



The Greatest Day Hikes in The USA

Description

by Jeff Aguilar

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Over the years I've had a chance to hike many trails in the USA. In that time there have been some day hikes that I felt were just a bit more inspiring, more exciting, and more scenic. These are the hikes that were genuinely epic. And thus, this page is my effort to share these recommended hikes with you.

I call these day hikes because they will take the relatively conditioned hiker at least half a day to complete and they will exceed five miles round trip. Some are longer and harder than others and I mention that in the descriptions.

The list is somewhat (but not completely) ordered based on my memory of the hike. But I can promise that any of these hiking destinations will be a great experience.

16. The DeCaLiBron Loop



As I mentioned in this [post](#) The DeCaLiBron Loop in Colorado hits four 14er summits of the Mosquito Range near Fairplay, CO. It's one epic 7.6 mile loop that is one of the best mountain hiking challenges that can be done in a day hike.

Unlike a normal mountain ascent and descent, the DeCaLiBron loop really becomes an adventure once you summit the first peak and start on your way to the next, descending and ascending along the ridge lines. I would not recommend this hike for a pure climbing novice, but for hikers who have completed a couple Colorado 14ers, this hike is a good next step.

15. Big Pine Lakes, California



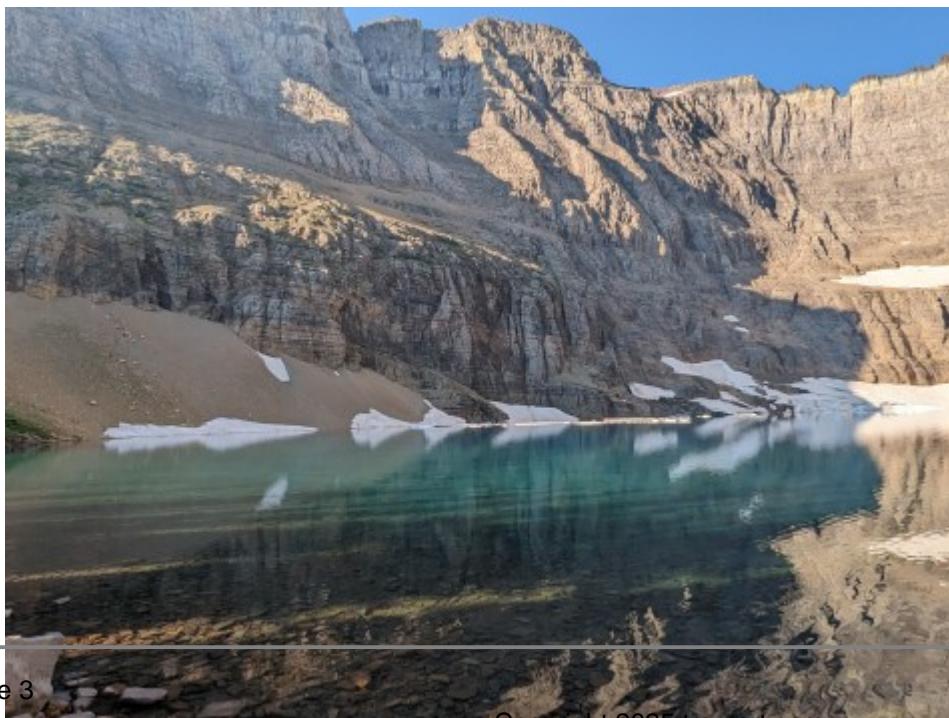
Lake Two, Big Pine Lakes

The Big Pine Lakes are a series of turquoise lakes in California's Sierra Nevadas. The lakes are numbered One, Two, and Three and are a relatively easy, but steep hike from the trailhead west of the town of Big Pine. The lakes get their turquoise color from glacial melt, an extreme rarity in California's Sierras.

You can continue on into the heart of the Sierras after passing the lakes and make an attempt on the North Palisade Peak, the third highest mountain in California at 14,248 ft.

I recommend camping at the Big Pine Creek campground since the area is a bit remote and the campground situated perfectly by Big Pine Creek and the trailhead.

14. Iceberg Lake, Glacier National Park



Iceberg Lake

Glacier has tons of incredible hikes and many that are probably longer than the day-hike criteria. I really need to do the full Highline Trail all the way from Logan Pass to Many Glacier and then add it to the list.

