

Planning Your Trip to the National Parks of the American West

The National Park Service seems to be walking a tightrope. The service has two missions, and they sometimes seem to run in opposition to each other: Its first mission is to preserve some of America's most unique and important natural areas for future generations; the second is to make these places available for the enjoyment of all Americans. Because the number of visitors to our national parks has grown tremendously over the years, some of the busiest parks, including the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Zion, and Yellowstone, are now searching for ways to make both of these goals a reality.

Park Service officials have often said that the real source of congestion in the most heavily visited parks is not the number of people, but rather the number of cars. (You don't go to a national park to get caught in a traffic jam, do you?) As a result, those parks with yearly attendance in the millions are now putting together plans to limit vehicle traffic within their boundaries.

If all this leads you to despair that you can't have a true "wilderness" experience at a national park in the American West, banish the thought! Even in a park as crowded as Yosemite, there are places where you can completely escape the crowds, where you'll be able to walk among the trees and hear nothing but the sound of your own footsteps. All it takes is a little effort and planning, and that's where this book can help.

Our authors have talked to the rangers, hiked the trails, and taken the tours, all the while asking, "How can our readers avoid the crowds?" In each of the following chapters, you'll find a section giving you straightforward, practical advice on just how to do this. Sure, if you're an outdoors iron man (or woman), you can avoid the crowds by taking off on the most strenuous backcountry hikes, but not everyone can manage that. So we've searched for secluded trails that can be hiked by the average person (not just the ones you'll see on the covers of *Outside* magazine), scenic drives where you won't get caught in bumper-to-bumper traffic, and points where, with only minimal effort, you'll be afforded spectacular views without feeling as if you're packed into Times Square on New Year's Eve.

We've also discovered that *when* you go is as important as *where* you go. Since most of the West's national parks and monuments are busiest in July and August, you can avoid many of the crowds by going in April or September, especially if you go just before students' summer vacation or just after classes resume. Most national parks are open year-round, though services are sometimes limited during the off season. In fact, many of the national parks are great places to go in winter for skiing and exploring, and you're less likely to feel mobbed. The hoodoos of Bryce Canyon, for example, are as strikingly beautiful when they're snow covered, and you won't be jostling with nearly as many people at the view points.

The last thing we've discovered (though it's not a big secret) is just how many hidden gems can be found among the national parks and monuments of the American West. Everyone knows about Mount Rainier and Carlsbad Caverns, but not always about the less-visited parks, such as Great Basin in Nevada, Great Sand Dunes in Colorado, the Channel Islands in California, Little Bighorn Battlefield in Montana, Jewel Cave in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and Guadalupe Mountains in Texas. These are places of great beauty or historical significance, but they're often overlooked because of their remoteness or simply because they're relatively new to the national park system.

As we all explore these parks and monuments, we should remember that they have been set aside not only for our enjoyment, but also for future generations. Let our gift to tomorrow's park visitors be that we have almost no impact on the beauty around us and, if anything, we leave it cleaner than we found it.

In this chapter, we've tried to give you the most useful general information you will need to help plan your trip to the national parks of the western United States. The individual park chapters that follow will answer your more specific questions.

1 The Parks Without the Crowds: Some General Tips

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

- **Avoid the high season.** For most parks in the West, this means July and August, but anytime schools are not in session, parks are crowded with families. Spring and fall in many of these national parks offer mild weather, vibrant plant and animal life, and relatively empty trails and roads. The exception (at least, regarding crowds) is college spring break, which is usually in March or April. Some parks, such as Big Bend, get extremely crowded at that time.
- **Walk away if you find yourself in a crowd.** It sounds simple, but often when a scenic overlook is crowded, you'll find an equally good, completely empty view just a short stretch down the road or trail.
- **Visit popular attractions at off-peak hours,** especially early in the morning or late in the afternoon. You'll be surprised at how empty the park is before 9 or 10am. Dawn and dusk are also often the best times to see wildlife. Eat at off-peak hours—try lunch at 11am and dinner at 4pm. Campers using public showers will often find them jammed first thing in the morning and just before bedtime, but deserted the rest of the day.
- **Don't forget winter.** You may not see wildflowers, and some roads and areas may be closed, but many national parks are wonderful places to ski, snowshoe, snowmobile, or just admire the snowy landscape.
- **Remember that some parks are rarely crowded,** and we've made a special effort to include information about them in this book. Generally, the more difficult a park is to get to, the fewer people you'll encounter. And many of the smaller parks remain essentially undiscovered while offering scenery and recreation opportunities that rival or even surpass the big-names. Consider parks such as Great Basin, as well as one of America's newest national parks, Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

2 Visitor Information

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

Another good source of information—and an important nonprofit advocate for America's national parks—is the **National Parks Conservation Association**, 1300 19th St., NW, Ste. 300, Washington, DC 20036 (☎ **800/628-7275** or 202/223-6722; www.npca.org).

Useful URLs for Planning Your Trip

In each of the following chapters we include pertinent websites, but here are a few for overall planning:

The National Park Service's website, www.nps.gov, has general information on national parks, monuments, and historic sites, as well as individual park maps that can be downloaded in a variety of formats. The site also contains a link to every individual park's website, and those often contain links to nearby attractions and other useful information. Unfortunately, the official national park websites are not as user-friendly as we would like, but you'll find most of the information you want if you're willing to do some searching. A good first step on the individual park websites is to look over the latest park newspaper, if it's available online.

