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Awesome Vistas

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Humboldt Redwoods State Park.

The Grand Canyon

Where the Earth Splits Open

All Ages • Arizona, USA

Postcards just don't do justice to this classic American panorama—this majestic 277-mile-long canyon of the Colorado River, a primeval gash in the earth's crust of titanic proportions. Gaze down into its depth from the rim and you'll see striated bands of multi-colored rock, a living history of geologic periods unfolding at your feet. Descend into it and you'll pass through no less than four distinct climate zones, as if you began your day in Mexico and ended it in Alaska.

Grand Canyon attracts a staggering number of tourists every year—4.5 to 5 million visitors—many of whom simply view the panorama from the North or South Rim viewpoints and then drive on. While it's awesome indeed to gaze around from the rim, something about that monumental chasm makes me long to just dive in. There are any number of hiking trails, from 7 to 9 miles long; if taking on the river is more your style, check the park website for a list of approved commercial outfitters that run 3- to 18-day rafting trips, which include everything from placid floats to heart-stopping whitewater thrill rides.

Perhaps the most memorable way to explore the Grand Canyon is to pick your way down the steep, narrow trails on the back of an ornery mule. The best options for kids depart from the North Rim and are offered by **Canyon Trail Rides** (☎ 928/638-9875; www.canyonrides.com). These rides range from 1-hour scenic rides along the rim to half-day trips (either a longer rim route or one that heads 2,300 feet down the North Kaibab Trail), or full-day trips (either down and up the North Kaibab Trail or, from the South Rim, a 12-mile day trip to Plateau Point). The real classics, though, are 1- or 2-night packages that go to the bottom of the canyon and include sleeping

arrangements and simple meals at **Phantom Ranch**, the only lodging available below the rim of the Grand Canyon. These Phantom Ranch trips fill up as soon as reservations are accepted, 23 months in advance (☎ 888/297-2757). For possible openings the next day, call the **Bright Angel Transportation Desk** at ☎ 928/638-2631, ext. 6015. Riders must be at least 4 feet 7 inches tall; pregnant women are not allowed.

A fair number of visitors also buzz overhead in sightseeing planes and helicopters. **Grand Canyon Airlines** (☎ 866/235-9422 or 928/638-2359; www.grandcanyonairlines.com) is the granddaddy of scenic air tours out here, having been in business since 1927. Plane tours out of Tusayan are also offered by **Air Grand Canyon** (☎ 800/247-4726 or 928/638-2686; www.airgrandcanyon.com). **Papillon Grand Canyon** (☎ 888/635-7272, 702/736-7243, or 928/638-2419; www.papillon.com) operates planes and helicopters, both from the South Rim and from Las Vegas. The truly heart-stopping moment is when you're looking down at the treetops of the Kaibab National Forest, and then you cross the North Rim of the canyon and—whoosh!—the ground drops away suddenly beneath you, an effect more spectacular in person than any IMAX film could ever convey.

📍 ☎ 928/638-7888; www.nps.gov/grca.

✈️ Grand Canyon National Park Airport, Tusayan, AZ.

🏠 \$\$\$ **El Tovar Hotel**, South Rim (☎ 928/638-2631). \$\$ **Grand Canyon Lodge**, North Rim (☎ 928/638-2611). Reservations for either: ☎ 888/297-2757.

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Discovering what's in that hole in the ground.

The Redwood Forests of California

All ages • Crescent City, California, USA

It's hard to explain the feeling you get in the old-growth forests of **Redwood National and State Parks**. Everything seems big, misty, and primeval—flowering bushes cover the ground, 10-foot-tall ferns line the creeks, and the smells are rich and musty. It's so Jurassic Park, you half expect to turn the corner and see a dinosaur.

The scientific name for these massive conifers is *Sequoia sempervirens*, cousins of the giant sequoias (see Sequoia National Park 3). Sheathed in rough reddish bark, miraculously fire-resistant, their stout straight trunks shoot up 100 feet or more before a canopy of branches begins; they often reach a total height of more than 300 feet. Among the planet's most ancient individuals—the oldest dated coast redwood is more than 2,200 years old—they only grow in temperate rainforests, meaning nowhere but the U.S. Pacific Coast. In 1968, the federal government created Redwood National Park (nowadays combined with three state redwood parks) to protect what's left of this seriously endangered species. The relative isolation of this stretch of coast helped the forests survive intact, but it also makes for a long drive.

The most spectacular display is along the **Avenue of the Giants**, a 33-mile stretch of U.S. 101 through the **Humboldt Redwoods State Park** (☎ 707/946-2263; www.humboltdredwoods.org). Environmentalists bemoan the tacky attractions along this route, but youngsters love 'em—from south to north, hollow **Chimney Tree**, where J.R.R. Tolkien's *Hobbit* is rumored to live; **One-Log House**, a small dwelling built inside a log; and the **Shrine Drive-Thru Tree**. More dignified landmarks include **Founders Grove**, honoring those who started the Save the Redwoods

League in 1918; and the 950-year-old **Immortal Tree**. Don't settle for looking at all this out your car window—from many parking areas you can ramble on short loop trails into awesome redwood groves.

The other cluster of parks begins another 100 miles or so farther north, threaded along U.S. Hwy. 101. The most scenic drive parallels 101, along the **Newton B. Drury Scenic Parkway**, passing through redwood groves and meadows where Roosevelt elk graze, and **Coastal Drive**, which has grand views of the Pacific. But again, the truly spine-tingling experience requires getting out and hiking through these soaring perpendicular woods. Pick up a park map to find your way to **Tall Trees Trail**, a 3¼-mile round-trip to a 600-year-old tree often touted as the world's tallest (get a permit at the Redwood Information Center in Orick); the self-guided mile-long **Lady Bird Johnson Grove Loop**; the short, very popular **Fern Canyon Trail**; or, for the littlest hikers, the .25-mile-long **Big Tree Trail**, a paved trail leading to—what else?—a big tree.

📍 1111 Second St. (☎ 707/464-6101; www.nps.gov/redw).

✈ Crescent City.

🏠 \$ **Curly Redwood Lodge**, 701 Redwood Hwy. S. (U.S. 101), Crescent City (☎ 707/464-2137; www.curlyredwoodlodge.com). \$\$\$ **Lost Whale Inn**, 3452 Patrick's Point Dr., Trinidad (☎ 800/677-7859 or 707/677-3425; www.lostwhaleinn.com).

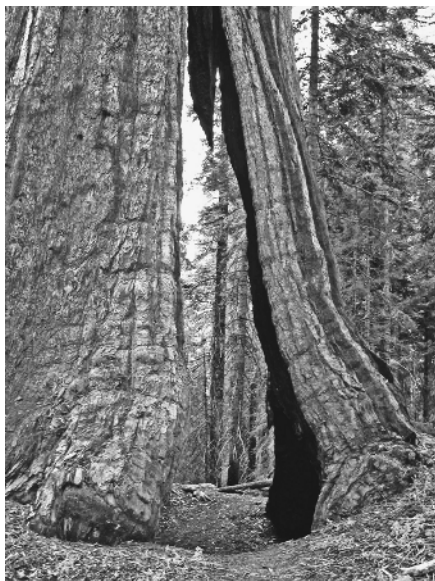
WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Seeing the redwoods before they're gone.

Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks

Giant Trees of the Sierras

All ages • Visalia & Fresno, California, USA

Only 200 miles by road from often-overrun Yosemite National Park, **Sequoia** and **Kings Canyon** national parks still feel like untrammelled wilderness. Only one road, the Generals Highway, loops through the area, and no road traverses the Sierra here. High-altitude hiking and backpacking are what these parks are really all about; some 700 miles of trails traverse this terrain of snowcapped Sierra Nevada peaks (including Mount Whitney, which at 14,494 ft. is the highest point in the lower 48 states), high-country lakes, and alpine meadows. For families, though, there's one main attraction: **the largest groves of giant sequoias in the Sierra Nevada.**



Sequoia National Park.

Though they are two separate parks, Sequoia and Kings Canyon are contiguous and managed jointly from the park headquarters at Ash Mountain—you hardly know when you're leaving one and entering the other.

Of the 75 or so groves of giant sequoias in the parks, the two most convenient to visit are **Grant Grove** (in Kings Canyon, near the Big Stump park entrance), and **Giant Forest** (in Sequoia, 16 miles from the Ash Mountain entrance). In Grant Grove, a 100-foot walk through the hollow trunk of the **Fallen Monarch** makes a fascinating side trip. The tree has been used for shelter for more than 100 years and is tall enough inside that you can walk through without bending over. In Giant Forest, the awesome **General Sherman Tree** is considered the largest living thing in the world; single branches of this monster are more than 7 feet thick. Other trees in the grove (each of them saddled with such names as General Lee or Lincoln) are nearly as large, creating an overall effect of massive majesty. Giant Grove has some 40 miles of intersecting footpaths to wander; the 6-mile **Trail of the Sequoias** will take you to the grove's far eastern end, where you'll find some of the finest trees.

While Sequoia's *raison d'être* is those incredible trees, Kings Canyon encompasses the **deepest canyon in the United States**: Drive to Road's End on the Kings Canyon Highway (late May–early Nov) to stand by the banks of the Kings River and stare up at granite walls rising thousands of feet above the river.

i Ash Mountain entrance, CA 198 from Visalia. Big Stump entrance, 180 from

Fresno, CA (📞 559/565-3341; www.nps.gov/seki or www.sequoia-kingscanyon.com).

✈️ Fresno-Yosemite, 53 miles.

🏠 \$ **Dorst Campground**, in Sequoia, near Giant Forest (📞 800/365-2267). \$\$

Wuksachi Village & Lodge, 64740 Wuksachi Way, Sequoia National Park (📞 866/807-3598 or 801/559-4930 [international]; www.visitsequoia.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: The redwoods' awesome (and even more endangered) cousins.

