

TRAVEL INTEL

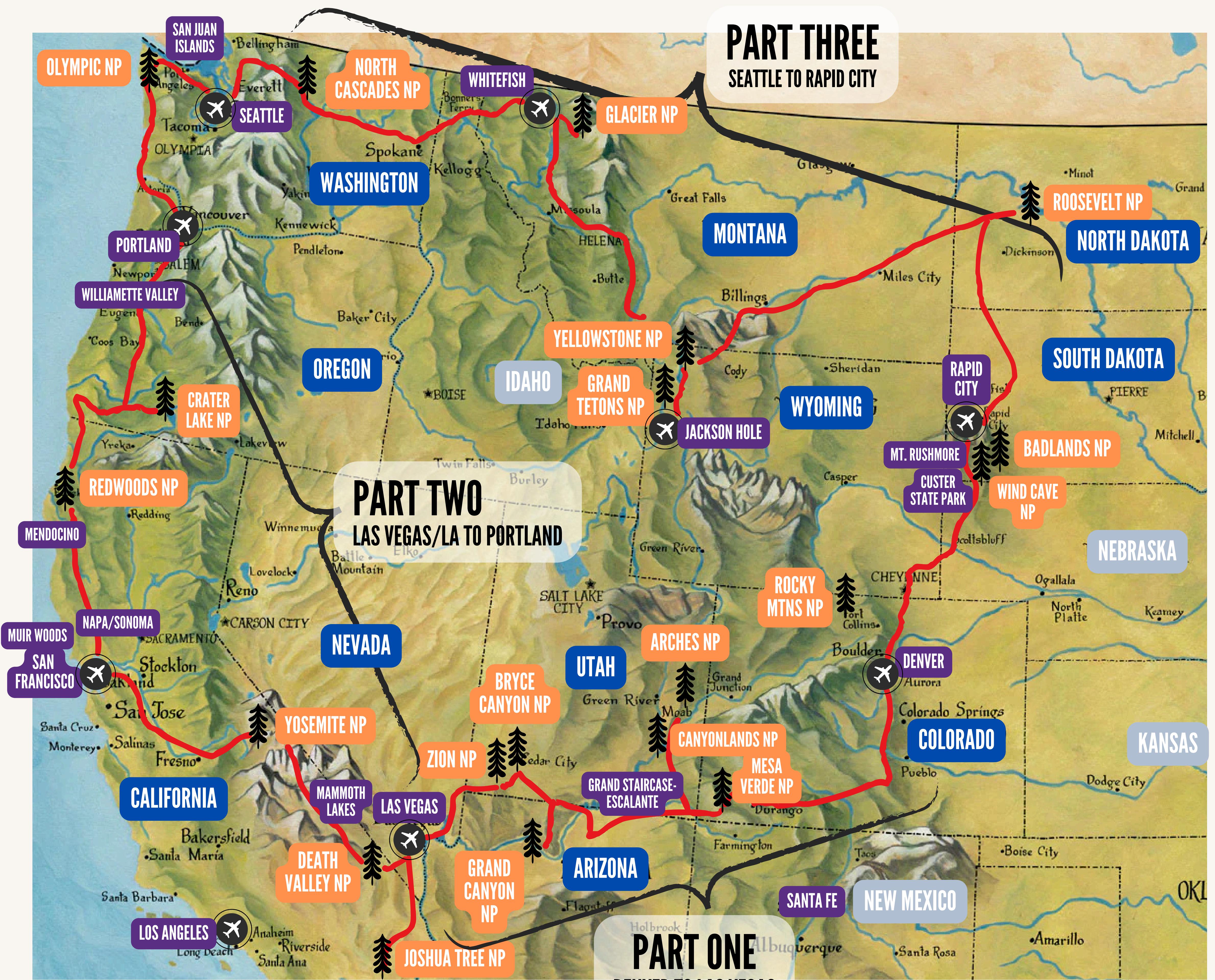
A GRAND (ROAD) TOUR:
NATIONAL PARKS
OF THE AMERICAN WEST

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NATIONAL PARKS OF THE AMERICAN WEST

The National Parks have been called “America’s Best Idea,” and for good reason -- they conserve and showcase the broad natural diversity of North America. These remain some of the United States’ best treasures, and while they attract visitors from near and far, many of these parks remain beyond the reach of many major urban areas. The most practical way to see a number of these parks is to take a ‘grand’ road trip. In this guide, Syllogi shares three different routes for seeing some of the great National Parks of the American West, from the Rockies through the Southwest, up the Pacific Coast, and then from the Northwest to the Prairies. Each leg would require at least two weeks’ time to see everything properly. Likewise, a grand tour such as this would encompass 6 to 8 weeks, making this an intense, but fabulous summer vacation, sabbatical, or bucket list-epic trip. This is not inclusive of all the national parks, but we’ve highlighted the very best ones to hit along the way. And our guide isn’t just the parks themselves, as we included a number of treats along the way - including great lodges and inns, restaurants, and sights that will likely tickle your fancy and showcase what the US is all about. We’ve done most of this trip personally, and can honestly say these were some of the best adventures of our lives.



Part One - Parks of the Southwest: (1,450 miles, +11 days)

