

YELLOWSTONE RESURGENCE

* WINTER CHANGES ARE WELCOME NEWS FOR SKIERS *

It's a crisp, cold (though not terribly so by Yellowstone standards) January day. My seven-year-old son Asa is approaching the threshold of his endurance. It's already been a sensory-filled tour, skiing past steaming thermal features, grazing bison and other-worldly scenery.

He's been a trooper, but five miles of uneven backcountry terrain on lightweight track skis has taken its toll on his young legs. At his fourth "how much farther," I stoop to my timeworn "just-around-the-next-bend" response, which always elicits a dramatic sigh and a look of mock indignation from Asa, but this time the promise holds. Exhaustion transforms instantly to awe as we round the last corner for an imposing view of the nearly 200-foot turquoise-blue ice face of Fairy Falls.

The cool mist of the trickle still falling from the Madison Plateau is rejuvenating and I share a truly magical moment with my son. This is the kind of experience that keeps me coming back to Yellowstone in winter, though these moments haven't always been easy to come by.

I first visited Yellowstone in winter a decade ago, when noise, exhaust and stress had reached levels that even the most ardent snowmobile enthusiasts now concede were out of place in a National Park. I didn't care to repeat that experience, but heartened by word of significant change, I brought my family here four winters ago to find improved, though certainly not pristine, conditions. This past winter, after hearing about continued positive trends due to more visitors choosing snowcoach access and fewer entering the park on snowmobiles, my wife and I packed



up our two young children to see for ourselves.

It was, quite simply, a wonder-filled experience in a winter wonderland. I'm certain my kids will never forget skiing with views of frosty bison and steaming geyser basins, watching bald eagles along the Madison and Firehole Rivers, and finding animal stories written in the snow everywhere we went. The air was clear and clean and, while we experienced some snowmobile noise, there were also moments of profound silence.

Part of this encouraging recovery is due to more stringent noise and exhaust requirements for all vehicles in the park and to commercial guiding requirements for snowmobiles. The biggest difference, however, is the simple fact that there are fewer vehicles in the park in winter now. More and more, visitors are opting to enter Yellowstone on snowcoaches or under their own power on skis and snowshoes; fewer on snowmobiles.

The result is a cleaner air, restoration of quiet and fewer animals caught in traffic. Yellowstone visitation statistics bear this out. Snowmobile numbers last winter dropped to around 175 per day — down from about 260 per day the previous five winters and way down from the snowmobile heyday of the '80s and '90s that saw an average of almost 800 snowmobiles per day and peak days with as many as 1,800 snowmobiles in the park.

Making this possible, and helping Yellowstone's transition to better health, are business owners who have invested in modern snowcoaches; retrofitted popular, historic snowcoaches so they're environmentally friendly; hired driver-guides knowledgeable about the Park's geology, wildlife and history; equipped snowcoaches with ski racks; and stocked their shops with information about boardwalks, trails and other opportunities to experience and learn about Yellowstone.

My family and I had the great fortune

of touring Yellowstone with Randy Roberson, owner of Yellowstone Vacations. The consummate host, Randy serves as snowcoach driver, interpretive mentor, ski guide and companion, and cheerleader for the park's resurgent conditions. Our first ski stop is the spectacular tour to Fairy Falls where Asa has his transformative experience. At that stop, my wife Dana and five-year-old daughter, Etta, take a more leisurely pace along the level roadbed, watching trumpeter swans in the Firehole River and bison grazing across the steamy meadow. Knowing a good part of our tour will be on backcountry terrain, we carry both skis and snowshoes for Etta.

Next stop is an out-and-back on the Mary Mountain trail which leads past hot pots and other thermal features before entering thickly wooded forest. While we ski only the first several miles, the 21-mile one-way trail makes for as long a tour as you care to do.

Mary Mountain is part of the Nez Perce Trail, the 1,170-mile path on which Chief Joseph led nearly 750 Nez Perce men, women and children in flight from the U.S. Army in 1877. It is also a major migratory path for bison and much of the snow on the trail was chunked up from bison hooves. Far from being an inconvenience, the hoof-marked snow adds to the sense of adventure. A dozen or so big bulls graze in an open snowfield a mile into the trail and we give them a wide berth. On the return ski, when one of the largest of the bulls turns toward us and raises his tail, Randy holds us up and imparts the local knowledge that a bison raising its tail means one of two things: charge or discharge. The bull returns to grazing and we continue around the edge of the meadow but Randy adds a precautionary note. "These big boys are in the backcountry for a reason — they don't like roads or people," he says. "They're a lot less predictable than the bison we see near the road."

In addition to being a wealth of information, it's clear that Randy Roberson loves what he does. After skiing, we meet Randy and his wife Jeanine for dinner in West Yellowstone and, as I listen to their stories, it occurs to me that the Robersons personify the positive changes occurring in Yellowstone and its gateway communities. In addition to Yellowstone Vacations, where daughter Heather is general manager, the Robersons own the Brandin' Iron Inn where son Jeremy is general manager.

Childhood sweethearts, Randy and Jeanine married young and they both laugh now about proving town skeptics wrong. Jeanine, it turns out, comes from the most well-known ski family in town — her father, Neil Swanson, developed the Rendezvous cross country trail system just outside the park — while Randy comes from a well-known motor sports family.

"Everybody said it would never last — we were just so opposite," Jeanine tells me. Then she adds with a telling smile, "But I guess I brought him around to my kind of thinking."

