



playgrounds

About the Author: Kelly Smith Trimble writes about national parks from her urban home in Knoxville, Tennessee, the gateway city to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, and Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, among others.



National Mall & Memorial Parks

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More than 80 percent of Americans live in urban areas. And as our cities grow, so does our desire for connection. That's where parks come in. Not only do national parks provide an escape from the crowds and technological trappings of our cities, but they also offer a sense of grounding — to place, history, and culture — within those urban boundaries.

Here, we've compiled a list of parks within or close to 24 major U.S. metropolitan areas. These national parks represent a diversity of people, landscapes, and stories, and most of the activities we're suggesting can be experienced in a day trip or less (with some exceptions). Whether you're a local or a tourist, the next time you're looking for things to do in these great American cities, be sure to add a national park to your list.

STATUE OF LIBERTY NATIONAL MONUMENT

New York City, NY



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A gift from France dedicated in 1886, the Statue of Liberty originally celebrated our country's centennial, and Lady Liberty, as she's now known, quickly became a welcoming vision to thousands of immigrants whose first stop in the U.S. was nearby Ellis Island. Today, she remains a symbol of faith in American ideals not only for tourists who come from across the world to see her, but also for area locals for whom she's a comfortingly familiar face on the horizon.

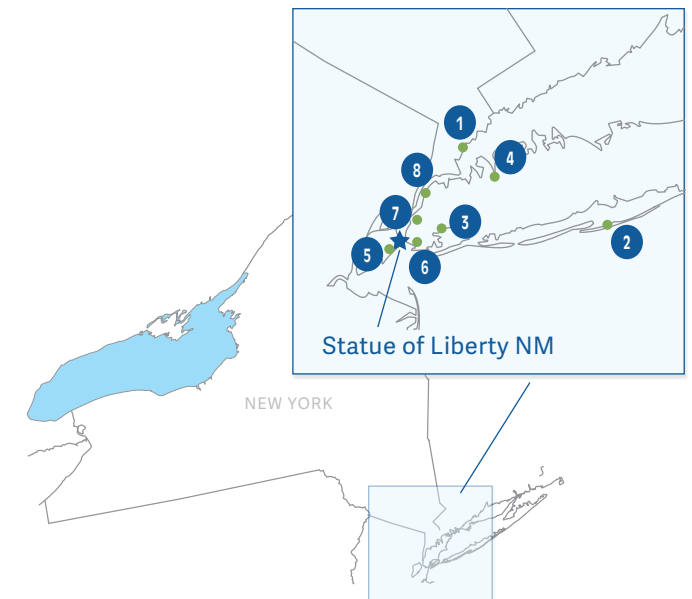
GET THERE: Liberty Island, where the statue stands, and Ellis Island can be reached via the same ferries, one leaving from Battery Park in Manhattan, the other from Liberty State Park in Jersey City, New Jersey. Boarding a ferry before 1 p.m. is recommended for full enjoyment of these two American icons, but ferries leave the mainland from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily except Christmas Day.

DO THERE: You can experience Lady Liberty from the pedestal, which is stunning enough, or get a once-in-a-lifetime view of New York Harbor from the crown. For either option, you must make reservations prior to your visit, though pedestal tickets require less advanced planning than ones for the crown, which can require booking months ahead of time during the busy season (April to September). Check the park website for more details.

Either way, plan to visit Ellis Island, part of the same national park as the Statue of Liberty. Here, the National Museum of Immigration reveals thousands of records and insights into the people who came to the United States — some of whom may be your ancestors — through New York City in search of a better life and land.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 St. Paul's Church NHS
- 2 Fire Island NS
- 3 Gateway NRA
- 4 Sagamore Hill NHS
- 5 Ellis Island NM
- 6 Governors Island NM
- 7 Castle Clinton NM
- 8 African Burial Ground NM



SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

Los Angeles, CA



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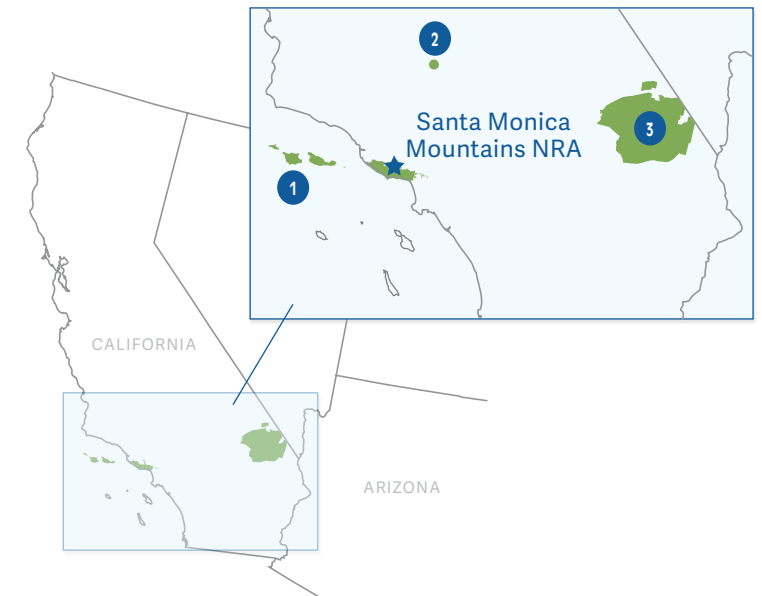
Who knew the famous 90210 ZIP code contains a national park? In fact, this and 25 more Los Angeles ZIP codes include land protected by Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, the world's largest urban national park at 153,075 acres. Unique to the National Park System, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area is made possible through collaboration with many state parks, local agencies, and even private landowners committed to protecting the stunningly scenic mountains and beaches west of Beverly Hills.

GET THERE: The park includes a large swath of land west of Los Angeles and south of Simi Valley, with Malibu at its center along the shore. Many bustling roads surround the area, including I-101 to the north and west, and the Pacific Coast Highway on the southern, ocean border — you can enter the park through numerous access roads from these thoroughfares. Many visitors choose to experience the scenic views of canyons, valleys, and the ocean via the thrillingly twisting 30-mile Mulholland Highway.

DO THERE: True to the promise of southern California, there's almost nothing you can't do here: hiking, climbing, mountain biking, camping, and horseback riding are among the options. On the 67-mile Backbone Trail, long-distance hikers can traverse the park and the Santa Monica Mountains, seeing many important historical, cultural, and natural sites along the way from Will Rogers State Historic Park in the east to Point Mugu State Park in the west. Formed in the early 1980s, the trail connects a formerly scattered collection of trails, fire roads, and paths into one continuous route.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Channel Islands NP
- 2 César E. Chávez NM
- 3 Mojave NP



PULLMAN NATIONAL MONUMENT

Chicago, IL



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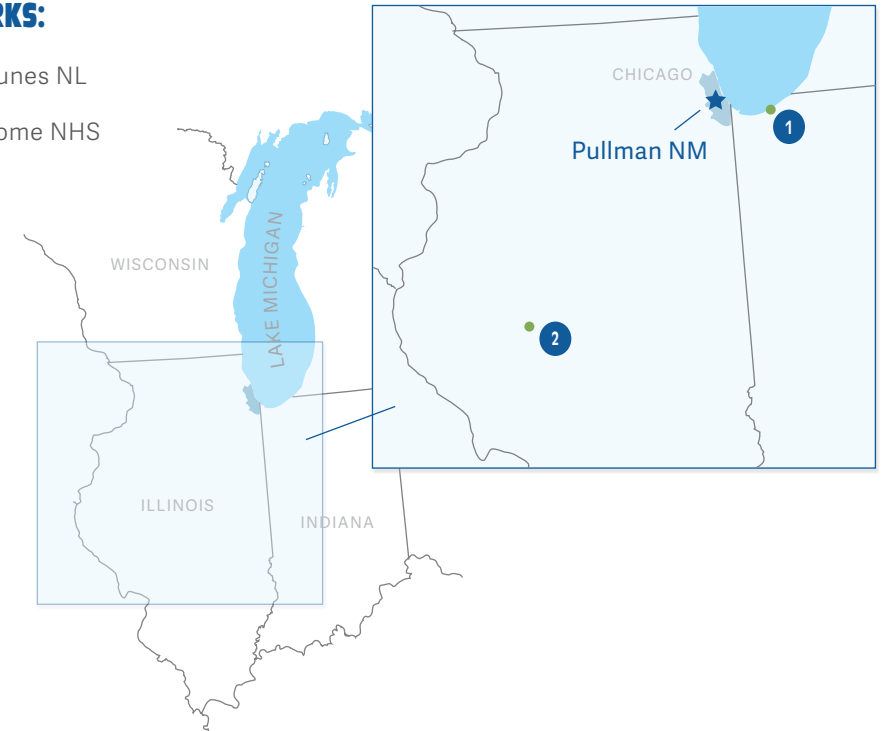
One of the most recent additions to the park system, Pullman is also the first national park in Chicago. The monument includes more than 90 original buildings that made up a factory town where the nation's first African American labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was born during the railroad strike of 1894. Not only did the union fight for the rights of African American workers, their efforts at Pullman also represent the rise of middle-class black communities in America that led to the Civil Rights Movement.

GET THERE: The Pullman community was designed to be a utopian company town in the open spaces south of the city, but it soon was enveloped by Chicago and became one of its vital neighborhoods. Today, it's easy to get there by car, bus, or commuter train.