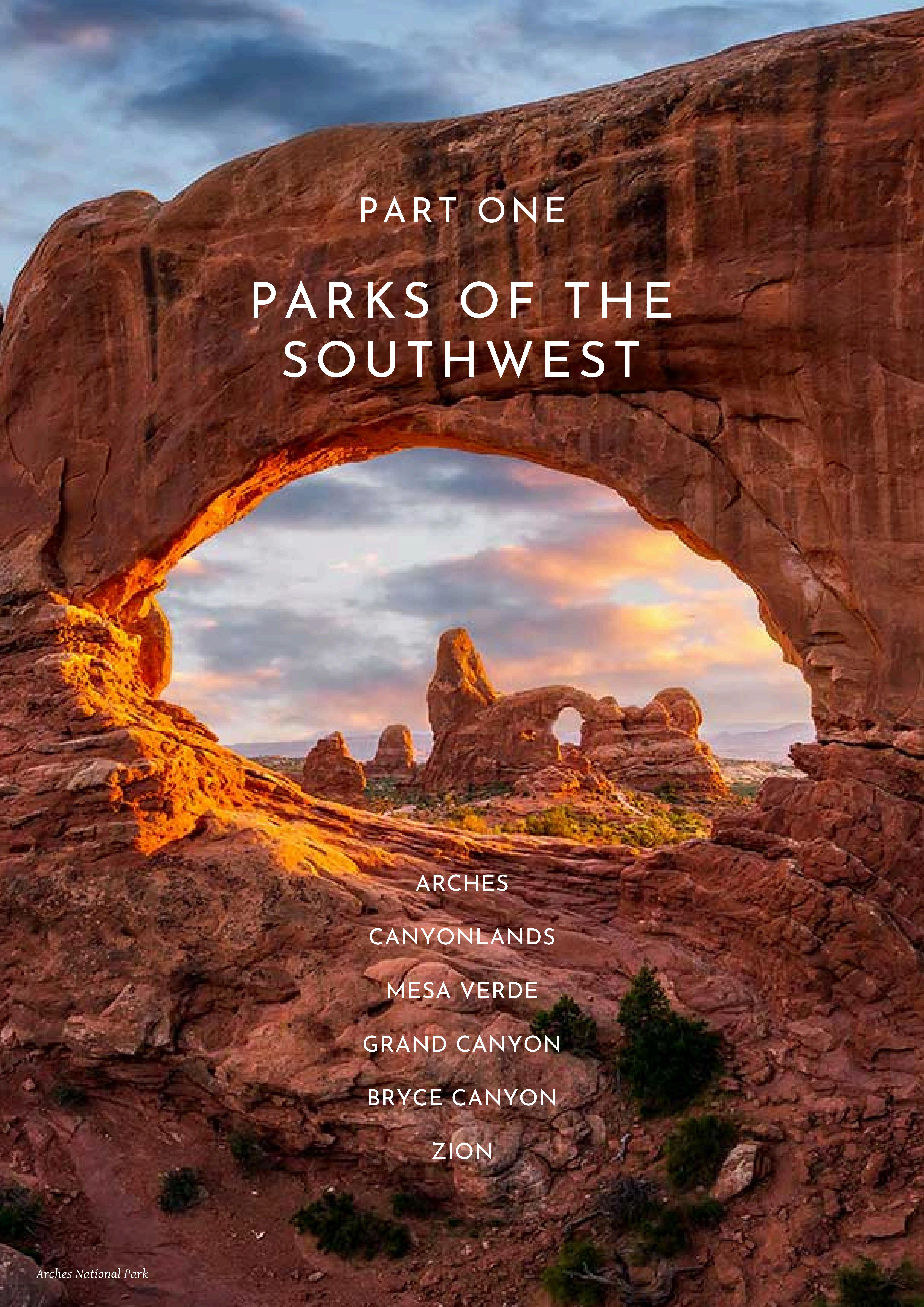
Starting in Denver, head south to Mesa Verde NP (CO), then to Moab for Arches and Canyonlands NP (UT). You’ll venture into Arizona for the North or South Rim of the Grand Canyon NP, before seeing Utah’s Bryce Canyon and Zion NPs, finally ending in Las Vegas.

Part Two - Parks of the Pacific Coast: (1,650 miles, +14 days)

Starting in Las Vegas or LA, visit Joshua Tree and Death Valley NPs before heading up past Mammoth Lakes to Yosemite NP. Stopover in San Francisco or Sonoma enroute to Redwoods NP. (All in California). Choose between the spectacular Oregon coastal road, or head inland to Crater Lake NP (OR) before ending in the Willamette wine Valley and Portland.

Part Three - Parks of the Northwest, Rockies, and Prairies: (2,500-2,800 miles, +18 days)

Starting in Seattle, visit Olympic NP and North Cascades NP (WA) before heading to the base of the Rockies at Glacier NP (MT). Head southward across Montana to Wyoming and visit Yellowstone and Grand Tetons NP. Head due west to the Dakotas, where Roosevelt NP (ND) and both Badlands and Wind Cave NPs (SD) anchor the great plains, before departing from Rapid City or Denver.



PART ONE
PARKS OF THE
SOUTHWEST

ARCHE
CANYONLANDS
MESA VERDE
GRAND CANYON
BRYCE CANYON
ZION

ITINERARY - PART ONE - SOUTHWEST PARKS

Day 1	Starting in Denver, drive to Moab, Utah (base for Arches/Canyonlands)
540 mi/5.5 hr	
Day 2	Arches NP, Utah
Day 3	Canyonlands NP, Utah (you may need more days here)
Day 4	Drive to Mesa Verde NP
145 mi/2.5 hr	
Day 5	Mesa Verde NP, Colorado
Day 6	Drive to Grand Canyon NP (Arizona) North Rim or South Rim
466 mi/6.5 hr or 380 mi/6 hr	via Valley of the Gods
Day 7	Grand Canyon NP, Arizona
Day 8	Drive to Bryce Canyon NP, Utah drive to Kanab or Springdale, Utah
80 mi/1.5 hr (from N. Rim) or 212 mi/3.5 hr (from S. Rim)	
	Optional diversion to Grand Staircase National Monument & Amangiri
Day 9	Zion NP, Utah
30 mi/30 min each way	
Day 10	Zion NP, Utah
Day 11	Drive to Las Vegas (or LA)
200 mi/3 hr	
	Total Drive 1,269 miles

Follow the entire route, or choose a section of it, and decide how long you'd like to stay in each destination. Each spot often warrants several days, or you may want to build in some rest in between the driving. In this version, we're sharing a fairly quick-moving adventure, with still enough days to get a sense of place. For this trip, it is best to use a one-way rental car, and fly into / from the starting and ending points of the drive.

SOUTHWEST COLORADO

Mesa Verde National Park

Experience the cliff dwellings and mesa top sites of pit houses, pueblos, masonry towers, and farming structures of the Ancestral Pueblo peoples who lived here for more than 700 years. A guided tour is recommended in order to fully immerse yourself in the story of the dwellings. Don't miss the [Petroglyph Point Trail](#) to see the large petroglyph panel representing the written language of the people who lived here. And, since you're on an iconic adventure enroute to/from Moab, don't forget to stop by the [Four Corners](#) where four states meet.

STAY:

Dunton Hot Springs

Read our recently published [review](#).

EAT:

Far View Lounge

Come here for sweeping views of the valley.

Durango Diner

If staying in nearby Durango, be sure to check out this classic spot and try their famous green chile sauce.



