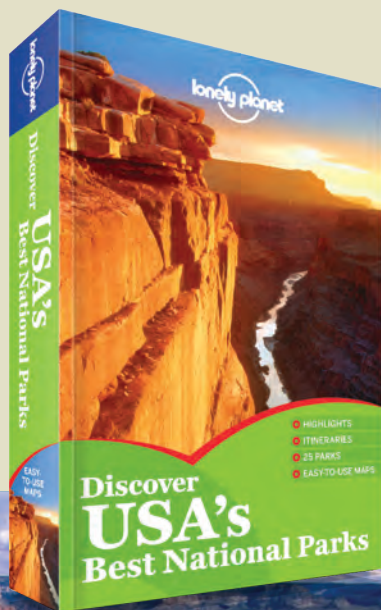




Plan Your Perfect National Parks Experience



**EXCERPT FROM LONELY PLANET'S
DISCOVER USA'S BEST NATIONAL PARKS**

15 USA's Best National Parks' Top Experiences



Yosemite Valley, Yosemite

In Yosemite Valley (p314), the national park system's crown jewel, massive granite rock formations tower thousands of feet over the Merced River. Wild creeks plummet from the cliff tops, creating a spectacle of waterfalls unlike anywhere on earth. And presiding over it all stand the iconic and mighty sentinels of rock, including El Capitan, Half Dome, the Royal Arches, the Three Brothers and Cathedral Rocks. No matter what people tell you about the summer crowds, the sights of Yosemite Valley are so astonishing that almost nothing can detract from the experience.

1



Going-to-the-Sun Road, Glacier

Going-to-the-Sun Rd (p69) offers steely-nerved motorists the drive of their life. Chiseled out of the mountainside and punctuated by some of the sheerest and most vertiginous drop-offs in the US, this 50-mile, vista-laden strip of asphalt offers drivers access to some of the most astounding sights in the Rockies.



ELI RUCKY/GETTY ©



MONAHEIM - EASTCOTT / CORNIS ©

Sunset, Grand Canyon

When Bob Dylan wrote of God and Woody Guthrie, he said 'I may be right or wrong/You'll find them both/In the Grand Canyon/At sundown.' Of all the places to watch the sunset in the world, few can measure up to the Grand Canyon. Lipan Point (p104) is one of the finest spots to do it. Or, if you're feeling leisurely, simply grab a drink and a porch swing on the patio of El Tovar lodge (p116), where you can watch the sunset in style. Toroweap Overlook (p137)



Wildlife Watching on Snake River, Grand Teton

Spilling down from Jackson Lake beneath the mighty Teton Range, the wild and scenic Snake River offers some of the most dramatic mountain scenery in the country. Not only are its waters the perfect place to gawk at the Tetons themselves (including the 13,775ft Grand Teton), but they're prime for wildlife watching. Numerous outfitters (see p303) offer float trips ranging from gentle to giant water. No matter which you choose, prepare to be awed. *View from Oxbow Bend (p291)*

4



The Best... Hiking

VERNAL & NEVADA FALLS, YOSEMITE

Yosemite's most stunning waterfalls plummet over granite cliffs. (p332)

ICEBERG LAKE, GLACIER

Icebergs float in azure waters beneath a massive glacial cirque. (p79)

GRANDVIEW TRAIL, GRAND CANYON

Grueling trail with epic canyon views. (p109)

LONGS PEAK, ROCKY MOUNTAIN

Views are endless from atop this 14,259ft peak. (p223)

THE NARROWS, ZION

Narrow slot canyon with a river for a trail. (p370)



The Best... Wildlife Watching

LAMAR VALLEY, YELLOWSTONE

Bison, moose, wolves and elk roam the 'American Serengeti.' (p253)

OXBOW BEND, GRAND TETON

Moose, elk, bald eagles, trumpeter swans, blue herons and more can be seen at this special place in Grand Teton. (p291)

ANHINGA TRAIL, EVERGLADES

Crowded as it is, this trail offers wildlife up close, including anhingas, alligators and turtles. (p57)

MANY GLACIER, GLACIER

This remote, mountainous sector of Glacier has the park's best wildlife viewing. (p77)

