



An
ANTONYM
And An
ANTIDOTE
Essence

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Blanding? Pffft. Never heard of it. And now that you have, it sounds generic and boring, right? Wrong! Don't let the name fool you. Located about an hour south of Moab (surely you've heard of this outdoor mecca!) in the Four Corners region, Blanding is the epitome of an antonym — Granding would be a more appropriate name. Though the city itself is a mere 2.4 square miles, its voluminous outskirts don the same terrain as many of the national parks in the area, minus the masses. But even the parks and monuments with official designations (National! State! Tribal!) near Blanding receive a fraction of the visitors you'd expect. Experiencing nature without throngs of selfie-stick wielding tourists is a calming antidote when life feels frenzied.



Room with a view

RUINS AND HIKERS AND BEARS EARS ... OH, MY!

Dinosaurs. Ancestral Puebloans. Spanish explorers. Latter-day Saint pioneers. Cowboys. Though they didn't all live here at the same time, each group has influenced the landscape and culture of Blanding. Before heading out on any adventures, stop at the Blanding Visitor's Center and take 15 minutes to walk through its small museum. You'll gain a better understanding of the region's history and probably get some inside info from the locals working there.

Grab some free maps while you're at it because, like socks in a dryer or the aforementioned dinos, you never know when the bars on your phone will disappear. And even if you do have cell service, anyone who has ended up at a cemetery instead of a soccer field knows that GPS isn't always reliable in the suburbs, let alone in remote reaches with nothing but ancient ruins. Speaking of which ...

Thousands of years before architects were drawing up plans for McMansions perched precariously on hillsides, Ancestral Puebloans were building homes in the alcoves of cliff walls using skilled stone masonry. Their dwellings often had upwards of 50 rooms and spanned three stories. Rooms in the rear were used for storage, while a courtyard in front held round kivas (pronounced kee-vuhs) used for ceremonial purposes.

At Edge of the Cedars State Park Museum in Blanding, you can walk through the remnants of an ancient village and descend a wooden ladder into a restored kiva. Or wander through the museum, which houses the largest collection of Puebloan pottery in the Four Corners region.



Go underground at Edge of Cedars

Plunge pools, vegetation and petroglyphs dot the desert landscape.



The roof is on fi-yah in Mule Canyon

When most people think of ruins, Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde National Park comes to mind. Once housing more than 150 rooms, Cliff Palace is a remarkable site and worth a visit to the southwest corner of Colorado. But there are lesser known cliff dwellings and ruins in Utah which (admittedly) aren't as expansive but are (arguably) more exquisite.

Take Moon House in Bears Ears National Monument, for instance. The Bureau of Land Management only issues 20 permits per day for the out-and-back hike to Moon House. There's a good chance you and your own tribe will have the place to yourself, which makes walking in the footsteps of the Ancestral Puebloans much more visceral. Lunar phases are painted inside one of the rooms and pictographs on walls continue the theme, making this one of the more unique sites to visit. A couple of hoodoos along the trail are an added bonus.

Mule Canyon is another place near Blanding where you can hike to impressive ruins, as long as you have that BLM permit displayed on your dashboard. Though both

the south fork and north fork trails showcase ruins and rock art, the south fork is more popular because it leads to House of Fire. Located a mellow mile from the trailhead, the rust-colored rock comes alive mid-morning, when the sun hits the striations on the stone overhang at just the right angle, transforming it to swirling shades of flaming red.

Many visitors take their Insta-worthy shots, sing their favorite fi-yah song (Pitbull? AC/DC? Ryan Cabrera?), then head back to the parking lot. Don't be like these people. You're better than them. Keep going and you'll be treated to several more ruins along the trail. This portion of the hike is more difficult than the first mile, the canyon deeper and more scenic. Plunge pools, vegetation and petroglyphs dot the desert landscape. It's possible to get close to some, but not all of the ruins. Bring some binoculars for a better look.

Wherever you choose to hike, please don't ruin the ruins (or your life) by climbing on them or taking ancient artifacts. It's illegal.



Take a gander at Goosenecks



Valley of the Gods, the ultimate tailgating destination

formations with names like Battleship Rock and Setting Hen Butte. Think of Valley of the Gods as a mini Monument Valley. But without the parade of cars. Or the fees. Pro tip: Take some Dramamine before turning onto US-261 and making the steep, switchbacked ascent to the Moki Dugway lookout for vertiginous views of the iconic western landscape.

Nearby Goosenecks State Park also has a claim to fame thanks to John Wayne. (Say that five times fast!) Its landscape has cameos in *The Searchers* and *Fort Apache*. Even if westerns aren't your thing, stop and gawk at the iconic bends of the San Juan River.

You can see for miles and miles and miles and miles and miles. Oh yeah.

