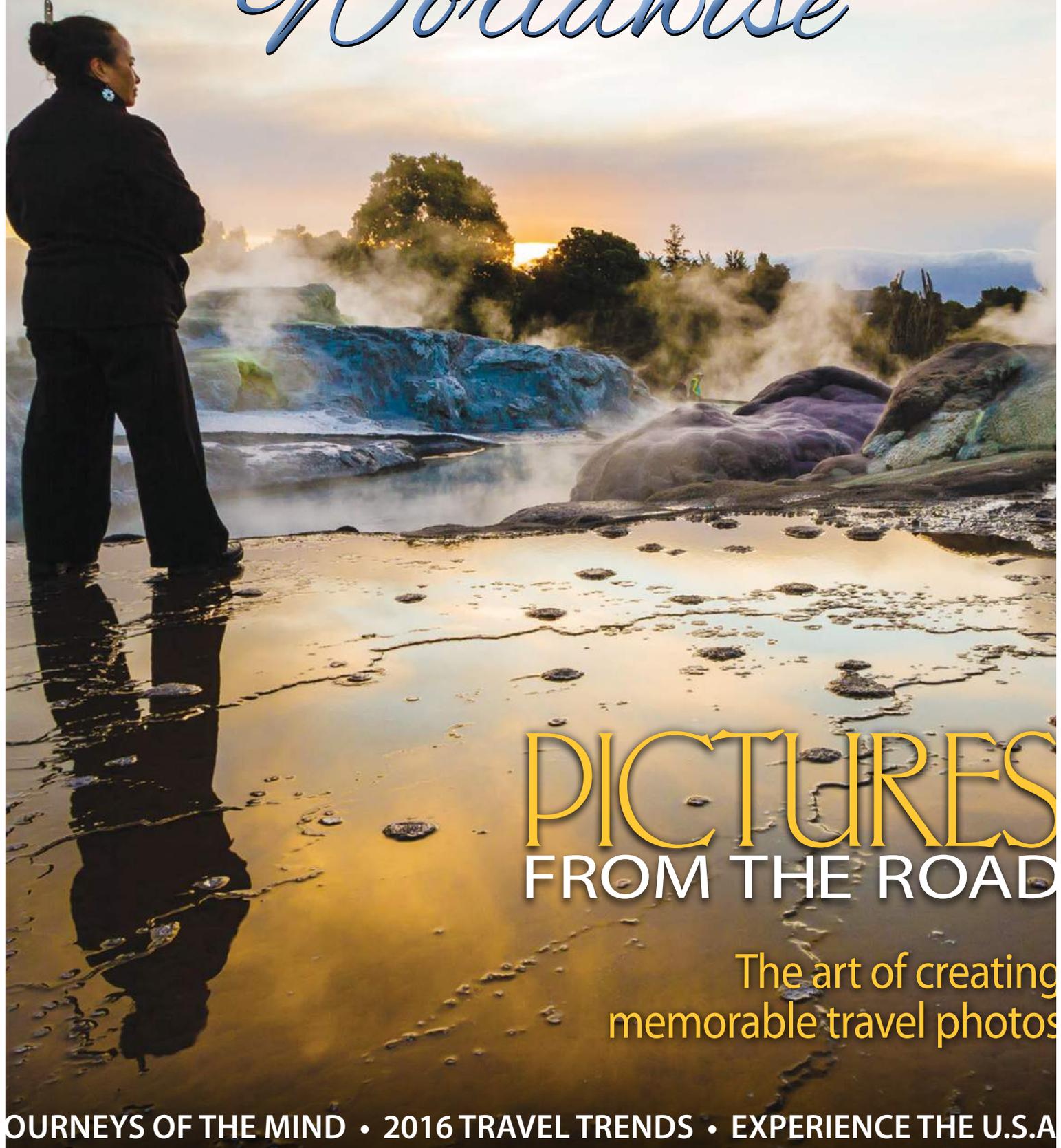


# AAA TRAVELER

Winter 2

## *Worldwise*



## PICTURES FROM THE ROAD

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# FOUR PARKS YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