ENCHANTED VALLEY, OLYMPIC

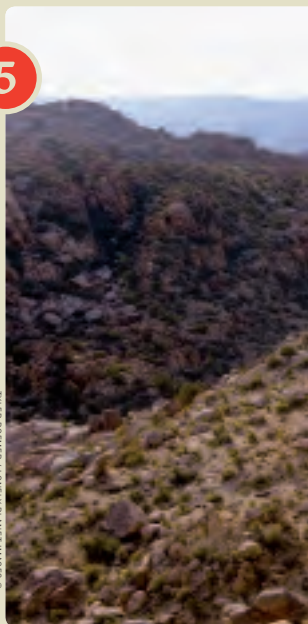
Moose and black bears are common sights along this spectacular Olympic hike. (p203)

Rock Climbing, Joshua Tree

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Whether you're a rock-climbing novice or a bouldering goddess, you'll find heaven above earth when you take to Joshua Tree's granite (p180). With more than 8000 established climbing routes, this is truly one of the world's rock meccas. There are classes for beginners, and the 400-plus climbing formations offer endless fun for seasoned enthusiasts. Amid the giant boulders and sweaty climbers, the bizarre Joshua trees themselves lend the scenery an otherworldly character.

TYLER ROEMER / LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©





6

Longs Peak, Rocky Mountain

Whether you hike to the top of its 14,259ft summit or just ogle its glaciated slopes from below, Longs Peak (p223) is truly a feast for the eyes. Given it's the highest peak in the park, it should be. Those who attempt the ascent via the Keyhole Route must first brave the hair-raising Ledges, before conquering the Trough and inching across the Narrows, which finally give way to the (whew!) Homestretch. The views from the top are mind-boggling.

CHRISTIAN KOEHLER / GETTY ©



The Narrows, Zion

Check your claustrophobia at the door and prepare to get wet on this hike up the Virgin River into a 2000ft-deep slot canyon (p370). As you make your way upriver, the cliffs press inward, towering higher and higher until, finally, you reach Wall Street, where the width of the canyon narrows to under 30ft.



DAN CHAMBER / GETTY ©



JEFF VAN NORD / CORBIS ©

Wildlife Watching, Yellowstone

No matter how many nature shows you've seen, nothing can prepare you for the first time you spot a moose in the wild. And in Yellowstone (p263), if you don't see a moose – or a bison or a herd of elk or a bear – you probably have your eyes closed. On par with the Galápagos, the Serengeti and Brazil's Pantanal, Yellowstone is one of the world's premier wildlife-watching destinations. Big mammals are everywhere. The knowledge that grizzlies, wolves and mountain lions are among them simply adds to the rush.



Sunrise, Cadillac Mountain, Acadia

Catching the country's 'first sunrise' from the top of Cadillac Mountain (p33) is, hands down, one of the finest ways to kick off a day. At 1530ft, Cadillac Mountain is the highest point on Maine's Mount Desert Island, and the views over the Atlantic are sublime. The island is one of the easternmost points in the USA, and, while it's technically not the *first* place that catches the morning sun, we prefer to do what everyone else up top does at sunrise: ignore the technicalities and bliss out.

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The Best... Views

CAPE ROYAL POINT, GRAND CANYON

The earth seems to disappear beneath your feet. (p130)

OBSERVATION POINT, ZION

The hike is a doozy, but the views make the 2150ft climb worth every grunt. (p372)

BRYCE POINT, BRYCE CANYON

Mysterious hoodoos tower up from the Silent City below. (p386)

GOING-TO-THE-SUN ROAD, GLACIER

Every turn in this road offers breathtaking Rocky Mountain views. (p69)

CADILLAC MOUNTAIN, ACADIA

Head here to watch the first sunrise over America. (p33)



The Best... Winter Wonderlands

YOSEMITE VALLEY

Frozen waterfalls, snowy cliffs, and a silent, magical white valley await winter visitors. (p314)

ROCKY MOUNTAIN

You'll practically have the park to yourself. (p220)

YELLOWSTONE

Without the crowds, wild-life watching is even better. (p246)

GRAND TETON

Miles of cross-country ski trails snake beneath massive peaks. (p286)

EVERGLADES

A subtropical paradise for those who want to be warm in winter. (p52)

Bryce Amphitheater, Bryce Canyon

Proof that nature has a wild imagination, hoodoos are one of the strangest formations on the planet. From the rim of southern Utah's Bryce Amphitheater (p386) you can look down upon thousands of these bizarre, ancient rock spires as they tower out of the so-called Silent City, a conglomeration of hoodoos so vast that you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd landed on another planet. Sunrise over the amphitheater is one of life's treats.

