

Ranger Pete's® Visiting Yellowstone with **YOUNG CHILDREN TIP SHEET**



Congratulations, you bit the bullet and decided to plan a family adventure to Yellowstone. Hopefully, a trip of a lifetime and a memorable experience, but realize Yellowstone National Park is not a petting zoo, an amusement park or a luxury resort. Next, and this is not a scare tactic, but before entering the park make sure your entire family knows the park rules and regulations. These safety guidelines, along with **Ranger Pete's®** “family-friendly” **Yellowstone Planner & Guide App**, will help create a vacation full of positive memories, and hopefully lessen unnecessary expenditures, stress or aggravation. Furthermore, touring the park with young children is encouraged, as the park offers countless learning opportunities, but let's be honest, caution and common sense need to be on your packing list. With that said, packing for any family vacation is a daunting task, but the process can be less overwhelming with the **Ranger Pete® Yellowstone Vacation Checklist**. Before starting, utilize the detailed packing list and use the itemization as a guideline for applicable items. As for clothing, focus on comfort and **pack gear that can be easily layered**. Realize Yellowstone's weather is unpredictable and varies from locations. **For example:** Mammoth Terraces, elevation 6,735 feet, may be ideal for a long sleeve t-shirt, while a hike to Mount Washburn, elevation 10,219 feet, may require a jacket, gloves and head wear. Next, **proper footwear is vital**. Tennis shoes are suitable for touring the thermal boardwalks, but for serious day hiking, consider **comfortable hiking boots**. Nowadays, hiking footwear is offered in a variety of styles and prices, however, think about a waterproof pair as trails can be muddy in the late spring and early summer. As for stockings, forget the 12-pack of discount athletic socks and treat your feet to **proper hiking socks**. Sore feet or blisters will put a damper on your outdoor activities. Finally, the majority of park visitors spend an average of 1-2 days touring Yellowstone, so use your existing “open air” wear, and forgo purchasing a new “fashionable” outdoor wardrobe. Save the money and splurge on family souvenirs.

To start, once visitors have paid their admission at one of Yellowstone's five entry gates, Park Rangers hand guests, along with their receipt, a governmental newsletter, which outlines many of the park's ground rules. Nonetheless, we have added some comments and suggestions when touring with young children:

1. Sign-up young children for the Junior Ranger Program, a self-guided course for children 4-years and older. The curriculum introduces youngsters to Yellowstone, as well as teaches park preservation. The inexpensive booklets are available at the park's visitor centers, and those who complete the requirements can obtain a colorful Junior Ranger Patch.

2. Educational opportunities abound within the Park's Visitor Centers. All the centers are different and concentrate, and educate on their specific segment of the park. Most displays are geared towards adults, but the **Old Faithful Visitor Center** provides an informative, hands-on children's exhibit.

3. You'll see warning sign posted around thermal areas, so this is a mere reminder: **Don't stray off the boardwalks.** Not only is it illegal to walk on the fragile thermal formations, but the inviting, colorful pools are overflowing with acidic, scolding hot water.

4. Enjoy the wildlife from a distance. Every season, vacationers post videos showcasing absent-minded tourists who cross the safety threshold and get injured when viewing animals too closely, or trying to obtain an envious wildlife selfie. **Just remember:** Every one of the park's 67 species of mammals can outrun a human.

5. Determine your families physical capabilities and then apply the **Ranger Pete App's Day Hikes** feature to locate “family-friendly” treks. Each entry lists the hike's distance, a brief description, and a color-coded rating system: **EASY, MODERATE** or **HARD**. Start with an easy hike and try not to bite off more trail than you can chew. Speaking of chew, be “smarter than the average bear” and **carry a can of bear spray on every hike.**

6. Enjoy the journey, not only the destination. Exploring Yellowstone is a sensory overload. So while hiking, stop regularly to relish the sights and sounds, but also to allow those, young and old, to catch their breath. Even the “easy” hikes can test a person’s leg and lung endurance. In addition, **“everyone” needs to carry water and snacks.** Notice I said “everyone.” Heaven forbid anyone ventures off-course and gets lost, but if it happens, they will have some essentials. Last, but not least, have a family member pack a handful of **basic medical necessities**, such as band-aids for scratches, moleskin for blisters, ointment for bug bites, sunscreen and lip balm.

