



The Atchafalaya National Heritage Area in southern Louisiana is rich with wildlife, cultural history, and Cajun food. It's one of many parks in the southern U.S. offering adventure and fascinating glimpses into Native and colonial history.

**PHOTOGRAPH BY TYRONE TURNER, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION**

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**PUBLISHED MAY 16, 2022**

• 15 MIN READ

Parks are places of refuge, reflection, conservation, and community. The new National Geographic book *100 Great American Parks* highlights some of the nation's greatest natural and cultural treasures.

Established in 1916, the U.S. National Park Service manages more than 420 units (including 63 national parks) across 85 million acres. Some parks protect precious and vulnerable habitats, some serve as reminders of important events from our history, and others provide a serene space for visitors. Some are, admittedly, loose definitions of the word "park." Those include historical sites, wildlife refuges, and congressionally designated wilderness areas. But each place has the potential to inspire.

These six parks in the American South reveal surprising natural and social histories of spectacular places in [Louisiana](#), [Arkansas](#), [North Carolina](#), [Georgia](#), [Florida](#), and beyond. Visitors to parks here are rewarded with vivid stories of Indigenous heritage, civil rights heroes, and ecological marvels.



## Cumberland Island National Seashore

The feral horses of Cumberland Island National Seashore can be seen grazing in the island's salt marsh, dune meadows, and fallow fields.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA FARLOW,  
NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

**Visit a storied Black settlement on a fragile barrier island.** The shifting sand dunes, salt marshes, maritime forests, and miles of unspoiled beaches of [Cumberland Island National Seashore](#) on Georgia's largest and southernmost barrier island echo with ghosts from the past.

For centuries, people have inhabited this 18-mile-long island, from its original Indigenous residents to the [Timucua people](#) and Spanish missionaries and to formerly enslaved Blacks to wealthy industrialists.

At the northern tip of the island, from where the ferry disembarks at Sea Camp, are the last remaining relics from [the Settlement](#). It was a community established in the late 1800s by Black residents, some of whom were born into enslavement and freed after the Civil War. One of the last buildings standing is the one-room [First African Baptist Church](#), built in 1893. It served an essential role in the community not only as a place of worship and fellowship, but also as a schoolhouse.

The wildly varied human history is juxtaposed with what is now a wilderness where wild turkeys, armadillos, and feral horses run free. With 17 miles of undeveloped beach, Cumberland Island is an ideal nesting area for loggerhead sea turtles, a federally threatened species. Each year the island accounts for 25 to 30 percent of the statewide nesting total. In 2019, 1,018 turtle nests were recorded, most of which belonged to loggerheads.

#### **Atchafalaya National Heritage Area**

**Visit a biodiverse region rich in cultural history.** Louisiana's [Atchafalaya National Heritage Area](#) highlights the Atchafalaya Basin, stretching across 14 of the state's 64 parishes. It contains ancient oaks and towering cypresses along bayous, swamps, and backwater lakes, all centered around the Atchafalaya River, from the [Choctaw](#) words *hacha falaia*, or "long river."

The cultural history of Atchafalaya is as complex as its waterways, starting 6,000 to 2,500 years ago, when the first Native Americans lived along natural levees and bayous of what was once the traditional Mississippi River floodplain. During the 1700s, the [French](#) arrived in the Atchafalaya Basin to trade furs with its Indigenous inhabitants and launch raids into their tribal areas to capture and enslave them.

Starting in 1703, roughly 3,000 [Acadians](#) from present-day [Nova Scotia](#) arrived after being exiled by the British. By 1718, most of the region's Native American population had diminished, decimated by diseases brought by the outsiders and continuous warfare.

The [Cajuns](#), descendants of the Acadians, are still the dominant culture in the Atchafalaya. But the region's food, music, and traditions have been heavily influenced by the Native American, [Spanish](#), French, [Caribbean](#), [African](#), and Acadian people who have lived here over the centuries.