4 Postcard Panoramas

Uluru (Ayers Rock)

Australia's Red Rock Center

Ages 6 & up • Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, Northern Territory, Australia

It's a bit of a mystery why people trek from all over the world to gawk at **Ayers Rock**. For its size? Hardly. Nearby Mount Conner is three times as big. For its shape? Probably not. Most folks agree the neighboring Kata Tjuta (the Olgas) is more picturesque. And yet, undeniably, a faint shiver goes up the spine when you gaze on the serene, hulking mass known as Ayers Rock.

People used to believe that **Uluru** (Ayers Rock's proper Aboriginal name) was a meteorite, but we now know it was formed by sediments laid millions of years ago in an inland sea and thrust above ground by geological forces (there's twice as much again underground, it's thought). On photos, it may look like a big smooth blob, but face to face, it's dappled with holes and overhangs, curtains of stone draping its sides, and little coves hiding water holes and Aboriginal rock art, all of it changing color dramatically depending on the slant of the sun. The peak time to visit is sunset, when oranges, peaches, pinks, reds, and then indigo and deep violet creep across its face, as if it were a giant opal. At sunrise, the colors are less dramatic, but many folks enjoy the spectacle of the Rock, unveiled by the dawn to bird song.

Aborigines refer to tourists as *minga*—little ants—because that's what we look like crawling up Uluru, which to them is

sacrilege. And yet, despite this, and despite ferocious winds, sheer rock faces, and extreme temperatures, visitors still feel compelled to scramble up the rock, which takes anywhere from 2 to 4 hours; the views from the top are amazing, but is it worth it? There are plenty of other options. The paved 9km (5.6-mile) **Base Walk** circumnavigates Uluru, with time to explore water holes, caves, folds, and overhangs; an easy kilometer (.6-mile) round-trip trail from the Mutitjulu parking lot visits a pretty water hole, with rock art near the Rock's base. On the free daily 90-minute **Mala Walk**, a ranger, who is often an Aborigine, discusses the Dreamtime myths behind Uluru and explains the significance of the rock art and other sites you see. Another peaceful way to see the Rock is on hour-long camelback forays through the red-sand dunes with **Frontier Camel Tours** (📞 61/8/8950-3030; www.ananguwaai.com.au). If it's aerial views you want, several local companies do scenic flights by light aircraft or helicopter over Uluru and other local landmarks.

With a glorious sunset viewing of Uluru your goal, start your day at **Kata Tjuta** (the Olgas), 50km (31 miles) west of the Rock. Kata Tjuta means "many heads," an apt name for this monolith of 36 momentous red domes bulging out of the earth like turned clay on a potter's wheel. The

AWESOME VISTAS

Olgas are more important in Dreamtime legend than Uluru, and many modern visitors find they're even more spiritual. Good hikers may do the challenging 7.4km (4.6-mile) **Valley of the Winds** walk among the domes; there's also an easy 2.6km (1.6-mile) **Gorge walk**.

i **Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre**
(☎ **61/8/8956-3138**) or www.centralaustraliatourism.com.

✈ Ayers Rock (Connellan) airport.

\$\$\$ Emu Walk Apartments. \$\$ **Outback Pioneer Hotel and Lodge.** Both at Yulara Dr., Ayers Rock Resort (☎ **61/2/8296-8010**; www.voyages.com.au).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Getting in touch with Dreamtime.

Postcard Panoramas

5

Lake Titicaca *Jewel of the Andes*

Ages 6 & up • Copacabana, Bolivia & Puno, Peru

Face it: The kids will talk a lot about their upcoming trip to **Lake Titicaca**—they just won't be able to resist saying the name. But that's okay. Once they get there and see this huge deep-blue freshwater lake sitting in its cup of mountain peaks, an awesome 3,600m (11,811 ft.) above sea level, they'll stop snickering.

To locals, measuring the altitude is irrelevant: Lake Titicaca is a mysterious and sacred place. Here, in the midst of the lake, Manca Capac and Mama Ocllo—the Adam and Eve of the Incas—were supposedly born on the **Isla del Sol** (Sun Island), which you can visit on a day trip from the picturesque lakeside town of **Copacabana, Bolivia**. (A 3-hr. bus ride from La Paz, Copacabana is also known for its Moorish-style cathedral, with a deeply venerated miracle-working statue of the Virgin inside.) On Sun Island, you'll visit the ruins of Chinkana, a huge stone labyrinth built as a seminary for Inca priests. The path back to the town of Challapampa passes the sacred rock, shaped like a puma, from which Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo first stepped; farther on, you can look down and see the two huge footprints the sun is said to have made when it

landed on earth to give birth to them. Tours also stop at **Isla de la Luna** (Moon Island), site of an ancient convent where



Lake Titicaca.


the Virgins of the Sun performed ceremonies honoring the sun.

Most local tour packages visit not only the Bolivian shore but also the Peruvian side of the lake, with its main town of **Puno** (a 10-hr. train ride from Cusco). Puno is not nearly as lovely as Copacabana, but the kids will want to come here to take a boat tour to the **Uros islands**. Since the time of the Incas, the local Uros Indians have lived on these tiny floating islands built on soft patches of totora reeds. Walking on the springy islets is truly a strange sensation. Some Uros wait for the tour boats to arrive so they can hawk their handmade textiles and reed-crafted items, but many others keep to their thatched huts, far from the snapping cameras, where they quietly fish and catch birds and continually repair the reed underpinnings of their islets. Full-day trips also include stops at **Taquile** and **Aman-tani islands**, serene and rustic natural islands with Inca ruins to explore.

Other Andean peoples subscribe to a different myth: that Viracocha, the creator

deity, called up the sun, moon, and stars to rise from icy Lake Titicaca to lighten the dark world. Powerful spirits still live in this amazing sky-high lake, they say. Gliding over the calm blue surface, you may find yourself staring down into the water's cold depths to connect with them. But you don't need to believe in these ancient legends to sense the magic of Lake Titicaca.

 **Puna tourist office**, Plaza de Armas
( **51/51/36-5088**; www.peru.info).

 Manco Capac, Juliaca, Peru, 45km (28 miles) from Puno.

 \$\$\$ **Hotel Rosario del Lago**, Rigoberto Paredes and Av. Costanera, Copacabana, Bolivia ( **591/2/862-2141**; www.hotelrosario.com/lago). \$\$\$ **Sonesta Posada del Inca**, Sesquicentenario 610, Sector Huaje, Puno, Peru ( **800/SONESTA** [766-3782] or 51/51/364-111; www.sonesta.com/laketiticaca).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Gazing up at a star-spangled sky from the stars' birthplace.

6

Postcard Panoramas

The Cliffs of Moher

Where Ireland Plunges into the Sea

All ages • Lahinch, County Clare, Ireland

Something as spectacular as the **Cliffs of Moher** could never go undiscovered by the tourist throngs. They are County Clare's foremost natural wonder, 213m (700 ft.) high and 8km (5 miles) long, a series of sheer rock faces plummeting to the crashing Atlantic surf below. The views from here are truly panoramic, especially from 19th-century **O'Brien's Tower** at the northern end. On a clear day, you can even glimpse the **Aran Islands** up to the north in Galway Bay.

It's a dramatic place indeed, with the roar of the waves crashing below and the call of circling seagulls. While you may see

daredevils venturing onto a forbidden area of north-facing cliffs, which are only half-heartedly fenced off, the kids won't need to follow their dangerous example to get a great view: There's plenty enough room on the main cliffs, with their well-paved path and lookout points; and the heights are awesome without feeling perilous (and believe me, I'm borderline acrophobic). Because the cliffs jut out into the sea on a headland, you can gaze clearly over the sea to the north, west, and south.

Talk about the middle of nowhere—the Irish country road R478 meanders down from the Burren and Galway, with little



The Cliffs of Moher.

along the roadside and very few cars in sight. Then suddenly you round a curve, and there's an immense parking lot filled with cars and tour buses—that's how you know you've arrived at the Cliffs of Moher. Proximity to Shannon Airport means that this is often a tour group's first stop upon hitting Ireland, so don't be surprised if you see a lot of folks staring out to sea with the glazed eyes of jet lag. There's no admission fee per se, although you'll have to pay to get into the parking lot, and some tacky souvenir stalls are set up along the footpath to the cliffs. Just shepherd the children past it all, and head uphill.

While you're here, don't rush on like the tour groups do—take the opportunity to explore farther along the craggy Clare coastline, where you'll find many off-the-beaten-path delights with such intriguing

names as **Pink Cave, Puffing Hole, Intrinsic Bay, Chimney Hill, Elephant's Teeth, Mutton Island, Loop Head, and Lover's Leap.** The tour buses won't follow you, that's for sure.

i Clare Ireland Tourism, R478, 7 miles north of Lahinch (☎ **353/65/708-1171**; www.county-clare.com).

✈ Shannon International, 48km (30 miles).

🏠 \$\$ Aran View House, Doolin (☎ **353/65/707-4061**; www.aranview.com; closed Nov–Mar). **\$\$ Royal Spa Hotel**, Main St., Lisdoonvarna (☎ **353/65/707-4288**; www.royalspahotel.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Nothing between you and America but sea.

The Giant's Causeway

Hero's Footsteps in Black Rock

All ages • Bushmills, Northern Ireland

Often called the eighth wonder of the world, the **Giant's Causeway** is a one-of-a-kind natural rock formation that truly captures the imagination. It doesn't take much effort for children to imagine the striding giant who purportedly left these immense stone footprints in the sea off of Northern Ireland.

