



# hikes great american

BY JAIME GUILLET

Few things are as simultaneously relaxing and invigorating as a good hike. You can either enjoy the company of friends or enjoy quiet contemplation as you walk through some of America's finest pieces of scenery. From scaling 50-degree angle peaks in the West to trekking gentle slope gradations in the East's Great Smoky Mountains, majestic hiking opportunities for all skills and fitness levels abound around the nation.

## YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

Every year, Yosemite Wilderness Center rangers remove hundreds of pounds of tattered, dry-rotting gloves from the base of Half Dome summit in California's Yosemite Valley. Hikers drop the gloves at the foot of the final 400 feet of Yosemite's Mist Trail, which culminates with the famous — or infamous — Half Dome summit.

Thousands of hikers flock yearly to Yosemite's iconic peak in the Sierra Nevada Mountains to go the limit on the complete 16-mile trail. Going the limit is no hyperbole. Mist Trail winds eight miles up from the valley's gorge, carved out by glaciers long ago, sideswiping the Vernal and Nevada waterfalls and ascending a total 4,800 feet. Hikers gain those final 400 feet with the assist of the Half Dome Cables, two metal cable handrails three feet apart that allow hikers to make the summit without

rock climbing equipment, necessary in large part because of the mountain face's 50-degree slippery granite slope. It is at the beginning of these cables that many hikers' used gloves accumulate.

"It's a fairly terrifying, dangerous experience," said Matt Nolte, a Yosemite ranger. "It's definitely a hike people use to prove themselves. Some people very wisely choose not to ascend."

Of various hiking experiences in national parks around the country, Yosemite National Park is one in which altitude should be considered when making plans, said Tim Devine, an employee with the Arthur Carhart Wilderness Training Center, a national interagency public education center outside Missoula, Mont. Yosemite's lowest elevation is 3,000 feet above sea level and rises to a max elevation of around 13,000 feet above sea

level. The National Park Service recommends a maximum hike of five miles for novices. Devine, who has worked in other national parks such as Shenandoah in Virginia, Rocky Mountain in Colorado, Olympic and Mt. Ranier in Washington and Everglades, says the “most important thing is for folks to plan ahead and realize what their abilities are.”

But popularity can be a buzzkill for some hikers, like Nolte, who prefer trails unfettered with mounds of people. He suggests Glacier National Park in West Glacier, Mont. and the Ruby Mountains in Nevada.

## RUBY MOUNTAINS

“Ruby Mountains is a special place. It doesn’t feel like Nevada,” opines Nolte. “You’d never think there are rugged, hard mountains like that in Nevada.”

The hike is leaning toward more of an advanced hiker, Nolte cautions.

The Ruby Mountains are actually two mountain ranges, the Rubies and East Humboldts, which are separated by Secret Pass, in northeastern Nevada. The Ruby Mountain range is within the Humboldt National Forest, is approximately 90 miles in length and, surrounded by 25 glacially formed lakes, is normally coined “Nevada’s Swiss Alps.”

The 42-mile Ruby Crest Trail coils from Lamoille Canyon upwards then back down to Harrison Pass. But with hardly any organized search and rescue teams, and the fact that “no one goes there,” it is vital to backpack stocked with the proper necessities, said Nolte.

## GLACIER AND YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARKS

Some national parks offer the glories of towering mountains without the heightened constraints of elevation. Glacier, located in scenic West Glacier, Montana, offers spectacular views

and is “one of my favorites,” said Nolte. Although its elevation is very high—from 3,000 feet above sea level to around 10,000 feet—it doesn’t feel as devastating since the rises are a lot less dramatic, he said. Yellowstone National Park, similarly, has a lot of flat, open areas but elevation is still high, around 7,000 to 8,000 feet, so it is not as noticeable.

Yellowstone National Park encompasses 2.2 million acres occupying parts of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho. Yellowstone provides potential viewing access to scores of wildlife including grizzly bears, wolves, bison and elk, as well as a collection of geysers and hot springs including the famous Old Faithful and Mammoth Springs.

Most of the park is backcountry and managed as wilderness, but it has more than 1,100 miles of trails that are available for hiking, particularly day hikes. Trails such as Black Canyon, Howard Eaton Trail and Observation Peak take hikers in the vicinity of Cascade Lake while Mary Mountain, Mallard Lake and Spring Creek scout Old Faithful.

## OPTIONS CLOSER TO HOME

For hikers looking to stay closer to home, quality backpacking locations in the Gulf Coast region are limited, says Liz Smith-Incer, head of the Park Service’s Mississippi Field Office of the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program.

The premier hiking trail in the Gulf South is Black Creek Hiking Trail, a 28-mile trail in the De Soto National Forest in Wiggins, Miss. near Hattiesburg, although an 11-mile stretch remains closed following Hurricane Katrina. Ron Smith, district ranger at De Soto, describes the trail as “five or six miles of terrain that is relatively flat and not real physically challenging.” For a more challenging hike in the Gulf South, Tishamingo Park in the extreme northeast of Mississippi offers an 8-

mile trail of varying panoramas, Smith said.

## WHAT TO PACK AND HOW TO PLAN

When packing for different hikes, the most important thing to consider, in a word, is footwear. Keeping feet dry, stable and comfortable is the best possible advice for any hike, said Devine.

“Make sure your shoes are well broken in and wear good socks,” he stressed. Second, layering clothes is the best way to plan and to accommodate changing weather conditions, said Devine. A good backpack weight for one person, although there are many variations, is around 15 lbs., said Devine. Equipment necessities include a flashlight or headlamp, food, water or purification tablets, a whistle, bright clothing, and a map and compass.

Devine advises hikers not to rely on Global Positioning Systems for directions. “Understand, it’s a good tool but you can’t rely on it all the time because of cloud cover or the satellite is unavailable,” said Devine. “Also, I’ve been out on the trail working and come across people who pull it out and it’s dead and they’re relying on that piece of equipment. Always have a map and compass and extra batteries.”

One other detail hikers should plan for and talk with their respective parks about is any permitting that will be necessary. Essentially any national park is going to require a hiking permit if plans include staying overnight. The permits generally don’t cost anything, like at Yosemite, but are a way for parks to regulate the number of people on trails at any given point for land management and conservation purposes, said Nolte. This leads to one final point all wilderness officials stress: outdoor ethics. The principle is all about leaving no trace, Devine said.