

World's Most Beautiful City Parks

The great outdoors and big-city culture come together seamlessly at these beautiful parks.

From [May 2013](#) By [Kristin Conard](#)

A well-designed park is more than green space in the midst of a concrete jungle—it makes a city lovable and livable.

The most beautiful combine meadows, woodlands, ponds, lakes, and streams with museums and other man-made attractions. At San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, as Catherine Nagel, executive director of the City Parks Alliance, describes it: "You can go from the entrance, with a lot of cultural institutions and a great botanical garden, and move through the park, and at the end, you find yourself at the ocean. The park connects a natural space to a built environment."

Parks also frequently bring world-class art out into the open. Park Güell, designed by Antoni Gaudí, overlooks Barcelona and is famous for a whimsical design and vibrant mosaics. Or consider the contemporary Civic Space Park in Phoenix, which opened in 2009 with a multimillion-dollar art installation by Janet Echelman. Her sinuous, weblike sculpture in the sky moves in the wind, and at night, lights up in a changing array of colors; it has helped invigorate the downtown area.

For city dwellers and tourists alike, an urban park becomes a shared backyard. "It's a place to meet friends; it's a place to have celebrations with families if you're in small apartments, say in New York," says Setha Low, director of the Public Space Research Group and author of *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity*. While New York has plenty of award-winning parks, Central Park remains the biggest crowd-pleaser, with a staggering 40 million annual visitors. "There are thousands upon thousands of people who have special memories of the park," says Low. "It accommodates this incredible range of humanity."

In Paris, a visit to the hillside Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, a locals' favorite in the 19th Arrondissement, is a chance to escape the tourist crowds among a haven of winding, tree-lined pathways, waterfalls, and ponds.

Indeed, for Alain de Botton, author of *The Architecture of Happiness*, an urban park's ultimate importance is in allowing us to step away from the rush. "In the midst of a busy city, a park becomes quite literally an oasis and a tree can bring about an epiphany no less intense than a beautiful painting."

Park Güell, Barcelona

Pavilions that resemble gingerbread houses and a vibrant mosaic salamander fountain greet visitors to Antoni Gaudí's enchanting Park Güell. Inspired by natural forms, Gaudí

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combined twisting organic-looking stone features with elaborate, fluid designs. Situated at the top of a terraced hill, his fantastical park has spectacular views of the city, along with paths through the woods and the Casa Museu Gaudí.

Stanley Park, Vancouver

The temperate rainforest of Stanley Park is almost completely surrounded by water, with both gorgeous skyline views and wild forest of 500,000 cedar, fir, and hemlock trees. It connects to the historic waterfront and downtown via a 5.5-mile portion of seawall that surrounds the park, popular with joggers, strollers, and cyclists. Rose and rhododendron gardens, nine intricately carved First Nations totem poles, a small golf course, an outdoor summer theater, a seaside swimming pool, and areas for lawn bowling round out its charms.

Keukenhof, Lisse, Netherlands

Timing is everything when it comes to visiting Keukenhof. The park springs to life for only eight weekends annually, between mid-March and mid-May, when more than 7 million cheery tulips, daffodils, and hyacinths bloom. As you wander among these flowers, look out for more than 100 works of art and four pavilions dedicated to more exotic species.

City Park, New Orleans

The world's largest collection of mature live oaks—some more than 600 years old—thrives within 1,300-acre City Park. Find a spot to picnic under the shade of these majestic trees, take a horseback ride, or wander the sculpture park. From March through October, the Botanical Garden throws seasonal parties with mint juleps and live music. Although damaged during Hurricane Katrina, the park became a special place where “people gathered after Katrina and could feel human again,” according to Catherine Nagel, executive director of City Parks Alliance.

Golden Gate Park, San Francisco

Built from more than 1,000 acres of sand dunes in the 1870s, San Francisco's beloved Golden Gate Park draws about 13 million annually. It's no surprise considering cultural attractions such as the De Young Museum and the beautifully manicured Japanese Tea Garden and Conservatory of Flowers. Picnic on meadows, check out the herd of American bison, paddleboat on Stow Lake, or head to the far western edge of the park to Ocean Beach—where you can watch surfers do their thing from atop high bluffs.

Namba Parks, Osaka, Japan

Opened in 2003, Namba Parks spans eight levels of a 30-story office tower and mall. It's an urban oasis with terraces, a narrow central canyon, vegetable gardens, waterfalls, and rock clusters—and the ingenious solution of what to do with the space formerly occupied by Osaka's baseball stadium. Adjacent to the Namba train station, the park makes a big first impression on new arrivals.

