

20 AMAZING PLACES IN SOUTHERN UTAH

That Aren't in the Big Five National Parks



20 AMAZING PLACES IN SOUTHERN UTAH THAT AREN'T IN THE BIG FIVE NATIONAL PARKS



1. MONUMENT VALLEY

Monument Valley is a cluster of iconic sandstone buttes in southern Utah. Used as the backdrop for early Western movies as well as the inspiration for The Road Runner cartoons scenery, the views of the valley symbolize the West. These beautiful rock formations, some rising as much as 1,000 feet above the desert floor, are mostly within the boundary of Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park. The park, which is on Navajo land, requires an entrance fee of \$20 per car (up to four passengers, each additional passenger is \$10).

Driving south on US Route 163, the park entrance is on the left (east) just north of the Utah-Arizona border.

Once in the park, you have a few options:

- Spend time at the visitor center, which has a gift shop and restaurant.

Tip: You can capture some of the best photos of the buttes from the visitor center's patio.

- Hike the 4-mile Wildcat Trail around West Mitten Butte; it's the only trail you can hike without a Navajo guide.
- Drive the 17-mile scenic road into the park to get a closer view of the monuments. The scenic road is rough, so be patient and take your time. It will likely take you at least an hour and a half to travel the entire route.

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2. HOVENWEEP NATIONAL MONUMENT

The National Park Service manages Hovenweep National Monument, which is best known for the well-preserved remains of stone buildings associated with its six Ancestral Puebloan village sites. Located close to the border of Utah and Colorado in the southeastern part of the state, the cool factor for this park is seeing these elaborate structures up close, some of which were built 700 to 800 years ago.

Tips:

- In the summer, it can be hot and crowded. We visited the monument early one November day & were the only ones there. The cool air & brilliant sunshine made for a

pleasant visit.

- Do not rely entirely on your GPS or vehicle's navigation system to properly guide you to the monument. Have a map of the area as a backup. Follow [this link to the NPS site](#) that provides driving directions.
- The campground, with 31 campsites, is open year-round. However, not all of the sites accommodate RV-sized vehicles. None of the campsites can be reserved; they are first-come, first-served only.
- Being remote has its benefits; the monument holds the designation of an International Dark Sky Park. It's a great place to stargaze!

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3. VALLEY OF THE GODS

In southeastern Utah, this valley of dramatic sandstone mesas, buttes, and towers was once part of Bears Ears National Monument. Although it has been removed from the monument, it's still protected as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern while managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Driving the 17-mile gravel road through the valley, you can't help but draw comparisons to Monument Valley, a mere 30 miles to the southwest.

Tip: Combine a trip through the Valley of the Gods with a visit to Goosenecks State Park and a drive up the Moki Dugway; all three sites are very close to each other.

You can access Valley of the Gods Road from US Route 163, about 17 miles west of Bluff, Utah, or State Route 261 (a portion of the Trail of the Ancients). The road through the valley is bumpy and steep in places but passable in non-four-wheel-drive vehicles when dry. There is no entrance fee, nor are there services in the valley. Dispersed camping is allowed in certain locations. Follow the link below to the BLM's site for more information.

[Click here for more information](#)



4. GOOSENECKS STATE PARK

The San Juan River is in no hurry to reach Lake Powell as it meanders through southeastern Utah. As it looped back and forth across the desert, the river left a spectacular, thousand-foot-deep canyon. From the park's overlook, you can look down at rock walls that are 300+ million years old. It doesn't take much time to visit this site, but if you're in the area, it's a must-see just the same.

The park is about a half an hour drive southwest of Bluff, Utah. Driving south on US Route 163, turn right (west) onto State Route 261 and then look for the sign on the left (south) side of the road directing you to the park. You'll drive a few

more miles on a gravel road that dead ends at the overlook to the goosenecks. The park is open 24 hours a day year-round; the entrance fee is \$5.

Tips for camping in the park:

- There are eight campsites close to the rim of the canyon.
- Fee for camping is \$10 per site, per night.
- All sites are on a first-come, first-served basis (no reservations accepted).

