

# Best Trails: National Park Hikes

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By Robert Earle Howells and Dan Grushkin

## 1. Grand Canyon National Park // Arizona

**GPS: 35°50'N 111°46'W**

Perhaps the most iconic of all natural wonders in North America, the Grand Canyon is pretty much obligatory fare for this lifetime. That said, it is only right to pay the ditch a little more homage than a tailgate picnic. Instead, venture away from the crowds and into the depths to absorb nature's greatest work the same way it was made, slowly and in peace.

### One-Night Stand

On a quick stop, there's no time for a knee-pounding plummet, so tone down the ambition and focus on one thing: unmitigated splendor. From a base camp at North Rim Campground or the Grand Canyon Lodge, head for the Widforss Point Trail for a ten-mile (sixteen-kilometer) out-and-back hike. The gradual path ducks in and out of a fragrant evergreen forest only to emerge for a stunning view at Widforss Point. From there you'll look south toward such landmark formations as the Brahma, Deva, and Zoroaster Temples and across to the South Rim.

### Three Days or More

With all due respect for a rim-to-rim hike, the Hermit Trail, a 15.4-mile (24.8-kilometer) round-trip below the South Rim, delivers much of the same impact and none of the mule trains. Start at Hermits Rest off Hermit Road and descend into the red-rock abyss's 3,800-foot (1,158-meter) plunge that was carved out for hikers by Santa Fe Railroad workers. Camp at Hermit Creek and take day hikes on nearby portions of the scenic Tonto Trail and down to the Colorado River. Note: There's untreated water at Hermit Creek, but none along the way; carry plenty for the commutes.

### Must-Do Secret

As far as desert road trips go, the 61-mile (98-kilometer) Sunshine Route, south from State Route 389, must be in the top ten. The rough but generally 2WD-able route delves into a remote western section of the park known as the Arizona Strip and ends at Toroweap Overlook, a 3,000-foot (914-meter) bright ocher free fall straight down to the Colorado. When you arrive, you just may have the view, and one of 11 nearby primitive (no water) campsites, to yourself.

**Vitals:** On the South Rim, Bright Angel Lodge has rooms ([www.grandcanyonlodges.com](http://www.grandcanyonlodges.com)) and detached cabins (\$109). On the North Rim, Grand Canyon Lodge North Rim has a variety of rooms ([www.grandcanyonforever.com](http://www.grandcanyonforever.com)) and good food. For park info, camp reservations, and backcountry permits, visit [www.nps.gov/grca](http://www.nps.gov/grca).

## 2. Yellowstone National Park // Wyoming, Montana, Idaho

**GPS: 44°46'N 110°14'W**

Over half of Yellowstone's three million annual visitors crowd the park during July and August, and 99 percent

never venture beyond checklist sites like Old Faithful and the Technicolor hot springs. So plan an off-season trip within the untrodden backcountry to have the blooming mud pots and projectile geysers virtually to yourself. But not totally, with grizzlies and black bears, mountain lions, bison, elk, bighorn sheep, and, since 1995, wolves, it's the most complete ecosystem in the continental U.S.

### **One-Night Stand**

All across Yellowstone, you can see the crenulated line of the Absaroka Mountains on the horizon, but a 12-mile (19-kilometer) jaunt on the Pebble Creek Trail allows you to see the snowy ledges up close. Near the northeast entrance of the park, you'll cross a footbridge from the Pebble Creek Campground to a mile-long (1.6-kilometer-long) switchback at the base of 10,400-foot (3,170-meter) Barronette Peak. Next pass through a series of meadows, irrigated by Pebble Creek and carpeted with wild flowers. Keep lookout for mountain goats, elk, and peregrine falcons.

### **Three Days or More**

To see Yellowstone in its unique grandeur, picture pillars of sulfuric steam with bison grazing in the backdrop, this 26-mile (42-kilometer) loop is a kicker. Head nine miles (14 kilometers) from Old Faithful south along the Howard Eaton Trail into the Shoshone Geyser Basin. Bed down at the west edge of Shoshone Lake, the largest backcountry lake in the lower 48, then skirt nine miles (14 kilometers) east along the Shoshone Lake Trail. Loop seven miles (11 kilometers) around the crumbly beaches of Shoshone Lake along the De Lacy Creek Trail.

