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Water, Sand and Plenty of Elbow Room on 8 Wild, Protected Coastlines

From California to Cape Cod, these national seashores and lakeshores offer everything from bird-watching to boating to basking in the sun.



Cumberland Island National Seashore in Georgia. Credit...Hunter McRae for The New York Times

By Jon Waterman

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The grandmother of American conservation, [Mardy Murie](#), once called the national parks our “best idea.” And this year, with foreign travel all but canceled, some of these celebrated domestic destinations have reached new heights of jam-packed popularity — and that, of course, presents challenges during a pandemic.

Despite the breathing room offered by the Great Outdoors, many of the 419 National Park Service areas have sites that are not conducive to social distancing. Many parks concentrate the public along narrow trails leading to crowded geysers, waterfalls, wildlife-viewing stands or other scenic vistas.

Yet there are notable exceptions. In particular, 13 national seashores and lakeshores offer a completely different experience. While these federally protected coastlines collectively attract millions of visitors each year, the primary attraction is water and uncrowded stretches of sand that invite picnics, water activities and social distancing.

During the pandemic, many of the visitor centers, museums, historic buildings and signature lighthouses have remained closed to the public.

The plan, according to the [National Park Service’s administrative history](#) about the seashore surveys of the 1930s, was to protect natural locations for “beachcombing, surf bathing, swimming at protected beaches, surf and sport fishing, bird-watching, nature study, and visits to historic structures.”

First on the roster, in 1937, was [Cape Hatteras National Seashore](#): 70 miles along North Carolina’s Outer Banks, including three lighthouses (the site wasn’t formally dedicated until 1958). Prompted by burgeoning development along the coastlines after World War II, Congress added nine more national seashores to the Park Service in 10 different states, along with four national lakeshores in three states surrounding the Great Lakes (Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore was recently changed to [a national park](#)). Today these 13 expanses of lake and sea shorelines protect 809,000 acres, abutting thousands of miles of oceans and lakes.

The principal focus of the seashores and lakeshores is recreation. Many of the sites also allow off-road vehicles and sport hunting — activities that are forbidden in national parks. And while the heat of summer makes these wild shores ideal destinations, most can also be explored throughout the fall and winter.

From California to Cape Cod, here are eight of the most scenic seashores and lakeshores in the National Park Service.

Cape Cod National Seashore

On a map, Cape Cod National Seashore, established in 1961, resembles the flexed forearm of Cape Cod, Mass., stretching 40 miles from its elbow to its fist, a peninsula punching into the Atlantic Ocean. Half of its 43,000 acres are water. Henry David Thoreau often walked and swam here in the mid-19th century, calling the autumn landscape “so beautifully painted ... It was like the richest rug imaginable.”

As one of the most popular seashores, with over four million visitors last year, this seashore has still plenty of room along 15 different beaches to spread out and fish, body surf, swim, go for interpretive walks, take four-wheel drives along the beach and hike a dozen different trails that lead to forested wetlands and picnic areas. Beaches are essential ecosystems that support a wide variety of often overlooked plants and animals, from small nematodes (simple worms) to tiny crustaceans and other clam-like invertebrates living between the lower surf and the higher grasses. You can also observe ospreys, foxes, coyotes and wildflowers amid the rolling dunes. For the summer of 2020, the two visitor centers, half a dozen lighthouses and historic buildings are closed.

Assateague Island National Seashore

Immediately south of Ocean City, Md., this windswept and pristine island stretches 37 miles into Virginia, where it adjoins one of the richest birding sanctuaries in the country, [Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge](#). The island is also famed for a herd of some 150 wild ponies, descendants of the animals shipped over by planters in the 1600s. Sometimes they can be seen trotting along (and into) Chincoteague Bay.

Most of the beaches are open to four-wheel driving (with permits), along with biking, hiking, surfing, swimming, kayaking, clamming and fishing. Presently, the visitor center and backcountry campsites are closed. Since this is the only nature-oriented national park site on the Mid-Atlantic seaboard, more than two million people come each year, but in the cool spring and fall, the tourist crowds thin.

Cape Lookout National Seashore

Directly south of the often-congested Cape Hatteras, N.C., the scantily visited, 56-mile-long Cape Lookout National Seashore bridges three unspoiled barrier islands: North and South Core Banks and Shackleford Banks. Less than half a million people made brief visits last year. Home to wild horses, nesting loggerhead turtles and countless shorebirds, this undeveloped seashore is accessible only by boat, with no roads or stores. Primitive cabins can be rented on the South Core Banks, while camping is allowed throughout the seashore. The Cape Lookout Lighthouse is closed until further notice.

