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## The Secret to Finding Seclusion in One of America's Busiest National Parks

Essential advice on where and when to see Yellowstone's splendors without the crowds. Plus where to stay and explore inside and outside the park



HOME ON THE RANGE | Yellowstone's Lamar Valley ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTIAN HEEB/LAIF/REDUX

By **JIM ROBBINS**

June 15, 2016

**IN 1870, A BAND OF** officials from the newly formed territory of Montana set out to explore the headwaters of Yellowstone River. They camped, hiked and were gobsmacked by swarms of wildlife and erupting geysers. One night, over cigars, they mused about securing the rights and selling this fantastic piece of real estate. But one team member, Cornelius Hedges, a Montana attorney, had another idea. He felt “the whole ought to be set apart as a great national park.” Mr. Hedges later co-led the campaign to create, in 1872, Yellowstone National Park, the nation’s first.

The national park system, celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, has turned out to be one of the best ideas in American history. It is, arguably, too successful; these days, crowds are practically overrunning the secluded park those first explorers experienced. Last year visitors thronged Yellowstone in record numbers—more than 4 million, 15% more than 2014. “We’ve been surprised by the size of the increase,” said Yellowstone superintendent Dan Wenk. The surge is likely due, in part, to promotions of the centennial. More people in the park leads to something called greenlock—gridlock in nature. Hotels and campgrounds are often full, and traffic can be nightmarish. I once saw a line of idling cars close to a mile long because tourists were stopping to ooh and aah over a knot of bison along the road.



**Related Reading:** Yosemite Slammed: Record Crowds Make America's National Parks Hard to Bear

This year could set another record. Still, it's possible to experience Yellowstone without getting caught in the crush. After decades spent wandering all over this 3,500-square-mile park, I've gleaned a few key lessons on how to make the most of a Yellowstone visit. The first word of advice is: September. The second is: October. After Labor Day, the families have mostly departed and, as the fall days cool and shorten, the crowds grow even thinner. You'll see Yellowstone in a new light, figuratively and literally.



KEEPING THE FAITH | Tourists at Old Faithful in the early 20th century. ILLUSTRATION: PRINT COLLECTOR/GETTY IMAGES

Last autumn, my wife, Chere, and I drove from our home in Helena, Mont., to the central target of most Yellowstone excursions, Old Faithful, one of the world's most famous geysers. Though you can't evade crowds there, even in fall, it still merits a stop. Old Faithful explodes in steaming glory every 92 minutes or so, blasting up to 8,400 gallons of scalding-hot water. The clouds of furiously churning steam are thicker on frosty fall mornings.

As we made our way along a paved trail that winds through the Yellowstone's Upper Geyser Basin, adjacent to Old Faithful, the hordes dissipated (they usually do in October). Geysers—a geothermal oddity where cracks in the earth's surface act as a vent for magma-heated water—are rare. Of the roughly 1,000 or so active geysers that exist on earth, Yellowstone is home to around half. We walked slowly through the basin, bathed in the golden fall sun and the sultry smell of sulfur, passing by several small geysers sporting names that would suit the members of an Iditarod dog team—Grand, Splendid, Comet, Rocket and Spasmodic, among them. In this part of the park, the earth seemed alive, straining to speak. The geysers all squirted and spouted at different intervals. The mud pots (small pools of hot water mixed with clay) simmered, and fumaroles (steam vents) roared. Other hot pools, in mesmerizing shades of green, orange and turquoise, have holes at bottom, making them look like portals to a subterranean netherworld.

Later in the day, Chere and I struck out for remote territories. We walked for an hour on



Castle Geyser in the Upper Geyser Basin of Yellowstone National Park ILLUSTRATION: ALAMY

a paved service road long ago closed to cars and given over to bikers and hikers. The road wound for several miles along the purling, gin-clear Firehole River and on to the little-known Lone Star Geyser, which looks like a blob of melted candle wax when it's not erupting.

About a dozen people gathered around it instead of the hundreds at Old Faithful. Its eruptions, which occur every three hours or so, last some 30 minutes.

The next day we took another short hike, this one up Nez Perce Creek—named after an Indian tribe that, in 1877, fled the pursuit of the U.S. Cavalry over hundreds of miles, including all along the creek here, trying to reach Canada. After we'd trekked a quarter of a mile, we spied two bison lying down across the trail, blocking our route. As we contemplated our next move, nature happened. Dozens of bluebirds "hover hunted" above us—that is, flapped rapidly in place, then dove to the ground to gobble up bugs. A few minutes later two elegant sandhill cranes appeared in the sky, their wings slowly flapping as they took off. To top it off we noticed a hot pool sunk into the ground, tendrils of steam giving away its position. "The great thing about Yellowstone," Chere said, "is that you don't have to hike to find nature here. If you wait, it comes to you."



Nez Perce Creek ILLUSTRATION: GETTY IMAGES

That afternoon we drove across the park, to the broad, sagebrush-studded Lamar Valley, known as America's Serengeti, remote and wildlife rich. We watched as more than a hundred shaggy-headed bison slowly forded the Lamar River, single file, heading up onto a river bank carpeted with yellow willows glowing in the sun. It was a procession that's been happening there for untold years. Mr. Hedges

and his party may have been awestruck by the very same sight.

On our last day we drove to Cody, Wyo., an hour from the east entrance, to the antique-filled Chamberlin Inn. "It was busy here all summer. You couldn't have gotten in without a reservation," said the innkeeper Ev Diehl. "But this weekend it just dropped off." That's precisely how I like it.

## THE LOWDOWN // Where to Park and Play in Yellowstone This Fall

**Getting There:** Most of Yellowstone National Park is in Wyoming, but some parts lie within Montana and Idaho. The three gateway cities, all an hour's drive from an entrance, are Bozeman, Mont.; Jackson, Wyo. and Cody, Wyo. Bozeman has the most flight options.

**Staying There:** The rustic and recently remodeled Old Faithful Inn is in the center of Yellowstone. Rates run from \$162 for a room in the original (1904) part of the Inn, up to

\$525 for a spacious suite. Rooms with views of Old Faithful are \$260. A large, beautiful dining room serves some 800 dinners a night during peak times and is the only real option in this neck of the woods. Luckily, the food isn't bad, with entrees ranging from buffalo meatloaf to a wild-game Bolognese. Old Faithful Inn closes for the season on Oct. 11 ([yellowstonenationalparklodges.com](http://yellowstonenationalparklodges.com)). The Chamberlain Inn, a flophouse turned quaint hotel in downtown Cody is a fine alternative and stays open year-round (*from \$195 until Oct. 15 and from \$125 until March, [chamberlininn.com](http://chamberlininn.com)*).

**Exploring There:** Also in Cody is the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. Five museums in one, it's filled with high-quality exhibits about Western Americana, including artifacts from the Plains Indians and Buffalo Bill himself ([centerofthewest.org](http://centerofthewest.org)).

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**Corrections & Amplifications:**

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Montana was a U.S. territory in 1870. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated Montana was a state when officials set out to explore the headwaters of the Yellowstone River that year. Also, the Nez Perce fled from the U.S. Cavalry up what is now called the Nez Perce Creek in 1877. The article incorrectly said their flight took place in 1872. (June 20, 2016)

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