

# Southwest Sunrise Loop: Zion, Bryce Canyon & the Grand Canyon (7 Days from Las Vegas)

A comfortable-pace road trip built around golden-hour viewpoints, moderate half-day hikes, and a deliberate "beat the crowds" rhythm. Two adults, mid-size rental car, mid-range hotels, late September 2026.

## o) Your trip at a glance (your details)

| Item           | Your spec                                                                                       |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dates          | One week, late September 2026 (plan anchored to Sun 20 Sep, returning Sat 26 Sep; shift freely) |
| Group          | 2 adults                                                                                        |
| Transport      | Mid-size rental car (pick up/drop off Las Vegas)                                                |
| Budget         | Mid-range: hotels approx. \$130–160/night, total flexible                                       |
| Pace           | Comfortable, 1–2 nights near each park, no rushing                                              |
| Activity style | Moderate hikes of a few hours, plus classic car-accessible viewpoints                           |
| Must-haves     | Best sunrise spots; avoid the worst crowds                                                      |
| Food           | No restrictions, happy to eat anything                                                          |

## 1) At a glance

| Stop                        | Nights | Base town             | Sunrise highlight                             | Signature moderate hike                         |
|-----------------------------|--------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Zion NP                     | 2      | Springdale, UT        | Canyon Junction Bridge / Pa'rus Trail         | Lower + Middle Emerald Pools, or Watchman Trail |
| Bryce Canyon NP             | 2      | Bryce Canyon City, UT | Sunrise & Sunset Points over the amphitheatre | Queen's Garden + Navajo Loop ("Figure 8")       |
| Grand Canyon NP (South Rim) | 2      | Tusayan, AZ           | Mather / Yaki / Hopi Point                    | South Kaibab to Ooh Aah Point or Cedar Ridge    |
| Return                      | 0      | Las Vegas             | n. a.                                         | n. a.                                           |

Entry: each park's standard private-vehicle pass is \$35.00, admitting a private, non-commercial vehicle (15 passenger capacity or less) and all occupants, valid for 1–7 days. Because you visit three parks, the better buy is the America the Beautiful pass: the Resident Annual Pass for US citizens and residents is \$80.00, covering all three entries (a saving versus  $3 \times \$35$ ).

💡 Honest budget note: late September is shoulder season, so you sit just after peak summer but the parks are still busy on weekends. This plan front-loads weekdays inside the parks and uses weekends for driving days. Gateway-town hotels in Springdale and at the Grand Canyon often run above your \$130–160 target in this window; expect to flex to roughly \$170–230 on the busiest nights, which I've reflected honestly in the cost overview.

## 1b) Recommendation and best alternative

**Recommended routing (this plan): Las Vegas → Zion → Bryce → Grand Canyon South Rim → Las Vegas.** It flows geographically west-to-east-to-south and saves the deepest "wow" (the Grand Canyon) for last. Two nights per park means you get a true sunrise at each location without a pre-dawn long drive, which directly serves your "best sunrise spots, no rushing" brief.

**Best alternative: reverse the loop (Grand Canyon first, Zion last).** Worth it if your flights make an early Grand Canyon arrival easy, or if late-September weather forecasts look stormy at higher elevation (Bryce sits near 8,000 ft and chills first). Same hotels, same sights, just flipped. The downside is a longer drive on day 1, so I've kept Zion-first as the lead recommendation.

## 1c) Book now

| What                                                                    | By when                       | Where / link                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| America the Beautiful annual pass (digital)                             | Before departure              | <a href="https://recreation.gov/">recreation.gov/...</a>             |
| Mid-size rental car, Las Vegas                                          | 4–6 weeks ahead               | Your preferred rental provider at LAS airport                        |
| Springdale hotel (2 nights), Cable Mountain Lodge                       | ASAP (sells out in season)    | <a href="https://cablemountainlodge.com">cablemountainlodge.com</a>  |
| Bryce hotel (2 nights), Best Western Plus Ruby's Inn                    | ASAP                          | <a href="https://bestwestern.com/">bestwestern.com/...</a>           |
| Grand Canyon hotel (2 nights), The Squire (Holiday Inn Resort), Tusayan | ASAP                          | <a href="https://visitgrandcanyon.com/">visitgrandcanyon.com/...</a> |
| Optional: Angels Landing permit lottery (Zion)                          | Seasonal lottery, apply ahead | <a href="https://nps.gov/">nps.gov/...</a>                           |