Mesa Verde



Arches National Park



Canyonlands

MOAB, UTAH**Arches National Park**

Arches is a place to leave you a feeling of complete awe. The jaw dropping, orange structures, formed over millenia have created a landscape unlike any other in the United States. Featuring over 2000 arches, the most famous of which is [Delicate Arch](#), this park is also home to rocks defying gravity with their balance. The trails are vast and some quite difficult, but worth it to see the magnificent formations up close. Perhaps the most all-encompassing adventure is the [Devil's Garden Trail](#).

Canyonlands National Park

Just 30 minutes down the road from Arches is a completely different and jaw dropping landscape at Canyonlands. Expansive, deep valleys are interrupted with tall peaks and buttes that were formed by the Colorado River. There are four main "districts" in the park, none of which are connected by road, so you'll need to choose accordingly. Of the four ([Island in the Sky](#), [The Needles](#), [The Maze](#), and [The Rivers](#)) - Island in the Sky and Needles are striking & the most easily accessible (the Maze takes 5 hours to access from Moab, FYI).

EAT:

Moab Food Truck Park

A fun spot to catch the amazing sunsets with a variety of food options.

El Tapatio

After a long day of hiking, there is no better place to refuel with hearty portions and margaritas.

STAY

ULUM Moab

Awarded 2 Michelin Keys, this luxury outdoor resort is known for its excellent cuisine and high-end amenities.

Bryce Canyon National Park

Another of Southern Utah's diverse geographical offerings, Bryce is a fairly quick visit but worth it in every way. This large canyon is filled with spires that resemble melted candles. Hike deep into the canyon to be immersed in its magnificent orange coloring, and end at the top with views spanning the entire canyon. Those with a fear of heights may want to proceed with caution.

Zion National Park

Zion is a place that will truly leave you breathless, even before you get out of your car. The towering cliffs, hidden rivers, and the intricate facades and textures - all illuminated with a purple-pink sunset hue, create a stunning mosaic that overwhelmed the senses. It requires more logistical elements than the other parks due to its popularity. Arrive early - the parking lot fills up quickly, or take the shuttle bus from parking in town. (Private cars aren't allowed into the park). At the [visitor's center](#), take a bus tour through the center of the park and stop at one of the many trails along the way. The most famous hike is [Angel's Landing](#), and while only the bravest and most daring conquer it, you can still venture to the base of the lookout for incredible views.

EAT:

[Whiptail Grill, Springdale](#)

[Cafe Feellove, St. George](#)

[Rocking V Cafe, Kanab](#)

SEE:

["Little Hollywood", Kanab](#)

Known for being the [go-to spot](#) for filming old Western movies, this quaint town feels like the set of a movie.



Bryce Canyon



Zion



Grand Canyon

NORTHERN ARIZONA

Grand Canyon National Park

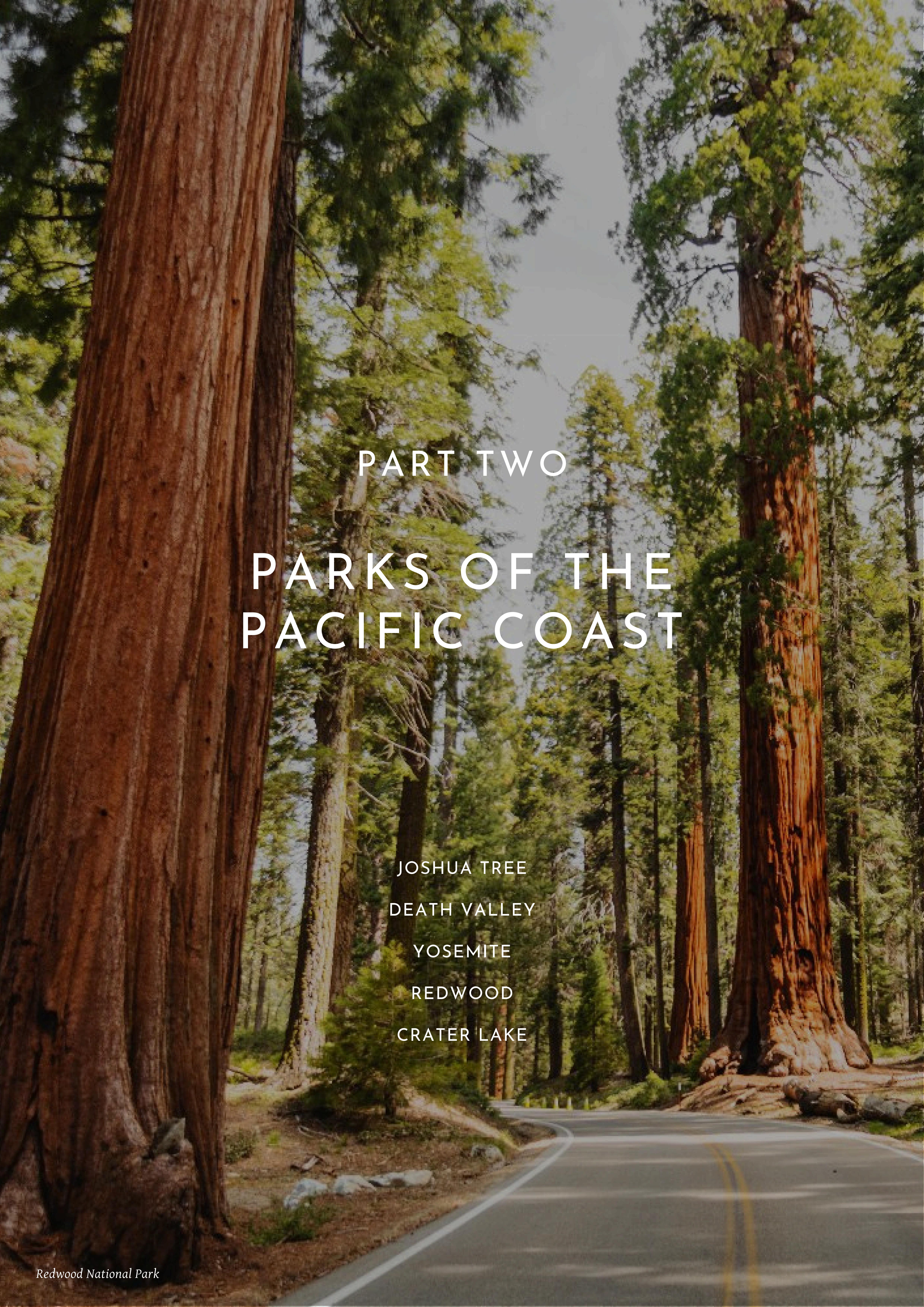
The Grand Canyon needs no introduction. It is one of the most iconic parks in the United States, a bucket list destination for anyone. You'll need to decide whether you want to visit the more popular (and accessible) [South Rim](#) or the less traversed [North Rim](#). (In our opinion, the South Rim is better for first-time visitors, and for the plethora of activities, e.g. mule rides down the canyon). Either spot, you're in for a drive...The Grand Canyon is far from anywhere.

