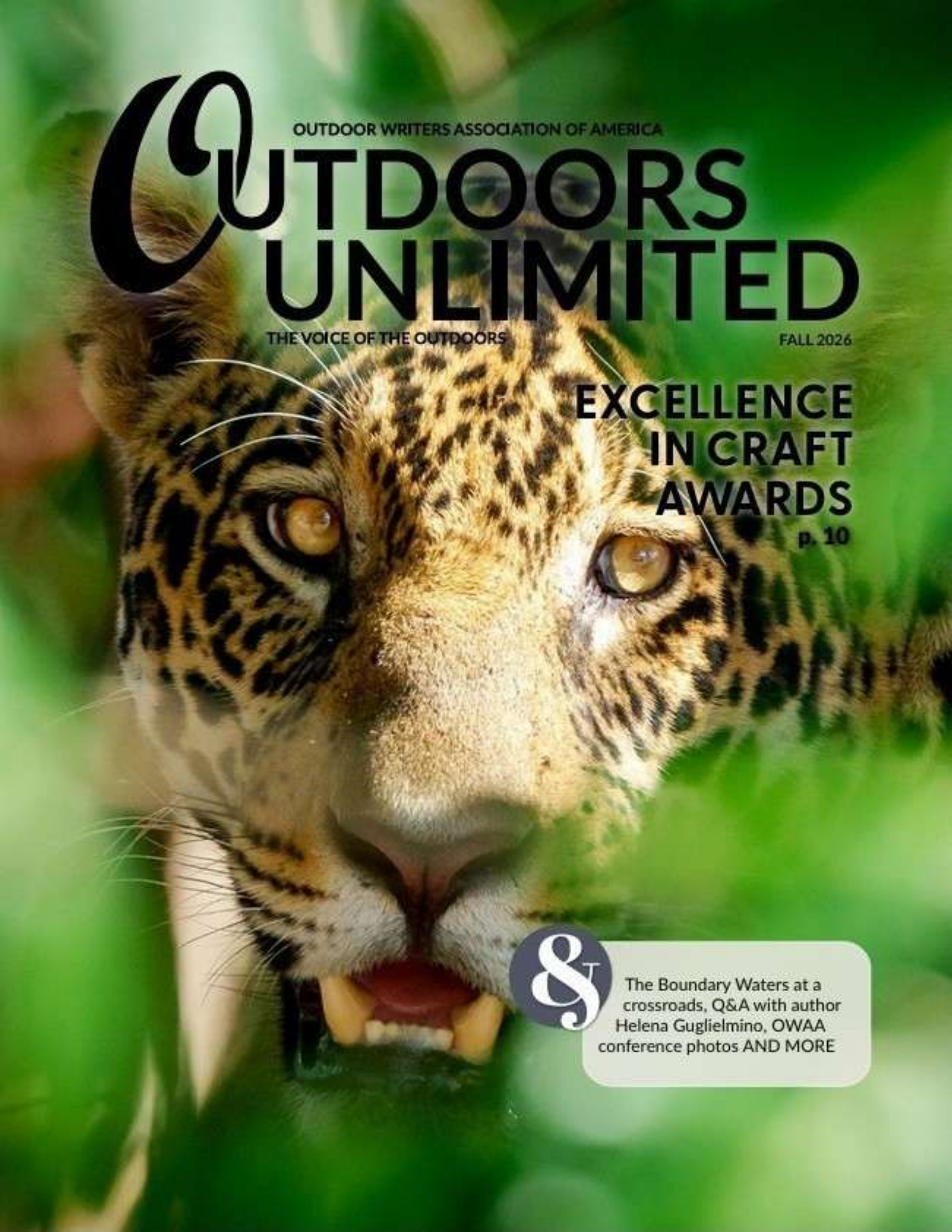




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BEYOND THE ICONS

FINDING A FRESH STORY AT ARCHES NATIONAL PARK

BY ROB ROGERS | WINTER GARDEN, FLORIDA, ALL PHOTOS BY ROB ROGERS.

Arches National Park in southeastern Utah is most famous for its monumental sandstone arches carved over millions of years from the high desert by wind and rain. Most of these arches are accessible by short hikes or nature walks from parking lots that often crowd to capacity. But if you love to hike in solitude and have a reasonable amount of dexterity and strength, there is nothing you'll enjoy more at Arches National Park than a group or solo hike in the Fiery Furnace.

About Arches National Park

Arches National Park lies approximately 230 miles south of Salt Lake City, just north of the town of Moab, and sits atop a subterranean ocean of salt deposited over hundreds of millions of years when 29 different seas filled and then evaporated from the Colorado Plateau. The layers of salt were then covered by thousands of feet of sediments eroded from mountains that long preceded the Rockies.

As tectonic forces caused the plateau to rise, the weight of the overlying landmasses caused the salt to liquefy, warp and thrust up into overlying layers of rock, causing them to fracture. Over millions of years, erosion removed the younger layers of rock and shaped many into gigantic sandstone "fins" (vertical walls).

The park's namesake arches formed when some of those fins eroded from below, leaving awe-inspiring rock formations that are much younger than the landmasses from which they have been carved. Geologically speaking, they also live very short lives, as the ravages of wind, rain and fluctuating temperatures from changing seasons leave them in a permanent state of disintegration.

