

## POSTCARDS FROM YELLOWSTONE

ANIMALS DO BATTLE, GEYSERS THRILL, AND THE TOWN OF CODY COMES ALIVE ON AN EPIC TRIP THROUGH NORTHWEST WYOMING.

By Bradford Pearson

**L**ARRY, OUR GUIDE, SPOTTED IT FIRST, AND jerked the wheel to the side of the road.

We were crossing a broad, glacier-carved riverbed when he saw the moose. Lanky but strong, it stood on the side of the small river, its legs hidden by tall grass.

"Woo boy this is exciting," Larry said. "You don't see too many moose in the park."

Within a minute we noticed its calf, not more than a few days old, standing in the grass. Beagle-size with T-ball-bat legs, it wobbled next to its mother, unsteady in its new world. As the mother nudged the calf toward the water, the grass behind them began to sway. The dark and light sides of the blades alternated, and a form came into focus.

"Is that ...," Larry asked.

"A bear," I responded.

The bear lunged, and the moose leapt in front, lowering its head. The confused calf looked on, unaware of the Yellowstone food chain. Back and forth they went, one trying to outmaneuver the other. Eventually, the bear gave up.

Exhausted and hungry, the bear grouched away, beginning its slow half-mile slink back to the woods. It was nature at its most raw, and it was

dire and it was necessary and it was beautiful.

The cow watched until the bear entered the line of trees, and then prodded her calf back toward the river. Swimming lessons were delayed, not canceled.





**Y**ELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK IS, REALLY, ABOUT 2,346 national parks rolled into one. There's the mountains one, the geysers one, the limestone cliffs one, the "Am I actually in the Serengeti?" one, and, of course, the 2,342 (approximately) other ones. To attempt to see them all, in one week, is a foolish venture. So that, of course, is what I tried to do.

Before even entering the park, it's clear that the experience will be one of divergences and dichotomies. On the plane ride into Cody, Wyoming, one side of the flight is treated to craggy, jutting peaks capped with powder. The other side sees amorphous blobs of flat plains, with occasional zigzags of melting snow.

The first creature I meet once inside Yellowstone is a bison. Shaggy and still shedding its winter coat, it's larger than the Kia Rio pulled alongside the road. Its broad shoulders would barely fit through most sets of French doors, and it is the most American thing I have ever seen. Pushed to extinction, the bison fought and clawed its way back, nearly to the point of ubiquity. Everywhere in Yellowstone, fields fill with hundreds of them; they're the Starbucks of northwest Wyoming. It's a shame, actually, how jaded one can get in less than a week. "Oh, there's another bison," I'd say dismissively, looking past them for the next best thing. There were bears to look for! And moose! And maybe even a lynx!

A rundown of most every animal I saw in Yellowstone: bison, moose, yellow-bellied marmot, mountain goat, elk, mule deer, grizzly bear, black bear, ground squirrel, and pronghorn antelope. I watched a grizzly bear eat the carcass of a bison, and then chase off a black bear that tried to horn in on the snack. I prayed for a grizzly vs. black bear fight; it didn't materialize, but I have a decent spec script now for a Syfy made-for-TV movie.

**R**OUGHLY 50 PERCENT OF all the geysers in the world are found in Yellowstone, and the geothermal activity that produces them crops up intensely across the park. The ground lurches and bellows, pocking the sky with an intense smell of sulfur. In some spots acres of mud fizz, and in others turquoise and pink ponds, the depths never explored because

the water is literally boiling. And yes, in other places it means water shooting 200 feet into the sky, as Austrians and Floridians snap photos with their iPhones and upload them to Facebook.

Old Faithful is impressive, but to focus on one small aspect of the geothermal laser-light show that is Yellowstone is to miss the point

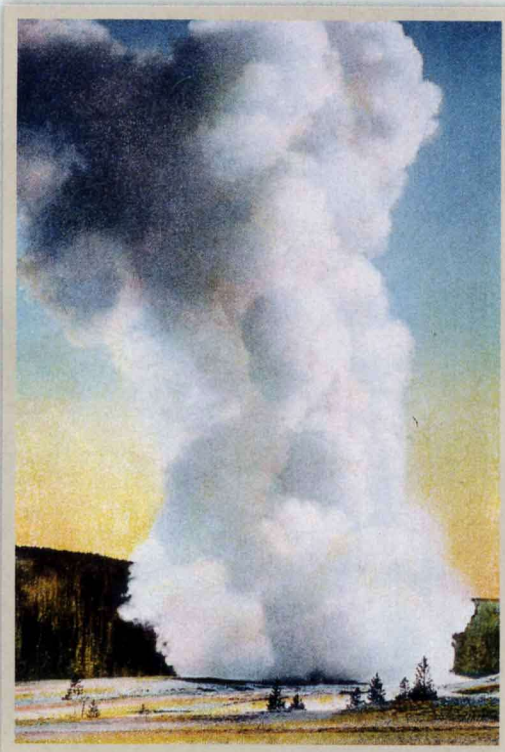
altogether. Millions of years of tectonic shifts have conspired to create a pocket on Earth that is unlike anything else on the planet, and you're allowed to walk around and see it all, provided you can afford the paltry \$25-per-vehicle entry fee.

