



EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

INSIDER'S GUIDES

GET THE BETA ON OUR FAVORITE HIKES



◀ See 8,876-foot Eldorado Peak from the heather-lined Hidden Lake Trail.
 ▼ For long-range views of Ross Lake, hike the Lightning Creek Trail.



The insider

The North Cascades are Katie Roloson's backyard—literally (in-park lodging is a perk of her job as manager of educational programs at the nonprofit North Cascades Institute). In her eight years on the job, she's made it a goal to climb all the peaks she can see from her house—she's down to the last three.

Best backcountry campsite

The shelf cradling Tapto Lakes sits in an off-trail camping zone just under 7,174-foot Red Face Mountain, with tent-door views of hulking, 7,574-foot Whatcom Peak and other forbidding Picket Range summits. And because the two teacup lakes don't show up as a campsite on the National Geographic Trails Illustrated park map, expect to have them to yourself, Roloson says. Best approach: a five-day, 47-mile loop from the Hannegan Pass trailhead. Hike 12 miles on the Hannegan Pass and Chilliwack Trails (spend night one at Copper Creek), then continue 5.2 miles on Brush Creek Trail to Whatcom Pass. Take the obvious spur trail about a mile north from the pass to reach the lakes. To return, backtrack on Brush Creek Trail and swing north on Chilliwack Trail, then west on Copper Ridge Trail for nonstop views of huge peaks and hanging glaciers (primo campsites: Copper Lake and Egg Lake).

Secret waterfall

A booming, 30-foot cascade tumbles just a quarter-mile southwest of the Big Beaver backcountry campsite—but for 10 months of the year, you'd never know it. High water in the dammed Ross Lake covers the waterfall until spring, when engineers draw down the lake and the gusher reemerges for its big annual show. "The lower falls are really impressive from mid-March to

mid-April, and there are often otters, loons, and peregrine falcons in the area," Roloson says. You could hike there (6 miles from the Ross Dam trailhead), but Roloson favors putting in a canoe at the Colonial Creek launch. Paddle 4 miles to the park service dock on Haul Road and portage a mile to Ross Lake (canoe wheels help), then paddle another 5 miles to Big Beaver.

Trail gourmet

The charming town of Stehekin (population 112), which sits on Lake Chelan in the park's southeast corner, offers hikers the chance to refuel on farm-fresh goat cheese from roadside stands, steaks at Stehekin Valley Ranch, and "anything they make" at the Stehekin Pastry Company, Roloson says. You can take a boat or float plane in, but Roloson's favorite way to visit is to stop off midway through a five- or six-day, 58-mile shuttle backpacking trip from Cascade Pass to Thunder Creek trailhead. (Ride the \$7 park shuttle 11 miles to Stehekin from High Bridge Campground and back.)

Beginner mountaineering

"Easy" is a relative term in the North Cascades, where vertical topography and summit glaciers are standard (it's the most heavily glaciated park in the Lower 48). But 7,182-foot Pyramid Peak is a great training ground for practicing snowfield skills, Roloson says. "You do cross steep remnants of the Colonial Glacier, but it's mellow, without any crazy crevasses," she says. Pack crampons and an ice axe and target June or July for the 5-mile push from the Pyramid Lake Trail up an obvious (but unsigned) climber's trail that leads from the south side of the lake up the peak's northeastern ridge. Navigation and self-arrest skills are a must; overnight at one of the established campsites on the rocky north ridge leading to Pyramid Peak (free permit required).

Best wildlife-watching

The park's remote valleys host plenty of charismatic megafauna like black bears, moose, wolverines, cougars, lynx, bobcats, and the rare wolf. But for the most, er, singular wildlife-watching experience, head to Willow Lake, just north of Ross Lake. "It's Sasquatch central—at least, that's what I've heard," Roloson says. Rumors of giant footprints and an eerie feeling of being watched swirl around the marshy lake. Grab the campsite on the lake's west side and keep your camera at the ready: The area is prime habitat for moose, coyotes, and gray wolves, just in case Bigfoot misses his appointment.

INSIDER'S

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GUIDE

Mountain Escape
**North Cascades National
 Park, Washington**

This remote park saves its best for hikers willing to tackle long miles and steep climbs. The reward for such commitment: lonely alpine lakes, colossal peaks frosted with glaciers, far-flung valleys hiding bears and wolverines, and some of the best mountain views in the Lower 48. Some things just shouldn't be rushed.

BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) ALAN MAJCHROWICZ, ANDY PORTER, ISTOCKPHOTO.COM (2)



Autumn Getaway Shenandoah National Park, Virginia

Shenandoah National Park hits its showy, vibrant prime this month as scores of tree species flare up in one of the East Coast's best foliage displays. But leaf-peeping is only the beginning at this 105-mile-long park draped over the spine of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Hikers will find crystalline swimming holes, quiet hollows, monster trout, see-forever ridgelines, and scrambly peaks from top to bottom. If you've been looking for an excuse to go, autumn is it. BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN



The insider

Tennessee-based Johnny Molloy had a wealth of experience to draw from to write his *Top Trails: Shenandoah National Park* guidebook: Over the past 20 years, he has spent more than 130 nights in the park's backcountry and hiked most of its 500-plus miles of trail.

Best backcountry campsite

Shenandoah doesn't have designated sites off the Appalachian Trail, so you're mostly on your own to pinpoint the perfect patch of tent real estate—

but the best bets are the secluded streamside campsites 4 miles from Skyline Drive on the Big Run Loop. Scout for an impacted site near Big Run stream, or sling a hammock: "Shenandoah is a particularly good park for hammock camping because it can be hard to find a flat spot without any rocks in it," Molloy says. But the best part about these spots? You'll have prime access to clear, 6-foot-deep swimming holes and excellent fishing for native brook trout. "Shenandoah is a native brook trout stronghold," he says. "They don't have any competition, so they've been able to get bigger than in other parts of the South." To reach the sites, hike the Big Run Loop Trail down from Big Run Overlook, then join the Big Run Portal Trail and scout out a spot. Next day, climb back up via the Rockytop Trail for a 13.3-mile loop.

Best car campground

With just 31 sites, the Lewis Mountain Campground is Shenandoah's smallest and least busy. Besides secluded wooded sites and several rustic cabins, the campground offers a glimpse into a shameful chapter in American history: In the 1930s and '40s, the park maintained Lewis Mountain as a "separate but equal," black-only facility. Under pressure from the Department of the Interior after World War II, Shenandoah finally integrated Lewis Mountain (and all other facilities) by 1950.

Seek solitude

The park's northern end is only 2 hours from D.C., so it naturally draws the city crowds. Dodge them by targeting Shenandoah's southern third, where another hour's drive insulates you from the metro mobs. Top trip: the 9.8-mile Rocky Mount Loop, which is quiet even by South District standards. Start with a ridgetop ramble dotted with stony outcroppings and views across Gap Run Valley, Shenandoah Valley, and the main crest of Shenandoah's mountains,

peaking on top of 2,736-foot Rocky Mount. Then drop 1,500 feet to the Gap Run Trail for creekside hiking (and camping, if you like) until rejoining the Rocky Mount Trail to close the lollipop loop.

Best multiday trip

Shenandoah's long, skinny shape means deep wilderness can be tough to find: "Skyline Drive divides the park, and if you want to do a multiday adventure, you almost always have to cross the road," Molloy says. The quiet Overall Run area on the north side is one exception, where a bulge in the park boundary forms a larger roadless area with extended trail options and top-notch black bear habitat. Molloy's favorite is the 12.5-mile Overall Run-Heiskell Hollow loop: From Mathews Arm Campground, follow the Overall Run Trail past 29-foot Twin Falls and on to Overall Run Falls, a 93-foot-tall, lacy cascade (the park's tallest). Continue northwest to camp in the lower reaches of the Overall Run valley. On day two, swing south on the Beecher-Overall Run Connector Trail to access Heiskell Hollow, a wooded valley rich with swimming holes. Follow the Heiskell Hollow Trail 3.3 miles up the flank of Knob Mountain to return.

Leaf-peeping perch

Blue Ridge Mountains? Not in fall. Instead, think scarlet (maple), gold (sassafras), amber (hickory), and vast swathes of ruby (oaks) as Shenandoah's hardwood forest shows off changing leaves. For

a little-known peak with horizon-wide views over the rainbow of foliage, head to 3,002-foot Bear Church Rock in the park's Central District. Take the Appalachian Trail north from Bootens Gap to hook up with the Laurel Prong, Cat Knob, and Jones Mountain Trails for a 9.4-mile (round-trip) high-country stroll. "Mid-October is the best time to go: You'll have vibrant color on Skyline Drive and changing color all around you," Molloy says. (Still, peak color can vary from year to year, so check the park's Fall Color Report at bit.do/ShenniesFoliage.)

Best trail town

Tiny Luray, just 5 miles west of park headquarters, is Molloy's favorite place to play tourist: "It's like Gatlinburg, Tennessee, was 60 years ago—only slight tourist schlock and an old-timey feeling." Historic buildings and funky craft shops dot the downtown, roadside ice cream stands serve the perfect posthike shakes, and the 10-story caves at Luray Caverns let hikers escape sticky summer afternoons among intricately carved stalactites and stalagmites (LurayCaverns.com).

Trip planner

Season April through early November; spring for wildflowers, summer for swimming, fall for foliage **Permit** Required for camping (free) **Contact** nps.gov/shen

PHOTOS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) TIM LUMLEY, ISTOCKPHOTO.COM / ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN; "BASIN AND RANGE NATIONAL MONUMENT IN NEVADA" JULY 30, 2015 VIA FLICKR; CREATIVE COMMONS AT-TRIBUTION; WENDELL SAMFORD, COURTESY OF JOHNNY MOLLOY; TEXT BY EMELIE FROEJEN (MAKE HISTORY)



INSIDER'S

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GUIDE

Warm Haven Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, CA

Winter blues? This SoCal desert hideaway has the cure: With “cold-season” daytime temps in the 60s and 70s, now is the perfect time to wander its cactus-filled canyons, scramble rocky peaks, and scope for desert wildlife.

BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

The insider

Two guidebooks (*Hiking in Anza-Borrego Desert*, volumes one and two) weren't enough to exhaust Robin Halford's knowledge of the park: The volunteer hiking leader for the Anza-Borrego Desert Natural History Association and local gift shop owner is currently working on volume three.

Best overnight

Lack of reliable water sources in the park makes backpacking in Anza-Borrego best for shorter trips, like the 10.4-mile overnight loop connecting Rockhouse and Butler Canyons in the Santa Rosa Mountains Recreation Area. Park where the road splits between the two canyons (4WD required; high-clearance 2WD cars can usually make it the first 7 miles, but you'll have to walk the final mile to the trailhead). Head into Rockhouse, where you'll have to scramble across several boulderfields to reach Hidden Spring about 3.5 miles in (it's more of a seep, Halford says; pack at least a gallon per person per day). Backtrack 100 feet from the spring and take an unsigned trail up to Jackass Flat, then scout a campsite on the wide bench (clear from flash flood danger). The next day, head through taller, narrower Butler Canyon to reach your car.

Flora-filled dayhike

The wildflower blooms at Anza-Borrego are the stuff of legend, with hundreds of species lighting up the desert when conditions are just right (the best shows require the perfect combination of rainfall, temperature, and sunshine). “If it's a good bloom in the spring, Hornblende Canyon can be just fantastic,” Halford says. To stroll among blossoms like apricot mallow, purple Canterbury bells, and orange

apricot yarrow, hike the 3.8-mile loop up Hornblende, over a small saddle, and down Box Canyon in March. No flower explosion this year? No problem: In these canyons, iconic desert plants such as hedgehog cactus, barrel cactus, agave, and prickly pear are a sure thing.