DO THERE: While the area was only recently declared a monument, organizations dedicated to preserving Pullman have been active for decades. First stop is the Historic Pullman Foundation Visitor Center. Then learn the story of how this place contributed to America's labor movement at the National A. Philip Randolph Pullman Porter Museum. Enjoy the beauty of this well-planned neighborhood, carefully designed in the late 1800s at the insistence of railroad engineer and company owner George Pullman, by walking its streets and relaxing in its many parks. Check the calendar of the impressive 15-acre West Pullman Park, where you can take part in family-friendly activities year-round.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Indiana Dunes NL
- 2 Lincoln Home NHS



BIG THICKET NATIONAL PRESERVE

Houston, TX



USDA photo by Larry Rana

Rural Southeast Texas may seem like a remote and forbidding place, but for plants and animals traversing the southern U.S. for millennia, it's been an essential thoroughfare. At an ecological crossroads, Big Thicket National Preserve is prized for its extreme natural diversity — from soil, to plants, to birds — often compared to that of the Florida Everglades.

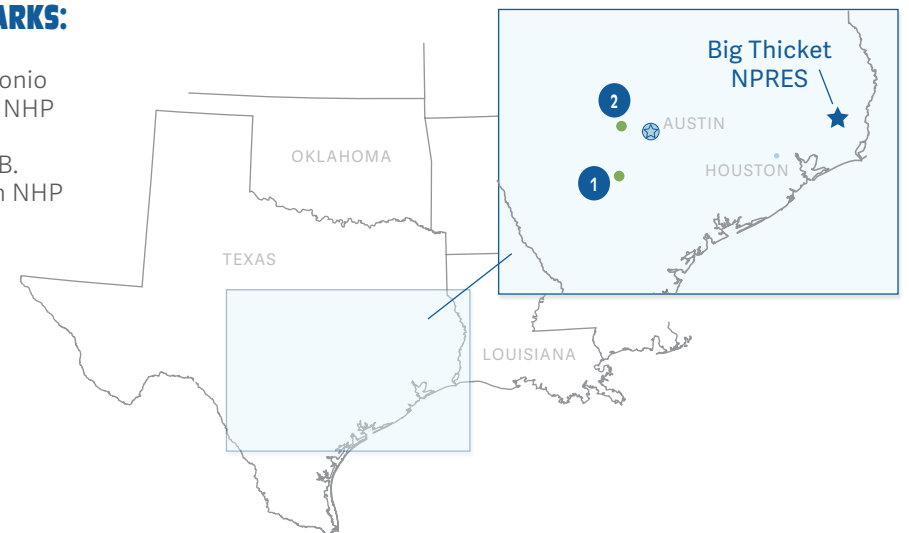
GET THERE: Find Big Thicket near the eastern Texas border about 30 miles north of Beaumont, near the town of Kountze. The preserve is a 1.5 to 2-hour drive from downtown Houston. Few roads lead into the preserve, so the best way to explore is on foot or by canoe or kayak (you can rent boats from local outfitters). Start your visit at the visitor center to get your bearings, maps, and advice from rangers.

DO THERE: Hiking, camping (primitive only, with permit), paddling, birding, and even hunting (in a limited area during the fall season) are possible here. Hikers can choose from a variety of trails revealing the park's diverse ecosystems, including the 1-mile Sundew Trail loop that leads to a bog where you can find carnivorous pitcher plants and sundews, as well as many birds, summer wildflowers, and longleaf pines.

The preserve includes two Texas State Paddling Trails that immerse you in Big Thicket's wonder. The longest is the 21-mile Village Creek Trail, which can be divided into sections from 2 to 6 hours for shorter day trips. Experienced paddlers up for multi-day trips will find many options on Village Creek and on the Neches River, 80 miles of which flow through the preserve, creating many lakes and bayous along the way to explore. Be sure to plan your trip carefully, checking water levels (which vary widely, especially on undammed Village Creek) and bringing life jackets and other safety gear.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 San Antonio Mission NHP
- 2 Lyndon B. Johnson NHP



INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Philadelphia, PA



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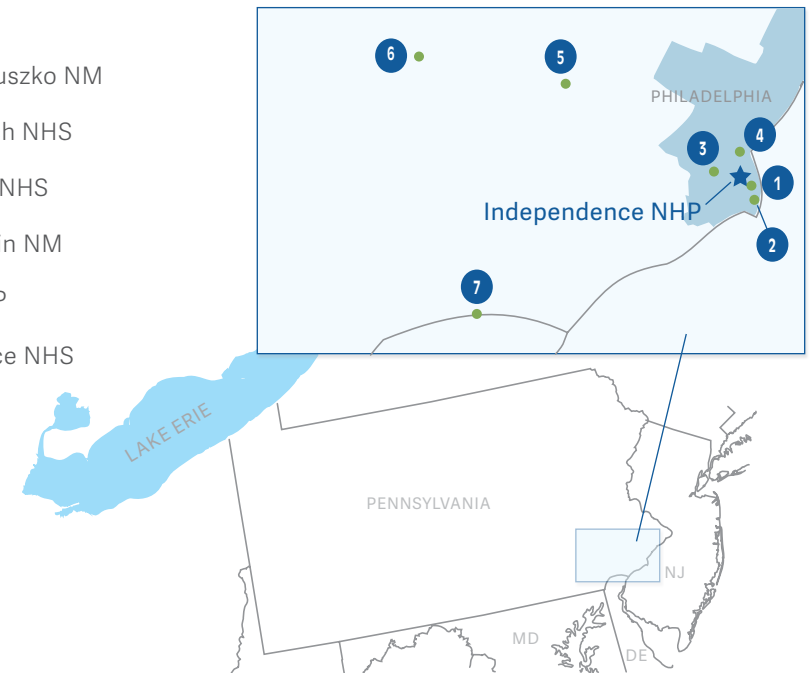
Visit this collection of historical sites in downtown Philadelphia and be transported back to the founding of the United States of America. It's here in the first capital of the U.S. that the founding fathers debated the moral underpinnings of a great new society, that the Declaration of Independence and Constitution were signed and the Liberty Bell rang. Here, you can walk in the footsteps of famous (and infamous) countrymen like Benjamin Franklin and Edgar Allan Poe while getting a feel for what daily life was like for the average urban American in the country's infancy.

GET THERE: The park is made up of many sites spanning 55 acres and 20 city blocks in the historic district between I-95 and I-676, accessible by car or public transportation. Be sure to download the park's mobile app (search "NPS Independence" in your app store) to help guide you through the more than 25 park sites.

DO THERE: Start from the Independence Visitor Center to get the lay of the land, and join a park ranger for an interpretive walking tour. For first-time visitors, some sites are must-dos, including Liberty Bell Center and Independence Hall (by tour only). Locals and tourists staying for multiple days will want to hit some smaller sites, such as Franklin Court (Ben's home), Congress Hall, Christ Church, and the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site. Foodies and historic buffs alike should add City Tavern to their must-do list — at this reconstructed tavern once frequented by the likes of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, you can eat and drink from an authentic menu of the times.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Thaddeus Kosciuszko NM
- 2 Gloria Dei Church NHS
- 3 Edgar Allan Poe NHS
- 4 Benjamin Franklin NM
- 5 Valley Forge NHP
- 6 Hopewell Furnace NHS
- 7 First State NHP



NATIONAL MALL & MEMORIAL PARKS

Washington, DC



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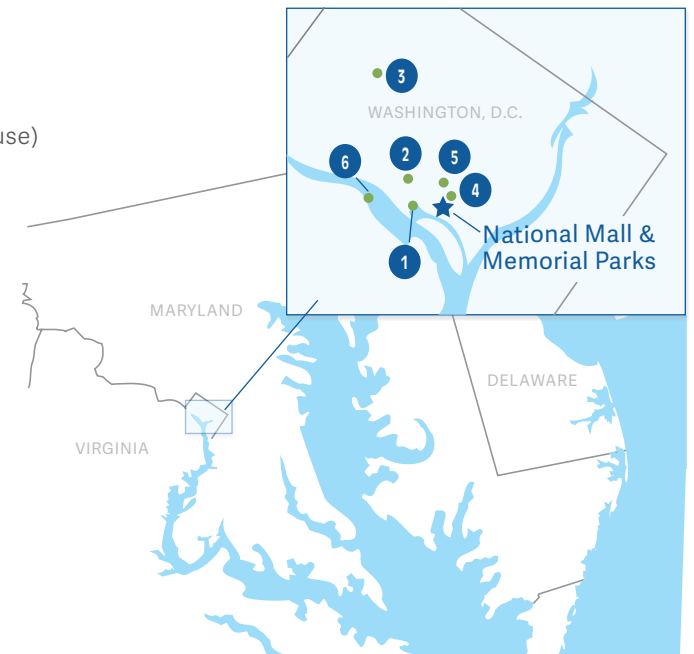
Without a doubt, D.C. offers the pinnacle urban playground with its National Mall and surrounding national sites all within walking distance of one another. You could visit the area for a week — or live there your whole life — and never tire of the opportunities to explore the diverse history and culture of America.

GET THERE: The National Mall is the center of any Washington, D.C., experience, easily accessed by any public transportation. Come to the Mall for access to the major monuments: Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, Jefferson Memorial, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Korean War Veterans Memorial, and many more.

DO THERE: The list of sites is so long that the best advice is to take your time — don't try to mark everything off your list at once, but instead slow down to experience each fully. When you're worn out from walking, grab a bite and a spot of lawn to take it all in. You'll enjoy the memorials on any day and in any season, but spring — especially when the cherry blossoms are in bloom — is especially nice, and evening presents a new experience worth trying. For a totally different view, hop aboard a paddle boat, available at the Tidal Basin — you'll see the Jefferson Memorial and Japanese cherry trees from the water. When you visit, be sure to download the National Mall app from your smartphone's app store for directions, latest event info, and more.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Constitution Gardens
- 2 President's Park (White House)
- 3 Rock Creek Park
- 4 Pennsylvania Ave NHS
- 5 Ford's Theater NHS
- 6 Theodore Roosevelt Island



BISCAYNE NATIONAL PARK

Miami, FL



iStock/ArendTrent

Just a few miles from hip and bustling downtown Miami, a park teeming with a different kind of life — native marine species from manatees, to sea turtles, to corals — offers a glimpse into the fabulous diversity of this slice of America. Winter is the busy season, but locals can visit year round. Whenever you come, be sure to plan ahead before visiting this true “waterpark” — 95% of the park is water.

