

## National Parks - Planning & Reservations

Visiting National Park [NP] campgrounds [CG] is a unique, must-do life experience. NP campgrounds are closest to the center of attraction and this is the best chance you have to experience authentic wilderness camping with minimal commercial distractions. The more time you spend researching your favorite NP's the more rewarding your visit experience and lifetime memories will be!

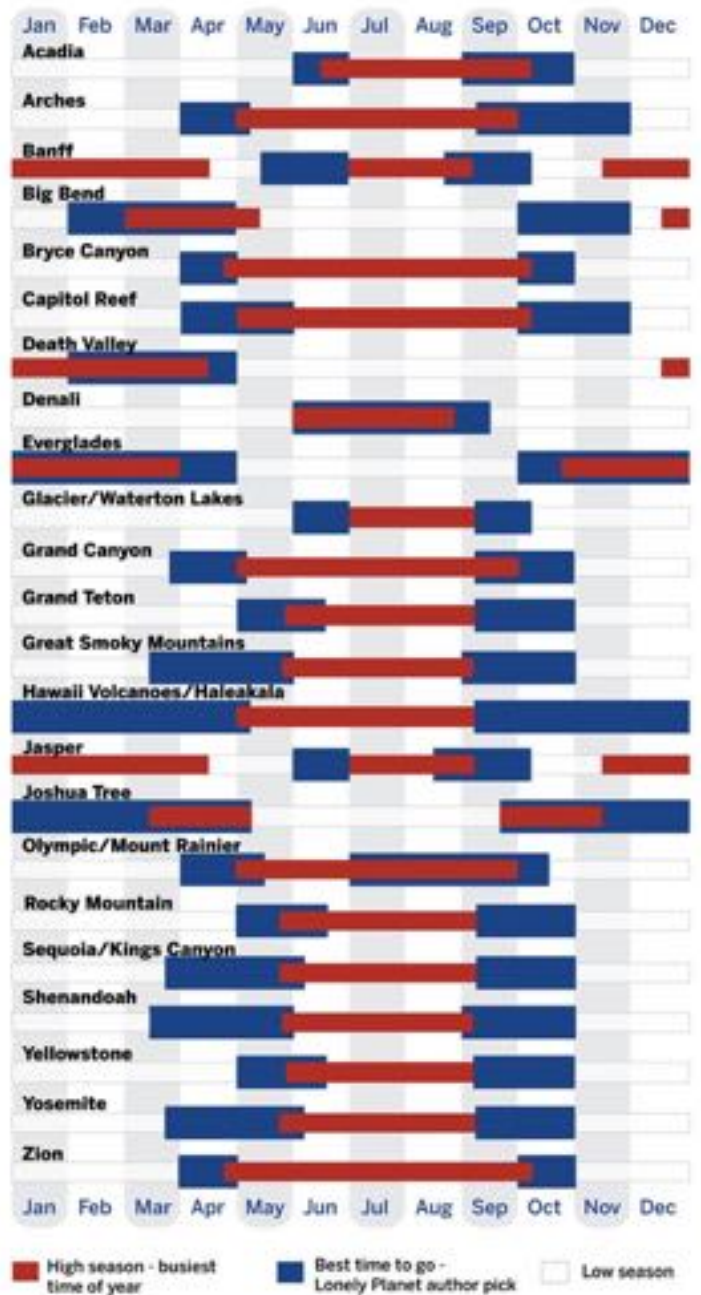
Your lifestyle will determine which parks you can reach and stay in long enough to enjoy. Golden age pass holders get incredible discounts and we have paid as little as \$8 a night in Death Valley and Organ Pipe Cactus! Our lifestyle allows us the luxury to travel 8 to 9 months a year and to help guide us we use NOAA Isotherm monthly maps to try to stay within the 60° to 70°F band.

There are some 60 National Parks with 130 campground units however many are tent camping only and many RV sites do not have any hookups, very few with full EWS hook-ups, most only with EW with a single dump station within the CG. Dry camping skills must be in your toolkit to enjoy the most scenic settings so plan for solar power and controlled generator use. Higher altitude parks lose 3.3°F for every 1,000 ft of elevation and can be considerably colder at night so an additional propane catalytic heater is recommended as your Airstream furnace will easily deplete your batteries overnight. Many parks operate generator and non-generator sections so that may also limit your CG scope.

Where possible, school vacations and holiday weekends should be avoided, especially at the most popular parks as severe overcrowding can really make for a disappointing visit. Zion is a small park so the visitor traffic is much more intense, Yosemite is closer to population centers and Grand Canyon South Rim – with 6 million visitors - unfortunately all fall into this category. Changes are on the horizon with increased NP entry fees and possible timed reservation systems that control visitor flow.