A **World Heritage Site**, the Causeway consists of roughly 40,000 tightly packed basalt columns that extend for 5km (3 miles) along the North Antrim coast. The tops of the columns form a dense honeycomb of stepping stones that sprawl outward from the cliff foot and eventually disappear under the sea. They're mostly hexagonal, about 30cm (12 in.) in diameter, and some are as tall as 12m (40 ft.). How did they get there? Scientists estimate that they were formed 60 or 70 million years ago by a series of volcanic eruptions and cooling lava. In the surrounding cliff faces, you can see dark stripes of volcanic basalt interrupting the sheer red rock.


But all that is the scientific explanation. The ancients, on the other hand, believed the rock formation to be the work of giants. Another even more romantic legend claims that the Causeway isn't natural at all, but the handiwork of Finn MacCool, the great Ulster warrior and commander of the king of Ulster's armies, who built it as a highway over the sea to bring his girlfriend from the Isle of Hebrides.

Tourists have come here to marvel over the Causeway since the late 17th century. For many years, visitors were forbidden to walk out onto the stones, or had to pay extra to do so; thankfully today they are open to the public. Watch your footing as you scamper over the uneven surface,

traipsing from stone to stone. You'll spy delicate flowers and mosses growing in the crevices, and all sorts of seabirds nesting in the nearby cliffs.

To reach the causeway, follow the path from the visitor center's parking area. Along the way you'll pass plenty of other extraordinary volcanic rock formations, amphitheaters of stone and striated columns and formations with such fanciful names as **Honeycomb**, **Wishing Well**, **Giant's Granny**, **King and His Nobles**, and **Lover's Leap**. From the causeway, a wooden staircase climbs up Benbane Head and travels back along the cliff-top walking path, where you'll get spectacular views of the North Antrim coast.

Train buffs, of course, will want to get there via the charming red narrow-gauge **Giants Causeway and Bushmills Railway** (☎ 44/28/2073-2844; www.freewebs.com/giantscausewayrailway), which runs for 2 miles along the coast from the town of Bushmills out to the Causeway; it runs weekends in spring and fall and daily in summer.

 Causeway Rd./B147 (☎ 44/28/2073-1855; www.giantscausewayofficialguide.com).

 Belfast, 121 km (75 miles).

 Portrush (8 miles) and Coleraine (10 miles)

 \$\$\$ **Bushmills Inn**, 9 Dunluce Rd., Bushmills (☎ 44/28/2073-2000; www.bushmills-inn.com). \$\$ **Marine Hotel**, 1 North St., Ballycastle (☎ 44/28/2076-2222; www.marinehotel.net).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Myths written in monumental stone.

Les Calanches

Going Coastal in Corsica

Ages 4 & up • Corsica, France


L'île de beauté, **Corsica** is called—"island of beauty"—and rightly so. This mountainous Mediterranean island combines rugged landscapes with stunning vistas of the sea, while native herbs and flowers perfume the air with an unforgettable fragrance. Although Corsica is technically a French possession, the island is in fact much closer to Italy (you can practically swim to Sardinia from Corsica), and everything here seems to have an Italian accent. You're lulled into thinking it's simply a fragment of the Riviera that worked itself loose from the mainland—and then you drive through a landscape that looks as though it fell from Mars: **Les Calanches**.

Ferries from Marseilles arrive at Corsica's main city, **Ajaccio**, a Riviera-like town with palm trees, promenades, and the birthplace of Napoleon Bonaparte. Up the western coast from here, driving or cycling along coastal D81, you curve around a headland to the tranquil village of **Piana**, with its red-tiled roofs rising 440m (1,444 ft.) above the azure sea. But beyond Piana, you enter an altered reality: The granite landscape to either side of the twisting road begins to turn red and become strangely striated and crumpled. The highway seems hacked out of the mountain-side, and it zigs and zags crazily to cling to the corrugated rock faces. And so it goes, all the way along the southern end of the Gulf of Porto, from Piana over to Porto.

Les Calanches remind me of the buttes of Monument Valley, but smaller and more eccentric, crabbed like the figures of arthritic old crones. And then, of course, there's that dynamite seaside backdrop setting it off, the hazy blue of the Mediterranean contrasting dramatically with the sharp-focused red rocks. As you drive

along, ask the children to try to decide what these oddly shaped boulders remind them of—a rearing stallion? A fire-breathing dragon? A stegosaurus? Patches of green pine scrub, snarls of gray thorn, and bursts of dark red and yellow flowering shrubs decorate the creased red-granite spires here and there, and the shoulder of the road drops with heart-stopping suddenness to the waters below. The road bends so sharply, you can't see beyond the next curve—honk to warn oncoming drivers of your presence before you pull around to the next dizzying view.

Several walking paths have been laid out through this tortured landscape—park your car and get out to take a short scramble over the rocks. (Trail maps are available from the **Piana tourist office**, Place de la Mairie, ☎ 33/4/95-27-84-42). From Porto, you can go on a boat tour to view the spiky red rocks from the water; contact **Nave Va** (☎ 33/4/95-21-83-97; www.naveva.com). And I'm sure I don't need to tell you that sunset is the most glorious time of all to view Les Calanches, especially one of those lingering summer sunsets that the Mediterranean does so well.

 D81, btw. Piana and Porto (www.corsica.net).

 Ajaccio, 74km (46 miles).

 \$\$ **Hotel Le Porto**, Route de Calvi, Porto (☎ 33/4/95-26-11-20; www.hotel-leporto.com). \$\$\$ **Les Roches Rouges**, 20115 Piana (☎ 33/4/95-27-81-81; www.lesrochesrouges.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Spotting the shapes in the rock piles.

Devil's Tower

Something Strange in Wyoming

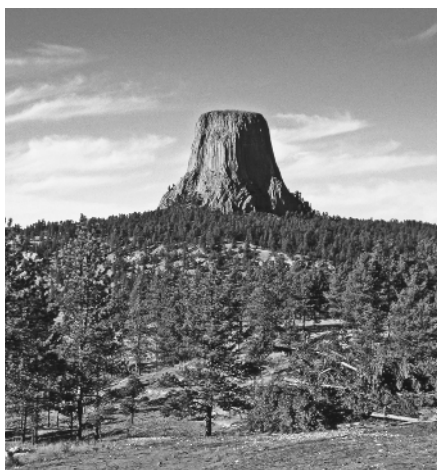
All ages • Devil's Tower, Wyoming, USA

I knew my kids would love the scene in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* when Richard Dreyfuss starts sculpting Devil's Tower out of mashed potatoes. Spielberg sure picked the right natural landing pad for his alien spaceship to make contact with earthlings—there is something otherworldly about this stark monolith rising out of the Wyoming pines and prairies. The Northern Plains Indians called it Bears Lodge, and it has sacred meanings for them too. Even seeing a picture of it is unforgettable, but visiting **Devil's Tower** in person—well, that's more special than you'd imagine.

Time for a geology lesson. Devil's Tower is what's known as an igneous intrusion, meaning that it's a column of rock hardened by molten lava that seeped long ago into a vein of sedimentary rock. A shallow sea once covered this part of the Great

Plains, and most of the rock is soft sedimentary stuff like red sandstone and siltstone, with a little shale mixed in. The flat-topped cone that became Devil's Tower used to be under that sea, but once the waters had receded, centuries of erosion gradually wore away the softer rock around the igneous cone, leaving it exposed. Today the cone thrusts 1,267 feet above the surrounding pine trees and prairie grasslands. That flat top no doubt gave Spielberg the idea of an extraterrestrials' spaceport; a parachutist did land on top in 1941, drawing great publicity—especially because he then had to figure out how to get down! Vertical cracks groove the sides of the tower in almost parallel columns, giving it its distinctive furrowed look. It's well-nigh irresistible for climbers, although you must register at the visitor center before attempting to ascend and follow strict regulations about bolts and drills. In deference to the Native American reverence for this sacred place, the park's staff urges climbers to voluntarily forego climbing in June, a month with many religious ceremonies for the local tribes.

For most of us, the best way to experience Devil's Tower is to take the 1.3-mile paved **Tower Trail** that circles around the base. It's very kid-friendly, being mostly flat (after a steep climb at the start), with benches and interpretive stations along the way. Take your time walking so that you can examine this rugged pinnacle from every angle and in different lights. Bring sketchbooks and try to draw its stern majesty. And don't be surprised if the kids start mounding their mashed potatoes at dinner that night, tracing ridges on the sides with their forks . . .



Devil's Tower.

While you're here, kids shouldn't miss the prairie dog towns on the park's east road, where black-tailed prairie dogs scamper about, popping in and out of their subterranean condos. You came out here to see the West—well, this is about as Western as it gets.

i Off U.S. 14 **(C)** 307/467-5283; www.nps.gov/deto.

✈ Gillette Airport, 40 miles.

\$\$\$ Alex Johnson Hotel, 523 6th St., Rapid City **(C)** 800/888-2539 or 605/342-1210; www.alexjohnson.com). **\$\$\$ Sylvan Lake Lodge**, 24572 U.S. Hwy. 87, Custer **(C)** 605/574-2561 or 605/574-4943; www.custerresorts.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: An icon of the West with mystical power.