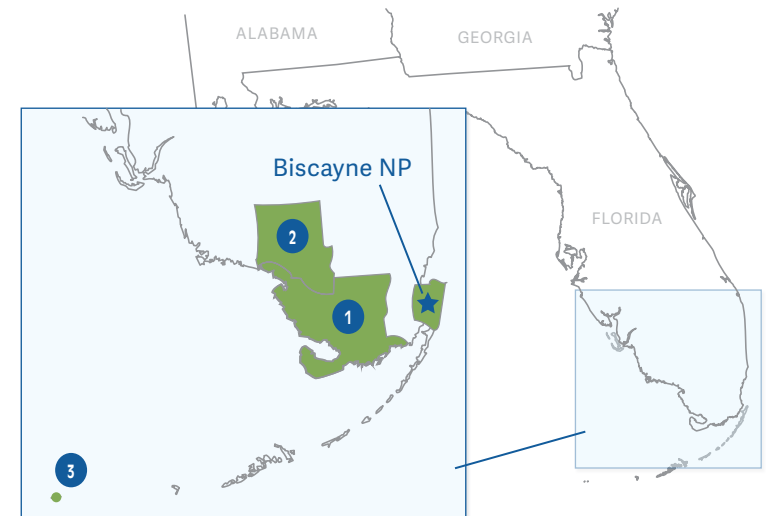
GET THERE: Find the park entrance at Convoy Point near Homestead just south of Miami. Here, you can explore the visitor center, picnic, and take a short walk along the jetty. But if you don't have a boat, that's where the experience ends. Most activities are on the water or on islands accessible only by water (Boca Chita Key, Elliot Key, and Adams Key) — there are no ferries or bridges, and only one mile of road in the entire park.

DO THERE: Boating is the most popular activity here, but it's BYO, accessible by nearby marinas. For those without large boats, such as sailboats, or much boating experience, you can explore mangroves on the shoreline and the shallow bay waters by canoe or kayak, either on a guided tour or on your own. Experienced kayakers can cross the 7-mile stretch from Convoy Point to set up camp on Elliot or Boca Chita key. Elliot Key is the largest and most developed, with waterside and forested campsites, picnic tables and grills, restrooms with sinks and showers, drinking water, and a 7-mile trail.

Scuba and snorkeling enthusiasts will want to explore the park's many shipwrecks on the only underwater archaeological trail in the National Park System. But like most of the park, access is by boat only. While the park doesn't currently have a concessionaire offering boat rentals, call before you come to see if that has changed.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Everglades NP
- 2 Big Cypress NP
- 3 Dry Tortugas NP



CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

Atlanta, GA



National Park Service

Flowing nearly the entire length of Georgia and forming the southern border between its home state and Alabama, the Chattahoochee River has become famous in recent years as stakeholders fight for use of its natural resources. Thankfully, one stretch of the river above metro Atlanta has been preserved as a recreation area for all to enjoy.

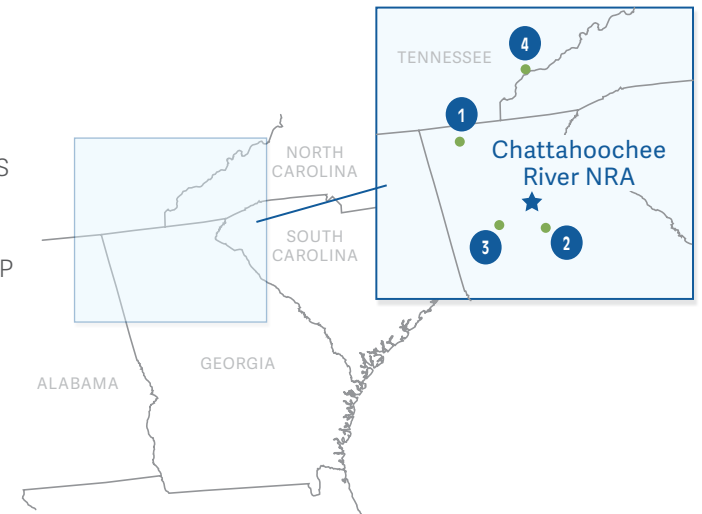
GET THERE: In a city known for its wicked traffic, getting off the road and into the water is a welcome diversion. This national park north of the city gives access to a 48-mile stretch of the Chattahoochee River that provides water and sustenance to the metropolitan area and its growing population. Residents of large northern suburbs like Marietta and Roswell can access the recreation area within minutes, while those living downtown or other coordinates along the city's perimeter can be there in less than an hour.

DO THERE: Boating by canoe or kayak and floating by raft or tube are exquisitely leisurely thanks to calm, cool waters with only the occasional class I or II rapids. Enter the water via multiple access points from Buford Dam to Chattahoochee River Park, and Morgan Falls Dam to Paces Mill, the last takeout point in the recreation area. Be sure to check the latest info about dam releases before planning a trip, and always wear a personal flotation device. Check local companies for boat rentals and fishing guide services.

Cyclists can also find opportunities to take a spin along the Chattahoochee River on about seven miles of trails in the Cochran Shoals and Palisades areas. Bikers can add these trails to their regular local road routes, and hikers (along with their pets) are also welcome.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Chickamauga and Chattanooga NMP
- 2 Martin Luther King, Jr. NHS
- 3 Kennesaw Mountain NBP
- 4 Great Smoky Mountains NP



BOSTON NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Boston, MA



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A city so important to the American Revolution deserves to be explored with history as the primary entertainment. Even longtime residents of Boston should set aside time to remind themselves of their home's rich history. The historical park includes many sites, with activities for amateur historians and military buffs of any age.

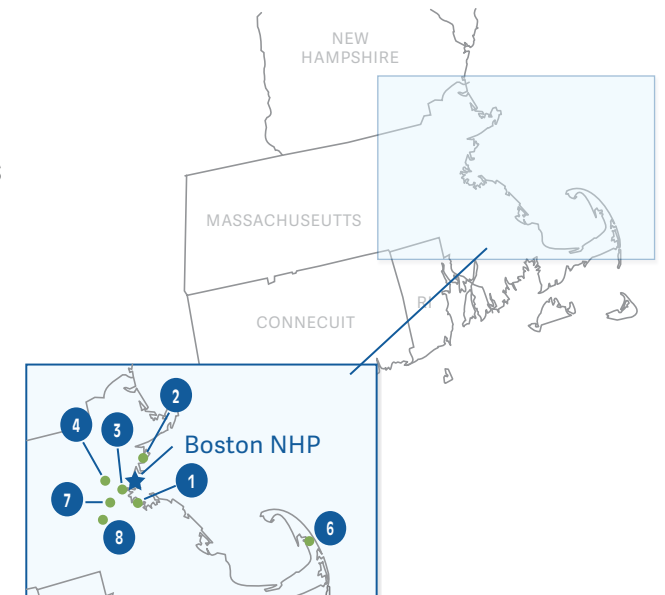
GET THERE: The downtown park includes two visitor centers: Faneuil Hall on Congress Street and Charlestown Navy Yard at Pier 3. Faneuil Hall is one of the older markets and meeting places in Boston, and the Navy Yard was one of the first in the country.

DO THERE: The National Park Service offers so many guided interpretive tours in Boston that it'd be a shame not to partake. Check the calendar and join a talk at Faneuil Hall, Bunker Hill National Monument (memorializing a key battle in the Revolutionary War), or Charlestown Navy Yard. You'll learn more about everything from the Boston Massacre of 1770 to the role of naval ships during the Cold War.

Continue on to explore historic Boston on your own, hitting more of the major sites along the city's Freedom Trail, including the Old State House, Paul Revere House, Old North Church (where Revere famously hung lanterns to warn patriots of the British invasion), and the USS Constitution, also known as "Old Ironsides" for her stalwart performance in the War of 1812. For help navigating so much American history, be sure to download the park's mobile app; search for "Boston National Historical Park" in your phone's app store.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Boston Harbor Island NRA
- 2 Salem Maritime NHS
- 3 Boston African American NHS
- 4 Longfellow House NHS
- 5 Cape Cod NS
- 6 John F. Kennedy NHS
- 7 Frederick Olmsted NHS



ALCATRAZ ISLAND

San Francisco, CA



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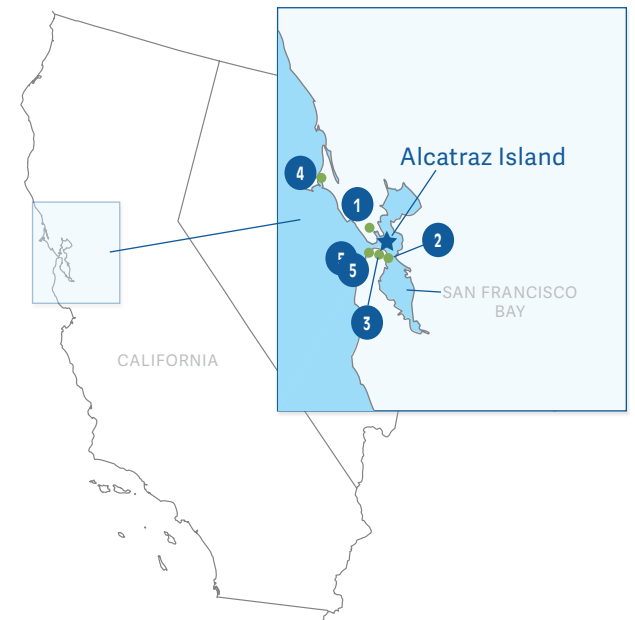
Going to prison on your day off doesn't sound like fun, but Alcatraz may change your mind. Here, you can visit the federal penitentiary made famous by movies like "Escape From Alcatraz" and "The Rock". You can also see the first lighthouse and U.S. fort on the West Coast, learn about the American Indian fight for equality, and explore the natural wonders, from birds to bay views, this special place freely offers.

