

US NATIONAL
PARKS

Six of the best

Sultry swamps, growling grizzlies and truly epic vistas – America's National Parks pack a real punch, says **Joanna Walters**



1 Grand Canyon, Arizona

For red rocks and precipitous paths

Images of this staggering abyss, with its crimson crinkle-cut sides, are so familiar from TV documentaries it's easy to think you know the Grand Canyon. But until you stand on the rim, feel the heat and scare yourself silly by peering over the edge, you don't know the half of it.

The must-sees: For the ultimate adventure, take courage and descend into the depths down the precipitous, zig-zag dusty paths, preferably on foot rather than on a stoic (but smelly) mule. The South Kaibab Trail, a short distance from the park's eastern entrance on the southern rim, is vertiginous and exposed, but gives the best glimpse of the silver streak of the Colorado River – the star of the show. The canyon can be lethal,

with searing heat and desert dryness (not to mention the risk of falling), so park rangers are ubiquitous. Carry water – and keep to the beaten track.

Early morning and late afternoon bring some relief from the sun and enhance the glow of the rock's colourful layers. And being able to say you've hiked the Grand Canyon is something money can't buy.

Get me there: BA (ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Phoenix from £634 return. El Tovar hotel, near the South Kaibab Trail, has doubles from £120, room only; Phantom Ranch, a hostel north of the Trail, has bunk beds from £29pp (00 1303 297 2757, grandcanyonlodges.com for both). See also atnps.gov/grca.

2 Shenandoah, Virginia

For forests and flowers

The car's a curse and a blessing to America's National Parks. It opens up the wilderness, but then fills it with crowds. And nowhere is this more true than in Shenandoah, where the tarmac snakes 170km along the spine of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, blighting the landscape – but providing a stupendous drive. The curves of the Skyline Drive through Shenandoah make a gorgeous road trip – as long as you avoid the bumper (to bumper) high summer. Autumn's kaleidoscopic foliage or springtime wildflower carpets are a far prettier sight. Stopping points are frequent and deliver magnificent views over the hazy blue silhouettes of the rolling Appalachians and the wooded valleys stretching deep into Civil War country.

The must-sees: Just steps away are trails to careering waterfalls and granite peaks where many fear to tread (even though visitor centres bristle with maps and advice). Picnic by romantic cascades, such as the Jones Run Falls, with its flat rocks and mossy cushions for lounging on. Or leg it 1,000m up the Old Rag Mountain, which locals say broods 'like Gibraltar' over the landscape. Some US school hols end earlier than Britain's – so nab a campsite for a break at the end of August.

Get me there: BA (ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Washington DC from £518 return. Big Meadows Lodge opens May–November (00 1540 843 2100, goshenandoah.com; doubles from £86, room only). See also atnps.gov/shen.

3 Everglades, Florida

For reptiles and raptors

You'll need nerve to get the most out of the Everglades – a place where vultures tearing at alligator roadkill is an everyday sight. Its vast, spooky swathes of mangrove host huge ospreys, weird pink spoonbills and some truly massive mosquitoes. Then, of course, there are the snakes... Dangerous, sultry and exotic, it's like nowhere else in the USA.

The classic airboat rides that most people associate with the Everglades are actually banned in the National Park (if you must, these fun-but-noisy tours are offered privately on adjacent land). Inside the park itself, cars are the loudest vehicles and all the most exciting forms of transport that get you closest to the creatures are self-propelled (kayaks, canoes, bicycles).

The must-sees: Follow in a wildlife expert's muddy footprints on a wading tour – one minute jittery you might get eaten, the next soothed by the tranquillity of the steamy forests growing out of this so-called 'River of Grass'. Here, where freshwater meets the ocean, modern civilisation seems to slip away. (Book through the Everglades hostel, below.)

Get me there: The Everglades Hostel is a clean backpacker spot (beds from £17pp) and also runs Nenby Cottage (doubles from £76, room only; 00 1305 248 1122, evergladeshostel.com for both). Kayaks and bikes can be rented at visitor centres. American Airlines (americanairlines.co.uk) flies from Heathrow to Miami from £622 return. See also nps.gov/ever. >



4 Kenai Fjords, Alaska

For humpbacks and ice blocks

The wildlife in the Kenai Fjords is in your face and fierce – except when it's adorable. Even before tour boats cast off from the port of Seward, alert passengers scamper out on deck to swoon over sea otters bobbing alongside.