Wildlife spotting

The park's canyons and rocky mountain slopes provide a refuge for a few hundred endangered peninsular bighorn sheep (as well as kit foxes, bobcats, mountain lions, jackrabbits, and more than 70 species of reptiles and amphibians). For your best shot at glimpsing the elusive bighorns, head to the steep terrain they favor. Halford's favorite scoping spot is 3,626-foot Sunset Mountain, a 3.5-mile out-and-back trip. Drive 4.3 miles up the Pinyon Wash (4WD required), park, and hike east, slaloming boulders and cacti, to a saddle on the peak's western side (there's no official trail, but the route is straightforward). Skirt the northern flank and follow a ridge to a “sheep guzzler,” or park-maintained seasonal water tank, then top out for views over the Vallecito Mountains and the Salton Sea.

Car camp with a view

The vista over miles of wrinkled badlands at Fonts Point draws crowds of wine sippers and sunset gazers most nights: “Fonts is beautiful, but everyone goes there,” Halford says. Better: the similarly sweeping views from Vista del Malpais just to the east. Best: You can drive to within about .1 mile of the overlook (high-clearance car required; 4WD recommended) and set up camp for a solo sunset show chased with mind-blowing stargazing. “It's very unlikely you'll see anyone else,” Halford says. (No reservations or permit required, but keep your vehicle within one car length from the road.)

Desert essentials

Halford never leaves home without a multitool with pliers to extract cholla cactus spines. “No matter where you go, you learn fairly quickly that the cholla really do seem to jump on you,” she says.

Trip planner

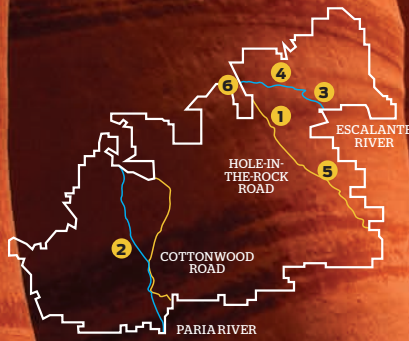
Season November to April for cooler weather (March for flora) **Permit** None **Contact** parks.ca.gov

Dayhike option: Drive to the Tule Wash and explore the Pumpkin Patch, a stretch of eroded sandstone formations.



PHOTOS BY (FROM TOP) MITCH MILLER / FINE EARTH PHOTOGRAPHY, RON NIEBRUGGE / WILDNATUREIMAGES.COM

play list



Play the slots in Zebra Canyon. The 5-mile out-and-back begins at a pullout off Hole-in-the-Rock Road near 37.639428, -111.445808.

Canyon Country

Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah

If it's true desert wilderness you seek—snaking slots, deep red-rock chasms, and secret swimming oases—then you can't do better than this 1.9-million-acre park sprawling across southern Utah. And with temperatures starting to hit their springtime best in March, now is the perfect time for a slickrock adventure.

BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

The insider

Rick Green may be king of the desert rats: As the 16-year owner of the outfitter Excursions of Escalante, he racks up some 200 canyon days every year. Totaled, that's more than six solid years of exploring Escalante's hidden corners.

1. Easy-access dayhike

Even though Big Horn Canyon is just 10 miles outside the town of Escalante, it remains surprisingly quiet: "Everyone's in a hurry to go way the heck out to Coyote Gulch, and they drive right by the canyons near town," Green says. The few who do explore the twisty, redrock canyon's sandstone towers and narrows enter on the north end, but Green prefers the "top-secret entrance": From the unmarked trailhead (just past a corral about 5 miles down Hole-in-the-Rock Road), follow Harris Wash 2 miles to join Big Horn Canyon to the north. Enter Big Horn and take the first fork on your right to snake through a rust-colored slot canyon and reach an open sandstone basin swirled with reds and oranges. Continue exploring up the main fork of Big Horn Canyon as the walls stretch 150 feet above you, then retrace your steps for a 6- to 8-mile hike (depending on how far up you go).

2. Best multiday trip

Looking for the classic Escalante experience—but not in the mood to share? Head for the under-the-radar Upper Paria River area on Green's favorite 33-mile, four-day shuttle hike down a deep (500 feet in spots), sculpted sandstone canyon packed with opportunities for exploring side gorges. "It's wide like the Grand Canyon in some places, there are giant ponderosa pines and cottonwoods to camp under, and if you have a keen eye, there's rock art the length of this hike," Green says. From the pullout off Cottonwood Canyon Road (37.511042, -112.033900), descend along the Paria Wash to the Sheep Creek confluence at about mile 10. Day two, hike 5 miles to Deer Creek and set up camp, then explore Deer Creek and West Oak Creek Canyons just downstream. Day three takes you 8 miles to Hoge Canyon, another worthy side trip (and your last reliable water). Finish with a 10-mile hike to your shuttle car on Cottonwood Canyon Road (37.227822, -111.928922). Target May or early fall for the best conditions and pack a 50-foot handline for navigating the scrambly bits in some side canyons (free permit required; pick up at Cannonville Visitor Center).

3. Top basecamp

The sandy, cottonwood-shaded campsite at the confluence of the Escalante River and Death Hollow tops Green's list for its nearby swimming holes (1.5 miles up Death Hollow Canyon), soaring canyon walls, and abundant rock art. But now it's better than ever, thanks to extensive volunteer work over the past couple of years that has cleared the canyon of its overgrowth of invasive tamarisk and Russian olive. To get there, follow the

Escalante River 7 miles upstream from the Escalante River trailhead, passing a natural rock bridge and panels of pictographs and petroglyphs on the south-facing canyon walls, to heavenly camping at the mouth of Death Hollow (free, self-issue permit required).

4. Secret car campground

Calf Creek Campground, between Boulder and Escalante on US 12, draws campers like flies to honey for its rich red canyon walls, desert spring, and proximity to 126-foot-tall Calf Creek Falls. But just down the road, Deer Creek Campground offers similar highlights "with 2 percent of the people," Green says. From your tent, hike down Deer Creek Canyon for rock art and trout fishing—but no waterfalls. Best bet: Take a dip in Calf Creek Falls, then hightail it to Deer Creek (\$10/night).

5. Slot canyons

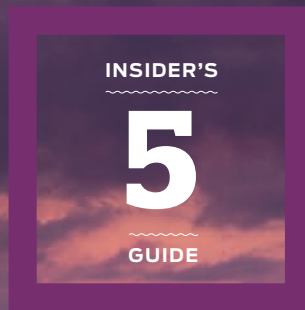
Visiting Escalante without wiggling through a few tight spots is like going to Yellowstone and skipping the geysers. For beginners, Green recommends the 5-miler connecting Peek-a-Boo and Spooky Gulches: "They give everyone a chance to climb and squeeze through classic, twisting slots." From the Dry Fork trailhead, spider through Peek-a-Boo, then hike .5 mile east across the desert to join narrower Spooky (no permit needed for day trips).

6. Post-trip refueling

"Easy choice: Escalante Outfitters," Green says. The guide company/gear shop/restaurant in Escalante serves up tasty pizza (try the ham-and-goat-cheese Big Horn) and local microbrews, including their own, Vagabond Ale. "The maps and cool vibe there make it the place to hang out."

Trip Planner

Season March to May and September to November **Permit** Required (free) for backpacking **Contact** bit.do/escalante-blm



Boots, Bikes & Boats

Nantahala National Forest, North Carolina

This half-million-acre treasure trove of hidden valleys, meandering ridgelines, round-topped peaks, and whitewater rivers hits its prime in late spring, when the whole place dresses up in a color wheel of wildflowers. As if you needed another reason to head into the woods. BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

From Tellico Gap, take the AT 1.4 miles to the Wesser Bald Tower and this killer view of the Appalachians.

The insider
Steve Foster has been hiking this area for 12 years—and retirement from his biology career isn't slowing him down. In fact, it just means more trail time for the Franklin, North Carolina, local. When he's not out trekking or paddling ("three days a week or more," he says), Foster works for the Nantahala Outdoor Center.

Best dayhike
To land see-forever views of the whole forest, you need to reach the open mountaintop meadow on 5,216-foot Siler Bald (not to be confused with Silers Bald in the Smokies). There are two ways to get there: the short way from Wayah Crest (4 miles out and back), and Foster's pick, the 8.4-mile round-trip from Winding Stair Gap. "You go through everything from oak-hickory to rhododendrons to tulip poplar and hemlock," Foster says. "And

when you get to the top, you'll have 360-degree views of the Nantahala Range." From Winding Stair Gap, hop on the Appalachian Trail and head northwest, gaining 1,396 feet en route to the bald. Can't tear yourself away? Camping is allowed up here, no permit required. (Check with rangers beforehand to see if the spring is reliable, or play it safe and BYO water.)



Paddling trip
The best intro to the Appalachians' famed whitewater? "It's gotta be the Lower Nantahala River,"

Foster says. "It offers something for everybody, and there are loads of surfing waves and play spots." The 8-mile stretch from the put-in on Wayah Road to the NOC is mostly Class II, with one Class III rapid—go guided if you're a rookie (starting at \$50; noc.com). Visit in early June for the best flora or early fall for warmer weather (the river flows reliably all year, except November).

Top overnight
The Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness on the Nantahala's northwest side is no secret—"You can't swing a dead cat in Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest without hitting a family there," Foster says—but solitude *is* possible. Head for the Big Fat-Nichols Cove loop in the area's outer reaches for a 7.5-mile trip along a clear stream. "I'm never in a hurry to make miles in this area," Foster says. From the Big Fat Gap trailhead, drop steeply on the Big Fat Trail about a mile,

then turn right on Nichols Cove Trail. Continue on, keeping an eye out for the remnants of pioneer homesteads and graves, to the junction with Slickrock Creek Trail. Turn left and hike to Wildcat Falls (mile 5), a multi-tiered cascade that tumbles 10 feet into a swimming hole. Camp at a social site along Slickrock Creek (bonus: brook trout here). On day two, follow Slickrock Creek upstream to rejoin Big Fat Trail and close the lollipop loop.

Best week
Foster's favorite backcountry escape starts right from his office at the NOC, then loops up and over a series of balds and ridges on a 56-mile trip linking the AT and the Bartram Trail. The payoff: killer high-country sunrises and sunsets, spring wildflowers, and a tour of the Nantahala's finest ecosystems, from hidden valleys and quiet creeks to the

lofty spruce-fir forest. Start at the NOC and climb 7 miles south on the AT to camp at Wesser Bald (pictured), a 4,627-foot meadow with a Civilian Conservation Corps fire tower on top. Day two's 11 miles hug high ridgelines as you continue south on the AT, crossing Tellico Gap and Burningtown Gap en route to 5,342-foot Wayah Bald. Then swing southwest on the AT/Bartram Trail to Wine Spring Bald (camp here). Just past here, the Bartram Trail branches off to the west; on day three, follow it to a streamside campsite on the Nantahala River around Bartram Trail mile 53.5 (10 miles total). Day four traces the Nantahala downstream 10 miles to Bartram Trail mile 63.5; camp near the intersection with the London Bald Trail. Next, hike across Winding Stairs Road and climb to 5,062-foot Cheoah Bald for the best sunrises around (8 miles). Finish by descending 8 more miles on the

PHOTOS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) STEVEN MCBRIDE; ISTOCK.COM (3); COURTESY, NANTAHALA OUTDOOR CENTER

AT to the NOC for burgers, beer, and hot showers, Foster says.

Easy-access waterfall
Dry Falls is anything but, especially after rain: "The whole Cullasaja River pours over a cliff there," Foster says. "You can't help but be inspired by the power of that waterfall if you catch it at high flow." A stroll of a few hundred yards from the parking lot off US 64 gets you to views of the 70-foot gusher splashing into a sharp ravine; follow the trail behind the falls to watch (and feel) the water's rumble from the inside out.



Multisport basecamp
Mountain bikers, paddlers, and anglers will be happy at Tsali Campground, a primo basecamp on Fontana Lake's multipronged peninsula. Nearly 37 miles of moderate bike trails cross rolling ridges and outcroppings with views of the lake and Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Foster's fave is the 8.7-mile Mouse Branch Loop). And for the more amphibious, endless opportunities for exploring Fontana Lake's jigsaw shoreline await from the boat ramp, a short walk from your tent. Pack a rod to cast for walleye, bass, and crappie while you're at it (camping: \$15/night, first-come, first-serve; mountain biking: \$2/person/day).



