

Yellowstone's steaming, belching spectacle is best seen in person

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Crowds of visitors on the wooden walkways at the Midway Geyser Basin walk through the steam clouds around the colourful Grand Prismatic Spring in Yellowstone National Park.
Photograph By Mark Boster, TNS

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Most days, in most ways, this park's Upper Geyser Basin is a geothermal outlaw biker beach party — belching and splashing at all hours, with a sulfuric whiff of menace riding the breeze.

But in one patch of boiling mud, about 17 times a day, the bubbling becomes something bigger. Heated to 93 C or more, the water and steam rise 15, 30 metres and beyond into the vast Wyoming sky.

If it's a summer day, the surrounding boardwalk and benches will be teeming with travellers from Chicago, China and thousands of other places where mud doesn't bubble. As the splashes grow, so do the oohs and ahhs. Sometimes Old Faithful blows for just 90 seconds, sometimes for a full five minutes.

Either way, it's one of the most thrilling scenes in North America.

There's no telling what fiery volcanic catastrophe might someday erupt in Yellowstone, but for now, this geyser masks that menace as a charming little ritual, a family photo op.

That's part of Yellowstone's appeal. Its beasts and geothermal wonders could kill you or bury several states in ash. But in the meantime, they're beautiful.

And — except for the bison that dawdle in the middle of Grand Loop Road — they usually don't stand still. Two black bear cubs scamper behind their mother across a meadow near Roosevelt Lodge.

A rainbow flickers above the Lower Falls in the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. Steam billows from Chinese Spring as dusk falls on a cold, windy day.

In late July, I spent four days among these iconic scenes with Los Angeles Times photographer Mark Boster. (Yellowstone is mostly in Wyoming but spills over into Montana and Idaho.) And as I did, my mind kept wandering back to an event in 1871, when photographer William Henry Jackson and painter Thomas Moran arrived here on the first federally funded expedition to document the area.

How much chance did Jackson and Moran have of capturing a landscape so thrumming with motion and colour? After all, it took so long to shoot and process an image that 13 black-and-white glass-plate exposures were a long day's work.

They did their best and took the results to Washington. The next year, Congress voted to make Yellowstone the world's first national park. (The legislators also agreed to buy a Moran oil painting, *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, for \$10,000.)

These days, the park gets about 3.5 million visitors a year. Every park lodging was sold out when we were there. (In later summer and early fall, your chances of landing a room are better — especially this year, with the opening of 249 new rooms in the park's central Canyon Lodge area. They'll stay open through Sept. 20.)

I had been to Yellowstone with my family just five years ago, but I was thrilled again to behold the elk that lounge on the lawns at Mammoth Hot Springs, to spy a dozen bison roaming a ridge above the Hayden Valley, to watch a man, his son and his grandson fly-fishing at dusk on the Madison River.

The massive log architecture and stone fireplace of the Old Faithful Inn, perhaps the most emblematic lodge in the national park system, were as impressive as ever. And even though I knew precisely what was coming at Old Faithful, I had to hang around long enough to see it erupt not once but twice.

I also had to make peace with crowds and crowd behaviour. Most visitors, of course, were great, and it makes an American proud to hear the honest enthusiasm and varied accents around Old Faithful at just about any hour.

But in those four days, I saw an entire family step off the boardwalk to pose for pictures in a dangerous geothermal area; one father helping his son stick his fingers into the water of an off-limits hot spring; and several men and women advancing perilously close to bear and bison.

Then there was the encounter I learned about from rangers: On our second day in the park, a 43-year-old woman from Mississippi approached a bison near the Fairy Falls trailhead, then turned her back on it to take a selfie. The animal stepped forward, lifted the woman with its head and threw her to the ground. Her injuries were minor, rangers said. Hers was the fifth bison-related injury of the summer.

(Two weeks after my visit, authorities found the body of a 63-year-old Montana man who had been killed by a grizzly while hiking alone off-trail. He was the park's third grizzly fatality since 2010.)

The best way to steer clear of animal attacks, rangers say, is to follow the park's rules: Stay at least 100 metres away from a bear (especially a mother with cubs) and at least 25 metres from bison or elk.

To steer clear of crowds? Hike more. Drive less. Rise early. Rest at midday. Roam widely in late afternoon and early evening, when many families retreat to dinner.

But keep in mind that it's possible to have a sublime park experience in the middle of a crowd.

I know this because one morning, I braved the busy Midway Geyser Basin parking lot, crossed a little bridge over the Firehole River and joined the procession of global tourists on the boardwalk.