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Forest Park, [St. Louis](#)

An ongoing \$100 million restoration project is sprucing up Forest Park, with projects that include the renovation of the Jewel Box, an Art Deco greenhouse and event space. The former host site of the 1904 Summer Olympics and World's Fair now contains a zoo, art and history museums, and a science center. Join one of the regular bird walks for the chance to see wild turkeys, great horned owls, and more of the 100-plus species that have been documented here.

Ibirapuera Park, [São Paulo, Brazil](#)

World-renowned Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer worked with landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx on a vision for Ibirapuera Park (opened in 1954). Niemeyer designed many of the signature buildings, including the flying-saucer-like planetarium and the Ibirapuera Auditorium, with a flamelike red structure at its entrance and concerts held inside. On Sundays, near the duck pond at the Bosque da Leitura, visitors can sunbathe with a book or magazine courtesy of the park's lending library.

[Englischer Garten, Munich](#)

City officials had the foresight in the 1790s to set aside more than 900 acres of prime real estate for the Englischer Garten, one of Europe's largest. You can rent a bike to explore trails that wind past green lawns and bridges toward a central lake with paddleboats. Warm weather brings sunbathers (some known to strip down to nothing), surfers, and plenty of thirsty locals and tourists alike, who head for the Chinese Tower, where the beer garden has room for 7,000.

[Balboa Park, San Diego](#)

You need more than two hands to count the charms of Balboa Park—and days to experience them all. Along with the San Diego Zoo and 15 museums (including the free Timken Museum with works by European old masters), the park offers an award-winning rose garden, a free summer concert series, and a 1910 carousel with hand-carved animals. Hikers and cyclists appreciate the 1,200-acre park's 65 miles of trails. Its most picture-perfect spot is the Botanical Building, with more than 2,000 plants on display and a lily pond.

Ueno Park, [Tokyo](#)

More than a thousand cherry trees line the main pathway of Ueno Park, blossoming into a sensational pink-and-white canopy each spring. Giant pandas reside at the zoo here (Japan's first), and you can also see remnants of the park's former life as a temple site in the pagodas and shrines. Set aside a few hours for a visit to the Tokyo National Museum, with collections ranging from textiles and ceramics to armor, painting, sculpture, and calligraphy.

[Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, Paris](#)

In the 19th Arrondissement, the steepest park in Paris remains under the radar of most tourists. Dynamite was used to create the distinctive 105-foot waterfall, a grotto, and

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lakes for the park, which opened in 1867 during the reign of Napoleon III. The Temple of Sybil, a Roman-inspired structure, tops an island, and shade comes courtesy of chestnut trees and cedars of Lebanon. Paris-based photographer Sophia Pagan describes the park as “a great place to go and get lost. There is always a new path or some small corner with a beautiful waterfall.”

Griffith Park, Los Angeles

Launched with a gift of land from Colonel Griffith to L.A. in 1896, Griffith Park now sprawls across 4,310 acres in the Los Feliz area, with 53 miles of trails through sage scrub, oak, and woodland forest. The park should look familiar as it has appeared in films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Back to the Future*, and it's the site of the hilltop [Griffith Observatory](#), with a 300-seat planetarium. The Greek Theatre hosts outdoor concerts, and the park's highest point, Mount Hollywood, delivers sweeping views of the valley.

Central Park, New York City

The concrete jungle of New York has made room over the years for many notable green spaces, including Brooklyn's Prospect Park, the elevated [High Line](#) in Chelsea, and [Governors Island](#). But Central Park remains the crowd-pleaser. According to Douglas Blonsky, president and CEO of Central Park Conservancy, “New Yorkers use Central Park's drives for running and bicycling, its lawns for picnicking and relaxing, its woodlands for exploring and relaxation, and its water bodies for rowboating—the park is truly a shared backyard for every New Yorker.”

Shanghai Houtan Park, Shanghai

A mile of former industrial land along the Huangpu River was transformed for the 2010 Shanghai World Expo into a series of terraces and meadows. Not only did they beautify the area, with benches and walkways urging people to linger, but they were also designed to filter the water of the river so that it can sustain life. The narrow waterfront location went from having water that was too polluted to come into contact with to a living ecosystem and award-winning park.

Civic Space Park, Phoenix

The 145-foot-tall netlike aerial sculpture at the center of Civic Space Park moves with the wind, creating what artist Janet Echelman calls “shadow drawings.” It's especially captivating at night, when lit by a changing array of colors. Opened in 2009, this award-winning park has helped spur the redevelopment of downtown Phoenix, luring folks with food trucks, concerts, green lawns, and easy access to bus and light-rail service. The splash fountain is popular on scorching days, and the park takes advantage of all that sunshine, generating energy from solar power.

