

WINTER WONDERLAND

A Snowy Adventure In Yellowstone National Park

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I BEGAN TO WORRY ABOUT OUR Winter Wonders Tour of Yellowstone National Park with Off The Beaten Path (www.offthebeatenpath.com) before our plane even touched down in Montana.

I'd tempted my 10-year-old daughter with pastoral visions of snow-covered mountains, expansive plains of white in which the only color was provided by herds of bison and elk, and all of the traditional wintertime fun (building snowmen, sledding, etc.) we rarely get to enjoy in our native Atlanta. Neither of us had ever seen the sort of icy winter wonderland promised by the brochures. From the looks of things as we flew into Bozeman— which had about as much snow as the globe she keeps on her bedside table— I fretted that we might have been hoodwinked by our own romanticized fantasies.

Things didn't get much better once we set foot on solid ground: It was warm enough that I didn't need a jacket, and our shuttle bus driver lamented that it had been unseasonably warm. In a heart-to-heart talk that night, my daughter and I agreed to lower our expectations and simply enjoy our first father-daughter trip in over two years. Worst-case scenario, we knew we'd see a ton of wildlife we had never seen before.

We needn't have worried: It began snowing at 7 AM the next day as we began the 2-hour drive into Yellowstone, building to what seemed like a light blizzard in the afternoon and snowing regularly for the next five days. By the time we got into the heart of America's oldest national park, there were snow banks in which we sank up to our knees. As the old saying goes, be careful what you wish for...

FOR THE BENEFIT & ENJOYMENT OF THE PEOPLE

Of course, snow is hardly the only draw of Yellowstone. Created by an act of Congress in 1872 "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people" (as the massive stone Roosevelt Arch proudly proclaims), the preservation of the park's 3,468 square miles of rugged wilderness is widely considered the world's first government-mandated effort in environmental conservation.

Although American Indians have lived here for 11,000 years, the area was bypassed during the Lewis and Clark expedition of the early 19th century, and earnest exploration of what is now Yellowstone National Park did not begin until the late 1860s. As a result, the park is surprisingly pristine, and includes ecotourism attractions such as one of the largest high-altitude lakes on the continent (Yellowstone Lake), the largest supervolcano in North America (the Yellowstone Caldera) and half of the planet's geothermal features. In short, it's the largest nearly intact ecosystem in the Earth's northern temperate zone.

As a result, Yellowstone offers the biggest population of megafauna (a.k.a. huge animals) in the Continental U.S., from grizzly bears, moose and wolves to free-ranging herds of elk, bighorn sheep and bison. There are plenty of other animals as well, including coyotes, foxes, pronghorn, mule deer, otters, bald eagles, trumpeter swans and hundreds of other species. Collectively, these features make Yellowstone National Park a nature lover's dream come true.

MAMMOTH HOT SPRINGS & LAMAR VALLEY

With the park's overwhelming vastness and ecological diversity, we were thankful we'd taken a group tour led by veteran guide Kurt Westenbarger and his wife, Eve. Kurt, who grew up nearby and has been guiding in Yellowstone for over 20 years, has an encyclopedic knowledge of the area's

geology, history and wildlife that came in especially handy during our first hike through Mammoth Hot Springs.

Kurt explained how the large complex of hot springs on travertine hills was created over thousands of years as water running through limestone cooled and deposited calcium carbonate. Over two tons of the stuff flows into Mammoth every day, creating unusually shaped and colored geological formations that are constantly evolving. The result was an otherworldly setting that took on an even more alien appearance in the winter as the cold snow hit the hot water, forming a dense shroud of eerie fog that gave it the look of something out of a Stephen King novel.

The next day we made our way east into the Lamar Valley. Weather conditions were still grey, with frequent snow flurries, but it was decidedly less blizzard-like when we reached our first stop to find a huge, handsome bull elk grazing nearby. It was the first of many amazing wildlife sightings, including a pair of bald eagles sitting side by side in a tree, several coyotes, bighorn sheep grazing on a hillside and numerous herds of bison and elk. My daughter, who sat next to Kurt in the front seat of our passenger van for this American version of a wildlife safari, had a great time serving as our eagle-eyed animal spotter.

There were few cars on the road, so when we rounded a curve to find several parked in a pullout, we knew there might be something worth seeing. As I got out my long-range lens and scanned the hillside, I realized that there were three wolves— two grey and one black— resting in the snow about a 1/2-mile away. After being eliminated from the park in the late 1920s, Yellowstone's Grey Wolf reintroduction program began back in 1995 and has been highly successful, with an estimated 100 wolves in 10 packs occupying the park at the end of 2011. The trio we spotted was part of Molly's Pack, which is currently the dominant group in the park. We watched them for over half an hour, and at one point got to see them chasing each other playfully through the snow.

The wolves and bison (of which there are around 3,000 in the park) are the subject of intense ongoing debate between environmental advocates and local ranchers, who fear that wolves will attack their cattle and wandering bison may infect their livestock with a disease called brucellosis. But American Indian tribes revere Yellowstone's bison as pure descendants of the vast herds that once roamed the grasslands of the U.S., and we believe that they and the wolves both deserve protection as a national treasure.

OLD FAITHFUL & THE GEYSER BASIN

The next day found us venturing deeper into the heart of Yellowstone, venturing south from Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel to the Old Faithful Snow Lodge, at the opposite end of the park.

The road is closed to regular traffic from November to mid-April, but Off The Beaten Path hires snowcoaches outfitted for traveling over snow and ice (picture an antique 8-passenger PT cruiser with skis for front wheels should be and back wheels that look like a tank). Riding in the odd-looking snowcoaches was one of my daughter's favorite parts of the trip, and I loved the dual sunroof, which allowed two people at a time to pop out of the top and snap photos without ever leaving the vehicle.

Impressive sights along the way were many, from the smoke-covered hills of Roaring Mountain and the picturesque scenery of the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone to numerous waterfalls and a mud volcano. But our two favorite sightings of the day came simultaneously. Our tour group's other



snowcoach spotted a red fox just ahead in Hayden Valley, and we got there just in time to watch the bushy-tailed beauty pouncing in the snow on a hunt for rodents. At the same time, the sun emerged fully for the first time in days, brilliantly illuminating the mountains of the central plateau.

Our last two days in the park were spent exploring the geyser basin, the most famous feature of which is Old Faithful. The famously reliable geyser was both timely (erupting every 90 minutes) and impressive, but we found the eruptions of nearby geysers such as Anemone, Beehive and Castle equally intriguing. We bumped into a National Geographic crew filming bison in the Upper Geyser Basin, and nearly stumbled onto a coyote on our way to go sledding behind the Old Faithful Snow Lodge.

The snow had finally stopped for good by the time our last day in the park rolled around, providing spectacular "Big Sky" views of the Lower Geyser Basin (where we witnessed three geysers erupting at once), National Park Mountain and Gibbon Falls. We were more than a little wistful as we left Yellowstone National Park to make our way to Chico Hot Springs, especially when we saw a small herd of bison and two mule deer in the road, almost as if to bid us farewell.

In the end, wintertime in Yellowstone National Park was like nothing we'd ever seen before. Our Winter Wonders Tour offered a refreshing taste of a wild, rugged, relatively unspoiled America, showcasing the very best of our nation's historic environmental conservation efforts.