

THE CITY YOU'RE MISSING

# Salt Lake City

Both rugged and cosmopolitan, Utah's capital combines a love of outdoor adventure with eclectic cultural offerings.

BY MILES HOWARD



**I**N THE SUMMER of 1847, a bearded man named Brigham Young looked out from the sun-bleached foothills of Salt Lake Valley to survey the territory below. The second president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had arrived to the region by wagon train, entering an improbably nourishing ecosystem surrounded by harsh, but often beautiful, elements: desert, craggy peaks, and, just for the hell of it, a 240-mile fault line capable of causing landslides. This was the place, Young realized, where members of the religious community he led would build a city and begin anew.

On a sultry July evening, 172 years later, I'm sitting near those same foothills where Young first saw Salt Lake Valley. But the object of my attention isn't the landscape: It's the outdoor stage at Red Butte Garden, a charming botanical garden and one of Salt Lake City's most romantic music venues. The lawn before the stage is filled with tanned concertgoers sipping wine from plastic cups, and the sun is painting us shades of burnt orange. The city's newest visitor, who we're all watching perform tonight, is Seal—yes, that Seal, who wrote “Kiss From a Rose.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MLENNY/ISTOCK

Like the singer, I've journeyed here from far away. I suspect many of the people dancing on the lawn tonight are travelers, too. By the time the sun sinks behind the hills, Seal has removed his shirt and my glass of zinfandel has been refilled. I've only been in Salt Lake City for a couple of hours. And although this music, and this scene, don't seem tailored to my usual interests, I am strangely at ease. That was my hope before coming: to feel at home in this storied city. My comfort isn't an accident. Generations of rolling stones have traveled far and wide and found themselves here, creating a shared sense of belonging—together.

**T**HE ECONOMIC FUEL propelling Salt Lake City has changed over the years. Agriculture, mining, banking, and software development are among the services and industries that have brought prosperity to the city. Today, SLC is adding new high-paying, high-skill jobs in bioengineering and cloud computing. (This hilly region in Utah has been nicknamed "Silicon Slopes.") Financial services firms like Fidelity have opened offices here. And increasingly, SLC is playing host to convention business, with hotel rooms filling during gatherings at the vast and gleaming Salt Palace Convention Center downtown.

I'm staying just a few steps away from the Salt Palace at the colorful Hotel Monaco, which occupies a historic building that dates back to the 1860s. Lively curtains and carpeting, chic furniture, and the towering headboard on my bed all evoke an old-school grandeur that contrasts with the sleek, silvery high-rises sprouting up across downtown. Change is also happening here on a human scale. Utah ranked among the top three fastest-growing states in the U.S. in 2018, with much of that population boom coming in the Salt Lake City area. That doesn't mean the city has lost its underdog spirit.

On my first morning in town, I meet up with Trent Call, an artist whose work adorns several of the buildings near my hotel. His most well-known creation is a gonzo mural that fashions basketball players as retro cartoon characters. The mural was commissioned by the city's own Utah Jazz, the perennial NBA underdogs that have often had brushes with greatness and have always been supported by one of the most loyal fanbases in the country. To hear Call tell it, that loyalty, along with the bargain cost of living in SLC, has kept him rooted here since the early '80s. "It's always been easy to live here, with rent for a studio or house being reasonable," Call says as we gawk up at his Jazz mural. "That's really why I stayed. The community helps each other."

Call leads me on a walk through downtown, past the vivid artwork decorating the buildings here. On the backside of a bank, beneath layers of eroding material, I can glimpse flashes of color: ancient graffiti that was painted over and lost to history, only to re-emerge later, as Salt Lake City expands and bustles its way forward into the 21st century.



## STAY IN THE CITY

↑ **Kimpton Hotel Monaco** / If the central location and stylish decor don't convince you to book a room, maybe the on-site restaurant will. Bambara, which serves New American cuisine in refined digs, is a destination in itself.

**The Peery Hotel** / Built in 1910, the Peery maintains its historic appeal while embracing SLC's modern character. Its downtown location puts ample dining and nightlife options, including the hip restaurant and cocktail lounge Whiskey Street, within walking distance.

**Anniversary Inn** / The themed suites at this bed and breakfast run the gamut from whimsical ("Enchanted Forest") to romantic ("Romeo and Juliet") to unclassifiable ("Citrus Crush"). Choose between two locations just east of downtown SLC.