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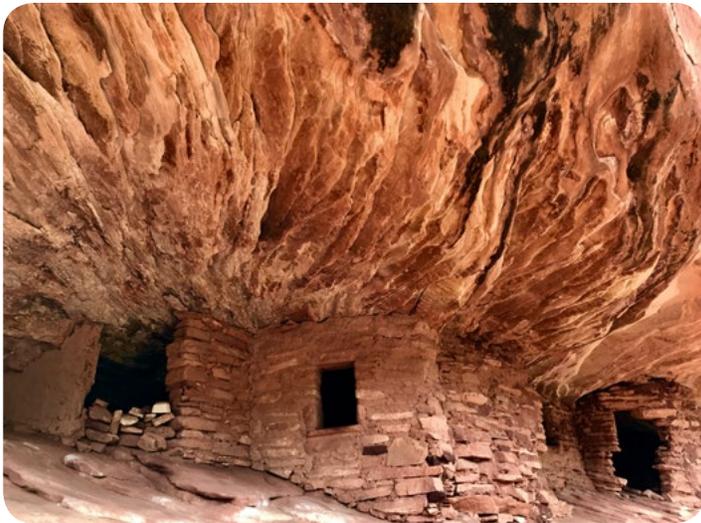
5. MOKI DUGWAY

Part of State Route 261, Moki Dugway is the name given to a 3-mile section of road that climbs over 1,000 feet up the side of Cedar Mesa about seven miles northwest of US Route 163 in southeastern Utah. The road was built in 1958 by a mining company that needed to get uranium ore from the Happy Jack mine by Hite, Utah to a processing facility in Mexican Hat, Utah. The steepness of the grade, its hairpin turns, and the dramatic views from the top make Moki Dugway an exciting destination of its own.

Why is it called Moki Dugway? "Moki" is derived from the word Spanish explorers used to refer to the native people they encountered in the area hundreds of years ago. A "dugway" is a road or passageway dug into the side of a cliff.

Tips:

- We've driven up the Moki Dugway and can speak from first-hand experience: it's not that scary of a drive. The views from the top however, are stunning.
- The State of Utah recommends that only vehicles less than 28 feet in length and 10,000 pounds in weight attempt it. They also advise caution for motor homes and vehicles pulling trailers.
- There's a parking area adjacent to the road at the top of the mesa where you can take panoramic photos of the desert landscape below.



6. HOUSE ON FIRE

House on Fire is a Puebloan ruin you can hike to in Bears Ears National Monument along the South Fork of Mule Canyon. As you can see in the photo, the dramatic markings on the rock above the stone structure make it look as if it's on fire. This ruin is just one example of thousands of ancient sites that exist in the Bears Ears area of southeastern Utah.

Tips:

- To take the best possible photo, you need to be there on a sunny day in the morning before the sun passes above the ruin.
- Finding the trailhead for this hike can be a little confusing. There is a parking lot for Mule Canyon Ruins about halfway between Blanding, Utah and Natural Bridges National Monument along State Route 95. While these ruins are also worth a visit, this is not where you want to park to hike to House on Fire. Instead, turn north on County Road 263, which is just west of mile marker 102 on State Route 95. After turning down 263, you'll soon see a pay kiosk. After paying, drive another quarter of a mile to find the trailhead marker for the South Fork of Mule Canyon on the left side (west) of the road.
- House on Fire is about 1.5 miles from the beginning of the trail. It'll be on your right as you're hiking toward the site. If you continue hiking past House on Fire, you will come to seven or eight additional ruins within the next 2.5 miles.

[Click here for more information](#)

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7. NATURAL BRIDGES NATIONAL MONUMENT

Karen added this park to her list of hidden gems after learning that Theodore Roosevelt designated it Utah's first National Monument in 1908. Home to three massive natural bridges within White Canyon, the monument offers seven named trails with hiking distances ranging from a half mile to ten miles. Thirteen campsites are available year-round on a first-come, first-served basis.

The park is about 40 miles from Blanding, Utah. When driving south on US Route 191, turn right (west) onto State Route 95. The turnoff to Natural Bridges (State Route 275) will be on your right (north) in about 30 miles.

Tip: Natural Bridges is a great place to star gaze. According to the park's website, on April 5, 2007, the International Dark-Sky Association certified Natural Bridges National Monument as the first International Dark Sky Park.

