National Park Foundation™

THE OWNER'S GUIDE SERIES
VOLUME 2

happy trails

25 UNFORGETTABLE NATIONAL PARK HIKES

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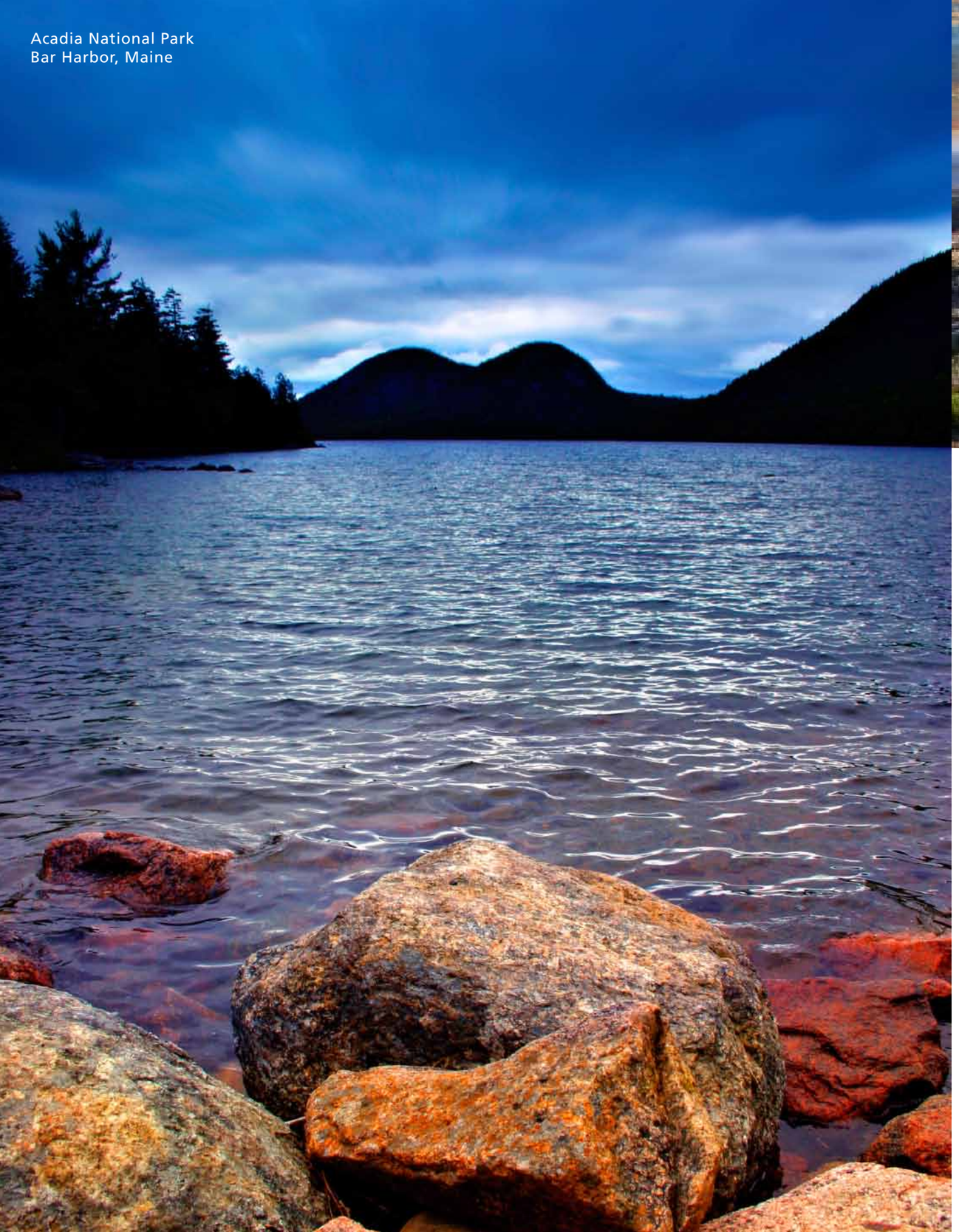
happy trails

25 UNFORGETTABLE NATIONAL PARK HIKES

Our over 400 national parks stand, not only as a remarkable representation of America's natural and historical legacy, but also as a cherished playground for visitors young and old. Together as Americans, we all own a piece of these majestic places. Whether it's a national park down the street or across the country, they are yours to explore.

Spanning all levels of expertise, this guide is meant to inspire park wanderlust in all. We invite you to not only take an active role in preserving these special places, but just as important, exploring and enjoying them — so lace up your boots, pack your bag and set out on a national park adventure uniquely your own!



Acadia National Park
Bar Harbor, Maine

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Acadia National Park

BAR HARBOR, MAINE

Trail: Cadillac Summit Loop
Length: .4 miles roundtrip
Level: Easy
Peak Season: May through November

As the highest point on the Eastern seaboard, Acadia's Cadillac Mountain is popularly known as "the spot to see the nation's first sunrise." While some believe this is only true in fall and winter (and other nearby spots win the race in spring and summer), watching the sunrise from the Mount Desert Island mountaintop truly inspires any time of year. Plan a hike to the top at sunrise via the short and easy Summit Loop Trail, which starts at the Cadillac Summit parking lot. From the summit, you'll have a panoramic view of Frenchman Bay and, on clear days, be able to spot Mount Katahdin to the north and Nova Scotia, Canada, to the east.