Trail town
Hometown pride: Franklin gets Foster's nod for the best place to wrap up a day in the Nantahala. Look for him at the new Lazy Hiker Brewing Co. (read about it at backpacker.com/lazyhiker) or the Rock House Lodge, a pub with 18 craft beers on draft tucked inside the Outdoor 76 gear shop. ■



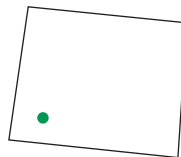
Bag 14,150-foot Mt. Sneffels to catch first light on the Blue Lakes Basin and surrounding San Juans. Below left: Columbine bloom in Blue Lakes Basin.



Crown Jewel

San Juan Mountains, Colorado

Even in a state revered for its wealth of mountains, Colorado's San Juans stand out as wilder, craggier, and lonelier than the rest. September is the perfect time to head above treeline and claim a piece for yourself. BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN



The insider

Photojournalist Donna Ikenberry became a master of peaks while authoring three editions of *Hiking Colorado's Weminuche and South San Juan Wilderness Areas*. "What I love about this place is that you never look down and see a city," she says. "There are no roads, nothing manmade. All you see are mountains."

Wild week

Mostly above treeline, this 51.4-mile section of the Continental Divide Trail cuts across the South San Juan Wilderness from Cumbres Pass to Elwood Pass, winding past meadows smothered with summer blossoms, ice-blue tarns, and a string of Thirteeners. "Herds of elk and the occasional white-tailed ptarmigan make



it extra-special," Ikenberry says. Drop a vehicle at Elwood Pass (no commercial shuttles available) and tackle the route in five days, camping at Trail Lake, Blue Lake, the Adams Fork Trail junction, and the Middle Fork Trail junction. The area is typically accessible July through October, depending on snow levels; September is ideal for avoiding summer's frequent afternoon thunderstorms.

Wildflowers

You know the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy conks out in a field of poppies? That scene might as well be from the San Juan hillsides, where from mid-July to mid-August, columbine, aster, paintbrush, alpine forget-me-nots, and mountain harebells explode onto the

scene. Ikenberry's favorite quick-access route to petal-peeping: the Stairsteps area on the Highline (also called Highland) Trail (#832), which passes through the tundra at 12,000 feet. Take the Hunters Lake Trail (#800) 1.1 miles to the Highline junction and continue to the flora-filled high country atop cliffy volcanic slopes near mile 2.5. Press on along the ridgeline to extend the hike by connecting to the Kitty Creek or Skyline Trails.

Peak experience

After years of gazing at the remote summit of 13,821-foot Rio Grande Pyramid from afar, Ikenberry had to see the up-close view for herself. "When you're on other peaks, you'll look out and say, 'Oh, there's the Pyramid,'" she says. "After seeing it from all over the San Juans for years, I had to actually climb to the top and see the view from there." And what a view it is: The spiky Weminuche Wilderness fans out in all directions, while the spine of the Grenadier Range cuts through, ultimately extending to the Sawatch and La Garita Ranges. Reach the pinnacle on an 18.4-mile out-and-back on the Weminuche (#818) and Skyline Trails. Camp near mile 5.5 on Weminuche Pass before taking the summit spur at mile 8.3. The final .9-mile scramble gains 1,524 feet.

Animal planet

The San Juans' expansive forests and clear streams attract A-list fauna like elk, moose, marmots, black bears, and mountain goats. For a quiet overnight with some of the best wildlife-spotting opps, head to the sites at Goose Lake: They're just far enough off the Continental Divide Trail to remain under the radar, so you won't have to share the primo cutthroat trout fishing or easy-access peakbagging side trips, either. Hike the Ivy Creek Trail (#805) 8.7 miles to the treeline lake and grab a site, then scan for wildlife both big (moose) and small (endangered boreal toads) in the shoreline shrubs. It's another 3.7 miles past Little Goose Lake and 13,148-foot South River Peak to link up to the CDT, where you might see marmots, pikas, and golden eagles.

Stock up

Durango's Bread bakery is Ikenberry's must-go for "the best cookies ever." For gear and maps, swing by Backcountry Experience (bcexp.com).

Trip planner

SEASON July through October in normal snow years **PERMIT** Required (free); self-issue at trailhead kiosk **CONTACT** fs.usda.gov/sanjuan

Desert Oasis Mazatzal Wilderness, Arizona

Think backpacking in Arizona is all about how much water you can carry? Not in the Mazatzal Wilderness, a high-desert preserve straddling the Tonto and Coconino National Forests. Here, springs and creeks knit together steep canyons, Sonoran Desert shrublands, and pine-fir forests—where javelina, black bears, and river otters wander. For perfect weather, now's the time to join them. BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

Travel through the Mazatzal to see saguaros and summits (here, in the Rolls Area by Brownie Tank).

The insider

As an official Arizona Trail Steward for the past four years, Chad Hummer roamed the Mazatzal Wilderness's roughest terrain, checking route conditions and water availability for the Arizona Trail Association. But the born-and-raised desert dweller was already hooked on the Mazatzal's magic: "I love hiking in places with shade and water—a precious commodity out here."

Go for the gold

All year, Hummer looks forward to October in the Mazatzal—fall brings relief from both searing summer temps and monsoon rains, giving way to dry, hiker-friendly weather (expect highs in the mid-70s). Even better: Starting in mid-October, the wilderness pops with bright oranges, yellows, and scarlets as hardwoods show off their fall colors. Hummer's favorite leaf-peeping trek traces Sycamore Creek under a canopy of golden cottonwoods. From the Mormon Grove trailhead, take the Saddle Mountain Trail #91 through a pinyon-juniper canyon 3 miles to the abandoned Story Mine. A few shafts dot the canyon walls (don't enter them), but the real attraction is the medley of shady, seasonal pools. Spend the night, then return the way you came.

Multiday

Circumnavigate 7,903-foot Mazatzal Peak on a 22-mile, three-day loop featuring waterfalls, shady campsites, and reliable springs. You'll score views of the Verde River and the 200-mile-long cliff face of the Mogollon Rim. From the Barnhardt trailhead, take the Y Bar Trail #44 southwest, gradually ascending blocky Mazatzal Peak (experienced scramblers can go for the class 3 summit, but loose rock and thick brush make it challenging). Around mile 5.5, scout a secluded social site under the pines. Next day, turn north on the Arizona Trail for vistas extending to the Verde River and Horseshoe Reservoir. Camp at Horse Camp Seep, a year-round spring. To close the loop, backtrack to the Barnhardt Trail and descend steeply along a canyon wall dotted with cascades.

Swimming hole

With its gushing waterfalls, staircase travertine deposits, and clear springs ("they're 30 feet deep, and you can still see the bottom," Hummer says), Fossil Creek draws the hordes—so much so that in spring and summer, the Forest Service bans camping and requires advance reservations just to park. But starting in October, the crowds fade and restrictions

loosen, opening up one of Arizona's primo escapes to backpackers. From the Fossil Springs trailhead, descend 1,600 feet on the 4-mile Trail #18 to reach the string of swimming holes on Fossil Creek. Splash away, then head at least 1.4 miles west to scout a cottonwood-shaded site at least 100 feet from the creek; camping is allowed west of Fossil Creek Bridge.

Basecamp

Pitch a tent under the pines at the Peeley trailhead, then spend a few days exploring the three trails that spiral out from there (high-clearance vehicle required; 4WD after rains). "There are awesome views overlooking the Mogollon Rim to the north and the valley below, and the higher elevation (6,000-plus feet) makes it nice and cool at night," Hummer says. Grab an impacted site with a fire ring (BYO water), then pick a direction for your next day's adventure: You can trace a ridgeline on the Mazatzal Divide Trail, follow a lush waterway on the Deer Creek Trail, or check out an old mine on the Cornucopia Trail.

Trip planner

SEASON September through April **PERMIT** Required (free); self-register at trailheads **CONTACT** bit.do/mazatzal

INSIDER'S

6

GUIDE

Bluegrass Escape

Daniel Boone National Forest, Kentucky

The wilderness draped across eastern Kentucky's Cumberland Plateau is a hiker's playground of sandstone cliffs, waterfalls, swimming holes, and rock arches.

BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

The insider

Matt Able, Trails Program Manager for the Daniel Boone, fell in love with the national forest as a college kid who spent his spare weekends climbing in the Red River Gorge. These days, he spends his workdays exploring the forest's trails.

Waterfall hike

The Daniel Boone is riddled with lacy waterfalls, but 40-foot Van Hook Falls is Able's favorite because you can walk right behind it. And on a sticky summer day, nothing beats the shoulder-pounding massage you'll get standing under it. To feel the spray, start the 6-mile Rockcastle Narrows East Loop clockwise. At the junction near mile 1.5, cross the bridge over Van Hook Branch to reach the grotto cradling the falls. Grab a perch on one of the boulders lining the stream to dip your toes in the water, or poke around the cool cavern behind the cascade, before closing the loop on Rockcastle Narrows.

Top overnight

A pair of natural sandstone arches, a bluff-lined river, and the state's tallest waterfall—the only way to make this 13-mile loop more *Kentucky* is to add a flask of bourbon. Hike west on Lick Creek Trail #631 in the forest's southern corner, dropping under rocky overhangs to a junction. Take the .5-mile spur to see an 80-foot cascade plunge over an amphitheater, then continue on to wide Princess Falls at mile 3.4. Swing north along the banks of the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River, crossing into the Big South Fork National Recreation Area.



See 40-foot Copperas Falls by following the creek of the same name about 2 miles on a social path from the trailhead off KY 715 (near the concrete bridge).

Pick up the Yahoo Falls Loop to see the state's tallest waterfall, a 113-footer, then turn east on Yahoo Arch Trail #602. The ridgeline between miles 7 and 8 offers good dispersed camping in the pine-oak woods. Next day, hike past 70-foot-long Yahoo Arch before hooking up with the southbound trail #612. Follow it back to the Sheltoewe Trace Trail before reconnecting with the Lick Creek Trail.

Best views

Land 360-degree vistas atop Auxier Ridge, a sandstone spine in the northern Daniel Boone's cliffy Red River Gorge. A 6-mile loop via the Auxier Ridge and Double Arch Trails will land you atop a stone fin with views that stretch across the gorge to Courthouse Rock and Raven Rock (two islands in a sea of lush foliage), Haystack Rock (which resembles a giant beehive), and Double Arch. Nab up-close views of the arch-within-an-arch later in the loop.

Best solitude

Alone time in the northern stretches of the forest can be hard to come by in summer, but not in the Beaver Creek Wilderness, a hardwood forest circled by sandstone cliffs and laced with creeks. Able's favorite

path in is the 6.5-mile (one-way), stream-riddled Middle Ridge Trail #518. "I'm a glutton for rough trails—the rockier and tougher it is, the more I enjoy it," he says. Take it along Beaver Creek, keeping an eye out for foxes and black bears. Scout a site after mile 4.5 to turn it into an overnight, or link up with Trail #512 at mile 6.5 and continue deeper into the wilderness.

Multiday trek

For the full Daniel Boone experience, you can't beat the 290-mile Sheltoewe Trace Trail, which bisects the national forest from north to south like the guyline on a pup tent. The long path links countless area highlights like cliff-top overlooks, wild creeks, waterfalls, and habitats for deer, bald eagles, and river otters. Able's pick for the primo miles with the fewest road crossings: the 70-mile stretch from Holly Bay Marina to the Great Meadows Campground on the Tennessee border (do it in five to seven days). "In late May and June, you're sure to see blooming rhododendrons and trillium," Able says.

Trip planner

SEASON Year-round **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** fs.usda.gov/dbnf

See the sun rise over Palo Duro from the Lighthouse Trail.



Color Country

Striated hoodoos and redrock cliffs distinguish Palo Duro, the second-largest canyon in the U.S. Hike this Texas secret now to enjoy mild springtime temperatures and wildflower-dotted crags. BY KELLY BASTONE



The insider

As head of the trail-building crew known as the Palo Duro Corps of Engineers, Chris Podzemny scouts new routes and uncovers old ones in this 120-mile-long canyon. He knows every square inch of Palo Duro, on trail and off.

