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Retiring Wild – The National Parks & You

Exploring our National Parks may boost your happiness, physical health, and mental well-being

For many, finding time to experience nature can be one of the greatest pleasures in retirement. And what better place to take in America’s splendor than one of our over 400 National Park Service sites?

For over a century, generations of retirees have explored these stunning landscapes, marveled at the diverse wildlife, and discovered the physical benefits of a retirement spent in the great outdoors. Recent research suggests that the mental benefits could be even more important. Read on to learn more.¹

The Cortisol Connection

Have you ever had a stressful day? One that left you tired and irritable? Those feelings are most likely caused by the stress hormone cortisol. Cortisol serves an essential purpose in the human body, helping to regulate your mood, motivation, and fear. However, when someone experiences sustained stress, their elevated levels of cortisol may greatly increase their risk of heart disease, depression, and even negatively impact their memory.

Luckily, multiple studies show that connecting with nature for at least 20 minutes each day may be correlated to significantly lower cortisol levels. And the benefits don’t stop after 20 minutes. In fact, longer durations spent in a natural environment may further enhance feelings of peace and well-being as well as increased mental performance.^{2,3}

A Thrifty Option

The American National Park system is considered by some to be one of the healthiest and most financially savvy ways to vacation in retirement. There are currently 425 National Park Service sites spread across the U.S., encompassing over 85 million acres.

For those who want access to everything the National Park Service offers, the Lifetime Senior Pass (\$80) or the Annual Senior Pass (\$20) are both a steal. Regardless of which you purchase, remember that:^{4,5}

- The Senior Pass may provide a 50% discount on some amenity fees, such as those related to camping, swimming, and specialized interpretive services.
- The Senior Pass generally does not cover or reduce special recreation permit fees or fees charged by concessioners.
- There may be a service fee depending on how you purchase your pass. For more details, including the most recent ticket prices, visit the National Park Service website before planning your next trip.

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A Prescription for Nature

Even though locations like Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Zion are the most popular destinations for retirees, many communities benefit from smaller parks and nature preserves. For those who haven't hiked or camped much, local areas can be a great way to get started. Even those with more than a few years of National Park experience stand to benefit, both physically and mentally, from visiting one of their local wildlife areas. So, before you pack your bags and load up the camper, do yourself a favor and look into what your home offers. You may discover that one of the best ways to stay happy, healthy, and sharp is closer than you think.

Citations.

1. NationalParks.org, 2023
2. WebMD.com, 2023
3. OneMedical.com, April 19, 2023
4. NPS.gov, 2023
5. NPS.gov, 2023

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