By Nick Regan, Scenic America intern

In his book, National Parks: The American Experience 4th Ed., environmental historian, Alfred Runte, epitomizes the nation’s perception of national parks, stating, “When Americans hear the term ‘national park,’ they think instantly of magnificent landscapes.” It is true that most people associate visual beauty with iconic destinations. Whether exploring Acadia’s rocky Atlantic coastline, witnessing the Grand Canyon’s overwhelming size, driving through the rugged badlands of the Dakotas, or hiking amongst Giant Sequoia trees in Yosemite, there is a shared belief that these national treasures are a part of our unique national heritage.

Beginning in late May of last year, I embarked on a six-month road trip with the goal of visiting as many National Park Service (NPS) designated sites as possible. Such an experience provided me new perceptions toward the nation’s distinctive visual environments. I recognized why certain landscapes are so beloved, why certain communities cherish their visual and cultural character, and why certain regional cuisines are considered so famous. (Texas BBQ really is better in Texas.)

I witnessed countless individuals and communities continuing the nation’s legacy of stewardship. Preserving the nation’s visual beauty was a common ideal on display throughout my travels. From park rangers leading educational hikes, to community business owners sharing their wisdom about the region, or fellow campers maintaining a clean campground, there was a mutual understanding that we all share a responsibility towards keeping America beautiful.

The recreational and educational opportunities available at many NPS-managed sites reflect the nation’s enthusiasm for green spaces and public lands. Some of the highlights of my trip include hiking through Glacier National Park’s alpine meadows, maneuvering through massive crowds at Yellowstone National Park’s Mammoth Hot Springs, finding constellations within the night sky at Great Sand Dunes National Park, and learning about Ancestral Puebloan Indian culture at multiple national monuments throughout New Mexico and Arizona. Of equal importance were the gateway communities I encountered, and their willingness to support tourists and park visitors with access to lodging, local restaurants, and local retailers. All these experiences represent the symbiotic relationship between governments, communities, and individuals seeking to appreciate and preserve the natural and historical wonders of the nation.

The most exciting aspect of this trip of a lifetime was the chance to discover scenic and historic destinations often overshadowed by the nation’s more recognizable and popular landscapes. For example, nestled between the cities of Cleveland and Akron, OH, Cuyahoga Valley National Park is a reminder that recreation and unique ecosystems can coexist adjacent major metropolitan areas.

Outside the suburbs of Albuquerque, NM, Petroglyph National Monument preserves one of the largest petroglyph sites on the continent, offering a unique glimpse into the cultural expressions of American Indians and Spanish settlers. Spanning across Wyoming and Utah, the Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area demonstrates the unique topography of the West and is a massive playground for outdoor enthusiasts.

While these overlooked places may never be as nationally adored as Yosemite’s El Capitan or the otherworldly red rocks of Arches National Park, their existence embodies the ideals the country’s leaders set out to accomplish when Yellowstone National Park became the world’s first acknowledged national park in 1872. With 418 NPS administered units across the nation, there are endless destinations filled with history, visual beauty, and recreational activities that cater to individuals’ interests.

Our nation may span across vastly different urban, suburban, and rural environments, but we should all equally cherish the country’s distinctive landscapes. We share a common goal of ensuring these places will continue to be a defining aspect of our national identity for future generations. I hope readers will discover their own sense of adventure, and become inspired by the nation’s abundance of scenic beauty.
Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area in Utah

Photos by Nick Regan