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© CORBIS / GETTY

11

Hoh Rainforest, Olympic

Embrace the rain! It's what makes this temperate rainforest (p201), in all its Tolkienesque beauty, one of the greenest places in North America. With an average rainfall of up to 170in (that's 14ft), it is also one of the wettest. This tremendous amount of water creates a forest covered in mosses, lichens and ferns, with a canopy so dense the forest floor seems trapped in the perpetual lowlight of dusk. Pack your rain jacket and watch for the Roosevelt elk.

Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes, Death Valley

Wind and sand make for magical bedmates in Death Valley, where dune fields rise from the desert floor and kindle the imagination with their shadowy, wind-hewn ripples. And just as you'd expect from the scene, it's hot! Located between the ominously named Stovepipe Wells and Furnace Creek, Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes (p187) are the easiest series of dunes to reach. With crescent, linear and star-shaped sand dunes, Mesquite Flat provides the complete experience.

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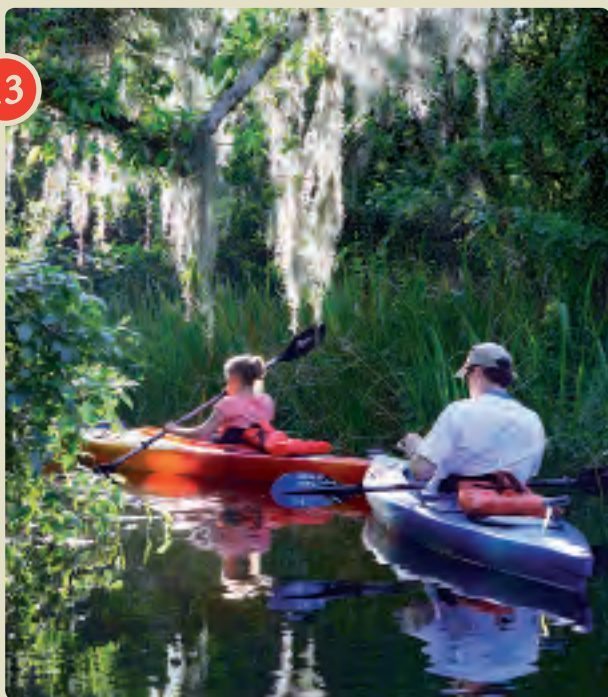
WITOLD SKRZYPCZAK / LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©



Paddling, Everglades

The country's third-largest national park (p49) is a paddler's paradise, with kayak and canoe 'trails' meandering through mangrove swamps and freshwater marshes that teem with wildlife. Crocodiles, alligators, turtles, cormorants, herons, egrets and fish are just some of the wildlife boaters come across while paddling around this subtropical park. Thanks to the National Park Service's handy (and free) kayak and canoe trail maps, navigating the waters is fairly straightforward.

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FRANZ MARC FRIEL / CORBIS ©



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Cades Cove Historic Buildings, Great Smoky Mountains

Pick up a self-guided tour booklet and poke your way around the historic buildings of Cades Cove (p146). Beneath the backdrop of Thunderhead Mountain, pioneer churches, a gristmill, grayling old homes and plank-board barns take you back to the 19th century, when settlers carved out their home in this idyllic valley. Tipton Place (p147)

RICHARD QUINNS / LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©



Wildflower Season, Mt Rainier

Mt Rainier (p208) gets over 650in of snow annually. It's covered in glaciers, and the high meadows are blanketed in white for nearly nine months of the year. Once the snow finally melts and the meadows are exposed, wildflowers, somehow knowing they have only a short time to do their thing, explode into bloom. Avalanche lilies, beargrass, bog orchids, wood nymphs and dozens of other flowers turn the slopes of the Cascade's highest mountain into a rainbow of color. July and August are peak season.

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The Best... Adventures

RAFTING THE COLORADO RIVER, GRAND CANYON

Hands down, the best way to see the Grand Canyon. (p110)

CANYONEERING, ZION

Rappelling into Zion's slot canyons is hair-raising fun. (p374)

ROCK CLIMBING, YOSEMITE

The world's holy grail of rock climbing is accessible to all. (p337)

PADDLING, EVERGLADES

Paddle the 99-mile Wilderness Waterway between Everglades City and Flamingo. (p58)

MOUNTAINEERING, MOUNT RAINIER

Some 10,000 people attempt this 14,411ft summit every year. Try it and find out why. (p211)

The Parks Month by Month

Top Events

-  **Cody Stampede**, July
-  **Spring Wildflowers**, April
-  **Strawberry Music Festival**, May
-  **Grand Teton Music Festival**, July
-  **Frozen Dead Guy Days**, March

January

Strap on your snowshoes or cross-country skis and enjoy the white winter magic in Yellowstone, Glacier and Grand Teton. Joshua Tree is lovely, and the subtropical Everglades are sublime.

