

Sunrise is prime time to  
admire the geysers that line  
Yellowstone Lake at West  
Thumb Geyser Basin.



# FULL-STEAM AHEAD

**Two first-time visitors fall in love with Yellowstone National Park.**

BY PATRICIA KAOWTHUMRONG • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF DIENER

In my dreams, Yellowstone was a wild wonderland bursting with steamy geysers, colossal waterfalls and freely roaming wildlife. In real life, America's first national park was even better than I imagined. More than 3 million people make their way to Yellowstone National Park annually, and last year my boyfriend Gavin and I finally found out why.

Armed with excitement, a rough itinerary of must-sees and a car packed with necessities — including a cooler stuffed with drinks and munchies — we embarked on a five-day summer road trip to Yellowstone National Park in northwest Wyoming.

**WHY AM I HERE?**  
**MEET RUTH AND LESLIE QUINN,**  
**LONGTIME YELLOWSTONE GUIDES WHO**  
**MET AND FELL IN LOVE IN THE PARK.**





## MAKING PLANS

Home to the world's largest concentration of geothermal features (more than 10,000 in total), North America's largest high-elevation lake and hundreds of species of wildlife, the 3,400-square-mile park (larger than Delaware and Rhode Island combined) is a gargantuan attraction.

We knew it was going to be difficult to see everything in one single trip, so we came up with a list of can't-miss sights, which included Old Faithful (of course), Grand Prismatic Spring, Yellowstone Lake, Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and Hayden Valley.

Months before hitting the road, we also had to decide where to stay. Lodging and campgrounds fill up quickly, particularly during the busy summer months. We reserved two nights at **Grant Village**, a rustic lodge near Yellowstone's South Entrance and one night at the historic **Lake Yellowstone Hotel & Cabins**. The park is full of lodging and campground options, but Grant Village and Lake Hotel's proximity to the things we wanted to see and Yellowstone's South and East entrances made them ideal headquarters for our adventures.

As a rookie wilderness explorer, packing for Yellowstone was challenging. Gavin, who introduced my hesitant soul to camping and appreciating the great outdoors, argued for comfort, so I packed some of my favorite cotton shirts and sweaters, cozy pants and a light jacket. No hard-core hiking clothing or gear was necessary, he assured me.

## THE JOURNEY

From our home in Boulder, Colorado, the road to Yellowstone is lined with small frontier towns, blond wheat fields and grassy farmland peppered with herds of

pronghorn and tail-wagging cattle. Keen on catching a glimpse of Grand Teton National Park, we chose a route that would take us through **Jackson Hole**, the gateway to the Teton Range.

By afternoon, we found ourselves driving through Jackson, where 1890s-era wooden sidewalks, elk-antler arches and blocks of preserved buildings begged us to stop and stroll. With our hearts set on finding a viewing spot of the Tetons and reaching Yellowstone before dark, we drove on.

Less than half an hour later, we marveled at the spiky, snow-streaked peaks of Grand Teton National Park from the side of the road amid a small group of bison, who nonchalantly grazed just feet from the scenic pullout as onlookers eagerly snapped photos.

We made it to Yellowstone's South Entrance before dark to check into Grant Village Lodge. Our room had everything we needed, including a small sitting area, queen bed equipped with warm blankets, convenient one-cup coffee maker and a bathroom with a small shower and hair dryer (Yay!).

We grabbed a quick bite at **The Lake House** restaurant, just a five-minute walk from our room. In the casual dining hall nestled on the banks of glistening Yellowstone Lake, smiling servers dished up heaping bowls of pasta, broth-soaked noodles, salads and wings, welcoming comfort food after our long voyage.



**HOT ATTRACTIONS (LITERALLY)**

My alarm buzzed at 4:45 a.m. the next morning, and we wandered in the darkness to watch the sunrise at our first attraction: **West Thumb Geyser Basin**, where geysers line the shore of **Yellowstone Lake**. As we drove up to the area and stepped onto the carefully crafted boardwalks, steam billowed from pools of all sizes. Some were holes smaller than a basketball, while others were larger than our Honda CR-V.

