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the places nobody knows

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North Cascades National Park

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Everybody loves Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon, and with good reason. Those and other icons of the National Park System are undeniably spectacular, and to experience their wonders is well worth braving the crowds they inevitably draw. But lest you think the big names are the whole story, consider that the vast park network also boasts plenty of less well-known destinations that are beautiful, historic, or culturally significant—or all of the above. Some of these gems are off the beaten track, others are slowly rising to prominence, and a few are simply overshadowed by bigger, better-publicized parks. But these national parks, monuments, historic places, and recreation areas are overlooked by many, and that's a mistake you won't want to make.

the places nobody knows

For every Yosemite, there's a lesser-known park where the scenery shines and surprises.

the places nobody knows

VISIT: Bandelier National Monument
IF YOU LOVE: Mesa Verde National Park
FOR: Archaeologist's dream

1| Few and precious places give us great insight into the civilizations that lived on this land long before it was called the United States. Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado is a prime example of such a place, with nearly 5,000 of the most well preserved archaeological sites in the country, including 600 cliff dwellings of the Ancestral Pueblo people who lived in the regions from A.D. 600 to 1300.

Another less well-known but equally intriguing example of ancient culture exists just across the border in New Mexico. Bandelier National Monument traces the Ancestral Pueblo people from their nomadic hunter-gatherer roots over 10,000 years ago to 1550, when they shifted their homes from the cliffs here to pueblos along the Rio Grande.

Come to Bandelier to experience 33,000 acres of canyon and mesa country at its finest. A few short, accessible hikes lead to up-close views of the ancient ruins and to prime examples of petroglyphs on the walls of Frijoles Canyon. Many other longer hikes take you further into the canyon and along the mesa, mostly in designated wilderness areas.

Conditions at Bandelier change considerably according to the season. Check the website or call for advice on preparing, especially for longer hikes or overnight trips. Consider planning a visit around the park's Fall Fiesta to learn more about Pueblo people past and present. Fires and floods affected Bandelier National Monument in 2011 and access to the park has changed, including bus-only entrance to Frijoles Canyon. Check the website for the latest information.

VISIT: Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area
IF YOU LOVE: Olympic National Park
FOR: A range of outdoor recreation

2| Any traveler to Olympic National Park can confirm that variety truly is the spice of life, especially for outdoor enthusiasts. In the popular park on the Washington State coast, varied vistas from snow-covered mountains to ancient forests to ocean tide pools mean nearly endless opportunities for recreation.

The same goes for a newer, more obscure member of the park system: Big South Fork National River & Recreation Area. The primary reason for establishing this park in 1974 was to preserve both the Big South Fork River and the land around it for the boundless recreational opportunities they offer.

Explore the park's trail system on foot, mountain bike, or horseback. Opportunities for camping and backpacking abound, or stay at Charit Creek Lodge, a remote but fully equipped getaway within the park. Springtime visitors will enjoy the abundance of native trees and wildflowers on the Cumberland Plateau. River rats shouldn't miss a day on the water here—whitewater rafting the Big South Fork is a must. Climbers, too, can find their place at Big South Fork along the plateau's famous sandstone walls.

For those accustomed to a slower pace, try the Big South Fork Scenic Railway, which chugs along from Stearns, Kentucky, to the historic Blue Heron Mining Community, providing insight into the role coal mining plays in the past and present of this area. With so many options, be sure to stop by one of the two visitor centers to get maps and guidance from rangers.

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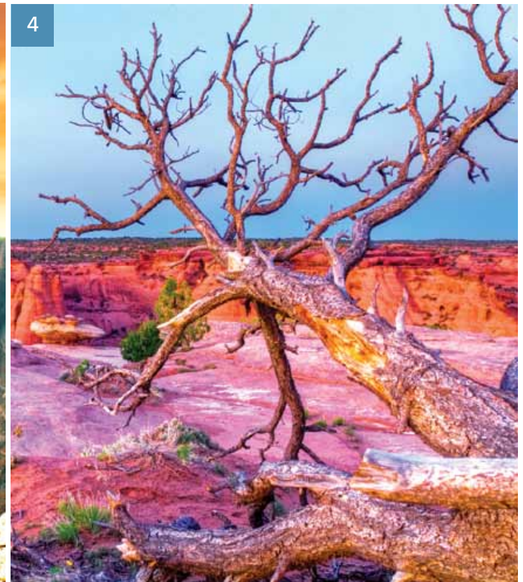
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VISIT: Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Grand Canyon National Park
FOR: Experience the depths of time

3| The Grand Canyon represents one of America's most iconic landscapes.Its vast layers depict a depth of American history—geologic history—that's nearly incomprehensible to most. Which is fine. After all, who needs to fully understand the Grand Canyon to appreciate it? The Grand Canyon is irreplaceable, but some places do inspire nearly equal levels of awe. Take Black Canyon of the Gunnison, for example.

What it lacks in width, the Black Canyon makes up for in depth. Great cliffs plunge to the Gunnison River, at points more than 2,700 feet down, creating some of the best and most advanced rock climbing opportunities in the national park system. In spots at the canyon bottom, the river has only 40 feet width to get through. This tight squeeze makes for radical Class V rapids suitable only for the most technically skilled paddlers. Likewise, hikes into the canyon are reserved for well prepared hikers who can manage orienting along unmaintained rock routes rather than established trails.

