



National Parks US

U.S. National Parks: Adventure Sea to Shining Sea



In 1872, Yellowstone National Park became the first national park in the United States. Today, there are 390 areas under the National Park domain. Every state with the exception of Delaware has some National Park Service land. This land includes national parks, monuments, battlefields, military parks, historical parks, lake and sea shores, rivers, trails, historic sites, and the White House.

The National Park system provides plenty of opportunity for a variety of vacations and tours. Well over 250,000,000 people visit these sites every year. From educational tours, back-to-nature experiences to relaxing seaside vacations, the plethora of opportunities for recreation at the National Parks is endless.



Half Dome in Yosemite National Park

Use this article to assist you in planning your visit to a National Park. Whether you are flying or driving, your travel consultant can assist you with transportation choices, accommodations along the way and at the park, as well as with very important travel advice that will keep you focused on your vacation and visit rather than on the logistics of travel. In addition to independently planned trips to any national park, your travel agent will also have access to special tour packages that provide additional amenities, guides, transportation and meals often not available to those booking independent tours. Many tour operators have access to special



Redwood National Park, California

accommodations and provide logistical support for groups. In some instances, tour operators provide excursions to multiple national parks in a single tour, allowing the traveler to sit back, relax and let someone else do the driving. Many such tours are nearly all inclusive, encompassing meals, transportation, accommodations and all passes, organizing the traveler's time so that travel and sightseeing is efficient and affordably on budget.

The mission of the National Park Service is to "preserve the natural and cultural resources for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of this and future generations."

Along those lines, vacations to the National Park Service

sites should follow that goal. You wouldn't find amusement parks and fast rides at the sites but you will find just about everything else, even shops at many of the parks.

Choosing the National Park Service site for a vacation depends on your budget, your time allotment and most of all, your idea of a vacation. Many National Park Service sites have park rangers that lead programs including interpretive walks and hikes, shows at the visitor centers and other special events. There are Junior Ranger programs at many parks where children can earn badges by exploring the park and performing simple tasks.

Many parks have lodging that includes simple cabins, camping areas, and rustic lodges. There are concession stands, small grocery stores and restaurants at many sites as well. And for those who always need to buy a souvenir, many have wonderful stores with books, clothes and even jewelry items for sale.

Pets are welcome at most National Park Service sites so long as they are properly restrained.

Interested in history? Visit Gettysburg National Military Park. Want to swim? Visit Assateague National Seashore. Always wanted to spot a grizzly bear? Try one of Alaska's parks. Visit the National Park Service web site at www.nps.gov to learn more about the National Park Service and to find out more about a park or site.



Haleakala Volcano, Maui

Recreational activities available vary from park to park and season to season. At many parks ,you can hike miles and miles of trails and paths on your own or participate an interpretive hike with a ranger; bike; swim; visit the visitor centers and museums and partake in events and interactive displays; ski; fish, and in some, even hunt. And of course, you can always just relax and enjoy the scenery!

At many parks there are special natural attractions to visit and watch. No one would visit Yellowstone National Park without watching Old Faithful erupt at least once!



Grand Canyon

Many of the national parks, forests and seashores are perfect settings for animal lovers. The animals are protected in the parks so there are often plentiful where you may not see them in other areas. In our national parks, you can see animals such as grizzly and black bears, elk, moose, deer, jackrabbits, squirrels, various snakes and fish, turtles, marmots, ground hogs, prairie dogs, rabbits, wolves, coyotes, manatees and even whales.

Bird watching is another favorite hobby with national park visitors. Stop in at the National Park Service visitors" and nature center when you first arrive at a park to see what

wildlife and bird sightings you can expect at that park. Of course, use caution when necessary around wild animals.

Park rangers and naturalists are well trained in local wildlife and fauna and are a wealth of knowledge for park visitors.

