

YELLOWSTONE IN WINTER 2011

This one again, started with something we got in the mail. We have always wanted to visit Yellowstone, but it has not been on our dance card. The brochure offered the trip to also include Salt Lake City and Jackson Hole. We have seen pictures of the park in the winter, and it is beautiful! An added plus is that there many fewer people.

This past October we were on a Mystery Trip with the same travel company, and some of the people had taken the Yellowstone trip. They heartily recommended the snowmobile trip, and said it was fun ending up at the hot springs. Kathy was really excited, because snowmobiling has been on her "bucket list". This is from a lady who grew up not ever seeing snow fall until our 2007 Danube River cruise!

She has a long list, but will never tell me because she knows I would go out and book them all. I just sort of find out as we go along, which is OK with me.



SALT LAKE CITY

I wore my hiking boots to save weight, forgetting I would have to unlace them to go through Security. One agent had a problem with my carry on (the same one that had gone through numerous times before without a problem) and that delayed my boarding. I tied the laces of my boots together, put the boots around my neck, and boarded the plane in my stocking feet!

Our tour escort met us at the airport to start our "winter wonderland" tour and checked us into our downtown hotel. We were starving, as we did not get a chance to have lunch on our Las Vegas layover between flights. I found a great toasted sandwich place down the street from the hotel and took them on the bus on our way to tour the State Capitol. It looked very similar in appearance to the U.S. Capitol. The rotunda had a series of murals depicting events in Utah's history.



After the tour we were taken back to the hotel to freshen up where this evening we were going to a get-acquainted dinner to meet our fellow travelers. The restaurant was a really funky Italian place with all kinds of unusual photos on the walls and ceilings of the different rooms.



SALT LAKE CITY TO YELLOWSTONE

On Sunday morning, special seating had been arranged for our group at Temple Square, where we had a chance to hear the world-famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir's weekly broadcast performance. We were taken to Temple Square and ushered into the Tabernacle. The setting was absolutely breathtaking with the choir on both sides of the organ pipes. We were given a history of the choir, which was originally started by Brigham Young in the late 1800's. We were also told about the requirements to be in the choir, and that there was a mandatory retirement age of 60 to allow new member to participate.

Following the performance, I went out into Temple Square to take a picture of the actual Mormon Temple.



After the performance we departed the Wasatch Mountains and drove north past the Great Salt Lake, Hill Air Force Base, and Utah's first settlement, Ogden. We entered Idaho and travel through the potato-producing fields of the Gem State. Traveling north, we passed the town of Rexburg. In 1976 the Teton Dam burst, sending a wall of water through the main street, destroying the town. Next we entered the Island Park Region. This area is world-famous for its outstanding trout fishing on the Madison and Henry Rivers. After going over Targhee Pass we entered Montana and the town of West Yellowstone, the western gate of our nation's first national park.

The hotel we stayed at had a vintage railroad car inside, which was decorated in the style of 1923. It was a combination sleeper and parlor car, and had the china set on the tables and the bed made up. There was also

some old luggage outside to help set the mood, and Kathy looked and said there was a piece that looked exactly like her father's old luggage!



YELLOWSTONE

This was our day to discover Yellowstone National Park, America's oldest and most famous national park, via private chartered snow coaches. We drove to the park entrance, and were met by our snow coaches and a thermometer reading minus 10 degrees F, which is minus 27 Celsius!



The snow coaches were warm, and we had 8 people plus the driver in each coach. There were two hatches in the roof for people to stand up and take pictures at the various stops.



Our first sighting was of a bald eagle in a tree, and shortly thereafter we saw the eagle's nest. The eagles use the same nest every year, and they can be huge.

