



Destination: Arches National Park, Moab, Utah

Several years ago I took my first month-long road trip around the American West. Planned stops included Santa Fe and the Grand Canyon among others. I did have a goal to include stops in the western states I hadn't been to before. I would have picked off Utah with a planned stop at Four Corners while on my way to the Grand Canyon, but my wall calendar had a cool picture of Delicate Arch in southeast Utah's Arches National Park. I wasn't at all familiar with Utah's red rock country at the time, but I really wanted to see Delicate Arch. So I made Arches National Park my Utah destination as I travelled from Santa Fe to the Grand Canyon.

Needless to say, I fell in love with Arches and more broadly the entire Colorado Plateau region. I've since explored many great destinations in the region, and I've been back to Arches several times since that first visit. Arches, after all, is my favorite national park.

But I'm not the only one who's discovered Arches National Park. Visitation has soared, close to doubling in just the last decade. For several months a year, the line to get into the park is long. The campground is routinely full. Parking lots at all the key attractions are often full – and you're delayed from trying your luck elsewhere by cars blocking the road waiting for parking spots to open. Hiking the main trails are very social affairs rather than quiet wilderness experiences. The first time I hiked up to Delicate Arch I had the arch to myself for 45 minutes. Today you'd be lucky if only 45 people are there with you – good luck getting a picture of the park's iconic arch without including strangers taking selfies.

The National Park Service has decided to address this overcrowding. They have proposed implementing a car entrance reservation system to control the number of cars that can enter the park and when they can enter. It may be implemented as early as 2019.



So in case you can't get to the park – or can't get past the entrance sign once you get to the park – I'll lead you on a trip through the park through pictures from my past visits. I hope you enjoy them. Perhaps they'll inspire your own visit someday.

Bring your own food and other refreshments. When you get in the park, consider stopping at the visitor center to learn more about the park, pick up some more detailed information, get some souvenirs, and use a bathroom with actual plumbing. Get some water here, too, because fresh water is available at only a few places in the park.

The main road through the park is 18 miles from the visitor center to the end of the road at Devils Garden. Paved side roads to the Windows Area and Delicate Arch Area can add another 10 miles to the trip. Unpaved roads to a couple sites can add even more driving miles.

Time to head up a steep hill and then have some fun.



On the way up you'll pass this cluster of sandstone pillars known as the Three Penguins. You can see them from a viewpoint near the top of the climb.



From that viewpoint you get this look at the park's visitor center, Highway 191 and the Moab Fault. The Moab Fault is a fracture that led to 2,600 feet of vertical movement about 6 million years ago.

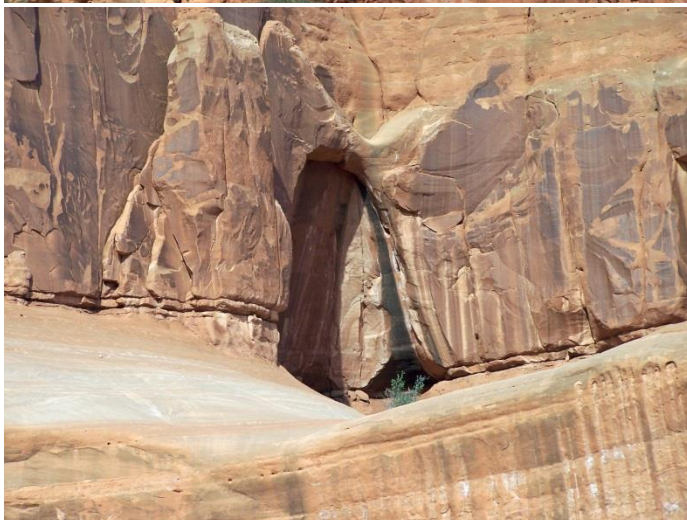
Although to the casual observer it's all just red sandstone, the upper layers on the Arches side of the highway are Entrada Sandstone, whereas the upper layers across the highway are much older Wingate Sandstone (that side's younger rock layers have eroded away).



Park Avenue is the first major stop. It gets its name from the sandstone fins that reminded early visitors of the New York City skyline. There's a mile-long downhill trail here that leads to a parking area that's about 1.4 miles by road – useful if a member of your party doesn't want to take the hike and thus can meet you with the car at the other end.



Some of the features along Park Avenue have been named, including Queen Nefertiti and nearby upright Sausage Rock on the side opposite the skyline.