Uncharted overnight

To protect archaeological sites (Comanche and Kiowa tribes lived here until the 1870s), backpacking in this 27,000-acre park is restricted to the southeastern corner. Most folks will stay in the north end of the area, but don't follow them. Instead, head over to the park's roadless southern boundary, where you'll find a rare native grassland. Deer and aoudad sheep (as well as natural wildfires) keep the grass to knee height, yielding views of the copper-colored Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River and the banded, 800-foot-high cliffs. Try this 6.4-mile out-and-back from the Equestrian Camp: Follow the Equestrian Trail for 1.7 miles, then continue southeast cross-country for 1.5 more miles and camp on the north side of

the fenceline. Keep an eye out for bobcats and deer—and petroglyphs. The park protects the exact location of the rock art, but Podzemny says they depict a chief wearing a red war bonnet.

Secret car campground

Formerly a day-use area, the 18-site Juniper Campground opened in summer 2016—so new that it doesn't appear on many park maps. "The sites feel private and you get great views of 3,400-foot-tall Fortress Cliff," Podzemny says. Plus, it's surrounded by "all the best trails."

Pretty vista

"My favorite view is from Fortress Rim," Podzemny says. "From 800 feet above the river, you can see the entire canyon

and all its colors—the ash layer from the Yellowstone eruption, and the Tecovas layer that ranges from purple to gold." Get there by hiking 2.4 miles on the steep Rock Garden Trail (a once-forgotten route that Podzemny resurrected in 2011), then head 1.4 miles northwest on the Rylander Fortress Cliff Trail to the viewpoint.

Big-league bouldering

The jumble of house-size boulders below Fortress Cliff offer an array of climbing problems for experts. The Boulder Gardens (opposite the Sunflower Day Use Area) is where you'll find the classic "High on Fungi" problem, a V5+ on a mushroom rock. Beginners: Hike .5 mile up the Givens, Spicer, Lowry (GSL) Trail.

Relics

Native Americans lived in Palo Duro for 1,200 years, and you can still see mortar holes they made. Hike the 3.8-mile GSL Trail and look for the little bowls about .5 mile in, on the left. "People used big poles and metate stones to grind beans and grains, and over the years, all that pounding created deep, round holes in

the rock," Podzemny explains. "They'd fill the hole with water and food, heat rocks on a fire nearby, and drop the stones into the hole to cook their meal."

Slot canyons

"Outrageously fun," is how Podzemny describes Palo Duro's slot canyons. His favorite awaits at the end of the Duck Pond Spur (3 miles from the Rock Garden trailhead). Prepare for wriggling: Though just 10 to 20 feet deep, it measures only 4 feet across at the widest points.

Wildflower ramble

"Every few years we get an explosion of sunflowers," Podzemny says. Admire them along the aptly named 1.2-mile Sunflower Trail on the canyon floor. Peak bloom depends on rainfall; check the park's Facebook page for updates.

Trip planner

SEASON March through May and September through November
PERMIT Required (\$12) for overnights
CONTACT bit.do/palo-duro-canyon-sp



Collared lizard

PHOTOS BY ROB GREEBON PHOTOGRAPHY (TOP); QILIAN YU / 500PX



From 1,942-foot Deasey Mountain, see Katahdin to the south.

Terra Incognita

Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, Maine

We welcomed the Northeast's most pristine watershed to the national park system last August with itchy feet. Now go see what the fuss is about. Hint: old-growth forests, craggy peaks, hidden waterfalls, and A-list wildlife.

BY RYAN WICHELNS

The insider

What is now a national monument was until last fall Lucas St. Clair's backyard. "I spent my childhood canoeing, hunting, and fishing here," says the lifelong Mainer. His mother, Burt's Bee's founder Roxanne Quimby, donated it to the federal government last year. In 2011, St. Clair took responsibility for the campaign to turn it into a park and spent his days showing it to congresspeople, National Park Service reps, school groups, and more. In the process, he's hiked, skied, and biked every inch of the park's 150 miles of trail "and then some."

Cascade hike

Waterfalls are a major part of Katahdin Woods and Waters, and according to St. Clair, the best is Orin Falls on the remote Wassataquoik ("wass-ata-cook") Stream. Take the only trail from Loop Road (between mile markers 15 and 16) and follow it 3 miles to the series of small drops and pools. Scout an established campsite

along the riverbank because you'll want to linger: "I've walked a long way up and down that river," St. Clair says. "It's a spiritual place."

Multisport

You could simply hike 1,942-foot Deasey Mountain—the monument's tallest peak—via the Katahdin Lake Trail and you wouldn't regret it, with its adventurous ford of the Wassataquoik and a trek through glacially carved hillsides. But you'd be missing out on a quintessential Maine multisport journey: "You should always start a hike in a canoe," St. Clair says. Put in at Lunksoos Camp and paddle 2 miles upstream on the East Branch of the calm Penobscot to the Big Seboeis campsite. Stash your boat and hike 4 miles on Old Telos Tote Road (which turns into the International Appalachian Trail) through a silver-maple floodplain and old-growth hemlocks to the bald summit. See forested Lunksoos Mountain (2.6 miles out and



back from here), the ragged Traveller Range, and, of course, the Katahdin massif. Head back the same way.

Thru-hike

Locals know the Appalachian Trail doesn't end at the Knife Edge. It keeps going 138 miles to Canada, bisecting Katahdin Woods and Waters. St. Clair calls the 27-mile section of the International Appalachian Trail (IAT) through the monument a classic: Start on the Loop Road and hike it north, taking the Katahdin Lake Trail (IAT) across the Wassataquoik and up Deasey (see "Multisport," left). Drop down to the Lunksoos Lean-to at mile 12.9 before continuing 4.5 miles to Old Telos Tote Road, which parallels the East Branch. Still on the IAT, pick a campsite near a waterfall: 20-foot Grand Pitch (mile 23.4) or 15-foot Haskell Rock (mile 24.9). Next day, close out the hike at Haskell Gate.

Fauna

Black bears are a common sight when raspberries are ripe (July and August), but it's the moose that people come to Maine to see. According to St. Clair, you can find them just about anywhere. Even the 16-mile Loop Road is a hot spot for the ungulates: "They're so big, they can't plow through the dense forests," he says.

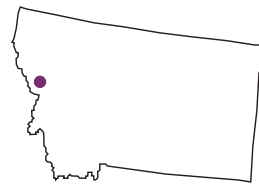
Trip planner

SEASON Year-round; expect snow October to April, but the roads and trails are skiable
PERMIT None **CONTACT** nps.gov/kaww



The Great Wide Open

Lolo National Forest, Montana



In the stretch of mountains spanning northwest Montana up to the Idaho border, trout swim legendary rivers like the Blackfoot and the Clark Fork; wolverines, grizzly bears, and moose amble through the evergreen forests; and locals complain it's too crowded if there's one other car at the trailhead. In short, it's paradise—especially in early summer, when wildflowers bloom and before August's wildfire season rolls around. BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN



Purple phlox dots Packer Meadows, a mile east of the Lolo Pass Visitor Center.

The insider

If you live in northwest Montana and enjoy the outdoors, you either know Alden Wright or wish you did. The lifelong Missoulian holds (or has held) leadership positions in the Rocky Mountaineers hiking club, the Missoula Nordic Ski Club, and the Thursday Night Ride mountain biking group, amassing decades' worth of knowledge about local trails. For the past 30 years, Wright has celebrated his birthday by leading an ascent up 10,157-foot Trapper Peak—this last April with 75 candles on his cake.

Dayhike

The proposed Great Burn wilderness area, a 275,000-acre zone straddling the Montana-Idaho border, draws its name from the catastrophic 1910 wildfires that torched 3 million acres in less than three days. Lucky side effect: The burn kept out logging and development for a century, preserving this now-recovered expanse of subalpine terrain, lush valleys, craggy cliffs, and glittering lakes. Wright's favorite day-size sampler is the 7.2-mile out-and-back up to Heart and Pearl Lakes, a one-two punch of 6,000-foot tarns tucked in rocky cirques.

Multisport trip

The best way to cover 45 miles in a weekend? Two-wheeled assist. Mountain bikes are allowed on the first 14 miles of the Main Rattlesnake Corridor (Trail 515) in the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area. Pedal up the wide gravel path along Rattlesnake Creek to the Rattlesnake Wilderness boundary (a manageable 1,250 feet of elevation gain), then stash your bike and start climbing into the lake-dotted high country on foot. Follow Trail 534 along Lake Creek and switchback up to the trio of Carter, Roosevelt, and McKinley Lakes—all excellent spots to pitch a tent and cast for westslope cutthroat trout. Next day, swing south on Trail 517 to climb 8,057-foot Mosquito Peak for views of the wilderness's rocky ridgelines and snow-speckled summits before descending to Wright's favorite camp spot, Sanders Lake. The triangular tarn sits beneath a sharp ridge with infinity-pool views. (Find an established site near the shore.) To close the three-day circuit, follow Wrangle Creek on trail back to your bike.

Best wildflowers

April through June, find a display of golden arrowleaf balsamroot, fuchsia bitterroots, purple phlox and pasqueflowers, and magenta shooting stars on the hills around Missoula. But while you can hardly hike a trail within 10 miles of town without tripping over those blooms, finding Wright's favorite flower—the rare, pale-pink steer's head—takes a little more sleuthing. Best bet: Hit the Rattlesnake Wilderness's Stuart Peak Trail “about two weeks after the snow melts on the peak,” Wright says (typically late May, depending on snowpack). Scan the meadow about 4.5 miles up for the curly-headed blooms that really do resemble horned cows (pictured below). Bag 7,960-foot Stuart by continuing another 4.5 miles.



Steer's head flower

Wildlife hike

There are no sure things in wildlife-watching. But if you're the betting type, chances are good on Petty Mountain in the Grave Creek Range, where a 150-strong herd of bighorn sheep frequents the 7,270-foot peak's precipitous slopes. Scan for the bighorns across a narrow canyon just .5 mile in on the Petty Pasture Trail. Keep going and look for them again as you climb above treeline en route to the summit (13 miles round-trip). Bonus: You might also spy moose near Petty Creek or elk higher up on the arid slopes.

Posthike refuel

Wright favors the dark beers at Lolo Peak Brewing Company, a microbrewery in the small town of Lolo with a sunny timber deck outside and Norman Maclean quotes embedded in the bar inside. For something lighter, try the seasonal Cherry Kriek Lambic. And if your hike ends late, you're in luck: Unlike many other Montana breweries, Lolo Peak has a license to serve past 8 p.m.

Trip planner

SEASON April through October; June is best for flora **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** fs.usda.gov/lolo

PHOTOS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) HEIDI WALKER; ISTOCK.COM; ELIZABETH BOEHM. TEXT BY AMY ECKERT



Get this view from from the 2-mile trail that links Fisk Mill and Stump Beach Coves in Salt Point State Park.

Sea World Sonoma Coast, California

A wild shoreline and pristine beaches make Sonoma County's coast a primo getaway any time of year. Explore its two state parks and more than two dozen named beaches in summer, when morning fog often gives way to dazzling afternoons—and you'll want to come back again and again.

BY KELLY BASTONE

The insider

Outdoor photographer Rachid Dahnoun makes weekly trips to Sonoma's coast to fill his portfolio with images of seaside cliffs and towering redwoods. He's covered every inch of the 30-mile coastline from Salt Point to Bodega Bay.

Redwoods and seashells

Dahnoun likes to link groves of sky-tickling redwoods with teeming tide pools by hiking the Pomo Canyon Trail to Shell Beach. The 7-mile round-trip starts from the redwood grove at the Pomo Canyon Campground (above Willow Creek) before

traversing coastal hills en route to one of this area's best spots for discovering urchins, hermit crabs, and anemones at low tide.

Cliffs and breakers

Enjoy cool ocean breezes and panoramic views of the surf churning below black cliffs on the Kortum Trail. The 8-mile out-and-back begins at Wright's Beach and heads north, rambling across meadow-topped headlands to Blind Beach. Scan for shiny patches on the sides of the stone monoliths atop the bluffs; Dahnoun thinks they were woolly mammoth back-scratchers.

