

ROUTE 66 ITINERARY ~ ARIZONA'S NATIONAL PARKS

By Roger Naylor

The National Park Service and Route 66 have long shared a deep connection. For decades, travelers drove Route 66 on their way to explore the iconic national parks of the west. In Arizona, nothing has changed. That tradition continues today.

Route 66 serves as the key to unlock the scenic beauty, rich history, and wide-open spaces of this amazing state. It is the ultimate road trip for adventurers because in Arizona, more than a dozen national park units are located within a two-hour drive from the Mother Road. Let's explore just a few of these special places so you can start planning your next journey.

CANYON DE CHELLY NATIONAL MONUMENT

North of Sanders, near the town of Chinle, Canyon de Chelly National Monument preserves a network of spectacular canyons on the Navajo Nation. Within the towering sandstone walls are green pastures, groves of cottonwood trees, and remarkably preserved cliff dwellings, the remnants of ancient civilizations.

Two scenic drives trace the canyon rims, offering multiple viewpoints to peer within. Don't be surprised if you see livestock grazing or gardens growing because several Navajo, or Diné, families still live here. Canyon de Chelly is one of North America's longest continuously inhabited landscapes. To explore the inner canyon requires a Diné guide. You can choose a tour with private operators for horseback rides, jeep tours, and hiking outings. Explore the pastoral beauty of this peaceful canyon while learning more about Navajo culture. 928-674-5500, www.nps.gov/cach.

PETRIFIED FOREST NATIONAL PARK

The world's largest collection of petrified wood lies scattered across rolling plains and tucked in the folds of brilliantly colored badlands just outside of Holbrook. These are trees that once shaded dinosaurs. Imagine that. The park is split in two. The Painted Desert occupies the northern portion with rumples, crumpled hills of eroded, colorful clay. Petrified Forest lies further south. A 28-mile scenic drive connects the two segments, with viewpoints, historic sites, and hiking trails along the way.



Petrified Forest is also the only national park that preserves a stretch of original historic Route 66. A poignant memorial with commemorative signage and a rusted 1932 Studebaker marks the spot where Route 66 once carried travelers across such a haunting expanse. A string of weathered telephone poles traces the old alignment, a silent reminder of what once existed while cars and semis hurtle past on Interstate 40. 928-524-6228, www.nps.gov/pefo.

WALNUT CANYON NATIONAL MONUMENT

Cut from the forested plateau east of Flagstaff, Walnut Canyon was once home to hundreds of Sinagua people who built homes beneath overhanging walls and in shallow alcoves. Protected by massive eaves of stone, the ancient cliff dwellings have survived for centuries. Some rooms, still darkened with soot from long ago fires, can be entered.

The steep Island Trail loops around a rock promontory jutting into the canyon where you'll find a couple of dozen cliff houses that were built and occupied from 1125 to 1250. There's also the easy, level Rim Trail that meanders atop the rim where the Sinagua once farmed, and past ancient field houses with views into the gorge. While you enjoy the history, don't forget to admire the scenic beauty and diversity. Walnut Canyon is packed top to bottom with life zones and microhabitats. Cactus and agave are growing just footsteps from Douglas fir and ponderosa pine. 928-526-3367, www.nps.gov/waca.

SUNSET CRATER VOLCANO NATIONAL MONUMENT

Protecting Arizona's youngest volcano north of Flagstaff, this pine forest conceals the haunting desolation of old lava flows that have transformed into twisted rock, porous black cliffs, spatter cones, and other intriguing formations that defy description.

Around 1085, Sunset Crater Volcano sprayed a fountain of lava hundreds of feet in the air. Ash and cinders followed. The cinders piled up around the volcano's vent forming the 1,000-foot high cone-shaped mound. A final blast deposited red and yellow oxidized cinders onto the rim that seems to forever glow with the rays of a setting sun. The fiery hues led to the volcano's name. The entire event may have lasted a few months or a few years. Visitors can experience short hiking trails probing the dark heart of this otherworldly landscape that still bears the scars of a long-ago cataclysm. 928-526-0502, www.nps.gov/sucr.

WUPATKI NATIONAL MONUMENT

On the quiet prairie just north of Sunset Crater Volcano, the pueblos of Wupatki National

Monument rise like red-boned ghosts above swaying grasses. The eruption of Sunset Crater covered the dry basin with volcanic ash and cinders creating



arable terrain. Soon afterwards, the Ancestral Puebloan people moved in and built the free-standing dwellings that appear today almost as natural rock formations.

Short pathways lead to up-close encounters with a handful of these ancient structures. Behind the visitor center, a paved trail leads to Wupatki Pueblo, the largest dwelling in the park. The sprawling three-story ruin contains nearly 100 rooms and straddles an outcropping of sandstone. Admission fee covers both Wupatki and Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument, connected by a 35-mile-long scenic road. 928-679-2365, www.nps.gov/wupa.

GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK

Arizona is also the only state that harbors one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World. Just an hour north of Williams, the Earth's most glorious wound continues to startle and astound millions of visitors each year. The Grand Canyon is why national parks were created. Stretching for 277 miles is sea of naked rock, an endless array of temples and terraces, castles and cathedrals, awash in reckless light. The eons are stacked in layers below, nearly two billion years of geology laid bare. You stand at the end of the world and gaze toward the beginning.

The Grand Canyon Village forms the commercial district of the South Rim, where you'll find hotels, restaurants, and shops, many housed in historic buildings. Free shuttle buses run on an almost continuous loop. Campgrounds are available inside and outside the park. Hiking trails stretch along the rim, while others drop into the abyss. Mules still clip-clop along the trails. Ranger-led programs and cultural demonstrations occur daily. Scenic drives offer multiple viewpoints. There are no bad seats for sunrises and sunsets at the Grand Canyon. Just be aware, this is the park that changes lives. 928-638-7888, www.nps.gov/grca.

LAKE MEAD NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

In Arizona, Route 66 ends on the banks of the Colorado River, just south of the Lake Mead National Recreation Area. This startling contrast of water and desert, mingled with mountains and canyons, creates an epic playground. America's first national recreation area, and its largest, includes picturesque Lake Mohave, which flows south from Hoover Dam.



It is a remarkable experience to discover a sparkling lake wrapped in mountains and spread across this gaunt and boney landscape where three deserts—Sonoran, Mojave, and Great Basin—intersect. It feels like some sort of magic. Just minutes from Oatman, the crystal waters flow past secluded coves and sandy beaches. Boating, fishing, swimming, and camping are all popular activities here.

702-293-8990, www.nps.gov/lake.

Roger Naylor is an avid hiker, travel writer, and author of numerous books, including *Arizona Kicks on Route 66*.