

A GUIDE TO OUR NATIONAL PARKS 



7 for your bucket list

Truly unforgettable experiences await at these parks

The popular St. Mary and Virginia Falls Trail in Glacier National Park extends south from the picturesque Going-to-the-Sun Road. BRENDA AHEARN/DAILY INTER LAKE VIA AP



Mikah Meyer visits Ofu island, part of the National Park of American Samoa, in February 2018 during his 3-year tour of every national park site. COURTESY OF MIKAH MEYER

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

In the 2007 buddy film “The Bucket List,” Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman play terminally ill strangers who help each other accomplish unfinished goals before they “kick the bucket.” The titular term, coined by screenwriter Justin Zackham, arrived at the same moment social media explosion. From that fortuitous combination emerged a carpe-diem generation whose members collect unforgettable experiences like souvenir spoons, then document them online as social currency.

Viewed through an Instagram filter, bucket lists might seem contrived or cliché. But to those who are bold enough to pursue them, they can be deeply meaningful and profoundly transformative. Just ask noted traveler and motivational speaker Mikah Meyer. When Meyer was only 19, his 58-year-old father died of cancer. Eleven years later, when he turned 30, he honored him by dropping everything to pursue a bucket-list goal of his own: experiencing all 419 sites in the U.S. national park system.

“We typically associate bucket lists with our retirement years, but my dad

never got to retire,” says Meyer, now 34, who completed his three-year odyssey in April 2019, making him the first person to visit all U.S. national park units in a single journey. “By completing one of my bucket-list goals, I wanted to teach others the lesson I had to learn the hard way: None of us knows if we’re going to live long enough to complete our bucket list, so we should tackle it now instead of waiting for some mythical ‘right time.’”

National parks are an ideal bucket-list backdrop, says Matt Kirouac, co-host and co-creator of the national-parks-themed podcasts “Parklandia” and “Hello Ranger.”

“For me, a bucket-list experience has to be truly one-of-a-kind,” he says. “It has to be the kind of place or activity or sight that takes your breath away because it’s so unbelievable, and so unlike anything else you’ve done before. National parks are havens for these types of experiences.”

Indeed, national parks are ecological curio cabinets whose marvelous contents are kindling for once-in-a-lifetime memories. Although there are infinite treasures throughout the system, here are a few experiences that deserve top bucket-list billing.

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Big Bend National Park gets its name from a section of the Rio Grande, the river that defines the border between Texas and Mexico. EMMANUEL LOZANO/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Arizona: Whitewater rafting in Grand Canyon National Park

To gaze into the Grand Canyon is to see America's soul. But the best vantage point isn't from the top looking down, Meyer says. Instead, it's from the bottom looking up. Meyer cites as one of his journey's highlights the eight days he spent rafting the Colorado River through 225 miles of Grand Canyon National Park. "The number of visitors to the rim of the Grand Canyon is insane," he says. "When you're on the river instead of looking down at it, you get to experience so much more of the canyon — without the hordes of tourists."

Pro tip: Meyer recommends booking through a commercial tour operator who will obtain the appropriate permits and provide all necessary supplies and equipment. Be sure to book early; tours often fill up more than a year in advance.

New Mexico: Descending into Carlsbad Caverns via the Natural Entrance Trail

Carlsbad Caverns National Park features more than 119 otherworldly caves whose geological viscera will leave your mouth agape. "Hiking down into Carlsbad Caverns via the Natural Entrance is the absolute best way to experience the park," Kirouac says. "You feel like you're leaving the real world and disappearing into a movie. Once you're deep enough in to escape natural light entirely, you begin to enter various sprawling cave chambers, each one more ornate than the next. These chambers are huge, filled with grandiose, larger-than-life formations that defy logic or reality. The stillness and utter silence of the cave adds to the awe-inspiring effect."

Pro tip: Dress appropriately, Kirouac says: The temperature in the cave is the same year-round — in the low to mid-50s — no matter how hot the desert gets outside.

Maine: Seeing the sunrise at Acadia National Park

Acadia National Park has some of the most spectacular sunrises around, says Retha Charette, owner of the women's adventure travel blog *Roaming Nanny*. She recommends a predawn hike to the summit of Cadillac Mountain, which for much of the year is the first place in the continental United States to see the sunrise. "Being able to watch the sky turn from dark and star-filled to rosy pink absolutely took my breath away," she says.

Pro tip: Charette recommends hiking Cadillac Mountain via the 7.5-mile South Ridge Trail Loop; it takes two to four hours to reach the summit, so give yourself plenty of time to ensure you don't miss daybreak, she says.

