

Denver, Colorado and Salt Lake City, Utah

Two major cities in the American West basically located on both sides of the Rocky Mountains, about 371 miles (597 km) from each other. However, because of all those mountains, it still takes eight hours to drive from one to the other. And yep, just look at those mountains. They're a big reason why Denver and Salt Lake City are two of the fastest growing major cities in the country.

So what else do they have in common?

Well, both are the biggest cities of their states. Both are the capital cities of their states. With both being capitals, the government is a major player...a major money maker...and...uh...spender, in both cities. Both are often considered among the best American major cities to live and work in.

Both are fairly isolated. You particularly notice this when looking at satellite imagery of both cities at night.

Both have relatively young populations and a similar median age. (D- 34.6, SL- 32.5) Both are ethnically diverse, although Denver a bit more so.

Both also have highly educated populations. There's a lot of smart people in both, yo.

Being in or near the Rocky Mountains, both are at a high elevation. (D- 5,279 feet, SL- 4,225 feet). Indeed, the vast majority of other major American cities in the country are at a lower elevation. Denver is easily the highest major city in the country. Oh uh...I guess I meant that in more than one way. (awkward pause) More on that in a bit.

Anyway, Denver is even nicknamed the Mile High City. In fact, the steps of the Colorado State Capitol in Denver mark the exact location of one mile above sea level, so it's quite literally the Mile High City.

Tourism is big in both, and both attract lots of outdoorsy folks, and are gateway cities for folks planning to go skiing, hiking, fishing, and camping in those nearby mountains.

Both are similarly bikeable and walkable.¹² Both have impressive public transit compared to most American cities of comparable size.

Both are increasingly threatened by wildfires.

Both have similar climates. Both have four seasons, with hot summers and cold winters. Both get lots of sunshine and have a semi-arid climate, which means both don't get much

¹ <https://www.walkscore.com/CO/Denver>

² https://www.walkscore.com/UT/Salt_Lake_City

precipitation, although both do regularly get snow in the winter and can get thunderstorms. Denver's climate is a bit more unpredictable. I mean, back in 2020 it snowed there in September, for crying out loud. Salt Lake City's snow is often called "The Greatest Snow on Earth" because it's great for skiing and snowboarding, and mostly lake-effect snow. Wait...huh?

Yep, Salt Lake City's climate is greatly affected by the Great Salt Lake, the largest saltwater lake in the entire Western Hemisphere. It's often nicknamed "America's Dead Sea," and it's fairly shallow, with an average depth of just 14 feet (4.3m). The lake's levels actually fluctuate quite a bit. When I was a kid, the lake was at its highest level on record. However, today it's drying up. Some experts predict that, if no action is taken to conserve the water from the rivers that feed the lake, it could go completely dry within five years.³ This would devastate Salt Lake City as it would lead to a dramatic increase in air pollution for the city. Not only that, dust that contains neurotoxins and carcinogens from the potentially huge, dried up lake bed might blow into the city. The air quality there sucks as it is, anyway.

Yeah, both Salt Lake City and Denver, have fairly bad air quality relative to most American cities, actually.⁴⁵ However, both have above average WATER quality relative to most American cities.⁶ So that's good at least.

Both have higher than average crime. That said, the crime rate is surprisingly much higher in Salt Lake City.⁷

And for the rest of this video, we shall look at nothing but differences, but before we do that, this video is once again sponsored by Morgan and Morgan, America's largest injury law firm.

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³ <https://pws.byu.edu/GSL%20report%202023>

⁴ <https://www.denverpost.com/2022/04/21/denver-fort-collins-worst-air-polluters/>

⁵ <https://dailyutahchronicle.com/2021/11/02/smog-city-air-pollution-slc/>

⁶ https://www.bestplaces.net/compare-cities/salt_lake_city_ut/denver_co/health

⁷ https://www.bestplaces.net/compare-cities/salt_lake_city_ut/denver_co/crime

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Alright, so how are Salt Lake City and Denver different? Well, for the rest of this video, let's contrast away, baby.

Salt Lake City has less traffic. Why? Well, not because the road system is better there or anything, but because simply Denver has way more people. In fact, Denver's metro population is (D- 2.9 million, SL- 1.2 million) about two and a half times bigger. Then again, if you include Ogden and Provo, Salt Lake's population nearly catches up to Denver's.

While about half of Colorado's population lives in the Denver metro area, around 80% of Utah's population lives in the Salt Lake City area.

Denver has a much higher population density.

Salt Lake City has a higher natural disaster risk.⁸⁹
But hey, it also has a much lower cost of living.¹⁰

Denver spends more money per student on education and you'll generally find smaller class sizes there. However, more Salt Lake students graduate from high school.¹¹

Salt Lake City is older. Let's get into some history now, cool beans?

Native Americans lived in the area of modern-day Salt Lake City and Denver for thousands of years. Before the Mormons first arrived in the Salt Lake Valley, the Ute, Paiute, and Shoshone all lived in the area. Meanwhile, the area of modern-day Denver was settled by the Apache, Cheyenne, Comanche, Arapaho, and also Ute.