[Gumbo](#) is synonymous with Cajun country and serves as a metaphor for the zone's melding of cultures. It is derived from the word *nkombo*, [Bantu](#) for "okra," a vegetable the [Portuguese](#) originally brought to America. Another key ingredient is [filé](#), which is Native American in origin and made from ground sassafras leaves. The dish's soup-like consistency is derived from a French bouillabaisse.

#### **Buffalo National River**

**Explore a beloved river at the center of a conservation struggle.** [Buffalo River](#) in Arkansas is the United States' first national river, a designation that protects it from industrial uses and other obstructions that would alter the natural character of the waterway. The 135-mile-long national river portion features dramatic limestone and sandstone bluffs, more than 500 caves, 100-plus miles of hiking and horseback riding trails, and 12 species of game fish.

Buffalo National River's designation did not come easily. In 1938, when Congress passed the Flood Control Act authorizing civil engineering projects like dams, dikes, and levees, the Army Corps of Engineers immediately began eyeballing the Buffalo's hydroelectric potential and planned for two massive dams along its length. Conservationists forcefully rallied against the plan and, in an effort to bring attention to the issue, they took Supreme Court Justice [William O. Douglas](#) canoeing down the Buffalo.

The debate finally came to a head in 1965, when [Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus](#) refused to back the plan. Seven years later, Congress voted to establish Buffalo as the country's first national river. Today there are 100 miles of wild, scenic, and recreational rivers across the country, inclusive of 209 protected rivers in 40 states and [Puerto Rico](#).

Despite its protected status, the Buffalo is still vulnerable. In 2019, the nonprofit [American Rivers](#) ranked it as the eighth-most endangered river in the country due to the presence of a 6,500-head hog farm known as a [concentrated animal feeding operation](#)

(CAFO) sitting on a hill above Big Creek, one of the river's main tributaries. In June 2019, the state reached an agreement with the hog farm to close the facility and [Governor Asa Hutchinson](#) announced a permanent moratorium on industrial-scale farms operating in the watershed.

### Cape Hatteras National Seashore

**From pirates to the Civil War, this seashore has seen it all.** Crashing surf, a secluded beach, and a cool dip in the Atlantic are what many visitors to North Carolina's [Outer Banks](#) seek. The three sandy islands—Bodie, Hatteras, and Ocracoke—parts of which make up [Cape Hatteras National Seashore](#), offer this peaceful repose. They also provide refuge for five species of sea turtles, nesting colonies of shorebirds, and a herd of [Banker ponies](#). Legend has it that the ponies descend from animals shipwrecked sailors abandoned in the 16th or 17th century.

The history of the Outer Banks is a centuries-long string of harrowing tales of shipwreck and war. The water off the coast, known as the "Graveyard of the Atlantic," has been the site of more than 600 shipwrecks, due to a "perfect storm" of deadly factors including the infamous [Diamond Shoals](#), a bank of constantly shifting sandbars underwater. In order to take advantage of the currents, ships must sail close to the Outer Banks and risk the consequences.

[Edward Teach](#), the pirate known as Blackbeard, terrorized the waters off the Outer Banks in the early 1700s. Ocracoke Inlet was Teach's favorite anchorage. After a ferocious battle there in 1718, Teach and several of his crew were killed by Royal Navy Lieutenant [Robert Maynard](#) and his men.

During the [Civil War](#), the islands were used as battlefields. Whoever controlled them, and the surrounding sounds, would ultimately control North Carolina. By the summer of 1862, a Union victory on [Roanoke Island](#) secured eastern North Carolina for the Union Army. Almost a century later, during [World War II](#), [German U-boats](#) lurked offshore to wait for passing ships, illuminated by lights onshore.

The area is facing significant erosion affecting the stability of homes along the shore. Large-scale storm events, a result of climate change, have wreaked havoc on the coastline in recent years.

To counter the perilous sea, many light stations were constructed along the Outer Banks, including the [Cape Hatteras Lighthouse](#). At 198 feet, the iconic black-and-white-striped structure, designed and built between 1868 and 1870, is still the tallest brick light tower in the U.S.



