

Poets & Writers

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You Get Your Own Island

Exploring Wilderness Residencies at National Parks Across the Country

by Rachel Riederer



When poet Julie Chase-Daniel, who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, spent a month with her husband, Matthew, a visual artist, on Loggerhead Key, an uninhabited island seventy miles west of Key West, Florida, she discovered a new sense of time. She'd start her mornings with a walk around the island, taking in the bird life and noticing how the tides might have shifted the sandy landscape overnight, and come back with her pockets full of shells and little objects she'd found, then spend the rest of the morning writing and reflecting. Her office was a beach chair and large umbrella. With no distractions—the island has no phone or internet service—she found a new rhythm. “It really changes the nature of time,” she says about life on the tiny island, part of Dry Tortugas National Park, without twenty-first-century technology. “You’re in tune with tides and the moon and the sunset. You’re able to understand your work more deeply across time,” she says.

The Chase-Daniels enjoyed their monthlong desert-island adventure, which took place in the late summer of 2017, courtesy of the National Parks Arts Foundation (NPAF), a nonprofit organization that runs writers- and

artists-in-residence programs in cooperation with national parks, national monuments, World Heritage Sites, and other parks across the country. In some ways, a month on Loggerhead Key sounds more like a private-island vacation than the typical writers residency—the privacy of the island provides great freedom and an opportunity for artists to immerse themselves in an expanse of sea and sky that most people will never get to experience. For the Chase-Daniels, the hours of artistic practice were punctuated by carefree skinny-dipping and snorkeling jaunts to explore the coral reefs offshore. Julie steeped herself in stories about the island, which used to house a marine research lab, found references to the island in Hemingway stories, and learned that Cuban fisherman used to frequent the island to collect seaturtle eggs; she discovered a legend about a band of down-and-out circus performers who wound up bringing their caravan of animals to the island by boat. But without any source of fresh water, none of the island’s visitors—migratory or apocryphal—could stay very long.

While the stretches of uninterrupted time and turquoise ocean vistas are luxurious, the residency also comes with serious responsibilities, and the artists selected have to be self-reliant. When a park ranger brought the couple to the island via boat, they brought all their food and supplies for the month along with them. They stayed in a small house powered by solar panels and equipped with a desalinator that could make the ocean water drinkable. “I think it’s self-selecting for people who delight in being off the grid,” Julie says. Because of the intense isolation, the NPAF accepts only applications from artists in pairs—either couples, like the Chase-Daniels, or collaborators who know each other well enough to live together for a month with no other people. Aside from the off chance that other visitors might venture out to the island, the only other human contact was with the ranger station at a nearby island, reachable only via a two-way radio.

That radio came in handy when, a few days into their stay, Hurricane Irma approached southern Florida. The pair were evacuated before the storm hit the Florida Keys on September 10 and drove inland to Orlando, where they hunkered down and waited out the storm. After the storm passed and it was safe to return to Loggerhead Key, the NPAF ultimately extended their residency, and they were able to stay on the island through mid-October.

Despite the drama of the evacuation, and the intensity of the experience—or perhaps because of it—both artists regard their time on the island as a gift that profoundly influenced their work and their thinking. “All the distractions of everyday life can make artistry difficult. This forces it on you,” Julie says. The two also collaborated more closely than they had before, creating a book of photos and poems, *The Blue Fold*, that collects some of their reflections from the islet. On their last night on the island, they walked along the beach as some sea turtles hatched—there were more than four hundred turtle nests on the island that year—and got to see some of the tiny turtles making their way toward the relative safety of the water. Julie saw a crab approaching one—the newly hatched turtles make an easy feast for predators—and was able to save it and release it into the waves.

Tanya Ortega, the artist who founded the NPAF, says she loves to describe the Dry Tortugas residency with a simple phrase: You get your own island. But she suspects that sometimes artists and writers are shy about applying. Some years the organization receives hundreds of applications for the one annual opportunity. But one year, after the residency was featured on NPR, the number of applications dipped dramatically. She thinks that writers and artists, hearing about the residency in the media, assumed the competition would be too stiff and decided

not to try—but she urges artists to go ahead. The NPAF residencies rotate among a range of many parks—the offerings for 2020 include Dry Tortugas, Hawai'i Volcanoes, and Gettysburg National Military Park, and there are plans to expand and include more.

