

A Visitors Guide to National Parks in Northern California

Most widely known for its amusement and theme parks, did you know California is also home to more national parks than any other state in the country? Five of California's nine national parks are all within a three hour drive from San Francisco. Someone who is vacationing in the San Francisco Bay area for a week or more may want to consider a quick trip (a day or two, maybe even a week) to one or more of these majestic national parks in northern California. You're probably wondering, 'Which national park is better?' It depends on what you are interested in seeing and doing. Each vacationer brings with them certain expectations and interests when it comes to visiting national parks. The six national parks mentioned here promise to appeal to anyone interested in a northern California national parks trip. Weather plays a major role when thinking about visiting one of these parks in northern California. Another factor to consider is crowds; they play a major role in timing as well.

Below is a quick vacationer's guide to national parks in northern California. We wanted to hit on important points of emphasis such as closest airport(s), the distance from a major city, things to do or see, and the best time of the year to travel to the national parks.

Yosemite National Park

One of the most popular national parks in the United States and by far the most visited in all of California is Yosemite, and for good reason at the top of the list. Some would argue that Yosemite is too popular and busy. Don't let those opinions of the park cloud your judgment when it comes to visiting. Yosemite provides visitors some of the best experiences and views in the entire country. Whether it's hiking, sight-seeing, photography, climbing, or whatever activity you enjoy when hitting up national parks, Yosemite is an adventure every national parks traveler should cross off their bucket list. This is the quintessential destination for a California national park road trip. Yosemite is also one of the best national parks near San Francisco.



Yosemite Falls, Yosemite National Park

Best Airport to Fly into Yosemite National Park: The two best airports to fly into for your Yosemite Destination are Oakland (OAK) and San Francisco (SFO). Depending on the traffic, it's about a three to four hour drive from the airport. There are some smaller airports that are a little bit closer, but when you consider arrival records plus avoiding connecting flights, your best bet is to choose OAK or SFO airports.

Distance from Major City: Yosemite National Park is about 180 miles from San Francisco and about 170 miles from Oakland.

Cool Things to See: There are so many sights to see, things to do, and places to hike in this tabernacle of nature. Some of the best things to check out while visiting Yosemite:

- Yosemite Falls: Highest waterfall in North America and sixth largest in the world.
- Half Dome: One of the most popular rock formations in the park. Towers almost 5,000 feet above the Yosemite Valley floor
- Tunnel View: Provides one of the best views Yosemite has to offer. Half dome, El Capitan, and Bridalveil Fall can all be viewed in one sitting.
- El Capitan: A very popular destination for climbers. From the base to the top of the peak, it reaches nearly 3,000 feet in the air.
- Valley View: This valley stretches eight miles long and nearly one mile deep and provides park-goers one of the best spots for majestic and nostalgic views.

Best Time of the Year: If you can avoid weekends, then do so. Otherwise you might be spending more time in traffic than out and about taking in all the incredible views Yosemite has to offer. With that said, the best time to visit the park is early fall or late spring. Not only will you avoid the larger crowds, but these seasons offer some of the best views of all the national parks in California.

Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks

You could argue if Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks should be included in a list featuring northern California national parks. Both are only about a hundred miles away from Yosemite and geographically almost right in the middle of California (closest national parks to the Sierra Nevada). Although one of the main hubs where people visit from is San Francisco, the quickest way to get here is via San Jose; however, it would be wise to plan a visit to these parks in addition to visiting Yosemite. They are close enough in proximity where travelers can get an incredible taste of the best national parks in northern California (Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and Sequoia) in about a week's length. Kings Canyon and Sequoia are two separate parks, but most people who visit the two do so in one combined trip. Home to the giant sequoia trees, travelers will want to make sure they soak in all there is to do here. Depending on what your interests and how much time you have, you'll want to plan about two to three days between the two parks.



Redwood Creek, Kings Canyon National Park

Best Airport to Fly into Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks: The best airport to fly into for a visit to Kings Canyon National Park is San Jose (SJC). Depending on the traffic, it's about a three to four hour drive from that airport. There are some smaller airports (FAT and BFL) that are a little bit closer, but when you consider arrival records plus avoiding connecting flights, your best bet is to choose the SJC airport.

Distance from Major City: Kings Canyon National Park is about 200 miles from San Jose.

Cool Things to See: Day hiking, backpacking, majestic drives, and viewpoints...these two parks have a lot to offer. Here are some of the best things to check out:

- **Kings Canyon Scenic Byway (Kings Canyon):** Also known as Highway 180, this 50+ mile route will take you to some of the best canyons in the country. Even though this route is packed with curves and cautions, it provides many opportunities for amazing stops for views, selfies, and photos.

- General Sherman Tree (Sequoia): In terms of sheer volume, this tree is touted as the world's largest standing almost 300 feet tall and about 40 feet in diameter.
- Giant Forest (Sequoia): There is literally no way to describe this giant grove without seeing it for yourself. It's inspiring, motivating, humbling and also home to 8,000+ sequoias (the most in all of California). You'll want to begin your adventure at the Giant Forest Museum which will give you more information and history.