After his assassination in 1968, restoration began to make Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birth home into a historic museum. Today, rangers offer tours of the house where the civil rights icon spent the first 12 years of his life.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN THOMAS PHOTOGRAPHY, ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

### Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park

**Learn about civil rights history and the heroes who advanced equality.** Centered around a few city blocks on [Atlanta, Georgia](#)'s Auburn Avenue—the once thriving heart of the city's Black community known as [Sweet Auburn](#)—the [Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park](#) highlights the most formative spaces in the young King's life.

From the day he was born until the age of 12, King lived at 501 Auburn Avenue in an 1895 Queen Anne-style house that his maternal grandfather, Reverend Adam Daniel Williams, bought for \$3,500 from its white owners in 1909. The two-story house, with intricate scroll-cut wood trim and a front porch, was a bustling place: King shared the home with his grandparents, parents, two siblings, and an occasional border.

[Ebenezer Baptist Church](#), just down the block from King's childhood home, was perhaps the most influential space in his life. His grandfather became the church's pioneering second pastor in 1894, preaching a social gospel of Black business development and civil rights. When he died in 1931, King's father, Michael, a powerful patriarch and fierce preacher, became the head pastor. King,

Jr., joined his father as co-pastor in 1959 and served at the church until his death. Of Ebenezer, King, Jr., once said, “My best friends were in Sunday School, and it was the Sunday School that helped me to build the capacity for getting along with people.”

The [International Civil Rights Walk of Fame](#), located on a promenade leading to the park’s visitors center, features granite markers with the embedded footprints of human rights icons including Rosa Parks, Desmond Tutu, Congressman John Lewis, and Sidney Poitier.

The park is also the final resting place of King and his wife, [Coretta Scott King](#). A four-hour drive southwest to Alabama is the [Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail](#), where King led nonviolent supporters of all races to fight for the Black right to vote.

### **Gulf Islands National Seashore**

**History echoes in this coastal region, but environmental threats loom.** Stretching 160 miles from Florida’s [Santa Rosa Island](#) in the east to [Mississippi’s Cat Island](#) in the west, [Gulf Islands National Seashore](#) spans two states, including seven islands and portions of the mainland. Its 13 unique areas range from historic forts predating the Civil War to wilderness beaches of white quartz sand accessible only by boat.

Florida’s Pensacola Bay, with its deep water and protected harbor, has long been considered the most important ship anchorage on the northern Gulf Coast. As such, [Fort Pickens](#), designed to protect the bay and the [Pensacola Naval Yard](#), was purposely built to look massive and intimidating. On the west end of Santa Rosa Island, the fort could hold more than 200 cannons and unleash fire from a maximum of 1,000 soldiers when under a siege.

This area also played a critical role in making beaches accessible to all, regardless of race. [Jim Crow laws](#) in the South made many beaches off-limits to Black families. As a result, many Black children drowned because they swam in unsupervised or unsafe waters. To change these laws, [Dr. Gilbert Mason, Sr.](#), led peaceful “wade-ins,” similar to restaurant “sit-ins,” into Gulf of Mexico waters off beaches near Biloxi. Many of the protests were met with violence, but in 1968, the Justice Department finally prevailed in opening these public beaches to all.

In many ways, Gulf Islands is a dreamy, idyllic destination, thriving with shorebirds and sea turtles and echoes of American history. A variety of animals make their nests and homes there, including 12 threatened or endangered species, such as the Gulf sturgeon and West Indian manatee.

But the seashore has also been under increasing human- and climate-induced pressure: In 2010, the [Deepwater Horizon spill](#) resulted in gobs of oil and tar washing on the sand, resulting in a fishing and swimming ban. Intense hurricanes, most recently Zeta and Sally, have wreaked havoc on roads and infrastructure. The delicate dance between man and nature is fully on display across these islands.

Find additional information on the destinations listed here and dozens more in National Geographic’s new book, [100 Great American Parks](#). The book celebrates all 63 national parks, as well as 37 other remarkable places—at least one in every state, territory, and district in the union. They include historical sites, wildlife refuges, and congressionally designated wilderness areas.

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