4 GREAT GETAWAYS FOR GROWNUPS OUTDOOR VACATIONS THAT MAKE ADVENTURE EASY

BY CRAI S. BOWER
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Exploring the Grand Canyon without crowds or heat

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Biking, skating, skiing or just relaxing in Quebec

3. SPRING
A comfortable grizzly bear safari in British Columbia

4. SUMMER
A catered, portered hike along the Appalachians
I wonder if any first-time visitor is ever quite prepared to behold the rim of the Grand Canyon. Widen your gaze and the canyon seems to go on forever. Narrow it and you discover fascinating details in every rock face.

I wanted to explore this Arizona landmark in myriad ways, and at a time when the air is cooler and crowds smaller, so I signed up for a six-day group tour in October with Austin Adventures, a Montana-based outfitter.

The trip is intended for people of average fitness (that’s me), which makes it ideal for intergenerational groups of grownups. I’m joined by two of them: older couples with their adult children.

We’ve all been busy with just-tough-enough adventures by the time we get to the canyon, including kayaking on the Salt River and biking an easy, relatively flat 11 miles on the Peavine and Iron King trails near Prescott.

The Grand Canyon portion of the trip begins at the South Rim, where we are greeted by two Austin Adventures guides and enjoy a picnic lunch at the Abyss—a lookout point offering incredible views. That’s followed by a mellow two-hour walk along the Rim Trail as vertical clouds toss lightning and drape heavy sheets of rain in the distance.

After a restful night in the Kachina Lodge at the rim, we descend into the canyon along the South Kaibab Trail for a four-hour hike. On the way, I note the park’s botanical diversity—hardy cottonwoods and willows, plus lacy maidenhair ferns and other delicate flora.

On our last day, headed back to Phoenix, we stop to see the cliff dwellings of Montezuma Castle National Monument. These lofty limestone structures, built more than six centuries ago, are a spectacular reminder of the land’s long history. It’s just one more inspiring way to explore this extraordinary region.
I’m finally exploring a place I’ve wanted to see for years, the Appalachian Mountains, drawn by the rich natural tapestry that spreads across Tennessee and North Carolina and as far north as Newfoundland. Yet, having reached a certain age, I’m not eager to lug a 60-pound-plus backpack full of equipment as I clamber up mountains.

Enter the Wildland Trekking Company, which offers a three-day porter-assisted backpacking trip in North Carolina’s Pisgah National Forest—exactly the help I need.

My group sets out upon the Art Loeb Trail, a beautiful 30.1-mile journey that ascends the rolling mountaintops through the Shining Rock Wilderness toward Black Balsam Knob and the 6,040-foot Tennent Mountain.

After a dinner of pasta puttanesca at our campsite (chairs and provisions are waiting for us there) with our guide, Kyle, we take a 20-minute walk to Shining Rock, a small quartz outcropping that had glimmered from the Blue Ridge Parkway in the morning. We climb on top and linger to watch the low clouds form the haze over the adjacent Great Smoky Mountains. There’s no evidence of civilization to be seen.

Tomorrow we’ll hike at a leisurely pace, enjoy views of Mount Mitchell—at 6,684 feet, the tallest peak in the entire range—and pause to photograph wild columbine, brilliantly lit orange fungus and waterfalls that, like their witnesses, flourish within the Pisgah forest.

All nice, but I’m here to stalk bears. So I’m thrilled that we embark on two three-hour boat outings per day, plus a daily land excursion. We borrow insulated suits, so staying warm is never a concern. I do learn that spending so long in a boat takes some stamina, though there’s no pressure to join every outing. The porch often beckons.

But evening outings can be magical. One night we find several grizzlies dining on sedge grass and grubs. When I take a burst of photos, the male is surprised. He turns, raises one paw, puffs once or twice, then returns to feeding before ambling down a log, out of sight.

A FEMALE GRIZZLY bear paddles from the shore across a wide swath of the Nekite River estuary to a small island, sniffs the air and retraces her swim. She shakes the water off her back, scampers onto a granite ledge and sniffs once more. We observe this ritual from our 16-foot aluminum boat about 100 feet away.

“She’s looking for someone,” observes our guide, Tom Rivest, the co-founder and head guide of Great Bear Lodge, the floating nature center that arranged this expedition.

As if on cue, the sow thrusts her snout in the air, then breaks into a lumbering sprint along the shoreline toward, we discover, a 450-pound male grizzly who’s nonchalantly sampling fresh shoots. Romance is in the air.

This lodge in the Vancouver Island region of British Columbia seeks to help visitors observe grizzlies in their native habitat with minimal intrusion. To that end, it books no more than 16 guests for three nights at a time for this once-in-a-lifetime experience. In spring, when I visit, visitors from all over the world arrive by floatplanes from Port Hardy. It’s a lovely setting, with gorgeously prepared meals—from cedar-plank salmon to rack of lamb—and potted flowers brightening the wraparound deck.

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