

7 Quirky Towns Near U.S. National Parks

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National parks in the United States draw visitors from around the world for their natural scenery and meditative splendor, but at their doorsteps, quirky small cities and towns packed with character hold an allure all their own. Here are seven to explore if you venture out to visit one of America's most amazing parks.

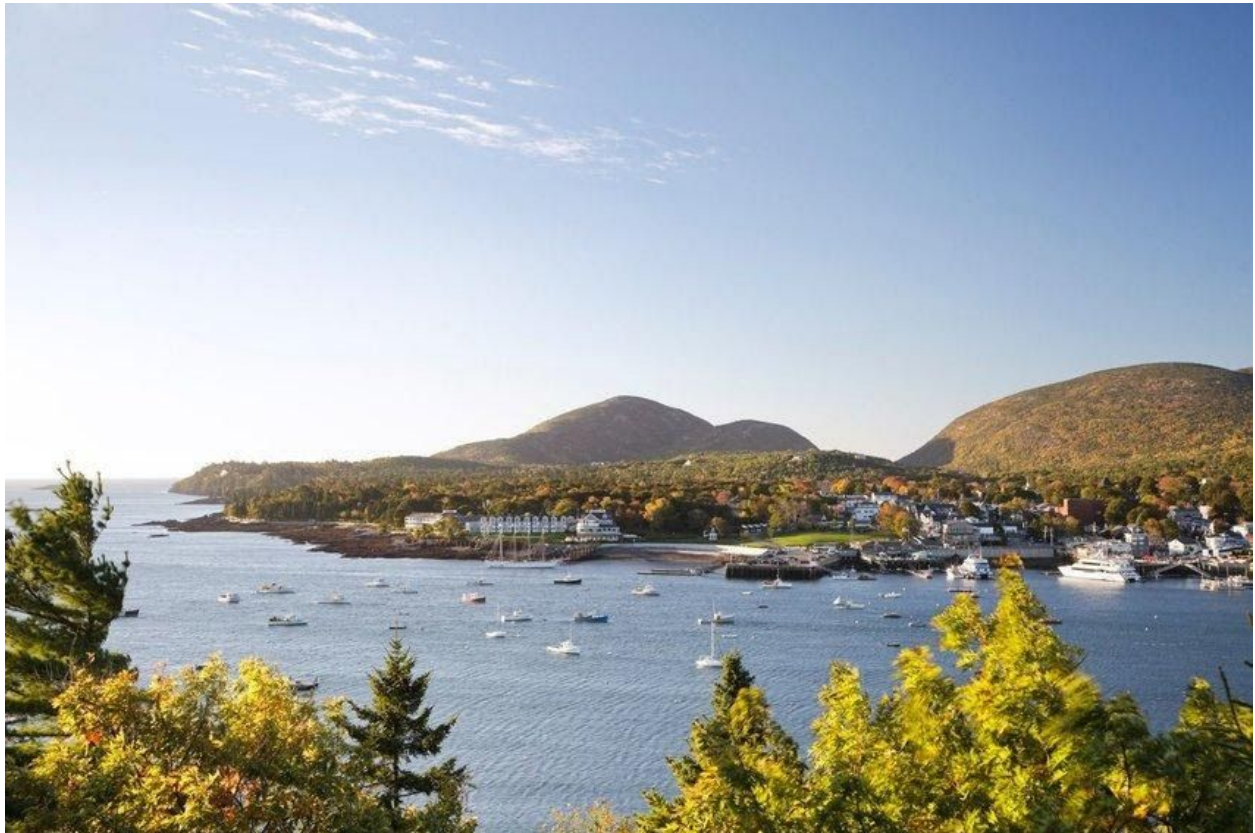
Gatlinburg, Tennessee, Near Great Smoky Mountains National Park



[Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#) attracts more visitors than any other national park in the U.S. Nearby, the town of [Gatlinburg, Tennessee](#), is a destination with its own delightful appeal. Here, you'll discover far more than just souvenir shops — there are countless indoor and

outdoor activities, including a vibrant folk art scene featuring numerous art galleries and creative workshops, a slew of southern barbecue restaurants and pancake houses, and a [scenic chairlift](#) that rides to a 1,800-foot overlook of the mountains. Gatlinburg even has its own 400-foot [Space Needle](#), where visitors can take in even more stunning, 360-degree views of the Great Smoky Mountains and the city — no hiking necessary. The area also boasts the only ski resort in the state, as well as countless hikes to the mesmerizing Laurel Falls and Rainbow Falls, Ramsey Cascades, and the historic ghost town of [Elkmont](#), an abandoned former logging camp, which is now considered one of the hidden gems of the Smokies.

