
Stop 46. Yellowstone North

Arrival datetime: Monday, July 1, 6:30PM
Sites visited: Great Falls of the Missouri,
Yellowstone National Park
Accommodations: Chico Hot Springs Resort
States traveled: Montana, Wyoming

We set off through the prairie with light blue skies with big fluffy clouds, leaving the dark gray clouds over the mountains behind us. Rain fell steadily through the sunny skies. This sun shower was not a passing drizzle, but a soaking pour. About 3 miles away from the hotel, it stopped. The Montana Rockies were cloud catchers if there ever were any. Michael called US 89, “The Driving from the Clouds Road.”

Because of our Lewis and Clark entertainment, we decided to see how far we were from the Great Falls of the Missouri. According to our Rand McNally map, they were close enough to be an enroute stop on the way to Chico Hot Springs. But the map was not detailed enough to show a road leading to them. Though there was a National Historic Landmark at Portage, it was not on the Missouri River and the Falls seemed a good distance away. We also had a detailed Montana Map from a tourist visitor center, but the falls were not on it at all. So we drove through long low hills to city of Great Falls, then bypassed the city and hugged the river, looking for the Great Falls.

We came to one dead end at the Rainbow Dam. But the empty brown banks of the flat brown river were worth a photo

anyway, not two miles from the city and it appeared we were in wilderness. We decide to head toward Portage hoping for a sign off the highway, and it did come. It was a small brown state park-looking sign, “RYAN DAM,” in big letters, and in smaller letters beneath it, “The Great Falls of the Missouri River.” It took us a few miles down the road to a nicely landscaped river island, a picnic area with a wooden gazebo and clean restrooms. Visitors entered over a bridge from the parking lot. It was very windy and the bridge swayed as we walked over it.

Coming off the bridge, we were met by a sign that said, “WARNING! Evacuate



Warning at Great Falls

the area if you hear 8 short blasts. Thank you!” Another large sign had a map of part of the Lewis and Clark Journey. A



The Great Falls of the Missouri River.

“YOU ARE HERE” on that sign confirmed that we were in the right place. Stairs from inside the gazebo led to a viewing platform where the Great Falls of the Missouri were still visible beneath the symmetrical wide arc of a modern dam. The wind was so strong and in such incessant gusts that we had trouble steadying the camera to get pictures. The river streamed in one long white wave over the dam then crashed haphazardly into water-smoothed rocks the size of railroad cars below. The power of the water was clear, but it was also clear why Montana had omitted this historic site from their tourist map.

We took the scenic route from Great Falls to Chico Hot Springs. We passed land striped with green plantings. Some stripes were single rows on a tan field, some stripes were a hundred feet wide, alternating with unplanted tan stripes of the same width. Valley irrigation machines stretched the length of very

field, their long pipes connected large wheels and hoses. We had seen the same ones before in other states, but here they were a more common sight than a driveway. Some that were in use actually had rainbows hovering around one end.

We pulled into Chico Hot Springs Resort at about 6:30PM. We contemplated what to do other than continue onto Yellowstone. We had two nights to spend and none of the activities of the Resort seemed worth staying for. Also, the room was falling apart. Though the screen fit perfectly in the windows, there was an inch gap between the wood of the window and its sill. The sink had two facets for hot and cold water, so it was very difficult to get the right temperature to wash your hands or face. Outside our door was a bathroom that was shared by other rooms down the hall that did not have private baths. The rugs and furniture in both the rooms and the hallway was sagging and fraying.

Luckily, the restaurant turned out to be very good, so that was a plus, and we would lose a deposit if we cancelled anyway. Over dinner, we decided to make the best of it by getting a spa treatment like an herbal wrap and massage. But the next morning, we found that we could not get an appointment for the spa, so the hot pools were the only Chico-specific activity we would do. The pools were very hot. One was a very large swimming pool, supposedly filled with 98° water, but overflow from the hotter pool kept at more like 102°. The other was a 20x40 shaded pool, at about 106°. We actually swam in the large pool, then stretched in the smaller one. We were close to fainting by the time we got out, and it took us a very long time to shower and dress for the day.

We entered Yellowstone from the north, and so as not to repeat too much total driving, stayed in the Mammoth Springs and Tower-Roosevelt areas, the north edge of the park. Mammoth Springs had a large hill that was formed by multiple hot springs bringing calcites to the surface, where the mineral hardened into rock and formed the hill. A few isolated springs had formed their own cones near the edges of the hills. The newly formed land was mostly white, with some bright orange streaks where iron had seeped into the water. There were sky blue and green pools of boiling water and steam vents everywhere in the soft white crumbly landscape. It was like another planet.

We drove along the northern-most road, stopping at Undine Falls for a few photos of gushing white water over several stories of steep rock in a narrow canyon,



Mammoth Hot Springs.

by now a familiar sight. Just before the Roosevelt Lodge, dozens of cars were piled into the small parking lot of a Ranger station. People were lined up along a hillside, looking up. We had pulled in thinking that it was the Lodge parking lot, and we were looking for lunch. Instead, we politely pulled out the binoculars to join the crowd in an ooh-ah session for a bear and her cub at least a thousand yards away. Here we learned the term, “animal jam.” It appeared to be Ranger language for several cars slowing to a crawl and parking haphazardly along the roadway to see animals that are visible from the roadside. Rangers are often dispatched to animal jams to keep traffic moving and to keep people from getting too close to the animals.

