
AMERICA'S HOLY GROUND



Mountain smoke in autumn, Great Smoky Mountains National Park

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*“You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.”*

—ISAIAH 55:12 (NIV)

*“It is not what we have that will make us a great nation;
it is the way in which we use it.”*

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

*“No synonym for God is so perfect as Beauty. Whether as seen carving the lines
of the mountains with glaciers, or gathering matter into stars, or planning the
movements of water, or gardening—still all is Beauty!”*

—JOHN MUIR

*“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will
endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated
refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night,
and spring after winter.”*

—RACHEL CARSON

INTRODUCTION

For as long as humans can remember, we have looked at the wondrous beauty of the world and sought to understand our place under the stars. In the tallest peaks of the mountains we see transcendence, a thin place between ourselves and the heavens. Verdant valleys remind us of the abundance the earth provides. Desert landscapes can leave us alone with our thoughts, perhaps to ponder our lives and to have gratitude for the supplies we need to sustain us in an otherwise unforgiving place. Roaring oceans remind us of the untamed power of the natural world and forces that can be mitigated but never fully controlled. Soaring birds and quick-footed deer give us over to dreams about what it would be like to move as they do, gliding on the wind's whispers or nimbly navigating rough terrain. We see beauty in these places and events; sometimes we see, or at least feel, something else our eye cannot fully see nor our mind fully understand.

These are holy moments. These moments are why we have written this book: to name not only the specific places we, the American people, have set aside as national treasures but also to speak humility and wonder and awe and gratitude into moments such as when you peer over the rim of the Grand Canyon, travel to another time in a Shenandoah hollow, or



Green sea turtle, Biscayne National Park

breathe in the smell of the earth deep in the Olympic Peninsula. How can we more fully take in what we are seeing, something that mere photographs can never record?

For many of us, those thin moments of divine connection and revelation are in the significant events of our lives: births, marriages, deaths, transitions of all kinds. They are in the everyday joys: a night at the symphony, narrowly avoiding disaster, and watching our children act with compassion, mercy, and curiosity. They are in the times when we retreat quietly somewhere to watch the dawn's early light or the dusk's lingering glow.

And for many of us, those holy moments of wonder come in America's national parks.

Seeing the fantasyland of Carlsbad Caverns through the eyes of a third-grader.

Oberholtzer Trail, Voyageurs National Park



Watching the Perseid meteor shower in Yellowstone's starlit darkness as Old Faithful erupts just a few yards away.

Lamenting wildfire smoke obscuring the afternoon view of Crater Lake and feeling ecstasy the next morning on seeing blue clear skies over the lake.

Listening to the deepest ocean depths as Atlantic waves pound the Acadia coast.

Shielding your face from the intense heat of a Hawaiian volcano's lava.

Locking eyes with a sea turtle as you snorkel in the reefs around Dry Tortugas.

Hopefully you've been, or will soon be, blessed to have those kinds of remarkable moments—moments when the pressure of packing a month's worth of sights into an afternoon, the buzz of stressed tourists and snack-craving children showing their exhaustion, the gnawing reminder that you should have eaten a while ago—when all those distractions suddenly evaporate and you see the handiwork of God right then, right there, right in front of you.

America's Holy Ground: 61 Faithful Reflections on Our National Parks seeks to reconnect you with your own holy moments of your past, to create new holy moments on future visits, or simply to transport you to any of the sixty-one national parks. Each reflection focuses on a particular theme that matches the park's natural setting or history. We have tried to give you a flavor of each park with brief notes about the features of each location, without turning it into a travelogue narrative. There are other books for that. At the same time, we have not attempted to answer all of the epistemological questions of the origin of the universe! The spiritual reflections are a starting place, not a deep theological dissertation. Every devotional closes with three questions that will help you reflect on the reading, your own faith and life story, and how you can use those reflections in the future.

Where's Mount Rushmore?

It's in South Dakota! But we know what you really mean is, "Why isn't Mount Rushmore included here?" This book covers national parks and *only* national parks. Mount Rushmore is a national monument. There are 418 national park units, including battlefields, historical sites, parkways, preserves, recreation areas, wild and scenic rivers, seashores . . . there are a lot of them, and we can't cover them all. (Yet.)

According to the National Park Service (NPS) website, "Generally, a national park contains a variety of resources and encompasses large land or water areas to help provide adequate protection of the resources." Other definitions suggest national parks offer a variety of activities like hiking, camping, fishing, and so on. It's a little vague, but why limit the possibilities?

