

JUST THE FACTS:

Planning Your Trip to the National Parks of the American West

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE'VE TRIED TO GIVE YOU ALL THE GENERAL INFORMATION you will need to help plan your trip to the national parks of the western United States. The individual park chapters that follow will answer your more specific questions.

The Parks Without the Crowds: Some General Tips

It's not easy to commune with nature when you're surrounded by hordes of fellow visitors. For each park, we've discussed the best times of year to go and listed certain areas, trails, and sites that are less visited than others. For really specific information, you can find park-use statistics at www2.nature.nps.gov/stats. Beyond that, here are a few general guidelines.

- ◆ **Avoid the high season.** For most parks in the West, this especially means July and August, but anytime schools are not in session, parks are crowded with families on vacation. Spring and fall in many of these national parks offer mild weather, vibrant plant and animal life, and relatively empty trails and roads. The exception (at least regarding crowds) is college spring break, which is usually in March or

April. Some parks, such as Big Bend, get unbelievably crowded at that time.

- ◆ **Walk away if you find yourself in a crowd.** It sounds simple, but often when a scenic overlook is crowded, you'll find an equally good, completely empty view just a short stretch down the road or trail.
- ◆ **Visit popular attractions at off-peak hours,** especially early in the morning or late in the afternoon. You'll be surprised at how empty the park is before 9 or 10am. Dawn and dusk are also often the best times to see wildlife. You also can avoid waits and crowds at restaurants by eating at off-peak hours—try lunch at 11 and dinner at 4. And campers using public showers will often find them jammed first thing in the morning and just before bedtime, but deserted the rest of the day.
- ◆ **Don't forget winter.** You may not see wildflowers, and some roads and areas may be closed, but many

Planning a Trip Online

A world of information is available on the Internet—in fact, you may find yourself inundated with almost *too* much information. In each of the following chapters we include pertinent websites, but a few stand out.

The National Park Service's website, www.nps.gov, has general information on national parks, monuments, and historic sites, as well as individual park maps that can be downloaded in a variety of formats. The site also contains a link to every individual park's website, and those often contain links to nearby attractions and other useful information.

national parks are wonderful places to ski, snowshoe, snowmobile, or just admire the snowy landscape.

- ◆ Finally, **remember that some parks are rarely crowded**, and we've made a special effort to include information about many of them in this book. Generally, the more difficult a park is to get to, the fewer people you'll encounter there. And many of the smaller parks remain essentially undiscovered while offering scenery and recreation opportunities that rival or even surpass the big-name parks. Consider out-of-the-way parks such as Great Basin, as well as one of America's newest national parks, Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

Information

Doing your homework can help you make the most of your trip; it can also help you avoid crowds. For park brochures and general planning information, contact each park directly, at the addresses included in each of the following chapters.

Another useful website for anyone interested in the outdoors is www.recreation.gov, a partnership of federal agencies that can link you to information on national parks, national forests, Bureau of Land Management sites, Bureau of Reclamation sites, Army Corps of Engineers sites, and national wildlife refuges.

Finally, those planning to travel with a dog or cat should check out www.petswelcome.com, a site that provides tips on traveling with pets, as well as lists of lodgings that accept pets, kennels for temporary pet boarding, and veterinarians to call in an emergency.

A WORD ON NATURE ASSOCIATIONS

Throughout this book, you'll read that a certain nature association or organization operates a particular park's bookstore. Practically every national park has a bookstore, and some have several. Bookstores are excellent sources for maps, guidebooks, videos, postcards, posters, and the like. Most of the nature associations also offer memberships (usually \$25–\$30 per year for individuals) that entitle the member to discounts of 15% to 20% on all purchases. You'll also usually get a quarterly newsletter. And for frequent travelers, here's the really good news: Membership in one nature association almost always entitles you to a 15% to 20% discount at other nature association bookstores and at national parks, monuments, historic sites, and recreation areas. For those of us who like to collect books, topographical maps, posters, and so on, the savings add up quickly. And we can also feel very smug about what a good deed we're doing in supporting these nonprofit groups.

Planning a National Park Itinerary

Even though distances seem vast in the western United States, it's possible to visit more than one of the region's national parks in a single trip. In fact, people often combine visits to Yellowstone and Grand Teton, Yosemite and Sequoia, and Zion and Bryce Canyon.

