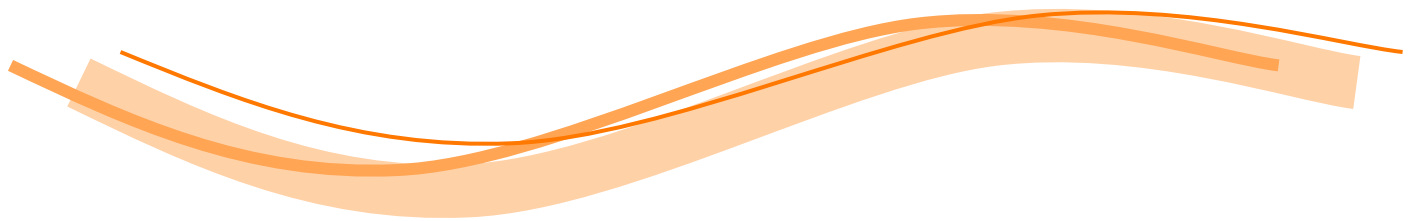




THE GREAT AMERICAN NATIONAL PARKS ROAD TRIP





<p>The Great American Road Trip</p>	<p>I am inviting you to come with me on a Great American Road Trip. And this one is pretty special. I was inspired to plan this trip by the “Visit the USA” website where you will find details on all those great American Road Trips that you always dreamt you would take one day. I am starting on the Pacific Coast, in San Francisco, and driving 5,000 kilometers through the US Southwest, through California, Arizona and New Mexico. Every great road trip needs a theme, a thread that provides purpose to the trip. My objective on this trip is to visit the iconic National Parks of America’s Southwest in what is a very special year for the National Park Service of the United States.</p>
<p>The National Parks Service Centenary</p>	<p>This is the U.S. National Park Service 2016 Centennial year: one hundred years of preserving, protecting and opening up some of the greatest natural and historical spaces on the continent. Starting in the Nineteenth Century, the scenic natural wonders of the West, such as the towering mountains and majestic trees of Yosemite and the immense vistas of the Grand Canyon, inspired individual Americans to call for their preservation, asking their government to create something called “national parks.” In 1916, the work of caring for these places was moved to a new agency created by Congress for that specific purpose. The National Park Service was given the responsibility to not only conserve and protect parks, but also to leave them “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”</p> <p>Today there are over 400 national parks and monuments which include not only places of scenic grandeur, but also places that commemorate history too. The National Parks have been described as “America’s Best Idea”. This trip will make that claim come alive in the region where the idea was first realized: America’s West.</p>
<p>The Route</p>	<p>This road trip begin on the Pacific Coast at San Francisco and heads east to the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the three National Parks of Yosemite, Kings Canyon and Sequoia.</p> <p>Then west, back into California’s Central Valley and south to curl around the other side of the mountains to the Basin and Range region, where Death Valley awaits.</p> <p>Heading south and east we cut across a corner of Nevada, bypass Las Vegas (no stopping – this is a National parks trip!), south to Hoover Dam and then east into Arizona and onto the Grand Canyon.</p> <p>Ever eastwards, we travel part of old Route 66 and see Meteor Crater and Petrified Forest National Park before crossing into New Mexico and two little known National Monuments: El Morro and El Malpais.</p> <p>Onto New Mexico’s biggest city of Albuquerque, then south almost to the Mexican border, to White Sands National Monument. East, over the mountains to Carlsbad Caverns National Park and finally north to the state capital of Santa Fe and ending back in Albuquerque.</p>

