

# Zion National Park film hits the big screen just outside its back door

By Shaun McKinnon  
Review-Journal

SPRINGDALE, Utah — The deep red buttresses of the Watchman, a monolith of Navajo sandstone that stands sentinel at the mouth of Zion Canyon, command the horizon, framed from above by unreal shades of blue, from below by dazzlingly lit cottonwood trees.

A falcon swoops across the scene, riding the currents in a graceful curve. It screeches, dives, the music swells with a pounding bass ...

Hold on. The music swells? Since when did the great outdoors come with a soundtrack? And how did we get up here all of

a sudden, 50 feet above the Watchman? Isn't this Zion National Park?

Well, yes and no. The view of the park's signature landmark is an image on a 60-foot-by-83-foot screen inside a climate-controlled auditorium with 475 padded seats and a state-of-the-art digital sound system.

The Watchman and the park itself — 110-degree summer days, bug-infested spring nights and all of it unupholstered — are still a few hundred yards down state Highway 9, there for anyone who wants it, a nice backdrop for those satisfied with the reel thing.

Welcome to the national park

experience, 1990s style.

"The people who come here, a lot of them have seen the park," said Brent Heaton, manager and part owner of the Zion Canyon Theatre, which opened last month at the south entrance of Zion National Park.

"When they see the film, they see things they didn't see. Some of the scenes are inaccessible any other way. People tell us they've never seen Zion quite like this."

The film's critics say Heaton is right: No one has ever seen the Zion portrayed in "Treasure of the Gods." The 40-minute IMAX film, those critics say, is historically inaccurate and geographically impossible. Worse, they say,

the theater is an eyesore that will detract from Zion's incomparable grandeur.

But the theater's critics are few these days, far fewer than two years ago when developers first announced plans to build on private land just across the Virgin River from Zion's most popular campground.

Heaton said the controversy died partly because the project was scaled back — a proposed motel was scrapped — and partly because it is not as out of place as opponents claimed it would be.

Built of redwood and natural stone, the building sits well off the highway and against a hill, a camouflage job Heaton said is so

effective it may be limiting some walk-in business.

"We've done everything we could to make it natural and aesthetically pleasing," Heaton said. The parking lot lights, for example, now cast less glow than the nearby campground restrooms.

The film itself still rankles some, including Zion National Park Superintendent Donald Falvey, who said he reminds park visitors that "Treasure of the Gods" is for entertainment, not for instruction.

One major concern is that long stretches of the movie were filmed outside Zion. Indian ruins in several scenes were photographed in Canyon de Chelly in

Arizona and Mesa Verde in Colorado. A stunning rock-climbing sequence takes place at Dead Horse Point in southeastern Utah. Some of the final aerial shots are of Bryce Canyon 60 miles to the north.

Heaton said some locations were used because Zion officials would not allow filming in fragile areas of the park.