Otherworldly Landscapes 10

Arches National Park

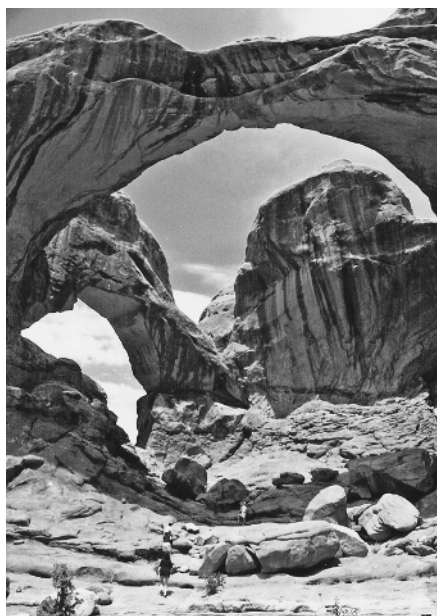
Sculpted by Nature

All ages • Moab, Utah, USA

More than 2,000 imposing natural stone arches punctuate this sandstone plateau, almost as if it were one gigantic pop-up book. These are natural formations, the

result of cycles of freezing and thawing rain and snow that continually dissolve the “glue” that holds together the sand grains of the stone, chipping away at them bit by bit over time. And yet, knowing the scientific process doesn't detract from the marvel of it, a seemingly endless variety of shapes and delicate colors, as if some giant sculptor were deliberately trying to make each arch more fantastic than the one before.

It's a place to let your imagination go wild. Is **Delicate Arch** really so delicate, or would its other nicknames (Old Maids Bloomers or Cowboy Chaps) be more appropriate? And what about those tall spires? You might imagine they're castles, the towering masts of stone sailing ships, or the petrified skyscrapers of some ancient city. Be sure to pick up a map at the visitor center, because half the fun is matching up the formations with the fanciful names that have been given to them. On the 18-mile scenic drive from one end of the park to the other, you'll pass such features as **Park Avenue**, a solid rock “fin” that reminded somebody of the Manhattan skyline; the **La Sal Mountains**, which early explorers thought looked like piles of salt; **Courthouse Towers**, with such monoliths as **Sheep Rock**, the






Hiking in Arches National Park.




Organ, and the **Three Gossips**; and the **Tower of Babel**. A side road leads to the **Windows**, **Turret Arch**, and the **Cove of Caves**, where erosion is even now slowly making a new arch out of the largest cave. Detour onto **Wolfe Ranch Road** for a brief hike to see a 100-year-old ranch and some **Ute pictographs**.

Along the drive, stop to venture onto the various walking trails, many of them short and easy enough for even young children. A .3-mile walk lets you circle **Balanced Rock**, a 3,000-ton boulder perched on a slowly eroding pedestal; a .5-mile there-and-back trail leads past the **Parade of Elephants** to **Double Arch**; and another .3-mile walk goes to **Sand Dune**

Arch, with an irresistible sandy hollow beneath that the kids can play in.

 U.S. 191 ( 435/719-2299; www.nps.gov/arch).

 Grand Junction, CO, 125 miles. Salt Lake City, UT, 230 miles.

 \$ **Arch View Camp Park**, U.S. 91 & U.S. 313 ( 800/813-6622 or 435/259-7854; www.archviewresort.com). \$\$ **Bowen Motel**, 169 N. Main St. ( 800/874-5439 or 435/259-7132; www.bowenmotel.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Waiting for Balanced Rock to topple.

11

Otherworldly Landscapes

Going to the Moon

Craters of the Moon National Monument

All ages • Arco, Idaho, USA

Here's one aptly named national park: Bring the children here and they will feel as though they've gone to the moon. Three lava fields, with some 60 distinct lava flows and 25 volcanic cones, cover nearly half a million acres on the Snake River Plain, a haunting black basaltic landscape 60 miles wide with deposits that may lie up to 10,000 feet deep. You may not know the difference between slabby pahoehoe and spiny pahoehoe (hint: they're both types of lava flow), but you'll know that this desolate landscape is one of the strangest sights you'll ever see.



The lava fields at Craters of the Moon were formed as long as 15,000 years ago, though much of it is quite young, formed only 2,000 years ago. At the visitor center, the kids will learn about such weird volcanic features as volcanic bombs (clumps of spewing lava that hardened in the air before falling to rest on the surface), lava tubes (underground tunnels hollowed out by receding flows of molten lava), and tree molds (the shapes of trees encased in lava

before they decomposed). They'll learn the difference between steep-sided spatter cones and pock-marked cinder cones. Look for these as you drive the park's 7-mile scenic drive, with various spurs leading to such intriguing features as 700-foot-high **Big Cinder Butte**, one of the world's tallest cinder cones, or the curiously colored **Blue and Green Dragon lava flows**. A half-mile hike will take you through the **Devil's Orchard**, where lava fragments stand like wraiths upon a sea of cinders; another half-mile hike lets you explore several lava tubes such as the **Boy Scout Cave** (bring a flashlight) and the **Indian Tunnel**. Because it is situated along the **Great Rift volcanic zone**, you'll see deep fissures in the earth, collapsed pits and craters, and ridges built by magma oozing upward through old cracks.


This is by no means a dead landscape; if they pay attention, the kids will discover plenty of hardy flora and fauna that has adapted to this environment. Big patches

of sagebrush grasslands and islands of grass (kipukas) have sprouted wherever they could find enough soil; on the lacy surfaces of cinder cones, wildflowers, shrubs, and even twisted little limber pines have managed to get a foothold. The mountains at the north end of the park have Douglas fir forests and groves of quaking aspens that look downright lush in contrast. In the daytime, you may see ground squirrels, lizards, chipmunks, and hawks; at dawn and dusk, coyotes, porcupines, and jackrabbits steal forth; and if

you were here at night, you'd see wood rats, bobcats, and bats.

 Hwy. 20/26/93, near Arco  **208/527-1300**; www.nps.gov/crmo).

 Hailey, 60 miles. Twin Falls, 90 miles.

 \$ **Arco Inn**, 540 W. Grand Ave., Arco  **208/527-3100**. \$\$ **Best Western Kentwood Lodge**, 180 S. Main St., Ketchum  **800/805-1001** or 208/726-4114; www.bestwestern.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Discovering life on the moonscape.

Otherworldly Landscapes

12

Petrified Forest & Painted Desert

Trees of Stone, Stones of Color

All ages • Near Holbrook, Arizona, USA

From the name, the children may expect to see standing trees of stones, leaves and branches and all. Well, a better name for the **Petrified Forest** might be the Petrified Pile of Logs, with its fossilized hunks of ancient trees scattered like kindling across the arid scrubby landscape. But these richly colored petrifications are plenty impressive close up, and the other half of the park, the **Painted Desert**, more than lives up to its name, in glowing pastel beauty.

Start at the **Rainbow Forest Museum**, the visitor center at the southern entrance to the park, where the displays will teach the kids how those petrified logs got petrified in the first place. These 225-million-year-old conifers date from the late Triassic age, when this area was an equatorial tropical forest. The trees fell, were buried in sediment, and then overlaid with volcanic ash, which gradually deposited silica in the trees that replaced their cells with quartz crystals. This unique set of circumstances left a profusion of these immense fossils in the area, which were sliced up and sold for souvenirs at such a rate that,

in 1906, the government stepped in to preserve what was left in this park. A short walking trail behind the visitor center winds around a hillside strewn with logs (4–5 ft. in diameter), giving the children a first chance to examine them up close; across the road, a 1.5-mile loop takes you to **Agate House**, a ruined pueblo fashioned out of colorful petrified wood.

Once you're back in the car, head north on the park's 27-mile scenic road. Several overlooks highlight wonders such as the **Crystal Forest** (unfortunately, tourists pried the quartz and amethyst crystals out of these logs long ago); the **Jasper Forest**, petrified trees with their roots still attached; and **Agate Bridge**, a natural bridge formed by a petrified log. In the hazy blue badlands of the **Blue Mesa**, chunks of petrified wood teeter on mounds of soft clay that are eroding away beneath them. The Teepees are a lovely set of hills striped with different colors. At **Newspaper Rock**, you can gaze upon ancient **Native-American petroglyphs**, with the ruined pueblos of their creators at nearby **Pueblo Parco**.



The Painted Desert.

Across I-40, you'll be fully in the Painted Desert section of the park, where a series of eight overlooks lets you admire the breathtaking desert colors, which were caused by various minerals in the mud-stone-and-clay soil—iron, manganese, and others—which oxidized at different rates as they were exposed by erosion. It's a dreamscape of pastels washing over dramatically eroded buttes and mesas, one of nature's best special effects ever.

i U.S. 180, 20 miles east of Holbrook
(📞 928/524-6228; www.nps.gov/pefo).

✈ Flagstaff, 90 miles. Phoenix, 180 miles.

🚗 \$\$\$ **La Posada**, 303 N. Second St., Winslow (📞 928/289-4366; www.laposada.org). \$ **Wigwam Motel**, 811 W. Hopi Dr., Holbrook (📞 928/524-3048; www.galerie-kokopelli.com/wigwam).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: If the rock logs don't get them, the Kodachrome mesas will.

13

Otherworldly Landscapes

Pinnacles National Monument

Lost Pieces of a Mojave Jigsaw Puzzle

Ages 8 and up • East of Salinas Valley, California, USA

Picture hundreds of towering crags, spires, and hoodoos, ferociously jabbing up out of the rolling brown California hills. The Pinnacles are the world's most dramatic demonstration of plate tectonics, a series of rocky spikes that are actually fragments of a 23-million-year-old volcano in the Mojave Desert that was split in two by the San Andreas Fault. One half of the volcano stayed in the Mojave; this is the other half, carried 195 miles north by shifting geologic plates. Okay, it got a little shattered and jumbled en route; and over the centuries the jagged remains were

further sculpted and scoured by wind and erosion. It's a unique and unforgettable sight.