Best Time of the Year: Avoid weekends. The best time to visit the Kings Canyon and Sequoia parks are late spring and early fall.

Lassen Volcanic National Park

The outcome of its eruption in 1915 sent massive chunks of lava and ash more than 200 miles away and has since created one California's lesser-known national parks. Lush forests, lava fields, and geothermal features are all commonplace in Lassen Volcanic National Park. Aside from being one of the least visited national parks in the country, Lassen is home to some of the most intriguing national park adventures in northern California. With mud pots, scenic hikes, bubbling pools, and Sulphur smells, it's no wonder many have dubbed this little gem as California's mini-version of Yellowstone National Park. If you are looking for another waypoint for your California national parks road trip, Lassen is one to add.



Bumpass Hell, Lassen Volcanic National Park

Best Airport to Fly into Lassen Volcanic National Park: The best airport to fly into for a visit to Lassen Volcanic National Park is Sacramento (SMF). This will put you at a three hour drive from that airport to the park.

Distance from Major City: Lassen National Park is about 180 miles from Sacramento. If travelling from San Francisco, you're going to be about 240 miles away (four hour drive).

Cool Things to See: With day hiking, backpacking, and geological mysteries to check out, Lassen gives park-goers one of the most unique national park experiences in northern California. Here are some of the best things to check out at Lassen:

- **Devastated Area:** this north side of Lassen Peak features the largest plug dome volcano in the world.
- **Lily Pond Nature Trail:** An easy trail to traverse and only one mile, this little hike lets you get great views of Reflection Lake and Lily Pond. There are also interesting plants and geological features to view along the hike.
- **Sulphur Works:** This geothermal feature is right off the road, has ample parking, and is easy to access. You'll see steam valleys, mud pots, and bubbling streams with this quick visit.
- **Bumpass Hell Trail:** Has been rated as a somewhat moderate trail to hike, this 2.7 mile trail is relaxing and gives park-goers one of the best experiences Lassen has to offer. It is one of the most popular destinations at Lassen National Park and for good reason.

Best Time of the Year: Summer and fall. You will not experience crowds at Lassen like you would at some of the other California national parks, so don't be afraid to visit on weekends.

Pinnacles National Park

Pinnacles National Park is a lot like Kings Canyon and Sequoia where it's debatable if they're located in northern California. With that said, Pinnacles is located in the center section of California and is easily accessible from a major city. In 2013, Pinnacles National Park became one of California's newest members of the national park family. You will want to plan your trip to this park carefully as the two park entrances do not connect with each other at any point in the park.



Pinnacles National Park

Best Airport to fly into Pinnacles National Park: The best airport to fly into for a visit to Pinnacles National Park is San Jose (SJC), which will put you about an hour and a half from the park's east entrance. You can also fly into San Francisco (SFO) which would put you at about a two hour drive from that airport to the park.

Distance from Major City: Pinnacles is a little over 70 miles from San Jose. The park is about 130 miles from San Francisco. As of the time of this article, there is no public transportation to and from Pinnacles to any of the major cities.

Cool Things to See: With day camping, hiking, backpacking, bird-watching, and spelunking to check out, Pinnacles gives travelers an intriguing and different national park experience in northern California. Here are some of the best things to check out at Pinnacles:

- **Hiking:** Make sure you do a little research before you embark on one of the various hikes Pinnacles has to offer. With more than 30 miles of trails in the Pinnacles National Park hiking system, hikers will experience a myriad of trail experiences.
- **Bird Watching:** Pinnacles National Park is one of the best parks for those who love bird watching. It's an activity that can be done all year round, but it's best to plan accordingly if you want to have success. Make sure you have binoculars (7-10 power range), a spotting scope, a field guide, and plenty of patience. Some of the birds you can expect to see are turkey, vultures, California Condors, and various birds of prey such as thrashers, quails, and many more. This park is home to a lot of birds. Best places to bird watch are Bear Gulch Nature Center, Moss Spring Trail, Bear Gulch Reservoir, Pinnacles Visitor Center, Campground, and the Balconies Trail.
- **Spelunking at Talus Caves:** There are two main caves to check out when visiting the Talus area at Pinnacles. On the east side, you'll want to adventure the Bear Gulch Cave and on the west side, the Balconies Cave. The National Parks Service has a page dedicated to checking the [status](#) of the caves so plan accordingly and be careful.
- **Ranger Programs:** Because of the hot weather, ranger programs are only offered in the fall, winter, and spring. There are a variety of [ranger programs](#) that the whole family can enjoy.

Best Time of the Year: You will not experience near the crowds at Pinnacle as you would with some of the other parks. Some of the temperatures in the summer can feel extreme and most

people who visit enjoy the park from October through May. Some of the best times are early spring and late fall. Since it isn't a heavily visited park and is lesser-known, you don't have to worry about avoiding weekends.

