



# PARK YOURSELF

# HERE

There are no lions or tigers, but America's phenomenal national parks have plenty of bears—not to mention geysers, mountains, caves, rivers, volcanoes and even something called hoodoos. Start checking off your parks bucket list with this definitive guide. BY ANDREA COOPER PHOTO BY JUSTIN BAILIE



## Find Romance

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, YOSEMITE VILLAGE, CALIFORNIA

One of the most-loved parks in the national park system has romantic spots at every turn. Cuddle by one of many waterfalls or under the shelter of the giant sequoias. Rent a raft together and drift down the Merced River, reveling in Yosemite Falls and the rock formations of Half Dome and El Capitan. For more quiet time to yourselves amid the granite cliffs, “visit Yosemite Valley after 3 in the afternoon, as people start leaving,” says Kay Pitts, who lived in the park for 32 years, including many as a bed-and-breakfast owner. Another tip from Pitts: Plan a picnic and visit Yosemite Falls or Mirror Lake while other tourists are having dinner in restaurants. In the winter, earn your hot chocolate by the fire with skiing, snow tubing and moonlight snowshoeing at Badger Pass ski area. [nps.gov/yose](http://nps.gov/yose)

**OR TRY HOLDING HANDS:** Walking among more than 2,000 sandstone arches in Utah's Arches National Park, over a beach picnic at Cumberland Island National Seashore in Georgia, on a flight among the nunataks and glaciers at Kenai Fjords or just relaxing in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. For another perspective on holding hands, visit the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., where 50 years ago this month Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech.



**GOAL**  
No. 2



## Ride a River

**NEW RIVER GORGE NATIONAL RIVER,  
GLEN JEAN, WEST VIRGINIA**

You can admire the beauty of the New River, one of the Earth's oldest, from the spectacular New River Gorge Bridge. But there's nothing like riding it, with the Appalachian Mountains all around you. The experience isn't limited to daredevil athletes. Think of the New as two rivers in one: The upper section has a gentler embrace, and outfitters offer trips on its smooth pools for children as young as 5 or seniors with no river experience, though those wanting more action will get class III rapids along the upper sections. The lower section is where you'll find the thrill of class IV or class V white water, which can take teamwork to conquer. Mighty waves and exciting runs make this one of the East Coast's most popular white-water rafting destinations. For something the entire family can do together, board the *Miss M. Rocks*, a covered jet boat, and ride upstream three miles to gaze at the New River Gorge Bridge, 876 feet above. [nps.gov/neri](http://nps.gov/neri)

**OR TRY:**

The Gauley River in West Virginia (which merges with the New), the Chattahoochee in Georgia, the Yukon-Charley rivers in Alaska or Big South Fork National River in Tennessee and Kentucky. Though most people don't associate the Grand Canyon with "river," trips on the Colorado are a dazzling way to see the canyon, from half-day flat-water excursions to multi-day white-water extravaganzas.

**GOAL**  
No. 3

## Get Cold

**DENALI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE,  
DENALI PARK, ALASKA**

You want cold? We'll give you 50 degrees below zero. Denali stretches over 6 million acres and two climate zones, so temperatures can range from above 90 degrees in the summer to get-me-out-of-here in the winter. The park is surprisingly accessible (you can even take a day-long flightseeing tour from Talkeetna or Anchorage), and visitors are rewarded with vistas of Mount McKinley, the highest peak in North America. Buses traveling the park's single 92-mile road provide a way to observe grizzly bears, caribou, moose, Dall sheep and possibly wolves. Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing let you immerse yourself in the wilderness. For something really different, outfitters offer guided dogsled expeditions for individuals and families. Kids are welcome; the youngest rider to date was two months old, sleeping in his mother's lap. Denali also has a fleet of sled dogs to help rangers patrol the park. They've got so many fans, there's a seasonal puppy webcam devoted just to them. [nps.gov/dena](http://nps.gov/dena)

**OR TRY:**

The snow-capped mountains of Glacier National Park in Montana, the waterways of Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota and the alpine hiking at Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. If you really need a chill, Gates of the Arctic in Alaska is as far north as you can go in a national park.