Note on the Angels Landing permit: everyone who hikes from Scout Lookout to Angels Landing needs to have a permit. This plan does not require it (Angels Landing is exposed and strenuous, beyond "moderate"), but it's listed in case you want to try the lottery.

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## 2) Day-by-day plan

### Day 1 (Sun), Las Vegas → Zion (Springdale)

Pick up the car at Las Vegas and drive to Springdale, roughly 160 miles / about 2.75–3 hours, plus a time-zone note: Utah is on Mountain Time (one hour ahead of Nevada/Arizona). Check in, then ease into the canyon with the flat, paved **Pa'rus Trail** from the visitor center (about 3.5 miles round trip, stroller/bike friendly) for first views of the Watchman and the Virgin River.

Dinner: **Oscar's Café**, 948 Zion Park Blvd, Springdale (Mexican and hearty American; per its Yelp listing, open Monday 7:00 am–9:00 pm, confirm current hours before visiting). Map: [Open in maps](#)

💡 Tip: Park your car in Springdale and ride the free Springdale Line shuttle to the pedestrian entrance. National Park Service parking lots often fill early in the day; paid parking is available in the town of Springdale, and if you leave your car there you can ride the free Springdale Line shuttle to enter the park.

**Plan B (weather):** If you hit afternoon rain, swap the trail for the Human History Museum and a scenic drive on the Zion–Mt. Carmel Highway (open to private cars year-round), then dinner in town.

### Day 2 (Mon), Zion full day (sunrise + moderate hike)

**Sunrise spot: Canyon Junction Bridge**, looking up-canyon at the Watchman glowing red as first light hits, the classic Zion sunrise shot. The flat Pa'rus Trail leads here on foot if you want to walk in pre-shuttle.

Then ride the Zion Canyon Line shuttle up-canyon. Key timing: the shuttle is free and needs no reservation, and shuttles take about 45 minutes to drive between the Zion Canyon Visitor Center and the Temple of Sinawava, so a round trip takes about an hour and a half. For late September, the fall schedule (Sept 13–Nov 28) is in effect; check the posted board, but the standard fall first departure is early morning from Stop 1.

Moderate hike options (pick one):

- **Emerald Pools (Lower + Middle/Upper):** From Zion Lodge, it's one mile round trip to the small waterfall at Lower Emerald Pool with 80 feet of elevation gain, and a moderate three-mile round trip to the Upper Emerald Pool with 360 feet of elevation gain.
- **Riverside Walk + a toe-dip into the Narrows:** The Riverside Walk trail is two miles round trip, takes about one hour, is rated easy and is mostly paved. From its end you can wade a little way into the Narrows. If you go into the Narrows, take water, food, and a jacket; there is no trail, you will always be hiking in the water, so wear closed shoes that can get wet.

Lunch is available in-park at Zion Lodge. Dinner back in Springdale.

💡 Tip: Do the sunrise and the up-canyon hike first, then come down by early afternoon. Don't gamble on the last bus: you should not wait for the last shuttle of the day, because if the last shuttle is full or you miss it, you may have to walk nine miles back to the visitor center.

**Plan B (flash-flood risk):** The Narrows closes with high water. High water may prevent travel in the Narrows, so check the park's current conditions before you start your day. If flagged, do the Watchman Trail (about 3 miles round trip, moderate) instead, which stays above the river.

### **Day 3 (Tue), Zion → Bryce Canyon (Bryce Canyon City)**

After a relaxed breakfast, drive Zion → Bryce, about 85 miles / roughly 1.75–2 hours, via the scenic Zion–Mt. Carmel Highway and Highway 12. Arrive midday, check in at Ruby's Inn, and spend the afternoon on the rim's easy walks (Sunset to Sunrise Point rim stretch) to acclimatise; Bryce sits high, near 8,000–9,100 ft, so take it gently on arrival.

