



## Return to Yellowstone and Grand Teton

### Description

In July of 2019 we returned to Yellowstone and Grand Teton for more fun and adventure. We took our camper and alternated activity in each park. There was never a dull moment as we took in the wildlife and scenery on the water, on horseback, and on dozens of trails.

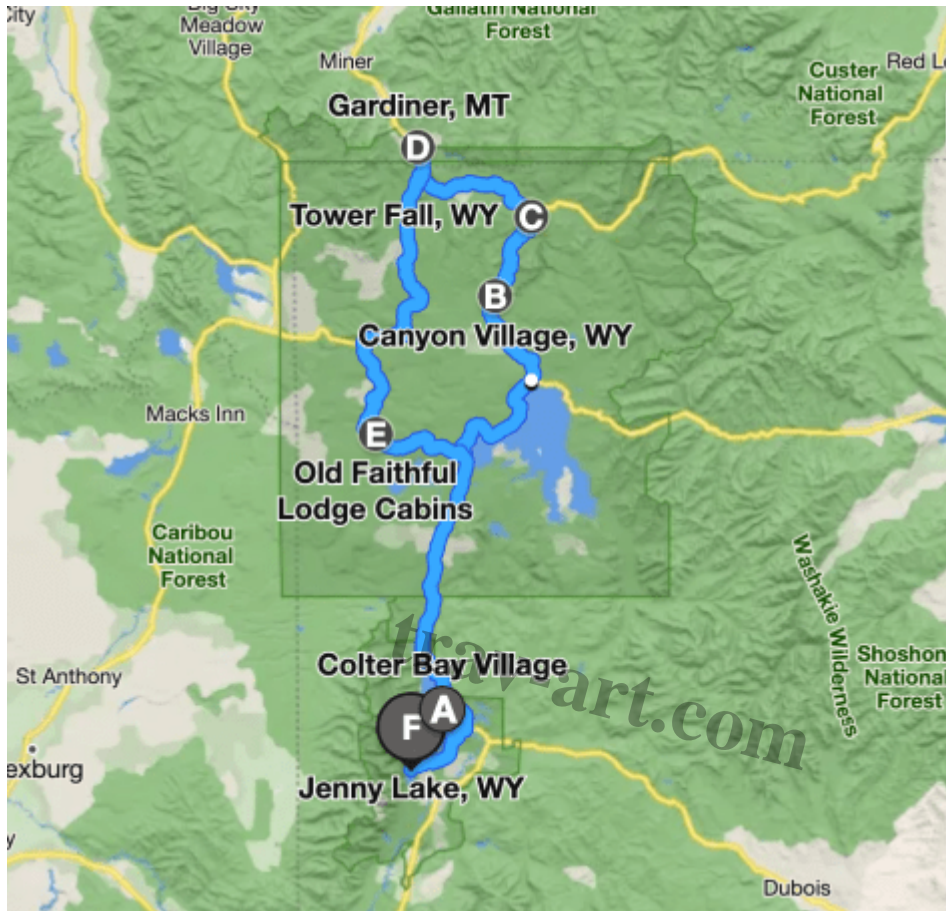
- **Highlights**

- Colter Bay
- Jackson Lake Boating
- Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone
- Wildlife in both parks
- Cascade Canyon Trail, Grand Teton
- Upper Geyser Basin
- Old Faithful Inn
- Horseback Riding at Hells-a-Roarinâ?? Outfitters, Gardiner, MT

- **Lowlights**

- The painful search for WIFI

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## Day 1: Arrival in Colter Bay

Colter Bay is in my opinion one of the very best places to stay in any national park, whether it be in a travel trailer or in one of the cabins. The beautiful Jackson Lake setting with the marina and other amenities make it a perfect place to be. We towed our camper from Colorado and pulled into our site where we would sleep for the next five nights.

**Lodging: Colter Bay RV Park, Grand Teton NP: 5 Stars**



Campsite at Colter Bay RV Park

As far as national park campgrounds go, this is the very best. The sites are full hookup (which is very rare in national parks) and you are not in an RV parking lot like so many other RV campgrounds. It's full of trees and you can walk over to the marina, visitor center, and directly to trails along the lake. You might not get very good WIFI if you need it, but you generally don't expect this in national parks. This would be the last camping trip with this camper which I'll discuss in another post specifically about RVs.