The NPAF itself was born out of Ortega's own often frustrating the NPS. experiences trying to find opportunities for existing national-park residencies. She had worked in Yellowstone as a teenager and has a keen awareness of the ways that the history of the National Park Service (NPS) is intertwined with artistic work. "Art made the national parks!" she says. At the end of the nineteenth century, the painter and illustrator Thomas Moran captured the landscapes of what would later become Yellowstone, and his art—along with others, like the writer John Muir's poetic dispatches from Yosemite—helped inspire the awe for these places that got the National Park System established.



That doesn't mean only nature writers need apply or the work the artists complete during their residency has to deal explicitly with the natural history of whatever park they visit. "We are more interested in excellence," Ortega says. The application, which can be accessed via Submittable, requires a curriculum vitae, a work sample of up to twenty pages, a two-page project proposal, and a personal biography. In the project proposal, applicants should not only describe their specific project and process, but also establish a connection to the NPAF's mission by describing how the project will benefit from the location—and how the public will benefit from any public programming related to the work. What the NPAF judges want to see in an application is artistic achievement and a strong connection to that particular place. "Why /this/ park?" is a top question applicants should answer, says Ortega. But the foundation also knows that artistic projects will necessarily evolve, and they're open to applications that embrace that sense of flexibility and change. She remembers one application from several years ago in which an artist conveyed his strong connection to Death Valley but didn't know what he would do when he got there—but he promised to give a public talk about it every week. "It was refreshing," Ortega said. "You can't dictate art; the project changes when you get there—you can't tell it what to do."

Ortega is proud of the fact that the NPAF has more than a hundred judges on its radar, so that no matter what genre an artist, poet, or writer is working in, they will be able to find a judge who can evaluate the application. "Whether someone applies with the haiku or the theremin, we find a judge who has that expertise," she says.

In addition to residencies administered by the NPAF, there are many more operated by the NPS itself, sometimes in partnership with local organizations. Kim O'Connell, a nonfiction writer who has completed NPS-administered residencies at Shenandoah National Park, in Virginia, in September 2015, and Acadia, in Maine, three years later, describes the NPS residency system as a loosely connected web of individual programs. "They're administered on a park-by-park basis," she says, "and the way each one approaches the process differs." Not every national park has an artist-in-residence program, but those that do administer the program individually—each one of them falls on a different place on the spectrum from rustic to comfortable and sets its own deadline and application process. Most applications include the same basic elements: a curriculum vitae, a project description, and a work sample, but details such as length requirements and how to submit differ from park to park.

In Shenandoah, O'Connell stayed in a room in Skyland lodge alongside other visitors. "It was quite cushy actually," she says, adding that she had access to air conditioning, a dining room, and a vista overlooking the Shenandoah Valley. In Acadia, on the other hand, her experience was far more rugged. She traveled by ferry to Isle au Haut, a tiny, craggy island whose forests were already blazing with fall color when O'Connell arrived. Park rangers met her at the dock and drove her up to a trailhead, and she hiked the rest of the way to her cabin. "I packed into the cabin, lit my Coleman stove, lit my lantern; I roughed it," she says. She agreed on a time, five days later, when the ranger would come and get her to take her back to the ferry to the mainland. "That's what I love about the National Park Service," she adds. "They offer such a range of experiences. If you want to be somewhere comfortable, you can be comfortable, or if you want to get out of your comfort zone and be a little brave, you can really challenge yourself and get out in the wilderness. And for writers, you can pick and choose the one that will suit you best."