We oohed and ahed at the quietly bubbling pools of aqua-colored water and watched the sun rise above the lake like a glowing lemon. Our first taste of Yellowstone's volcanic identity was blissful — and we had so much more to see.

As the National Park Service explains, “At the heart of Yellowstone's past, present and future lies volcanism.” The park's geysers, boiling pools and bubbling mud pots are the result of the mammoth magma chamber underneath the area. And while the last volcanic eruption occurred more than 600,000 years ago, the hot magma under Yellowstone's caldera still powers the park's geothermal activity.

Our next stop was the **Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone**, created by the movement of colossal rocks preceding the eruption of Yellowstone caldera and erosion by the Yellowstone River, which rumbles through the canyon's heart and down two waterfalls.

We drove straight to **South Rim Drive** to park and hike down **Uncle Tom's Trail**, named after Tom Richardson, who led visitors more than 500 steps down the canyon in the late 1890s to picnic at the base of the **Lower Falls**. While the trail was reconstructed to include just more than 300 steps and there's no picnic at the bottom, those who brave the less-than-half-mile descent are rewarded with a spectacular vista of the falls.

The canyon's walls — which are flecked with wispy cascades, emerald-colored swaths of moss and shrubs that appeared to be growing out of rocks — are a beautiful sight on the hike down. And when we reached the bottom, we could truly feel the power of the falls with all of our senses.

“This is my favorite part of Yellowstone so far,” Gavin said, as we gazed at the permanent rainbow below the cascading water. I agreed.

**RIGHT ON TIME**

By early afternoon, Yellowstone bustled with visitors. My stomach began to rumble, so we made our way toward the **Old Faithful Inn** for lunch. Housed in the world's largest log structure, the National Historic Landmark was built in 1904 with local logs and stone.

As we entered the asymmetrical building, our eyes were immediately captivated by the floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace and intricately carved wooden railings and beams. The inn looked like it blossomed from the surrounding landscape.

After we satisfied our bellies with burgers and trout cakes in the lounge, it was time to see Yellowstone's most popular attraction. **The Upper Geyser Basin**, home to Old Faithful, has more than 150 geysers, hot springs and fumaroles (openings in the earth's crust that emit steam and other gases).

A few minutes before Old Faithful's estimated eruption time, we snagged a spot on one of the benches surrounding the feature. And like clockwork, Old Faithful's vent began to shoot boiling-hot water more than 100 feet into the air.

As the day went on, I was consistently amazed by Yellowstone's well-preserved beauty — and how accessible everything was. The easy-to-navigate roads, convenient parking areas and perfectly placed boardwalks make the national park a prime example of a happy marriage between nature and modern engineering.

From athletically opposed hikers (me) and wilderness-savvy explorers (Gavin) to families with kids of all ages to world-traveling retirees, Yellowstone is a destination that caters to all types of travelers.

**NATURE'S CANVAS**

At **Midway Geyser Basin**, our next stop, I found my favorite Yellowstone attraction: the **Grand Prismatic Spring**. The tie-dyed beauty is the largest hot spring in the U.S. and credits its brilliant colors to microscopic colonies of pigmented bacteria that thrive around the edges of the spring's mineral-rich water. From the boardwalk, I could see Grand Prismatic Spring's bright orange, yellow and blue colors peek through the clouds of steam that continuously rose from it (“A free facial,” commented the woman standing next to me).

After ogling the spring and the bubbling azure-blue waters of the adjacent Excelsior Geyser for more than an hour, Gavin and I stopped at a shady spot on the banks of the nearby Firehole River for a picnic. Skilled fly fishermen arched their lines in the waterway, known for its feisty population of brown, rainbow and brook trout, as we devoured salads and sandwiches purchased from a general store in the Old Faithful area.

Hayden Valley, on our way back to Grant Village, was the perfect place to end our day. Framed by forested hills, the valley was speckled with bison, who keep the amazingly green area impeccably mowed. Meanwhile, trumpeter swans mingled in a river, and a duo of elk savored a grassy dinner next to the road.

