Travel and Adventure: A hiking tour of Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons takes you to places where natur

by Lori Weisberg

For two days, our tour group had been hearing promises of wildlife sightings in Yellowstone National Park, and so far the closest encounter I'd had with an uncaged animal was an overly friendly squirrel hungrily grabbing scraps of food from tourists on the deck of the Old Faithful Inn.

NEW HEIGHTS - The jagged, snowcapped mountains that comprise the Grand Tetons in northwestern Wyoming will take your breath away the first time you see them. The highest peak rises 13,770 feet. CNS Photo by Aaron Steckelberg. ANOTHER WORLD - Thermal features such as this hot spring in Yellowstone National Park bubble and churn, sometimes giving off the strong smell of sulfur. The park's active volcanic area, one of the world's largest, includes some 10,000 such features. CNS Photo by Aaron Steckelberg. RIDING WRANGLERS - At daybreak, wranglers at a riding stable across from the Snake River Lodge in Jackson Hole, Wyo., round up horses. CNS Photo by Aaron Steckelberg. WORTH THE WALK - The hike to Inspiration Point in the Central Tetons offers a great view of Jenny Lake. CNS Photo by Aaron Steckelberg. Finally, on day three, it appeared our luck had changed. One of our guides, who would be leading our group's morning hike along the shore of Yellowstone Lake, abruptly stopped the van she was driving, motioned to the second van to pull over, and screamed, "Hey, anyone wanna see some buffalo?"

That was all we shutterbugs needed to hear. We piled into her van and drove hurriedly to where she had spotted a herd of bison grazing in a meadow near the Yellowstone River. Sure enough, they were still there.

Positively gleeful, several of us scampered out of the van and sprinted up some steps to catch a glimpse of the animals who, one by one, were crossing the river to a grassy bank where more bison were grazing.

We made our way to the area to get a closer look, and all of a sudden we were nearly face to face with the herd, munching away on grass. I grabbed my telephoto lens, moved toward the animals and snapped away, oblivious to the warnings of my fellow travelers that I needed to back away. This was my Kodak moment, and there was no stopping me.

Only later did I come to find out how reckless I'd been. Bison are considered one of Yellowstone's most dangerous animals, responsible each year for several gorings and even some fatalities. Despite their hulking

frames, they are very agile and, if provoked by humans, will attack.

It was one of the many cautionary tales we'd hear during the six-day hiking tour my husband and I took in Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons. People in these parts seem to have a fascination for all things grisly and terrifying.

Even before we met up with our tour group in West Yellowstone, the driver who picked us up at the small airport in Bozeman, Mont., regaled us with accounts of everything from horrible car accidents on the area's perilous, twisting mountain roads to the young woman mauled beyond recognition by a grizzly.

During our hike in Yellowstone's geyser country, the geologist leading our group of 20 seemed to smirk as he told us about the young man who foolishly leapt into a 200-degree hot spring to rescue a friend's dog. The animal perished, he said, and his rescuer was blinded, burned over all his body and dead a day later. Let that be a lesson to you, he seemed to be admonishing us.

Stories of death and destruction, though, couldn't dampen our enthusiasm for this captivating area of the Rockies, where we were treated to thermal eruptions, thundering waterfalls, snowcapped mountains, crystalline lakes and yes, even a fair amount of wild animals.

In all my years of traveling, I confess I'd never once visited a U.S. national park, opting instead for more urban destinations. After witnessing firsthand the mesmerizing geologic attractions of Yellowstone and the majesty of the Tetons, I wondered why I had waited so long.

TAKE IT EASY

We chose Berkeley, Calif.-based Backroads, which bills itself as an "active travel company," to set our itinerary, lead us on our hikes, arrange our meals and do all the heavy lifting involved when you're staying at four hotels over the course of five nights.

While my husband and I aren't exactly experienced hikers, we did our best to keep up with what turned out to be a very competitive group of walkers. Early on I got a little peeved, because the hikes felt as though they were a continual race to the finish line that favored the more fleet-footed members of our group. But as time went on, that seemed to change, as most of us took our time to take in the wondrous scenery.

For anyone who doesn't care for the herdlike feel of many organized tours, Backroads is a good compromise because it offers travelers various hiking options with different mileages and intensities, and, if you choose to go it alone, detailed route instructions are provided. You can hike as little or as much as you want, although typically, our daily treks would range from five to nine miles.

On some days, when there was no way for the guides to bring lunch to us, we'd meet early in the morning to pack bagged lunches and grab snacks and water for the day. On other occasions, Nancy Neimann and Matt McDonald, our group leaders, would lay out delectable buffets that included salami and cheeses, pasta and spinach salads, smoked salmon, sliced bread and bagels, and fresh berries and melons.

Dinners were usually in the hotel restaurants where meals were a meat-eaters dream: farm-raised boar, pan-seared elk, roast prime rib of bison and rib-eye steaks.

It took some time for my husband to disengage from his workaday world, tethered as he was to his Palm pilot. One morning, after completing a hike a little behind the rest of the group, he emerged from the trail with a broad smile in his face, happy to recount, what I thought, were his impressions of what he'd just seen. Instead, he announced triumphantly, "I got cell service."

In truth, there was little time for checking e-mails or making cell phone calls, given the breadth of the landscape we were traversing. Our first day, we were quickly acquainted with the eerily exciting terrain that is

Yellowstone. In essence, it is a giant caldera or crater, sitting within one of the world's largest active volcanic systems, the most recent of the giant eruptions dating back 640,000 years.