You can knit the parks of the California desert (Death Valley, Joshua Tree, and Mojave Preserve) into a nice itinerary that might even leave you time to stop off in the resort town of Palm Springs. A popular trip for families is a drive through Badlands National Park and the Black Hills of South Dakota, all the way through Devils Tower to Yellowstone. It's not a small stretch, but it's doable if you have more than a week.

Although it can be a lot of fun to combine several national parks in your vacation trip, try not to make the all too common mistake of attempting to see everything there is to see in too short a period of time. Be realistic about how much you want to see at each park, and create an itinerary that lets you thoroughly enjoy one or two aspects of a park rather than just glimpsing every corner as you speed by. And try to schedule a little relaxation time, especially for trips of more than a week—perhaps loafing in the campground one afternoon, or lounging by the motel swimming pool.

Following are two of our favorite national park tours.

THE SOUTHWEST CIRCLE

This long circle drive hits five states and involves a lot of driving (or flying regional airlines and renting cars), but it takes you to a fantastic variety of parks—desert, cave, mountain, and deep canyon, plus one of the world's most fascinating archaeological preserves. We begin and end in Phoenix, Arizona, where almost all major airlines serve the airport, and car and RV rentals are available. We've laid it out for just

under 2 weeks, but allowing more time would make it more satisfying.

DAY 1: PHOENIX, ARIZONA

After arriving and picking up your rental car or RV, Phoenix is a good spot to stock up on supplies. The city is also famous for its golf resorts, so you may want to hit a few balls before heading south.

DAY 2: SAGUARO NATIONAL PARK

This is one of America's few national parks dedicated to protecting one specific plant—the saguaro cactus. Here you will see forests of them. But you'll also see a variety of other plants and animals, such as javelinas—odd pig-like animals that have mouths so tough they can bite through prickly pear cactus pads. The park has two good **scenic drives** as well as numerous trails through the Sonoran Desert, including the **Valley View Overlook Trail**, which provides a close-up view of the desert, and the **Signal Hill Petroglyph Trail**, where you'll get a good look at some ancient petroglyphs. See chapter 31.

DAY 3-5: CARLSBAD CAVERNS & GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARKS

One of the largest and most spectacular cave systems in the world, **Carlsbad Caverns** in southern New Mexico has practically countless cave formations, ranging from the fantastic to the grotesque. Be sure to take the **Big Room Self-Guided Tour** and the **King's Palace Guided Tour**. For a genuine caving experience, get your clothes dirty on the **Slaughter Canyon guided tour**. Just over the state line in Texas, **Guadalupe Mountains** is a rugged wilderness of tall Douglas firs, offering panoramic vistas and the highest peak in Texas. Recommended for experienced hikers is the trek to the top of **Guadalupe Peak**. Everyone can enjoy the colors in **McKittrick Canyon**—either the trees in fall or

the wildflowers in spring. See chapters 10 and 20.

DAY 6: SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

It's a long drive from Carlsbad Caverns to Mesa Verde National Park, so we recommend breaking it up with an overnight stop in Santa Fe, famous for its art, history, and picturesque adobe buildings. For information, see *Frommer's New Mexico*.

DAY 7-9: MESA VERDE NATIONAL PARK

The largest archaeological preserve in the United States, Mesa Verde contains intriguing, well-preserved cliff dwellings, plus mesa-top pueblos, pit houses, and kivas, built by the ancestral Puebloan (Anasazi) people hundreds of years ago. Recommended stops here are **Cliff Palace**, the largest cliff dwelling in the Southwest, and **Balcony House**. See chapter 23.

DAY 10: PETRIFIED FOREST NATIONAL PARK

Especially colorful after a rainstorm has washed away the dust, this national park is a fascinating look at an unreal world of wood turned to stone. Take the 28-mile **scenic drive**, stopping at the pull-outs and walking some of the short trails. We especially recommend the **Giant Logs Trail**, where you'll see some of the park's largest petrified logs, and **Blue Mesa Trail**, one of the prettiest and most otherworldly hikes in the park. At **Newspaper Rock**, early inhabitants pecked dozens of petroglyphs into the dark stone, including an image of the famous humpbacked flute player, Kokopelli. See chapter 27.

