
Stop 47. Yellowstone South

Arrival datetime: Wednesday, July 3, 4:00PM

Sites visited: Yellowstone National Park
Accommodations: The Old Faithful Inn
States traveled: Montana, Wyoming

We had decided to hike to the top of Mount Washburn for the great views of the park and to see the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone. But we had not even arrived at the park before it started raining. Then we were distracted on the drive by a rather large animal jam for four bison wandering in the roadway. We also stopped to see a few waterfalls, and to search the Obsidian Cliff for obsidian, as it had very little obsidian on it. We reached Norris at about 10:30AM and decided to stroll around the geyser basin to give the weather time to clear.

Small geysers erupting with great frequency immediately captivated us. We then came upon a crowd of about 30 people sitting on wooden benches in a 45° drizzle waiting for the Echinus Geyser to erupt. A man was explaining to a friend that when the pool is full, the geyser would soon erupt. The pool looked full. We read in our walking guide that the Echinus Geyser exhibits classic geyser behavior. The pool fills up, then it starts to boil, then small fountains of water start to erupt from one edge, then the whole geyser erupts for 3-5 minutes. The way it supposedly works is that the water is trapped in a crevice of some rock formation that is just above an earthen source of heat, that is, molten rock, or magma. The water at the bottom turns to gas because of the heat, but the

water on top prevents the gas from rising. Pressure builds up and the water on top starts to rise and fills the crevice of the rock formation and makes a pool above it. When enough water gets in the pool, it becomes too heavy for the gas to lift it gradually and the gas eventually pops like a cork, carrying the water on top of it to the surface ahead of it. The guide said that the interval between Echinus Geyser eruptions is between 1 and 4 hours.

It looked so close, we decided to wait it out. Michael had not worn a jacket for what was supposed to be a quick stroll. So Jennifer took off one sleeve of her knee length spring raincoat, sat beside Michael, and wrapped half of her coat around him. Michael was wearing a baseball cap and Jennifer was able to still wear the hood of her coat. We huddled like this as the drizzle turned to rain and back again. A couple on the bench in front of us gave up and we moved into prime geyser-gazing seats. We sat there for over an hour and a half watching the black and orange pool fill higher and boil in about a dozen more places. But we were rewarded. The geyser erupted at least ten feet wide and thirty feet high. It spouted white gushes of water straight up in the air for several minutes.

We sauntered about and saw several more small geysers and hot boiling



Waiting in the rain for the Echinus Geyser to erupt, our first geyser.

pools. One geyser, called the “Whirlgig” erupted with such constant force that the water flying from the pool sounded like a helicopter. This was in an area appropriately named Porcelain Basin. The pools were all slightly different shades of blue-green, ranging from the clearest turquoise to a deep dark, almost black, aquamarine. The ground was white with siliceous sinter, or geysers, a mineral brought to the surface by the hot water that formed a crusty white sheet over the surfaces it covered. Here and there a hot spring would darken the white ground with bright yellows and oranges. All of the land was crusty and crumbly. An interpretive exhibit informed us that this type of land was called “sulfatara,” scalding mud and steam barely covered by hot decomposing rock. We walked mostly on boardwalks, though occasionally an area was stable enough for the park to have laid macadam.

Back on the road, we decided to head straight for Old Faithful. We were again were distracted with roadside bison, this time a whole herd. We were careful to take pictures from a safe distance because we had read in the local paper that a man had been gored by a bison in front of the

Old Faithful Inn just two days ago. It was grazing three feet from a path between the Inn and a Gift Shop. The man was on his way to the gift shop and passed by it three feet away. It turned and threw him, piercing his leg in the process, then continued grazing.

We had a few more wildlife sightings from the car, a coyote and a big bird strutting around a field that looked like an ostrich but a Ranger later told us was something much more common that actually flew. We saw some more hot springs from the roadside, and got to Old Faithful by 4:00PM.

We had thought we would be out hiking all day but had not eaten our hiking lunch. As we did not know what time we would arrive, we had not made dinner reservations either. The Old Faithful Inn informed us that we would not be able to eat there until 9:45PM, so we wandered about, saw the Visitor Center, and shopped, until the restaurant across the parking lot at the Snow Lodge opened at 5:00PM. It was fine.

Back at the Old Faithful Inn, we caught the Old Faithful geyser. We realized it

must be close because there were no less than 500 people gathered on the 25 sets of benches and various railings and balconies that overlooked the most famous geyser in the park. It went off every 45-120 minutes and the activity desk at the Inn and the Information desk at the Visitor Center kept track of its patterns and posted their predictions. The Visitor Center also tracked 5 other



Old Faithful.

geysers in the general area. For the rest of our stay, we were checking in with them every time we were back in our room to see if we should run out and look at something. That first night, we wandered about the geyser basin without a plan and saw many pools, springs, and white earth, but did not see any more geyser eruptions.

When we first saw the literature on Yellowstone, we realized that the park was too big to see in one day and also too big for us to figure out what the highlights should be in one day, so we had booked a tour for the next morning. It was a nice break for Michael not to have to drive. The first stop on the tour was our lodge. We actually rode in a circle through the parking lot then got out to walk up to the Beehive geyser. It looked like a five-foot tall beehive with a very large circular opening at the top, more like a child's pottery attempt at a beehive, really. The driver had a radio with her and was told it was ready to erupt. It only erupts once a day and it is 100 feet high, so it was quite an event. A small "indicator" fountain beside it shot water four feet high at a 45-degree angle away from the main cone. We were able to get to an overlook close to the parking lot a few seconds before the main eruption, 100 feet of water shot as if from a fire hose, straight up in the air. Like Old Faithful, the wind blew mist to one side as the force of the water rose straight up. It lasted about 5 minutes.

