

# NPS Trip Planning Guide

February 2018

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



North Cascades National Park. NPS Photo.

## Going out for an adventure?

**Make your fun adventure a safe one too!** No one plans on getting hurt while out exploring in a National Park. However, nature is unpredictable, structures are historical, and your equipment can unexpectedly fail. Planning ahead can be the key to a fun and safe adventure. Remember, safety starts with you!

**Know before you go.** You and your group should be informed about the national park you are visiting and the activity you are participating in. Be prepared to fully enjoy your time.

**Use this guide and checklist to help plan your trip.** The first part of this guide provides a detailed description of each of the four phases of your trip. At the end you will find a checklist that sums up the guide.

### PLAN

Get information about the park at [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)

### SEEK

Ask a Ranger at a Visitor Center or Ranger Station when you arrive

### ADJUST

Be prepared to adjust your plans if things change

#### Before the Trip



##### "Know Before You Go"

What you need to know and consider before going out to a park

#### Arrival at Park



##### "Ask a Ranger"

Get up-to-date information on park requirements and safety information

#### During the Trip



##### "Assess and Adjust"

Actions to consider while you and your group are enjoying the activity

#### After the Trip



##### "Share the Experience"

What you can do to be better prepared for your next park adventure

**Follow the principles outlined in this guide to help you avoid the most common mistakes people make.**

*Photos on this page from left to right : Brochures from Yellowstone National Park. NPS photo; The park rangers that help visitors at visitor centers (Fishing Bridge Visitor Center shown here), museums, and other places throughout the park are part of our operations team. Photo by Jim Peaco; Visitors exploring Timpanogos Cave. NPS photo; Kids from northern Virginia experienced a special outdoor adventure known as Camp S.E.E.D. at Shenandoah National Park. NPS photo.*

# Before the Trip

# Know Before You Go

## 1. If you are part of a group, identify a Trip Leader and for larger groups, an Assistant Trip Leader

Ensure that the Trip Leader has the right level of skill and experience to serve in a leadership role.

## 2. Know your limits and the limits of your group members. Assess the elements listed below:

**SKILL**

Determine the skill level needed to safely enjoy the activity you picked. Do you and your group members have the right skill level for the activity?

**EXPERIENCE**

Determine if you and your group members have any outdoor experience. Is this your or their first time? Have you done this activity before?

**FITNESS LEVEL**

Identify how physically fit you and your group members are. Are you prepared to take a short hike on a paved trail or can you go on a long hike up a mountain?

**REQUIRED MEDICATION**

Determine if you or any group members have a medical considerations. Will you need to bring medications with you on the trip (e.g. inhalers)?

### HEALTH CONDITIONS\*

Find out if you or any group members have health conditions which may limit the kind of activity you can participate in? Do you have any mental or physical disabilities that should be considered? Do you have a medical conditions that could be worsened by certain activities or changes in altitude (asthma, heart condition)?

\* Consult a physician if you have any questions on fitness levels, health conditions, or medications required

## 3. Pick the national park you want to visit

Visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov) to find a park in your area. If planning a group trip, try to visit the park prior to the trip.

## 4. Pick the right activity for you or your group from the list of allowed activities at the park

Available activities can be found under "Plan Your Trip" on each park's website at [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov). Consider participating in [Ranger-guided and Junior Ranger programs](#) offered by many parks. In choosing your activity, be sure to "Know Your Limits" and those of your group members and consider these factors:

- **Time of year** - During what season will you be doing your activity?
- **Setting** - Does the activity take place at the beach, on a trail, in a cave, or at a historical site?
- **Duration** - Will your trip and activity last a few hours or all day?
- **Difficulty level** - Will you be going a short distance at a slow pace on flat terrain or a long distance at a faster pace on difficult terrain?
- **Skill level** - Do you need special skills (e.g. rock climbing) to safely enjoy the activity?



The Junior Ranger Program is an activity based program where youth complete a series of activities during a park visit, and receive an official Junior Ranger patch and certificate.

