



TRAVEL UNITED STATES

On the run

Fiona Harper takes part in a marathon just for women through Utah's iconic desert.



Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon in *Thelma & Louise*, left. Above: A suite tent at Ulum Moab. Right: runners in the marathon. Below: Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump*.



i Need to know
Thelma and Louise Marathon and Half entries for next year 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. Rates from \$US549 a tent (for two) on weekdays and \$US599 at weekends. Meals and drinks are not included. ulumresorts.com, visitutah.com

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 (15-kilometre) 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."

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* *Star Trek* and *The Lone Ranger*. Even if you've never

stepped foot on Utah's red soil, you'd recognise the landscape.

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

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 marathon (42.2km) 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.

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.

"I love the energy and the way this format brings women together to run," says Ricks. "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," she says.

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 entrants 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.

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.

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.

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.

The Lodge blends 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 gather to dine, listen to live 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.

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 sides revealing layers of petrified Navajo sandstone embedded with fossils dating beyond the Jurassic age.

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. **AFR**

The writer travelled as a guest of Visit Utah.

TRAVEL NSW



From top left: Landscaping will soon give the new Shearer's Quarters even more privacy; Adam Cullen's painting of a drover, among other artworks, in the bedroom of the Shearer's Quarters; property owners Belinda and Bill Pulver. Below: Shire horses roam the farm, with Peter Lundberg's *Mona O* sculpture in the background. PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER MORRIS

It's dusk on a chilly winter's afternoon in Braidwood in the NSW Southern Tablelands, and I am soaking in a steaming outdoor spa admiring the view over Mona Creek towards some museum-quality artworks. They're part of Mona Farm, one of the finest privately owned sculpture parks in Australia.

"Did you see any platypus in the creek?" the farm's owner, Bill Pulver, asks me later. "They nest here at the Shearer's Quarters, but feed at the lake on the far side of Monet Bridge."

The Shearer's Quarters is the seventh – and final – onsite accommodation on this 50-hectare convict-era farm, 3½ hours' drive south of Sydney. Bill and his wife, Belinda, bought it in 2018 for \$5 million and have spent the years since reimaging it.

"Bee [Belinda] is a horticulturalist so when Mona Farm came on the market, what we fell in love with were the mature elms, oaks, Scots firs and poplars," the former president of Rugby Australia explains. "These trees date back to the 1840s and '50s."

"After we'd bought the farm, I got a fright because there were all these heritage buildings in a very sad state. We felt the only way we could do justice to the property was to renovate all of them – and we could only afford to do that if we turned into a business."

Pulver, 63, knows a thing or two about business, having been CEO of the speech-recognition software company Appen from 2010 to 2013, leaving with 8.8 million shares.

Today, the Pulvers' Mona Farm is a highly successful property specialising in weddings, anniversaries and corporate events – complete with croquet lawn, tennis court, English-style rose garden and that platypus-spotting lake.

Belinda's cousin, Louise Nettleton, an acclaimed Australian architect who has worked with the Pulvers on their other properties, designed and supervised the heritage exterior renovations – and stunningly contrasting modern interiors.

However, the 18 sculptures around the farm by the likes of American



An artistic retreat

Steve Meacham soaks up culture and a dash of history while staying in the Shearer's Quarters at Mona Farm.

Peter Lundberg, Australians Marea Gazzard and Ben Tooth were commissioned by the Pulvers themselves. Asked to name similar privately owned contemporary sculpture parks around the world, Pulver identifies Storm King Art Center in upstate New York and Gibbs Farm, near Auckland.

The Pulvers also commissioned, bought and placed the sizeable contemporary artwork collection – Ben Quilty, Guy Maestri, Bill Henson and Janet Laurence among the artists – which fills the seven accommodation offerings.

They even did the interior decorating. "We feel rather proud of ourselves," Pulver admits. "In all fairness, Bee does most of it. She's the creative director of Mona Farm, but we've had great fun doing it."

The Shearer's Quarters differs from the other six properties. Although the rugged galvanised-iron exterior looks authentically 19th century, it's actually a reconstruction.