### **Must-Do Secret**

For those who crave creature country, Pelican Valley presents a wildlife bonanza. From the northeast edge of Yellowstone Lake, the seldom-plied lodgepole pine slopes cut through several wolf packs' territories and open onto broad grasslands trafficked by elk, bison, coyotes, and foxes. You'll likely only see traces of bears, but ask park rangers for advice on dealing with potential encounters. For the next two days you'll ascend the 22-mile (35-kilometer) Lamar River Trail along the Mirror Plateau, a warmer, dryer winter hangout for migrating wildlife.

**Vitals:** The view from Headwaters of the Yellowstone Bed and Breakfast's wraparound porch marries the sandy banks of the Yellowstone River with 10,969-foot (3,343-meter) Electric Peak (\$145; [www.headwatersbandb.com](http://www.headwatersbandb.com)). For park info, visit [www.nps.gov/yell](http://www.nps.gov/yell).

## **3. Yosemite National Park // California**

**GPS: 38°01'N 119°57'W**

John Muir was prophetic when he wrote that in Yosemite Valley "Nature had gathered her choicest treasures, to draw her lovers into close and confiding communion with her." That communion can get downright cozy with the park's 3.6 million visitors in 2007. But the truth is, they don't all need to squeeze into the seven-mile (eleven-kilometer) valley. Marvel at the temple, by all means, but look to high country, low country, and the unsung glories of the Sierra Nevada for your solitude. There's a lot of park out there.

### **One-Night Stand**

Just off Tioga Road in Tuolumne Meadows is the trail to Elizabeth Lake. It's only a five-mile (eight-kilometer) hike, but one that distills all the joys of the High Sierra into an easy jaunt. You'll take in granite outcroppings; lodgepole pines; grassy, flower-strewn meadows; and, finally, the frigid reflecting pool of Elizabeth Lake. The

glacial tarn lies at 9,508 feet (2,898 meters), beneath 10,823-foot (3,299-meter) Unicorn Peak. Camp here and you'll have seen Yosemite, even if you never venture into the valley.

### Three Days or More

If Yosemite has a gentle side, it's near the settlement of Wawona, in the southern portion of the park. The elevations are lower but this is still the majestic Sierra, just with a longer hiking season and fewer crowds. For a three-day highlights tour, forge a 22-mile (35-kilometer) clockwise loop, hiking from Wawona to Buena Vista Pass. Along the way, stop off at Chilnualna Fall, a series of foamy tumbles that would be a major tourist attraction were it in Yosemite Valley. Camp the first night just down from the pass at Buena Vista Lake, in a beautifully carved cirque below 9,709-foot (2,959-meter) Buena Vista Peak. On day two take it easy: Wind your way through forest until you reach the picture-perfect campsites at either Johnson or Crescent Lakes.

### Must-Do Secret

It sounds preposterous, but there's a hidden path in the heart of Yosemite. The 13-mile (21-kilometer) Valley Floor Loop Trail is an old bridle path that hasn't seen much traffic since the 1950s. Still, the trail is signed and very much intact. Pick it up behind Yosemite Lodge or Camp 4 and walk west, hugging the base of El Capitan, as far as Pohono Bridge. There, the trail crosses over to the south side of the valley, then east past Bridalveil Fall, through El Capitan Meadow, and across Swinging Bridge over the Merced River for a stunning view of Upper Yosemite Fall.



**Vitals:** The cedar-shrouded cabins at Evergreen Lodge, about 500 yards (457 meters) from the park's western boundary on the road to Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, are a good way to dodge the larger and louder campgrounds in the valley ([www.evergreenlodge.com](http://www.evergreenlodge.com)). For park info and free backcountry permits, visit [www.nps.gov/yose](http://www.nps.gov/yose).

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