GET THERE: The only way to Alcatraz (and the only way out) is the Alcatraz Cruises ferry leaving from Pier 33 at the Embarcadero, just south of Fisherman's Wharf in downtown San Francisco. Parking near the ferry is tough, so public transportation is recommended. Reserving your space on the ferry beforehand is also suggested, especially during summer and the holiday season.

DO THERE: Tour the infamous site to discover stories of incarceration and escape. Visitors looking for a night adventure can take the evening ferry ride, which circles the island and includes a guided tour of the prison and its cells. (The daytime tour is self-guided.) But Alcatraz isn't all about prison. You may also be surprised to learn about the island's military and natural history, as well as about the American Indian occupation of 1969, when a group of Native Americans came to the island to symbolically reclaim it for indigenous people. While the demands of the group regarding Alcatraz Island weren't met, the occupation raised awareness of American Indian concerns, led to concession of some tribal lands, and sparked a movement that continues today.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Muir Woods NM
- 2 Maritime NHP
- 3 Golden Gate NRA
- 4 Point Reyes NS
- 5 Fort Point NHS



CASA GRANDE RUINS NATIONAL MONUMENT

Phoenix, AZ



National Park Service

An hour south of Phoenix (also an hour north of Tucson), explore a monument that provides insight into the great Sonoran people who lived and farmed in the Southwest for more than 2,000 years, and learn about the remarkable efforts to preserve it and other treasures of the region in the early days of the National Park Service.

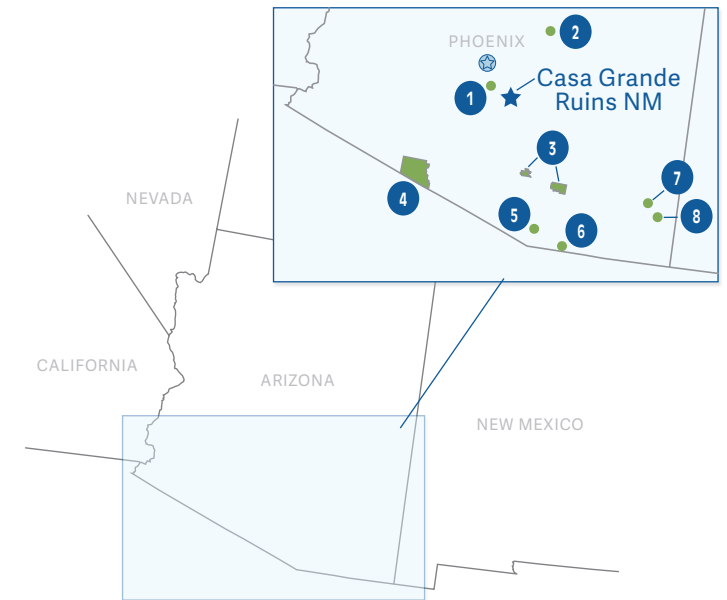
GET THERE: Casa Grande, which means “Great House,” is an easy drive from Phoenix or Tucson on I-10. Follow signs to the monument near Coolidge.

DO THERE: A stop in the visitor center and a short self-guided walk around the grounds gives you a sense of the place’s history. While archaeologists aren’t sure of its purpose, they believe this was one of the largest prehistoric structures in North America. It was possibly a gathering place for ancient Sonoran Desert people who developed wide-scale farming practices, including extensive canals and trade routes throughout the area.

One of the first things you’ll notice is the modern open-sided shelter built over the primary ruins, first constructed in 1903 and then upgraded in 1932. Strong efforts by several famous East Coast anthropologists and philanthropists shined a light on Casa Grande in the late 1880s that led President Benjamin Harrison to declare it as the first prehistoric and cultural reserve in the U.S., a major step toward the creation of the National Park System. In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson declared the site a national monument, and it became part of the two-year-old National Park System.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Hohokam Pima NM
- 2 Tonto NM
- 3 Saguaro NP
- 4 Organ Pipe Cactus NM
- 5 Tumacácori NHP
- 6 Coronado NM
- 7 Fort Bowie NHS
- 8 Chiricahua NM



RIVER RAISIN NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD PARK

Detroit, MI



National Park Service

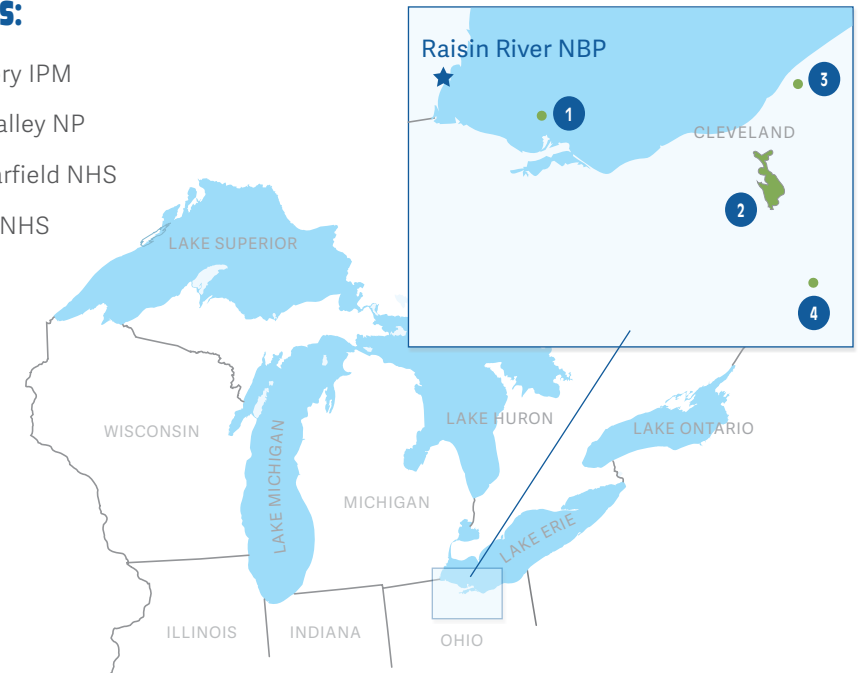
“Remember the Raisin!” That battle cry, recalling a crushing defeat by the British, Canadians, and American Indians at this site, eventually spurred the American troops on to success during the War of 1812. This area changed hands many times in the early days of our country, from American Indians (Pottawatomi and Wyandot Tribes), to French settlers, to the British, and then the Americans. This is the only national battlefield park devoted to the War of 1812 that secured the Northwest Territory for the U.S.

GET THERE: Find the park along the shore of Lake Erie near Monroe (once called Frenchtown), just 35 miles outside of Detroit. A short drive on I-75 from Detroit will get you there. The park is 270 miles from Chicago. Stop in the visitor center first to brush up on your War of 1812 history and learn more about the Battles of the River Raisin. True history buffs should look into the Route 1812 Driving Tour through Michigan, Ohio, and Ontario; along the way, relive some of the most important events — from heroic to cowardly — of the war.

DO THERE: Walk the paved and accessible 0.6-mile Battlefield Loop Trail, taking time to stop and read the historical markers along the way. The loop is part of the River Raisin Heritage Trail, an 8-mile paved greenway linking the major historic sites; national, state, and local parks; and natural features. Especially if you live in Detroit, check the park calendar often to learn about upcoming events — the park plans tons of activities for kids and families, as well as connoisseurs of war history, from evening concerts to reenactments.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Perry's Victory IPM
- 2 Cuyahoga Valley NP
- 3 James A. Garfield NHS
- 4 First Ladies NHS



OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK

Seattle, WA



Bigstock/Andrushko Galyna

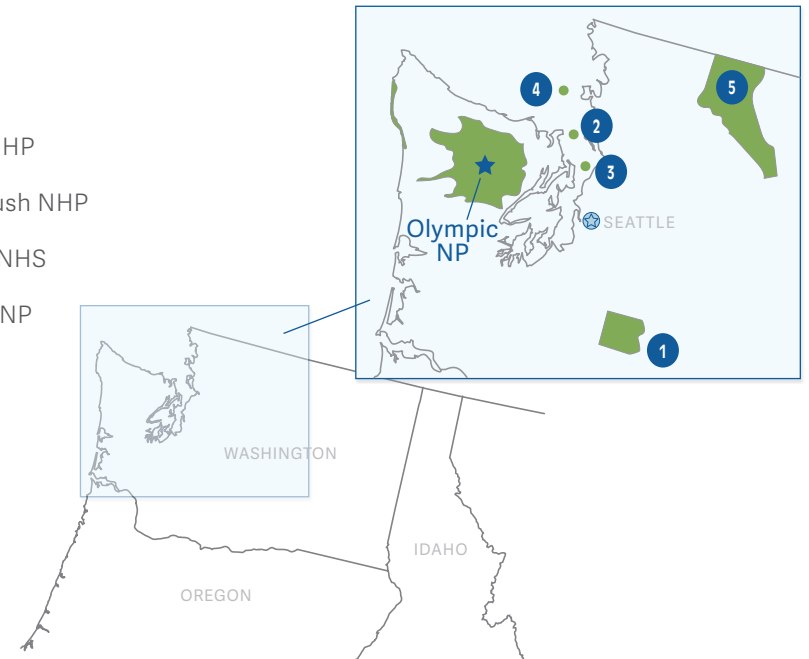
With 95% of its acres designated as wilderness, much of Olympic National Park is best explored on foot over many days. But that doesn't mean you can't enjoy the park on a day trip. In fact, that may be one of the best ways to get a taste for everything this diverse piece of the Pacific Northwest has to offer.