*Here are four gems in the national park system  
that might have escaped your radar.*

*Time to explore!*

BY CLAIRE VATH

Mushroom-shaped coral in the waters of Dry Tortugas National Park

Plenty has been written about Yosemite's alpine lakes and rocky mountains, the shooting geysers and hot springs of Yellowstone, the wisps of cloud that curl around the Great Smoky Mountains, and the plunging depths of the Grand Canyon. Indeed, the National Parks Conservation Association estimates nearly 20 million visitors traveled to these four parks in 2014 alone. We all know about these popular parks, but did you know the National Park Service actually oversees more than 400 sites, which cover more than 84 million acres of land? President Lyndon Johnson once wrote of the national park system, "If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them something more than the miracles of technology. We must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it."

Here are a few of the lesser-known parks sprinkled throughout the United States—shimmering jewels in the treasure chest of America's diverse and beautiful landscapes.

## DRY TORTUGAS NATIONAL PARK

### FLORIDA

Key West, Florida, occupies the southernmost point of the continental U.S. If you were to venture west from the southern tip of this island city, you would come upon a 100-square-mile park rising out of the crystal clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico. That paradise, Dry Tortugas National Park—accessible by seaplane, boat or ferry—lies 70 miles from Key West. Officially designated as a national park in 1992, the Dry Tortugas consists mostly of open waters, but it also comprises seven small islands.

Fort Jefferson National Monument, the country's largest all-masonry fort, sits on Garden Key. Constructed between 1846 and 1875 to protect the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico, the citadel was never completed due to structural concerns.

Visitors can hop on a boat, snorkel or scuba dive down to old shipwrecks off Loggerhead Key. The area is a prime snorkeling and scuba diving spot for both beginning and advanced divers owing to the relatively shallow, clear waters. Fishing opportunities also abound in the Dry Tortugas, as does wildlife viewing. Visitors can even geocache here.

Due to its remote location, amenities in this national park remain scarce, so those planning to camp here need to haul in their own water, food and supplies.

More Info: [nps.gov/drtow](https://nps.gov/drtow)

## CHACO CULTURE NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK

### NEW MEXICO

Want to explore the ancient world? No need to head to Egypt. Plan instead to spend a few days in New Mexico, where massive stone buildings crafted by Native Americans rise from Chaco Canyon. Chaco falls under the protection of the National Park Service as one of its 49 National Historic Parks. The area served as a cultural epicenter for thousands of early people between 850 and 1250 A.D.

During those early centuries, the area now designated park land featured Great Houses with multiple stories and hundreds of rooms which served as centers for commerce, trade and large gatherings for the early Pueblo people.

Guests today can wander through several excavated buildings and ruins, including Pueblo Bonito, one of the Great Houses showcasing stacked-stone doorways and masonry walls as thick as three feet. A hike up to Pueblo Alto affords stunning views of Pueblo Bonito from above. The easy-to-hike Petroglyph Trail takes visitors past Chacoan and Navajo petroglyphs and inscriptions etched into rock, including primitive astrological and animal symbols. Take a self-guided tour along Canyon Loop Drive to get the best overview of six of the park's major sites, including Pueblo Bonito, Chetro Ketl, Pueblo del Arroyo and Casa Rinconada. Check the park's website for information on guided moonlight walks and night-sky gazing.

