



Yellowstone Country: A Spiritual Snowshoeing Experience

By Rick Stedman

Snowshoeing in Yellowstone Country is a must for wintertime nature lovers. Families will especially appreciate the bonding atmosphere created throughout this serene setting in western Wyoming. The star of the show unquestionably is Old Faithful Geysir, which has fascinated visitors since it became the first geyser in the park to receive a name back in 1870.

Old Faithful erupts about every 70 to 90 minutes, according to park officials. Its blast of boiling water can go as high as 140 feet, though the show lasts for only a minute or two. While snowshoeing the area surrounding Old Faithful, the beauty of the geyser can be experienced from a variety of locations and angles. Eugene Gearity, a local guide and bus driver with Xanterra, the concessionaire for the park, recommends that snowshoeing families take the Observation Point trail. “It’s very scenic, not far from civilization, and offers a great vantage point for visually scanning the entire property, including Old Faithful Geysir and the plentiful wildlife.”



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Prior to their snowshoeing adventure, visitors can settle into their room at the Old Faithful Snow Lodge & Cabins (www.yellowstonenationalparklodges.com). This is one of two lodges open during winter months within Yellowstone. The other lodging option, Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel, is located a few hours north. According to Rick Hoeninghausen, director of sales and marketing for Xanterra Parks & Resorts in Yellowstone, both hotels opened just prior to Christmas and close the first week of March. And in the meantime, there's a lot of snowshoe exploring to be done.



Xanterra officials make it easy for visitors to plan their snowshoeing excursions. You can either explore independently, or go with a knowledgeable guide who provides excellent background and historical information on the surrounding area. One of the featured package deals that's very popular with guests is the "Old Faithful Winter Expedition." Participants observe and learn about wildlife, receive breakfast and lunch daily along with a welcome gift, in-park transportation for field trips, snowshoes, one-hour hot tub rental, unlimited ice skating, and optional evening programs. This, and other lodging and learning programs are offered under the guidance of the nonprofit Yellowstone Association Institute.

"Winter for us means terrific snowshoeing, a sense of quiet and solitude, and truly unparalleled opportunities for wildlife viewing," says Jeff Brown, director of education for the Institute. "With the exception of the hibernating bears and some migratory bird species, winter in Yellowstone is the best time to view wildlife such as wolves, elk, bison, and more in their natural habitat."



Another popular program is "Winter in Wonderland," which is designed as a comprehensive introduction

to Yellowstone in winter. Guests receive four nights lodging at Mammoth Hotel and two nights at Old Faithful Snow Lodge. Guests explore the park via snowcoach, skis, and snowshoes while learning about wildlife in the Lamar Valley, geology in the Old Faithful region, and more. A snowcoach, by the way, is Yellowstone's exclusive transportation vehicle that shuttles passengers throughout the park during winter. Equipped with Mattracks for over-the-snow use in winter, these unique vehicles have all the comforts of a regular shuttle bus. Snowcoaches have been providing winter-season transportation in Yellowstone National Park for more than 50 years. Xanterra operates a fleet of snowcoaches throughout the park.



Beyond the Park Boundaries

The all-encompassing term Yellowstone Country extends beyond the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. For example, Big Sky Resort (www.bigskyresort.com), which receives more than 400 inches of snow annually, is located just 18 miles north of Yellowstone National Park. Big Sky and Moonlight Basin offer in excess of 5,500 acres of skiable terrain, with lots of snowshoeing options as well. A few other amenities that Big Sky guests enjoy include a Tarzan-like zipline through the trees, or an evening Montana Dinner Yurt (<http://skimba.com/home.html>) experience. A yurt is a large, round semi-permanent tent with vertical walls and conical roof usually associated with Central Asia and Mongolia. The evening dinner yurt is a unique backcountry dining experience. Guests board one of two snowcats that take you on a 20-minute ride through the forest



en route to the dinner yurt. Visitors arrive to the cozy confines of the warm yurt, but can choose a little pre-dinner activity in the form of torch-lit sledding or a nearby bonfire. The candlelit tables inside the yurt create an intimate atmosphere, while a talented musician plays acoustic guitar throughout the meal. Dinner includes hearty baked French onion soup, fresh warm bread, filet mignon or fresh salmon, garlic mashed potatoes, and fresh

vegetables. Dessert includes Toblerone chocolate fondue with fresh fruit and pound cake. The Montana Dinner Yurt is one excursion you won't soon forget.

