

20 places to travel in your 20s

By DAN SALTZSTEIN OCT. 20, 2016



The majesty of a national park, like Yosemite, is just one starter idea for travel in your 20s.

Jim Wilson/The New York Times

This article is part of a series aimed at helping you navigate life's opportunities and challenges. What else should we write about? Contact us: smarterliving@nytimes.com.

There's no better way to change your perception of the world — and maybe yourself — than travel. You'll experience different cultures, meet new friends and make lifelong memories. But traveling in your 20s poses challenges: You might have financial constraints, limited time off from work and concerns about safety. So think of this selection of 20 places less as a checklist and more as a starter kit to world travel. (We've left out the obvious classic cities: New York, Paris, London. They are, of course, great places to visit, too.)



Acadia National Park in Maine. Pat Wellenbach/Associated Press

1. A national park. They represent so much of what's great about the United States — beauty, diversity of landscape, freedom. But which one to visit? There's [Acadia](#) in Maine, the [Badlands](#) in South Dakota, [Joshua Tree](#) in California and 55 others. Pluses for young travelers: Camping (or park cabins) will help save on lodging; they are equally suited to solo travelers and groups; and they are endlessly Instagram-friendly. (Also consider Canada's national parks, which will [offer free admission](#) for all of 2017, the country's 150th birthday.)



The Charles Bridge on a foggy morning in Prague. Michal Cizek/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

2. Prague. Sure, it's a bit of an after-college travel cliché, but Prague is still a great spot for backpackers — full of charm, great beer and energy. And the food has [gotten a lot better](#). Visit the beautiful city center, but stay in Vinohrady or Zizkov, which are full of young Praguers and expats.

3. Oaxaca, Mexico. One of the world's great gastronomic destinations, Oaxaca is also cheap, friendly and safe. Start in Oaxaca City (eat and drink your way through the sprawling markets and mezcalerias), and then take a very short flight or longer minibus ride down to the coast for surfing, swimming and whale-watching.



Tourists wait for the driver for a car tour around Revolution Square in central Havana.
Mauricio Lima for The New York Times

4. Cuba. It's [a lot easier to get to](#) than it used to be, and still pulses with youthful energy. Start in [Havana](#), but getting around the country will give you a real sense of the culture — perhaps before it starts its post-embargo transformation.

5. Amsterdam. Yes, there are plenty of places to get high. But even without the decriminalized marijuana, Amsterdam would be one of [the most charming places on earth](#): gorgeous (those canals), friendly (with plenty of English speakers), easy to get around (especially on a cheap rental bike), incredibly diverse (because of the Dutch colonial past). The famous/infamous hostels can be fine, though more appealing lodging sits outside the city center, in neighborhoods like De Pijp and [Westerpark](#).

6. Patagonia, Argentina. It feels like the ends of the earth and basically is, but you'll be glad you took the flight or (very scenic) train ride from Buenos Aires. Stunningly beautiful, it's home to lakes, skiing, plentiful wildlife and some of the world's [healthiest and most accessible glaciers](#).



Head to Frenchmen Street in New Orleans for live music. Mario Tama/Getty Images

7. New Orleans. This city is the closest you'll get to an overseas experience in the continental United States. It's a world unto itself, full of history, character and friendly folks. The [food](#) and [drink](#) scene is unlike anywhere else: po'boys, gumbo, beignets, Sazeracs. Skip Bourbon Street's debaucherous chaos in favor of live music at the clubs on Frenchmen Street. Music festival lovers should also consider going in late April for Jazz Fest.

8. Berlin. There are few cities as welcoming for young people as Berlin — [affordable, vibrant and friendly](#), with plenty of English speakers. Fans of contemporary art and beer will be especially pleased. Try Prenzlauer Berg and Kreuzberg as home bases. (The city is also a great hub for getting around Europe, especially with today's cheap European carriers.)