Oceanside car campground

All 27 sites in Wright's Beach Campground (\$35/night) offer fast access to the Kortum

Trail, the hiking path to Duncan's Landing (an overlook above the most violent waves), and Coyote Hole (a Paleolithic rock structure that housed native Pomo and Coast Miwok people thousands of years ago). Aim for sites 5 through 9, which sit right on the black-sand beach, for unmatched ocean views from your tent door.

Seal encounter

A colony of 50 to 100 harbor seals occupies a peninsula between the Pacific Ocean and the Russian River in Goat Rock State Beach. Visit them at the end of a 5-mile hike north along the trailless beach. In August, they often splash in the estuary, where they're safe from sharks.

Trip planner

SEASON Year-round **PERMIT** Day-use fees vary park to park **CONTACT** parks.ca.gov

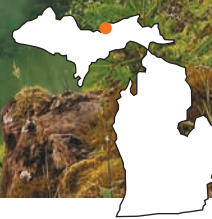
PHOTOS BY RACHID DAHNOUN (LEFT); ISTOCK.COM / ANTHONY ROSENBERG





Water's Edge Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, Michigan

On Lake Superior's southern shore, sandstone meets the unrelenting waves and weather of the world's largest freshwater lake. The result: caves, arches, pillars, and cliffs that stretch for miles along the shoreline. Better yet: The colorful coast gets even more vibrant this month, when its blufftop hardwoods flare up in a palette of ruby, gold, and tangerine. BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN



Get this view of Miners Castle on the North Country National Scenic Trail near the visitor center.

The insider

Few can claim to know the nooks and crannies of Michigan's wild Lake Superior shoreline better than Michael Neiger. After decades spent exploring the region as a volunteer canoeing and backpacking guide for groups like the Sierra Club, a lead investigator for Michigan Backcountry Search and Rescue, and author of *Exploring Pictured Rocks: West Half*, Neiger has logged nearly as many days in "the bush" as he has in civilization.

Top dayhike

The loop circling Chapel and Mosquito Beaches is "the best cliffside hiking in the Midwest," Neiger says—and that's not even the half of it. This 10.4-miler also encompasses a pair of waterfalls, wavy sandstone formations, and pristine, singing-sand beaches. From the Chapel Road trailhead, hike counterclockwise through abundant patches of orange-yellow jewelweed (blooming late summer into fall) to 60-foot Chapel Falls. Continue on to see Chapel Rock at mile 2.1, a sculpted

sandstone pillar marking the start of Chapel Beach. Swing west along the sandy stretch (when it's dry, the sand will squeak or "sing" underfoot), then ascend the lakeside cliffs to stroll 200 feet above the shoreline to "the most spectacular part of the park." The escarpment offers views of the cliffs' orange stripes, rutted coves, and sea caves in both directions. Descend to Mosquito Beach (usually bug-free in September), then head back into the woods to pass Mosquito Falls—a wide shelf where you might spy river otters—en route to the trailhead.

Multiday trek

Pictured Rocks is a long, skinny park, and the North Country National Scenic Trail spans the whole thing—making it the best bet for extended backpacking. Neiger's favorite segment links Sand Point to Little Beaver Lake for a leisurely 22-mile, four-day shuttle route. From Sand Point (beachy and sheltered, it's a top spot for a dip in the lake), follow the NCT northeast along the bluff to Miners Castle (pictured above).

Take the short spur to a series of overlooks to check out the solitary sandstone pillar, then continue down to Miners Beach. Camp at the cliff-top Potato Patch site at mile 7 (there's no water up there, so top off at Miners Beach 4 mile back). Day two, hike the shoreline section of the Chapel-Mosquito Beach Loop (see "Top Dayhike," previous) and snag a coveted site in the pines near Chapel Beach for a grade-A Lake Superior sunset (reservation required). Follow the bluff 4.3 miles to the sandy Coves site for night three, nabbing views of 70-foot Spray Falls along the way. Finish by connecting with the spur to Little Beaver Lake in the Beaver Basin Wilderness and hiking out to your shuttle car.

Beach ramble

The 5-square-mile expanse of Grand Sable Dunes, a rare "perched dune" system of sand deposited on top of a bluff, "will blow your mind," Neiger says. "You'll think you're in the desert." For the best access, start at the Sable Falls lot and head 1 mile north to the lake to wander through the fragile

PHOTOS BY MICHIGAN NUT PHOTOGRAPHY



Kayakers can explore the innards of Miners Castle. To do it, put in at Miners Beach near the visitor center.

dune ecosystem, a rolling, sandy landscape dotted with stands of jack pine.

Best car campground

Tent-door lake views, epic sunsets, a sugary beach: Midwestern camping doesn't get much better than Twelvemile Beach. The first-come, first-serve sites (\$14-\$16/night) sit on an elevated plateau shaded by white birch and fill up fast, so show up early and beeline it for sites 12, 15, 16, 24, 25, or 26 for the best water views.

Après

At Falling Rock Café & Bookstore in Munising, locals hang their own coffee mugs on the walls, smoked whitefish headlines the menu, and a "super selection" of ice cream replenishes lost calories, Neiger says.

Trip planner

SEASON May through October; fall foliage typically peaks late September through mid-October. **PERMIT** Required for backpacking (\$5/person per night plus \$15 reservation fee); obtain at recreation.gov. Car campgrounds are \$16/night. **SHUTTLE** ALTRAN (altranbus.com/backpack.html) and Trailspotters (trailspotters.com) both run hiker drop-offs and pickups. Prices vary. **CONTACT** nps.gov/piro

15 WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

EASTERN SIERRA NEVADA, CALIFORNIA

The geologic forces that built the Range of Light followed two different blueprints: On the west side, a long, gradual slope climbs from the Central Valley to the Sierra Crest. But on the east, the divide plummets dramatically to the flats, creating a wonderland of granite peaks and alpine lakes guarded by punishingly steep approaches. High summer is the best time to tackle the wilder side, and with topography like that, what are you waiting for?
By Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan

THE INSIDER

SP Parker has been exploring the eastern Sierra and its five wilderness areas and three national parks—up to 100 days a season—for a lifetime. A Kiwi by birth, Parker fled soggy New Zealand for sunny California almost 40 years ago and has been working as a mountaineering and climbing guide ever since, nowadays for his Bishop-based outfit, Sierra Mountain Center.

PERFECT DAYHIKE

Why settle for one gorgeous, peak-rimmed alpine lake when you can have six? Parker's favorite day trip strings together a series of sparkly tarns in the John Muir Wilderness—plus a quiet jaunt over Table Mountain—in an 8-mile shuttle hike. Start on the Tye Lakes Trail and huff nearly 2,000 feet to the first four lakes at 11,000 feet, earning views of the Inconsonable Range as you climb. At the fourth Tye Lake, pick up the trail to Table Mountain and cross the southern end of the flat-topped peak to connect to the George Lake Trail. You'll drop 2,500 feet, much of it via the steep switchbacks above George Lake, and traipse through high meadows to link to the Sabrina Lake Trail and your shuttle car. (The trailheads are just 9 miles apart, so you can try to hitch a ride back in lieu of a shuttle.)

BITE-SIZE JOHN MUIR TRAIL

If the whole JMT is a distant dream, this three-night sampler will ease the wait. The 28.1-mile route starts high (8,322 feet), getting you to the good stuff without as much of the usual eastern Sierra elevation penalty, and summer public

transit makes for an easy shuttle. Bonus: Because you start in the Ansel Adams Wilderness and hike into Yosemite, permits are slightly easier to land (but still apply early; see Trip Planner). From the Agnew Meadows trailhead (the first stop on the mandatory bus from Mammoth Mountain Adventure Center; \$7), take the High Trail along the eastern edge of the San Joaquin River canyon, enjoying views of Banner Peak and the thorny Minarets. Head northwest to Badger Lakes, then drop to lakeside camping—and excellent swimming—at Thousand Island Lake, mile 7.8. Pick up the JMT from here for a mellow second day that crosses Island Pass to the Rush Creek drainage; Parker recommends taking a side trail to Davis Lakes and camping in the shadow of 12,303-foot Mt. Davis (mile 11.3). Day three carries you over Donahue Pass into Yosemite's Lyell Canyon, a wide, glacially carved granite valley, where you can scout a quiet campsite on the east side of Lyell Fork near the Ireland Lake Trail junction (if the water is low enough to ford; it usually is by August). Hike out to Tuolumne Meadows and catch the YARTS bus back to Mammoth Lakes (\$9; yarts.com).

BEST PEAK

There's no casual route to the top of 13,986-foot Mt. Humphreys, which is just how Parker likes it. The "easy" way, a class 4 scramble over sliding talus, starts by tracing Bishop Creek along a necklace of lakes over Piute Pass. Set up basecamp in the northern part of Humphreys Basin, about 6.5 miles in, then tackle the western ridge (alpine know-how required).

Visit Sailor Lake on an 11-mile out-and-back from the Lake Sabrina trailhead.



SIERRA SOLITUDE

The glories of the Sierra are no secret, but that doesn't mean you have to share. When Parker wants to shake the masses, he hightails it to Kings Canyon National Park's Marion Lake. "It's a little gem of a lake surrounded by high peaks, as deep into the Sierra Nevada as you can get—and you have to work really hard to do it," he says. It'll take you two or three days to reach the heavenly blue pool that splashes with trout, but every step is worth it. Start at the John Muir Wilderness's Taboose Pass trailhead and bust out

6,000 feet of elevation gain over 8 miles to the pass; drop into the national park's South Fork of the Kings River Canyon and camp. Day two, ascend 2,200 feet over 11,730-foot Cartridge Pass to a granite-framed Lake Basin, some 5 miles away. Camp here, or make Marion Lake via 2 miles of simple off-trail navigation, and stay awhile: You've earned it.

ANCIENT TREES, BRIGHT STARS

Parker's favorite Sierra car campground isn't actually in the

Sierra—it's across the Owens Valley, in the White Mountains, with an excellent view of the Sierra, including Wheeler Crest and the Palisades. The remoteness and open, high-altitude (8,600 feet) setting of the Grandview Campground (\$5/night) makes for primo stargazing, and it's just down the road from the Schulman Grove of bristlecone pines. Hike the 4.5-mile Methuselah Trail to see a 4,850-plus-year-old bristlecone, one of Earth's oldest living things.

POSTHIKE TOAST

Bishop locals replay the day's greatest hits at Mountain Rambler Brewery (mountainramblerbrewery.com), a pub with live music and great vegetarian options (try the tempah Reuben, Parker says).

TRIP PLANNER

SEASON June to September
PERMIT Required (price varies); obtain from the agency that manages your trailhead. Reserve on recreation.gov. **CONTACTS** www.fs.usda.gov/inyo; nps.gov/yose; nps.gov/seki

If the mountains feel out of reach, reach for your mouse and scroll to the top of select summits via 360-degree videos in our growing library. Find an e-climb near (or far from) you at backpacker.com/360.



See Mize Mill Falls on a short hike from the Sipsey Picnic Area.



Southern Charm

Bankhead National Forest, Alabama

The hardwood forests, scalped cliffs, and sandstone caves of northern Alabama are good any time of year, but they're hard to beat with fall's mild temperatures and electric foliage. It's time to reap the rewards of the South's best season. BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN



The insider

The Bankhead—which includes the Sipsey Wilderness—is Janice Barrett's backyard. And as outreach coordinator for the advocacy nonprofit Wild South, she takes full advantage of it. Barrett leads hikes exploring the wilderness's caves and ridges all year.

Canyon country

The swimming hole below 40-foot Caney Creek Falls is no secret. But most hikers stop at the falls 1 mile in—leaving the off-trail extension deeper into the canyon all for you. Continue downstream on the social trail along the South

Fork of Caney Creek another .8 mile to reach a 20-foot cascade Barrett calls Lower Caney Creek Falls (there's no official name). From here, the trail disappears and the sandstone walls deepen to 50 feet. Hike on and keep your eyes peeled for shallow overhangs; these rock shelters were used by prehistoric inhabitants 10,000 years ago. Turn back at the junction with the North Fork of Caney Creek for a 5.9-mile out-and-back.