DAY 11-12: GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK'S SOUTH RIM

The Grand Canyon truly is grand, and no matter how many photos you've seen, being there in person is an

awe-inspiring experience. After stopping at the information center for a quick geology lesson, take the shuttle to some of the South Rim **viewpoints**, and perhaps walk the **Rim Trail** a bit. Then, if you're physically able, walk down **Bright Angel Trail** at least a little way, watching the vegetation and rock layers change as you descend. Unless you are in very good condition, however, it is probably best to not go beyond the One-and-a-Half-Mile House, which has restrooms and drinking water, before heading back up to the rim. See chapter 16.

DAY 13: BACK TO PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Back in Phoenix, you can practice your golf swing or visit some of the city's excellent museums before catching your plane for home.

THE GRAND CIRCLE

Southern Utah has five delightful national parks and several national monuments, the North Rim of the spectacular Grand Canyon is just over the border in Arizona, and perched along the state line is an awe-inspiring Navajo Nation park. Together they form a somewhat circuitous loop. This jaunt begins and ends in Las Vegas, Nevada, which is accessible by almost all major airlines and has car and RV rentals. You can complete this tour in 2 weeks, but it is much more satisfying in 3 weeks, as described here.

DAY 1: LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

Fly in, pick up your rental car or RV, lay in some supplies, and maybe try the slot machines for a half-hour or so. Then hit the road and head northeast into the mountains of southern Utah.

DAYS 2-4: ZION NATIONAL PARK

Famous for its mammoth natural stone sculptures and unbelievably narrow **slot canyon**, this park begs to be explored

on foot. Hop on the shuttle bus that runs the length of the **Zion Canyon Scenic Drive**, getting off to take trails. We especially recommend the easy **Riverside Walk**, which follows the Virgin River through a narrow canyon past hanging gardens, as well as the **Emerald Pools Trail**. Especially pleasant on hot days, this walk through a forest of oak, maple, fir, and cottonwood trees leads to a waterfall, a hanging garden, and a shimmering pool. See chapter 36.

DAYS 5-6: GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK'S NORTH RIM

The North Rim of the Grand Canyon receives far fewer visitors than the South Rim, but that doesn't mean it's any less spectacular. The North Rim (which is open in summer only) provides views of and access to the same overpowering canyon as the South Rim does, just from the other side. You'll want to stop at the **Grand Canyon Lodge**, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and then hike a few of the **Rim Trails**. If you're in good enough physical shape, you might want to hike partway down into the canyon on the **North Kaibab Trail**. See chapter 16.

DAYS 7-8: MONUMENT VALLEY NAVAJO TRIBAL PARK

Although not a national park, this Navajo Tribal Park is well worth a stop (and it's on your way). Monument Valley is, to many of us, the epitome of the Old West—we've seen it dozens of times in movies and on television. Part of the vast Navajo Nation, the park has a 17-mile self-guided **loop road** that lets you see most of the major scenic attractions, or you can get a personalized tour with a **Navajo guide**. Either way you'll see classic western scenery made famous in movies such as 1939's *Stagecoach*, which starred a young John Wayne. For information, see *Frommer's Arizona* or *Frommer's Utah*.

DAYS 9-12: ARCHES & CANYONLANDS NATIONAL PARKS

Famed for its massive red and orange rock formations, this area is home to two national parks and the lively town of Moab. **Canyonlands National Park** (see chapter 8) is a great hikers' park. Make sure you stop at the **Grand View Point Overlook**, in the **Island in the Sky District**, and hike the **Grand View Trail**, especially scenic in the late afternoon. **Arches National Park** (see chapter 2) is a bit more user-friendly. Take the scenic drive and walk a few trails—on the **Devils Garden Trail**, you can see 15 to 20 arches, including picturesque **Landscape Arch**.

DAYS 13-14: CAPITOL REEF NATIONAL PARK

Relatively unknown, this park offers brilliantly colored rock formations and a bit of history. The Fremont River created a lush oasis in this otherwise barren land, and 19th-century pioneers found the soil so fertile that they established the community of **Fruita**, named for the orchards they planted. Today you can explore the buildings and even pick fruit in season. Hikers can examine **Pioneer Register**, a rock wall where traveling pioneers "signed in," and explore canyons where famed outlaw Butch Cassidy is said to have hidden out between train and bank robberies. See chapter 9.

