

Becoming a National Parks Family

There's something special about the awe in a 5-year-old's eyes when they see for the first time the Old Faithful Geyser in full eruption, spitting thousands of gallons of steaming hot water into a robin's egg blue sky, all the while thundering like a rocket engine at liftoff. Too, the sense of accomplishment that a 14-year-old basks in atop a 13,770-foot outcrop of granite called the Grand Teton is something that can't be duplicated in the classroom. And when you're standing beside them when they enjoy these experiences, well, it's something *you'll* never forget.

Collectively, our national parks are a vast, and at times seemingly boundless, touchstone that cradles our nation's conservation ethic, our connection to the North American continent's wild side, and even our own self-inspection. Through parks like Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Yosemite, and Sequoia, we can walk off into the forest, or to the top of a mountain, and discover things about ourselves we never truly realized before: How self-reliant we are or are not, how we can see beauty in something as simple as a lily pad in bloom, how fit we truly are, or how little we really know about the world around us. In the parks, we can find enjoyment in nature without need for electronic stimulation from a video game or stereo, and come to understand how fragile earth is.

For nearly a quarter-century I've traveled to national parks from coast to coast specifically to relate to others the experiences that can be found, enjoyed, and profited from (educationally, that is) in this incredible natural slice of our heritage. And every visit to a park, whether it's one I've been to many times before or one I've never been to, rewards me with an experience that can't be matched.

There's really no perfect age for a trip to a national park. That's one of the beauties of our national park system. Young and old alike can enjoy, and learn from, our parks side by side. That's just what Gail and Wayne Lundeen were hoping for when they took their young children, 9-year-old Sienna and 7-year-old Evan, to Acadia National Park off the coast of Maine. The Lundeen's had left their home in St. Paul, Minnesota, on a 3-week journey to explore New England on their summer vacation. They were looking for a national park that would fit both the couple's desires for an outdoorsy experience, but one that wouldn't overpower their youngsters. After much reading and Internet browsing, they settled on Acadia.

"Acadia they said was one of the most kid-friendly parks," Wayne told me as my wife and I joined his young family atop the Beehive, a rocky hummock that juts out above the Gulf of Maine along Acadia's eastern boundary. "It's intermingled with services nearby in case you need them."

Plus, Gail pointed out, there are great hikes that don't take all day to complete, and broad bike trails that wind through dense forests without the threat of automobile traffic. And, she added, there's the educational aspect.

"The ranger program we went to was on tide pools, and it was really interesting and fun," she said.

For young Evan, though, looking down on the park's landscape was perhaps the best part of the visit.

"I liked climbing the mountains," he said, a broad smile wrapping his face.

Don't misunderstand. Choosing a national park vacation for your family won't magically make all frets, concerns, and anxieties vanish. For more information on figuring out which park to visit, see chapter 2, "Planning a Family Trip to a National Park."

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

This book is intended as a guide to help you make the best out of your national park vacation, to find the most enjoyable, and rewarding, locations, activities, and experiences for you and your family. While there's an inkling of each individual park's history, I didn't toss a lot of that information in because, well, because this isn't a history book. It's nice to know a little bit about each park's background, but it's even better to know what sort of experiences you can bring away from your visit.

A beauty of our national park system is that every park is unique. While there are nearly 400 units in the national park system, I wouldn't even consider attempting to capture each and every one inside this

book's front and back cover. I couldn't do justice to them. Instead, I've focused on 15 parks that I believe offer a wonderful cross-section of our national park system. I've tossed in Cape Hatteras and Cape Cod national seashores to provide some beach time, the Rocky Mountain jewels of Glacier, Grand Teton, Rocky Mountain, and Yellowstone because they're so visually stunning, the deep chasm known as the Grand Canyon because it is so grand, and seven other parks that round out this wonderful smorgasbord with deep forests, bobbing islands, tall trees, hoodoos and goblins, and towering canyon walls.

With that introduction out of the way, let me toss in a cheat sheet of superlatives that hopefully will help you chart your path through some of the national parks.