BEFORE YOU GO: Find the time of sunrise, and set your alarm to wake up early. Check road conditions; the Park Loop Road, including the road to Cadillac Mountain, is closed from December 1 through April 14 and at other times during severe weather.

BRING WITH YOU: Even in summer, the summit of Cadillac Mountain remains cool. Wear a jacket or sweatshirt. Carry your camera to capture the nation's first sunrise and your binoculars to get a closer look at the view.

Big Thicket National Preserve

KOUNTZE, TEXAS

Trail: Beaver Slide
Length: 1.5 mile loop
Level: Easy
Peak Season: Spring and Fall

The biological crossroads of North America, Big Thicket is often called an American ark. Here, various ecosystems collide: Southeastern swamps, Eastern forests, Central plains, and Southwestern deserts, all bringing thousands of plant and animal species together in one place. In the southeast corner of the Preserve's Big Sandy Creek Unit, get up close and personal with the cypress habitat on the Beaver Slide Trail. The short walk passes by several ponds formed by old beaver dams. Ethereal cypress trees rise from still waters, their knees poking the pond's surface. Spring and fall offer the most pleasant outdoor experience in Big Thicket. Summers are hot and humid. If you hike in summer, start early in the morning or late in the afternoon to avoid the hottest part of the day.

BEFORE YOU GO: Hunting is allowed at the preserve from late September to late February; during hunting season, check first to make sure the trail isn't closed to hikers. Big Thicket Preserve includes 15 units; this hike is in the Big Sandy Creek Unit.

BRING WITH YOU: Plant, bird, and other outdoor identification books come in handy, given the rich biodiversity here. Insect repellent is a must, especially in summer.

Cape Cod National Seashore

WELLFLEET, MASSACHUSETTS

Trail: Beech Forest
Length: 1 mile loop
Level: Easy
Peak Season: May to October

Cape Cod plays a significant role in American history. The Pilgrims landed here on the Mayflower in 1620, finding native forests rich in resources for settling a new land. These forests quickly were gone. The American beech forest now present in the area represents a final stage of reforestation that is a couple hundred years in the making. The trail follows along the shore of shallow Beech Forest Pond. Bird watching is excellent here in spring and fall; look for migrating warblers and other songbirds. Also find other plant species beyond beech trees, such as mayflower, spotted wintergreen, starflower, swamp azalea, tupelo, and red maple. In this landscape, you'll witness the constant battle between land and ocean on Cape Cod, as dunes are gradually taking over parts of the forest.

BEFORE YOU GO: Find the trailhead at the Beech Forest parking area in Provincetown. Plan for a short, one-hour hike into the woods. You can also access the Province Land bicycle trail from this lot, so bring a bike if you want to try both a walking and a biking trail.

BRING WITH YOU: Carry water, especially in hot weather. Wear sunscreen and bug repellant—mosquitoes are abundant in summer. Bring binoculars and a bird identification book for bird watching.

Carlsbad Caverns National Park

CARLSBAD, NEW MEXICO

Trail: Slaughter Canyon Cave
Length: 1.25 miles roundtrip
Level: Moderate
Peak Season: June to August

Of the more than 110 caves of Carlsbad Caverns, Slaughter Canyon Cave is one of the most accessible and awe-inspiring. Flashlights and headlamps provide the only light illuminating 89-foot Monarch, one of the world's tallest columns, and other grand architecture underground. Old excavation sites bring to life the early pioneering days in the caves, which focused on guano mining. Phosphorous-rich guano was prized for use in fertilizer and gunpowder. Today, park officials and visitors cherish the cave for its beauty, mystery, and fragility. You can only see Slaughter Canyon Cave on a reservation-only ranger-guided tour.

BEFORE YOU GO: Make reservations (required) by calling 1.877.444.6777 or visiting recreation.gov. You must be at least 8 years old to participate in this tour; anyone under 16 must be accompanied with an adult. Get directions to the Slaughter Canyon Cave entrance, which is 23 miles from the Visitor Center.

BRING WITH YOU: Wear hiking shoes and an extra layer for the cooler temps inside the cave. Bring water, sunscreen, and a flashlight or headlamp with fresh batteries. While you can use a walking stick on the trail to the cave entrance, the sticks aren't allowed inside the cave.

