1

Introducing Yellowstone & Grand Teton National Parks

Long before you reach the entrance to Grand Teton National Park, your sights will be set on the towering spires of the Teton Range—those signature hornlike peaks made famous through countless photographs. From afar, Yellowstone is not as dramatic because much of the parkland comprises heavily forested mountains, burn areas, and arid, high-country plateaus. However, at closer glance, Yellowstone's natural marvels are startling: hundreds of geysers, scores of inspiring waterfalls, and a gorge—carved by time and water—that rivals the Grand Canyon. Both parks command the imagination and envelop the senses from the moment of arrival.

Creatures great and small thrive in Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks. In the wilderness of Yellowstone's southern corners, grizzlies feed on cutthroat trout during their annual spawning run to the Yellowstone headwaters. In the soft blue depths of Octopus Pond, microbes of enormous scientific value are incubated and born; in the mountain ridges, wolves make their dens and mountain lions hunt bighorn sheep. Bald eagles and osprey soar above the banks of the Snake River in Grand Teton, moose munch their way through meadows of native foliage, and elk and buffalo lazily traverse the park on the same roads as visitors.

When John Colter, a scout for Lewis and Clark, first wandered this way in 1807, his descriptions of geysers and sulfurous hot pools and towering waterfalls drew jeers and suspicion. No one doubts him now, but these are still places you should see for yourself. The explorers of today come in minivans and on bicycles, aboard snowmobiles and telemark skis, and in such numbers that the parks sometimes groan under the strain.

In the early days of Yellowstone, first established as a national park in 1872, visitors were so sparse that the things they did—catching a string of 100 trout, washing their underwear in the hot pools—left few noticeable scars. Now, with millions of people visiting the parks annually, the strain on everything from sewer systems to fish populations is immense.

While there are problems, these parks still radiate with extraordinary beauty: the jagged Tetons, the glassy surface of Jenny Lake, the awe-inspiring Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, the towering Obsidian Cliff, the steamy meandering of the Firehole River. Wildlife that most Americans see only in zoos wanders freely here, from the grizzly to the river otter, the trumpeter swan to the rufous hummingbird. Aspen groves, fields of lupine, the howls of coyotes and wolves—all these testify to the resilience and vitality of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, which extends outside the borders of the park to include Grand Teton and beyond.

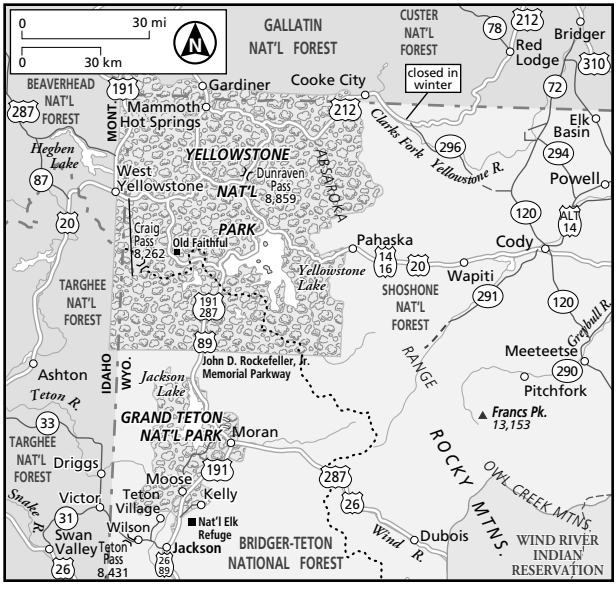
This is not just a paradise for sightseers—it's a scientific preserve as well. The hot pools support a population of unique microbes known as thermophiles and extremophiles; studies of the elk herds and grizzly have yielded crucial information on habitat needs and animal behavior; and the rocks of Yellowstone are like the earth turned inside out, a treasure-trove for geologists.

Most visitors will see or know little of this. They park in a pullout on U.S. Hwy. 191/89/26 to pose in front of Grand Teton, or they sit on the crowded benches to watch Old Faithful erupt. If you have more time, however, I suggest that you take little sections of these parks—just the Jenny Lake area in Grand Teton, say, or Yellowstone's northeast corner, the Lamar Valley—and savor them in all their fine detail rather than embark on a madcap race to see every highlight.

Definitely get out of your car and away from the road, into the wild heart of the backcountry. These parks embody our country's beginnings: a nation of wilderness, of challenging and rugged extremes, and a landscape of extraordinary bounty and beauty. Use this guide as a set of footprints to help you find your way there.

