

Great gateway getaways

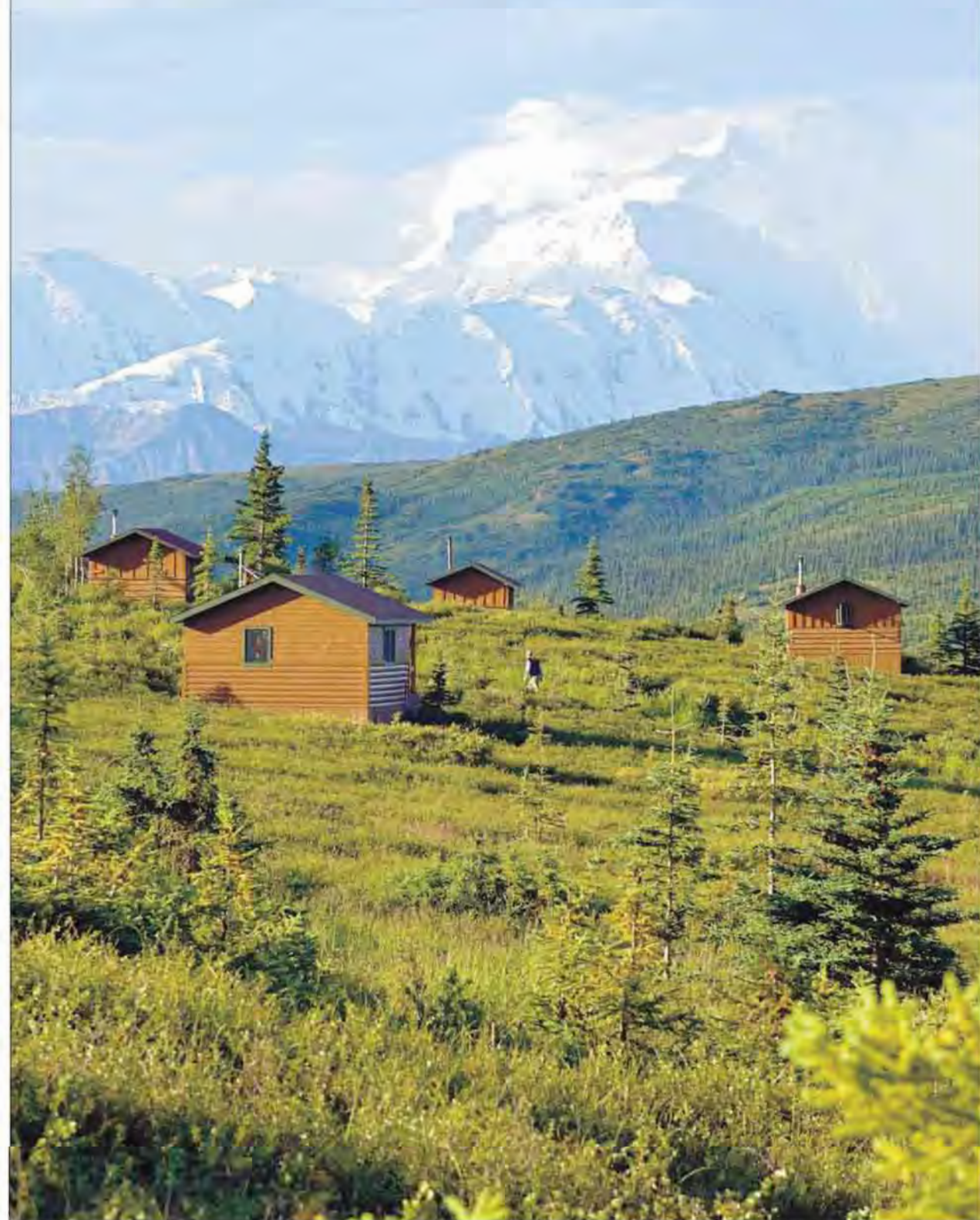


Photo provided by Camp Denali
Avoid the more crowded park entrance: Inside Denali National park you will find Camp Denali, where cabins come with a view of Mount McKinley.

Our national parks deliver some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. Unfortunately, spending the night 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 CATCHPOLE • Special to the Star Tribune

I had come to hike along trails deep into the forest, explore living archaeological sites and maybe do some horseback riding. But what I remember most from my first visit to Great Smoky Mountains National Park is cheap souvenir stores, 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. Pleasant? No.

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

It took some digging, but I've discovered that many must-see parks from coast to coast have alternative gateway towns, some with new, convenient and pleasant places to stay. **Turn to G6** for my recommendations.



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Saguaro National Park in Arizona.

Great gateway getaways



Arches National Park, Utah

The place: A new Hampton Inn in Moab, Utah, adds 81 much-needed rooms to this adventure base camp town. The hotel is 10 minutes from the entrance to the park (www.nps.gov/arch) and has an outdoor pool, free breakfast and guest laundry (\$149-\$179). The hotel plans to offer jeep and rafting safaris.

To do: Moab Monsoons (www.moabphotoworkshops.com) is a one-day outdoor photography course designed to give visitors to Moab and Arches National Park the skills needed to best capture the area's beauty.

Learn to capture the beauty of Utah's Arches National Park with an outdoor photography class.

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A host of activities and lodging are available at Zion National Park.