I spent much of my time in Yellowstone wondering what it was like to be the first European American there, to step out of the forest and see water shoot 20 stories into the air. That man, John Colter, described it as fire and brimstone, to which I would add another word: magic. The park rangers and tour guides explained the science, but all I could think about was that underneath us all was a super-volcano that could end life on earth if it decided to. That it chose not to, that it instead chose to awe fanny-packed tourists and inspire thousands of fifth-graders' science fair projects? Magic.

**T**HE ROOMS ARE NOT AIR-conditioned at the Lake Yellowstone Hotel, which isn't a problem. Guests are invited to throw up the sashes of nearly 125-year-old windows and let the lake cool them.

I opened my windows, cracked a beer, and put my boots up on the sill. The water glides up about 50 feet from the hotel, and as the sun began to set the light reflected off the nearby Absaroka Mountains, still piled with snow. The lake had only thawed three weeks before, and it was cool and crisp and clear.

Later in the evening, I walked along the shore. Eventually the moon rose, and I wandered out into the darkness, wolves be damned. The lake had glassed over, and the stars hung bright and low, fuller than I'd ever seen. I slowly made my way back to the hotel, turned out the lights, and looked at the sky one more time. A few miles away, Old Faithful was preparing for its ascent, a moose was giving birth, and a grizzly bear was looking for a meal. But in that moment, all I could think of were those stars.





## CODY, WYOMING

WILLIAM F. "BUFFALO BILL" CODY FOUNDED THIS EPONYMOUS TOWN WITH THE EXPRESS PURPOSE OF SERVING YELLOWSTONE VISITORS. HERE'S WHAT THE TOWN OFFERS THEM THESE DAYS.



### ART & CULTURE

Two of the best museums in the United States are located in and around Cody, Wyoming: the **Buffalo Bill Center of the West** ([www.centerofthewest.org](http://www.centerofthewest.org)) and the **Heart Mountain Interpretative Center** ([www.heartmountain.org](http://www.heartmountain.org)). At the former, spend hours drifting between exhibits on ecology, Native Americans, and the art of the American West (not to mention a collection of nearly 5,000 American-made firearms). At the latter, be stunned and saddened that the U.S. government once interned thousands of its own Japanese-American

citizens at the base of a mountain in Wyoming during World War II. The center was developed by former internees and their children; you will likely cry, as I did.

### MUSIC & RODEO

Before my trip, I wouldn't have expressed much interest in attending what was billed as a "cowboy music revue." This wasn't country music, my Cody host explained, but *cowboy* music. Failing to see the difference, I skeptically headed into **Dan Miller's Cowboy Music Revue** ([www.cowboymusicrevue.com](http://www.cowboymusicrevue.com)). But ... it

was just delightful. These are proud Wyomingites, showing guests what's great about their state. I left smiling, and surprised.

During the summer, head to the **Cody Nite Rodeo** ([www.codynightrodeo.com](http://www.codynightrodeo.com)) on the outskirts of town. It runs every night in June, July, and August, and will make you want to get an American flag tattooed across your heart.

### FOOD & LODGING

At one point during my five-day trip, I ate buffalo for four straight meals. There were buffalo burgers, buffalo bratwursts, buffalo hashes, and buffalo jerkies, usually served within earshot of a stuffed buffalo head. At **Rib & Chop House** ([www.ribandchophouse.com](http://www.ribandchophouse.com)), I tried the buffalo rib-eye, medium rare. You, too, will enjoy this unique cut, and wonder why you can't just leave all your clothes in Wyoming and load your suitcase full of steak. (The restaurant also sells a locally sourced yak burger, in case you want to have something strange to brag to your friends about.)

Here's what you should drink at any given watering hole: **Wyoming Whiskey** bourbon ([www.wyomingwhiskey.com](http://www.wyomingwhiskey.com)). In a glass, with a few cubes of ice. That's it. (And also a lot of water; it helps the body adapt to the elevation. But then you should get back to the bourbon.)

The **Ivy Inn & Suites** ([www.best-westernwyoming.com](http://www.best-westernwyoming.com)) is the newest hotel in Cody, a Best Western Premier location near the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. The rooms are spacious and tasteful, with all the amenities of a more urban hotel. But, honestly, you should make your way out to the newly renovated **Lake Yellowstone Hotel & Cabins** (open May 16–October 5, [www.yellowstonenationalparklodges.com](http://www.yellowstonenationalparklodges.com)) in the national park itself and spend a quiet evening just looking up at the star-filled sky.

—B.P.