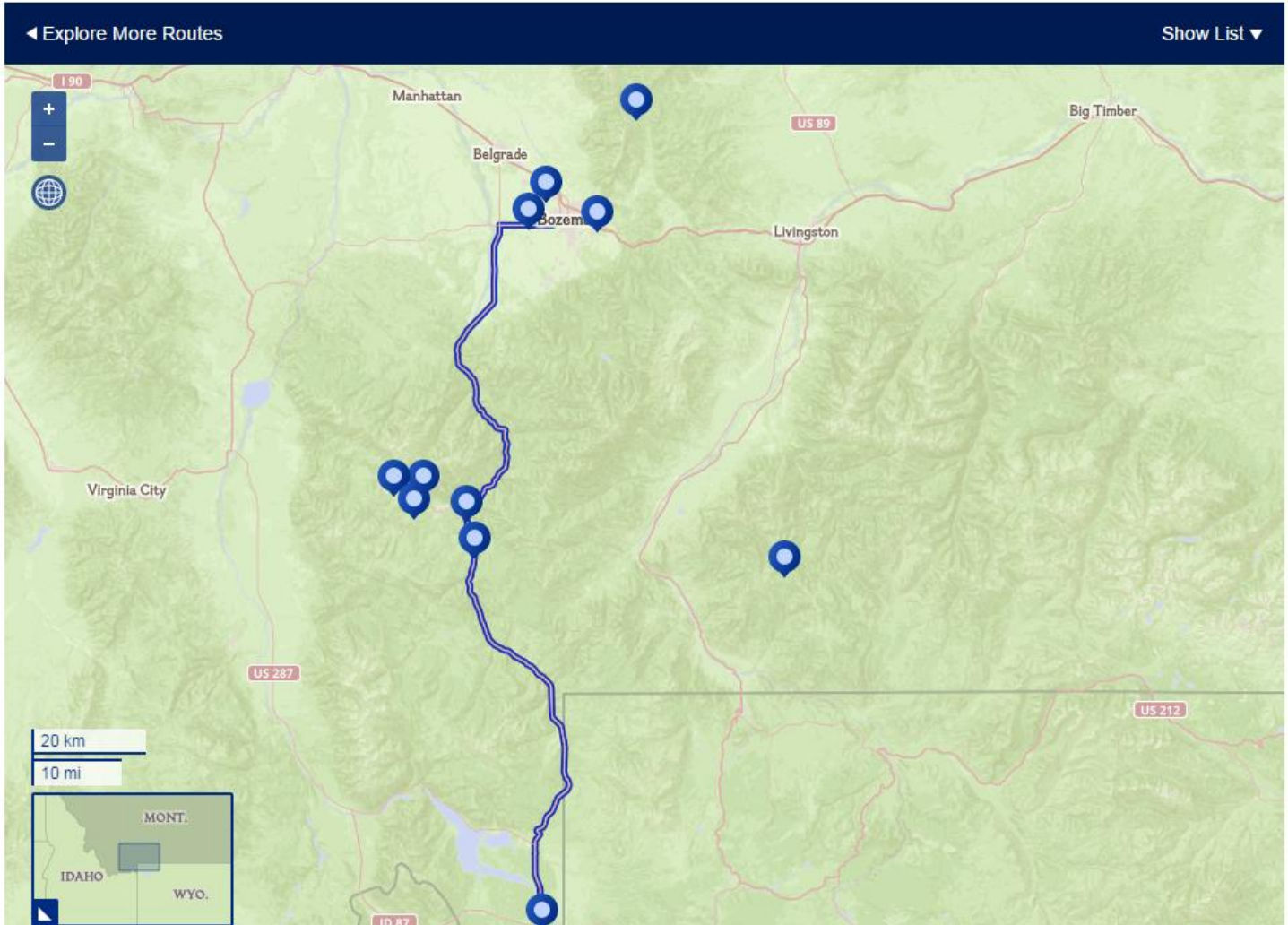




## Montana Road Trip: On the Loose in Big Sky

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This 180-mile drive from Bozeman to Yellowstone National Park and back is spectacularly scenic any time of the year. Add a blanket of deep, glistening snow to the surrounding Gallatin Range, however, and the views are utterly enchanting. And it's not just the scenery that's magically transformed in winter. The frosty temperatures, ice, and snow make this the sole season to experience some amazing, only-in-Montana activities like ice climbing in Hyalite Canyon, skiing double-black diamond runs at 11,166-foot Lone Peak, and riding a snow coach to Old Faithful Geyser in Yellowstone National Park. Winter is also when you're more likely to see Montana's iconic bighorn sheep. Watch for the regal animals along the shoulders of U.S. 191 as the road weaves through Gallatin Canyon.

## The Route:

Bozeman > U.S. 191 > West Yellowstone > U.S. 191 > Bozeman.

**Inside Tip:** Some roads may be closed due to snow; always check road conditions before taking this road trip.

## Gateway Airport

Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport, Bozeman

## Don't Miss

From West Yellowstone, take a guided snow coach or snowmobile tour into Yellowstone National Park with an authorized park concessionaire such as Yellowstone Tour and Travel or Rendezvous Snowmobile Rentals. Weather permitting; tours are available December 15 through March 15. Reservations required. **Best Bet:** Book the full-day Old Faithful Tour to see Firehole Falls, Fountain Paint Pots, Midway and Biscuit Geyser Basins, and Old Faithful.

## Highlights

Bozeman, known as the adventure capital of the northern Rockies, is a blue-jeans-and-cowboy-boots university town. And the hometown campus, Montana State University, houses a somewhat unexpected jewel: the Siebel Dinosaur Complex, led by world-renowned paleontologist Jack Horner. Located at the Museum of the Rockies, the Siebel features an amazing array of paleontology exhibits. One of the newest, "The Tyrant Kings," includes Montana's *T. rex*—one