### **Restaurants: John Colter's Ranch House, Grand Teton NP: 4 Stars**

John Colter's Ranch House is one of two restaurants in Colter Bay. Grand Teton actually has some of the best lodges in the national parks and some of the best dining places too. This one serves Colter Bay and was a good place for dinner after the long drive in (roughly 550 miles while towing a trailer). It is busy in the summer as you would expect.

## **Day 2: Boating on Jackson Lake**

I was the first one up and as is usually the case I took an opportunity to put my camera to use in the early morning light. If you are interested in wildlife photography there are two ideal times of day, dawn and dusk. If you venture out in the midday hours you'll miss out on a lot. Plus these times of day are the best for dramatic landscape photos.

I drove a short distance to the Jackson Lake Dam area where there was a nice reflection on the surface.





An elk herd had congregated nearby and a short distance behind the dam was a flock of white pelicans. It is never hard to find wildlife in either Grand Teton or Yellowstone.

Returning to Colter Bay I stopped at the marina to rent a small motor boat for the family. Returning to the camper I let everyone know we had an hour to eat a quick breakfast and to be down at the marina to board our boat.

**Attractions: Colter Bay Marina, Grand Teton NP: 5 Stars**







### Exploring Jackson Lake

Of course I let my kids (even 6-year-old Evan) drive the boat on the lake. It doesn't go very fast and it lets me look for wildlife to photograph. We quickly saw a bald eagle and motored across the lake to where we saw it land to get a picture. I've been on dozens of lakes and reservoirs and Jackson Lake, with the Tetons on the western shore and dozens of islands and coves is just the most beautiful. One tip I have for those who want to go out on the lake: go early. In the morning in the summer it will be pleasantly warm and there is hardly any wind between the hours of 8 AM and 11AM. Later in the day the winds and clouds are more likely to pick up. Just about every afternoon it will lightly rain at some point too.

After spending a morning on the lake we had a quick lunch in the camper and then had a bit of a WIFI odyssey for much of the rest of the afternoon.

Shelley had brought her work computer and needed to finish and send a report. Once the report was sent, sheâ??d be able to put it away for the rest of the trip and forget about it. Only one problem, we could not find a reliable WIFI signal.

We started in the campground, then went over to the pizza place in Colter Bay where there was a weak signal, but not enough to complete the send. We got in the car and decided to drive south the Signal Mountain Lodge. Surely there would be public WIFI and weâ??d be done. But no. Not at Signal Mountain. Next stop. Jenny Lake. We pulled into the parking lot next to the restaurant and much to our relief there was a sufficient WIFI signal for my Shelley to finish her work. We walked around a bit while she worked in the car. Finally she was done and we could all forget about work for good for the next several days.

Colter Bay has a grocery store and we stocked up on food for the rest of the trip. We ate a cookout dinner at our campsite.

## Day 3: Yellowstone

On day three we left the camper and drove up to Yellowstone. I probably should discuss distances and travel times in the parks now.

Normally we would have split our time camping in each park, but on this trip we stayed the entire time at Colter Bay in northern Grand Teton. We did this because the only full-hookup campground in Yellowstone, Fishing Bridge, was closed for badly needed upgrades and we didnâ??t want to dry camp again and end up with a dead battery (although it wasnâ??t the end of the world).

The downfall to staying in Grand Teton was that to drive to the north end of Yellowstone is three hours each direction. We were willing to accept that but in the future Iâ??ll stay in Yellowstone half the time.

Our plans for the day were to travel the northern loop of the figure-8 or roadway through Yellowstone. Consequently we turn from the Lake Junction area and passed through Hayden Valley to make our first stop at the mud volcano.

**Attractions: Mud Volcano, Yellowstone NP: 4.5 Stars**





Mud Volcano

The mud volcano (which has various thermal features including "Black Dragon's Cauldron") is a short loop hike that takes you alongside various bubbling mud pots as well as some sulfurous lakes. Bison are not at all unwilling to relax by the hot springs and mud pots. The pictured bison was only about ten feet away on the other side of a wooden fence. We are careful around these huge animals.

Continuing northward we arrived at the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone.

**Attractions: Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, Yellowstone NP: 5 Stars**





Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone with Lower Falls

Though it was lightly raining when we arrived on the south rim, it wasn't enough to deter us from going to Artist's Point for photos. This is just one of the iconic places in the west and truly a sight to behold. Had the weather been better we would have hiked a few of the trails.