1 The Best National Park Experiences

- **Oh Say Can You See:** Whenever I visit a park, I seem to gravitate to high spots, and there are some great high spots to take in the surrounding landscape. Perhaps the most notable is the one I mentioned up above, climbing to the top of the **Grand Teton** in Grand Teton National Park (p. 340). Lesser in elevation, but not significance, are the views from the **North and South rims** of the Grand Canyon (see chapter 7), from **Moro Rock** in Sequoia National Park with

its view into the rugged canyon cut by the Middle Fork of the Kaweah River (p. 431), from **Cadillac Mountain** rising over Acadia (p. 63), and from **Hurricane Ridge** in Olympic National Park (see chapter 16).

- **Lions and Tigers and Bears:** Although wildlife are residents of our national parks, don't mistake the parks for open-air zoos. These animals aren't restrained by cages or fences, come and go as they please and, from time to time, prey on each other.

Yellowstone (see chapter 11) arguably offers the best views of the most complete wildlife ecosystem in the Lower 48. Pan your binoculars across the Lamar Valley in late spring and you're bound to see **wolves, grizzlies, elk, bison, mule deer, ravens, coyotes** and maybe even **bighorn sheep**. At **Cape Cod National Seashore** (p. 100) and **Acadia** (p. 71), sign on for whale-watch cruises that take you out into the Atlantic to view **humpbacks** and **right whales** up close. Or simply gaze into the waters off shore and see if you can't spot some **seals**. At **Glacier**, walk the trail to Hidden Lake (p. 267) and you're bound to encounter **mountain goats** practically face-to-face.

- **Up a Creek, or in a Lake:** Although my astrological sign is Scorpio, at times I think I'm an Aquarius, a water baby, for I'm always looking for a park where I can paddle away from shore. Fortunately, there are plenty of places in the national park system to do just that. If you like **canoeing**, Yellowstone's Lewis, Shoshone, and Yellowstone lakes (p. 308) offer incredible backcountry adventures. Visit Shoshone Lake and you can paddle up to a geyser basin. At Acadia, Cape Cod, Cape Hatteras, and Olympic (p. 70, 98, 134, and 464, respectively) you can push off from shore in a **sea kayak**. And in the Grand Canyon (p. 191), as well as

near Glacier (p. 273) and Olympic (p. 464), you can buck the white water from the relative comfort of a **rubber raft**.

- **What A View!:** Jaw-dropping views? Parks seem to claim a monopoly on those. Just look down into the **amphitheaters** at **Bryce Canyon National Park** (p. 232), take in the sweep of horizon from atop **Glacier Point** in **Yosemite National Park** (p. 398), or look *up* 2,000 feet into the belly of **Zion Canyon Narrows** in Zion National Park (p. 210). Of course, at times you can't see the forest for the trees in Sequoia National Park, where those **giant sequoias** require a wide-angle lens (p. 431). Another of my favorites is simply gazing up at the star-crowded skies that seem to hover over our national parks.
- **Surf's Up:** If, during your visit to **Cape Cod National Seashore** or **Cape Hatteras National Seashore** (chapters 4 and 5), a storm roils up over the Atlantic, a stroll along the beach unveils nature's fury at work, as wave after monstrous wave comes crashing ashore, flinging spray in all directions and even redesigning the beach at times. Cross the continent to **Olympic National Park** (chapter 16) during the stormy season and you'll find that watching the waves explode as they smack into the sea stacks just off the coastline is an incredible pastime.

2 The Best Day Hikes

- **Lone Star Geyser, Yellowstone National Park:** This is a pleaser for families with youngsters. The bulk of this 5-mile round-trip hike (p. 309) down to the geyser is an asphalt trail that parallels the Firehole River, making for firm footing summer and winter, when you can travel via

cross-country skis or snowshoes. And once you get there, you're confronted by a thick, 12-foot-tall geyserite cone that blows its tops about every 3 hours or so. Bicycles are allowed on this nearly level trail, which makes it even easier in summer.