Another useful website is www.recreation.gov, a partnership of federal agencies that can link you to information on national parks, national forests, Bureau of Land Management sites, Bureau of Reclamation sites, Army Corps of Engineers sites, and National Wildlife Refuges. You can make reservations at campsites, book tours, and either apply for or purchase various permits here.

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

Voices

Surely the great United States of America is not so poor we cannot afford to have these places, nor so rich we can do without them.

—Newton Drury, National Parks Service Director, 1940–1951

A WORD ON NATURE ASSOCIATIONS

Throughout this book, you'll read that a certain nature association or organization operates a particular park's bookstore. Practically every national park has a **bookstore**, and some have several. Bookstores are excellent sources for maps, guidebooks, videos, postcards, posters, and the like. Most of the nature associations offer memberships (usually \$25–\$35 per year for individuals) that entitle the member to discounts of 15% to 20% on all purchases. You'll

also usually get a regular newsletter. And for frequent travelers, here's the really good news: Membership in one nature association almost always entitles you to a 15% to 20% discount at other nature association bookstores and at national parks, monuments, historic sites, and recreation areas. For those of us who like to collect books, topographical maps, posters, and so on, the savings add up quickly. And we can also feel very smug about what a good deed we're doing in supporting these nonprofit groups.

3 Planning a National Park Itinerary

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

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

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

Following are two of our favorite park tours.

THE SOUTHWEST CIRCLE ITINERARY

This long circle drive hits five states and involves a lot of driving (or flying regional airlines and renting cars), but it takes you to a fantastic variety of parks—desert, cave, mountain, and deep canyon, plus one of the world's most fascinating archaeological preserves. We begin and end in Phoenix, Arizona, where almost all major airlines serve the airport, and car and RV rentals are available. We've laid it out for just under 2 weeks, but allowing more time would make it more satisfying.

Day 1: Phoenix, AZ

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

Day 2: Saguaro National Park, AZ

This is one of America's few national parks dedicated to protecting one plant—the saguaro cactus. You will see forests of them here. But you'll also see a variety of other plants and animals, such as javelinas—odd piglike animals with mouths so tough they can bite through prickly pear cactus pads. The park has two good **scenic drives**, as well as trails

through the Sonoran Desert, including the **Valley View Overlook Trail**, which provides a close-up view of the desert, and the **Signal Hill Petroglyph Trail**, where you'll get a good look at some ancient petroglyphs. See chapter 31.

Days 3–5: Carlsbad Caverns, NM & Guadalupe Mountains, TX, National Parks

One of the largest and most spectacular cave systems in the world, **Carlsbad Caverns** in southern New Mexico has numerous cave formations, ranging from the fantastic to the grotesque. Take the **Big Room Self-Guided Tour** and the **King's Palace Guided Tour**. For a genuine caving experience, get

Voices

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

—National Park Service Organic Act, 1916

your clothes dirty on the **Slaughter Canyon guided tour**. Just over the state line in Texas, **Guadalupe Mountains** is a rugged wilderness of tall Douglas firs, offering panoramic vistas and the highest peak in Texas. Recommended for experienced hikers is the trek to the top of **Guadalupe Peak**. Everyone can enjoy the colors in **McKittrick Canyon**—either the trees in fall or the wildflowers in spring. See chapters 10 and 20.

Day 6: Santa Fe, NM

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

Days 7–9: Mesa Verde National Park, CO

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

Day 10: Petrified Forest National Park, AZ

Especially colorful after a rainstorm has washed away the dust, this park is a fascinating look at an unreal world of wood turned to stone. Take the 28-mile **scenic drive**, stopping at the pullouts and

walking some of the short trails. We recommend the **Giant Logs Trail**, where you'll see some of the park's largest petrified logs, and **Blue Mesa Trail**, one of the prettiest and most otherworldly hikes in the park. At **Newspaper Rock**, early inhabitants pecked dozens of petroglyphs into the dark stone, including an image of the famous humpbacked flute player, Kokopelli. See chapter 27.

Days 11–12: Grand Canyon National Park's South Rim, AZ

The Grand Canyon truly is grand, and no matter how many photos you've seen, being there in person is an awe-inspiring experience. After stopping at the information center for a quick geology lesson, take the shuttle to some of the South Rim **view points**, and perhaps walk the **Rim Trail** a bit. Then, if you're physically able, walk down **Bright Angel Trail** at least a little way, watching the vegetation and rock layers change as you descend. Unless you are in very good condition, however, it is probably best to not go beyond the One-and-a-Half-Mile House, which has restrooms and drinking water, before heading back up to the rim. See chapter 16.

Day 13: Back to Phoenix, AZ

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

THE GRAND CIRCLE ITINERARY

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

Day 1: Las Vegas, NV

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

Days 2–4: Zion National Park, UT

Famous for its mammoth natural stone sculptures and unbelievably narrow **slot canyon**, this park begs to be explored on foot. Hop on the shuttle bus that runs the length of the **Zion Canyon Scenic Drive**, getting off to take trails. We especially recommend the easy **Riverside Walk**, which follows the Virgin

River through a narrow canyon past hanging gardens, as well as the **Emerald Pools Trail**. Especially pleasant on hot days, this walk through a forest of oak, maple, fir, and cottonwood trees leads to a waterfall, a hanging garden, and a shimmering pool. See chapter 36.