GET THERE: The most direct tour from Seattle is via the Bainbridge Island Ferry to the north end of the park, but you can also take I-5 for a two-hour drive to the park's southern border on the Olympic Peninsula. The park is open year-round but some roads may not be accessible in winter, so plan ahead.

DO THERE: With distinct zones — mountains, forests, and coast — Olympic is like three parks in one. You can experience them all in one day's road trip for a sampling of what the park offers, or try to focus on one region. If the former, plan your loop route to include Hurricane Ridge, the Hoh Rain Forest, and Rialto Beach. It's best to start the morning at Hurricane Ridge so you'll end up on the beach around sunset. Leave time to make stops at the visitor centers along the way and to explore nature trails around them. If the latter, you can still aim for these sites, but give yourself more time to explore. Lake Crescent is another easily accessible favorite, where you can explore 12 miles along the pristine glacially-carved lake. Lake Crescent Lodge is a classic choice for an overnight stay.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Mt. Rainier NP
- 2 Ebey's Landing NHP
- 3 Klondike Gold Rush NHP
- 4 San Juan Island NHS
- 5 North Cascades NP



MISSISSIPPI NATIONAL RIVER AND RECREATION AREA

St. Paul, MN



iStock/Dave15957

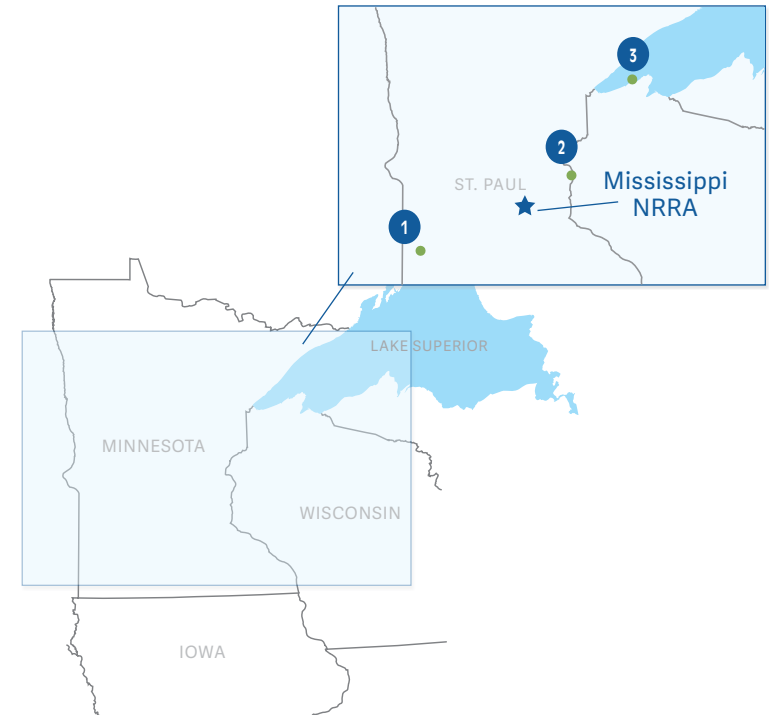
As you look at the map of this park, which follows along 72 miles of the Mississippi River above, through, and below the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, you'll notice many designations of national, state, and city parks and refuges. This is a "partnership" project, meaning the National Park Service collaborates with other entities to protect and manage the park's 54,000 acres. No matter the designation, the park provides access to the headwaters of the greatest river in the U.S. for all to safely enjoy.

GET THERE: There are numerous entry points to this long stretch of river park, but you can get a great introduction at the main visitor center in the Science Museum of Minnesota in downtown St. Paul. The park can be accessed by public transportation, car, bike, and on foot, depending on your plans.

DO THERE: From biking and hiking to boating and fishing, options are nearly limitless. Check the latest park calendars for ranger-led programs and events for kids and adults. Those interested in getting on the water should check out the Mississippi River Companion, a guidebook with maps of trails, boat landings, and paddling stretches along the river, as well as detailed information about rental and mass transit options. Locals should plan to take the river section by section, from the scenic north through the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul to the southern forests and floodplains.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Pipestone NM
- 2 Saint Croix NSR
- 3 Apostle Islands NL



CABRILLO NATIONAL MONUMENT

San Diego, CA



iStock/Ron Thomas

In 1542, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo became the first European to step onto the West Coast of what is now the United States. Now, San Diego residents and tourists can travel just a few miles out on Point Loma peninsula to step back in time and rediscover the history of the city while taking in some of its most magnificent views.

GET THERE: The monument lies at the end of Point Loma peninsula and Catalina Boulevard (also called Cabrillo Memorial Drive), part of San Diego’s 59-mile scenic drive. The history of this peninsula is part of the experience, starting with 7,000-year-old archaeological remnants from native cultures, to Spanish colonialism in the 1700s, to conversion of the area to a military reservation in the 1850s, including a national cemetery established in the 1930s that today honors more than 86,000 veterans.

DO THERE: Start in the visitor center to get oriented to the place and the history it holds. As a peninsula, the park is surrounded by water, with magnificent views of the ocean and San Diego, the city on its shores. From the visitor center, walk to the restored Old Point Loma Lighthouse, and then proceed from the lighthouse through coastal sage scrub forest for views of the harbor; in spring, you’re sure to spot wildflowers on this walk. If you visit in January and February, walk south from the lighthouse to Whale Overlook for spectacular views of the Pacific Ocean.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Juan Bautista NHT
- 2 Joshua Tree NP



CASTILLO DE SAN MARCOS NATIONAL MONUMENT

Jacksonville, FL



iStock/benkrrut

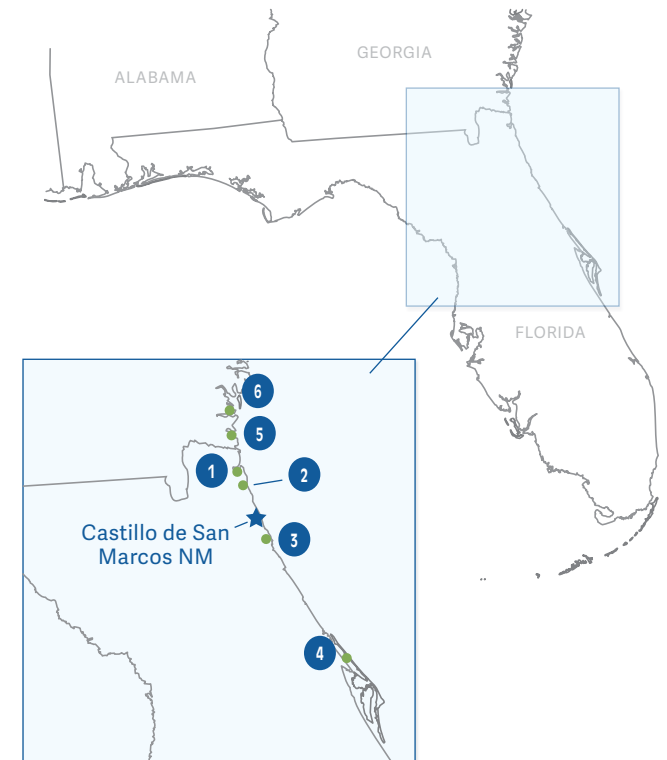
This monument, a fortification originally surrounding the Spanish colonial city of St. Augustine, Florida, holds many accolades. It's one of only three walled cities constructed in North America (along with Québec, Canada and Charleston, S.C.). And it's one of only two forts built using a semi-rare form of limestone called coquina that proved strong against cannon fire and hurricanes (the other is Fort Matanzas, 14 miles south). At more than 450 years old, it's one of the best and most enduring examples of colonial life, struggle, and determination in the U.S.

GET THERE: Find the monument in historic downtown St. Augustine, 40 miles south of Jacksonville on Highway A1A. If you're a resident or tourist anywhere in the area, a day trip to St. Augustine and Castillo San Marcos will whet your appetite for early American history.

DO THERE: Take a seat for the park's 25-minute video that outlines the fort's place in history and includes an explanation and demonstration of historic weaponry. Walk around the fort's casements to experience varying exhibits explaining events here. You'll likely run into reenactors in period clothing giving presentations about life at Castillo de San Marcos and the colonial experience.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Timucuan Ecological & Historic Preserve
- 2 Fort Caroline NM
- 3 Fort Matanzas NM
- 4 Canaveral NS
- 5 Cumberland Island NS
- 6 Fort Frederica NM



JEFFERSON NATIONAL EXPANSION MEMORIAL

St. Louis, MO



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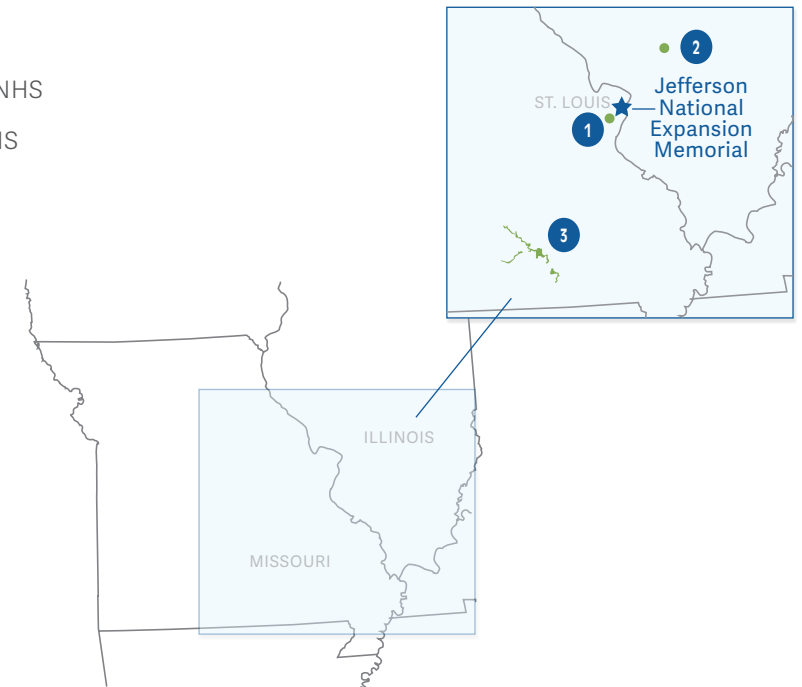
The Gateway Arch celebrates St. Louis's role in the westward expansion of the U.S. and serves as a monument to the spirit of western pioneers. With foundations sunk 60 feet into the ground, it's built to withstand earthquakes and high winds and to sway up to 18 inches. Passing through the arch is a must for road trippers heading west.