Not all features of Black Canyon of the Gunnison are limited to experts only, though. Ample scenic drives and short hikes along the South and North rims provide stunning views of this geologic time capsule. And for those who come to Colorado with big fish on the mind, look no further. The Gunnison River is designated a Gold Medal Water & Wild Trout River by the state.

Come prepared for hiking among wildlife, including possible bears, and legendary poison ivy. Most of all, come prepared to be overwhelmed by the awesome views.

VISIT: Canyon De Chelly National Monument
IF YOU LOVE: Zion National Park
FOR: Canyon country views and adventure

4| Known for sheer sandstone cliffs and red slot canyons contrasted against a bright blue Utah sky, Zion National Park evokes the wonder and allure of Southwest adventure, and its proximity to other popular parks—including Grand Canyon to the south and Bryce Canyon to the north—makes it a can't-miss.

Another park should be added to this list to fulfill a grand tour de force of canyon country. Canyon de Chelly (pronounced "de-shay") lies east of the Grand Canyon in Arizona along the Colorado border. Here, Navajo people have lived for thousands of years, finding the canyons to be prime real estate for farming and homebuilding. Today, roughly 40 Navajo families still live within the park boundaries. Canyon de Chelly is managed through a partnership between the National Park Service and the Navajo Nation, and many areas, including the backcountry, are accessible only with a permit and an official Navajo guide. Start a visit to Canyon de Chelly at the visitor center to learn more about the history and rules at this unique place.

Similar to the Grand Canyon, Canyon de Chelly can be viewed from both the South Rim and North Rim. Drive and stop at several overlooks along the way, and get on foot for the short hike to White House Ruin. To see more, sign up for a guided tour. While Canyon de Chelly will definitely be a shorter visit than Zion or Grand Canyon, the park does offer a campground where you're bound to get a spot. If you're planning a grand tour of canyon country, consider booking a night here to avoid the crowds.

VISIT: Canyonlands National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Bryce Canyon National Park
FOR: Red-rock vistas and canyon trails

5 | Known for its quirky geologic formations called "hoodoos," Bryce Canyon lures visitors to Utah's national parks, who can see prime examples of Southwestern geology in a few hours or a few days. Travelers often tack on Bryce as part of a tour including Zion or the Grand Canyon's North Rim. A bit to the north, though, a vast, less populated park awaits.

Canyonlands—even the name gives a sense of this national park's vastness. Divided into four districts, the park offers numerous ways to experience up-close its many canyons and buttes and the Colorado and Green rivers that form them. Whether you fancy traveling on-foot or on-wheels, Canyonlands delivers.

Islands in the Sky, the most accessible district, offers breathtaking views of the canyons and hikes along the edge of the plateau "islands." Four-wheel enthusiasts (who congregate in nearby Moab, Utah) find their bliss here, whether on easier tracks in Islands in the Sky or more hard-core technical routs in the Needles district and the remote areas of the Maze district. Hikers, too, shouldn't miss the Needles, well worth longer drive from Moab around the canyons and into the lower portion of the park, below the Islands. If raging water is more your scene, make reservations with local outfitters to raft the Colorado and Green rivers through the park.

Though both Islands in the Sky and the Needles have visitor centers, you won't find much in the way of food, gas, or lodging here. Most areas of Canyonlands are rather primitive, and that's what makes this park Utah desert adventure at its finest.

VISIT: Congaree National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Big Bend
FOR: River access to wildlife

6 | There is a place in West Texas where birdwatchers and stargazers kneel down and pray, along the arc of a grand river in the shadow of vast mountains beside a great desert. Big Bend National Park. It's a collection of experiences that only come together when a river gets involved with a characteristic landscape. But Big Bend is a long way from anywhere—remote, though often visited, especially by Texans.

There is a lesser-known river-runs-through-it experience on the East Coast. Congaree National Park, one of the newest parks in the system, is tucked along the mystical Congaree River near Columbia, South Carolina, just a short drive from Atlanta, Charleston, or Charlotte.

Congaree lacks little on the biodiversity front. In the 27,000-acre park lives the largest intact expanse of bottomland hardwood old growth forest on the Southeast. This example of floodplain forest, formed by the Congaree and Wateree rivers and teeming with life, showcases a unique ecosystem where water and forest converge, becoming nearly indistinguishable.

The park includes more than 25 miles of hiking trails and 2.4 miles of boardwalk loop trail, but many visitors also choose to explore Congaree on the water via kayak or canoe. A marked canoe trail winds along Cedar Creek. Bring your own boat or rent one in nearby Columbia; call ahead for free guided tours, or venture out on your own. Camping is possible along hiking trails or canoe trails—a permit is required but free. In fact, most things at Congaree appear to be free, including the flowing rivers and streams. After a visit here, you'll feel free, too.

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VISIT: Cuyahoga Valley National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Great Smoky Mountains National Park
FOR: Lush, verdant valleys

7 | With its easy accessibility to many urban areas along the East Coast, Great Smoky Mountains National Park claims the prize, hands-down, for being the most-visited national park in the system. Along with those inspiring waterfalls, fall colors, and layered vistas come long lines and traffic jams. This popular park should be on your not-to-miss list, but if you're looking for a little more solitude along with accessibility, try Cuyahoga Valley.

