Great gateway getaways

Avoid the more crowded park entrance inside Denali National Park you will find Camp Denali, where cabins come with a view of Mount Mckinley.

Our national parks deliver some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. Unfortunately, spending the right can be an ugly experience. Discover charming, value-packed rooms on the doorstep of the parks you'll want to visit this summer.

By KAREN CATAFALCO • Special to the Salt Lake Tribune

I had come to hike along trails deep into the forest, explore archaeological sites and maybe do some horseback riding. But what I remember most from my first visit to Great Smoky Mountains National Park is a cheap souvenir store, mini-golf courses and a dirty and depressing motel room. That's because I made the mistake of choosing Pigeon Forge as my gateway town for this Tennessee park. Convenient? Yes. Pleasing? No.

Over the past three years, I've visited hundreds of national and state parks in the course of my Trans-American Journey (www.trans-americans.com), most with similarly dismal gateway towns.

It took some digging, but I've discovered that many parks from coast to coast have alternative gateway towns, some with new, consistent and pleasant places to stay. For my recommendations.
Great gateway getaways

Arches National Park, Utah
The plains... a new viewpoint.

Zion National Park, Utah
The plains... a new viewpoint.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee
The plains... a new viewpoint.

Saguaro National Park, Arizona
The plains... a new viewpoint.

Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park, Utah
The plains... a new viewpoint.