



Exploring Yellowstone

Description

We've been to Yellowstone several times in the past few years and we've had the chance to explore a large array of the park's features. While we will be back to discover more of this great wilderness (and this page will inevitably grow as I have more to add), I'll provide here an overview of many of the various attractions, campgrounds, trails and more of which I am familiar.

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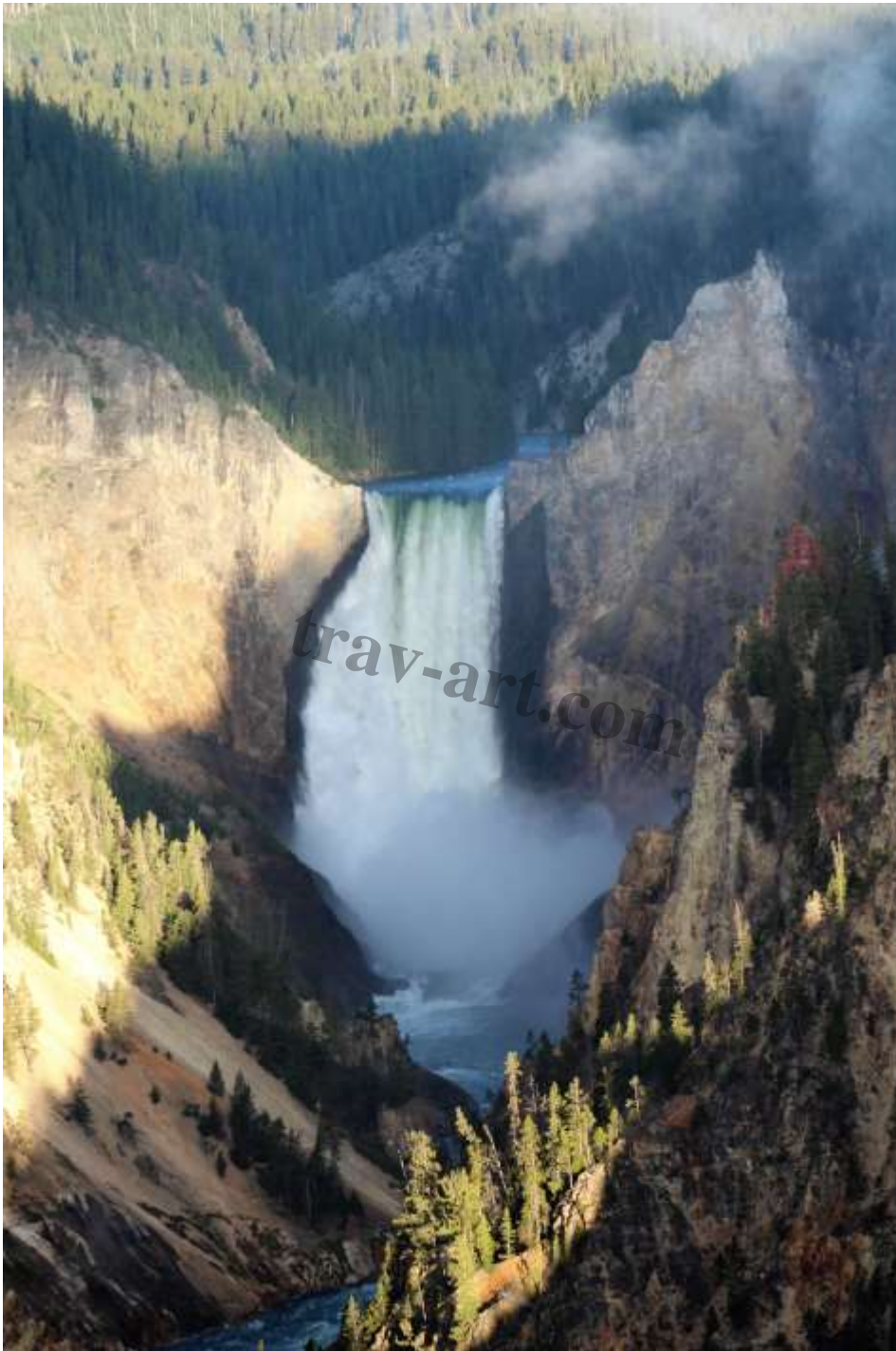
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Canyon Area

It goes without saying that the main reason for coming to the Canyon area is the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. It is certainly worth stopping at the viewpoints on both rims, particularly Artist Point (I should know).









Even if you don't plan to emulate Albert Bierstadt you'll be glad you got to experience the canyon from more than one perspective. Even better, get there early, as close to sunrise as possible. The colors are most vibrant and enchanting at sunrise as the yellow and pink canyon walls glow in the illumination.

You can also take Uncle Tom's Trail down a series of stairs to get a closer look at the Lower Falls (currently closed at the time I am writing this). Another trail that I have heard is quite good is the Seven Mile Hole which descends to the river downriver from the Lower Falls.

