

MAPS & ITINERARIES

National Parks & Hidden Gems of the Midwest, South & Southwest



Overview

This route covers a broad portion of the center of the United States, a trip that truly showcases the country's cultural, geographical and environmental diversity. Beginning in Chicago, you will drive through Indiana and into Kentucky. There, you will experience thriving Louisville and the marvels of Mammoth Cave National Park. Next is Tennessee and the urban centers of Nashville, a.k.a. "Music City, USA", and Memphis, home to some of the country's best barbeque. After that you will head into Arkansas to soak up Hot Springs National Park, a lovely geothermal and historical wonder. A stop in Dallas/Fort Worth follows, one of Texas' most bustling metropolitan regions, and then a trip into Austin, a small cultural hub in the center of the state, will bring you across the range of classic Texan landscapes. Following this is a drive into deep West Texas, one of the most beautiful portions of this gigantic state, where you will take in Big Bend National Park and the funky arts town of Marfa. You will then head straight north into New Mexico to check out the stunning underground geology of Carlsbad Caverns National Park. After that, you will dip back into the corner of Texas at El Paso to appreciate the history of this bustling city. A visit to Las Cruces and Spaceport America will lead you north back into New Mexico, where you will also roll through the small ex-mining town of Silver City. Your road trip through the open desert will end at lively Albuquerque, the largest city in the state.

#MYUSAPARKS

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States: IL, KY, AR, TX, NM

Start: Chicago, IL

End: Albuquerque, NM

Total miles: 2,687

Suggested days: 18 - 26

Type: scenic rural/urban road trip including national parks, cities & small towns

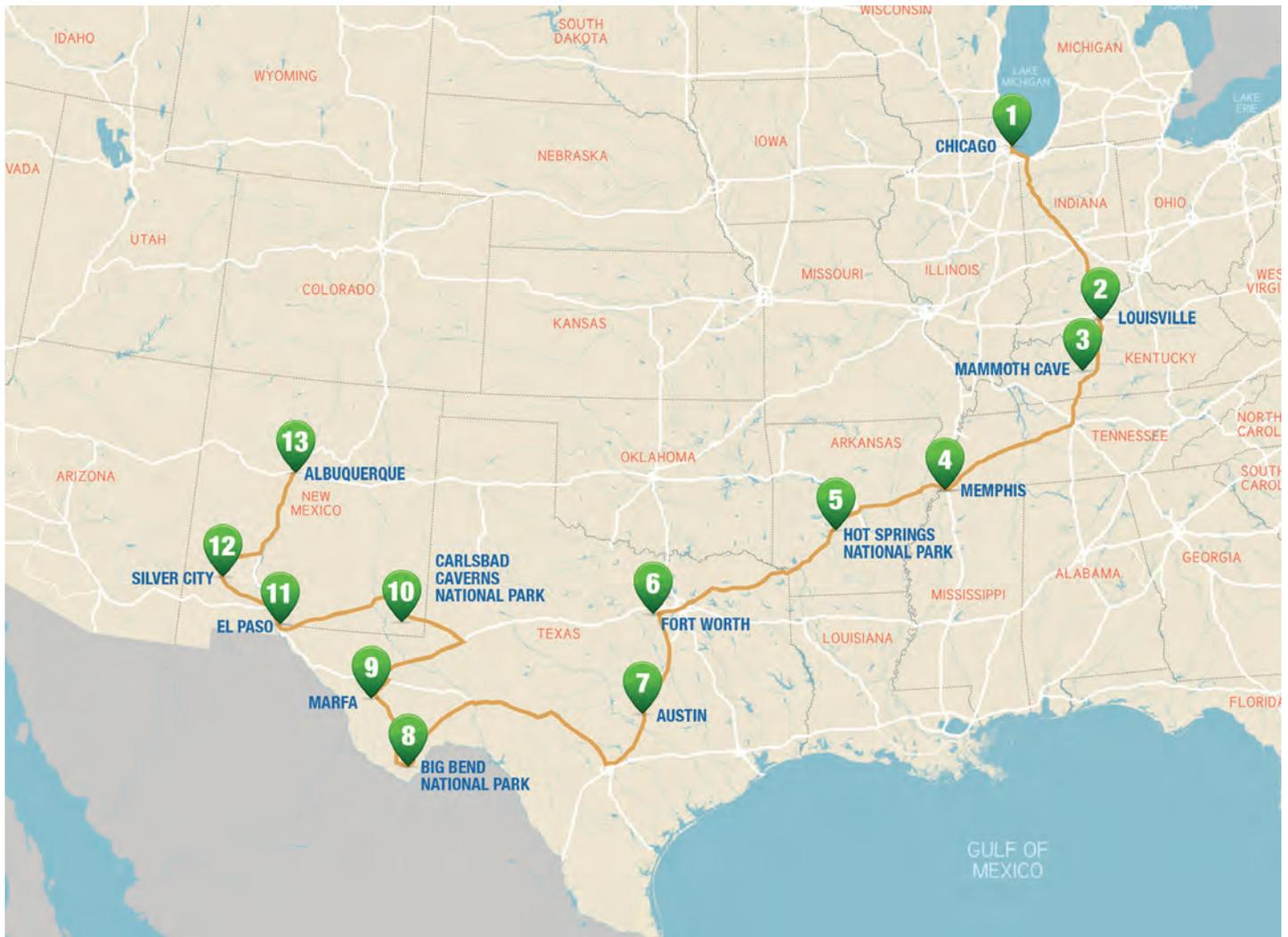
Recommended for: road trippers, motorcycles, honeymooners, families

