



ALL PHOTOS JACK E. BOUCHER/NPS

V I S I T I N G

# kin

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACK E. BOUCHER

**A new family of visitor centers** grew up in the national parks of the 1950s and '60s. This recently discovered cache of images gives a glimpse of the brood fresh out of the box.

**Left:** Its form inspired by Eero Saarinen's Kresge Chapel at MIT, Georgia's Fort Pulaski Visitor Center offered exhibits viewed as one reads a book—left to right—with traffic flowing smoothly clockwise.

## Lens legend

Jack Boucher made a find in his basement not long ago, taking him back to his days as a young pup with the National Park Service.

“I was poking around and up pops a trip to days gone by,” says Boucher. Now, owing to a box of faded color negatives—since digitally restored—you can go there, too.





**Left, above:** Hopewell Village Visitor Center, Pennsylvania. The new centers were born as the emerging interstates looked to deliver 80 million visitors by 1966, the 50th anniversary of the National Park Service. Dubbed “the city hall of the park,” the building type borrowed from its sibling, the shopping center, a place for people to park and sample a menu of attractions. Visitation had already jumped from 3 to almost 30 million between 1931 and 1948, with the floor of Yosemite Valley a parking lot littered with cars, tents, and refuse. The aptly named visitor center centralized park use, helping prevent random, destructive patterns. Other patterns would soon be gone, too, wished *Progressive Architecture*: “Disappearing, one hopes, are the rustic-rock snuggery and giant-size ‘log cabin’ previously favored.” Some centers, like this one, reconciled traditional and modern. Yet the intent was not to be picturesque, but to demure to the landscape, and accommodate cars and buses using low-cost, efficient materials. The idea, and style, migrated to parks worldwide.





**Left:** Clingmans Dome Tower, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee.

The Mission 66 Program, launched to cope with skyrocketing visitation, built over 100 visitor centers between 1956 and 1966, stretching the concept to a host of new forms like this observation deck, sited at one of the highest spots in the East. By the 1950s, American architects had absorbed European modernism, drawn to the idea of aesthetic and technological freedom unfettered by convention. Modern methods and materials, like concrete, lent new power to an old idea: channeling visitors. But not everyone was a fan. Some, shocked by the spread of modernism to the parks, yearned for the rustic styles of old. “Ugly beyond words” is how Devereaux Butcher of the National Parks Association described one of the structures.

**Below, right: Flamingo Marina, Florida Bay.**

The marina, today a beachfront fixture, emerged along with new kinds of national parks like seashores. Flamingo, the handiwork of architect Cecil Doty, featured a lodge, restaurant, gas station, and elaborate dock for cruise boats. Doty, a lifelong National Park Service employee steeped in the rustic style, embraced the free plans, flat roofs, prefab components, and concrete construction. Having witnessed great achievements, from the Empire State Building to the advent of space travel, he said, "How could you help but go away from that board-and-batten stuff?"



**Above: Park Housing, Florida.** A drive for excellence permeated Doty's buildings, even those hidden from view. This question sums up his standard: "Do you like it, does it please?" He hoped to exude a sense of pride, inspiring stewardship of both structure and site. "Doty's buildings often achieve a kind of timelessness . . . without being cheap rustic imitations or modern spectacles," says Sarah Allaback in *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of a Building Type*. Doty received the Department of the Interior Distinguished Service Award shortly before retiring.







**Left, below: Everglades National Park, Florida.** Everglades, with its sweeping flourishes of pure modern, was a showpiece of the Mission 66 Program. Ironically, the program earned acclaim just as the style was fading, with a citation from the American Institute of Architects in 1970. "The architectural elite [had] largely discounted the principle tenets of modernism by the late 1960s," says Sarah Allaback in *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of a Building Type*. Over the next two decades, architects rejected the style for its more colorful successor, postmodernism. Today, modern architecture in the parks has aged poorly, says Allaback. "Unlike rustic structures, which benefit from a patina of age and wear, modern buildings depend on a crisp, clean aesthetic," she says. "A crumbling rustic wall is considered appropriately antiquated, but a deteriorating gypsum panel only appears shabby." Spare styles can also be damaged by "improvements," says Allaback. "When smooth colored tile is covered with industrial carpet and wood paneling is tacked over window walls, a spacious, sunny lobby becomes dim and utilitarian." Center additions such as bookshops can compromise elements like landscape views, with the demands of a new day sometimes outstripping a structure's original intent. In these images, taken when all was young and new, the original vision lives on.