## GET OUT YOUR TENT

The **Wonder Lake Campground at Denali National Park** "lives up to its name," says Clemson University's Jeff Hallo. It's a bit surreal to think of poking your head out of your tent at 7 a.m. and—hello!—there's Mount McKinley. The campground near the end of the park's 92-mile road is also just a short hike to Wonder Lake, with its glasslike surface that reflects the mountain in all its majesty. One step up from camping are the cabins at **Haleakala National Park** in Hawaii, which require a hike of at least several miles past volcanic remnants to get there. **Flamingo Campground** in the **Florida Everglades** is a favorite of Audrey Peterman, a dedicated parks advocate. At the campsite, she says, "we watched flocks of wading birds, including great blue herons, wood storks, egrets and roseate spoonbills fishing in the bay." Peterman also recommends **Kalaloch Campgrounds** in **Olympic National Park** in Washington, on a bluff above the Pacific Ocean, and **Watchman Campground** in **Utah's Zion National Park**, where colorful cliffs enfold the valley. At **Dry Tortugas National Park** in the **Florida Keys**, the campground is on the same island as historic Fort Jefferson. Snorkeling here is a joy above the coral reefs.

PHOTOS: KAAREY PETERSON/TANDEMSTOCK (NEW RIVER GORGE); FREDRIK WARSATER (DENALI); MIKE THEISS/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STOCK (CARLSBAD CAVERNS)

**GOAL**  
No. 4

## See Something New

**CARLSBAD CAVERNS NATIONAL PARK, CARLSBAD, NEW MEXICO**

"Bats are fairly common, but to see hundreds of thousands of them circling overhead and flying off into the night like a dark river of wings is a unique experience," says Jeff Hallo, associate professor of parks at Clemson University. From May through mid-October, up to 400,000 Brazilian bats depart the park's namesake cavern in the evenings. Wake up early to watch them dive back in during the predawn light. It's possible to explore parts of Carlsbad Cavern on your own on self-guided tours; to see other parts of the cavern or more remote caves, take a guided tour. Ambitious spelunkers will want to explore the Hall of the White Giant (plan to crawl on your belly through tight passages to get there), while birders come from around the world to spot some 350 species at the park's Rattlesnake Springs. Set in the Guadalupe Mountains, the park terrain includes desert shrub land and ponderosa pine, which make a striking contrast to such cave landmarks such as Witch's Finger. [nps.gov/cave](http://nps.gov/cave)



**OR TRY:** Glacier Bay in Alaska, Mount Rushmore in South Dakota, Lassen Volcanic National Park in California for its steaming fumaroles (openings near volcanoes) or Saguaro National Park in Arizona for giant cacti straight out of a cartoon. Mesa Verde in Colorado is famous for its cliff dwellings built by the ancestral Pueblos.



## Get Hot

### DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL PARK, DEATH VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

Sounds like a fun place, right? A hundred years ago, a world record temperature of 134 degrees was recorded in Death Valley. While we agree that August may not be the best time to stop by, Death Valley in California and Nevada is full of unexpected landscapes, from waves of mountains to the salt flats of Badwater Basin, the lowest point in North America. The valley floor gets less than 2 inches of average rainfall annually, yet rainfall elsewhere has helped produce more than 1,000 plant species throughout the 3.4 million-acre park, with fields of wildflowers a golden surprise some years in the spring. Wildlife sightings range from desert tortoises to bobcats. People come to Death Valley to hike, backpack, camp, bird watch, mountain bike—and to be reminded that where there is death, there is also life. [nps.gov/deva](http://nps.gov/deva)

GOAL  
No. 5



#### OR TRY:

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, where a plume of volcanic gas keeps things toasty at the live volcano. Soak in the warm waters at Hot Springs in central Arkansas or watch tropical birds set against turquoise waves at Virgin Islands National Park. Joshua Tree National Park in California is known for strange trees with twisty branches that look a little like a scrub brush.