## 5. Learn about the environment and hazards of the park and be prepared for them

Every park is unique. Environments and hazards can even vary *within* a park. Research the park's website or call the park to find out what risks and hazards are associated with your activity (e.g. wildlife, swift water, uneven steps) so you can prepare for them before you go on your adventure.

### Potential Hazards



## 6. Identify park requirements and regulations for your activity

Requirements for each park can be found under the "Plan your Trip" menu on every park's website at [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov). Review requirements for:

- Permits
- [Open fires regulations](#)
- Group size restrictions
- Food storage & disposal requirements

## 7. Plan water, food, and equipment needs; test equipment before you go

Testing and practicing with your equipment are important steps in planning for a safe trip. You or the group's Trip Leader should:

- **Make a packing list** - research the activity you selected and make sure that you and group members have the required gear (e.g. hiking boots, life jackets) including the 10 Essentials.
- **Do a test run** - learn how to use your equipment properly. Make sure it works and that items like hiking boots, backpacks, and life jackets fit correctly.
- **Decide who is going to carry the equipment.**
- **Practice** - practice packing and carrying your backpack, and pitching a tent if you are planning a long trip.

Check for available [drinking water](#) sources. If none, you will need to bring enough water for you and your group to meet your needs.

### Always Pack the [10 Essentials](#)



**1. NAVIGATION**  
Map, compass,  
and GPS system



**2. SUN PROTECTION**  
Sunglasses, sunscreen,  
and hat



**3. INSULATION**  
Jacket, hat, gloves,  
and rain shell,



**4. ILLUMINATION**  
Flashlight, lanterns,  
and headlamp



**5. FIRST-AID SUPPLIES**  
First Aid Kit



**6. FIRE**  
Matches, lighter  
& fire starters



**7. REPAIR KIT & TOOLS**  
Duct tape, knife,  
& scissors



**8. NUTRITION**  
Extra food



**9. HYDRATION**  
Water and water  
treatment supplies



**10. EMERGENCY SHELTER**  
Tent and tarp



Reenactors preparing for a performance at Castillo de San Marcos National Monument. NPS Photo.

### 8. Develop a “Plan B”

Have a back-up plan in case something comes up and keeps you or your group from doing your planned activity. It can be an alternative activity or you can reschedule the trip for another date.

### 9. Identify a “Safety Leader”

A Safety Leader(s) is someone, or a couple of people, in your group responsible for safety. If you are traveling alone, *you* are the Safety Leader! Your job includes:

- Checking all equipment before and during the trip
- Monitoring your or group members’ health and energy levels
- Being aware of changes in the environment (e.g. weather) and physical conditions and communication them to the Trip Leader
- Looking out for hazards during the activity

It is always a good idea for you or at least one person in your group to be trained in CPR and First Aid.

### 10. Complete a Trip Plan

A Trip Plan includes information such as destination, list of group members, and expected return time. This information helps Search and Rescue authorities respond if an emergency occurs or if you don’t return from your trip on time. Leave the plan with your emergency contact, a reliable person who is **NOT** going on the trip. **Do not leave your trip plan with the park.** Find a [Trip Plan template](#) at the end of this guide.

### 11. Develop and practice an Emergency Plan

An emergency plan will help you know what to do if someone becomes lost or injured. **Do not count on your cell phone reception.** Practice your plan before you go so everyone knows what to do. Read the [section on emergency plans](#) at the end of this guide.

## Top 3 Causes of Visitor Fatalities 2007 - 2013



### Drowning

To reduce the risk of drowning<sup>1</sup>:

- Wear a life jacket
- Learn to swim
- Swim in Lifeguard Areas
- Assign a Water Watcher
- Follow park regulations



### Motor Vehicle Crashes (MVC)

To reduce the risk of an MVC:

- Buckle up every time
- Obey posted speed limits
- Keep your eyes on the road
- Watch for animals on the road
- Do not drink and drive



### Fall

To reduce the risk of a fall:

- Wear the right footwear
- Stay on the trail
- Stay within designated areas
- Use the right equipment
- Stay hydrated to prevent dizziness

<sup>1</sup><https://www.nps.gov/articles/watersafety.htm>

## Pre-Departure

This is your group's last chance to check that everyone is prepared before going on the trip and that you have all the necessary equipment and documents.

