

Parklife

As the US National Park Service celebrates its centenary, Anna Hart explores California's big six national parks

US cities will always be a major draw for British travellers, but it's the natural scenery that keeps us crossing the Atlantic for more. California, more than any other state, presents a bewildering array of landscapes; it's possible to explore parched desert terrain, snowy mountains, dense ancient forest and rugged coastal scenery all on a two-week fly-drive. In such a vast and varied state, it can be hard to know where to start, but happily the National Park Service, which celebrates its centenary this year, offers international visitors that most longed-for of experiences: holidaying the way the locals do. Home to more national

parks than any other state (nine in total) a road trip around its national parks is a direct route to the heart of California.

▶ YOSEMITE

Best for: Dramatic glacier-sculpted geology and top-notch outdoors action.

Stretching across the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada, 200 miles east of San Francisco, Yosemite is California's busiest national park, with more than 3.7 million visitors each year. They're not wrong: with spectacular granite cliffs, waterfalls, clear streams, giant sequoia groves and enviable biological diversity, this belongs on every nature-loving traveller's

bucket list. There's no danger of getting bored, with abundant rafting, fishing, hiking, biking and rock-climbing opportunities. Avoid the super-busy summer months, and visit in spring, when wildflowers adorn meadows, or the snowy paradise that is winter, when beautiful Mirror Lake freezes, cross-country ski routes open and the hot tubs at rustic retreats seem like a very good idea indeed. For a huge post-hike lunch, head to 1850 for a burger.

1850restaurant.com
Stay: Tenaya Lodge offers luxurious family-friendly cabins and rooms from £110. Rustic cabins at Yosemite Bug start at £45.
tenayalodge.com
yosemitebug.com

▶ JOSHUA TREE

Best for: Other-worldly desert landscapes and a hipster vibe.

In recent years, visitor numbers at Joshua Tree have soared, fuelled by its proximity to Los Angeles (a mere two-hour drive), well-palmed rock-climbing routes, rocky desert landscape and the undeniable Instagram-appeal of both the park and the quirky peripheral settlements, where a Wild-West-meets-1970s-hippy vibe pervades. More than any other Californian park, Joshua Tree is surrounded by characterful accommodation, such as vintage airstream trailer camps and retro motels, and excellent dining options, from the vegan fare at The Sisters Cafe to the

→ legendary barbecue ribs at Pappy & Harriet's Pioneertown Palace, where Robert Plant and Queens of the Stone Age have played impromptu gigs. Lack of light pollution makes stargazing a treat. thenaturalsisterscafe.com pappyandharriets.com

world (by volume, weighing more than 2,000 tonnes), the venerable and genuinely awe-inspiring General Sherman. Sherman sees a steady stream of car drive-thru visitors, but to really see Sequoia and Kings, get your hiking boots on and go off-road. This beautiful and underrated national park has dramatic and varied back country to explore, ranging from waterfalls and rivers to trails and forests. Climb 4,421m Mount Whitney, the highest point of the John Muir Trail, or for a shorter adrenaline blast venture up Moro Rock, a granite dome with unbeatable views of the Sierras. Kings Canyon encompasses forks of the Kings and San Joaquin rivers, two of the most scenic and pristine waterways in California. Crystal Cave's trippy rock formations are also worth a pilgrimage. **Stay:** Lodgepole Campsite is a popular choice. For more of a glamping vibe, the stone-and-



ABOVE: Joshua Tree

cedar Wuksachi Lodge has rustic but charming lodgings from £120.

▶ **REDWOOD**

Best for: Awe-inspiring ancient forest and very, very big trees.

A quick guide to big trees:

the inland giant redwoods of California (found in Sequoia National Park) are the fattest and therefore bulkiest trees in the world, almost cartoon-like in their proportions. But the world's tallest trees are the coast



Inland giant redwoods are the bulkiest trees in the world, with proportions that are almost cartoon-like

redwoods, so this is where to come to put a serious crick in your neck. Start with the ultra-accessible Ladybird Johnson Grove trail, but consider getting a (free) permit to make the four-mile hike into the Tall Trees Grove Trail, one of the prettiest half-day hikes in the state. The precise location of the tallest tree in the world, Hyperion, is a closely protected secret, but its towering cousins won't let you down.

Stay: Prairie Creek campsite puts you right in the midst of the

redwoods. Camping is the most magical way to experience the redwoods (and the only option in the park itself), but the charming Requa Inn has 12 pretty rooms from £80, organic breakfasts and views over the Klamath River. parks.ca.gov requainn.com

▶ **CHANNEL ISLANDS**

Best for: Serious wildlife buffs, rugged coastline and world-class scuba diving.

Five islands off the southern California coast make up one of the US's most remote - and utterly unique - national parks. Channel Islands was created by tectonic forces five million years ago, and thus supports plants and animals found nowhere else on Earth, like a mini Galapagos. The park is home to more than 2,000 plant and animal species - 145 of which are found nowhere else in the world. Today →



ABOVE: Sequoia & Kings Canyon

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LEFT:
Redwood
national
park



RIGHT:
Lassen
Volcanic

BELOW:
Channel
Islands

→ Channel Islands manages an exemplary long-term ecological research programme with a marine sanctuary extending for six nautical miles around each of the five designated islands. The islands shelter the only breeding colony of northern fur seals south of Alaska. Visitors can access the islands only by boat (which depart regularly from Ventura and Oxnard) or small plane, then hiking or kayaking is the only way to get around. Anacapa, with its atmospheric 1930s lighthouse, is one of the most accessible (just 12 miles out to sea), while

Santa Rosa is justly celebrated for the Lobo Canyon hike, with native flora, eroded sandstone formations and embedded pygmy mammoth fossils. (Yes, a 5ft mammoth once roamed here.) **Stay:** There are no lodgings within the park, and most visitors stay an hour north in pretty Santa Barbara. The Wayfarer Inn is a retro-chic motel with rooms from £49. pacificahotels.com

▶ LASSEN VOLCANIC

Best for: Hot springs, sulphurous mudbaths and geothermal plains. Legendary Yellowstone

national park in Wyoming might be the big-hitter when it comes to volcanic landscapes and geothermal action such as geysers and mud springs, but California has its own mini version in the shape of Lassen, an hour east of the town of Redding. The park's famous volcano, Lassen Peak, last blew its top in May 1914, and although things have settled down, the spluttering mud pots and steaming sulphur vents regularly remind you that the landscape is alive. The brilliantly named Bumpass Hell, accessed via boardwalks, is a vast

sulphurous, spluttering plain. But Lassen is no one-trick-pony: volcanic soil has produced colourful wildflower meadows and dense forest, and sparkling Lake Manzanita is as enticing as Bumpass Hell is thrilling.

Stay: Dating back to 1900, Drakesbad Guest Ranch offers rustic and charming lodges from £120 a person on a full-board basis, with access to a private hot pool. For campers, Manzanita Lake campsite is the prettiest in the park. drakesbad.com nps.gov 