Channel Islands National Park

VENTURA, CALIFORNIA

Trail: Water Canyon
Length: At least 3 miles roundtrip
Level: Moderate
Peak Season: Year-round

Isolated from the mainland, the Channel Islands offer a glimpse into ancient California, with precious archaeological sites and endangered ecosystems found nowhere else on earth. The largest of the Channel Islands and the second largest island off the coast of California, Santa Rosa Island showcases the best of natural southern California, from the beach to the central mountain. The 3-mile roundtrip hike to the mouth of Water Canyon showcases the island's striking landscape and native vegetation, which comes alive with color in summer. Once you reach the canyon, turn around and go back to explore Water Canyon Beach, or experienced hikers can follow the streambed into Water Canyon, which continues another 6 miles to Soledad Peak. In the steep-walled canyon fed by year-round water, you'll see lush vegetation thriving.

BEFORE YOU GO: Plan to take a boat from the Visitor Center in Ventura. Check the schedule for the boat concessionaire and know your departure and return times. Plan your route; if you want to go further into the canyon, time your start appropriately and bring enough supplies.

BRING WITH YOU: Carry plenty of water. Wear hiking shoes if you plan to venture into the canyon. Smoking isn't allowed on trails due to threat of wildfires; do not bring matches or lighters.

Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park

HAGERSTOWN, MARYLAND

Trail: Billy Goat Section A
Length: 3.7 mile loop
Level: Strenuous
Peak Season: Spring to Fall

In the 1800s, the series of canals on the Potomac River brought commerce, industry, and jobs to the area. The historical park now preserves 184.5 miles along the river. Experience the park's natural side on the Billy Goat Trail Section A. You really will feel like a billy goat when hiking 1.7 miles over rocks and along a cliff on this trail leading above Mather Gorge. If you're in shape for it, though, the views of the gorge and the river are totally worth the climb. The trail intersects the towpath at two points: the stop gate below Great Falls and just upstream from the Angler's Inn access point. Start at either end of the trail. To get back to your starting point, either rehike the trail or take the towpath. Follow the blue blazes painted on trees and rocks, and allow 3 hours for the hike—don't try hiking after dark.

BEFORE YOU GO: Be sure you're up for scaling rocks and boulders. Rangers warn against bringing small children or inexperienced hikers on this trail. If you opt out, the park offers many more miles of trail, including Billy Goat Sections B and C.

BRING WITH YOU: Hiking shoes with ankle support are a must. In summer, rock faces can get hot and shade is nowhere to be found. Bring sunscreen and plenty of water and food.

Crater Lake National Park
CRATER LAKE, OREGON

Trail: Cleetwood Cove
Length: 1.1 miles one way
Level: Strenuous
Peak Season: July to October

Q: What's the deepest lake in the United States?
A: Crater Lake.

At 1,943 feet deep, it's actually one of the 10 deepest lakes in the world. The vast basin, called a caldera, formed after the collapse of Mount Mazama, an ancient volcano that erupted about 7,700 years ago. Cleetwood Cove Trail provides the only access to the lakeshore and a firsthand experience with the lake. Follow the trail down to the rocky shore; the trail descends 700 feet and can be challenging for some. At the shore, concessionaire boats offer tours around the lake; on board, ranger interpretation gives you a clearer picture of how Crater Lake was created. You can also take the boat to Wizard Island, where you can hike the short Wizard Island Summit Trail (.9 mile loop). Save your energy, though—remember, you have to hike back up the steep trail to the rim.

BEFORE YOU GO: Check trail conditions. The trail is covered in snow from October to July and could be at other times as well. Be sure you're in good physical condition before attempting this hike. Purchase advance tickets for the tour boat to ensure a spot.

BRING WITH YOU: Carry water and snacks. It's cool here even in summer; wear warm clothing as well as sturdy hiking shoes. Remember your camera—you'll probably never see water this blue again.

Cumberland Island National Seashore
ST. MARYS, GEORGIA

Trail: Dungeness
Length: 1.5 miles one way
Level: Easy
Peak Season: Year-round

Cumberland Island is the largest and southernmost barrier island in Georgia and keeper of some of America's great stories, from natives to early settlers to wealthy Industrialists. The Dungeness ruins on the south end of the island are a don't-miss part of the island experience. Revolutionary War hero Nathanael Greene originally purchased the land in 1783 and his widow built a home here called Dungeness. On the same foundation, Thomas Carnegie and his wife built their island getaway nearly 100 years later. Today, only ruins remain. Follow the Dungeness Trail from the dock to the Dungeness Ruins. Look for the famous feral horses nearby. Continuing on the trail, take the short spur to Greene-Miller Cemetery for a look at history and a view of the marshes. Return to the main trail and continue on to the unfettered southern beach.

BEFORE YOU GO: Take the ferry from St. Marys to the southern dock at Cumberland Island. Arrive 30 minutes before your ferry departure time. The island includes both public and private property; be respectful of private areas.

BRING WITH YOU: There are no supplies available on the island, except drinking water and restrooms. Bring anything you think you might need: drinks, food, sunscreen, insect repellent, first aid kit. Wear comfortable walking shoes or sandals.