Days 5–6: Grand Canyon National Park's North Rim, AZ

The North Rim of the Grand Canyon receives far fewer visitors than the South Rim, but that doesn't mean it's any less spectacular. The North Rim (which is open in summer only) provides views of and access

to the same overpowering canyon as the South Rim does, just from the other side. You'll want to stop at the **Grand Canyon Lodge**, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and then hike a few of the **Rim Trails**. If you're in good enough physical shape, you might want to hike partway down into the canyon on the **North Kaibab Trail**. See chapter 16.

Days 7–8: Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park, UT

Although not a national park, this Navajo Tribal Park is well worth a stop (and it's on your way). Monument Valley is, to many of us, the epitome of the Old West—we've seen it dozens of times in movies and on television. On the Utah/Arizona border, and part of the vast Navajo Nation, the park has a 17-mile self-guided **loop road** that lets you see most of the major scenic attractions, or you can get a personalized tour with a **Navajo guide**. Either way, you'll see classic Western scenery made famous in movies such as 1939's *Stagecoach*. **Note:** Federal passes, such as the America the Beautiful pass, are not valid here.

Days 9–12: Arches & Canyonlands National Parks, UT

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

Days 13–14: Capitol Reef National Park, UT

Relatively unknown, this park offers brilliantly colored rock formations and a bit of history. The

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

Days 15–18: Scenic Utah 12 & Bryce Canyon National Park, UT

From Capitol Reef, go south on Utah 12 over Boulder Mountain and through **Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument**, possibly stopping for a short hike to Calf Creek Falls, before heading to **Bryce Canyon National Park**. Spend the night in the park or nearby so you can be on the rim of Bryce Amphitheater at **sunrise**, the best time to see the colorful and often whimsically shaped rock formations called hoodoos. Top hikes here include the colorful **Queen's Garden Trail**, named for a formation that resembles Britain's Queen Victoria. See chapter 7.

Days 19–20: Cedar Breaks National Monument, UT

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

Day 21: Back to Las Vegas, NV

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

Carrying Firearms in National Parks

New National Park Service regulations, which went into effect in early 2010, make National Park Service properties subject to specific local, state, and federal firearms laws. Previously, the Park Service had a system-wide gun policy, which mostly prohibited the carrying of loaded weapons in parks. The Park Service has updated its website to provide links to state firearms laws and advises gun-carrying visitors to check those websites before visiting the parks. Visitors who would like to bring a firearm with them to a national park need to understand and comply with the applicable local laws. If a national park's boundaries extend from one state into another (and some 30 national parks do cross state lines), you'll need to be aware of the local laws in *both* jurisdictions. Federal law continues to prohibit the possession of firearms in designated "federal facilities" in national parks. For example, you can't bring a gun into visitor centers, offices, or maintenance buildings that are posted with "firearms prohibited" signs at public entrances. The new law also does not change prohibitions on the use of firearms in national parks and does not change hunting regulations.

The Federal Lands Name Game

Throughout this book, you'll read about America's most spectacular public lands, most designated as **national parks** and managed by the **National Park Service (NPS)**. But you will also learn about national monuments, historical parks, and other public lands, also run by the NPS, as well as areas managed by other agencies. So what's in a name?

Although Yellowstone, America's first national park, was established by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1872, President Theodore Roosevelt is generally credited with spearheading the movement to preserve America's most beautiful scenic areas as public lands in the early 1900s. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed an act creating the National Park Service as a division of the U.S. Department of the Interior. Today the NPS includes nearly 400 areas of public land covering more than 84 million acres in every state (except Delaware), as well as in Washington, D.C., and American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

These NPS properties go by a variety of names. Generally, a **national park** is the best of the NPS properties, covering a fairly large area and containing a variety of attributes. Traditionally, these parks have been set aside to be preserved and visited by the public, so mining, oil and gas drilling, hunting, cattle grazing, and other activities that would change the areas are not permitted. A **national monument**, which many consider "junior" national parks, are usually smaller and with fewer attractions than national parks; they still must include at least one feature considered nationally significant, and they are often managed with similar practices to national parks. **National preserves**, which are sometimes adjacent to national parks, are like national parks, except that they often allow mineral exploration, hunting, and other activities prohibited in national parks.

There are also **national historic sites**, which usually contain a single historical place of note; **national historical parks**, which include more than one historic site; **national memorials**, which are designated to commemorate a historic event or person; and **national battlefields**, which contain the sites of historic battlefields, usually from the Revolutionary or Civil wars. The NPS's 14 **national cemeteries** are significant historic cemeteries that mostly date to the Civil War era and are not the same as the national cemeteries managed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs that contain the graves of more recent military veterans as well as veterans from earlier times.

National recreation areas are lands set aside primarily for recreation, such as boating or hiking; and **national seashores, lakeshores, rivers, and wild rivers** are usually scenic areas that include water sports and related activities. A **national trail** is a long-distance scenic or historic hiking trail, and a **national parkway** is a roadway through a scenic area.

