



Off the *beaten path*

WEST YELLOWSTONE'S BAR N RANCH PUTS A LUXURIOUS SPIN ON WESTERN HOSPITALITY

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The first time I saw a moose, I was seven years old. It was an icy-cold early fall morning in Yellowstone National Park. There I was, in earmuffs and mittens, standing with my mother and waiting for Old Faithful to shoot its magnificent blast of steaming water nearly 200 feet into the freezing air.

Old Faithful has performed with nearly military precision every 90 minutes—day and night—for well over a hundred years. On a typical summer day, huge audiences pack circular boardwalks surrounding the world-famous geyser in anticipation of its awe-inspiring show. But on that special October morning in 1963, the two of us were all alone. Our family was in the last car allowed into the national park before roads were closed for the winter.

As we waited, we saw him—a quiet brown giant with a soft furry rack of antlers appeared at the edge of the woods. We stood motionless as he slowly approached, eyeing us curiously as to what we were doing there—last he had heard, the tourists were gone for the season. He stopped just a few feet from us, close enough to hear his warm breath as it hit the crisp air and see tiny icicles that formed on his nose. Before long, the earth began rumbling and the geyser started bubbling furiously, a signal that Old Faithful would soon be ready. Then, with a shriek of a steam whistle, a huge cloud of steam and a column of

boiling water shot for more than two minutes. And just as suddenly, it was over. Our friend took one last look at these wide-eyed humans and casually sauntered back through the mist into the forest. Once again, we were alone.

Forty-four years have passed since that magical moment. But it was an experience I've never forgotten. The time had certainly come for a return visit to Yellowstone National Park.

Yellowstone has shaped the American public's definition of nature since 1872, when President Ulysses S. Grant made it the first national park in the world for good reason: There are more geysers, hot springs, and other thermal features here than the rest of the planet combined. In the spring, pristine snowmelt cascades into dazzling waterfalls of every description, including one that is twice as high as Niagara Falls. Yellowstone has a canyon that is deep and colorful enough to fall into the "Grand" category. Best of all, a significant portion of the park's incredible terrain is accessible by a hiker of just average ability.

Then, there's the wildlife: Ever focus your telephoto lens on a wild, untamed grizzly bear grabbing a trout from a stream? Or a bald eagle spreading his wings? What about a mother bison, nursing her baby calf? Thousands of people experience these wonders in Yellowstone annually.

The park covers a mind-boggling 2.2 million acres. The most



popularly used entrance is adjacent to West Yellowstone, a classic tourist town that is home to the Museum of the Yellowstone and the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center. Both are worth a visit to get oriented on the extensive history, wildlife, and geography that are encompassed within the park.

For my return visit, I sought an authentic guest ranch experience removed from the bustle of town, and found the perfect spot just 5 miles from the park's west entrance on Buttermilk Creek Road—a beautifully restored lodge with private cabins called the Bar N Ranch. The location is superb: 200 private acres on the south fork of the famous Madison River, renowned for its world-class fly-fishing.

In 2003, the Gavagans left their professional lives in Chicago behind, where Gayle practiced residential interior design

and Mike was involved in film and video production, after Mike's employer spotted an ad in *The Wall Street Journal* and bought the property.

The Gavagans became sweat equity partners and assumed the role of managers. But they arrived in November to bitter-cold winter temperatures and extreme snowfall, discovering that the buildings were sadly neglected, needing drastic structural and cosmetic improvements. Undaunted, they moved into the attic of the main lodge and set to work. After months of back-breaking physical labor and carpentry, they've succeeded in creating a simple, beautifully appointed retreat like none other in the region.

Today, the massive lodge is an ideal place to sink into a cozy hair-on-hide sofa with a glass of wine and a good book, next to a crackling fire. Giant hand-hewn log ceiling beams are artfully



draped in Pendleton wool blankets. A massive handcrafted pine burl staircase was restored and leads to the guest wing, where creature comforts in seven guest rooms or one of seven cabins are top-notch—private baths, luxurious down comforters, silky sheets, and plush doeskin robes are standard issue.

Authentically chinked log cabins all have wood-burning fireplaces, supplied with an endless stack of split logs. Each cabin's four-person hot tub is perfect for a late-night soak after a day spent exploring Yellowstone—from fishing to rafting, kayaking, hiking, or horseback riding. It's all available, and the Gavagans are happy to arrange the details for their guests. We became addicted to sitting in our tub and watching a breathtaking show of stars appear after dark—literally so close and numerous that they felt within reach.

Each morning, guests enjoy a multicourse breakfast that may

include homemade blueberry pancakes or ranch hand Ron's French Toast—a truly divine way to start the day. A seasonally changing dinner menu is prepared each night by executive chef Jack Cole, whose pedigree is impressive—New York's Club 21 and The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel are among his former culinary stops. Here at the ranch, his philosophy focuses on showcasing outstanding regional ingredients, simply prepared in an unpretentious style that caters to a regular local clientele in addition to ranch guests.

Though I was there for a week, I never did spot my friend the moose again, although I waited early one morning by Old Faithful for him to return. Maybe magic never happens twice in the same way. But there's plenty of magic at the Bar N Ranch, where nature and luxury are perfectly mixed with authentic and warm Western hospitality. ■