Canyon Campground



There are several campgrounds in Yellowstone, but the only one we have camped in thus far is the Canyon Campground. There are a few nice things about this location: 1) It's centrally located in

Yellowstone so almost everything is within an hour's drive 2) You have access to the eateries, stores, and trails at Canyon 3) It's wooded and feels slightly more secluded.

The negatives, however, were 1) You can't see anything but trees from your campsite and 2) We never saw any animals from the campground even though Yellowstone is full of them. We also slept in our camper so maybe we were just unaware of them (the battery completely drained after 3 days). So that's just a few things to consider when choosing where to camp (or if to camp).

The Mount Washburn Trail

Driving north from Canyon leads to Dunraven Pass and the trailhead for the best hike (in my opinion) in Yellowstone (and one of my top-10 day hikes in the country).

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Depending on the time of year you'll start off the trail gazing at wildflowers, then taking in the distant views of the Grand Canton of the Yellowstone and distant geyser basins. After three miles you'll arrive at the fire lookout where resident bighorns are ready to greet you. To see as much of Yellowstone in one hike (even the distant Yellowstone Lake) is a great reward for the challenging hike (I carried my three-year-old part of the way).

Tower Falls Area

Tower Falls

The most obvious stop in this area of the northwestern region of Yellowstone is Tower Falls. It's only a very short hike to the overlook from the visitor center (and a gift shop we like).



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Don't, however, skip the hike down to the Tower River. While the descent is steep the geology is fascinating. Check out the ring of volcanic rhyolite that illustrates the history of eruptions at Yellowstone.

Lamar Valley

Wildlife viewing in Yellowstone is easy, but the wide-open expanses of the Lamar Valley make it that much easier. Bison can be found in vast herds here, as well as pronghorn, and (if you are lucky) wolves and grizzlies.





Specimen Ridge

One of the lesser known hikes in Yellowstone is Specimen Ridge which begins in the Lamar Valley ascends up to an alpine ridge overlooking the valley.





At the top youâll find petrified trees that date back to the last eruption of the volcano. You may encounter grizzlies on this trail, but more likely youâll see pronghorns and bison.

Beartooth Highway

The Northeast Entrance leads to the Beartooth Highway. Weâve never made it beyond Cooke City, MT. Next time we will make it a priority to travel this scenic highway.

Roosevelt Lodge

We had lunch at the Roosevelt Lodge after the Mt. Washburn hike. Youâll want to stop here at least once to enjoy the porch and the dining room, even if you arenât staying here. Theodore Roosevelt is

my favorite president, so itâ??s also a good chance to pay homage to the outdoorsmen commander-in-chief who spent time in Yellowstone (but not at the lodge which hadnâ??t been built yet).

Huckleberry pie is served here, as it is in many places throughout the park.

Mammoth Hot Springs

Mammoth Hot Springs Terraces







There are upper and lower boardwalks and both are relatively short hikes. This area shows a surprising amount of change in only a matter of a few years as the pools that are still fed by the underground springs show vibrant colors while older areas turn into a crumbling white chalky limestone.

Fort Yellowstone





This is a good spot to get a bite of ice cream before you continue on to trails or start the drive south. I do believe this area is getting renovated and the historic structures will be restored as a museum.

Beaver Ponds Trail

I started this hike but not long after beginning I had to turn around as the rest of the family was tired and not interested in a day hike. The trail starts right by Fort Yellowstone and winds its way into the backcountry. I've heard this is a good family-friendly hike however.

Bunsen Peak

This is another hike I have yet to do, but will try to complete in my next visit. It is reputed to have great views over the northwestern territory of the park.

Rustic Falls



This falls is right off the roadside on the way from Mammoth Hot Springs to Norris. There is a small parking area at the head of the falls

Norris

Norris Geyser Basin

Of all the geyser basins this one might be my favorite. It's full of vibrantly colored hot springs and has some remarkable geysers (that may erupt if you're lucky). It's less crowded than some of the other geyser basins as well.





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I guess it's also worth noting that this is reputed to be the "hottest" geyser basin and that a step off trail here might be your last. Several years ago a couple tried to sit in a hot spring and one of the two dissolved without a trace left. It goes without saying: don't be stupid.

Ice Lake

This is another lesser known trail along the road between Norris and Canyon. This area was among the most severely burned in the 1988 fires and the entire forest is new growth. In 2010 the trees here were quite small and the fire damage was still very visible, but during our last visit in 2019 the trees were quite tall and the forest a beautiful testament to nature's resilience.



The trail is short and the lake is pretty but I must warn you to put on a LOT of mosquito repellent. They were absolute vultures and we ran back to the car after a few minutes.

Porcelain Basin

Somehow we keep missing this basin but weâ??ll make sure to stop here next time.

Artistâ??s Paint Pots

And how is it lâ??ve not yet been to this basin of colorful hot springs? Next time for sure.

West Yellowstone

If you canâ??t get a place to stay in Yellowstone itself (and I highly recommend paying a little more to stay in the park so you can spend more time recreating and less time driving), then West Yellowstone is your best option. Itâ??s only about an hour drive to much of the park, and two hours to some of the more southerly and easterly locations.