And on the right side is your first arch of the park, not surprisingly named Park Avenue Arch. It's only 7 feet wide and barely a half foot from the wall behind it. Not impressed after all the hype? Don't worry. Most visitors to Park Avenue don't even notice it.



Next up is the La Sal Mountains Viewpoint. It provides views of many of the features of the south end of the park – as well as the nearby La Sal Mountains, which I'll show you later.

It's just that I got this cool rainbow picture from the viewpoint on one of my trips, so I wanted to use this picture here instead.



The Courthouse Towers area features a number of monoliths and spires, including the Tower of Babel and the Organ, pictured here.



You can also see the Three Gossips (left) and Sheep Rock (right). Sheep Rock may be a remnant of a long-fallen arch.



You can also see Baby Arch from this area. It's that small arch located near the lower right of this sandstone wall. Only it's not all that little. Baby Arch is about 24 feet wide and 15 feet tall.



A little further along, the road crosses a streambed called Courthouse Wash. The wash generally cuts a path from west to east before turning south. It eventually leaves the park along Highway 191 and empties into the Colorado River.

If you feel like hiking, you can stop here and follow the wash and some cairns upstream to Ring Arch. It's about 1.5 miles (one way).

Along the way you'll see this arch, Atlasta Arch.



Ring Arch is about 45 feet wide by 40 feet tall. But it doesn't look as elegant as it used to. Part of it collapsed in 2014, giving it a much chunkier look.



Some people hike the stretch of Courthouse Wash that heads downstream from the park road to Highway 191 (working out driving arrangements with a hiking partner is a good idea). Depending on when it has rained recently, the wash can be dry in many places or contain flowing water.

It is generally not a good idea to hike in washes when there is rain in the area. Even a brief downpour somewhere upstream can send a wall of water rushing down a desert wash.



Just above the place where Courthouse Wash meets Highway 191 are some pictographs on the cliff face high above the wash. There's parking here along Highway 191, so you don't have to hike through the wash to see them. Some of the rock art is believed to be Barrier Canyon Style dating back as much as 4000 years. Fremont contributions date back about 1000 years. Ute or Navajo artists added some figures on horseback in historic times.

Don't touch the rock art. And certainly don't make your own contributions – or heavy fines and jail time may await you.



Back along the main park road, we've stopped here at the Petrified Dunes Viewpoint. And yes, those beige lumps spread across the middle of the picture are indeed petrified sand dunes, cemented in place back in the Jurassic Period.



Past Courthouse Wash, the Great Wall follows the left side of the park road for a few miles. Keep an eye out for Bean Pot Arch, pictured here. Arch of Motion is along here, too, but it's hard to spot from the road because it also has a rock background. Arch of Motion is indeed my Arches nemesis because it has repeatedly foiled my efforts to see and photograph it – although I've gotten pictures of a few other Great Wall area arches that I've found while looking for Arch of Motion.



Of course, you can look across the road in the other direction for nice views of the La Sal Mountains. The La Sals were formed by an intrusion of igneous (volcanic) rock into what was once a much thicker layer of sedimentary rock. That sedimentary rock has long since eroded away exposing the igneous rock. The La Sal Mountains form the second highest mountain range in Utah, offering visitors a cool escape from the area's summer heat.



The different types of sandstone at Arches erode at different rates. Balanced Rock is a 55 feet tall Entrada sandstone boulder that sits atop a Dewey Bridge Member sandstone pedestal that's about 73 feet tall. Dewey Bridge Member is softer than Entrada and thus erodes faster. At some point, enough of it will erode away and the 3600-ton boulder will fall to the ground – much like the nearby "Chip Off The Old Block" balanced rock did during the winter of 1975-76.



A 4 wheel drive road heads left off the main park road near Balanced Rock. The road crosses Willow Flats and exits the park (there's a dinosaur trackway about a quarter mile beyond the park boundary that can also be accessed via Highway 191). But at 0.7 miles you can take a right and head out another couple miles. Here you will find an outcropping that features two noteworthy arches, including Eye of the Whale Arch, pictured here. Eye of the Whale Arch is 36 feet wide by 20 feet tall.



Leaping Arch in the same outcropping is 68 feet wide and over 50 feet tall.

The round trip makes for a pleasant 5-mile hike if you want some time away from the crowds.



Continuing along the main road, take the almost immediate right on the paved road that leads to the Windows Area.

Keep an eye out for Pothole Arch, which is about 37 feet by 20 feet. Technically this is a double arch. See that crack across the front? That's actually an opening – 14 feet long but just 1 foot tall.



