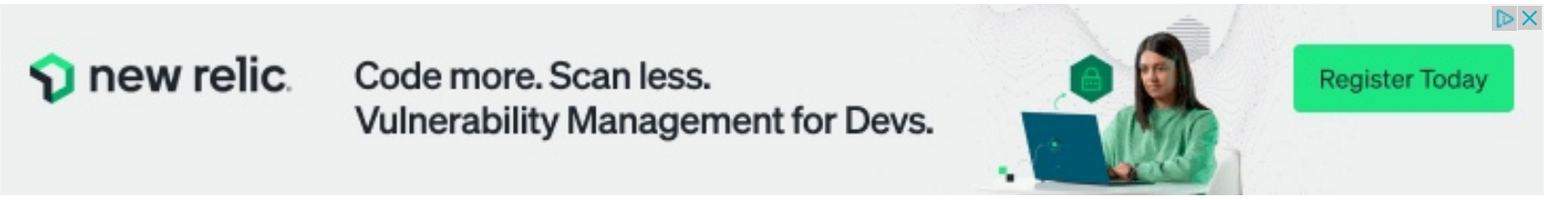

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What it's like to run through the vast red landscape of Moab

A marathon just for women channels 'Thelma & Louise' through the canyons and desert plains of this iconic region of Utah in the American southwest.

Fiona Harper

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Tom Hanks and I have at least one thing in common. We've both run through the lofty landscape of southern Utah.

Here, colossal rock formations rise from desert in an exquisite geological tapestry millions of years in the making.

Admittedly, my own nine-mile (15km) run is significantly shorter than that of Hanks' character, Forrest Gump, in the movie of the same name. By the time Gump reached Monument Valley, he'd been running for three years, two months, 14 days and 16 hours. Then he famously declared, "I'm pretty tired. I think I'll go home now."

Behind the Rocks in the Wilderness Study Area of Utah. It's tough territory for runners, but what a location. **Alamy**

After a near 30-hour journey from Australia I'm a little weary myself. I've travelled across hemispheres to the national parks gateway city of Moab to run the trails that lure outdoor enthusiasts from around the globe. Hikers and mountain bikers along with river rafters, canyoners and campers have long known about this region's dramatic red rock landscape interwoven with tracks crisscrossing the Colorado River. Trail runners like myself are attracted by the stunning scenery seen in films including *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Mission Impossible II*, *Star Trek* and *The Lone Ranger*. Even if you've never stepped foot on Utah's red soil, you'll probably recognise the landscape.

I was enticed to Moab by the 1991 film *Thelma & Louise*, whose heroines Thelma (Geena Davis) and Louise (Susan Sarandon) set off on an impromptu weekend break that quickly evolves into a wild and desperate dash for the Mexican border to escape the law. From behind the wheel of their Ford

Thunderbird convertible the two throw off their past and embrace female rage and friendship. Many of the film's scenes were shot in Utah, including the wrenching finale (spoiler alert), in which the pair drive the Thunderbird off a cliff high above the Colorado River.

The Colorado River winds its way through Canyonlands National Park in the Moab region of Utah. **Sandra Salvas**

Ten years ago, a running event was created to honour the film. Called the Thelma and Louise Marathon and Half, Ten years ago, a running event was created to honour the film. Called the Thelma and Louise Marathon and Half, it's a trail-running event exclusively for women (and those who identify as women). In addition to the marathon (42.2 kilometres) and half-marathon distances, there's a 50km ultra marathon; and a 15km run.

Until four years ago, the Thelma and Louise was a road race along the Colorado River, but under new organisers Mad Moose Events it became a trail run in the foothills of the La Sal Mountains south of the city of Moab. The course takes competitors through steep-sided canyons, along riverbeds and across vast plains of desert sand.

Competitors in the all-women Thelma and Louise Marathon trail running event which is held each May.

Mad Moose Events hosts 19 trail races across Utah and Colorado. All of them are held in challenging environments, often under difficult conditions, and consequently, there's great camaraderie among entrants. Yet, according to race director Denise Ricks, the Thelma and Louise run dials that up a notch.

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"I love the energy and the way this format brings women together to run," says Ricks. "They camp together, they travel together... Runners expect that it's going to be a difficult race. But it's supposed to be because that's what Thelma and Louise had – a real challenge."

Geena Davis (right) with Susan Sarandon in 'Thelma & Louise'. **Alamy**

The race starts and finishes at Behind the Rocks Wilderness Study Area on a Saturday in mid-May. Camping is free for tents and RVs, and plenty of competitors take advantage of it. I choose to drive the 25km from Moab, and when I arrive at the starting zone before sunrise, bleary-eyed campers are emerging from their tents to collect their race kits.