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	Nearly 5,000 kilometers of great road tripping and unforgettable natural wonders!
Recommended Books	<p>I used Lonely Planet guidebooks on my trip. They have several that cover this trip; the specific ones I recommend are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - California - Southwest USA - Yosemite, Sequoia & Kings Canyon - Grand Canyon
Starting in San Francisco	<p>San Francisco is the perfect place to start a road trip showcasing the National Parks, because they are all around you. I flew into San Francisco International Airport, picked up my rental car and within the hour, I was driving across the iconic Golden Gate Bridge, which is itself part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The Pacific Ocean glints in the sunshine far below and you feel as if you are driving into a movie set.</p>
Muir Woods	<p>A few minutes up the road, not half an hour from the city, is Muir Woods National Monument, a little gem of a park. The Redwood Creek Trail leads me through an awe-inspiring valley of massive Coast Redwoods, the tallest trees in the world. The land was bought by William Kent to protect these last stands of uncut Redwoods. He named this place after John Muir, the spiritual founder of the National Park Service, whilst he himself introduced legislation that created the National Park Service in 1916.</p> <p>So, it's appropriate that this road trip begins here with the late afternoon sunlight filtering through the ancient trees of Cathedral Grove in Muir Woods. There is a hush on the trail beneath the trees and a stillness in the air. You can loop back on the other side of the valley, high on the Hillside Trail and you're able to almost look some of the 350 feet high trees in the eye. This place almost defines being at one with nature...</p>
The Presidio	<p>Back across the Golden Gate, you enter the Presidio, the historic origin of San Francisco and the third National Park in one day. The Presidio served for over 200 years as an army post, successively for Spain, Mexico and the US. Now it is a peaceful oasis in the city with glorious views of parkland, Bay and noble architecture. You can stay here for your first night of the trip at The Inn at the Presidio. It was once the home of the bachelor officers and is an elegant base for visitors to San Francisco.</p>
Yosemite	<p>Yosemite National park: it was to this inspirational wilderness that John Muir brought Teddy Roosevelt to convince him of the need to protect such wondrous places. And I'm thinking that John Muir let the landscape itself do the persuading...</p> <p>I visited Yosemite at the turn of the season: the previous week I would have needed tire chains to access the park; but in late March Spring sunshine filled the valley and meltwater filled the dramatic waterfalls</p>

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	<p>that spring from the immense granite cliffs. See all the great valley viewpoints. Tunnel View provides one of the most famous views of Yosemite Valley. From here you can see El Capitan and Bridalveil Fall rising from Yosemite Valley, with Half Dome in the background. Half Dome is perhaps the most recognized symbol of Yosemite. Rising nearly 5,000 feet above the Valley floor, it is one of the most impressive landmarks in Yosemite.</p> <p>And the place is made for hiking: I made the most of the spring sunshine and hiked Valley Loop Trail, Mirror Lake Trail, Lower Yosemite Fall Trail, Mist Trail and, appropriately, the John Muir Trail to give me an intimate feel for this lovely place.</p>
<p>Kings Canyon & Sequoia</p>	<p>Heading south down the Sierra Nevada there are two more mountainous National Parks that are even higher in altitude than Yosemite: Kings Canyon and Sequoia. Again, it is a dramatic approach up hairpin bends under the granite knob of Moro Rock. I stayed at the Alpine Wuksachi Lodge at over 7,000 feet and there was deep snow everywhere in March. These two National Parks adjoin each other and both deserve to be better known. Kings Canyon hides a cleft in the earth that is deeper than the Grand Canyon and in the March snows I was only able to peer down into its depths from a viewpoint on the Generals Highway which had only opened from under winter snows that very day. Check the road conditions if you travel at this time of the year or earlier in winter.</p> <p>I hiked frozen trails, snowshoed in the forest, gazed on contiguous USA's highest peak, Mount Whitney and watched a spectacular sunset from atop Beetle Rock. But the highlight unquestionably was spending time in the Giant Forest. Here are groves of Giant Sequoia trees that gently remind you of your place on this planet. For they are huge and have been here forever. General Sherman Tree is the largest living organism on the planet. As I stood beneath its immensity – 275 feet high, 103 feet circumference and 1,385 tons in weight – I reflected that this great tree began its life 2,500 years before mine and will outlive me for sure...</p>
<p>Death Valley</p>	<p>The final National Park on this Californian leg of the road trip is the ominously named Death Valley National Park. To get there from Sequoia is quite a journey and one that for me began at first light at the Lodge scraping the ice off my windscreen and ended later in the day at the aptly named Furnace Creek in Death Valley, where the temperature hovered around 100F.</p> <p>From snows to desert sands. From 7,000 feet up, to nearly 300 feet below sea-level – this is a unique part of the road trip.</p> <p>This is a park of extremes. Death Valley is the driest, hottest and lowest spot in America. Enter via Rainbow Canyon where you may see Airforce fighters playing Star Wars games deep in its depths and then</p>