So no, there are no national monuments in this book. But there are some parks that may be totally unfamiliar to you, including the seven Alaskan parks born on a single day in December 1980, plus the most recent addition of Indiana Dunes National Park in February 2019. All sixty-one national parks are here, including the year each was established. And when the sixty-second park is created, we'll post that on

our website, www.Americas-HolyGround.com.

You'll notice that forty-five of the parks have four pages devoted to them, while sixteen have two pages. We made this decision based on the number of visitors each park has. Great Smoky Mountain deserves a bit more attention than Gates of the Arctic. Forgive us if we slighted your favorite park.



Starfish at a Rialto Beach tide pool, Olympic National Park



A spot for reflection along the South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park

Suggestions for Using This Book

Most of us don't get to visit our national parks often enough. Our lives are too busy or the parks are too far away or the weather doesn't suit us. And that's fine. *America's Holy Ground* helps you make the most of the visits you take—and of the times when you're reminiscing or planning ahead.

Important to remember is that the land all around you has been sacred for a long, long time, longer than you can possibly imagine. This applies even in your own hometown. Native Americans have lived in North America for tens of thousands of years, and their faith practices, legends, and histories are the first human chapters in the stories of America's national parks. Respect the holy ground of those who preceded you, just as you hope others respect your holy ground. When you learn about Native American religions and traditions, contemplate how they compare and contrast with your own.



A sea-level view of Ofu Island



Delicate Arch

ARCHES NATIONAL PARK

UTAH • 1971 • CONNECTION

A friend loves you all the time.

A brother is always there to help you.

—PROVERBS 17:17 (ICB)

Your favorite oceanside beach may look very different in a few hundred million years.

About three hundred million years ago, Arches National Park lay beneath a salty sea. Each time the sea ebbed, a layer of salt was deposited, eventually hundreds of feet thick. Then, about 160 million years ago, sand dunes lined the inland sea, covering the salt. Over time, sediment buried this sand and salt, and its crushing weight transformed it into sandstone more than a mile thick in places. That sediment also pressured the salt, warping and buckling the rock above.

Then water got to work, seeping into cracks, eroding the salt but leaving the tougher rock. Geologic shifts and hydraulic erosion chipped grooves in the rock, and the deeper-buried rock was washed away. Hard rock on top, soft rock on bottom—that won't last long, geologically speaking.

Eventually, the salt layer washed away completely, and the sandstone was left hanging over an empty gap: an arch.

In Arches National Park, this happened more than two thousand times. At least that many arches have been discovered within the boundaries of this compact park, an astonishing number. The National Park Service defines an arch as spanning at least three feet, and some of the most famous arches span hundreds of feet, a mind-boggling feat of natural engineering.

Delicate Arch is the most famous of the park's landmarks. Perched atop a ridge, the sixty-foot-tall arch is breathtaking at any time of day, though it shows off its coral colors particularly well at sunrise and



The Spectacles

the arch, then the empty hold-your-breath space, and then the rest of the stripe on the other side. Delicate is the perfect name for it; despite being made of solid rock, the emptiness creates a sense of suspense—how long can this arch last?

Trails lead you to some of the most beloved sites in the National Park System. Landscape Arch, a ribbon of rock spanning roughly three hundred feet, makes you wonder: *Will this will be the wind that topples the arch?* Balanced Rock is exactly what its name implies—a gravity-defying feat that begs to be photographed. The 112-foot-tall span of Double Arch, with two arches sharing a base, is the park's tallest. From a certain point of view, North Window and South Window align around a nose-shaped rock, together appropriately dubbed the Spectacles. The Devil's Garden Trail leads to the Navajo Arch, with its irresistible sense of a gateway to another world. Double O Arch is the rarity of two arches in a single vertical space, a large gap with a smaller arch tucked beneath. Partition Arch, Black Arch, Tunnel Arch, and Pine Tree Arch are also along this trail.

Arches is a fragile place. These arches aren't going to last forever. Two well-known arches, Skyline and Landscape, have had significant rock collapses over the years. Wall Rock, a graceful, well-known span of more than seventy feet, wasn't so lucky; it collapsed into a pile

sunset. A short hike gives you a view from a mile away, and a longer, tougher hike provides a perspective you'll never forget. You can see the layers within the rock: a horizontal stripe of rock or erosion on one leg of

But what may stick with you most is how the deep water mirrors all that is above it: the volcanic caldera rim, the peaks rising above the caldera, even the clouds passing overhead. Gazing at the reflection can be calming and inspiring, and it can be disconcerting and disorienting. You may be surprised at what you see.