First we passed Excelsior Geyser Crater. Then we strode straight into a great white cloud with a sulfurous stink.

Somewhere before me, I knew, was Grand Prismatic Spring, the largest in the park, about 90 metres across. But where?

Then the wind shifted. Steam and stink vanished. Suddenly it was 10 degrees cooler, with a wraparound view.

The spring began at the boardwalk's edge with a flat, brown earthen crust, then a soggy orange fringe, a yellow edge and then the spring itself, whose greenish shallows gave way to blue. The deep blue of prisms, of cake frosting, of too much Photoshop. Implausible blue.

Then the hot, stinky cloud swallowed me again, and my only sensory input was the sound of a thousand tourists, murmuring in a dozen languages at the strangeness of it all.

Every time the wind changed, the setting shifted again. One moment, misty, lunar desolation. The next, a boiling blue pool with a forested slope beyond.

I couldn't get enough. I walked the loop twice. I climbed ridges to the north and south to get different perspectives. And I imagined William Henry Jackson and Thomas Moran at wits' end, desperate to capture some sliver of this sensory spectacle.

Later, I tracked down their photos and paintings and wondered: If color photography and reproduction had been common in the 1870s, would Grand Prismatic Spring have become Yellowstone's marquee attraction instead of Old Faithful?

It hardly matters. Whether our photo-op tools come from the 19th century or the 21st, we're all overmatched at Grand Prismatic Spring and at Yellowstone.

If you want the gleaming, belching, splashing, seething, stinking, roaring, growling, menacing essence of the place, you'd better just come and put yourself in the middle of it.

Do's and don'ts when you visit the park

Don't get within 100 metres of a wolf or bear, or within 25 metres of bison, elk, bighorn sheep, deer, moose and coyotes. Rangers say more people are hurt by bison than by bears. (Bison can run about 55 km/h — three times faster than most people.)

Don't imagine you can cover 30 kilometres in 20 minutes on Grand Loop Road, the park's main artery, which is shaped like a big figure eight. It's mostly a two-lane road, with speeds capped at 72 km/h or less. Animals frequently interrupt traffic.

Don't expect easy winter access. Most park roads are closed to automobiles between early November and late April, and most park lodgings have similar seasons. But there are winter options at www.lat.ms/1Ki8ryW.

Do brave the crowds to see Old Faithful spout. After all, it's the park's marquee attraction. And the people-watching is priceless.

Do check out the rest of the Upper Geyser Basin, a collection of about 150 geysers neighbouring the Firehole River. If you take a bridge across the river, the features continue, connected by a boardwalk and trail.

Distances from Old Faithful

0.5 km west: Do book at least six months ahead if you want to stay at Old Faithful Inn, and forget about staying there in winter; it's open only in warmer months. (It closes this year on Oct. 11.) It's an easy stroll from dozens of geysers. Rooms for two start at \$108 (for old-style units that share a bathroom down the hall) and go up to \$260. Suites fetch \$479-\$525. For info, call Xanterra at 866- 439-7375 or go to yellowstonenationalparklodges.com.

3 km north: Don't miss Morning Glory Pool. It's part of the Upper Geyser Basin, The blue is striking but now marred by a ring of yellow algae that rangers say may be caused by rule-breaking visitors who throw things into the pool.

10 km north: Do get to Midway Geyser Basin by 9 a.m. That way, the parking lot might not be full yet. The main attraction is Grand Prismatic Spring.

25 km north: The Madison River runs for 16 kilometres alongside Highway 287. It has some of the park's best fly-fishing.

51 km northwest: Don't expect a bargain price — in fact, standard rooms in summer fetch \$250-\$280 — but the Yellowstone West Gate Hotel (638 Madison Ave., West Yellowstone, Montana; 406-646-4212; yellowstonewestgatehotel.com) is a comfortable 79-room lodging in the gateway town of West Yellowstone. Rates dip in September and October; in late October the hotel closes for the winter. Call for specifics.

65 km northeast: Do consider the hundreds of new units at Canyon Lodge. Concessionaire Xanterra is putting up several new lodge buildings and pulling down hundreds of old cabins. They will be open through Sept. 20 and open again June 3-Sept. 25 in 2016. Nightly rates for 2015 are \$222-\$254, or \$479 for suites. Two more lodge buildings are due to open next August.

For details, call Xanterra or go to yellowstonenationalparklodges.com.

67 km northeast (70 minutes' drive): If you're in decent shape, do take the Brink of the Lower Falls trail along the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River. The trail of switchbacks down to the falls is just a little more than half a kilometre, but it's a 183-metre altitude change, which makes for slow going.