Other departments and agencies also administer federal lands. The **U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM)**, a separate division of the Department of the Interior, manages a lot of public land, almost always as multiple-use areas where recreation, cattle grazing, mining, and oil or gas drilling can go on side by side. While many national monuments are managed by the National Park Service, some are under the BLM. Another division of the Department of the Interior is the **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**, which manages America's **national wildlife refuges**. In addition, **national forests**, which abound throughout the American West, are under the jurisdiction of the **U.S. Department of Agriculture**. National Forests are also multiuse areas but often have a greater emphasis on recreation than BLM areas. Maybe that's because they usually have more trees!

4 Visitor Centers

Your first stop at any national park should be the **visitor center**. Some large parks have more than one, and we list the location of each. Not only will you learn the history of the park, but you'll also get timely information such as road and trail closures, updates on safety issues, and the schedule for ranger

programs. Visitor center hours usually vary by season; most are open daily from 8am until 6 or 7pm in summer, closing earlier at other times. Many park visitor centers close for New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, even though the parks themselves usually remain open.

North to Alaska! The 49th State's Great National Parks

Although this book looks closely at the national parks in the American West of the continental United States, we must point out that some of the country's most beautiful and pristine national parks are in a destination a bit farther north: **Alaska**. In fact, more than two-thirds of America's national park acreage is in our northernmost state, encompassing huge areas of wilderness and near-wilderness, with few roads, buildings, or even airplane landing strips.

Most of the Alaska parks are challenging, both to get to and to explore. One exception is **Denali National Park** (☎ 907/683-2294; www.nps.gov/dena), which provides visitors with easy access to genuine wilderness. Denali has sweeping tundra vistas, abundant wildlife, and North America's tallest mountain: 20,320-foot Mount McKinley. But what makes this park unique is that its accessibility hasn't spoiled the natural experience. That's because the only road through the park is closed to the public. To see Denali, you must ride a bus. The grizzly bears and other animals are still visible, and their behavior remains more normal than that of the animals seen in the more visited, vehicle-intensive parks such as Yellowstone and Yosemite.

Another recommended Alaska experience is **Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve** (☎ 907/697-2230; www.nps.gov/glba), a rugged wilderness the size of Connecticut that can be seen only by boat or plane. Created by a receding glacier, this bay is a work in progress, where you'll see a vast variety of flora and fauna, including grizzly bears, mountain goats, seals, and especially whales, including humpback whales breaching (leaping all the way out of the water).

Other national parks in Alaska include **Katmai National Park & Preserve** (☎ 907/246-3305; www.nps.gov/katm), the site of a phenomenal volcanic eruption in 1912 and now an excellent place to see relatively close up the huge Alaska brown bear as it devours a seemingly endless supply of red salmon. **Kenai Fjords National Park** (☎ 907/224-7500; www.nps.gov/kefj/index.htm), a remote area of mountains, rocks, and ice, is the spot to see a vast array of sea lions, otters, seals, and birds. And **Wrangell-St. Elias National Park** (☎ 907/822-5234; www.nps.gov/wrst), which, at over 8 million acres, is by far the largest unit in the National Park Service system, consists of numerous rugged mountains and glaciers, plus some fascinating history from its early copper mining days.

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

5 Fees & Permits

Though fees have increased in the past few years, visiting a national park is still a bargain—a steal compared to the prices you'd pay for a theme park or even a movie. Entry fees, ranging from free to \$25, are usually charged per private vehicle (for up to 1 week), regardless of how many visitors you stuff inside. Those arriving on foot, motorcycle, or bicycle usually pay lower per-person fees. Some parks offer passes good for unlimited visits to the same park, or a few nearby parks, for 12 months.

NATIONAL PARKS/FEDERAL LAND PASSES

Those who enjoy vacationing at national parks, national forests and other federal lands have a new annual pass, but for most of us, it will cost more than the old passes that have now been phased out.

The **America the Beautiful—National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass**, which is available for \$80, provides free admission for the pass

holder and those in his or her vehicle to recreation sites that charge vehicle entrance fees. These include lands administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Reclamation. At areas that charge per-person fees, the passes are good for the pass holder plus three additional adults. Children under 16 are admitted free.

The pass, which is valid for 1 year from the date of purchase, replaces the National Parks Pass, which was limited to only properties administered by the National Park Service, and the Golden Eagle Passport, which provided free entry to all the federal lands covered by the new pass. The **America the Beautiful Senior Pass** is available for U.S. citizens and permanent residents 62 and older for a lifetime fee of \$10 (same as the former Golden Age pass-ports), and the **America the Beautiful Access Pass** is free for U.S. residents and permanent residents

Tips on Renting an RV from the Experts

Shirley Slater and **Harry Basch** have been traveling the U.S. and Canada in their RV (and writing about it, authoring *Exploring America by RV* and *RV Vacations for Dummies* [Wiley]) for years; here, they offer some tips on what to look for, and where to look if you're thinking of renting an RV for a national parks trip. Harry and Shirley say:

A great many rental RVs are booked by European and Australian visitors to the United States who want to see our national parks, or drive along the coast of California. The most common unit available for rental is the motor home, either the larger type A or the type C mini-motor home which accounts for 90% of all rentals. Prices begin at around \$975 a week.