Dinner: **Ruby's Inn Cowboy's Buffet & Steak Room**, 26 S Main St, Bryce Canyon City (steakhouse + buffet). Per the restaurant's own site, it is open daily, summer season 6:30 am–9:30 pm and winter season 6:30 am to 8:30 pm; late September is shoulder season, so confirm at check-in. Map: [Open in maps](#)

💡 Tip: At Bryce's elevation, late-September nights drop near or below freezing. Pack a warm layer and gloves for the sunrise, your phone battery will thank you too.

### **Day 4 (Wed), Bryce sunrise + the "Figure 8" hike**

**Sunrise spot: Sunrise Point** (and a short walk to **Sunset Point**) over the Bryce Amphitheatre, the hoodoos light up orange-pink from the first rays. These are a few minutes' walk from the parking areas, ideal for an easy cold-morning sunrise.

Signature moderate hike: the **Queen's Garden + Navajo Loop ("Figure 8")**, roughly 3 miles, descending among the hoodoos and climbing back via Wall Street or the Two Bridges side. It's the park's best bang-for-effort hike and squarely "moderate, a few hours." Descend Queen's Garden (gentler) and ascend Navajo.

Afternoon: drive the 18-mile scenic road to the higher overlooks (Natural Bridge, Rainbow and Yovimpa Points) for car-accessible viewpoints.

💡 Tip: Start the hike right after sunrise. Bryce's amphitheatre faces east, so the morning light in the hoodoos is far better than midday, and you'll be climbing out before the tour buses arrive.

**Plan B (weather):** High-elevation thunderstorms or early snow can ice the steep Navajo switchbacks. If so, stick to the paved Rim Trail between Sunrise and Inspiration Points and drive the overlooks.

### **Day 5 (Thu), Bryce → Grand Canyon South Rim (Tusayan)**

The big drive: Bryce → Grand Canyon South Rim is roughly 270 miles / about 4.5–5 hours. Leave after a Bryce sunrise if you're keen, or a leisurely breakfast otherwise. Crossing into Arizona you move back to a time zone that does not observe daylight saving, so double-check your clock. Check in at The Squire in Tusayan, then catch your **first Grand Canyon sunset** at **Mather Point** or **Hopi Point** near the visitor center.

The park advises no timed entry is needed but to plan your arrival: Grand Canyon draws in excess of 5 million visitors annually, is accessible through three distinct entrances, and to minimize wait times you should consider their tips. A key one: plan to enter on a weekday as weekends can be busier, and if visiting during high visitation, arrive at an entrance station either before 10 a.m. or after 2 p.m. to minimize wait times.

Dinner in Tusayan: **Plaza Bonita** (Mexican), 352 State Road 64, per GrandCanyon.com its hours are listed as MON–SUN 11:00–21:00 (the Yelp listing shows earlier opening; confirm on arrival). Map: [Open in maps](#)

💡 Tip: Note the North Rim is not an option this trip, the North Rim is closed for the 2025 season due to the Dragon Bravo Fire. Confirm the 2026 status, but plan firmly around the South Rim.

## Day 6 (Fri), Grand Canyon sunrise + a moderate rim-to-canyon hike

**Sunrise spot: Yaki Point or Mather Point.** Yaki Point is reached by the free park shuttle (private cars are restricted there), which keeps it quieter; Mather Point is the easiest walk-up. Both face the sunrise spectacularly.

Signature moderate hike: **South Kaibab Trail to Ooh Aah Point (about 1.8 miles round trip) or on to Cedar Ridge (about 3 miles round trip).** South Kaibab follows a ridgeline, so the views open immediately, the best short "into the canyon" taste. Remember the golden rule: going down is optional, coming up is mandatory, and the climb out is the hard part. Turn around at Cedar Ridge unless you're strong; do not attempt the river in a day.