Otherwise, surf-casting is popular, along with hunting, shell collecting, windsurfing, kayaking, motor boating (like most national seashores, areas for personal watercraft and Jet Skis are limited), long beach strolls and four-wheel driving on the two Core islands (scheduled ferries transport motor vehicles).



Cumberland Island, Ga. Credit...Hunter McRae for The New York Times

Cumberland Island National Seashore

As the least visited and most isolated national seashore (53,904 people came in 2019), the 18-mile-long Cumberland Island, off the Georgia coast, showcases an unusual landowner history. Historic structures, such as the Thomas Carnegie mansion ruins, surround what were once thriving cotton plantations. The north end of the island, home to an African-American community in the 1890s, holds the intact First African Baptist Church, which is still a popular destination.

Today, although there are private property owners living on the island, many of the dunes and surrounding beaches have been reclaimed by nature; nearly one-third of the total 36,000 acres are protected wilderness (Cumberland Island National Seashore was established in 1972). Along with feral horses, there are rattlesnakes, alligators, more than 300 species of birds and white tail deer. Fishing, boating and camping opportunities abound; after storms, try your luck hunting for sharks' teeth and shells on the beaches.

Gulf Islands National Seashore

Largest of all the national seashores at 135,600 acres, with over five million visitors a year, Gulf Islands National Seashore offers plenty of room to go beachcombing and boat across 12 different units that are spread from the Gulf shores on the Florida Panhandle to Southern Mississippi. Eighty percent of the park is water. And the beaches, with their pure white sand, are heralded as among the most beautiful in the world. These crushed quartz shores are likened to spun glass, the grains of which have washed down over thousands of years, from the Appalachian Mountains and into the Gulf.

In addition to sunbathing, swimming or picnicking, you'll find year-round snorkeling and scuba diving throughout the warm and pellucid waters, along with ample opportunities to camp, hike, bike, ride horses and hunt. The diversity of wildlife habitats — from dunes to marshes to forests — attracts more than 300 species of birds, along with armadillos, black bears, dolphins and river otters. Many come to visit the islands' four intact forts (the Fort Barrancas area is currently closed) that were built to protect the mainland during the War of 1812.

Padre Island National Seashore

Renowned as the largest undeveloped barrier island in the world, the drivable hard sand of Texas's Padre Island sweeps 80 miles from Corpus Christi to Brownsville, free of the resorts and homes strung along the mainland several miles west across the Intracoastal Waterway. One sheltered stretch, Laguna Madre, contains some of the most saline waters in the world. Padre Island is also known as a windsurfing destination, but when the breeze dies, or out among the sheltered dunes, mosquitoes can be fierce.

Although busy on weekends and during college breaks, most visitors drive in four-wheel vehicles at least five miles south from park headquarters until they've found the desired isolation. Last year, more than half a million people visited the park. Along with innumerable activities on beaches colorful with evening primrose, there are several shipwrecks buried offshore. For birding opportunities, bring your binoculars, and if patience prevails, wildlife watchers might also get a glimpse of the endangered Kemp's ridley turtle.

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore

Five miles wide and 42 miles long, Pictured Rocks hugs the brisk waters of Lake Superior on Michigan's scantily populated Upper Peninsula. Taking advantage of the park's lack of entrance fees, more than 800,000 visitors came last year to walk or snowshoe 100 miles of trails, ice climb, camp, ice fish, picnic, hunt, boat and swim. The park is named after its spectacular and multihued limestone cliffs, towering directly above the lake for 15 miles and frothing with waterfalls.

There are also half a dozen beaches easily reached from the road, stretching as long as 12 miles, along with several more isolated beaches to hike into. The shoreline bristles with hardwood forests that blush in brilliant reds and golds during autumn foliage.

Point Reyes National Seashore

As the only national seashore on the West Coast, the spectacular Point Reyes — on the San Andreas Fault — is a short drive north of San Francisco. In 2019, more than two million people visited this 71,000-acre headland. Home to more than a thousand species of plants and animals, Point Reyes is the most biologically rich and diverse seashore of them all. With forests sheltering tule elk, pastoral grasslands and tall cliffs overlooking the breakers, visitors can watch migrating gray whales, seals and fluttering colonies of seabirds. An astonishing 480 different species of birds have been identified here. In 1988, UNESCO included Point Reyes in the Golden Gate Biosphere Reserve.

Historically, the park preserves the region's 150-year-old cattle-ranching legacy, with dairy operations still active today on the treeless plain above the sea. And down below, in 1579, Sir Francis Drake became the first European to land in California, in what is now called Drake's Cove. The 80 miles of shoreline hold a dozen different beaches — the most popular destinations for backpacking, surfing, kayaking or simply strolling along the littoral where the vast Pacific beats the shore.

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