

Trails well-traveled



MS doesn't have to be a barrier to exploring national parks.

by Vicky Uhland

There are few things more uniquely American than our national park system. For more than 100 years, we've been able to explore saguaros and sequoias, glaciers and geysers, caves and canyons. We can travel from the heights — Denali National Park in Alaska — to the depths — Death Valley National Park in California and Nevada — of our country's remarkable geography.

Take a hike — for free

U.S. citizens or permanent residents who have disabilities can get a free lifetime Access Pass for any national park, wildlife refuge, forest or other federal recreation land.

You'll need either a letter from a doctor stating that you have a "permanent physical, mental or sensory impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities," or proof of Social Security Disability Income or Supplemental Security Income.

You'll also need documentation of citizenship or permanent residency, such as a state driver's license or ID, birth certificate, passport or Green Card.

Once you've got all of that in hand, you can apply for an Access Pass either in person at a national park or by [mailing in a form](#). There's a \$10 processing fee if you apply by mail; in-

person applications are free.

We can wade in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and the Niobrara and Congaree rivers. And we can learn about our culture and history at parks like Mesa Verde in Colorado, Valley Forge in Pennsylvania and Kaloko-Honokohau in Hawaii.

With this avalanche of experiences outside our back doors, it's no wonder that nearly 320 million people a year visit the 419 parks, battlefields, historic sites, memorials, monuments, recreation areas and waterways that make up the U.S. National Park System (NPS).

"National parks are the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst," said writer, environmentalist and historian Wallace Stegner in 1983.

But for many people living with multiple sclerosis, national parks don't seem like the best idea — or even a good idea. Mobility issues, fatigue, heat sensitivity, cognitive issues, vision problems, or bowel and bladder concerns can make a visit to a national park feel off-limits.

And yet, that doesn't have to be the case. An NPS initiative, "All In!" prioritizes accessibility throughout the park system. National park visitors with MS say the initiative, which began in 2015 and ends in 2020, has made an impact in terms of more accessible trails, facilities and, most important, park rangers who have been trained to understand the needs of people with disabilities.

"It's a move away from the mindset of 'accessibility is this extra thing you do' to 'accessibility is a fundamental thing you do,' " says Jeremy Buzzell, chief of service-wide housing and accessibility program support in the Park Facilities Management Division of the NPS.

Of course, there's only so much that can be done to make the great outdoors accessible. But travel experts say there are plenty of steps people with MS can take to not only enjoy national park outings but also feel confident about doing so. Here's what they recommend.

Don't presuppose

You'd think a small park surrounding the deepest lake in the United States wouldn't be a great choice if you have mobility issues. But Crater Lake National Park in Oregon has done a "really fantastic job with access," says Lynn Anderson, director of the Inclusive Recreation Resource Center at the State University of New York College at Cortland.

The key, Anderson says, is how accessible the "front country" of the park is. She says most visitors only see about 5% to 10% of a park — the famous front country scenery like the geysers at Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming or the dunes at White Sands National Park in New Mexico. These are the areas that have benefited most from the "All In!" program.



Lynn Anderson at Crater Lake National Park in Oregon. Photo courtesy of Lynn Anderson

It may be impossible to pave the wilderness, but it is possible to put in tarmac trails, flat boardwalks and accessible bathrooms in the front country areas. Many parks also have roads that lead to scenic overlooks, making it easy to experience a park's grandeur without leaving the car or park shuttle.

And some parks let you check out all-terrain wheelchairs and other accessibility equipment.

A variety of parks also have interactive or interpretive programs that are helpful for people with vision or cognitive issues. For example, Buzzell says the new museum at Gateway Arch National Park in Missouri has tactile representations of artifacts that are under glass, including 3-D models of maps. And at Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, the visitor's center has a room devoted solely to nature sounds like waterfalls and geysers.

There are also tours for people who want to visit the more rugged, backcountry portions of parks. "Most parks have accessible routes and tours," says Tarita Davenock, who was diagnosed with MS in 1995 and later founded Travel for All, an agency in British Columbia, Canada, specializing in accessible travel.

For instance, NPS-authorized companies operate accessible boat, raft, kayak or canoe tours in Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area in Utah and Nevada. Or you can take a hand-bike tour of backcountry trails in parks like Grand Teton in Wyoming.

You can Google the name of the park and "adaptive programs" or "adaptive tours" to find these excursions, or ask at the park visitor center — just make sure to talk with the tour

operator before you go to ensure they can accommodate your needs.



Greg Lais, executive director at Wilderness Inquiry. Photo courtesy of Greg Lais

Another option is to arrange a tour through a travel agency that specializes in inclusive adventures — like Travel For All or Minneapolis-based Wilderness Inquiry.

“There’s a fear of the physicality of national parks,” says Wilderness Inquiry Executive Director Greg Lais, whose sister has MS. “Can I make it on that trail, or walk that loop? This is very common, and not just limited to people with MS. A lot of people use our trips to prove to themselves that they can do more than they thought they could.”

Know before you go

Many people with MS are used to researching activities beforehand to avoid surprises. That goes double with national parks.

Start with the park’s website. You can find a list of all 419 national parks on the [NPS website](#). All but a handful of the parks have websites. Choose the park you want, click on its website, find the “Plan Your Visit” tab, then click on “Accessibility” to learn about accessibility features at the park.

But just as some parks are more accessible than others, some park websites have more accessibility information than others. For instance, Yosemite National Park’s website only lists “deaf services” under its accessibility tab. Grand Canyon has an eight-page “Accessibility Guide” PDF that includes everything from accessible ATMs to average daily temperatures.

These dichotomies are why savvy national park visitors like Dave Bexfield and Jodi Johnson

recommend checking out a variety of resources before visiting a national park.