A short drive from Cleveland and Akron, Ohio, Cuyahoga provides the weekend respite and open space that many weary urbanites need. Don't be fooled, Cuyahoga still receives plenty of visitors each year, but thankfully many find alternative modes of transportation, namely bike, train, or sometimes both. The historic Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad (CVSR), a private partner of the national park, operates train rides through the park from nearby cities.

This park offers not only natural treasures—forests, hills, open farmland, and the Cuyahoga River—but historical interest as well. The Cuyahoga Valley played a key role in American history as the site of the Ohio & Erie Canal, which opened Ohio up to settlement in the early-to-mid 1800s. Today, the Towpath Trail follows the route of the canal, winding through the valley past historical sites and verdant landscapes. Some travelers choose to bike one way and hitch a $3 CVSR ride back.

Cuyahoga offers plenty of infrastructure and amenities. Stop by one of a few visitor centers for interpretation and cultural exhibits.

VISIT: Devils Tower National Monument
IF YOU LOVE: Mount Rainier National Park
FOR: Seeing a landscape icon

8 | Mount Rainier towers over the Washington landscape, beckoning hikers and mountain climbers to ascend. One of the most iconic mountains in America, Rainier is a can't-miss park. If you're enamored with natural icons, though, make sure Devils Tower National Monument also makes it on your list.

The sheer vertical walls of Devils Tower are open to experienced technical climbers. For those looking for an easier way to see the natural monument up close, walk the 1.3-mile paved Tower Trail that circumvents the tower. In winter, snow lovers can experience the park via cross-country skis or snowshoes.

How did Devils Tower form? This question has led to many stories, legends, and hypotheses, from ancient times to today. The American Indian tribes who view the tower as sacred have passed down stories about its inception for generations. These stories are as varied as the people who created them. Geologists pass on their own ideas about the tower's origins. All agree that the tower is an igneous intrusion, formed by magma, though they have not yet found consensus on how the igneous rock became exposed to its current majesty.

Whatever the answer, Devils Tower stands as an iconic representation of the land and its people. Learn more about the cultural history and significance of Devils Tower and the surrounding Black Hills at the park visitor center. And don't leave the park without seeing the Circle of Sacred Smoke Sculpture, which illustrates how more than 20 American Indian tribes revered the tower long before the U.S. recognized its importance and named it the first national monument in 1906.

VISIT: Dry Tortugas National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Haleakala (Hawaii) National Park
FOR: Island adventure, far from home

9 | For many Americans, Haleakala National Park on the Hawaiian island of Maui feels like a paradise destination, ocean crossing required. Indeed, the Hawaiian Islands have served as the nation's western-most outpost since the late 1800s and Haleakala their natural treasure. But there is at least one island park perhaps even more remote—Dry Tortugas National Park at the country's southern-most tip.

Made of the seven farthest-flung of the Florida Keys (70 miles west of Key West), Dry Tortugas is managed alongside its mainland sister park, Everglades. Dry Tortugas plays an important role in American history, protecting the valuable shipping channel at the confluence of the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Caribbean Sea and securing the coastline for the U.S. Today, visitors value these clear azure waters more for swimming, sailing, snorkeling, and site seeing.

Unless you're accustomed to sailing a private boat in the Caribbean, this isn't a drop-in spot. Visitors can't drive or fly here commercially, but instead must travel via ferry, chartered seaplane, or private boat. Yankee Freedom ferry, the most economical option, departs Lands End Marina at Key West.

However you get to Dry Tortugas, come prepared with water (it's called dry for a reason: there is no fresh water), food, sunscreen, and gear for activities such as snorkeling, swimming, camping, and bird watching; the park offers none of these amenities. Your first stop must be a tour of Fort Jefferson, the park's biggest cultural attraction. Then embark on the adventure of your choice.

VISIT: Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve
IF YOU LOVE: Death Valley National Park
FOR: Discovering dunescapes

10 | Death Valley National Park boasts superlatives that seem a bit uninviting—hottest, driest, lowest—but these extremes are indeed the lure of this desert environment characterized by sand dunes and salt flats. In spring, when wildflowers dot the landscape, visitation soars in Death Valley by those looking for signs of life.

While dunes are a part of Death Valley's harsh environment, their low relative percentage may disappoint many travelers imagining rippling sand to the horizon. Another park delivers the dunes of our imagination (both in name and in physical features) as well as much more. Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve highlights the tallest dunes in North America.

Lest you think sand dunes mean a place devoid of life, Great Sand Dunes is one of the most biologically and geologically diverse places in the U.S. The extreme temperatures on the dunes—150° F on a summer afternoon to minus 20° F on a winter night—have led to evolutionary adaptations and at least seven endemic species, such as the Great Sand Dunes Tiger Beetle, known only to these dunes.

In addition to the dunes, this 150,000-acre park and preserve also includes rugged 13,000-foot peaks, alpine lakes and tundra, forests, creeks, grassland, and wetlands, all waiting to be explored. If planning a hiking or backpacking trip here, be sure your route includes a sampling of these environments. The park allows hiking on the dunes year-round. A free permit is required to camp on the dunes overnight, and dunes-accessible wheelchairs are also loaned for free. Check the visitor center for both.

