

SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE SEPTEMBER 6, 2020 | BOSTONGLOBE.COM/TRAVEL



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Eye of the Whale Arch in Utah's Arches National Park.

The perks of national parks: wide-open spaces, geological wonders, and breathtaking scenery

It's essential to be prepared before you embark on an adventure. Here are some tips.

By Kari Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

he benefits of embracing the great outdoors prove invaluable these days: breathing fresh air, enjoying nature's beauty, getting exercise for the sake of mind and body, and relieving stress to help keep life in perspective. Whether you're taking off for a fall getaway or taking school on the road this year, consider exploring some of our country's national parks, which offer everything from wide-open spaces, geological wonders, and breathtaking scenery to remnants of ancient civilizations.

More than 325 million people visited national park sites last year (there are 419 total) and visitor numbers remain high at some of the most popular parks this year. Not all services are available, however, meaning it's essential to be prepared before



you embark on an adventure.

"You can't just wing it," says Kerry Gallivan, founder of Maine-based Chimani, a company that makes national park travel guides, available on mobile devices and computers. "You need to plan more than you ever have before."

Campgrounds and visitor centers are open in some parks but not in others, shuttle bus services may be limited or canceled, and

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Colorado's Mesa Verde National Park.



Enjoy nature's beauty in national parks

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some sections of parks have been closed to protect local Native American communities, including the South Unit of Badlands National Park within the Pine Ridge reservation (the North Unit remains open to visitors — and is well worth the journey). Additionally, Rocky Mountain and Yosemite now have timed entry, requiring you to book a visit time in advance, and some states still have mandatory 14-day quarantine periods for visitors.

Each destination has had its own reopening strategy and offerings vary widely, so it's important to check individual park websites while planning your trip.

"We spent a lot of hours putting a lot of information on our websites, so if you do your homework you'll be rewarded," says John Harlan Warren, the Northeast's NPS spokesperson.

Warren added this tip for travelers: "You don't have to know the websites for all the parks. If you put the first two letters of the first two names of the park — or the first four letters if the park only has one name — it will give you the alpha code we use for the website. So, for instance, Acadia would be www.nps.gov/acad and the Springfield Armory would be www.nps.gov/spar."

Or consult Chimani's blog post, a handy and regularly updated resource that outlines what's open or not at the country's 62 national parks and how that may impact your visitor experience. Each individual Chimani park guide also has a COVID-19 Impacts section with info not only on the park, but on privately run hotels, campgrounds, and other facilities within the park (something the NPS website doesn't cover since many of these facilities are run by private companies).

Try to visit outside of busy times, if possible, since highlights at popular parks (think: Old Faithful at Yellowstone) draw such big crowds that it is challenging to social distance and explore.

"Parks are melting pots," says Gallivan. "People are coming from all over the country, so you need to be extra diligent with social distancing."

The NPS recommends visitors re-



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A virtual ranger station at Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado. Top: Mountain biking in Arches National Park.

main 6 feet apart and wear face coverings. My kids and I have explored six NPS sites this summer, from Canyonlands National Park to Mount Rushmore, and noticed that many people disregard these standard health protocols. We realized we needed to allow extra time when visiting sites, to wait for crowds to thin or wait our turn to access narrow viewing platforms.

Keep in mind that parking lots at trailheads may be full due to the increase in park visitors or have other restrictions in place. Zion, for instance, now requires visitors to make reservations for the shuttle bus that takes people into the park, since no private cars are allowed on Zion Canyon Scenic Drive (book these timed reservations — good for a one-hour block — at Rec-

reation.gov for \$1 per person).

It pays to be strategic when visiting a park. Sure, almost everyone who visits Arches National Park wants to see Double Arch and Delicate Arch (and for good reason) but try to find alternative times to venture out to these gems. Hit the road or trail early in the morning when temperatures and crowds are down or aim for midweek. Also, research other options and talk to locals for alternatives.

My son and I visited Eye of the Whale Arch one busy Saturday afternoon in Arches National Park and had the entire road and destination to ourselves. With a tip from a local friend, we took a left at Balanced Rock and followed a dirt road .7 miles to a parking area, leaving the busy roads be-

hind. We grabbed our mountain bikes (we brought our own, but you can rent them in town) and pedaled 2 miles down a four-wheel-drive road with big rock slabs and deep sand. We didn't see anyone the entire way. Similarly (and on another tip from a local), we drove 1.5 hours west of Moab to the southeast entrance to Canyonlands National Park and explored the tucked-away and lesser-visited Needles area. We saw only six cars the entire time we were there.

Since visitor centers were closed at most of the parks we visited, we stopped at camping and outdoor shops in nearby towns to get local information from staff. Some parks, such as Acadia, have staff stationed outside visitor centers to answer questions and provide guidance. Other parks have helpful information displays outside closed visitor centers (use your phone to take photos of information displays) and, if available, resources for audio tours. Make sure you download relevant apps in case you lose cell or Wi-Fi service within the park.

Chimani offers audio tours for the country's top eight most-visited national parks, including Acadia, Yellowstone, Grand Teton, and the Grand Canyon. These tours are included with the subscription-based digital guides, which you can download on Apple or Android devices and use offline.

If you're a fan of the NPS's Passport Program, consider using Chimani's apps to track your park visits and get virtual park badges. Chimani has partnered with the National Park Travelers Club, a nonprofit group that gives the location of 1,500 sites at parks nationwide where you can get virtual cancellation stamps.

"It has helped get people away from the main visitor places," says Gallivan. "People have said, 'I wouldn't have gone to that spot,' so it helps spread people out."

And that's the key these days: Get out and discover new places and embrace the outdoors while keeping a safe distance from fellow adventurers.

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Exploring Vermont with the 251 Club

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lotte is one of the largest African American family farms in Vermont. After COVID, we'd like to do more meetups.

Q. Has there been more interest in the 251 Club this summer, with more people staying closer to home during the pandemic?

A. We have seen a spike in membership, but some of that is from starting online signup. Until this year, you had to mail in a check. The governor has been heavily promoting staycations. Using 251 is a great way to explore while also being able to adhere to public health guidelines. One new member said they were signing up 'to shake away the

'Many members come up with their own twists. Some walk or cycle, or visit with a classic car.'

STEPHANIE YOUNG,
251 Club executive director

virus blues.' A Vermont couple who had to cancel their honeymoon in Maine decided to honeymoon with 251. We also got more attention after the 251 documentary "One Town at a Time" came out. It's now airing on Vermont Public Television and you can see it online. The producer, Mike Leonard, is one of our board members. And we've partnered with Vermont state tourism. We survey members about things like fall foliage spots and the best creemeees, which they turn into stories. So we're getting a lot more visibility.

Q. Looking through the stories on your website, a lot of 251 members come up with themes, like visiting cemeteries or general stores. What are some others?

A. Many members come up with their own twists. Some walk or cycle, or visit with a classic car. One person ran the entire route. Some visit post offices, libraries, or schools. One man hit a golf ball in every town. In the end, no matter how they finish, it's really about the journey and the memories.

For more information, visit www.vt251.com. Fees are \$22 for one year, or \$58 for five, for the household, with a discount for renewals.

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