Snowshoeing

Leave the crowds behind and take to the trails of the national parks with snowshoes on your feet. Seeing the high-elevation and northern parks when they're blanketed in snow is a magical experience. Rangers at some of the parks even host guided snowshoe hikes.

March

The biting cold of winter fades from the desert parks, and wildflowers begin to bloom at lower elevations. Snow activities are still good at high elevations.

Frozen Dead Guy Days

Join the living in Nederland, CO (near Rocky Mountains National Park) and celebrate a dead guy – a Norwegian named Grandpa Bredo Morstoel – who is cryogenically frozen in a local lab, patiently awaiting reanimation. The festival (go to 'events' at www.nederlandchamber.org) spans three days in early March and includes music and coffin races.

April

Wildflowers are in full swing at lower elevations, and waterfalls begin pumping at full force with the beginning of the snowmelt. Weather in the desert parks is beautiful.

Spring Wildflowers

Wildflowers put on dazzling springtime displays at the lower-elevation parks, especially at Death Valley, Shenandoah, Great Smoky Mountains, Zion and sometimes Joshua Tree. Check the National Park Service websites for wildflower walks, talks and celebrations.

Yosemite Waterfalls

Most people who visit Yosemite in July and August have no idea – until they get there – that the Valley's famous falls (p317) are but a trickle of their springtime selves. April, May and June are the best months to see the falls in full force.

National Park Week

For an entire week every April, admission to the national parks is free. Early in the year, the US president announces when National Park Week will fall that year. Many of the parks also host free activities.

May

Temperatures in Zion, Bryce, Grand Canyon, Yosemite Valley, Death Valley and Joshua Tree are delightful. The summer crowds have yet to materialize, waterfalls are at their peak, and river and stream levels are high.

Strawberry Music Festival

Twice a year (Memorial Day and Labor Day weekend), lovers of country and folk music make a beeline to this wildly popular music festival (www.strawberrymusic.com) held in a meadow at Camp Mather, 10 miles west of Yosemite's Big Oak Flat Entrance.

Joshua Tree Music Festival

Over a long weekend in May, numerous bands rock Joshua Tree Lake Campground during a family-friendly indie music fest (www.joshuatreemusicfestival.com). It's followed by a soulful roots celebration in mid-October.

June

It's still possible to beat the crowds of summer in early June. By late June, the parks are jammed but the weather is stellar in many of them. Upper-elevation roads are still closed in the Sierras and Rocky Mountains.

Utah Shakespeare Festival

Near Zion National Park, Cedar City kicks off its three-month-long Shakespeare Festival (www.bard.org) in late June, bringing famed actors to the stage for dozens of top-notch performances. Activities include classes, literary seminars, magic shows and more.

July

High elevation sectors of the Rockies, Sierras and Cascades begin opening. It's prime hiking time in the high-country, where wildflowers are at their peak. Desert parks, including Grand Canyon, are sweltering.

Cody Stampede

In Yellowstone's gateway communities, rodeo is the major cultural event of the year. Cowboys take to the saddle throughout June, July and August in various communities. The largest rodeos are the Cody Stampede (www.codystampede.com) and the Wild West Yellowstone Rodeo (www.yellowstonerodeo.com).

North American Indian Days

In the second week of July, head to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, immediately east of Glacier National Park, for traditional drumming, dancing and the annual crowning of the year's Miss Blackfeet. The four day festival (www.browningmontana.com/naid.html) is a wonderful display of Blackfeet traditions.





Summer Wildflowers

There's nothing like hiking through high-country meadows that are blanketed in wildflowers. In high-elevation parks such as Glacier, Rocky Mountain, Yellowstone, Grant Teton and parts of Yosemite, wildflowers bloom intensely during the short growing season between snows.

Grand Teton Music Festival

Over 40 classical music concerts are held throughout the Jackson Hole region near Grand Teton National Park. Everything from children's concerts to full orchestras are on the menu. Concerts take place almost nightly throughout July and into August. See www.gtmf.org for calendars and to purchase tickets.

August

Hello crowds! It's the height of summer, it's blazing hot, and every hotel and

campsite is reserved. First-come-first-served campgrounds are your best bet. Head to the high-country, where the weather is superb.

