

Magnificent Off-the-Beaten Path National Parks and Monuments

Posted on December 18, 2021 by Travel Editor



Off-the-Beaten Path National Parks and Monuments

Albert Einstein once said “Look deep into nature. And then you will understand everything better.”

There can’t be a better way to be at one with nature than a visit to our national parks.

And did you know that the National Park System encompasses 423 national parks and 129 national monument sites in the U.S? That’s pretty impressive.

While most of us are familiar with popular ones like Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Zion, there are many other national sites that are awe-inspiring as well. The best part is these spectacular places aren’t as well-known or crowded, providing visitors a much-more private, intimate look at these national treasures.

We’ve gathered some of our off-the-beaten-path favorites – places that also make for an ideal road trip or a fun boating excursion.

Black Canyon of Gunnison, Colorado

We all know and celebrate the immense beauty of the Rocky Mountain National Park, but Colorado has a hidden gem that’s absolutely spectacular, located in the western part of the state.

The Gunnison River along with forces of weathering for over two million years sculpted a narrow vertical canyon reaching 2,700 feet at its deepest point with sheer steep cliffs, craggy spires, and minimal sunlight. How minimal? Some portions of the canyon manage to get only 33 minutes of light per day, hence the name of this perpendicular wilderness spectacle.

Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico

This national park marvel is tucked beneath the rugged but scenic Chihuahuan Desert in the Guadalupe Mountains of remote southeastern New Mexico.

One of the largest and most spectacular cave systems in the world, the park features more than 100 caverns containing some of the most unique, fanciful, and subterranean fascinating formations in the world.

The primary showstopper here is Carlsbad Cavern, the park’s main cave boasting a 25-story high ceiling, an immense floor as large as six football fields... and lots of bats. 300,000 Mexican free-tailed bats hang from the

ceiling during the day, but put on a spectacular evening show as they leave the cavern in search of food.

Channel Islands, California

Pristine beauty and wide-open wilderness spaces. This is Southern California's idyllic offshore gem - the Channel Islands. The Park encompasses five remarkable islands with a wealth of natural and cultural resources.

Just getting to the national park is a scenic experience, a one-to-two-hour voyage from Ventura Harbor or Santa Barbara. Santa Cruz is the largest in this island archipelago. Visitors can meander along scenic hiking trails on shore surrounded by rugged mountain terrain, or even better, kayak through crystalline waters, kelp forests and splendorous sea caves. Sculpted by a relentless ocean surge, these caverns are believed to be some of the most beautiful in the world.

And if you hit the high tide and sea conditions just right as happened on our kayak adventure, you'll be treated to a jaw-dropping powerful blowhole experience shooting water 100-feet horizontally and over 50-feet into the air.

Crater Lake, Oregon

Located in Southern Oregon, Crater Lake is Oregon's only national park and the nation's fifth-oldest. It's also the deepest lake in the U.S.

Native Americans witnessed its formation over 7,000 years ago when a violent eruption triggered the collapse of a towering mountain peak. The Park now surrounds the water-filled caldera as pristine Crater Lake is fed by rain and snow. With its surrounding hills and verdant forest, it's an absolutely breathtaking place to visit.

Dry Tortugas, Florida

This remote national park located almost 70 miles from Key West is renowned for its 19th-century coastal fortress, crystal-clear tourmaline waters, idyllic coral reefs, and abundant marine life.

Accessible only by boat or seaplane, the 100-square mile park with seven small islands is mostly open water. Which is why it's a favorite with divers and snorkelers looking to discover its natural wonders. The Park is also great for birdwatching, beach camping, and one amazing place to kayak.

Lassen Volcanic, California

A dominant feature of this Northern California park is Lassen Peak, the largest plug dome volcano in the world. Home to pristine mountain lakes, bubbling streams, steaming fumaroles, and wildflower-covered meadows, Lassen is a fascinating piece of heaven on Earth. Our biggest surprise when visiting during the summer was to discover snow-covered mountaintops, eight-foot snowdrifts, and a lake partially frozen over.

Lassen also boasts breathtaking mountain scenery reminiscent of Yosemite and fascinating thermal wonders similar to Yellowstone, all without the crowds of these popular national parks. The bottom line, it's a must-do hidden gem.

Mammoth Cave, Kentucky

We've all heard about Mammoth Cave, but how many of us have visited, especially in the off-season? Which is any time other than summer.

Situated in more remote west-central Kentucky and 100 miles from Louisville, this cavern system is the longest in the world. Home to thousands of years of human history and a rich diversity of animal and plant life, Mammoth earned the prestigious title of being named a UNESCO World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve.

Taking a ranger-led cave tour is the best way to get introduced to this impressive cavern. Guests can choose from moderate tours to those more challenging, even crawling on your hands and knees to access rarely seen subterranean marvels.

Pu'uhonua o Honaunau, Hawai'i Island

On the barren lava fields of Kona in the Hawaiian Islands lies a historic "city of refuge." This was once a sanctuary for the island's aboriginal people, and ancient Hawaiians who violated sacred laws of the kapu, were punishable by death. No physical harm could come to those who reached the boundaries of the Pu'uhonua before apprehension.

Located on the grounds south of Kealahou Bay, the park is a fascinating journey through time offering an in-depth insight into Hawaii's ancient Polynesian history and culture. Hundreds of years old and beautifully restored, guests can explore the structures of the Pu'uhonua by a self-guided walking tour. The nearby Royal Grounds were once the sacred home of the ali'i (Hawaiian nobility). Sunsets from this point are breathtakingly beautiful.

Wind Cave, South Dakota

A culturally significant and sacred site to the Lakota and Cheyenne and other tribes who settled around the area, Wind Cave is one of America's oldest national parks.

Located in the forested foothills and rolling prairie grasslands of South Dakota, Wind Cave was named for the barometric winds at its entrance. These incredible "breathing" caverns form a maze of passages creating one of the longest and most complex caves in the world.

The caves are also known for their stunning box work, thin blades of calcite that form a distinctive honeycomb pattern projecting from the walls and ceilings of this majestic grotto.

Flagstaff, Arizona National Monuments

Flagstaff, Arizona is home to three spectacular national monuments that can be explored within the same day. If you're in Flagstaff, you really should see them all. They're completely fascinating.

Wupatki National Monument is home to some of the world's most intact and culturally-revealing archeological sites. It features a 110-room intact deep-red colored Sinaguan pueblo with an ancient ball court and a unique geological phenomenon known as the Blow Hole. Views of the Painted Desert from this location are stunning.

Between 1125 and 1250 AD, nearby Walnut Canyon was also home to the Sinaguan people who constructed 25

ancient cliff dwellings within this enormous spectacular canyon. To get up-close and personal, visitors can choose multiple hiking paths, all with awe-inspiring views.

Lastly, every U.S. astronaut that's ever walked on the moon has trained at Sunset Crater. This expansive area was created in 1085 after an immense volcanic eruption. Hence the sharp lava rock, loose cinders, and other geological features create an other-worldly surreal environment ideal for lunar exploration training.

So, next time you're thinking of a national park visit, consider some of these less-frequented yet truly magnificent natural treasure troves.