GET THERE: The memorial is located in the heart of downtown St. Louis and is hard to miss. Crowds can be heavy in the spring and summer, though extended hours and lighter traffic make summer evenings a good option; also try a trip in fall or winter, when you'll likely have little to no wait and the weather is generally pleasant.

DO THERE: In 2015, the Museum of Westward Expansion went under construction to make way for a new museum and visitor center. Call or check the latest info on the park website for closures and openings. You can still experience the arch, though. A tram ride to the top is a must — there, you'll get a phenomenal view of the St. Louis area. Day-of tickets aren't available for purchase, so be sure to secure tram tickets ahead of time. You can also rent a bike (or bring your own) and explore the 11-mile Riverfront Trail along the Mississippi River, starting at the Arch. If possible, be sure to walk back by the Arch to see it illuminated at night — still today, it stands as a beacon to opportunity in the American West.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Ulysses S. Grant NHS
- 2 Lincoln Home NHS
- 3 Ozarc NSR



FORT MCHENRY NATIONAL MONUMENT

Baltimore, MD



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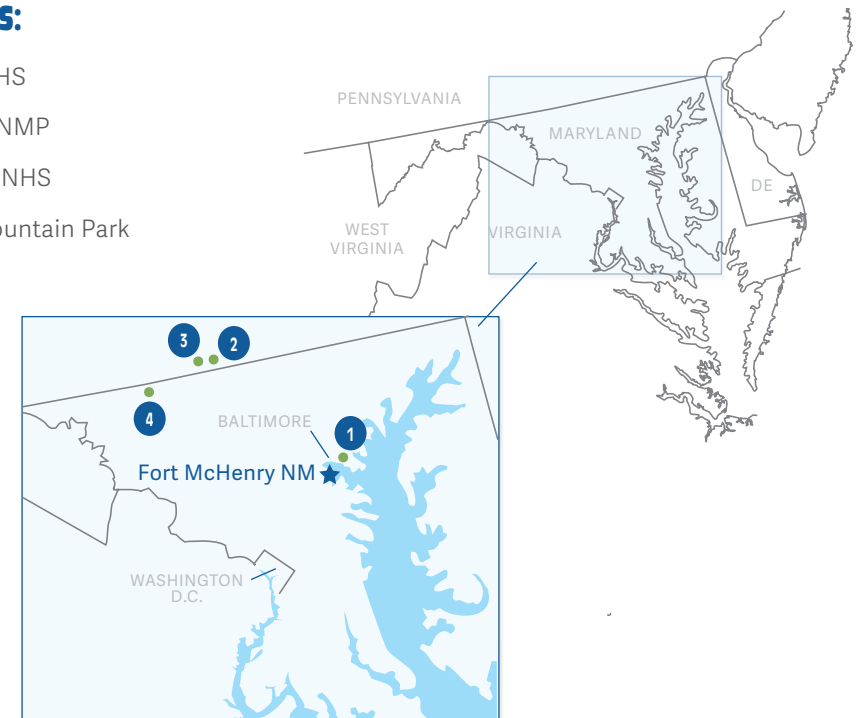
This fort's star-shaped construction (completed during the Revolutionary War) foretold its primary significance to American culture — the successfully valiant defense of Fort McHenry during the 1814 Battle of Baltimore inspired Francis Scott Key to compose one of our country's most beloved songs and its national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

GET THERE: The park is so close to the action in downtown Baltimore that there's no excuse for tourists and locals alike to miss this piece of American history. Find the park entrance just 3 miles southeast of Baltimore's Inner Harbor off I-95.

DO THERE: Fort McHenry was vital to the formation and preservation of the early United States and to the development of Baltimore as a great coastal city. It played a role in every major conflict from the Revolutionary War to World War I, when a hospital here served as a major surgical center for wounded soldiers returning from Europe. After WWI, the fort was turned over to the National Park Service for restoration and preservation. Begin a self-guided tour at the visitor center. During summer, you're likely to experience living history exhibits, including drill, musket, and artillery demonstrations. Plan a visit on Flag Day (June 14) for a special treat.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Hampton NHS
- 2 Gettysburg NMP
- 3 Eisenhower NHS
- 4 Catocin Mountain Park



FORT SUMTER NATIONAL MONUMENT

Charleston, SC



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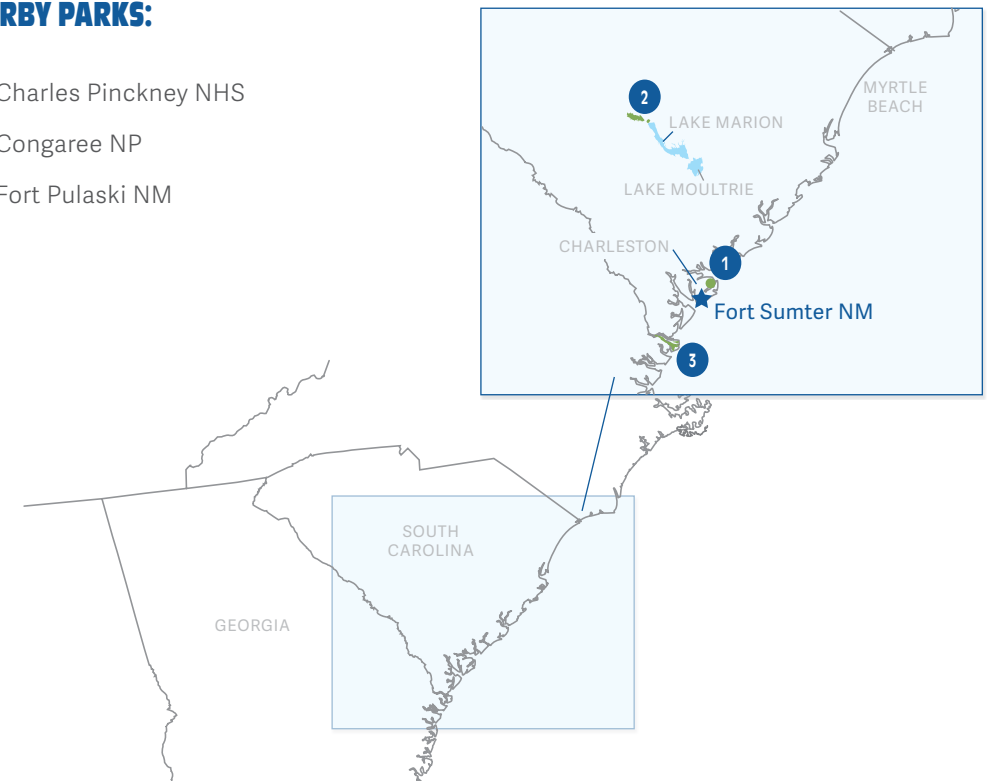
Here, the American Civil War began on April 12, 1861, when Confederate artillery opened fire on federally controlled Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Federal troops surrendered after 34 hours, leading to more than four years of our country's bloodiest and darkest times.

GET THERE: Start from the Fort Sumter Visitor Education Center on Concord Street in downtown Charleston at Liberty Square. The fort itself is accessible only by ferry, leaving from the visitor center, or by private boat.

DO THERE: Tour Fort Sumter for a better understanding of early Civil War history as well as for sweeping views of the city of Charleston and Charleston Harbor. During the 30-minute ferry ride, you'll get briefed on the history of this place where the first shots of the Civil War were fired. At the fort, you'll see one of the best collections of 19th-century seacoast artillery anywhere in the United States. Ranger-guided sunset tours are available March through October.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Charles Pinckney NHS
- 2 Congaree NP
- 3 Fort Pulaski NM



HARRY S. TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Kansas, MO



National Park Service

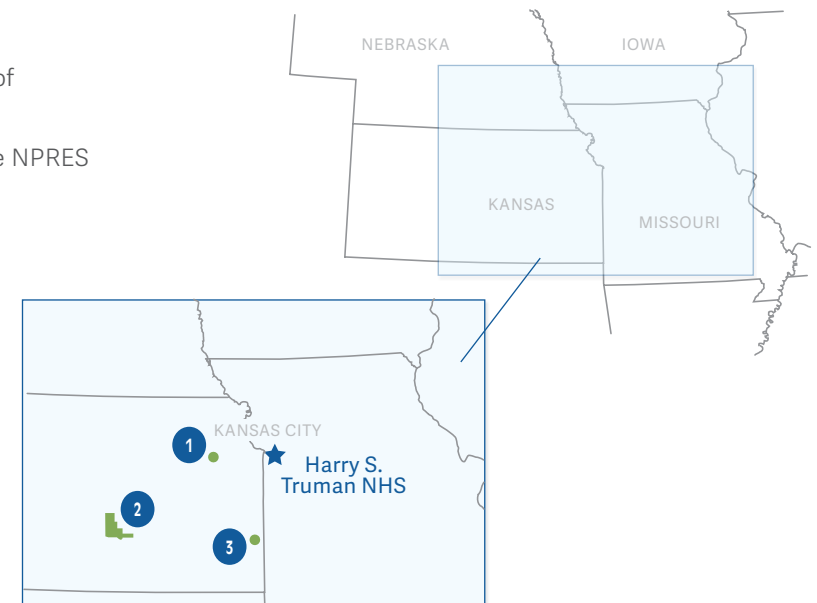
The 33rd President of the United States (1945-1953), Harry S. Truman is credited with taking the country from a period of isolationism into an international age. The Missouri farm boy was Franklin D. Roosevelt's running mate in 1944 and became president in 1945 when Roosevelt died. The Truman era saw World War II end and the Cold War begin, but here, you'll get to know more about the man before he became the nation's leader.