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VISIT: Guadalupe Mountains National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Yosemite National Park
FOR: The Other El Capitan

11 | Visitors from all over the world flock to Yosemite National Park to see for themselves, among other natural marvels, a sheer rock face known as El Capitan. The Captain, or The Chief. Rising high above Yosemite Valley, it causes necks to bend and eyes to rise ever higher to find its summit. It would seem there is no other face like it, if it weren't for the other El Capitan, deep in the heart of Texas.

You can find this Captain in Guadalupe Mountains National Park, between El Paso and Carlsbad, New Mexico. Few beyond Texans know its there, but this national park deserves broader attention. As is often the way in Texas, it's larger than life. Millions of years ago, when a vast tropical sea covered the entire region, a great reef formed here. Today, the fossilized reef stands tall as the Guadalupe Mountains, and El Capitan is The Chief.

Driving to see the sites isn't an option here, so be prepared to explore via foot on one of more than 80 miles of trails. Veteran hikers should trek to Guadalupe Peak, also called the "Top of Texas," at the base of El Capitan.

Guadalupe Mountains also attracts more than 300 bird species and is a paradise for their spectators. Find a list of summer and winter birds on the park website. The park is considered remote and rugged, so come prepared with binoculars and more. The closest stop for ice (vital in hot summers), food, or a place to lay your head (other than a few campsites) is 35 miles away in White's City, New Mexico.

VISIT: Isle Royale National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Crater Lake National Park
FOR: Peace and quiet, lakeside

12 | Lakes offer an opportunity to slow down and relax, and one of the best-known lakes in the national park system is Crater Lake in southern Oregon. Formed by violent volcanic activity more than 7,700 years ago, Crater Lake's deep, pure, blue water today creates an unparalleled opportunity for solitude, peace, and both literal and figurative reflection.

Though Lake Superior, the largest freshwater lake in the world, is itself not a national park, an island in its midst offers a unique outlet for experiencing the lake and its surrounding landscape. Isle Royale National Park protects more than 132,000 acres of wilderness land in the northwest portion of the lake. The park is actually a series of islands—one large and more than 450 small—making it an archipelago. Within the large island reside many inland lakes, adding to the tremendous biodiversity of this ecologically rich park.

This is place to get away from it all. Vehicles aren't allowed on Isle Royale, so leave yours at one of three departure points (two in Michigan and one in Minnesota) and arrive on the island either by boat or seaplane. When you get there, explore the island's boreal forests on foot or paddle along the island's rocky shore. You can carry your canoe or kayak with you on the boat to the island, or save yourself the trouble and rent one when you get there. Scuba diving is also popular, with natural and cultural treasures waiting to be discovered again and again. Find a full list of travel options and fees on the park website.

VISIT: Lassen Volcanic National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Yellowstone National Park
FOR: Volcanic geology and activity

13 | Nearly everyone can picture steam spewing from Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone, and with good reason—Yellowstone was America's first national park and Old Faithful one of the iconic pictures that helped sell the country on the idea. Old Faithful, more than 300 additional geysers, and thousands more thermal features that lie beneath Yellowstone's majestic landscape represent a marvelous story of geologic history.

At Lassen Volcanic National Park, that story continues. It's one of the most undiscovered parks, nestled in the southern tip of the Cascade Mountains, but its anonymity belies its wonder. Known for volcanic geology, Lassen includes examples of all four types of volcanoes (shield, plug dome, cinder cone, and composite) within its boundaries. This rich diversity of landscapes plays host to an equally rich diversity of plant and animal life. Though no true geysers exist in Lassen, as in Yellowstone, hot springs abound.

What you do in Lassen depends largely on the season. Though the park is open year-round, many areas are inaccessible in winter (here considered October through June) unless you're willing to strap on cross-country skis or snowshoes. When accessible, mountain roads lead to several lakes and trails.

Exploring the hydrothermal areas in Lassen can be tricky, and park advisories warn to stay on established trails and boardwalks. Take the three-mile round-trip hike around Bumpass Hell, the largest hydrothermal area in the park, to safely see 16 acres worth of plopping mud pots, bubbling pools, and roaring steam vents that will satisfy even the most discerning geology buff.

VISIT: Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial
IF YOU LOVE: Washington Monument
FOR: American history on the National Mall

14 | Washington Monument, the first and most well known structure on the National Mall, stands tall as a memorial to the country's first president. Many other memorials glorify presidents, from Jefferson to Lincoln to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. But one memorial—the newest, dedicated in 2011—celebrates another man, not a president but a leader who ultimately died in his quest to secure civil rights for all people.

How do you appropriately honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? By bringing his own words to life. The designers of the memorial took inspiration from Dr. King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he said: "Out of a mountain of despair a stone of hope." At the center of the memorial is a 30-foot statue of Dr. King carved into the Stone of Hope, emerging from two boulders representing the Mountain of Despair. The design illuminates Dr. King's own struggle to overcome the injustice of discrimination and segregation.

Find the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial along the Tidal Basin directly between the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials. It's fitting for the memorial to Dr. King to be sited here, just a stone's throw from where he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech at the feet of Lincoln's statue to a crowd collected around the Reflecting Pool.