[Click here for more information](#)



8. UTAH'S BICENTENNIAL HIGHWAY

One of our favorite drives in Utah, State Route 95, was mostly unpaved until the 1970s. It's now a scenic byway that runs 121 miles from Hanksville in the west to US Route 191 in the east. Paved in time for the US Bicentennial, it's also known as the Bicentennial Highway. From your car window, you'll see miles and miles of wilderness, very few cars, and no services of any kind.

It's not possible to drive this road without stopping a few times because of all the interesting things to see and do along the way. Driving west from US Route 191, the highway cuts through Bears Ears National Monument where thousands of Puebloan ruins are scattered throughout the remote countryside. (House on Fire is one example).

Why is it called Bears Ears? You'll have to take a side trip down State Route 261 (to the south) to get the picture—literally. After driving a few miles south, you'll start to see two mesas emerge in the distance to the north (in the opposite direction of travel). Eventually, you'll reach a point where the two nearly-identical mesas look like the ears of a massive bear—see the accompanying photo of the “ears.” Of course, if you happen to be driving north from Moki Dugway, this view will emerge in front of you as you head toward Highway 95.

Other highlights along the Bicentennial Highway, from east to west:

- Turn off to Natural Bridges National Monument (State Route 275).
- Cheesebox Butte is on the north side of the road a few miles past Natural Bridges.
- The road follows White Canyon for many miles west past Natural Bridges.
- Hite Crossing Bridge over the Colorado River just before it enters Lake Powell.
- Just north of the turnoff to Bullfrog (State Route 276), you'll see the Henry Mountains rise in the west. These mountains, the last in the lower 48 to be explored and named, are home to one of the few remaining open-range bison herds.

[Click here for more information](#)

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9. NEWSPAPER ROCK

For us, searching for petroglyphs feels like a treasure hunt. It's a thrill to spot an ancient carving on a sandstone wall, knowing that the person who created it stood in that same spot hundreds of years ago as they scratched out their design. So you can imagine our excitement the first time we visited Newspaper Rock, one of the largest collections of petroglyphs in the country. The accompanying photo shows a portion of the approximately twenty-foot by ten-foot wall covered with more than 650 petroglyphs.

Newspaper Rock State Historic Monument is twelve miles west of US Route 191 on State Route 121. For those traveling to the Needles District of Canyonland National Park, this magnificent example of ancient rock art is right beside the road and easy to access.

Tip: It's also a great place to stop, stretch your legs, and take a bathroom break on your way to The Needles.

[Click here for more information](#)



10. HIDDEN VALLEY TRAIL

Nestled in the cliffs above the town of Moab lies a beautiful hidden valley. After a 700-foot hike up a trail strewn with boulders, you'll get your first glimpse of this serene landscape that's hidden from the rest of the world. At this point the trail levels and rewards you with a gradual grade through a peaceful, grassy valley, the same path used by Native Americans for the past 2,000 years. When you reach the end of the valley at 1.6 miles and the trail starts to descend, look for a 1/4-mile-long swath of petroglyphs along the north rock wall. On the hike back to the trailhead, you'll be face-to-face with incredible views of the La Sal Mountains.

Tips:

- The petroglyphs are along the base of the north cliffs at the west end of the valley. Continue to hike west along the base of the cliffs and look for rock carvings that will be at eye level.
- This trail continues to the Colorado River.

The Utah Office of Tourism website provides turn-by-turn directions to the trailhead: From Moab, drive 3 miles south on US 191 and turn right (west) on Angel Rock Road. Drive 2 blocks and turn right on Rimrock Road. Drive to the parking area and trailhead at the road's end.

[Click here for more information](#)

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11. CORONA ARCH

Corona Arch is a popular destination just outside of Moab, so be prepared to have plenty of company as you hike to this huge, 140-foot natural arch. From the parking lot, the trail to the arch is about 1.5 miles with an elevation gain of 500 ft. Hikers are required to climb a short (about ten feet) metal ladder halfway through the hike; otherwise, the trek is only moderately strenuous.

Tip: When you come around the bend in the trail and see Corona Arch for the first time, be sure to get a good look at Bowtie Arch that sits a few hundred yards to the left.

To get to the trailhead from Moab, drive northwest out of town on US Route 191, turn left (southwest) onto State Route 279, just opposite of the entrance to Arches National Park, and then drive ten miles to the trailhead parking lot, which will be on the right side of the road. You'll know you're there when you see the Gold Bar Campground on the left side of the road right next to the river. The trailhead parking lot is on the opposite side of the road from the campground.

