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5 Tours of Dark Events in American History

Featured

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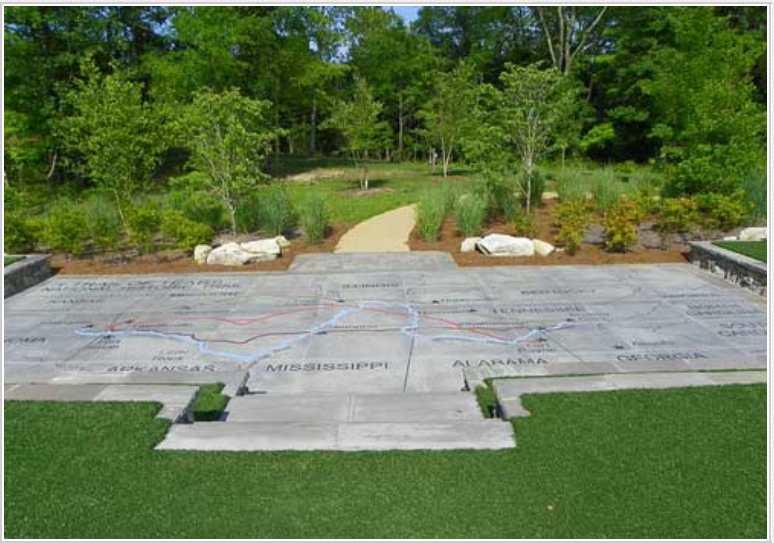
United States history has featured many moments of great pride (think D-Day, man walking on the Moon), along with a few episodes of great shame that our national consciousness might prefer to forget. But the five vacation itineraries listed here, featuring haunting monuments, trails and landmarks, assure that these darkest corners of the American experience don't remain in the shadows. History shows time and again how mistakes are often repeated over generations. These landmarks stand as a testament to the fact that our "civilized" nation is capable of brutalizing its own people, even today, and hopefully they provide incentive to prevent such shameful acts now and in the future.

5. Trail of Tears National Historic Trail



A map at a park in Birchwood, Tenn., shows the various routes taken by the Cherokees on the Trail of Tears; J. Stephen Conn

Retrace the steps taken by the more than 16,000 Cherokee people forced to embark on what would be a lethal journey for around one-fourth of this displaced population. As part of a broader policy to force tens of thousands of Native Americans

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from lands in the Southeastern U.S., in 1838 Cherokees made the grueling journey by foot (and by sea) from the present-day Carolinas, Virginias, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia and Alabama to what the government deemed their new homeland — "Indian Territory" in what is today Oklahoma. You can visit the places where so many tears were shed, as illness brought on by brutal cold, harsh road conditions, and a starvation diet of poor-quality flour and corn made death a daily occurrence. The historic trail passes through many communities where the Cherokee traveled on their solemn journey to Tahlequah, capital of the Cherokee Nation. Other stops along the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail include the site of the most prominent — and final — act of resistance by Cherokees against white settlers in Cave Spring, Georgia; the camping spot and burial ground for thousands of Cherokees on their journey west, Camp Ground Church, Illinois; Mantle Rock Preserve in Kentucky, where an estimated 1,700 people waited for two weeks to cross the icy Ohio River in December 1838; and New Madrid, Missouri, the village where exiles were shuttled, hundreds to a boat, across the Mississippi River. Some never made it; one overcrowded steamboat, Monmouth, lost half of its 600 passengers in an accident. One of the highlights of the trail is the Cherokee National Museum in Tahlequah, which features many exhibits and a reconstructed 17th century Cherokee community.