**C**ALL LEAVES ME with two recommendations—for an experimental art gallery as well as a pastry purveyor called Eva's Bakery. I make a beeline to the latter and order a black pepper and Parmesan croissant so savory and buttery that I return to the counter and order another for the road. I wander down University Boulevard, leaving a trail of flaky croissant crumbs in my wake, and within 10 minutes, I reach the Saturday farmers market at Pioneer Park. Everything you could want from a farmers market is here: crisp vegetables from regional growers, grass-fed beef jerky samples from regional livestock, a young woman playing Vivaldi on a violin, and, just for good measure, a guy pulling a red wagon full of puppies.

The restaurant scene here has earned accolades from national publications and tastemakers. And people are willing to carve out the time to wait for a killer meal.





Public transit moves happy couples and solo travelers around the city.



The city's mountain views and scenic sunsets are a big attraction.

This is impressed upon me when I walk over to Fairpark, an arbor-filled neighborhood west of downtown.

A healthy crowd is amassed outside a Mexican restaurant called the Red Iguana—an SLC institution—and everybody seems happy. It's refreshing compared to the moodier, more passive aggressive human queues you'll encounter outside the hottest restaurants in bigger cities. I add my name to the list and make small talk with some teenagers visiting from Denver, who recommend a hike to a place called "The Living Room." More on that later. Once the hostess ushers me inside, I order one of the house specialties: sirloin tips sautéed with bacon, jalapeno strips, onions, and tomatoes, and served atop a mind-numbingly delicious golden almond mole.

Stuffed, I catch a ride on the UTA TRAX light rail. The transportation system here is surprisingly well-developed for such a relatively small city. Among other stops, the rail connects downtown SLC to the University of Utah and Salt Lake City International Airport, which is in the midst of a major expansion, while a network of commuter trains and buses provides further access to nearby ski resorts and various hot spots.

When I disembark, I find myself standing downtown before the Salt Lake Temple, a soaring house of worship in the heart of the city. Although the inside of the temple is open only to church members, this site draws visitors from near and far. The surrounding 10-acre Temple Square is the spiritual and institutional center of the 16 million member-strong Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints and one of SLC's most popular tourist destinations. For good reason: This place is impressive. The towers of the temple remind me of magic citadels from books that I devoured as a kid.

While I'm at Temple Square, I decide to check out the Family History Library, which is exactly what it sounds like. The world's largest genealogical library, run by the church, allows visitors to chart their own family history through collected public records. I sit down at a desktop computer and, before I know it, I'm digging deep into the Howard family past, discovering relatives from rural Newfoundland who might have bestowed Canadian citizenship upon me had their kids not migrated south to the American colonies.

When I leave the library and step into the late afternoon haze, I'm struck by how my first engagement with the church hinged on the art of exploration—just like all my initial stops in SLC. Whether it's an internationally inspired meal you didn't know you'd find, or relatives you never knew you had, SLC seems to encourage a spirit of inquiry. I shouldn't be surprised by this: SLC, after all, was born in an era of westward expansion. As I'll soon learn, that shared sense of curiosity—and the thrill of discovery—can have a unifying effect on towns like SLC, which is more diverse than you might think.

**T**HE NEXT MORNING, I wake up at sunrise, before the swelter sets in, and go for a lung-buster of a trail



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## HIT THE SLOPES

← **Alta & Snowbird** / These neighboring resorts benefit from abundant snowfall. Beginners are welcome, but the steep and technical terrain is better suited to more seasoned ski bums.

**Deer Valley / Cozy** lodges, gourmet food, and spa treatments beckon. But if you can bear to part with the amenities at this upscale resort, you'll find a number of well-maintained trails.

**Park City / Skiers** and snowboarders of all experience levels have some choices to make at this sprawling resort. For the snow-averse, there's plenty of places to eat, drink, and play.

run beginning at City Creek Park. The entrance is just a few steps beyond Temple Square. It's a particularly idyllic example of how SLC makes stepping into the natural world seem effortless. After a breakfast of eggs, quinoa, and kale at Pulp Lifestyle Kitchen, I trek over to the offices of SLUG Magazine. In publication for over 30 years, SLUG, an acronym for "Salt Lake Underground," has consistently pushed the envelope of culture in SLC, spotlighting the creators behind the city's art, food, and music scenes. I'm here to hang out with Angela Brown, owner and executive editor of the magazine.