7. Sadly, the average visit to Yellowstone is a day and a half, with that said, **focus on a quality park experience, not on quantity.** Don’t make an ill-advised attempt to “see it all” in one day. Avoid turning your family vacation into a car-trapped, mad dash from one major site to another. Take advantage of the **Ranger Pete® Check-off Itinerary** to astutely explore the park in sections. Be assured, your kids will enjoy more “in the woods” time verses “in the car” time. If possible, when planning your trip, and the budget allows, schedule a minimum of 3-5 touring days, if not, arrange a return visit!

8. Take advantage of seasonal Ranger talks or sectional tours. Yellowstone’s Park Rangers deliver educational historic walking tours, descriptive hiking trail talks and campground amphitheater programs throughout the park. All are highly informative, and offer kids the opportunity to meet park officials, and ask those inquisitive questions that parents can’t answer. **Inquire at any Visitor Center**, or consult the park newspaper, for times and locations. In addition, Yellowstone’s crown jewel, the Old Faithful Inn, has a tour. A guide, dressed in turn-of-the-century attire, conducts the free and enlightening, 45-minute walking tour. Tour times are posted near the hotel lobby’s fireplace and require no reservations.

9. Giddy-Up at the Roosevelt Lodge. Families can step back in time by traveling via covered wagon (30-45-minute), or horseback (1-2 hours), into Yellowstone’s Pleasant Valley for Roosevelt Lodge’s crowd-pleasing, **western-style, nightly cookout.** Parents appreciate the valley’s solitude, while the kids survey the hillsides for wildlife. Later, the dinner bell rings, and everyone indulges on a Texas-size feast. Reservations are required, and limited.

Not hungry, and just want to horse around, the park offers **1-2 hours guided horse tours** near the Roosevelt and Canyon communities. For the horse enthusiasts, Yellowstone permits private, licensed out-

fitters to operate guided trail rides inside the park. The outings range from day trips to overnight back-country adventures.

10. Want more fun in Yellowstone? Simply add water. Did you know visitors can utilize the park’s waterways to **soak, swim, fish or boat?** It’s true, the park is not comprised of merely boardwalks and hiking trails, as the park services and concessionaires offer numerous, family-fun, water adventures. Start by soaking in the thermal run-off in Mammoth’s Boiling Springs. Dip your toes, or take a plunge, in Firehole Canyon’s sanctioned swimming section. Purchase a fishing license and fly-fish, with or without a guide, in one of Yellowstone’s rivers, lakes or streams. Rent a kayak, or a fishing boat at the lake’s Bay Bridge Marina. While at the marina, board the “Lake Queen” for a 1-hour “Scenicruise” and history excursion on Lake Yellowstone. And finally, go off the “deep end” and book a whitewater rafting trip in Gardiner, MT or Jackson Hole, WY. Wow, with all these water activities, it may be wise to pack some towel!

11. Investigate the park’s outside communities. All of Yellowstone’s border towns, **Gardiner, MT** (North Gate), **West Yellowstone, MT** (West Gate) and **Cooke City, MT** (Northeast Gate) “bear-hug” the park’s boundary line, and exists, as well as survive, on park tourism. These former whistle-stops all have their rustic charm, complete with a variety of hotels, eateries and tourist outlets.

Gardiner, MT, which is divided by the Yellowstone River, is home to the iconic **Roosevelt Arch**, the park’s historic treasures at the **Heritage Research Center** and the educational non-profit foundation headquarters of **Yellowstone Forever.** A quick peek of **Gardiner’s Chamber of Commerce** website reveals a variety of local activities: fishing, horseback riding, tour guides, whitewater rafting, winter guides and zip-lining.

West Yellowstone, MT is a landlocked island surrounded by a national park and three national forests. The town, which is centrally located on Yellowstone’s western border, houses the **Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center** and **The Museum of the Yellowstone**, and due to it’s whereabouts, this compact, tourist-driven town has become Yellowstone’s busiest gateway. In fact, “West,” as the locals call it, is a year-round, revolving door that encompasses 40% of Yellowstone’s yearly visitation. During the summer the local activities include a rodeo, fly-fishing, camping, hiking, horseback riding and zip-lining, while the winter month’s offer snowcoach tours,

snowmobiling and cross-country skiing. In addition, and unknown to many, West Yellowstone contains a commercial airport which handles a limited lineup of summer flights from Delta and United Airlines.