The Garden of Eden is an area of sandstone spires. It's not uncommon to find visitors practicing rock climbing here. Rock climbing is permitted in a number of areas in the park – but not on any of the arches.



The Garden of Eden also features some nice views of the surrounding area, such as this view of Turret Arch (left) and the La Sal Mountains.



Two of the highlights of the Windows Area are the North and South Windows, which somewhat resemble a giant pair of eyes. Watching you. (Strangely, as you hike around the area, it's almost like they're following you.)

The South Window (left) is 115 feet wide and 55 feet tall. The North Window is 90 feet wide and almost 50 feet tall.



Here's a closer look at Turret Arch, also in the Windows Area. Turret Arch is 35 feet wide and 65 feet tall; its small companion to the right is just 10 feet by 12 feet.

A hiking trail leads from the parking area to Turret Arch and the Windows. A loop trail circles the Windows. All of these trails combined add up to only about a mile of hiking.



On the other side of the Windows Area parking lot is a quarter mile long trail to Double Arch. These arches may not seem all that big from a distance, but keep an eye out for hikers underneath them – that will give you a better appreciation for their scale.

The smaller of the two arches here is only 61 feet wide and 86 feet tall; the larger of the two is 144 feet wide and 112 feet tall, making them some of the largest arches in the park, and the largest double arch in the world.



Back on the main park road, stop at Panorama Point for some great views of the features of the central part of the park.

Here's the view towards Fiery Furnace, which we'll explore in a bit.



From Panorama Point you can also get your first glimpse of the park's famous Delicate Arch. But you might not recognize it if you don't know what you're looking for.

There's a dark spot in the reddish sandstone in the upper center of this picture. That's the shadow created by Delicate Arch, which stands just to the right of that spot.

Delicate Arch is our next stop.



A paved road heads off to the right off the main park road towards the Delicate Arch Trail and Delicate Arch Viewpoint Trail parking areas.

If you want to hike up to Delicate Arch, stop at the first parking area for the 3-mile round trip hike.

Near the parking area is what survives of Wolfe Ranch, home to John Wesley Wolfe from 1888 to 1910. Certainly isolated, but he probably got sufficient water from Salt Wash to sustain his small operation.



Nearby the trail passes some historic Ute petroglyphs – historic (i.e., post-European contact) because they depict people on horses.



The trail climbs about 500 feet in the 1.5 miles to Delicate Arch. In warmer months it can be plenty hot and there's no shade, so be prepared for the hike.

And if you don't care for heights or if you wonder if it's safe for the little kids you're herding, here's a picture of a short stretch of the trail near the end.

Know your limits.



Keep an eye out for Echo Arch across the canyon. But when you reach Frame Arch along the trail, you'll know that you're getting close to Delicate Arch. After all, you can see Delicate Arch through 14 feet wide and 12 feet tall Frame Arch.

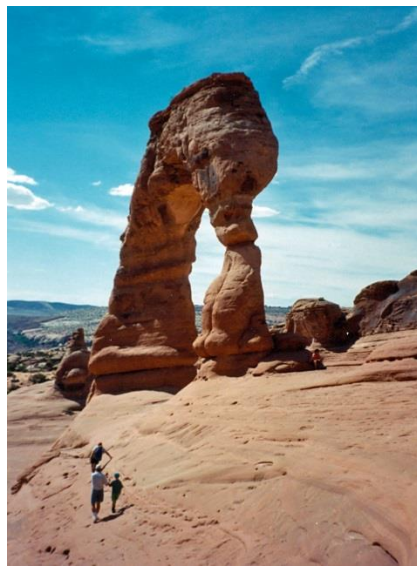


The iconic Delicate Arch – 32 feet wide and 46 feet tall.

In the old days you might have been lucky enough to have it all to yourself. But with today's crowds visiting the park, you will probably be sharing this experience with dozens of others.



I had overcast skies when I hiked up to Delicate Arch the first time. But then the morning sun broke through the clouds, brightening the arch and the surrounding landscape.



It is tempting to try to see Delicate Arch from its other side. Some people do creep down that steep outer slope (I stupidly did it too on that first visit) to get that view.

But if you slip, there isn't anything to stop you – it goes from steep slope to vertical drop.

So skip this. Besides, you can get a much better view of that side of Delicate Arch from the Delicate Arch Viewpoint Trail.



