

Hiking in the U.S. National Parks

America is home to many of the world's most beautiful national parks. From Olympic National Park in Washington to Acadia National Park in Maine, America's national parks are pristine places where you can experience all the best that the United States has to offer. The attractions range from a wide diversity of plant and animal life to spectacular geographic formations, such as the spectacular Bridalveil Fall in Yosemite National Park. While people of all ages can visit and appreciate the national parks, one of the best ways to experience them fully is to hike their trails. As hiking expert Paula Martinez (2016) notes, "For many hikers, Yosemite is the gold standard, but every national park is a hiker's dream" (p. 4). In this article, I offer an overview of three beloved national parks (Acadia, Glacier, and Yosemite) and tips for hiking in them.



Figure 1. Bridalveil Fall. Bridalveil Fall is one of Yosemite's most popular attractions (Hullman, 2017).

Rocks and More Rocks!

When you visit a national park, one of the first things you notice is the uniqueness of its landscape. You might see towering mesas, rugged coastlines, jagged mountains, or magnificent waterfalls. These physical attractions share one characteristic: they are made of rock. Geologic

formations are an extremely important aspect of the national park experience. Each of these parks is home to mountains and outcroppings that offer beautiful photo opportunities. At Glacier National Park, Chief Mountain is particularly popular (Trent, 2015). At Acadia National Park, "some of the park's most popular features are Cadillac Mountain and the Blue Hill Overlook" (Jefferson, 2012, p. 18). Geologic formations offer more than just photo opportunities. According to Lydia Tan (2017), Yosemite's El Capitan and Cathedral Peak formations are world-famous hiking destinations. Tan also mentions Sentinel Rock as a popular hiking destination.

Acadia National Park

Several of our most glorious national parks are located at land's end—close to an ocean—and several are located on the country's northern border with Canada. One of my favorite parks is Maine's Acadia National Park, the easternmost national park. Some of this park's most beautiful features are Echo Lake Beach, Jordan Pond, Otter Cove, and Thunder Hole. If you are going to visit only one part of Acadia, then I recommend Cadillac Mountain. However, you'll need to get there before sunrise. What makes Cadillac Mountain so special? There, "you can see the sun rise earlier than you can at any other place within the United States" (Jefferson, 2012, p. 18). Jefferson also points out that you shouldn't expect to watch the sunrise all alone on Cadillac Mountain, because dozens of other hikers will probably have arrived there before you do.

Acadia National Park is the northernmost and easternmost national park in the United States. It is also the "oldest national park east of the Mississippi River" (Jefferson, 2012, p. 17). Jefferson (2012) explains:

The park has undergone various name changes over the years. It began as the Sieur de Monts National Park in 1916, when President Woodrow Wilson granted the park federal status. It was then renamed Lafayette National Park in 1919. It did not take the name of Acadia National Park until 1929. The name "Acadia" is a tribute to the former French colony of Acadia, which once included what is now the state of Maine. (p. 17)

Acadia is also one of the most popular parks. More than 2.4 million people visit Acadia, many of them in the summer. The best time of year to visit is in September and October, after the crowds have left and while the weather is still relatively warm (Dorfman, 2011). Some of my favorite memories of Acadia include listening to the cry of seagulls and the muffled roar of the waves against the rocks on a tranquil fall day.

Glacier National Park

Another spectacular park is Glacier National Park in Montana. Like many of the U.S. national parks, Glacier National Park was originally inhabited by Native American tribes, specifically the Blackfeet and the Flathead ("A Warm Welcome to Glacier National Park," 1945). According to Trent (2015), the park was established in 1910 as the 10th national park. Trent tells us that "the rugged mountains and glacial-carved valleys give inspiration to those who travel through them" (p. 17). In fact, the park is named for its glaciers, many of which are disappearing. "In 1850, geologists estimated that there were as many as 150 glaciers within the park boundaries, while today there are only 25" (Vidraru, 2017, p. 27).