Those crags and spires beg to be climbed, so it's no surprise that this is one of the most popular weekend climbing spots in central California, with its mild winter climate (spring is also a good time to visit, when wildflowers carpet the chaparral). Located only 80 miles south of San Francisco, the **Pinnacles** get a lot of visitors—some weekends it seems every spire and monolith has a climber clinging to its surface. Most visitors arrive via CA


25, at the eastern entrance, where you can get an eyeful of dramatic spires right away, from the **Bear Gulch picnic ground**. For a moderately strenuous half-day hike, take the **Condor Gulch Trail** uphill from the Bear Gulch Nature Center; within 2 miles, you'll be amid clusters of spires, which are much larger up close than they look from the parking lot. Switch to the **High Peaks Trail** to get a dramatic view: the Salinas Valley to your west, the Pinnacles below, and miles of coast to the east. After traversing the high peaks (including stretches of footholds carved in steep rock faces) for about a mile, the trail drops back toward the visitor center via a valley filled with eerie-looking hoodoos.

One intriguing feature of this jumbled rockscape is the talus caves, which are basically narrow stream canyons roofed over with tumbled boulders. Bats love these caves—in fact, **Bear Gulch Cave**, only a short walk from the picnic ground (take the Moses Spring Trail), only allows visitors in half the cave because rare **Townsend's Big-Eared Bats** occupy the other half; it's closed entirely mid-May to mid-July to protect newborn bat babies. If you enter the park from the west, there's a

2-mile loop trail from the Chaparral parking lot to visit **Balconies Cave**, another talus cave. Flashlights are required to explore either cave.

Along with the bats, the Pinnacles—which sit at an intersection of two ecosystems—have an incredible 400 species of **bees** buzzing around their chaparral and grasslands, and half a dozen extremely **rare California condors** were successfully released to the wild here. Keep your eyes open, because you never know what you'll see.

 **Visitor Center**, off CA 25, at eastern entrance (📞 831/389-4485; www.nps.gov/pinn).

 Monterey Peninsula Airport, 58 miles.

 \$\$ **Casa Munras Garden Hotel**, 700 Munras Ave., Monterey (📞 800/222-2446 or 831/375-2411; www.hotelcasa.munras.com). \$ **Pinnacles Campground**, off CA 25, near the eastern entrance (📞 877/444-6777; www.recreation.gov).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Mountains that migrate.

Otherworldly Landscapes

14

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park

Where Hot Lava Still Flows

Ages 6 & up • Volcano, Hawaii, USA

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park beats out all the other U.S. national parks on two scores: It has the only tropical rainforest, and it has the only active volcano. Since 1983, the Big Island's **Kilauea volcano** has been erupting regularly, although these are “quiet” eruptions, with gas escaping slowly instead of exploding violently. Its slow-moving red lava oozes over the landscape, sometimes even over the park roads. The kids may wish they could

see volcanic fireworks, but once they're here, feeling the soles of their sneakers getting gummy from the heat below, they'll realize this is spectacular enough.

This is not a tame volcano, not by any means. Over the past 2 decades, some \$100 million worth of property has been destroyed by the eruptions, though the lava flow has also added 560 acres of new land. On many days, the lava flows right alongside accessible roads and you can

get as close as the heat will allow; sometimes, however, the flow is in underground tubes that spill out miles away.

Near the visitor center, you can get your first look at **Kilauea Caldera**, a 2½-mile-wide, 500-foot-deep pit with wisps of steam rising from it. Going counterclockwise on Crater Rim Road, you'll drive past the **Sulphur Banks**, which smell like rotten eggs, and the **Steam Vents**, fissures where trails of smoke, once molten lava, escape from the inner reaches of the earth. At the **Thomas A. Jaggar Museum**, there's a viewpoint for **Halemaumau Crater**, which is half a mile across but 1,000 feet deep; walk right to the rim to gape at this once-fuming old fire pit, which still gives off fierce heat from its vents. Near the **Iki Crater**, the .5-mile **Devastation Trail** is a sobering look at how a volcanic eruption wreaked havoc in 1959. Another intriguing stop is the **Thurston Lava Tube**, a cool underground hole in a lush forested bowl that somehow escaped the lava flow.

By now you won't be surprised to learn that the volcano goddess, Pele, was an important deity to ancient Hawaiians—you definitely wanted to be on the right side of this lady. At the 15-mile mark down Chain of Craters Road, you can see **Puu Loa**, an ancient site sacred to the Hawaiians, where a .5-mile boardwalk loop trail will show you thousands of mysterious Hawaiian petroglyphs carved in stone.

If the volcano is actively erupting, call the visitor center for directions to the best locations for night viewing—it's quite a sight, watching as the brilliant red lava snakes down the side of the mountain and pours into the cold sea, hissing and steaming ferociously. Of course, the ultimate view is from the sky: **Blue Hawaiian Helicopter** (☎ 800/745-BLUE or 808/961-5600; www.bluehawaiian.com) runs several



Desolation Point in Volcanoes National Park.

tours right over the bubbling caldera, for a bird's-eye view you'll never forget.

i Hawaii Belt Rd. (Hwy. 11; ☎ 808/985-6000; www.nps.gov/havo).

✈ Hilo, 29 miles.

🏠 \$\$ **Kilauea Lodge**, Old Volcano Rd., off Hwy. 11 (☎ 808/967-7366; www.kilauealodge.com). \$ **Volcano House**, inside Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (☎ 808/967-7321; www.volcanohousehotel.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Red-hot magma.

The Monteverde Cloud Forest

A Mountaintop Jungle

Ages 6 & up • Monteverde, Costa Rica

Monteverde means “green mountain,” and that’s exactly what you’ll find at the end of the steep, rutted dirt road that leads to Costa Rica’s **Monteverde Biological Cloud Forest Reserve**. Passing through mile after mile of dry, brown pasture, you may wonder if you’re in the right place—where’s the cloud forest? Well, this land used to be forest, until humans entered the picture. All the more reason to appreciate what has been saved when you finally hit the top of the mountain: a lush, tangled swath of greenery, where orchids and ferns trail from the treetops while monkeys chatter, tree frogs croak, and hummingbirds hum. Walking here in the early-morning mist, with the susurrant of leaves and disembodied birdcalls all around, can be an almost out-of-body experience.

Cloud forests are always on mountaintops, where moist, warm air sweeping up the slopes from a nearby ocean condenses swiftly in the higher elevation, forming clouds around the summit. The clouds, in turn, condense moisture on the forest trees, giving rise to an incredible diversity of life forms—Monteverde boasts more than 2,500 plant species, 400 bird species, and 100 different mammal species. Monteverde is no secret, and its main trails are often crowded with ecotourists, all gaping (generally without any luck) to see rare and elusive species such as the quetzal, with its 2-foot-long tail feathers. The density of the cloud forest, however, makes it possible to escape the crowds by branching off the central paths. I suggest booking a guided tour through your hotel, which will also reserve your admission (only 120 people at a time are allowed inside the reserve); the guide will be able to identify far more of the flora and fauna than you could spot on your own.

The option older kids will be dying to try is a canopy tour, where you can zip around harnessed to an overhead cable, going from platform to platform high above the forest floor in the treetops, where two-thirds of the species live. Two good operations are **Sky Trek** (☎ 506/2645-5238; www.skytrek.com) and **Selvatura Park** (☎ 506/2645-5929; www.selvatura.com), both located outside the reserve, near the town of Santa Elena.

Slightly less crowded than the Monteverde Reserve, but with much the same flora and fauna, the **Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve** (☎ 506/2645-5390; www.reservasantaelena.org) can be a good alternative; the 3.5km (2.2-mile) **Bajo del Tigre Trail**, in the town of Monteverde, is a great bird-watching option. Other related attractions around Monteverde are the **Butterfly Garden** in Cerro Plano (☎ 506/2645-5512), the **Monteverde Serpentarium** (☎ 506/2645-5238; www.skytrek.com), the **Frog Pond of Monteverde** (☎ 506/2645-6320; www.ranario.com), and the **Bat Jungle** (☎ 506/2645-5052).

📍 ☎ 506/2645-5112; www.cct.or.cr or www.monteverdeinfo.com.



Juan Santamaria International, San José, 160km (99 miles).



\$\$\$ **Hotel El Establo**, adjacent to Monteverde preserve (☎ 877/623-3198 or 506/2645-5110; www.hoteleleestablo.com). \$\$ **Monteverde Lodge**, 5km (3 miles) outside the reserve, near Santa Elena (☎ 800/886-2609 in the U.S., or 506/2257-0766 in San José; www.costaricaexpeditions.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Getting your head in the clouds.

Rotorua

Land of Mists

Ages 4 & up • North Island, New Zealand

You'll smell Rotorua long before you see it, a peculiar sulphuric aroma that may provoke a loud "Euww! Who farted?" from the back seat. But then you draw closer, and start to see the steam hissing out of fissures in the landscape, the scattered lakes and waterfalls, the volcano peak of Mount Tarawera in the hazy distance, and—who cares about the smell?

Geothermals are what make Rotorua special, so head first for **Te Puia, Hemo Road** (📍 64/7/348-9047; www.nzmaori.co.nz), an ancient site set in a rocky landscape full of mud pools and the prolific **Pohutu Geyser**, which shoots hot water up 16 to 20m (52–66 ft.), 10 to 25 times a day. At its heart is a replica of a Maori village—the population of Rotorua is about one-third Maori (New Zealand's aboriginal peoples), and exhibits of Maori culture are one of the bigger tourism draws here. The other must-do in town is in Ngongotaha, a suburb halfway up Lake Rotorua's western shore: **Skyline Skyrides, Fairy Springs Road** (📍 64/7/347-0027; www.skylineskyrides.co.nz) hauls you on a gondola up **Mount Ngongotaha**, then offers all sorts of thrilling ways to descend, from a chairlift to a bone-rattling luge track.