### Trip Leader(s):

- Check in with your emergency contact - a person NOT on the trip - and leave your Trip Plan with them
- Pack your permits and any other important paperwork
- Assign chaperones and a buddy system

### Safety Leader(s):

Double-check equipment and supply list, travel route, weather forecast, and other conditions at the park.

## Your Cell Phone is ...



**NOT** a flash light



**NOT** a map



**NOT** a survival kit



**NOT** always going to have reception

## Arrival at Park

## Ask a Ranger

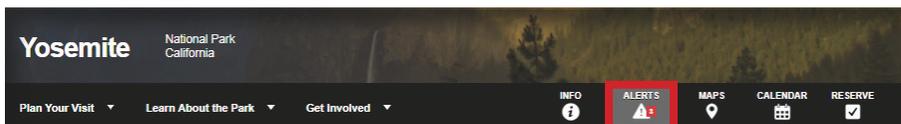


Visitors checking in with a Park Ranger at Denali National Park. NPS Photo/ J. Elhard

### 1. Ask a Park Ranger and check [park alerts](#)

When you arrive at the park, locate the Visitor Center or Ranger Station and ask a Park Ranger about:

- **Closures or Postings** - Are there any trails, campsites, or other areas closed or posted due to hazardous conditions that may change your planned itinerary?
- **Hazards** - Is there any fire or animal activity, high water from recent rain events, rock fall, or icy trails and routes? Are you visiting a historic structure with uneven steps, unlevelled paths, or no barriers to protect you from falls?
- **Weather Changes** - Is there rain, wind, snow, or extreme temperatures (high or low) forecasted for the duration of your trip?



### 2. Get necessary permits and pay any required fees

If a permit is required for your group or your activity, get the permit, pay permit fees, and read all regulations printed or stamped on it.

### 3. Check your own and your group members' health & energy levels

Check in with group members to find out if they are in good health and have the energy to do the planned activity.

### 4. Check your water, food, and equipment before heading out

Check everyone's water and food supplies and that you brought all the necessary equipment for your activity.

### 5. Put "Plan B" into action if necessary

Use Plan B if park conditions have changed, a group member's health or fitness level is not optimal, or equipment is missing.

## During the Trip

## Assess and Adjust



### 1. Sign the logbook

Some trails have log books at the trailhead. If available, sign the book and note your return time.

### 2. Stick to your intended route

Unless you encounter a safety hazard, stick to your intended route during your activity. If you change your route, your emergency contact will not know where you are and it will be difficult for Search & Rescue authorities to find you. If something impacts your activity, you may be better off turning around.

### 3. Stay on trail and within designated areas

Reduce your risk of a serious injury by staying on trail and avoiding shortcuts. Many serious outdoor accidents happen when people go off the designated trail or walkway.

### 4. Stay together

If traveling as a group, stay together. Separating from the main group could lead to a lost or injured group member.

### 5. Follow the principles of "Leave No Trace"

These principles reduce your risk of injury and minimize your impact on the environment. Learn more at [lnt.org](http://lnt.org)

### 6. Check your physical well-being and keep an eye on changes in the environment

Check to see that everyone is feeling well and not experiencing conditions such as tiredness, dehydration, heat illness, etc. Also keep an eye out for environmental hazards (e.g. weather changes, wildlife).

Determine whether you should keep going, take a break, or turn around. If traveling in a group, the Safety Leader(s) should watch for changes in group members' health and for environmental hazards.