Everglades National Park
HOMESTEAD, FLORIDA

Trail: Anhinga
Length: .8 miles roundtrip
Level: Easy
Peak Season: December through April

Dubbed "River of Grass" by those who fought for its protection, the Everglades is the largest subtropical wilderness in the United States, the largest wilderness area east of the Mississippi, and home to many rare and endangered species and more than 350 documented species of birds. The Anhinga Trail is named for one of those birds, a Southern swamp native also called Water Turkey (for its broad tail) or Snake Bird (for the bird's swimming style, with only its long, thin neck poking out of the water). Starting at the Royal Palm Visitor Center, the wheelchair-accessible path winds through sawgrass marsh. Wildlife viewing abounds, especially in winter. Look for alligators, turtles, herons, egrets, and, of course, anhingas.

BEFORE YOU GO: Plan your trip according to the weather. Mild, pleasant winters make the Everglades a prime destination for escaping the cold elsewhere. June to November, expect high heat, humidity, a lot of rain, mosquitoes, and possible hurricanes. In other words, go in winter.

BRING WITH YOU: Water and insect repellent, especially in summer. Sunscreen is necessary year-round. Rain gear is never a bad idea in the Everglades, but an especially good idea June to November. Bring binoculars for viewing wildlife a little closer.

Glacier National Park
WEST GLACIER, MONTANA

Trail: Grinnell Glacier Viewpoint
Length: 3.8 miles
Level: Strenuous
Peak Season: July to September

Known to the Blackfeet Indians as the "Backbone of the World," the Glacier ecosystem encompasses Alpine forests, lakes, meadows, rugged mountains, and its namesake, glaciers. As global warming is causing the glaciers to shrink rapidly, now is the time to see them before they melt away. Hike to Grinnell Glacier to see one of the most magnificent. Take the concession boat from Many Glacier Hotel to the head of Josephine Lake, where you can meet the trail to Grinnell Glacier. The trail climbs quickly—1,600 feet in just a few miles. At the top, you're in for some of the best views in the park. Notice the vibrant turquoise color of Grinnell Lake; glacial flour, sediment resulting from the glacier abrading rock, causes this surprising shade.

BEFORE YOU GO: Check the trail status first; this trail often isn't cleared of snow until late July. Purchase tickets and meet your vessel at the Many Glacier Hotel boat dock. Bears are seen often on this trail; read and heed cautions about bears and other wildlife in Glacier. For a longer hike (5.5 miles) minus the boat travel, start the hike at the Grinnell Glacier trailhead or Many Glacier Hotel.

BRING WITH YOU: Prepare for a variety of weather conditions. It could snow in August in Glacier. Dress in layers and bring rain gear. Carry plenty of drinking water and some food.

Grand Canyon National Park

GRAND CANYON, ARIZONA

Trail: Bright Angel
Length: 9.2 miles roundtrip to Indian Garden
Level: Strenuous
Peak Season: May to September

Witness geological history as you descend through distinctive rock layers of the Grand Canyon. Following a natural fault line, Bright Angel is the most accessible trail leading into the canyon. You won't be alone on this most popular route from the South Rim. The crowd thins after a few miles to the fittest hikers and the mule packs; step aside and let the mules pass. At 4.6 miles, stop for a picnic at Indian Garden, where vegetation indicates the Colorado River is nearby. You're strongly urged to turn around here. Permits are required for overnight stays at Bright Angel Campground or Phantom Ranch at the end of the trail.

BEFORE YOU GO: Plan according to your group's fitness level. The Park Service warns against attempting to hike to the river and back in one day. Start early; hike during the cooler, shadier parts of day. The trek up takes more than twice as long as the walk down.

BRING WITH YOU: Food, salty snacks, and plenty of water and water storage. During summer, water is available at the Mile-and-a-Half and Three-Mile rest houses and at Indian Garden. Sunscreen, sunglasses, and a hat will help shield you from the brutal summer sun.

Grand Teton National Park

MOOSE, WYOMING

Trail: Hidden Falls at Jenny Lake
Length: 5.1 mile loop
Level: Moderate
Peak Season: June to October

Majestic scenery and pristine waters attract millions of visitors to Grand Teton each year. The park's famous lakes formed during the Ice Age, when glaciers flowed slowly down the canyons and carved out the valley floor. Follow an easy trail along the south shore of Jenny Lake. The mirror-clear alpine lake reflects the mountains and canyons surrounding it. Then embark on a short climb to a view of Hidden Falls, a 200-foot cascade through the alpine forest. Whether or not you're in great shape, pace yourself—hiking at more than 7,000 feet can take a toll on anyone. Look out for black bears, grizzlies, and moose, some of the iconic animals of Grand Teton.

BEFORE YOU GO: Start from the Jenny Lake Visitor Center. Get on the trail early to beat the crowds in summer. For a shorter walk, take the boat shuttle to the west shore boat dock; the hike to Hidden Falls is just 1 mile roundtrip from the dock.