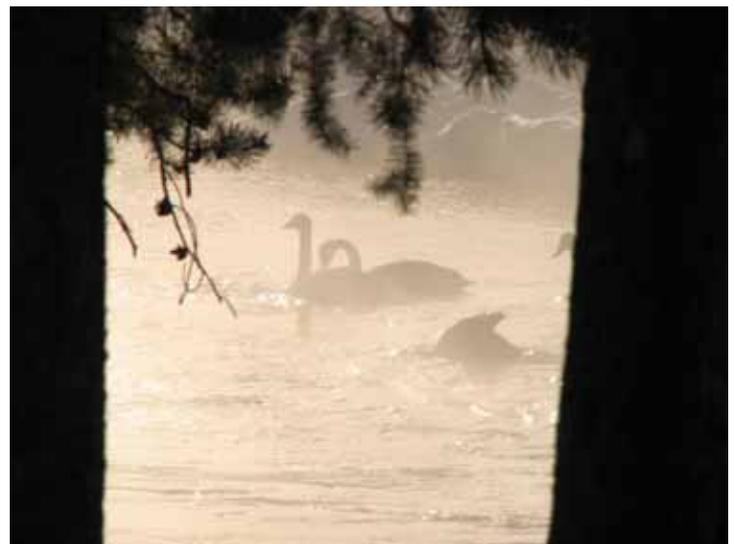


As we started our snow coach tour through the park, we came across a bison calf wandering down the road. A little further along, we came across a small herd doing the same.



This was fantastic, to be up close and personal with these animals! They just sort of wandered down the road then got out of our way.

A bit further down the road, we stopped to observe swans swimming in the heated water of the Madison River.



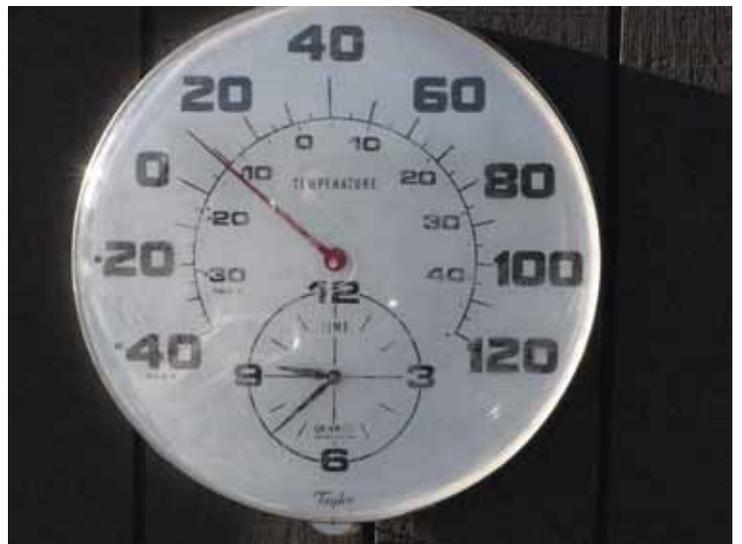
Our next animal encounter was with a small herd of elk, first a calf, then a few more crossing the road.



We then passed through an open area, where some bison were feeding in the distance, and then some small elk feeding.



We then made a brief stop at a “warming hut”, but you can see what the outside temperature was at the time.



Our next stop was at Firehole Falls, which was not frozen. We can only imagine what it would look like in the spring, fed by the runoff from the melting snow.



Our next stop was at the Lower Geyser Basin. Yellowstone has more geysers than most of the rest of the world. There were bubbling paint pots, fumaroles, and small geysers all around.



After stopping to admire the geysers, we proceeded down the road, stopping to observe another herd of bison grazing.



We continued down the road to the visitor center to have lunch and watch Old faithful erupt. The timing was critical, as we would only have one chance to see it. We got to the dining room, and were told it would not even open for another half hour, so that was out. We then went to the grill area, but we were preceded by a large group of snowmobilers, and service was very slow. We did not want to miss Old faithful, so we opted to miss lunch. We found out later that shortly after we left they finally opened up another register and some of our group did get fed.

We walked over to the visitor center, and discovered there was a great place inside to sit and view the eruption. The glass was angled out, so there would not be a reflection when we took a picture. We waited for the scheduled time, and shortly thereafter, the geyser erupted, sending a plume of steam and water high into the air.



After seeing the spectacular show from Old Faithful, we reboarded our snow cat and headed south, stopping at Lewis Falls.



After viewing Lewis Falls, we passed a sign indicating we were at the Continental Divide, where water on one side flows to the Pacific and water on the other side flows to the Gulf of Mexico via the Missouri-Mississippi Rivers. We were told there was one stream that actually splits, with one side flowing west and the other east. We left the park at the South entrance and stopped at Flagg Ranch, where we bought some snacks to hold us until dinnertime.