A mile further down road from the Delicate Arch Trailhead parking area is the Delicate Arch Viewpoint Trailhead. If hiking isn't your thing, you can get a decent albeit distant view of Delicate Arch from near the parking lot. An uphill hike does lead to better views, such as this one that features both Delicate Arch and Frame Arch (far left).

As well as a nice view of that steep slope and vertical drop that I mentioned above.



Zooming in on Delicate Arch from the Delicate Arch Viewpoint Trail.



At the Delicate Arch Viewpoint parking area is a sign for the car-punishing 4x4 (plus high clearance and rugged tires) Cache Valley Road. Curious, I decided to hike out (far less punishing) along this road for a stretch past the park boundary.

Not far past the park boundary I noticed a faint trail that headed off to the left. Curious, I checked it out. I soon found myself in a colorful pocket of blue-green rock. It's a naturally occurring color, part of the Brushy Basin Member of the Morrison Formation. It makes for an interesting contrast to the area's red and golden sandstone.



You probably noticed pockets of this blue-green rock elsewhere in the Delicate Arch Road area.

Back along the main park road you'll even see some of this Cache Valley feature with Fiery Furnace in the background.



On the way to the Fiery Furnace Viewpoint, make a stop at the Salt Valley Overlook. Among its views is this one of Salt Valley. It doesn't look very interesting, especially compared to everything else we see in the park. But Salt Valley explains a lot about why we have so many arches here in the first place.

An underlying salt dome dissolved and washed away as Colorado River water reached these layers of rock. When the layers of sedimentary rock above it collapsed (creating the valley), that put stress on nearby sandstone. That sandstone developed parallel cracks. Crack erosion led to fins. And arches eroded through the fins. So Salt Valley is actually pretty cool.



Fiery Furnace Viewpoint gives you some close up views of the sandstone spires of the maze-like Fiery Furnace.

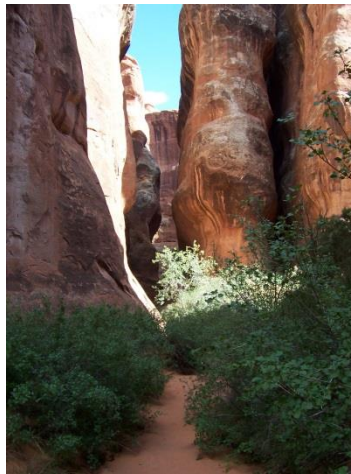


Wonder how Fiery Furnace got its name? Come back here when the late-day sun illuminates these red and gold spires. Depending on the quality of the setting sun's light, Fiery Furnace sandstone takes on the color of flames.



From the Fiery Furnace Viewpoint you can also look south across Cache Valley towards the La Sal Mountains.

As for those cliffs just to the left of the La Sals? Those rise above the Colorado River, which marks the southeast boundary of the park.

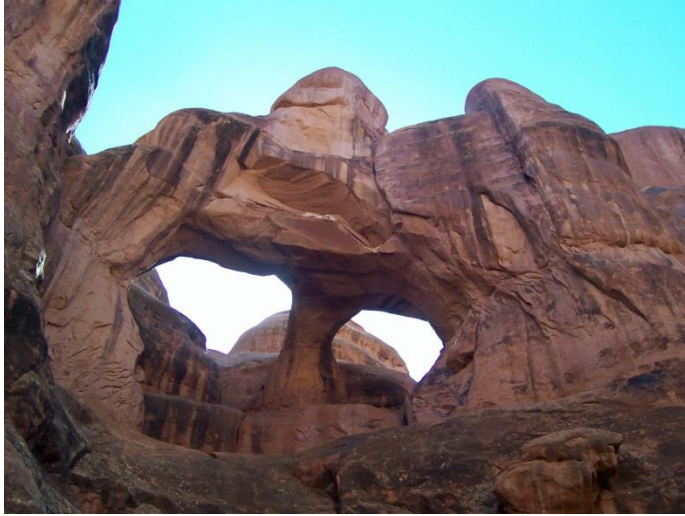


The Fiery Furnace Trail is one of the highlights of the park, but for most visitors you are required to reserve a spot with a ranger-led hike because it's pretty easy to get lost in there. It's a somewhat rugged 2-mile hike, but it's worth it if you get the opportunity.



This is actually a natural bridge – not an arch – along the Fiery Furnace Trail. A natural bridge is carved by flowing water, whereas an arch is generally created by other types of erosion.

Walk Thru Bridge is about 9 feet wide and 6 feet tall.



