

Kurt Repanshek, author of Frommer's National Parks with Kids, answered your questions about vacations in the National Parks.

May 22, 2007

Kurt Repanshek: Hi, thanks for joining me to talk about the national parks. Hopefully I'll be able to get to all your questions.

Portland, OR: I'm going to Alaska for a little over a week and definitely want to visit **Denali National Park**, what do you recommend doing at the park to get the best experience? We are two healthy 20/30s hikers. We would really like to camp out in the part but are nervous about the bears, any advice?

Thanks, Kellie

Kurt Repanshek: Hi Kellie,

The first couple times I backpacked in Yellowstone I dreaded calling it a night and crawling into my tent. I thought for sure I was going to have a bear experience. That was more than two decades ago. I'm happy to report that the only grizzly bears I've seen in Yellowstone have been more than a quarter-mile away from me, interested in everything but me.

The key to having a good time in bear country is keeping your head about you and paying attention to the basics. In **Denali**, as in other parks with bears, whether they're black or grizzlies, avoid surprise encounters. Don't go through thick, brushy areas if you can avoid it. Make some noise, whether that's talking loudly or even singing, if you're hiking through areas where you can't "see around the next bend." And pay attention for bear sign, whether that's fresh scat or tracks, both when you're hiking and when you're deciding where to camp. Obviously, you don't want to camp anywhere near a bear kill.

When you do choose your campsite, be sure to set up your kitchen at least 300 feet downwind of where you pitch your tent, and be sure to change the cloths you wore for cooking and eating before you call it a night. Also, keep your camp clean and store all food and scented items -- including toothpaste -- in bear-resistant containers at least 300 feet from your tent.

And before you head out into the park, check with rangers for areas where bear activity has been reported recently.

Don't let bears keep you out of the parks. Just accept that they're part of the landscape and that while you don't have to fear them, you surely must respect them, and preparing properly for hiking and camping in the landscape is part of that respect.