Use of the **generator** is not usually included in the fee. You would need it only for operating the ceiling air-conditioning, microwave, and TV in a place without electrical hookups. The dealer will know how much time you've logged by reading the generator counter, usually located by the on/off switch.

If you're looking to rent a **travel trailer** (which you pull behind another vehicle), you'll find they usually require that you furnish your own tow vehicle, hitch, and electrical hookups on the tow vehicle.

Some companies offer a **furnishings package** with bedding, towels, dishes, cooking pots, and utensils for a flat price of around \$100 for kitchen needs and \$50 for bedding per trip. Other add-on kits are those containing power cords and hoses, plastic trash bags, toilet chemicals, and a troubleshooting guide. Remember to get a detailed list of what furnishings are included in your rental so you'll know what necessary items you have to supply. It may be easier to bring things from home than to spend vacation time searching for them on the road.

Be sure you're provided with a full set of **instruction booklets** and **emergency phone numbers** in case of a breakdown. The best thing to have is a 24-hour emergency toll-free number in case of a problem. When in doubt, ask fellow RVers what to do. They're always glad to help, but sometimes hesitant to offer for fear of offending. No matter how much you bustle around like you know what you're doing, the veterans in the campground can spot a goof-up a mile away.

Before setting out, be sure the dealer demonstrates how to operate all the **components** and **systems** of your unit. Take careful notes and, just as with rental cars, check for dents and damage from prior use before leaving the lot.

To find information about RV rental companies all over the United States and Canada, check out the website of **Recreation Vehicle Rental Association (RVRA)** (☎ 888/467-8464 or 703/591-7130; www.rvra.org). You'll find a directory with addresses, phone numbers, and prices for European, Canadian, and U.S. companies listed by city and state or province. There is also a companion

with permanent disabilities (also the same as the former Golden Access passports). The senior and access passes also provide 50% discounts on some other park fees, such as camping and guided tours. The passes are available at all national parks. For information, see www.nps.gov/fees_passes.htm or call ☎ 888/275-8747, ext. 1.

BACKCOUNTRY PERMITS

At most national parks, it is necessary to obtain a **permit** to stay overnight in the park's undeveloped backcountry. Some parks have even more restrictions. To be safe, if you intend to do any backpacking, look in the individual park chapter or contact the park's backcountry office in advance. In some cases, it may be possible to obtain a permit by mail;

in most cases, you must appear in person. Some parks charge for backcountry permits, while others do not; some restrict the number of permits issued and also the number of people in a group.

OTHER PERMITS

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

page, **Rental Ventures**, with additional helpful information. Write to RVRA, 3930 University Dr., Fairfax, VA 22030-2525. Call for rental information (☎ 888/467-8464; www.rvra.org).

Your local Yellow Pages should also carry a listing for rentals under "Recreational Vehicle—Rentals." **Cruise America**, the largest rental company with more than 120 outlets, has added budget items such as camping vans, fully equipped travel trailers, and fold-out truck campers with compact pickups to tow them. It answers the requests from European campers in America, who are responsible for one-half to two-thirds of the company's rentals. Rentals will range from \$800 to \$6,350 a week. Contact them at 11 West Hampton Ave., Mesa, AZ 85250 (☎ 800/671-8042 or 480/464-7300; www.cruiseamerica.com).

Another important detail you need to take care of when you rent/before you leave: You also need to make sure your rental vehicle is insured. Normally, insurance on a rental RV is not covered on your personal automobile insurance, so ask your agent for a binder that extends your coverage to the RV for the full rental period. Many dealers require the binder before renting you a vehicle.

Along with Cruise America, some of the larger rental firms in the West include: **Adventure Rentals** in Ontario, California, which claims to have the largest trailer rental department in the United States, offering folding camping trailers from \$520 a week and travel trailers from \$750 a week. No rentals are made to anyone under 25. Renters supply a tow vehicle, hitch and electrical connections, bedding, and utensils. A cleaning deposit of \$45 is required and forfeited if the vehicle is not returned clean; the company has its own dump stations for holding tanks. Contact them at 1200 W. Mission Blvd., Ontario, CA 91762 (☎ 909/983-2567; www.adventurerentals.net). **Altman's Winnebago** in Carson, California, has type A and type C new motor homes for rent. A typical rental charge for a small type C motor home would be around \$1,000 to \$1,500 a week. Rental of a type A motor home would run around \$1,988 a week. Additional charges would be \$15 a day for insurance, with optional charges for a kitchen kit (pots, dishes, glasses; \$99 per trip) and a bedroom kit (bedding and towels; \$26 per person per trip; Contact them at ☎ 888/820-0800 or 310/518-6182; www.altmans.com).

Once you've made arrangements to rent an RV, if you're flying into the region to pick up your RV, many rental companies offer free airport pickup and return, if you notify them ahead of time.

Finally, if you fall in love with your rental vehicle (as we did our first one), you might be able to negotiate a purchase price that would subtract your rental fee from the total. If the vehicle is a couple of years old, the price should be even lower, since most dealers get rid of vehicles after 2 or 3 years.