After gandering at Goosenecks, head to mile marker 13 on US-163. This is known as Forrest Gump Hill, where the beloved movie character stopped running and said, "I'm pretty tired ... I think I'll go home now." Warning: Tour busses stop here and it can get very people-y. Introverts and agoraphobes may want to go back to their temporary Blanding homes to be alone.

But before you go back to Four Corners Inn, curl up on your queen bed in the fetal position and start binging comfort shows on DirecTV, make a stop at Blanding's Dinosaur Museum (open April-October). Besides fossil footprints and a 14-foot model of a feathered Therizinosaurus with an impressive 20-foot wingspan, the museum also has an exhibit dedicated to the history of dinosaurs in the movies, complete with historical movie posters dating back to 1919's *Ghost of Slumber Mountain* and 1933's *King Kong*. The exhibit also includes modern movie memorabilia.

CRAWL BEFORE YOU WALK

Not too far from Blanding, you'll find Arch Canyon. This long box canyon has red rock walls adorned with hanging gardens and primitive pictographs. A creek runs along

Pack your lunch so you can dine alfresco on the picnic table surrounded by ponderosa pines at the end of the OHV trail.

its flat bottom most of the year, as does an OHV trail that crosses the creek several times. It's a fairly easy drive, with a trail rating of 3-5. Three arches are found at the end of the canyon — Cathedral, Angel and Keystone — which are only accessible by foot.

You could hike the entire way, but that makes for a long day. Most people ride mountain bikes or drive side-by-sides, then hike to the arches. Whatever you do, don't race to the end or you'll miss some of the cliff dwellings visible near the beginning of the trail. Bring your zoom lens to get better photos of these remnants of the past and pack your lunch so you can dine alfresco on the picnic table surrounded by ponderosa pines at the end of the OHV trail.

For more of a white-knuckle drive, Hotel Rock offers jeeping joy and sweeping views of Arch Canyon from an overlook. This lightly trafficked trail boasts a 5-9 trail rating thanks to steep climbs and dips, sandy washes, narrow portions and off-camber sections. Regardless of your skill level, it's a good idea to walk the final obstacle — aptly named SOB Hill — before attempting it in your vehicle.

Both Arch Canyon and Hotel Rock are included in Jeep Jamboree USA's annual lineup. The number of vehicles for this late-April event is limited, giving it a friendlier, more intimate vibe. Exactly what you'd expect from anyone or anything in the Blanding area.

Don't worry if you're a Prius-driving, podcast-listening, urban commuter who hasn't the foggiest idea what the best approach angle to avoid a butt scratcher is. The pros know. Book a guided tour and get some expert driving advice along with a side of local folklore. Yes, please!

A CHANGE OF COLOR

Utah's desert landscape is famous for its red rock. But if you dream of colors in less angry shades, take the tranquil Blue Mountain road north to the Abajo Mountains. In the fall, the Abajo Loop (from Spring Creek to Robertson Pasture) is a superb singletrack for mountain biking where pristine evergreens mingle with aspens aglow in brassy golds. It starts out nice and easy before making a quadbusting climb, but the views of Canyonlands National Park (and beyond) are worth every painful pedal, as is the carefree descent. Parts of the trail feel like you're riding in Park City, but are far less trafficked.

In the winter, many people come to the Four Corners region to escape the snow. But just in case you don't have the white stuff at home or you do and miss it terribly, you can find some a mere 30 minutes from Blanding. Dalton Springs Winter Trailhead is located on the Abajo's shady slopes, offering access to several miles of groomed trails for nordic skiers and snowshoers of varying abilities.

BOOK IT TO BLANDING

So why call this north-of-the border basecamp with cinematic scenery something as diametrically divergent as Blanding, anyway? For the love of books. In 1914, a wealthy educator/publisher from New England fancied having a namesake town (egotistical, much?) and offered a 1,000-book donation to the library of any Utah municipality that would rename itself in his honor. Two towns vied for the prize and ended up splitting the books. One was renamed Bicknell, the other Blanding — the maiden name of Mr. Bicknell's wife. Oddly enough, the town's original, comparably colorless name was the maiden name of an early settler's wife: Grayson. Oh well. Once you visit, it's clear to see Blanding is anything but. ■

NUMBERS OF NEARBY NATIONALS

1,000+

Documented climbing routes in the crackly-cliffed wonderland known as Indian Creek, a premiere sandstone climbing area in Bears Ears National Monument.

15,000

Stars visible throughout the night at Natural Bridges National Monument, the first location to be certified as an International Dark Sky Park and less than an hour's drive from Blanding.

20

Percent of Canyonlands National Park's total annual visitors that go to the park's Needles District.

650

Number of petroglyphs found on the rockface at Newspaper Rock National Monument, a 50-minute drive from Blanding.