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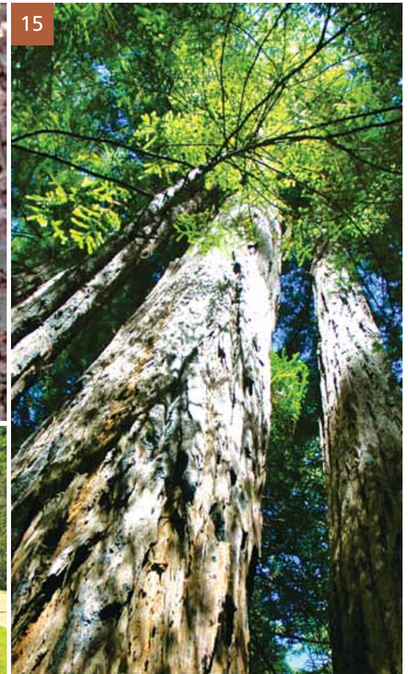
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VISIT: Muir Woods National Monument
IF YOU LOVE: Redwood National Park
FOR: Really big trees

15 | Everyone knows redwoods. You've seen the photos of grown men trying to wrap their arms around one of these tallest trees on earth, or perhaps tried yourself. Redwood National Park in the far northern tip of California is known worldwide for the gargantuan trees it protects. It also boasts pristine coastline and incredible biodiversity. If you're looking for a big-time redwood experience a little closer to civilization, though, try Muir Woods National Monument just a few miles outside of San Francisco.

While the old-growth redwoods at Muir Woods deserve exclamation, the stories about this property warrant attention as well. Start your journey at the visitor center, where you'll learn some of the stories that led to the protection of Muir Woods, including how Congressman William Kent and his wife donated 295 acres in honor of philosopher and early environmentalist John Muir. President Theodore Roosevelt declared these acres a national monument in 1908, preserving a prime example of the redwood forest that once covered the coasts of California and Oregon.

This park, though small, offers accessibility and connections to a wide array of coastal California experiences. A newly constructed boardwalk leads into the redwood forest where views of the tallest living things in the world are accessible to everyone. As part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), the opportunities to create a larger itinerary are virtually endless—for as little as a day or as much as a week. Sites in the GGNRA include Alcatraz Island, Presidio, Cliff House, and other don't-miss icons of the San Francisco area.

VISIT: Natchez Trace Parkway
IF YOU LOVE: Blue Ridge Parkway
FOR: The lure of the open road

16 | The proverbial Sunday drive becomes an any-day-of-the-week experience on one of the few roadways designated as a National Parkway. Driving slow enough to take in the scenery, parkway travel recalls a time when automobiles were more about relaxation and enjoyment than a daily necessity designed for speed and convenience. Perhaps the most famous parkway is Blue Ridge, which connects Shenandoah National Park in Virginia and Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina via 469 road miles. Along the way, travelers stop to take photos at overlooks, hike trails (including the Appalachian Trail), or set up picnics or campsites. It's unarguably one the most pleasant drives in America.

Not far away, Natchez Trace Parkway meanders through three more Southern states. For 444 miles, travelers see beautiful scenery, for sure, but they also experience a sort of time travel, learning about the people and places along this important historical route from Natchez, Mississippi, to just south of Nashville. In the 1800s, the Natchez Trace was a thoroughfare for farmers and boatmen carrying supplies from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky to ports in Natchez and New Orleans. By the time these folks, often called "Kaintucks," came along, the path has been well worn by generations of Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians.

Plenty of spots along the parkway deserve a stop, from waterfalls in Tennessee to Indian mounds in Mississippi. Natchez Trace Parkway is a designated bicycle route, so drivers should remember to slow down and share the road. Few conveniences such as gas stations or restaurants exist on "The Trace" (as it's often called), so it's best to plan ahead.

VISIT: San Juan Island National Historic Park
IF YOU LOVE: Acadia National Park
FOR: Island hopping

17 | On the Maine coast, Acadia National Park lures those who want to check this first park east of the Mississippi River off their list. The collection of islands making up the park offers ample opportunities for experiences on foot or on float (via ferries).

Where else can you hop from island to island in the national park system? San Juan Islands National Historical Park off the coast of Washington. San Juan received the historical designation due to a strange1859 skirmish, in which the U.S. and Great Britain nearly started a war after an American farmer shot and killed a British pig rooting in his garden. Luckily, the two countries settled the dispute peacefully, and the San Juan Islands eventually became the final boundary between Canada and the U.S. in the west.

Today, visitors are much more concerned with looking for whales than pigs. Come between April and September for the best views of marine life, and plan to get on the water for a more up-close experience. Kayakers know the reputation of San Juan Islands as some of the best paddling in the Pacific Northwest. The park's two camps, English Camp and American Camp, offer easy boating access.

As in Acadia, the hiking is great on San Juan, too, and the landscape varies from mountain to forest to beach. Hikers enjoy native wildflowers in spring and pick non-native (but delicious) blackberries in late summer. Whenever you'd like to visit, be sure to plan out your travel and lodging accommodations ahead of time, and bring a change of clothes. Pacific Northwest weather is known for its changing temperament.

VISIT: North Cascades National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Glacier National Park
FOR: Glaciers, before they're gone

18 | For anyone looking to see or traverse real-life glaciers, Glacier National Park is a natural and deserving choice. In fact, see this park's glaciers as soon as you can, as some scientists predict that the 25 or so remaining large glaciers in the park will be gone by 2030, due to climate change.