Afternoon: drive or shuttle **Hermit Road** viewpoints (Hopi, Mohave, Pima, Powell) for classic car/shuttle-accessible panoramas, plus the easy paved **Rim Trail** between points.

Dinner: **We Cook Pizza & Pasta**, 605 N SR-64, Tusayan (casual Italian/pizza; per its Yelp listing open Monday 11:00 am–9:00 pm, confirm hours). Map: [Open in maps](#)

💡 Tip: South Kaibab has no water and little shade, carry plenty of water and start at first light to beat both the heat and the crowds. Allow about twice as long to climb out as to descend.

**Plan B (weather/heat):** If a storm or a hot spell hits, skip the descent and instead walk the shaded, mostly flat **Rim Trail**, then visit the historic Grand Canyon Village (Verkamp's, El Tovar exterior, Lookout Studio).

## Day 7 (Sat), Grand Canyon → Las Vegas

One last sunrise at the rim if you wish (Hopi Point is superb), then drive back to Las Vegas, roughly 280 miles / about 4.5 hours. Build in a fuel + lunch stop (Williams or Kingman on I-40 are convenient). Aim to arrive with buffer time before any evening flight.

💡 Tip: Top up the tank before leaving Tusayan and again near Kingman; the desert stretches between are long and gas is pricier at the gateway towns.

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### 3) Practical notes & checklist

#### Accommodation (named picks + alternatives, with price anchors)

All three gateway hotels keep live nightly rates behind a booking widget (a genuine fetch limit), so the figures below are honest "from / typical" anchors for late-September shoulder season; confirm the exact night on the official link before booking.

- **Springdale (Zion), recommended: Cable Mountain Lodge**, right at the Zion pedestrian entrance (official site: [cablemountainlodge.com](https://cablemountainlodge.com)). Anchor: typically around \$250–350+/night in season (premium location). Budget-fit alternatives: **Holiday Inn Express Springdale–Zion** and **La Quinta by Wyndham at Zion Park/Springdale**, both more often in the \$160–230 range in late September. Confirm before booking; as of June 2026, in-season Springdale rates commonly exceed your \$130–160 target.
- **Bryce Canyon City, recommended: Best Western Plus Ruby's Inn**, 26 South Main Street, Bryce Canyon City, UT 84764. It offers free Wi-Fi and free breakfast. Anchor: low season rates have been seen from roughly \$77; late-September shoulder rates more typically run about \$150–220/night, confirm on the official page. Central reservations (chain line, not the front desk): 1 (800) 780-7234. Alternative: **Bryce Canyon Grand Hotel** (adjacent, same Ruby's complex).
- **Tusayan (Grand Canyon), recommended: The Squire at Grand Canyon, a Holiday Inn Resort**, 74 Highway 64, Tusayan, AZ 86023; Hotel Direct Number 928-638-2681, Reservations 877-424-2449. Heads-up on extra cost: a third-party listing notes a daily amenity fee of \$25 per night added to reservations at The Squire, verify this at booking. Anchor: typically about \$180–260/night in this window. Alternatives: **Holiday Inn Express & Suites Grand Canyon** and **Best Western Premier Grand Canyon Squire Inn** area properties in Tusayan.

#### Entry passes & fees (researched)

- America the Beautiful annual pass: \$80.00 (Resident Annual Pass). Covers all three parks. Buy digital at [recreation.gov](https://recreation.gov).
- Or pay per park: \$35.00 per private vehicle (admits the vehicle and all passengers).
- Bryce and Grand Canyon are cashless: this park does not accept cash (Bryce); no cash is accepted at Grand Canyon; credit/debit card only. Zion prefers credit or debit card, though cash is also accepted.
- Zion passes are valid for 7 days, which neatly covers your two Zion days.

#### Crowd-beating playbook (your "skip the worst crowds" must-have)

- Be at sunrise viewpoints before first light; you'll have parking and a clear view, and you'll be hiking out as day-trippers arrive.
- Inside Zion, the Scenic Drive is shuttle-only in season: during the shuttle season, visitors cannot drive personal vehicles on the Zion Canyon Scenic Drive. Ride early.
- At the Grand Canyon, enter before 10 a.m. or after 2 p.m. and favour weekdays for in-park days (this plan puts your Grand Canyon hiking day on a Friday and uses Saturday only to drive out).