of only a handful of real fossilized *T. rex* specimens in the world that are mounted and displayed (most are casts). **Inside Tip:** Don't miss the "Burrowing Dinosaurs" or exhibit. The lifelike display details a science-changing discovery (made in southwestern Montana) indicating that some dinosaurs cared for and nurtured their young in nesting colonies.

Take a stroll outside around Bozeman's historic downtown, then warm up by wandering the halls of the Emerson Center for the Arts and Culture. Housed in a former elementary school built in 1918, the historic building is a hub of creativity. Tenants include multiple art galleries, art exhibits, shops, and artist studios. **Best Bet:** If visiting in November or December, check the Emerson website for the date of the annual Holiday Bazaar. The event includes gingerbread-house building for kids, as well as items for sale from local artisans and vendors.

Nonprofit Bridger Bowl delivers big-mountain skiing and snowboarding with a friendly, small-town vibe. A local favorite, the ski area boasts diverse terrain, from a first-time beginner slope to expert-only ridge terrain (avalanche transceiver required). **Inside Tip:** Ski or snowboard midweek and you'll likely have the place to yourself.

Lace up a pair of skates and hit the ice at one of [Bozeman's free, outdoor rinks](#). From Christmas Day through the end of February, the city typically waters and maintains ice-skating rinks at Beall, Bogert, and Southside Parks. During skating season, get updated outdoor rink conditions by calling the City of Bozeman at +1 406 582 2905.

If you're a Nordic skier—or want to give the sport a try—detour 16 miles northeast of Bozeman to [Bohart Ranch Cross Country Ski Center](#). Lessons (group or private), rentals, and more than 18 miles of groomed and tracked trails are available from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Bring food (only snacks and drinks are sold on-site), plus cash or checks (no credit cards accepted). **Best Bet:** The annual Skinny Festival on the second Sunday in January includes free beginner lessons and reduced rental prices.

