

Roaming Wyoming: A Three-Day Holiday in the Cowboy State Was Too Short

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If you know just one thing about the state of Wyoming, it is probably something about Buffalo Bill. He made himself famous there more than a hundred years ago. He knew how to strike a pose and make it pay, promoting his image as frontiersman and hunter in the nineteenth-century equivalent of an advertising blitz, The Wild West Show. Then, beginning around 1940, Hollywood spread his fame around the world in film after film more or less true to the legend he created for himself. What could be more American than that—immortality achieved through “truth” in advertising?

As it happens, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show image adds a mythical dimension to the everyday cowboy reality of a state still truly open and free. More than half of Wyoming is classified as farm and ranch land, most of it merely dotted with trees since this is the famous prairie, an inland grassland sea of rich and resilient pasture perfected by nature for thousands of years. These wide open spaces are swept by ferocious extremes of weather these plants evolved to survive. No wonder cattle ranching has prospered here since the state's territorial days in the 1860s.

Wyoming is known, and rightly, as “The Cowboy State.” Its sky blue auto license plate logo is a cowboy riding high on a bucking bronco. It is not just advertising hype. Rodeos in Wyoming are a genuine part of the local culture. Some

of the biggest summer rodeos in the nation attract visitors from around the world. The most famous is billed as “the granddaddy of 'em all,” that being an old frontier expression for anything that claims to be the biggest, best, and most influential. This rodeo is held in July in the state capital Cheyenne. Wyoming's less well known moniker is “The Equality State” because it was the first to vote for women's suffrage.

In the western part of the state the prairie gives way to forest and the geological wonderland and wildlife preserve of Yellowstone National Park. Founded in 1872, this is the oldest national park in the United States. It protects more kinds of wildlife than can be named in a page of print, among them bison, elk, deer, moose, bighorn sheep, and pronghorn antelope, along with bear and coyote and wolves. More unique to Yellowstone is its array of colorful geological formations and geothermal wonders, more here than anywhere else in the world. Scalding hot water from deep in the earth well up in quiet pools richly colored by mineral deposits. Steam and water mix to explode in dramatic fountain geysers, mischievous vents, and comical swamps of cheerful pink mud that swells and explodes in slowly popping bubbles of gas. The air is heavy with the rotten egg smell of mineral springs but the spectacle is so astonishing you do not think to

complain.

Parts of Yellowstone Park spill over into neighboring Idaho and Montana, but 90% of this national treasure lies within Wyoming. And Yellowstone is not the state's only such natural wonderland. Equally famous is Grand Teton National Park. It was established in 1929 to preserve high green mountains. The early French explorers viewed them with great admiration and called them "les grands tetons," i.e. big breasts. Many a "politically correct" American tourist today would be shocked if they knew their French. My own thought is that we must make allowances for those early explorers, first on the scene and so far from home.

Many who have not even heard of Grand Teton National Park have its beauty fixed in their minds by *Shane*, the George Stevens classic movie of 1953. Who could forget that final, heart-rending scene—*Shane* turning his back on civilization, riding off into a horizon of sky and green mountain as little Joey's voice echoes, crying out: "Shane, come back!" That scene was shot in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, surely one of the most beautiful places on earth. (In frontier days, Indians and fur trappers frequently used the term "hole" to designate a mountain valley).

One look at Jackson Hole and I understood instantly why a millionaire friend, a fellow fly fisherman, built his vacation home there. He and his family discovered Jackson Hole ten years ago. They spent a month driving across America, looking for some place far from the hustle and bustle of Tokyo. And what a contrast they found in Jackson Hole! Their dream home now looks out on vistas of mountain wilderness offering relief from the pressures of one of the largest, most crowded cities on planet

earth.

Wyoming's economy gets a vital boost from tourists who come flooding in after the snows are gone. Summer motel rates speak for the bottom line value of this vast influx. Off-season rates for a single room in Jackson Hole at Super 8, a popular motel chain, range from \$40 to \$60 a night. In summer the same room may rent for three times that price. Japanese used to horrific rates may wonder what all the fuss is about, but Super 8 caters to middle-class Americans who consider such prices a "big rip-off."

My husband and I have made eight trips to Montana, the so-called "Big Sky." It has been our annual pilgrimage to Nature. This year, we decided to explore the middle western part of Montana, then press on into Wyoming. Unlike most tourists, however, we planned to avoid the obvious parkland destinations.