We have visited 19 of the 23 NP's on this chart of most popular parks courtesy of Lonely Planet. For optimum visit time choose the calendar with the blue bar only – that's when the weather is good and the park season is open but avoids the red bar peak visitor season and overcrowding.

Use these free apps - Allstays and Campendium - to get detailed information and links to NP websites, especially for valuable user reviews. For National Parks it's necessary to go to [reserveamerica.com](https://www.reserveamerica.com) and initially create your personal profile that you will use for all



reservations. Some NP's are sub-contracted. Xanterra and Aramark are park management concession organizations we have run into in many parks including Crater Lake, Zion, Death Valley, Yellowstone, Grand Tetons and Denali and probably many more CG's.

We backup our CG research by using satellite maps to check against campground site maps to ensure we are not adjacent to a highway, railway, community center, garbage or restrooms. It's easier to gauge relative site spacing and eliminate hazards to achieving best locations for privacy, views, tree shade and tranquility! Take note of site maximum trailer length and make sure the site is not reserved for handicap or host access only. Make a short-

list of the most desirable sites for your CG ready for the next stage.

The exact moment to make a reservation is critical! Having selected a park, find out when their reservation window opens - actual time for the time zone - usually 6 months before your trip. Start a week before that window by stalking the reservation site and watching the pattern of current reservations to look for openings when a prior reservation will be completing and will open up a free site. Mid-week openings are easier to reserve, so be prepared to make your reservation long enough ahead to cover the full period of your stay. Be ready to pounce at 8 am local to snag that open site! We usually have two computers online and hovering at exactly the reservation opening time to a split second. If you don't get it, someone else will a few seconds later, so be ready to try again day after day! Later, about a month before your trip, trim your reservation by going back online and cancelling the period you don't need - you will get a refund, which is usually all the fees for the cancelled days less a trivial administrative charge.

Some National Parks have sites offered on a first come basis - Organ Pipe Cactus and Death Valley are typical examples. Our recommendation is to stay commercially as close as possible the night before and gently cruise in around 11 am to check out the very best spots! Another alternative if arriving late is to use the CG overflow for the first night and relocate the following morning at leisure! Some other NP's open reservations on a specific annual date, Banff and Jasper in early January, and Denali on December 1<sup>st</sup>.

If all this fails there is usually a commercial site just outside the park, but you will be claustrophobically boxed in by giant motor homes and pay anywhere from 3 to 10 times more for the night. So much for the wilderness experience!

Lastly there is a perfect solution to avoid the DIY reservation hassle! Let someone else do it! Join a WBCCI caravan! We joined the South West Adventure in 2016 and on a 7 week caravan visited 7 National Parks in Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico with day trips to over 13 National Monuments, National Recreation Areas, National Historic Parks and National Historic Sites! Our itinerary included Mesa Verde, Zion, Bryce, Capitol Reef, Arches, Canyonlands, and the North Rim of the Grand Canyon National Parks. This trip introduced us to the joys of the National Park system and how to get the most out of a trip of a lifetime in the magnificence of the United States. It also introduced us to fellow Airstreamers who continue to share their travels and insights with us. This year we are joining the Alaska caravan with 35 other Airstreamers for a two-month odyssey into the real wilderness!

Once you've secured your key reservations, you can turn your attention to the route and sites of interest along the way. We like to select a few strategic anchor points on the longer trips, where we'll make reservations for multiple nights in order to explore. For the rest of the trip let serendipity guide you - state and county parks are generally much better CG choices and often the most scenic and spacious, however most do not accept same-day reservations. When we're trying to make a speedy repositioning trip across the country with a succession of one-night stops, we usually wait until mid-day to consider our projected overnight spot - free at Cracker Barrel and at some Walmarts and casinos - availability at most KOA's, or at independent CG's along the route.

Enjoy the adventure and see you down the road.....

If you have any questions about this article please contact David by email at [airstream@db26.net](mailto:airstream@db26.net). Margaret & David Broad (WBCCI #2381) from Tappahannock Virginia, traveling 8 months of the year since July 2016 in their 2015 Flying Cloud 25 RB. Their travel blog is at [www.flyingcloud25.blogspot.com](http://www.flyingcloud25.blogspot.com) and David also publishes an Airstream improvement discussion at [www.facebook.com/airstreamtweaks](https://www.facebook.com/airstreamtweaks)



Margaret & David Broad



Spirit Island - Jasper