STAY:

[El Tovar](#)

This iconic and popular national park lodge is rustic, but one of our favorites - for the location on the edge of the canyon alone.

Enroute to Utah again, consider diverting through the [Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument](#). You'll see some distinctive features ([Toadstool Hoodos](#)) and hiking trails from Highway 89 that runs through its southwest corner. Consider a splurge at the nearby [Amangiri](#), one of the United States' nicest resorts.



PART TWO
PARKS OF THE
PACIFIC COAST

JOSHUA TREE

DEATH VALLEY

YOSEMITE

REDWOOD

CRATER LAKE

ITINERARY - PART TWO - CALIFORNIA/PACIFIC COAST PARKS

Day 1 190 mi/3 hr	Starting in Las Vegas (or LA), drive to Joshua Tree NP (CA)
Day 2	Joshua Tree NP, California
Day 3 225 mi/3.5 hr	Drive to Death Valley NP (CA)
Day 4	Death Valley NP, California
Day 5 135 mi/2 hr	Drive to Mammoth Lakes, CA
Day 6 67 mi/1.5 hr (summer) 315 mi/6.5 hr (winter)	Drive to Yosemite NP (CA)
Days 7-8	Yosemite NP, California
Day 9 200 mi/4.5 hr	Drive to San Francisco or Sausalito/Bay Area
Day 10	Sausalito/Muir Woods National Monument, California
Day 11 320 mi/7 hr	Take Hwy 1 North from Bodega Bay to Mendocino to Eureka, CA
Day 12	Redwoods NP (CA)
Days 13-14 160 mi/3 hr (total itinerary will be 15-16 days)	Optional detour to Crater Lake NP (OR) in summer only
Days 13-14 350 mi/6 hr	Drive along the Oregon Coast to Coos Bay, then to Salem and the Willamette wine Valley, and Portland
Total Drive 1,650 miles	

Follow the entire route, or choose a section of it, and decide how long you'd like to stay in each destination. Each spot often warrants several days, or you may want to build in some rest in between the driving. In this version, we're sharing a fairly quick-moving adventure, with still enough days to get a sense of place. For this trip, it is best to use a one-way rental car, and fly into / from the starting and ending points of the drive.

CALIFORNIA

[Joshua Tree National Park](#)

There's something about Joshua Tree that feels quite alien, perhaps due to the quirky Yucca Palms that scatter its landscape. These trees that resemble a mix of a palm tree and a cactus contrast the stark, desert landscape of the park. One of the most popular things to do here is stargaze. Miles away from the light pollution of Los Angeles, Joshua Tree NP is a certified International Dark Sky Park - a designation given to areas that dedicated to preserving and protect the night time environment. Because of this, there are several camping sites within the actual park where you have a front row view to the night sky.

SEE:

[Cholla Cactus Garden](#)

STAY:

[AutoCamp Joshua Tree](#)

Stay in a chic airstream among other amenities at this luxury glamping site.

[Death Valley National Park](#)

The largest, hottest, driest, and lowest national park is best visited outside of the summer months where the daily temperatures are known to reach 120°F. It's home to several sand dunes and salt flats, making it an excellent place for unique outdoor activities like sand boarding in the cooler months. And as with Joshua Tree, the stargazing is breathtaking in such a vast landscape.

[Yosemite National Park](#)

Tucked deep inside a narrow valley in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, getting there will be an adventure. If you're coming from the west (Mammoth), beware that the closest road across the peaks is generally only open in the mid to late summer months. But once you're there, like so many others, you may say this is your favorite of the national parks. Known for granite monoliths and striking vistas with waterfalls, this park is ideal for at least two nights, as you'll be taking up some of the better hikes from the valley below. Take the Lower and Upper Yosemite Valley Falls trails (a challenging 8+ miles for the Upper Falls), or Vernal Falls paths towards the legendary Half Dome rock. The park can get crowded, so the shoulder season (May and September) is often a better time to visit. Advance reservations have typically been required to visit the park, although there is a new system being developed. Entry fee or pass required.

STAY:

[The Ahwahnee](#)

Considered one of the best, and most iconic, lodges in the National Parks - this is worth a stay for the setting and location. There's really only one other option in the valley (besides camping). And the iconic dining room (reservations required) is a visual treat. But plan your stay in advance. Reservations are available one year ahead, and rooms typically sell out early.



Joshua Tree



Mesquite Dunes



Yosemite National Park

CALIFORNIA



US Highway 1 in Sonoma



Redwoods National Park



Tu Tu' Tun Lodge, Oregon

Sausalito / Napa / Sonoma (Santa Rosa)

En route northward from Yosemite, consider a stopover in the charming bay-side town of Sausalito, or perhaps one of the earthy inns or posh resorts in the Napa and Sonoma wine valleys. This area puts you nearby to the Redwoods of Muir Woods and the start of Northern California's dramatic coastal section of Highway 1.

SEE:

Muir Woods National Monument

Just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, and part of the National Park system, this primeval Redwood forest is named for John Muir, who campaigned for the establishment of the National Parks.

DRIVING NORTH ON US-1:

Note, as you begin your drive northward toward Eureka and Redwoods National Park, be aware that the coastal road is slow, steep, and dramatic--plan on a leisurely pace. Start at Bodega Bay, the filming location of Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds" and eat at the namesake cafe. Sea Ranch (though off limits to outsiders except for inn guests) will be along the route, as will lovely towns like Elk and Mendocino. Check out the Glass Beach nearby.

STAY:

Sea Ranch Lodge - Sonoma Coast

If you're taking the slow route, take a rest at this mid-century planned community, beloved by architects and aesthetes.

Harbor House Inn - Mendocino Area

Located in the postcard stamp-sized town of Elk, a plush stay about halfway up the coast.