GOAL  
No. 7



## Pack Your Kids

### BRYCE CANYON NATIONAL PARK, BRYCE CANYON, UTAH

“What is that?” 14-year-old Winston Goldstein thought when he first saw the hoodoos. Walking among Bryce Canyon’s weirdly shaped limestone spires, arches and fins, collectively called hoodoos, will make your kids feel as if they’ve landed on another planet, too. “Each hoodoo is different. If you see one, you haven’t seen another. It felt mysterious,” says Winston, whose family is on a quest to visit all 59 national parks by the time the kids turn 18. Best places for a mind-bending view include Sunrise Point, Sunset Point and Inspiration Point, all within Bryce Amphitheater. You can take kids as young as 7 on a horseback or mule ride through the otherworldly landscape. Early geologists, by the way, dubbed the formations “hoodoos” because they thought the rock might be able to cast spells. [nps.gov/brca](http://nps.gov/brca)

#### OR TRY:

Yosemite in California, Muir Woods National Monument near San Francisco for the redwoods, Zion National Park in Utah (which you can see on the same trip as Bryce) or Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado and Utah. For history that’s a bit more recent, visit the place where the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution was signed at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia.

PHOTOS: SASHA CARIN/TANDEMSTOCK (DEATH VALLEY); ZACH HOLMES/ALAMY (CONGAREE); PHILIP AND KAREN SMITH/LOVELY PLANET IMAGES (BRYCE CANYON); JUSTIN BALLEW/TANDEMSTOCK (MT. RAINIER)