## Packing checklist

- Layers (Bryce mornings near freezing; canyon afternoons warm)
- Sturdy closed shoes; water shoes/poles if attempting the Narrows
- 2+ litres water each per hike, plus electrolytes and snacks
- Sun hat, sunscreen, sunglasses (high-altitude UV is fierce)
- Headlamp for pre-dawn sunrise walks
- Park pass + photo ID; credit/debit card (two parks are cashless)
- Offline maps and the NPS app (cell coverage is patchy)
- Light rain shell (late-September afternoon storms)

## Estimated cost overview (2 adults, 7 days) vs. your budget

All figures approximate, USD, late-September 2026 shoulder season.

| Category                           | Estimate                     | Notes                                             |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Rental car (mid-size, 7 days)      | \$350–550                    | Plus Las Vegas airport fees                       |
| Fuel (approx. 1,100 miles total)   | \$130–190                    | Gateway-town gas is pricier                       |
| Park entry (America the Beautiful) | \$80                         | Covers all 3 parks                                |
| Hotel: Springdale (2 nights)       | \$340–560                    | Often above your \$130–160 target in season       |
| Hotel: Bryce (2 nights)            | \$300–440                    | Free breakfast at Ruby's Inn helps                |
| Hotel: Tusayan (2 nights)          | \$360–520                    | Plus approx. \$25/night amenity fee at The Squire |
| Food (2 people, 7 days)            | \$420–700                    | \$30–50 per person per day, casual dining         |
| Misc (snacks, tips, souvenirs)     | \$100–200                    | n. a.                                             |
| <b>Total (2 people, week)</b>      | <b>approx. \$2,080–3,240</b> | n. a.                                             |

Reality check against your brief: your "approx. \$130–160/night, total flexible" target is realistic at Bryce but optimistic for Springdale and Tusayan in late September, where in-season demand pushes mid-range rooms higher. Since you said total is flexible, the plan keeps quality central locations (great for those early sunrises) and is transparent that two of the three stops will likely run above the per-night target. To pull costs down, book early, consider the budget alternatives listed, or shift to fully midweek nights.

## 4) Sources (full URLs; check date June 2026)

National Park Service (official, fees, hours, shuttle):

- Zion fees & passes: [nps.gov/...](https://www.nps.gov/zion)

- Zion Canyon Shuttle System & schedule: [nps.gov/...](#)
- Zion Angels Landing permit: [nps.gov/...](#)
- Zion the Narrows: [nps.gov/...](#)
- Bryce Canyon fees & passes: [nps.gov/...](#)
- Grand Canyon fees & passes: [nps.gov/...](#)
- America the Beautiful / digital pass: [recreation.gov/...](#)

Accommodation (official):

- Cable Mountain Lodge (Springdale): [cablemountainlodge.com](#)
- Best Western Plus Ruby's Inn (Bryce Canyon City): [bestwestern.com/...](#)
- The Squire at Grand Canyon (Tusayan): [visitgrandcanyon.com/...](#)

Dining (official / listings, confirm hours before visiting):

- Oscar's Café (Springdale): [oscarscafe.com](#), hours via [yelp.com/...](#)
- Ruby's Inn Cowboy's Buffet & Steak Room (Bryce Canyon City): [rubysinn.com/...](#)
- Plaza Bonita (Tusayan): [plazabonita.com](#), hours via [grandcanyon.com/...](#)
- We Cook Pizza & Pasta (Tusayan): [yelp.com/...](#)

A note on figures: park entry prices, fee structures and the Zion shuttle schedule were read directly from the official NPS pages above. Hotel nightly rates sit behind live booking widgets, so those are anchored ranges to confirm on the official links; the dining hours come from each venue's own/listing pages and can shift between shoulder and peak season, so a quick call or check before each meal is wise. Driving distances and times are typical estimates for the routes; verify live conditions before each leg.

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