Texas: Stargazing at Big Bend National Park

If you want to really see the stars, you've got to get as far away from civilization as possible. Dark, distant and desolate, Big Bend National Park fits the bill perfectly, says travel blogger Lindsay McKenzie, author of "Follow Your De-tour." Since 2017, she and her husband have been traveling the country full-time in an RV. When they stopped at Big Bend, it made a big impression thanks in part to its night sky, which has less light pollution than any other national park in the lower 48 states. "The stargazing is unbelievable," McKenzie says. "You truly feel like you're on another planet because you are out of cellphone service and the landscape is so unique."

Pro tip: To see the sky at its best, plan to camp on a moonless night. Or head 150 miles north of the park to attend a "star party" at McDonald Observatory.



Montana: Driving Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park

The glaciers that created Glacier National Park are impressive. Unfortunately, they're also imperiled, melting at a rapid clip due to climate change. But you can still see them — along with stunning valleys, mountains, waterfalls and wildlife — by traveling the park's scenic two-lane highway, Going-to-the-Sun Road. Kelly Beasley, co-founder of the RV website Camp Addict, traveled the 50-mile road, which crosses the Continental Divide, for the first time in 2015. "Being from Florida my entire life, I could not wait to get into the mountains. Glacier did not disappoint," she says. "I played the music I love during the drive, and I stayed most of the day. It was glorious. A true feast for the eyes."

Pro tip: Traffic on Going-to-the-Sun Road can be intense. To avoid jams, arrive as early in the morning as possible, suggests Beasley, who recommends checking the road's status ahead of time (due to weather, it typically is open only from June to October).

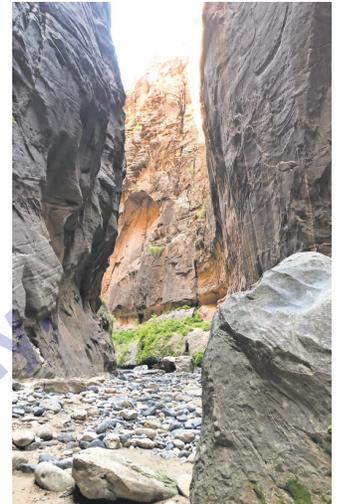
California: Conquering Half Dome at Yosemite National Park

If the point of a bucket list is to feel more alive before you die, then your bucket will spill over at Yosemite's Half Dome, a 4,800-foot granite formation whose summit can be reached only by hiking about 8 miles, then ascending a sheer cliff face using two metal cables to pull yourself the final 400 feet to the top. It's strenuous but spectacular, says Timothy Carlson, owner of the blog Hike the Planet. "Summiting Half Dome is an entirely unique, incredibly memorable experience," he says. "Getting to the Half Dome cables is a respectable feat in itself, but climbing them is a different story. As the trail makes the jarring switch from horizontal to vertical, it becomes clear that this is no simple day hike."

Pro tip: Half Dome generally is open only from Memorial Day to Columbus Day, and the hike requires obtaining a permit via lottery. You should therefore plan your trip early and have flexible dates in case you can't secure a permit when you want one, says Carlson, who recommends bringing gloves for the cables and a headlamp for hiking in the dark — a likely scenario since the trek typically takes 10 to 12 hours roundtrip.

Hiking up Yosemite's Half Dome involves a "jarring switch from horizontal to vertical" as you make the final push to the top, says hiker Timothy Carlson.

TIMOTHY CARLSON/
HIKE THE PLANET



Experiencing The Narrows at Zion National Park means wading (or swimming) in the Virgin River through the soaring but tight-walled canyon.

MELISSA YEAGER/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Utah: Hiking The Narrows at Zion National Park

Zion National Park's most popular hiking trail, The Narrows, isn't a trail at all; it's the bed of the Virgin River, whose north fork carved the famous slot canyon into Zion's sandstone. Although the gorge itself is narrow, the experience inside it is outright expansive, according to Suzy Short, owner of "Camping? No Problem!" — an online guide to RV camping. "Even a short hike will stimulate your every sense," she says. "Hawks circle above, and their cries bounce off the canyon walls. The smell of hot sandstone and juniper bushes surrounds you. Sometimes the canyon walls are so close together the sunlight doesn't penetrate and everything is in shadow. Other times, the gorge opens up to the sky, and the hot Utah sun bakes you. You can find yourself in ankle-deep water, or water as deep as your waist — and it's always cold, cold water. It's a beautiful, truly unique experience."

Pro tip: Wear close-toed water shoes, bring walking poles and check the weather before you go, advises Short, who says you should avoid visiting when there's rain in the forecast due to the risk of flash flooding. Because the trail is closed when the river gets too high — in the spring, for instance, due to snowmelt — check in advance to see if it's open.