



DINA MISHEV FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Yellowstone in winter: A secluded, snowy dream

BY DINA MISHEV

Settling into a pool at the base of a small waterfall in a creek corralled by snow-covered banks but fed by thermally heated waters, I'm wearing Crocs, a wool hat, an old bathing suit and a smile that feels big enough to swallow the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. The gorge, which is roughly 20 miles long and ranges from 800 to 1,200 feet deep, is only a couple of miles from the yurt camp where I've spent the past three nights. And I'm not even certain this soak is the day's highlight.

Since being dropped off by a "snowcoach," a van fitted with tank-like treads instead of tires, at the Cygnet Lakes trailhead a little to the southwest of the geographic center of Yellowstone National Park four hours earlier, I've seen no sign of humans — not so much as a ski or snowshoe track. The park does groom tracks and paths for cross-country skiing, but Piper Gillard, a ski guide at the Yellowstone Expeditions yurt camp, and I are not on any of these.

We're taking turns breaking trail through a foot of snow, through tight forests of young lodgepole pine, along the banks of — and sometimes on top of — a frozen tributary of Otter Creek and around

steaming thermal areas that are so small and inaccessible that the map we're using to navigate doesn't bother to show them. While ours are the only *ski* tracks, they cross a multitude of wolf, bison, snowshoe hare, coyote, ermine and pine marten tracks.

When Yellowstone was founded — 150 years ago this March — it was to protect its geothermal wonders, of which it has the highest concentration anywhere in the world. Today the park is as special for its diversity and density of wildlife as its geology. It is unique in the Lower 48, because all of the large mammals — grizzly bears, bison, wolves and others — that lived in the area before the arrival of Europeans still live here in the wild.

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After soaking for about 30 minutes, Piper and I put our wet bathing suits and towels into plastic

SEE YURTS ON F6

Miles from other accommodations, yurt camp serves as a home base for exploration

The dining yurt at Yellowstone Expeditions' yurt camp serves meals to guests daily.

Marking the long road to equality in Louisiana

BY ANDREA SACHS

On Feb. 1, the start of Black History Month, Leona Tate stood near the doorway she first entered more than 60 years ago as one of three Black students to integrate the McDonogh 19 Elementary School in New Orleans. Back then, the 6-year-old in the dainty dress and hair ribbon was flanked by federal marshals. This morning, she was surrounded by admirers and other activists, plus a life-size figure draped in billowy fabric. At the go signal, Tate grabbed a handful of cloth and pulled, revealing a Louisiana Civil Rights Trail marker, another stop on the state's long road to racial equality.

"Today is special, because [the desegregation of McDonogh 19] is getting the recognition it should have gotten years ago," Tate said after the ceremony. "We were introduced to racism here, even

though we didn't understand what it was at 6 years old. I want racism to end here."

Last February, the state debuted the Louisiana Civil Rights Trail, a mix of online content, such as archival photos and video, and physical sites integral to the movement that engulfed the South in the 1950s and '60s. Three months later, the first marker — a 6-foot-tall-ish steel silhouette of a protester holding an interpretive plaque — was installed at Dooky Chase's Restaurant in New Orleans. Designations at two spots in Baton Rouge (A.Z. Young Park and the Old State Capitol) and one in Shreveport (Little Union Baptist Church) followed. The day after the McDonogh 19 unveiling, the Louisiana Maneuvers and Military Museum in Pineville received its signage. The Robert "Bob" Hicks House in Bogalusa is

SEE CIVIL RIGHTS ON F4



CHRIS GRANGER/TIMES-PICAYUNE/NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Leona Tate, left, helps unveil a new Louisiana Civil Rights Trail marker Feb. 1 at what was once her New Orleans school. Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser, right, helped spearhead the trail project.

NAVIGATOR

Tipping overseas has always been confusing — and the pandemic isn't helping. F2



CANADA

A skier's dream come true: two months in British Columbia at the peak of winter. F3

TECH

Are your pictures worth less than 1,000 words? Tips for upping your vacation-photo game. F5

During winter, quiet Yellowstone is rife with adventure

YURTS FROM F1

bags, change back into our ski clothing, shoulder our day packs and ski four miles across Hayden Valley. We give a herd of grazing bison a wide berth. When several animals in the herd pause their grazing — they use their ponderous necks and heads to push snow out of the way to reach the grasses beneath — and start running, we give them an even wider berth. A park law states that you can't be any closer than 25 yards to a bison, but I've always interpreted that as a minimum: A cardinal rule of wildlife watching is that if an animal is reacting to you, you're too close.

