

TRIPTIPS

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Immersing yourself in nature is uplifting in so many ways, and advances in accessibility have been made at state and national parks that you'll be sure to appreciate.

With the price of gasoline, food and so many other consumer items on the rise, many families may be looking for less costly vacations closer to home this summer. Why not take advantage of one of America's beautiful local, state or national parks and the accessible recreational facilities they offer? Adaptive fishing, camping, swimming, kayaking, hiking, sailing, cycling, horseback riding—it's all possible. A growing number of not-for-profits around the country also offer adaptive recreation programs, often more affordable than one would imagine.

Getting out into nature is both physically and psychologically beneficial, especially for children. Sadly, Americans are devoting more and more time to video games, movies and the internet and less and less to outdoor recreation. A recent study found that nature activities – measured by national and state park admissions, game licenses, hiking permits and surveys of leisure activities -- have fallen by over 20 percent since their peak in the late 1980s. Among children and teenagers, the decline may be even steeper. Between 1997 and 2003, the proportion of children ages nine to 12 that spent time hiking, walking, fishing, playing on the beach or gardening declined 50 percent, according to a University of Maryland study.

People with disabilities, however, are one segment of the population that has not been content to just stay indoors. Their demands for equal access to outdoor recreational facilities have led to class-action lawsuits against both state and federal parks. In 2005, the State of California settled its case by agreeing to repair and remodel 270 parks over an 11-year period at an estimated cost of \$100 million. This March a class-action lawsuit was also filed in San Francisco against the National Park Service and its Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which includes Muir Woods and Alcatraz Island. Should this case succeed, it will impact over 400 parks, trails and monuments nationwide.

Contributing to the uneven quality of access at national, state and local parks has been the lack of clear, enforceable guidelines for recreational facilities. Only in June 2007 did the U.S. Access Board finally publish a "Proposed Rule for Accessibility Guidelines for Outdoor Developed Areas" like trails and campsites, applicable at present just to federal agencies subject to the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA). Following an economic feasibility study, the Access Board plans to extend the Rule to state and local governments and private companies under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Guidelines for recreational facilities such as swimming pools, boating piers, docks, fishing piers and amusement rides are already incorporated in the new ADA and ABA Access Guidelines, expected to be adopted into law by the Department of Justice this year.

While these developments promise even better access to parks and nature areas in the future, there's plenty to get out and enjoy right now. Many local and state parks have already answered the call for improved access and even provide detailed information online, a major change from just a few years ago. One should, however, always call the local park office to confirm accessibility. Residents with disabilities and disabled veterans are typically eligible for free entry passes and discounts on amenities such as camping and moorage. Reservations can be booked online at www.recreation.gov, if not directly from the state.

A recent online search quickly turned up access information for state parks in Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Florida, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Washington. As an example of what's now available, the Massachusetts' Universal Access Program has accessible trails with hand cycles for rent; adaptive kayaking, canoeing and rowing; beach and pool access; and accessible camping and picnicking facilities. To encourage people to try new activities, they organize recreational events that include free instruction, assistance and adaptive equipment. Their Web site also provides links to local organizations specializing in accessible recreation.

A good resource for adaptive recreation programs nationwide is DisabledTravelers.com. Among the companies listed is Wilderness Inquiry, a not-for-profit founded in 1978 and dedicated to making the outdoors accessible to everyone. Most of their trips are paddling/camping adventures integrating people

of all abilities. Rates are very reasonable, and families pay half-price for children sixteen and under. Many well-known adaptive winter sports programs such as Challenge Aspen, National Sports Center for the Disabled and National Ability Center also offer summer activities of all types from whitewater rafting to horseback riding to sailing.

For cyclists and hikers, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has helped create approximately 1,400 rail-trails nationwide, covering almost 14,000 miles. Most are wheelchair accessible. Their TrailLink Web site, searchable by zip code, keyword and state, provides detailed information and links for each rail-trail, as well as photos and reviews. My personal favorite is the 60-mile Pine Creek Trail, with adapted restrooms and parking, which runs through the scenic Pennsylvania Grand Canyon.

Whatever recreational activity you prefer, chances are the adaptive equipment for it is available through Access to Recreation. Initially just a catalog, the company now has an online store that features items such as fishing rod holders, adaptive golf clubs and all-terrain and beach wheelchairs.

For those who prefer a less athletic experience, a small-group tour of the national parks in the West or Southwest may be just the thing. Access Tours has several itineraries available for 2008 including Grand Canyon, Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks; Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks; and Santa Fe with visits to Mesa Verde, Canyonlands and Arches National Parks.

While the national parks in the West may be more spectacular, all federal recreation lands and parks have something unique to offer. Best of all, entrance everywhere is free to people with permanent disabilities. The National Park Service Access Pass, good for a lifetime, provides free entry for up to 4 adults in a non-commercial vehicle and a 50-percent discount on park amenities such as camping. The Access Pass can only be applied for in person at participating federal recreation sites or offices. Written proof of disability such as a physician's statement is required. To make advance reservations for campsites, tours or other amenities, visit www.recreation.gov.

Resources

National Park Service

www.nps.gov

Park Reservations

www.recreation.gov

California State Parks

access.parks.ca.gov

Massachusetts Universal Access Program
www.mass.gov/dcr/universal_access/index.htm

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
www.railstotrails.org
www.trailink.com

DisabledTravelers.com
www.disabledtravelers.com

Wilderness Inquiry'
www.wildernessinquiry.org

Challenge Aspen
www.challengeaspen.org

National Sports Center for the Disabled
www.nscd.org

National Ability Center
www.discovernac.org

Access Tours
www.accesstours.org

Access to Recreation
www.accesstr.com

U.S. Access Board
www.access-board.gov

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