BRING WITH YOU: Rain gear and extra layers, just in case; the weather changes rapidly. Carry plenty of water and food. Bear spray is also recommended. Don't forget your camera—it's nearly impossible to take a bad picture here.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

GATLINBURG, TENNESSEE

Trail: Andrews Bald
Length: 3.5 miles roundtrip
Level: Moderate
Peak Season: Spring to Fall

Great Smoky welcomes more visitors annually than any other national park. The area has a history of hospitality, as the ecosystem has welcomed species of all kinds to its temperate forests for millions of years. This is one of the most biodiverse places in the world, with more than 17,000 species documented. Rising over 5,000 feet, the crest of the Great Smokies runs in an unbroken series of peaks for 36 miles. Along the ridge are high-elevation grassy meadows called balds, and Andrews Bald claims reign as the highest bald in the Smokies at 5,920 feet. (The highest peak is nearby Clingmans Dome at 6,643 feet.) The hike to Andrews Bald climbs almost 900 feet, mostly along a rocky creekbed, to a grassy, treeless mountaintop with panoramic views of the southern Smokies. Spot Fontana Lake below. In spring, enjoy the wildflowers; in fall, the changing leaves are inspiring.

BEFORE YOU GO: The trail leaves from Clingmans Dome Road parking area, about 20 miles from the Sugarlands Visitor Center. Great Smoky can get very congested during peak seasons; arrive early to ensure parking.

BRING WITH YOU: Wear sturdy hiking boots. A hiking stick is a good idea, too. Wear layers and be prepared for foggy weather. Carry water and pack your lunch—a grassy bald provides a perfect spot for a picnic and a nap.

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park

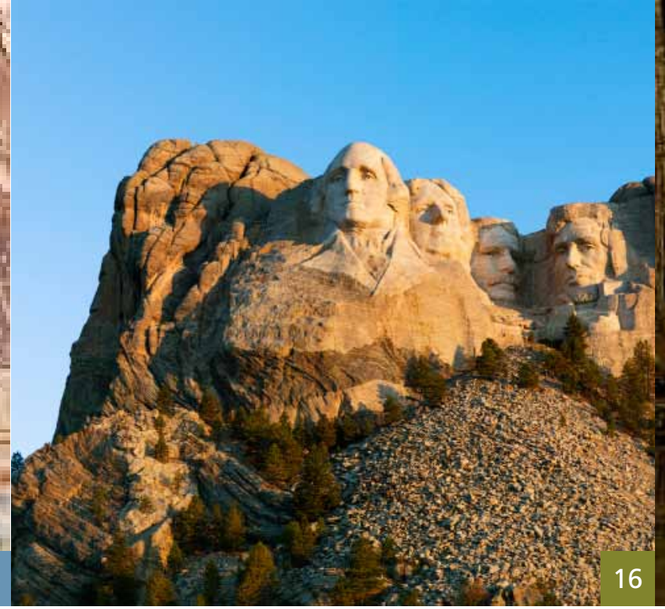
HAWAI'I VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK, HAWAI'I

Trail: End of Chain of Craters Road
Length: 1 mile roundtrip
Level: Easy
Peak Season: Year-round

If you're looking for a view (and who isn't?), the End of Chain of Craters Road hike definitely delivers. Chain of Craters Road leads down the side of Kilauea Volcano to where dramatic cliffs meet the ocean and an active lava flow. Lava flowing down the side of the volcano glows bright red and orange, and where the lava meets the ocean, massive steam clouds fill the air. Trails across the rough lava lead to better views. Begin your hike at the abrupt end of End of Chain of Craters road—the remainder was covered by lava flows in 2003. During the day, park rangers stand duty here, so ask about current lava flows and best paths. The best time to try this hike is at night. After sunset, you'll be able to see the red lava and steam clouds better. If not, you'll still marvel at the glowing stars in a clear night sky.

BEFORE YOU GO: Check the weather and volcanic fumes level at the Visitor's Center. The weather can be unpredictable, so be prepared for heat, wind, and rain. The area has current volcanic activity, so fumes are common.

BRING WITH YOU: The hiking surface is rough lava. Wear closed-toed hiking shoes or boots, not sandals or flip flops. Bring layers and rain gear; the weather changes fast. Carry a little water and food for hiking in this dry climate. If you hike after dark, be sure to bring a flashlight or headlamp.



Mesa Verde National Park

MESA VERDE, COLORADO

Trail: Petroglyph Point
Length: 2.4 miles roundtrip
Level: Strenuous
Peak Season: November to Early March

Walk back in time at Mesa Verde, where Ancestral Pueblo people expertly constructed their homes in the cliffs along the Colorado Plateau. After touring the Spruce Tree House cliff dwelling, expand your knowledge of the Pueblo with a short hike to the only spot where you can view petroglyphs, images engraved on rock surfaces. Many petroglyphs communicate oral stories that keep Pueblo history alive. Petroglyph Point Trail starts from the Spruce Tree House Trail. Continue below the edge of the plateau to a petroglyph panel. Spend some time considering this creative mode of communication. Then follow the trail to the top of the mesa, where you'll see views of Spruce and Navajo canyons. The trail loops back around to the museum.