There are more geothermal sites south of town, a whole valley of steamy activity: I'd choose **Wai-o-Tapu** (📍 64/7/366-6333; www.geyserland.co.nz), a half-hour drive south on Hwy. 5, where you can see the **Lady Knox Geyser** (she erupts daily at 10:15am) and all sorts of intriguing pools, from the beautiful **Champagne Pool** to the arsenic-tinted **Devil's Bath** to New Zealand's largest bubbling mud pool.

The small village of **Te Wairoa**, or **Buried Village**, on Tarawera Road (📍 64/7/362-8287; www.buriedvillage.co.nz), is Rotorua's version of Pompeii, an excavated

townscape dug out of the lava that destroyed it when Mount Tarawera erupted in 1886. Lots of artifacts discovered in the excavations are displayed at the museum on-site, but what'll really bring this place alive for the kids is going from one excavated dwelling to another on a meandering pathway along a stream.

Since the 19th century, tourists have been coming to "take the waters" in the geothermal spas and springs. The elegantly restored **Art Deco Blue Baths**, in Government Gardens, now includes the **Rotorua Museum** (Queens Dr.; 📍 64/7/349-4350; www.rotoruamuseum.co.nz), where a multimedia cinema re-creates the experience of a volcanic eruption. The **Polynesian Spa**, Hinemoa Street (📍 64/7/348-1328; www.polynesianspa.co.nz), has lots of luxury soaking experiences, including a Family Spa section, where kids



Hell's Gate in Rotorua.

can frolic in the warm freshwater pool while adults relax in two adjacent hot mineral pools.

i I-Site information center, 1167 Fenton St. (📞 63/7/348-5179; www.rotorua.co.nz).

✈️ Rotorua.

🛀 \$\$\$ **Peppers on the Point**, 214 Kawaha Point Rd., (📞 64/7/348-4868; www.peppers.co.nz). \$\$ **Rydges Rotorua**, 272 Fenton St. (📞 800/446-187 in New Zealand, 1300/857-922 in Australia, or 61/2/9261-4929; www.rydges.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Like one giant hot tub.

Otherworldly Landscapes

17

The Burren

Ireland's Moonscape

All ages • County Clare, Ireland

In the heart of Ireland's green and rural County Clare lies an amazing landscape of rock and stony outcroppings, a limestone weirdness that looks as if you have just stepped onto the moon. It's called the **Burren**, from the Irish word *boirreann*, which means "a rocky place." What an understatement.

This strange 260 sq. km (100-sq.-mile) region of naked carboniferous limestone once lay under a prehistoric tropical sea; over the next 300 million years, decaying shells and sediment hardened into rock, thrust to the surface, and lay exposed to pelting Irish rains and scouring winds. Today you can drive around and gaze over massive sheets of rock, jagged boulders, caves, and potholes, punctuated with tiny lakes and streams as well as ancient Stone Age burial monuments. Get out of your car to explore, though, and you'll see that it's not all just rocks: Something is always in bloom, even in winter, from fern and moss to orchids, rock roses, milkwort, wild thyme, geraniums, violets, and fuchsia. The Burren is also famous for its butterflies, which thrive on the rare flora. The pine marten, stoat, and badger, rare in the rest of Ireland, are common here.


A good place to begin your exploration is at the **Burren Exposure** (📞 353/65/707-7277) on Galway Road 4km (2½ miles)

north of the Galway Bay village of Ballyvaughan. This 35-minute multimedia exhibition tells you all you need to know about the extraordinary natural wonders and historical legacy of the Burren. If you're coming from the south or west, however, get your introduction in the historic village of **Kilfenora** at the **Burren Centre**, R476 (📞 353/65/708-8030), which has landscape models, displays on flora and fauna, and an audiovisual "walk through time."

Drive along corkscrewing R480, between Corofin and Ballyvaughan, through the heart of the landscape, or better yet, hike a portion of the 26-mile **Burren Way** footpath, signposted from Ballyvaughan to Liscannor, near the **Cliffs of Moher** 6. A wide swath of the area bordered by Corofin, Lahinch, Lisdoonvarna, Ballyvaughan, and Boston has been designated the **Burren National Park**; it has no official entrance, so find a place to park and begin rambling around the limestone terraces and shale uplands. The area is particularly rich in archaeological remains from the Neolithic through the medieval periods—dolmens and wedge tombs (approx. 120), ring forts (500), round towers, ancient churches, high crosses, monasteries, and holy wells are all noteworthy. It's an eerily different sort

of place that the kids will remember forever.

 **Clare Ireland Tourism** ( 800/369-87412; www.county-clare.com).

 Shannon International, 50 km (31 miles)

 **Royal Spa Hotel**, Main St., Lisdoonvarna ( 353/65/707-4288; www.royalspahotel.com). **Temple Gate Hotel**, The Square, Ennis ( 353/65/682-3300; www.templegatehotel.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: A trip to the moon without a rocket.

18

Otherworldly Landscapes

Volcanoes of the Auvergne

Ages 6 & up • Montlosier, Aydat, France



When you think of France, you may not automatically think volcanoes. Yet in one 385,000-hectare (950,000-acre) region, no fewer than 90 extinct volcanic cones—known in French as *puy*s—rise dramatically and eerily above the pine forests. Their symmetrical shapes, formed over centuries of successive eruption and cooling, are cloaked with the vivid green grass of the region; peat bogs and lakes, formed by glaciers, are tucked in between. The peaceful rural calm of this region, where few tourists venture, seems at odds with the violent geological activity that blasted craters out of the mountaintops 5,000 to 6,000 years ago; nowadays villages and farms are interspersed with the volcanoes, where farmers tend the cows and goats responsible for the Auvergne's luscious cheeses.


The highest and oldest peak, **Puy-de-Dôme**, has been used as a worship site since prehistoric times by the Gauls and the Romans. In 1648, Pascal used this mountaintop to prove Torricelli's hypothesis that altitude affects atmospheric pressure; in 1911, aviator Eugène Renaux landed here after a nonstop flight from Paris in just over 5 hours. There's a handy shuttle bus up the treacherously winding road to the summit, where on a clear day you'll have a panoramic view as far east as Mont Blanc.

Les Puys (also known as *Monts Dômes*) are a minichain of 112 extinct volcanoes

(some capped with craters, some with rounded peaks) packed densely into an area 4km (2½ miles) wide by 31km (19 miles) long. Each dome is different: Some were built up by slow extrusions of rock; others were the source of vast lava flows. This rectangle of extinct volcanoes traces one of the most potentially unstable tectonic areas in France, the San Andreas Fault of the French mainland.

This is a fantastic area for hiking and biking. The hills may look dramatic, but they're gentle; and the quiet country roads and footpaths through the park have little or no traffic, yet you're never far from civilization. Throughout the region, even in the simple farmhouses, look for blocks of black stone formed by ancient volcanic deposits, with roofs of overlapping tiles of dark gray volcanic schist. (You'll find a prime example, the Romanesque Eglise Notre-Dame-de-Paris, in the Auvergne's capital, Clermont-Ferrand.) It's just another way in which the bizarre beauty of the old volcanoes has been tamed and embraced by the people of the Auvergne.

 **Visitor center**, Montlosier ( 33/4/73-65-64-26; www.parc-volcans-auvergne.com).

 Clermont-Aulnat, 4km (2½ miles).

 \$\$ **Hotel Le Kyriad**, 51 rue Bonnaud, Clermont (📞 33/4/73-93-59-69; www.hotel-kyriadcentreclermont.com).
 \$\$\$ **Mercure Clermont Ferrand Centre**, 82 bd. François-Mitterrand, Clermont

(📞 33/4/73-34-46-46; www.mercure.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Dead volcanoes, like slumbering green giants.

Otherworldly Landscapes

19

Blyde River Canyon

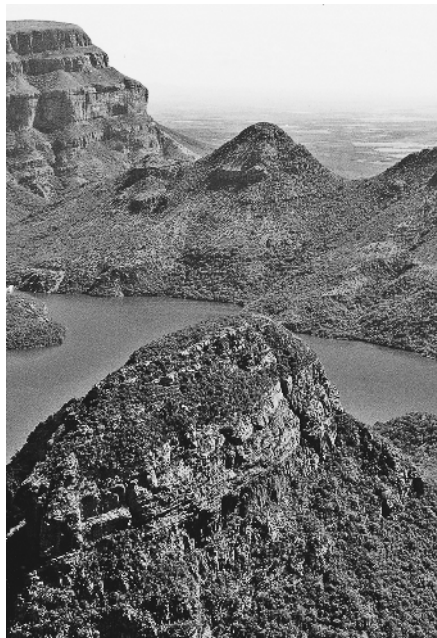
Great Green Gorge

Ages 4 & up • Graskop to Blydepoort, Mpumalanga, South Africa

If your mental picture of a canyon is an arid sandstone gorge (as in, say, the Grand Canyon or Mexico's Copper Canyon), South Africa's immense **Blyde River Canyon** will turn your head around. It's a land of heavy mists and high rainfall, precipitated by hot air rising over the canyon wall, giving the upper plateau lush grasslands,

the riverbanks dense dark forests, and in between them, pockets of subtropical rainforests tucked into the creases of the ravines. Each level has its own wildlife, too: mountain reedbuck up on the escarpment, hyrax on the canyon walls, hippos and crocodiles in the Blyde Dam, and impala, kudu, blue wildebeest, waterbuck, and zebra on the Lowveld plain near the canyon's mouth. If you're going from Pretoria to the Kruger National Park, take an extra day to drive along R532—the **Panorama Route**, as it's called for obvious reasons.

