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Bison often graze at lower levels in winter. It's easy to spot them against the snow and exploding geysers.

# A WELCOME WINTER

## YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK OFFERS SOLITUDE IN THE SNOWY SEASON

→ TEXT AND PHOTOS BY **SUZANNE MORPHET**

**M**Y TOES ARE TINGLING. I'M WEARING snow boots and standing on a square of blue Styrofoam to keep my feet off the frozen ground, but it's still not enough on this bitterly cold January day in Yellowstone National Park.

Fortunately, the wolf at the end of my telescope is providing an interesting diversion. He's lying in the snow, and occasionally lifts his black head and looks west down the Lamar Valley. His thick coat insulates him from the frigid temperatures, but he's got another problem, one that has nothing to do with the weather.

Wolf 755 — the wolves here are all numbered — lost both his mate and his brother to hunters a couple months earlier when they strayed outside the park boundaries. Now he's looking for a new mate from another pack, but it's a life and death gamble.

"He's negotiating travelling through territories with rival packs that may well try to kill him," explains wildlife biologist Rick McIntyre. "But on the other hand, if he's successful in what he's trying to do — to draw off one or more females — he'll be back in business with a new family and a new litter of pups within a few months."

I didn't expect to be immersed in some animal soap opera at Yellowstone, America's oldest national park, but this is part of the upside of travelling here in winter. Wildlife is everywhere and people are few and far between. It feels like we've got the park, the animals and the experts all to ourselves.

Free workshop led by Professional Move manager,  
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## EMBRACING THE QUIET SEASON

McIntyre has spent more than a thousand consecutive days watching the wolves of Yellowstone. He's here in summer too, of course, but so are hundreds of thousands of visitors. More than three million people will visit the park this year, with about 98 per cent of them coming between June and September, clogging the roads and filling every one of the 2,200 hotel rooms and cabins, 11 campgrounds and one RV park.

Even though Yellowstone has been welcoming winter enthusiasts since 1949, it's definitely the slow season, with only two hotels open. Travelling by snow coach is the most popular way to get around the park in winter, but you can also join a snowmobile tour or explore on skis or snowshoes.

That evening, we warm ourselves in the Boiling River, an aptly named ribbon of rushing water near Mammoth Hot Springs Resort, where scalding hot water from an underground stream enters and merges with the icy flow.

The next morning, we climb aboard a heated snow coach for the seven-hour journey to Old Faithful. Along the way, our guide and driver, Victor Sawyer, entertains us with stories about the park and how fantastical the place once seemed. For instance, when an early explorer tried to have a story published about the hundreds of thousands of bison he witnessed, an editor turned him down, saying "We don't publish fiction."

To my eyes, it's still fantastical. Wild animals roam everywhere. Elk graze peacefully on the banks of the Firehole River, while trumpeter swans float by in water that's warmed by the thermal activity deep underground. "Hundreds of them are here in winter," Sawyer tells us. "They come for the open water."

We also spot coyotes and a river otter. Are those tracks in the snow weasel or mink? It feels like we've gone back in time, back to the prelapsarian world that once was.



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*\*price includes lunch and two coffee breaks*

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↖ A herd of bison rests alongside the Gibbon River.  
↑ A lone photographer stands at the end of the boardwalk extending into Lower Geyser Basin, while Fountain Geyser erupts in the background.

## A STEAMY SHOW

There may not be as many bison as before — the huge herds were almost completely wiped out by poachers — but we see them up close, walking on the road to avoid deep snow, and from a distance, most spectacularly against a backdrop of exploding geysers.

And perhaps this is where Yellowstone really shines in winter. “We’re travelling along the most geyser-rich area on the planet,” Sawyer tells us as we marvel at the billowing clouds of condensed steam against a cold blue sky.

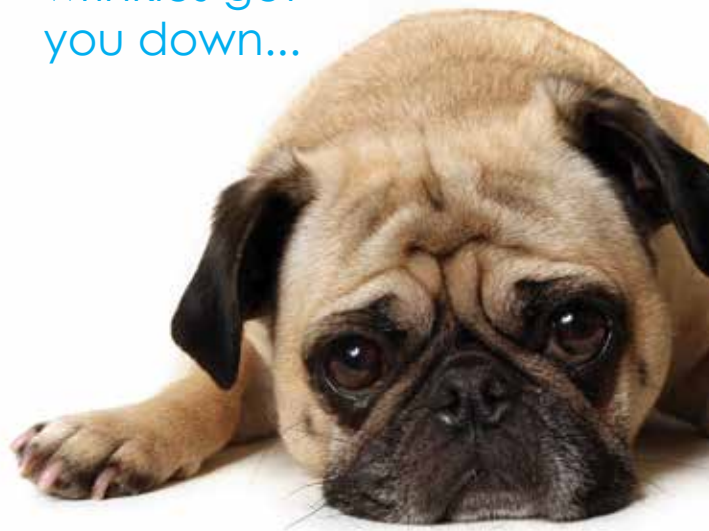
“Yellowstone National Park is an immense, active volcano — one of the largest and most violent on Earth,” according to a sign in Yellowstone’s Grand Canyon warming hut, where we stop for lunch. So when Sawyer tells us we’ll be spending the night in the crater, it’s a little disconcerting until he adds, “it’s very well studied — we would have lots of advance warning.”

Late that afternoon I rent cross-country skis and take a well-groomed trail that bisects a group of geysers. I’m hoping to catch the anticipated eruption of Daisy Geyser at 4 pm and be back in time for Old Faithful’s at 4:26 pm, about a one-mile round trip.

Even when they’re not exploding, geysers and their relatives — hot springs, mud pots and fumaroles — are fascinating: hissing steam, burping bubbles and turning the surrounding muck vivid shades of orange and yellow. I’m so distracted that I don’t get back in time to see Old Faithful blow her stack, but I get something better: a private encounter with a coyote.

I’m on my knees photographing a bubbling “pot” when I notice something moving. I look up and see the tawny creature no more than a dozen yards away. It’s just her and me in the fading afternoon light. I pick up my ski pole, but she’s harmless. She stops to relieve herself, then nonchalantly walks off into the quiet night of a Yellowstone winter. **B**

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