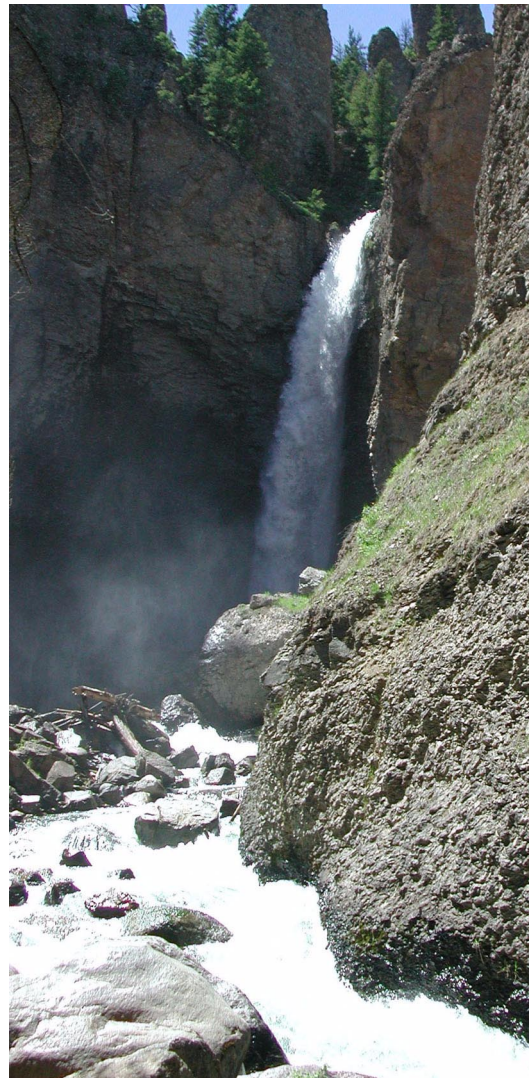
We found the lodge too overcrowded for a quick lunch so we got some cheese and crackers at the general store and headed for the picnic grounds that, according to the map, seemed to be along the Yellowstone River. The picnic grounds were crowded too. We could not find a parking space or a table. We packed lunch in the backpack and headed toward the river. On the map, we could see a

trail following the river for a few miles. It had gotten warm enough for us to wish for a cool rock in the shade by the water, followed by a leisurely stroll along the river. However, the trail we ended up on was a quarter mile through low brush and wildflowers to a ridge a few hundred feet over the river, and it ended abruptly at an overlook in the sun. But there was a lunch rock, so we ate in the sun, then headed back to the car.

It was a bit tense, carrying food in bear country and having to clap and shout the whole time we were out. Our next stop was Tower Fall, a little over a mile round trip to the falls and an actual beach along the Yellowstone River. We were relieved to find it crowded enough so there were no bear worries. The fall was impressive even by our newly developed standards. Huge jagged boulders that had broken from the eroded cliffs under the rushing water were just below the falls, those that had rolled further downstream were progressively more smooth, a trail that had taken geological time unfathomable to us to build.

Below the falls, the creek ran into the Yellowstone River and a short path led to the beach. Across the river was a yellow mountain. In the river, among other pastel colors, were yellow rocks. Though it had been a rough climb down and promised to be an ever more rough trip back up, the colorful view was worth every step. We thought we figured out how Yellowstone got its name.

On the way back from Tower, we ran into another animal jam. Dozens of cars had pulled over where there was no curbside. People were standing by open doors or hanging out windows, taking pictures of



Tower Fall.

an 800 pound grizzly that was foraging for food in the same type of low lying brush that we had hiked in prior to our picnic. A Ranger broke up the traffic, but Michael slowed as much as he could while Jennifer took pictures out the window. The grizzly seemed oblivious, but we were not about to risk getting out of the car.

Later by the same Ranger Station that we had seen the first grizzly, a crowd again had gathered. This time, there was a black bear lying on rock near the roadside.



The Yellowstone River and the "yellow stone."



Roadside Grizzly.

Again, a Ranger was keeping traffic moving, and keeping an eye on a line of over 20 people standing not 300 yards from the bear itself.

We exited the park via the north gate that was framed with a majestic stone arch. The arch called the Roosevelt Arch dedicates Yellowstone as the first national park.



The Cadillac in the "Roosevelt Arch"

Back at the Chico Lodge, we hit the hot pools again, as it was the only thing to do there. We had another excellent dinner and slept in our hot room that had no air conditioning. We awoke to sounds of

truck drivers conversing loudly with the staff in the parking lot behind our room at 6:30AM. We again skipped the buffet-only breakfast and headed again to Yellowstone.

Miles traveled: 545
Departure datetime: Wednesday, July 3, 7:30AM
Departure weather: 65° Cloudy