DAYS 15-18: SCENIC UTAH 12 & BRYCE CANYON NATIONAL PARK

From Capitol Reef, go south on Utah 12 over Boulder Mountain and through **Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument**, possibly stopping for a short hike to Calf Creek Falls, before heading to **Bryce Canyon National Park**. Spend the night in the park or nearby so you can be on the rim of Bryce Amphitheater at **sunrise**, the best time to see the colorful and often whimsically shaped

rock formations called hoodoos. Top hikes here include the colorful **Queen's Garden Trail**, named for a formation that resembles Britain's Queen Victoria. See chapter 7.

DAYS 19-20: CEDAR BREAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT

This small, high-altitude park has an amphitheater reminiscent of Bryce Canyon's as well as a 5-mile road that offers easy access to the monument's scenic overlooks and trailheads. Hike **Spectra Point Trail** along the rim for changing views of the colorful rock formations. The trail also takes you through fields of wildflowers, which are especially colorful in late July and August, and past bristlecone pines that are more than 1,500 years old. See chapter 36.

DAY 21: BACK TO LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

Back in Sin City, you can catch a stage show or feed the one-armed bandits before boarding your flight home.

Visitor Centers

Your first stop at any national park should be the visitor center. Not only will you learn the why of the park, but you'll also get timely information such as road and trail closures, updates on safety issues, and the schedule for upcoming ranger programs. Visitor center hours usually vary by season; most are open daily from 8am until 5 or 6pm in summer, closing earlier at other times.

"To preserve and protect . . . and to provide for the enjoyment of park visitors."

**—National Park Service
Organic Act, 1916**

Fees & Permits

Though fees have increased in the past few years, visiting a national park is still a bargain—a steal compared to the prices you'd pay for a theme park or even a movie. Entry fees, ranging from nothing at Great Basin, Channel Islands, and Point Reyes to \$25 at Yellowstone and Grand Teton, are usually charged per private vehicle (for up to 1 week), regardless of how many visitors you stuffed inside. Those arriving on foot or by bicycle often pay lower per-person fees. Some parks offer passes good for unlimited visits to the same park for 12 months.

Special Passes. Several passes offer discounts or completely free admission to as many different parks as you care to visit.

If you plan to visit a number of national parks and monuments within a year—and by "a number" we really mean only five or six—a **National Parks Pass**, which costs \$50, will save you a bundle. The passes are good at all properties under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, but not at sites administered by the Bureau of Land Management, National Forest Service, or other federal or state agencies. The National Parks Pass provides free entrance for the pass holder and all vehicle occupants to National Park Service properties that charge vehicle entrance fees, and for the pass holder, spouse, parents, and children at sites that charge per-person fees. Buy passes at park entrance stations and visitor centers or by mail (☎ 888/GO-PARKS; www.nationalparks.org).

Also available at park service properties, as well as other federal recreation sites that charge entrance fees, is the **Golden Age Passport**, for those 62 and older, which has a one-time fee of \$10 and provides free admission to all national parks and monuments, plus a 50% discount on camping fees. The

North to Alaska!

Although this book looks closely at the national parks in the American West of the continental United States, we need to point out that some of the country's most beautiful and pristine national parks are in a destination not included here: Alaska. In fact, more than two-thirds of America's national park acreage is in our northernmost state, encompassing huge areas of wilderness and near-wilderness, with few roads, buildings, or even airplane landing strips.

Most of the Alaska parks are challenging, both to get to and to explore. One exception is Denali National Park, which provides visitors with easy access to genuine wilderness. Denali has sweeping tundra vistas, abundant wildlife, and North America's tallest mountain—20,320-foot Mount McKinley. But what makes this park unique is that its accessibility hasn't spoiled the natural experience. That's because the only road through the park is closed to the public. To see Denali, you must ride a bus. The grizzly bears and other animals are still visible, and their behavior remains more normal than that of the animals seen in the more visited, vehicle-intensive parks such as Yellowstone and Yosemite.

