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Western United States Vacations

By Laurie Jo Miller Farr
eHow Contributor

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The diversity reflected by the cities and sights in 11 states out West is as widely flung as the geography. Las Vegas has nightly showtimes and Yellowstone's Old Faithful is guaranteed to put on a show every 90 minutes or so. Famous songs suggest taking a San Francisco cable car halfway to the sky or exploring a Rocky Mountain high.

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Nature's Showy Pacific Northwest

In the verdant Northwest corner of the country, outdoor adventurers can explore superlatives created by Mother Nature. At Washington's Mount Rainier National Park, even the trail encircling this active volcano is called Wonderland. It leads to Paradise, visited by more than a million hikers every year. Further evidence of volcanic forces at work is reflected in clear blue Crater Lake in Oregon, one of the deepest on earth, where ranger-led snowshoe walks continue around the rim right into spring before biking takes over in summer. Straddling the Oregon-California border, forests of majestic old-growth coastal redwoods enjoy the moist and foggy conditions, which supports the tallest trees on earth at the Redwood National and State Parks.

Pacific Coast Highway Drama

A drive along the Pacific Coast Highway is a destination in itself. Described as "exhilarating ... twisting, cliff-hugging" in "Drives of a Lifetime," by National Geographic, California's Route 1 is best undertaken north to south, so you can hug the jagged side of the ocean coastline at a leisurely pace. Three days gives you time to cover the most scenic 115 miles, from Monterey to Santa Barbara, stopping at dramatic overlooks along the way. The 17-Mile Drive above the jewel-box village of Carmel-by-the-Sea provides views from celebrated Pebble Beach, Monterey Bay and the Lone Cypress Tree. The priceless natural beauty of Big Sur is juxtaposed by what money can buy at sublime Hearst Castle. Relax at the gorgeous beaches at Morro Bay and vineyards in the Santa Maria Highlands.

Mountain Highs and Canyon Lows

Catch your breath when you're 1 mile high in Denver, or proceed -- after acclimating -- to even higher altitudes at famous Colorado ski resorts such as Aspen, Vail and Breckenridge. In no way conceding first place to the Rockies, Utah's Wasatch Range ski resorts are only a 30-minute drive from Salt Lake City; Wyoming's Grand Teton Mountains promise skiing and snowboarding among the best in the West. For many Americans, witnessing firsthand the Grand Canyon's vast expanses and the dramatic landscapes of Yellowstone, Yosemite and Bryce Canyon National Parks are at the top of a Western vacation wish list.

Under the Southwestern Sun

Arizona claims 325 sunny days a year, and neighboring New Mexico promises clear skies for astonishing star-gazing. A diverse list of vacation experiences in the Southwest includes Native American cultural appreciation, the Sonoran desert beauty of Saguaro cactus, hot air balloon rides, dude ranches, a chimichanga Mexican dinner, and relaxation at the splendid golf and spa resorts that populate Phoenix's Valley of the Sun.

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