BEFORE YOU GO: The gate to Petroglyph Point Trail is accessible only when the Spruce Tree House is open for free guided tours, November to early March. Before starting your hike, visit the Far View Visitor Center and Chapin Mesa Archaeological Museum to learn more about the history and culture of the Pueblo. Mesa Verde hikes are at high elevation, between 7,000 and 9,000 feet; be sure you're up for the challenge before you start the hike.

BRING WITH YOU: Carry plenty of water and a snacks. Summer rains and winter snow can make the trail slippery; check the recent weather and choose appropriate shoes. Wear sunscreen.

Mount Rushmore National Memorial

KEYSTONE, SOUTH DAKOTA

Trail: Presidential Trail
Length: .5 miles roundtrip
Level: Easy
Peak Season: June to October

An iconic national park, Mount Rushmore is a must-visit spot for every American. The massive mountain sculpture in the Black Hills of South Dakota recalls the history of the nation through the faces of four great American presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. The short, paved Presidential Trail leads to a closer view at the base of the mountain carving. Take this opportunity to learn more about the natural and cultural history of the area from the park's many rangers. Ranger walks start at the beginning of Presidential Trail every half hour.

BEFORE YOU GO: More than 3 million visitors descend on Mount Rushmore every year; be prepared for the crowds. Check at the Visitor Center for information about programs, which are offered continuously throughout the summer. The Presidential Trail is fully accessible. While there's no entrance fee to the memorial, you'll need to pay for parking.

BRING WITH YOU: Don't forget your camera—you're sure to get a few shots worthy of the family album. Binoculars are handy for viewing the sculpture of four great Americans even more closely.

Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail

TUPELO, MISSISSIPPI

Trail: Cypress Swamp
Length: .5 miles roundtrip
Level: Easy
Peak Season: Spring, Fall, Winter

The Old Natchez Trace was a 500-mile footpath running through Choctaw and Chickasaw from Natchez, Mississippi, to Nashville, Tennessee. Today, four separate pieces of the trail total 65 miles of preserved history and scenery, and the Natchez Trace Parkway provides a 444-mile drive along the original way. Milepost 0 is in Natchez, and milepost 444 is near Nashville. At milepost 122, between Jackson and Tupelo, Mississippi, get out of the car for a short stretch through a water tupelo and bald cypress swamp. Safe on the trail and boardwalk over the swamp, look for alligators in the mysterious waters around you. This is just one of the amazing sites that travelers along the Natchez Trace have seen for hundreds, even thousands, of years.

BEFORE YOU GO: The Natchez Trace Parkway has fewer entry and exit points than you may be accustomed to on a long drive and no commercial services. Check the maps and plan your trip before starting. Read up on the remarkable history of the Trace, including stories of Meriwether Lewis, Andrew Jackson, Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians, and early settlers called "Kaintucks."

BRING WITH YOU: On the Parkway, bring along food and water for a long, uninterrupted drive. For the short hike, all you need is your camera and car keys.

New River Gorge National River

GLEN JEAN, WEST VIRGINIA

Trail: Endless Wall
Length: 2.5 miles roundtrip
Level: Moderate
Peak Season: Spring to Fall

Among the oldest rivers on the continent, New River runs northward through deep canyons, creating some of the best and biggest whitewater in the country. While many adventure-seekers travel to this West Virginia park for the rapids, others come to walk within and along the canyon. You'll get amazing views of the gorge and the river from Endless Wall Trail. You might even hear the whitewater and voices of rafters 1,000 feet below. Even more likely, you'll see and hear more than a few rock climbers. Endless Wall is known as one of the best rock climbing spots on the Southeast, and this trail gives climbers access to it. Diamond Point, an overlook at the 1-mile mark, makes a good turnaround spot, or go a little further to trail's end. The trail follows along steep cliffs; stay aware and use caution.

BEFORE YOU GO: Nearby Canyon Rim Visitor Center is open year-round. Hunting is permitted within the park; check trail openings and wear blaze orange clothing if you hike during hunting season. If you're a rock climber, check out the awesome climbing and rappelling opportunities.

BRING WITH YOU: Carry a map, water, and snacks. Wear hiking shoes. Bring rain gear in case of sudden showers. Binoculars for getting a closer look into the gorge.

Olympic National Park
PORT ANGELES, WASHINGTON

Trail: Spruce Nature
Length: 1.2 mile loop
Level: Easy
Peak Season: Spring to Fall

Picture the Hoh Rain Forest: a trail wandering under the lush green canopy of coniferous and deciduous trees, mosses and ferns covering every surface, and an enchanting mist filling the air. This temperate rain forest once stretched along the Pacific Coast from Alaska to central California. You can experience the forest's magic on even a short hike. Spruce Nature Trail leads from the Hoh Rain Forest Visitor Center directly into temperate rain forest and to the Hoh River. Fed by snowmelt and rain, the Hoh River travels from Mount Olympus to the Pacific Ocean. Along the way, the river takes in massive fallen conifers, which create dams and pools for the area's favorite fish—the salmon. Look for these revered creatures in the river and for grazing elk in the forest understory.

