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Great Escapes: 11 Alternatives To America's Crowded National Parks

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ForbesWomen
Transformative Travel: I look at how travel can change lives.

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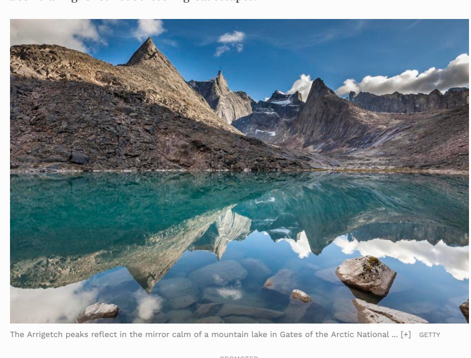
After being stuck at home for the past year, many Americans are craving the great outdoors. As a result, the country's most popular national parks—from Yellowstone National Park to the Grand Canyon—are being deluged. According to the National Parks Service, 2021 is expected to break all kinds of records. "So far, in 2021, we have set monthly visitation records January through May," a park ranger with Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains National Park told NBC.

In fact, some parks are so crowded that they're closing, turning away visitors or going to a lottery system where people have to compete to win a chance to enter. And if you haven't already booked something? You might be out of luck. NPR recently reported that all the camping and lodging sites near Yellowstone are sold out; you'll need to travel hours away to find a place to stay.

But don't despair if you want to get a breath of fresh air this summer. From lesser known parks to natural areas, there are some great alternatives across the country where you can get away from the crowds and find that much-needed serenity you've been craving. Check out these 11 great escapes.



The Arrigetch peaks reflect in the mirror calm of a mountain lake in Gates of the Arctic National ... [+] GETTY

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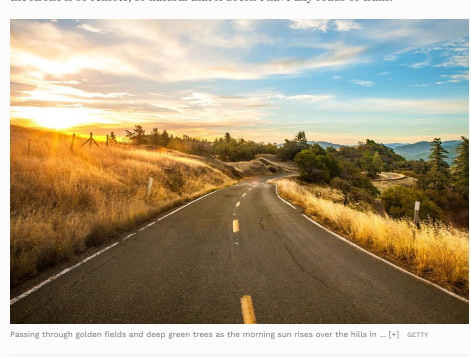
Gates of the Arctic, Alaska

The Body Shop recently did a study of the best places to escape into nature by analyzing air quality, outdoor activities and green spaces. The state that come out on top: Alaska, which has over three million square feet of national and state parks, plus plenty of space to avoid the masses. Where to go in the Last Frontier? Check out Gates of the Arctic, which is the least visited national park in the country, attracting just 2,872 people annually. (Compare that to the most-visited national park, the Great Smoky Mountains, which welcomed more than 12 million people last year.) Gates of the Arctic is so remote, so natural that it doesn't have any roads or trails.



Passing through golden fields and deep green trees as the morning sun rises over the hills in ... [+] GETTY

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Mendocino, California

Looking for an ideal escape to unplug and recharge in California? About two hours north of San Francisco, Mendocino County is known for its wine, waves and wilderness. From vintage lodges to classic cabins and plow-for-chow farms, Mendocino County is a safe haven for people who want to seek a reboot with Mother Nature. Think ancient redwoods, meandering streams, lambs, chickens and llamas. You'll find 90 miles of Pacific coastline, 24 state and national parks and a wealth of off-the-grid getaway options like the Andiron Seaside inn & Cabins, which is set on five acres of meadows and woods. The 11 classic cabins have names like Nature and Nurture. Our favorite: Curious (cabin #11), which is equipped with old telescopes, guides to the night sky, science kits and even a bird whistle.

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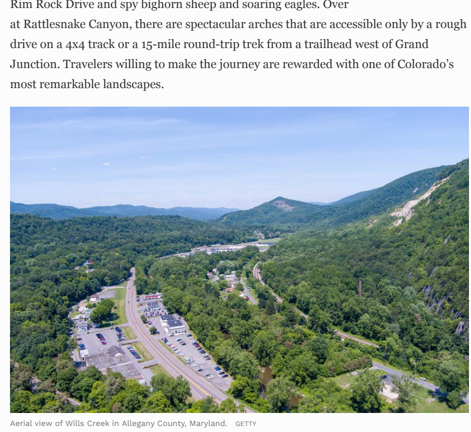
Sunrise on the Colorado National Monument after a rainstorm. GETTY