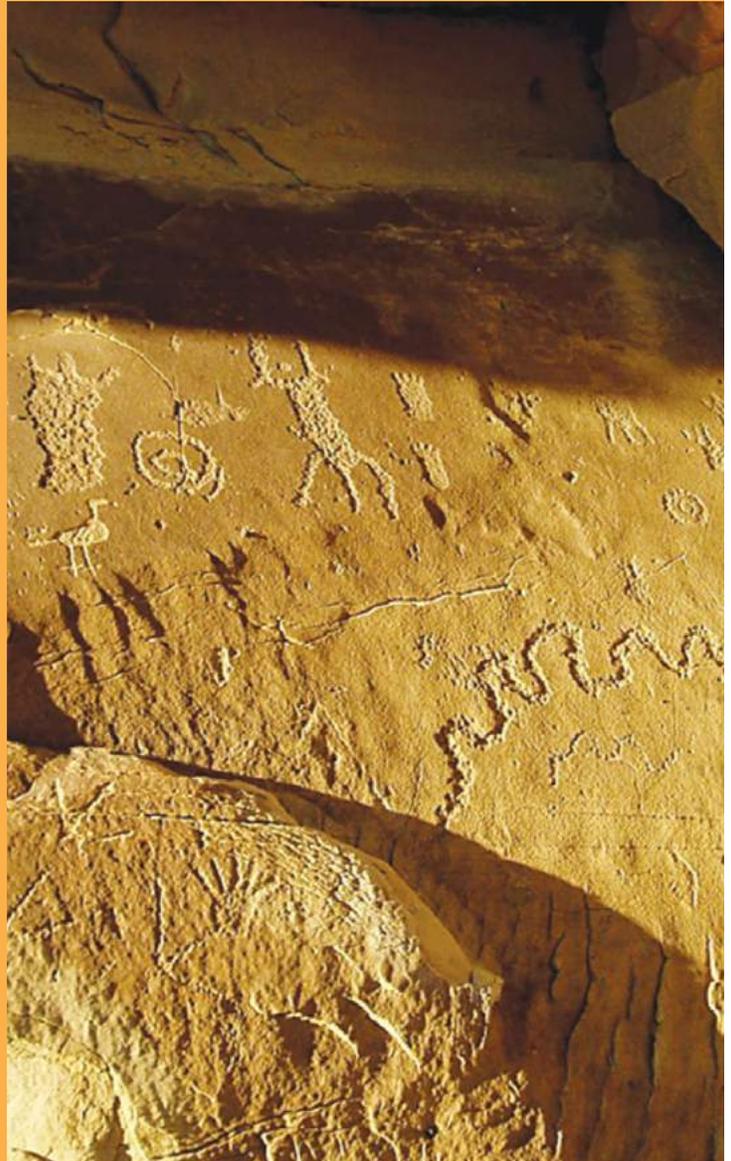
Due to the park's arid climate, the National Park Service recommends carrying plenty of water and slathering on the sunscreen. Since there's only one main road into the park, which tends toward narrow and bumpy, drive slowly and check out weather and road conditions before visiting.

More Info: [nps.gov/chcu](https://nps.gov/chcu)



Ruins of the officers' quarters at Fort Jefferson, Dry Tortugas

### Petroglyphs at Chaco Culture National Historic Park





Stalactites in Wind Cave National Park



Visitor center at Barataria Preserve

## WIND CAVE NATIONAL PARK SOUTH DAKOTA

The great conservationist and national parks champion Theodore Roosevelt designated Wind Cave as a national park in January 1903. It was the eighth national park and the first to preserve a cave.

The park's initial boundaries were small, but the American Bison Society created a nearby game preserve to help reestablish American bison on prime prairie habitat, and the park eventually expanded to encompass that prairie, too. Today Wind Cave National Park spans 52 square miles, much of it below ground in rambling boxwork—a rare, honeycomb-like cave formation with origins that largely remain a mystery. Rangers offer cave tours year-round.

Extensive hiking and nature trails as well as winding park roads offer excellent views of the natural prairie rife with free-roaming bison, elk, prairie dogs and pronghorns in this area of the southern Black Hills. In late July, wildflowers infuse these green-grass prairies with color. For a small fee, visitors can set up camp at Elk Mountain. The remote location of Wind Cave creates spotty cell phone service, and food and beverage options in the park are limited, so prepare accordingly. If you plan on exploring caves, make sure you bring a good pair of shoes and a jacket.