In some parks (Yellowstone and Grand Teton, for example), you will need a special permit to go **boating**. In others, you may need a permit for

cross-country skiing. Check individual park chapters for details on other required permits.

6 Getting a Campsite at a National Park

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

campground tends to fill up especially early and whether reservations are accepted.

Reservations for many National Park Service campgrounds, as well as national forest and other agency campgrounds, can be made through one central reservation center (☎ 887/444-6777 or 518/885-3639; TDD 877/833-6777; www.recreation.gov).

We also include information on nearby commercial campgrounds (both tent and RV) in individual chapters.

So You Like a Mystery? National Parks Set the Scene for Barr's Books

Author **Nevada Barr** (www.nevadabarr.com) spins a good yarn. A former National Park Service ranger, she writes what she knows—the settings for her mysteries are national parks, and her detective, Anna Pigeon, is a ranger. Anna's backstory is that she joined the Park Service after her actor husband was killed in New York City, and she finds safety in solitude. But occasionally someone breaks into her aloneness, such as the time she enjoyed a brief liaison with an FBI agent during a murder investigation at Lake Superior. Anna loves the wild country, and her work often takes her into strange situations. It's fascinating to see the parks through Anna's eyes, in the series' inaugural volume, *Track of the Cat* (Berkley, 1993), as she patrols the backcountry of Guadalupe Mountains on horseback—is the killer a mountain lion, as the tracks imply, or something more sinister?—or when she strives to uncover the cause of inexplicable deaths amid the ruins at Mesa Verde in *Ill Wind* (Berkley, 1995). The "accident" that befalls a spelunker in the depths of Carlsbad Caverns in *Blind Descent* (Berkley, 1998) takes the reader into subterranean territory, and the tense situation that develops among the small group of isolated firefighters during the aftermath of a forest fire at Lassen Volcanic National Park in *Firestorm* (Berkley, 1996) is riveting. In *High Country* (Berkley, 2004), set in Yosemite National Park, Anna goes undercover to find four missing seasonal workers. Ms. Barr makes Anna the new District Ranger at Rocky Mountain National Park in *Hard Truth* (Putnam, 2005), where a 6-week-old mystery seems to be winding down . . . until the disembodied voices start and small slayings turn into something bigger. In the latest (the 15th) installment of the series, *Borderline* (Putnam, 2009), Anna and her new husband, Paul, head down the Rio Grande on a raft in Big Bend, but the relaxing jaunt takes on nightmare proportions when their raft gets lost in rapids.

7 Maps

When you arrive at a national park, you'll receive a large, four-color brochure that has a good map of the park in it and in many cases, a park newspaper that also has maps; of course, you also have the maps in this book. If you plan to do some serious hiking, especially into backcountry and wilderness areas, you'll need detailed topographical maps.

Topographical maps can usually be ordered in advance from the individual park bookstores, which we list in the following chapters, and we suggest that you check with park personnel to see which maps they recommend. Maps can also often be purchased in electronic form and carried in a small PDA or laptop computer, or you can print out the sections of the areas you need to carry on the trail.

8 Tips for RVers

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

Carrying your house with you also lets you stop for meals anytime and anywhere you choose, and makes it easy to take care of individual dietary needs. RVing also means you don't have to worry about sleeping on a lumpy mattress, and you won't need to spend time searching for a restroom—almost all RVs have some sort of bathroom facilities, from a full bathroom with tub/shower combination to a Porta Potti hidden under a seat.

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

Other disadvantages include the limited facilities in national park campgrounds (although they are being upgraded to the point where camping purists are starting to complain). Even in most commercial campgrounds, the facilities are less than you'd expect

in moderately priced motels. And parking is often limited in national parks, especially for motor homes and other large vehicles. However, since most people are driving in the parks between 10am and 5pm, the solution is to head out on the scenic drives either early or late in the day, when there's less traffic. It's nicer then, anyway.

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

Many national park campsites are not level. If your RV does not have built-in levelers, carry four or five short boards, or leveling blocks, that can be placed under the wheels. You'll discover that not only will you sleep better if your rig is level, but your food won't slide off the table and the refrigerator will run more efficiently.

You might consider purchasing as a companion to this book *Frommer's Exploring America by RV* (Wiley), by Shirley Slater and Harry Basch, which includes five road trips in the West (including one in Alaska) that pass through many national parks.

There are also chapters on RV basics that people renting a vehicle for the first time will find useful.

You may also want to pick up *Frommer's Best RV and Tent Campgrounds in the U.S.A.* (Wiley), by David Hoekstra.

RENTING AN RV

If you're flying into the area and renting an RV when you arrive, choose your starting point carefully; not only do you want to keep your driving to a minimum—you'll be lucky to get 10 miles per gallon of gas—but rental rates vary depending on the city in which you pick up your RV. Do some research before you commit to a starting point. Rates are generally highest, between \$1,000 and \$1,500 per week, in midsummer. The country's largest RV rental company is **Cruise America** (☎ 800/671-8042; www.cruiseamerica.com), with outlets in most major western cities. RV rentals are also available in many western states from **El Monte RV** (☎ 888/337-2214; www.elmonte.com). Information on additional rental agencies, as well as tips on renting, can be obtained online from the **Recreation Vehicle Rental Association** (www.rvra.org). See "Tips on Renting an RV from the Experts," p. 8.