There's nothing small about [Big Sky Resort](#): four mountains connected by chairlifts, room to roam (about two acres per skier), and a mind-boggling list of winter recreation options, many of which don't require any skiing. The mountain playground is so big that there's no way you can cover everything you want to do or see in a single visit. Stay and play for a couple of days on the drive south, then stop again on the return trip to Bozeman. On your initial visit, spend the morning on the slopes skiing or snowboarding, or taking a half-day lesson. In the afternoon, soar 100 to 150 feet above the snow on an [Adventure Zipline Tour](#). Or try the freestyle [Nature Zip tour](#), and learn how to go upside-down and do tricks on the lines. **Inside Tip:** The Nature Zip tour is a seriously fun workout combining snowshoeing and zip lining. Getting to the lines requires a 20-minute snowshoe or Yaktrax shoe hike up Lone Mountain.

[Lone Mountain Ranch](#) in Big Sky is open to day visitors and is perennially rated as one of the top Nordic ski resorts in North America. Rent cross-country skis or snowshoes to explore the groomed trails. Or book a private lesson or guided tour (by ski or snowshoe). **Inside Tip:** Fishing is a year-round sport in Montana and at the ranch. Make advance reservations to go on a guided fly-fishing or ice-fishing trip. Rod, reel, wader, boot, and, if needed, snowshoe rentals are available.

[West Yellowstone](#), the gateway city to Yellowstone National Park, is the place from which to launch any winter adventure in the park. See elk, eagles, wolves, waterfalls, geysers, and more on a guided snowmobile tour to the Old Faithful area or the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone with licensed park concessionaire [Two Top Snowmobile Rental](#). While in town, rent Nordic ski gear and glide through forest and open mountain meadows on the [Rendezvous Ski Trails](#). Located entirely on U.S. Forest Service land on the edge of West Yellowstone, the Rendezvous system includes more than 18 miles of groomed trails and multiple loop options. **Inside Tip:** The 4.5-mile [Deja View](#) ski loop is a local favorite and offers spectacular park views. Begin and end the loop at the heated Taylor Fork Cabin in the Rendezvous Ski Trails biathlon area (stash snacks in the cabin before you head out).

Wildlife sightings are guaranteed every day of the year at [West Yellowstone's Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center](#). The not-for-profit wildlife park and educational facility is the year-round home of three wolf packs and grizzly bears. The seasonal birds of prey exhibit is closed December through April.

On your return visit to Big Sky, zip along a snow-packed trail on an exhilarating dogsled ride. [Spirit of the North Sled Dog Adventures](#), located about a mile north of Big Sky Resort's Mountain Village, offers half-day dogsledding tours. Sit back and enjoy the view, or learn to mush and lead your team part of the way.

Back at Big Sky Resort, reserve a spot on a guided snowshoe tour through [Moose Tracks Gully](#). The tours last two hours, so wear a light backpack stocked with snacks and water. You'll be back in plenty of time to slide under the lights at the resort's 300-foot-long Tube Park. Tickets include a tube and an hour of sliding time, and reservations are required. **Inside Tip:** If you've always wanted to ski on a near-empty mountain, book a [First Tracks Guided Experience](#).

## Stay

[The Lark](#) is a newly rebuilt downtown Bozeman property incorporating retro design touches (such as platform beds, molded plastic chairs, and repurposed metal highway signs). Even the stationary [Victory Taco](#) food truck parked next to the hotel (and its outdoor fire pit) is a gleaming, vintage aluminum Spartan trailer. Amenities include a complimentary [Field Guide](#) travel journal to document your road trip. Each of the 38 rooms includes original wall installations by Bozeman artists.

It's the personal service (starting at check-in with freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies in your room) that brings guests back to [Big Sky's Rainbow Ranch Lodge](#) year after year. The small (by Montana standards), five-acre ranch has 21 rooms and one cabin and is conveniently located about 45 miles from Bozeman on U.S. 191. Book a [Riverside](#) room for unobstructed views of the Gallatin River from your private deck. And bring your fishing gear to take advantage of the fully stocked catch-and-release pond.