9. Montreal. Like New Orleans, it's [a taste of Europe](#) without leaving North America. The food is spectacular (go early for the smoked meat sandwiches at Schwartz's), and summertime means easy biking and overflowing markets. If you have a few days to get out of town, the rest of Quebec is gorgeous all year long. (Oh, yeah, and the drinking age is 18.)

10. Vietnam. A trip to Southeast Asia would be tough to squeeze into a week, but if you find yourself with a bit more time, consider Vietnam, a country [rich in cuisine](#), culture and natural beauty — and light on the wallet. Set your sights in particular on the seaside town of Hoi An and Hue, a former national capital. [A boat trip through Ha Long Bay](#) is equally memorable.

11. Budapest. It's come a long way from its Soviet days. Language can be a bit of a challenge, but it's a welcoming place full of charm and a youthful energy. Take a soak in one of its famous bathhouses and enjoy the city's laid-back cafe culture.

12. New Zealand. It's a long (and expensive) flight from the United States, but one with great rewards. Reasonably priced bus tours are easy ways to get around the islands, which offer the stunning, diverse beauty made famous in the "Lord of the Rings" movies.



In the Blue Lagoon outside Reykjavik, Iceland. Olivier Morin/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

13. Iceland. Not quite as cheap for Americans as it was after its economy collapsed, Iceland is still a quick flight from the East Coast. Its otherworldly beauty — [hot springs](#), volcanic fields, waterfalls and the famous Blue Lagoon — is best appreciated by getting out of the capital, [Reykjavik](#); consider booking a tour.

14. Barcelona. Few cities offer such a wealth of dining and night life options as Barcelona. Architecture fans can go on a tour of the wild work of Antoni Gaudí, including the soaring Sagrada Família. Neighborhoods to explore include medieval Barri Gòtic, seaside Barceloneta and more touristy El Born. It even has [great beaches](#).

15. California coast. A trip up the Pacific Coast Highway requires driving skills and stamina, but you can't beat the views. Save by camping along the way, in [over 20 designated spots](#).

16. Morocco. Culturally rich, easy to get around and budget-friendly, Morocco is perfect for adventurous young travelers. Start in Casablanca (your flight will probably take you there anyway), but use the extensive train and bus system to get to the Fez (and its dizzying medina), Marrakesh (and the wildly colorful Jardin Majorelle) and the coastal town of Essaouira (and its piers, where you can eat fresh-off-the-boat seafood). If time permits, you can even head by camel [into the desert](#).



One of Costa Rica's many rain forests, as seen from a hot-air balloon. Toh Gouttenoire for The New York Times

17. Costa Rica. A few reasons to visit: Rain forests [teeming with wildlife](#), two coasts peppered with reasonably priced eco-resorts and creative ways to get around (horseback riding and rafting, for example). Flights from the United States tend to be reasonable.

18. A Greek island that's not Mykonos, Ios or Santorini. The Cyclades — the islands south of Athens — offer unrivaled beauty and relaxation, particularly if you stay away from the party destinations. There's nothing wrong with them, of course (Santorini is particularly gorgeous), but less-visited islands like [Naxos](#) and [Folegandros](#) offer fewer tourists and more intact culture. Spend your days swimming, eating amazing grilled seafood and exploring ancient ruins. Evenings are for music, more food and ouzo.

19. Lisbon. Lisbon is [an utterly charming city](#), both youthful and ancient. Neighborhoods to visit include colorful Bairro Alto, Alfama and [Intendente](#). Also consider a side-trip to [Sintra](#), a storybook village nestled in the hills with a castle and not one but two alluring palaces.



The medieval port of Dubrovnik on Croatia's Adriatic coast. Elvis Barukcic/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

20. The Croatian coast. It's gotten fancier over the years, but bopping down the Adriatic coast in Croatia is still a great option for young travelers. Start in scenic Dubrovnik and hit laid-back and gorgeous spots like Rovinj, Kornati Islands National Park and Makarska. You'll find great food and wine, dazzling vistas and a welcoming attitude.