Half an hour past the bison herd, power lines and one of the park's snow roads come into view. My feet, now sweating inside ski boots for more than six hours, are the only part of me happy about this. I've lived an hour south of Yellowstone National Park for 25 years and backpacked, hiked, snowshoed and kayaked in it more times than I can count — even disappearing for days in the summer in trail-less areas and seeing several grizzly bears — and this is the first time I've felt the wonder of its wildness.

President Ulysses S. Grant signed the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act into law March 1, 1872. The act set Yellowstone aside as "a pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." It was the country's first national park.

In 2021, more than 4.8 million people visited Yellowstone National Park, making it the busiest year on record. Although much has been made of Yellowstone's "overcrowding," the reality is that, even during the park's busiest month — July, with 1.08 million visitors — only a fraction of people ventured more than a half-mile from its parking lots, roads and boardwalks. Yellowstone is more than 2.2 million acres, about the size of Delaware and Rhode Island combined, and its roads and parking lots are less than 0.08 percent of its total area. So it's more of a congestion problem than an overcrowding one. Still, you can't get to the non-congested areas without navigating the congested ones.

This time of year, though, there's no congestion: Only about 110,000 of 2021's visitors came to Yellowstone during the park's winter season, which runs from mid-December through mid-March. During this time, when the park gets an annual average of 10 to 20 feet of snow, the majority of Yellowstone's roads are closed to cars, and the only major attraction you can drive to is Mammoth Hot Springs.

Roads close in early November and are left unplowed. Once there's enough snow, usually starting in early December, the park begins grooming the roads for snowmobiles and snowcoaches, creating snow roads. You can take a snowmobile or snowcoach to the Old Faithful Snow Lodge, which is one of only two hotels open in the park in winter. (The other is Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel.)

Or you can be one of about 15 people at a time who stay at a yurt camp run by Yellowstone Expeditions near the north rim of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. Here, the only other living creatures spending the night for 35 miles are a handful of park and concessionaire employees and the wildlife for which the park is famous.

Founded in 1983 by Arden Bailey and Dale Fowler, the yurt camp is open for about 10 weeks every winter. Still run by Bailey and, since 1989, Erica Hutchings, the yurt camp is a 30-mile ride in a snowcoach from West Yellowstone, Mont., the gateway town at the park's west entrance. On a Sunday morning in February, 10 of us pile into two of them — "Uncle Billy" and "Eleanor" — in the parking lot of the West Yellowstone Visitor Information Center. "Each of our coaches is named for someone important in Yellowstone's history," Hutchings says. I'm in Uncle Billy, named for Thomas Elwood "Billy" Hofer, a naturalist in and explorer of the park in the late 1800s.

With guide Nadia Garbaj at the wheel, we stop to watch trumpeter swans as they float, feed and, yes, trumpet, in the Madison River. She shares enough information about them to take my mind off how badly I want to see wolves, which were reintroduced to the park in 1995 and 1996 and now number about 90.

Hundreds of the birds winter in the park — they migrate from Canada — but only about three dozen nest there. "In the summer, there are fewer trumpeter swans in Yellowstone than there are wolves," Nadia says. "But now, in winter, they're easy to see."

Farther up the river, we stop to watch bison on the far bank.



PHOTOS BY DINA MISHEV FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



TOP: Norris Geyser Basin is home to the tallest active geyser in the world, the Steamboat Geyser. ABOVE: A snowcoach drops cross-country skiers off near Pelican Valley. In winter, most of Yellowstone's roads are maintained as snow roads.

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Yellowstone is the only place in the United States where wild bison have lived continuously from prehistoric times to the present. (The park's population hit a nadir of about 23 of the animals in 1901; today, it aims for a population of about 5,000.) A pair of trumpeter swans floats by in front of them.

Before lunch, we stop at Norris Geyser Basin, one of summer's congested areas, the most varied thermal area in the park and home to the tallest active geyser in the world, Steamboat Geyser. Ours is the only vehicle in the parking lot.