The must-sees: Once the vessels chug clear of the mountains and hanging valleys lining spectacular Resurrection Bay, more A-list characters appear. Humpback whales breach and dive. Orcas rise and dip, seeking out vulnerable seals. And cheeky, black- and white Dall's porpoises frolic so fast in the bow wave you'll struggle to catch them on your camera. Meanwhile, puffins whizz by and sea lions dot craggy outcrops, bellowing like yobs on a Friday night. As you round the

headland into Aialik Bay, freezing winds whoosh off the glacier, even in summer. Witness giant ice blocks shearing off with a boom, then plunging into the fjord, black bears and bald eagles hanging out on the shore. Intrepid kayakers and campers venture out here, too – camping is allowed, and rustic cabins are available to rent (take heed of the park's rules and bear warnings – attacks do happen).

Get me there: Icelandair (icelandair.co.uk) flies from Heathrow to Anchorage, via Reykjavik, from £685 return. Accommodation in port is functional, so head to Alyeska Resort in Girdwood for an ace spa and all the comforts (00 1907 754 2111, alyeskaresort.com; doubles from £95, room only). See also nps.gov/kefj.



5 Yellowstone, Wyoming

For geysers and grizzlies

America's first National Park, founded in 1872, is thick with grizzlies and black bears loping across its untamed wilderness. Wolves and bison also roam this hauntingly wild expanse that sprawls across Wyoming, Montana and Idaho.

The must-sees: Beyond the astonishing animals, Yellowstone's freaky hot springs and geysers are the big draw. Many bubble into psychedelic-hued mineral pools scalding to the touch, while the renowned Old Faithful shoots its boiling jet sky-high every 90 minutes (the west entrance is the nearest).

Perfect, peaceful ways to recce the landscape are snow-shoeing or cross-country skiing in winter (the quietest season), or on

horseback in summer. Want to reach the twisting canyons or the mountain lookouts up on the great Continental Divide? A humble hike will do just fine.

Get me there: Delta (delta.com) flies from Heathrow to Bozeman, Montana, via Minneapolis, from £708. Old Faithful Inn is a classic park lodge with a giant central fireplace, with doubles from £110, room only. Roosevelt Lodge's more secluded cabins, close to the Yellowstone Falls (twice as high as Niagara), and with elk and moose wandering at will outside, cost from £50 – and its canteen serves up a mean elk *empanada* (00 1307 344 7311, yellowstonenationalparklodges.com for both). See also nps.gov/yell.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY, ROBERT HARDING



6 Arches, Utah

For sculptures and silence

Time your visit shrewdly and you can have the iconic rock formation Delicate Arch (pictured) all to yourself. Which is surprising, considering it's the star among more than 2,000 natural rock arches in this popular National Park, and is so famous its image graces Utah car-licence plates.

With a sunrise start and a moderate 2km uphill hike from the car park, there's a good chance you'll be alone when you reach it. Pose beneath the arc, gaze through it to the La Sal mountains, listen in the primordial stillness – and wonder at how it's withstood millions of years of erosion.

The must-sees: When the silence is broken by tourists trickling in, trot off sharpish to crane at other soaring arches and towering

spires. The cluster of rocks resembling tall women at a coffee morning – The Three Gossips – is a knockout, and the wind-hollowed features of Double Arch, Landscape Arch and South and North Windows in other areas of the park will stir you with their purple, orange and pink gravity-defying curves.

Get me there: Delta (delta.com) flies from Heathrow to Salt Lake City, via Boston, from £696 return. The nearest town, Moab, draws arches-lovers, mountain-bikers and climbers. Veer up Route 128 on its outskirts to sniff out scenic ranches, such as Red Cliffs Adventure Lodge (00 1435 259 2002, redcliffslodge.com; doubles from £81, room only). See also nps.gov/arch. ■