- **Mist Trail, Yosemite National Park:** This decidedly kid-friendly trail (p. 398) is one of the Yosemite Valley's classics. Why? Follow it to the top, a 7-mile round-trip, and you not only pass two waterfalls (Vernal and Nevada) but get great views of the Yosemite Valley as well as find yourself at the very spot where the Merced River tumbles out of the Little Yosemite Valley and down into its big brother. Plus, on hot, sultry summer days you get a wonderfully cool drenching from the falls' spray. From the top you can either backtrack to the bottom, or take the John Muir Trail, which is not quite as steep.
- **South Ridge of Cadillac Mountain, Acadia National Park:** "Barbara," a 67-year-old Marylander who has summered in Mount Desert Island's Northeast Harbor every year since she was 4, makes at least 20 treks up the South Ridge of Cadillac Mountain (p. 64) during her stays. On the day we encounter her, she's dressed in a denim skirt, broad-brimmed white hat, white shirt, and comfortable shoes. Armed with a hiking pole, she doesn't dawdle on her way up to a rock outcrop that overlooks a pond cupped by the mountainside. "I hike it a lot because if I died, somebody will find me because so many people hike it," she jokes as we share the sprawling blue view of Frenchman Bay, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Gulf of Maine from Cadillac's granite shoulder. "I think it has absolutely wonderful views. It's gradual going up, and just gorgeous views going down." That sums it all up.
- **Hall of Mosses Trail, Olympic National Park:** Only got time for one hike in the Hoh Rain Forest? Then this would be it. It takes just about 40 minutes to navigate this .75-mile loop trail (p. 461) as it winds through a green kingdom of lush vegetation. It's not steamy, like a tropical rainforest, but you can feel the humidity. Along the trail, *epiphytes*—plants that grow on other plants—in the form of spongy club mosses, mosses, lichens, liverworts, and licorice ferns scramble across tree trunks and limbs and up into the leafy canopy where they manage to block most of the sun's rays. Scattered here and there on the ground are toppled trees and rotting stumps that serve as nurseries for the next generation of trees. And for kids who like creepy crawly things, there are the slimy, 8-inch-long banana slugs that seemingly have misplaced their shells.
- **Tharp's Log, Sequoia National Forest:** What makes this one of Sequoia's best trails? Kids love visiting Tharp's Log, which, in truth, is a real log cabin. You see, Hale Tharp lived in this hollowed out sequoia during summers from 1861 to 1890 when he would bring his cows up to graze in Huckleberry, Crescent, and Log meadows. Judging from the wooden bunk inside, I don't think his nights were entirely comfy, but he was no doubt dry when the rains came. You can find this mile-long trail at the Crescent Meadow parking lot, which is located 1.25 miles beyond Tunnel Log and marks the western terminus of the High Sierra Trail. See p. 431.
- **Queen's Garden Trail, Bryce Canyon National Park:** Looking down into the fairylands of Bryce's amphitheatres is one thing. Walking down into them is quite another. Along red-dirt paths you wind back and forth through the hoodoos that make Bryce such a wonder. The Queen's Garden Trail is not even 2 miles in length, making it doable for

all but the youngest of toddlers, and the climb down and back up isn't too terrible, either. Link Queen's Garden with the Navaho Loop Trail and you'll have a nearly 3-mile-long hike that is a perfect way to whet your appetite for dinner, or burn off any of your children's left-over energy before bedtime. See p. 232.

- **Angel's Landing, Zion National Park:** Perhaps my favorite trail in Zion, this also happens to be one of the park's most challenging hikes, and not one to be taken lightly for it tests your fear of heights. Definitely not a hike for pre-teens, this is a good 5-mile challenge for teens who like to push themselves. The trail (p. 216) climbs 1,488 feet—at one point traversing 21 short switchbacks known as “Walter's Wiggles”—to a summit with incredible views of Zion Canyon. But be prepared: The final .5-mile to the top crawls along a narrow, knife-edge trail where footing can be dicey under even the best of conditions. To help you along this section, the park has mercifully installed stout chains that you can cling to. The view from the top is definitely worth the work. You can gaze in all directions, taking in the Virgin River sweeping through the bottom of the canyon, the Great White Throne, Red Arch Mountain to the southeast, and the entrance to Zion Canyon Narrows beyond the Temple of Sinawava.
- **Ramsay Cascade Trail, Great Smoky Mountains National Park:** If you're like me, the taller the waterfall, the better the hike. If that's the case, this hike is the best in the park because Ramsey Cascades, which falls 100 feet, is the park's tallest waterfall. This 8-mile round-trip hike to the waterfall gains more than 2,000 feet

