



Find this winter-perfect slice of heaven on Rabbit Key in Everglades National Park, Florida (turn the page for details).

# ENDLESS SUMMER

*Pack the sunscreen for these national parks, where you can escape the cold and the crowds.*

BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN



PHOTO BY MAC STONE / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

# DON'T BE ASHAMED

Not everyone loves winter weather. It's OK. Some members of our tribe would rather build a sand castle than a snow cave. For the cold-averse among us, there's a host of national parks that come into their own during the fourth season. Swap your parka for a sun hat and hit the trails, rivers, and sweet, sugar-sand beaches for a different kind of national park adventure.

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## *Paddle Through a Zoo*

**SWEETWATER BAY CHICKEE-RABBIT KEY LOOP, EVERGLADES NP, FL**

Blue-haired snowbirds aren't the only ones flocking to south Florida in winter: The dry season's warm, lower-humidity conditions also attract actual birds by the thousands. And dropping water levels concentrate freshwater alligators in the remaining waterholes, making winter prime time for a wildlife-spotting expedition. Find the best option in the park's Ten Thousand Islands area on this 43.5-mile, five-day loop linking inland swamps and gulf beaches. From Everglades City, paddle 9 miles southeast and up the Lopez River to Crooked Creek Chickee, a covered tent platform hovering over the water on stilts. Day two, hop on the inland Wilderness Waterway, a 99-mile route through mangrove swamps, open bays, and sawgrass prairie connected by wide rivers and narrow forest tunnels. Follow it 10 miles to Sweetwater Bay Chickee, near a freshwater zone where gators bask on sunny streambanks. Then paddle the Chatham River to Pavilion Key (11.5 miles; time your trip to match the outgoing tide), then Rabbit Key (another 4 miles), both white-sand beach sites on the Gulf of Mexico where chances for glimpsing white pelicans, bald eagles, and dolphins are high. You might also see sea turtles and manatees in the grasses off Rabbit Key, especially closer to spring. Head back to Everglades City via Chokoloskee Pass on an incoming tide. One animal sighting you don't want: raccoons raiding your dinner. Store food in a kayak compartment or hard-sided cooler. **Average January high/low 78°F/54°F Dry season** December to April **Permit** Pick up at Gulf Coast Visitor Center; \$15 plus \$2/person/day **Kayak rentals** evergladesnationalparkboattours-gulfcoast.com **Info** nps.gov/ever



In the Everglades, look for American alligators in shallow, freshwater swamps and lakes.

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) PAUL MARCELLINI / TANDEMSTOCK.COM; JOE CARINI / PACIFIC STOCK / AURORA PHOTOS

## THE FIRST 100 YEARS

**Let the fire fall! For nearly 100 years beginning in 1872, that simple command initiated the nightly Yosemite Firefall, which saw park staff push smoldering bonfire embers off the edge of Glacier Point at 9 p.m. The fiery ash plummeted 3,200 feet to the valley floor, creating a glowing cascade visible for miles. It was the stuff of Smokey Bear's nightmares, but visitors reveled in the popular spectacle and trampled meadows in huge numbers to watch. Despite public opposition, the park finally ended the Firefall in 1968, citing environmental impacts.**  
—Trent Knoss

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## *Explore a South Pacific Paradise*

**MT. 'ALAVA, NATIONAL PARK OF AMERICAN SAMOA**

You want exotic? You'll have to think past Hawaii—2,500 miles past, to American Samoa, the uncontested champion of the system's tropical getaways. Yes, it's everything you imagine: Thickly rainforested peaks rising above white-sand beaches, fruit bats with 3-foot wingspans flitting among the lush trees. Head to Tutuila island and up 1,610-foot Mt. 'Alava for the park's best view. From Fagasa Pass, trace a ridgeline for 3.5 miles, beneath banyan and fig trees alive with the calls of tropical seabirds, to reach the summit, where views extend down to the glittery blue Pago Pago Harbor (pictured). Connect to the Mt. 'Alava Adventure Trail and continue 2.5 miles (shimmy down a series of rope ladders) to tiny Vatia Village. Continue 1.1 miles on the Tuafanua Trail to a secluded beach where red-footed boobies fish and butterflyfish dart among coral reefs (you'll have to come back in summer to snorkel here, though—winter's rip currents make swimming sketchy). Backtrack or (better yet) arrange for a homestay with a family in Vatia. **Average January high/low 87°F/78°F Season** Year-round **Info** nps.gov/npsa