We continued on south into Grand Teton National Park, where we saw America's youngest and most rugged mountains, the Teton Range



The Tetons were spectacular and Grand Teton, with a height of 13,775 feet dominates the range.



JACKSON HOLE

We entered Jackson, and checked into our hotel. We also checked around to see where we could have dinner the second night in the city.

The next morning we turned on the TV, and found that because of the cold and the wind chill, a number of schools in the area were closed. We were supposed to go snowmobiling to Granite Hot Springs, but we were concerned that it would be too cold to go. We cancelled our reservation, but a few hardier souls decided to go anyhow. When they got back we were told that there was no heat in the changing rooms, and they were all very cold. We did make the right decision, but the operator told us that the fee was non refundable, which really griped us.

We went with the rest of the group to the Jackson Visitor Center, and then to National Wildlife Museum for a tour of the paintings and sculptures. It was a great museum, and we enjoyed it very much.

The group was then to go to the National Elk Refuge for a sleigh ride. We opted to stay in the museum where it was warm, instead. We could look out the museum windows and see the sleds in the distance. While we were there, we also visited their café and had lunch. We think we had the better idea.



There was a great sculpture of a bear on the rear of the museum, so I got a picture of it with the snow in the background.

The next morning, when we got up, I went outside in my robe and got a picture of the temperature display on the bank across the street!



SALT LAKE CITY

As we left Jackson this morning, we traveled through western Wyoming into Idaho, surrounded by silver streams, soaring peaks, and lush meadows. Next, we ascended rugged Logan Canyon, and passed through the alpine dairy country of Cache Valley, and skirted the shores of the Great Salt Lake as we traveled south back to Salt Lake City.

We had one large problem, however. During the night in Jackson, the temperature dropped to -21 degrees and everything in the bus ended up at that temperature. It was so cold out that the bus engine never got warm enough to heat up the inside of the bus. During a pit and warming stop, the driver put a piece of cardboard over the radiator to help heat up the bus. I remember my dad doing that in the winter when I was a kid back East. The bus finally warmed up about a half hour out of Salt Lake!

We arrived at Utah Olympic Park near Park City and toured the facility that hosted events for the 2002 Winter Olympic Games and continues to host World Cup events. We saw the Nordic Jumps along with the Bobsled and Luge Track, which is the fastest ice on earth. I got a picture of the starting gate, and of part of the track. We had one of guides with us who explained how they keep the ice in the summer with special refrigeration pipes.



We also visited the start for the ski jump and the landing area for the freestyle skiing.



On this last evening, we joined the group for a farewell meal at a nearby restaurant in Salt Lake City. The next day we were taken to the airport for our 2 PM flight back to Burbank. We really appreciate these short flights that leave at a reasonable hour. Well, the balance of nature struck again. Our plane was to come in from Denver, but it had to be deiced, so that delayed its arrival into Salt Lake by an hour. That delayed our arrival into Burbank to right in the middle of rush hour!

We took an alternate less congested route home, and I suggested we stop half way to get something to eat. I knew about this great sushi bar in the town, to get away from eating beef as we did for the trip. We ordered a couple of special rolls, and after finishing the first one, we waited what seemed like a long time. In fact, so long that we ordered a third roll, and ate it and the other one was still not there. We got hold of the waitress, and she apologized and said the man at the sushi bar forgot to make it! We did finally get it, and then headed for home.

We now understand what it is to be truly cold at -24F; however it was such a privilege to see this "national treasure" as few tourists experience, in the dead of winter with bright beautiful sunshine every day. The raw and frigid beauty of the animals and scenery will be remembered forever. We met some great people who were all good natured and a pleasure to travel with. Our tour guide, Steve Whittaker, was really exceptional. Believe me; we have a whole new respect for all of you who live your daily lives in frigid temperatures. The night we got home we were watching the news, and the weather forecast for the next day was 80 degrees.

I turned to Kathy and said "That's 100 degrees warmer than yesterday."
Our next trip in three weeks is to Hawaii to thaw out.