Golden hour dayhike

Toward the end of October, you'll find a fiery palette of fall colors on any trail in the Bankhead. But for a view

that's next-level idyllic, make like a photographer and chase the light: "The Rippey Trail runs north-south, and on a fall afternoon, when the sun is shining from the west, it's a beautiful scene," Barrett says. For a 7.5-mile out-and-back, follow Rippey Trail 201 along a ridge thick with northern red oak, hickory, sugar maple, and American beech. Then hang a left on Trail 206 to descend into the Sipsey Fork canyon, a short-but-steep drop with expansive views over the forest's mosaic of reds, oranges, and yellows. Trace the river for a half mile, then head back on Trail 206 to link back to 201.

Off-trail overnight

In the Sipsey's little-tracked northern reaches, "you can drop down any canyon, follow a stream, and find beautiful places to camp," Barrett says. Her top pick for those with navigation chops: the roughly 5-mile, partially off-trail loop linking the Lick Branch and Thompson Creek areas. From the Braziel trailhead, immediately head cross-country to the southwest and follow the unnamed creek. Pick your way down into the canyon, where ankle-deep Lick Branch flows between sandstone walls and limestone outcroppings. Scout an established campsite under

the trees, then ditch your pack and explore the side canyons riddling the area—you might find unnamed waterfalls and more rock shelters. Next day, head west to Thompson Creek, then climb Warlick Ridge back east to hook up with the Gum Pond Trail back to the road and your car.

Multiday epic

Get a grand tour of the Sipsey on Barrett's favorite trip: a four-day, 40-mile loop that meanders through each of the region's ecosystems, from upland forests to sandstone canyons to fern-filled gullies. The logistics are a bit intense, but it's worth it: You also get abundant seasonal waterfalls (November through May) and a firsthand look at the area's human history, from post-Ice Age shelters to 19th-century whiskey stills. Follow Trail 203 from the Flannigan trailhead on the wilderness's eastern edge down to Borden Creek, then link Trails 207, 208, and 210 to camp under the forest canopy near mile 9.5. Day two's hike stays high on a ridge for almost 7 miles, connecting Trails 210 and 223. Day three, follow Trails 208 and 206 past Eye of the Needle (a tight boulder squeeze) and Ship Rock (a prominent, prow-shaped bluff) before taking Trail 209 east along the Sipsey Fork. To finish, link Trails 209, 200, and 203.

Birder's campground

Avian enthusiasts pitch their tents at the quiet, 13-site Brushy Lake Campground for a peek at great blue herons, kingfishers, and, in spring and fall, migratory species such as orchard orioles, yellow-throated vireos, and warblers. Not among the binocular set? Launch a kayak or canoe from the campground and paddle the day away on 35-acre Brushy Lake or 10 miles along Class I and II Brushy Creek to Hickory Grove Road (portage around the dam on the southern shore).

Trip planner

SEASON Year-round **PERMITS** None **CAR CAMPING** \$5/night (first-come, first-serve) **MAPS** Bankhead National Forest and Sipsey Wilderness by Carto-Craft Maps (\$5 each); cartocraft.com **CONTACT** bit.do/bankhead-nf

16 WATERFRONT PROPERTY

ALPINE LAKES WILDERNESS, WASHINGTON

Yes, the peaks here are something to behold. And there's no way to downplay views of Pacific Northwest forests and Cascadian volcanoes. But look a little lower in the aptly named Alpine Lakes Wilderness, and you'll see the real prize: 700 crystalline tarns. The sharp topography hides pockets of water deep in basins, high on slopes, and everywhere in between. Here, it's about the swimmable, campable, and jaw-droppable lakes as much as it is the climbable summits. And at the end of summer, the water sure is fine. *By Ryan Wichelns*

THE INSIDER

Craig Romano likes to say hiking is his livelihood. The author of more than 20 outdoor guidebooks, he has walked more than 25,000 miles in Washington alone for research. His latest goal? Discovering off-the-beaten-path trips in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness, which, just one hour from Seattle, is rightly popular with Pacific Northwest hikers.

WEEKEND SOLITUDE

The Enchantments, on the north side of the 400,000-acre wilderness, attract hikers like ants to honey, leaving the nearby Chain and Doelle (“dool-ee”) Lakes comparatively vacant. The 24-mile out-and-back there follows the Pacific Crest Trail from Stevens Pass for 4.9 miles before veering south onto the Icicle Creek Trail at fir- and cedar-trimmed Josephine Lake. Head 3.2 miles down the valley before turning east up the Chain Lakes Trail and climbing 2,000 feet to the first of the three Chain Lakes at mile 10.5. A serrated ridge frames the pool to the north, and 6,846-foot Bulls Tooth looms above it to the south. Keep going up to the 6,200-foot pass that separates the Chains from the Doelles for views of the Enchantments' multi-peaked Mt. Stewart. Drop north off the pass on-trail to visit the twin Doelles, ringed with granite and meadows, at mile 12. Camp on the bigger lake's north side.

CUSTOM HIKE

Not sure how far you want to go? Build your own dayhike starting with Dorothy Lake, the first in a series of alpine pools. From the end of Miller River Road, it's an easy 1.8

miles to the 1.5-mile-long tarn, which reflects Big Snow Mountain at the far end when the weather's calm. Most casual hikers stop here—you don't. The string of lakes that follows—Bear, Deer, Snoqualmie—is one of Romano's favorites because it's so quick to leave the crowds. Continue on the Dorothy Lake Trail, tracing high above the east and south shores, to reach much smaller Bear Lake and its quiet beachfront camping near mile 4.8. From there, you can continue to Deer and Snoqualmie Lakes at miles 5.3 and 6.3, respectively.

MOUNTAIN GOAT SANCTUARY

Go goat watching in the area around Tuck and Robin Lakes. The shaggy, white animals congregate on the talus slopes of 7,142-foot Granite Mountain, high above treeline, late spring through summer. (Go in May and June to try to spy babies.) To get there, tackle the 14.4-mile out-and-back from the Tucquala Meadows trailhead. Weave through a forested valley before beginning the climb up to the lake basin at mile 4.5. At the twin tarns, scan for mountain goats balancing on boulders and lingering near snowfields. Find a wind-protected campsite before returning the way you came.

BEST VIEW

Climb any mountain in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness and you're pretty much guaranteed a viewshed of water, ice, granite, and spruce, so it's hard to go wrong. But Romano's favorite is the view from Surprise Mountain, which stretches north across a broad, tunnel-like glacial valley, all the way to 10,541-foot Glacier Peak, 30 miles away. Best

Visit the stained-glass waters of the Thunder Mountain Lakes on an 8-mile piece of the Pacific Crest Trail from Tunnel Creek. Or, scramble 1.2 miles up from Surprise Lake (see Best View).



part? The route there is just as good: Take the Surprise Creek Trail 4 miles south from U.S. 2 in Scenic to the path's namesake. (Stop for a swim; at just 4,500 feet, it's relatively warm.) Keep going on the Pacific Crest Trail, crossing Surprise Mountain's north ridge to the Deception Lakes at mile 8. From there, climb up its southern flank on the Old Cascade Crest and Surprise Mountain Trails, summiting near mile 10. (Want another Romano favorite? Tackle the 8-mile out-and-back to Granite Mountain for fire lookout-assisted vistas south to Mt. Rainier. The trailhead is off I-90 on NF-9034.)



APRÈS

Leavenworth is the undisputed capital of the Alpine Lakes, but Romano prefers the quieter town of Roslyn for post-hike eats. His favorite: Basecamp Books and Bites, which sells—you guessed it—hiking books and food.

TRIP PLANNER

SEASON June to October
PERMITS Most trailheads require a Northwest Forest Pass (\$30; store.usgs.gov/forest-pass) and backcountry permit (free; self-issue). **CONTACT** www.fs.usda.gov/okawen

17 EMPIRE BUILDING LONG PATH, NEW YORK & NEW JERSEY

Step off the subway and into a wilderness sparkling with lacy waterfalls and craggy summits—all thanks to the Long Path, a 358-mile work in progress stretching from 175th Street to John Boyd Thacher State Park upstate and linking the Hudson Highlands, Shawangunks, and Catskills. The trail is inching its way to the Adirondacks (72 miles to go), but that's no reason to delay a visit (or five) to its top-tier bits, all aflame with the fall palette this month. *By Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan*

THE INSIDER

On a weekend trip in 2004, **Andy Garrison** discovered the Long Path when his 9-year-old son wondered what the “LP” icons all over their map meant. Captivated by the idea of a long-distance trip right in their own backyard, the pair hiked the whole thing over the next two years. Since then, Garrison has become a self-made Long Trail expert, volunteering thousands of hours with the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference to maintain, acquire land for, and promote his hometown thru-hike.

BIRD'S-EYE DAYHIKE

Garrison favors the northern Shawangunks for the far-reaching views: “It’s so different from everything else in the area,” he says. “It has deformed pitch pines, scrub oak, and berry bushes—but doesn’t, for the most part, have tall trees.” This 8.3-mile loop treats you to an aerial perspective over the Hudson Highlands, Catskills, southern ‘Gunks, and the lofty outcroppings of Gertrude’s Nose and Castle Point, plus a 187-foot waterfall and a series of explorable caverns called the Ice Caves. From the Sam’s Point Preserve lot, the trail passes spurs to the caves en route to an overlook above Verkeerder Kill Falls. Turn northwest and hike to High Point, then swing south on High Point Carriage Road to close the loop.

PEAKBAGGER'S CHOICE

This four-day, 36-mile shuttle hike is the one that kicked off Garrison’s love affair with the Long Path. A rollicking sine wave of a trek that tags six Catskills summits (including the range’s high point), the trip offers vistas so big, you just might



fall for it yourself. From Upper Cherrytown Road in Ulster County, hike to 30-foot Vernoooy Falls, then stump up and over Bangle Hill to tent at Sundown Primitive Campsite at mile 9.7. Day two roller coasters over 3,843-foot Peekamoos Mountain and Table Mountain to campsites in the floodplain of the East Branch of Neversink Creek. The third day traces a ridge of the Burroughs Range to 4,180-foot Slide Mountain, then bobs up and down between cols and Cornell and Wittenberg Mountains. Land at a campsite near the seasonal stream .9 mile past the East Branch-Phoenicia Trail junction before

Get an eyeful along the Long Path in Hook Mountain State Park. From the trailhead on US 9W, hike 1.5 miles to this perch above the Hudson (foliage peaks mid-October).

closing with 9 miles over three more peaks (Cross, Pleasant, and Romer) to the town of Phoenicia.

STRETCH OF SOLITUDE

This 7.4-mile section near the Long Path’s northern terminus is all about the little things—quiet red pine and spruce forests, miniature waterfalls and ponds, remnants of 1800s-era homesteads and cemeteries. Start at West Kill Road and head into the Eminence State Forest, tracing old stone walls to Rossman Hill Lean-to at mile 5.9. Day two, pass Looking Glass Pond and the cascades in its outlet on your way to Sawyer Hollow Road.

URBAN HIKE

With a southern endpoint at a New York subway station, the Long Path is citified by design—but even its densest areas hide natural beauty, like the stretch between the Hudson River and New Jersey’s Palisades Parkway. From the George Washington Bridge north, the trail follows the Palisades escarpment, a blocky, 600-foot basaltic cliff wall where the views are both wild (swamps, hardwood forests, the Hudson) and civilized (NYC, the Met Cloisters monastery, old stone homesteads). Garrison’s top section runs 13.9 miles up from the bridge, tracing the cliffs most of the way.

PHOTOS BY ISTOCK.COM (6)
TEXT BY MORGAN MCFALL-JOHNSON

CAN'T-MISS TRAIL TOWN

Phoenicia (population 309) is the kind of place where the hardware store sells hiking boots and quaint inns offer a chance for a hot shower and a genteel return to civilization. Garrison hits up Brio’s Pizzeria for his posthike celebrations: “After a week in the woods, I go for the 1-pound hamburger.”