The starting point is the town of Graskop, where you head north on R532, though almost immediately you'll loop east onto R534 to stop at **God's Window**, your first amazing vista of the whole 33km (21-mile) canyon. Back on R532, head north to see **Berlin Falls**, a crystalline 48m (157-ft.) cascade. Farther north on R532 in Mpumalanga, where the Blyde River meets the Treur River, you'll have to pay an entrance fee to gape at **Bourke's Luck Potholes** (📞 27/13/761-6019), one of South Africa's most photographed sights: bizarre swirly holes scooped deeply out of the rock, with mysterious dark pools of water inside. The lichen walking trail here is easy and good for children. A few miles farther, the **Three Rondawels** is an amazing outlook above a heart-stopping sheer drop down to the Blyde River some 1,600m (5,250 ft.) below. The name refers to three massive spiral outcrops, topped





Blyde River Canyon.

with green hats, across from the viewpoint—I like the other name for them, the **Three Sisters**, because they look like hoop-skirted old biddies to me.

Near the Blydepoort Dam, turn east on R531 for two great options for exploring the landscape: a spectacularly scenic 90-minute boat ride on the Blyde Dam, run by **Blyde Canyon Adventure Centre** (☎ 27/15/795-5961; look for the turnoff from R531 to Aventura Swadini resort); or, north on R40, the **Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre** (☎ 27/15/793-1633), where you can take a 90-minute drive through a plains preserve to spot cheetahs, wild dogs, rhino, and various bird species. Head back to Graskop on the

R40, then the R533; the total drive is only 159km (99 miles), but oh, what a ride.

 **Graskop Information**, Spar Centre, Pilgrim's Way, Graskop.

 Hoedspruit.

 **\$\$\$ Royal Hotel**, Pilgrim's Rest (☎ 27/13/768-1100; www.pilgrimsrest.org.za). **\$\$\$ Rissington Inn**, off R40, Hazyview (☎ 27/13/737-7700; www.rissington.co.za).

TOUR: Blyde River Safaris (☎ 27/13/767-1833; www.wildadventures.co.za).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: That view at the Three Rondawels.

20

Falling Waters

Niagara Falls

The Big Spill

All ages • New York, USA & Ontario, Canada

Everyone's seen a Kodachrome photo of **Niagara Falls**, that stupendous curve of cascading water that lies between the United States and Canada. It's one of those sites, however, to which postcards will never do justice: To stand on a viewing platform and see, really see, how big it is, to hear the thunder of falling water, to feel the mist spritzing your face and the earth shaking under your feet, is another thing altogether. Kids don't understand how amazing it is until they're actually there.

There are actually two waterfalls here, both of them doozies: the **American Falls** and **Horseshoe Falls**. Both are around 175 feet high, although Horseshoe Falls, at 2,500 feet wide, is more than twice as wide as its sibling. The Canadian shore has the real panoramic view; both falls can be seen from the American side, but not together (Prospect Point for the American Falls, Terrapin Point for Horseshoe Falls). The Canadian side tends to have better hotels and more attractions, as well. No

matter where you stay, you can easily visit both, by crossing the **Rainbow Bridge**, preferably on foot—it's only the length of a couple city blocks. Bring a passport (or a driver's license and original birth certificate; you'll need birth certificates for the kids as well).

On the U.S. shore, head for **Niagara Falls State Park** (☎ 716/278-1796; www.niagarafallsstatepark.com) to explore the falls: An **Observation Tower** overlooks the river, and the **Cave of the Winds tour** (Apr–Oct; ☎ 716/278-1730) takes you by elevator down onto boardwalks, where you can walk around the base of the American Falls. Canada's 775-foot-high **Skylon Tower**, 5200 Robinson St. (☎ 905/356-2651; www.skylon.com), has a revolving restaurant on top, and the **Journey Behind the Falls** (☎ 905/354-1551; www.niagaraparks.com), allows you to descend via elevator to tunnels punctuated with portholes that look out through the blur of water right behind



Niagara Falls.

Horseshoe Falls. The coolest way to see the falls, of course, is the classic **Maid of the Mist boat ride** (Apr–Oct; ☎ **716/284-8897**; www.maidofthemist.com), which plays no favorites; it departs from either shore. You'll chug upriver toward the American and Horseshoe Falls, sailing right up the base of both (don't worry, blue slickers are provided to keep you dry).

Want more of an adrenaline rush? Book a 10-minute helicopter ride over the cascades with **Niagara Helicopters** (☎ **905/357-5672**; www.niagarahelicopters.com) or **Rainbow Air** (☎ **716/284-2800**; www.rainbowairinc.com), or crash through the white waters of the Niagara gorge with **Whirlpool Jet Boat Tours** (Apr–Oct; ☎ **888/438-4444** in the U.S., or 905/468-4800 in Canada; www.whirlpooljet.com). This being a major tourist destination, there's a ton of other attractions around, from historic old forts and botanical gardens to

aquariums and amusement parks. But over-developed as it may be, the spectacular Falls are still there.

📍 U.S. (☎ **877/FALLSUS** [325-5787] or 716/282-8992; www.niagara-usa.com). Canada (☎ **800/563-2557**; www.niagarafallstourism.com).

✈ Buffalo Niagara International Airport, 34km (21 miles).

🏠 **\$\$ Courtyard by Marriott**, 5950 Victoria Ave., Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada (☎ **800/771-1123** or 905/358-3083; www.nfcourtyard.com). **\$\$\$ Red Coach Inn**, 2 Buffalo Ave., Niagara Falls, NY, USA (☎ **866/719-2070** or 716/282-1459; www.redcoach.com).

BEST TIME: May–Oct.

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Roaring water, mist, and rainbows galore.

Victoria Falls

Shades of Stanley & Livingstone


Ages 6 & up • Livingstone, Zambia, or Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe


In 1855, British explorer David Livingstone first gazed in wonder upon these spectacular falls and promptly named them for his Queen. But their local name, Mosi-Oa-Tunya—literally, “the smoke that thunders”—is more apt. When, on a clear day, more than 9 million liters of the Zambezi River crash down into the Batoka Gorge, the veil of roaring spray can be seen from up to 80km (50 miles) away. Straddling the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia, **Victoria Falls** are the world’s largest, spanning almost 2km (1¼ miles) and dropping some 100m (328 ft.), twice the height of Niagara Falls. A sight this tremendous can’t help but be Africa’s number-one tourist destination.


Nourished by perpetual spray, a rainforest flourishes on the southern cliff opposite the falls, protected by the **Victoria Falls National Park**. This is the best vantage point for viewing the falls, and getting drenched is all part of the experience (rent raincoats or umbrellas at the park entrance). You don’t need a guide, though many hopefuls stand near the entrances angling for business; a clearly marked trail runs through the lush and fecund rainforest, with side trails leading to good overlooks of the falls. Head down the steep stairs to **Cataract View** to see **Devil’s Cataract**; the final viewpoint, nearest the **Victoria Falls Bridge**, is called **Danger Point**, where you can perch on a cliff edge and peer down into the abyss. When the moon is full, the park stays open later so

that visitors can marvel at the lunar rainbow reflecting off the mist.

While the Zimbabwe side of the falls has many more scenic overviews, during high water (Apr–June), when the view is less obscured by spray, you may want to cross over to the Zambian side (just purchase a visa at the bridge) for a spectacular panorama of the main gorge and **Eastern Cataract**. You can also walk (or scramble, rather) along the Zambian lip of the gorge to a viewpoint called **Knife Edge**, to stand suspended above the churning waters of **Boiling Pot**. **Warning:** There are no fences on this side of the river. For some kids, that will just add to the thrill.

 **Zimbabwe Tourism** (www.zimbabwe-tourism.co.zw) or Zambia Tourism (www.zambiatourism.com).

 Livingstone, Zambia side. Victoria Falls International, Zimbabwe side.

 \$\$\$ **Ilala Lodge**, 411 Livingstone Way, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe (☎ **263/13/44737**; www.ilalalodge.com). \$\$\$ **Victoria Falls Safari Lodge**, Squire Cummings Rd., Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe (☎ **263/13/43201**; www.vfsl.com).

TOUR: Safari Par Excellence (☎ **27/11/888-4037**; www.safpar.com). **Victoria Falls Tours** (☎ **27/31/765-4446**; www.vicfallstours.com).

WHY THEY’LL THANK YOU: Getting all wet.

Iguazú Falls

Spilling through the Jungle

Ages 6 & up • Puerto Iguazú, Argentina

It's not just one spectacular waterfall but a whole series of them, 275 in all, plunging step by step through an incredibly lush jungle canyon. While **Iguazú Falls** doesn't offer one single knock-'em-dead postcard panorama, exploring this rippling sequence of individual falls can be mesmerizing in its own way—in fact, it will engage some children for hours as they hurry ahead, treasure-hunt style, to find the next one, and the next one, and the next . . .

Like Victoria Falls and Niagara Falls, Iguazú Falls sits on the border between two countries, in this case Brazil and Argentina, though the main park is on the Argentina side. Next to the visitor entrance, there's an excellent new interpretation center full of displays about the park's history, flora, and fauna. Past that,

you'll find the starting station for an open-sided train that trundles to the trail heads for the two well-signposted walking trails, the **Upper** and **Lower Circuits**.

The 1km (.6-mile) **Upper Circuit** winds its way along the top of the canyon, where you can walk right to the edges of at least five waterfalls and look over as they drop as much as 60m (197 ft.) to the next stage of the river below. But the best views are along the 1.8km-long (1-mile) **Lower Circuit**, where you'll walk past the feet of nine magnificent waterfalls (the kids may want to keep a checklist), crashing down before you in walls of silvery spray. The most awesome of all the falls is on this route, the furious avalanche of water and spray known as **Garganta del Diable** (Devil's Throat), which is also the final stop for the park train. Along the Lower Circuit,





The lush Iguazú Falls.

you can catch a free boat over to **San Martín Island**, where you'll be literally surrounded by an arch of waterfalls. Combining the two circuits, exploring the cascades will take about 4 hours—it's not so much the distance you'll walk but the many times you'll want to stop and gasp at the views.