Suggested season:

March - November

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Trip Details

We recommend at least two weeks to encompass all of the possible offerings that are suggested in this itinerary. A lot of distance is covered here, so it would be ideal to spend a couple of days in, say, Big Bend, after driving many hours to and from there. (Of course, the drives themselves are uniquely impressive, so it won't feel long at all! The journey is the destination, as they say.) Only a few of the drives are relatively short, around 3 hours or so. But, as you go through Texas, many drives will take up a good part of your day, so plan accordingly. (These longer drives could be broken

up into segments, too, but there may be few decent stopping points in the more desolate regions.) The weather through this drive is variable depending on the season. In the summer, it will be quite hot everywhere, muggy in Chicago and dry in Big Bend. In the autumn, it will be much more pleasant in the south, but it could definitely snow in Chicago towards the end of the season. The majority of this trip could be done any time of year, but possible heavy snow November through February can make driving in the upper Midwest a bit treacherous. Follow the forecasts accordingly.

Our #1 trip recommendation:

- Don't forget your camera



DAY 1: Arrival in Chicago

After flying into Chicago O'Hare International Airport, you'll rent your car and have the city at your fingertips. Chicago is a world-class city, though one that is somewhat peripheral due to its location away from the coasts. This perhaps makes the city even better, though, as Chicago has retained much of its local culture and history over the centuries. There is enough to do in Chicago that one could easily spend a week sightseeing there, but if you only are dedicating a couple days to the city, you can easily concentrate your time on the key attractions. As the city is fairly spread out, you could pick a neighborhood to concentrate on – like the famous Loop, or the less traveled Pilsen, Ukrainian Village, Logan Square and Wicker Park – or ping pong around the city by public transit to see Cloud Gate and Millennium Park, the Magnificent Mile, the Field Museum, Garfield Park Conservatory and other deservedly known places. There is a lot to explore in Chicago and anywhere you go will be worthwhile.

Best Place to view art:

Art Institute of Chicago

Best sports watching:

Cubs game at Wrigley Field

Recommended stroll:

Lakefront Trail

Best "Chicago - style" food:

Pizza at Lou Malnati's or hot dog at Gene & Jude's

Recommended hotel:

The Langham

DAY 2: Into the Bluegrass State and Louisville

(driving time: 4.5 hours)

When you're ready to leave Chicago, you will head south, through Indiana and into Kentucky, the lovely Bluegrass State. A recommended stopping point is Louisville, the largest city in the state and one that has plenty of shopping, eating and sightseeing to offer travelers. For history buffs, there are a lot of monuments and museums to discover in the city, one of the oldest west of the Appalachian Mountains. For culture hounds, there is a thriving local music scene and a few great art museums. If you happen to be in town during the Kentucky Derby in May, that may be your best bet on getting a taste of one of the most longstanding traditions in the state.



Best local museum:

Louisville Slugger Museum or Kentucky Derby Museum

Recommended local drink:

bourbon at Stitzel-Weller Distillery

Recommended dinner:

Hammerheads or Sidebar

Recommended lodging:

The Brown Hotel

DAY 3: Descending into Mammoth Cave

(driving time: 1.5 hours)

A couple of hours south of Louisville is one of the more stunning geological features in the United States, the massive underground chambers of Mammoth Caves. This is the longest known cave system on the planet and is designated as a World Heritage Site and an international Biosphere Reserve. In other words, prepare to be blown away. There are 405 total miles of surveyed passageways at Mammoth Cave and the system goes as deep as 379 feet beneath the ground. It might be best to take a guided ranger tour, as there is a lot of significant historical and geological information that you can't obtain on your own.

