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20 great American adventures

From rafting in Alaska to biking in Utah, nowhere does the great outdoors better than the US. So whether you are looking for a cosy cabin hideaway or a high-octane expedition, Jane Dunford and Sarah Turner have the low-down on the country's national parks

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Get a new perspective on the Grand Canyon National Park by raft or mule trip

Shasta-Trinity National Forest, California

The first green-minded US president, Teddy Roosevelt, set up a two-million-acre protected wilderness in 1907, known today as the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. Volcanic Mount Shasta dominates the landscape: soaring to over 4,322m, it's the second-highest volcano in the US. For a back-to-basics experience, stay at the Hirz Mountain Lookout, a fire-watching tower built in 1949 (there's no running water or electricity, but it's only \$35 a night). Larger groups looking for luxury could rent a houseboat with all mod cons to explore Shasta Lake - the Renaissance sleeps 10 and has hot tub, stainless steel kitchen and Bose entertainment system, from \$2,035 for a weekend (00 1 877 468 7326; houseboats.com).

Grand Teton, Wyoming

To the south of Yellowstone, Grand Teton National Park is less famous than its bigger neighbour but, if anything, the scenery's even more dramatic, with majestic mountain summits soaring to 3,700m, lording it over a landscape of lakes and forests. There's all the hiking, climbing, boating and fishing any outdoor enthusiast could want. Families love the TriangleXRanch, with the Tetons as a backdrop and run by the Turner family since 1926. The wooden cabins are immaculate and there are lots of activities, with a special kids' programme featuring horseriding and swimming. From \$1,500 per person for a week, including food and activities (00 1 307 733 2183; trianglex.com).

Canyonlands, Utah

Utah is a mecca for mountain-bikers, and getting in the saddle's perhaps the best way to explore the mountains, red-rock canyons and deserts. The largest and wildest national park is Canyonlands, a rugged place with breathtaking vistas. Join a six-day trip with Escape Adventures, covering 138 miles and staying in inns or campsites along the way, and you'll really get off the beaten track in this sandstone wonderland. Suitable for cyclists of all levels, the route starts at the town of Moab, traversing Canyonlands and Arches National Parks, and costs from \$1,275 (00 1 800 596 2953; escapeadventures.com).

Boundary Waters Canoe Area, Minnesota

In the north of the Superior National Forest in Minnesota, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness is one of the best canoeing places in the world, with 1,500 miles of canoe routes, hundreds of crystal-clear lakes, and rich wildlife, including moose, beavers and bears. Camping is at designated sites only and you need a permit. You can do it yourself with the help of a detailed map, but it's best to go to a canoe outfitter, which will provide camping gear, food, maps, canoes, route planning and permits. A seven-day trip booked through Clearwater Outfitters costs from \$538pp with equipment and food (00 1 218 388 2254; clearwateroutfitters.com).

Denali, Alaska

For nature lovers, the wilds of Alaska have a mystical draw - and 54 million acres of it are run by the National Park Service. Denali National Park, home to moose, caribou and bear and Denali itself, North America's tallest peak (also known as Mount McKinley), has just a single road running through the heart of the park, used only by shuttle buses. Explore Tours' nine-day Alaska Explorer Safari Camping Adventure visits both Denali National Park and Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. It includes a boat trip in the Kenai Fjords, river rafting and hiking, with camping and cabin accommodation and meals, and costs from \$3,820, excluding flights (00 1 800 523 7405; exploretours.com).

Ozark National Forest, Arkansas

Arkansas calls itself 'the natural state' and there's certainly plenty for the outdoor adventurer. The Ozark-St Francis National Forest covers 1.2 million acres, with endless hiking, biking and boating opportunities. To hide away in this wilderness, rent a 1930s cabin atop White Rock mountain - ask for Cabin B, a simple but cosy, stone-wall haven for two, with woodburning stove and deck with beautiful views, from \$70 a night (00 1 479 369 4128; whiterockmountain.com).