[Click here for more information](#)



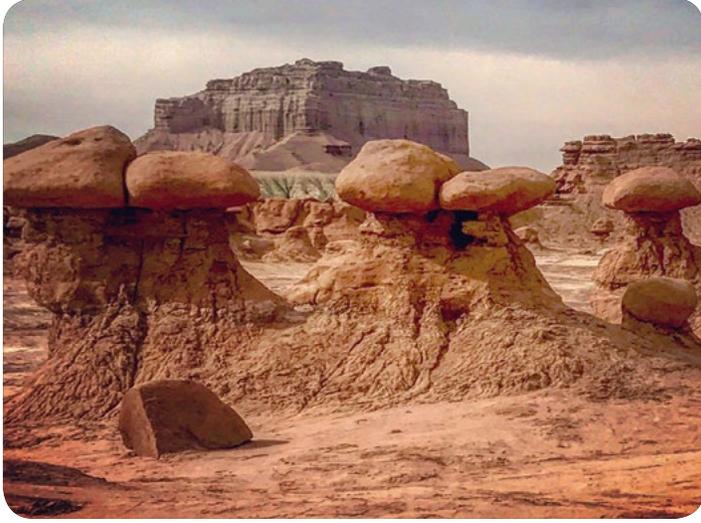
12. DEAD HORSE POINT STATE PARK

A 32-mile drive west of Moab takes you to this state park that sits adjacent to Canyonlands National Park. The defining feature of the park is its spectacular panoramic view from Dead Horse Point of the Colorado River 2,000 feet below. But that's not the only view the park has to offer: seven miles of trails, ranging from very easy to moderate, take you to eight overlooks along the canyon rim.

Tip: In addition to the RV and tent pad campsites in the park's two campgrounds, the Wingate Campground has nine, newly-built yurts you can rent for overnights stays. Go to www.reserveamerica.com to learn more about available dates and prices.

[Click here for more information](#)

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13. GOBLIN VALLEY STATE PARK

Twelve miles north of Hanksville, Utah, this genuinely unique desert park nestles up against the San Rafael Swell, which is home to several hikeable slot canyons. Named after its mushroom-shaped, sandstone hoodoos, Goblin Valley offers visitors a chance to wander through this un-earthly landscape without the constraint of designated trails. To get to the park from State Route 24 (which runs north out of Hanksville and south from Interstate 70), turn west on Temple Mt. Road and drive about five miles until you see a sign for Goblin Valley Road, where you'll turn south and drive another six or so miles to the park entrance.

While on the small side—about 3,600 acres—the park gets over 60,000 visitors each year. On our most recent visit to the park, we were impressed by the tidiness of the

campgrounds; they run a tight ship at the Goblin.

Tips:

- In addition to the park's 25 campsites, there are two yurts that you can rent for overnight stays. Go to www.reserveamerica.com for more information about campsite and yurt reservations.
- The yurts are very popular, and you cannot book a reservation for more than four months in advance. If you're interested in renting a yurt, book as far in advance as you can.
- Goblin Valley is the perfect base camp for those who enjoy hiking in the slot canyons on the eastern slope of the nearby San Rafael Swell. Little Wild Horse Canyon is our favorite of those slot canyons, but there are others close by as well worth checking out [at this link](#).

[Click here for more information](#)



14. LOWER CALF CREEK FALLS

Lower Calf Creek Falls flows year-round and is one of the most popular hiking destinations in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The trail begins at the Calf Creek Campgrounds off State Route 12, 12.6 miles south of Boulder, Utah. This moderately strenuous, 5.5-mile round trip hike has an elevation gain of about 500 feet and a magnificent reward at the end; a spectacular view of the lower 126 feet of Calf Creek Falls.

Tip: The trail to Upper Calf Creek Falls begins at a different location; you cannot reach the trail to the upper portion of the falls from Lower Calf Creek Falls Trail.

[Click here for more information](#)

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15. THE BURR TRAIL

Originally a cattle trail blazed in the late nineteenth century, the Burr Trail today connects the towns of Bullfrog, Utah to the east and Boulder, Utah to the west. The road is paved for part of the way, yet unpaved across its more treacherous sections. It's passable in non-four-wheel-drive vehicles when the road is dry. When wet, even four-wheel-drive vehicles struggle.

