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HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF A DAY TRIP TO YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

DRIVE TIME FROM BIG SKY RESORT

Yellowstone has five entrances with the West Yellowstone option being the most convenient for guests coming from Big Sky Resort. The park's west boundary is only 20 minutes from Big Sky, but the gate where an entry pass can be purchased is about an hour away. If you're entering Yellowstone at the height of tourist season, it's also important to factor in the time you'll wait in line to enter the park. This is good to keep in mind when planning your trip because you'll want to hit the popular sites either early in the morning or in the afternoon to avoid crowds.



Photo: Yellowstone National Park Service

WHAT TO BRING

Lunch: Food can only be found in certain locations in Yellowstone, which makes bringing lunch much more convenient than waiting for a table. It also allows you to have an impromptu picnic when you find the perfect spot for a break.

Snacks: Again, while hubs like Old Faithful and Canyon have ice cream shops and convenience stores, you won't find vending machines at trailheads or in geyser basins. Pack plenty of snacks for when you are on the trail, in the car, or hanging out.

Bear spray (and know how to use it): People come from all over the world to see one of Yellowstone's bears (grizzly or black). If you do see one it is important to be prepared - for your safety and the bear's. That means viewing wildlife from a distance and always carrying bear spray, a high-powered pepper spray used to deter aggressive or charging bears. Be sure to acquaint yourself with the product (you spray it at the bear, not on yourself) by reading the instructions and watching how-to videos before going on your hike.

Plenty of water: Generally, Yellowstone's elevation is somewhere between 7,000 and 8,500 feet in the central plateau. The further you are above sea level the less moisture and oxygen (the O in H₂O) there is in the air - both of which mean you need to drink more water to stay hydrated. Plus, you have to drink even more if you are being active, so always bring more fluids than you think you'll need.

Patience: In 2015, Yellowstone had over 4 million visitors for the first time, and it has reached that threshold every year since except for during the 2020 pandemic when it hit 3.8 million. That means lots of traffic and waiting to see the iconic sights. Away from the crowds, patience is also important for those hoping to see wildlife as seeing animals can sometimes mean waiting till the animals show up.

PRO TIP: The maximum speed limit in Yellowstone is 45 mph, and there are many instances where it is much slower. The park is set up by road junctions and a good estimate of drive time from one junction to another is to double the mileage between them to get the minutes the drive will take, which is something to take into account when you are making your itinerary for the day.

TOP 3 ATTRACTIONS



OLD FAITHFUL

The most famous geyser in the world can be found in the Upper Geyser Basin. Surrounded by hotels, a visitor center, and shops, this is a destination that gets very crowded, especially at eruption times, which are predicted with near-precision by the park rangers. Don't worry if you just miss Old Faithful spewing its water over 100 feet in the air. There's usually just over an hour between eruptions, which gives you plenty of time to wander the rest of the geyser basin and check out other 1,000+ thermal features, each one as unique as the next.

GRAND PRISMATIC

Located at Midway Geyser Basin about halfway between the Madison and Old Faithful junctions, the park's largest hot spring and the third largest in the world, Grand Prismatic not only takes its name from its impressive size but also from the colorful bacterial mats (living microorganism) that surround the steaming blue water.

- **FAST FACT:** These tiny bacteria have been found to have many scientific uses, including helping in the [fight against COVID-19](#) [↗](#).
- **PRO TIP:** Because it is so big and flat, Grand Prismatic is very hard to photograph. The best way to get a shot that looks like one of the postcard pictures you'll see of the spring is to drive a mile south of Midway to the Fairy Falls Trail, which leads to the Grand Prismatic Overlook Trail. This 130-foot climb takes hikers to a viewing platform for a bird's-eye view of the colorful hot spring.

GRAND CANYON OF THE YELLOWSTONE

Almost a mile wide and up to 1,200 feet deep, this colorful chasm is a testament to the power of nature to shape a landscape. A trip to the park isn't complete without a shot in front of the 308-foot Lower Falls, the park's largest waterfall from the Artist Point overlook.

- **FAST FACT:** Many people think that Artist Point is where Thomas Moran painted his 1872 painting of the Canyon, which helped convince the US government to declare Yellowstone a national park. However, it's thought that he actually formed his vision at the now-named Moran Point on the canyon's north rim.

BONUS ATTRACTIONS

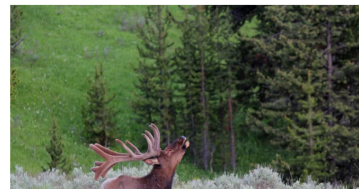


HOT SPOT: Norris Geyser Basin: The hottest place on earth, the ground below Norris Geyser Basin has been measured at 459°F. All that heat manifests itself in the world's tallest active geyser, Steamboat. It was once a rarity to see this geyser go off, but since 2019 it has erupted more than 40 times. Along with Steamboat, Norris also features colorful hot springs that are contrasted by the area's moonscape-like landscape.



ROADSIDE ATTRACTION: Gibbon Falls: On the side of the road between Norris and Madison junction, this 84-foot waterfall is a great place to snap a quick picture of one of Yellowstone's natural wonders. There's a half-mile paved trail that makes for a perfect leg-stretcher that provides a picturesque view of the cascade.

MORE TIPS



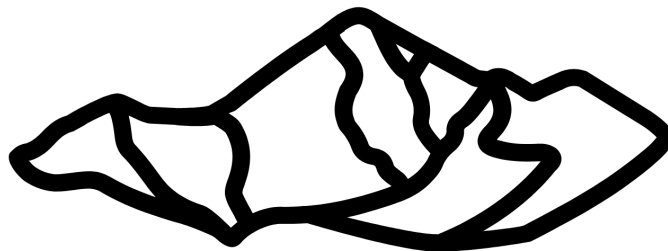


The road less traveled: Visitors have been touring Yellowstone since the 1800s, so the well-worn wagon paths that led to all the iconic landmarks are now roads. This makes it easy to see the postcard sights, but it also can make it so some people never leave their cars or the paved walkways. Whether true or not, it's said that 97% of visitors use 3% of the park (the roads and developed area). If you truly want to experience a taste of Yellowstone's wild nature, then you need to take a hike—even short trails in Yellowstone can make you feel like you are in an unspoiled wilderness.

Wildlife watching: Whether you are in your car or in the backcountry, seeing one of Yellowstone's legendary animals like a wolf, bear, bison, or elk can be an awe-inspiring moment. Dusk and dawn are the best times for these sightings, but remember these are wild animals, and as such, the National Park Services advises visitors to keep a distance of 100 yards from bears and wolves and stay at least 25 yards away from other animals, like bison, elk, and deer.

STEPHEN CAMELIO

A former editor at In Style magazine, Stephen Camelio is a freelance writer living in Bozeman. He wrote the Montana-set film *Mending the Line*, which was the number-one film on Netflix in March 2024. After many years of living in and around Yellowstone National Park, Stephen now lives in Bozeman, Montana.



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