

My Favorite Hiking Trails

Gary Vesperman has hiked, rafted, canoed, backpacked, and otherwise visited approximately 125 units of the Canadian as well as American national park and wilderness systems plus dozens of American state and Canadian provincial parks. Thus he is uniquely capable of judging the relative scenic merits of hiking trails. He personally hiked and selected the following compilation of his favorite hiking trails.

Twin Falls Loop, Yoho National Park, British Columbia

This trail begins at Takakkaw Falls, at 380 meters Canada's highest waterfall. Takakkaw is the Cree Indian word for "It is magnificent!". The trail leisurely heads up the Yoho River to a view of the Yoho Glacier, and then backs off to steeply switchback up to a teahouse. After cookies and tea, the hiker crosses two bridges just above Twin Falls to begin the Highline trail. The trail stays high above the Yoho Valley for several miles until it comes to the Jean Sharp Memorial Lookout. Absorbing the view requires eating an entire peanut butter-with-jam sandwich. The snowy President Range sprawls to the west. To the southeast corner of Yoho National Park, the mountainous ramparts of the popular Lake O'Hare region sawtooth the horizon. And to the north and east, the rocky peaks, glaciers and waterfalls of the Yoho Valley easily earn the Cree Indian word "Yoho" which means awe. The trail then rapidly descends back down to the valley floor and eventually follows the Yoho River back to Takakkaw Falls.

Grotto Falls, Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee
Easy 1.5 mile trail through rare stand of virgin hemlock to behind Grotto Falls.

Mount Ajo via Bull Pasture, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona

Trail climbs to a ridge through Sonoran desert vegetation. Cross-country on ridge to 4,808-ft. Mount Ajo with views to the north of the giant abandoned copper mine at Ajo, Baboquivari Peak to the east, and far south into the Mexican state of Sonora.

Anhinga Interpretative Nature Trail, Everglades National Park, Florida

The raised boardwalk circles over sawgrass where one can see wildlife such as the anhinga, soft-shelled turtle, snakes, fish, blue heron, purple gallinule, and egret. Alligators sometimes sleep on the trail. Yet they are so fast and powerful an adult alligator can outrun a horse the first 200 yards.

Fisher Towers, 20 miles east of Moab, Utah

Trail enters lofty maze of tall, slender spires carved by eons of erosion from sandstone. Near end of the trail, one stands at base of the 900-foot Titan spire. The trail tops out on a ridge with magnificent views in all directions of La Sal Mountains, upper Fisher Valley, red rock grottos of Onion Creek, and Colorado River gorge.

Smith Rocks Loop Trail, Smith Rocks State Park, Oregon

Loops through rugged rock formations including 300' spire Monkey Face. To the west is a grand parade of the major snow-capped peaks of central and northern Oregon.

Bears Ears-Lizard Head-North Fork-High Meadow Loop, Popo Agie Primitive Area, Wind River Range, Wyoming

Features some of the finest western mountain scenery with Yosemite-like rock walls and elk.

Hallett Peak, Rocky Mountains National Park, Colorado

12,713' Hallett Peak is a 4.5-mile trail climb from 9400' Bear Lake. Midway, trail overlooks pretty Dream Lake. Then winds around the Tyndall Glacier to the peak. To the east from the summit can be seen the blocky profile of 14,256' Longs Peak. To the south can be seen range after range of the Colorado Rockies.

Devils Garden to Dark Angel, Arches National Park, Utah

A child's delight, the trail clammers over rocks and even through the Double O Arch. The trail leads to seven arches, provides views of several more, and overlooks Fin Canyon with a sweeping vista of the La Sal Mountains. Landscape Arch with its 291' span is one of the longest natural stone spans in the world. Along one stretch, the trail travels the tops of a series of slickrock fins. In places the trail travels between soaring red slickrock walls hundreds of feet high and only a few claustrophobic yards apart. At the end of the 2.3-mile trail towers the Dark Angel, an exceptionally sculptured pinnacle of age-blackened sandstone.

Moraine Lake-Sentinel Pass-Paradise Valley, Banff National Park, Alberta

The trail climbs steeply from popular Moraine Lake through a forest of Engelmann spruce and alpine fir to enter the delicate meadows of Larch Valley. The open country up to bleak Sentinel Pass allows counting the famous Ten Peaks after which the valley is named. Fine views are offered of the rugged Wenkchemna Peaks, ice-draped summit of Mount Fay (3235 meters), and Minnestimna Lakes. The way out through Paradise Valley features the Giant Steps – a lovely cascade of small waterfalls over rocky ledges. A memorable sight can be had of the sun setting its light on the ice-capped 1200-meter north face of Mount Temple.