Skull Arch a.k.a. Twin Arch is a double arch in the Fiery Furnace. The openings are bigger than you might realize – the largest opening is 47 feet wide by 30 feet tall, and the smallest is 27 feet by 27 feet.



Kissing Turtles Arch is less noteworthy for its 6 feet wide and 5 feet high arch than for the fact that it looks like two turtles kissing.



Yet another arch along the Fiery Furnace Trail is Flatiron Arch, a 14 feet wide and 5 feet tall arch.



Further up the main park road, the Sand Dune Arch/Broken Arch parking area has trails that lead to some more arches.

A short trail leads to Sand Dune Arch. Routinely shady with lots of soft sand, this 25 feet wide and 11 feet tall arch is regarded as quite kid-friendly.

Even for really big kids.



A half mile in the distance from the parking area is Broken Arch, named for what appears to be a crack at the top. Broken Arch is 53 feet wide and 41 feet tall.



From Broken Arch you can continue on the trail to Tapestry Arch, which is about 50 feet wide and 30 feet tall.

At this point you're also just a short distance away from the Devils Garden Campground. If you're camping here, the trail to Tapestry Arch and Broken Arch makes for a nice after-dinner hike.



The unpaved Salt Valley Road heads off the main park road to the left. It heads out to the Klondike Bluffs area of the park. Deep sand can lead to some interesting driving in places when it's dry, and the road can be impassable when it's wet. Know your driving skills. And your car's limits.

Salt Valley can be filled with colorful globemallow in the late spring.



A 1.7 mile one-way trail from the Klondike Bluffs parking area features some interesting arches, including Parallel Arch, a double arch. The outer arch is 32 feet wide, whereas the inner arch is 22 feet wide.



Tower Arch gets its name from the sandstone tower just beyond the arch. The arch itself is just over 100 feet wide and 45 feet tall.



When you finish at Tower Arch you can return the way you came, or you can hike a 4 mile stretch of 4 wheel drive roads back to the parking area. It may not be the best use of your time, but you will get to see Anniversary Arch along the road. It is actually a pair of adjacent arches – the left one is 16 feet wide and the right one is 7 feet wide.



From both Klondike Bluffs hiking options you will see this line of sandstone pillars, the Marching Men.



Continuing back along the main park road, we see Skyline Arch on the right side of the road. Skyline Arch is 71 feet wide and 34 feet tall. It actually doubled in size after a 1940 rockfall.



It's easy to miss, but look for Diamond Arch just to the right of the road as you enter the Devils Garden Trail parking area. Diamond Arch is 20 feet wide and 11 feet tall.



The Devils Garden Trail is the longest of the hiking trails in the park and features a number of impressive arches. That said, you can have a great visit in as little as an hour – the time needed to hike out to Landscape Arch and back – or cover all 7.2 miles of its arches and fins.

You will find water and toilets at the trailhead (and at the nearby Devils Garden Campground), so make use of them – you won't find either anywhere else along the trail.



At about 0.4 miles you'll reach a spur trail to the right that leads to a few arches, including Tunnel Arch and its small partner, pictured here. The main arch is about 23 feet wide by 25 feet tall.

The spur also leads to Pine Tree Arch – makes me wonder just how old that tree is given when the arch was named. Pine Tree Arch is about 45 feet wide and 44 feet tall.



Arguably the highlight of this trail is Landscape Arch, which at 290 feet is the world's fifth longest freestanding arch. A large slab broke off the day before I took this hike for the first time, and there have been a couple more rock falls since then. Like every arch, its days are numbered.



As was the case with Wall Arch, which once stood about 0.2 miles further along the trail. With an opening of 71 feet it was once the park's 12th biggest arch. But it collapsed the night of August 4, 2008.



0.6 miles past Landscape Arch a spur trail leads to Partition Arch and Navajo Arch.

You may have noticed Partition Arch in the wall high above Landscape Arch. You get a much closer look here. Partition Arch is a double arch. The main arch is about 30 feet wide by 30 feet tall. The smaller one measures only about 9 feet by 9 feet.



A spur trail off the spur trail leads to Navajo Arch. It's about 41 feet wide and 13 feet tall.



Once you return to the main trail, it's about .75 miles to the next arch, Double O Arch.

It is along this stretch of the trail that you get your introduction to Fin Canyon. And it's quite the introduction as the trail crosses the narrow top of one of Arches fins.

If it helps, don't think about how far you can fall... think about how far you can see.



What you see from up here are Fin Canyon's parallel rows of eroded sandstone fins. From Double O Arch you will have the option to hike down into Fin Canyon.