High on our list of must-visit sights to avoid was Devils Tower National Monument. This volcanic core soars some 1,200 feet into the air. It has featured as an American natural wonder for a century now, but became world-famous in the Eighties, when it served Hollywood as a place of rendezvous with aliens in the box-office smash hit *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Devils Tower stands outside Sundance, a town associated with its famous outlaw Harry Loughbaugh, better known as The Sundance Kid. Look for him in any number of movies on the subject. My husband and I agreed that we had seen enough so good-bye Sundance, hello wilderness—as far from tourist traffic jams as we could get!

We flew out of Pittsburgh at the end of July, headed for Bozeman, Montana. As always, we had to change planes in Min-

neapolis-St. Paul. I have lost count of the times we passed through this northern metropolis of a state whose newly elected governor is a big man with a big voice and not a bit shy about calling attention to himself as Jesse "The Body" Ventura. The body reference is to his previous profession of champion wrestler.

Thanks to a delay in Minneapolis, we arrived at Bozeman late at night. Also arriving was a large contingent of Chinese tourists. They must have flown in from the West coast. So where were the Japanese? We saw no sign of one. We wondered why. Was the recent recession still canceling Japanese travel plans? Or was school still in session there, putting off their vacations? I found myself hoping we were seeing signs of delay, not cancellation.

We picked up our Avis rent-a-car and drove to our favorite Super 8 motel in downtown Bozeman. What a start for a vacation trip! We did not get much sleep, thanks to other late-comers banging doors as they arrived.

Next morning we drove to Livingstone some thirty miles east of Bozeman. Livingstone, Montana is to fly fishermen what Canton Ohio is to football fans—home of their Hall of Fame. Livingstone is headquarters of the FFF(The Federation of Fly Fishers). The building itself is like a museum, complete with live aquarium displays. Twice a week they even provide free flycasting lessons to beginners like me.

We headed right to Livingstone because both of us were (and always are, in fact) crazy to fish. Our plan was to drift down the Yellowstone River, which happens to be the longest undammed waterway in the original forty-eight states. We stayed that night in Livingstone and set out early on

our long-awaited guided trip downriver. What a letdown! An American in the mood we were in would say it in plain slang: fishing that day really sucked!

Please understand. My husband and I are snobs when it comes to fishing. We have traveled hundreds, even thousands, of miles in the USA and up to Alberta and British Columbia to fish for trout and other "game" fish. Game fish are as beautiful to fight as they are to look at and eat. So here we were, on one of America's wildest, most magnificent rivers, expecting rainbow and brown trout to rise and shine on the end of the line. We even had hopes of cutthroat, a native Montana fish now so rare it is considered an endangered species. All that and all we caught was—

This is really embarrassing. Because the first cast I made I landed a carp! And carp, I have to tell you, get NO respect in America. They consider carp "trash fish," "bottom feeders." Of course it is not entirely fair, since a carp on the hook does put up a fight. But still, carp is not the fish anglers travel far to catch. Carp are everywhere. Whitefish, too, are not the right stuff. Far too many whitefish took our bait that day. And very few trout.

Next morning early we left for Wyoming. Our faces must have worn the look of outlaws "vamoosing" after making a mess of a major robbery. But of course we could not be glum for long. This was Montana, Interstate 90, a stretch of highway headed for the sky, or so it seems as you speed along. Last year there was no speed limit along this stretch of I-90. I had just got my license, yet there I was, zooming along at 80 miles an hour and more, looking like a little old Japanese lady racer at the world-famous Indy 500.

This year we passed signs posting lim-

its of 70 miles an hour. Most of the cars we saw going our way passed us going faster. I obeyed the law, partly because in Pennsylvania speeding on the interstate can get you a fine of several hundred dollars. Judging by the number of speeders on Montana roads, the Big Sky state does not hit its offenders with nearly that much.

At Laurel, Montana we left I-90 to head south into "the back of beyond," which is to say somewhere that looked like nowhere in particular. We passed vast stretches of farm and grazing land but nary a human. The cows we saw were resting in the shade, flicking flies with lazy tails. We did see one small herd heading into a "draw," a dip in the land that would shelter them from the heat that shimmered up in waves from the surface of the road. We did pass through one small town all but swept away by the hardship it is to make a living in space so vast and far out of the economic mainstream. One gas station was still open for business and a rundown motel. Several cafes appeared to have closed with no hope of opening ever again.

