

Moab Skyway Takes Visitors to Greater Heights

By Janet Bronk Reese

MOAB, UTAH -- There are no ski slopes in Moab, but there's a chairlift, a new one dubbed the "Moab Skyway." Open since May, the half-mile long chairlift carries sightseers, photographers, hikers, climbers and mountain bikers 1,000 feet above the town.

Tucked between the La Sal Mountains and Canyonlands, Moab is well known for its spectacular scenery. Magnificent sandstone formations with wind-carved windows and arches, endless blue skies, and the Colorado River winding through red-walled canyons make the Moab area one of the most popular destinations for outdoor enthusiasts and travelers. The Moab Skyway offers a new way to see 360-degree panoramic views of Moab, the Colorado River, Arches National Park and La Sal Mountains.

The Skyway is a 25-year dream-come-true for Emmett Mays, a Moab resident and businessman. In 1974, Mays purchased a 160-acre portion of the Moab Rim about a mile west of the town's Main Street. He envisioned a chairlift that would take passengers up to the incredible vistas. Over the years, Mays' family became involved in the project, working on the business and financial plans in their spare time.

Last November, the \$2.3 million project received funding and city approval. In five months, the chairlift was constructed as well as an observation deck, ramps, and restrooms at the summit - all wheelchair accessible. The 34-chair system carries up to 500 passengers per hour and is equipped with racks for mountain bikes. Several chairs are specifically designed for easy wheelchair loading and unloading, making a reality Mays' dream of opening the mountain top to everyone, including those with disabilities.

A gift shop, snack bar and a 300-seat amphitheater featuring both evening and daytime performances will be built on the summit this winter. The chairlift is certified by the Utah Tramway Safety Board.

"The amphitheater will help to fill a void in Moab for evening activities, especially for families," said Van Mays, son of Emmett and one of the owners. "Concerts, plays and nature talks will be presented."

"The city was concerned about the environmental impact of the chairlift," he said. "So we made sure the lift was integrated into the natural surroundings. The chairs were painted in earth tones and a special banding pattern was applied to the poles so they blend into the background.

We also wanted to keep the lift low profile, 40- to 50-feet from the ground, and operate it at half the speed of a usual ski lift.”

The trip to the summit takes just 10 minutes. At the top, there’s a 1.5-mile nature trail accented by a desert garden filled with sagebrush, pinon pines and wild flowers. At night, stargazers can stroll the pathways, lit by soft solar lights.

“Serious hikers and mountain bikers can connect to the Moab Rim trail here at the summit,” Van Mays said. “Also nearby is a four-plus-rated jeep trail for those who want to drive up.”

The Scott M. Matheson Wetlands Preserve, one of the largest bird refuges in the western United States, is across the street from the chairlift base and easily visible when taking the lift down.

“In our environmental assessment, we had to determine if there were peregrine falcons inhabiting our property,” said Mays. “Luckily, we found there were none, which sped project approval.”

At the base, a bride and groom dressed in formal wedding attire were waiting for their guests. Later, they would be the first couple married at the summit. Undoubtedly, they won’t be the last.

If you go to the Moab Skyway

Directions: from Main Street/Highway 191, turn west onto Kane Creek Boulevard (at McDonalds). In approximately .75 miles the road forks. Follow the left fork for .6 miles. The parking lot will be on your left.

Hours of operation: March-October, open 7 days a week, 9 a.m.- late evening

Lift ticket prices: Adults, \$7; children, 12 and younger, \$5; seniors, \$6.50. Groups rates for 50 or more.

Moab Skyway, (435) 259-7799; web site, <http://www.moab-utah/skyway>; e-mail, moabsky@lasal.net

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