A group of Mormon pioneers led by Brigham Young famously founded Salt Lake City on July 24, 1847. The group came to the Salt Lake Valley to escape religious persecution back east. Here, they hoped to practice their controversial religion in peace. When Brigham Young first came upon the valley, he supposedly said "This is the right place." Today there's even a "This is the Place" monument you can visit that remembers this moment.¹² It's worth noting, though, that he wasn't the first Mormon to scout the area. Others came before him! Anyway, it may have been the "right place," but it also was technically in Mexico. Well, after the Mexican-American War ended, it was now part of the United States, but the Mormons there preferred to start their own

⁸ <https://www.augurisk.com/risk/state/utah/salt-lake-county/49035>

⁹ <https://www.augurisk.com/risk/state/colorado/denver-county/08031>

¹⁰ <https://www.nerdwallet.com/cost-of-living-calculator/compare/denver-co-vs-salt-lake-city-ut>

¹¹ https://www.bestplaces.net/compare-cities/salt_lake_city_ut/denver_co/education

¹² https://www.uen.org/utah_history_encyclopedia/t/THIS_IS_THE_PLACE_MONUMENT.shtml

country called Deseret, with Great Salt Lake City as the capital. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that back then it wasn't called Salt Lake City, it was GREAT Salt Lake City. That's great, man.

In those early years, Great Salt Lake City was a tight-knit community that shared most of their crops. Dang communists. Soon outsiders arrived and the United States federal government created Utah Territory. In 1856, Great Salt Lake City became the capital of the territory. Two years later, tens of thousands of Americans rushed into the Rocky Mountains during the Pike's Peak Gold Rush. Several of them from my city, Lawrence, Kansas, started a mining town called Montana City. Soon another settlement named Auraria popped up nearby, and finally on November 17, 1858, General William Larimer and Captain Jonathan Cox started another new settlement also nearby. Eventually its first settlers named it "Denver City" in order to suck up to the Kansas Territorial Governor James Denver.

By that time, the residents of Salt Lake City were at war! Specifically, the Utah War, which wasn't really a war since there were no battles, but a series of armed hostilities between Mormons there and the federal government. President James Buchanan had sent federal troops in after there were many complaints that Utah Territory was being run as a theocracy. A lot of Americans were also troubled that polygamy, or the practice of marrying more than one spouse, was legal there. Eventually polygamy would be made illegal across the whole country.

During the 1860s, Denver was a wild frontier mining town and also had some bad luck. On April 19, 1863, a huge fire burned most of Denver's business district to the ground. On May 19, 1864, nearby Cherry Creek severely flooded the town. That year, Native Americans would regularly attack supply lines getting into town. This dramatically increased prices of everyday goods for Denver residents. In 1865, swarms of grasshoppers invaded the town, wiping out nearly all vegetation and any clothes left outside. However, what saved Denver and helped it end up ultimately becoming one of the most important cities in the country was a small group of leaders in the community. Despite the transcontinental railroad bypassing Denver and instead going through Wyoming to the north, these leaders were able to secure federal funding to build a separate railroad that connected Denver to it. This move arguably singlehandedly saved the city's future. After Colorado became a state, its residents chose Denver as the capital mostly due to the fact that it was once again booming. By this time, 100 new settlers were moving to Denver every day, and by 1880 Denver's population had skyrocketed past what was now just called Salt Lake City.

Meanwhile, the transcontinental railroad DID go near Salt Lake City, and many moved there also for nearby mining opportunities. For the rest of the 1800s, the city grew as hundreds of lead, copper, silver, and gold mines opened up nearby. However, Utah didn't become a state until 1896, mostly because that's how long it took before the Mormons finally agreed to ban polygamy.

In the early 1900s, Denver was now a transportation hub, mostly a place to process and ship minerals and ranch products. Salt Lake City remained a mining hub, but had also diversified its economy quite well. While the Great Depression did hit both cities quite hard, during World War

Two the federal government built up the defense industries in both, giving them both a much-needed economic boost. Ever since, the population of both cities has steadily grown, although Denver has grown at a faster rate.

Today, Denver has a lower poverty rate. (D- 11.6%¹³, SL- 14.7%¹⁴). Related to this, the median household income is higher in Denver. (D- \$78,177, SL- \$65,880)

Major industries in Salt Lake City today include transportation, health care, and manufacturing. Major industries in Denver include aerospace, telecommunications, and technology. According to Forbes magazine, Denver is a better city for business and careers.

Many more people work from home in Denver.

Denver residents generally lean more to the left, politically. That said, it's worth noting that Salt Lake City residents tend to lean way more left than most of the rest of Utah.

Salt Lake City residents are generally more religious. And yes, the majority of those religious folks are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, aka the Mormon Church. However, contrary to what you probably think, less than half of Salt Lake residents identify as Mormon.¹⁵ The biggest religious group in Denver is Roman Catholic.