Redwoods National (and State) Parks

Near California's northernmost frontier lie the Redwood National Park and four adjacent state parks, campaigned by Frederick Law Olmstead to be the salvation for the coastal Redwood forests. Home to the world's tallest tree (at 380 feet), this temperate rain forest is bisected by US-1, and is an easy stop in which to hike and enjoy the surrounding coast. We love the peaceful and easy Lady Bird Johnson hike. It's quiet here--few urban spaces are nearby, the closest towns of size being Eureka or Crescent City.

STAY:

Tu Tu' Tun Lodge - Southern Oregon

If you love a great stay, we recommend this elegant lodge (read more in our Travel Research feature this week), about 1 hour north of the park, along a river in Southern Oregon. It is nearby the coastal road to Ophir Beach and Coos Bay, one of the prettiest spots on the trip. Read our full review here.

OREGON

Crater Lake National Park

One of the snowiest inhabited places in the United States, Crater Lake is a special place among parks as a large volcanic crater with an ice-blue, super clear lake in its center. The lake is also the nation's deepest. Although the park is open year round, most of the facilities and roads are subject to the unpredictable weather. If you're really wanting to explore this park, your best bet is July through October. A park pass or fee is required for entry.

STAY:

Crater Lake Lodge

The rustic lodge inn, one of the National Park Service's iconic properties, is one of the few places to stay nearby (unless you are camping). Book early, as reservations are limited at the 71 rooms. Reservations open 1 year in advance.

Portland and the Willamette Valley

This segment of your Pacific Parks road tour will likely end in the epicurean city of Portland, but we also urge you to extend your trip for a few tastings in Oregon's Willamette wine Valley.

EAT:

Ava Genes

We love the Roman style bites in this cozy dining room.

Salt & Straw

Next door, sample some of the city's best ice cream.

SEE:

Powell's Books

Literally a "city of books", occupying several blocks. A book-lover's dream.

Portland Japanese Garden

A manicured landscape.

Multnomah Falls

One of the US's most picturesque waterfalls. While there, check out the Oneonta Gorge.

SIP (in WILLAMETTE VALLEY):

King Estate

One of the larger vintners, with a lovely restaurant with fireplaces.

Domaine Drouhin

For a proper sip and gorgeous grounds.

St. Innocent Estate

Our pick for an off-the-beaten-path, oenophile's dream.



Crater Lake National Park



Multnomah Falls



PART THREE

PARKS OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST, ROCKIES, & PRAIRIES

OLYMPIC
NORTH CASCADES
GLACIER
YELLOWSTONE
GRAND TETONS
THEODORE ROOSEVELT
WIND CAVE
BADLANDS

ITINERARY - PART THREE - NORTHWEST/ROCKIES/PRAIRIES PARKS

Day 1 **Starting in Seattle, drive/ferry to Port Angeles/Forks, WA**
140 mi/3.5 hr

Days 2-3 **Olympic NP, Washington**

Day 4 **Drive to Seattle via Olympia, WA**
185 mi/3 hr
Consider detour to San Juan Islands, 1-2 extra days

Day 5 **Drive to Spokane via North Cascades NP (WA)**
400 mi/7 hr

Day 6 **Drive to Whitefish, MT (base for Glacier NP)**
250 mi/4 hr

Days 7-8 **Glacier NP, Montana**
30 mi+/45 min+ each way

Day 9 **Drive to Jackson, Wyoming (base for Tetons and Yellowstone NP)**
520 mi/8.5 hr
(consider a stopover at Green O' or Big Sky enroute)

Days 10-11 **Grand Tetons NP / Jackson, Wyoming**

Days 12-13 **Yellowstone NP / Jackson, Wyoming**
90 mi/2 hr each way

Days 14-16 **Optional detour: Drive to Medora, ND (base for Roosevelt NP)**
650 mi/10.5 hr to Medora, ND
+ 240 mi/4 hr to Rapid City, SD

Roosevelt NP, North Dakota

Day 14 **Drive to Rapid City, South Dakota (base for Badlands NP)**
or 530 mi/8 hr (Jackson to SD)

Days 15-17 **Badlands NP / Custer State Park / Wind Cave NP / Mt. Rushmore**
200 mi/3 hr round trip

Day 18 **Depart Rapid City, SD**

Total Drive 2,500 - 2,800 miles

Note: this trip is best undertaken May through October, considering winter road conditions and park closures.

Follow the entire route, or choose a section of it, and decide how long you'd like to stay in each destination. Each spot often warrants several days, or you may want to build in some rest in between the driving. In this version, we're sharing a fairly quick-moving adventure, with still enough days to get a sense of place. For this trip, it is best to use a one-way rental car, and fly into / from the starting and ending points of the drive.



Driving along Ruby Beach



Hoh Rain Forest



Orcas Island

Olympic National Park

Olympic may appear adjacent to Seattle - but getting there is a chore. From ferries to hours of driving, this National Park occupies most of the Olympic Peninsula, and is best seen over a period of several days, though you can encircle the park with a few quick stops in a day (I did it in a rush - it was a very long day). Choose your base in [Port Angeles](#), which offers a few modest hotels, or an AirBNB homeshare (there are a [few choice cabins](#) and a few b&bs near the town of [Forks](#)). The park is known for hosting 3 distinct ecosystems, notably the Pacific coast rainforest, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Best time to visit: May through September.

SEE:

Ruby Beach

A lovely beach on which to meet the Pacific Ocean. There's a parking area above, and you may have to climb over fallen logs to access the pebble-strewn, scenic beach.

Hoh Rain Forest

This very well might be Olympic's most awe-inspiring place. Deep within the center is this temperate rain forest. Hike the loop within an hour amidst giant, moss-covered trees. The silence and majesty make this one of nature's preeminent cathedrals. This is one of the several areas in the park that require a fee/pass.

Cape Flattery and Cape Alava

The westernmost point of the Continental United States, offering breathtaking scenery.

Seattle Area

You'll undoubtedly need to anchor your trip into Seattle, which warrants a day or two of your time. Some of our favorite sites:

STAY:

Willows Lodge

Across from the [Chateau St. Michele](#) winery, a lovely lodge stay just outside the city.

Captain Whidbey

One of our favorite getaway inns, a bit rustic with the whimsical charms akin to a Wes Andersen set.

SEE:

San Juan Islands

Add a day or two to your adventure, and take the (car) ferry from [Anacortes](#) to either [San Juan Island](#) or [Orcas Island](#). On Orcas, climb to the scenic top of [Mt. Constitution](#) and don't miss lunch at the [Barnacle](#) in the charming village of [Eastsound](#).