The legacy of all that volcanic activity is more than 10,000 thermal features that include hot springs, bubbling mud pots, steaming fumaroles and, of course, the star attractions, the geysers, which number more than 400. At times, it's reminiscent of a battlefield in the aftermath of a hellacious gunfight, the smoke rising from amid the slender pines.

During the course of a relatively easy hike in the Lower Geyser Basin, we got our fill of all those geothermal theatrics as we peered into the molten hot, deep blue pools; oohed and awed over the periodic spouting of geysers; and inhaled the rotten-egg smell of sulfuric fumes.

Bending over one of the steam vents, I felt a rush of hot, moist air, as if I were getting a facial.

Before we embarked on the more arduous hike of the day, we picnicked on the bank of the Firehole River, enjoying the warmth of the sun overhead and the light filtering through the skinny lodgepole pines. Our geologist guide, who seemed to have a little of the vaudevillian in him, donned a black Smokey Bear hat while informing us that his grandfather, a U.S. Forest Service ranger, was the one who put the ranger hat on Smoky.

FORCES OF NATURE

Throughout the week, we'd see reminders of the hugely destructive 1988 fire that torched one-third of the national park. Interestingly, a lot of the trees depend on high temperatures to help release the seeds from their pine cones. As a result, we frequently saw acres of miniature versions of mature pine trees, leaving you with the feeling that you'd just entered a gigantic Christmas tree lot.

After our picnic lunch, we headed out to Mystic Falls, one of many waterfalls in Yellowstone park. While just a mile long, the trail to the 70-foot falls requires some huffing and puffing as you climb the ascent along a gravel trail that narrows and becomes increasingly steep. At more than 7,500 feet, it was my first encounter with the effects of the area's higher elevation.

But as with most of the sights on this trip, you're rewarded with a phenomenal view - in this case, the sweep of the geyser basin.

Rather than join most of the group on a hike to the Old Faithful Inn, where were staying for the night, we instead took the van there, and I'm glad we did. We made it in time to catch the showy eruption of Old Faithful, which these days blows off steam every 92 minutes. A clock in the hotel lobby lets guests know the anticipated time of the next eruption.

We grabbed a front-row seat on benches set up for viewing the geyser and got a clear view of the 180-foot-tall column of steam spewing upward.

Old Faithful was definitely a gee-whiz moment, but more awe inspiring was the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone. Twenty miles long, 1,000 feet deep and 2,500 feet wide, the canyon area was at one time covered by a series of lava flows. Over time, the canyon was sculpted by erosion from melting glaciers and earthquakes.

The steep sides of the canyon have a painterly quality, stained in hues of yellow, orange, white and a pinkish blush, the result of iron oxidation in the rock.

The real treat are the thundering lower and upper falls along the North Rim Trail. We maneuvered a side trail of switchbacks that descended 600 feet to reach the Brink of Lower Falls, where we got close-up views of the white water crashing into the river. "A grander scene than the lower cataract of the Yellowstone was never

witnessed by mortal eyes" was how a member of the 1870 Washburn party of Yellowstone explorers described the scene."

BEAUTY MOST RARE

Just when you think Mother Nature has no better spectacles to offer, you get a glimpse of the Grand Tetons, which we first saw on our third day. I never tired of staring at this range of jagged, snowcapped peaks that rise as high as 13,770 feet, mirrored in the cerulean glacial lakes along the valley floor.

My favorite hike of the trip, hands down, was our trek through Cascade Canyon, which cuts through the heart of the Teton range. After making a steep climb along a rocky trail to Inspiration Point, where we had a gorgeous view of Jenny Lake and the tree-lined bank, we hiked along Cascade Creek, a round-trip of nine miles.

Along the way, we had one captivating view after another of the Tetons, surrounded by gurgling waters, wooded trails and tree-studded slopes. It felt like a scene right out of "The Sound of Music," and we were the Von Trapp family crossing the Alps to safety in Switzerland. Some of us were so inspired we broke into a rendition of "The Hills Are Alive With the Sound of Music."

Contrast that with my least favorite outing, a hike up Renaissance Mountain in Jackson Hole, where we trekked uphill for more than a mile, eventually gaining 1,000 feet in elevation. Sure, the views were great and it was fun watching daring paragliders drift over the valley floor, but I spent more time trying to catch my breath than admiring the scenery.

My discomfort, however, paled in comparison to that of my husband, who, unbeknownst to the rest of our group, decided to take the tram all the way to the top of the mountain and, instead of making it a round trip, walked all seven miles to the bottom - alone.

He later acknowledged the folly of his ways, gulping down Gatorade to rehydrate himself because he'd run out of his one small bottle of water early into his hike.

"Maybe next year," he said that evening, "we could go on a cruise?"

IF YOU GO

The tour: Prices start at $2,498 for a six-day trip, which includes lodging and all meals except one dinner. Accommodations include four hotels, including the famous Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone National Park and the upscale Snake River Lodge & Spa in Teton Village. The lodge, with its sprawling pool and cascading waterfalls and indoor spa, is a perfect choice for the final hotel of the trip, and there is free time for spa treatments.

Getting there: You can choose to fly either to West Yellowstone, Mont., where the group meets the first day or to Jackson, Wyo., where you can pick up an early-morning Backroads shuttle to West Yellowstone. The tour company has suggestions for lodging the night before the tour starts.

Getting prepared: Because of the higher altitude and rigorous daily hikes, it's a good idea to begin walking and hiking months before the trip. Be sure to include hilly routes in your training regimen, and break in the shoes you plan to wear during the trip. A small backpack is all that's needed for the hikes, and bottled water is provided each day.

Details: You can contact Backroads by calling (800) 462-2848 or visiting the company's Web site at www.backroads.com.

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