The trail passes through some of the most scenic parts of several amazing public lands in southern Utah: Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Capitol Reef National Park, and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

Tip: If you don't have time to drive the entire trail, consider leaving from Boulder in the morning, driving east along the Burr Trail through Capital Reef National Park, then instead of continuing south to Bullfrog, turn north on Notom Road and drive toward Utah State Route 24. Turn west on SR 24 toward Torrey and then south on State Route 12 to make it back to Boulder. Driving this loop is still a long trek, but you'll see some magnificent sights along the trail and have a fighting chance to make it back to your starting point on the same day.

[Click here for more information](#)



16. LITTLE WILD HORSE & BELL CANYONS

Slot Canyons are strewn throughout Southern Utah, and a couple of great ones sit along the eastern edge of the San Rafael Swell. About 50 million years ago, a large chunk of earth was pushed up in south-central Utah. Since then, water and wind have eroded this 75-mile by 40-mile "swell," creating a playground for those of us who love to explore slot canyons.

Our favorite is Little Wild Horse Canyon, which you can access from a trailhead a few miles from the entrance to Goblin Valley State Park. LWHC has a long stretch of "narrows," an area where the sculpted canyon walls are so close you have to turn sideways to make it through. The hike requires some scrambling, but it's doable for anyone in decent physical condition.

A popular variation of this hike is to combine it with the adjacent Bell Canyon and turn it into a loop, rather than an out-and-back trek. One trail leads north from the parking lot. After about a mile, it forks; veering right leads you into Little Wild Horse Canyon, and left takes you into Bell Canyon. Choose whichever you'd like, and at the north end of your canyon, follow the dry wash to the top of the next canyon. Descending the second canyon brings you back to the original fork in the trail. For us, the round trip from the parking lot was a 9-mile hike.

Tip: Another popular slot canyon trail nearby is Ding and Dang Canyons, which is an 8.4-mile loop hike.

[Click here for more information](#)

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17. HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK ROAD

If you want to experience a stretch of Utah's desolate backcountry the way the pioneers did back in the late nineteenth century, the Hole-in-the-Rock Road is for you. Starting at State Route 12 a few miles east of the town of Escalante, this 55-mile, unpaved road begins in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (BLM) and ends in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (NPS).

The Hole-in-the-Rock is a steep, precarious crevice in the rock that Mormon settlers passed through in the late 1800s while driving their wagons and livestock to and from the Colorado River. The blasting holes and anchor points from the expedition's wagons are still visible in the rock walls.

The road provides access to a lot of spectacular hikes, but the main attraction for us is the slot canyon trails. The accompanying photo is one example of a magnificent slot canyon (Zebra Canyon) that we recently hiked. The canyon itself was only about a quarter of a mile in length, while the entire hike—out and back—was 5.3 miles from the road.

Tip: The road is rough but can be driven by passenger cars for all but the last few miles on the south end.

[Click here for more information](#)



18. GLEN CANYON NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

When the 710-foot Glen Canyon Dam was completed in 1966, it blocked the Colorado River and formed Lake Powell. Now, the lake and the land area surrounding it make up Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. The dam sits a few miles south of the Utah border in Page, Arizona, but the majority of the recreation area—and its 186-mile long lake—is in Southern Utah.

Lake Powell is a popular site for water recreation in the summer. A few years ago we spent several days with friends on a houseboat on Lake Powell and have been wanting to do it again ever since. Our memories of lying in our sleeping bags on the top deck of the boat and falling asleep while gazing at the Milky Way are some of our fondest out of all our National Park travels.

Another great way to see the lake is to book a boat tour to Rainbow Bridge National Monument, one of the largest known natural bridges in the world. The eight-hour tour, leaving from Wahweap Marina near Page, Arizona, cruises 50 miles of Lake Powell's shoreline and requires a total walking distance of just over a mile to reach the bridge.

Boating, jet-skiing and floating on inner tubes are not your only recreation options in this National Park Service-managed site. With over 1.25 million acres, there are numerous regions within the park, each with several hiking trails worth exploring. Follow [this link to the park's website](#) for a list of hikes.