1 THE BEST OF YELLOWSTONE & GRAND TETON

A "best of" list could never do justice to Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. These are just starting points, the best of the excellent accommodations and food the parks offer, as well as the unique sightseeing and recreational opportunities. Some involve backcountry expeditions; others can be enjoyed from behind the steering wheel. In the wildly diverse environments of these two parks, you can be as adventurous as you want, climbing peaks and spending the night deep in the wilderness, or simply enjoying the more civilized side of the park at grand lodges and enchanting roadside overlooks.



THE BEST VIEWS

You'll never get it all in a camera lens, but you'll undoubtedly try. Don't let that viewfinder get attached to your face; take a few shots, or run a little videotape, and then put the camera down so you can enjoy this place with all your senses.

- **Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River** (Yellowstone): The waterfalls are spectacular, especially the 308-foot Lower Falls (twice the height of Niagara), and the steeply cut canyon walls are colorful and alive with life. Take the short, easy hikes to **Inspiration Point** or **Artist Point,** and you'll see the falls that stimulated Thomas Moran's creativity. If you're in reasonable shape, hike down the short but steep trail to the **Brink of the Upper Falls** or the 328-step steel staircase known as **Uncle Tom's Trail.** (Be careful of slick spots during the spring and following afternoon thundershowers.) See "Yellowstone: The Extended Tour," in chapter 3.
- **Lamar Valley** (Yellowstone): Bring your telephoto lens or binoculars to the northeast corner of the park, one of the best places to spot wildlife: **bison** and **elk** grazing along the Lamar River, **wolves** at Slough Creek and among the big ungulates, and the occasional

grizzly bear on its never-ending quest for food. See "Yellowstone: The Extended Tour," in chapter 3.

- **Yellowstone Lake** (Yellowstone): Sunrise over Yellowstone Lake is stunningly beautiful, especially if there's fog on the lake, whether you watch it from the sunroom at the Lake Yellowstone Hotel or (better) from a campsite along the southern wilderness shore. For an equally spectacular sunset view, drive 10 miles east of the hotel to **Lake Butte Overlook.** See "Yellowstone: The Extended Tour," in chapter 3.
- **Cathedral Group** (Grand Teton): The three central mountains in the Teton Range rarely disappoint, except on the rare occasion when weather gets in the way—clouds tend to accent rather than obscure their majesty. You'll need a wide-angle lens to get it all in from the valley floor (there are pullouts along the highway between Moran Junction and Jackson), but if you want a panoramic shot, drive east on U.S. Hwy. 26/287 toward Togwotee Pass. See "The Highlights," in chapter 5.
- **Elk** (Grand Teton): While visiting the Jackson/Grand Teton area during the winter, take the opportunity to ride a horse-drawn sleigh out among thousands of elk on the **National Elk Refuge.** You'll get close-up shots of some of the biggest antler racks in the world, and you'll probably see coyotes and sometimes wolves. See "Jackson, Wyoming," in chapter 8.

THE BEST THERMAL DISPLAYS

Yellowstone has more thermal features—geysers, mud pots, and steam vents—than the rest of the world combined. When you're angling for a good shot of a colorful pool or a belching mud pot, obey the signs—otherwise, you could find yourself, literally, on shaky ground.

- **Old Faithful Geyser** (Yellowstone): While not quite as faithful as it used to be—the intervals average 74 minutes but sometimes stretch as long as 120 minutes—it's still the most predictable geyser on the planet, blasting water 130 feet into the air more than 20 times a day. How could you skip this one? See "Yellowstone: The Extended Tour," in chapter 3.
- **West Thumb** (Yellowstone): This lakeside thermal area is a must-stop for its collection of gemlike hot pools and steaming vents, as well as Fishing Cone, where early visitors poached their catch—until they realized the scalding water had natural traces of arsenic. See "If You Have Only 1 or 2 Days (the Short Tour)," in chapter 3.
- The **Mammoth Hot Springs Terraces** (Yellowstone): Here you can observe Mother Nature going about the business of mixing and matching heat, water, limestone, and rock fractures to sculpt the area. This is one of the most colorful areas in the park; its tapestries

of orange, pink, yellow, green, and brown, formed by masses of bacteria and algae, seem to change colors before your eyes. The mineral-rich hot waters that flow to the surface here do so at an unusually constant rate, roughly 750,000 gallons per day. See "Yellowstone: The Extended Tour," in chapter 3.

THE BEST DAY HIKES

Just a few hundred yards off the road, things get a lot less crowded, and you'll have the views and the wildlife (almost) to yourself. The hikes described have an easy rating, but you'll find more challenging options later in the book.

