7 Islands You Can Visit Without a Passport if You Live in the U.S.

(Courtesy of Alice Barnes-Brown, The Discoverer)

The world is full of unique islands — little oases away from the chaos of mainland life. Luckily for American travelers, quite a few of them are in the U.S. Maybe you simply want to avoid the hassle of applying for a passport or perhaps you'd rather not organize an international trip. Whatever the reason, these domestic destinations are worth getting excited over.

Dry Tortugas, Florida

The Florida Keys are one of America's tropical paradises. On these islands you can expect soft sands, warm sunshine, and unbelievably blue skies. But if you're looking for something to do beyond your standard beach vacation, travel about 70 miles farther west via seaplane or ferry and you'll discover the largest brick building in the Western Hemisphere at Dry Tortugas National Park. The park is dominated by Fort Jefferson, a massive masonry structure built in the mid-19th century. Even though it was never finished, it was still used as a prison during the Civil War. Today, it makes for an educational detour from the sunbathing and snorkeling opportunities in and around the nearby reef.

Kodiak, Alaska

As the largest island in Alaska, Kodiak is a remote, rugged island that awaits intrepid and outdoorsy adventurers. Hike its steep mountains for unbelievable views, canoe in rushing creeks, or wait to spot its majestic namesake bear — the largest of the grizzlies— from a safe distance. You can observe the Kodiak bear in the National Wildlife Refuge on the island, but the only way to get in is via a helicopter tour or excursion from one of the wilderness lodges. Getting to the island itself is a little easier, as regular daily flights leave from Anchorage, or you can take the 9.5-hour ferry from the Homer peninsula.

Catalina, California

Just like former resident Marilyn Monroe, California's Channel Islands are glamorous, lively, and beautiful. Better still, these chilled-out islands are only an hour from downtown Los Angeles. The port of Avalon on Santa Catalina Island is a great starting point for all of your discoveries. Make sure you bring good shoes, as the town can only be explored on foot or via golf buggy (golf is the preferred sport of the Channel Islands). On this quaint island, sailboats float lazily in the harbor, locals stroll along waterfront promenades, and seafood is fresh and plentiful.

Kauai, Hawaii

You likely already know that you can hit the beach at Honolulu without flashing your passport, but now's the perfect time to explore one of Hawaii's quieter islands. There's plenty of room to spread out on Kauai, known as the "garden island" because of its lush mountains, endless fruit plantations, and colorful flora. Swim underneath secret waterfalls, take a mountain-tubing tour, or zipline through valleys virtually undisturbed by tourism. Kauai is also very proud of its strong Polynesian connections, and you can learn all about them by attending a hula or traditional chant workshop with an islander.

Puerto Rico

As a commonwealth of the United States, this Spanish-speaking island welcomes American visitors, no passport required. Uncover Puerto Rico's pirate history at the castillos in San Juan, where no fewer than three castles protect the harbor mouth from greedy invaders, or stroll the city's colorful streets with a tropical smoothie in hand. You can also soak up the Caribbean sunshine on one of the island's 300 beaches. Whatever you do, you'll see why Puerto Rico is nicknamed the "isle of enchantment."

Mackinac Island, Michigan

Forget chain stores and identical hotels — Mackinac Island is fiercely proud of its independent establishments. Ride along the historic, cobbled streets in a horse and carriage, take a knife-making workshop at Forge a Memory, stop by the old-world confectioners to taste some Mackinac fudge, or visit the house where John Jacob Astor made his fur-trading fortune. When you're through with the romantic walk through history, explore the island's many hiking and nature paths, ride your bike through the charming americana downtown, or explore the pebbled beach. Worn out from the day? Kick off your slippers at the spa, or lounge in a lakefront hotel.

Assateague Island, Maryland

Want to see horses running wild and free along the beach? Assateague Island — a 37-mile strip of sand in the Atlantic — has hundreds of them. Local folklore says these feral horses landed here after they were shipwrecked off the Virginia coast, but it's more likely they were moved there by early American settlers. Admire their beauty from afar, or journey to Assateague for the annual "Pony Swim." The herd is Assateague's star attraction, but camping in the island's secluded dunes and taking a ride in an over-sand vehicle are great options too.