### Keep Wildlife Wild

25 Yards

100 Yards

- ◇ Enjoy wildlife from the safety of your car or from a safe distance
- ◇ Do not touch, feed, or disturb wildlife
- ◇ Watch out for wildlife on the roadway
- ◇ Obey food storage regulations

## After the Trip

## Share Your Experience

### 1. Check in with your emergency contact

Sign out in the log book and let your emergency contact know you completed the trip safely.

### 2. Assess the outcome of the trip and any "lessons learned"

Review what went right and what can be improved next time.

### 3. Share your experience

This will allow others to have an adventure similar to yours and learn from your lessons learned!

# Trip Planning Checklist

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This checklist can help you plan for a fun and safe adventure to a national park. It may need to be adjusted to meet your needs or those of your group depending on the park you are visiting, the time of year you are visiting, if you extend your trip for more than one day, or any other local considerations. For park specific information, go to the park's home page at [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov) and click on "Plan Your Visit". Following the principles below can help you avoid some of the most common mistakes people make. **Remember, safety starts with you!**

## 1

### Before the Trip

- Identify the Trip Leader(s)
- Identify group members and assess their skill, experience, fitness level, required medication and health conditions
- Pick the park you want to visit
- Pick the right activity for you or your group from the list of allowed activities at the park
- Learn about the environment and hazards\* of your park
- Identify park requirements and regulations for your activity
- Plan water, food, and equipment needs; test your equipment before your trip
- Develop a "Plan B"
- Identify a Safety Leader(s)
- Complete a [Trip Plan](#) and leave it with a person that is NOT going on the trip with you
- Develop and practice an [Emergency Plan](#)

## 2

### Pre-Departure

- Leave Trip Plan with a person not on the trip
- Make sure you have permits
- Assign chaperones and a buddy system
- Check your equipment and supplies
- Check [park alerts](#), weather conditions, travel route, & road conditions

### Arrival at Park

- Ask a ranger about park alerts and conditions
- Get necessary permits and pay any required fees
- Check your own & your group members' health & energy levels
- Check your water, food, and equipment before heading out
- Put "Plan B" in action if necessary

## 3

### During the Trip

- Sign logbook at the trailhead
- Stick to your intended route
- Stay on the trail and within designated areas
- Stay together
- Follow the principles of "[Leave No Trace](#)"
- Check your physical well-being and keep an eye on changes in the environment



## 4

### After the Trip

- Check-in with your emergency contact
- Assess the outcome of the trip and any "lessons learned"
- Share your experience

### The Ten Essentials

 <b>1. NAVIGATION</b> Map, compass, and GPS system	 <b>2. SUN PROTECTION</b> Sunglasses, sunscreen, and hat	 <b>3. INSULATION</b> Jacket, hat, gloves, and rain shell	 <b>4. ILLUMINATION</b> Flashlight, lanterns, and headlamp	 <b>5. FIRST-AID SUPPLIES</b> First Aid Kit
 <b>6. FIRE</b> Matches, lighter & fire starters	 <b>7. REPAIR KIT &amp; TOOLS</b> Duct tape, knife, and scissors	 <b>8. NUTRITION</b> Extra food	 <b>9. HYDRATION</b> Water and water treatment supplies	 <b>10. EMERGENCY SHELTER</b> Tent and tarp

\*Every park has inherent risks and environmental conditions associated with outdoor recreation, such as wildlife, swift water, precipitous terrain, icy trails, rapidly changing weather conditions, and other local considerations.