Colorado National Monument at Rattlesnake Canyon, Colorado

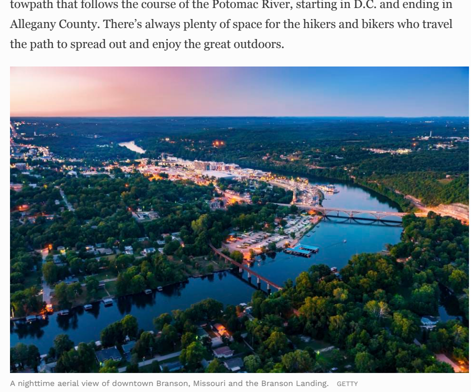
In Grand Junction, Colorado, you'll find two excellent alternatives to the national parks: Colorado National Monument (which is often called the state's secret national park) and Rattlesnake Canyon. At Colorado National Monument—which is more than just a monument—you can check out red rock canyons, explore the twists and turns of Rim Rock Drive and spy bighorn sheep and soaring eagles. Over at Rattlesnake Canyon, there are spectacular arches that are accessible only by a rough drive on a 4x4 track or a 15-mile round-trip trek from a trailhead west of Grand Junction. Travelers willing to make the journey are rewarded with one of Colorado's most remarkable landscapes.



Aerial view of Wills Creek in Allegany County, Maryland. GETTY

Allegany County, Maryland

A lot of people don't realize that the state of Maryland has a mountain side—and it's called Allegany County. This outdoorsy region is about a two-hour drive west from Washington, D.C. or Baltimore. Out here, one in every four acres is public land just waiting to be explored. That makes "The Mountain Side of Maryland" a hiker's and biker's paradise. It's home to a state forest, three state parks and one national park. This year the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park is celebrating its 50th anniversary as part of the National Park Service. It's one of the most visited national parks in the country, but you'd never know it. The park is actually a 184.5-mile towpath that follows the course of the Potomac River, starting in D.C. and ending in Allegany County. There's always plenty of space for the hikers and bikers who travel the path to spread out and enjoy the great outdoors.



A nighttime aerial view of downtown Branson, Missouri and the Branson Landing. GETTY

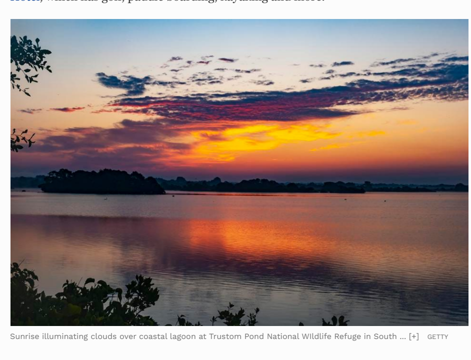
Branson, Missouri

What drew the first visitors to Branson, Missouri more than 100 years ago was the wide open beauty of the Ozark Mountains. And that's still a major part of the draw. Around here, even the town's famed live entertainment takes place in nature's arena. Though this destination has a reputation for unbeatable amounts of family fun, the mountains continue to provide a stunning backdrop for all the action. Outdoor adventure takes on a whole new meaning here, from ziplines with mountain views to Silver Dollar City theme park, which was literally built right into the Ozarks. In recent years, Branson has also earned itself a reputation among golfers, thanks to courses whose designs echo the magnificence of their mountain surroundings.

Boating on Otsego Lake in Cooperstown, New York. COURTESY OF COOPERSTOWN GETAWAY NEW YORK

Cooperstown, New York

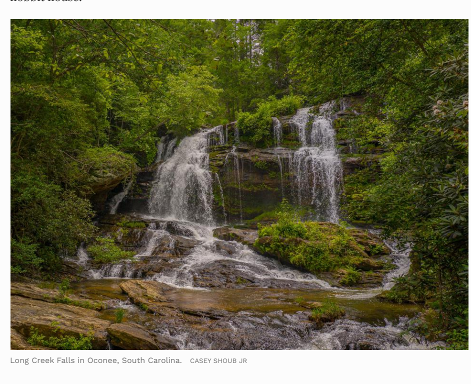
Instead of checking out a national park this summer, head to Cooperstown, New York, known as "America's Most Perfect Village." Cooperstown combines the best of all worlds, including nature and America's favorite sport: baseball. Cooperstown is famously home to the National Baseball Hall of Fame & Museum. It's also known for Glimmerglass State Park, where you can go camping, fishing, biking, hiking and swimming on Otsego Lake. For amazing lake views, check out the Otesaga Resort Hotel, which has golf, paddle boarding, kayaking and more.