Until recently, Steamboat's major eruptions, which can last up to 40 minutes and shoot water more than 300 feet into the air, were as irregular as they were infrequent. At one point, 50 years passed between eruptions. Steamboat reactivated in 2018, though, and has since erupted 150 times. Although its eruptions are no longer infrequent, big ones remain irregular. When we walk a half-mile on a snow-covered boardwalk to see the geyser, it steams and every minute or so shoots water 10 or 15 feet into the air. "You got to see a minor eruption," Nadia says when I meet the rest of my group back at Uncle Billy. "It's pretty cool when no one else is around, isn't it?"

We reach camp, tucked into trees at the end of a snow road marked "Restricted Access," around 3 p.m. "For those who want to, we're going on a short ski in about 30 minutes," Nadia says. Yellowstone Expeditions' yurt camp sits in the middle of the park's Canyon Village network of ski trails.

Unlike many yurt setups, in which everyone eats and sleeps in one yurt, Yellowstone Expeditions has a small compound.

There are two main yurts — one is the kitchen, and the other is where guests eat and hang out — and nine "yurtlets," where guests sleep. Despite the company's name for them, they're small cabins rather than yurts. Mine had a king-size bed, a battery-powered lightbulb, a propane heater and hooks on which to hang gear and clothing to dry. The camp also has a sauna, an outhouse with two composting toilets and foot-pump sinks, an outdoor fire pit and several additional yurtlets

for guides. I settle into Yurtlet 6 and dress for skiing.

Even though we're all going to the same place — the north rim of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone — I get a guide to myself because I'm traveling solo. We ski to the rim via a slightly longer route than the other two groups, each of which includes people who have never gone cross-country skiing. We start on the Roller Coaster Ski Trail, which the park grooms after fresh snowfall, and take it to the North Rim Trail, also groomed. About an hour after leaving camp, we have the north rim of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone to ourselves. During the day, snowmobiles and snowcoaches do stop here, but by late afternoon, these visitors are on their way out of the park or to Old Faithful Snow Lodge.

From Lookout Point, I can hear Lower Falls, the 308-foot-tall waterfall that marks the canyon's start. Perhaps because of the thick ice cone around its base, it doesn't roar. It sounds vaguely spiritual, like a sustained note on the organ — and also kind of like a sustained snore.

The following morning, after spinach and ham frittata, granola and bacon for breakfast, we head out as one big group to Pelican Valley, just north of Yellowstone Lake, where the park's remaining bison retreated in 1901. In summer, this area is prime habitat for grizzly bears, and access is restricted. In winter, with trails buried beneath snow and bears hibernating, we're free to explore. Less than 10 minutes after leaving the snowcoaches, we ski over wolf tracks. Judging by the depth of the trough they left, it was a whole pack, and, because individual tracks are still discernible, they probably came through within the past day.

After lunch — sandwiches eaten while sitting on logs above a lightly steaming hillside green with mosses — several of us try to ski up to the top of an even steeper hillside. The guide calls it "the Valley of Death"; my map calls it the Sulphur Hills. We run out of snow several hundred vertical feet from the top and turn around.

In Yellowstone, snow, even just an inch, means safety. A patch of bare ground in the otherwise snowy landscape reveals the pres-

If You Go

WHERE TO STAY Yellowstone Expeditions yurt camp

Canyon Village, Yellowstone National Park, Wyo.
406-646-9333

yellowstoneexpeditions.com

Tucked into the forest near the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, this camp includes nine "yurtlets" for guests. Also included are a sauna and a main yurt, where meals are served. Available through March 6. Four-day/three-night trips \$1,560 per person (double occupancy) and \$1,760 (single occupancy); five-day/four-night trips \$1,900 per person (double occupancy) and \$2,150 (single); eight-day/seven-night trips \$2,700 per person (double) and \$3,000 (single). Prices include transportation to and from West Yellowstone, Mont., and the yurt camp, plus all meals, transportation to trailheads within the park and guided cross-country ski tours. Fees don't include park entrance: \$35 per car for seven-day pass or \$20 per person.

Old Faithful Snow Lodge & Cabins

2051 Snow Lodge Ave., Yellowstone National Park, Wyo.
307-344-7311

yellowstonenationalparklodges.com

There are 100 lodge rooms, 24 Western cabins and 10 Frontier cabins at Old Faithful. The opportunities for cross-country skiing aren't as varied as at the yurt camp, but there is electricity and indoor plumbing. Open through March 6 this winter and April 29 through Oct. 30 for summer. From \$180 per night.