In the Everglades, for example, residents have an experience that's far less isolated. The Everglades residency is administered by a nonprofit, Artists in Residence in Everglades (AIRIE), that partners with the park. It brings

up to ten artists to the park every month of the year, except for August and September, when the program is closed because of hurricane season. Residents stay in an apartment a few miles past a major visitor center, in a complex called the park ranger village, where other rangers and park volunteers stay. There's no Wi-Fi in the residence, and cell coverage is spotty, but compared with locations like Loggerhead Key or Isle au Haut, the accommodations are positively bustling with human activity. "Right outside the door you can hop on a trail, or borrow a bike, and you can access that 24/7, or you're twenty-five minutes from Homestead [a nearby Miami suburb] and civilization," says Sarah Michelle Rupert, a visual artist and AIRIE's executive director. Rupert notes that residents handle the question of connectivity differently. "Some people need that tether and come into the visitor's center daily." Others tend to stick to the trails, making more wild connections. "I just heard a story this week of a resident who had a lucky encounter with a panther, on the last day of his residency," she says. This was an extremely rare sighting—it's estimated that only 120 to 130 panthers remain in all of southern Florida—but other brushes with wildlife are more common. "We've had close—friendly—encounters with alligators, snakes," Rupert says, though in recent years there haven't been as many with deer, rabbits, or other mammals as they would like to see. Pythons, an invasive species that has become common in the Everglades (urban legend has it that the influx goes back to an exotic pet shop that was destroyed during Hurricane Andrew), have decimated the small-animal populations throughout the marshy ecosystem. Artists in residence often go along for python hunts, mostly conducted at night, to help eradicate the ecologically troublesome snakes. "They always bag one," Rupert says.

When Carol Hendrickson, an author and anthropology professor from Vermont, stayed in the Everglades in 2019, she didn't try to bag a python, but she did have plenty of interaction with the rangers, who helped her see parts of the park that would be hard for a regular visitor to access. She went on a "swamp stomp" into a forested section of marshland called a cypress dome and went with an AIRIE staffer in an airboat through the wide swaths of swampy prairie called the "river of grass." She also gave an artist's talk, as part of a ranger-led session, about the process of creating visual field notes.

Artist's talks and other similar types of engagement are an important part of the NPS residencies and can take many forms. Rupert recalls one recent resident who brought his guitar out on one of the trails and serenaded hikers as they passed by. Others are more elaborate: In 2018 the choreographer Dale Andree created a dance performed in the swampy Everglades prairie. For the performance, two hundred visitors walked through a trail to a clearing, where dancers performed while a Seminole Miccosukee musician played the flute.

The Chase-Daniels didn't do this kind of community program during their residency—and not just because they were on an uninhabited island. A key difference between NPAF's residencies and those organized directly by the NPS is that the foundation does not ask artists to donate any of their work; the NPS does, in the form of a community-engagement activity during the residency and a completed work (whether a painting, a piece of writing, or something else entirely) after the residency is complete. For Rupert, that sharing of the work is key to the dual mission of both giving writers and artists creative time and inspiration and to disseminate the projects they create that celebrate the parks. "You can't love something unless you know it," Rupert says, "and with these wilderness places, art and literature is the best way to inspire people to protect them."

Marybeth Holleman, an essayist and nature writer who lives in Alaska, has attended two wilderness residencies in her home state, one in the Tongass National Forest in 2011 and one in Denali National Park in 2012. For her, the best use of these trips isn't as a time to do much writing at all but rather to view some rare landscapes, soak up inspiration, take notes, and generate ideas that may show up in future work. In Tongass, Holleman was an artist in residence with Voices of the Wilderness, a program sponsored jointly by the U.S. Forest Service, NPS, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that offers artists a chance to work closely with rangers stationed on public lands. Her group spent eight days paddling in the remote fjords of the Alaska Panhandle. "There are no roads, so rangers patrol the area by kayak," she says. "You're in these narrow fjords, with steep-sided glaciers, and the land access is really minimal." To get there she flew to Juneau, where she met up with Forest Service rangers and took a boat to an island that served as their base camp for the duration of the trip. It's easy to see why Holleman, who kept busy with this level of outdoor activities, views these residencies as a source of inspiration rather than writing time. "A lot of writing residences, like Hedgebrook or MacDowell, you go in with a piece of writing that you're perhaps already working on, and it's just giving you time and space to work on something that you're already doing," she says. "With these wilderness residencies, you're going and experiencing the place, taking notes when you can, and later working on something."