TRIP PLANNER

SEASON May to October at higher elevations, year-round at lower ones
PERMIT None **SHUTTLE** Cabs are available across the Long Path. Pre-arrange a pickup. **CONTACT** nynjtc.org



Nab one of two sites at Labyrinth off Canyonlands' White Rim Road for private desert real estate.

18 CANYON CONFIDENTIAL MOAB, UTAH

No other trail town is as synonymous with desert paradise as Moab: Within easy striking distance of Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, the Bears Ears buttes, and acres of empty Bureau of Land Management land, the town sits at the heart of A-list canyon country. You can't keep real estate like this secret for long, though, and in recent years, parts of the wilderness have become downright crowded. The good news: There's plenty of redrock utopia to go around—if you know where to look. *By Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan*

THE INSIDER

Mike Coronella has spent the last 15 years ferreting out Moab's secret spots. As both the owner of local outfitter Deep Desert Expeditions and a volunteer with Grand County Search and Rescue, he knows almost every inch of the canyons and mountains around his hometown, and quite a bit more to boot: He's also the cofounder of the 800-mile Hayduke Trail through southeast Utah and northwest Arizona.

EASY DAY TRIP

With a high rock art-to-effort ratio but a low number of hikers per mile, the South Fork of Sevenmile Wash adds up to a Coronella favorite. There's no official trail on this BLM land, so just follow the sandy bottom up to 5 miles (one way) between canyon walls layered like phyllo dough. From the unmarked trailhead on UT 313 (near 38.6492, -109.7222), wind past petroglyph and pictograph panels, keeping your eyes peeled for human figures, geometric shapes, and bighorn sheep adorning the desert varnish. (Leave all rock art undisturbed, of course.)

QUIET OVERNIGHT

A geologic mystery lies in Canyonlands National Park's Island in the Sky District: a 3-mile-long zone of wildly tilted rock layers that don't match the rest of the park. "Everything is turned inside out," Coronella says of the area, called Upheaval Dome. The theories about its origin involve a meteor impact or a layer of ancient salt rising to the surface. Form your own ideas on the 8.3-mile Syncline Loop, which traces the canyons around Upheaval Dome, careening up and down cliffy switchbacks and winding through boulderfields. Camp at the Syncline site and save time to tour the inner dome on the 1.5-mile spur. "Dayhikers never go in there," Coronella notes.

WILD WEEK

Ready for a big bite? Tackle the 50-miler from Cathedral Butte to the Colorado River in Canyonlands' Needles District. The point-to-point route showcases canyon country's finest, from rock art panels to sandstone arches to striated hoodoos. "It's an astonishing series of canyons, drainages, and ridgelines with huge views," Coronella says. From the trailhead on the district's southern border (37.9500, -109.7062), drop into Salt Creek and spend two

days exploring a remote canyon rich with ruins and art panels (like the famed All American Man). Camp at the Salt Creek 1 campsite, then near the spur to Angel Arch. Next day, head west into Lost Canyon, a series of slickrock benches overlooking deeper chasms, and camp at Lost Canyon 1. Continue west among Chesler Park's pillars, tossing in the short side trip to Druid Arch en route, and sleep at Chesler Park 1. Head northwest on Lower Red Lake Canyon Trail to spend the last night in the open zone before finishing on the banks of the Colorado, just south of its confluence with the Green River. Hop a pre-arranged jetboat shuttle (texasriverways.com) back to Moab (there's no other way out).

COUNTERPROGRAMMING

Shhh: There's more to Moab than the desert. The lonely La Sal Mountains rise southeast of town and see a fraction of the traffic the canyons do. For top-of-Utah views, head for 12,645-foot Mt. Mellenthin via Gold Basin, a 3-mile (one-way) ascent through aspen stands, then evergreens, then open talus. You'll tag Pre-Laurel Peak and Laurel Peak before swinging northeast and negotiating steep scree slopes to the top. There, you'll find vistas extending into Colorado's San Juan Mountains and Utah's Henrys.

STARGAZING

Coronella maintains that the celestial show is excellent "everywhere" in the Moab region, but, when pressed, he recommends the 360-degree view from the La Sal Mountains Viewpoint in Arches National Park. "The stars here are surreal," he says.

PHOTO OPP

Canyonlands' White Rim Road is popular with drivers and mountain bikers, but with just 20 campsites along the 100-mile route, solitude is guaranteed if you score a permit. Gun for the Labyrinth area (pictured), applying as many as four months in advance, to enjoy a private vista over the Green River.

TRIP PLANNER

SEASON March to May and September to November **PERMIT** Required for backpacking at Canyonlands (\$30/group; reservations recommended); canypermits.nps.gov **INFO** nps.gov/cany; nps.gov/arch; www.fs.usda.gov/mantilasal

19 SECRETS OF THE SOUTH

PALMETTO TRAIL, SOUTH CAROLINA

The Palmetto Trail winds 360 miles (and counting) northwest from the coast, threading together South Carolina's wildest lowlands to its highest mountains. Between, it crosses historic battlefields and defunct railways, giving hikers a full immersion in the state's history. Start planning a thru-hike, or knock off the best sections now: no bugs, no problems. *By Morgan McFall-Johnsen*

THE INSIDERS

The first time **Bernie** and **April Hester** set out to thru-hike the Palmetto Trail, April's multiple sclerosis put a big question mark on the endeavor. "We weren't sure if she could do it," Bernie says. But she was strong, and the couple completed the trail in April 2017. They didn't stop there. That October, they set out from the opposite trailhead and did it again, raising money for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society and becoming the first thru-hikers to complete the trail twice in one year. Then they did it a third time in 2018.

TOAST THE COAST

Myrtle Beach might get all the attention, but South Carolina has 2,876 miles of shoreline. Explore some of its best on a 7.1-mile hike along the coastal bluffs and marshes of Awendaw Creek. From Buck Hall Recreation Area, swoop through maritime forest and stands of the Palmetto Trail's namesake miniature palm trees, where fiddler crabs scurry across the trail (look for the males' oversized claw). At mile 2, emerge on the bluffs above Awendaw Creek and the Intracoastal Waterway before crossing a salt marsh (there's a boardwalk). From there, dip inland through a live oak forest to reach U.S. 17. Hitch a five-minute ride back to Buck Hall or retrace your steps for a 14.2-mile out-and-back.

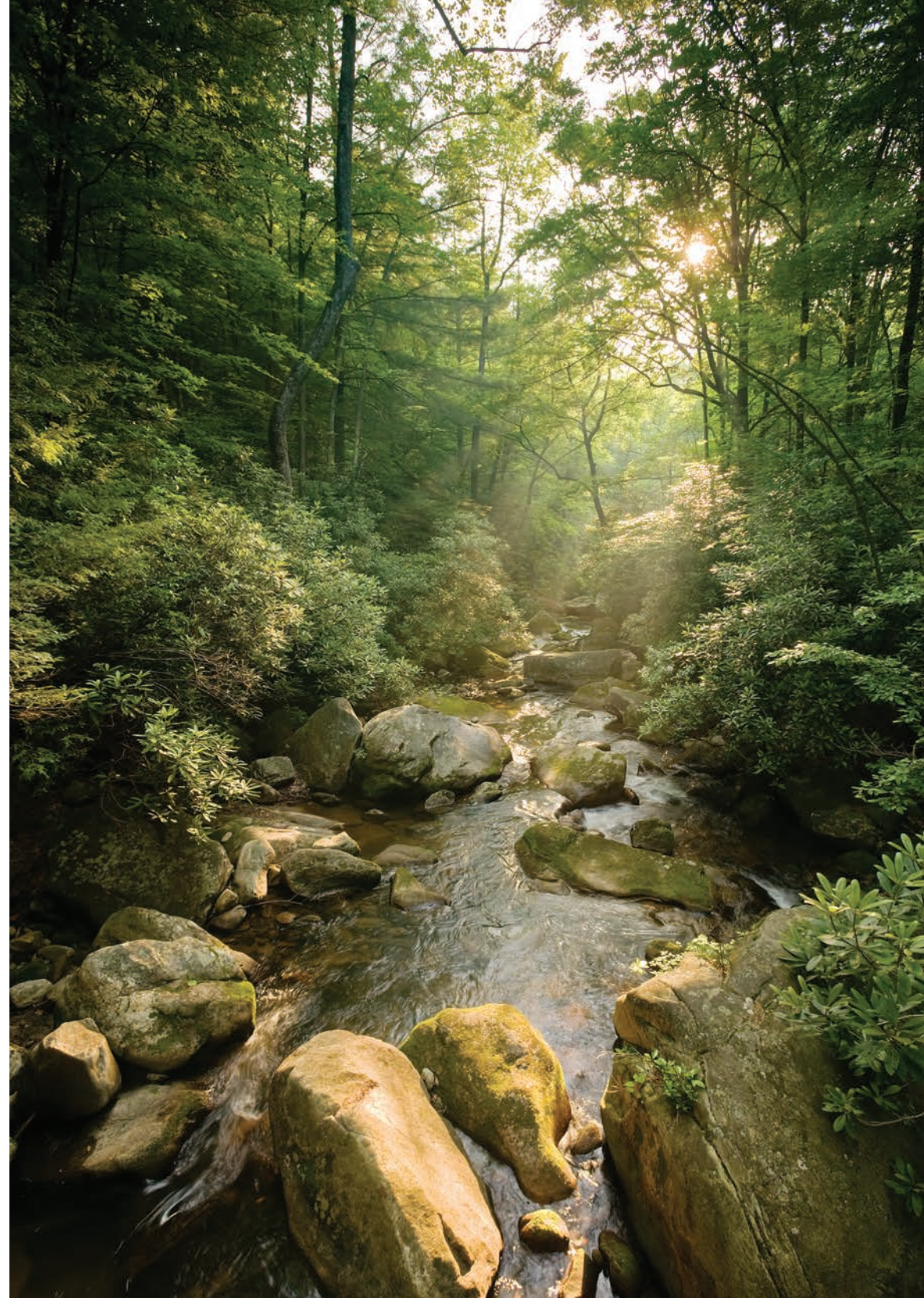
SWAMP SOLITUDE

Find big-wilderness quiet on the Palmetto's longest section, which winds through the otherwise trail-less lowlands in Francis Marion National Forest. Case in point: During the 47.2-mile Swamp Fox Passage, the Hesters hiked for four days without seeing another person. They saw plenty of wildlife, though: This section of the Palmetto Trail

passes through four ecosystems teeming with unique flora and fauna. To do it, begin at the U.S. 17 trailhead, and head 17.7 miles west on day one, trekking through grasslands and swamps with 100-year-old cypresses. Spy alligators lurking in the murky water (the Hesters have never seen them on the high-and-dry boardwalks). Snag one of the Hesters' favorite campsites in the quiet pine forest .2 mile north of Bob Morris Road: It sits in a palm-shaded clearing at the transition zone between forest and swamp and doesn't appear on maps, so it's rarely used (find water .3 mile north at Turkey Creek). Day two, stage a 12.8-mile push: Gain elevation as you hike through the Santee Experimental Forest, where longleaf pines painted with white stripes mark the homes of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Land at a campground near the Witherbee Ranger Station and the waters of Little Hellhole Reserve. Day three is an easy 7.7 miles through lanky pines where swallow-tailed kites and wild boars live. Tent on a bluff overlooking the slow-moving water of Cane Gully, then finish with 9 miles through the Wadboo Creek marshes to U.S. 52. Fun fact: Francis Marion and his troops hid in these swamps during the Revolutionary War, launching surprise attacks on British supply lines and earning him the nickname "Swamp Fox."