But other parks offer glacial adventure, too, including North Cascades National Park, with more than 300 glaciers. Just three hours north of Seattle on the British Columbia border, North Cascades presents a wonderland of glacier-capped mountain peaks, alpine wilderness, and cascading waterfalls to rival Yosemite.

Climbers, backpackers, and hikers find plentiful opportunities to stretch their skills here. Check for information on climbing and backcountry permits. Those visitors interested in more relaxed glacial views will find plenty, from guided tours to scenic drives. You can also experience the park by boat on its many lakes and rivers. Looking for a more cultural experience? Check out Stehekin, a remote historic community accessible only by foot, boat, or plane.

If you're truly enthralled with glaciers or other natural features of this area, consider a class at the new North Cascades Environmental Learning Center, on Diablo Lake in the park. Here, you can enroll in weekend classes or longer courses on topics ranging from climate change to plein air painting to mushroom foraging. No worries about school being boring or stressful—here, there are no grades and class meets outside.

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VISIT: Petrified Forest National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Badlands National Park
FOR: History set in stone, revealed by the wind

19 | Preserved in the rugged landscape of Badlands National Park are fossils from many ages past. From camels to saber-toothed cats, these remains tell the story of a changing South Dakota landscape and its inhabitants. You'll find a similar story in Petrified Forest National Park, though this one's told on wooden scrolls, the fossilized remains of an ancient forest from 200 million years ago.

Petrified Forest is a badland, too. The term "badlands" isn't reserved just for the park that carries the name; badland refers to a type of terrain characterized by sedimentary rock that's heavily eroded by wind and water and doesn't support much vegetation—two conditions that make these areas perfect for hunting fossils.

Start at the Painted Desert visitor center, and then drive through the park, stopping at Kachina Point and other overlooks along the way. For a closer look, walk one of the park's few established trails. Long Logs Trail takes you on a short 0.6-mile loop that showcases some of the best examples of petrified logs, all that remains of now-extinct conifers. If the walk revives your inner archeologist, don't miss the exhibits—including more petrified wood, fossils, and prehistoric animal displays—at Rainbow Forest Museum.

Exploring Petrified Forest, you'll be reminded of the park's popular neighbors along the Colorado Plateau, including Grand Canyon, Zion, and Arches national parks. In fact, it's a great side trip if you're visiting Grand Canyon and have a little extra time.

VISIIT: Saguaro National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Joshua Tree National Park
FOR: Iconic plants

20 | Sometimes, a plant so special comes along that a whole park is made to preserve it. That's the case in both Joshua Tree and Saguaro National Parks. The former and more often visited of the two—Joshua Tree—lies a short drive from Los Angeles, San Diego, and Palm Springs, California, in the Mojave Desert. While aging these trees, actually members of the yucca family, is difficult, scientists estimate some in the 3,000-year-old range.

Over the border in Arizona, the Giant Saguaro, North America's largest cactus, has a park of its own. Nestled around Tucson (the city splits the park into two districts), Saguaro National Park celebrates its namesake cactus and unique Sonoran Desert ecosystem.

What makes the Giant Saguaro so special? This native of the Sonoran Desert has a presence like a tree, standing tall on the desert landscape, and can live to 250 years, a far cry from the Joshua Tree's life span but no slouch for a cactus. The Sonoran Desert is one of the most unique regions in the country, with many other plant and animal species found nowhere else: roadrunners, horned lizards, Gila monsters, kangaroo rats, and several other cactus species among them.

A springtime visit promises wildflowers galore as March and April rains hydrate and paint the landscape. The park offers more than 165 miles of trails to explore. Bikers also will enjoy scenic loops in both the Rincon Mountain and Tucson Mountain districts. Remember: This is the desert, so always bring plenty of water with you, no matter the season.

VISIT: Shiloh National Military Park
IF YOU LOVE: Gettysburg National Military Park
FOR: Turning points in Civil War history

21 | Even those Americans without a passion for Civil War history know the importance of the Battle of Gettysburg and the words spoken there by President Abraham Lincoln, recalling the country's founding: "Four score and seven years ago…" Gettysburg is a must-see among the park system's many preserved national military parks and battlefields, but many battlefields, including several in the South, offer the complete telling of America's Civil War.

Shiloh National Military Park, situated along the Tennessee River not far from the mighty Mississippi River, is one battlefield that should not be missed. The historic April 1862 battle, Civil War soldiers thought Shiloh would decide the war, giving control of the Mississippi River Valley to one side or the other. In the end, the Union stopped the Confederates from moving Northward as planned, but more than anything, the battle steadied the Union's resolve to crush Southern rebellion at all costs.

You'll want to visit both the Shiloh Battlefield itself, near Crump, Tennessee, and the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center, not far across the state line in Corinth, Mississippi. Both stops include engaging interpretation, including several films that bring the battle to life and illuminate its role in the Civil War. To get the full experience, drive the 12.7-mile auto tour of the battlefield, including Shiloh National Cemetery and Shiloh Indian Mounds. Then stretch your legs for a walking tour of Corinth, complete with Civil War era homes. Shiloh National Military Park hosts several living history events throughout the year, so check the events calendar on the website to plan your trip.