Cameron Lake to Waterton Townsite, Waterton Lakes National Park, Alberta

Waterton Lakes National Park is a symbol of international congeniality. The 20-kilometer Carthew Trail has all the elements, including grizzly bears (!), that make alpine travel the pleasurable experience it is.

Wallowa Lake State Park to Matterhorn Peak via Ice Lake, Eagle Cap Wilderness, Oregon

Trail first passes through a heavy forest of very large larch, Douglas fir, and spruce. Several small waterfalls are seen along the way. A steep climb to pretty Ice Lake, and then cross-country to the top of Matterhorn Peak, the highest peak in the Wallowas and a most beautiful mountain. Much more similar to Yosemite's El Capitan than its namesake, the top is of highly polished limestone. Its west face is a dizzying 3000' cliff.

Whitney Portal to Mount Whitney, Sequoia National Park, California

The nearly continuous grade of the Mount Whitney trail adds a unique tinge of drama as it steadily climbs onward and upward to the summit, the highest point in the contiguous 48 states at 14,495.811 feet above sea level. (Try to imagine the US Geological Survey determining sea level to the nearest .001 feet!) The 10.5-mile trail starts at 8,300 feet in a typical Southern Sierra forest, passes by a few meadows and views of sparkling white granite buttresses, and then climbs up a classic series of switchbacks to Trail Crest Pass. The pass offers a colorful view to the west including the blue-green Hitchcock Lakes. Approaching the summit, the trail at one point becomes a 2-foot by 20-foot slab of concrete with no handrails. On one side is a sheer 1500-foot cliff, and on the other side is an extremely steep 2000-foot slope. The altitude is so high most hikers can only stagger a few feet between boulders on which to collapse gasping for breath, and the sky overhead is an intense blue-violet. The view from the summit encompasses the Kern River drainage to the west, brown Los Angeles smog drifting by to the south, and the Owens Valley to the east two vertical miles below.

Half Dome from Happy Isles, Yosemite National Park, California

The trail starts at the forested floor of Yosemite Valley at Happy Isles, skirts both Vernal and Nevada Falls, and climbs a ladder of cables and boards up the east side of Half Dome. The top is a flat area big enough to play softball. The stomach-churning edge overlooks the nearly straight 4,600-foot drop to valley floor. In late spring when Yosemite's waterfalls are full, and the setting sun's angle is right, Nevada Falls is a spectacular curtain of falling gold.

Rainbow Bridge, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Arizona

This 14-mile trail starts way up on a shoulder of Navajo Mountain, dips in and out of four ravines, and descends through Keyhole Pass into Cliff Canyon with its 1000-foot sandstone walls. A side canyon is found which leads out over cute little Redbud Pass, and then curves down Bridge Canyon between magnificent red sandstone cliffs and alcoves. The stately Rainbow Bridge is one of the largest natural arches in the world and can also be reached by boat on Lake Powell.

Hoh River Rain Forest, Olympic National Park, Washington

If you enjoy fresh blackberries, early September is a good time to also avoid mosquitos. Most of the trail is in a lush forest which receives an average of approximately 12 feet of rain per year. The trail ends at a toe of the Blue Glacier. Elk crashing through the brush add excitement.

Kalalau Trail, Kauai, Hawaii

The wildly romantic Kalalau Trail is justly famous for its superb scenery, enchanting valleys, and lush tropical vegetation clinging to cliffs which in places rise thousands of feet above the Pacific Ocean. The sign at the start of the 11-mile trail states "Except for some reconstruction done during 1935-1937 this is the original trail built and used by the ancient Hawaiians who inhabited Kalalau and other hanging valleys of the Na Pali Coast". The remains of stone terraces built by these people for their taro patches are encountered along the trail in the valleys and in fact are used sometimes for campsites. Feral goats and colorful rare birds are often sighted.

Mount Abbott, Rogers Pass, Glacier National Park, British Columbia

The incredibly rugged Rogers Pass forged the final link in the Trans-Canada Highway in 1962. Scene of the world's largest avalanche control operation, howitzers keep the heavy snows of winter at bay. Even so, miles of tunnels and snow sheds are still necessary to keep open through the long winter the highway and adjacent railroad. The trail first climbs through a lush forest and then winds to the top of 8091-foot Mount Abbott. All around is a stupendous panorama of mountains and glaciers. Most striking is Matterhorn-like Mt. Sir Donald soaring 6300 feet above the valley floor. The ridge can be traversed up to 8433-foot Mount Afton for an even better view.

Lake Louise-Beehive Loop, Banff National Park, Alberta

The Beehive trail gently climbs 2.5 miles from world-famous Lake Louise to the traditional teahouse at the Lakes of the Clouds - Mirror and Lake Agnes. A side trail leads to a fire lookout which has a magnificent view of the Bow Valley both east and west and northward up the Banff-Jasper highway. A short steep trail carries you over the Big Beehive (very descriptive) to the highline trail. Another teahouse at the Plain of Six Glaciers, a glacier overlook, and you are hiking along the shore of Lake Louise back to the Victorian Chateau Lake Louise.