Sunrise illuminating clouds over coastal lagoon at Trustom Pond National Wildlife Refuge in South ... [+] GETTY

South County, Rhode Island

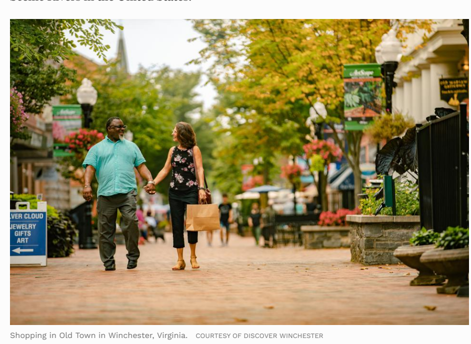
Another place to enjoy the great outdoors: South County, the southernmost part of Rhode Island. The area encompasses 11 towns, 100 miles of coastline and endless hiking and biking trails that lead to lush forests and wildlife preserves. You'll find plenty of wide-open spaces and myriad chances for adventure, including hiking, fly-fishing, zip-lining, golf and more. The place to stay is the Preserve Sporting Club, which is spread across 3,500 acres and perfect for social distancing. Guests stay in free-standing cabins and can have a lovely packed picnic or a meal in an adorable hobbit house.



Long Creek Falls in Oconee, South Carolina. CASEY SHOUB JR

Oconee, South Carolina

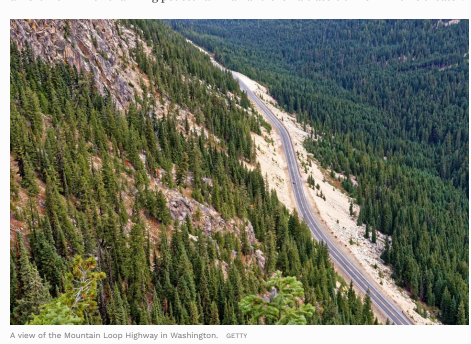
The Oconee region of South Carolina is an uncrowded escape within the Blue Ridge Mountains. "Oconee" is a Cherokee word meaning "land beside the water," and there's plenty of that here. The region is home to 29 waterfalls, which can be accessed via hiking trails or by boat. Two state parks, Oconee and Devils Fork, offer stunning wide-open spaces. In Devils Fork, book a boat tour with Jocassee Lake Tours, which will get you right up close with a number of waterfalls. For a more dramatic water adventure, try rafting on the Chattooga River, one of just five federally designated Wild and Scenic Rivers in the United States.



Shopping in Old Town in Winchester, Virginia. COURTESY OF DISCOVER WINCHESTER

Winchester, Virginia

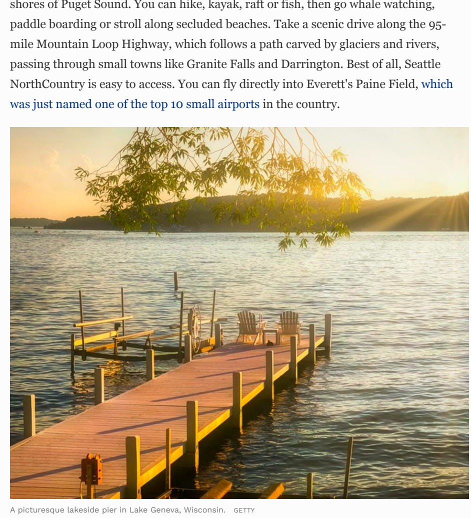
As an alternative to Shenandoah National Park, veer slightly north and end up in Winchester, Virginia, located at the uppermost tip of the Shenandoah Valley. It lives up to its nickname, "Uncommon to the Core," a reference to both the region's history of growing apples and the diversity of ideas, beliefs and backgrounds you'll find here. Winchester is home to roadside markets, mom-and-pop shops and total serenity all within a short drive of major cities like Washington D.C., Baltimore and Charlotte. Highlights include family-run farms and wineries, outdoor pursuits from fishing to hiking to horseback riding, historic sites such as George Washington's Office Museum, an Old Town with charming pedestrian mall and even a classic drive-in movie theater.



A view of the Mountain Loop Highway in Washington. GETTY

Seattle NorthCountry, Washington

Here's another way to escape the crowds: Head to Seattle NorthCountry. This 2,200-square-mile destination stretches from the peaks of the Cascade Mountains to the shores of Puget Sound. You can hike, kayak, raft or fish, then go whale watching, paddle boarding or stroll along secluded beaches. Take a scenic drive along the 95-mile Mountain Loop Highway, which follows a path carved by glaciers and rivers, passing through small towns like Granite Falls and Darrington. Best of all, Seattle NorthCountry is easy to access. You can fly directly into Everett's Paine Field, which was just named one of the top 10 small airports in the country.