GET THERE: The visitor center and Truman Home are located on Truman Road in downtown Independence, Missouri, within a few blocks of the Truman Presidential Library & Museum. Independence is part of the Kansas City metropolitan area and just 35 miles from the Kansas City airport. Another site, the Truman Farm Home, is a short car ride away from Independence in Grandview.

DO THERE: Start at the visitor center to brush up on your presidential history and knowledge about this president. Then take a tour of the Truman Home, a beautiful white Victorian originally built by the family of Truman's wife, Bess, in 1867. This was the primary home of the president from 1919, when he and Bess married, until he died in 1972. To understand Harry Truman, though, it's important to also visit the Truman Family Farm and Home, where 22-year-old Harry worked alongside his parents, grandmother, sister, and brother for 11 years, leaving behind a promising banking career in Kansas City to help out his family. Enjoy a self-guided tour of the farmhouse and 10 surrounding acres where this future president spent his formative years.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Brown v. Board of Education NHS
- 2 Tall Grass Prairie NPRES
- 3 Fort Scott NHS



FORT VANCOUVER NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Portland, OR



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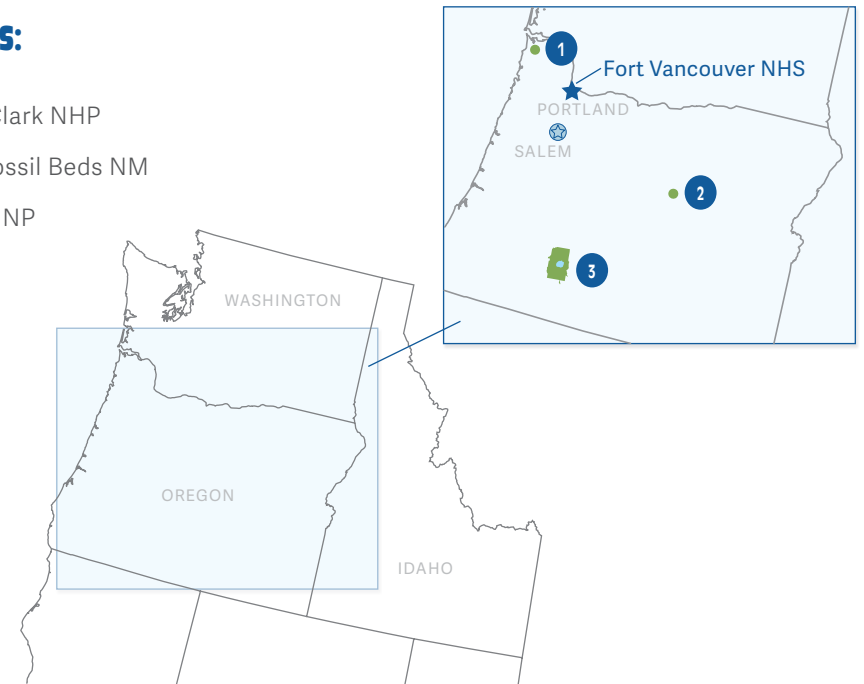
At this site in the Pacific Northwest, many cultures merged. In 1825, it was originally established by the British Hudson Bay Company, which focused on the fur trade, but Fort Vancouver saw as many American Indians, French Canadians, and American settlers come and go as it did British citizens. It later became a western outpost for the U.S. Army. Today, it serves as one of the most important archaeological resources in the region.

GET THERE: The majority of this national park lies just across the Columbia River in Vancouver, W.A., a few minutes from downtown Portland. It includes the East & South Vancouver Barracks, a reconstructed fur-trade era Fort Vancouver, the Parade Ground, a park along the river, and the Pearson Air Museum. A second site, 25 miles away in Oregon City, O.R., includes the McLoughlin House, the original home of the fort's chief benefactor, a doctor who was known for welcoming weary travelers arriving here at the end of the Oregon Trail.

DO THERE: Every visitor will enjoy exploring the archaeological sites preserved and restored here, but programs designed for kids are especially welcome. The summer Kids Dig! program introduces youngsters aged 8-12 to the wonders of archaeology with hands-on experiences: excavating with trowels, screening dirt, and measuring and mapping discoveries. Local families should definitely consider planning ahead for this unique summer field school.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Lewis and Clark NHP
- 2 John Day Fossil Beds NM
- 3 Crater Lake NP



TULE SPRINGS FOSSIL BEDS NATIONAL MONUMENT

Las Vegas, NV



National Park Service

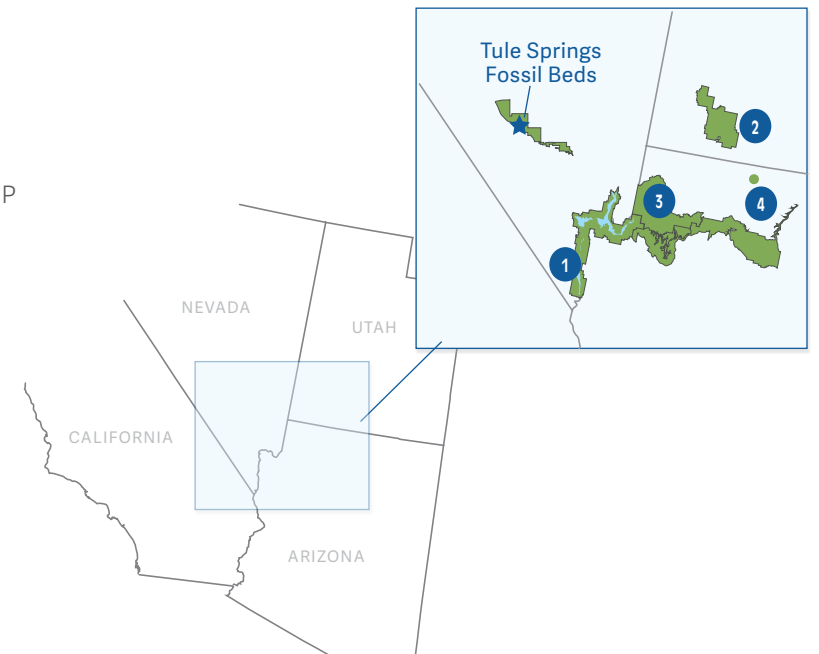
In Las Vegas, there's the legal gambling age and the drinking age, but what about the Ice Age? Just beyond the glitz and glare of Las Vegas, one of the newest national parks highlights a very different part of the Nevada desert, a rugged, seemingly barren badlands that holds prehistoric secrets. Here you'll find the first national park to preserve and interpret the Ice Age (also called the Pleistocene Epoch).

GET THERE: Whether you're a Vegas local or a tourist, it's worth taking the time to imagine what this area was like 200,000 years ago. The park is located 20 miles north of the Las Vegas Strip, along US-95 in the Upper Las Vegas Wash. Because it's a new park, there are no roads, designated trails, parking areas, or facilities yet. You can get there by bus, bike, or car, but if the latter, you'll need to park on nearby public roads.

DO THERE: Paleontologists believe that Tule Springs may be the greatest record of Ice Age fossils in the world. Scientific interest in the area began in the early 1960s, when they created the "Big Dig" excavation and uncovered a wealth of fossils, including the Columbian mammoth. You can access this portion of the monument from the south along North Decatur Boulevard and walk among the trenches, looking for fossils. But remember the saying: Leave only footprints and take only pictures. You'll capture amazing photos of fossils, flowers, and desert sunsets, but you must leave anything you find for visitors to experience for generations to come.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Lake Mead NRA
- 2 Zion NP
- 3 Grand Canyon NP
- 4 Pipe Spring NM



JEAN LAFITTE NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK

New Orleans, LA



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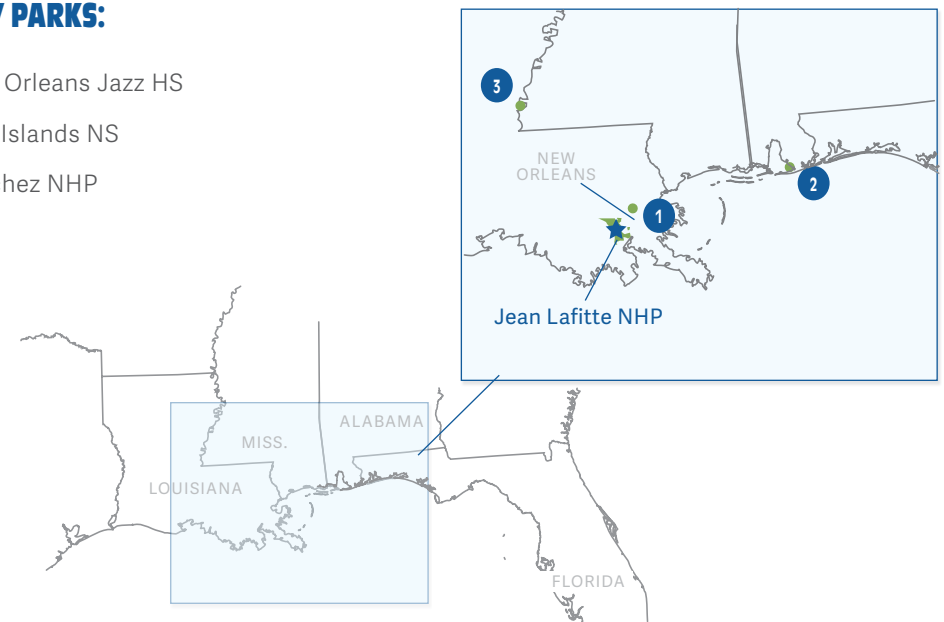
Here, the park system pays homage to the people and traditions that make south Louisiana unique, not in one location but in six separate sites that together paint a picture of an unparalleled place in America. Sites include Barataria Preserve in Marrero, Chalmette Battlefield and National Cemetery in Chalmette, French Quarter Visitor Center in New Orleans, Acadian Cultural Center in Lafayette, Prairie Acadian Cultural Center in Eunice, and Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center in Thibodaux. Plan to visit all the sites, though it's not necessary to try and see them all in one trip. If you're a local, check them off one at a time.