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	<p>spend time at some of the highlights in the baking heat. Mesquite Flats Sand Dunes is a desolate region of blown sand. The Badwater Basin is the lowest point on the continent, full of dry saline flats and mirages of lakes that evaporate as you approach. Artist Drive is a narrow twisting road that showcases the bright colours of an artist's palette on the sides of the canyon walls. The view of the badlands at Zabriskie Point is so famous it has inspired a film title of the same name. And the sunset from the summit of Dantes View at 5,500 feet was phenomenal, encompassing 6,000 vertical feet and the Basin and Range topography of Death Valley. It is the serendipity of events on road trips that cannot be planned which often remain the most memorable moments- and so it will be for me in Death Valley. For I was lucky enough to be here at something that happens for just a few weeks every ten to twelve year: a "Super Bloom", where the normally desolate Death Valley desert is covered with wild flowers coaxed out of decades-long hibernation by the right combination of weather conditions. Yellows punctuated by whites and purple, like a mirage... Quite beautiful.</p>
<p>Grand Canyon</p>	<p>The scale of the Grand Canyon can be overpowering. It is one of the planet's most powerful and inspiring landscapes. Numbers don't do it justice, but here they are anyway: 277 river miles long, 18 miles wide, a mile deep and 1.5 billion years of earth history. Start your commune with the Canyon at the Watchtower at the eastern end of Desert Drive. It will enable you to mix a little of the human history with the geologic history which somehow makes the cocktail easier to assimilate. The Watchtower, perched on the edge of the Canyon, is a symbol of 2016's National Park Service's centenary and is being transformed into a cultural showpiece. It is also the perfect place to gaze past the frescos on the wall, through the rough openings of the Watchtower and out into the immensity of the canyon. This is just the first of many viewpoints that I spent time at heading west from the Watchtower along Desert View Drive. Navajo Point, Lipan Point, Moran Point, Grandview Point...all add a different and equally marvelous dimension to the Grand Canyon vistas. Hiking the Rim Trail along the edge of the abyss also brings different panoramas with each twist and turn. Along the way, I take in Tusayan Museum and Ruin, which places the First Nations presence in the context of the Grand Canyon. It's a tiny museum with just a handful of exhibits, but well worth the time to understand that when John Wesley Powell first rafted down the Colorado in the mid-nineteenth century, his were definitely not the first human eyes to set upon this extraordinary sight. There is a partially</p>

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	<p>excavated Indian village alongside the museum, which helps bring a sense of reality to the museum exhibits.</p> <p>To really get to grips with the Grand Canyon, ypu have to get off the Rim and actually into the depths of the Canyon to truly feel its immensity. Take a full day hike away from the mass of humanity at South Rim Village on the most famous of all the Grand Canyon hikes: the Bright Angel Trail.</p> <p>Bright Angel Trail</p> <p>This is an intense but rewarding experience. The Trail is ten miles long, but snakes down over 3,000 feet...and then back up 3,000 feet of course. It's like launching yourself off the side of a tall building. The Rim rapidly disappears from view and you are cloaked in the early morning shadows. The drops are enormous. Two great sandstone buttresses are solved by short tunnels. You may have to make way for a mule train making its way up the trail. The trail switchbacks past two Rest Houses and casual hikers are left far behind – only focused hikers carry on towards a distant plateau above the Colorado River at the base of the canyon. Immense cliffs of Kaibab Limestone are followed by equally impressive Coconino sandstone cliffs, separated by endless switchbacks and millions of years of geological time.</p> <p>At last, the green oasis of Indian Garden approaches. Heaven! After hours of dry and increasingly hot trail, here is a spring, a stream and actual trees...plus a drinking water source. After a picnic lunch you can experience the ecstasy of paddling in the cool stream water. Then you will realize that you have to start the return trip if you are to make the Rim before sundown!</p> <p>This is what the Grand Canyon experience is truly all about...</p>
<p>Petrified Forest</p>	<p>This National Park combines two exquisite attractions: the hauntingly beautiful landscapes of the Painted Desert and the amazing fossilized record of ancient trees.</p> <p>Here in Petrified Forest National Park it is possible to step back 225 million years and see, touch and marvel at tree logs that have been perfectly preserved.</p> <p>The 28 mile park road leads you first to the Painted Desert Inn, an adobe National Historic Landmark, then on through the desert to Kachina Point and Pintado Point for views over the gaunt Painted Desert landscapes.</p> <p>On past a remnant of old Route 66 with a rusting old wreck, to Puerco Pueblo, the remains of a settlement dating to around 1300 AD and proving that Ancestral Puebloans liked a room with a view. Nearby Newspaper Rock has more than 650 petroglyphs carved into the desert stone, the oldest dating back over 2,000 years.</p> <p>As so often, this park saves the best till last. The last section of the drive</p>