We rode the bus to the Fountain Paint Pot. Our 22-year-old bus driver/guide, Christine, was exuberant about our guaranteed opportunity to see flying pink mud. She was correct. We did see flying pink mud. She was also right about our chances of seeing certain geysers that went off every three to four minutes. We learned that the acidic water made the ground unable to support plant life. If there were plants living where geysers erupted, they absorb acid along with water instead of nutrients they need to survive, so they die. She pointed out some "bobby-socks trees," standing

lifeless, the first few feet of their trunks stark white.

There were a lot of dead trees in the park. We would drive for miles and miles with views of dead trees. Acres and acres of them were left from huge fires that burned in 1989. The environment is so harsh that new growth was still only five feet or so high. Every overlook had at least one patch of charred treetops. Christine explained how the policy in 1989 was to not suppress fire. That is, until the 1989 fires threatened to destroy the entire park, then for a short time the policy was, “fight all fire.” Now it is to not suppress fire unless it threatens buildings or roads.

Christine knew where there were elk and bison along the road, and where there were uncrowded waterfalls. She took us to great lookout points along the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone. We got in an extra view by taking a short run along the North Rim trail. We asked if we were right about the yellow cliff walls giving Yellowstone Park its name. Christine said no, that the park was named for the Yellowstone River, which was named for cliff walls further North that were also yellow.

Yellowstone’s Grand Canyon also had pink, orange, and deep red colors in its walls. There was also plenty of green plant life. It framed loud white waterfalls reminiscent of Yosemite. At the bottom was a wide flat winding blue river. We finally understood why people enjoy Yellowstone so much and say how beautiful it is. The geysers, while interesting, make for harsh-looking, dead landscapes.

Our final tour stop was the Lake Hotel. Lake Yellowstone was long, wide, deep blue, and eerily unpopulated, even by tour boats. We asked if anyone swam in it. The answer was that it was 45° year round. For the rest of the drive Christine rambled on a bit much about her career path in the park concessionaire, but for the most part, it was a very good tour.

We had run up enough short hikes and crowded into enough overlooks that we were pretty tired by the time the tour was over. Still, we checked the Old Faithful schedule as soon as we got back to the Inn and were able to see it erupt again before heading to West Yellowstone for Fourth of July Fireworks.



Roadside Elk and Bison



Lake Yellowstone.

The fireworks were not until 10:00PM. There had been a parade with all the local businesses and civic groups represented. We caught just the end of it, and watched a snowcat vehicle roll down Main Street. Apparently, those vehicles



The Fourth of July parade in West Yellowstone.

are the sole form of transportation into Yellowstone Park in the winter. We meandered around town for a long while. A shopkeeper asked Michael if there was something he could help with, or was Michael, “just grazing?” We had never



Yellowstone's Grand Canyon.



Beehive geyser with it's "indicator".

heard the farming term applied to anything but restaurants that serve small portions, but we assumed that it more often came to mind out here in ranch country. Michael said he felt invited to eat anything he wanted, but he refrained.

Michael got sunglasses and Jennifer got a mushroom-shaped box. We checked out every restaurant in West Yellowstone before settling on an Italian pizza-pasta place for dinner. It was just great. It was not pizza by North Eastern standards, but good food, as only pizza ingredients can

consistently muster. We got take out gourmet chocolate from one shop and went for gourmet coffee from another. To help celebrate the July 4th holiday Jennifer was wearing Michael's flag-patterned shorts, red and white stripes on one hip and stars on the other. The man running the coffee shop had on the same pair. Apparently, his staff had made fun of him all night, and Jennifer brought him fashion legitimacy, for which he was grateful. He gave her a quintuple espresso instead of the small black coffee she had ordered..



The Upper Fall of Yellowstone's Grand Canyon.

For the first time in the trip, we brought out our big picnic/emergency blanket. As per advice from the fifty-ish, slim,

attractive lady at the chamber of commerce booth, we spread out our blanket in front of the Museum of the



Yellowstone. We relaxed over our chocolate and espresso before the fireworks started and the sky filled with patriotic color. The fireworks were fitting for the occasion.

Afterwards, we filed back into the park with all the people that worked there. The Rangers checked our pass and laughed out loud that a stray couple from New Jersey was part of their local July Fourth celebration.

The next day was Michael's birthday. We liked the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone and the Lake Hotel enough to return. So we spent most of the day there. We



Fireworks in West Yellowstone. again saw elk and bison on the road, but decided not to stop long for anything but a moose, which we have never seen outside a zoo. We hiked the South Rim of the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, had lunch at the Lake Hotel, and then walked around a geyser basin that was on the shore of the Lake.

Returning to our hotel, we thought we had a chance to see Old Faithful before dinner, and went to the second floor porch of the hotel to wait. But we missed it, so we had a drink inside instead, listening to a classical piano player who was excellent. We saw Old Faithful erupt after dinner.

In the morning, we began by seeing Old Faithful after breakfast. Then, equipped with predictions, we headed out to the Upper Geyser Basin and actually saw two geysers erupt that were not Old Faithful. One of these was the rather impressive Riverside Geyser. We also ran into a

ranger who told us where to find moose
in the Grand Tetons.

Miles traveled: 221
Departure datetime: Saturday, July 6, 11:25AM
Departure weather: 80° Cloudy