Another recommended Alaska experience is Glacier Bay National Park, a rugged wilderness the size of Connecticut that can be seen only by boat or plane. Created by a receding glacier, this bay is a work in progress, where you'll see a vast variety of flora and fauna, including grizzly bears, mountain goats, seals, and especially whales, including humpback whales breaching (leaping all the way out of the water).

Other national parks in Alaska include Katmai, the site of a phenomenal volcanic eruption in 1912 and now an excellent place to see relatively close up the huge Alaska brown bear as it devours a seemingly endless supply of red salmon. Kenai Fjords National Park, a remote area of mountains, rocks, and ice, is the spot to see a vast array of sea lions, otters, seals, and birds. And Wrangell–St. Elias National Park, which at over 8 million acres is by far the largest unit in the National Park Service system, consists of numerous rugged mountains and glaciers, plus some fascinating history from its early copper mining days.

The above parks, plus a number of other national parks, monuments, and preserves, are explored fully in *Former's Alaska* by Charles P. Wohlforth, a lifelong resident of Alaska.

Golden Access Passport, free for U.S. citizens who are blind or have permanent disabilities, has the same benefits as the Golden Age Passport and is available at all federal recreation sites that charge entrance fees.

Available from U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife areas is the **Golden Eagle Pass**. At a cost of \$65 for 1 year from the date of purchase, it allows the bearer, plus everyone traveling with him or her

in the same vehicle, free admission to all National Park Service properties plus other federal recreation sites that charge fees. The National Parks Pass discussed above can be upgraded to Golden Eagle status for \$15.

Backcountry Permits. At most national parks, it is necessary to obtain a permit to stay overnight in the park's undeveloped backcountry. Some parks have even more restrictions. To be safe, if you

intend to do any backpacking, look in the individual park chapter or contact the park's backcountry office in advance. In some cases, it may be possible to obtain a permit by mail; in most cases, you must appear in person the day before your trip. Some parks charge for backcountry permits, while others do not; some restrict the number of permits issued.

Other Permits. Hunting is not allowed in national parks, but fishing often is. You will usually need a state fishing license. Licenses are generally available at local sporting-goods stores and state game and fish department offices. Fees vary for state residents and nonresidents, for various time periods, and sometimes by location within the state, but you can usually get a nonresident 1-day license for \$5 to \$15 and a 5- to 7-day nonresident license for \$15 to \$25.

In some parks (Yellowstone and Grand Teton, for example), you will need a special permit to go boating. In others, you may need a permit for cross-country skiing. Check the individual park chapters for details on these and other required permits.

Getting a Campsite

Although a growing number of national park campgrounds accept campsite reservations, many still do not. If you plan to camp and are heading to a first-come, first-served campground, the first thing to do upon arrival is to make sure a site is available. Campsites at major park campgrounds fill up early in summer, on weekends, and during other peak times, such as school holidays. A reservation or an early morning arrival (sometimes as early as 7 or 8am) is the best defense against disappointment. In each chapter, we've indicated whether a campground tends to fill up especially early, and whether reservations are accepted.

The **National Park Service Reservation Center** (☎ 800/365-2267; <http://reservations.nps.gov>) provides reservations for National Park Service campgrounds at many popular parks,

including Channel Islands, Death Valley, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Joshua Tree, Mount Rainier, Rocky Mountain, Sequoia-Kings Canyon, Yosemite, and Zion. Campground reservations for another group of parks, including Arches, Big Bend, Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Bryce Canyon, and Lassen Volcanic, are available through the **National Recreation Reservation Service** (☎ 887/444-6777; www.reserveusa.com), which also takes reservations for many national forests.

Maps

When you arrive at a national park site, you'll receive a large, four-color brochure that has a good map of the park on it; of course, you also have the maps in this book. If you plan to do some serious hiking, especially into backcountry and wilderness areas, these won't be enough. What you'll really need are detailed topographical maps.

Topographical maps can usually be ordered in advance from the individual park bookstores, which are discussed in the following chapters. The especially useful maps published by National Geographic Maps/Trails Illustrated can be ordered directly from the publisher (☎ 800/962-1643; <http://nationalgeographic.com/trails>). Most topographical maps retail for about \$10.

Tips for RVers

Many people prefer to explore the national parks in an RV—a motor home, truck camper, or camper trailer—especially in the warm months. One advantage to this type of travel is that early morning and early evening are among the best times to be in the parks if you want to avoid crowds and see wildlife. Needless to say, it's a lot more convenient to experience the parks at these times if you're already there, staying in one of the park campgrounds.