- The **Mount Washburn Trail** (Yellowstone): Starting at Dunraven Pass, south of Tower Junction, this walk to the fire lookout atop Mount Washburn offers unsurpassed views of both parks plus the opportunity to see mountain wildlife such as bighorn sheep. See p. 86.
- The **Lonestar Geyser Trail** (Yellowstone): This gentle, 5-mile hike along the Firehole River presents several places to stop and take in the scenery, fish, and—at the endpoint—view this active, medium-size geyser of its name. It is also one of a few bicycle-friendly trails in Yellowstone, and, in the winter, this is a popular cross-country skiing trail. See p. 90.
- **Cascade Canyon Trail** (Grand Teton): This hike can be short and sweet or long and rewarding. Make a day of it, or simply take a boat ride across the lake and hike to Hidden Falls, and you'll barely break a sweat. See p. 127.
- **Signal Mountain Summit Trail** (Grand Teton): The hike to the summit of Signal Mountain is rewarding for its solitude. While everyone else drives to the top, you'll have the same views and be closer to the greenery and wildlife. See p. 125.

THE BEST BACKCOUNTRY TRAILS

- **The Thorofare Trail** (Yellowstone): This hike will take you deeper into road-free wilderness than you can get anywhere else in the Lower 48 states. You'll spend a few nights on the trail, climbing up to the park's southern border and beyond to the Yellowstone River's headwaters, a high valley bursting with wildlife. Early in the summer, if the snow has melted, the cutthroat spawning run attracts grizzlies and fishers. It's not for the faint of heart. See "Exploring the Backcountry," in chapter 4.
- **Cascade Canyon Loop** (Grand Teton): Perhaps the most popular trail in Grand Teton, the Cascade Canyon Loop, which starts on the west side of Jenny Lake, winds northwest 9.5 miles on the

Cascade Canyon Trail to Lake Solitude and the Paintbrush Divide, and then returns past Holly Lake on the 10-mile Paintbrush Canyon Trail. The payoff comes at the highest point, Paintbrush Divide, with marvelous views of Jackson Hole Valley and Leigh Lake. See "Exploring the Backcountry," in chapter 6.

THE BEST CAMPGROUNDS

If you stay in developed campgrounds in the parks, the outdoor life is pretty civilized. You'll have running water and, in most cases, flush toilets, plus there are opportunities to meet fellow campers.

- **Jenny Lake Campground** (Grand Teton): Situated near the edge of the lake from which it takes its name, Jenny Lake Campground is nestled among spruce and fir trees just a short walk away from the South Jenny Lake area. It's the perfect place to spend the night if you plan to hike around the lake to Hidden Falls or up Cascade Canyon the next day. The only problem: There are no site reservations, and sites are usually taken early in the morning. See p. 156.
- **Norris Campground** (Yellowstone): Although it's away from the hotels and services, the Norris Campground has excellent sites with a little elbow room, as well as flush toilets and the Solfatara Trailhead. A small hillside amphitheater hosts campfire talks by rangers. The campground is across the street from the Norris Geyser Basin and within walking distance of the Museum of the National Park Ranger. See p. 146.
- **Slough Creek Campground** (Yellowstone): Another favorite is out in the Lamar Valley. The campground is smaller, but it's away from the crowds (and other services) yet close to fishing and wolf viewing. Because of the wildlife-watching and fishing opportunities here, it fills quite early. See p. 145.

THE BEST PLACES TO EAT IN THE PARKS

Don't expect five-star dining (with one exception) or a great variety, but the food is well prepared, the servers are cheerful, and the dining rooms are mostly big, convivial gathering places. All of these are detailed in chapter 7.

- The **Old Faithful Inn,** Yellowstone (✆ **307/344-7311**): Can't beat the ambience: a grand stone-and-timber lodge perched next to the most famous geyser in the world. The food's pretty good, too, but it can be inconsistent. See p. 151.
- The **Lake Yellowstone Hotel,** Yellowstone (✆ **307/344-7311**): Enjoy a bit of Victorian-era hospitality (without dressing up) and the finest food in the Wyoming wilderness. There are views of the

lake from the dining room and the comfortable lounge area off the lobby. See p. 150.

- **Jenny Lake Lodge Dining Room,** Grand Teton (✆ **307/733-4647**): This place gets my five-star award: Dine where presidents have dined on five-course meals featuring such delicacies as smoked sturgeon ravioli. Breakfast and dinner are included in the price of a room; nonguests can call for reservations, but it's not cheap. See p. 160.
- **Signal Mountain Lodge,** Grand Teton (✆ **307/543-2831**): **Trapper Grill** and **Deadman's Bar** here make good casual meals (including mountainous plates of nachos in the latter), with a view of Jackson Lake and the Tetons or, in the lounge, a view of one of the few televisions in the park. **Peaks** offers finer dining, with a largely organic menu. See p. 160.