The deepest swimming hole you'll ever find

God created humans as self-aware: we know our feelings, our histories, our successes, and our failures. We know our whole story, whether we choose to remember that story honestly or to sugarcoat the painful parts to make it easier to swallow. When used best, self-awareness and reflection help us see our actions and our choices in new ways, hopefully teaching us how to make better choices in the future. Truly reflecting on our lives requires courage to admit when we were wrong, vulnerability to admit when our actions hurt others or ourselves, and forgiveness when we acknowledge that we have sinned.

Reflect on the big choices in your life, or a surprising-choice that had unexpected benefits or consequences. If you could choose again, what would you choose differently? Are there practices you engage for more meaningful reflection? How can your reflection propel you to act now or to make amends with someone you have hurt?

Sunrise





Brandywine Falls
after a heavy rain

CUYAHOGA VALLEY NATIONAL PARK

OHIO • 2000 • RESTORATION

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal,
flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great
street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life,
bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month.
And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

—REVELATION 22:1–2 (NIV)

In 1969, sparks from a train passing on a trestle spanning the river ignited oil-soaked debris floating in the Cuyahoga River. It was not the deadliest fire, nor was it the costliest, but of the more than a dozen times the river burned in the last 150 years, it was the most notable. Cleveland, the city through which the Cuyahoga winds as it reaches Lake Erie, became the butt of many a late-night comic's jokes. The once-proud industrial city, with its hardworking immigrant-filled neighborhoods representing much of central and eastern Europe, became known as the "mistake on the lake." How bad is your city if your river burns? Apparently, pretty bad.

Sometimes, in the flowing current of events and circumstance, even awful things can become a channel for something good to follow. The sight of the Cuyahoga—meaning crooked—River burning against the city skyline galvanized a growing movement of people who realized our environment was in trouble, and not just in Ohio. The inferno that lasted a little more than an hour inspired legislation that led to the establishment of the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Water Act, and the eventual creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. An image of a dying, burning river, choked with sewage effluent and industrial waste, validated the urgent need for the first Earth



Bald eagle with the catch of the day



Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad

Day, celebrated only a year later in 1970.

Maybe it was just embarrassment, or perhaps the realization that the river should be a source of life rather than a perpetual portrait of failure was what united the communities bordering the eighty-five twisting miles of the Cuyahoga. They invested their tax dollars and a considerable amount of time and energy to clean up the crooked river that meanders from near the Pennsylvania border east of Cleveland south toward Akron and back north again and on to Lake Erie. Now, five decades after that infamous fire, the river is reborn, home to sixty species of fish. Bald eagles

and blue herons soar over the tree-lined embankments where river otters and beavers make their homes.

The park is different than most of those in the National Park System. Yes, it has sweeping vistas (The Ledges), deep canyons (Tinkers Creek Gorge), waterfalls (Brandywine, Blue Hen, and Bridal Veil), and rocks aplenty (Deep Lock Quarry) that hold the geological record narrating the story of how the earth was born. But it also has working farms, ski slopes, operational canal locks, a scenic railroad, art galleries, a

thick. Fire triggers the opening of giant sequoia cones and thins out the ecosystem, giving seeds a better chance at germination and survival. Controlled burns and closely monitored wildfires are tolerated in the interest of future trees.

Sequoias thrive only in a few places; there are fewer than seventy known groves, and in the United States they are concentrated in the Sierra Nevada near Sequoia and adjacent Kings Canyon National Parks. Usually found in humid climates with snowy winters and dry summers, giant sequoias stick to the higher elevations between five and seven thousand feet. In the dry air, the trees have a sophisticated system to push water absorbed by the roots up the trunk and to use air roots to absorb moisture from fog.

It's easy to believe these immense trees were made especially for this rare place on earth: high above the ocean, just the right amount of rock in the soil, with the right kind of moisture in the right places. If you happen upon a toppled tree and see its root ball, ridiculously big, you may start imagining around you the deep roots necessary to hold such a large structure upright. Those roots have dug deep for a long, long time—much longer than you've been alive.