Each distance category has its own pre-race briefing and start time. At 6.30am, the 72 brave competitors in the 50km and marathon categories set off in a cloud of dust as they descend into the first of many canyons. The biggest category – 179 half-marathoners – goes next, and at 8am it's our turn. There are 113 of us, and by now the rising sun is beaming its heat upon the desert sand; I, for one, am thankful I opted for the shortest distance.

As we cross the start line our cheers of encouragement reverberate across the canyon. The red-dirt trail is marked with pink flags, and yet it's surprisingly easy to become disoriented, especially when we pass through soft sandy washouts at the bottom of chasms or dance across jagged slickrock where concentration is required to keep from tripping on the uneven surface. Ascending from creek washouts onto the plains, we're rewarded with blooms of apricot globemallow and the gnarly trunks of stunted trees – the only vegetation beyond clutches of spiky grass beside the trail.

Mesa Arch in the Moab area of Canyonlands National Park, Utah. **Sandra Salvas**

It occurs to me as I'm running how little an inkling I had about Moab's landscape before I got here. Sure, I'd seen its dramatic red rock formations as a backdrop to movies, but when you're immersed in it, the scale is daunting. As I reach the midway point, nothing prepares me for my first view of the famous Picture Frame Arch, one of the main features of the Behind The Rocks wilderness area. It rises out of an otherwise featureless plain, and as I get closer, I spot hikers ascending a trail towards it, putting its enormous size into perspective.

On an uphill section of the trail I meet Cori from Colorado and her chatty 11-year-old daughter, Aurora, who have stopped briefly to catch their breath. They've turned the event into a family reunion of sorts: Aurora's three aunts and grandmother have travelled from Alaska to join them.

Further along, Joanne tells me she drove six hours from Colorado and camped in her vehicle the night before. After the race I saw her again – with her finisher's medal bearing a Thunderbird car and two enthusiastically waving women – "absolutely thrilled" to have finished, despite the energy-sapping heat. Another competitor, Whitney, had achieved a milestone – her first marathon. "I was so happy to finish," she tells me. "It was tough, but I met my goal to come in under six hours."

My race done, and seeking some restoration, I drive less than an hour south of town to ULUM Moab, a desert hideaway with 51 upmarket safari-style tents at the base of a towering red rock bluff.

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Occupying 89 hectares of former cattle ranch land which is being revegetated, Ulum is an ideal base for exploring the nearby Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, as well as adventuring on the Colorado River.

ULUM Moab consists of sophisticated tented accommodation and a central lodge.

The Lodge blends seamlessly into the red-rock backdrop, its dining room bathed in natural light through floor-to-ceiling glass, which frames views of Looking Glass Rock. Fire pits, three plunge pools and a yoga deck circle an outdoor seating area where guests can gather to dine, listen to live acoustic music and roast s'mores, a snack of toasted marshmallows sandwiched between chocolate biscuits.

Minimal light pollution guarantees a magical twinkle above our tents, which are equipped with wood-burning stoves, king beds and ensuite bathrooms with rain showers and Aesop amenities. We're encouraged to use rechargeable LED lanterns when walking to and from our tents at night, and there's complimentary charging for electric vehicles. I relish falling asleep bathed in the warmth of soft firelight.

It's home from home inside a palatial Suite Tent at ULUM Moab.

Feeling up for a hike, I venture into Arches National Park where the weathered landscape has been carved over millions of years, and boulders balance precariously on pinnacles as tall as the Statue of Liberty. Close by Dead Horse Point State Park rises 600 metres above a gooseneck bend in the Colorado River, its steep sides revealing layers of petrified Navajo sandstone embedded with fossils dating beyond the Jurassic age.

As I explore Utah further I don't quite make it as far as Monument Valley, where Gump had his "aha moment". His turnaround point at mile marker 13 on Highway 163 is now a famous photo stop known as Forrest Gump Point. I can't help wondering how much further he could have run had he taken a moment for some similar luxurious rest and recuperation.

The writer travelled as a guest of Visit Utah.

Need to know

- Thelma and Louise Marathon and Half entries for 2024 close on April 24. Early bird prices (if registered before October 31) from $US90 ($136) to $US145. madmooseevents.com
- Ulum Moab is at 147 Looking Glass Road, Moab, Utah. Tents accommodate two people for $US549 per tent on weekdays, $US599 at weekends. Meals and drinks are not included. ulumresorts.com | visitutah.com

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