Island Lake-Beauty Lake-Beartooth Lake Loop, Beartooth Mountains, Wyoming

A local horsepacker enthusiastically suggested this classic alpine trek with wildflowers at their peak in August. Many happy days could be spent backpacking further on north.

Berg Lake, Mount Robson Provincial Park, British Columbia

The 18-kilometer trail to Berg Lake is perhaps the most spectacular alpine trail on the North American continent outside of Alaska. It is a stunning sight to behold 12,972-foot Mount Robson five miles from the highway; two vertical miles from top to bottom. The trail first crosses a bridge and climbs gradually along the torrent of the Robson River. The giant mountain concentrates rain in this valley resulting in a lush micro-rain forest of Douglas fir, cedar, spruce, and hemlock. The many very large cedar trees are reminiscent of California's redwoods.

The waters of Kinney Lake, located at 4.2 kilometers from the trailhead, are milky blue from great quantities of finely ground rock fed into the Robson River by glaciers on Mount Robson. The trail passes through a scene of great devastation with many huge cedar trees snapped off by a spectacular avalanche in 1968. Then there is an excellent view of Kinney Lake and the gravel outwash area at its head. After a short steep climb up from Kinney Lake and two more crossings of the Robson River on suspension bridges, the trail begins its tortuous rise up the spectacular Valley-of-a-Thousand Falls. Earlier in the summer, hundreds of waterfalls tumble down all around. The trail parallels the narrow gorge of the thundering Robson River with three major waterfalls - White Falls, the Falls-of-the-Pool, and Emperor Falls. At various points along the trail, one cranes his or her neck at the icy summit soaring nearly two miles overhead.

After leveling off above the Valley-of-a-Thousand Falls, the trail dips down along the river again, offering the first glimpse of the majestic, snow-cruled north wall of Mount Robson. Views of the wall and its glaciers become increasingly spectacular beyond. At the low pass an icy stream splits into three tributaries, the middle of which is thoughtfully left unabridged by the Canadians. For hikers must baptize their feet in ice melt before entering the temple of Berg Lake.

Two two-mile long rivers of ice cascade down from the uppermost reaches of the mountain - Mist Glacier and Berg Glacier. The latter terminates in the turquoise blue waters of Berg Lake. The groan and rumble of these two overburdened bodies is constant, with chunks of ice calving from Berg Glacier and drifting into the lake. The icefalls sound like thunder but more impressively solid and heavy.

Cottonwood Springs to Lost Palms Oasis, Joshua Tree National Monument, California

Much of the trail is along the top of a ridge offering outstanding views of the Salton Sea far below as well as colorful cliffs. At the end is a large grove of palm trees sheltered in a cozy little canyon.

Redwood Canyon Loop, Kings Canyon National Park, California

Hikers crawl through two tunnel logs, duck in and out of the "Fallen Goliath", stroll through the nearly pure stand of sequoia trees in the Sugarbowl, and pass by the Hart Tree, the tallest of the world's four largest giant sequoia trees.

South Kaibab, Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona

The South Kaibab is perhaps the best trail down into the Grand Canyon, one of America's premier scenic attractions. After a rain, the color show put on by alternating sun and drifting clouds can be highly photogenic. The trail occasionally switchbacks down cliffs, crosses the Colorado River on a suspension foot bridge, and ends at Phantom Ranch.

Hyndman Peak, East of Sun Valley, Idaho

Second highest peak at 12,078 feet in Idaho. Open colorful meadows with flowers in late summer. The summit offers top-of-the-world views all around of rugged mountains.

Swiftcurrent Lookout from Swiftcurrent Campground, Glacier National Park, Montana

This all-day hike is especially attractive in early September with red-berried green bushes, dark red rock outcroppings contrasting with golden meadows, and a panoramic view of the park from the strategically located lookout.

Bird Ridge, 26.5 miles south of Anchorage on the Seward Highway, Alaska

The trail starts almost at sea level next to Bird Creek. Flocks of birds feed on the alluvial mudflats at the mouth of the creek at low tide. The trail climbs to its first high point at 3505 feet in elevation with tremendous views of fjordlike Turnagain Arm and even the 10,000-foot snowy volcanoes Mt. Redoubt and Mt. Illiama clear across Cook Inlet. At low tide, the braided mudflats shimmer many shades of gray or silver. The snow-capped peaks of the Chugach Mountains contrast with dark rock and deep green forested valleys. Weather-beaten Sitka spruce, wildflowers, ptarmigan, and tundra plants cling to the windswept ridge.