Recommended hiking trail:

Big Hollow Trail Loop

Recommended dinner:

El Mazatlan in Cave City

Recommended hotel:

The Brown Hotel



DAY 4: Through the Cities of Tennessee

(driving time: 4.5 hours)

There is a fair amount of distance between Mammoth Caves and your next park destination at Hot Springs National Park, but luckily you pass through two of Tennessee's great major cities. Nashville and Memphis each have a lot to offer



to travelers, but you can choose which one you'd like to break up your drive to Arkansas. In Nashville, you can take in the Grand Ole Opry, the Country Music Hall of Fame and everything else related to this form of American traditional music. On the other hand, in Memphis you can go to Elvis Presley's Graceland, visit the famous Sun Studios and, perhaps most importantly, eat some of the country's best barbeque. Either way, plan on spending the night in Memphis so that you get a full day in Hot Springs after the next drive.

Best museum:

National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis

Music pilgrimage sites:

Grand Ole Opry, Graceland, Sun Studios

Recommended Memphis barbeque:

Central BBQ

Recommended Hotel:

River Inn of Harbor Town

DAY 5: Dipping into Hot Springs National Park

(driving time: 3 hours)

Adjacent to and within the town of the same name, Hot Springs National Park is the oldest park maintained by the National Park Service and was initially designated as a federally protected area before the national park system was established. It is also one of the most conveniently located national parks, as portions run through

downtown Hot Springs. There are 26 miles of trails around the park and a few places to take the kind of traditional hot spring bath that has been attracting visitors to the site for thousands of years.

Best stroll in town:

Bathhouse Row

Best hike:

Goat Rock Trail

Recommended soaks:

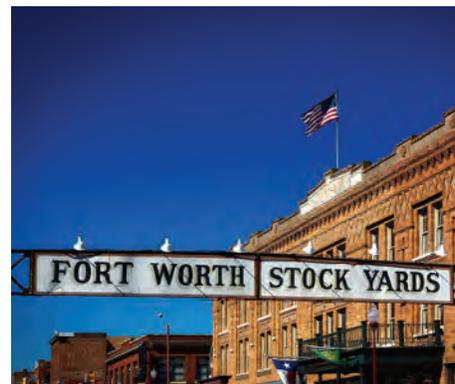
Buckstaff Baths or Quapaw Baths

Best dinner:

Rolando's Nueva Latino Restaurant

Recommended lodging:

Lookout Point Lakeside Inn



DAY 6: Onwards to Texas via Fort Worth

(driving time: 5 hours)

You will next head into Texas, the Lone Star State, for a few days. The first of these stops will be the charming town of Fort Worth, part of the larger DFW (Dallas – Fort Worth) metropolitan area, one of the most populated urban regions in the South. Though Dallas is the largest of these cities, Fort Worth has a lot of charm to offer to visitors. The city has renowned art museums, fantastic modern architecture and an array of wonderful dining and shopping opportunities.

Best art viewing:

Kimbell Art Museum

Recommended historic neighborhood:

Forth Worth Stockyards

Architectural monuments:

Amon Carter Museum and Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

Recommended dinner:

Horseshoe Hill or Fixture

Recommended hotel:

Homewood Suites



DAY 7: Austin, the Hippest College Town of Texas

(driving time: 3.5 hours)

Your next stop, a few hours south, is the hip town of Austin, the state capital and the home to the flagship campus of the University of Texas. Like Portland, San Francisco and Brooklyn, Austin is usually considered to be one of the epicenters for the youth of America these days. Yet with nearly a million people within its borders, Austin has enough for everyone: a booming music scene, cheap and tasty food, lots of unique shopping and cultural opportunities, and a unique local vibe around every corner.

Recommended outdoor swimming:

Barton Springs

Best shopping and people watching:

South Congress Avenue

Recommended dinner:

Salty Sow

Recommended hotel:

Hotel Granduca

DAY 8: Traversing Texas to Big Bend National Park

(driving time: 6.5 hours)

You have a long drive of several hours to reach your next destination, the spectacular landscapes of Big Bend National Park. In a sense, this is one of the best ways to experience the magnitude of Texas, as you will drive through hundreds of miles of flat desert expanse to reach the park, which is nestled along the border with Mexico. This park is especially significant as it is the largest protected area of Chihuahuan Desert topography and ecology in the United States. The park – which sprawls over 800,000 acres – is host to more than 1200 species of plants, 450 species of birds, 56 species of reptiles and 75 species of mammals. Backpacking, horseback riding, birdwatching and fishing are all popular within this desert paradise. Plan on spending at least a couple of days in Big Bend to take it all in.