Double O Arch is about 2 miles from the trailhead. Its upper arch is 66 feet wide and 35 feet tall. Its lower arch is 21 feet wide but only 9 feet tall.

Many Devils Garden Trail hikers turn around here, but you do have a couple options to consider.



You could hike out to the Dark Angel – either the source of all evil in the modern world or a 150 feet tall pillar of darkened sandstone. It adds up to a mile (round trip) to your hike. I’ve done it a couple times, but don’t feel bad if you skip it for time reasons.



What I don’t skip is the Primitive Loop Trail. It’s a more rugged trail that heads down into Fin Canyon, where you can get up close and personal with its impressive fins – and see a few more arches, although this is really about the fins. It’s an otherworldly landscape that is almost unique to anywhere I have gone hiking.

It does add some length to your hike, though. A hike that uses the main trail to get to Double O Arch, includes the spur trails to some of the arches and the Dark Angel, and returns via the Primitive Loop Trail is about 7.2 miles long.

The small arch at the top of the fin is Top Story Window, about 18 feet wide and 12 feet tall.



A short side trail off the Primitive Loop Trail leads to Private Arch, probably the most accessible arch along the Primitive Loop Trail – yet it was unknown to park rangers until 1992. Private Arch is on a spur trail, and is 38 feet wide and 16 feet tall.

Keep your eyes open. There are other arches in the fins of Fin Canyon.



As you hike the Primitive Loop Trail, you will eventually leave Fin Canyon and cross a stretch of Arches' high desert scenery. Keep an eye out for Landscape Arch. That's your sign that you're back to the main trail (you've still got 0.8 miles to get back to the parking area).

That pretty much covers all the highlights of Arches National Park. Well, except for one of my favorite activities in the park.



The angle and intensity of the sun, sky conditions and where you stand while looking at something changes what you see. Often by a lot.

This is especially apparent late in the day in the hour or so leading up to sunset. The low sun really brings out the color of the rock.

My favorite places for late day sun pictures include the Fiery Furnace Viewpoint and the stretch between the Sand Dune Arch/Broken Arch parking area and Skyline Arch.

In this picture from my first visit, the sky provided quite a sharp contrast with the red rock landscape.



Here's a mid-afternoon shot of the fins south of the Sand Dune Arch parking area.



Here they are one evening just before an intensely red sunset.



On a different evening, the sunset was more golden than red. The rock glows with its color.

And with that, I hope you enjoyed our visit to and through Arches National Park.

Some tips for your visit....

Moab is a full service town and can provide just about everything you need for your visit to Arches National Park. But Moab can fill up fast during tourist season and whenever there are events in town. So it's good to make reservations for lodging well in advance.

Similarly, keep an eye on the park's website for information related to camping and entrance reservations. After all, Arches National Park can get pretty crowded, too.

Be prepared. Bring food, water, a first aid kit, appropriate footwear for hiking, sunscreen, bug spray and rain gear. Have a spare tire (and know how to put it on).

Know the weather. It may look like desert country, but rain – and especially thunderstorms and lightning – aren't unusual, especially during monsoon season (July through September).

Know your limits. A hike on a hot day in the sun isn't like a stroll through an air conditioned mall. Give yourself time to get used to the weather and (for some of you) the elevation. (If you have mobility issues, if you're not in shape or if you have little kids, this is one park where you can still see quite a bit while sticking with paved roads and sidewalks.)

Again, bring plenty of water. If you feel thirsty you already are dehydrated. Your pee should be very pale – if it's yellow or darker then drink some water. And then drink some more water.

Stay on marked paths, on rocks or in sandy washes. Stay off the cryptobiotic soil (the darkish lumps on the ground). Cryptobiotic soil plays an essential role in the environment here, and it is easily damaged.

Stay off the arches. For some reason, seeing an arch seems to bring out some people's ancestral primate. It's not just that it's unsafe, but it can damage the arches. And it's just plain rude to stick yourself in the middle of the pictures that people are trying to take of the arches that they came to see.

Don't litter. It seems ridiculous that after all these years we still have to tell people that.

No graffiti anywhere. And especially near or on the Native American rock art, or near or on any of the arches and other features. It's a federal offense with serious penalties.

Take some selfies if you must, but don't lose sight of what you really came here to see. Arches National Park is one of the coolest, most alien places that many of you will ever visit. Take time to take it all in without worrying about how to get yourself into the picture all the time.