

Comprehensive Day-by-Day National Parks Itinerary

With hiking, photography, stargazing, coffee shops, and local attractions

PART 1: DENVER JOURNEY

Thursday, April 25: Starved Rock to Lake Anita State Park

Drive Time: 5-5.5 hours (310 miles) **Moon Phase:** 27% illuminated, good dark sky conditions

Morning:

- Depart Starved Rock State Park after breakfast
- Coffee Stop: Cafe Bella in Utica, IL before departure - charming local coffeehouse with homemade pastries

Afternoon:

- Drive west on I-80
- Lunch Stop: Quad Cities area at Redband Coffee Company in Davenport
- Loess Hills Scenic Byway detour (if time allows) - unique landforms with prairie habitat ideal for photography

Evening - Lake Anita State Park:

- Arrive and set up camp at your reserved site
- Sunset hike around the 171-acre lake (1-2 miles)
- **Stargazing:** Set up your telescope near the lake shore for reflections of stars on water
- Lyrids meteor shower still active but winding down - look northeast for any remaining meteors
- Telescope Target: Messier 3 globular cluster visible in spring sky with moderate magnification

Friday, April 26: Lake Anita to North Platte Area

Drive Time: 6-7 hours (360 miles) **Moon Phase:** 38% illuminated, good evening viewing

Morning:

- Early morning wildlife photography around Lake Anita
- Depart for Nebraska

Midday - Omaha, NE:

- Old Market District for lunch and exploration
- Archetype Coffee - award-winning specialty coffee
- Urban Abbey - unique bookstore/coffee shop concept
- Homer's Music & Gifts - iconic independent record store

Evening - Pals Brewing Company (Harvest Host):

- Arrive at Pals Brewing Company in North Platte for overnight stay
- Craft beer tasting and dinner at the brewery
- **Stargazing:** First Quarter Moon approaching - excellent for observing lunar features
- Open rural setting should provide good viewing conditions
- Telescope Target: Craters and mountains along the Moon's terminator line (shadow line)

Saturday, April 27: North Platte to Cheyenne

Drive Time: 3.5-4 hours (225 miles) **Moon Phase:** First Quarter (50% illuminated)

Morning:

- Depart Pals Brewing Company after breakfast

Midday:

- Lake McConaughy State Recreation Area detour
 - Known locally as "Lake Mac" - Nebraska's largest reservoir
 - Wildlife photography opportunities, particularly for birds
 - Quick hike at one of the nature trails

Afternoon - Cheyenne:

- Downtown Cheyenne exploration
- Paramount Café - Downtown coffeehouse in historic building
- Night & Day Coffee - Bohemian vibe with art displays
- Wyoming State Museum (if time allows)

Evening - Curt Gowdy State Park:

- Setup camp at Curt Gowdy State Park between Laramie and Cheyenne
- **Stargazing:** First Quarter Moon provides good illumination for landscape astrophotography
- The park's three reservoirs create excellent foreground elements for night photos
- Telescope Target: Lunar Apennine Mountain range on the Moon

Sunday, April 28: Cheyenne to Denver

Drive Time: 1.5-2 hours (100 miles) **Moon Phase:** Waxing Gibbous (60% illuminated)

Morning:

- Optional sunrise photography at Curt Gowdy's Aspen Grove area
- Breakfast at The Bunkhouse in Cheyenne - hearty local fare
- Take US-287 scenic route through Fort Collins instead of I-25

Fort Collins Stop (if time allows):

- Old Town Fort Collins - Pedestrian-friendly district that inspired Disneyland's Main Street
- Bean Cycle Roasters - Combined coffee shop and used bookstore with local art displays

Arrive in Denver before noon - Check in to your accommodations

PART 2: UTAH NATIONAL PARKS JOURNEY

Sunday, May 4: Denver to Capitol Reef National Park

Drive Time: 7 hours (400 miles) **Moon Phase:** Full Moon (excellent for landscape photography)

Morning:

- Depart Denver early

Midday Stops:

- Glenwood Springs
 - Sacred Grounds Coffee - local organic options
 - Book Train - independent bookstore with local literature
- Optional detour to Goblin Valley State Park if time allows

Evening - Capitol Reef (Fruita Campground):

- Arrive and set up camp at Fruita Campground
- Quick visit to Sunset Point for evening golden hour photography
- **Full Moon Activity:** The full moon provides perfect illumination for night landscape photography
- Photograph the moon rising over Capitol Reef's red rock formations
- Telescope Target: Lunar maria (dark plains) and major crater systems
- **Note:** Deep space viewing will be limited due to bright moonlight