THE BEST PLACES TO SLEEP IN THE PARKS

My Yellowstone favorites are both grand hotels, but they're very different. In Grand Teton, I lean toward the rustic option. All of these are detailed in chapter 7.

- The **Lake Yellowstone Hotel,** Yellowstone (✆ **307/344-7311**): Try this recipe for a great vacation: a quiet drink in the sunroom overlooking the lake, a friendly meal in the big dining room, a walk by the lake, and then a comfortable bed in one of the big wings. See p. 142.
- The **Old Faithful Inn,** Yellowstone (✆ **307/344-7311**): As if the wonders outside aren't enough, this is the park's architectural high point, a cavernous lobby with an 85-foot-high ceiling and lodgepole balconies inside and out. Get a room in the old lodge, not the wings, even if the bathrooms are down the hall. See p. 143.
- **Jenny Lake Lodge,** Grand Teton (✆ **800/628-9988**): Solitude, great food, and beautifully appointed cabins with porches—there is just one downside: the high prices. See p. 154.
- **Colter Bay Village,** Grand Teton (✆ **800/628-9988** or 307/543-3100): Rough it in a roomy canvas tent with a stove and bunk beds and firewood delivered to your door (or flap). The rates are relatively inexpensive, and the fresh air is free. For a step up, try the rustic cabins. See p. 153.

THE BEST PLACES TO EAT OUTSIDE THE PARKS

This is food so good that you won't mind spending $15 to $30 for entrees. These establishments are detailed in chapter 8.

- **In Jackson, Wyoming: Rendezvous Bistro** (✆ **307/739-1100**) offers steaks, seafood, and game dishes with creative twists, not to mention the perfect balance of chic and casual. See p. 192. Mornings, though, you'll find me at **Nora's Fish Creek Inn** (✆ **307/733-8288**), in nearby Wilson, with a bottomless cup of coffee and a huge plate of huevos rancheros. See p. 193.
- **In Cody, Wyoming: Cassie's Supper Club** (✆ **307/527-5500**) is a brothel turned cowboy eatery, plating up some of the best steaks in the Rockies. After dinner, country bands hold court over the bustling dance floor. See p. 203.
- **In West Yellowstone, Montana: Sydney's Mountain Bistro** (✆ **406/646-7660**) offers an intimate setting, an excellent wine list, and a menu that balances seafood and vegetarian fare with beef, poultry, and pork. Entrees such as sweet-chile salmon and a porterhouse pork chop with butternut squash make this my pick for a special meal at the west entrance to Yellowstone. See p. 167.

THE BEST PLACES TO SLEEP OUTSIDE THE PARKS

All of the following are detailed in chapter 8.

- **In Jackson, Wyoming:** The **Wort Hotel** (✆ **307/733-2190**) is a downtown Jackson landmark with comfortable "New West"–style rooms; it's also a good value for its downtown location. See p. 183. In nearby Wilson, I love the wooded whimsy of **A Teton Treehouse** (✆ **307/733-3233**), a B&B located 95 steps from the road up a forested hillside where flying squirrels glide in the canopy.
- **In Gardiner, Montana:** The **Absaroka Lodge** (✆ **800/755-7414**) has modern rooms and decks overlooking the Yellowstone River, near the center of town. See p. 169.
- **In West Yellowstone, Montana:** Sleek and opulent, but definitively Western, the newly renovated lodge rooms and cabins at the **Bar N Ranch** (✆ **406/646-0300**) are the most distinctive lodgings in the chain-dominated town. See p. 164. Another pick: **Moose Creek Cabins** (✆ **406/646-9546**) is a good value and one of the better maintained properties in town with cabins (good for families) and cabin-style motel rooms with queen beds.
- **In Cody, Wyoming:** Centered on a serene and green courtyard, the new-and-improved **Chamberlin Inn** (✆ **888/587-0202**) features charming historic rooms and apartment units. See p. 201. **The Cody** (✆ **307/587-5915**) became the top modern hotel in the town of its name when it opened in 2008. Located on the west end of town, the hotel has a colorful, thoroughly Western-chic design in both the common areas and the spacious guest rooms. See p. 201.

THE BEST THINGS TO SEE & DO OUTSIDE THE PARKS

Don't assume a Yellowstone and Grand Teton vacation is limited to park boundaries. Here are a few attractions worth highlighting in the area. See chapter 8 for more information.