67 km northeast: Do keep your eyes open in Hayden Valley. The valley's mostly grassy slopes, a great spot for sighting bears, bison and other beasts, offer clear views above a lazy stretch of Yellowstone River.

75 km south: Do make time for Grand Teton National Park. This geysers park gets 2.8 million visitors yearly to Yellowstone's 3.5 million.

80 km north: For nearly certain elk sightings, do head to Mammoth Hot Springs near the park's northern boundary. Mammoth Hot Spring Hotel & Cabins will be open through Oct. 12 and in winter from Dec. 18 to Feb. 29. But with upgrades in the next several years, Xanterra hopes to make this the only park hotel open year-round. Rooms \$90 to \$250; \$479 for suites. Info: yellowstonenationalparklodges.com.

188 km west: For a great family detour, do consider a day and night in Cody, Wyoming, where summer offers include a nightly rodeo, six faux shootouts per week outside the Hotel Irma; and a fascinating complex of museums at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West.

192 km north: If you're heading into Yellowstone from the north, check out the lively college town of Bozeman, Montana.

Bozeman has youthful energy, Old West flavour

BOZEMAN, Montana — Yellowstone has some great small-city neighbours.

To the south, just beyond Grand Teton National Park, there's Jackson Hole, the Aspen of Wyoming.

To the east, Cody, Wyoming, where the summer is one long procession of rodeo events and shootout skits.

There's also West Yellowstone, Montana, which is neither beautiful nor cheap but does have many vintage neon signs.

Till my last visit, I hadn't gone north to Bozeman. Now I wish I had given it more time. Bozeman (population: 39,860) has youthful energy, Old West trappings and immediate access to all sorts of epic outdoor places.

It's home to Montana State University (enrolment: 15,400); the Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport (through which I flew) and the Museum of the Rockies, which has one of the world's leading dinosaur fossil collections.

I'm not going to pretend I spent my time studying up on triceratops and deinonychus. Mostly I ate, drank and slept. And mostly I stayed on Main Street.

Among the highlights:

- Breakfast: Nova Café, 312 E. Main St.; thenovacafe.com. Top breakfast price is \$12.75 for crab cake Benedict.
- Lunch: Victory Taco, an Airstream trailer converted into a food truck, sells tacos and ice cream. Opened this year, it's in the Lark Hotel parking lot. facebook.com/VictoryTaco
- Dinner: Roost Fried Chicken, 1520 W. Main St.; roostfriedchicken.com. Salads and sandwiches \$7-\$8.75, breast \$4, thigh \$3. A 12-piece family meal (with sides, biscuits and drinks) for \$35.
- Drinks: Montana Aleworks, 611 E. Main St.; (406) 587-7700, montanaaleworks.com. Dozens of beers. Most dinner main dishes \$9.95-\$24.
- Sleeping: Lark Hotel, 122 W. Main St.; larkbozeman.com. Opened this year. Summer rates are \$178-\$259; fall, \$129-\$229; winter, \$129-\$189.

Yellowstone timeline

About 640,000 years ago: A massive eruption creates the Yellowstone Caldera.

About 174,000 years ago: Another Yellowstone volcano eruption reshapes Yellowstone Lake, creating the area now known as West Thumb.

1869: After generations of occupation by native peoples and years of exploration by trappers and others, the Folsom-Cook-Peterson Expedition is the first of three to take formal measure of the Yellowstone area.

1870: Members of the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition come upon an oddly reliable geyser and name it Old Faithful.

1872: Congress and President Ulysses S. Grant act to make Yellowstone the world's first national park. Amount set aside to develop, protect and maintain the park: none.

1886: Because park officials have no resources, the U.S. Army is assigned to operate the 890,000-hectare park.

1904: Workers complete Old Faithful Inn.

1911: The 400-room Canyon Hotel opens.

1918: Yellowstone gets its first rangers. They count 21,275 visitors for the year.

1926: The last wolf pack in Yellowstone is killed, though individual wolves remain.

1948: Annual visitation reaches one million.

1960: The Canyon Hotel burns down.

1971: Park offers winter lodging for the first time at Old Faithful Snow Lodge.

1988: Summer fires burn for months and blacken more than 320,000 hectares — more than one-third of the park — before rain and snow subdue the flames in September.

1990s: Snowmobiling becomes a popular park pursuit.

2000: Park Service starts phasing out most snowmobile use. A long legal battle begins. Snowmobiles and snowcoaches still operate, but with many restrictions.

1995: Grey wolves are reintroduced to the park. More than 300 wolves now live in greater Yellowstone.

2014: About 3.5 million visitors.

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