4. Japanese Internment Camps

This monument at Manzanar commemorates the Japanese-Americans who lost their lives at the detainment center; MLH Radio

While 10 hastily built internment camps housed the estimated 120,000 Japanese-Americans forced from their homes in the months following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Manzanar in the Sierra Nevada Mountains is considered the best preserved. Around 11,000 people lived in just 504 barracks at this outpost 230 miles northeast of L.A. between 1942 and 1945. Internees made the best of a bad situation — the result of heightened racial tensions and paranoia at the onset of World War II — by establishing their own churches, temples, clubs, recreational programs and even a newspaper. Check out the internee-built interpretive center (originally a high school auditorium), and walk two reconstructed barracks and a mess hall adjacent to the center. Most compelling experience at Manzanar is the three-mile drive past the remains of orchards, rock gardens and ponds, building foundations and a graveyard. Japanese Americans were also held in Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah and Wyoming. Another historic Japanese detention site sits in the high desert of south-central Idaho. At its peak population, Minidoka Relocation Center housed nearly 9,400 detainees. A fire station has been refashioned into a visitor's center, and travelers may walk the interpretive trail dotted with exhibit panels and remnants of camp life.

3. Salem Witch Trial Sites

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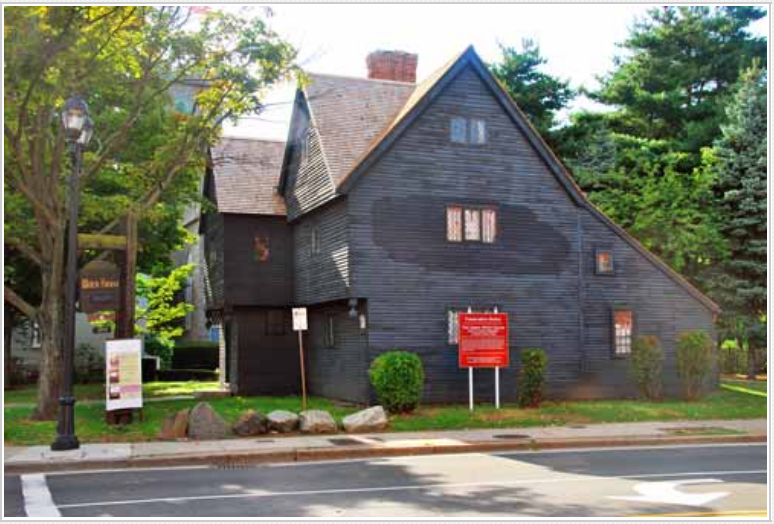
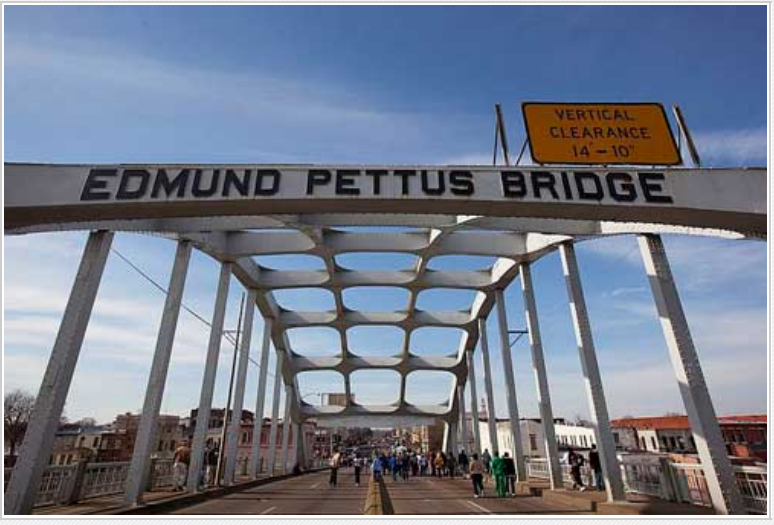


