

National Parks

The U.S. National Parks have been called America's Best Idea. There's also a case to be made that they're the Best Place to Connect with Your Kids. Young and old and everywhere in between – each of us as citizens are part owner of America's national parks sites.

The National Park System encompasses 423 National Park Sites in the United States, 63 of them are National Parks. They span over 84 million acres, with parks in each state extending into the territories, including parks in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and Guam.

They offer some of the most spectacular scenery in the country. They are home to some of the most interesting wildlife and preserved natural habitats in the world, making them an ideal location for family vacations.

Here are our top tips for National Park Family Vacations with your kids.

PICK A GREAT PARK FOR YOUR FAMILY

The first step in planning a family trip to a national park is determining which park is best for your family. You'll want to consider several factors, including the park's location, the activities offered, and the best time of year to visit.

While some of the most popular parks, like Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon, are great for families, their popularity makes them very crowded at the peak of their season. Here are a few other incredibly family-friendly parks.

Arches National Park, Utah – Explore this red-rock wonderland's 2,000 natural stone arches. Stargaze and see the Milky Way for the first time as the park is an International "Dark Sky" Park. For some great family adventures, check out an Explorer Backpack from the visitor center.

Black Canyon at Gunnison National Park, Colorado – Hike among some of North America's steepest cliffs, oldest rock, and craggiest spires. Fishing is another popular activity, as the Gunnison River has outstanding trout fishing.

Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Ohio – Ride the scenic railroad. Hike to the Brandywine Falls, a 65-foot waterfall (the park has over 60 waterfalls). Visit Ice Box Cave. Spring and Fall are perfect for enjoying the flowers and leaves.

Everglades National Park, Florida – Explore the wetland's swamps, marshes, river, and bay via kayak, canoe, or airboat tour. Search for alligators, manatees, and endangered turtles.

Great Sand Dunes National Park, Colorado – The tallest dunes in North America. You can sandboard and sand sled. See the Sandhill Crane migration. It's also an excellent park for exploring the night sky.



Olympic National Park, Washington – Rainforests, natural hot springs, and some of the world’s oldest trees. Paddle on Lake Crescent’s glacial clear waters. Watch for elk, whales, dolphins, and seals. See the Olympic Mountains from the top of Hurricane Ridge.

Sequoia National Park, California – See the largest tree on earth, General Sherman, standing 271 feet tall. Climb Moro Rock for views above the sequoia trees. Explore Crystal Cave.

Acadia National Park, Maine – Adventure on the incredible biking and hiking trails. Take a horse-drawn carriage ride. Visit the Nature Center. Explore the lighthouse grounds. Take the ranger-led historical cruise.

PLANNING YOUR VISIT

Once you’ve picked a park, here are some things to remember when planning your trip.

Make reservations in advance, especially during the peak season, to help you avoid long lines and ensure you have a place to stay.

Consider visiting during the off-season, when the parks are less crowded and the weather is milder.

Decide where you want to stay, such as a hotel, cabin, or campsite. The National Park Service’s sister site [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) is the reservation site for the lodges, campgrounds, and activities that require tickets. The reservation systems open six months in advance and book up fast.



Get the kids involved in the planning. Let them research and think about the activities they want to do in the park. That will get them excited about what they are going to see.

Each year there are Free Entrance Days to the parks, although most parks are free. One of the Free Days is the first day of National Park Week each April. This is also a great week to visit the parks as they host special programming to celebrate.

Also, if you plan to visit several parks in a year, consider a season-long America the Beautiful pass that gives a family of four entrance to the parks for a year.

If you want to leave the planning to someone else, [AAA Travel](https://www.aaatravel.com) Partners have great park vacations to consider.

ESPECIALLY FOR THE KIDS

Many of the park programs and resources are perfect for kids and families. Consider joining a ranger-led program or taking a guided tour to learn more about the park and its unique features.

Junior Ranger Program - Almost every Park has a Junior Ranger Program. Kids can earn an official Junior Ranger badge or patch by completing activities or joining a ranger-led activity. At the Visitors Center, they get a badge, passport, and materials to explore the Park. It’s an excellent way for the kids to learn and for the whole family to enjoy the park.

Every Kid Outdoors - If you have a fourth grader, the National Park Service's Every Kid Outdoors program provides fourth graders and their families a free pass for the year to explore more than 400 national parks and millions of acres of federal lands and waters.

PREPARING FOR YOUR TIME IN THE PARKS

You'll want to consider what gear and supplies you need before you visit. Your basics should include a backpack, maps and park information, water bottles, snacks, sun protection, comfortable shoes, and comfortable clothes. If you're doing specific activities, consider what you'll need for those. And always be prepared for the weather to change, with rain gear and layers, as many parks have different elevations.

Be sure to teach your children about park safety and wildlife, and ensure they understand the importance of staying on designated trails and respecting park rules and nature. As KeeKee says, leave only pawprints.

When you arrive at a park, a great first stop is the Visitors Center. The Rangers can tell you what trails are open, where the best animal viewing has been most recently, and where the crowds are so you can visit more off-the-beaten-path areas. Visitors Centers also typically offer some food and beverage options. Some have cafes. And there's a store for souvenirs.

Take breaks and allow plenty of time for rest, relaxation, and enjoying the beauty of the National Parks. They can be a great place to unplug and connect with nature and your family.

Visiting a U.S. National Park is an excellent way for your whole family to make memories that will last a lifetime - and provide your children with an education in nature that they can carry with them wherever they go.

National Park Adventure Awaits!

