



nature

Get out, get back to nature

By Diane Hughes

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As helpful as technology can be, sometimes you find yourself longing to get away from the smartphone, laptop, TV, tablet and iPod and get back to the basics. A vacation that allows you to get up close and personal with nature is a great way to escape the demands of modern life.

From hiking and backpacking to the simple pleasure of a scenic drive, Mother Nature has a way of calming the technology-ravaged soul. Whether you want an adventure-filled vacation that demands physical stamina or just want to relax and enjoy the view, we've rounded up some suggestions that might suit your idea of getting away from it all.

If you're not into vacations that demand physical prowess, you can still enjoy an encounter with nature. Middle Tennesseans have an excellent asset right here in our own backyard: the Natchez Trace Parkway. Spanning 444 miles from Nashville to Natchez, Miss., this byway offers stunning views that can be enjoyed from your car or by foot, bike or horse.

If taking it easy while encountering nature is not your style,

the physical and mental demands of hiking the Grand

Canyon might be the perfect way to get away from it all. Most visitors experience the canyon on its South Rim, which offers a variety of lodging (\$69 to \$426 per night) and dining options. Even if you don't plan to backpack, you can get a taste of the great outdoors by staying at one of several campgrounds accessible by car. Whether you experience the canyon by raft, mule or on foot, it's an encounter with nature that you won't soon forget.

You may have seen the Great Smoky Mountains from the comfort of your car or by strolling one of the park's quiet walkways or trails, but a trip to the park's LeConte Lodge is a totally different experience. Accessible only by foot, reservations are required and difficult to come by. Bookings fill up quickly, so this is one expedition you must plan in advance. At an elevation of 6,593 feet, Mount LeConte is the third highest peak in the Smokies. At the lodge perched atop this peak, there's no electricity, no TVs and no showers. But you will find hot chocolate, hot coffee, hot water, hearty meals and a wool blanket for curling up after a long day on the trail.

IF YOU GO

nps.gov/natr
800-305-7417

grandcanyon lodges.com
303-297-2757 or
888-297-2757

leconte-lodge.com
865-429-5704



Autumn leaves color the landscape along the Natchez Trace Parkway. JEANNE REASONOVER / THE TENNESSEAN

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Family: Swim with dolphins

Kids and parents alike can thrill at the chance to swim with and touch dolphins at a number of Florida attractions. Discovery Cove in Orlando, Dolphin World in Miami and the Dolphin Research Center near Marathon offer packages ranging from \$50 to \$650 (most start at around \$199).

For \$500 per person, you can take part in Dolphin Research Center's Researcher For a Day program, which allows you to spend the day with a research team collecting data and observing dolphin behavior.

Regardless of which facility you choose, this is sure to be a vacation that you won't soon forget.



Discovery Cove in Orlando COURTESY OF DISCOVERY COVE

IF YOU GO

Discovery Cove
discoverycove.com
877-557-7404

Dolphin World
dolphinworld.org
800-667-5524

Dolphin Research Center
dolphins.org
305-289-0002

— Diane Hughes

Budget: Tennessee Aquarium

Your nature-themed vacation needn't take all of your money or your time. Chattanooga, just a short drive from Nashville and the surrounding area, is a nature lover's paradise. From water sports like kayaking and rafting to biking, hang-gliding and rock climbing, there are plenty of nature-related options in this fair Southern city.

Start your exploration of nature at the top-rated Tennessee Aquarium. The River Journey exhibit includes river otters, turtles and giant catfish, while penguins, sharks and butterflies fill the Ocean Journey exhibit. There's even a Sleep in the Deep package where guests can spend the night and sleep alongside sharks and stingrays.

Next, take a leisurely drive (or hike) through Reflection Riding Arboretum & Botanical Gardens, a 300-acre historic site with a three-mile driving loop that meanders past gardens, ponds and wildflowers. If you prefer, get out of your car and explore the hiking trails.

Chattanooga offers all this and more: horseback riding, flat-water paddling on the Tennessee River, mountain biking and caving.

— Diane Hughes

IF YOU GO

Tennessee Aquarium
tnaqua.org
800-262-0695

Reflection Riding
reflectionriding.org
423-821-9582

Other sites to explore
outdoorchattanooga.com
chattanoogaofun.com
tn.gov/environment/
parks/Hiwassee

Luxury: Hot springs in Costa Rica

As you relax in a naturally heated pool set amid lush landscaping, you hear the faint rumbling of a volcano in the distance. Later, you settle in for a relaxing massage. Following dinner, you return to the hot springs for a late-night soak.

Sound inviting? That could describe your next vacation at a hot springs resort in Costa Rica.

Just a stone's throw from Arenal (one of the world's 10 most active volcanoes) is the town of La Fortuna, site of several luxury hot springs resorts. The nearby Tirimbina Rainforest Center offers an unforgettable experience with creatures and plants, or you can plan a rafting trip or take a ride through the tree canopy on a zipline tour.

Whether you decide to relax, explore thrilling adventures or a combination of the two, Costa Rica is waiting to fulfill your vacation fantasy.

— Diane Hughes



Tabacon Grand Spa Thermal Resort in Costa Rica. COURTESY OF TABACON GRAND SPA THERMAL RESORT

IF YOU GO

Websites to visit
arenal.net
arenalnayara.com
govisitcostarica.com
tabacon.com
tirimbina.org
waterfallgardens.com

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