LONELY PLANET’S WONDERS OF THE WORLD

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Extraordinary? You bet. But elusive? Not quite. From Antarctica and the Amazon to Victoria Falls and the Great Wall of China, Lonely Planet reveals 101 spectacular sights and how to see them.

Inspiring and practical, with expert advice on how and when to visit, where to stay and itineraries to suit a range of budgets, you’ll discover how Earth’s wonders are much easier to visit than you might think.

101 GREAT SIGHTS AND HOW TO SEE THEM ON ANY BUDGET
Yosemite Valley

Yosemite Valley is a glorious tableau of wildflower-strewn meadows and thunderous waterfalls hemmed in by some of the most majestic chunks of granite on earth.

At the core of Yosemite National Park, Yosemite Valley serves up the landscape’s greatest hits. A visit here is like being transported into an Ansel Adams photo. At the edge of the picture is the granite monster of El Capitan, whose sheer face draws world-class climbers. Hang out in the meadow below and you’ll see the ant-size figures – and maybe even hear them – as they grapple with El Cap’s ledges.

At the picture’s other side, haughty Half Dome rises over 2500m above the valley floor. This mountain is the park’s spiritual centrepiece and likewise sends out a siren call to climbers. In the middle of the scene Yosemite Falls drops from a dizzying height. It’s the tallest cascade in North America and its roar is an urgent force. Bridalveil Fall also steals some of the focus. Gusts blow it from side to side and it’ll soak you as you hike to its base. An endless array of trails scatters throughout the valley, which remains the poster-child for nature’s grandeur.
The Blue Hole

Submerge into the perfectly round, perfectly blue sinkhole off Belize’s coast and see the mysterious ocean depths come to life.

In the 1970s, underwater pioneer Jacques Cousteau explored the Blue Hole and declared the dive site one of the world’s best. Since then its image – a deep azure pupil with an aquamarine border surrounded by the lighter shades of the reef – has become renowned far and wide.

The hole forms a flawless circle on the surface, while its sheer walls drop more than 400ft (122m) straight down. Plunge into the chasm and you’ll drift by a dense forest of ancient stalactites and stalagmites that hang from the walls. Swimming through these hiking features of the eerie blue glow of the water feels as though you’ve slipped into another, more primal world. A school of reef sharks and the occasional hammerhead – as well as plenty of invertebrates and sponges – keep you company as you descend further into the abyss. If you don’t dive, don’t worry: charter flights swoop over the Blue Hole, letting you experience its startling azure gleam from a bird’s-eye view.

Travel

International

Phil Goldsmith International Airport, 15 miles (24km) north-east of Belize City centre, is the main hub. From there you can connect to a local airline and fly to Caye Caulker or San Pedro on Ambergris Caye (20 minutes), or take the ferry from Belize City to the cays (45 minutes to 1½ hours).

Regional

Caye Caulker (more laid-back and budget oriented) and Ambergris Caye (more developed and busier) are popular bases for exploring the Blue Hole. The only way to reach the natural monument is on a private vessel. Dive boats head out from both islands for the two-hour trip to the site.

Stay

Sheerling

Yam’s House Bakes This fun and freshly painted hostel, with a palm shaded, hammock-strewn garden, is just steps from Caye Caulker’s waterfront dock. Rates from BZ$121/£95.91; doubles from BZ$170/£135.45; www.yamshousebakes.com

Midrange

Oasis Set around blooming gardens on Caulker, Oasis offers elegant apartments with wicker tapestries and locally woven sarongs. Hung with hammocks, of course. Apartments from BZ$210/£167.96; www.oasis-holidaysbelize.com

Flash

Rat Lodge Located on Long Caye, its swathed open-air dining room, kayaks and terrific dive shop are perks to go with its 24 hardwood rooms. Three-day major expeditions from BZ$247/£197.95; www.ratlodge.com

Eat

Sheerling

Gladys’ Café Gladys’s serves traditional Belizean food in a clapboard house on Caye Caulker’s west side. It boasts the best breakfasts in town, plus chicken with rice and beans for lunch. Meals from BZ$25/£19.80

Midrange

CaribSea Colors Art Café Browse the gallery’s walls while sipping a coffee or smoothie, then all down for a healthy breakfast, salad or sandwich in the thick of Caulker’s scene. Meals from BZ$25/£19.80; www.caribbeascoolorsbelize.com

Flash

Hibiscus by Habaneros At Caulker’s poshest restaurant chefs prepare gourmet international food, combining fresh seafood, meat and vegetables with insanely delicious sauces. Meals from BZ$32/£25.16; www.facebook.com/hibiscuscauclair/
Smithsonian Institution

The world’s largest museum and research complex stashes everything but the kitchen sink. Actually, it has that, too...