Mount Rainier National Park

1.5 hrs from downtown, this iconic, snow-capped park is best visited in the summer months.

WASHINGTON STATE

North Cascades National Park

En route across Washington State, North Cascades straddles the namesake mountain range, cradling opal lakes, waterfalls, and coniferous forests. The drive alone though the park is tranquil. Consider stopping on the Diablo lakeshore for a picnic, or one of the many hiking trails, before you head further east through the arid plains and apple orchards of Eastern Washington. Best time to visit: July to October.

Spokane

This progressive town provides a good stopping point half-way between WA and MT. Stroll in the Riverfront Park to stretch your legs, and stop in one of the many coffeehouses in town.

MONTANA

Glacier National Park

Glacier is perhaps our most favorite national park, and certainly the best park within the Rockies. Straddling both Canada (Waterton Lakes) and the US, it is also an “International Peace Park.” Despite its namesake, many of the original glaciers have retreated significantly over the last few decades. This park experience is all about the experiential drive from west to east, and you’ll need a full day or more to experience it. Starting at the Scottish loch-looking Lake MacDonald, and MacDonald Falls, head into the birch forests and along alpine vistas as you climb the Going-to-the-Sun Road to the sometimes snowy, high mountain vistas of Logan Pass. On the eastern end of the park, dramatic peaks front the majestic St. Mary Lake. Visitors must have a pass to enter the park, and reservations are required in peak months (Jun-Sept). Best time to visit: summer, but we particularly love September there for the change of colors in the yellow birch forests and the chance of snow-capped peaks. Note the Going-to-the-Sun Road closes in the winter.

Whitefish

This lovely town on the edge of the lake by the same name is a hip, lovely place to base yourself while exploring Glacier. From shops, to eateries, to bars, there is plenty in which to indulge.

STAY:

Hidden Moose Lodge

Read our recently published review.

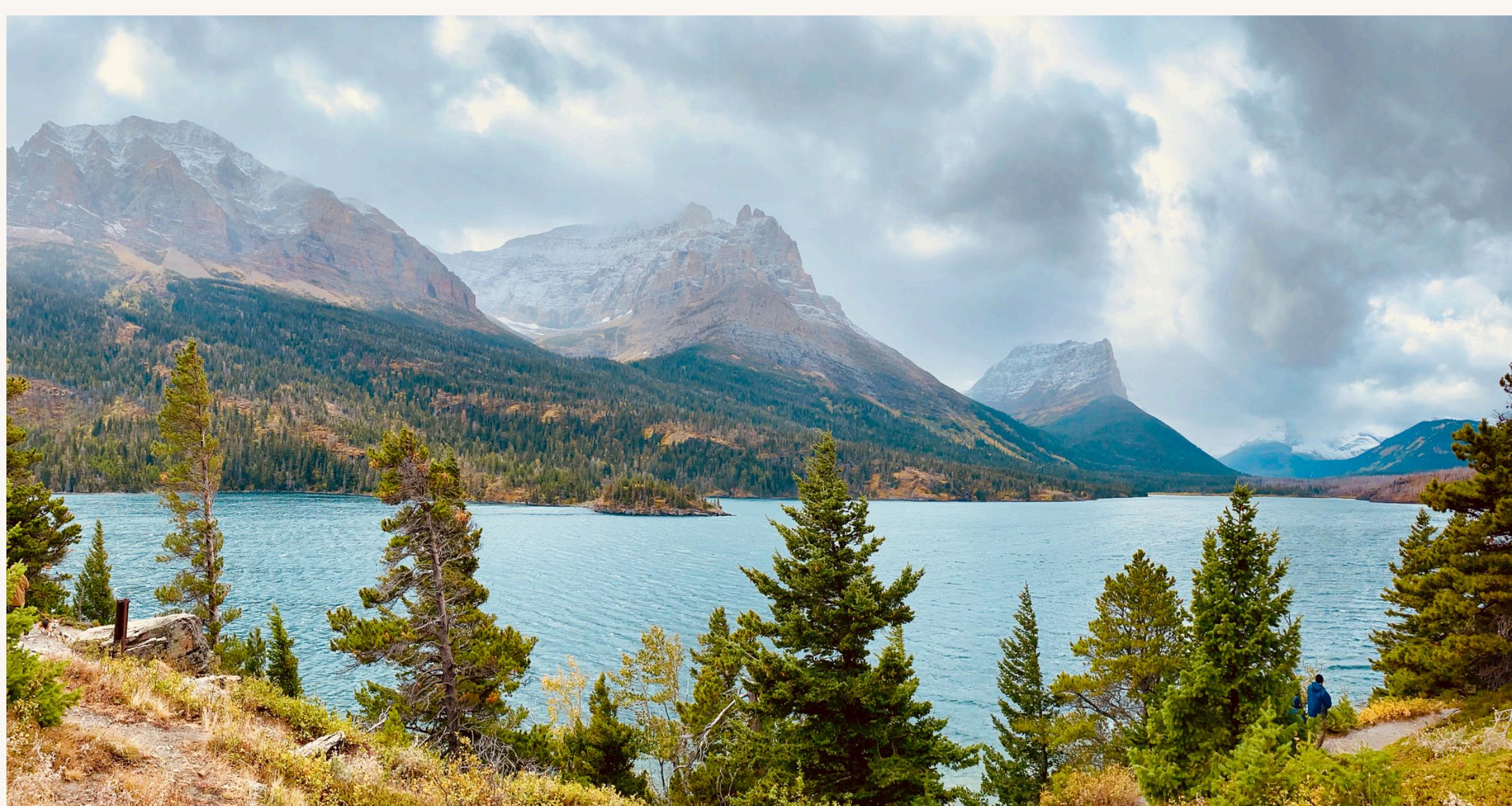
Helena - Big Sky

Your trek between Whitefish and Jackson Hole is long, but the drive will be spectacular. Consider stopping in the capitol of Helena, at the Lewis and Clark Missouri Headwaters Park, or even take a longer pause at one of the posh Big Sky resorts, or our favorite, new little hideaway:

