

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of the National Parks of the West

In This Chapter

- ▶ The best ways to experience the outdoors
 - ▶ Top places to stay and dine
 - ▶ Favorite winter escapes and family activities
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The old adage “If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all,” doesn’t apply to America’s national parks. Each park has its own, distinct personality. Even those that border one another — such as Yellowstone and Grand Teton, or Sequoia and Kings Canyon — have some very different elements. If you’re a wildlife fan, it’s easy to choose a visit to Yellowstone over a trip to Death Valley. If you want to walk sea-swept beaches, Olympic, not Mount Rainier, is the place to head. When it comes to descending into the landscape, Zion tops the list. Want to see a rock landscape out of the old Flintstone’s cartoon scenery? No place comes as close as Arches with its rock arches, windows, and fins.

If you haven’t already visited these places, it may be hard to know which fits with the vacation you envision. But that’s okay, because I’ve already done all the hard work and come up with some lists that help define the very best of the national parks of the West.



Throughout the book, you will find the “Best of the Best” icon highlighting the best the parks have to offer in all categories—hotels, restaurants, hikes, wildlife viewing, and more.

The Best Scenic Overlooks

Sometimes you can’t see the forest for the trees. Sometimes you can see almost forever. Here are some of the best places for great views:

- ✓ **Dantes View:** There are two benefits to trekking to this viewpoint in Death Valley National Park. One, you escape the blistering heat of the valley floor. Two, you gain an incredible vantage point over

Death Valley. Views spread downward to the parched salt pan of Badwater and upward toward the summit of Telescope Peak across the valley. See Chapter 10.

- ✓ **Lipan Point:** There are numerous overlooks that provide breathtaking views into the Grand Canyon, but this one gets a gold star. Not only is it far enough from Grand Canyon Village on the South Rim to discourage crowds, but come sundown, it offers what is arguably the best view into the canyon. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Hurricane Ridge:** Look to the north, and you see the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Canada. Look to the south, and you spot glacier-coated peaks and thick coniferous forests that practically beg you to hike down into them. This ridgeline outpost in Olympic National Park clearly demonstrates why this park is a favorite for those looking to mix up their activities — mountaineering and beachcombing — during a national park vacation. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Glacier Point:** Yosemite's Half Dome gets more press, but its summit is much tougher to reach and it doesn't offer the same perspective of the Yosemite Valley. Plus, when you're standing atop Half Dome, you can't admire its ponderous profile the way you can from Glacier Point. Although you can hike to the top of Glacier Point via the Four Mile Trail, you can drive much more quickly to the summit and enjoy the view without the exertion. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **Angel's Landing:** It takes a hike that at times is strenuous and that will test your fear of heights, but climbing to the top of this outcrop in Zion National Park is a real thrill. Not only can you congratulate yourself for making it to the top, but once there you can enjoy some beautiful views down into Zion Canyon. See Chapter 18.

The Best Day Hikes

A national park vacation should be an “active” vacation, one that challenges your body as much as your mind. Here's a collection of day hikes that will get you started in the right direction:

- ✓ **Primitive Trail from Double O to Landscape Arch:** Definitely off the beaten path, this hike in Arches National Park has little rock cairns marking a route that will at times test your trail-finding skills. But it also rewards by taking you between, and atop, rock fins, past showy displays of wildflowers (in springtime), and treating you to some solitude in this otherworldly landscape. See Chapter 9.
- ✓ **Hidden Falls/Inspiration Point:** Committing to this hike in Grand Teton National Park allows you to enjoy a gentle boat ride across Jenny Lake before (and after) venturing into the mountains. True, this hike is popular and can be crowded, but it pays off with several views of crashing water falls and one overlooking Jenny Lake.

You can also watch classes of hopeful climbers working on their techniques before heading up to the top of the Grand Teton. See Chapter 12.