In Denali, Holleman stayed in a cabin on the dirt road that runs through the park and spent a lot of time hiking on her own and spotting wildlife. That sense of separation from everyday life and the particular depth of quiet offers an important shift in perspective. "You're just out there all on your own," she says. For this type of residency it's important that applicants have some backcountry experience. "They really want to make sure that you have the ability to take care of yourself," Holleman notes. During her stay at Denali, rangers gave her a satellite phone that was her only means of communication. She was supposed to call to check in with the rangers at an appointed time each day. "But the first night I was there, I was so excited to be there, I went for a hike," she says. "And it's light almost all the time there in July, so I got back at 11 or 11:30 and realized, uh-oh, I had forgotten to call them." By the time she did get in touch, a few hours after the time they'd arranged, a ranger was already on the way up to the cabin to look for her, and she got a firm reminder not to miss the scheduled calls and that the park service takes residents' safety very seriously.

Holleman says that one of the best features of these public-land residencies is that they offer uncommon access to the inner workings of the park. During her stay in Denali, Holleman went with a wildlife biologist to visit the den of a storied local wolf pack and hiked up a creek bed with a paleontologist who showed her dinosaur footprints that had recently been discovered. Not all these special amenities were outdoors—she also got to search through the park's archival materials and examine an herbarium collection created by a botanist who visited the area when the park was first established.

But writers don't have to focus on the natural environment—either as subject matter or a source of inspiration—to find something of value in a national park residency. Shin Yu Pai, a poet, essayist, and photographer for whom incorporating records and archival research is a big part of her process, was working in a small college town in Arkansas when she accepted a residency at nearby Hot Springs National Park. Pai was looking for a place

where she could get the distance necessary to focus on a new project—she wanted an element of privacy and anonymity while working out her ideas, hard to come by in a setting where, she says, you'd often run into the same colleagues and friends all over town—but she wasn't looking for rugged wilderness either.

Staying in a cabin in a wooded area in a “nice little park” in the town of Hot Springs, Pai wound up finding an archive and a slice of history that offered unexpected fodder for her work. Rather than untrammelled wilderness, she was inspired by the human history that the park had also collected. “There was this very interesting historical site in the middle of downtown Hot Springs, where the buildings had been kept and preserved, and there were the remnants of these bath houses that had been part of the recuperative, early spa industry when people would come to ‘take the waters.’” She soon discovered that the African American workers who kept the bath houses running weren't allowed to use the healing baths themselves. With the help of park rangers, she accessed historical archives, including oral histories, and these documents opened up a whole new level of understanding of the area's history. “I got to go behind the scenes with the rangers to see these urban ruins. And I also discovered this tension,” Pai says. “The nature was nice,” she says, but the real value of her experience was the way that the archival materials enabled her to “learn more about this place and relate to it in a way that I hadn't expected.”

The artist residencies of the national parks offer a wide range of experiences, and writers come away from them having reaped many benefits: whether it's mental clarity from a purely off-the-grid experience, renewed confidence and self-reliance from immersing oneself in a rugged landscape, new insights from accessing an obscure historical archive, or simply some uninterrupted time for developing new ideas and setting them down on paper. For writers interested in seeking their own national-park residency, those mentioned here are just a small sampling. Because each park's program is different, there is no central timeline for applications—but timelines and deadlines are generally posted online months in advance, and the NPS has an interactive map of the parks that offer residency programming at www.nps.gov/subjects/arts/air.htm . And Tanya Ortega of the NPAF offers an important reminder: Just because a particular park doesn't have a residency offering right now doesn't mean the possibility doesn't exist. If there's a public land that's important to you or your work, and you want to spend some time there, contact the ranger station and ask about opportunities and accommodations that might exist. You never know who will say yes.

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