

America File: Salt Lake City

By Daniel Akst

Travel Holiday

December, 1995

When the International Olympic Committee finally decided in June to say "this is the right place" in connection with Salt Lake City and the 2002 winter games, it wasn't just echoing Brigham Young, who supposedly uttered those words when he and his Mormon followers, nearly 150 years ago, reached the magnificent void that is now the site of the city. The IOC was echoing a lot of other people as well.

Once a sleepy outpost, the Salt Lake region now ranks among America's fastest growing, thanks to a splendid setting, a bevy of charming neighborhoods and a booming local economy, all of which have drawn newcomers in droves. In snatching the Olympics away from Oestersund, Sweden; Sion, Switzerland; and Quebec City, the other locales that vied for them, Salt Lake City saw a chance to finally put itself on the tourist map as well, and so went all out. Even before the IOC voted, the Utahns had five Olympic venues ready, with four more under construction. All are within 55 miles of downtown.

Despite its growing prominence and sophistication, though, the city itself remains a town of modest size and friendly faces, one well worth visiting no matter what the season. Although Mormons account for only half its 166,000 residents--the mayor is a woman, a non-Mormon and a Democrat--Salt Lake retains many of its old-time Mormon virtues, standing out today as one of the safest, cleanest, and, I think, most beautiful of American cities.

It's also one of the most interesting. Salt Lake City was founded in 1847 by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 148 of whom made a 1,300 mile trek from Illinois across the Great Plains in search of freedom to pursue what was then a controversial religion that included polygamy. Salt Lake City thus was founded by a people with a mission, and their disciplined zeal marks the area still.

Today Salt Lake City and the surrounding region are home to software, aerospace and biomedical firms, professional basketball, a spiffy modern airport, a surprisingly vibrant cultural life and a youthful, outdoorsy population that looks at times like a photo spread in *Outside* magazine. But its uniqueness still owes largely to the LDS church, an institution as uniquely American as jazz. The major streets are numbered outward from Temple Square, the heart of Mormon life as well as the center of town, and the Mormon influence is reflected in the local politics, media, and liquor laws.

You'll notice this only if you can take your eyes off the natural splendor of the place, which is evident not just in winter, when Utah is a playground, or in fall, when the meadows and foliage are so grand, but all year round. Salt Lake City sits at the juncture of some of America's most glorious mountains and, just beyond, its most desolate flatlands. Walk around downtown and in practically every direction--even in summer--you'll see the snow-capped pink and green mountains of the Wasatch and Oquirrh ranges. The region is known as the Wasatch Front because it fronts this magnificent range, which lies to the north and east and extends as far as Idaho, just like the Mormons. Wasatch means "high mountain pass," and such passes are abundant, as are deep canyons, alpine lakes and splendid meadows, testament to the artistry of the glaciers that left them all behind.

One result is that Utah is famous for skiing. Thanks to its preparations for the 2002 Winter Olympics, you can practice ski jumping in Park City, a former silver-mining town turned resort

30 miles east of Salt Lake City. The Utah Winter Sports Park there will also feature a \$20-million bobsled and luge run (scheduled to open in January), where visitors can ride with professional drivers.

If the eastern edge of Salt Lake City is alpine, to the west are the lowlands left behind by the shrinking vastness of the Great Salt Lake, America's mercurial and eerily beautiful dead sea. The remnant of prehistoric Lake Bonneville, which thousands of years ago covered 20,000 square miles of Utah, Nevada and Idaho, it now collects waters from the Bear, Weber and Jordan rivers; with no outlet, the minerals are trapped as the water evaporates.

The brine flies seem to keep many locals away, and arriving aircraft often provide the finest view, but at perhaps five times the salinity of ocean water it is a natural wonder you're likely to want to visit and, weather permitting, float in. (The salinity makes you unsinkable.) Saltair Beach State Park offers easy access 16 miles west of the city on I-80. Better yet, head for Antelope Island to the north. Accessible by causeway (I-15 north, exit 335) from the mainland, this 40-square mile state park offers a sandy beach and stark landscapes as well as deer, fox, cougar and bison.

These natural wonders make the region a hiker's paradise, but there is plenty to be seen simply by walking about town. (Or bicycling; the place is crisscrossed by bike paths, and traffic is scant.) Inevitably, the local star is history.

Start at Temple Square, which is especially pretty during Christmas season, when it's decorated with more than 300,000 lights. This manicured enclave is dominated by the spires of the striking neo-Gothic Mormon Temple, built of local quartzite during 40 years of on and off construction that began in 1853. Non-Mormons are forbidden entry, but don't fail to go inside the other buildings in the square, including the grand old LDS Tabernacle, home of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and its 11,613 pipe organ. You can hear the choir rehearse Thursdays at 8 p.m. or attend a live broadcast on Sundays if you arrive by 9:15 a.m. You should also stop at the 115-year-old LDS Assembly Hall, with its ornate wooden cupola and free piano concerts.

(Temple Square is staffed by indefatigably cheerful young Mormon missionaries, and the free tours offered throughout the day include a dose of Mormon beliefs. Proselytizing is a central tenet of Mormonism, one reason it is probably the world's fastest growing religion. If it doesn't interest you, don't take it personally.)

Temple Square also marks early Mormon hardships. The Handcart Pioneer Memorial was erected in 1926 to commemorate the journey of adherents who crossed the desert on foot, pulling their worldly goods behind them, and the Seagull Monument recalls the gulls who ate the masses of crickets that threatened the settlers' crops.

Across the street from Temple Square is the historic former Utah Hotel, now a gleaming white meeting facility known as the Joseph Smith Memorial Building. Smith, whose larger-than-life likeness is featured in the lobby, founded the LDS Church in upstate New York in 1830 based on the Book of Mormon, which he claimed to have translated from golden plates received from an angel named Moroni. Smith was slain by a mob in Carthage, Ill. in 1844.