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## *Hit the Beach*

**GARDEN KEY, DRY TORTUGAS NP, FL**

We'd forgive you for parking it in the sand upon arrival at the primitive Garden Key campground. For one, you've just reached the end of a long journey, capped by a two-hour boat ride into the Gulf of Mexico. And for two, the palm-shaded refuge in the shadows of a 19th-century military outpost is the kind of place where sunbathing, fishing for tarpon and bonefish, and snorkeling can tie up entire weeks. But you came all this way. So buck up, slide into your flip-flops, and kayak 3 miles west to Loggerhead Key, the largest of the seven Dry Tortugas islands (BYO kayak; for experienced paddlers only). Snorkel the 22,000-square-foot Little Africa Reef on the key's western side or check out the Windjammer shipwreck off the southern tip. Return to Garden Key to camp. No kayak? Park yourself on that beach after all. **Average January high/low 75°F/65°F Dry season** November to May **Camping** First-come, first-serve; \$3/person/night **Ferry** \$195/person if camping/\$175 for day trips; (prices are round-trip and ferry leaves from Key West; includes two meals and snorkeling gear); drytortugas.com **Permit** Required for kayaking; free **Info** nps.gov/drt0



Mt. 'Alava stands tall over Pago Pago Harbor.

Saguaros line the Douglas Spring Trail. The park's namesake cactus can weigh 6 tons and reach a height of 50 feet.



PHOTOS BY GREG MCCOWN. (2) AIDAN LYNN-KLIMENKO AND MADISON PERRINS

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### Backpack the Desert

**MANNING CAMP LOOP, SAGUARO NP, AZ**

The iconic, arms-aloft silhouette of the saguaro cactus conjures up the desert Southwest like few other images can. It also provides precisely zero shade, a matter of no small importance from spring into fall, when temperatures crank to broiling. In winter, though? The Saguaro Wilderness in the Rincon Mountain District offers pleasant weather in lower elevations and refreshing temps up top. Start an 11.8-mile overnight on the Douglas Spring Trail, hiking through a garden of saguaros, barrel cacti, and prickly pear that gives way to creosote and manzanita as you gain about 2,000 feet en route to the Douglas Spring campsites at mile 5.9. Descend a steep 3.5 miles to Grass Shack Camp, then head north to close the loop. (For a longer, if chillier, trip, head east into the high country from Douglas Spring via the Cow Head Saddle Trail to Manning Camp at 8,000 feet, a ponderosa pine- and juniper-covered oasis with year-round water and easy access to extensive views over Heartbreak Ridge, the Rincon Valley, and Tucson.) **Average January high/low** 60°F/35°F (Douglas Spring) **Season** February and March for warmer high-elevation weather **Permit** \$8/night **Info** nps.gov/sagu

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### Ply the Bayous

**UPPER NECHES RIVER, BIG THICKET NATIONAL PRESERVE, TX**

Deep in southeast Texas, worlds collide. Here, the South's swampy bottomlands crash into the East Coast's hardwood forests and Texas's cactus-studded plains, forming a little pocket of biodiversity where river otters, bobcats, deer, and armadillos thrive. Head to the Upper Neches River for an up-close look at the ecological melting pot: Winter, with its milder, bug-free weather and lower water levels (read: more expansive sandbar campsites), is an excellent time to go. Put in at McQueen's Landing for a three-night, 45-mile getaway. Paddle south through a hardwood forest to the park's Canyonlands Unit for night one; save time for an off-trail hike to explore the fern-decked, 30-foot-deep gullies. Next morning, continue south through cypress sloughs and scout a beach campsite on one of the plentiful sandbars. On day three, you'll paddle through a swamplier thicket of sweet gum, tupelo, and pine in the Neches Bottom and Jack Gore Baygall Unit. Finish by paddling another 12 miles to your takeout at the US 96 bridge. **Average January high/low** 60°F/40°F **Season** February to April for better water conditions and mild temps **Permit** Free camping permit required **Canoe rental** eastxcanoes.com **Info** nps.gov/bith



**BEST JOB EVER**

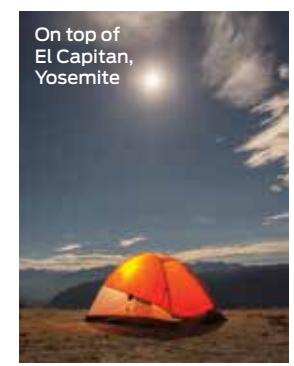
## WASTE NOT

Our national parks centennial team, Madison Perrins and Aidan Lynn-Klimenko, spent much of the fall exploring California's iconic parks. They've had amazing adventures, but they've also learned that they—and the millions of others who visit the parks every year—can be a burden on the NPS system, simply by filling trash cans that the parks must deal with. Over the last four months and 14 parks, they've come to see how they can be part of the solution. Here are a few ways they've reduced their impact. Because taking photos like these is a lot more satisfying when you *really* leave nothing behind.

**It may attract funny looks**, but if we stay in park hotels, we bring our own plates and silverware to avoid using the disposable stuff at breakfast.