Monday, May 5: Capitol Reef to Zion National Park

Drive Time: 4 hours (215 miles) **Moon Phase:** Waning Gibbous (95% illuminated)

Morning - Capitol Reef:

- Sunrise at Panorama Point
- Hike: Hickman Bridge Trail (1.8 miles round trip)
 - Moderate difficulty with 400 ft elevation gain
 - Natural stone bridge and spectacular canyon views
 - Morning light best for photography

Midday:

- Drive to Zion National Park
- Lunch Stop: Kiva Koffeehouse in Escalante - architecturally stunning cafe with panoramic views

Afternoon - Zion (Watchman Campground):

- Set up camp at Watchman Campground
- Visit Zion Visitor Center for park orientation
- Hike: Riverside Walk (2.2 miles round trip)
 - Easy, paved trail along the Virgin River
 - Great for wildlife photography and canyon views
 - Leads to the entrance of The Narrows (without entering)

Evening:

- **Stargazing:** Set up at Pa'rus Trail area - paved, accessible trail along the Virgin River
- Eta Aquariids Meteor Shower viewing (early evening before moonrise, which will be late)
- The nearly full moon will wash out fainter meteors but should rise late enough for some viewing
- Telescope Target: Moon and bright planets (Jupiter if visible)

Coffee/Dining:

- Deep Creek Coffee Co. - excellent coffee and light meals with bohemian vibe in Springdale

Tuesday, May 6: Zion National Park

Drive Time: None (full day in Zion) **Moon Phase:** Waning Gibbous (90% illuminated)

Morning:

- Early breakfast at MeMe's Cafe in Springdale - local favorite with outdoor seating
- Hike: Angel's Landing (5.4 miles round trip)
 - Strenuous hike with 1,488 ft elevation gain
 - Depart early to avoid crowds and heat
 - Spectacular views of Zion Canyon
 - Photography tip: Morning light best for eastern canyon walls

Afternoon:

- Lunch and rest period during midday heat
- Kayak the Virgin River (guided tour or rental)
 - Gentle floating with canyon views
 - Great for wildlife photography

Evening:

- Dinner in Springdale
- **Stargazing:** Watchman Trail area - quieter than main canyon
- Continued Eta Aquariids Meteor Shower viewing
- Telescope Target: Double stars and brighter deep sky objects despite moonlight

Wednesday, May 7: Zion to Bryce Canyon

Drive Time: 2 hours (80 miles) **Moon Phase:** Waning Gibbous (85% illuminated)

Morning - Zion:

- Sunrise at Canyon Junction (spectacular light on The Watchman)
- Visit Zion Human History Museum
- Final photos of Zion Canyon

Midday:

- Drive to Bryce Canyon
- Lunch at Bryce Canyon Coffee Co. - bohemian cafe with homemade pastries

Afternoon - Bryce Canyon (Ruby's Inn):

- Check in to Ruby's Inn
- Hike: Navajo Loop and Queen's Garden Trail (3 miles combined)
 - Moderate difficulty with 600 ft elevation gain
 - Descend into the hoodoo-filled amphitheater
 - Late afternoon light creates dramatic shadows among hoodoos

Evening:

- Attend ranger-led astronomy program at visitor center
- **Stargazing:** Bryce is certified as one of the darkest sky locations in the country
- Despite bright moon, the park's elevation (8,000+ ft) provides excellent clarity
- Learn from park "Dark Rangers" about celestial features
- Telescope Target: Lunar features, Saturn if visible

Thursday, May 8: Bryce Canyon to Moab (Arches & Canyonlands)

Drive Time: 5 hours (270 miles) **Moon Phase:** Waning Gibbous (75% illuminated)

Morning - Bryce Canyon:

- Sunrise at Sunrise Point (iconic view of hoodoos in morning light)
- Hike: Peek-a-boo Loop (5.5 miles)
 - Moderate to strenuous with 1,500 ft elevation gain
 - Less crowded than rim trails
 - Immersive experience among hoodoo formations
 - Morning light best for photography

Midday:

- Drive to Moab
- Scenic route through Capitol Reef if time allows

Evening - Moab (Devil's Garden Campground):

- Set up camp at Devil's Garden Campground in Arches
- Drive to Dead Horse Point State Park for sunset
 - Spectacular overlook 2,000 feet above Colorado River bend
 - One of Utah's most famous photography locations
- **Stargazing:** Dead Horse Point parking area
- Telescope Target: Brighter deep sky objects visible despite moonlight

Coffee/Dining in Moab:

- Moab Garage Co. - Coffee shop with vintage decor and local art
- Desert Bistro - Higher-end dining with southwestern cuisine