Cape Cod National Seashore, Massachusetts

Massachusetts may be New England's most populated state, but an abundance of national parks mean

it's still easy to experience the great outdoors. Explore the 40 miles of beaches, dunes, 10 nature trails, salt marshes and forests of 43,500-acre Cape Cod National Seashore. Swim, hike, walk, cycle, or just soak up the scenery on an unspoilt beach. Begin by checking out the Salt Pond Visitor Center, with its excellent exhibits about the area, then join a ranger-guided trip, from canoeing through Nauset Marsh to family-friendly shellfishing demonstrations or yoga on the beach (00 1 508 255 3421; nps.gov).

Grand Canyon, Arizona

Get a new perspective on perhaps the most famous park of them all - Grand Canyon National Park - on an eight-day rafting trip along the Colorado River. Gawp at the multi-coloured canyon walls and the wildlife, from golden eagles to ringtail cats, as you glide on a motorised raft, stopping to explore the sculpted shore, and camp by the river's edge, far from other tourists. The trip costs from £1,369, including transfers to and from Las Vegas, a rafting guide, all camping equipment and all meals while camping, through Footloose (0845 330 6095; footloose.com). Alternatively, explore the canyon the way tourists travelled a century ago - on the back of a sure-footed mule. Overnight trips follow the Bright Angel Trail to the Colorado River via Indian Garden, across the Tonto Plateau to Plateau Point, with frequent stops to photograph the jaw-dropping scenery. The night is spent at Phantom Ranch, in rustic cabins, where you'll tuck into a steak dinner before bed. Rates from around \$700 for two (00 1 303 297 2757; grandcanyonlodges.com).

Olympic National Park, Washington State

Olympic National Park in Washington State, established by President Roosevelt 70 years ago, is one of the US's lesser-known national parks, a prime wilderness destination and a Unesco World Heritage Site. The park is often referred to as 'three parks in one' since it encompasses three distinct eco-systems - rugged, glacier-capped mountains; over 60 miles of Pacific coast and beaches; and old-growth and temperate rainforest, with more than 600 miles of hiking trails. TrekAmerica's 14-day Pacific Coast trip includes two nights' camping in the park, with time to get out and about. Prices from £614, excluding flights, through TrekAmerica, (0845 330 6095; trekamerica.co.uk).

Sequoia High Sierra, California

Combining wilderness with creature comforts, the hike-in Sequoia High Sierra Camp in California offers luxury camping in tented cabins with proper beds, hot showers, maid service and staggering views of Kings Canyon. To get there, you either follow an easy one-mile trail from the car park, or hike a 12-mile route along the Twin Lakes trail from Sequoia National Park's Lodgepole Visitor Center (if you want to camp en route you'll need to pick up a wilderness permit there, too). Numerous hiking trails from the camp allow guests to explore the back country, but relax in style at the end of the day. The camp is open until 5 October, with tents from \$250 per person per night, including three meals (00 1 866 654 2877; sequoiahighsierracamp.com).

Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado

Though most visitors to Rocky Mountain National Park stick to the scenic Trail Ridge Road, it's easy to lose the crowds on more than 300 miles of trail, with hikes for everyone, from family-favourite walks in the Wild Basin area, to strenuous treks to Longs Peak. Get there on a self-drive tour, starting from Denver, and you can take in other national parks too. American Sky has a 14-night Self-Drive Colorado and the Rockies tour, which takes in Rocky Mountain National Park and others including Custer, Badlands and Yellowstone, from £499 for room-only accommodation, plus £288 for car hire, excluding flights (0870 904 0920; americansky.co.uk).

Shenandoah National Park, Virginia

It's only 75 miles from the US capital, Washington DC, but Shenandoah National Park feels a world away. Almost 80,000 acres, around 40 per cent of the park, is designated wilderness, so there's plenty of space for soaking up the natural beauty. There are four campsites plus designated areas for backcountry camping. You can pick up maps and information leaflets from the two visitor centres, or let Visit Shenandoah do the planning for you - its three-day Out and About Package includes horseriding, canoeing and hiking, with two nights' accommodation at Skyland or Big Meadows lodges, from \$549 for two, including dinner and breakfast (00 1 888 896 3833; visitshenandoah.com).

Lake Powell, Utah and Arizona

Lake Powell is a spectacular 180-mile-long flooded canyon that twists and turns along tightly carved red rock walls - and exploring by kayak is a great way to appreciate the drama. Exodus has a new nine-day escorted tour, kayaking on the lake and camping on a remote beach. You'll learn about the geology and Native American history, and take in Zion National Park, Bryce Canyon National Park and Grand Canyon National Park, too. Prices from £2,062, including flights, food and two nights in Las Vegas (0845 863 9600; exodus.co.uk).