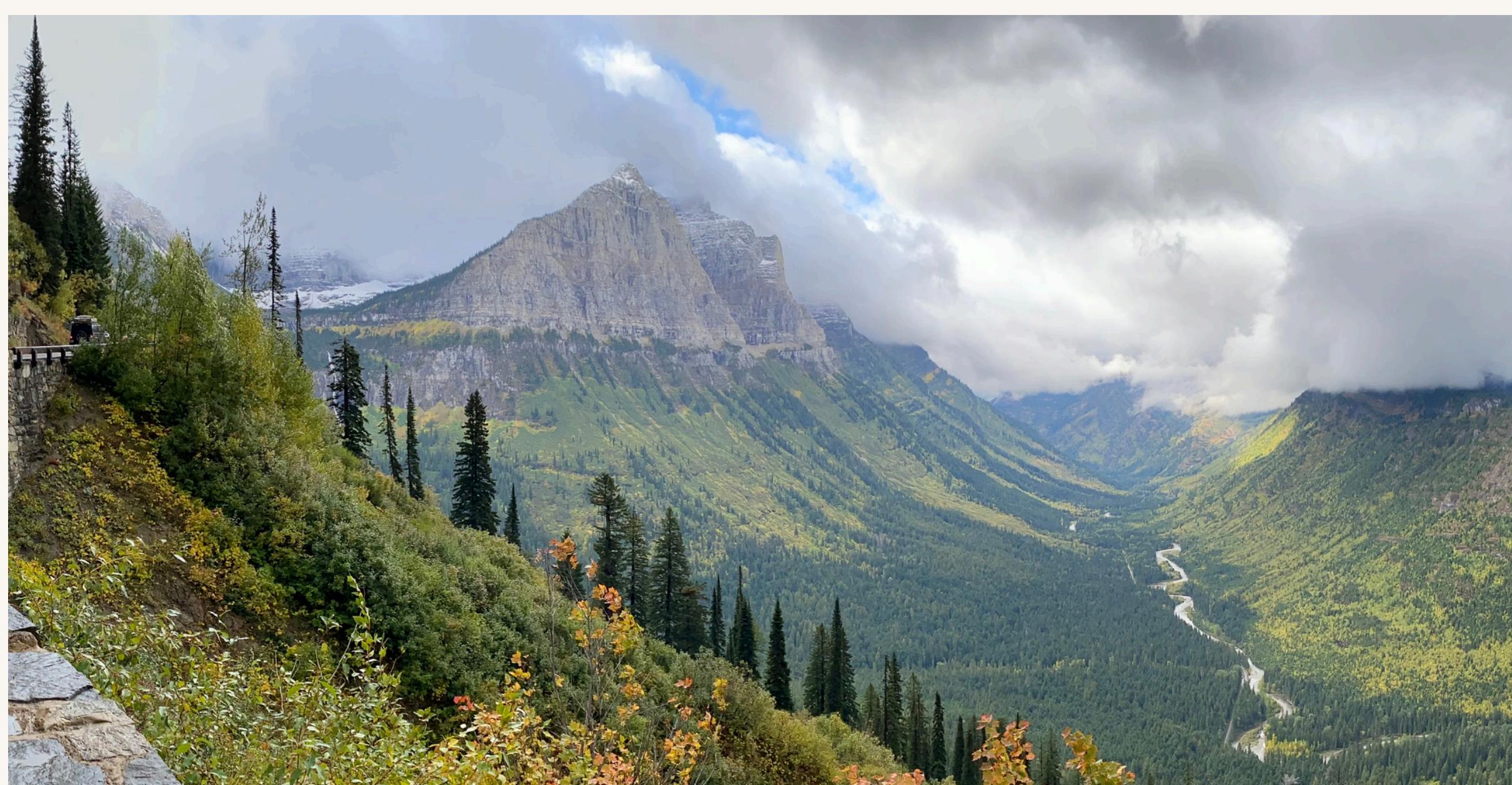
STAY:

The Green O'

Read our recently published review.



Saint Mary Lake, Glacier



Going-to-the-Sun Road, Glacier

Jackson Hole

The town of Jackson, and its surrounding valley called “the hole,” is the quintessential chic, western town in which to base your Wyoming parks exploration. The town square has famed antler arches for photo-ops, old-timey boarded sidewalks as if you’re walking into a saloon, plus it’s polished enough to host a number of gift shops and upscale eateries, nearby ski resorts, and posh hotels.

STAY:

Amangani

North America’s first outpost of the Aman empire is the chic-est and most expensive place in the state. It’s totally exclusive -- non guests aren’t allowed to visit, even for dinner. If you can swing the room rate, it’s worth a splurge. The infinity pool overlooking the Tetons is amazing.

Alpenhof and Four Seasons

At the base of the ski resort, these two properties are solid options for a budget and mid-level luxury option.

Grand Tetons National Park

As you approach Jackson Hole, you won’t be able to take your eyes off the Tetons, for this national park is all about the incredible view. A spine of snow-capped, alpine peaks stretches from north to south, reaching from Jackson, all the way to the bottom of Yellowstone. Take a picturesque stroll along Jenny Lake for some serious photographic subject matter. This place comes alive in both the late spring and early fall, and also offers a true winter season (with the adjacent ski resort). No entry reservations required.