Carrying your house with you also lets you stop for meals anytime and anywhere you choose, and makes it easy to

take care of individual dietary needs. RVing also means you don't have to worry about sleeping on a lumpy mattress, and you won't need to spend time searching for a restroom—almost all RVs have some sort of bathroom facilities, from a full bathroom with tub/shower combination to a Porta Potty hidden under a seat.

There are disadvantages, of course. If you already own an RV, you know what you had to pay for it. And even if you rent, you probably won't save a lot of money. Renting a motor home will probably end up costing almost as much as renting a compact car, staying in moderately priced motels, and eating in family-style restaurants and cafes. That's because the motor home will go only one-third as far on a gallon of fuel as your compact car will, and it's expensive to rent. Some of the fancier private campgrounds now charge as much for an RV site with utility hookups as you'd expect to pay in a cheap motel.

Other disadvantages include the limited facilities in national park campgrounds (although they are being upgraded to the point where camping purists are starting to complain). Even in most commercial campgrounds, the facilities are less than you'd expect in moderately priced motels. And parking is often limited in national parks, especially for motor homes and other large vehicles. However, since most people are driving in the parks between 10am and 5pm, the solution is to head out on the scenic drives either early or late in the day, when there's less traffic. It's nicer then, anyway.

If you'll be traveling in the park in your RV and want to make it obvious that your campsite is occupied, carry something worthless to leave in it, such as a cardboard box with "Site Taken" clearly written on it. You can usually find a rock to weigh it down.

Many national park campsites are not level. If your RV does not have built-in levelers, carry four or five short boards, or leveling blocks, that can be placed under the wheels. You'll discover

that not only will you sleep better if your rig is level, but your food won't slide off the table and the refrigerator will run more efficiently.

Renting an RV. If you're flying into the area and renting an RV when you arrive, choose your starting point carefully; not only do you want to keep your driving to a minimum—you'll be lucky to get 10 miles per gallon of gas—but rental rates vary depending on the city in which you pick up your RV. Do some research before you commit to a starting point. Rates are generally highest, between \$1,000 and \$1,500 per week, in mid-summer. The country's largest RV rental company is **Cruise America** (☎ 800/784-7368; www.cruiseamerica.com), with outlets in most major western cities. RV rentals are also available in many western states from **El Monte RV** (☎ 888/337-2214; www.elmonte.com). Information on additional rental agencies, as well as tips on renting, can be obtained online from the **Recreation Vehicle Rental Association** (www.rvra.org).

Tips for Traveling with Kids

Most parks offer **Junior Ranger Programs** that give kids the chance to earn certificates, badges, and patches for completing certain projects, such as tree or animal identification, or answering questions in a workbook. It's a good way to learn about the national parks and the resources that the Park Service protects. Also, many parks offer special discussions, walks, and other ranger-led activities for children.

Tips for Travelers with Disabilities

The National Park Service has come a long way in the past 20 years in making the parks more accessible for visitors with disabilities. Most parks have accessible restrooms, and many have at least one trail that is wheelchair accessible—the Rim Trail at Bryce Canyon is a prime

Special Tip for Pet Owners

Although pets are not permitted on the trails or backcountry in practically all national parks, those traveling with their dogs can hike with them over miles of trails administered by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, adjacent to many parks.

example. In addition, as campgrounds, boat docks, and other facilities are upgraded, improvements are being made to make them more accessible. Many parks now have campsites designed specifically for travelers in wheelchairs, and park amphitheaters can usually accommodate wheelchair users.

But perhaps just as important as upgrades in facilities is the prevailing attitude of National Park Service personnel that these parks are for the public—the entire public—and they are going to do whatever it takes to help everyone enjoy his or her park experience. Those with special needs are encouraged to talk with park workers, who can usually assist, such as by opening locked gates to get vehicles closer to scenic attractions, or simply by pointing out trails with the lowest grades or with portable toilets that are accessible.

One note on service dogs: Seeing Eye and other service dogs are not considered pets, and are legally permitted anywhere in the parks. However, because of potential problems with wildlife or terrain (sharp rocks on some trails can cut dogs' paws), it's best for those taking service dogs into the parks to discuss their plans with rangers beforehand.

