

# CAMP SITES WE LOVE

By Josephine Matyas and Craig Jones

Our road trip wanderlust begins with a deeply ingrained curiosity. Two pre-retirement boomers, travelling with our dog, in a decked-out camper van, going with the wind. We both read voraciously and are obsessed with current events as well as how the arc of history has impacted the land and people we encounter. As professional writers (and one of us a musician), we almost always travel on a shoestring budget, with writing assignments in hand and a mission in our back pocket.

Over the past five years, we've driven our camper van through the eastern parts of Canada and criss-crossed the United States, especially during the chilly winter months. We're drawn to beautiful natural surroundings, historical sights, music destinations and local food and drink.

When we're on the go – just motoring from Point A to Point B – we're always on the lookout for a boondocking spot (\*boondocking – also called dry camping – refers to RVers who camp overnight without power, water or sewer services). The local campground might be full, far

away or, more likely, we just need a cheap, quiet and safe place to pull over and sleep while we are getting from A to B.

In our travels, we've found some remarkable campgrounds where we've parked our tires for a longer stay. We admit to a bias for public parks (national, state, provincial) rather than private campgrounds. We're looking for secluded spots surrounded by nature and as far away from video arcades, satellite TV and mini-golf as possible. These are some of our favourites:

## Gulf Islands National Seashore, Florida

**Why we love it:** The long park is a series of sand dunes stretching along the Gulf of Mexico just a few miles from busy Pensacola Beach. Being protected parkland, there are no high rises, no tacky t-shirt shops and no fast food joints. Just rolling dunes, beach and a nice stretch of wetlands with fantastic walking trails.

## Silver Lake State Park, Vermont

**Why we love it:** Small and quiet and very dog

## Hunting Island State Park, South Carolina

**Why we love it:** This has turned out to be one of our all-time favourite campgrounds. It's got everything – it's on the ocean, there is a palm-lined beach and it's close to the lovely town of Beaufort (never shelled during the Civil War, so think of it as Charleston, SC on a smaller, easily walkable scale). Close to the state park there are docks where the shrimp boats come in, including Gay Fish Company, where parts of the movie *Forrest Gump* was filmed. We ate our weight in shrimp while we camped here.

friendly. It's a short drive to the postcard-perfect town of Woodstock and a 10-minute walk from the campground to the Barnard General Store, where you can stock up on Vermont cheese, grab an ice cream and relax on the front porch.

## Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, Florida

**Why we love it:** Who would have thought that right smack in the middle of Florida you'd find a wide swath of undeveloped park? Just on the edge of Gainesville, Payne's Prairie has well se-



## City of Rocks State Park, New Mexico

**Why we love it:** We were originally planning a quick drive through to look at the park's balanced rock formations. About two minutes in we were smitten, changed plans and booked a site. The desert campground is about 45 minutes south of Silver City, the skies are incredibly dark (they host a nighttime astronomy program) and the setting – the rocks, open desert, mountains in the distance – is unbeatable.

cluded sites, and a network of hiking and biking trails that take you past wildlife from wild horses to alligators.

## Bayou Segnette State Park, Louisiana

**Why we love it:** It's just across the river from New Orleans, so you can get to the French Quarter in about 20 minutes. The sites are well spaced, you can have the pluses of NOLA without the downtown city craziness. And the on-site laun-

dry facilities are free.

## Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona

**Why we love it:** What's not to like? Another spot that was scheduled to be a quick visit but where we tossed the map out the window and booked a site. It's an otherworldly, protected wilderness of impossibly balanced rocks and pinnacles with some of the darkest and starriest skies of our travel



## Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, Colorado

**Why we love it:** The Gunnison River (nicknamed the "Gunny") showcases the extraordinary power of water to sculpt a landscape. This dark grey schist and gneiss are the "basement rocks" of the Precambrian-era. Think very old rocks that are extremely hard and resistant to the erosive effects of water and wind. Think: Black Canyon. Now the name makes sense.

## Rueter National Forest Service Campground, Wyoming

**Why we love it:** It was just chance that we happened upon a fantastic National Forest Service campground just north of Sundance, Wyoming (yes, the Sundance Kid was named after this spot). It's quiet, secluded and perfectly situated



## Chaco Culture National Historical Park, New Mexico

**Why we love it:** One of the most remote and least-visited national parks in the lower 48 states, Chaco has it all (well, not quite – it's a long drive to get gas, food and services). Ink-black nighttime skies, a small observatory and astronomy program, a high desert canyon landscape that appears largely untouched, and some of the most archaeologically-significant Puebloan ruins in the nation. Spiritual is the best word to describe Chaco.





### Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado

**Why we love it:** Visiting Mesa Verde on a day trip is spellbinding enough, but staying overnight atop the mesa notches up the experience tenfold. When the day visitors to the cliff dwelling ruins have cleared out, the park becomes quieter and more intimate. The deer come out to graze, the stars pop out overhead and there's something magical about knowing it happened this same way for the Puebloan people who lived here a thousand years ago.

for a visit to the nearby Devil's Tower National Monument, Steven Spielberg's location choice for his blockbuster film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

### Lazydays KOA, Arizona

**Why we love it:** This KOA cracked our aversion to the large scale campgrounds aimed at RVers. The spotless property turned out to be a great base for exploring Tucson and the surrounding Sonoran Desert. It's a popular winter campground for long-stay snowbirds. Loved the park's lemon and grapefruit trees (guests are encouraged to pick the fruit).

### Sugar Hollow Park, Virginia

**Why we love it:** It's part of the city of Bristol, without ever feeling like you're in the city. When we pulled in to register and asked about Internet connections, the elderly ranger turned pleasantly gruff and told us: "Wi-Fi, Hi-Fi. Nobody wants to go camping anymore!" Of course, it had a ring of truth. Hard to argue. **SB**

Writer Josephine Matyas and writer/musician Craig Jones travel with their dog, Eleanor Rigby, in a Roadtrek camper van. Their upcoming book – a road trip style travel guide to the blues – will be published in 2018. Learn more at [www.travelswithrigby.com](http://www.travelswithrigby.com).

### Yellowstone National Park (various campgrounds), Wyoming

**Why we love it:** We joke about Yellowstone being an "Acts of God Theme Park."

Yellowstone is the first U.S. National Park, established in 1872 by President Ulysses S. Grant. It's got elevation, so not the best choice for the winter months but a great place to camp from late spring through early fall. The massive park is world famous for its wildlife and geothermal sites including Old Faithful, just one of 10,000 geothermal volcanic vents in the parklands.