Parque Quinta Normal, Santiago, Chile

While Cerro San Cristobal and Cerro Santa Lucia deliver the best city views, Parque Quinta Normal is an underappreciated gem—and full of locals. The family-friendly park's museums include the hands-on Museum of Science and Technology and the Railway

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Museum with 14 steam engines. You can paddle around the lagoon or check out the stands of Monterey pines, Babylonian willows, and sequoias from the park's origins as a nursery for imported species in the 1840s.

Mount Faber Park, Singapore

Overlooking busy Keppel Harbour and southern Singapore, Mount Faber Park occupies the second highest hill in the city. It's also where you can board a cable car to Sentosa Island, a resort complex complete with theme parks. With cozy dining at Emerald Lodge and the Jewel Box and plenty of tucked-away corners along the paths through the lush rainforest, the park has developed a reputation for romance.

Lumpini Park, Bangkok

Start your morning at Lumpini Park to catch locals doing tai chi and going about their daily routines. There are tree-lined pathways for strolling, paddleboats for rent on the lake, and vendors hawking pad thai and other treats. Be on the lookout for the park's resident water monitor lizards, which make a fun photo-op. It's all a very welcome breath of fresh air in the middle of Bangkok's chaotic business district.

Chapultepec Park, Mexico City

Aztec rulers once used the area of Chapultepec Park as a retreat, and it's still a place of relaxation and rejuvenation today. You can visit the Baths of Moctezuma—a series of Aztec-built waterfalls and canals—and check out the sprawling green space on a Segway tour. Locals come here to picnic, play, and explore the zoo and museums, which are free on Sundays.

Minnehaha Park, Minneapolis

Each season brings a new look to this park above the Mississippi: blooming native wildflowers in spring and summer; changing colors of the trees in the fall; and in the chill of winter, the frozen 53-foot waterfall, which resembles a dramatic, beautiful ice sculpture. During the warmer months, break from biking or hiking to sample fresh seafood from the Sea Salt Eatery.

Hyde Park, London

The Royal Family likes its green spaces, having made room for eight royal parks within London—and their subjects agree. Each year, more than a million people flock to Hyde Park, one of the biggest, to picnic, sunbathe, run and cycle the miles of pathways, swim and boat in the Serpentine, or watch a concert. (This has been the location for the last night of the **BBC Proms** classical music festival for more than a decade.) Or, you can listen to the opinions voiced freely in Speakers' Corner.

Millennium Park, Chicago

Since opening in 2004, Millennium Park has become a favorite of locals and tourists alike thanks to its modern art and architecture amid the green lawns. In the northwestern corner of Grant Park, this multimillion-dollar park most famously features

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the stainless-steel *Cloud Gate* sculpture, which resembles a bean and reflects the skyline. From May to October, rotating videos and images are projected on the 50-foot-tall towers of Crown Fountain.

Villa Doria Pamphili, Rome

Rome's largest public park was mapped out in the 1600s as a private estate with a villa that still has formally landscaped gardens, fountains, waterfalls, and statues. It was known as *Bel Respiro*, or "beautiful breath," for its panoramic views of the city. The park draws joggers, bicyclists, and bird-watchers, who head to the more wild, natural scene of meadows and towering pine trees to the west of a curving bridge.

Royal National City Park, Stockholm

Three parks in and around the Swedish capital form the six-mile Royal National City Park, which, in some places, brushes up against natural forest. That means you can spy all kinds of wildlife, from moose and deer to 100 species of birds among the ancient oak trees. You can also get a healthy dose of culture at one of the museums and theaters on the grounds.

Beihai Park, Beijing

Not far from the Forbidden City, this serene 10th-century park harks back to the days of imperial China, with its well-preserved landscaping, pavilions, Buddhist temples, and a large lake. The Jingxin Room (Quieting Heart Room) is a garden inside a garden with ponds filled with water lilies, where former Chinese emperors used to study and relax. Look, too, for the glazed brick wall decorated with nine swirling colorful dragons.

Vondelpark, Amsterdam

With a central locale near the recently reopened **Rijksmuseum**, the park teems with visitors as well as animals that make their homes amid the lawns, ponds, and tall chestnut and birch trees. Go on a hunt for the statue of the park's namesake Dutch poet, Joost van den Vondel, and for Picasso's abstract *Fish* sculpture. While the people-watching is great entertainment year round, summertime brings free dance and music performances in the open-air theater.

Phoenix Park, Dublin

Hundreds of wild deer roam the charming lake at the Furry Glen and the pond at Phoenix Park, which covers more than 1,700 acres—a mix of gardens and wide-open spaces—to the west of the city center. Animals are indeed the main attraction at the park, which has hosted the Dublin Zoo since 1831. Other attractions include the 15th-century Ashtown Castle and Victorian tearooms.