



National Parks Tips



Fees



- Visit the parks on Fee-Free Weekends to avoid paying entrance and parking fees: <http://bit.ly/freeparks>
- Many national parks never charge an entrance fee—find one near you: <http://bit.ly/parksearch>
- If you are planning to visit multiple parks within a year, look into National Park Passes. Not only do you save money on park entrance fees, but at many of the busiest parks, the pass lets you join a shorter line at the entrance station.
- Travel with senior citizens. Anyone over age 62 can pay a one-time \$10 fee to get an America the Beautiful Senior Pass (previously called the Golden Age pass), which gets your entire carload in for free to every park .
- Get in to any park for free for 1 year by obtaining a Volunteer Pass. The pass is for volunteers acquiring 500 service hours on a cumulative basis: <http://bit.ly/parkfees>

Transportation



- Save money on gas and parking fees by carpooling to the park.
- Use your AAA card for discounts on transportation and accommodation services
- Look for travel deals and vacation packages on websites like:
Travel Muse: <http://bit.ly/travelparks>
Budget Travel: <http://bit.ly/budgetdeals>
- Conserve fuel and avoid parking hassles by boarding the free, eco-friendly park shuttles wherever possible.
- Fill up your gas tank before arriving in the parks, where gas stations are expensive, hard to find and sometimes completely sold out.

Lodging



- Plan ahead, especially if you're going to one of the popular, big-ticket parks. Campground reservations and wilderness permits for parks like the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Yellowstone can fill up many months ahead of time. Reserve here: <http://www.recreation.gov>
- All parks offer first-come, first-served campgrounds, but even still, you might be disappointed when you arrive, so be sure to have a back-up plan. Be sure to show up at first-come, first-served campgrounds between 10 am and noon, just as last night's campers are vacating sites. Campgrounds in less-popular areas of the park, especially those accessible only by dirt roads, tend to fill up last and be more peaceful. If all else fails, camping may be allowed on national forest lands outside a few parks.
- If you're traveling alone, check out CouchSurfing, a free network of people who offer their couches to travelers in cities all over their world: <http://bit.ly/couchsurf>
- Save money and meet cool people by staying in a hostel near the park: <http://www.hihostels.com>
- Look out for early bird specials! Frequently, the parks and towns nearby offer discounts to travelers willing to visit in the early months of the year.



Gear



- Bring everything you need; necessities like batteries, sunscreen, and bug spray are more expensive in and around national parks.
- Look for used gear sales in the spring and fall, where larger outdoor gear companies sell returned and rental gear.
- Try renting gear, especially if you are new to camping/hiking and aren't sure if you're ready to invest a lot of money in the activity yet.
- Sign up on Freecycle in your area (it's all free!) and watch for folks giving away outdoor gear, or post a request for what you need. <http://www.freecycle.org>

Activities



- Get the biggest bang for your buck by going for a hike with a ranger. The campfire programs and nature walks are a great way to learn some history and science about what you're seeing.
- If hiking or camping aren't for you, try having a picnic, painting or photographing the park, having a scavenger hunt with a guide book, doing yoga or meditation, or reading a book while enjoying your beautiful surroundings.

Avoiding Crowds



- Visit in the off-season (fall through early spring) or visit on business days rather than weekends
- Consider visiting second-tier parks that share some of the same natural features as the most popular parks. For example, instead of fighting the crowds in Yosemite Valley, visit nearby Kings Canyon. If you do visit a superstar park, base yourself in a less-popular area - for example, the north rim of the Grand Canyon instead of the busy south rim.
- Travel against the grain by driving the park's popular scenic loops in reverse. Start your day early or late so that you miss most of the day-tripper crowds, which peak between 10am and 4pm. Remember that getting from place to place may take longer than you think, especially with summer road-construction delays.
- If you follow almost any hiking trail more than 15 minutes away from the nearest parking lot, you'll lose 90% of the crowds. If you want even more solitude, plan an overnight backpacking trip. A limited number of same-day wilderness permits may be available for walk-up visitors to the parks, even during the peak summer months.

Miscellaneous Tips



- Your first stop in the park should be the visitor's center, where you can get up-to-the minute information on park conditions and purchase permits if you'll be hiking in the backcountry or camping.

Read guidebooks, such as National Geographic's Guide to the National Parks, before you go. The books tell you what time of year to visit each park, what time of day to hike different trails for the best experience, etc

- Don't be afraid to talk to the rangers and ask them for advice. They're a wealth of information, and can often help steer you in the direction of a trail that's particularly nice at the time of your visit, or help with something that fits your interests.
- Bring plenty of cash, as some in-park businesses won't accept credit cards and ATMs are rare. Exact change helps pay for campsites, wilderness permits and more.
- The biggest mistake you can make is to try and see an entire park in a day. Slow down and get to know a smaller piece of the park in depth, instead of trying to swallow the whole place at once.