Bexfield, who operates the [ActiveMSers.org](https://www.ActiveMSers.org) website out of his Albuquerque, New Mexico, home, estimates that he's been to about a dozen national parks since he was diagnosed with MS in 2006. He currently uses a manual wheelchair to get around, and in the past has used forearm crutches and trekking poles.

Bexfield checks out a park's accessibility via its website, but also through independent websites like spintheglobe.net and barrierfreetravels.com.

Even if you don't use a wheelchair, Googling the name of the park plus "wheelchair" can help you find firsthand accessibility info from people with mobility issues.

Anderson also recommends the AllTrails app to research specific trails in a park.

Johnson, a Darnestown, Maryland, resident who was diagnosed with MS in 2008 and uses a yellow scooter she's nicknamed Bumblebee, checks out Google Maps to zero in on whether a trail is packed dirt, gravel or other accessible material. And she Googles "accessible activities" at parks she's interested in visiting. "I also try calling the park, although it can be hard to reach rangers by phone," she says.

Accessible national parks in the U.S.

1. Acadia National Park, Maine
2. Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, Colorado
3. Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona
4. Glacier National Park, Montana
5. Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming
6. Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming
7. Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, Michigan
8. Sunrise and Sunset Points, Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah
9. McKinley Station Trail, Denali National Park, Alaska
10. Kaloko-Honokōhau National Historical Park, Hawaii
11. White Sands National Park, New Mexico
12. Crater Lake National Park, Oregon
13. Joshua Tree National Park, California

But you can almost always find a ranger in person at park visitor centers, and they can be a wealth of information. Most parks have maps or brochures of accessible trails and bathrooms, and rangers can tell you if a path is under repair, has stairs, or has exposed tree roots, mud, mulch or other accessibility nightmares. They can also point you to the most accessible scenic overlooks and park shuttles that can get you there.

The key, though, is to ask specific questions for your individual needs. "What rangers think is

accessible is not necessarily accessible,” Bexfield says. Adds Buzzell: “The NPS’ goal is not to say ‘x’ trail is accessible or not accessible. Instead, we describe the trail, like the average rise and run, the average cross slope and whether it’s dirt or rock.”

At the same time, unmarked areas may be navigable for people with mobility issues if the surface is packed and relatively even. For example, Johnson found that the supposedly accessible ramps at San Juan National Historic Site in Puerto Rico were too steep for her scooter to descend, but the “non-accessible” lawn in front was perfectly accessible.

“When they take the care to manicure a lawn like that so you can get your scooter across it, it makes you feel just like a normal visitor,” Johnson says.

When nature calls

Concerns about fatigue, heat sensitivity and accessible bathrooms can also scare people away from national parks. What happens if you hit a wall in the middle of a trail and can’t go any further? Or what if you have to “go” and there’s no bathroom nearby?

Bexfield and Johnson have some answers.

First of all, they note that it’s important to schedule your visits when crowds and temperatures are at their lowest. That usually means avoiding the summer months and the midday hours. Instead, try to visit national parks in the late spring or early fall, and in the morning or late afternoon.

“You see more wildlife then and can Instagram out the wazoo, whether you’re exploring from a trail or a vehicle,” Bexfield says. “Don’t forget that you can do a lot from the comfort of your car.”

He also recommends taking a mobility device that’s one level up from what you usually use. For instance, if you use a cane, bring trekking poles or arm crutches as well for added stability and safety. And when he wasn’t using a wheelchair, Bexfield carried a portable, lightweight camp stool in his backpack for times when fatigue hit, and there wasn’t a nearby place to sit.

He also packs a portable bedside commode in his car when he visits national parks. “It’s a little security blanket so I can go into the back of a parking lot and use the ‘facilities’ if I have to.”

While all national parks are required to have accessible bathrooms, that doesn’t necessarily mean an outhouse or portable toilet is maneuverable for someone with a scooter or other mobility device, or that the pathway to the bathroom isn’t too steep or rocky.



Jodi Johnson at the Sabino Canyon Recreation Area in Arizona. Photo courtesy of Jodi Johnson

But Bexfield has found that, in general, national park bathrooms are quite accessible, especially if you check out the signs and pictures on the door saying what type of toilet it is — like a squatty potty or wheelchair-friendly.

Another reason to avoid peak times at parks is that there can be lines for the toilets. That's why Bexfield recommends taking the opportunity to visit any bathroom you pass that doesn't have people waiting.

Buddy system

Bexfield's and Johnson's final piece of advice is always to visit national parks with at least one other person.

This is important for everyone, not just people with MS. While solitary rambles through the wilderness sound romantic, the harsh reality is that there are too many opportunities to get lost or injured. A buddy not only helps keep you safe but can have other benefits.

For instance, Bexfield's wife, Laura, will go ahead on trails and check whether they're muddy, damaged or otherwise inaccessible. Buddies can also scope out a restroom to make sure you can access it. And they can help you feel empowered to keep on trekking.

Of course, no matter how much you plan or anticipate, a visit to a national park can be full of adventure — both good and bad. But that's OK, Johnson and Bexfield say.

"People underestimate what they can do. If I can explore the world with abandon — and not hurt myself, at least not usually — you can push your personal boundaries and make new discoveries on your own," Bexfield says. "It starts with just opening your front door."

Vicky Uhland is a writer and editor in Lafayette, Colorado.

Find a list of all 419 national parks on the [National Park Service website](#). Most parks have their own websites. Choose the park you want, click on its website, find the “Plan Your Visit” tab, and then click on “Accessibility.” The link will list accessibility features at the park. Due to COVID-19, some national parks might be closed or partially open. Be sure to check before you visit.

Watch a [video of some of Dave Bexfield’s trips](#) to national parks.