No matter how mighty the tree, it would collapse and die without the roots as its foundation. We thinking humans have different kinds of foundations: Our moral codes that help us make decisions every day, whether we realize our morals are at play or not. We turn off the water while brushing our teeth so we don't waste water. We recycle. We turn off our car engine while waiting to pick up our kids after school even if it's hot or cold. We vote our consciences. Our foundation is there, keeping our souls steady. We know when we stray from that foundation because we become disoriented, unsteady, unsure. We topple, even if it's just for a moment.

What have been your life's foundations? Could your foundation use some shoring up? How can you serve as a foundation for somebody important to you?



Skyline Drive in autumn

SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK

VIRGINIA • 1935 • HOME

Look down from your holy house in Heaven! Bless your people Israel and the ground you gave us, just as you promised our ancestors you would, this land flowing with milk and honey.

—DEUTERONOMY 26:15 (MESSAGE)

For millions of Americans, Shenandoah National Park is their neighborhood national park. Just seventy-five miles from the nation's capital and a few hundred miles from the East Coast megapolopolis stretching from D.C. north to New York City, Shenandoah was created partly in response to the majority of early national parks being located out west. Two parks—Maine's Acadia and Great Smoky Mountains spanning the Tennessee–North Carolina border—partially filled that void, but the long ridgeline through north-central Virginia became a project for Virginia leaders in the years leading up to the Great Depression.

The challenge was that the land had been occupied for generations by subsistence farmers and tradesmen living in small communities or in their own isolation. Despite their hard way of life and an exhausted landscape, convincing them to leave their homes was not an easy task.

Cobbling together the park wasn't easy either. The original vision for the park required obtaining more than five thousand parcels of land, and the federal government provided no funding for the park. Virginia political and civic leaders raised money to buy the land, scraped together some public money, and changed laws to make it easier for them to acquire the land. But many residents, especially older ones who had always lived in the Shenandoah highlands, refused to sell at any price.

Thinking creatively, park supporters crafted a compromise: residents could remain on their land the rest of their lives. Steadfast

residents agreed, and eventually the federal government accepted the deal. The last grandfathered resident, Annie Lee Bradley Shenk, passed away in 1979, more than three decades after her husband preceded her.

The Great Depression, a tree blight, and the opportunity to improve their quality of life prompted most of the more than two thousand residents to leave their homes in the early years. Much of the evidence of those old homesteads has been removed, but a few hollows still hold cemeteries and other artifacts of the people who used to call Shenandoah home.

The park was transformed by the construction of Skyline Drive, a twisting 105-mile, two-lane road. For many visitors, what they see from Skyline Drive is all they will ever see of the park. And that's just fine, for dozens of pullouts provide vast views of the Shenandoah River valley to the west and the Piedmont to the east. No view is the same, and you could spend your whole trip gazing out at your favorite vista. As you make your way along the road, keep your eyes open for a black bear traipsing along the side of the road, deer skittering into the woods, or foxes and bobcats. The speed limit along Skyline Road is thirty-five miles per hour, which may feel too fast as you take in the views from mountains



Shenandoah's rolling hills

billions of years old.

But to examine those mountains up close or to see the old backcountry homes, you will need to get out of your car and hike. With more than five hundred miles of trails of varying difficulty, there is a trail for every ability. The Appalachian



Sunrise

Trail, stretching from Georgia to Maine, passes through the park and crisscrosses many of the smaller trails along the way. Limberlost Trail is accessible to all and showcases the flora of Virginia, especially mountain laurel in June. Another popular trail takes you through a valley shaded by oak, maple, hickory, and other trees and leads to Dark Hollow Falls, which stairsteps seventy feet under a lush canopy. Blackrock Summit Trail connects to a rock jumble that will entertain rock scramblers for hours. Other trails will take you to the park's high points at Hawksbill Mountain (elevation 4,051 feet), Stony Man (4,011 feet), and Old Rag (3,291).

Once the day is done, you can relax at developed or backcountry campgrounds or huts along the Appalachian Trail. If you want something a little more luxurious, Skyland has offered accommodations since the 1890s; its owner was one of the visionaries for the park, seeing the economic opportunities in potential tourists. You can also visit the mountain retreat of former President Herbert Hoover, who donated his Rapidan Camp to the park when he left office.

Eventually, you will head back home, but perhaps you will understand why so many old-timers didn't want to leave the beautiful mountains their families had called home for generations. Maybe Shenandoah will become a home away from home for you too.

Where are the places you have called home? What is it about those places that have truly made them feel like home? How you can help others make a new place their home?