"The original shearer's quarters was 150 years old when we bought Mona Farm. Shearer's quarters in those days were basically just shacks, with no foundations," Pulver explains. "They would have had 20 cots crammed in, with the toilet just a hole in the ground outside."

"So, we couldn't renovate it, but we consulted with the local council and the Heritage Council of NSW. Inside was a beautiful old fireplace with a big chimney of convict-made bricks. We took it apart brick by brick and rebuilt it exactly where it was once the foundations were in."

The new Shearer's Quarters follows the same footprint as the original, "except we've put in an extension featuring a Japanese-style bathroom where the old outhouse used to be".

The Lake House and the Old Stables also cater for couples, however the Shearer's Quarters has an extra level of intimacy, isolation and luxury – separated from the main part of the property by Mona Creek and the Palladian-stone Monet's Bridge.

As I arrived, head chef Tristan Rebbettes – formerly of award-winning Sydney restaurants Rockpool 1989, Sepia, EST and Saint Peter – was hanging two brisquets in the outside smoker beside the old shearing shed.

This is where all the food for the weddings and corporate events is prepared, using vegetables grown on the farm and other local meats and fish.

After I've had a chance to settle in (and discovered the large, confronting painting by Adam Cullen depicting a haggard old drover above the king bed), Rebbettes knocks at the door with my evening meal – which I am expected to cook myself.

Guests at Shearer's Quarters can choose three options when it comes to dining. Cook their own meals via the amply provided



kitchen. Pay \$160 a head for one of the farm's chefs to come and cook a meal with matching wines. Or the third option for \$89 a person, which I have chosen: get the kitchen to prepare a sumptuous three-course banquet, plus detailed instructions – and slip it into the oven when you're out of the spa.

This evening, Rebbettes has prepared a charcuterie platter of local prosciutto, cheeses, the farm's own honey and apple-cider paste, plus instructions on how to bake a round of camembert topped with

rosemary and garlic.

The main course – which emerged perfectly from the oven as per instructions – was stout-braised beef cheeks, pancetta, cavalo nero and pickled shallots, with mashed potato and a green salad.

Followed by an apple tart tatin with vanilla-bean ice-cream.

At 7am the next day, farm manager John Turner takes me on a golf buggy tour of the property and introduces me to all the animals.

They're mainly old-fashioned British breeds that Thomas Braidwood Wilson, who established Mona Farm in about 1824, would recognise: Highland cattle, Wiltshire Horn sheep, Wessex Saddleback pigs and two enormous shire horses – one of which is in foal.

"Guests love meeting the animals and learning about the history," Turner says. He points to a huge radiata pine on a commanding hill. "That's where Thomas Braidwood Wilson is buried. He owned over 14,000 acres, and introduced lots of things to Australia including European honey bees and various British plants."

Braidwood Wilson – after whom NSW's first heritage-listed town is named – had made nine voyages from Britain, reputedly never losing a single convict. For that service, he was granted land in Tasmania, which he exchanged for this property.

Yet his life ended in tragedy. He borrowed heavily to develop Mona Farm and went bankrupt during a depression. His third child died at five months and his wife soon after. Braidwood Wilson himself died in 1845 after swallowing poison.

It's tempting to imagine him relaxing in the Shearer's Quarters' outdoor spa and reviewing what has become of the old place. **AFR**

The writer was a guest of Mona Farm.

JEWELLERY VENICE

The legend lives on

Jane Cornwell is suitably dazzled at the launch of Bulgari's latest collection, *Mediterranea*, held at the Palazzo Ducale.

The Doge's Palace, Venice, a Tuesday evening in May, and Bulgari is in the house. So is Zendaya, channelling old Hollywood glam in a black off-the-shoulder gown, a bejewelled serpent choker – the Yellow Diamond Hypnosis – coiled around her neck.

Nearby, wearing a glittery gold frock and silver platforms, is fellow brand ambassador Anne Hathaway, her pink gold necklace sporting six plump, dark pink tourmalines.