Many Mormons believe they can be baptized to redeem ancestors who died without benefit of the faith, and so genealogy is important. Off the lobby of the Smith building you'll find the FamilySearch (CQ) Center, where you can tap into the unparalleled LDS family-records database to try and trace your ancestry (whether you're a Mormon or not). The building's top floor observatory offers sweeping views of the city, by the way.

Polygamy was a part of what led the Mormons to far-off Utah; Brigham Young, for instance, had children by more than 16 women and married many more. Up the street from the Smith

building, along East South Temple, you'll see the Lion House, built for Young's families in 1856, and nearby is the Greek revival Beehive House, of similar vintage and also built for Young. (The beehive is Utah's state symbol and a metaphor for Mormon industry.)

Further east along South Temple, you'll find block after block of the city's grandest mansions. This is where Utah's merchant princes and mining magnates worked out their edifice complexes; see especially the Kearns Mansion (603 E. South Temple), now the governor's residence. This is also where the Catholic Cathedral of the Madeleine (331 E. South Temple) and First Presbyterian Church (347 E. South Temple) established themselves in the grand manner. Above South Temple, the neighborhood called the Avenues contains many of the loveliest old homes (a mix of Victorian, Craftsman and other styles) and leafiest streets.

Back in the central part of town, the grandly domed neoclassical state house dominates the skyline from a hill north of downtown, and just to the west is the charming old Marmalade District, so named because of streets such as Apricot and Quince. Several blocks south of Temple Square on State Street is the imposing City and County Building, a century-old Romanesque edifice at the center of Washington Square, where the lead party of Mormons is said to have camped when they first arrived in July of 1847. Surrounded by 45 kinds of trees, the building is now the seat of local government.

One downtown building that says a lot about Salt Lake City is the magnificent old Union Pacific Railroad Depot, at the end of South Temple Street. Built in 1909, the mansard-roofed structure sits empty and unused, yet is better maintained than many still-functioning train stations elsewhere in the country. No one has figured out yet what to do with this landmark, but when I wandered in I was stunned by the great stained glass windows of the Pony Express, the buffalo and the like, and the grand murals depicting the driving of the golden spike at Promontory, Utah in 1869 (marking the completion of the nation's first transcontinental railroad), and the arrival of Brigham Young's party at the valley that would become Salt Lake City.

If the weather is nice, you won't want to miss the Tracy Aviary, in stately old Liberty Park (600 E. 1300 South), where the more than 220 species of winged exotica include eagles, pheasant, grosbeak, King vultures, hyacinth macaw, emu and hornbills. It's the oldest and largest such self-contained aviary in the country,

Clear skies should also induce you to visit Pioneer Trail State Park (2601 Sunnyside Ave.), where Old Deseret is an interesting collection of cabins and homes--including, of course, one that belonged to Brigham Young--that recreates life in the time of the first Mormon settlers. (Deseret is Mormon lingo for honeybee, a symbol of Mormon industriousness.) The pastoral setting is gorgeous; in summer, horses and oxen laze in a corral against a backdrop of pink and green mountains, some of them topped with snow. Get a gander from the "This is the Place" memorial and you'll see why the Mormons decided to stay.

Where to Eat

Salt Lake City offers some sophisticated cuisine for a city of its size, but before you plunge into all that chervil and concassÉ, stop for lunch at Lamb's (169 S. Main St.). Utah's oldest continuously operating restaurant is all wood, brass and white table linens, yet a satisfying three-course meat-and-potatoes lunch is less than \$10.

Since taverns in Salt Lake City are barred from selling anything stronger than beer (it's not hard to be a saint in this city), locally produced gourmet brew is popular here. Try Squatters (147 W. Broadway), in a converted 1909-vintage hotel, which makes a variety of delicious beers on the premises and serves tasty pub food. Another budget-oriented favorite of mine, near the

university, is W.H. Brumby's (224 S. 1300 East), where you can enjoy a casually delicious meal of creative pasta and other salads and homemade bread, soups and cakes for \$12.

For something fancier, consider the New Yorker (48 W. Market St., dinner \$35 for one) or the Market Street Grill (48 Post Office Place, dinner \$20). Or drive out to La Caille (9565 S. Wasatch Blvd., Sandy, UT). Its amazing gardens, with peacocks walking amid babbling brooks and glorious landscaping, are worth the trip alone, though I found the food and service not worth the tariff (\$70 for one).

(Editors: all prices are pretax, pretip, no drinks for 3 courses.)

Salt Lake Stay-overs

My favorite hostelry is the charming 75-year-old Peery Hotel at 110 W. 300 South St. (800-331-0073), which is loaded with modern comforts yet only costs \$59 to \$79 a night. It's near everything. For high-rise accommodations downtown, consider the Red Lion (800-547-8010) or the Marriott (800-345-4754); the founder of the latter chain was a famous Mormon benefactor. For the truly budget-minded, the Royal Executive Inn at 121 N. 300 West St. (801-521-3450) and the Travelodge Temple Square at 144 W. North Temple St. (801-533-8200) offer value and convenience. A bed and breakfast to consider is the Brigham Street Inn, a handsome turn-of-the-century mansion at 1135 E. South Temple (801-364-4461).

At some of the older facilities, at least, the security isn't what you might expect in urban America these days, but remember, this isn't your average city. On the flight home I sat next to a man who had just sold his house and put all his worldly goods in storage, only to discover that he'd brought the padlock with him on the plane.

"Well," he shrugged with a laugh, "it's a good thing it's Utah."

Daniel Akst is a novelist and screenwriter in Los Angeles.