Big Bend, Texas

Big Bend is one of two national parks in Texas (Guadalupe being the other), and with its lunar landscape of desert mountains, deep canyons and fast-running rivers is a paradise for hiking, biking and boating. Among more unusual ways of exploring is on a camel-assisted walking trek, following cattle trails, creek beds and mountain passes - just as the US military's Texas Camel Corps did in the mid-1800s, scouting for fort locations. Leader Doug Baum takes groups on overnight or three-day treks which combine desert scenery, history and ecology. A three-day trek costs \$950, with children under 14 half-price (00 1 254 675 4867; texascamelcorps.com).

Great Smoky Mountains, North Carolina

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, straddling two states, is the most visited park in the US, but don't let that put you off - you can easily get away from the crowds and into the back country on 850 miles of trails. There's a massive variety of flora and fauna: the northern and southern eco-systems collide here, with over 125 tree species alone - more than in all of Europe - and some 1,500 bears. Get an insight into the park's biodiversity on an all-day hike with the Smoky Mountain Field School (\$49; outreach.utk.edu/smoky), then camp at the least crowded and highest of the park's campsites, Balsam Mountain, at 1,615m, for just \$14 a night (no reservations).

Tonto National Forest, Arizona

Keen riders can saddle up for adventure on a pack trip following the Verde River through the Tonto National Forest to Red Creek, passing red rock canyons and making frequent river crossings. You'll ride

for 20-25 miles a day, so it's not for novices, but rewards await at the end of the day, with gourmet meals and camping in idyllic settings - guides go ahead by jeep to set up the tents so you don't need to lift a finger. The Arabian horses are top-notch, with top-of-the line saddles and equipment. Trips are tailor-made to suit and can include fishing, hiking or simply chilling for a day. Trips cost \$450 per person per day with Windwalker Expeditions (00 1 480 585 3382; windwalkerexpeditions.com).

The Everglades, Florida

The Florida Everglades is the largest subtropical wilderness in the US and its 3,125 square miles are filled with swamps, alligators, panthers and manatees (as well as particularly virulent mosquitoes). Nearby, on Marco Island, is the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, a protected mangrove forest near Naples on the West Florida coast. Keycamp has a campsite set within the reserve's boundaries; accommodation is at the distinctly comfortable end of the camping spectrum, with motorhomes and hot tubs as well as swimming pools. A 12-night stay costs from £720 for a family of five for a three bedroom lodge, including car hire but excluding flights with Keycamp (0844 406 0319; keycamp.co.uk).

Active Volcanoes, Hawaii

Hawaii is home to the only US National Park that contains active volcanoes. These include the majestic Mauna Loa, where temperatures are tropical at the base and sub-arctic at the top, and the erratic Kilauea, still creating land mass through lava flows. This is nature made easy for not only can you drive around Kilauea but there's also a hotel within the park, Volcano House, which is heated with volcanic steam. A room with a view of the crater costs \$230 a night (00 1 808 967 7321; volcanohousehotel.com).

Appalachian Trail, New England

Formed in 1921, the Appalachian Trail is a walking route that runs from Maine to Georgia. This 10-day walking holiday focuses on the first part of the walk, including two days in Baxter State Park, the White Mountains of New Hampshire and, as a challenge, the 1,917m Mount Washington before enjoying some urban adventures in Boston and New York. The trip costs £1,349, excluding flights, with the Adventure

Company (0845 450 5136; adventurecompany.co.uk).

San Juan Islands, Washington State

Sitting in the middle of Puget Sound in Washington State, the San Juan archipelago covers 750 square miles. From May until September it is easy to explore them by kayak amid the orca whales, porpoises and river otters that share the water. Sea Quest Kayak Expeditions run a variety of trips throughout the islands, based around the parks but also using private camping grounds. A two-night tour costs \$499 and covers, guiding, camping equipment plus all food (00 1 360 378 5767; sea-quest-kayak.com).

• For more information about America's national parks, visit nps.gov.

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