VISIT: Shenandoah National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Rocky Mountain National Park
FOR: Breathtaking mountains and wilderness

22 | Colorado's Rocky Mountains beckon world travelers with high mountain peaks, hundreds of miles of hiking trails, and vast wildflower-covered expanses. For easterners looking for a similar experience closer to home, come to Shenandoah National Park, a stone's throw (well, just 75 miles) from Washington, D.C. The park encompasses 300 square miles of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the southern Appalachians, one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the world.

More than 500 total miles of hiking trails wind through the park, and in spring, you'd be hard-pressed to find a hike that doesn't pass by one of Shenandoah's signature cascading waterfalls. Among the 500 are more than 100 miles of the Appalachian Trail. Shenandoah protects a large expanse of previous hardwood forest, and nearly 40 percent of the park is protected as wilderness under the Wilderness Act.

Though wilderness escape lures many visitors, Shenandoah welcomes everyone, whether you're looking for backcountry trails and camping or just a cozy, casual weekend getaway. Several lodges and cabins offer comfortable options for staying the night, minus the tent. Adventures of the culinary kind can even be found here, with fine dining available at both Skyline Lodge and Big Meadows Lodge. Need a cool beverage after a day of hiking or scenic driving? You're in luck. Each lodge also features a signature taproom.

Every season has something to offer in Shenandoah. Come for snow in the winter, wildflowers in the spring, lush green views in summer, or, like many travelers, visit for vibrant color in the fall.

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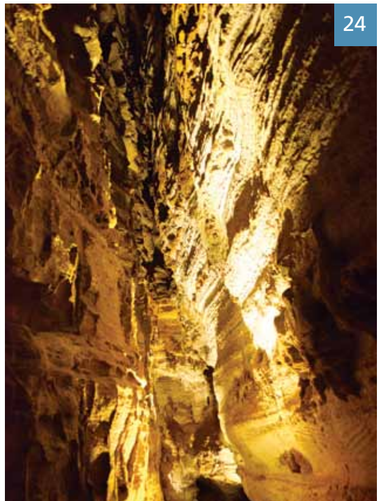
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VISIT: Voyageurs National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Everglades National Park
FOR: Exploring while paddling

23 | Many national park journeys occur on four wheels or two feet, but some special parks are best experienced on the water, with a boat and paddle as your companions. Everglades National Park at the tip of Florida offers this experience. This park receives ample recognition for its global biological significance, so calling Everglades "unique" would be an understatement.

What's another unique park best experienced with paddle in hand? Voyageurs National Park along the Minnesota–Ontario border. The interconnected waterways of this area were used in centuries past as highways for transporting valuable goods—fur, lumber, fish, and even gold—from the North Woods to the global trade. The name "Voyageurs" celebrates the fur traders who, taking a cue from the native people (Cree, Monsoni, Assiniboin, and Ojibwe Indians), paddled large birch bark canoes between the Canadian Northwest and Montreal, satisfying Europe's demand for fashionable furs.

Compared to Everglades' 1.5 million acres, Voyageurs is diminutive, with just over 200,000 acres of land and water. But what it lacks in size it makes up for in year-round recreational opportunities, from paddling and fishing in summer to enjoying changing colors on the trails in fall to snowshoeing and fishing again in winter (though this time through a sheet of ice). Canoes and rowboats are available for rent, or charter a larger vessel for a group trip.

VISIT: Wind Cave National Park
IF YOU LOVE: Mammoth Cave National Park
FOR: Explore a world underground

24 | Of Kentucky's Mammoth Cave—the world's longest known cave and, since 1816, one of its most toured—the great American naturalist John Burroughs (a contemporary of Whitman and Thoreau) wrote: "The great cave is not merely a spectacle to the eye; it is a wonder to the ear, a strangeness to the smell and to the touch. The body feels the presence of unusual conditions through every pore."

Any cave will challenge our senses, our imaginations, and our levels of comfort. Wind Cave in South Dakota is another national park preserved for generations of explorers. A visit to the Black Hills region of South Dakota, which also includes Mount Rushmore National Monument and Badlands National Park, isn't complete until you've been to Wind Cave.

The eighth park in the system and the first cave to be named a national park, Wind Cave holds within its depths a history as diverse as the people who've been there. Among them are the Lakota and Cheyenne Indians, who view the cave as a sacred site; early white settlers to the region, including one female geologist and guide, a rarity for the time; and men of the Civilian Conservation Corps, who lived and worked at Wind Cave Camp during the Great Depression.

As in Mammoth Cave, exploration of Wind Cave, the fifth longest in the world, is limited to guided tours only. Above ground, visitors can hike any of the 30 miles of trails that traverse the park's Black Hills prairie landscape. Don't be surprised to see native wildlife: elk, pronghorn, mule deer, coyotes, prairie dogs, or bison, which roam free here.

VISIT: Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve
IF YOU LOVE: Grand Teton National Park
FOR: Awe inspiring mountain peaks

25 | Some of us have a vision of mountains—huge, snow-capped peaks, characterized by the Swiss Alps—that can only be fulfilled by a few places. Grand Teton National Park is one of those, located in Wyoming near popular Jackson Hole, with numerous mountain peaks and the Snake River to explore.

Another, less accessible but equally, if not more, picturesque, is Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska. At 13.2 million acres, Wrangell-St. Elias is the largest national park in the U.S., larger even than the entire country of Switzerland itself.