A picturesque lakeside pier in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. GETTY

Lake Geneva, Wisconsin

It's the next best thing to Switzerland in the U.S: Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Just like its namesake in Europe, there are plenty of opportunities to enjoy a gorgeous lake, from boat rentals to paddle boarding. You can also hike countless trails, head out on zip lining adventures and go hot air ballooning. The place to stay: Grand Geneva Resort & Spa, which was named one of the top 10 resort hotels in the Midwest in Travel + Leisure's 2020 World's Best Awards. The hotel has championship golf courses, hiking, horseback riding and even scooters for rent, so that you can zip around the rustic roads and enjoy the great outdoors.

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#ChangeMusic And Diverse Representation Launch Black Music Executives Pipeline Program

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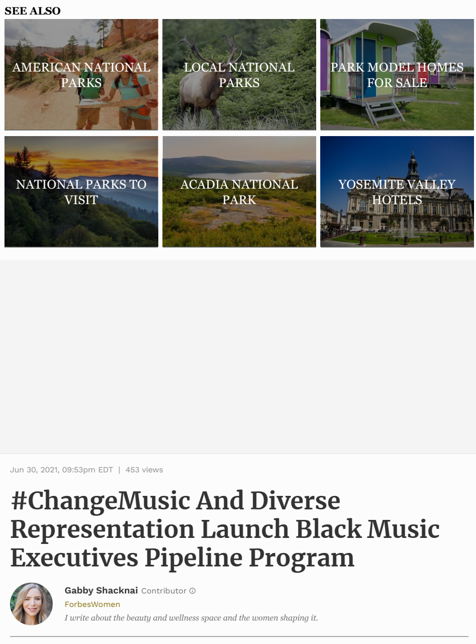

#ChangeMusic COURTESY OF #CHANGEMUSIC

As part of its ongoing #ChangeMusic initiative, Color of Change announced today that it will partner with Diverse Representation to launch the Black Music Executives Pipeline Program. The project is the first to be released from #ChangeMusic and will call upon the expertise of the civil rights non-profit and the diversity database in an effort to increase the number of Black executives in the music industry.

The program comes as a follow-up to Color of Change's #ChangeMusic Roadmap, created last December in collaboration with The Recording Academy, and will help execute the goals laid out within it, including investment in Black talent and careers. But this news also arrives on the heels of years-long calls for greater representation in the music industry—not just among artists but also among executives, a group that has historically lacked diversity. In fact, while nearly 50% of established artists are Black, less than 10% executives at the vice presidential level or higher are Black.

In an effort to change this, the Black Music Executives Pipeline Program will select 12 participants for a three-month training program that will provide them with the tools and resources needed to build a successful career as an executive in the industry. The training, which will take place from September to November, will include a speaker series, one-on-one mentorship, executive training, and executive shadowing.

"As leaders in the music industry, it is up to us to usher in a new age in vision and set a new tone for our community and peers," Ryan Butler, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Director of the Recording Academy, said in a press release. "The Pipeline Program stands not only as an illustration of our ongoing commitment to prioritize and promote diversity and inclusion efforts through the #ChangeMusic initiative, but also as a concrete way to honor the countless Black professionals and artists whose contributions have helped build our industry."

The Black Music Executives Pipeline Program is the third program of its kind from Diverse Representation, which successfully launched similar initiatives within the sports and entertainment industries, aimed at increasing the number of Black executives in each. “We are excited to be partnering with #ChangeMusic for this much-needed initiative,” said Jaia Thomas, Founder and President of Diverse Representation, in a press release. “Although Black creatives have long-served as the tastemakers of the music industry, they’ve continually been shut out and passed over for leadership positions. It is time for us to wield greater influence over the decisions that affect Black artists, their work and their livelihoods. And we’re ready to take the first step to ensure that this goal becomes a lasting reality.”

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Applications for the Black Music Executives Pipeline Program will open on July 5 and are open to any Black professionals with two or more years of professional experience.

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Gabby Shacknai

I’m a New York-based journalist who covers beauty and wellness, food and travel, and lifestyle. My work has appeared in Fortune, ELLE, Departures, Air Mail, Travel... **Read More**

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