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Your Guide to the National Parks

Michael Joseph Oswald
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When you read through Michael Joseph Oswald's *Your Guide to the National Parks*, there's a good chance you will have a barely-contained (or not) impulse to pack a bag and book a trip to one of the country's fifty-eight national parks. This gem of a travel guide is one of the most comprehensive and well-crafted books of its genre on the market.

Oswald spent several years visiting and camping in all of our national parks, so the reader can be assured of an insider's perspective. As his introduction says, "America's 58 parks are irreplaceable treasures, yet they are our parks, preserved for our enjoyment, and if you want to experience them to their fullest, you're going to need a good guide."

The book is arranged by region and is easy to follow. For each park, readers will find history, directions and transportation information, maps, weather, detailed information about camping and lodging, hiking trails, and myriad activities such as backpacking, boating, rafting or paddling, horseback riding, fishing, and, occasionally, stargazing, plus the best sites for photography. Parents will appreciate the sections dedicated to children's activities and ranger programs.

The author includes a one- to three-day vacation planner for each park, which is particularly helpful for first-time visitors and chock full of invaluable information. Equally relevant are the multiple listings at the end of each park's description, with complete accounts of other area attractions, restaurants, annual festivals, and grocery stores.

Readers can also find some fun and intriguing facts about the parks. For example, Oswald tells us that Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado was "the first tract of land set aside to protect a prehistoric culture and its ruins, pottery, tools, and other ancient artifacts." Did you know that General Sherman, in Sequoia National Park, is the largest known tree by volume, roughly equivalent to the size of sixteen blue whales? Or that the Great Smoky Mountains is the most visited park, with nine million annual visitors, perhaps because of the Smoky Mountains Synchronous Fireflies, a phenomenon that occurs in only one other place in the world (Southeast Asia)?

This guide offer more than just the basics, and Oswald writes well and manages to keep each of the fifty-eight chapters fresh and entertaining while making the book accessible to all: "The Badlands is a swath of semi-arid land bisected by a 60-mile rock wall with steep pinnacles and spires that used to be a daunting site to Indians, fur trappers, and homesteaders."

One of the most helpful features is the "Best of the Best" section in the beginning of the book. Oswald lists the best scenic drives, the best trails, the best lodges, the best waterfalls, the best parks for fishing, stargazing, rock climbing, and the best parks for families and couples. (There are also a couple of "worst" lists, too, noting such deterrents as traffic and bugs.)

Interspersed throughout the guide are hundreds of photographs of spectacular wildlife and scenery that will likely inspire readers to place at least one of America's national parks on their travel bucket lists.
HILARY DANINHIRSCH (August 30, 2012)

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