Glacier offers many different activities to visitors. Trent (2015) notes that the park includes historic lodges and chalets, in addition to a variety of scenic wonders. If you are interested in driving through mountainous terrain, the 50 mile-long Going-to-the-Sun Road is an engineering marvel that will take you across the Logan Pass at a height of 6,646 feet ("A Warm Welcome to Glacier National Park," 1945). There is no shortage of hiking opportunities. Glacier has more than 700 miles of hiking trails, offering routes to stunning views of Hidden Lake and Chief Mountain, as well as the opportunity to hike long distances on the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail or the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail (Trent, 2015).

Yosemite National Park

Yosemite National Park is a must-see national park. Dedicated hikers can easily spend a week hiking the many beautiful trails in Yosemite. However, some hikes are much more strenuous than others, and you need to make sure that you are physically ready for the challenge. Hiking expert Paula Martinez (2016), author of *The Hiker's Guide to Yosemite*, suggests, "Before planning any strenuous hikes, visit your doctor to ensure that you are fit enough to handle the rigors of the trail. You should know the distance you will be hiking, and the elevation gain" (p. 52). It is important for hikers to know their own capabilities and limitations. A doctor's assessment is the safest way to ensure that you are ready for your trip.

Knowing your capabilities makes it easy to find a trail that is both safe and fun for you. According to Martinez (2016), there are many options at each skill level. For example, "beginners should start with the Bridalveil Fall Trail and Lower Yosemite Fall Trail, both of which are considered easy" (Martinez, 2016, p. 54). I have hiked both trails and they are very

accessible. In contrast, Snow Creek Trail and Half Dome Trail are both strenuous; neither should be attempted unless you have ample hiking experience (Martinez, 2016). No matter where you hike, you will see beautiful scenery.

There are many spectacular places to visit in Yosemite National Park. One of the most popular attractions is Bridalveil Fall, which is 620 feet tall. According to local lore, Native Americans believed that Bridalveil Fall was the home of a malevolent spirit, but they also believed that breathing in the Fall's mists would improve your chances of marriage (Little, n.d.). One of the most popular features of Yosemite National Park is El Capitan, a vertical rock formation that is about 3,000 feet high (Martinez, 2016). Hikers and rock climbers alike are overawed by this magnificent rock.

Some basic guidelines will be useful as you prepare to hike Yosemite. First, don't stray from the marked trails, because leaving the trail can cause soil to erode. Second, remain hydrated by drinking plenty of water on your hike. Third, don't leave anything behind on the trail; whatever you bring onto the trail, you should bring out of the trail. Finally, hike safely because when you choose to hike, the risk is yours (Martinez, 2016).

Hiking on a Budget

Visiting a national park can be costly and it is easy to overlook some of your expenses. During peak season, park entrance fees can be as much as \$30 per vehicle or even more (Tan, 2017). Getting to and from the park usually involves a long trip of some sort, with the cost of airplane fares and rental cars, or the cost of gasoline and wear and tear on your own car (Tan, 2017). Many hotels in national parks “know that travelers to the national parks have few hotel

choices, so they charge a premium fee” (Tan, 2017, para. 3). From my own experience I know that other costs, including food and the equipment necessary to keep you safe and sheltered from the weather, add up quickly.

The cost of visiting a national park may seem to be out of reach for those on a budget, but there are a few ways that you can bring the price down. Keep a close eye on airfares to ensure that you get the best deal, and be cautious about waiting too long to book your flight. For lodging, make your reservations well in advance, and consider staying in more remote, less expensive hotels that provide transportation to and from the park each morning and evening. If you don't have the time to plan every aspect of your trip, then think about taking advantage of tour operators' pre-season and post-season sales (Tan, 2017).

America's national parks are an amazing resource. Hiking in them and seeing firsthand the wonders of nature is a renewing and refreshing experience. With a little planning and research, you can have an experience that you will never forget.

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