RAILS TO TRAILS

Varied landscapes are the Hesters' favorite thing about the Palmetto Trail: "One minute you're in complete solitude, the next you're descending an old railway into a historic industrial town," Bernie says. See for yourself on an 11.4-mile shuttle hike from Poinsett State Park to the town of Wateree (a church, a power plant, and a few homes). Climb past oaks



Time the Middle Saluda Passage (Walk the Line, right) for March's budding season.

draped in gray Spanish moss, pausing at 260-foot Molly's Bluff to catch views west all the way to Columbia. Then descend to the remnants of the 19th-century SC Railroad, where the boardwalk beelines across the Wateree Swamp. Loop around the reservoir to the road, then catch a 35-minute taxi back to your car.

PHOTO BY ROB HAMMER / AURORA PHOTOS. TEXT BY CASSANDRA MAJEWSKI (IN THE CLUB)

WALK THE LINE

Though the mountains here seem gentle, the 10.9-mile Middle Saluda Passage packs a serious punch. "It's our favorite section, and also the most difficult," Bernie says. To taste it, park at Jones Gap (near mile 3 of the Passage) and head west along the Middle Saluda River before finding a

waterside tent site near mile 2 (\$19; reserve at southcarolinaparks.com). Next day, bear south along a tributary, then ascend .5 mile up steep wood-and-rock steps, gaining 400 feet. Top out on a 3,000-foot ridge in the Mountain Bridge Wilderness, where the view includes farmlands to the south, a string of distant mountains wrapping west and north, and the North Saluda Reservoir to the east. Continue along the spine to a suspension bridge that carries you to 420-foot Raven Cliff Falls. Retrace your steps for a 15-mile out-and-back.

HIGHPOINT DETOUR

You could drive to the top of Sassafras Mountain, but what's the fun in that? Earn the view on a 24-mile loop that touches the highest point of the Palmetto Trail—and South Carolina's tallest peak. At Table Rock State Park, head west on the Palmetto Trail, following a ridge above the Jocassee Gorges. After the boulderfield, hit a T in the trail at mile 8.9. Head north to stay on the Palmetto Trail, roller coasting into one of the gorges and then along granite cliffs to a rhododendron-crowned ridge, the trail's highpoint. Veer onto the Foothills Trail to ascend 3,553-foot Sassafras Mountain, dotted with the mountain's namesake trees. "It's drop-dead gorgeous up there for the sunset," Bernie says, so set up camp anywhere (the whole peak is open) and enjoy. Next day, backtrack to the junction and continue on the Foothills Trail, tracing cliffs with Blue Ridge views, to Table Rock, a .9-mile road walk from the trailhead.

CHEERS

After peakbagging and swamp splashing, head over to RJ Rockers Brewing Company in Spartanburg (6 miles north of the Croft Passage) to clink pints of the Palmetto Trail Pale Ale. All sales of the brew benefit the Palmetto Conservation Foundation's "Finish the Trail" campaign.

TRIP PLANNER

SEASON January to March and September to November **SHUTTLE INFO** Taxis are available near Wateree (taxicabincolumbiasc.com), and Nature Adventure Outfitters (natureadventureoutfitters.com) runs shuttles in the Swamp Fox Passage. **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** palmettoconservation.org

20 MIRACLE IN THE DESERT RED ROCK CANYON NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA, NEVADA

Forget dancing waters on the Vegas Strip. Want to see a real show? Head 17 miles west of Sin City to Red Rock Canyon, where a geologic rumble 65 million years ago turned everything upside-down. The result is a topsy-turvy wonderland that juts 3,000 feet out of the Mojave Desert. Stage a visit in early spring, when 60°F days are the norm and occasional precip keeps the tinajas full. It's sure to outshine the neon mirage next door. *By Olivia Dwyer*

THE INSIDER

When **Joel Brewster** moved to Nevada 20 years ago, he joined the Las Vegas Mountaineers Club and started ticking off the group's Classic Peaks, a selection of the region's best summits, including four in Red Rock Canyon. The 47-year-old professional gambler has since completed all 50 Classics and continues to hit Red Rock every month to hike and prep for summer expeditions.



all the sandstone." Stake out a campsite, then climb on. Two large tinajas—rock depressions where water pools—signal the final summit approach. From the top, scan south to 6,801-foot Rainbow Mountain before retiring to your camp.

MEET THE CREATURES

Though the desert tortoise hibernates from November to March, other animals here stay active. At higher elevations, listen for the deep, hollow clip of hooves on rock, then scan cliffs for the curved horns of desert bighorn sheep. Gila monsters also call Red Rock home: The heavyweight of American lizards grows up to 20 inches long and weighs as much as 4 pounds. Brewster's heard of sightings near Kraft Mountain, a peak just west of NV 159 before the fee station. And those donkeys braying near the Scenic Drive? They're wild burros descended from ranching and mining pack animals.

FIRST PEOPLE, INFINITE LEGACY

Humans enter Red Rock history around 11,000 BC. More recently—1,000 years ago—Southern Paiutes moved through with the seasons. Their art adorns cliffs: See painted pictographs on the 1.5-mile Willow Spring Loop. Then take the .2-mile spur from Willow Spring Picnic Area to Petroglyph Wall, a brick-red panel etched with 800-year-old shapes. A 3-mile foray to Pine Creek Canyon passes donut-shaped limestone berms; these roasting pits were used to soften the spiny agave's heart into a succulent dish.

CHASE WATERFALLS

Head 2.6 miles south of the Scenic Drive exit on NV 159 for a 3-mile out-and-back to First Creek Canyon. Follow a level trail 1.5 miles through open desert to the canyon mouth, then listen closely: "There's a hidden waterfall," says Brewster. "It runs almost year-round, but what's a little trickle in summer becomes a 30-foot gusher in winter." That cascade fills a pool framed by rust-colored boulders hung with ferns. No mirage. Just a desert jackpot.

TRIP PLANNER

SEASON September to May **PERMIT** Required for overnighting (free); call (702) 515-5050 to obtain paperless permit. **CONTACT** bit.do/redrock-blm

WAKE-UP CALL

Get a fast start on Brewster's favorite morning workout: Turtlehead Peak, a 5-mile out-and-back that gains 2,000 feet. From the Sandstone Quarry trailhead, follow a wash between sloping rocks to a gully, where the trail ramps up to gain the 6,323-footer at the turnaround point. From the summit block, spot Las Vegas to the east, and watch sunlight play over sandstone that's tinted red and orange by oxidized iron. "Note the peak's misnomer," Brewster says. Turtles prefer water; Red Rock's resident hard-shell denizen is the land-dwelling desert tortoise.

PENTHOUSE SUITE

Red Rock Canyon limits backcountry camping to dispersed sites above 5,000 feet, so set your sights on 6,460-foot Bridge Mountain, one of the Mountaineers Club's Classics and so-named for a nifty geologic feature. Brewster's prep includes minding the moisture two ways: He packs all his water (refills here are rare) and checks recent precip to make sure rocks aren't slick (the route requires an exposed, class 3 scramble). To tick off the 8-mile (one-way) hike, park at Willow Springs Picnic Area off the Scenic Drive. Trek 4 miles on Rocky Gap Road's dirt surface—a long approach that deters crowds. At the pass, take the signed Bridge Mountain Trail about 2 miles through juniper and pinyon scrub to an escarpment. Follow black "quote" marks on the rock before downclimbing a bench to a 4-foot-wide crack. There, use all fours to ascend the class 3 rock for about a mile before picking an exit via the distinct, "beehive" rock. Pass under the mountain's 40-foot-tall, 40-foot-wide namesake and look downhill for a stand of pinyon pines. "We call it the hidden forest," Brewster says. "The needles disintegrate to soft dirt, which is unusual with

Pine Creek Canyon at sunrise



TEXT BY CASSANDRA MALEWSKI

21 CITY BY THE BAY GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL RECREATION AREA, CA

Forget sourdough and Silicon Valley: Greater San Francisco's most valuable treasure is its 80,000-acre necklace of wildflower-spotted hills, miles-long beaches, and oceanside bluffs. Stretching from Tomales Bay in the north to the redwood groves southwest of the Bay—with the Golden Gate Bridge smack in the middle—the chain of public land offers everything from quick lunchtime treks to campsites so quiet you'll forget you could be back in a booming metropolis in time for a breakfast of \$12 avocado toast. *By Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan*

THE INSIDER

Paul Myers spends his days shooting photos and video in Golden Gate's most beautiful corners as the digital content producer for the park's non-profit partner, Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy (GGNPC). And he's certainly put in the scouting leg-work: The born-and-raised Bay Area local has spent four decades exploring the park's 250-plus trails.

LUNCH HIKE

Golden Gate's Presidio, an old military base-turned-park at the southern end of the bridge, hosts San Francisco's best hidden trails, says Myers. His pick for a midday leg-stretcher begins at Baker Beach, a white-sand expanse with crashing waves and big views of the Golden Gate Bridge. Take the California Coastal Trail a short jog north to the .7-mile Batteries to Bluffs Trail, then wind along the bluffs. "Watch pelicans go by and see whales (humpbacks, grays, and killers) when they're migrating in early spring and fall," Myers says. Rejoin the California Coastal Trail and continue north to Fort Point, an 1850s-era post at the base of the bridge, then retrace your steps for a 3-mile trip.

BIG DAY

With nearly 3,200 feet of elevation gain, this 13-mile loop was Myers's go-to when training for the High Sierra Route. Rewards for the sweat: a glimpse of ecosystems ranging from coastal cliffs to oak forests, views of the Farallon Islands, and a stretch meandering through the redwoods at Muir Woods. Kick it off from Stinson

Beach on the Dipsea Trail, then cross into Mt. Tamalpais State Park and trace fern-lined Webb Creek on the Steep Ravine Trail to the Pantoll Campground, where vistas range northwest to Point Reyes National Seashore. Drop into another canyon shaded by old-growth redwoods on the Stapelveldt and Ben Johnson Trails to Muir Woods—Myers considers this the back door into the arboreal cathedral because it conveniently skirts the new parking and shuttle reservation system. The return leg's stiff, 1,700-foot climb in 2.4 miles on the Bootjack Trail ditches the crowds for good: You'll hug Redwood Creek, then connect to the Matt Davis Trail via the short Alpine Trail and descend another 4 miles back to Stinson Beach.

Take the California Coastal Trail through the Marin Headlands for the best bluff views.

QUICK OVERNIGHT

The three tent sites at Hawk Camp, perched on a rise overlooking the wrinkly topography of Gerbode Valley and the mouth of San Francisco Bay, feel a lot more remote than they really are. "It's isolated, but the trailhead is 30 minutes from the city," Myers says. And the moderate, 3.2-mile approach means you can start hiking in late afternoon and still catch a killer sunset from the grassy hilltop. Myers's favorite way in: From the Tennessee Valley trailhead, take the Old Springs Trail through eucalyptus trees to the Miwok Trail. Hike .9 mile, then link the Bobcat and Hawk Camp Trails to reach the free backcountry sites, just shy of 800 feet elevation. Pack in your water.

BUTTERFLY HIKE

Milagra Ridge is one of the few places to reliably spot the endangered Mission blue butterfly, thanks to the GGNPC's work restoring the silver lupine flower, one of the insect's host plants. And now is the perfect time to go looking for the periwinkle, quarter-size bugs, as the adult blues are out and fluttering from March to June. Scan for them on the lupines along the Milagra Ridge Trail on a 2-mile out-and-back to the overlook west of Battery 244—and don't forget to look up for vistas of the Pacific, Mori Point, and Mt. Tamalpais.

REDWOOD SOLITUDE

Psst: Muir Woods isn't the only place in Golden Gate to see redwoods. Down

at the southern tip of the park complex, a little-known grove of the giants awaits at Phleger Estate. True, it's a mix of old- and second-growth trees, so the redwoods don't reach the same lofty heights as their more famous neighbors up north. "But there could be 4,000 people a day at Muir Woods," Myers says. "Here, you might see five." Access the secret stash via San Mateo County's Huddart Park, linking the Miramontes, Raymundo, and Mt. Redondo Trails for a 5-mile lasso-loop that tracks steeply through a forest of redwoods and wood sorrel.

TRIP PLANNER

SEASON Year-round **PERMIT** Required for overnighting (prices vary; check recreation.gov or call (415) 331-1540. **CONTACT** nps.gov/goga

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