Since it was now lunch time and we were experiencing a passing rainstorm we decided to have lunch at Canyon Village. A couple years before we camped at the Canyon Campground and knew the area well. Canyon has a number of eateries, gift shops, a lodge, and more.

**Restaurants: Canyon Eatery, Yellowstone NP: 3 Stars**

For relatively inexpensive food of a variety of cuisines, the Canyon Eatery is a pretty good place. This is more of a cafeteria than a sit-down restaurant (there is an adjacent sit-down restaurant however that we ate at in 2017).

After eating we took a rather leisurely drive northward, over Dunraven Pass and onward to the Tower Falls area. In 2017 we hiked from Dunraven Pass to the summit of Mt. Washburn which is an incredible hike with impressive views in every direction.

Continuing onward we made our way to Tower Falls and took time to walk the short trail to the viewpoint, as well as stop in the gift shop for some souvenirs and a game (we still love the game we bought here in 2017)

**Attractions: Tower Falls, Yellowstone NP: 4.5 Stars**

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### Tower Falls

From Tower Falls you can hike down to the Yellowstone River and see a lot of interesting geology along the way. It is a steep hike but my kids did it at a relatively young age in 2017, so most able bodied people can do it.

Had we not driven from Colter Bay in Grand Teton I would have loved to have driven up Lamar Valley and into the Beartooth Range. Unfortunately we knew we needed to stay a reasonable distance from our starting point and turned toward Mammoth Hot Springs.

Pulling into Mammoth Hot Springs we decided on doing the Beaver Ponds Trail which leads from a parking area near the old Fort Yellowstone. A couple things happened along the trail that made it impossible for me to come up with a rating.

First my kids bailed on the hike. It's kind of hard to just continue on when the rest of your family decides the hike is too long and the weather too hot (the sun had come out and it was a very humid 80F+ degrees). Second the mosquitoes were starting to bite and that was understandable. Always bring lots of repellent to Yellowstone.



Mammoth Hot Springs from Beaver Ponds Trail

I did get a pretty good view of the Mammoth Hot Springs with my zoom lens as I was hiking back on the Beaver Ponds Trail. I'll have to come back and hike this trail another day.

The family was getting a bit hot, tired, and hungry now so we started down the road to the gateway city of Gardiner, MT for dinner.

### **Restaurants: Rosie's Bistro: Gardiner, MT: 3.5 Stars**

Rosie's Bistro is nothing fancy. But it is a decent place to get some reasonably priced pizza and a few beers after a long day. The waitress was from Eastern Europe and chatted with us for a while until the manager asked her to continue waiting tables. We left her a good tip.

In the summer the days are long in Yellowstone and you'll reliably have daylight until past ten o'clock. With that in mind as we drove south into the park we were going to be in luck.

One tip I can give visitors to Yellowstone is to go out early, go in for lunch and to rest at midday when the park is full of visitors and parking lots are jam-packed, then head out again in the late afternoon. In the mornings and the evenings the park will not be crowded and the wildlife will be much more abundant and active. There will still be plenty of sunlight for many hikes and the setting sun is particularly sublime in the park.

On the road south between Madison and Mammoth Hot Springs we saw the first grizzly of the trip and it was only about 60 feet from us.



Grizzly in Yellowstone meadow

We were the first to spot the bear and pulled over. As other cars passed they stopped as well and soon a bear jam formed along the roadway.

With about 2 hours driving left we continued on and enjoyed the scenery and the setting sun as we continued on, stopping occasionally for photos.



Yellowstone as dusk approaches

## Day 4: Tetons and Cascade Canyon

On day four we started off together from the String Lake trailhead and began a hike around Jenny Lake to where the boats would dock to allow hikers access to the Cascade Canyon trailhead. Because Evan was six years old and the hike up Cascade Canyon is a fairly strenuous ascent, he and Shelley went back to the fun beachside area of String Lake while Daniel and I continued up the trail.

**Attractions: Cascade Canyon, GTPN: 5 Stars**

Cascade Canyon is easily one of my top-ten day hikes in the US. The scenery is simply astounding. You'll pass Hidden Falls relatively early in the hike, then come to Inspiration Point overlooking Jenny Lake. After that it's a long slow ascent that if you have time will take you all the way to Lake Solitude. And if the conditions are right and the snow has melted sufficiently over Paintbrush divide the hike can be continued down the Paintbrush Canyon trail making an incredible loop of 20+ miles.