in elevation, so it's not for everyone. But the trail winds through stands of old-growth hardwood forest, so you enjoy the trees along the way. Just don't think of climbing to the top of the falls—over the years a few folks have tried and have met unpleasant deaths. See p. 157.

- **Hidden Lake, Glacier National Park:** Traversing wildflower-studded alpine meadows, with breathtaking views in all directions, this is a great hike along the “Crown of the Continent,” one that brings you in close contact with wildlife. True, it's one of the most popular hikes in Glacier, and so one of the most crowded. But it offers immediate payoffs. I encountered shaggy mountain goats within 10 minutes of leaving the Logan Pass parking lot. During the entire hike I could easily gaze up at snow-capped peaks, or down below to U-shaped valleys cut long ago by glaciers. The moderate grade and short distance, 3 miles round-trip, make this is a good hike for youngsters. See p. 267.
- **Jenny Lake Loop, Grand Teton National Park:** This mostly level trail winds around the lake close to the shoreline, a fact that makes it a nice hike for families. The setting is great, with the lake wrapped by a thick forest and the Tetons towering over the western shore. The downside is that this is one of the more popular trails in the park. If you have really young children and prefer a shorter hike, you can take a shuttle boat across the lake to the West Shore Boat Dock and then walk back to the east shore. This trail also connects with hikes up into Cascade Canyon (an even more popular hiking destination, but one with great scenic payoffs) and to String and Leigh lakes to the north. See p. 334.

- **Alberta Falls, Rocky Mountain National Park:** This isn't a long, full-day hike, but for families with youngsters, this is a great jaunt. Located near Bear Lake, this trail runs only 1.2 miles round-trip but it leads you into the woods to one of

the park's most revered waterfalls as its comes crashing down Glacier Creek (p. 361). The easy grade is a good place to start young hikers, and the prospect of seeing a waterfall keeps them interested.

3 The Best Little-Known Park Spots

- **Cataloochee Valley, Great Smoky Mountains National Park:** What does Cades Cove look like without the crowds? Cataloochee. Here (p. 160) you don't have to jockey with crowds to enjoy the views or the historic buildings. When I visited one mid-June day I practically had the place to myself. But like Cades Cove, Cataloochee features preserved 19th-century buildings and rolling orchards alive with wildlife. Along with the historic buildings, the Cataloochee Valley is where park biologists in 2001 began a 5-year experiment to return elk to the Smokies. Visit early in the day or just as evening begins to fall and you might spy some.
- **Kolob Canyons, Zion National Park:** Most tourists confine their visit to the highlights of Zion Canyon, but those with a bit more ambition also venture 45 miles to the park's northwest corner to see Kolob Arch, one of the world's longest free-standing arches with a span of 310 feet. You can hike to the arch and back in 1 long day on the La Verkin Creek Trail, a 14-mile round-trip hike from Lee Pass along the Kolob Canyons Road, although I wouldn't recommend it for inexperienced hikers or families with youngsters. A shorter, but equally worthwhile, hike in this area leads to Double Arch Alcove, an arched alcove topped overhead by an arch in the cliff. You

reach the formation on the Taylor Creek Trail, a 5.4-mile round-trip hike that crosses the Middle Fork of Taylor Creek and passes two log cabins before arriving at a viewpoint of the arch. You access the trail head from Kolob Canyons Road. See p. 216.