There are a ton of hotels and restaurants in West Yellowstone to choose from. Also, the drive toward the west entrance features lakes where you might see trumpeter swans.

Madison

Madison is a nice, centrally located area with campground at the confluence of the Madison and Firehole rivers. I think if we camp again in Yellowstone weâ??ll try this location since itâ??s a little more open and itâ??s a prime wildlife area.

Firehole Canyon Road

A little detour from the main route will take you through the Firehole Canyon. There is a swimming area at the southern end. We drove through rather quickly and unfortunately didn't stop to test the waters, but there's always next time.

Firehole Lake Drive

Another detour from the main road will take you to a series of hot springs and lakes, including the aptly named "Hot Lake".



Midway Geyser Basin

This area is the biggest star of the Madison area and features the incredible Grand Prismatic Spring. By all means stop here and see not only the GPS but hike the adjacent trails.

Fairy Falls is a popular hike and one that we'll try to do next time. It's one of the tallest falls in Yellowstone. Another hike we need to do is the Imperial Geyser trail. Overall this is a great area to explore.







There is a new overlook that allows you to see the entire extent of the GPS. Be sure to check it out.

Upper Geyser Basin

This is the busiest and most popular area owing to two attractions: Old Faithful and the Old Faithful Inn.

Boardwalk and Trails







Old Faithful is the highlight here and the crowds that surround it near eruption time are a testament to that. For a different view try crossing the Firehole River and ascending the Overlook Trail.

There are many geysers and hot springs here so you will have a lot to see while waiting for Old Faithful to erupt.

Old Faithful Inn

You can't miss topping into Old Faithful Inn regardless of whether you are staying there or not. We come here every time we are in Yellowstone for lunch in the dining hall, ice cream, and souvenirs.





This is the greatest of all national park lodges and the most historic.

Biscuit Basin

Just north of the Upper Geyser Basin is Biscuit Basin. I have no idea where the name comes from but I will tell you this is a good place for hikes and to enjoy more hot springs and geysers.





A good trail here leads to Mystic Falls. I wanted to hike to Mystic Falls last time but ended up getting off trail and ascending a steep trail with an overlook of Biscuit Basin. So next time I have some waterfalls to check off my list.

Lone Star Geyser

Just south of Upper Geyser Basin is the trail to Lone Star Geyser. We started this trail and I was pretty excited about it but we had to turn back after about a mile because my youngest had to poop. Yup. Had to turn right around and go to the outhouse. Next time.

Shoshone Lake



View of Shoshone Lake from a distant overlook

If you continue on past Lone Star Geyser you can make it as far as Shoshone Lake. This is the largest backcountry lake in the country (no roads lead to it). Iâ??ve been curious to go to this lake for a while so maybe next time.

Kepler Cascades

These impressive cascades are right off the roadside between Old Faithful and West Thumb.



Yellowstone Lake

By itself Yellowstone Lake would be a great destination. But in Yellowstone itâ??s just yet another amazing natural wonder. This is the largest high-elevation lake in the country and the shoreline actually changes due to geologic activity beneath the surface.



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There is a small geyser basin right by the north shore. When we came in May the lake was still partially frozen over but in July the lake was a vibrant blue.

The eastern shoreline has an area of dead trees that's likely the result of bark beetle. It's a pretty substantial area and hopefully this devastating infestation doesn't spread around much of the rest of the park (I haven't seen this elsewhere). It might actually be that the fires of 1988 prevented the spread of bark beetle.

Elephant Back Mountain Trail

We started this trail but decided to turn around due to the age of my kids at the time. This is an area that was still recovering from the 1988 fires and at times it's sobering to see the remnants. But the

forest is returning strong.

Hayden Valley

I actually think this is the best area of the park for wildlife viewing (others consider Lamar Valley it's close either way). We've seen dozens of elk and hundreds of buffalo, a wolf, pronghorn, waterfowl, coyotes and more here. I don't have a photo of the wolf but I really tried.





There are lots of trails here and I'd like to traverse many of them in the coming years. Since this is a grizzly area be sure to be aware and possibly carry bear spray (I never do).

Mud Volcano

The Mud Volcano area is in the center of the drive between Hayden Valley and Canyon.





The mud volcano (or Black Dragon's Cauldron) is one of our favorite stops. At the nearby Sour Lake a bison was sitting only feet away from the boardwalk. Luckily he was uninterested in all the people taking his picture.

Final Thoughts

Have I covered a lot? Not really. There are so many thousands of miles of trails in Yellowstone and areas of wilderness to explore that no one could possibly ever traverse it all. In fact, I heard that in recent years an attempt was made to catalog all of the waterfalls in Yellowstone. Thousands of them were found from an aerial survey, the vast majority never named and probably never before seen by man.

There are a ton of trails I want to hike and I'd like to try kayaking upriver to Shoshone Lake. When I have more to provide here I'll be sure to update the page.

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