### Along the Cascade Canyon Trail

Daniel and I made it about 3/4 of the way to Lake Solitude before turning around, knowing that with every mile we continued the wait for us my Shell and Evan would be that much longer. We encountered a moose cow and calf and cautiously got some photos. A mother with young is always the most dangerous, whether it be a moose or a bear.

On the way back along the trail to String Lake we stopped at the sound of a woodpecker and took a couple photos of our own overlooking Jenny Lake.





We rendezvoused with Shelley and Evan, both looking happy with new souvenirs, at String Lake.

After our hiking fun we had tired legs and minds and decided the best place to eat dinner was Signal Mountain Lodge's Peaks Restaurant.

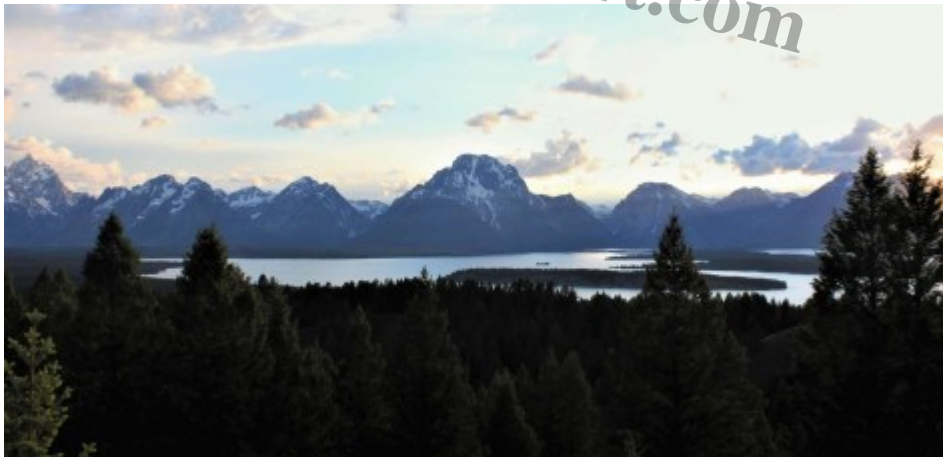
**Restaurants: Peaks Restaurant, Signal Mountain Lodge, GTNP: 4.5 Stars**

We had eaten here before and again we enjoyed it. It's hard not to as the view of the Teton's from the restaurant is amazing. The food is also good (and of course we always manage to have a few beers to help sooth our tired muscles after hiking). It's not as pricey as Jenny Lake Lodge and a little more upscale than the restaurants in Colter Bay. I think we'll be back again and again in the coming years.

After our relaxing dinner and another gift shop stop we went back to the camper to play some games and rest a bit.

Since it was the 4th of July we had a decision to make. We could drive all the way to Jackson, WY where there would be fireworks or we could just accept that we wouldn't see them this year. A long drive of 40 miles each direction seemed exhausting after the long day, but we didn't want to go another year without fireworks (it seems to happen most years).

We decided to try driving to the top of Signal Mountain, where we supposed the distant Jackson fireworks show would be visible. We made our way to Signal Mountain as the sun was setting and took in the view.



View from Signal Mountain

Unfortunately the mosquitoes were oppressive and we decided that we were still hopelessly distant from Jackson and wouldn't see anything. It was still a happy 4th of July.

**Day 5: Geysers and Horseback Riding**

We started out the day with two objectives in mind (other than to get a coffee, which we succeeded in doing at the Colter Bay coffee shop): 1) Go up to Yellowstone 2) Go horseback riding.

The one issue with item number two is that the stables in Yellowstone have a minimum age of 8 years old. We're very careful with our youngest but we also knew he was fully capable of being safe on a horse on a trail ride (I had gone when I was 4 years old). So we called around for stables just outside of Yellowstone that would allow a 6-year-old to ride (they all did) and found one just north of Gardiner, MT. We were ready to go.

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Our first stop was the Lonestar Geyser trail. I had wanted to do this trail both for the geyser but also for its access to Shoshone Lake, which is the largest backcountry lake in the US (meaning there are no roads to it).

Unfortunately, we endured an event that required immediate attention and forced us back to the trailhead after not making it more than a half mile up the trail. That circumstance was a kid that needed to go poo. We hiked right back down the trail to the bathroom.

Since we were now back where we started at the we decided that we would continue on to the Upper Geyser Basin where there would be more than enough to keep us busy before we had to continue north to the trail ride.