Many of the major car-rental companies now offer hand-controlled cars for drivers with disabilities, and can provide

those vehicles with advance notice. **Wheelchair Getaways** (☎ 800/642-2042 or 859/873-4973; www.wheelchairgetaways.com) rents and sells specialized vans with wheelchair lifts and other features for visitors with disabilities. It has outlets in most western states.

And don't forget your **Golden Access Passport** (see "Fees & Permits," above). It is free and will grant you free admission to most national parks and a 50% discount on many park services and facilities.

Tips for Travelers with Pets

National parks as well as other federal lands administered by the National Park Service are not pet-friendly, and those planning to visit the parks should consider leaving their pets at home. Pets are almost always prohibited on hiking trails, in the backcountry, and in buildings, and must always be on a leash. Essentially, this means that if you take your dog or cat into the parks, they can be with you in the campgrounds and inside your vehicle, and you can walk them in parking areas, but that's about all. It's no fun for you or your pet.

Aside from regulations, you need to be concerned with your pet's well-being. Pets should never be left in closed vehicles, where temperatures can soar to over 120°F (49°C) in minutes, resulting in brain damage or death. No punishment is too severe for the human who subjects a dog or cat to that torture.

Those who do decide to take pets with them despite these warnings should take the pets' leashes, of course; carry plenty of water (pet shops sell clever little travel water bowls that won't spill in a moving vehicle); and bring proof that the dogs or cats have been vaccinated against rabies. Flea and tick spray or powder is also important, since fleas that may carry bubonic plague have been found on prairie dogs and other rodents in some parks, such as Mesa Verde and Bryce Canyon.

Protecting Your Health & Safety

First of all, don't forget that motor vehicle accidents cause more deaths in the parks every year than anything else. Scenic drives are often winding and steep; take them slowly and carefully. And no matter how stunning the snow-capped peak you may glimpse off to the side, keep your eyes on the road.

When out on the trails, even for a day hike, keep safety in mind. The wild, untouched nature of these parks is what makes them so exciting and breathtakingly beautiful—but along with wildness comes risk. The national parks are not playgrounds, nor are they zoos. The animals here are truly untamed and sometimes dangerous. This doesn't mean that disaster could strike at any time, but it does mean that visitors should exercise basic caution and common sense at all times, respecting the wilderness around them and always following the rules of the park.

Never feed, bother, or approach animals. Even the smallest among them can carry harmful, sometimes deadly, diseases, and feeding them is dangerous not only to yourself but also to the animals, who (like us) will happily eat what their bodies can't handle. In addition, wild animals' dependence on human handouts can lead to unpleasant confrontations, which often result in rangers' having to relocate or kill the animal. As the Park Service reminds us, "A fed bear is a dead bear."

In some parks where there are bears and mountain lions, it's often a good idea to make noise as you hike, to make sure you don't accidentally stumble upon and frighten an animal into aggression. Also, follow park rules on food storage when in bear country. Photographers should always keep a safe distance when taking pictures of wildlife—the best photos are shot with a telephoto lens.

It's equally important for your safety to know your limitations, to understand the environment, and to take the proper equipment when exploring the park. Always stop at the visitor center before you set out on a hike. Park staff there can offer advice on your hiking plans and supply you with pamphlets, maps, and information on weather conditions or any dangers, such as bear activity or flash flood possibilities on canyon hikes. Once out on the trail, hikers should always carry sufficient water and, just as important, remember to drink it. Wear sturdy shoes with good ankle support and rock-gripping soles. Always keep a close eye on any children in your group, and never let them run ahead.

Since many park visitors live at or near sea level, one of the most common health hazards is **altitude sickness**, caused by the high elevations of many of the parks in this book. Symptoms include headache, fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, muscle pain, and lightheadedness. Doctors recommend that until you are acclimated—which can take several days—you consume light meals and drink lots of liquids, avoiding those with caffeine or alcohol. It's a good idea to take frequent sips of water, as well.

One proven method of minimizing the effects of high altitudes is to work up to them. For instance, on a visit to southern Utah, go to lower-elevation Zion National Park for a day or two before heading to the higher mountains of Bryce Canyon.