- **In Cody, Wyoming:** The **Buffalo Bill Historical Center** (✆ **307/587-4771**) is the best museum in the region. See p. 198. Another can't-miss is the **Cody Nite Rodeo** (✆ **800/207-0744**), the only rodeo held every night throughout the summer. See p. 199.
- **In Jackson, Wyoming:** Glimpse some of the finest artistic interpretations of the natural world at the fantastic **National Museum of Wildlife Art** (✆ **307/733-5771**), which houses 1,300 pieces within its red-sandstone walls. See p. 180. At the top of the **Jackson Hole Aerial Tram** (✆ **307/739-2753**) at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort, you can see the Tetons from an elevation above 10,000 feet. During busy summer days, the tram carries 45 passengers, packed in like the skiers that take the lift in the winter. See p. 179.
- **In West Yellowstone, Montana:** For a look at Yellowstone's cultural history, pay a visit to the **Yellowstone Historic Center** (✆ **406/646-1100**) in the historic Union Pacific depot. See p. 163.

THE BEST SCENIC DRIVES

Roll down the windows, crank up your favorite music, and take time to relax as you travel these byways.

- Every stretch along the figure eight of roads at the center of Yellowstone has some scenic allure, but my favorite is the part along the western and northern shores of **Yellowstone Lake.** There's less traffic than around Old Faithful or the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, and you have a good chance of seeing wildlife east of **Fishing Bridge,** as well as steaming geothermal features near **West Thumb.** The drive is best in the morning, when the sun is rising over the steaming lake. See chapter 3.
- From the northeast entrance of Yellowstone, head across the Beartooth Highway (U.S. Hwy. 212) to Red Lodge, Montana; at Red Lodge, head southeast toward Cody (Mont. 308 to Wyo. 120), and then catch the **Chief Joseph Highway** (Wyo. 296) and return to the park. Imagine this: dramatic mountain peaks, river valleys, painted landscapes, and two Old West towns, all on this 155-mile drive. See chapter 3.
- A twisting, narrow road climbs **Signal Mountain** to a fine 360-degree view of the valley and the mountains. On the way up, you'll see wildflowers and birds, and from the top, you can study the moraines and potholes left by retreating glaciers. See chapter 5.

2 A LOOK AT YELLOWSTONE

Think about this: What other national park boasts an assortment of some 10,000 thermal features, including more than 300 geysers? Even when the rest of North America was largely a wilderness, Yellowstone was unique. The geothermal area is greater than any other in the world, with mud pots, geysers, and hot springs of all colors, sizes, and performances. Plus, there's a waterfall that's twice as tall as Niagara Falls and a canyon deep and colorful enough to be called "grand." Sure, other parks have great hiking trails and beautiful geologic formations—Grand Teton is pretty spectacular in its own right, as is Yosemite—but a sizable percentage of the geology in Yellowstone is reachable by visitors in average shape.

Ever focus your telephoto lens on an untamed grizzly bear? Or a bald eagle? What about a wolf? Thousands of visitors have these experiences here every year. Protected by the national park and surrounding forests from development, Yellowstone is home to herds of bison, elk, grizzly bears, trumpeter swans, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, and more subtle beauties such as wildflowers and hummingbirds.

And the park doesn't appeal solely to the visual senses; you'll smell it, too. By one biologist's estimate, Yellowstone has more than 1,100 species of native plants. When wildflowers cover the meadows in spring, their fragrances are overpowering. The mud pots and fumaroles have their own set of odors, although many are less pleasing than a wild lily.

Your ears will be filled with the sounds of geysers noisily spewing forth thousands of gallons of boiling water into the blue Wyoming sky. After sunset, coyotes break the silence of the night with their high-pitched yips.

You can spend weeks hiking its backcountry or fishing its streams, but the park's road system makes it easy to tour in a day or two from behind the windshield. Yes, *really.* It's possible to see most of the highlights of Yellowstone without hitting the trail. Park roads lead past most of the key attractions and are filled with wildlife commuting from one grazing area to another. While there's no doubt that driving through the park yields vivid memories, those who don't leave their cars are shortchanging themselves.

Yellowstone is just as active after summer ends, when the park is open for snowmobiling and skiing for 3 months during the winter. (***Note:*** For snowmobile policy updates, visit **www.nps.gov/yell**.)

3 A LOOK AT GRAND TETON

Because the Grand Tetons stand so tall, with the park curling snugly at their feet, visitors sometimes fail to appreciate this surrounding environment of rivers and high valley floor. The Tetons are a young range of old pre-Cambrian granite, abrupt and sharp-edged as they knife up from the Snake River valley, sliding upward along a 40-mile-long fault sculpted over the course of the last 13 million years, with help from geological upheaval, retreating glaciers, and erosion. The result is a masterpiece. Many visitors regard Grand Teton National Park as more dramatically and immediately scenic than its northern neighbor, with its shimmering lakes, thickly carpeted forests, and towering peaks blanketed with snow throughout most of the year.