**PLANNING TIPS**

**1 Bring Layers:** We visited in early June, when forecasts predicted temperatures in the low 70s. Pack rain gear and a jacket for the cooler mornings and evenings and the occasional thunderstorm.

**2 Get Choosy:** If you have limited time, choose one of the park's major areas to conquer; we chose the Old Faithful, Canyon Village and Lake Village areas. Next time, we plan to camp in the northern portion of the park and investigate Lamar Valley, Norris Geyser Basin and the limestone-draped Mammoth Hot Springs terraces.

**3 Disconnect:** While there is cell service in some of Yellowstone's developed areas and Wi-Fi for purchase in hotel rooms, connections to the outside world are fairly limited. Bring your own entertainment (we played card games); rooms in the park's lodges and hotels don't have TVs or radios.

**4 When to Go:** While peak season is typically mid-July through August, we suggest visiting in June and September. Daybreak, when it's less crowded, is an ideal time to see some of Yellowstone's most popular attractions. Plus, the lighting is excellent for snapping photos and chances to spot wildlife are heightened.

**5 Like Clockwork:** While there are more than 200 active geysers in Yellowstone, the eruptions of only five are predicted regularly (Castle, Grand, Daisy, Riverside and Old Faithful); anticipated eruption times are posted in the lobby of the Old Faithful Inn.

**6 Keep Your Eyes Open:** Yellowstone is a wild-life-watching haven. We probably saw more than 100 free-roaming bison; some were even sunning next to geysers! Bring your binoculars, and keep your eyes peeled for more than 300 species of birds, bears, bald eagles, gray wolves, elk and much more. However, it's important to stay at least 25 yards away from bison and other animals and at least 100 yards away from bears and wolves for the safety of animals and visitors alike.

*That's WY*



## WHERE TO STAY (BOOK EARLY!)

**Lodges, Cabins & Hotels:** From the storied Old Faithful Inn to the Roosevelt Lodge inspired by Teddy himself, there are nine different lodging facilities in Yellowstone.

**Campgrounds:** There are five reservation campgrounds (more than 1,700 sites) and seven first-come, first-served campgrounds (more than 450 sites). Backcountry sites are also available, but a special permit is required.

**Outside the Park:** Whether you're seeking a bed-and-breakfast hideaway, snug cabin or a Western-inspired inn, there are dozens of accommodation options within the gateway communities of Jackson and Cody. Learn more at [TravelWyoming.com/places-to-stay](http://TravelWyoming.com/places-to-stay).

*That's WY*

### LIFE ON THE LAKE

Since we crossed all of the must-sees off our list by day two, Gavin and I were excited to spend a slower-paced day in the park. Before settling into Lake Yellowstone Hotel and Cabins, we made one final trip to Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, per Gavin's request, to walk along the canyon's rim and stand next to the Brink of Upper Falls, where the Yellowstone River thunders over a cliff formed by lava more than 500,000 years ago.

We also stopped to see some bubbling mud pots in the Mud Volcano area before making our way to Lake Yellowstone Hotel, housed in a stylish yellow building with white columns. I almost screamed in delight when I saw our room's view of the lake.

Meanwhile, Gavin was mesmerized by the elegant lobby, which had a lovely wooden bar framed by giant windows featuring views of the lake. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places,

Lake Yellowstone Hotel was lovingly restored in 2014 to highlight the building's simple Colonial Revival style.

We felt super fancy as we sipped cocktails at the bar and listened to live piano music in the lobby. While the ambiance is undeniably upscale, the hotel supports the casual dress code maintained by the park's other properties, so we weren't afraid to hang out in tees and shorts. To soothe the reality of our morning departure, we booked a special meal in the dining room (reservations are required) and feasted on perfectly prepared bison tenderloin and New York strip steak.

Then, we watched the sun set over the lake from the window of our room, admired the lack of city lights — and even forgot about the absence of TV, radio or cell service. While returning to our everyday lives seemed unappealing, we were confident that we'd return soon to experience more of Yellowstone's otherworldly splendor.