100 YEARS OF NATIONAL PARKS

Plus

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OF PRIVATE JETS
As the National Park Service hits the century mark, rediscover the beauty of the West

A major shift thundered through the country in the 19th century, when westward expansion led to the discovery of America’s breathtaking landscapes. Seeing the potential for harm done by those living out newerman Horace Greeley’s famous advice — “Go West” — President Ulysses S. Grant signed into law a plan to preserve Yellowstone as a national park in 1872. Other designations followed. And followed.

By the time President Woodrow Wilson signed off on the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, there were 35 national parks and monuments.

Today, 59 national parks cover 52 million acres spanning 27 states, drawing visitors to America’s bounty of canyons, forests and monuments.

The West is loaded with the jewels they found so precious. Nebraska claims the Great Basin and a piece of Death Valley _plus more than a dozen national monuments and historic sites that highlight the state’s compelling ruins, geology, native history, canyons and sahara cactus. Utah has five national parks and many monuments, trails and landmarks. Combined, the West’s protected parks and monuments take up far more land than those on America’s East Coast.

As we celebrate their first century, it’s worth going back to the first year, and the words of then NPS Director Stephen T. Mather: “Who will gainsay that the parks contain the highest potentialities of national pride, national contentment and national health?”

A visit inspires love of country; begets contentment; engenders pride of possession; contains the antidote for national restlessness. ... He is a better citizen with a keener appreciation of his natural beauty; his county, his state and his national parkland, than those on America’s East Coast.

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DEATH VALLEY
States: Nevada and California
Distance from Las Vegas: 2 hours
Details: nps.gov/deva

Crushed beneath the sea with its tectonic plates colliding and pulling apart, Death Valley’s violent geological past carved an intensively sculptured landscape—a story written in the strata of the rocky terrain. The 3.4 million acres of Death Valley National Park offer a front-row seat to rock formations dating back more than 2 billion years. This is the land of superlatives. Famous one of the hottest places on Earth and the hottest in North America, temperatures in excess of 120 degrees draw tourists to explore its ghost towns, mining history and natural attractions, driving in nearby Shoshone or Tecopa or staying at the Furnace Creek Inn. At Badwater Basin, ichnologically salt flats cover the lowest point in North America—a 282 feet below sea level. The saline lake, craggy aridness of Zabriskie Point badlands, sled-worthy dunes and volcanic craters become a poem of evolving climates, a trip through time defined by lava flow and ash fall. Spring rains and existing snows deliver watercourses basin that incite regional pilgrimages to witness the life in Death Valley.

Its Mars-like landscape is home to the Devil’s Golf Course and the Devil’s Cactus. It baffles with the sliding rocks of Racetrack Playa that leave wakes of chunky berms as they mysterically move across dried mud. President Herbert Hoover proclaimed the area, home to the Shoshone people for centuries, as Death Valley National Monument on Feb. 11, 1933. In 1994, it was expanded and renamed Death Valley National Park, a vast desert with scenic byways taking visitors into the beauty created by erosion and the Earth’s tumultuous crust. — Kristen Peterson

REDWOOD
State: California
Distance from Las Vegas: 14 hours
Details: nps.gov/redw

John Steinbeck and his poodle, Charley, took a road trip in search of America in the ‘60s. They went about 10,000 miles, following the nation’s outline. On the West Coast, they found themselves in a forest where ancient trees stretch 30 stories high, growing tight as blades of grass in a lawn you could see from space.

It was Redwood, an old-growth sanctuary of endangered giants. Some have stood for 2,000 years. Laying a hand on the bark of such a tree, one feels with Darwin that, “the cathedral hush.” Because you can’t help thinking about everything these creatures have lived through, all the milestones of history and footsteps over their powerful roots. The power doesn’t come from growing deep into the ground, it’s about saplings shooting up side by side and weaving together to the sky.

Unless we’re talking about Corkscrew Tree, which has multiple trunks twisting into a single spectacle off the Newton B. Drury Scenic Parkway. The famously twisted Douglas fir stands 110 feet in the park for “Niles, bogus or fully encountered.” The list includes the magnificent Star Wars Tree, used in “Return of the Jedi” during the famous speeder bike scene, and Tall Tree, the tallest measured at nearly 368 feet—until the top broke off in the 1980s.

Marveling at the collective organism on a bike or on horseback, from the seat or the comfort of your own boots, it hits hard how close we came to logging into oblivion the cathedral that once covered this part of California. — Erin Ryan

PHOTO BY ASSOCIATED PRESS

THE TALLEST OF ALL LIVING THINGS
Trees inside Redwood National Park can reach 30 stories high.