If America was a quirky grandfather, the Smithsonian Institution would be his attic. Rockets, Rodin sculptures, George Washington’s sword, Julia Child’s kitchen – even the 45-carat, famously cursed Hope Diamond lights up a room here. The Smithsonian is actually a collection of 19 free museums, many lined up in a row on the National Mall, and they’ll blow your mind. Pick one of the vast treasure chambers, say the National Air and Space Museum, walk in and, holy cow: there’s the Wright Brothers’ first plane a stone’s throw from Amelia Earhart’s natty red flyer. Enter the bronze-tiered African American History and Culture Museum, and there’s Emmett Till’s casket with a solemn procession of visitors lined up to pay their respects. The American History Museum is so school-group clamorous you’re almost too distracted to notice you’re standing in front of Abe Lincoln’s top hat or a piece of Plymouth Rock. A giant squid (at the Natural History Museum); Andy Warhol paintings (American Art Museum); the world’s rarest stamp (Postal Museum) – the Smithsonian’s 155 million artefacts eye-pop at every turn.
Travel

DC has two airports. Dulles International is larger and further flung with global connections. Smaller Reagan Washington National Airport is just 4.9 miles (7.9 km) south of downtown Washington. Both have public transport into the city.

Racial
Amtrak trains exit Boston, New York and Philadelphia to DC’s Union Station multiple times daily. Once in DC, the metro/subway network is the main way to get around. It runs near most major sights. Fares are from US$2.50 to US$4.50 depending on distance traveled; a daily pass is also available. Capital Bikeshare is another popular way to zip around.

Stay

Shoestring
Hostelling International—Washington DC. The large, well-run hostel attracts an international crowd downtown with amenities including game-area, lounge rooms, free neighborhood tours and free breakfast. (Bunks from US$33; www.hostelling.org)

Midrange
Hotel How Not far from the National Mall, it buzzes with hip travelers drawn to the tiny but cleverly designed rooms and the rooftop bar. (Rooms from US$199; www.hotelhow.com)

Flash
Hilton Adams Hotel Set in an elegant old building where ‘nothing is overcooked but the White House’, the Hay offers the city’s best rooms of the old-school luxury variety. (Rooms from US$405; www.hayadams.com)

Eat

Shoestring
Woodward Takeout Food Jumble in line with all of the office workers to order a gourmet lunch sandwich, pizza slice, salted chocolate croissant or the daily doughnut. (Sandwiches from US$6; www.woodwardtable.com)

Midrange
Old Ebbitt Grill This legendary restaurant occupies prime real estate near the White House. Political players and tourists pack into the wood-paneled interior, where thick burgers and jumbo lump-crab cakes reign supreme. (Menu from US$15; www.ebbitt.com)

Flash
Equity It sources meat, fish and vegetables from nearby farms in the Shenandoah Valley and Chesapeake Bay. Dishes are seasonal and up to 50% plant-based. (Menu from US$35; www.equityrestaurant.com)

Timing

Peak season is late March to June. July and August are less busy, but hot. From September to November, business travellers keep cities alive. Winter (off-season) has fickle weather.

Start early in summer; you’ll avoid the crowds and, more importantly, you’ll avoid the heat.

The line Smithsonian Folklife Festival is held in late June and early July, with folk dance, crafts, storytelling and food from around the world.

Best Value Itineraries

3 days
3 days in DC for the duration, as there are loads of sights. Start at the National Mall, home to the monument of Mahatma Gandhi and the iconic Washington Monument, Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Lincoln Memorial. The next day, tour Capital Hill, visit the National Air and Space Museum by the White House. At night go to K Street or Shaw for unique diners. On day three, stroll around historic Georgetown or head to Dupont Circle to peek at the museums along Constitution Ave. In the evening, catch a show of the Kennedy Center.

9 days
After arriving in the US capital, take the train (about 5 hours) to New York City and spend three days exploring this mighty metropolis. Start with the famous sights in Lower Manhattan and avoid the har- d core. People-watch in the West and East Village and scramble down the Upper East Side. Have dinner at Central Park or return to Brooklyn. Next, catch the train (about 4 hours) to Boston for two days of visiting historic sights, skiing in the North End and pubs in Cambridge. Add on a final day in Cape Cod, with its Mystic rivers and pretty shores.