Christmas in August

Join the Christmas caroling in one of the parks' oddest celebrations, Yellowstone's Christmas in August (celebrated on the 25th). The event dates back to the turn of the last century, when a freak August snowstorm stranded a group of visitors in the Upper Geyser Basin.

September

The crowds begin to thin out, and by the end of the month things are pretty quiet. If you don't mind brisk evenings, this can be a beautiful time to visit the parks. High-country sectors close by the end of the month.

Mountain Life Festival

Participate in hearth cooking demonstrations and help make historic farm staples like hominy, apple butter, apple cider and soap. The event is celebrated every year in mid-September at the Mountain Farm Museum in Great Smoky National Park.

October

From Yosemite to the Great Smoky Mountains, fall color is nothing short of fabulous in many of the parks. Grand Canyon, Zion, Joshua Tree and Death Valley are especially beautiful. Crowds are nonexistent and the temperatures are dropping quickly. High-elevation sectors are closed.

Pioneer Days

On the third weekend in October, the town of Twentynine



Palms, near Joshua Tree National Park, celebrates Pioneer Days (www.visit29.org) with an Old West-themed carnival featuring a parade, arm-wrestling and a giant chili dinner.

November

Winter is creeping in quickly. The best parks to visit are those in southern Utah, Arizona and the California deserts, where the weather is cool but still beautiful.

Death Valley '49ers

In early or mid-November, Furnace Creek hosts this historical encampment (www.deathvalley49ers.org), featuring cowboy poetry, campfire sing-alongs, a gold-panning contest and a western art show. Show up to this Death Valley festival

early to watch the pioneer wagons come thunderin' in.

December

Winter is well under way in most of the parks. High-elevation roads and park sectors are closed, and visitor center and business hours are reduced. Think snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.

National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count

Every year around Christmastime, thousands of people take to the wilds to look for and record birds for the Audubon Society's annual survey. Many of the parks organize a count and rely on volunteers to help. Check the National Park Service websites for information.

Far left: Cross-country skier, Yellowstone (p270) **Left:** Orchestra at Grand Teton Music Festival

PHOTOGRAPHERS: (FAR LEFT) LEE FOSTER / LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©; (LEFT) BRADLEY BONER



Get Inspired



Books

◦ **Our National Parks** (1901) The words of John Muir inspired a nation to embrace national parks.

◦ **Ranger Confidential: Living, Working & Dying in the National Parks** (2010) Former park ranger Andrea Lankford tells you what it takes to fill the shoes of our favorite park employee.

◦ **Lost in My Own Backyard** (2004) Chuckle your way around Yellowstone with Tim Cahill.

◦ **A Sand County Almanac** (1949) Aldo Leopold's nature classic embodies the conservation ethic that lies at the heart of our national parks.

Films

◦ **American Experience: Ansel Adams** (2004) Inspire your snapshots with this PBS documentary.

◦ **Vacation** (1983) Perfect comedy kick-starter for any family vacation.

◦ **Thelma & Louise** (1991) The classic American road-trip flick is a joy to watch, despite the terrible circumstances.

◦ **Into the Wild** (2007) Follow Chris McCandless as he kisses his possessions goodbye and hitchhikes to Alaska.

Music

◦ **Classic Old-Time Fiddle** (2007) Perfect fiddle compilation for trips to Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah.

◦ **Joshua Tree** (1987) Crank up this U2 classic, whether you're heading to Joshua Tree or not.

◦ **Beautiful Maladies** (1998) Nothing spells 'road trip' like a good Tom Waits tune.

◦ **This Land is Your Land: The Asch Recordings, Vol. 1** (1997) Woodie Guthrie sings everything from 'This Land is Your Land' to 'The Car Song'.

Websites

◦ **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com) Lodging information, Thorn Tree, Trip Planner and more.

◦ **RoadsideAmerica.com** (www.roadsideamerica.com) Don't miss all

those weird roadside attractions!

◦ **The National Parks** (www.pbs.org/nationalparks) Online portal of Ken Burn's national park PBS classic.



Short on time?

This list will give you an instant insight into the national parks.

Read Ansel Adams' *In the National Parks* (2010) is the next best thing to being there.

Watch Ken Burns' 12-hour PBS miniseries, *The National Parks, America's Best Idea* (2009) is a must.

Listen Dig into the blues, folk and country roots of America with Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952).

Log on National Park Service websites (www.nps.gov) are jammed with information on everything from hiking to stargazing.