Patrick's Point State Park, California

Located 25 miles north of Eureka, California, Patrick's Point is a California State Park located in the heart of California's coast redwood country. The park's dense forests of spruce, hemlock, pine, fir and red alder stretch over an ocean headland with lovely wildflower-festooned meadows. A dramatic shoreline ranging from broad sandy beaches to sheer cliffs that rise high above the Pacific Ocean offers great opportunities to explore tide pools, search for agates and driftwood, watch whales, sea lions and brilliant sunsets. The park offers several miles of hiking trails, a recreated Yurok Village, a native plant garden, visitor center, three family campgrounds, 2 group camps, a camp for hikers and bicyclists, and 3 group picnic areas.

Shoreline Trail, Waianapanapa State Park, Maui, Hawaii

Much of the four-mile trail between the airport and Hana was built centuries ago by the early Hawaiians and is still visible in the black lava rocks. Driven by the trade winds, the crashing surf squirts columns of water through blowholes dozens of feet into the air. When the molten lava sizzled into the sea long ago, it hardened into caves, pits, arches, and other odd shapes. Hexagonal columns similar to those of Devils Postpile in the Sierras of California rise out of the water. A rare black sand beach bisects the trail in two. Early Hawaiian burial grounds add archaeological interest.

Sliding Sands-Holua Cabin-Halemauu, Haleakala National Park, Hawaii

The world's largest dormant volcano, Haleakala crater's barren beauty contrasts strangely with the lush tropical vegetation of the Hawaiian Islands. The 12-mile trail descends rapidly from the summit to the crater floor along the accurately named Sliding Sands. The crater walls and floors are variously smothered with ash and cinder from long-gone eruptions. The attractive silversword, similar but not related to yucca, can occasionally be seen sprouting a flower stalk several feet tall. At the Holua cabin, tame nene (Hawaiian geese) gladly waddle up to share your lunch. The Halemauu Trail switchbacks 1400 feet up out of the crater to the road. (A car shuttle is recommended.) At the top of the ridge, more of the friendly nene may be found with which to share what's left of your lunch and spectacular views of the volcano's crater and east side.

Stout Grove, Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park, California

Stout Grove is the world's most scenic stand of redwoods. The Stout Grove has an openness and cathedral-like majesty combined with a lush, lawn-like ground cover. There are quite a few good-sized trees here, although the Stout Tree with its distinctively rippled bark dwarfs all the others. The trees are all densely packed redwoods, with no understory of tanoak or other small trees to obscure the views. A perfect, plush layer of ferns and redwood sorrel carpets the ground.

Batopilas, Chihuahua, Mexico

Batopilas is a small town of fewer than 2000 people in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. It is located along the Batopilas River at the bottom, altitude 1650 feet, of one of the canyons that make up the over one-mile deep Copper Canyon. The main connection to the outside world is a five-hour bus connection to Creel, half of which occurs on an unpaved mountain road. The Chihuahua el Pacifico Railway starting at Los Mochis climbs over 8000 feet to the Continental Divide at Divisadero. See photo of the Divisadero train depot at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Divisadero.JPG>. After allowing tourists time to walk to an overlook of grandiose canyon scenery, the railroad continues downhill on to Creel, altitude 7715 feet. The most spectacular railroad in the western hemisphere, it traverses extremely rugged terrain via dozens of tunnels and frequently big bridges. It took a very difficult 90 years to build from 1871 to 1961.

Batopilas was established by Spanish conquistadores starting in 1632 as a center for silver mining. Over the centuries scores of hugely productive silver mines have been dug in the area; one estimate (Wilson and Panczner) is that mines in the area have produced seven times as much silver as come from the famous silver mine of Kongsberg, Norway. Little mining is now done. Walking a few blocks upriver from Batopilas will access centuries-old ore processing pits and old mine tunnels.

Among the world's greatest long-distance runners, the 50,000 Tarahumara Indians which live in the vicinity of 5,000 square miles may still be living the best preserved native culture in all of the Americas. Many Tarahumarans live in caves, fashion plows from the limbs of oak trees, and know how to use 200 species of plants from several thousands of feet of altitude for food. Sturdy young men frequently walk into Batopilas carrying huge bales of hay and corn to feed the numerous chickens, goats, sheep and pigs which scurry about the streets. Skillful farmers and herders, Tarahumarans raise cattle and other livestock for the purpose of fertilizing their plots of corn. In contrast American farmers typically plant corn for the purpose of feeding cattle and pigs.

Founder's Tree Redwood Grove, Dyerville, California

Most impressively tall and cathedral-like of all the redwood groves, the Founder's Tree Redwood Grove was a gift of preservation from a past generation.