"Come away with me," sings Grammy-winning chanteuse Norah Jones, seated at a grand piano under a ceiling painted by Renaissance master Paolo Veronese, while out on the waterfront, gondolas rock gently on their moorings.

This was the launch for press and VIP clients of *Mediterranea*, Bulgari's latest high jewellery collection, a paean to founder Sotirio Bulgari's journey from Greece to Italy in 1884, and to the cross-cultural history of Venice itself.

As luxury dos go, the Roman jewellery

house was leaving no stone unturned.

"Our dream is to offer the most desirable experience through our magnificent creations with their exceptional craftsmanship," says Bulgari chief executive Jean-Christophe Babin, after a photo surrounded by models draped in the one-of-a-kind decorative fancies they have ferried along a mosaicked runway.

The collection has three 'universes':

■ The sea-inspired Southern Radiance, all sparkling diamonds, cool aquamarines and deep-blue sapphires;

■ The desert-informed East Meets West, in which garnets, citrines and black onyx vie and blend majestically; and

■ Roman Splendor, a tribute to Rome and its monuments (past which Bulgari's creative director, Lucia Silvestri, ca-clacks in kitten heels most days) blinging with amethysts, tourquoises and a 218.53-carat emerald the size of a baby's fist.

Each gem has been ethically sourced, patiently waited for. Each piece has been



Zendaya, above left, with Bulgari's Lucia Silvestri at the launch, where the table is set inside the Palazzo for VIP clients and media. A one-of-a-kind *Mediterranea* necklace, inset. PHOTOS: GETTY

designed by Silvestri to suit the times and reinforce a reputation that is the stuff of legend. Bulgari, after all, has adorned stars from Lady Gaga back to Elizabeth Taylor, whose flaunting of a Serpenti bracelet on the 1962 set of *Cleopatra* elevated it to a design recognised worldwide.

The 75th anniversary year of Bulgari's signature emblem brings new creations – including the Yellow Diamond Hypnosis – which are displayed at the canal-side fresco-tastic Palazzo Soranzo Van Axel the following day, along with the rest of the *Mediterranea* collection.

Silvestri is here, doing media interviews in a side-room, away from the display cases of



cushion-cut ruby rings, fantasy flower brooches and a wildly ornate, sea bed-inspired arm piece with a watch face hidden inside a tiny clam. Necklaces shaped to reflect the movement of waves carry pendants with motifs that reference the henna tattoos worn by Oriental women, Venetian windows and the reliefs on the Ara Pacis, Rome's 2000-year-old marble 'Altar of Peace'.

"My mind is always searching for inspiration," says Silvestri, who began her career as a secretary in the Bulgari geological department. She went on to buy gemstones in Sri Lanka, India and New York, heeding the advice given by Bulgari brothers Paolo

and Nicola: "Do not buy a gem if you don't know how you will use it."

Gems are Silvestri's passion. She loves the musical sound they make when tipped from a pouch. The myriad ways in which they can represent a place, culture, mindset. "Yesterday I was noticing the colours on the ceiling of the Palazzo Ducale [the Doge's Palace]. My mind is always working."

So, how difficult is it to create classic pieces with a contemporary edge? She's been doing as much all along, she says with a smile. "This company started with the [Bulgari] family, so it is important to maintain the same DNA. But my aim from the beginning was to create pieces that are timeless."

Behind an area dedicated to high-end watches is an AI installation designed to help clients discover the *Mediterranea* universe. Donning a headset that purports to measure emotions, I gaze at a series of extraordinary, loose stones before – ta da! – I'm presented with my inner Bulgari: an twisting, emerald-green sci-fi tower.

The Bulgari takeover of Venice feels complete when, heading down the Grand Canal in a river taxi, a billboard looms into view. It's Zendaya and Anne Hathaway, posing on a balcony, jewels in full view, the city of Rome spread out behind them.

"Bulgari," runs the banner. "Magnificence never ends." **AFR**

The writer was a guest of Bulgari.