**Attractions: Upper Geyser Basin, Yellowstone NP: 5 Stars**

Upper Geyser Basin not only includes the signature Old Faithful geyser but hundreds of other geysers and hot springs spread over a large area.





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Upper Geyser Basin

We watched Old Faithful erupt and then hiked the Overlook trail to view the entire area including Old Faithful Inn. We walked along the boardwalks and saw a number of hot springs before making our necessary stop at the grand old lodge.

**Attractions: Old Faithful Inn, Yellowstone NP: 5 Stars**

Most people who walk in the doors of the grand old lodge aren't sleeping there. Someday we will. But Old Faithful Inn is a remarkable building all by itself and absolutely worth seeing. This is the lodge that became the standard for every national park lodge, but none has ever matched its cavernous grandeur.





The Old Faithful Inn

Another tradition we have after three family trips to Yellowstone is to eat in the dining room, and of course we did that.

**Restaurants: Old Faithful Inn Dining Room, Yellowstone NP: 4.5 Stars**





Old Faithful Inn Dining Room

The food is a giant buffet, but it is very high quality and the servers are always friendly as well. It's fun to just look around the room at all the twisted logs that were used in its construction.

Finally, we made our requisite stop at the ice cream shop.

We still had some time to spare before our 5 PM trail ride so we stopped at Biscuit Basin.

**Attractions: Biscuit Basin, Yellowstone NP: 4.5 Stars**





### Biscuit Basin

We walked the boardwalks and saw Sapphire Pool and many other hot springs as a family. While there was time to still hike to Mystic Falls, it could not be done quickly as a family. Instead I said that I could jog my way there and back in a matter of 30 minutes and I would show them the pictures on my return. They agreed.

I ran up the trail and followed it higher and higher until I was out of breath and realizing that I was not on the trail to Mystic Falls but instead an overlook. Catching my breath and feeling disappointed, I nonetheless took the photo of the overlook then jogged on back down the switchbacking trail. When I got to the car I asked for the AC and a cold drink from the cooler.

Google maps said we would arrive right at 5PM but an hour into the drive traffic and some road construction began to delay our arrival. As we started down the road to Gardiner we called the stables and let them know we were on our way, just running a tad bit late.

After a long drive up a fairly steep dirt road we arrived at the Hells-a-Roarin Outfitters.

**Attractions: Hells -A-Roaring Outfitters, Gardiner, MT: 4.5 Stars**





The actual guide wasn't the nicest (we essentially had a private ride), possibly because we were a half hour late, but everyone else at the stables was very nice and helped us get saddled and on our way. The views from the trail of the valley and distant Beartooth Mountains of Montana are gorgeous. We had a good time despite the rush and the slightly grumpy guide.

Following the trail ride we ate at the Raven Grill in Gardiner, MT which closed a couple months after our visit. It was only ok and I wouldn't have recommended it.



Bison along the roadway

With a three hour drive back down through Yellowstone we saw plenty of bison and stopped briefly at the Kepler Cascades and Shoshone Lake overlook.





We proceeded onward and stopped at Grant Village for gas and some wine and chocolates and shot glasses and shirts (the usual assortment of souvenirs and stuff), then carried on until we were back at the camper as darkness settled in.

## Day 6: Homeward Bound

It was time to depart. We hooked up the trailer and left early knowing we had a long journey ahead. But we did make a couple stops along the way.

**Attractions: Tate Geological Museum, Casper, WY: 4 Stars**





### Tate Geological Museum

The Tate Geological Museum isn't huge but it's definitely a worthwhile stop if you are like we are fascinated by the prehistoric world. We spent an hour here enjoying exhibits like the Columbian Mammoth and trilobites.

For dinner we found ourselves in the Chugwater, Wyoming area and gave the Stampede Saloon a shot.

#### **Restaurants: Stampede Saloon and Eatery, Chugwater, WY: 4 Stars**

The owners were the nicest and most welcoming people. The food was BBQ and in a buffet arrangement. They had live music ready to begin as we were finishing our meal but overall the experience was pleasant. Try it out if you are driving north of Cheyenne, WY on I-25.

Yellowstone and Grand Teton are really just a long day drive from our home in Colorado so we will certainly be back to both places again in the coming years. We always have a good time and enjoy the

adventure along the way. This would be the last trip we would take with the camper but whether we buy another camper in the future, or stay in lodges like Old Faithful Inn, or even try tent camping, weâ??ll be ready to come back.

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