GOAL  
No. 6

## See Birds

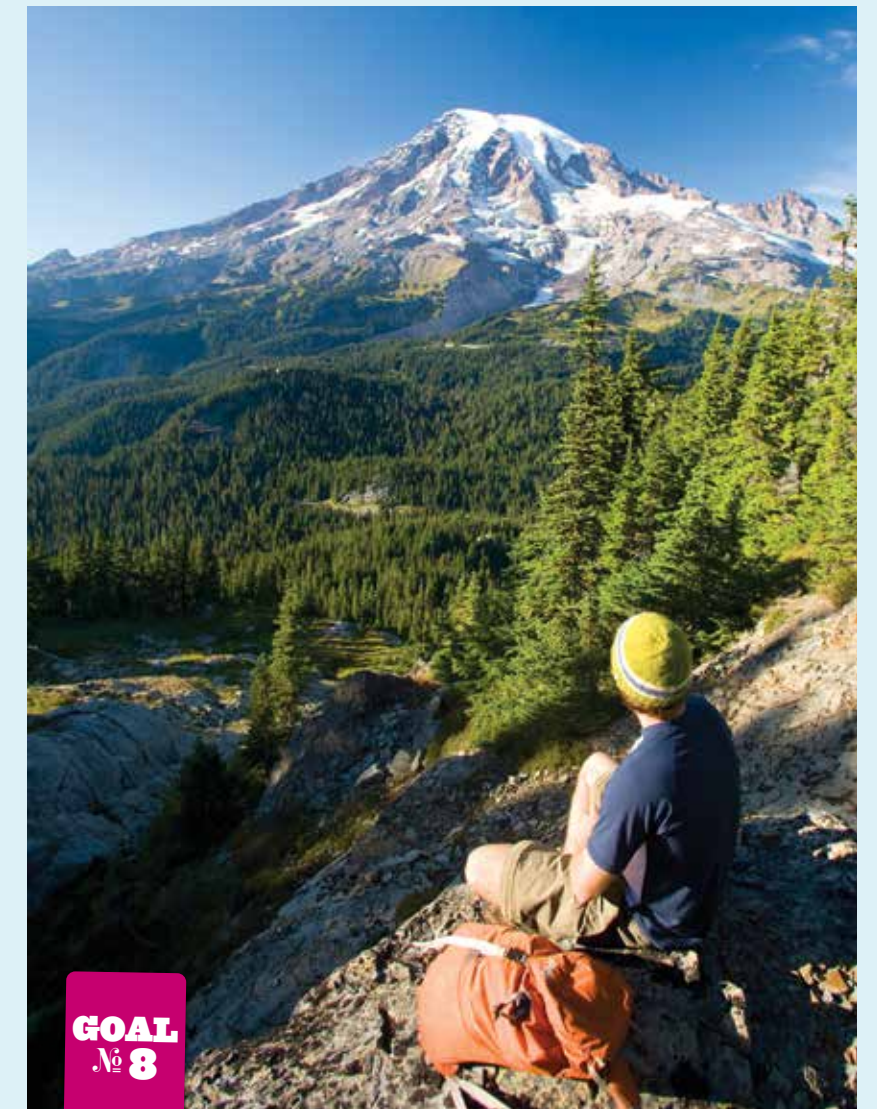
### CONGAREE NATIONAL PARK, HOPKINS, SOUTH CAROLINA

You’ll see an astonishing variety of life in this old-growth, low-lying hardwood forest, named an International Biosphere Reserve in 1983 and a Globally Important Bird Area in 2001. It used to be called Congaree Swamp National Monument, which gives you an idea of the terrain, but don’t let “swamp” scare you off. Rent a canoe or kayak from outfitters in Columbia, South Carolina, or bring your own craft to paddle on Cedar Creek, where you’ll observe yellow-bellied sapsuckers (yep, they really exist), red-shouldered hawks and other birds under the bald cypress and tupelo trees. Rangers also lead a small number of guided canoe tours each year. You can stroll 2.4 miles of boardwalk and more than 30 miles of trails for another leisurely way to view herons and nearly 200 other species, or join a guided night walk to search for owls. Watch where you step or stick that oar: snakes and feral hogs like Congaree, too. [nps.gov/cong](http://nps.gov/cong)

#### OR TRY:

Everglades National Park in Florida, Olympic National Park in Washington, Bering Land Bridge

National Park in Alaska or the Great Smoky Mountains. Hike early morning to High Peaks at Pinnacles National Park in California, our newest national park, for the chance to see a rare, huge-winged California condor.



GOAL  
No. 8

## Climb a Mountain

### MOUNT RAINIER NATIONAL PARK, ASHFORD, WASHINGTON

Anyone who has visited Seattle has seen stunning Mount Rainier from a distance. It’s worth the roughly two-hour drive from the city for a more intimate experience with the park’s forests, flowers and snowy splendor. Ascents to the summit of Mount Rainier, the highest mountain in the Cascade Range, are for serious climbers. More than 10,000 people tried in 2010, and fewer than half made it all the way up 14,410 feet. But there are plenty of hiking trails for families, including those that depart from suitably named Paradise Meadows. The paved Skyline Trail to Myrtle Falls is wheelchair accessible with assistance, and hikers who complete the area’s 5.5-mile trail circuit can “get a good look at Nisqually Glacier, which moves six to 12 inches down the mountain’s slope each summer day,” says Michael Oswald, author of *Your Guide to the National Parks*. Winter is long here, and some higher elevations are closed because of snow as late as early July. That’s all the better for snowboarding, skiing, sledding and ranger-guided snowshoe hikes. How many places can you say that about a volcano? Don’t worry—Rainier hasn’t erupted since the 1890s. [nps.gov/mora](http://nps.gov/mora)

#### OR TRY:

Great Basin National Park in Nevada, with its pinyon-juniper forest; Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina and Tennessee; Acadia National Park in Maine; or the 500 miles of trails in the Santa Monica Mountains in California. Wrangell-St. Elias in south-central Alaska is the nation’s largest national park—at 13.2 million acres, it’s bigger than Switzerland, and it’s a top spot for mountaineering, with licensed guides available to lead the way.





