**Visiting Our National Parks- Top Ten lessons Learned**

The following “lessons learned” are based on visits to 16 national park and multiple visits to

 Yellowstone (20), Grand Teton (7), and Glacier (5).

1. **Plan Ahead**. I’ve organized and planned trips for friends, family, and groups to several national parks. It is best to start the planning process six months to one year in advance due to the limited lodging available in many parks. Be sure to check on cancellation fees. Things happen.
2. **Homework.** Spend time researching and reading about where you are planning to visit. The national park website for each park is the best resource to help plan your trip. Stop at the Visitors’ Center and spend time learning about the park before you start your visit.
3. **Respect Your Ability, Age and Environment.** Our national parks are a place of wonder, wildlife, and wilderness. If you hike, select your hike based on the ability, experience, and stamina of your group. Falls, vehicle accidents, and drownings are the leading cause of death in the parks. Do not underestimate the potential impact of altitude, terrain, and weather. Pay attention to weather conditions that can often change in a matter of minutes. Let someone know your plans and/or sign in at the ranger station/trailhead. Allow enough daylight for a safe return.
4. **Essentials for Hiking.** Don’t leave the trailhead without: water, food, first aid kit, map, pack, flashlight or headlamp, hat and sunscreen, whistle, waterproof matches, knife, and waterproof clothing. Set attainable hiking goals based on the ability of your group.
5. **Safety First.** Read the rules and obey them. Carry bear spray and know how to use it. In Yellowstone, stay on the board walk, and do not approach bear, bison, or elk…and keep a safe distance at all times (25 yds. for bison and elk, 100 yds. for bear and wolves).
6. **Gear.** Invest in the right clothing and gear before you arrive in the park as prices are much higher the closer you get to the parks.
7. **Footwear.** Wearing shoes or boots not designed for hiking is the **NUMBER ONE** reason for hospital visits at Bryce Canyon National Park. Wear hiking boots that have good ankle support; sports sandals, tennis or running shoes, and flip-flops are **NOT** safe hiking footwear. Wear good hiking socks. Hiking poles are worth the cost.
8. **Get Up Early/Stay late.** Wildlife are more active in the early morning and late evening hours and the crowds are usually less.
9. **Pace Yourself.** You can’t do everything. Prioritize your day and leave time to relax and reflect on your visit. There will be unexpected delays, so remember to pack your patience and use it.
10. **Journal.** Keep a journal of your travels. End every day with group exercise: What lessons did I learn and what was the highlight?