The famous Witch House in Salem, Massachusetts; Chensiyuan

While the Massachusetts town is so associated with the 17th century hysteria that everything from Salem's police cars to its newspaper is adorned with a pointed hat-wearing witch on a broomstick, only one structure directly connected to those historic events survived the likes of the Great Fire of 1914. Judge Jonathan Corwin and his family resided in "The Witch House" from the late 1600s to the early 1700s. A local leader, Corwin investigated the rash of witchcraft claims spreading through Salem and 34 neighboring communities in Essex County. It's said that some of the 20 innocents accused of diabolical wrongdoing were examined for spectral evidence (like "witch's marks") in the house's dining room, prior to very questionable "trials" which sent 14 women and five men to the gallows. A septuagenarian, Giles Corey, was pressed to death at Howard Street Cemetery after he refused to plead guilty or not guilty to charges of witchcraft, cleverly assuring that his family, not the government, inherited his estate. As was customary, a plank was laid across a person who refused to plead. Heavy rocks were then added to extract a plea. After two excruciating days, Corey died. His last words? "More weight." Corey and the 19 others who lost their lives to the paranoia of the period are memorialized at the Charter Street Burying Point via a series of benches featuring each victim's name as well as their documented protests of innocence. Learn more about all these sites at the Witch Dungeon Museum or the Witch History Museum.

2. Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail



Marchers commemorate the 1965 Civil Rights March across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 2010.

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Although this is the shortest national historic trail in the country, it packs a significant amount of notable sites into its 54 miles. If you follow the entire trail shadowing the three civil rights marches that captivated the country in March 1965, you'll begin at Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama, the starting point for the 600-some marchers who set off on the first march toward the state capital. You can walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where peaceful protestors encountered tear gas and beatings at the hands of the very law enforcement officials who, in theory, were supposed to protect them. After this "Bloody Sunday" debacle played out on national TV, more than 2,500 marchers left Selma two days later on a second march. Halfway between Selma and Montgomery, you can check out the "Tent City" where marchers camped on their way to the capitol. You can also visit the Alabama State Capitol itself, where the third and final march concluded with one of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s most notable speeches, in which the preacher/activist asked "How long?" will it be before African Americans attain equal rights. "Not long," he answered, "because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." By the time King's speech concluded, the procession had grown to more than 25,000 marchers. Within five months, LBJ would sign the Voting Rights Act. Additional civil rights must-sees include the Selma Interpretive Center at the foot of the bridge that hosted so much bloodshed, the Montgomery Interpretive Center at Alabama State University and, a short drive from there, the Rosa Parks Museum. While in the capital city, stop by the church on Dexter Avenue where MLK pastored from 1954 to 1960.

1. The Underground Railroad

Historic Harpers Ferry, W.Va.; National Park Service

You could visit most, if not all of the aforementioned historic sites in anywhere from an hour to a couple of days. Even the most ambitious history buff would be hard-pressed to see all of the 64 sites on the National Park Service's Underground Railroad Travel Itinerary. That's fitting, because the Underground Railroad's very success came from the fact it was so widespread. Peaking in the 1850s and 1860s, the Underground Railroad aided in the escape of some 100,000 slaves. Places connected to or recognized as part of the secret network established to navigate slaves from the South to the free states of the North include abolitionists' homes, slave jails and pioneering colleges, as well as pivotal forts, farmsteads and churches. Visit the likes of Harpers Ferry, the West Virginia port town made famous by abolitionist John Brown's bold but unsuccessful raid on a federal armory. Tour the D.C. home where escaped slave-turned-social reformer Frederick Douglass lived from the 1870s until his death in 1895. Lesser-known sites include the log cabin in Kansas that Brown used as the headquarters for his abolitionist activities for 20 months in 1855 and 1856, and the commercial building in Denver owned by Barney L. Ford, a black man born into slavery who later rose to influence as a politician and one of the richest people in Colorado. You can find a complete list of historic Underground Railroad sites at this National Park Service website.

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Michelle Leach's love of writing has taken her to Sydney, Australia, London, U.K. and other exotic locations like Grand Island, Neb., and Clio, Mich. She has developed pieces for TV and radio stations, PR departments, newspapers and magazines. A graduate of Northwestern University and Lake Forest College (also in Illinois) she enjoys running marathons and likes to say when not writing, she's running—but she tries not to mix the two activities.

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