**GOAL**  
No. 9

## Catch a Salmon

LAKE CLARK NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE, PORT ALSWORTH, ALASKA

Talk about off the grid. There are no roads to the spectacularly beautiful Lake Clark National Park in southwest Alaska; the only way in is to fly your small aircraft or hire an air taxi from Anchorage or other locales. Why bother? For pristine waters and world-class fishing. You'll find rivers and lakes with Dolly Varden trout, lake trout, grayling and king salmon. The signature item, though, is the abundant sockeye (also known as red) salmon. Every year, up to 6 million of the rosy pink fish return to the Lake Clark watershed via the Newhalen River. Outfitters can lead you to the best locations for a catch. If the fish aren't biting, there's always backpacking in the tundra, watching brown bears on Silver Salmon Creek and Chinitna Bay or taking a float trip on the glacier-fed Tlikakila River. [nps.gov/lacl](http://nps.gov/lacl)

PHOTOS: MICHAEL DEYOUNG (LAKE CLARK); BENNETT BARTHELEMY (ANDERSTOCK) (YELLOWSTONE)

**OR TRY:**

For great fishing spots in the lower 48, [takemefishing.org](http://takemefishing.org) suggests a variety of national seashores and parks, including Sleeping Bear Dunes in Michigan, Cape Cod in Massachusetts, Bighorn Canyon in Montana and Wyoming and North Cascades in Washington. At Biscayne National Park in Florida, along with fishing and lobstering, you can snorkel or dive with the fish in coral reefs. Get more ideas at [takemefishing.org](http://takemefishing.org).

**GOAL**  
No. 10



## Watch Bears (or Moose or Elk or Eagles ...)

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, WYOMING

Yellowstone contains more geysers than anyplace else on Earth. But that's not the only highlight of this park, which spans Idaho, Wyoming and Montana. Wildlife is so common that travelers talk about seeing bison running alongside them on trails. You'll also share your day, if you're lucky, with grizzly bears, elk, moose, eagles, coyotes and wolves, which were reintroduced here in 1995. Head for Lamar and Hayden valleys in the park's interior for some of the best wildlife viewing. To find the more elusive animals, "you'll need to either hike in the backcountry or bring along a spotting scope," says Suz Garber, who visited Yellowstone as part of a 21-day road trip of national parks. It was in Lamar that Garber watched a wolf eat a bison that had died while giving birth that morning—an example of nature in all its messy glory. Looking for slightly tamer fare? Anglers praise the fishing in Yellowstone River, particularly for cutthroat trout. [nps.gov/yell](http://nps.gov/yell)

**OR TRY:**

Badlands National Park in South Dakota for bison, bighorn sheep, prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets or Saguaro National Park in Arizona for roadrunners and other desert creatures. (In a don't-try-this-at-home move, vultures actually pee on themselves in the desert to cool down.) Other haunts for wildlife: Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, Katmai National Park and Preserve in Alaska and Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado.



## BON APPETIT

Established in the 1870s, **The Jordan Pond House Restaurant** in Maine's **Acadia National Park** serves popovers and tea on Jordan Pond, a meeting spot for several hiking trails. "You can eat fresh-baked popovers outside on the lawn, with incredible views of The Bubbles, two glacially sculpted mountains," says author James Kaiser, whose four books on the national parks include *Acadia: The Complete Guide*. **Muir Woods Trading Company Café** in California's Muir Woods National Monument focuses on local foodstuffs, from organic pastries and produce to locally made hot dogs. But the item getting the buzz at the moment is the Marin Melt, a grilled cheese with tomato and triple-crème Brie from local creameries, on local honey-whole-wheat bread. "It's not like any other grilled cheese I've ever tasted," chef Tyler Florence gushed to viewers on Food Network's *The Best Thing I Ever Ate*. Many national parks have grand lodges with fine-dining restaurants. These tend to get mixed reviews for the food but boast extraordinary settings. Grab a table next to the window and drink in the view along with your beer.