMIT?	HOW TO GET IT	COST	KEY NOTES
Angels Landing (chain section above Scout Lookout)	YES -- required 24/7, every day	Recreation.gov. Two options: (1) Seasonal lottery -- apply quarterly ~2 months before your season. (2) Day-before lottery -- apply 12:01 AM to 3 PM MT the day before.	\$6 application + \$3/person if selected	Hiking TO Scout Lookout does NOT require a permit. Only the half-mile above Scout Lookout. Download permit before entering park -- cell service unreliable.
The Narrows (bottom-up day hike)	NO for day hiking	No reservation needed for bottom-up day hike starting at Temple of Sinawava	Free (standard park entry only)	Check flash flood conditions daily at nps.gov/zion before entering. River may close without notice. Gear rental strongly recommended.
The Narrows (top-down, overnight)	YES -- backpacking permit	Recreation.gov, lottery. Top-down is a 16-mile point-to-point through the full Narrows canyon starting at Chamberlain Ranch.	\$10 permit + \$3/person/night	Top-down trip is one of the great multi-day canyon adventures in Utah. Requires advanced planning -- permits release 3 months ahead.
The Subway (Left Fork)	YES	Recreation.gov, competitive lottery. One of the most sought-after permits in Utah.	\$10 permit	A technical canyoneering slot canyon requiring rappelling gear and route-finding. Not a hiking trail -- requires specific skills and equipment.
Zion Narrows or Kolob Canyon Backpacking	YES	Recreation.gov or Zion Backcountry Permit Office for walk-up permits	\$10 permit + \$3/person/night	Overnight below the rim in most Zion backcountry zones requires a permit. Walk-up availability exists but is limited in peak season.
All Other Day Hikes (Observation Point, Emerald Pools, Watchman, etc.)	NO	Standard park entry only	\$35/vehicle or pass	No reservation or permit needed for any other day hike in the park. Just arrive and hike.

7:30 AM	Riverside Walk and Narrows entry The first shuttle reaches the Temple of Sinawava by 7:30-7:45am. Walk the paved Riverside Walk (1.1 miles) to the river, then step in. The canyon at this hour is extraordinary -- almost no other hikers, morning light just beginning to angle into the slot, and the whole canyon essentially to yourself. Hike upstream as far as you want -- most first-timers find Wall Street (1.5-2 miles in) to be the most dramatic and satisfying turnaround.
11:00 AM	Return to Zion Lodge for lunch Shuttle back toward the Visitor Center and stop at Zion Lodge (Stop 5). Castle Dome Cafe for lunch. Return your rental gear to Springdale this afternoon if you pre-paid.
Afternoon	Emerald Pools and Kayenta Trail From Zion Lodge (Stop 5), walk to the Emerald Pools -- Lower Pool is 0.6 miles flat; Middle and Upper Pools extend the walk. The Kayenta Trail from The Grotto (Stop 6) to the Emerald Pools area is a quieter alternative that adds variety to the afternoon.
Evening	Return to Springdale + Dinner at Bit & Spur Bit & Spur Restaurant is the classic Springdale dinner destination -- reservation recommended. Apply for your Angels Landing day-before lottery tonight (midnight opener) if you don't already have a seasonal permit. Set your alarm for 12:01 AM.

DAY 2	Angels Landing (With Permit) + Canyon Overlook The summit and the tunnel-side viewpoint
6:30 AM	First shuttle to The Grotto (Stop 6) Board the first available shuttle from the Visitor Center and ride directly to The Grotto -- Angels Landing trailhead. Download your permit screenshot before leaving your hotel (cell service at the trailhead is unreliable). Have your photo ID ready -- rangers check both at the chain section.
7:00 AM	Angels Landing hike begins Cross the footbridge, through Refrigerator Canyon (shaded, naturally cool), and up Walter's Wiggles -- 21 steep switchbacks to Scout Lookout. At Scout Lookout, either rest and enjoy the view (no permit needed here) or continue with your permit into the chain section. The chain section is 0.5 miles with significant exposure -- move at a controlled pace, one direction at a time in the narrow sections.
9:30-10 AM	Summit of Angels Landing (5,790 ft) The summit lookout delivers the definitive Zion Canyon panorama: the full canyon below, the Great White Throne across the gap, the Narrows slot canyon to the north, and the canyon plateau in every direction. Allow 20-30 minutes at the summit before descending. The descent requires care and patience -- step aside for uphill hikers on narrow sections.
Midday	Drive to Canyon Overlook Trail (East Side) After returning to the Visitor Center, collect your vehicle and drive through the Zion-Mt. Carmel Tunnel (verify your vehicle meets size requirements). Park immediately east of the tunnel exit for the Canyon Overlook Trail -- 1 mile round trip, 20-60 minutes, outstanding views of lower Zion Canyon from the east side. Combine this with the Checkerboard Mesa viewpoint (a short drive east on SR-9).

What's Inside the Full Edition

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TRAIL PROFILES

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MAJOR 2026
UPDATES EXPLAINED

2026

FACT-CHECKED

In the full guide, you'll get:

- The complete 2026 update rundown -- the new large-vehicle ban on the Zion-Mt. Carmel Highway, the year-round Angels Landing permit requirement, and the South Campground closure.
- Full profiles for all 10 major trails, from Angels Landing's chain section to the permit-free alternatives most visitors never discover, like Scout Lookout and Observation Point via East Mesa.
- The Angels Landing permit system explained step by step -- seasonal lottery vs. the day-before lottery, and which one gives spontaneous visitors the best odds.
- Complete Narrows gear and safety guidance -- what to rent, what it costs, and the flash-flood precautions that matter most before you step into the river.
- A full, hour-by-hour 3-day itinerary built around shuttle timing, permit logistics, and golden-hour light in the canyon.
- Our picks for lodging and dining in Springdale, plus the winter secret that lets you drive your own vehicle all the way up Zion Canyon.

PREMIER EDITION

Get the Full Zion Guide

26 pages. 10 full trail profiles. The complete 2026 permit, shuttle, and 3-day itinerary system -- built by locals.

\$15 -- Buy the Full Guide

Available now at
AdventureFamilyVlog.com