A few miles from the heart of Big Sky's Mountain Village is Lone Mountain Ranch (www.lmranch.com), which offers more than 10 miles of snowshoe trails. After a morning of invigorating snowshoeing, try the buffet lunch at the Dining Lodge, which is surrounded by numerous picturesque Aspen trees. The pot roast is to die for, and the hospitality unmatched.

On your way to Yellowstone National Park, a stop in the town of West Yellowstone (www.wyyellowstone.com) is a must for snowmobiling. During winter months, there are actually more snowmobiles in town than cars and trucks. Hundreds of trails are available and traversing the Continental Divide will no doubt feature the picturesque "ghost trees" that haunt the area.

Just in case you don't see any bears or wolves in the wild, take a quick tour of the Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center (www.grizzlydiscoveryctr.com) in West Yellowstone.

A few Yellowstone National Park Fun Facts:

Spasm Geyser: It's steamy, yet surrounded by snow. And if you close your eyes, cup your ears, and face the geyser, you will think you're on a sandy beach in Hawaii. Spasm Geyser sounds just like the ocean.



Phantom Lake: This lake fills annually with mountain run-off during the spring. Like clockwork, too, the water disappears in late summer. Strangely, folks routinely try their luck at fishing this small body of water. To date, the only thing caught in Phantom Lake has been a good time!

Ermine Watch: While snowshoeing, be on the lookout for ermine, the weasel-like creatures which resemble a ferret. Normally brown, their fur changes to white during the winter. If you're lucky, you can see them bounding through the pristine snow. Most of



the time you see their tiny tracks as they search for mice, who leave an even tinier mark in the snow while trying to elude the ermine.

Stop, Thief!: Beware of the oversized ravens that inhabit the park. In less than a minute, these resourceful birds can unzip a backpack, empty the contents, and find food – no matter what container it's in. If you have food in a Tupperware container,

that's not a problem for ravens. It just takes them a little longer to poke a hole through the bottom of the container! It's fun to watch these scoundrels at work, but not when they are pilfering *your* belongings! Be alert.

Sidebar: Solace on a Pair of Snowshoes

Snowshoeing has always served as a refuge for recharging the batteries, and getting in touch with myself. Whether it's merely to appreciate the beautiful surroundings, the silence, or the solitude, this winter activity is much more than a walk in the park. Not only have I employed snowshoeing over the years for recreational purposes and athletic endeavors, the sport has also served as a source of internal comfort. Many times, I've substituted snowshoeing for Sunday visits to church. Though the venues are completely different, the resulting peace in my heart is exactly the same.

After my mother passed away just after Christmas, I spent several days snowshoeing in Yellowstone National Park. I could think of no better tribute or place on earth to honor her life. The stark beauty of Yellowstone in winter is a gift visitors can open repeatedly and enjoy forever. I was fortunate to have that opportunity. Though my mom never put

on a pair of snowshoes or visited the country's first national park, she always enjoyed my adventures vicariously. She would have loved hearing about my snowshoe explorations in Yellowstone. Though I presume she probably did enjoy it while observing from her new vantage point, above.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and author of "Thoughts on Solitude," reflected that "Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time." That analogy lends itself to the solitude of snowshoeing coupled with the artistic beauty that's found in nature. For me, that's what makes up the profound attraction of snowshoeing. In this huge cosmic dance to which we've all been invited – whether we accept the invitation or not – there is a greater comfort in the substance of silence than in the answer to a question, as Merton suggested.

Similar to making snow angels, breaking a new trail with snowshoes is exciting. Sometimes while carving a trail, I reflect on the *Footprints Prayer* where the disgruntled man questions the Lord about abandoning him during the low points of his life. "When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you," explained the Lord. I understand and appreciate that concept fully. While snowshoeing in the beauty and solitude of Yellowstone, I saw but a single set of snowshoe tracks trailing behind me.





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