The editorial office, which is decorated with framed posters and paintings, is full of young people typing away on desktop computers. A lumbering hound named Hondo joins Brown and me as we head downstairs to a studio where SLUG records podcasts and interviews. The magazine also organizes events like Brewstillery, Utah's all-local gathering of craft brewers and distillers. The existence of such a boozy festival in the hometown of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may surprise visitors, but Salt Lake City's culture provides a bigger and more inclusive tent than many people realize, Brown says.

"We have regular contributors, local bishops, who are still passionate about SLUG," she says. "I see [us] really working on inclusivity. We want our culture to change, and we want Salt Lake City to change and grow and blossom."

Later that day, I hear a similar sentiment at Ken Sanders Rare Books, an enormous used bookstore whose exterior is emblazoned with a portrait of the late Utah labor activist Joe Hill and the words "Come in and remember what a book smells like." Sanders, a gregarious fellow with a long beard, has been tracking down and selling books since his teens. "I wheeled and dealt comic books, two for a nickel, when I was in grade school," he tells me. "Mostly as a means of funding my own collection."

Appearances on PBS' *Antiques Roadshow* put Sanders on the map for many collectors, but the bookstore has long been a reliable place for SLC natives and visitors. There are young people plopped on couches leafing through ancient hardcovers. A nearby shelf features a robust collection of Edward Abbey paperbacks, along with a rusty wrench, a wry ode to *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Abbey's novel about an environmental saboteur.

Sanders describes his bookstore as a safe space for wandering souls. As long as you're curious enough to enter the maze



of bookshelves with an open mind, you're likely to find something worth savoring. "I've done some really fabulous hikes, from Australia to Utah," Sanders tells me. "And the whole point of going on the hike—or going on the hunt for a book—is to not know what you're seeking, and to find it."

I'd love to spend the rest of the day roaming this literary labyrinth, but travel writing duty beckons, so Sanders sends me off with a fresh copy of Charles Bowden's *Blood Orchid*, an unflinching and often devastating history of man's relationship with the natural world. I take the light rail up into SLC's eastern foothills, to the Natural History Museum of Utah. I spend the next hour listening to descendants of Utah's Native American tribes as they recount their hard-won struggle for tribal sovereignty in Utah and nearby states. These video testimonials are just one piece of the museum's stunning and deeply moving Native Voices exhibition. And something of an epiphany is beginning to emerge.

The land here in Salt Lake Valley has cast a sustaining spell on one generation after the next. As the sun goes down and I take a stroll through Sugar House—a bucolic residential neighborhood and home to Westminster College, Utah's only accredited liberal arts college—I'm reminded of the humility that nature can inspire in humans. Perhaps there's something universal about feeling tiny and wondrous in the face of mountains and desert—something that can bring people together. I'm heading to nearby Wasatch Brew Pub for a beer, but before I reach

