

- Mark your confusion.
- Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)
- Write a 1+ page (250+ word) response to the article.

A Race to the Top of the Most Beautiful Place on Earth

by Reese Wells for *Narratively*, 08/11/15

In the dark we ride. Three from Keys to Freeze¹ – Brady, Tyler, and I – pedaling up the black canyon in the pre-dawn. Since leaving the Florida Keys in February, bound for Deadhorse, Alaska, we've met swamp people and fallen heroes, battled near-decapitating headwinds, and seen the most tricked-out traveling van imaginable. Today, we've arrived at Zion National Park in southwest Utah before the morning rush – before the shuttle buses carrying hundreds of tourists to the valley drive into the canyon. We are alone, and heading to Angels Landing.

"Only an angel could land on it!" said explorer Frederick Fisher of Angels Landing's high, thin peak from the canyon floor in 1916. So the name stuck, and when the trail was built in 1926 by the parks service, Angels Landing became — and remains — the premier hike of Zion National Park.

Each day during prime tourist season thousands of park visitors hike here. From the landing, where one has a full view of the lower half of the trail, it is said that hikers coming up look like ants winding their way up the anthill.

The trailhead is located at the Grottos, which is three miles up the Zion Canyon Scenic Drive and only accessible by shuttle bus or bicycle. The hike to the peak – the literal landing – is two and a half miles and 1,400 feet of elevation gain. The final half-mile follows the trail's narrow ridgeline up to the summit. A guiding chain-linked cable accompanies this dangerous ascent, set up for added protection against the thousand-foot cliffs to either side of the trail.

The expectation when hiking Angels Landing is that one will be summiting and descending with hundreds of other hikers, a consequence of the shuttle system that controls the inflow of traffic up the canyon. But, with a bicycle, one might begin their hike much earlier than when the first shuttle runs at seven am. So Brady, Tyler, and I awake at five am in the dark.

It is a windy morning. We fight with more headwinds as we ride up the canyon, the steep edges of the Zion monoliths observing our slow progress deeper into the valley. The purple and blue sky gazes its pale dawn from behind the mountains. We are hiking. We are alone. It is quiet.



The two miles of trail before the cabled ascent is steep but tame. It is a paved path switching up and back out of the valley, cut from the mountainside. We walk up the trail towards a slender pass leading to the backside of the mountain. I find myself wondering at the Great White Throne, Zion's largest monolith set

¹ *Keys to Freeze* is the epic biking quest undertaken by six twenty-somethings seeking to ride bicycles from Key West, FL to Dead Horse, AK, writing about their experiences along the way.

adjacent to the trail. It rises 2,400 vertical feet, a big stony sentinel. The Virgin River runs through the valley's floor, following the path of Zion's great glaciers of the last ice age.

Reaching the pass and leaving the view of the valley, the trail flattens and rolls. There are tall trees fighting for sunlight to the left, a steep red cliff to the right that we will ascend above on Walter's Wiggles, and a series of 21 steep switchbacks leading up to Scout's Landing, which is the hike's two mile marker. It is the lone flat before the final ascent leading to Angels Landing. While walking the wiggles I consider how tripping over my feet while on a switchback would send me over the trail's edge and there I would fall headfirst towards rocks waiting hundreds of feet below. Imagining Thomas Vint and Walter Ruesch – the park service employees who planned and led the construction efforts of Angels Landing in 1926 – out here makes my stomach hurt. That the Angels Landing trail even exists is a feat of human engineering worthy of our wonder.

At the final flat before the cable climb we pause and look out from Scout's Landing. The peak that we will ascend is a half-mile off, cast in the gold of a clear morning sun. Continuing towards the cables there is a sign stating that since 2004 six people have fallen to their deaths on Angels Landing. Of the six, three were women, two were men, and one was a boy of fourteen. Most fell to their deaths in the final stage of the hike, stumbling over the trail's edge. It is a sobering reminder of the dangerous climb ahead, motivation to clutch at the steel guiding cables as the width of the trail narrows along the cliff's edges, a thousand foot drop to the left and right.

We are a half-mile from the start of the cables guiding us to the top of Angels Landing. The time passes quickly. We have a view of the valley as we approach the summit and see it stretching further north, the road ending at the Narrows trailhead. The scenery is staggeringly beautiful.

We have climbed to where Frederick Fisher once stated that only angels could visit. We sit down on a rock, eat our breakfast, and look around. We are utterly alone at the summit, watching the first hikers from the seven am shuttle make their way up from the trailhead.

Brady, Tyler, and I have a full hour at the top of Angels Landing. We watch the sun crest over the eastern mountains and cast the walls in their morning light, shadows falling down to disappear within the valley floor. Shuttles begin racing up and down the canyon drive that twists through the valley, dropping off the ants and their cameras.

There are moments that define an existence. For two hours I exist with only Brady and Tyler. We share an experience with no one other than ourselves, and it brings us closer. We touch the sky as the day races towards us, welcoming the rest of the world to join the space we have created.

Possible response options:

- Do you have a place that you consider the most beautiful place on Earth? Why do you consider that place so beautiful? Explain.
- Keys to Freeze is a pretty crazy idea -- talk about something for the Bucket List. Do you have any kind of crazy quest that you'd like to embark upon, perhaps after high school? Explain.
- This isn't our typical AoW style -- it's a narrative essay versus an informational or argumentative article. Are articles like this worth reading? Explain.
- Choose a passage and respond to it.