The next tiny town we came to was Belfry. No gas station here or grocery store, just a tiny roadside cafe. We stopped for lunch. A friendly waitress handed us a menu. I read it, feeling sorry for any weight watcher passing this way. Every dish on the menu was all about high cholesterol. But then, these Montana ranchers are hardworking hearty eating types who can probably handle a meat-and-potatoes diet that would kill a sedentary city slicker in no time. I settled with a small dish of homemade soup and a fish sandwich made with fish fresh from the freezer, defrosted and deep fried, tasting remarkably like a board. (Of course I am only guessing. Maybe boards are quite

delicious.) My husband is American so he did the American thing ("my country right or wrong" we call it), ordering a hamburger with everything on it—tomato, onion, pickles, bacon....

After lunch we came to the Clarks Fork River, one of the most famous trout streams in Montana. The Blackfoot flows into it, the river used for the fly fishing scene in Robert Redford's *A River Runs Through It*. We saw no anglers but stopped to talk to a farmer mowing hay in the scorching sun. Asked about fishing in the Clarks Fork, he said he had never done any fishing himself, but had seen some "mighty big trout" taken out by others.

We pressed on along this winding state road till we came to a large sign reading "Welcome To Wyoming." We were now officially in Buffalo Bill County. Finally we entered Cody, Wyoming, the city named for the state's most famous son William "Buffalo Bill" Cody. The "buffalo" of his name refers to the animal more properly called a bison. Buffalo Bill got his name from killing untold numbers of that magnificent prairie native at a time of slaughter so senseless and short-sighted that it very nearly drove the bison to extinction. But William Cody was more than a star in that sad chapter of American history. He was one of Wyoming's first and most enterprising promoters of tourism and recreation. He invested much of the fortune he had made in recreational facilities like the Hotel Irma and the Pahaska, a hunting lodge. Both buildings still stand, serving as memorials to Buffalo Bill and the "frontier spirit" visited by admiring tourists from everywhere under the sun.

Cody also serves as an eastern gateway to Yellowstone Park. As such, it handles a steady flow of summer tourists. The

farther we drove into town, the more dismayed we were to see how congested it was, thanks to glut of businesses it takes to service the tourist trade. Even so, Cody is more than a cowtown turned tourist trap. It is the site of the world renown Buffalo Bill Historical Center. It houses the largest and finest collection of Western art in the United States. More than a quarter million people visit it every year.

My husband and I were suitably edified by Cody's attractions, but in no mood to mix with its noisy crowds. We had not come all this way from Pittsburgh to savor urban congestion with a mock-up of Old West aftertaste. We had booked a room in advance at the Cody Super 8 but decided to "get the hell out" as cowboys in movies and in real life like to say. It was not long before we found ourselves speeding along a lonely road through grazing land as far as the eye could see. Suddenly it occurred to me that we needed to cancel our reservations or risk finding a bill when we got home. It was nearly two o'clock. I didn't think my cellular phone would work from so far away but decided to give it a try and dialed the 800 number. It rang all right. And lo and behold (more old-timey talk there), it connected me from smack in the middle of nowheresville, Wyoming.

Better yet, I called the town we were aiming for, a town named Lander. Sure enough, I connected with the clerk at the Best Western motel. She said the only room left was a suite complete with Jacuzzi. I said that we would take it, and on we drove for another hour to reach "a wide place in the road" (more cowboy talk) called Meeteetse, an Indian name meaning "place of rest." The town is home to upwards of 500 people. The main street is some-

thing like a hundred meters long, but it does lead past a two-pump gas station, several souvenir shops and cafes and a couple of motels. There are museums too, one an old bank famous for being overlooked by Wyoming's answer to The Sundance Kid, the infamous bandit Butch Cassidy. (Yes, you did see them die together in that movie.) So why did Butch Cassidy neglect to rob this bank in Meeteetse? Was it fresh out of money in days gone by? Nope. Cassidy did not dare rob that bank because friends of his had all their money there.