Some of the national parks charge an admission fee. Fees vary from park to park. For those visiting several parks per year, there is a National Parks Pass, an annual pass that provides admission to any of the national parks that charge an admission fee. Currently, the pass is \$50 for one full year. The year starts from the first use of the pass in a park. If traveling on an organized tour, pass fees are often, but not always, included in the tour fee. Be sure to ask your travel consultant.



Everglades National Park, Florida

It is important to note that when the park has a per vehicle entrance fee, the National Parks Pass admits the pass owner and any passengers in the vehicle (this is per private vehicle, not a commercial vehicle). If the park charges a per person entrance fee, the National Park Pass is good for the owner, spouse, children and parents. Passes are non-transferable. It is also important to note that the fees do not include or reduce fees for camping, tours, concessions or parking.

You may purchase or obtain a pass at any national park where an entrance fee is charged, online at www.nationalparks.org or telephone 1-888-GO-PARKS (1-888-467-2757).

A Golden Eagle sticker may be purchased for an additional \$15. The Golden Eagle provides admission to sites managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management in addition to the National Parks. This sticker is affixed to the National Parks Pass. Same restrictions apply as for the National Parks Pass.

Those who are age 62 or older are eligible for a lifetime admission and discount pass to the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Corps of Engineers, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service and the Tennessee Valley Authority sites. This pass is called the Golden Age Passport and costs \$10. You must be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident of the United States to be eligible for this pass. You will also need to show proof of age and residency.

You may also received discounts on federal use fees using your Golden Age Passport. These fees may include camping, swimming, parking, and other services.



Shenandoah National Park

The National Park Service has made tremendous strides in accessibility for those with disabilities. There are many attractions that are accessible including some trails that are wheelchair accessible or designated for those who are blind and are marked with Braille signage.

There is also a pass for those who have a permanent disability or blindness. The Golden Access Passport is free and a lifetime pass to U.S. citizens or permanent residents of the United States who have a medical determination and documentation of permanent disability or blindness. Same regulations apply as above.

Golden Age Passports and Golden Access Passports must be obtained in person at a federal area including the National Park, Wildlife Refuge, or Forest where an entrance fee is charged. Please bring appropriate documentation.

There is a variety of lodging available at many National Park Service sites. If you are arranging a tour through your travel consultant, most, if not all accommodations and meals will be a part of your tour. If you and your travel agent are arranging an independent visit to a park, other considerations are important.

Want to hear the ocean when you wake up and watch wild ponies on the seashore? Try the campsites at Assateague National Seashore. There are campsites at many national parks. For a minimal fee, campers may rent a campsite for one night to two weeks. Services are limited usually to water, campfire rings, toilets (sometimes chemical toilets) and bathhouses (again, sometimes very primitive).

Those wanting a more exotic camping experience may want to check out the Virgin Islands National Park campground at Cinnamon Bay. Accommodations here are a step up in rustic but comfy cabins right on the beach at the U.S. Virgin Island St. John. Two-thirds of the island belongs to the National Park Service which maintains the natural island beauty.

At Yellowstone, you can lie in your toasty warm bed at the Old Faithful Inn and watch the trusty Old Faithful Geyser erupt. After a day of strenuous hiking, enjoy a hot cocoa or hot toddy by one of the huge fireplaces in the center of the lodge. This rustic, homely lodge that has withstood the test of time while having welcomed such guests over the years as the late President Teddy Roosevelt.

Cabins, campgrounds and hotels/lodges are available at many National Park Services sites. The web site will provide more information. Advance reservations are strongly suggested.



Rush hour, Yellowstone National Park

It is usually very easy to get meal at one of the National Park Service sties. Many have concession stands and informal restaurants for quicker meals and those with the nicer, larger hotels or lodges often have more upscale restaurants in those locations.

Often, especially parks with campgrounds will have small grocery stores or food available in the visitor"s centers. If food isn"t available at the actual park, often there are restaurants and stores in nearby towns.

The United States is truly blessed with an absolute panorama of sites and natural wonders. Make visiting a National Park one of your travel goals soon.