

Slipping Into The Silent Winter Of Yellowstone

By Jeffrey Scheuer
Special to The Washington Post

First light came at 7 a.m. on a clear, cold January morning in the Madison Range of southwest Montana. At the ski resort of Big Sky the temperature climbed slowly toward zero. But the sun didn't rise above the eastward peaks until after 8. By that time, my wife and I were already on a bus heading south toward Wyoming, for a day trip into the silent winter confines of Yellowstone National Park.

Dawn broke as the bus wound its way down the seven snowy miles of the Big Sky access road, following the West Branch of the Gallatin River as it hurries down to the main stream from the slopes of Lone Mountain. The 11,166-foot peak loomed behind us—a soaring white pyramid above the timberline that dominates this part of the Madison Range and offers, from the base at Big Sky, some of the best skiing in Montana.

Steam was rising off the river as we reached the valley floor—in places a mere canyon between the Gallatin peaks to the east and the Madisons to the west—and headed south on Route 191. It was about 50 miles down the valley to West Yellowstone, the main winter gateway to the national park; this first leg of the journey took a magnificent hour and a half.

We had made the trip before, but that was in summer, and now it looked new and different. The river, rolling north to join the Madison and then the Missouri, was partly covered by shelves of snow and ice as it wound through sloping meadows and between towering rock cliffs. The only sign of human life was an occasional lonely ranch or cabin, or an access road into the back country.

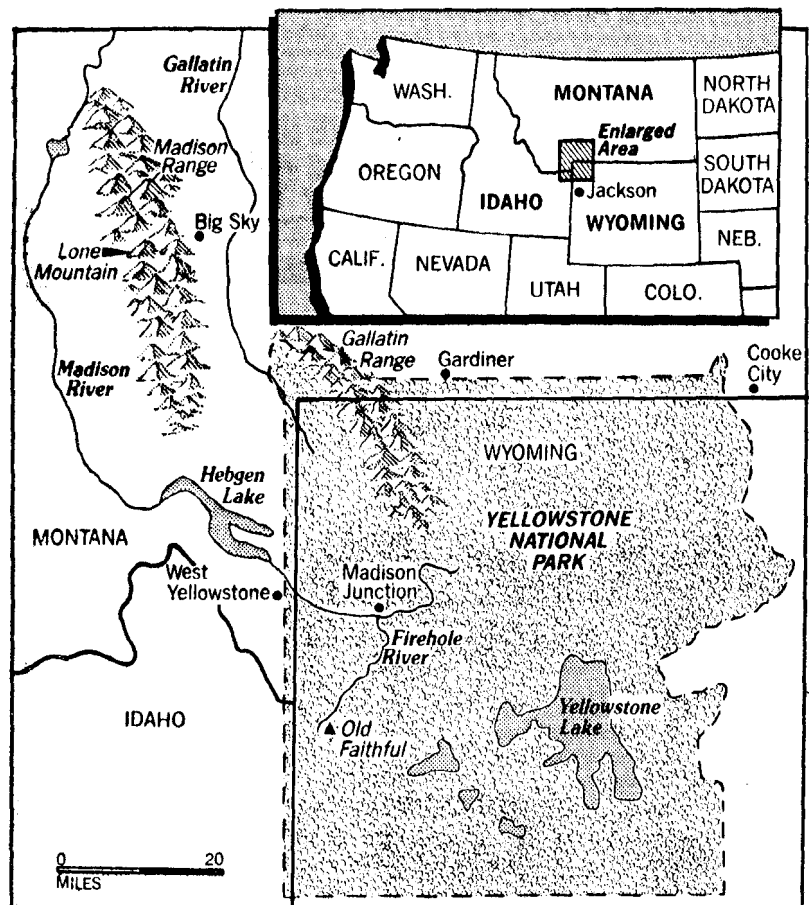
In summer Yellowstone National Park is crowded with tourists, but in winter only one road is cleared of snow for traffic—the one connecting the north entrance at Gardiner, Mont., with the northeast entrance near Cooke City. Our plans would avoid the road

altogether: At West Yellowstone we would transfer to a snowcoach, an all-winter vehicle, and venture along the snowed-in roads where no car or truck—only an occasional snowmobile—could follow.

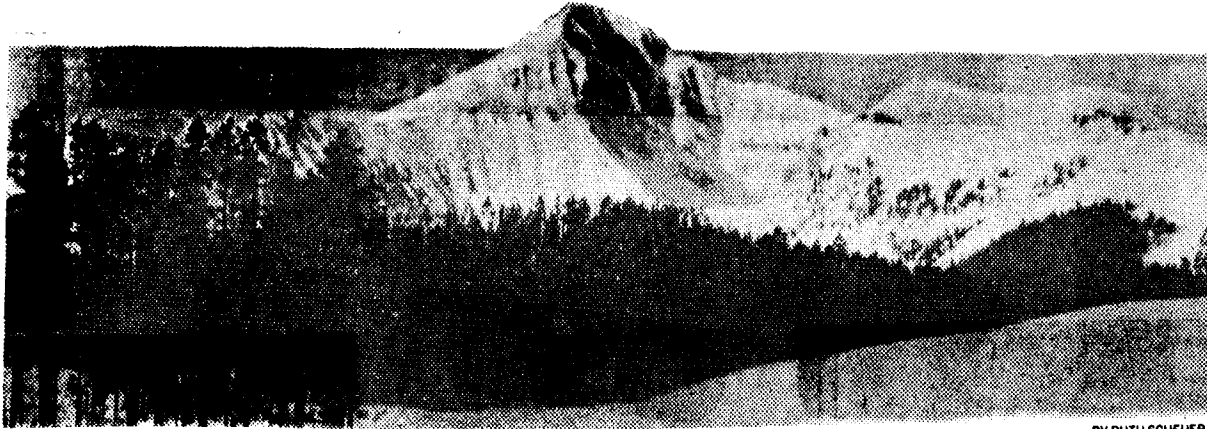
At 9:45, after a brief stop at the rustic Stage Coach Inn in West Yellowstone, we boarded the snowcoach. Akin to the Caterpillars that pack snow on ski trails, it is an orange, radio-equipped, 10-passenger vehicle on treads, with hatches in the roof for viewing and photography. As one passenger observed, "You can stand up and look out just like Rommel."