- **Tuolumne Meadows, Yosemite National Park:** I don't have the statistics, but I'd venture that 90% to 95% of the folks who trek to Yosemite go into and out of Yosemite Valley without visiting any other portion of the park. And that's a shame, because places like Tuolumne Meadows are breathtaking and provide a view of the High Sierra that you can't get from the Yosemite Valley. To reach this area you need to drive almost the entire length of the Tioga Road, but if you make the trip you uncover sprawling meadows capped by bulbous mounds of granite that make for great playgrounds for kids who like to scamper on rocks, gorgeous lakes for skipping stones, and great hikes, like the 7-mile round-trip down to Cathedral Lakes. See p. 400.
- **Cape Alava, Olympic National Park:** Located along the coast in the northwest corner of Washington State's Olympic Peninsula, this is a good place to retreat if you shun crowds and want to view images left behind by an earlier culture. The Cape Alava-Sand Point Loop is a

three-legged loop trail that offers ocean views, beach camping, and petroglyphs; it's an easy round-trip back to your car. The hike covers 9.3 miles and takes you to Cape Alava, the westernmost point in the Lower 48. Your trek begins on a 3-mile-long stretch that begins on a cedar-plank boardwalk that winds through a lush, and dense, forest. Once you reach the beach, you swing south and make your way 3 miles along the beach. During this stretch be sure to look for the petroglyphs on the rocks along the shore next to the high-tide mark. The final leg follows the Sand Point Trail for 3 miles back to your starting point. See p. 461.

- **Mineral King, Sequoia National Park:** Unfortunately, because it's time-consuming, or fortunately, because not many people do it, you have to temporarily leave Sequoia National Park to reach Mineral King. This primitive area once was eyed by ski resort developers. Today its scenery is dotted not by chairlifts but by lakes and laced by trails heading into the high country. The valley is breathtaking, with thick stands of conifers and outcrops of red and orange shale offset by white marble and black metamorphic shale and granite. Towering over the basin is Sawtooth Peak, which stands 12,343 feet tall and holds snowfields year-round. See p. 433.

4 The Best Campgrounds

- **Rising Sun, Glacier National Park:** Though Glacier has 13 campgrounds to choose from, this one struck me as one of the best places to spend a night or two or three under the stars. Why? The individual sites are well-spaced, there are plenty of trees for shade, and the Rising Sun Lodge is nearby in case you feel the urge for a hot shower or for someone else to do the cooking. Plus, you've got St. Mary Lake right across the road for boating or swimming (if it's a really hot day), and the east side of Glacier is just as interesting, and less crowded, than the west side. See p. 253.
- **Jenny Lake, Grand Teton National Park:** This campground (p. 326) just might be the most picturesque campground that has a paved road leading to it that you'll ever find. The 49 sites are carefully sprinkled amid evergreens and boulders left behind by retreating glaciers and the crags we call the Tetons tower overhead. And there's even a lake.
- **Nickerson State Park, Cape Cod National Seashore:** True, this state park isn't inside the national seashore's borders, but let's not split hairs. It's a great place to call home during your visit. At 1,900 acres, this is the largest state park on the cape and the nicest one because of the many "ponds" (I call them small lakes) scattered within its borders. The park's 420 campsites are nestled among towering white pines and clumped in seven groups scattered about the ponds, so you don't get claustrophobic. Not only can you swim and sail in the ponds, but the Cape Cod Rail Trails runs through the park, and so you can peddle from the state park to the national seashore. See chapter 4.
- **Ozette Lake, Olympic National Park:** This is a great campground for families with teens who like to backpack, or who want an introduction to backpacking. You can opt for one of the 15 drive-up campsites on the lake, or reserve one of the backcountry

campsites and hike in. Located in the northwest corner of the Olympic peninsula, away from the bulk of the national park, this location takes a little extra driving, but the solitude is worth it. See chapter 16.

- **Slough Creek, Yellowstone National Park:** Like Ozette Lake, this campground is removed from the heart of the park. Located in the northeastern corner of Yellowstone, just off the Lamar Valley Road, Slough Creek (p. 292) is the park's smallest campground with just 29 sites. And there are no flush toilets or showers. Its beauty, though, is its location in one

of the busiest wildlife corridors in the park. If luck strikes, you'll find yourself falling to sleep to a wolf serenade.