Visiting and exploring Wrangell-St. Elias is no easy task, but it is, without a doubt, the trip of a lifetime, and one that deserves advanced planning. Other parts of Alaska can be considered crowded compared to here. Few major roads or trails traverse the park. Instead, nearly limitless backcountry routes wait to be explored. Rivers, too, rush from the mountains to provide the perfect opportunities for a float.

Start your visit at one of the many visitor centers, where rangers can help you get acquainted with the park. Drive the major roads for sweeping views of some of the most majestic mountain ranges in the world. Visit historic Kennecott for a glimpse into the intense mining history of the region. If you have more time and budget, book a flight into the center of the park, where serious adventurers can break away for backcountry hikes like no other national park can offer.

SUPPORT: National Park Foundation
IF YOU LOVE: National Parks
FOR: The next generation

There are 84 million acres of cherished landscapes, ecosystems, and historic sites in America's nearly 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.

This is your land. Join us.

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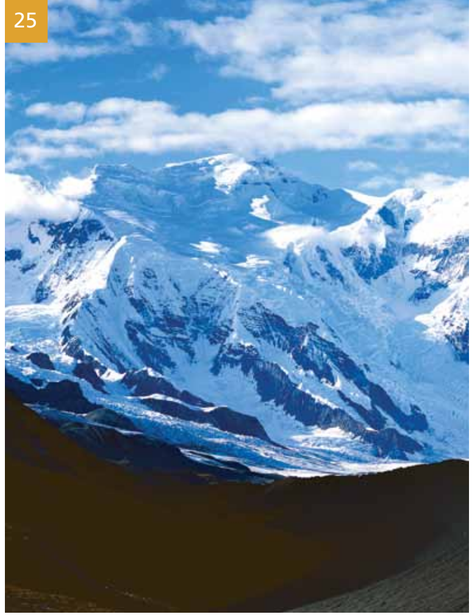

the places nobody knows

Park Directory

To help you start planning your next national park adventure, here is a directory of all 25 national parks featured in this guide—complete with information on entrance fees, Junior Ranger programs and lodging availability. Happy Planning!

Park Directory

	PARK	PHONE	WEBSITE	FEE	JR. RANGER	LODGING
1	BANDELIER NM *Los Alamos, New Mexico*	505.672.3861	www.nps.gov/band	●	●	●
2	BIG SOUTH FORK NRRA *Oneida, Tennessee*	423.569.9778	www.nps.gov/biso	●	●	●
3	BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON NP *Gunnison, Colorado*	970.641.2337	www.nps.gov/blca	●	●	●
4	CANYON DE CHELLY NM *Chinle, Arizona*	928.674.5500	www.nps.gov/cach		●	
5	CANYONLANDS NP *Moab, Utah*	435.719.2100	www.nps.gov/cany	●	●	●
6	CONGAREE NP *Hopkins, South Carolina*	803.776.4396	www.nps.gov/cong		●	●
7	CUYAHOGA VALLEY NP *Brecksville, Ohio*	330.657.2752	www.nps.gov/cuva		●	●
8	DEVILS TOWER NM *Devils Tower, Wyoming*	307.467.5283	www.nps.gov/deto	●	●	●
9	DRY TORTUGAS NP *Homestead, Florida*	305.242.7700	www.nps.gov/drto	●	●	●
10	GREAT SAND DUNES NP AND PRES *Mosca, Colorado*	719.378.6399	www.nps.gov/grsa	●	●	●
11	GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS NP *Salt Flat, Texas*	915.828.3251	www.nps.gov/gumo	●	●	●
12	ISLE ROYALE NP *Houghton, Michigan*	906.482.0984	www.nps.gov/isro	●		●
13	LASSEN VOLCANIC NP *Mineral, California*	530.595.4480	www.nps.gov/lavo	●	●	●

	PARK	PHONE	WEBSITE	FEE	JR. RANGER	LODGING
14	MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. NM *Washington, DC*	202.426.6841	www.nps.gov/mlkm			
15	MUIR WOODS NM *Mill Valley, California*	415.388.2595	www.nps.gov/muwo	●	●	
16	NATCHEZ TRACE PKWY *Tupelo, Mississippi*	800.305.7417	www.nps.gov/natr	●	●	
17	NORTH CASCADES NP *Sedro-Woolley, Washington*	360.854.7200	www.nps.gov/noca		●	●
18	PETRIFIED FOREST NP *Petrified Forest, Arizona*	928.524.6228	www.nps.gov/pefo	●	●	
19	SAGUARO NP *Tucson, Arizona*	520.733.5100	www.nps.gov/sagu	●	●	
20	SAN JUAN ISLAND NHP *Friday Harbor, Washington*	360.378.2240	www.nps.gov/sajh		●	
21	SHENANDOAH NP *Luray, Virginia*	540.999.3500	www.nps.gov/shen	●	●	●
22	SHILOH NMP *Shiloh, Tennessee*	731.689.5696	www.nps.gov/shil	●	●	
23	VOYAGEURS NP *International Falls, Minnesota*	218.283.6600	www.nps.gov/voya		●	●
24	WIND CAVE NP *Hot Springs, South Dakota*	605.745.4600	www.nps.gov/wica		●	●
25	WRANGELL-ST. ELIASNNP AND PRES *Copper Center, Alaska*	907.822.7250	www.nps.gov/wrst		●	●

*For information on national park lodging, camping and tour reservations please visit www.recreation.gov.

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