At the sprawling Big Sky Resort, lodging options range from bare-bones ski dormitories to luxury mountain homes. Many resort-managed properties offer special rates that include breakfast, and all include free skiing for kids ages ten and younger. In Mountain Village (the resort's dining and retail hub), the 198-room [Huntley Lodge](#) is a historic and convenient choice. The hotel is named for legendary NBC News broadcaster and Montana native Chet Huntley and was part of the original Big Sky Resort concept he envisioned. In addition to ski-in/ski-out access to the nearby [Explorer Lift](#), the lodge has an on-site restaurant and shops, ski storage, and a spa. For more privacy, choose [Cowboy Heaven Cabins](#) or the [Alpine Meadow Chalets](#). The on-mountain cabins have decks with outdoor hot tubs, and the chalets have cathedral ceilings and stone fireplaces, plus slope-side access to the lifts at Madison Base.

Lone Mountain Ranch is about ten minutes away from Big Sky Resort, yet offers a more intimate resort experience. The all-inclusive rate includes all meals and activities, including Nordic skiing. There are two private lodge homes, plus 18 traditional and premium cabins (private and duplex) built between 1915 and 1927.

West Yellowstone's original Three Bear Lodge was built in 1932 and severely damaged by fire in 2008. Salvaged sections of the original (the faulty gas pipe that sparked the flames is now a railing in the lobby) were used to rebuild the 27-room, quintessential Montana log-and-stone lodge. Popular with summer tour groups due to its close proximity (two blocks) to Yellowstone National Park, the lodge has a cozy, low-key vibe in winter. Be sure to request the lodge when making reservations. The "motel" rooms are located in the separate Three Bear Motel, which does offer snowmobile (or car) parking outside your door.

## Eat and Drink

For breakfast in Bozeman, try the Nova Cafe, located in the heart of downtown and offering an array of options based on eggs benedict; Western Cafe, known as the Gallatin Valley's "last best café" for such dishes as chicken fried steak, breakfast style; or Granny's Gourmet Donuts, famous locally for creative sweets such as the Applejack Bronut, a fluffy doughnut frosted with apple buttercream and dipped in Applejacks cereal.

Bozeman's lunch and dinner spots share a passion for authentic food and wine. Starky's Authentic Americana is a neighborhood grill known for its house-made pastrami and corned beef, giant cookies, Starky doughnuts, and challah French toast with maple syrup. Plonk Wine is special because of a knowledgeable staff serving cocktails and four-course dinners like duck confit paired with well-thought-out and hard-to-find wines (**Best Bet:** Try a GFC cocktail). The Emerson Grill has been a downtown staple for a decade. Locals love its intimate setting and menu of such dishes as spaghetti and meatballs, fettuccine Bolognese, Caesar salad, fettuccine carbonara, and grape and gorgonzola salad.

For dinner only in Bozeman, head to Blackbird, the centerpiece of which is a wood-fired oven that turns out pizza, meats, roasting vegetables, and baked bread. Montana Ale Works has a devoted, friendly, and well-trained staff, many of whom are also fishing guides, skiers, mountain bikers, river floaters, and so on who can give tips and recommendations about how to enjoy winter in the area. **Best Bet:** Montana Ale Works brews its own beer and, in total, offers 40 local and regional craft beers on tap.

Buck's T-4 in Big Sky boasts that customers get a New York fine-dining experience while dressed in jeans and cowboy boots. Popular wild-game items on the menu are cast-iron-seared red deer with Montana berry reduction, bison tenderloin, duck three ways, and pheasant quesadillas as an appetizer. **Inside Tip:** The restaurant offers complimentary shuttles to the resorts in the area.