A waterborne hazard is *Giardia*, a **parasite** that wreaks havoc on the human digestive system. If you pick up this pesky hanger-on, it may accompany you on your trip home. The best solution is to carry all the water you'll need (usually a gallon a day). If you need additional water from the parks' lakes and streams, it should be boiled for 3 to 6 minutes before consumption.

So You Like a Mystery?

Author Nevada Barr spins a good yarn. A former National Park Service ranger, she writes what she knows—the settings for her mysteries are national parks, and her detective, Anna Pigeon, is a ranger. Anna joined the Park Service after her actor husband was killed in New York City, and she now finds safety in solitude. But occasionally someone breaks into her aloneness, such as the time she enjoyed a brief liaison with an FBI agent she met during a bizarre murder investigation at Lake Superior. Anna loves wild country, and her work often takes her into strange situations. It's fascinating to envision the parks through Anna's eyes, first as she patrols the backcountry of Guadalupe Mountains on horseback—is the killer

really a mountain lion as the tracks imply, or something more sinister?—or when she strives to uncover the cause of inexplicable deaths amid the ruins at Mesa Verde. The “accident” that befalls a spelunker in the depths of Carlsbad Caverns takes the reader into subterranean territory, and the tense situation that develops among the small group of isolated firefighters during the aftermath of a raging forest fire at Lassen Volcanic National Park is riveting. Each book takes place in a different park, so you can sample a variety of environments: arid deserts, forested mountains, deep lakes, dark caves, teeming islands—wherever there's a national park, there just might be a mystery from Nevada Barr's pen.

Hiking Tips

Don't venture off on any extensive hike, even a day hike, without the following gear: a compass, a topographical map, bug repellent, a whistle, and a watch. In many western parks, sunglasses, sunscreen, and wide-brimmed hats are also considered essential. To be on the safe side, you should keep a **first-aid kit** in your car or luggage, and have it handy when hiking. At a minimum, it should contain butterfly bandages, sterile gauze pads, adhesive tape, antibiotic ointment, pain relievers, alcohol pads, and a knife with scissors and tweezers.

Planning a Backcountry Trip

Here are some general things to keep in mind when planning a backcountry trip:

- ◆ **Permits** In many parks, overnight hiking and backcountry camping require a permit.

- ◆ **Camping Etiquette & Special Regulations** Follow the basic rules of camping etiquette: Pack out all your trash, including uneaten food and used toilet paper. Camp in obvious campsites. If pit toilets are not available, bury human waste in holes 6 inches deep, 6 inches across, and at least 200 feet from water and creek beds. When doing dishes, take water and dishes at least 200 feet from the water source, and scatter the wastewater. Hang food and trash out of reach of wildlife, use bear-proof containers, or follow other park rules to keep wildlife from human food.
- ◆ **Shoes** Be sure to wear comfortable, sturdy hiking shoes that will resist water if you're planning an early season hike.
- ◆ **Sleeping Bags** Your sleeping bag should be rated for the low temperatures found at high elevations. Most campers are happy to have a sleeping pad.

- ◆ **Water** If you're not carrying enough water for the entire trip, you'll also need a good purifying system, because that seemingly clear stream is filled with a bacteria likely to cause intestinal disorders.
- ◆ **Your Pack** The argument rages about the merits of old-fashioned external-frame packs and newer internal-frame models. Over the long run, the newer versions are more stable and allow you to carry greater loads more comfortably; however, they also cost more. The key issue is finding a pack that fits well, has plenty of padding, a wide hip belt, and a good lumbar support pad.

Protecting the Environment

Not long ago, the rule of thumb was to "leave only footprints"; these days, we're trying to do better and not leave even footprints. It's relatively easy to be a good outdoor citizen—just use common

**"Surely the great United States of America is not so poor we cannot afford to have these places, nor so rich we can do without them."
—Newton Drury, National Parks Service Director, 1940–1951**

sense. Pack out all trash; stay on designated trails; be especially careful not to pollute water; don't disturb plants, wildlife, or archaeological resources; don't pick flowers or collect rocks; and, in general, do your best to have as little impact on the environment as possible. Some hikers go further, carrying a small trash bag to pick up what others may have left. As the Park Service likes to remind us, protecting our national parks is everyone's responsibility.