Still, there's no doubt that the Mormon Church has a big influence on Salt Lake City, which might explain a bit why the city tends to be generally quieter and lowkey. Denver's nightlife, music, and art scenes are certainly more hoppin'.

Speaking of partying, since Salt Lake City is in Utah, it has historically had stricter alcohol and marijuana laws. Until just a few years ago, all Salt Lake restaurants had to block customers from being able to see alcoholic drinks being mixed and even poured.¹⁶ While medical marijuana is legal in Salt Lake, ALL marijuana is legal in Denver. Heck, Denver was one of the first cities in the country to make marijuana completely legal for adults again nearly ten years ago. There are even cannabis bars there, and that's where you'll find both the Marijuana Mansion and International Church of Cannabis.

Denver is famous for its many, many above average breweries, but don't get it twisted. Salt Lake has several fantastic breweries as well.

Other major attractions in Denver include the 16th Street Mall, Larimer Square, and Confluence Park.

¹³ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/denvercitycolorado.US/PST045221>

¹⁴ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/saltlakecitycityutah/PST040221>

¹⁵ <https://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-utah-salt-lake-mormons-20181215-story.html>

¹⁶

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/07/02/535259524/utahs-zion-curtain-falls-and-loosens-states-tight-liquor-laws>

Oh, and just outside the city is the famous Red Rocks Park and Amphitheater, which is one of the best places in the world to catch a concert, in my humble opinion.

Major attractions in Salt Lake City include City Creek Center, Red Butte Garden, and the National History Museum of Utah.

If you're an American, Denver is where many of the coins in your pocket are minted. Yep, it's one of six locations where there's a United States Mint.¹⁷

Salt Lake City also has Temple Square, a ten-acre complex owned by the Mormon Church right in the middle of the city and it's stunning. There you'll find the iconic Salt Lake Temple, Salt Lake Tabernacle, Salt Lake Assembly Hall, and the famous Seagull Monument. Temple Square, as it turns out, is the most popular tourist attraction in Utah.

Often Salt Lake City looks like [THIS](#) in the winter. Why? The city often gets inversions, which happen when a layer of warm air traps a layer of colder air closer to the ground.

The mountains are a bit closer, and therefore more visible in Salt Lake City. In fact, it's surrounded by steep mountains...which is why we call it a valley. The only surrounding part of Salt Lake City that isn't mountains is...well...the aforementioned Great Salt Lake. The Wasatch Mountains border Salt Lake City in the east. The Oquirrh Mountains to the west, and the Traverse Ridge to the south. People also forget about the Utah Lake located south of the Salt Lake metro.

Meanwhile, many folks don't realize that Denver is technically at the western edge of the Great Plains. The High Plains, eh? That said, its western suburbs definitely stretch into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and there's not a place in the city where you can't see those mountains on a clear day. Well, unless a building or a Bronco...or something...is blocking them.

Hey speaking of the Denver Broncos, Denver has more professional sports teams. In addition to the NFL's Broncos, Denver is home to Major League Soccer's Rapids, the National Hockey League's Avalanche, the National Basketball Association's Nuggets, and Major League Baseball's Rockies. Salt Lake just has the NBA's Jazz and MLS's Real Salt Lake.

Salt Lake City has hosted the Olympics, Denver has not. Salt Lake City hosted the Winter Olympics back in 2002. Denver could have hosted the Winter Olympics back in 1976, but voters rejected it.¹⁸

Denver is home to the country's largest international airport. Uh yeah, there's a lot of conspiracy theories about that airport.¹⁹

¹⁷ <https://www.usmint.gov/learn/kids/about-the-mint/locations>

¹⁸ <https://www.si.com/olympics/2018/02/06/winter-games-denver-olympics-bids-1976>

¹⁹ <https://www.uncovercolorado.com/conspiracy-theories-denver-international-airport/>

I'm sure GeneaVlogger would want me to share that Salt Lake City has the Family History Library, the largest genealogical library in the world.

Denver is home to Colfax Avenue, the longest continuous street in the country.

Salt Lake City is home to the U.S. Postal Service Remote Encoding Facility, where all mail with unreadable addresses are sent with the hope that the experts working there can figure out where the heck the mail was actually supposed to go.²⁰

Denver has this big blue bear and this blue demon horse. Salt Lake City as the Sphinx....with Joseph Smith's head, of course.

Yeah that might be a sign to end this video. In conclusion, Denver and Salt Lake City are two exciting, beautiful, rapidly changing cities, and as long as we figure the whole water thing out, both have bright futures.

Well I've been to Salt Lake City once and Denver...probably at least a dozen times, so I really had to hold back on this video. In fact, I was just in Denver a few months ago with a bunch of Edutubers! Speaking of Edutubers, I did consult SLC native Mr. Terry, so shout out to him and subscribe to his channel! Anyway, which city do YOU think is better? Denver or SLC? Also, which cities would you like me to compare for this series next? Let me know down below. Thanks for watching.

Sources/further reading:

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