It's also a very accessible park. You can appreciate its breathtaking beauty on a quick drive-by, or take to the trails and waterways in search of backcountry lakes and waterfalls. The Tetons themselves are especially popular with mountain climbers, who scale them year-round.

There's a dynamic relationship between the Tetons and the valley below. The elk and other wildlife migrate from the high country down to the open grasslands to forage during the winter, when the snowmelt curls across the valley floor and west through a gap in the mountains, and the moraines and alluvial soils that slough off the mountains provide rich soil for the pastures below.

Visitors can float and fish the lively Snake River, visit the National Elk Refuge in the winter, hike in nearby ranges such as the Wind River or the Gros Ventre, or play cowboy at one of the dude and guest ranches that dot the valley of Jackson Hole. Skiers and snowboarders have a blast on the slopes here, as well as at Grand Targhee on the other side of Teton Pass. And the chic town of Jackson, with its antler-arched town square and its busy shops, offers everything from fly-fishing shops to classy art galleries to noisy two-step cowboy bars.

4 MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR TRIP

Yellowstone and Grand Teton are more than photo ops and zoos where the animals roam free. They aren't museums, either, where magnificent scenery is merely on display. Both parks, unlike a picture hanging lifelessly on the wall of a museum, are works in progress; they are living, breathing wilderness areas. Plant your feet in a comfortable pair of walking or hiking shoes, find a trail head, and set off into the

woods with a sack lunch and big bottle of water. Better yet, if you can afford the time, plan an excursion around Shoshone Lake or to the south end of Yellowstone Lake by boat to areas few visitors ever see. There are isolated areas in Grand Teton, too—even on the far shore of popular Jenny Lake—where, with a little hiking, you'll be rewarded by a pristine, forested glade with nothing to distract you but wild moose and an awe-inspiring mountaintop.

If you're more adventurous, take a white-water trip down Snake River Canyon, or let a guide take you up to Grand Teton's summit. In Yellowstone, sleep under the stars and listen to the wolves howl at Slough Creek Campground; or backpack for a week on the Thorofare Trail.

You'll never plumb the absolute depths of these parks—no one ever will. You could spend your whole life trying, though, and have a great and illuminating time doing it.

5 SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Before the arrival of European settlers, the only residents on the plateau were small bands of Shoshone Indians known as "Sheepeaters," who lived on the southern fringe. Three other Indian tribes came and went: the Crows (Absaroka), who were friendly to the settlers; the Blackfeet, who lived in the Missouri Valley drainage and were hostile to both whites and other Indians; and the Bannocks, who largely kept to themselves. The nomadic Bannocks traveled an east-west route in their search for bison, from Idaho past Mammoth Hot Springs to Tower Fall, and then across the Lamar Valley to the Bighorn Valley, which is outside the park's current boundaries. Called the Bannock Trail, it was so deeply furrowed that evidence of it still exists today on the Blacktail Plateau near the Tower Junction. (You'll see remnants of the trail if you take Blacktail Plateau Drive, described in chapter 3.)

The first white explorer to lay eyes on Yellowstone's geothermal wonders was probably John Colter, who broke away from the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1806 and spent 3 years wandering a surreal landscape of mud pots and mountains and geysers. When he described his discovery on his return to St. Louis, no one believed him. Miners and fur trappers followed in his footsteps, reducing the plentiful beaver of the region to almost nothing, and occasionally making curious reports of a sulfurous world still sometimes called "Colter's Hell."

The first significant exploration of what would become the park took place in 1869, when a band of Montanans, led by David Folsom, completed a 36-day expedition. Folsom and his group traveled up the Missouri River and into the heart of the park, where they discovered the falls of Yellowstone, mud pots, Yellowstone Lake, and the Fountain Geyser. Two years later, an expedition led by U.S. Geological Survey Director Ferdinand Hayden brought back convincing evidence of Yellowstone's wonders, in the form of astonishing photographs by William Henry Jackson.

A debate began over the potential for commercial development and exploitation of the region, as crude health spas and thin-walled "hotels" went up near the hot springs. There are various claimants to the idea of a national park—members of the Folsom party later told an oft-disputed story about thinking it up around a campfire in the Upper Geyser Basin—but the idea gained steam as Yellowstone explorers hit the lecture circuit back East. In March 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed legislation declaring Yellowstone the nation's first national park.

The Department of the Interior got the job of managing the new park. There was no budget for it and no clear idea of how to take care of a wilderness preserve; many mistakes were made. Inept superintendents granted favorable leases to friends with commercial interests in the tourism industry. Poachers ran amok, and the wildlife population was decimated. A laundry business near Mammoth went so far as to clean linens in a hot pool.