**When grocery shopping**, we often forgo bags altogether and wheel our cart to the car and load our supplies straight into the cooler.

**When recycling containers are not available**, we don't give up. We simply tote recyclables around with us until we find a place to deposit them—and keep them out of the landfill.



On top of El Capitan, Yosemite



Glacier Point, Yosemite

**We've found that our number one waste product is food packaging.** Now we choose unpackaged foods like bananas and apples, and look to buy our staples in bulk.

**We decline paper maps** for campgrounds and (especially) hotels that are useful for all of two minutes.

**Learn more** about the effort to eliminate trash in Yosemite, Denali, and Grand Teton National Parks at [subaru.com/environment](http://subaru.com/environment).

**We use refillable water bottles.** Of course.

**For updates**, photos, and videos from our NPS Centennial Team, go to [backpacker.com/NPS100](http://backpacker.com/NPS100).

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## *Get Lost*

### BACKCOUNTRY LOOP, WHITE SANDS NATIONAL MONUMENT, NM

Big, stark, and dazzlingly bright, White Sands is like a winter wonderland minus the snow. You can even go sledding (pick up a waxed plastic saucer at the gift shop). But nighttime might be the real show-stopper. Snag a permit for one of the 10 dunefield campsites and get ready for bedazzling stars or a moon so bright it turns the sand to silver. And because the monument closes to day visitors at sunset, backpackers on the Backcountry Loop get the celestial show all to themselves. Hit the 2.2-mile loop winding up and down the dunefield's 40-foot-tall gypsum mounds. Pitch your tent, then climb the nearest dune to watch the Milky Way, the Andromeda galaxy, and approximately one bajillion stars twinkle into view. Pack all water on this dry route. **Average January high/low** 57°F/22°F **Season** October to April for milder temps **Permit** Pick up in person up to one hour before sunset at the visitor center; \$3/person **Info** nps.gov/whsa

At 275 square miles, White Sands is the largest gypsum dunefield in the world.

PHOTO BY IAN SHIVES / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

## *Hike, Swim, and Snorkel the Caribbean*

### REEF BAY & BROWN BAY, VIRGIN ISLANDS NP

Yes, the above-sea level view on St. John is something out of a honeymoon brochure. But you'd be missing half the point if you never stuck your head underwater on this reef-ringed island, home to sea turtles, neon-bright fish, and 50 species of coral (including seven that are threatened). Best plan: Basecamp at the forested Cinnamon Bay Campground just off the beach and see the best of both worlds on day trips. On dry land, hike the 2.2-mile (one-way) Reef Bay Trail, a mostly downhill path through lush kapok, bay rum, and spike-studded "monkey no climb" trees and past the remains of several 1700s Danish sugarcane plantations. (Don't miss the .3-mile spur at mile 1.5 to a panel of petroglyphs left by the Taino culture between 900 and 1400 AD.) Pop out of the forest at Reef Bay for a dip in the calm water, then backtrack. For a peek under the waves, link the Leinster Bay, Johnny Horn, and Brown Bay Trails for a 3-mile (one-way) hike past several primo snorkeling spots. At Leinster Bay and Watermelon Cay, look for cushion sea stars, turtles, and branching gorgonians (a coral relative); staghorn corals, conch, and fish are the stars at Brown Bay. With water temps a near-constant 80°F and underwater views stretching 60 feet and beyond, you might never want to dry off. **Average January high/low** 82°F/70°F **Season** Year-round **Camping** \$37/primitive campsite, \$67-\$93/platform tent; cinnamonbay.com **Snorkel gear rental** divelowkey.com **Info** nps.gov/viis

Nab this view of Leinster Bay at the junction between the Johnny Horn and Brown Bay Trails.



Canyonlands view of the Milky Way

## THE NEXT 100 YEARS

An estimated two-thirds of the U.S. population lives in areas where it's too bright at night to see the Milky Way with the naked eye. And as urban centers grow over the next century, you can expect even more Americans to grow up in places where they can't see this iconic sight. Fortunately, the National Park Service has increasingly embraced the dark sky experience. In recent years, parks such as Acadia and Rocky Mountain have led the way in introducing more nighttime astronomy programs, ranger-led moonlight hikes, and stargazing festivals. In 2015, Canyonlands, Capitol Reef, and Black Canyon of the Gunnison were recognized as International Dark Sky Parks for their achievements in reducing artificial light pollution. In all, 30 national parks currently employ darkness monitoring technology, a number that the NPS expects to increase to 55 by the end of the decade. Up next: system-wide lightbulb retrofitting to reduce ambient glow, as well as outreach partnerships with nonprofits like No Barriers Youth to stress the importance of pristine night skies to future generations—efforts that should only give visitors even more reasons to visit a park after dark.

—Trent Kross

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) JOHN SKUCE, JOHNILLOYDPHOTO.COM