Lazy G Motel

123 N. Hayden St., West Yellowstone, Mont.
406-646-7586

lazymotel.com

The owner services the front desk at this property a short walk from downtown West Yellowstone. From \$99 per night for double occupancy.

WHAT TO EAT Madison Crossing Lounge

121 Madison Ave., West Yellowstone, Mont.
406-646-7621

madisoncrossinglounge.com

Elevated pub fare — bison brisket nachos, elk medallions, Idaho rainbow trout, a burger topped with chipotle huckleberry spread — in a relaxed atmosphere. Open daily 5 to 9 p.m. Entrees from \$21; burgers from \$14.

Mocha Mamas coffee bar

33 Yellowstone Ave., West Yellowstone, Mont.
406-646-7744
freeheelandwheel.com/coffee.html

Grab espresso, coffee, tea and baked goods inside Freeheel and Wheel, a Nordic skiing and bike shop across the street from Yellowstone Expeditions' meeting spot. Open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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Horn & Cantle

750 Lone Mountain Ranch Rd., Big Sky, Mont.
406-995-2782

hornandcantle.com

You need not be a guest at the Lone Mountain Ranch to enjoy its restaurant, which serves a hearty breakfast buffet and "The Skier's Table" for lunch. Dinner menu features elk, bison and beef. Open daily 7 to 10 a.m., 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m., and 5 to 9 p.m. Breakfast and lunch \$25 per person, dinner entrees from \$36.

WHAT TO DO

Yellowstone Expeditions

406-646-9333

yellowstoneexpeditions.biz

See Old Faithful or the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone on a day trip in a guided snowcoach from West Yellowstone. Pickup at West Yellowstone motel/hotels. Available through March 15 and from Dec. 15 to March 15, 2023. For next season: Ages 16 and up, \$150; ages 15 and younger, \$130. Nine-hour private tour in a 10-seat van from \$950.

Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone

Yellowstone National Park, Wyo.
307-344-2550 (Canyon Visitor Education Center)
nps.gov/yell

It's a five-mile round-trip, cross-country ski from the yurt camp on the North Rim Trail to Lookout Point, which offers views of the Lower Falls, the tallest waterfall in Yellowstone. Open daily 24/7. Free with park entry.

Big Sky Resort

50 Big Sky Resort Rd., Big Sky, Mont.

800-548-4486

bigskiresort.com

Go Alpine skiing at Big Sky Resort, which is between West Yellowstone and the Bozeman airport. Here, 39 ski lifts allow access to 5,850 skiable acres. Open through April 24, conditions permitting. Adult full-day lift tickets from \$178 ages 15 to 69; from \$135 ages 70 and over; from \$106 ages 7 to 14; and from \$1 for skiers and riders 6 and under.

Boundary Trail

330 Gallatin Rd., West Yellowstone, Mont.
406-823-6961

fs.usda.gov/main/custergallatin/home

The 3.5-mile Boundary Trail is groomed several times a week for cross-country skiers and snowshoers and parallels Yellowstone National Park's western boundary. It connects northern West Yellowstone with the Baker's Hole Campground in the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Open daily, conditions permitting. Free.

Rendezvous Ski Trails

100 S. Geyser St., West Yellowstone, Mont.
406-646-7701

skirunbikemt.com/ski.html

There are about 20 miles of regularly groomed trails, for classic and skate skiing southwest of downtown West Yellowstone, in the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Open daily through April 1, conditions permitting. Dec. 1 through March 31, day passes are \$15, three-day passes are \$30, an individual season pass is \$100, and a family season pass is \$190; children 12 and younger ski free. November skiing is a separate pass, and costs \$15 per day and \$60 for the month; \$7.50 for children younger than 10.

INFORMATION

nps.gov/yell

including rivers and creeks warmed by thermal runoff, at your own risk. "It's a lot of work and route-finding, but worth it," Nadia says. I tell her the experience sounds like something out of my wildest dreams.

And when I finally do it, on my last full day at camp, it exceeds them.

Mishev is a writer based in Jackson Hole, Wyo. Her website is dinamishvev.com. Find her on Instagram: [@myspiritanimalisatrec](https://www.instagram.com/myspiritanimalisatrec).