Recommended desert hike:

Chimneys Trail

Recommended river hike:

Hot Springs Canyon Trail

Recommended mountain hike:

Lost Mine Trail

Recommended lodging:

Chisos Mountains Lodge



DAY 9: Refresh in Marfa

(driving time: 2 hours)

To get a dose of high culture in an unexpected place, head a couple of hours north to Marfa, a tiny West Texas town that has become a cultural mecca in recent years. What was for decades a sleepy old military town became a mark on the art-world's map when minimalist sculptor Donald Judd bought numerous buildings in Marfa to turn into studio and living spaces in the 1970s. Today, though still quite rural, the town is host to many world-famous art institutions like the Chinati Foundation, the Judd Foundation and the Lannan Foundation, as well as a handful of smaller galleries and shops. The town has retained its mid-century looks over the years and many Hollywood movies are filmed here to evoke that time. There are, surprisingly, a few stellar places to eat in this middle-of-nowhere locale.

Cultural tours:

Chinati Foundation and Judd Block House

Best book browsing:

Marfa Book Company

Recommended dinner:

Cochineal

Recommended lodging:

Hotel St George (upscale) or El Cosmico (fun and funky)

DAY 10: More Caving in New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns

(driving time: 2.5 hours)

Your next stop is amazing Carlsbad Caverns National Park, a few hours north of Marfa. Like your earlier trip to Mammoth Caves in Kentucky, the geology of Carlsbad Caverns is truly astounding. Though there are a handful of aboveground hiking trails, the cave itself is the real reason to visit. Home to countless stalagmites, stalactites and other geological wonders at every turn, Carlsbad Caverns also has a large 4,000-foot-long and 255-foot-high chamber ("The Big Room"), making it the fifth largest in North America and the twenty-eighth largest in the world. Plan on spending a full afternoon here.



Best cave experience:

King's Palace Tour

Recommended dinner:

Danny's Place in White's City

Recommended hotel:

Rodeway Inn in White's City

DAY 11: Back into Texas & into El Paso

(driving time: 2 hours)

Right on the border with Mexico is the bustling city of El Paso, home to the largest bi-lingual workforce in the Western Hemisphere and frequently voted the safest city in the United States. It is



home to a major university, numerous cultural activities and, as it's along the flowing Rio Grande, many potential outdoors opportunities. Many locals say that no visit to El Paso is complete without first taking a ride on the Wyler Aerial Tramway to get a full panorama of the city below.

Recommended nearby nature:

Franklin Mountains State Park

Best military museum:

Fort Bliss

Recommended dinner:

The Hoppy Monk or L&J Cafe

Recommended hotel:

Hilton Garden

DAY 12: Upwards into New Mexico

(driving time: 2.5 hours)

The penultimate leg of this trip will take you north into New Mexico, passing through Las Cruces and Silver City on the way to Albuquerque. First, in Las Cruces, check out the fantastic Zuhl Museum and, if you happen to be there on a Saturday, check out the renowned Farmers & Craft Market.

Next, head north to the town of Truth and Consequences and pay a visit Spaceport America, “the world’s first purpose-built commercial spaceport [...] designed to make space travel as accessible to all as air travel is today”. It’s a wonderful glimpse into the possible future. Take a small detour west and plan on spending the night in Silver City, a small former mining town that is now home to a thriving arts scene.



Recommended side trip:

White Sands National Monument

Best local view:

Chino Mine Vista Point

Recommended dinner:

Jalisco Café in Silver City

Recommended hotel:

Palace Hotel in Silver City

DAY 13: Ending in Albuquerque

(driving time: 4 hours)

Your weeks of road tripping down the center of the United States will end in Albuquerque, the largest city in New Mexico and one of the cultural and economic centers of the southwest. One could easily



spend a couple of days in Albuquerque and the surrounding environs, so, as this is the end of your drive, it's up to you how much time you'd like to devote there. The Sandia Mountains and Rio Grande provide outdoor adventures to those that want them and the large student population from University of New Mexico draws a good amount of culture into the city. If you happen to be in town in October, a must see event is the International Balloon Festival, the world's largest gathering of hot-air balloons.

Recommended nearby hike:

Petroglyph National Monument

Best regional museum:

Indian Pueblo Cultural Center

Recommended shopping:

Old Town Albuquerque

Recommended dinner:

Cocina Azul

Recommended hotel:

Hotel Parq Central