The Corral in Gallatin Gateway is a true Montana roadhouse. Built in 1947, it's the oldest food-and-beverage establishment in the Gallatin Canyon. Local favorites include the steak Corral, an eight-ounce beef tenderloin wrapped in hickory-smoked bacon, charbroiled, and topped with snow crab and béarnaise sauce; and the Corral burger, a six- or eight-ounce burger topped with bacon, ham, mushrooms, and white and yellow American cheese.

With a history going back a hundred years, Lone Mountain Ranch offers a special winter treat in the form of sleigh-ride dinners. Visitors journey up the trail in a sleigh under starlit skies and towering pine trees to a cabin lit by lanterns, heated by a wood stove, alive with the music and storytelling of a cowboy singer, and smelling of a meal of prime rib with roasted potatoes, grilled asparagus, and seasonal vegetables. **Inside Tip:** The owners point out that you don't have to be a guest at the ranch to attend the dinner but that it's a nice experience to have a meal and return via sleigh ride, then stay overnight in a log cabin on the property, which adjoins 53 miles of some of the best Nordic trails in the world.

For breakfast or boxed lunches to-go in West Yellowstone, go to Ernie's Bakery, Sandwich Shop and Deli, or Woodside Bakery, whose specialties are "lightning" and "thunder bolts"—croissants filled with Bavarian cream and topped with a glaze (lightning bolts) or chocolate (thunder bolts). For dinner, consider Madison Crossing Lounge, which is housed in the old school building. **Best Bet:** Madison Crossing's menu highlights include Montana-raised grilled bison, rainbow trout, and flat-iron steak topped with Argentinian chimichurri (a house recipe). Be sure to taste the place's signature cocktail, the Huckleberry Lemondrop. Also try Slippery Otter Pub, which fuses the atmosphere of Montana's saloon heritage with a contemporary American cuisine. **Best Bet:** Kids like the pizzas in the shape of bears while adults favor the jalapeño wontons, which are filled with a whipped cream-cheese filling and served with a sweet Montana huckleberry sauce. Finally, eat at Serenity Bistro, which serves items common to the area such as elk, bison, quail, trout, and salmon at reasonable prices.

## Shop

Bozeman has many historic shops. [Schnee's](#) claims it makes the best pac boots in the world and sells them, along with other brands, in its 113-year-old building on the old Yellowstone Trail. **Inside Tip:** Check out the historic gunroom, with a gunsmith on-site. [Alara Jewelry](#), a perennial "Best Place to Buy Jewelry" winner in Bozeman, tries to be the anti-jewelry store by having the all-female staff greet guests with, "What is your mission today?" and selling a collection of handcrafted works from more than 70 artists, including originals by owner Babs Noelle. Shop for Bozeman-made chocolates and warm up with a hot chocolate at [La Châtelaine Chocolat Co.](#), purveyor of artistic sweets such as s'more tarts. **Inside Tip:** If you keep your candy box and return it for a refill, you'll receive two free chocolates.

Visiting Montana in winter means gearing up right. Places to do that in Big Sky include [Gallatin Alpine Sports](#), which sells or rents anything you need for cold-weather fun. [Grizzly Outfitters](#), founded by two ski buddies, is best known for its expert ski-boot fitting backed by their "GrizFit" guarantee. **Inside Tip:** Boots that fit dramatically enhance your skiing experience, so it's worth the expense to get them right. **Best Bet:** The boys have opened a second shop, [Grizzly Outfitters on the River](#), to provide guided fly-fishing trips and other adventures; the location claims to have the lowest ski-rental prices in Big Sky.

[Freeheel and Wheel](#) in West Yellowstone prides itself on getting you the right gear for any nonmotorized winter activity, including cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. **Best Bet:** Stop in for an espresso, mango smoothie, caramel coffee, or other treat at [Mocha Mamas Coffee Bar](#), where you can get information about the latest conditions for frigid-weather fun from staff members who spend their days in the wilderness. **Insider Tip:** While Yellowstone National Park on one side of West Yellowstone is the big attraction, remember that the town's other three sides are surrounded by national forest, making for less crowded winter adventures.