By 1886, things were so bad that the U.S. Army took control of Yellowstone; iron-fisted management practices resulted in new order and protected the park from those intent upon exploiting it. (However, the military did participate in the eradication of the plateau's wolf population.) By 1916, efforts to make the park more visitor-friendly had begun to show results: Construction of the first roads had been completed, guest housing was available in the area, and order had been restored. Stewardship of the park was then transferred to the newly created National Park Service, which remains in control to this day.

GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK

Unlike Yellowstone, Grand Teton can't boast of being the nation's first park and a model for parks the world over. This smaller, southern neighbor was created as the result of a much more convoluted process that spanned 50 years.

The first sign of human habitation in the Grand Teton region points to people being here around 12,000 years ago. Among the tribes who hunted here in the warmer seasons were the Blackfeet,

Crow, Gros Ventre, and Shoshone, who came over the mountains from the Great Basin to the west. Indians spent summers hunting and raising crops, before heading to warmer climes.

Trappers and explorers, who first arrived in the valley in the early 1800s, were equally distressed by the harsh winters and short growing season, which made Jackson Hole a marginal place for farming and ranching. Among these early visitors were artist Thomas Moran and photographer William Henry Jackson, whose images awoke the country to the Tetons' grandeur. Early homesteaders quickly realized that their best hope was to market the unspoiled beauty of the area, which they began doing in earnest as early as a century ago.

The danger of haphazard development soon became apparent. There was a dance hall at Jenny Lake, hot dog stands along the roads, and buildings going up on some prime habitat. In the 1920s, after some discussion about how the Grand Teton area might be protected, Yellowstone park officials and conservationists went to Congress. Led by local dude ranchers and Yellowstone superintendent Horace Albright, the group was able to protect only the mountains and foothills, leaving out Jackson Lake and the valley; Wyoming's congressional delegation—and many locals—were vehemently opposed to enclosing the valley in park boundaries.

Then, in 1927, something called the Snake River Land Company started buying up ranches and homesteads along the base of the Tetons. It was a front for John D. Rockefeller, Jr., one of the richest men in the world, working in cahoots with the conservationists. He planned to give the land to the federal government, while keeping a few choice parcels for himself. But Congress wouldn't have it, and Rockefeller made noises about selling the land, about 35,000 acres, to the highest bidder. In the 1940s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Jackson Hole National Monument out of Forest Service lands east of the Snake River. That paved the way for Rockefeller's donation, and in 1950, Grand Teton National Park was expanded to its present form.

6 ISSUES FACING THE PARKS TODAY

In 2001, after 32 years with the National Park Service, Michael Finley left his post as superintendent of Yellowstone. His parting shot: "At some point, you just can't keep dumping people into the parks," he told the *Livingston Enterprise.* "The park's mission is not to sell more motel rooms in an adjacent community or more rubber tomahawks."

The struggle to balance recreation and preservation is as old as the park itself, and it's an issue that continually comes to a boil when long-standing park policies, such as the use of snowmobiles, are revisited with a critical eye. Superintendent Suzanne Lewis, Finley's successor, knows all too well that the mission of the Park Service is a tricky balancing act.

"How do you get your hands around 2.2 million acres?" said Lewis in an interview with Frommer's. "You just can't put it in perspective until you come here. And you have almost three million visitors a year who come for this once-in-a-lifetime experience. The magnitude of people's expectations is enormous, and it takes a lot of management."

BISON, BEARS & WOLVES

In the frontier West—where bison seemed to be everywhere, grizzly bears were fearsome, and wolves regularly raided livestock—wildlife was treated as more of a nuisance than a national treasure. Eventually, the bison and grizzly populations around Yellowstone and Grand Teton were whittled down nearly to extinction, and ranchers and federal agents completely eradicated wolves by the 1930s.

It took some intensive management to bring grizzlies and bison back to reasonably healthy numbers in the area, and now the wolves, which were reintroduced from Canada in 1995, are reaping the benefits of the huge ungulate herds that have enjoyed a nearly predator-free environment for quite some time. But these high-profile species—called "charismatic megafauna" by biologists—are not out of the woods yet. Given the pressures of development around the parks, they might never be secure again.

There are now more than 3,500 bison in Yellowstone and Grand Teton, and, naturally, they pay no mind to the park's invisible boundary. In the winter, when snows are deep, they leave the park to forage at lower elevations, sometimes in ranch pastures shared with domestic cattle. The ranchers fear that the bison will spread brucellosis, a virus that can be transmitted to cattle, causing infected cows to abort their unborn calves. There have been no documented cases of bison-cattle transmission, but because of the perceived threat to livestock, Montana officials allow them to be shot once they wander outside the park. Animal-rights activists are outraged, and park and state officials continue to search for some middle ground.

