

Guest Column: You can explore the West and escape the crowds

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Here's the dilemma: You want to explore the West's huge treasure of public land, but you don't want to be accompanied by crowds of people. How do you avoid places that wind up on everyone's bucket list or that have been Instagrammed and geo-tagged to death?

After a few decades of hiking and mountain biking the West, I've learned the trick is to search out the obscure, the not-quite-as-beautiful, the off-season or the remote. If I've chosen well, I may not see another human all day.

But this approach means you can't just plug into some top-10 list of must-see natural attractions. Instead, you need to study maps.

What you're looking for are blank spots — still-wild places whose names you don't recognize. There are lots of them. The National Park Service manages 423 units, totaling 84 million acres of land, but more than half

of the system's total annual visitation takes place in just 20 of its most popular parks. That leaves a lot of less-visited destinations to explore.

Or, broaden your horizons to consider national forest or Bureau of Land Management lands, and you will discover millions of acres that only locals are canny enough to visit.

I realize not everyone is as crowd-averse as I am. Linda Merigliano, wilderness program manager for the Bridger-Teton National Forest in Jackson, Wyoming, says most visitors — even those in busy places — enjoy their experiences despite lots of people.

That's a good thing, because scientific studies show that it doesn't take much for nature to work its magic. Spending as little as two hours a week in green spaces —even a crowded city park — has health benefits, from lowering blood pressure to improving self-esteem and mood.

I don't think about health outcomes when I plan my outdoor excursions, but I know I get antsy and grumpy if I don't get outside. A few quiet hours surrounded by the sights, sounds and smells of the natural world are what I crave. But I've learned that if everyone is going to the latest hotspot, I'm itchy to go somewhere else.

One such place is Rawlins, Wyoming. For years, I've raced through Rawlins, noticing little more than a dusty stop for gas and gummy bears on I-80. But then I studied the map. A couple of hours southwest of town there's a wilderness study area called Adobe Town.

It features a maze of pinnacles, arches, buttes and craggy badlands. It also contains archaeological remains from 12,000 years of human habitation, and wild horses and pronghorn roam above the rim. Even better: Most people have probably never heard of Adobe Town.

This is blank spot nirvana.

Another gem is the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, which receives roughly 10 percent of Grand Canyon National Park's 5.9 million annual visitors. Ditto for the North Rim of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park in western Colorado. It's just as spectacular as the South Rim, but with only a handful of tourists.

Or try starting at the edges of popular places like Arches National Park in Utah or Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming and checking out what's nearby. A national forest adjacent to a national park may share the same landscape that a park boasts. Once there, you'll get a feel for the wonders protected by the park but you're likely to see a fraction of the people.

Above all, avoid sites featured in social media posts and skip the must-see view.

If you want personal opinions — and I tend to trust those in the know — check in with outdoor shops, public land managers or conservation nonprofits close to where you're headed. Often, a passionate local who knows the best hiking or mountain biking will be happy to talk to you. Chances are that they've explored it all and helped restore some trails to boot.

What's the big payoff when you get to be mostly by yourself in the backcountry? You swap out ringtones for the resonance of a true blank spot – the sound of birds and the feel of a brisk wind. No overheard conversation. And any number of insects will remind you that in this place you've entered nature's domain.

Molly Absolon is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about Western issues. A West Virginia native, she was drawn West more than 30 years ago to explore its wild places; she now lives in Victor, Idaho.