We stopped at an old cafe for coffee. Each table had its booklet giving the histories of Wyoming mountain men and cowboys from those pioneer days of yore. Our booklet was in tatters, soiled by the hands of many a visitor. That little detail prepared us not to expect much in the way of comfort and cleanliness when we headed to the restroom: only one restroom for everybody. I am happy to report that we were most agreeably disappointed. The restroom was the cleanest, most thoughtfully furnished we had seen since leaving our bathroom at home. It even featured a full-length mirror and framed Wyoming landscape.

We continued along a state road wandering lonely as a cloud. Most of the time we were the only car in sight. After a while, the landscape struck us as getting monotonous, just grazing land and more grazing land. Just as we started to talk about how road-weary we were, a sign came into view: "Super 8. Turn Right at the Next Stoplight." They forgot to mention that the next stop light was another fifty miles on down the road.

We found it in Thermopolis, a town of 3,000 souls. Its fancy Greek name trans-

lates "Hot Springs City." Fair enough, given that Hot Springs State Park is there. According to our free brochure, *Wyoming Guide*, this is the site of the world's largest mineral hot spring. Millions of gallons of water gush out at 135° F. There is even a public bathhouse. What Japanese, you ask, could resist a long relaxing soak in a huge steaming tub filled from the world's largest hot mineral spring? You just met one. My husband and I still had Lander on the brain so we skipped that treat, driving right through Thermopolis nonstop.

Soon we were entering the Wind River Canyon area. Suddenly, I spotted a huge billboard advertising "Bighorn River Outfitters." Then we drove past a house with two boats parked in front of it. I asked my husband to turn back. He pulled into the driveway and I knocked at the door. It was answered by a mountain of a man with a big friendly smile. (Later we would learn that he had played football in college.) We scanned his brochure, smiling at the prospect of banishing our failure on the Yellowstone by fishing the Bighorn, another famous trout stream. We booked a half-day trip for the following day.

The landscape changed dramatically as we drove on, following the Wind River as it wound its way through the canyon bearing its name. Gaining elevation, we came to a tunnel blasted through a mountain of solid rock. Coming out, we were greeted by a fantastic view, complete with an enormous lake connecting with Boysen State Park. After so many miles alone on the road we saw people, and not just people but one of our favorite kinds of people: anglers. Some were casting from the shore. Others bobbed in boats. Families had spread out picnic lunches. Kids were

running and screaming everywhere. Welcome to Wind River County. The Shoshone Indians used to call this area "Valley of the Warm Winds." They and the Northern Arapaho still claim most of the land hereabouts. The Wind River Indian Reservation is one of the largest in area in the lower '48 states. Some 7,000 Indians still live there.

A thirty-minute drive took us to another small town, Shoshoni, population 500. It looked rather dismal. A number of buildings stood empty, among them a motel and restaurant. The only thriving places seemed to be gas stations combined with convenience stores. According to *The Wyoming Visitor's Guide*, the town's Yellowstone Drug Store is famous for its soda fountain—"the best in Wyoming." Too bad for us, that place was history now. And here was my husband, reading the guidebook, dying for a malt or milkshake like the ones he loved as a child.

It took us another hour to reach Lander, a mountain town of 5,000 inhabitants voted one of the "best small towns" in the United States in the book with that title. Part of our curiosity about Lander had to do with this notion we have of living part of the year somewhere out West after we retire. It is not a decision we have to make anytime soon. For my part, I am not remotely ready to say "sayonara" to my teaching career. I like it far too much for that. Still, we were thinking, it does not hurt to look so let's just look at little Lander, Wyoming.

Agriculture used to be the town's mainstay, with some employment in a mine operated by a steel company. The mine is closed now and agriculture has taken a back seat to a tourist industry thriving on the beauties to be seen in the nearby Wind

River Mountains. The Wyoming State Training School is here as well. Its innovative curriculum for the developmentally disabled has a high profile nationwide. There is also the National Outdoor Leadership School, teaching wilderness skills to students from all over the world.

After checking in at a brand-new Best Western hotel next to a convenient discount superstore, we decided to visit the city's one hospital. It is always good to know what help is available, just in case something goes wrong with your wilderness vacation. Hospitals are also important to anyone looking ahead to retirement. We found a surprisingly up-to-date medical complex served by over sixty doctors! But then doctors are human too; they do not mind living and working in sight of gorgeous wilderness scenery. The friendly head nurse offered us a tour. Among its pleasant surprises was an emergency room equipped to handle twenty patients at a time. I am happy to report that it was empty on this particular beautiful day.

