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Yellowstone Park

By Dennis Gaub for KOA Kompass

Yellowstone National Park enthralled those who sampled its wonders long before they were preserved as the world's first national park.

Early 19th century adventurers such as John Colter and Jim Bridger provided accounts of Yellowstone's fabulous geysers, hot springs, canyons and waterfalls. Their reports, however, were dismissed as tall tales.

It took an influential visitor, Nathaniel P. Langford, to help achieve something that has delighted millions from around the world over the past 132 years.

Langford, a member of the 1870 Washburn Expedition to Yellowstone, lectured the next year in New York City. He said: "This is probably the most remarkable region of natural attractions in the world; and, while we already have our Niagara and Yosemite, this new field of wonders should be at once withdrawn from occupancy, and set apart as a public National Park for the enjoyment of the American people for all time."

The Washburn Expedition was the second of three scientific expeditions to the Yellowstone area (the others were in 1869 and 1871). They prompted Congress to pass an act, signed into law by President Grant on March 1, 1872, that established Yellowstone National Park.

Yellowstone, which lies largely in Wyoming with small sections in Idaho and Montana, totals 3,472 square miles – larger than Rhode Island and Delaware combined.

Highlights, by park area, include:

Mammoth

- Mammoth Hot Springs – multi-colored, ever-changing terraces formed from travertine (calcium carbonate)
- Albright Visitor Center – learn about the park's wildlife and history, including the period (1886-1916) when it was under U.S. Army protection. View park headquarters based in buildings left from Fort Yellowstone, a cavalry garrison.
- Obsidian Cliff – a national historic landmark that commemorates the role of obsidian, a volcanic glass prized by Native Americans for projectile points and cutting tools. A trading network across North America took Yellowstone obsidian far from the park.

Norris

- Norris Geyser Basin – thermal features include Steamboat Geyser, the world's largest, which erupts at irregular intervals ranging from days to years, and Porcelain Basin, the park's hottest exposed area. Yellowstone's five geyser basins – Norris, Midway, Lower, West Thumb and Upper – represent the world's largest concentration of geysers.

Old Faithful

- Old Faithful Geyser – the most famous geyser in the world and the centerpiece of the Upper Geyser Basin. Its eruption intervals have ranged from



40 to 126 minutes; get eruption times for Old Faithful and other large geysers at the visitor center.

- Old Faithful Inn – as famous as its namesake geyser, [the rustic hotel turned 100 years old](#) in 2004. Architect Robert Reamer designed the original log building and two wings that were added later. His vision started the so-called “parkitecture” movement of designing park buildings in harmony with the landscape.



Yellowstone Lake

- Yellowstone Lake – snow-capped peaks ring much of this high-elevation 136-square-mile lake, which has an average depth of 140 feet (maximum depth of about 400 feet). Yellowstone Lake lies in the southeast corner of the Yellowstone caldera, a 30- by 45-mile basin formed 640,000 years ago by a massive volcanic eruption. That was one of three volcanoes – earlier ones occurred 2 million years ago and 1.3 million years ago – that created the heat source for Yellowstone’s thermal features: super hot magma just below the earth’s crust.
- Lake Yellowstone Hotel – sitting along Yellowstone Lake, this elegant hotel was completed in 1891 and was restored to its 1920s elegance in 1990. It is listed on the Register of Historic Places.
- Fishing Bridge – closed to fishing since 1973, the bridge over the Yellowstone River as it flows out of Yellowstone Lake now provides view of an outstanding trout spawning area. Pelicans, who give their name both to a creek east of the bridge and the valley through which the creek flows, feed on cutthroat trout.
- Lake Butte Overlook – a spur road from the East Entrance highway takes you several hundred feet above Yellowstone Lake, providing outstanding views south to the far-off Grand Teton and other peaks of the Teton Range.

West Thumb-Grant Village

- West Thumb Geyser Basin – boardwalks through this geyser basin give a sense of intense heat pulsing here from sediments in Yellowstone Lake, an indicator of a shallow thermal system. Park scientists say this could cause a powerful steam explosion if the lake level were to fall just a few feet.
- Grant Village Visitor Center – exhibits highlight the role of fire in Yellowstone’s ecology. Fishing, boating and backcountry use permits are available at the Backcountry Office.

Canyon

- Hayden Valley – one of the park’s premier wildlife viewing areas, where moose, bison and occasionally grizzly bears roam. Pelicans, trumpeter swans and other waterfowl frequent the Yellowstone River and tributary streams.
- Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone – several vistas offer spectacular views of a 1,000-foot-deep gorge cut by the Yellowstone River, which plunges 109 feet at the Upper Falls and another 308 feet at the Lower Falls.

Tower-Roosevelt-Lamar Valley

- Tower Fall – a 132-foot cascade named for adjacent volcanic pinnacles. A short, but steep, walk takes you to the base of the fall.
- Mount Washburn – a drive to the old fire lookout at the top provides views of prime grizzly bear habitat on Antelope Creek.
- Lamar Valley – another outstanding place to see wildlife throughout the year (the road is plowed in the winter). A winter range for bison and elk, the valley attracts longstanding predators such as bears, foxes and coyotes plus wolves, the offspring of animals reintroduced to the park in the 1990s.

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A vast amount of Yellowstone Park information is available online. A good place to start is the official park [web site](#). Also, check [road closures and delays](#) while planning your visit.

Nearby KOAs are located in [Montana](#), [Wyoming](#) and [Idaho](#).

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