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	<p>takes you to Blue Mesa loop and trail where the first of the petrified logs are seen. Together with Crystal Forest, Long Logs Trail and Giant Logs Trail, the desert becomes filled with these amazing relics of the Permian period when the first of the dinosaurs roamed the earth. Sections of colourful, agatized log are everywhere, scattered randomly on the desert floor. Their surface still looks like rough bark, but it is hard as steel and protects the interior structure which has been faithfully replaced, cell by cell, with quartz of every hue. Some of the logs are enormous – up to 180 feet long and “Old Faithful” is 10 feet across at its base.</p>
<p>El Morro</p>	<p>Come off Interstate 40 as you head eastwards into New Mexico from Arizona onto the back roads – it’s classic road trip territory, with huge landscapes, empty roads and the promise of wonders ahead. The first of these is El Morro National Monument. It was once a welcome oasis in a barren land. Travellers were drawn here from ancient times due to its rare pool of fresh water. As they passed by, they created graffiti that today tells a fascinating story of the people who visited this place. Thanks to the interpretation by the National Parks Service you learn the story behind every name and message carved in the rock at El Morro. Here at Inscription Rock are petroglyphs created by the Native Puebloan people depicting the animals that they hunted and their sacred symbols. There are messages from Spanish soldiers who passed by and even Lieutenant Governors sent from Spain to this new territory. There are markers from Pioneers who passed this way en route to California and a better life. Railway surveyors signed their names here – before they ultimately bypassed this area and it lost its significance as a resting place for travellers. Until now... As you sit in the crisp sunshine at over 7,000 feet above sea level, and imagine the countless weary peoples who have found a respite in this place.</p>
<p>El Malpais</p>	<p>Each National Park or Monument on this road trip teaches you about geology and the formation of these spectacular South Western landscapes. El Malpais National Monument, close to El Morro, was formed by volcanic action and here are huge areas of lava tubes, cinder cones and some of the most recent lava rock formations in North America. You can explore its jumbled and sometimes jagged landscape by hiking El Calderon Trail. The highlights are the lave tube caves which once carried rivers of molten lava and now exist as darkly sinuous caves under the volcanic landscape. Further west, El Malpais National Monument features huge sandstone bluffs. Stand atop Sandstone Bluffs Overlook and gaze out of a true</p>

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	<p>wilderness of lava fields and desert lands, a desolate environment, but one in which Ancient Puebloans still managed to eke an existence.</p>
<p>White Sands</p>	<p>Drive south from Albuquerque towards El Paso and the Mexican border to the Tularosa Basin. This is where you will find one of the world's great natural wonders - the glistening white sand dunes of gypsum sand which cover 275 square miles of desert, creating the world's largest gypsum dune-field: White Sands National Monument.</p> <p>This unearthly landscape is not comprised of ordinary sand - the dunes are formed from gleaming white gypsum. This is the largest gypsum dune field in the world – it is so large that astronauts in the Space Station can see White Sands National Monument and know that they are over New Mexico. The dunes were formed because of an unusual combination of geological events, but in essence deposited gypsum crystals were tumbled by the wind to grind them to a fine powder. And the wind continues to shape the landscape, painting beautiful patterns on the dunes.</p> <p>The National Parks Service provides great interpretation here, as at all the National Parks. This Interdune Boardwalk makes the dunes accessible to everyone. There are also informative “Sunset Strolls” with a Park Ranger. For the 100th anniversary of the National Parks Service there are special events such as concerts amongst the dunes as well as Full Moon Nights.</p> <p>And who says that National Parks aren't also fun? At White Sands National Monument the dunes are regarded as a highly stable resource and you can walk wherever you wish, take some great marked hikes and even camp overnight on the dunes under the stars. But the best thing to do is to whizz down the dunes on a sled – much warmer and drier than sledding on snow! You can even purchase a sled at the Park Visitor Center.</p>
<p>Carlsbad Cavern</p>	<p>There is no indication that far below the desert landscape of Carlsbad Caverns National Park hides one of the most remarkable cave systems in the world...</p> <p>The caves were discovered in the early 1900's and were soon declared a National Park. What actually led to their discovery was what looked like smoke rising from the ground. In fact this phenomenon was hundreds of thousands of bats leaving the cave at twilight to feed. Today the cave system is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. You can hike down into the depths via the Natural Entrance Route, where as the daylight faded away, the enormity of this cave system becomes apparent...</p> <p>The cave system is very extensive and stretches many kilometers underground. The stalagmites, stalactites, columns and other formations are quite beautiful. The Big Cave at the far end of the system lives up to its name – the scale is tremendous: it covers 8.2 acres, is</p>

