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## Hit the trail at low-key national parks

Alternatives to popular favorites offer rewards

BY CHRIS RIEMENSCHNEIDER • MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE • MAY 23, 2010

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MINNEAPOLIS -- Our first campsite was so cramped, tents were piled together like tenements. Our path up to Nevada Falls was congested -- we got stuck behind fanny-pack hikers snapping photos every 200 feet. Our immersion in nature was so, well, unnatural, we spent mornings and afternoons waiting at bus stops and fighting traffic.

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What a difference a few hours, a couple hundred miles and 2.5 million fewer annual visitors can make in a national park.

It promises to be an especially busy year at the big parks. Ken Burns' recent TV series on PBS, "The National Parks," breathed new life -- albeit long-windedly -- into Americans' love affair with their wilderness havens. Meanwhile, the economy is forcing many Americans to take cheaper vacations.

So it's a good year to take our Yosemite lesson to heart. If you're hitting the trail in high season, consider visiting a more low-key park.

### Instead of Yosemite, try Sequoia-Kings Canyon

Why not Yosemite? Everyone on the planet should see the iconic Yosemite Valley sometime in their life. They just shouldn't all do it during the summer.

Why Sequoia-Kings? About 200 miles southwest of its more famous High Sierra neighbor, Sequoia-Kings Canyon is akin to Yosemite in scenery and topography. It doesn't boast landmarks as famous as Half Dome or El Capitan, but it does offer more hiking trails (about 800 miles total), higher



A rainbow shimmers above the Lower Falls of the Yellowstone River at Yellowstone National Park. While the park is visited by 2.5 million annually, and can seem packed, it is a place you should see sometime in your lifetime. (Courtesy of the National Parks Service)

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mountain peaks (Mount Whitney is the tallest in the continental United States at 14,497) and 2.5 million fewer annual visitors. Even

John Muir declared it "a rival to Yosemite."

The landscape's variety here might even be better. In just one challenging 16-mile day-hike up the High Sierra Trail, we started in a boulder-lined canyon with cascading waterfalls and worked our way up to Eagle's View, where we couldn't see anything (we had hiked into the clouds). As we headed down the other (shaded) side of the mountain, we hiked over deep snowpack (in mid-June) and into a grove of the park's giant namesake trees.

### Instead of Great Smoky Mountains, try Mammoth Cave

Why not the Smokies? It's not the nation's most renowned park, but Great Smoky Mountains is actually the most visited -- by far. Its average of 9.4 million annual visitors is more than twice that of No. 2, the Grand Canyon. Chalk it up to the Appalachian Trail and the scarcity of parks in the Southeast. Or maybe it's its proximity to Dollywood.

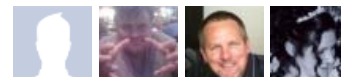
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