# Sample Trip Plan

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This is a sample template that you can use to help you prepare a trip plan. It is **NOT** a substitute for any permits required for your activity. The type of information outlined in this sample template can help Search and Rescue authorities during an emergency response. **A trip plan is not required to visit a national park or to seek help from authorities during an emergency. Leave your trip plan with a reliable person who is NOT going on the trip with you. Do not leave it with the park.**



## Personal or Group Information

Your Name (or name of Trip Leader if traveling in a group) \_\_\_\_\_

Number of people traveling with the group \_\_\_\_\_

Number of children ages 0-17 traveling with the group \_\_\_\_\_



## Travel Details

Destination/Route/Trail \_\_\_\_\_

What types of activities will you be engaging in? (e.g hiking) \_\_\_\_\_

Visitor Center/Ranger Station phone # \_\_\_\_\_

Arrival (Date/Time) \_\_\_\_\_

Where will the activity take place? (e.g. name of trail) \_\_\_\_\_

Return (Date/Time) \_\_\_\_\_

Method of Travel/Distance \_\_\_\_\_

Vehicle(s) & Parking Location (make/model/color/license) \_\_\_\_\_

Name and phone # of Guide/ Outfitter (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_



## Equipment

Tent(s) - make/model/color: \_\_\_\_\_

Vessel(s) - make/model/color/ license or ID: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_



## Contact Information

What kind of communication device will you carry with you? Type/Number [e.g. Cellphone and carrier (e.g. Sprint), VHF] \_\_\_\_\_

What kind of distress alerting device will you carry with you? (e.g. Spot, PLB, inReach) \_\_\_\_\_

**REMEMBER TO LEAVE YOUR PLAN WITH YOUR EMERGENCY CONTACT, A PERSON WHO IS NOT GOING ON THE TRIP WITH YOU. INSTRUCT THEM TO ALERT THE AUTHORITIES AND PROVIDE THIS INFORMATION IF YOU ARE NOT BACK BY THE EXPECTED TIME.**

# Emergency Plan

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An emergency plan will help you and your group know what to do if someone becomes lost or injured. Create and practice your plan before you go. **Modify this plan to fit your specific trip and activity.**

## DO NOT GET LOST

Review the route your taking with all group members. Point out landmarks and tricky turns which can be used as a reference point before you go. Consider carrying and giving each group member a whistle that can be used to locate them. Share and use the following principles:

- **“Stay Together”** - Stay with the group, pay attention, and don’t wander off the trail
- **“Be a Buddy”** - Make sure everyone has a buddy and stays with them at all times
- **“Stay Put”** - Unless there is an immediate threat to life, the lost person should **always** stay put and not wander. If they become lost, instruct them to:
  - ◇ Stay put
  - ◇ Stay Calm
  - ◇ Blow their whistle often



## DO NOT GET INJURED

- Stay on the trail and within designated areas
- Consider First Aid and CPR training for the Trip Leader(s).
- Pack a First Aid kit. Inventory the kit and replace any expired medication. Remember to pack any special medications required for the group members.

## ACTION PLAN

If someone in your group becomes lost or injured, the Trip Leader and the Safety Leader need to stop the activity and gather the group together. Review the plan of action with everyone and begin delegating tasks. Remind the group members to stay together and be calm.

Lost Person	Injured Person
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Call 911 and tell them:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◇ The last known location the lost person was seen, including GPS coordinates if you have them</li><li>◇ Types and colors of clothing they are wearing and what equipment the lost person was carrying</li><li>◇ Any medical conditions they may have</li></ul></li><li>• If you don’t have a cell phone or cell signal, flag down hikers in the area who are returning to the starting point and ask them to alert Park Rangers of the situation.</li><li>• If you don’t see any hikers, Trip Leaders may need to split the group up and send some people to the ranger station or visitor center to find help. Remember to stay together and “Be a Buddy”.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assess the nature of the injury to decide if you should call 911.</li><li>• When dealing with minor injuries (e.g. scrapes and abrasions), use the First Aid kit to clean and cover the affected area. In the event of major injuries be sure to:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◇ Control bleeding by applying pressure to the wound</li><li>◇ Make sure the person is breathing</li><li>◇ Minimize movement</li></ul></li><li>• In case of evacuation, if the injured person is able to walk, evacuation might be as simple as helping the person walk out. If the person is not able to walk, call 911 or alert Park Rangers (see Lost Person).</li><li>• Make sure someone waits with the injured person until Search and Rescue arrives.</li></ul>