Redwood National Park

Home to Northern California's most northern national park, Redwood is one of those classic, iconic destinations for a national park visit while vacationing in northern California. Everyone at some point in their lives must visit this California gem. One of the most beautiful and scenic national parks in California, Redwood deserves this classification as a must-see. Redwood provides visitors some of the best experiences and views in the entire country: giant redwood trees, tranquil hiking trails, and jaw-dropping overlooks. One of the major hurdles of visiting Redwood is it is located further from a major city compared to other national parks in California. But don't let that be a hindrance for not visiting. A little bit of planning will go a long way if you are choosing to visit here. Another note about planning is that Redwood National Park, Del Norte State Park, Prairie Creek State Park, and Jedediah Smith State Park are all separate parks but work together to create Redwood National and State Parks. This can be confusing, especially when traveling through this park system. It's just best to plan on accessing all the parks to get the full effect of the redwoods.



Fern Canyon, Redwood National Park

Best Airport to Fly into Redwood National Park: The closest international airports to fly into for your Redwood park destination are San Francisco (SFO) and Sacramento (SMF). It is about a six hour drive from the airport to each of the locations. There are some smaller airports that are a little bit closer, but when you consider arrival records plus avoiding connecting flights (and potential layovers), your best bet is to choose SMF or SFO airports.

Distance from Major City: Redwood National Park is about 320 miles from San Francisco and about 290 miles from Sacramento.

Cool Things to See: There are so many sights to see, things to do, and places to hike in this tabernacle of nature. Here are some of the best things to check out while visiting Yosemite:

- **Big Tree:** Located in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park, Big Tree is a must-see. It's super easy to access with its less-than-300-foot-stroll and while standing at its base while looking skyward you'll immediately understand why it received its name. Although it isn't California's largest tree, it is still a marvel and humbling icon of the Redwoods. To get a better view of the area, don't hesitate to make the one-third of a mile jaunt on the Circle Trail.
- **Coastal Scenic Drive:** Part of the old Highway 101, this one way scenic drive along a narrow road (so narrow that trailers and RVs aren't allowed) will give you plenty of those coveted northern California coastal views. Crashing waves, fabulous views, and wildlife provide some memorable experiences. There is a farmhouse (actually an old WWII Radar Station) you have to check out and you'd be foolish not to check out the High Bluff Overlook.
- **Fern Canyon:** Located in the Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park, this area was made famous by being featured in *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*. Majestic canyon walls surrounded with ferns and small waterfalls, you will get the sense that you are indeed off on an adventure to some small remote area thousands of miles from civilization. The featured trail here is about a one mile loop.
- **Tall Trees Grove:** If you are up for a nice hike promising to make you sweat, check out the Tall Trees Grove. It is home to the tallest redwood trees in the world. There are some of the tallest trees in the world located here so it's well worth the hike. The Tall Trees Trail is about 4 miles and ranges in elevation change up to 700 feet (a permit is also required).
- **Klamath River Overlook:** Located in Redwood National Park, some consider this area one of the best places for wildlife viewing. Birds, sea lions, and gray whales are the most sought-after wildlife (March, April, November, and December are the best months). Make sure to bring a spotting scope or binoculars! Even if you don't see wildlife, the coastline view of the Klamath River emptying into the sea is plenty picture-worthy and one view you'll remember.
- **Lady Bird Johnson Grove:** Named after the former first lady of the United States, this spectacular forest of the redwoods will inspire and leave you in awe. The entire trail is a 1.5 mile loop with multiple numbered stops along the way. The hiking experience is indeed a peaceful one. There are brochures at the beginning of the hike, so be sure to grab one to add more context and history to your hike.

Best Time of the Year: Don't worry about avoiding weekends. The best time to visit the park is from May to September. Any time after that and you will experience weather that might not be as comfortable. During this time, temperatures will stay in between 40 and 65 degrees so plan accordingly. Aside from the weather, those times to visit will also allow you to engage in park programs and walks along the tide-pools. You can get an amazing taste of the Redwoods in one day, but to fully capture everything this park has to offer, pacing your trip for two days is not only smart (you're driving a distance so why not get the most of your travel), but the best way to get the most out of your time.

A Northern California National Park Trip Offers a Little Bit of Everything

As you can see, the national parks in northern California offer a little bit of something for a little bit of everybody. It's hiking, sight-seeing, bird-watching, rock climbing, spelunking, shopping, swimming, and everything in between. All of these parks are fun and entertaining adventures for those looking for a fun family trip with kids, a romantic getaway, or the traveler just looking for the next national park to check off the bucket list. And on top of that, these national parks deliver the elusive, yet unforgettable and memorable experiences we all expect when traveling in Mother Nature's backyard.

Do you have an itch to visit the National Parks of Northern California now? Find a great hotel and airfare package using the [Southwest Vacations](#) search engine and check out the [Low Fare Calendar](#), to help you see when you can get a great price on your airfare.

Have you ever been to these parks? Leave a comment and help other travelers plan their visit!

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