The vast majority of the park's visitors cannot be blamed for focusing only on those arches, as they are awe inspiring and easily reached by car. Most of Arches National Park's visitors rarely stray far from the roadside walking paths that lead to star attractions like Delicate Arch, Balanced Rock, Double Arch, Landscape Arch, the Windows and Sand Dune Arch. But because Arches also receives millions of visitors each year, parking (and peace and quiet) at the main attractions can often be hard to find during the busy spring and summer months.

Tickets to the Fiery Furnace are worth the effort to get

And then there is the Fiery Furnace. Located deep within the heart of Arches, the Fiery Furnace is a secluded labyrinth of narrow canyons and sandy washes within the park's most narrow set of fins. Access to the Fiery Furnace is limited and can take a bit of planning and effort to secure. But if you're lucky enough to snag one of the park's daily reservations to hike there, you'll be left positively breathless in more ways than one.



Because of the complexity and fragility of the terrain, the National Park Service restricts access to the Fiery Furnace to only ranger-guided tours and difficult-to-get individual hiking permits. The Park sells only 75 individual permits per day, which must be purchased no more than one week in advance and picked up one day before your hike at the park's Visitors Center, where you'll be required to watch a film and listen to a brief instructional lecture from a ranger.

The permits typically sell out minutes after they go on sale each morning. When my family visited Arches for a spring break trip this past March, my wife tried to get hiking passes three days in a row and succeeded only on her final try. So getting a permit can be tricky.

But my, was it worth it. Park rangers at Arches aptly describe hiking through the Fiery Furnace as the outdoor equivalent of exploring an escape room. There are no trails or conventional trail markers or cairns; you are just set free to climb through the washes and atop boulders, losing yourself among circuitous paths in deep canyons that are often narrower than an airline coach seat.

Of course, there is a recommended path through the furnace, and you'll learn about it during your pre-hike meeting with the ranger. This is the one my family followed, and it is the most popular route for first-time visitors to the park. But even that trail is marked only by thumb-sized arrows that often blend into walls and boulders.

Skills you'll need for the Fiery Furnace

So hiking in the Fiery Furnace requires patience and at least a minimal amount of trail-finding skill. It also requires a mod-

erate amount of physical fitness. Arches National Park warns for good reason that the Fiery Furnace can be challenging and physically demanding, as many portions require you to climb steep rock faces, squeeze or lift yourself through narrow passages, and even jump or climb across crevasses.

But as my family and I can attest, you don't have to be an athlete or an experienced climber to enjoy the Fiery Furnace. My 14-year-old had no problem getting through even the steepest and narrowest of passages, nor did I, despite being a less-than-fit 50-year-old weekend backpacker with a crippling fear of heights.

So the Fiery Furnace feels more like a natural obstacle course, even if you're a flatlander desk jockey like me.

What makes the Fiery Furnace so special

And the scenery there is breathtaking. Climbs through dune-embraced washes and atop boulders and collapsed pillars lead to towering canyons, huge monoliths and even the occasional hidden arch. As you rise in elevation, you climb toward

sun-licked walls and turn around to see endless vistas of the salt valley below.

Each climb and corner seems to hide a new natural wonder, and being forced to turn around at dead ends on mistaken paths to find your way on is half the pleasure of hiking there. The Fiery Furnace appeals to the wandering child in all of us, and it's not hard to imagine what the region's first explorers felt when discovering these magical places.

Best of all, the limited access allows you to enjoy these awe-inspiring scenes in quiet solitude, where you can hear the wind and the calls of birds echoing off the canyon walls. We chose to arrive at 8 a.m. and were the first ones into the Furnace, and we spent almost our entire 2 ½ hours there alone.

If you are like me and prefer to enjoy nature far from the maddening crowds, you'll find the experience of hiking through the Fiery Furnace positively heavenly.

If you go

Daily permits to the Fiery Furnace must be purchased in addition to park

admission and cost \$10; they can be purchased here. Alternately, a spot in a ranger-led hike through the Fiery Furnace can be purchased for \$16 per person. The separate fee for admission to Arches National Park is \$15 per person or \$30 per private vehicle.

If you plan to visit one or more national parks multiple times in a year and reside in the U.S., consider purchasing an Annual Pass, which costs only \$80 for U.S. citizens and covers park admission for a single private vehicle (i.e., a family) to any national park for 365 continuous days. (Annual Passes are less attractive to persons visiting from outside the United States, as they cost \$250 per private vehicle for non-U.S. citizens.)

Most out-of-state visitors reach Arches National Park by flying to Salt Lake City International Airport and then renting a car and driving approximately 3 ½ hours to Moab, which contains an ample selection of hotels and rental properties through Vrbo and Airbnb. Moab is also an excellent gateway community to Canyonlands National Park, portions of which are less than an hour south of Arches National Park.

Arches is one of the busier American national parks, and with most visitors entering through the gate just outside Moab, lines to enter the park can be long throughout the year. I therefore recommend arriving early — my family arrived each morning before 7:30 and still had to wait 15 minutes to get past the gate.

— Rob Rogers is an attorney and author of *Finding My Way Home: Fighting Depression Backpacking in Central Florida*. He also writes a blog, the "Central Florida Backpacking Desk Jockey" (backpacking-deskjockey.blog), and his articles have been featured on floridahikes.com. Rogers and his family have also traveled to more than fifteen European countries. Links to Rogers' essays and other articles he has written about backpacking can be found on his website, robrogerswriter.com.