Wolves are another sore point with area ranchers. The reintroduction has been astonishingly successful. Rapidly reproducing, feeding on abundant elk in the park's Lamar Valley, wolves now number several hundred in the Yellowstone area—and over 1,000 in the Northern Rockies, most in Idaho—and the packs have spread as far south as Grand Teton, where several have denned and produced pups.

Although the Defenders of Wildlife have set up programs to compensate ranchers for livestock lost to wolves, the ranchers have gone to court seeking to have the wolves removed. The wolves have, indeed, been implicated in the deaths of sheep and cattle, and a federal judge in Wyoming ruled in 1998 that all reintroduced wolves should be removed. This decision was overturned in 2000, and the wolves are finally entrenched in Yellowstone for the long haul. In the park, the wolves' numbers soared to about 250 before plunging to about 125 due to a bout with distemper in 2008. In all of the Northern Rockies, there were about 1,500 wolves as of 2009, about half of them in Idaho.

Grizzly bears once teetered on the brink of extinction in the parks, but they've made a slow comeback to a population estimated at about 500 animals in the Yellowstone area. (It seems the wolves have helped, because their hunting results in many more carcasses to scavenge.) Because of this success, in March 2007 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed grizzlies from the endangered list, a decision environmentalist groups subsequently attempted to reverse by filing a lawsuit. Nonetheless, the grizzly habitat in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem keeps shrinking, as more and more development takes place around the plateau.

A MULTIPLE-USE PARK

Grand Teton National Park is much more than just a preserve of mountains and lakes and wildlife. Its land is used for all sorts of things that most people don't expect of a national park. There's a big dam holding irrigation water for potato farmers in Idaho; a commercial climbing business that charges big bucks to take climbers up the peaks; and even a commercial airport and a country club.

Each year, one of these conflicting uses makes headlines. Lately, it's cattle, which graze in the fall only a short lope from a den of young wolves. What's the purpose of this park, critics ask—to feed a rancher's cattle or to protect wildlife?

As park spokesperson Jackie Skaggs points out, these are the sorts of public-lands conflicts that arise more often in modern times. With its pockets of private land, uses that predate the creation of the park, and heightened debate between park purists and multiple-use advocates, Grand Teton is a prime example of the difficulty of modern park management.

A BURNING ISSUE

Yellowstone's park managers faced the ultimate test of their noninterference philosophy of fire management in 1988, when nearly one-third of Yellowstone was burned by a series of uncontrollable wildfires. These

violent conflagrations scorched more than 700,000 acres, leaving behind dead wildlife, damaged buildings, injured firefighters, and ghostly forests of stripped, blackened tree trunks.

The debate over park and public-land fire policies still rages, although things have quieted down some. After years of suppressing every fire in the park, Yellowstone, in 1988, was operating under a new "let it burn" policy, based on scientific evidence that fires were regular occurrences before the settlement of the West and part of the natural cycle of a forest.

What you will see, as you travel Yellowstone today, is a park that could be healthier than it was before. Saplings have sprouted from the long-dormant seeds of the lodgepole pine (fires stimulate the pine cones to release their seeds), and the old, tinder-dry forest undergrowth is being replaced with new, green shrubs, sometimes as thick as one million saplings per acre. Visitors who want to better understand the effects of the fires of 1988 should check out the exhibits at the Grant Village Visitor Center; the coverage there is the best in the park.

SNOWMOBILES: TO BAN OR NOT TO BAN?

Winter in Yellowstone is a time of silent wonder, with fauna descending from the high country in search of warmth and food. The only dissonance to this winter wilderness tableau is the roar of snowmobiles, which inhabit the park's snow-packed roads in ever-growing numbers. The noisy, pollution-heavy engines are not exactly ecologically friendly, but the gateway towns are staunch snowmobile proponents because the activity boosts their economies in the moribund winter.

Before President Clinton left office in 2001, he "ended" the ongoing controversy by establishing a ban on snowmobiles in Yellowstone, effective beginning the winter of 2003–04. However, gateway communities and snowmobile manufacturers responded with lawsuits; and the Bush administration also voiced its opposition to a total ban, delighting the outfitters in West Yellowstone and Cody. In mid-2004, a judge overturned a ruling enforcing the ban.

Through the winter of 2009–10, snowmobiles continued to ramble through Yellowstone and Grand Teton; all trips were guided by licensed outfitters with a daily quota of 540 machines, and the technology met best-available standards. Additionally, over-snow travel on the Continental Divide Snowmobile Trail has been discontinued in Grand Teton National Park and the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway. If you're planning a trip, you can get up-to-date information on winter use policies by visiting **www.nps.gov/yell**.