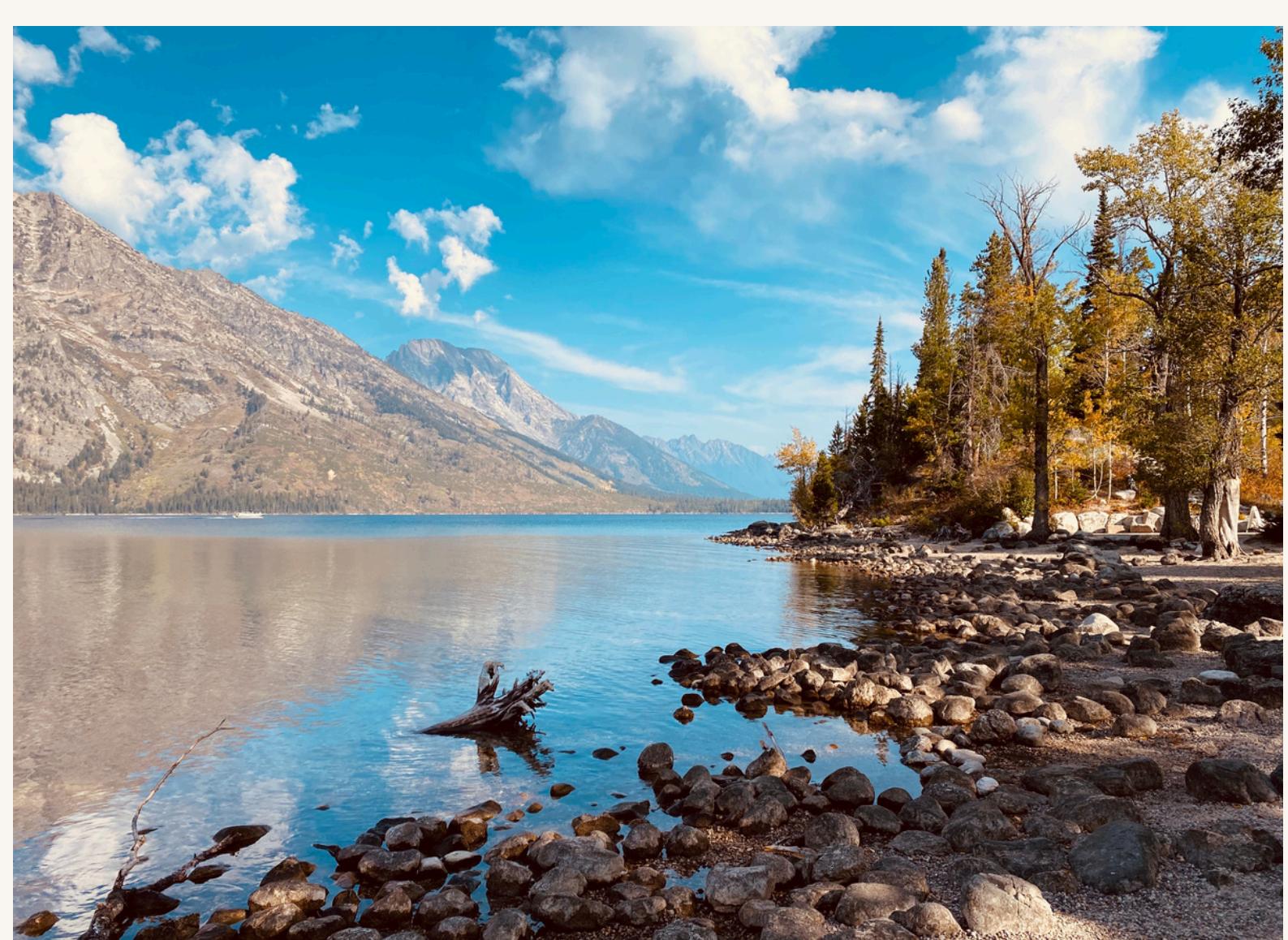
Yellowstone National Park

If the Tetons are all about the view, Yellowstone is all about a collection of unique sites, scattered across a vast expanse of Northwestern Wyoming. About 90 minutes north of Jackson, the park is experienced by a circular ring road that links most of the sights within the park. We recommend arriving at dawn, first to the park’s most popular site, the Old Faithful geyser, before the crowds arrive. Do not miss the boardwalks that link the other adjacent geysers and bubbling springs while you’re there...they are likely to interest you more than the grand spout itself. And do stay on the boardwalks -- the warning signs will explain the hazards. Grand Prismatic Spring is perhaps the most photogenic of the park’s features, but it is best witnessed from the viewpoint above. If you’re ok with heights, check out the Grand Canyon and its Lower/Upper waterfalls for the park’s most dramatic vistas. Beartooth Pass provides a thrilling, windy road experience, and the massive Yellowstone Lake will likely be part of your route. It is possible to encircle the whole park in a (very long) day, but you might want to reserve multiple given the park’s size. No advanced reservations are required, but a pass/entry fee is. The park is best visited from May to October, as most of the roadways are closed in the winter months.

STAY:

Old Faithful Inn

The iconic national park lodge is undoubtedly the best location in the park. Otherwise, you’ll be commuting in from afar: Jackson (where the posh places are) or West Yellowstone outside the park’s western gate. While the somewhat steep room rates are based in popularity rather than luxury, you have the park at your doorstep. It is rather rustic, so set expectations accordingly. Reservations open 13 months in advance and sell out early, so plan ahead. The Inn is open May through October.



Jenny Lake, Grand Tetons



Jackson Hole



Geysers, Yellowstone

THE DAKOTAS



Rapid City



Badlands



Custer State Park

Theodore Roosevelt National Park, North Dakota

For many, North Dakota is the 50th state they finally visit, and this iconic park in the western part is a great excuse to visit it as you head into the Great Plains. Named for the President who is best known for giving the National Parks system its start, expect isolated wilds, canyons, and numerous bison. Best visited May through October. No reservations required, but an entry fee/pass is. There are only campgrounds within the park. Stay in the town of [Medora](#), where there are a few budget motels, and [one wild-west b&b](#).

Rapid City, South Dakota

This bustling town in the far west of South Dakota's plains is truly the edge of the western experience, and is surrounded by a number of iconic parks and monuments, worthy of a few day's visit. There are ample art galleries, shops, bars, and restaurants to keep you entertained. A great base for your stay, and there's a regional airport with frequent connections to Denver and Minneapolis.

STAY:

Hotel Alex Johnson

Likely the nicest hotel in town, it's a older establishment managed by Hilton, with a nice rooftop bar.

Badlands National Park

Rugged, barren expanses of canyons splitting the dusty, tan prairie in two, Badlands is striking. We loved the ability to drive upclose to wild Bison, spot Prairie Dogs popping up out of the ground, and curious goats that clustered around us. Much of the park is off limits to automobile traffic, but the park is easily explored in a day, starting at the [Pinnacle Entrance](#) and exiting via [Ben Reifel](#), which offers a nice nearby [hike](#). Best visited April through October. Park pass/entry fee required.

SOUTHWEST OF RAPID CITY, ALSO SEE:

Wind Cave National Park

Named for the lengthy cave system, which is open for tours.

Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills

Perhaps one of the most recognizable icons of the United States is this mid-twentieth century mountainside sculpture of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt. There's a [visitor center](#) on the mountainside that provides a nice vista. Getting there, you'll drive across the Black Hills' [Iron Mountain Road](#), a sacred area for the native peoples, with tunnels and beautiful, windy roads that offer viewpoints.

Custer State Park

This South Dakota state park bedazzled us with endless grasslands of Bison. A drive through this iconic area is worth the [entrance fee](#).

Crazy Horse Memorial

This mountainside sculpture honoring the native hero has [been in the works since 1948](#) and is far from completion. There's a visitor center, but guests are not allowed near the monument itself.



HAPPY TRAVELS!