The Iceberg Lake trail is both beautiful and a relatively easy 10-miles-roundtrip. The presence of grizzlies and other wildlife around this trail also adds to the fun here.

13. Mount Elbert Summit Trail, Colorado



Hiking Mount Elbert Trail

The Mount Elbert summit hike is the highest in Colorado and for that reason it gets a bit more traffic than average. But it's terrifically scenic with views of the Twin Lakes below and the surrounding Sawatch Range. It's also one of the non-technical 14ers so anyone can hike it safely in the summer (just watch for afternoon thunderstorms).

12. Sky Pond, Rocky Mountain National Park



Gazing at the Sharks Tooth over Sky Pond

Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado is packed full of hiking trails within the confines of the park, but Sky Pond is especially rewarding. On a nine mile hike you'll pass two beautiful alpine lakes, a cascading waterfall, and ascend a cliff face alongside another waterfall before arriving at Sky Pond. Once there you can admire the beauty of the lake with the jagged "Shark's Tooth" hovering in

the background.

11. Mount Washburn Trail, Yellowstone National Park



Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, Yellowstone Lake, and the Absaroka Range from Mount Washburn Trail

Yellowstone has thousands of miles of hiking trails across a huge expanse of wilderness. So in a park with endless natural features, what makes the Mount Washburn trail the number one day hike? Well, it provides an amazing birds-eye view across so much of the park. You'll not only enjoy the nearby wildflowers and wildlife (which are often grizzlies, but are more likely to be bighorn sheep and marmots), but see the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, and even more distant sights like Lake Yellowstone and geyser basins.

The hike is a steep three mile ascent in both directions from Dunraven Pass. A second option is the steeper, less scenic 2 mile ascent from Chittenden Road.

10. Longs Peak, Rocky Mountain National Park



The Diamond Face of Longs Peak

The ultimate hike in Rocky Mountain National Park is also arguably the most challenging and dangerous day hike on the list.

At 14,255 ft Longs Peak is among the highest peaks in Colorado, and with its distinctive diamond face, one of the most photographed. The trail to the summit is 15 miles round trip.

The first 5 miles are a relatively steep, but straightforward, high altitude hike. However, once you cross through the notch known as the "Keyhole", the pathway narrows to steep ledges and rock scrambles to the summit. Care must be taken to avoid inclement weather with an early start in the summer time.

9. Bright Angel Trail, Grand Canyon National Park



View from Bright Angel Trail

This is the second trail that might be considered a multi-day hike. Make no mistake, to travel the entire distance from one rim to the other would be a multi-day hike, but most hikers at least travel as far as Indian Gardens, and even Phantom Ranch at the river is achievable.

Most visitors never do more than stare down from the rim, and while the views are majestic, particularly at sunrise and sunset, they really don't do this place justice. It's like seeing only the cover of a great novel and never turning the page. Entering the canyon is to travel through layers of time and through varied ecosystems. I would also note that colorful bands of rock similar to places like Zion or Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is hidden within the Grand Canyon too, and only visible from below.

8. The Narrows, Zion National Park



Virgin River near entrance to the Narrows

This really isn't so much a trail as it is a long walk up a river. But you won't often experience anything like this hike where you can stand almost arm's length from either side of the canyon and stare up at canyon walls a thousand feet high. It's slippery, often cold, and sometimes dangerous if conditions aren't right, but it's one of two hikes in Zion National Park that make the list.