BEFORE YOU GO: Camping is available at the Hoh Rain Forest Visitor Center. Make reservations well in advance to get a spot. If you have the time to stay overnight, you can walk the Spruce Nature Trail as well as the Hall of Mosses Trail and part of the Hoh River Trail, which all start from the same spot near the campground.

BRING WITH YOU: Rain gear—although winter is the rainy season, it is a rain forest, after all. Wear hiking shoes with good support and plenty of clothing layers for the changing weather. Water and food are always a must.

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore
MUNISING, MICHIGAN

Trail: Miners Falls
Length: 1.2 miles roundtrip
Level: Easy
Peak Season: May to October

Lake Superior is larger, deeper, colder, and cleaner than the other Great Lakes, making it seem, well, superior. At Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, explore the nearly 40 miles of lakeshore, 15 of them marked by towering sandstone cliffs (including Miners Castle), as well as the inland area dotted with rivers, creeks, and waterfalls. Miners Falls Trail is a self-guiding interpretive trail with great views of Miners Basin, ending at Miners Falls. To see the falls closer, take the long stairway—77 steps total—down to a viewing platform, where you'll witness the point where Miners River cascades 50 feet over a sandstone outcrop. Or take a short spur trail to another viewing platform, no steps required. Early May to early June, try to catch the wildflowers at their peak: violets, bloodroot, hepatica, trout lily, Dutchman's breeches, and more.

BEFORE YOU GO: Visit the Miners Castle Visitor Center, open June to September; any time of year, walk the paved trails from the center to the overlook, where you'll see Miners Castle jutting out into Lake Superior. This is where the Miners River flows into the lake a short way down from Miners Falls.

BRING WITH YOU: Wear sturdy hiking shoes. Carry water, a snack, a map, and a wildflower identification book in spring. Be prepared for cool temperatures and possible rain.

Point Reyes National Seashore
POINT REYES STATION, CALIFORNIA

Trail: Coast–Laguna
Length: 5 mile loop
Level: Easy
Peak Season: Year-round

Just 30 miles north of San Francisco, the unfettered coastal habitats of Point Reyes teem with life. Beaches, estuaries, scrub grasslands, saltwater and freshwater marshes, and coniferous forests—you'll find them all here. Experience some of these varied landscapes on the Coast Trail via the Laguna Trail. Laguna Trail leads through coastal scrub. Look for Anna's hummingbird, which feeds year-round on Indian paintbrush and bush monkey flower. Head toward Coast Camp, where backcountry camping is available by permit only, and explore the beach. The beaches of Point Reyes are some of the cleanest in California. Then turn back and follow Coast Trail northwest along bluffs and a streamside riparian zone before returning to the Youth Hostel.

BEFORE YOU GO: If you're up for backcountry camping, make reservations for Coast Camp well in advance. Check the weather in later fall and winter, the rainiest seasons.

BRING WITH YOU: Weather changes day to day; be prepared by wearing layers. Bring plenty of drinking water and food.

Saint Croix National Scenic Riverway
SAINT CROIX FALLS, WISCONSIN

Trail: Trego Nature
Length: 2.8 miles roundtrip
Level: Easy
Peak Season: Year-round

St. Croix National Scenic Riverway protects 154 miles of the St. Croix River and the full 98 miles of its Namekagon tributary. Together, they are the last undisturbed large floodplain in the upper Mississippi River System. While most visitors see the area via canoe or kayak, the Riverway also includes a handful of great walking trails. To explore the area around the Namekagon River on foot, start near the Namekagon Visitor Center and take the Trego Nature Trail, which runs parallel to the river through a variety of forests. Make sure to look for wildlife: deer, fox, bobcats, and otters—oh, and your fellow humans paddling the river. In winter, traverse this trail on snowshoes.

BEFORE YOU GO: Brush up on your poison ivy identification. Hunting is allowed on Riverway trails. Look for postings. If you go in hunting season, wear blaze orange. Stop in the Namekagon Visitor Center to learn more about the river and its history. Check out Trego, with options for dining and overnight stay, and Trego Lake, where there's great cross country skiing in winter.

BRING WITH YOU: Insect repellent is a must; the area attracts mosquitoes, deerflies, horseflies, and ticks. In winter, bring snowshoes. Always carry water and a little food when hiking.

White Sands National Monument

HOLLOMAN AFB, NEW MEXICO

Trail: Alkali Flat Trail
Length: 4.6 miles roundtrip
Level: Moderate
Peak Season: Year-round

Unique gypsum dunes are ever-shifting here in the Tularosa Basin, a high-desert area at 4,000 feet elevation—the most active dunes move up to 30 feet a year. Walking through these white gypsum dunes is not likely following a well-worn path. White posts topped with orange reflective tape are your only navigational aids across the dunes, so follow them very closely. If winds blowing sand or dust cause you to lose sight of the next post, turn around and head back. The Alkali Trail travels over unvegetated dunes and leads to Alkali Flat, the dry lakebed of Lake Otero, which once covered the area during the last ice age. The trip may take longer than expected, as you're hiking on soft, shifting sand; plan for two to three hours.