Bar Harbor, Maine, Near Acadia National Park



To spend time in [Bar Harbor, Maine](#), is to step into a quintessential seaside town often obscured by a salty mist sweeping only lighthouses into view. Quaint, historic, wood cottages dot the rolling green lawns, while restaurant tables line the docks along the narrow streets in warm weather. On the menu, you'll find an abundance of fresh, local seafood prepared in every fashion, from buttery lobster rolls to crisp crab cakes, spicy bisques, creamy chowders, and briny raw oysters and clams plucked right from the sand skirting the coast and served by the half-shell. Set on Mount Desert Island, adjacent to [Acadia National Park](#), the scenery here is spectacular at every turn. Along the town's beloved Shore Path, tide pools promise hours of outdoor fun for families and nature lovers, with views of distant, pine-scented islands — one

even accessible by foot via a sandbar at low tide. Just remember to watch the time and tide when planning your return to town!

Jackson, Wyoming, Near Grand Teton National Park



At the rim of [Grand Teton National Park](#) and not far from Yellowstone, the small town of [Jackson, Wyoming](#), has long been known for its historic hotels and countless steakhouses, cowboy bars, and mom-and-pop shops. Here, hand-constructed log cabins nestled between aspens and evergreens and elk-antler arches greet visitors at each corner of the old Town Square. The nearby National Museum of Wildlife Art, impressive Historical Society, and large art center offer countless opportunities for soaking in local culture. Rodeos are another popular attraction in the area. Beyond world-class skiing available in the Tetons, the area abounds with hiking paths that meander up the wooded slopes around Ski Lake and over rushing streams. Rafting on Snake River is also a treat for thrill-seekers visiting in warmer months.

Red Lodge, Montana, Near Yellowstone National Park



Another noteworthy gateway town to [Yellowstone National Park](#), the laid-back old mining settlement of [Red Lodge, Montana](#), which was once frequented by the likes of Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane, has a whole lot of Wild West charm. A growing number of upscale cafés and steakhouses keep the active community and tourists well-fed. With arts and crafts shops, climbing and fishing gear stores, a bookshop, and more, Red Lodge is the perfect place to relax before venturing into the great outdoors. The local Carbon County Historical Society and Museum displays impressive rodeo collections and offers ecology and geology tours of the historic Beartooth area, as well as a fascinating interactive coal mine exhibit. Nostalgic wagon and sleigh rides pulled by draft horses also are available in town.

Red Lodge serves up a slew of exciting outdoor attractions too. From fly-fishing and river kayaking adventures to white-water rafting, skiing, horseback riding, and mountain biking along Wild Bill Lake, this town offers something for everyone year-round.

Visalia, California, Near Sequoia National Park



A trip to Northern California's [Sequoia National Park](#) — which protects some of the largest living organisms on the planet, including impossibly tall, 3,000-year-old evergreen trees — is awe-inspiring in countless ways. Nearby [Visalia](#), roughly 40 minutes away, is the park's main gateway town that never disappoints. The town offers its own array of wonders, such as the tallest mountain range in the U.S., the Sierra Nevada, at its doorstep. The great outdoors provide countless opportunities for white-knuckled or relaxed fun, from whitewater rafting to hiking, biking, and trail riding.

At the heart of the country's most fertile agricultural zone, locally grown produce abounds on the tasty menus of Visalia's many farm-to-table restaurants, which are best enjoyed after a full day of adventure. But history and culture flourish here, too — much of which can be taken in from a scenic trolley ride through the downtown district, with stops at California mission buildings, the historic Fox Theater (where music performances and classic-film showings are held), and several of the city's colorful art galleries.

Flagstaff, Arizona, Near Grand Canyon National Park



The gargantuan and highly popular [Grand Canyon National Park](#) is skirted by numerous towns due to its size, but none is more appealing or brimming with character than [Flagstaff, Arizona](#), which is located a little more than 70 miles away from the canyon's South Rim. With an attractive Historic Downtown and Railroad District, including a plethora of quirky shops, museums, and hotels housed in converted, turn-of-the-century buildings, Flagstaff is not to be missed. Chock-full of craft breweries pouring flavorful refreshments perfect for capping off a long day hiking the canyon, the town also dishes out a range of tasty, creative cuisine including Southwestern grill fusion. And few places on Earth offer clearer stargazing than the [Lowell Observatory](#), which boasts fantastic views of the night sky and hands-on science exhibits and walking tours to enjoy by day.

Palm Desert, California, Near Joshua Tree National Park



Among California's many popular destinations, [Joshua Tree National Park](#) is remarkable for its miles of interesting-shaped cacti, mountains of boulders that are perfect for amateur climbers, and lush palm forests. But the valley south of the park shelters its own enticing oasis in the middle of this desert landscape. [Palm Desert](#), known as a mid-century modern design mecca, is a hub of culture and attractions. There are a wide array of shopping and dining options, a notable art scene, massive music festivals, and several superlative, rolling green golf courses — even a [Living Desert Zoo](#).

It's easy to see why this small city, with its Old Hollywood glamour — which is still evident on a tour of the Movie Colony — once served as a welcome escape for the rich and famous who were looking for a remote haven far from the drama of Los Angeles. [Mount San Jacinto](#) features one of the nation's toughest hiking trails, [Cactus to Clouds](#), which beckons in the distance of Palm Desert. There are also many easier hikes that skirt the town, such as the trail to [Palm Canyon](#) and the picturesque [Painted Canyon](#). The nearby Salton Sea is another notable natural wonder.