Top: Half Dome (p316), Yosemite; Left: Black bear (p432)

PHOTOGRAPHER: (LEFT) CHRISTER FREDRIKSSON / LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©; (ABOVE) BRENT WINEBRENNER / LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©

Need to Know

Entry Fees

\$0 (Great Smoky) to \$25 (Yellowstone); valid for seven consecutive days.

America the Beautiful Annual Pass

Valid for all national parks for 12 months from purchase. Buy through National Park Service (☎ 888-275-8747, ext 1; www.nps.gov).

ATMs

Most parks have at least one ATM; widely available in gateway towns.

Credit Cards

Major credit cards widely accepted; Forest Service, BLM and other campgrounds accept cash and/or checks only.

Cell Phones

Coverage inside parks is spotty at best.

Wi-Fi

Some park lodges have wireless. Outside the parks, most cafes and hotels offer free wireless. Chain hotels charge.

Tipping

Tip restaurant servers 15–20%; porters \$2 per bag; hotel maids \$2 to \$5 per night.

When to Go



High Season (Jun–early Sep)

- High-country sectors in the Rockies, Sierras and Cascades are guaranteed to be open.
- July and August are crowded; reservations are a must.

Shoulder (May–mid-Jun & mid-Sep–Oct)

- Waterfalls in Yosemite and Great Smoky Mountains are at their peak in spring.
- High elevation roads are still closed in spring.

Low Season (mid-Sep–May)

- Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are excellent in the Rockies and Sierras.
- High season for the subtropical Everglades.

Advance Planning

- Twelve months before** Reserve campsites and historic lodge accommodations.
- Six months before** Reserve hotel rooms in satellite towns if visiting in summer. Book flights.
- Three months before** Start training if planning to backpack. If you haven't reserved sleeping arrangements, do so.
- One month before** Secure rental car. Take your own car in for a safety inspection and tune up if planning a long drive.

Your Daily Budget

Budget less than \$50

- Campsites: \$10–25
- Plenty of self-catering options in gateway towns; pricier at stores inside parks
- Park entry: \$0–25
- Park shuttles and visitor sites free with admission
- Gas costs depend on distances and vehicle

Midrange \$50–250

- Budget hotels: \$50–99
- B&Bs, midrange hotels, most park lodges: \$100–200
- Two can eat well at local cafes for \$25

Top end more than \$250

- Better B&Bs and four-star hotels: over \$200
- High-end restaurants in gateway towns: \$50 per person

Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	\$1.01
Canada	C\$1	\$1
Euro zone	€1	\$1.41
China	¥10	\$1.54
Japan	¥100	\$1.22
Mexico	MXN10	\$0.86
New Zealand	NZ\$1	\$0.79
UK	£1	\$1.62

For current exchange rates see www.xe.com.

What to Bring

- Rain jacket** Thin shell that's easy to pack; afternoon thundershowers common in summer.
- Layers** Layered clothing keeps you warmest and is best for adjustability.
- Binoculars** A must for wildlife watching.
- Insect repellent** Critical for high-country in summer, when mosquitoes and black flies are out. Also use for ticks in woody, low-elevation areas.
- Camp chair** Always relax in style.

- Sun protection** Hat, sunglasses and sun block.
- First aid kit** Buy one or make your own.
- Flashlight** Critical for campers.

Arriving at a National Park

- Information** Pick up a park newspaper at the entry kiosk and hang onto it; they're packed with useful information.
- Camping** If you're going for a first-come-first-served site, head straight to the campground. Try to arrive no later than mid-morning Friday.
- Parking** People not spending the night inside a park will find parking difficult. Arrive early, park and take free shuttles whenever possible.
- Visitor Centers** Best places to start exploring the parks. Purchase books and maps, ask rangers questions, check weather reports and trail and road conditions.

Getting Around

- Car** Most convenient way to travel between the parks. A few park roads are gravel. Traffic inside some parks can be horrendous.
- Park Shuttles** Many parks have excellent shuttle systems with stops at major visitor sites and trailheads.
- Bicycles** Some parks have rentals. Good for getting around developed areas. Elsewhere, roads can be steep and shoulders narrow.

Accommodations

- Campsites** Reservation and first-come-first-served sites both available in all parks. Flush toilets are common, hot showers are not. Full hookups for RVs usually found outside parks.
- Park Lodges** Wonderful experience. Usually lack TV; some have wi-fi.
- B&Bs** Available in gateway towns outside parks; often excellent and usually include wi-fi.
- Hotels** Occasionally inside parks; most in gateway towns. Nearly all have wi-fi.