7. Harding Ice Field Trail, Kenai Fjords National Park

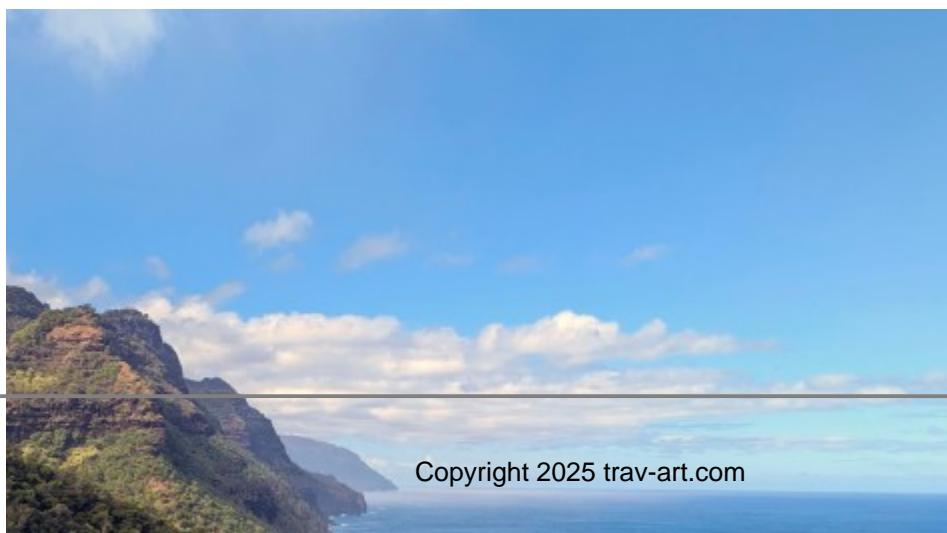


Exit Glacier from Harding Ice Field Trail

This is one of those hikes I'd love to return and complete later in the season. I was able to ascend the trail to about a mile short of the full icefield before deep snow in late May made continuing on too difficult.

What I did see along the way was glacial scenery that became steadily more impressive the higher I ascended. From the trailhead (where a black bear and hoary marmots congregated) to Exit Glacier, to ever more impressive views back over the valley floor, this was a gorgeous hike and one of the most accessible in Alaska. I have seen pictures of the icefield that awaits my return, and that promising expanse of unbroken ice surely makes this one of the 10 best day hikes in the country.

6. Kalalau Trail, Kauai, Hawaii



The Na Pali Coast

Kauai is, in my opinion, the most beautiful of the four main islands of Hawaii. The Na Pali coast is the very dramatic and remote stretch of the island and the location of the Kalalau Trail.

The Kalalau Trail traverses the Na Pali Coast on land and provides striking coastal scenery and rainforest beauty throughout. This is arguably the greatest coastal hike in the country. Hiking as far as Hanakapiai Beach is a rewarding experience. I hope to return and continue on the side trail to Hanakapiai Falls.

5. Mount Whitney Summit Trail, California



Lakes visible on the western slope of Mount Whitney trail

This is one of two hikes I've listed that are arguably multi-day hikes, but I was able to reach the summit and back in one long, tiring day. Mount Whitney is the highest mountain in the lower-48 states and the summit trail is non-technical. It is a tough hike at 22 miles round trip, but one that gets progressively more rewarding. Once you arrive at the ridge line and enter Sequoia National Park for the final thousand foot ascent, you'll see the gorgeous Sierra Nevada range at its sublime best.

4. Angelâ??s Landing, Zion National Park



The trail to the top of Angelâ??s Landing

Zion National Park earns back-to-back honors in this list, but I think most visitors to the park that have hiked these trails would agree the honor is rightly deserved. Angelâ??s Landing hits all the right notes though it is the shortest by distance on the list, just making the cut. But for awe-inspiring views and a unique experience crossing a precipice above the canyon floor it is an undeniably memorable hike.

This is probably the most dangerous hike on the list and the one that should not be undertaken by anyone with a fear of heights or by children. Every year there are fatalities from those who mis-stepped. Take your time, watch your feet, and hold on to the chains.