9 Tips for Traveling with Kids

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

For a complete list of national parks that offer Junior Ranger programs, visit www.nps.gov/learn/juniorranger.htm. WebRangers is an online component of the Junior Ranger program, and kids of all ages can play dozens of National Park-based games, look at and share photos in a web community, and even earn WebRanger patches at www.nps.gov/webangers.

10 Tips for Travelers with Disabilities

The National Park Service has come a long way in the past 25 or 30 years in making the parks more accessible for visitors with disabilities. Most parks have accessible restrooms, and many have at least one trail that is wheelchair accessible—the Rim

Trail at Bryce Canyon is a prime example. Several parks with sandy conditions, such as Great Sand Dunes, offer free use of specially designed wheelchairs with balloon tires for travel over sand.

Making Art in the Parks

The National Park Services offers opportunities for visual artists, photographers, sculptors, performers, writers, composers, and craft artists to live and work in the parks, in residencies that run from a week to a few months in length. The residencies are free of charge, and in some cases, the artists are asked to share their work by giving a reading, performance, or gallery show. There are currently 29 parks participating in the Artist-In-Residence program. The parks in this book that offer residencies are **Badlands** (ND), **Crater Lake** (OR), **Devils Tower** (WY), **Glacier** (MT), **Grand Canyon** (AZ), **Joshua Tree** (CA), **Mount Rushmore** (SD), **North Cascades** (WA), **Petrified Forest** (AZ), **Rocky Mountain** (CO), and **Yosemite** (CA). For more information on application requirements and deadlines, visit www.nps.gov/archive/volunteer/air.htm, or contact the individual park.

In addition, as campgrounds, boat docks, and other facilities are upgraded, improvements are being made to make them more accessible. Many parks now have campsites designed specifically for travelers in wheelchairs, most in-park lodging offers accessible rooms—some with roll-in showers—and park amphitheaters can usually accommodate wheelchair users.

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

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

Many of the major car-rental companies now offer hand-controlled cars for drivers with disabilities and can provide those vehicles with advance notice. **Wheelchair Getaways** (☎ 800/642-2042 or 859/873-4973; www.wheelchairgetaways.com) rents and sells specialized vans with wheelchair lifts and other features for visitors with disabilities. It has outlets in most western states.

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

11 Tips for Travelers with Pets

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

Aside from regulations, you need to be concerned with your pet's well-being. Pets should never be left in closed vehicles, where temperatures can soar to

over 120°F (49°C) in minutes, resulting in brain damage or death. No punishment is too severe for the human who subjects a dog or cat to that torture.

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

12 Health & Safety

Bears, rattlesnakes, and lightning can be dangerous, but that driver heading for you on a park road can be even more dangerous. In fact, **motor vehicle accidents** cause more deaths in the parks every year than anything else. Scenic drives are often winding and steep; take them slowly and carefully. And no matter how stunning the snowcapped peak you may glimpse is, keep your eyes on the road.

When out on the trails, even for a day hike, keep safety in mind. The wild, untouched nature of these parks is what makes them so exciting and breathtakingly beautiful—but along with wildness comes risk. The national parks are neither playgrounds nor zoos. The animals here are truly wild and sometimes dangerous. This doesn't mean that disaster could strike at any time, but visitors should exercise basic

Special Tip for Pet Owners

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

Stay Hydrated: A Cautionary Tale!

Frommer's author Ethan Wolff lived in New Mexico, and loves to visit the Four Corners area whenever he can. However, he forgot an elementary safety rule on a recent visit (which he recounted in *Frommer's MTV USA Roadtrips*): "It can be a fine line between Paradise and Hell in the desert Southwest. Pretty landscapes can take on a sinister cast very quickly if you don't make basic preparations. In Natural Bridges National Monument in Southeast Utah, I found the scenery so gorgeous I couldn't bring myself to turn around, even though I had only planned on a quick ramble. I ended up hiking right through lunch, and right through my water supply. Somehow I managed to forget that the steep downhill that began the trail would be even steeper when it was time to climb back up. By then, it was the hottest part of the day, and with each step on rebelling legs, I was increasingly parched. Stupid? *Imbecilic*. And it's not like it would have taken some amazing effort to be properly outfitted: I had trail bars and Gatorade sitting in the car, and there was free water at the visitor center. When in doubt, make the minor effort it takes to be properly prepared. You'll feel freer to enjoy the scenery if you're not stressing about how much time you have, or whether you can afford to chance the next overlook. And the downside of not having it together out here is just too extreme."

caution and common sense at all times, respecting the wilderness around them and always following the rules of the park.

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

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

It's equally important for your safety to know your limitations, to understand the environment, and to take the proper equipment when exploring the park. Always stop at the visitor center before you set out on a hike. Park staff there can offer advice on your hiking plans and supply you with pamphlets, maps, and information on weather conditions or any dangers, such as bear activity or flash flood

possibilities on canyon hikes. Once out on the trail, hikers should always carry sufficient water and, just as important, remember to drink it. Wear sturdy shoes with good ankle support and rock-gripping soles. Keep a close eye on children in your group, and never let them run ahead.

