

The Record

Try a national park group tour next trip

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National parks are hot this year – the U.S. Tour Operators Association in fact is calling the jump in interest a symptom of “National Park Fever.”

Last year a record 305 million people visited national parks. As the National Park Service likes to point out, that’s more people than went to every single Disney park, NFL, NBA and MLB game and NASCAR race combined. While national park itineraries have long been popular with Americans, this year tour operators and specialty travel services have come up with all sorts of new spins and special features, hoping to catch part of the park fever business. They run the gamut, from basic camping to five-star-with-spa-services – and while the bulk of itineraries centers on the big parks out West, many explore closer-to-home parks of the East.

While a group tour might be at odds with some travelers’ image of a national park vacation as one of solitude and wilderness exploration, tour operators point out there are advantages to getting a packaged trip. One is that on your own, you probably won’t be able to book a room at any of the national park accommodations, which tend to sell out in advance of summer high season; tour operators, however, reserve blocks of rooms.

Also, any kind of multi-park vacation will require lots of driving, especially in the West, as well as getting oriented and hitting the highlights of each park. Tour operators handle the transportation and scheduling.

On the other hand, your time will be limited by the tour’s itinerary. Will you be happy peering into the Grand Canyon and having lunch at El Tovar and a sightseeing shuttle ride along the South Rim before moving along? Read our

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itineraries carefully, and see if they’ll meet your expectations.

Actually, given the flood of new itineraries, you may never have a better chance of finding a trip with your name on it.

Here’s a sampling of the wide variety of interesting and noteworthy new itineraries that have cropped up this year. Unfortunately, some sold out quickly – especially since some parks have a fairly limited tourist season because of weather/road conditions. But you can

get a jump on a spot for 2017, and anticipate it for a whole year.

■ Intrepid Travel is introducing four new tours this year – all of them active trips: Key West & Dry Tortugas Sailing Expedition; Cycle Bryce and Zion; Hike & Kayak Yellowstone; and Key West to Key Largo Sailing Expedition. Information: intrepidtravel.com.

■ As part of its partnership with the National Park Foundation, Globus has 16 GoParks! trips to 43 national parks. Its newest is a 10-day Southern California with Death Valley & Joshua Tree National Parks vacation. Information: globus.com.

Cosmos, the budget division of the Globus company, recently unveiled seven tours in and around the national parks that average less than \$150 per day. Among them: Highlights of Route 66 (16 days, \$1,799), Western Wonders (12 days, \$1,699); and National Parks & Canyon Country (13 days, \$1,799). Information: cosmos.com.

■ The seven-day “Montana: Big Sky & Yellowstone National Park Tour” is new from Adventures by Disney and includes hiking in Yellowstone, along with a stay at a dude ranch, glamping outside Yellowstone, and activities such as horseback riding, zip-lining, stargazing and watching the geysers in Yellowstone. Prices start at \$3,779 for children under 12, and \$3,969 for adults for next year’s trips, which begin in June.

The new “Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia” trip by Disney creates encounters with master storytellers and costumed characters from the past to make history come alive for kids and adults. Activities include a scavenger hunt through a 19th century mansion, hands-on experiences at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, a cruise down the Potomac River and more. This year’s departures are filled, but they start up again on April 9, at \$3,209 for kids under 12, \$3,369 for adults. Information: adventuresbydisney.com.

■ Austin Adventures already offers dozens of trips to parks out West, but new this year is a six-day “Oregon-Crater Lake National Park” tour, including river rafting, berry picking and a dip in a natural hot spring; and a six-day “Glacier National Park” tour. But take note: This year, all fourth-graders travel free on any national park trip. Information: austinadventures.com.

■ Cox & Kings’ eight-day “Southwestern Spa and Healing Immersion” private journey is the perfect respite for travelers wanting to disconnect from daily cares, reconnect with nature and rejuvenate at renowned spas. In addition to marveling at the Grand Canyon and hiking in Petrified Forest National Park, guests will receive a guided tour of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Taos from a Native American healer, take part in a hands-on cooking experience with a Native American chef and scholar, and relax at the natural hot springs of Ojo Caliente. Available throughout 2016, prices start at \$8,950 per person. Save \$250 per person based on double occupancy for travel by Labor Day weekend. Information: coxandkings.com.

kingsusa.com.

■ Veterans of adventure and wildlife-watching travel, Natural Habitat Adventures has come up with a new way to explore America's national parks and reserves via its Safari Series: choosing paths less traveled and incorporating deluxe catered camping, guests experience in solitude the wonder of the country's most magnificent landscapes without compromising comfort. The first in the series is the nine-day "Under the Desert Sky" tour, featuring deluxe catered camping in private settings on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and at Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument; at Bryce and Zion, the group will stay at classic lodges in the parks. Remaining departures this year are Aug. 7 and 25, with prices starting at \$3,995 per person, double occupancy. Information: nathab.com.

■ Tauck has been leading tours to the national parks since 1925; since 2010, the company has been working with documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, who provides storytelling videos to enhance many Tauck U.S. tours; he also collaborates with Tauck for its Ken Burns American Journeys series. The latest collaboration, "In Freedom's Footsteps: Philadelphia to Washington, D.C.," debuted this year; the 11-day trip, with prices starting at \$4,790 per person, includes 10 National Park Service sites in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia and the nation's capital such as Independence National Historical Site, Gettysburg National Military Park, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, Shenandoah National Park and Jamestown.

The group will also get early admission to the National Archives for a special look at America's founding documents; learn about the Civil War from historian and author Mark Howell; and be treated to a private presentation on "Slavery, the Plantation and the Civil War" by Dr. Leni Sorensen, scholar, living history interpreter, and African American Research Historian for the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monti-

cello. Yeah, it's a great trip – and so this year's departures are sold out, but they start again April 21.

Also new and on this coast is the Grand New England trip, timed to coincide with fall foliage. The 12-day itinerary includes Mount Washington and Acadia National Park, and classic New England towns like Stowe, Vt., Stockbridge, Mass., Bar Harbor, Maine – plus stays at some grand old inns and resorts. Departures from late September to early October – but this foliage season is booked. Sign up for next fall season at Tauck.com.



MARK LELLOUCH/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Bryce Canyon National Park in Utah, left, and Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona, above, are among destinations included in group tour packages.