- ✔ **Cape Alva/Sand Point Loop:** Temperate rain forest, grassy meadows, and sandy beaches. This hike in Olympic National Park has it all, and tosses in some petroglyphs reflecting Native Americans' impressions of whales for good measure. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Lone Star Geyser:** Most folks who head to the Upper Geyser Basin at Yellowstone National Park are satisfied to view Old Faithful and stroll along the boardwalk up to Geyser Hill. What makes the hike to the Lone Star Geyser a winner is the beautiful forest the trail roams through, the nearby Firehole River, and the payoff: a towering mound of geyserite that erupts about every three hours with a gusher of steaming water. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Half Dome:** True, this is one long day hike. But the 17 miles you'll cover from start to finish lead you uphill alongside frothing cataracts, along the edge of the Little Yosemite Valley, and up one of Yosemite National Park's signature rockfaces to an incredible viewpoint overlooking the Yosemite Valley. If you take this hike on a hot day, allow some time on your return to cool off in the Merced River before it leaps down into the Yosemite Valley via Nevada and Vernal falls. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Riverside Walk:** If you don't have the time to hike the entire length of Zion National Park's "Narrows" trail, this is a good substitute. Located at the Temple of Sinawava, this walk leads you into a massive slot canyon whose walls rise thousands of feet above the Virgin River. A summertime hike into this canyon is cooling and reveals dazzling displays of hanging gardens. See Chapter 18.

The Best Places to Sleep under the Stars

Heading into the backcountry can be one of the best aspects of a national park vacation. You can walk off into the woods in just about any direction, but here are some of my favorites:

- ✔ **Lizard Creek Campground:** Near Grand Teton's northern border, this out-of-the-way campground is often overlooked, so you can be sure it's not overrun with noisy campers. The forest setting on the shores of Jackson Lake is picturesque, and there's no light pollution to obscure your views of the night sky. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Shoshone, Lewis, or Yellowstone lakes:** You have to work, either by hiking or paddling, to reach the backcountry campsites that dot the shores of Yellowstone National Park's three major lakes. But I guarantee you won't be disappointed. I've seen shooting stars crease the sky on clear nights, and wildlife abounds in this natural setting. See Chapter 16.

- ✓ **High Sierra Camps:** Strung like jewels through the backcountry of Yosemite National Parks, these camps make venturing into the backcountry less daunting than it may seem to first-timers. There's no need to carry a tent, because the camps offer tent-cabins for shelter, and no need to carry food, because the on-site chef feeds hikers as if they were kings. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **Kolob Canyon:** Located in the northwestern corner of Zion National Park, this canyon leads to Kolob Arch, which, with a 310-foot span, just may be the world's longest freestanding arch. Along the way, the trail passes a number of backcountry campsites and La Verkin Creek. See Chapter 18.

The Best Lodges to Check Into

There are lodges, and then there are *lodges!* Not all national park lodges were created equally. Here are my top picks:

- ✓ **Furnace Creek Inn:** Nestled on a hillside amid a sprawling grove of palm trees, this Mission-style inn has an almost palatial feel to it. While the rest of Death Valley National Park sizzles in the summer heat, this inn bakes in atmosphere. I've been tempted to spend my Death Valley visit pool-side surrounded by the inn's gardens. See Chapter 10.
- ✓ **El Tovar Hotel:** This historic hotel on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon coddles its guests with elegant rooms, a private sitting room that provides privacy from unregistered guests, innovative cuisine, and a staff that's always ready to pamper you. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Jenny Lake Lodge:** Surrounded by an evergreen forest in the afternoon shadow of the Grand Teton, this lakeside lodge with its accompanying cabins is a perfect romantic retreat. Although rustic in appearance, the lodge, its cabins, and their furnishings provide a wonderfully relaxing and comfortable retreat after a day in the park. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Old Faithful Inn:** The patriarch of what I like to call the "stately national park inn," this oversized log cabin in the heart of Yellowstone is infused with atmosphere, stories, and charm. Sure, some of the rooms require that you use communal bathrooms down the hall, but all give you the impression that you're staying someplace special. And with the Upper Geyser Basin out your window, you are. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **The Ahwahnee Hotel:** Queens, presidents, and Hollywood elite have stayed in this striking lodge in Yosemite, and for good reason. You won't find a finer accommodation in the national park system. This hotel is pricy, but if you can afford it, you won't regret staying here. See Chapter 17.