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	<p>255 feet high and 1,800 feet long...and lies 800 feet under the desert landscape above.</p> <p>For those of faint heart, there is an elevator service built down into the cave so you don't have to face the long, uphill hike out of this cave system!</p>
Roswell	<p>No, this is definitely not a National Park, but it is certainly a National Oddity, and it is on the route north to Santa Fe from Carlsbad Caverns, so it's certainly worth seeing what all the fuss is about.</p> <p>And the fuss is the "Roswell Incident"</p> <p>The International UFO Museum recounts the events surrounding the mysterious 1947 "Roswell Incident". Did a UFO crash near this small New Mexico town? Did the US Government cover it up and remove both the spaceship and the bodies of aliens? We will never know.....but the truth is out there somewhere!</p>
Santa Fe	<p>A highlight of any trip to New Mexico has to be Santa Fe. Older than Quebec City and the highest State Capital in the US at over 7000 feet above sea level - Santa Fe is a cultural treasure trove of historical adobe buildings, fascinating museums and a modern arts explosion that makes for a wonderful mix. Visit the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, which displays many lovely paintings inspired by New Mexico landscapes.</p> <p>The Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe is the oldest public building in the US. It began as home to New Mexico's first Governor in 1610 and passed to Pueblo Indians and Mexico before becoming the seat of the US Territory's earliest Governors. It faces the Plaza - Santa Fe's heart for over 400 years – and a great place to hang out as the desert light fades, and reflect on your remarkable trip of 5,000 kilometers, three states, from ocean to mountain to desert and thirteen National Parks and Monuments.</p>
Accommodations	<p>I would recommend the accommodations I experienced on this trip:</p> <p>The Inn at Presidio 42 Moraga Ave, San Francisco, CA 94129 415-800-7356</p> <p>Yosemite View Lodge, 11156 Hwy 140, El Portal, CA 95318 209-379-2681</p> <p>Wuksachi Lodge, Wuksachi Way, Sequoia National Park, CA, 866-807-3598</p> <p>Grand Canyon Squire Inn, 74 Highway 64, Tusayan, AZ 86023 Phone: 928-638-2681</p> <p>The Wigwam Motel 811 W Hopi Dr, Holbrook, AZ 86025 Tel:</p>

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	<p>928-524-3048</p> <p>Nativo Lodge, 6000 Pan American Freeway, Albuquerque NM 87109 505-7987-4300 www.nativolodge.com</p> <p>Inn of the Mountain Gods, 287 Carrizo Canyon Road, Mescalero NM 88340 Tel: 575-464-7780 http://innofthemountaingods.com</p> <p>Trinity Hotel, 201 S. Cana St., Trinity NM 575-234-9891 www.thetrinityhotel.com</p> <p>Hotel Albuquerque, 800 Rio Grande Blvd. NW Albuquerque NM 87104 505-843-6300 www.hotelabq.com</p>
Travel Show Blogs:	<p>You can read all about my personal journey following this road trip, complete with photographs from the trip on three travel blogs, one for each state:</p> <p>http://www.chrisrobinsontravelshow.ca/Blog/tabid/400/EntryId/89/Great-American-Road-Trips-The-National-Parks-of-California.aspx</p> <p>http://www.chrisrobinsontravelshow.ca/Blog/tabid/400/EntryId/90/Great-American-Road-Trips-The-National-Parks-of-Arizona.aspx</p> <p>http://www.chrisrobinsontravelshow.ca/Blog/tabid/400/EntryId/91/Great-American-Road-Trips-The-National-Parks-of-New-Mexico.aspx</p>
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National Parks website: <https://www.nps.gov/index.htm>

National Parks Facebook:
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National Parks on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/natlparkservice>

You can see images from my road trip on Pinterest at:
<https://www.pinterest.com/TravelShow/>

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