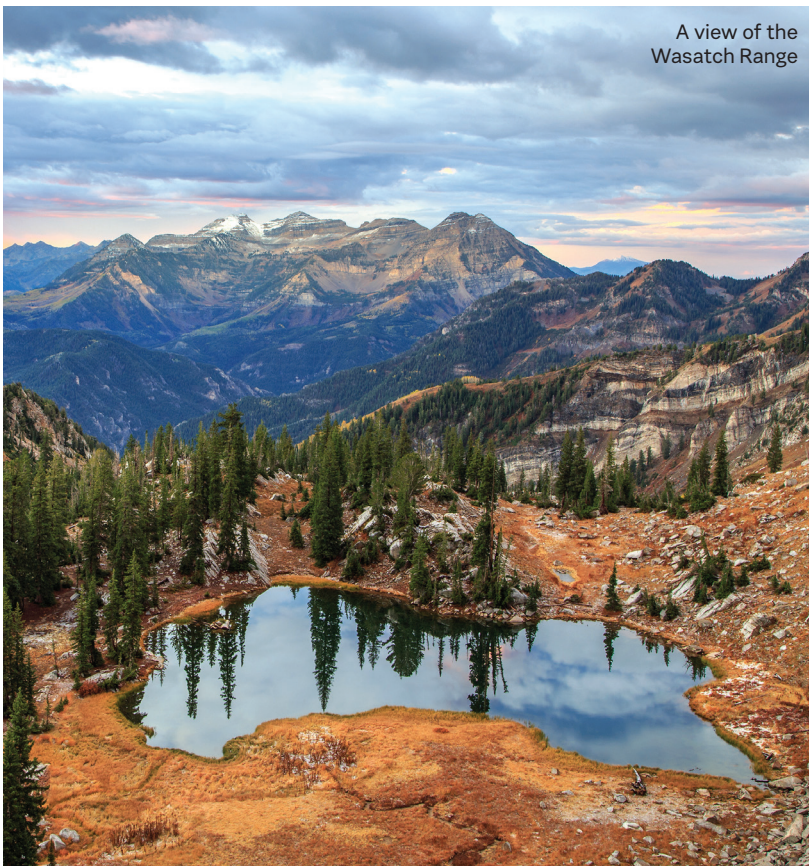


Bison roam at Antelope Island State Park

my destination, I stumble upon a little park called Hidden Hollow. It's a leafy glen tucked between shopping centers, and a chuckling brook runs through it. I pick a meandering concrete path and walk alongside the brook. There are other people out tonight. Some of them are jogging. Two young parents are pushing a stroller, and one older guy is sitting on a bench, watching the water and listening to it ripple. I know what I'm doing tomorrow.

**I**N MANY PLACES, getting outside of your element requires a long journey. Not for residents of Salt Lake City. I kick off the next morning by driving just north of the city to cross the long bridge to Antelope Island State Park. Spanning 42 square miles on the Great Salt Lake's southeastern shore, the park is home to bison, elk, and, yes, antelope. The island's pinnacle, Frary Peak, is among the more popular natural wonders you'll encounter here. Still adjusting to the Utah heat, I take an easier hike to Ladyfinger Point on the northern side of the island. Later, I glimpse bison grazing near the bottom of a hillside.

My next stop is the Wasatch Range itself. I ascend into the mountains by taking I-80 from SLC to Park City, which involves an elevation gain of nearly 3,000 feet and puts some hair on the transmission of my rental Ford Fiesta. Park City is known for hosting the Sundance Film Festival, and it's where much of the infrastructure for the 2002 Winter Olympics was built and remains in use. I rendezvous with Kim Brown, a creative director for a catalog company who I first met at the Seal



A view of the Wasatch Range

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHNNYA123/ISTOCK (BOTTOM LEFT) AND CHERI ALGUIRE/ISTOCK (TOP RIGHT)





concert. An avid hiker, she's the perfect person to take me up the Moose Puddle Trail, which begins right next to an active bobsledding course. As we climb through birches and wildflowers, the sound of sleds whizzing down the tracks echoes from below. Mountain bikers rumble past on the ribbon-like trail as we break through the tree line and step out onto a breezy ridge.

Later, for dinner back in SLC, I've managed to snag a reservation at Log Haven, the mountain hideaway of a steel tycoon that's since been refashioned into a gourmet dining oasis. To reach the restaurant, I drive deep into Millcreek Canyon, leave my car with a valet, and climb a pathway to the chic lodge. A wedding reception is taking place in the courtyard, so I'm seated in the dining room, right in front of a window facing a silvery waterfall. When my grilled bison steak with sweet potato orzo and smoky succotash arrives, it's almost too much. Almost.

A meal at a joint like Log Haven could be the capstone to a busy day. But when I stagger down the path to my car, it's 7 o'clock, the sun is still up, and I'm

reminded of something I had been urged to do. I slide my hiking boots back on, get in the car, and set my phone's GPS for The Living Room Trail. Located right by the University of Utah campus—not too far from the Red Butte Garden—this short, challenging trail takes visitors up to a scenic ledge on Mount Wire. There, I'm told, people have arranged stones to resemble sofas.

I walk up the trail, sweating, huffing, hoping to reach the ledge before sundown. I meet students, families, and solo wanderers like myself. By the time I arrive at the overlook, I'm heartened to find that a few of the "sofas" are occupied by hikers drinking in the vista. I gaze out at SLC, a blinking grid of activity far below. It's a very different view than the one Brigham Young saw when he took his first gander at the valley.

What I see as the sun goes down is a rebuttal of the idea that the American West is a wilderness of rugged individualism. Sure, you can find that out here. But in Salt Lake City, I found a welcoming community bound together by a love of exploration and discovery. This town is a living testament to the possibilities of human collaboration.

All you have to do is go west. Or east, depending. Whatever. My point is that once you're in SLC, you're in.

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