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Exploring America's National Treasures

by S. Alison Chabonais

The Kent family, of Amherst, New Hampshire, has faced many “Can I really do this?” moments while adventuring in America’s national parks. So far they’ve visited 57, and with Pinnacles just named a full park in January, they’ll likely be headed for California again. American Samoa, in the South Pacific, potentially the last and most remote destination of their 11-year odyssey, is under serious consideration.

Along the way, father Scott, mother Lisa and (now) 18-year-old Tanner and 16-year-old Peyton each grew increasingly self-confident in testing their skills at everything from spelunking, subtropical snorkeling and paragliding to ice trekking and kayaking subarctic waters. “If they offered it, we tried it,” says Lisa. “Our family regularly debates our favorite memories.”

While they hiked and explored natural rock formations at every opportunity—including New Mexico’s Carlsbad Caverns, Kentucky’s Mammoth Cave, South Dakota’s Wind Cave and California’s Yosemite—the gals also liked to ride horses while the guys fly fished. “One of my favorite moments

was when Tanner and I hiked a Colorado trail to a pristine lake in Rocky Mountain National Park, where he caught his first trout,” recalls Scott.

“I never give the same answer as to the best experience or best park,” adds Tanner, citing Yellowstone, in Wyoming, and Wrangell-St. Elias, in Alaska, as particularly spectacular, partly for their distinctive wildlife. His favorite anecdote? “When I was little, I stared down a barracuda in the Dry Tortugas, off the coast of South Florida, wildly pointing it out to Dad, who was calmly photographing itty-bitty fish and never saw it.”

“It’s so cool to get close to a big animal,” says Peyton, recalling when she and Mom were sea kayaking Alaska’s Glacier Bay near a humpback whale. “I thought we were going to end up in the whale’s mouth,” she laughs.

The family agrees that their longest expedition—eight Alaskan parks in three weeks—was extraordinary. “We had to fly into the Arctic Circle on a float plane and walk the ice using crampons,” Peyton notes about their visit to the remote Gates of the Arctic and Kobuk Valley, among America’s least-visited parks, in



contrast to the most-visited Great Smoky Mountains National Park, straddling Tennessee and North Carolina.

Whether witnessing Kodiak Island bears, Hawaiian volcanoes or Everglades' alligators, their overarching mission was to visit every major park before Tanner embarked for college. The family's National Park Service Passport already has 57 stamps secured during school holidays and summer vacations, timed to prime park seasons and complemented by destination photos.

"It's easy to talk about the big moments, but you can have a memorable time in any park," says Lisa, from appreciating the beauty of a boardwalk to boarding a ferry for an island picnic. "Getting back to basics has been really good for our family, part of the glue that binds us together."

She says her growing children learned to be brave and patient, help fellow travelers and be happy without cell phones. "We moved away from immediate gratification to focusing on a greater good," remarks Lisa. "We enjoy interacting and doing simple things together."

The family assesses its national parks tour as affordable, accessible and affecting how they experience life as a software engineer (Scott), physical education teacher (Lisa) and student athletes (Tanner and Peyton). They are pleased to be counted among the innumerable national park visitors that have benefited since the inception of what Ken Burns' video series characterizes as *America's Best Idea*. Lisa sums it up: "You don't have to do it as big as we did to get big out of it."

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