[Click here for more information](#)

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19. BUCKSKIN GULCH

We'll always remember Buckskin Gulch as the first slot canyon we ever hiked. That experience was magical; we'd never walked between such beautiful, sculpted sandstone walls that were so close we could touch both sides of the canyon at once. With more than 13 miles of narrow passageways, Buckskin is the longest slot canyon in the southwestern US, and possibly the world. Even though it's a bit difficult to reach from the nearest paved road, this is one hike you'll want to check out.

On the south side of US Route 89, about halfway between Kanab, Utah and Page, Arizona, is the turnoff to House Rock Valley Road. Follow this gravel path 8.5 miles south to Wire Pass Trailhead to begin your hike. If there is a threat of rain within 50 miles, do not hike into Buckskin Gulch, or any slot canyon. Buckskin has been rated one of the most dangerous hikes in America because there's no way to hike out if a flash flood comes through while you're in the canyon. But don't let that warning deter you; on days with no threat of rain, it's a must-see natural wonder.

[Click here for more information](#)



20. CEDAR BREAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT

Often compared to Bryce Canyon National Park because of its reddish-colored hoodoos, Cedar Breaks holds its own as one of Utah's must-see destinations. The three-mile-long amphitheater, filled with an incredible array of spires, pinnacles, arches, and hoodoos, drops 2,000 feet below the canyon rim. Surrounded by Dixie National Forest and situated at a whopping 10,000 ft elevation, winter comes early to this monument, with snow falling some years by mid-October.

There are only a few hiking trails inside the park. Our favorites are the Spectra Point and Ramparts Overlook Trails, which take you along the rim past Bristlecone pine trees, the longest-living species of trees in the world; the oldest known tree in Cedar Breaks is 1,600 years old. Spectra Point is a two-

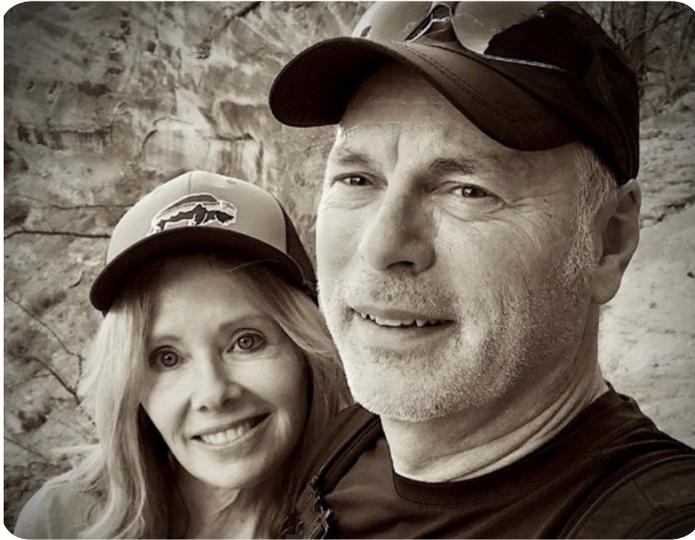
mile roundtrip trail, and continuing to the Ramparts Overlook will add another two miles to your roundtrip.

Point Supreme Campground has 25 campsites and accommodates both tents and RVs. Ten sites are available for reservations on www.reserveamerica.com and the remaining 15 campsites are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Cedar Breaks is in the southwestern part of the state just west of State Route 148 between State Route 14 to the south and State Route 143 to the north.

Tip: In the winter--mid-October to late May--the visitor center and restrooms are closed, as is State Route 148. However, visitors can still snowshoe, snowmobile and cross-country ski into the park in the winter.

[Click here for more information](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



MATT AND KAREN SMITH met at the University of Kansas and married in 1982. They live in the Pacific Northwest in Washington State. In 2010, they began traveling to US National Parks and writing about their experiences. Their first book, *Dear Bob and Sue*, is a travel memoir about their journey to visit all 59 US National Parks. Written as a series of emails to their friends Bob and Sue about their experiences on the road, they published it in 2012. Since then, they've written and published *Dories, Ho!*, another non-fiction work that recounts their dory boat trip through the Grand Canyon, followed by *Dear Bob and Sue: Season 2*. Matt and Karen's website, cleverly named mattandkaren.com, is where they post travel-related content when they're not working on their next book project.