Friday, May 9: Moab (Arches & Canyonlands)

Drive Time: Minimal (exploring Moab area) **Moon Phase:** Waning Gibbous (65% illuminated)

Morning - Canyonlands:

- Sunrise at Mesa Arch (iconic photography location)
 - Arrive 30-45 minutes before sunrise to secure spot
 - Sun illuminates underside of arch with golden light
- Morning exploration of Island in the Sky district

Midday:

- Lunch in Moab
- Eklecticafe - Eclectic breakfast/lunch spot with garden seating
- Shopping at Back of Beyond Books - specializing in desert Southwest literature

Afternoon - Arches:

- Hike: Devils Garden Trail (7.9 miles full loop)
 - Strenuous with multiple arches and formations
 - Can be shortened to easier segments
 - Late afternoon light best for arch photography

Evening:

- Sunset at Green River Overlook in Canyonlands
- **Stargazing:** Return to Arches' Windows Section area
- Dark skies improving as moon rises later each night
- Telescope Target: More deep sky objects becoming visible as moon wanes

Saturday, May 10: Moab to Great Sand Dunes National Park

Drive Time: 7 hours (290 miles) **Moon Phase:** Waning Gibbous (55% illuminated)

Morning:

- Visit Newspaper Rock petroglyphs en route
- Drive through Mesa Verde National Park region

Afternoon - Great Sand Dunes:

- Arrive and set up camp at Piñon Flats Campground
- Evening exploration of dunes and Medano Creek
- Wildlife photography opportunities at dusk

Evening:

- **Stargazing:** Great Sand Dunes is a certified International Dark Sky Park
- Up to 15,000 stars visible on clear nights
- Setup telescope on dunes for unobstructed 360° viewing
- Long exposure photography opportunity: capture star trails over dune shapes
- Telescope Target: Improving deep sky viewing as moon rises later

Photography Tips:

- Use dunes as dramatic foreground elements
- Consider light painting techniques on dune ridges
- Bring a tripod you don't mind getting sandy

Sunday-Tuesday, May 11-13: Mueller State Park

Drive Time: 2.5 hours to Mueller from Great Sand Dunes **Moon Phase:** Waning Gibbous to Last Quarter (declining illumination)

Mueller State Park Highlights:

- Over 5,000 acres of spring-fed meadows, mixed forests, and massive granite outcroppings
- 55+ miles of hiking trails with varying difficulty levels
- Rich wildlife viewing opportunities (elk, black bear, eagles, hawks)

Recommended Daily Activities:

Day 1 (Sunday):

- Morning wildlife viewing along Outlook Ridge Trail
- Afternoon hike on Cheesman Ranch Trail (5 miles)
- **Evening Stargazing:** Visitor center parking lot area
- Check with park staff about Colorado Springs Astronomical Society events

Day 2 (Monday):

- Bird watching walk in early morning (over 100 species in park)
- Photography at Rock Pond and along Elk Meadow
- **Evening Stargazing:** Darker skies with waning moon
- Telescope Target: More deep sky objects becoming visible

Day 3 (Tuesday):

- Final exploration of trails and wildlife viewing
- Possible day trip to nearby Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument
- **Evening Stargazing:** Last Quarter moon rises very late
- Excellent conditions for deep sky viewing

Nearby Bohemian Coffee & Dining:

- The Pantry in Woodland Park - Local breakfast institution
- Cafe Leo - Bohemian coffeehouse with baked goods
- The Donut Mill - Famous oversized donuts and coffee

Stargazing Equipment Recommendations

General Tips:

1. **Weather Protection:** Bring covers and cases for all equipment - dust in Utah and sand at Great Sand Dunes can damage optics
2. **Cold Weather Prep:** Bring insulated gloves that still allow dexterity for telescope adjustments
3. **Power Supply:** Ensure you have sufficient battery power or portable power options for your telescope mount
4. **Red Light:** Use red-light headlamps to preserve night vision
5. **Warm Clothing:** Pack layers even if daytime is warm - temperatures drop dramatically at night at these elevations

Best Stargazing Locations (Ranked):

1. Great Sand Dunes National Park - International Dark Sky Park with up to 15,000 visible stars
2. Bryce Canyon National Park - Professional astronomy programs and pristine dark skies
3. Dead Horse Point/Canyonlands - Exceptional darkness and stunning foreground elements
4. Capitol Reef National Park - Gold-tier Dark Sky Park with minimal light pollution
5. Mueller State Park - High elevation with organized astronomy programs
6. Zion National Park - Newest Dark Sky Park in Utah with canyon views