- **Cape Point, Cape Hatteras National Seashore:** Perhaps the best Cape Hatteras National Seashore camping experience comes from a stay at this campground. Located on a large sprawl of grass, the campground is the park's closest to a beach with life-guards. And from the campground, it's just a 1.5-mile walk to the end of the point itself. True, the showers spew only cold water, but on a hot, muggy beach day, that's a treat. See p. 118.

5 The Best Hotel Bets

- **Colter Bay, Grand Teton National Park:** What makes Colter Bay (p. 329) tops in Grand Teton when it comes to families? It's reasonably priced for family vacations, it's surrounded by a small village with restaurants, showers, laundry facilities, camp stores, and activities, and it's charming, as well. Some of my best boyhood vacation memories flow from the cabins we stayed in, no matter how rustic they were. Kids, I think, just seem to have an affinity for wood and rock. And these cabins, while appearing rustic, are very comfortable.
- **Wuksachi Lodge, Sequoia National Park:** Key to finding lodging in a national park is finding lodging that's ideally located, and the Wuksachi Lodge (p. 427) is that. This lodge with its glorious setting, comfortable rooms, and nice dining room is not far from the park's Giant Forest with its towering trees, not far from hiking trails, and not far from the entrance to Kings Canyon National Park.
- **Old Faithful Inn, Yellowstone National Park:** There's something

about sleeping in what just very may well be the largest log cabin on earth (p. 297) that makes this place very, very special. Of course, having the Old Faithful Geyser spouting off every 90 minutes or so right outside the front door says something, too. But when you walk through the front doors, and your head drops back as you measure the height of the fireplace's chimney, or when you run your hands along the log banisters that have been worn smooth over the past century by who knows how many other hands, or when you sit on one of the upper balconies with a favorite book or while playing checkers or cards with your children, you cache away memories you'll hold for the rest of your life.

- **Many Glacier Hotel, Glacier National Park:** From a setting I truly believe is one of the most awe-inspiring in the national park system, to the abundant activities for those who enjoy boating, hiking, horseback riding, or simply staring at glacially sculpted peaks, this lodge has few counterparts that can measure up.

True, the rooms aren't the best you'll find in the park system. But you're here for the scenery, right? See p. 257.

- **Kalaloch Lodge, Olympic National Park:** My youngest son loved the time we spent in one of Kalaloch's seaside cabins (p. 456). True, the wood-burning stove was a draw. But so, too, was the ocean just a few short steps away from our front door. And falling asleep at night to the crash of the surf is something neither of us will ever forget. With the kitchen in the cabin, and the restaurant in the main lodge building, we had the best of both worlds when it came to meal time.
- **Grand Canyon Lodge, Grand Canyon National Park:** Far from the at-times-maddening-crush of the South Rim, this lodge (p. 185) on

the canyon's North Rim reflects one of the classic styles of park architecture. And the setting can't be beat, either. Plus, what kid doesn't like to spend a night or two in a log cabin? It's all right here on the North Rim, surrounded by virtual wilderness, hiking, and stellar views into one of the grandest canyons on earth.

- **LeConte Lodge, Great Smoky Mountains National Park:** Okay, I cheated with this choice, since it's the *only* lodge inside the park's boundaries. It's a throw-back, at that, a lodge you have to hike, not drive, up to for a room. The setting is breathtaking, you get exercise coming and going, and you and your family have an opportunity to make new friends in a setting you all value. See p. 153.