## Events

[Bozeman's Wild West Winterfest](#) at Gallatin County Fairgrounds in February features fun local events that include dog keg pulling, a chili cook-off, and wagon rides.

Taking place one weekend per month from November to March, [Kids 'n' Snow Weekends](#) in West Yellowstone try to take the fear out of winter activities for children by introducing them to safe and fun pursuits such as snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, and ice fishing. **Inside Tip:** Call +1 406 646 7701 or email ([kidsnsnow@gmail.com](mailto:kidsnsnow@gmail.com)) the West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce for the 2016 lineup of activities.

## Tour

The ultimate insider experience at Big Sky Resort is the [First Tracks Guided Experience](#).

## Detours

Ever wanted to ice climb but feel it's out of reach? That's not true in [Hyalite Canyon](#)—located in the Custer Gallatin National Forest, about 15 miles south of Bozeman—which offers experiences scaling frozen water for everyone from beginners to experts. **Best Bet:** Hire [Montana Alpine Guides](#) to teach you how to ice climb and take you on a trip to the canyon.

## Seasonal Notes

In winter, road conditions can change quickly on this route. Before heading out each day, check the [Montana Department of Transportation's interactive traveler conditions map](#) for road closures, alerts, accidents, and highway conditions.

## Fun Fact

[Old Faithful](#) in Yellowstone is nothing if not regular. Year-round, every one and a half to two hours, the cone geyser erupts, shooting 4,000 to 8,000 gallons of scalding water and steam into the air for about two minutes.

## Suggested Itinerary

### Day One: Bozeman

- [Bozeman](#)
- [The Siebel Dinosaur Complex](#)
- [Museum of the Rockies](#)
- [The Emerson Center for the Arts and Culture](#)
- [Bozeman's free, outdoor ice rinks](#)
- [Bohart Ranch Cross Country Ski Center](#)
- [The LARK](#)
- [Starky's Authentic Americana](#)
- [Plonk Wine](#)
- [Emerson Grill](#)
- [Blackbird Kitchen](#)
- [Montana Ale Works](#)



### **Day Two: Bozeman to Big Sky**

- [Nova Café](#)
- [Western Café](#)
- [Granny's Gourmet Donuts](#)
- [Gallatin Alpine Sports](#)
- [Grizzly Outfitters](#)
- [Hyalite Canyon](#)
- [Montana Alpine Guides](#)

### **Day Three: Big Sky**

- [Big Sky Resort](#)
- [Spirit of the North Sled Dog Adventures](#)
- [Big Sky Resort lodgings](#)
- [Huntley Lodge](#)
- [Cowboy Heaven Cabins](#)
- [Alpine Meadow Chalet](#)
- [Lone Mountain Ranch](#)
- [Buck's T-4](#)
- [Lone Mountain Ranch sleigh ride dinners](#)

### **Day Four: Big Sky to West Yellowstone**

- [West Yellowstone](#)
- [Yellowstone Tour and Travel](#)
- [Rendezvous Snowmobile Rentals](#)
- [Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center](#)
- [Rainbow Ranch Lodge](#)
- [Three Bear Lodge](#)
- [The Corral](#)
- [Madison Crossing Lounge](#)
- [Slippery Otter Pub](#)
- [Serenity Bistro](#)
- [First Tracks](#)

### **Day Five: West Yellowstone to Big Sky**

- [Ernie's Bakery, Sandwich Shop & Deli](#)
- [Woodside Bakery](#)
- [Big Sky Resort](#)
- [Two Top Snowmobile Rental](#)
- [Rent Nordic ski gear](#)

## Day Six: Big Sky to Bozeman

- [Bridger Bowl](#)
- [Schnee's](#)
- [Alara Jewelry](#)
- [La Chatelaine Chocolat Co.](#)