It was almost supper time when we drove around the city looking at houses for sale. (The following day we would talk to a real estate broker whose sales pitch convinced us the recent influx of retirees has inflated prices.)

We decided to try the town's only Oriental restaurant—Thai cuisine with a number of American dishes on the side. Both of us ordered noodle dishes, both dismally disappointing. Mine was a watery slop floating shreds of Chinese cabbage somehow surprising to encounter this far into the wilderness. The Thai-est thing in the place appeared to be a portrait of the owner dolled up in traditional costume. "Too bad she can't cook as good as she looks," my husband said dryly.

The next day we headed back to Thermopolis for our fishing trip on the Bighorn. This would be our last day in Wyoming, the last day of our holiday. We decided to splurge on a really comfortable room, the best the Super 8 had to offer, complete with Jacuzzi.

I am happy to say that the climax of our trip was everything two people crazy about fishing could hope for, given a glorious summer afternoon and evening on a river like the Bighorn.

The Bighorn in Montana is known as a "blue ribbon trout stream." Anglers have been flocking to it ever since it was written up in a popular fishing magazine. The Bighorn in Wyoming has yet to be hyped, so we could hope to have fewer competitors here. In fact, we had the river mostly to ourselves. Our guide Reggie took us to a boat ramp near his house around three in the afternoon. Soon we were catching trout after trout—rainbows, browns and yes, cutthroats. And cross my heart and hope to die if ever I tell you a fisherman's lie but these trout were big, really BIG.

And so, as I have mentioned, was Reggie, one of the nicest guides we had ever had in any size. He was born and raised in Wyoming and cannot imagine living anywhere else. His wife is from Wyoming too. She works as a secretary to a medical technician. He works part-time for the state and has this outfitter's business on the side. They and their two children live in a house Reggie built himself and is still in the process of renovating. All in all, they are a typical middle-class Wyoming family.

I add Wyoming there, because out in this part of the country, middle-class people have to be rather more self-reliant than they are near America's large population centers. Hunting, for example, is more than mere

sport to many of these families. Reggie and his wife and thirteen-year-old son all buy licenses to hunt deer and elk. If one of them is lucky and gets a big elk, it will fill their freezer with meat for a year. Reggie told us they seldom buy meat except for a little pork and chicken. It stands to reason that they take a dim view of gun control lobby so active nowadays in Washington D.C. The issue of drive-by shootings in big city streets seems pretty remote in the Cowboy State, where firearms are weapons for a purpose as needful, and traditional, as hunting to fill the larder.

Fishing has more meaning in Wyoming too. It was dark by time we got back to Reggie's dock at ten o'clock. Even so, we saw anglers fishing from the bank. Reggie explained that they were not sportsmen fishing for pleasure, but working people fishing for their supper. Thermopolis is that kind of place. Life there is good, even very good; but in some ways it can be tough as well. The town is a world away from the bull market mainstream economy so many Americans are enjoying now. Year-round work at a decent wage can be hard to find in a place so dependent on tourism. I was struck by a great number of young girls working as housekeepers at the Super 8. (Housekeeper is the preferred word in the USA now. "Maid"

is considered demeaning.) Most of these girls were fresh out of high school. The low-skill labor of cleaning rooms and changing beds is probably the only paying job they can get without leaving the hometown and lifestyle they happen to love.

Waiting to be served at a local cafe, I looked through the Help Wanted section of a newspaper left on our table. There were not many jobs. Most were for waitresses. Only one was for a teacher. Later, soaking in the Jacuzzi, I felt somewhat guilty about the luxury we could afford during this trip. When we checked out the following morning, I left a generous tip on the table in our kitchenette. I hoped that it would buy a good lunch for whoever would get it.

All in all, we agreed that our adventure had been exciting and relaxing and in a sense educational too. What better introduction to a state we cannot wait to revisit? Saying good-bye to Reggie, we said we would be back next summer for sure. We liked him instantly and liked him even better after our time together on the river. Next summer he will meet our Japanese friends. Of course we also can hardly wait to share Wyoming with them.

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