More Info: [nps.gov/wica](http://nps.gov/wica)

## JEAN LAFITTE NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK AND PRESERVE LOUISIANA

Louisiana is best known for its unique foods, *joie de vivre* and oral traditions of storytelling. One of the state's many folktales involves Jean Lafitte, a 19th-century pirate whose ghost reportedly haunts Louisiana's bayous and rivers. Just as Lafitte made his name looting ships along the Louisiana coast, Jean Lafitte National Historic Park and Preserve is similarly scattered among six sites throughout southern Louisiana.

These sites include the Barataria Preserve, which comprises 23,000 acres of wetland with swamps, bayous, marshes, forests and all manner of wildlife, including alligators, nutria and bountiful bird species. At Chalmette Battlefield and Chalmette National Cemetery, a stone's throw from New Orleans, visitors can learn about the War of 1812's Battle of New Orleans; each January reenactors storm the battlefield. The park even extends into the heart of the French Quarter—Decatur Street, where visitors can take a ranger-led walk along the Mississippi riverfront to learn about the countries that influenced New Orleans' culture.

While New Orleans celebrates its French, African and Spanish influences, Lafayette, Louisiana, is the epicenter of Cajun culture. There, the Prairie Acadian Cultural Center uses exhibits and tour guides to showcase the Acadian culture, such as dance, Mardi Gras

# FUN FACTS ABOUT THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Long before President Woodrow Wilson signed the bill forming the National Park Service in 1916, President Ulysses Grant designated Yellowstone as the world's first national park in 1872. When formed, the original mission of the NPS included "maintaining and protecting our national parks for the continued benefit and enjoyment of all Americans." Here are some fun facts about the NPS and the parks it protects.

- ◆ President Theodore Roosevelt, known as the conservationist president, created the U.S. Forestry Service in 1905, within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and he helped create and protect many of the sites that now fall under the NPS.
- ◆ By 1920, one million people visited national parks annually. By 1940, that number jumped to 17 million visits. In 2014, the NPS estimated 290 million people visited the parks.
- ◆ In 1933, FDR consolidated federal management of monuments under the NPS.
- ◆ Our national parks contain 18,000 miles of trails.
- ◆ The highest point in North America, Denali—previously Mount McKinley until President Obama changed its name in 2015—resides in Alaska's Denali National Park. The lowest point in the Western Hemisphere, Badwater Basin, is part of Death Valley National Park.
- ◆ Kentucky's Mammoth Cave National Park comprises the world's longest cave system.
- ◆ The national park system extends past the equator. The National Park of American Samoa sits just south of the line.
- ◆ Carlsbad Caverns houses a cafeteria in its caves, a source of unlimited debate. Congress has allowed the cafeteria to remain, as it doesn't pose a risk to the site's preservation.
- ◆ In addition to battlefields, the sites of the Oklahoma City Bombing and the 9/11 Flight 93 crash sites fall under NPS care.
- ◆ Thirty-five parks are named after American presidents. President Theodore Roosevelt has the most national parks named in his honor.

If you're visiting several national parks, consider purchasing a convenient "America the Beautiful" National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass. At \$80, the annual pass gets you into more than 2,000 sites, and there is no limit to the number of sites you can visit. Each pass covers entrance for the pass owner and accompanying passengers in a personal vehicle at per-vehicle fee areas. For sites that charge per person, the pass covers entrance for the pass owner and up to three accompanying adults (no fee is charged for those 15 and under). To purchase, go to [AAA.com/Tickets](http://AAA.com/Tickets) or visit your AAA store.



Bald cypress at Jean Lafitte National Historic Park

and food traditions. Nearby, Eunice's Prairie Acadian Cultural Center continues that story, featuring music, demonstrations and a Saturday night "Cajun Grand Ole Opry." The Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center in Thibodeaux (pronounced "Tib-ah-doh") offers bayou boat tours, history walks and the story of bayou country.

More Info: [nps.gov/jela](http://nps.gov/jela)