About growing up skiing in West Yellowstone, Jeanine explains, "When we first moved here we bought a snowmobile but, when it left us stranded up on a hill somewhere, my dad sold it and said, 'Enough of that. Let's get cross country skis.' He was the one who got permission from the forest service to build the Rendezvous trail system. My brothers helped out a lot — I think Dad figured it was a good way to keep them out of trouble."

Jeanine remembers plenty of Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners put on hold while her father and brothers were out grooming trails. "Nobody paid them for doing that. It was their passion."

For his part, Randy remembers, "I grew up in the mainstream in West Yellowstone riding snowmobiles. That was a lot more popular than

skiing at the time. I was very passionate about that sport. I did some racing and was very involved until the early '90s."

After a couple of avalanche near-misses in the backcountry, Randy says he woke up one morning and said to Jeanine, "I think I've used up all my chances." Since then his interest has turned to muscle activities like skiing, hiking and bicycling. Of his newfound love of endorphins, Randy adds, "there's no comparison in how much better I feel now. I have so much more fun and I enjoy these activities for longer periods of time."

In line with his personal change of heart, Randy has transformed his business model to focus primarily on snowcoach tours rather than snowmobile rentals, though Yellowstone Vacations still offers both. In addition to investing in new snowcoaches, Randy has been at the forefront of developing more guest-friendly snowcoach technology and last season added a new snowcoach to his fleet — the first of its kind in Yellowstone — that is accessible to people who use wheelchairs.

Both Yellowstone Vacations and cross-town snowcoach operator Yellowstone Alpen Guides, which utilizes historic Bombardier snowcoaches (retrofitted with new engines to be cleaner, quieter and more fuel efficient), offer skier and snowshoer transportation into the park. Snowcoaches from both companies are equipped with ski racks and guides are knowledgeable about trails and conditions.

This season, Yellowstone Vacations is adding a dedicated ski coach and daily guided ski tours, meaning that rather than the traditional "skier drop," a driver-guide will ski with guests and continue the interpretive part of the snowcoach tour on skis. Committing a snowcoach to daily ski tours is a leap of faith, but Randy believes the time is right.

"In the last six years, as we've seen the popularity of both skiing and snowcoaches grow so much, it was real easy to expand because that's what people wanted," he explains. "We said, we'll accommodate that and all of a sudden it was, boom, here we go."


Yellowstone Vacations will also offer van transportation and ski guide service to the less-visited northwest corner of Yellowstone National Park. As a sample of what's to come, Randy offers to take me and two other guests the following day by van to ski the 11-mile Fawn Pass/Big Horn Pass loop. In a full day of skiing, we see one other party of three skiers on the other side of a wide valley. What's more, once we leave the van, we don't hear an engine sound until we return to the highway at the end of the day.

While this corner of the park lacks the thermal features for which Yellowstone is revered, the scenery is spectacular. Later on, I mention the Fawn Pass tour to Melissa Alder and Kelli Sanders, co-owners of West Yellowstone's terrific Nordic shop Freeheel and Wheel, and they add that, in springtime when the crust is supportable, the Fawn Pass loop makes for a fantastic backcountry skate ski route.

While I'm skiing Fawn Pass, Dana and the kids spend a delightful morning on the Rendezvous trails and, in the afternoon, explore the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center. Five-year-old Etta



is so jazzed about her morning on the meticulously groomed trails that she insists we all ski there the next morning before leaving town. After a family ski the next day, I have to agree that Etta's enthusiasm was well-founded.

Long-term, it remains to be seen how the National Park Service will manage winter use in our nation's first national park. A temporary two-year plan has been proposed allowing 318 snowmobiles per day — less than half the number allowed the past five years but still more than the park's own scientists recommend — while a long-term plan is developed. The good news for skiers is that we don't need to wait to find out because Yellowstone's winter visitors are already making the choice for cleaner, quieter means of access and many local businesses are embracing that change. In short, now is the perfect time to visit Yellowstone. 

IF YOU GO...

A few noteworthy businesses catering to skiers and snowshoers in West Yellowstone, Montana:

Yellowstone Vacations

Offers first-rate interpretive tours. Increasingly catering to skiers and snowshoers. Has made major recent investments in snowcoaches.

www.yellowstonevacations.com/tours/snowcoachyellowstone.htm

Yellowstone Alpen Guides

Longtime provider of snowcoach tours with expert guides and a big supporter of cross country skiers and snowshoers.

www.yellowstoneguides.com/#WinterTours

Yellowstone Expeditions

Providing backcountry ski excursions and tours for skiers of all levels from their yurt camp within the park. www.yellowstoneexpeditions.com

Free Heel and Wheel

Just half a block from the park entrance, one of the most knowledgeable, friendly and well-stocked Nordic and backcountry shops I've ever found. Great people!

www.freeheelandwheel.com/

The Book Peddler

Offers a wonderful selection of books about the Park, natural history, the West – and a great coffee bar.

www.travelmt.com/mt_sites_10401_Book+Peddler.html

Somewhere between Old Faithful and Mammoth Hot Springs you realize vacation is just another word for adventure.



“After experiencing Yellowstone from atop a pair of cross-country skis, I can't understand why anyone would want to hibernate the winter away. I explored miles of trail, passed geysers and hot springs, and saw wildlife thriving within glistening-white landscapes. Now I know why they call winter the most wonderful time of the year.”

For reservations or to hear more details about these special packages, call today at 866-GEYSERLAND (866-439-7375).

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