BEFORE YOU GO: Check weather forecasts for temperatures and wind reports. Temperatures often exceed 100˚ F in summer. Plan to hike during the coolest times of day. In spring, high winds can blow dust and sand and hinder visibility. Be sure to sign in and out at the trailhead register.

BRING WITH YOU: You'll need food and at least two quarts of water. Drinking water is only available at the Visitor Center, not along the trail. Wear sunglasses and protective clothing to avoid sunburn from bright sun reflecting off the white sand.

Yosemite National Park

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, CALIFORNIA

Trail: Artist Point
Length: 2 miles roundtrip
Level: Easy
Peak Season: June to October

El Capitan, Clouds Rest, Half Dome, Bridalveil Falls, Yosemite Valley—you can see them all in the spectacular panorama from famed Tunnel View, but good luck setting up your tripod among scores of other view-seekers. Instead, get nearly the same vista and relative peace and quite with a short 1-mile hike to Artist Point. You'll even catch a glimpse of a few sites Tunnel View doesn't offer: Bridalveil Meadow, Royal Arches, and a touch of North Dome and Ribbon Falls. To get to Artist Point from Tunnel View, hike a half-mile on the Pohono Trail then turn left to follow an old stagecoach road that once led into Yosemite Valley. A view like this is hard to miss, but if you reach Artist Creek, turn around—the creek is just past the point.

BEFORE YOU GO: Check out the 1855 drawing by artist Thomas Ayres, which spurred the naming of this point, though it's now thought that Ayres most likely stood somewhere closer to Inspiration Point. Plan to come for sunset. Park at the Tunnel View lot. While you can visit in winter, check road conditions before you go; the roads that are open in winter often require tire chains.

BRING WITH YOU: Wear hiking shoes with ankle support; the trail does get rocky. Mosquito repellent, especially in summer, will ward off the non-human pests. If you're prone to artistic inspiration, carry a sketch pad and pencil or, at the very least, a camera. This view deserves to be captured.

Zion National Park

SPRINGDALE, UTAH

Trail: The Narrows
Length: 9.4 miles roundtrip
Level: Moderate
Peak Season: June to October

Marvel at the lush forest, natural springs, and hanging gardens of the Zion Canyon floor, a striking contrast from the rock and desert elsewhere in the park. Day hiking from the bottom and back is the easiest way to experience The Narrows. More than half the time, you'll be hiking, wading, even swimming in the Virgin River; knee-high water is typical, but prepare for water up to chest high. Start from the end of Riverside Walk at the Temple of Sinawava shuttle stop, and then hike into the canyon to Orderville Canyon, about 2 hours upstream. In the shadow of the canyon walls, up to 2,000 feet above you and the river, you'll be glad you brought an extra jacket.

BEFORE YOU GO: Summer storms and flash floods approach often and fast. Check weather and flash flood reports at Zion Canyon Visitor Center. Waterproof your gear. Permits required for more strenuous top to bottom trips, day or overnight from Chamberlain's Ranch.

BRING WITH YOU: Extra clothing made of wool and synthetic fibers (no cotton). Wear hiking boots with ankle support. Pick up a walking stick in town or at the trailhead. Water and lunch; water filtration for all-day or overnight hikes.

National Park Foundation

WASHINGTON, DC

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There are 84 million acres of cherished landscapes, ecosystems, and historic sites in America's over 400 national parks – and they all belong to you. From the Grand Canyon to Yellowstone, Gettysburg to Golden Gate, our national parks would not exist without the dedication, foresight and generosity of Americans throughout history.

As the official charity of America's national parks, the National Park Foundation carries on this tradition. Founded by Congress, we work hand in hand with the National Park Service to strengthen and preserve these treasured places. From conservation to education to community service, our work helps make sure our national parks can be enjoyed today, and safeguarded for tomorrow.

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4	Carlsbad Caverns NP CARLSBAD, NM	575.785.2232	www.nps.gov/cave	●	●	
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17	Natchez Trace NST TUPELO, MS	800.305.7417	www.nps.gov/natt			
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20	Pictured Rocks NL MUNISING, MI	906.387.3700	www.nps.gov/piro		●	●
21	Point Reyes NS POINT REYES STATION, CA	415.464.5100	www.nps.gov/pore		●	●
22	Saint Croix NSR SAINT CROIX FALLS, WI	715.483.2274	www.nps.gov/sacn		●	●
23	White Sands NM HOLLOMAN AFB, NM	575.679.2599	www.nps.gov/whsa	●	●	
24	Yosemite NP YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, CA	209.372.0200	www.nps.gov/yose	●	●	●
25	Zion NP SPRINGDALE, UT	435.772.3256	www.nps.gov/zion	●	●	●

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ABBREVIATIONS KEY

NHP—National Historical Park

NL—National Lakeshore

NMP—National Military Park

NP—National Park

NP and PRES—National Park and Preserve

NRRA—National River and Recreation Area

NSR—National Scenic River/Riverways

LODGING, CAMPGROUND & TOUR RESERVATIONS

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