Zion National Park, Utah

The place: Opened by a former Zion National Park (www.nps.gov/zion) shuttle bus driver, the Cable Mountain Lodge (www.cablemountainlodge.com) in Springdale, Utah, is a welcome addition to this bed-and-breakfast-filled town just a stone's throw from the south entrance of the compact but varied park, which offers everything from canyoneering, to the heart-stopping Angel's Rest hike, to the chance to see endangered California condors. Some of the hotel's 50 rooms (\$89 to \$139) feature jetted tubs, fireplaces and full kitchens and all rooms have in-your-face views of Cable Mountain. Even better: There's not a dolly, lap cat or nosy host in sight.

To do: Zion Canyon Giant Screen Theater (www.zioncanyontheatre.com), located next to Cable Mountain Lodge, just switched to digital 3D and is now the largest digital 3D theater in the western United States.

Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska

The place: It requires a dramatic, wildlife-filled two-hour bus ride across the park to reach Camp Denali & North Face Lodge (www.campdenali.com), which was grandfathered in as an official concessionaire of the park system and therefore allowed to stay within the boundaries of Denali National Park and Preserve (www.nps.gov/dena). Camp Denali & North Face Lodge trumps the competition with cozy lodge rooms and 18 hand-crafted cabins with wood-burning stoves, handmade quilts and luxury (yes) outhouses with views of Mount McKinley. Three-night packages are \$1,425 per adult and include transportation to and from the lodge, three gourmet meals per day, guided excursions and use of canoes, mountain bikes and fishing gear. It all certainly beats the jumble of T-shirt shops and hotels outside the main entrance to the park, where most visitors stay.

To do: Denali is one of a precious few parks in the United States that don't require visitors to stay on established trails, because there aren't any. Staff members are ready to lead guests on outings through the trailless tundra.



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The scenic Rocky Mountain National Park.

Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado

The place: Della Terra Mountain Chateau (www.dellaterramountainchateau.com), at the Fall River entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park (www.nps.gov/romo), has 14 luxury suites (\$225 to \$295 per night with breakfast) each featuring sitting nooks with arched windows, fireplaces, soaking tubs, walk-through jetted showers and private balconies with hot tubs. The Chateau will also have a lodge room with a four-sided stone fireplace and waterfall, private spa treatment rooms, a dry heat sauna, espresso bar, library and theater.

To do: The Rooftop Rodeo (www.rooftoprodeo.com), from July 7 to 12 (\$15 adults, \$5 children, \$20 box seats). So named because of the 7,500-plus-foot altitude of Estes Park, where the event is held.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee

The place: With 8 million visitors a year, Great Smoky Mountains National Park (www.nps.gov/grsm) is the country's most-visited national park. Watershed Cabins (www.watershedcabins.com) in Bryson City, N.C., offer luxury cabins ranging from a one-bedroom treehouse to four- and five-bedroom cabins (\$150 to \$450) with full kitchens, 600-thread-count Egyptian cotton linens, down comforters, pillowtop mattresses and a hot tub. And it's all just 20 minutes from the Deep Creek entrance to the park.

Also consider: Dancing Bear Lodge (www.dancingbearlodge.com) is 3 miles from the Townsend entrance to the park in the town of Townsend, Tenn., known as the "Peaceful Side of the Smokies." It's actually closer to the park than the traditional gateway towns of Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, Tenn. Translation! No strip malls, Elvis museums, mini-golf courses or musty-smelling motel rooms. Dancing Bear Lodge provides a homey, stylish and slightly swank base camp. Lodge rooms are \$99 weekdays and \$149 on weekends; cabins, some with full kitchens, are \$229 to \$259 weekdays/\$189 to \$209 weekends; call 1-800-369-0111 to reserve at these special rates.

To do: Special events celebrating the 75th anniversary of the park are scheduled throughout 2009.



Provided photo

The Watershed Cabins in Bryson City, N.C., provide a luxurious look at Great Smoky Mountains National Park.



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Bear it all at Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska.

Saguaro National Park, Arizona

The place: Westward Look Resort (www.westwardlookresort.com) in Tucson, Ariz., dates to 1912. The historic 244-room resort (\$89 to \$189 including breakfast) is just 20 miles from Saguaro National Park (www.nps.gov/sagu) and recently underwent a multimillion-dollar makeover. Inspired by the resort's 80 acres of desert landscape, the new look is focused on desert colors and traditional Spanish-American furniture.

To do: The Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum (www.desertmuseum.org) just west of Tucson is less a museum and more an interactive 2-mile stroll through a meticulously curated zoo and botanical garden celebrating the best the Sonoran Desert has to offer, including 1,200 types of plants and desert animals ranging from cougars to butterflies.



Provided photo

The historic Westward Look in Tucson, Ariz., which dates to 1912, now has a new look.

Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park, Utah

The place: The View Hotel (www.monumentvalleyview.com) is the only noncamping accommodation within Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park, <http://www.navajonationparks.org/html/monumentvalley.htm>. Each of the 95 rooms (\$195 to \$215) has jaw-dropping views because the hotel was built high on a ridge with an unobstructed vista down the formation-filled valley. Rooms on the top floor, called the Star-view Level, feature skylights for nighttime views, as well. A spa and pool are being planned.

To do: Sunset on the Mittens, an iconic sandstone formation that really does evoke a child's mitten.



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Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park in Utah.

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Utah/Arizona

The place: Amangiri Resort, Spa and Villas in Page, Ariz., will open in late summer or early fall just a few miles from Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (www.nps.gov/glca), one of the nation's premier houseboating destinations. The extremely high-end 34-room resort, which will offer private houseboats and provide transportation/tours to Grand Canyon National Park (www.nps.gov/grca), is being built on 600 dramatic mesa- and canyon-filled acres.