The Best Park Dining Rooms

Just because you're in the wilderness, you don't need to go hungry. In fact, meals at some park restaurants will require you to take a hike to keep off the pounds. Some of my favorites:

- ✔ **The Arizona Room:** A short stroll from the edge of the Grand Canyon's South Rim, this dining room doesn't take reservations. Instead, your name goes on a list and when a table opens they call your name. Trust me, the wait is worth it, particularly when you time things perfectly and the sun is setting on the canyon. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Paradise Inn:** Perhaps it's the location on the flanks of Mount Rainier, or maybe the fact that a day spent hiking really hones the appetite, but I've never had a bad meal in the inn's historic dining room. The food, which tends to the hearty side, comes in large, tasty portions. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Lake Crescent Lodge:** My youngest son discovered the palette-pleasing joy of crab cakes during our stay in Olympic National Park, and the ahi tuna main course wasn't bad, either. The beautiful lake-front setting, the elegant dining room, attentive staff, and sumptuous menu that features some of the freshest seafood in the park system all combine to make this one of my favorite park restaurants. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Lake Hotel:** On the shore of Yellowstone Lake, this colonial-style hotel boasts a restaurant that's not only Yellowstone's best, but also one of the best in the whole national park system. The view of the shimmering lake through the dining room's windows doesn't hurt, of course, but the creative menu and the meals' preparation are the main attractions. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **The Ahwahnee Hotel:** You don't have to be a hotel guest to eat in the elegant dining room here, and I strongly recommend you dine here at least once, to enjoy both the food and the ambience. The dining room pulls out all the stops at year's end during the annual Bracebridge Dinners that recreate an Olde English Christmas feast that is part pagentry and part culinary extravaganza. See Chapter 17.

The Best Winter Escapes in the Parks

Parks are open year-round, although many are most crowded in the summer months. If your schedule allows, be daring and schedule a winter visit. Here are some great winter activities to pursue:

- ✔ **Storm watching:** When storms roll in from the Pacific Ocean, they send humongous waves crashing into the seastacks that tower off the shore of Rialto Beach in Olympic National Park. Some people

schedule their winter weekends around this incredible display of nature's forces. See Chapter 14.

- ✓ **Cross-country skiing:** Many national parks offer cross-country skiing come winter, but Sequoia has gigantic trees to go along with it. Kicking and gliding beneath these cinnamon-hued behemoths is the experience of a lifetime. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **Wildlife watching:** When winter arrives in Yellowstone, it forces the animals out of the high country and down to the river valleys, making them much more accessible than during the summer months. The Lamar Valley is home to several wolf packs, thousands of elk, and hundreds of bison during the winter months. Snowshoeing in the park takes on added excitement when you spy a set of wolf tracks on the trail. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Snowshoeing:** The West's national parks offer endless snowshoeing opportunities. Trails are marked and rentals are available in: Grand Teton, Mount Rainier, Sequoia, Yellowstone, and Yosemite. The solitude you'll enjoy while snowshoeing down a trail, and the discoveries you'll make, are unforgettable. See Chapters 12, 13, and 15 through 17.

The Best Family Activities in the Parks



National parks are perfect for family vacations, because they offer activities for all ages. Here are some of the possibilities:

- ✓ **Climb a mountain:** Climbing can be a great family bonding adventure if you and your teens love the outdoors. Climbing schools at Grand Teton, Mount Rainer, and Yosemite national parks can help you conquer summits. See Chapters 12, 13, and 17.
- ✓ **Go for a float:** Rivers run wild through a lot of the parks, and you can find many rafting companies ready to turn you into white-water cowboys. Although the Grand Canyon is particularly renowned for its white-water raft trips, other possibilities exist in and around Arches, Grand Teton, Olympic, and Sequoia/Kings Canyon national parks. See Chapters 9, 11, 12, 14, and 15.
- ✓ **Lodging and learning:** The concessionaire at Yellowstone National Park offers a nice variety of “lodging and learning” programs that combine accommodations and meals with interpretive programs ranging from cross-country skiing and wolf watching in winter to family-specific summer programs that include painting, photography, animal tracking, and hiking. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Saddle up:** Horseback rides can be found in Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Zion national parks. Grand Canyon, of course, also offers its famous mule rides into the canyon. See Chapters 11, 12, and 16 through 18.