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

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

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

13 Hiking Tips

Don't venture off on any extensive hike, even a day hike, without the following gear: a compass, a topographical map, bug repellent, a whistle, a watch, and sufficient water. In many western parks, sunglasses,

sunscreen, and wide-brimmed hats are also considered essential. To be on the safe side, you should keep a **first-aid kit** in your car or luggage and have it handy when hiking. At a minimum, it should

contain butterfly bandages, sterile gauze pads, adhesive tape, antibiotic ointment, pain relievers, alcohol pads, and a knife with scissors and tweezers (tweezers are especially useful for removing those nasty little cactus spines that seem to attack from the side

of the trail). In many national parks, cellphone service is spotty or nonexistent, so don't depend on being able to call for help in an emergency unless you have a satphone (which is rather expensive to own but can be rented for your stay in a remote area).

14 Planning a Backcountry Trip

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

- **Permits.** In many parks, overnight hiking and backcountry camping require a permit.
- **Camping Etiquette & Special Regulations.** Follow the basic rules of camping etiquette: Pack out all your trash, including uneaten food and used toilet paper. Camp in obvious campsites. If pit toilets are not available, bury human waste in holes 6 inches deep, 6 inches across, and at least 200 feet from water and creek beds. When doing dishes, take water and dishes at least 200 feet from the water source, and scatter the wastewater. Hang food and trash out of reach of wildlife, use bear-proof containers, or follow other park rules to keep wildlife from human food.
- **Footwear.** Be sure to wear comfortable, sturdy hiking shoes or boots with good ankle support that will resist water, if you're planning an early season hike.
- **Sleeping Bags.** Your sleeping bag should be rated for the low temperatures found at high elevations. Most campers are happy to have a sleeping pad.
- **Water.** If you're not carrying enough water for the entire trip, you'll also need a good purifying system, because that seemingly clear stream is filled with a bacteria likely to cause intestinal disorders.
- **Your Pack.** The argument rages about the merits of old-fashioned external-frame packs and newer internal-frame models. Over the long run, the newer versions are more stable and allow you to carry greater loads more comfortably; however, they also cost more. The key issue is finding a pack that fits well and has plenty of padding, a wide hip belt, and a good lumbar support pad.

America's National Parks: We're Ready for Our Close-Up!

Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan's six-part, 12-hour 2009 documentary series *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* told the dramatic story of the origin of the National Park system. Starting with "The Scripture of Nature," it focused on the early appreciation (in the 1850s) of the areas that became Yosemite and Yellowstone national parks, followed by "The Last Refuge," depicting the ongoing battle between the preservation of the parks, starting in the 1890s, and industrialization and commercialization of the lands. "The Empire of Grandeur" profiled the formation of the National Park Service in 1916, spearheaded by wealthy, charismatic businessman Stephen Mather, who returned again and again to nature to restore his own health. "Going Home" featured people following in the footsteps of Mather in the 1920s and '30s to create more parks and protect the natural wonders all over the country, including John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s purchase of land to donate to the U.S. to expand Grand Teton National Park. "Great Nature" told the story of how the parks survived and changed in the Depression, with the creation of the WPA, and how President Franklin Roosevelt resisted pressure to use their natural resources during World War II. Set in the postwar years through about 1980, "The Morning of Creation" told how the parks have developed the balancing act between being cherished and visited by millions each year, and protecting the environments from being overrun and permanently altered. You can watch scenes from the series at www.pbs.org/nationalparks or purchase the DVDs, companion book, and soundtrack CD.

15 Protecting the Environment

Not long ago, the rule of thumb was to “leave only footprints”; these days, we’re trying to do better and not leave even footprints. It’s relatively easy to be a good outdoor citizen—just use common sense. Pack out all trash; stay on designated trails; be especially careful not to pollute water; don’t disturb plants, wildlife, or archaeological resources; don’t

pick flowers or collect rocks; and, in general, do your best to have as little impact on the environment as possible. Some hikers go further, carrying a small trash bag to pick up what others may have left. As the Park Service likes to remind us, protecting our national parks is everyone’s responsibility.

Be Gentle with Mother Nature, She’s Fragile

Although you’ll find westerners don’t much stand on ceremony, there are a couple of things to be aware of out here. Much of America’s historic and cultural heritage in the west runs on the honor system. Architectural sites can be damaged easily, so *please* keep off ruins with signs that warn people away. There are plenty of places where you can explore ruins up close without putting them at risk. When you think of it, it’s a miracle any of this stuff survived—anything visitors can do to prolong its existence contributes to the miracle, and honors these unique, irreplaceable sites. Avoid touching petroglyphs, getting them wet, or walking on them. If you make it into the back country, you may see shards of pottery scattered around unexcavated sites. Taking things from archeological sites carries heavy penalties, but beyond the legal incentives, you can imagine the larger karmic reasons for not looting our national heritage. Most of the west is hearty enough that you can walk (or bike or drive) freely without worrying about damaging the land. There are some sensitive areas, however, especially around Canyonlands (chapter 8). The crust (sometimes called **cryptobiotic soil**) is alive with algae, lichens, and bacteria. You’ll start recognizing it as a black, puffy growth. If you stay on trails and rock tops, and step carefully when you’re around it, you’ll help keep the desert alive. As the locals say: “Tiptoe through the crypto!”