6 The Best Museums in the National Parks

- **Giant Forest Museum, Sequoia National Park:** The life and times of sequoia trees are best explained in this neat museum in the park's Giant Forest section. A visit here will teach you and your kids how sequoias naturally ward off fire and insects, how many seeds are stored in one of the tree's pine cones, and what sort of climate the trees thrive in. See p. 434.
- **Albright Visitor Center, Yellowstone National Park:** At Mammoth Hot Springs, the museum offers exhibits depicting park history from prehistory through the creation of the National Park Service and features a wildlife display. My favorite aspect of this museum, though, is the exhibit on landscape painter Thomas Moran, whose works helped convince Congress to turn to Yellowstone to kick-start the world's national parks movement. See p. 282.
- **Yosemite Museum and Indian Village of Ahwahnee, Yosemite National Park:** Yosemite's cultural history is tracked here. The Indian Cultural Exhibit explains the lives of the Ahwahneeche, Miwok, and Paiute tribes that once lived in the area. You occasionally find Native Americans speaking here or giving demonstrations of long-forgotten arts, such as basket weaving. A replica of an Ahwahneeche village is behind the museum. Its exhibits guide you through the tribe's transformation in the years after whites discovered the valley. A ceremonial roundhouse, which is still used, is also on-site. See p. 401.
- **Olympic National Park Visitor Center:** Inside this building you'll find a nice little museum that tracks the Native Americans who once lived across the Olympic peninsula and examines the wildlife that calls it

home. Too, younger kids enjoy the Discovery Room, where they can play in a miniature log ranger station, learn about ecology, and build a totem pole with felt stick-on pieces.

In the main visitor center, older kids can keep busy with a virtual scavenger hunt that requires them to study the exhibits in order to answer questions about the park. See p. 446.

7 The Best Bargains in the National Parks

- **A National Parks Pass:** Fifty bucks. That's what this pass (p. 20) will set you back. And in return, it will provide you with access into nearly 400 units of the national park system. Tell me a theme park that offers you such a return on investment. And once you leave a park, if you hold this pass you don't have to pay to get back in. In fact, no one in your car has to pay to get in.
- **Free Entertainment:** Travel to Yellowstone, and you can spend hours, or days, watching Old Faithful and its fellow geysers spit and fume and boil and hiss. You also can keep count of all the elk, moose, wolves, bison, bears, and other wildlife that you see. Spend a few days at Cape Hatteras National Seashore and you can mesmerize yourself watching the waves roll in to shore, count the seabirds, or simply walk the dunes. Go to Yosemite and you can watch some of the world's tallest waterfalls plummet wispily into Yosemite Valley. Travel a bit south to Sequoia and you can see some of the tallest trees on earth. Go to the northwest and into Olympic and you can marvel at basically three parks in one, what with the Pacific beaches, temperate rainforests, and high, glacial-covered alpine reaches. And the charge for these activities? Nothing once you get in the gate.
- **Fresh Air and Exercise:** These two amenities are getting tougher and tougher to find these days. Fortunately, travel to a national park and you're likely to find some of the freshest air in the country, and plenty of exercise to go along with it, exercise that you don't always appreciate you're racking up because you're so busy enjoying your visit.
- **Getting Back to Basics:** Okay, this is one of those touchy-feely, amorphous kinds of rewards of a national park vacation. Pack your kids into the car, tell them they have to leave the video games and iPods behind, and once you reach the park of your choice you can get to know one another better by actually communicating face-to-face while enjoying a hike, paddle, or quiet dinner. National park vacations are perfect for bonding with your teens, particularly if you share your experience mountain climbing or backpacking or sea kayaking.
- **No Closing Time:** Parks are open 24/7 every day of the year. There's no closing time. You don't have to go to bed when the sun goes down. In fact, some times it's more enjoyable to stay up, watch for shooting stars, or listen for owls.
- **Go at Your Pace:** You can be as organized, or as laid back, as you wish on a park vacation. You can rise with the sun to get out on the trails before anyone else, or sleep in and enjoy a leisurely breakfast while others are out beating the trails. You can sign up for a naturalist-led course in sketching or wildflower identification, or sit back in a tour bus and let someone else drive while the guide tells you what you're seeing.

- **Learning without Realizing It:** It surely must be a scientifically proven fact: Kids learn more when they're having fun. That's part of the beauty of ranger-led hikes and programs where kids have someone other than their parents to bounce questions up against. And where those rangers fire back with their own set of questions

that force kids to learn all the while that they're having a great time. Check out any park's supporting nonprofit foundation and you'll find a slew of programs that range from a few hours to a week or more of family-oriented activities that will help you bond with your kids while you all learn something.