GET THERE: Check the calendar and plan around special events, from ranger-led history strolls in the Quarter, to wetlands walks in Barataria, to Cajun music jams at the Acadian cultural centers. Driving is the only option for most of the sites, though you can take public transportation to the French Quarter in New Orleans. For more immersion, cruise the Mississippi River on the Creole Queen from the Quarter to Chalmette Battlefield. Over the next couple of hours, you'll get a full history lesson about the 1815 Battle of New Orleans, a walk around the battlefield and a great view of the Port of New Orleans.

DO THERE: Birders and other nature lovers will flock to Barataria, where the native wetland ecosystem is on display. History buffs will enjoy Chalmette. Lovers of music and great food won't want to miss the three Acadian cultural centers, which tell the interesting story of the Cajun people, who made their way here in the 1700s from France by way of Nova Scotia. Check the calendar to catch a Cajun jam at one of these locations; the Thibodaux center is closest to New Orleans, while Lafayette and Eunice are near Baton Rouge. Note that all sites are closed on federal holidays and, of course, on Mardi Gras.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 New Orleans Jazz HS
- 2 Gulf Islands NS
- 3 Natchez NHP



TIMPANOGOS CAVE NATIONAL MONUMENT

Salt Lake City, UT



iStock/ryan_christensen

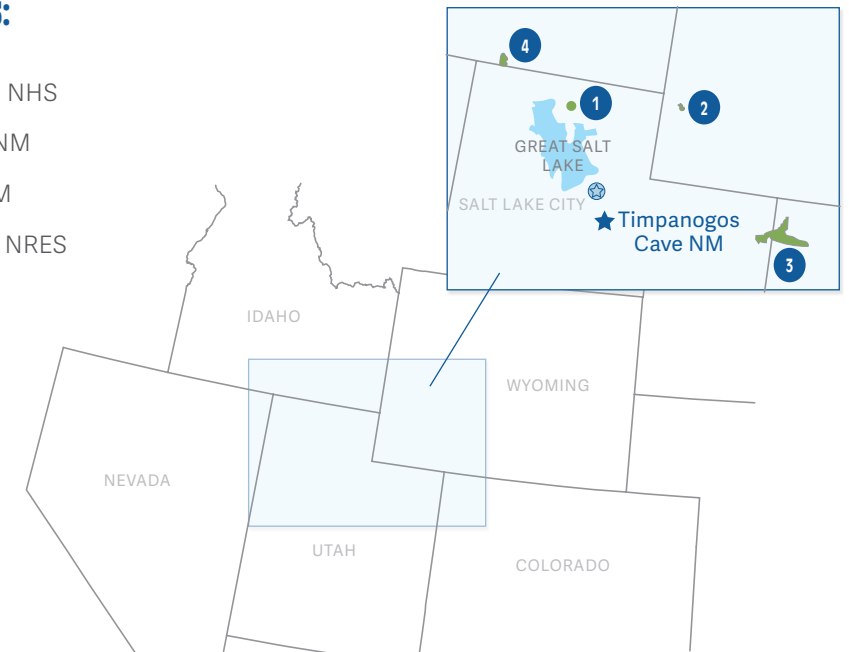
Caving always highlights the contrast between the aboveground and underground worlds, and in a landscape as vast and wide open as Utah, this sense is only heightened. At Timpanogos in the Wasatch Mountains, you'll experience both — spectacular canyons above the surface, and ethereal formations below.

GET THERE: Access the northern Utah park just 40 miles south of Salt Lake City. (Interstate 15 provides the quickest route.) The park is located a few miles up American Fork Canyon, which offers stunning, unfettered views. The park is open seasonally from mid-May to mid-October.

DO THERE: Tour the limestone caves with a ranger guide — it's your best and only option. Purchasing tickets in advance (\$16 per person), online or by phone, is highly recommended; while you can show up without a ticket, you'll likely have to wait to join a tour, or worse, get turned away for the day. Be prepared for a strenuous walk to the cave entrance: 1.5 miles on a paved trail gaining 1,100 feet in elevation. The minimum age for touring the cave is 14. Come prepared for the change in temperatures, sometimes as drastic as 100 degrees outside and 45 degrees inside the cave. Wear close-toed hiking shoes, good gloves, long pants and sleeves, and a jacket or sweatshirt, and bring water, caving helmets, headlamps, and an incredible experience will be provided.

NEARBY PARKS:

- 1 Golden Spike NHS
- 2 Fossil Butte NM
- 3 Dinosaur NM
- 4 City of Rocks NRES



DIRECTORY

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 — so lace up your boots, pack your bag, and set out on a national park adventure uniquely your own!

To help you get started on your next national park adventure, here is a directory of all 24 parks featured in this guide. Happy Planning!

Statue Of Liberty National Monument

New York City, NY | 212-363-3200 | www.nps.gov/stli

Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area

Calabasas, CA | 805-370-2300 | www.nps.gov/samo

Pullman National Monument

Chicago, IL | 773-264-7431 | www.nps.gov/pull

Big Thicket National Preserve

Kountze, TX | 409-951-6700 | www.nps.gov/bith

Independence National Historic Park

Philadelphia, PA | 215-965-2305 | www.nps.gov/inde

National Mall & Memorial Parks

Washington, DC | 202-426-6841 | www.nps.gov/nama

Biscayne National Park

Homestead, FL | 305-230-1144 x555 | www.nps.gov/bisc

Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area

Sandy Springs, GA | 678-538-1200 | www.nps.gov/chat

Boston National Historical Park

Boston, MA | 617-242-5642 | www.nps.gov/bost

Alcatraz Island

San Francisco, CA | 415-561-4900 | www.nps.gov/alca

Casa Grande Ruins National Monument

Coolidge, AZ | 520-723-3172 | www.nps.gov/cagr

River Raisin National Battlefield Park

Monroe, MI | 734-243-7136 | www.nps.gov/rira

Olympic National Park

Port Angeles, WA | 360-565-3130 | www.nps.gov/olym

Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

St. Paul, MN | 651-290-4160 | www.nps.gov/miss

Cabrillo National Monument

San Diego, CA | 619-557-5450 | www.nps.gov/cabr

Castillo de San Marcos National Monument

St Augustine, FL | 904-829-6506 | www.nps.gov/casa

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

St. Louis, MO | 314-655-1700 | www.nps.gov/jeff

Fort Mchenry National Monument

Baltimore, MD | 410-962-4290 | www.nps.gov/fomc

Fort Sumter

Sullivan’s Island, SC | 843-883-3123 | www.nps.gov/fosu

Harry S. Truman National Historic Site

Grandview, MO | 816-461-5550 | www.nps.gov/hstr

Fort Vancouver National Historic Site

Vancouver, WA | 360-816-6232 | www.nps.gov/fova

Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument

Boulder City, NV | 702-293-TULE | www.nps.gov/tusk

Jean Lafitte National Historic Park

Marrero, LA | 504-589-3882 | www.nps.gov/jela

Timpanogos Cave National Monument

American Fork, UT | 801-756-5238 | www.nps.gov/tica

ABBREVIATIONS KEY

NB—National Battlefield

NBP—National Battlefield Park

NBS—National Battlefield Site

NHP—National Historical Park

NHS—National Historic Site

NL—National Lakeshore

NM—National Monument

NMP—National Military Park

NP—National Park

NP and PRES—National Park and Preserve

N PRES—National Preserve

NRA—National Recreation Area

NRR—National Recreation River

NRRA—National River and Recreation Area

NS—National Seashore

NSR—National Scenic River/Riverway

NST—National Scenic Trail

Olympic National Park

NATIONAL PARK FOUNDATION | We are all owners of 84 million acres of the world's most treasured places – all protected in America's more than 400 national parks. Chartered by Congress, the National Park Foundation is the official charity of America's national parks and nonprofit partner of the National Park Service. Dedicated to enriching America's national parks and programs through private support, the National Park Foundation helps to PROTECT America's national parks through critical conservation and preservation efforts, CONNECT all Americans with their incomparable natural landscapes, vibrant culture and rich history, and INSPIRE the next generation of park stewards. Together, we can make a difference – this is your land. Learn more at www.nationalparks.org.

FIND YOUR PARK

The National Park Service and the National Park Foundation are inviting people everywhere to discover their own personal connections to parks. So much more than vast landscapes, there are urban parks, cultural treasures, and historical places—all within the National Park System. A park can even be a feeling or a state of mind. You may also find that a National Park Service program helped preserve a special place in your community. With more than 400 national parks and thousands of historic and recreational lands across the country, there are endless ways for you to find your unique connection.

If you've already found your park, please share your story with us using #findyourpark or by going to findyourpark.com. If you haven't found your park just yet, visit findyourpark.com for more ideas and inspiration.

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