The snowcoach did seem crowded and ungainly at first, more like a tank than a bus. But we rumbled down the smooth snow-covered road into the park, between rows of lodgepole pines, in a state of relative comfort, total warmth and high excitement. The hatches soon proved indispensable. In rapid succession we crossed into the park and into Wyoming—into a place where winter and wildlife were undisturbed by man.

Our driver and guide, employed by TW Services, the primary concessionaire for lodging and transportation in the park, was a friendly and voluble young woman named Bobbi, who delighted in sharing her



BY JOSEPH ROBINSON—THE WASHINGTON POST



BY RUTH SCHEUER

Lone Mountain, in the Madison Range of southwestern Montana

considerable knowledge of the natural life of the region. Very soon we could see it for ourselves: roaming herds of bison and elk; geese and trumpeter swans in the relatively warm waters of the Madison River, which flows out of the hot springs in the park; bald eagles nesting on distant trees, distinctive because of their black and white coloring; ravens swooping from the forest in search of prey; coyotes on the prowl. Only the hibernating bears remained in their winter fastnesses.

The grizzly population in the park has dwindled to about 200, and they are on the federal government's list of threatened and endangered species. But the place abounds with elk and moose, deer and antelope; bison seem ubiquitous.

Yellowstone itself is the oldest national park in the United States and the largest in the lower 48 states. Its mountains and high volcanic plateaus, forested by lodgepole pine, Douglas fir and spruce, cover some 2.2 million acres. Abounding in lakes, peaks, canyons and waterfalls, and noted for Old Faithful, the park contains about 10,000 other geysers and geothermal features.

John Colter is believed to have been the first white man to pass through here, during the winter of 1807-08, after leaving the Lewis and Clark expedition.

According to legend, the idea for the park came from Cornelius Hedges, a member of the Washburn-Langford-Doane expedition in 1870. In the following year a highly publicized federal survey of the area was conducted under Dr. F.V. Hayden; the national park was established in 1872 by an act that set aside the enormous tract, most of it in Wyoming but verging into Montana and Idaho, as a public "pleasuring ground" and for the "preservation . . . of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within . . . and their reten-

tion in their natural condition." Until the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, Yellowstone was administered by the First Cavalry. As the first national park in the United States, it became a model for other parks in America and around the world.

Our route into Yellowstone followed the Madison east into the park for about 14 miles to Madison Junction, a rest stop with a small warming hut and snack bar. From there we followed the Firehole River south another 16 miles to the geyser basins and Old Faithful. Snow-covered mountains and meadows, rivers and streams, waterfalls

arrested by frost in mid-plunge: All were wrapped in eloquent silence.

Toward noon, we emerged from the Firehole Canyon and up onto the broad Madison Plateau, where scattered clouds of steam offered the first sign of the unique thermal features of Yellowstone: geysers, hot pots, pools, fumaroles. At one place we got out to watch as a pair of oblivious coyotes, less than 20 feet away, dismembered the last remains of an elk carcass along the rim of a thermal pool. After a leisurely 2½ hours in and out of the snowcoach, we arrived at our destination, Old Faithful, just in time for an eruption.

The geysers are more impressive in winter, when the park is all but deserted and the hot steam rises above the frozen landscape. At Old Faithful, the plumes of steam from neighboring geysers receding into the distance suggest burning villages in the wake of raiding horsemen. The Cossacks have not been this way, but the U.S. Army chased the Nez Percé Indians out of their Idaho lands and through this country, driving them all the way up through Montana almost to the Canadian border.

More bizarre than beautiful, the

diverse thermal features bubble and spit and hiss with sulphurous water and vapor. A jaundiced eye might find them slightly ridiculous. But one can also marvel at the queer juxtapositions of fire and ice: the heat of the Earth's interior breaking through the frozen crust of a western winter and making this corner of Wyoming seem like part of a strange and distant planet. "These features change daily," Bobbi explained, pointing matter-of-factly to a new vent spouting up that she hadn't noticed before.

For those who come in by snowcoach, overnight accommodations are available at the Old Faithful Snow Lodge and Cabins. The area is a paradise for cross-country skiers, with numerous trails through the geyser basins and surrounding country.

But while the back-country ski trails beckoned, so did the Montana peaks, and we decided to return some other time for cross-country. After a pleasant lunch at the Snow Lodge, and an hour or so of walking around the geysers and browsing at the visitor center, we climbed back in the snowcoach for the return trip.

The day unwound slowly, long and full, as we chugged back along the 30 miles of snowy road we had traveled in the morning. From time to time Bobbi stopped or slowed the snowcoach to give us a longer look at the wild. Ebbing red ribbons of light were yielding to darkness as we reached West Yellowstone and transferred to the bus that would return us to Big Sky.

The bus now seemed big and warm and dark. It was a relaxing ride home, a time to reflect and remember, to savor what we had seen: winter at its wildest, most silent and best.

Jeffrey Scheuer is a New York writer.