

Tauck World Discovery: Desert Oasis: Zion, Death Valley & Palm Springs

Day 1

Arrive Las Vegas

Tour Begins: Las Vegas. Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas. A transfer is included from McCarran Airport to The Four Seasons Hotel in the city's pulsing neon heart, on the boulevard known as the Strip. Your luxury hotel is a tranquil, non-gaming retreat from the action, but shopping, bright lights, and entertainment are only steps away; guests at the Four Seasons enjoy access to the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino next door; and floor to ceiling windows in your room offer captivating views of the desert city at night. Join us this evening for a welcome reception and dinner at the hotel.

Meals: D

Day 2

Lake Mead and The Valley of Fire

Drive to Boulder City for a tour of Hoover Dam, one of the Seven Wonders of the Industrial World. In fact, the city was built to house the thousands of workers who came here in the 1930s to dam the Colorado River and create Lake Mead, the nation's largest reservoir. Over 700 feet high and a quarter-mile wide, with enough concrete to pave a two-lane highway from San Francisco to New York, the arch-gravity dam is a sweeping, breathtaking experience; drink in the views from the observation walks, admire the art deco embellishments, and gain insights on its turbulent history at the museum inside. From a world of water, your next stop is Valley of Fire State Park, in the Mojave Desert, a Martian landscape of red sandstone mountains, bizarre rock formations, cacti, and undulating striped hills of pink and orange. Pause for a picnic lunch in this vast, mystical, outdoor gallery, where ancient tribes left hidden messages in strange, indelible petroglyphs, then drive on to Zion National Park in Utah; arrive in time for dinner at your classic wilderness lodge inside the park's south entrance.

Meals: B, L, D

Day 3

Zion National Park

Zion, named by Mormon settlers, is known for its dramatic, diverse geography: forests, deserts, canyons with soaring red sandstone cliffs, waterfalls, emerald pools, weeping rocks, and hanging gardens, and monumental rock formations with titles like Angels Landing, Court of the Patriarchs, the Temple of Sinawara (coyote-god of the Paiutes), and the Great White Throne, that suggest a place between earth and heaven. California Condors and golden eagles sail over canyons that harbor bighorn sheep and mountain lions; forests along the winding Virgin River are home to mule deer, spotted owls, and peregrine falcons. This morning experience an awe-inspiring guided walk through Zion Canyon, featuring some of the park's iconic scenery, molded, and sculpted from soft rock by currents of water. After lunch in nearby Springdale or at the lodge, rejoin the group on a scenic drive highlighting the major landmarks in the eastern half of the park, a photogenic realm of orange-tinted rock, petrified dunes, arches, plunging canyons, and stunning vistas. Tonight, dinner is followed by a lecture on the park's ecology and history.

Meals: B, D

Day 4

Death Valley Flightseeing

Spend time in the park as you please, then head back to Las Vegas, with a stop for lunch in St. George. At North Las Vegas Airport, you'll board a small plane for a flightseeing trip over Death Valley, a stretch of desert east of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Named by luckless prospectors looking for a shortcut to the California Gold Rush, Death Valley is known as the lowest, driest, hottest place in North America, 282 feet below sea level. In an earlier era, it was the bottom of a vast lake which evaporated and left behind a moonscape that a million years of wind and elements have carved into strange rolling hills, unexpected rock formations, desert plains, sand dunes, and salt pans. Get a big-picture look at the valley's topography from the air, then see it up close on a drive to your luxury resort deep inside Death Valley National Park, under the shade of palm trees on a lush desert oasis.

Meals: B, L, D

Day 5

Badwater Basin & An Artist's Palette

Among Death Valley's stranger features are sand dunes that emit ghostly sounds, like the low notes of an organ. Strange, too, is the fact that this inhospitable place has been the ancestral home of a Native American tribe, the Timbisha, for at least a thousand years. Perhaps most surprising, Death Valley teems with hidden life. Bighorn sheep, coyotes, bobcats, and occasional mountain lions live discreetly in the hills; small creatures survive by burrowing underground or under rocks; some, like kit foxes and black-tailed jackrabbits, are nocturnal, and some endemic species like the Badwater Snail actually thrive in hostile environments. And once a year, with enough spring rain, water returns briefly to the lakebed and salt flats, and wildflowers bloom in riots of color all over the valley and foothills. Board a Hummer for a tour of major landmarks, including Zabriskie Point, a location for westerns, Star Wars movies, and an Antonioni art film; Badwater Basin, covered in salt, looks from a distance like a tundra blanketed with snow, where the constant cycle of freezing, thawing, and evaporation of water has carved a honeycomb pattern on the plain; and Artists Palette, a psychedelic (geologic) patchwork tinted with many colors. Return to the lodge for lunch, then it's your choice: spend the afternoon at the inn enjoying the pool, the spa, tennis, or a game of golf, or venture out to Mesquite Flats, where mesquite trees and creosote bushes are habitats for birds and small animals, and hiking trails wind among towering, mesmerizing sand dunes. You'll also visit the remains of a mining facility at Furnace Creek that used to haul borax out of the valley in 20-mule-team wagons; the company went bust in 1888, but the 20-mule-team logo remains a commercial and cultural icon. Keep your eyes peeled for elusive wildlife; you may not see a coyote riding an Acme rocket, but there are roadrunners galore. Tonight, experience the dazzling constellations of the desert sky, untouched by ground lights; Death Valley has been designated the largest dark-sky national park in the country by the International Dark Sky Association.

Meals: B, L

Day 6

Joshua Tree National Park

Depart for Palm Springs, with a lunch-stop along the way, and arrive this afternoon in Joshua Tree National Park. Here the Mojave and Colorado deserts, with their distinct vegetation and ecosystems, merge to create a surreal landscape of creosote and cactus, weird rock formations, boulder hills,

wandering canyons, and windswept desert plains where giant yucca plants called Joshua Trees open their spiky arms to heaven. Along nature trails that wind through Lost Horse Valley, hidden oases, abandoned mining camps, arresting monoliths, and the Wonderland of Rocks, the park is a place out of time, made for awestruck wonder and meditation. Begin the last leg of your road trip, and arrive at the Ritz-Carlton in Rancho Mirage in time for dinner.

Meals: B, L, D

Day 7

Sunnylands & Palm Springs

Once famous for its restorative springs and health tourism, Palm Springs in the mid-20th century became a hot destination for movie stars, presidents, and entertainers drawn to its burgeoning golf resorts, nightclubs, and casinos, where they created an impressive community of wealth and influence. Depart your hotel on Frank Sinatra Drive for a visit to Sunnylands, the former estate of Walter and Leonore Annenberg. The exquisite modernist mansion, designed by A. Quincy Jones, sits on 200 acres with its own golf course (naturally), and was known as "Camp David of the West" for the number of presidents who stayed and played there; the estate is now a retreat and meeting place for world leaders, dedicated to international understanding; peruse the garden and visitor's center for a sense of Sunnylands' history, then embark on a tour of the area's extraordinary wealth of mid-century Desert Modern architecture. Spend free time in town to lunch and explore on your own, then join us at the hotel this evening for a farewell reception and dinner.

Meals: B, D

Day 8

Journey Home

Tour ends: Palm Springs. Fly home anytime. A transfer is included from the Ritz-Carlton, Rancho Mirage to Palm Springs Airport.

Meals: B