3. Cascade Canyon to Lake Solitude, Grand Teton National Park

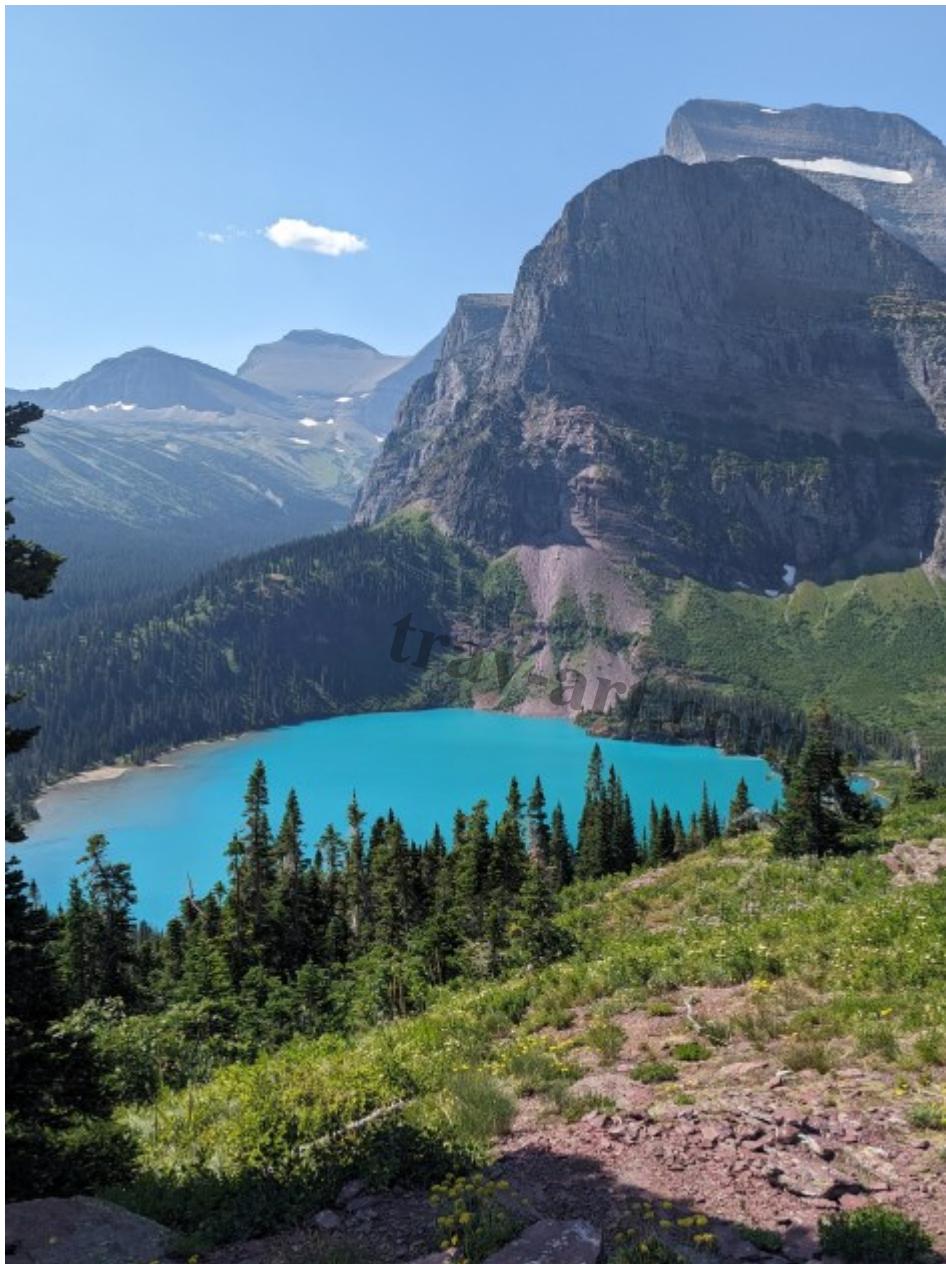


The Grand Teton from the Lake Solitude Trail

The vast, vast majority of visitors only see the Tetons from the valley floor. And those views are majestic and beautiful.

But taking a hike into the heart of the Tetons is otherworldly. I have done the Cascade Canyon section of the hike a few times, but the most astounding beauty awaits after the trail junction. Follow it Lake Solitude, or even over Paintbrush Divide, or just as far as the weather and trail conditions permit. The 360 degree views on this trail are some of the most majestic anywhere in the world.

2. Grinnell Glacier Trail, Glacier National Park



Glacier is packed full of amazing hikes across the expanse of the park. The best of the day hikes is probably the Grinnell Glacier trail.

The scenery just doesn't quit along the 6 miles from the trailhead to the glacier. You'll pass by Swiftcurrent Lake, Lake Josephine, the ultra-turquoise Grinnell Lake, a waterfall on the trail and on up to the Glacier itself and the Upper Grinnell Lake.

I last completed this hike in July of 2023 with my teenage son and it was a great experience. We made a video of our hike which you can view below.

In my opinion the two parks with the greatest hikes are Glacier and the park that follows with the number one day hike.

1. Half Dome Trail, Yosemite National Park



Jeff standing on Halfdome

I've hiked a lot of trails, but in the nearly two decades since I first hiked to the top of Half Dome in Yosemite nothing has ever quite matched this unique and memorable hike. With Vernal and Nevada Falls along the way, the final ascent of the cables is really the final act of an amazing journey through the best of Yosemite's scenery. When you finally arrive at the summit to gaze down on Yosemite Valley your effort is justly rewarded.

Category

1. Travel

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