STATE OF THE ART
Valleym of Ghost Towns
Among Death Valley’s many ghost towns is Rhyolite City, “the toughest, rawest, most hard-boiled little hollab but ever passed for a civilized town.” Founded by cyanide mining for rich silver, the town that once housed 2,000 is now little more than a ramshackle chimney.

DEATH VALLEY BY FOOT
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NOTEWORTHY SPOTS
Artist’s Palette is a collection of volcanic hills colored red, pink, yellow, green and purple by mineral pigments, and Devil’s Golf Course is so named because the jagged shards of eroded rock salt are so treacherous they say only the devil could play golf on the surface. And the dunes stretch to forever.

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GREAT BASIN
State: Nevada
Distance from Las Vegas: 4.5 hours
Details: nps.gov/grba

Nevada’s other national park puts ecosystems in a blender, offering the charged emptiness of dry lakebeds and the grandness of rock clusters, the intrigue of caves and the music of crickets. Nevada has gotten.

Biodiversity is so rich in Great Basin and its adjoining valleys that the NPS tallies more than 800 plant species and 238 bird species, with mammals, reptiles and fish that range from mountain lions to hissing gopher snakes to cutthroat trout. The variety grows from elevations that climb from 5,000 feet in the desert to 13,000 feet in the high peaks, but spectacles are not limited to the peaks.

In the Lehman Caves, minerals come to life in the spires of stalactites and stalagmites, plus helictites, like twig-like helictites, flowstone like frozen waterfalls, corral-mimicking popcorn and over 300 rare shield formations. Growing from the fractured limestone like a giant petrified jellyfish, the Parachute might be the most famous cave shield.

President Warren Harding made the Lehman Caves a national monument in 1922, but the greater park did not reach national status until 1986. It boasts more than 50 miles of hiking trails, its back-country permits wilderness solitude, and offers unique opportunities to explore Lehman Caves, the Blue Cut earthquake fault and the Lehman Area.

And this spring, Great Basin was designated an International Dark Sky Park. With high elevation and low humidity and light pollution, it allows for naked-eye viewing of countless stars, meteors, five planets, the Andromeda Galaxy and the Milky Way, prompting the slogan: “Half the park is after dark.” — Erin Ryan

GOLD MINING
Three miles west of the park, mining operations have been operating along what the local tribes in the Ogden Ditch, named for a 19th-century speculator of gold who walked the desert with a bent guitar-shaped shovel, until the federal government bought the land from the tribes in 1996.

For those who seek gold, there’s an 18-mile, road to the northeast of the park along the Clark County Side Road. Scarcely water hampers extraction efforts to this day.

JOSHUA TREE
State: California
Distance from Las Vegas: 3.5 hours
Details: nps.gov/jotr

Like God dropped a handful of molten pebbles on Earth. That’s how one Las Vegas climber sees the random, almost globular rock deposits of Joshua Tree National Park, where he says some sites in the Hidden Valley and Jumbo Rocks campgrounds back right up to granite walls. While one person climbs a perfect crack, another can boulder from a camp chair right next to the tent. Other places have been called climbing’s “mecca,” but “JTree has over 8,000 routes — about four times that of our own Red Rock Canyon.

Within the sprawling desert vistas are groves of the plant for which the park is named. The Joshua Tree looks like a sea anemone that crawled onto dry land, with cactus-like bursts of evergreen leaves on spindly branches. They contribute to the Dr. Seuss vibe and can grow so thick it’s like hiking through a full auditorium. They’re incredibly photogenic against a pink and purple dusk.

For those into geology, there’s an 18-mile, self-guided tour of 16 stops along a dirt road, from natural rock sculptures to debris flows and the Blue Cut earthquake fault. But there are better photo spots, like Skull Rock on the main east-west road, eroded by rain to the point of having hollowed-out eye sockets (and a suspiciously alien forehead). Or hike the half-mile from White Tank Campground to Arch Rock.

Right next to the rock arch on the desert-lover’s bucket list is the oasis. And Joshua Tree has five, the fan palms towering up to 75 feet, waving back at God. — Erin Ryan

Oct. 28-30 is the Night Sky Festival, part of the celebration of the NPS’ 100th birthday. Astronomers, scientists, artists and enthusiasts will gather in the dark to bask in the celestial fireworks.