While you're here, don't make it all about the waterfalls; the surrounding jungle is just as amazing. The park's system of elevated footbridges and catwalks takes you right up into the dense tree canopy, for a great view of orchids, butterflies, tree frogs, lizards, parrots, parakeets, and brown capuchin monkeys. That's just the short list—within the national park live 200 species of trees, 448 bird species, 71 kinds of mammals, 36 types of reptiles, 20 species of amphibians, and more than 250

kinds of butterflies. Though you'll see a fair bit just on the Upper and Lower circuit trails, a tour with an experienced jungle guide is something too fascinating to pass up. The main local operator, **Iguazú Jungle Explorer** (☎ 54/3757/421-696; www.iguazuexplorer.com), offers a variety of surprisingly inexpensive options.

 www.iguazuargentina.com.

 Cataratas del Iguazú.

 \$\$\$ **Hotel Saint George**, Av. Córdoba 148 (☎ 54/3757/420-633; www.hotelsaintgeorge.com.ar). \$\$\$\$ **Sheraton Iguazú Resort**, Parque Nacional Iguazú (☎ 0800/888-3535 or 54/3757/491-800; www.sheraton.com).

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Water, water everywhere.

23

Falling Waters

Angel Falls

A Strand of Crystal from the Sky

Ages 12 & up • Canaima, Venezuela

In the wilds of southern Venezuela stands the world's tallest waterfall—a silvery wonder with one uninterrupted drop of 807m (2,648 ft.) and a total drop of 979m (3,212 ft.), which adds up to twice the height of the Empire State Building, or 15 times as high as Niagara Falls. **Angel Falls** isn't just some sight you tack on to another nearby destination—there is no other nearby destination, except for Venezuela's largest national park, a wilderness known as **Canaima National Park**. So once you decide to come here, do the kids a favor and make sure you get the full amazing experience.

This region is so wild, there are just about no roads—people get around primarily in motorized dugout canoes called *curiaras*. As a result, most tourists only see the falls out of the window of their airplane as they approach Canaima, and

they're often disappointed—Angel Falls is located up a steep canyon that can easily be socked in with clouds, especially in the rainy season. Even when the falls are visible, you'll get only a fleeting glimpse.

If you really want to see the falls, then, go there by river. One-day excursions involve heading upstream through rapids and canyons for about 4 hours, then finishing off with an hour-long uphill hike through tropical forest to reach the pools at the foot of the falls. The hike is strenuous and can be muddy, but your reward at the top is plunging right into those deliciously refreshing jungle pools. And because it was such an arduous trek to get here, you won't have to battle mobs of photo-snapping bus tourists—you'll have that breathtaking view of Angel Falls practically to yourselves.

7 Super City Views

Help your kids make sense of these bewildering cities you're visiting—find some high-up spot where they can get a bird's-eye view. Maybe you offer that Big Picture panorama to orient them at the start of your visit; maybe you save it for the end of your trip, so they can identify sights they've already seen. Either way, once they've seen it from on high, they'll feel like they *own* that city.

24 Domkirche St. Stephans, Vienna, Austria The best place to view mellow Vienna is still from the tower of its great 14th-century Gothic cathedral. Affectionately called Alter Steffl (Old Steve), the South Tower's needlelike spire rises 135m (450 ft.) above Vienna, a focal point of the city's skyline. Built between 1350 and 1433, it was the main lookout for the walled medieval city; you can climb 343 steps to reach the watchmen's room, which offers spectacular views all the way to the Vienna Woods (not to mention a glimpse of the cathedral's colorful tiled roof). There's an elevator in the stumpy North Tower, which was never properly finished; it now contains the church's massive bells. See Prater **484**. *Stephansplatz 1. www.st.stephan.at.*

25 Eiffel Tower, Paris, France Built in 1889 for the centenary of the French Revolution, this skyward swoop of iron gridwork swiftly became the symbol of modern France. At 317m (1,040 ft.), it can be seen over the rooftops for miles, but don't stop there—take an elevator up, at least to the second landing, for a panoramic view. From that height you can gaze in all directions, picking out other postcard sights like the Arc de Triomphe, the Gothic cathedral of Notre Dame, the formal gardens of the nearby Jardin des Tuileries, the exotic white basilica of Sacré-Coeur on a distant Montmartre hilltop, and above all the loopy course of the Seine as it divides Right Bank from Left Bank. See Catacombs **66**, Pont Neuf **91**, Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie **283**, Notre Dame **314**, Louvre **336**, Paris Opera **344**, Fontainebleau **363**, and Versailles **364**. *5 Av. Anatole France, Champs de Mars. ☎ 33/1/44-11-23-23; www.tour-eiffel.fr.*



The Eiffel Tower.

26 Victoria Peak, Hong Kong An 8-minute ride on the Peak tram—the world's steepest funicular railway—whisks you to the top of Victoria Peak, where there are spectacular views of bustling Hong Kong Harbour. The Peak Tower has a viewing terrace, as well as the obligatory set of tourist traps—a Madame Tussaud's, Ripley's Believe It or Not!, and the motion-simulator theater Peak Explorer. Don't leave without walking around the lush cliffside footpaths. Victoria Peak is an exclusive residential enclave, where the expat British vibe is still strong.

Another option: From Des Voeux Road and Queen Victoria Street, you can take a zig-zagging series of escalators to the Mid-Levels of Victoria Peak; it takes 20 minutes to go up, but be prepared to walk back down! ☎ 852/2522-0922; www.thepeak.com.hk.

27 Empire State Building/Top of the Rock, New York City Crowded onto its narrow island, Manhattan grew up, not out—so to view its spectacular cityscape, you'll have to go high. In Midtown, the most famous view is from the Art Deco Empire State Building; you'll be 102 stories up, right among the skyscraper tops. But I prefer the sleeker deck 70 stories up at Top of the Rock, atop 30 Rockefeller Center. Both offer open-air terraces, for those who dare; and they're open at night, so you can be dazzled by the bright lights of the big city. See Central Park **58**, Brooklyn Bridge **95**, American Museum of Natural History **273**, Bronx Zoo **127**, Statue of Liberty **252**, *Intrepid* **241**, Metropolitan Museum **340**, American Museum of the Moving Image **354**, and Cyclone **487**. *Empire State Building: Fifth Ave. & 34th St.* ☎ 212/736-3100; www.esbnyc.com. *Top of the Rock: 50th St., btw. Fifth & Sixth aves.* ☎ 212/698-2000; www.topoftherocknyc.com.

28 Washington Monument, Washington, D.C. The world's tallest freestanding work of masonry, the Washington Monument lies at the west end of the National Mall—a perfect vantage point to admire the elegant geometric layout Pierre L'Enfant designed in 1791 for America's new capital. Because D.C.'s zoning prohibits any building taller than the Capitol dome, nothing obstructs the 360-degree view from the top. Due north is the White House; due east stretches the National Mall, ending in the white dome of the Capitol; due west is the Lincoln Memorial; and due south is the Jefferson Memorial and the Tidal Basin. See National Museum of Natural History **275**, Air & Space Museum **287**, National Museum of the American Indian **261**, and the International Spy Museum **242**. *15th St. & Madison Dr. NW (on the National Mall btw. the U.S. Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial).* ☎ 202/426-6841; www.nps.gov/wamo.


29 Space Needle, Seattle, Washington Built for Seattle's 1962 World's Fair, this towering landmark (605 ft. tall) still has a futuristic vibe. A flying-saucer-like deck set near the top contains a roomy Observation Deck and the SkyCity restaurant, the oldest revolving restaurant in the world (and the food's pretty darn good, too). Low-lying Seattle doesn't have as many architectural points of interest to spot as some cities do, but the distant views of sparkling Puget Sound, the Olympic Mountains, and even the Cascade Range, are thrilling. See Seattle-Victoria Ferry **46** and Experience Music Project (EMP) **350**. *400 Broad St.* ☎ 206/905-2100; www.spaceneedle.com.

30 CN Tower, Toronto, Ontario Opened in 1976, this slender 553m (1,815-ft.) tall concrete spike is the tallest freestanding structure in the world, a gargantuan communications antenna with glass-walled elevators zipping up and down its stem. The first stop is the 346m-high (1,136-ft.) Look Out level; young daredevils will run right away down one level to the Glass Floor, where you can look straight down to the sidewalk, over a thousand feet below. Even higher up is the world's highest public observation gallery, the Skypod, where you can usually see all the way to Niagara Falls. The tower's attractions include an IMAX theater and revolving restaurant. See International Hockey Hall of Fame **463**. *301 Front St. W.* ☎ 416/868-6937; www.cntower.ca.

AWESOME VISTAS

Almost all visitors come here as part of a package tour, which will include accommodations, airfare, local guide services, the works. Try **Lost World Adventures** (☎ 800/999-0558 in the U.S., or 58/212/577-0303 in Caracas; www.lostworldadventures.com), or book your excursion directly through one of the lodges listed below.

 Canaima.

 \$\$ **Jungle Rudy Campamento**, Parque Nacional Canaima (☎ 58/286/962-2359 in Canaima, 58/212/693-0618

in Caracas; www.junglerudy.com). \$\$ **Campamento Parakaupa**, Parque Nacional Canaima (☎ 58/286/961-4963; www.parakaupa.com.ve).

BEST TIME: It's a trade-off—the river waters are highest during the rainy season, in Aug and Sept, but although this feeds the falls with abundant water, expect frequent rainfall. June and July will be less wet. From Jan to May, the river level is too low to visit the falls by boat at all, although flyovers are still possible.

WHY THEY'LL THANK YOU: Getting there like Indiana Jones.