Compared to the other border towns, **Cooke City, MT** looks like the runt of the litter with it's hundred-plus, year-round residents. However, don't let its size fool you because after the first snowfall, Cooke City transforms into a winter powerhouse that Jack Frost would envy. This remote, northeast township offers an array of "snow"-related adventures, such as backcountry snow skiing, cross-country snow skiing, ice climbing, ice fishing, snowboarding, snowshoeing and snowmobiling. Meanwhile, Cooke's summertime line-up is a heavy-hitter with nearby ATV riding, camping, hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking. Another perk, besides its convenience to Yellowstone's Lamar Valley for wolf-watching, are the two breathtaking entryways to Cooke City, the scenic **Chief Joseph Highway** and the **Beartooth Highway**, which has been hailed as the *"most beautiful highway in America."*

Although not considered border towns, **Cody, WY** (East Gate) and **Jackson Hole, WY** (South Gate) are gatekeepers to the park. Both cities have airports, ample shops, restaurants, hotels and tourist activities. However, due to their distance to Yellowstone, they should be recognized as travel-stops, or vacation destinations, and not used as daily-commute, base camps. For reference, Cody, WY is situated about 54-miles from Yellowstone's East Entrance, while Jackson Hole, WY is located about 57-miles from Yellowstone's South Entrance.

Founded in 1896, **Cody, WY** was the hometown of Buffalo Bill Cody. Today, the area is marketed as a communal township verses a city and comprised of Cody, Powell and Meeteetse, as well as the valley east of Yellowstone National Park. Travelers relish Cody's 12-month event's calendar, and western-flavored broad streets that overflow with annual festivals and history rich museums, including the famous **Buffalo Bill Center of the West**. In addition, Cody boasts of "no shortage of outdoor fun and adventure" where visitors can book a variety of day tours, ride horses, rope cattle, or enjoy the serenity of a guest ranch campfire.

Last, but definitely not least, is the thriving tourist town of **Jackson Hole, WY** with it's cultural arts center, acclaimed restaurants, high-end shops, outdoor activities, abundant wildlife, and of course, **Grand Teton National Park**. The Tetons are the region's focal point and inspire endless outdoor pursuits, such as biking, golfing, hiking, rock climbing, pa-

ra-sailing, whitewater rafting and wildlife viewing. Meanwhile, the **Snow King Mountain Lodge**, located downtown, has recently transformed itself into a revolving, year-round, family-fun adventure land with rope courses, zip-lines, a mountain coaster and snow skiing. *"But wait, there's more!"* (Stated like the last seconds of an infomercial). Cold weather doesn't end Jackson's tourist season, in fact, snow merely shifts the outdoor mindset to downhill snow skiing, cross-country skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling and the **National Elk Refuge Sleigh Ride**. A century-long, memorable adventure in which participants of all ages ride a guided, horse-drawn sleigh through the National Elk Refuge and witness, close-at-hand, thousands of majestic elk. Honestly, in Jackson Hole, your money will run out way before the fun does! **Side Note:** 12-miles northwest of Jackson is **Teton Village**, a trendy, snow resort community that has become Wyoming's largest and most popular ski area.

7. Don't feed the bears, but remember to feed your family. I am a proponent of saving money by purchasing snacks outside the park prior to entry, eating-on-the-go, and splurging on one good, sit-down meal in the late afternoon or evening. However, that frugal philosophy may not work well when touring Yellowstone with young children. With that being said, beside sporadic vending machines, gas station snacks or the general store's mini-marts, Yellowstone offers a variety of food options in each village; Canyon, Grant, Lake, Mammoth, Old Faithful and Roosevelt. The **Ranger Pete App Food and Beverage** feature can help sort out your dining desires with a list of inside the park eateries, menus and prices. **On a tight schedule?** Try eating during off-hours as the park's food establishments can get overwhelmed by peak summer crowds, holiday weekend travelers or unexpected tour buses.

Each of the park's **"Villages"** tend to have similar food choices: a general store, a deli or diner, and a dining room. While the fast food menus are comparable, the dining rooms vary slightly as each sectional chef features a sprinkling of signature dishes. Obviously, dining rooms require patience with greater crowds, extra food prepping time and staffing shortages. Furthermore, once the sun goes down, dinner guests are in no hurry to vacate, as they eat slowly, raise a glass and socialize. Food for though, practically all of the park's restaurants are first-come, first-serve, however dinner reservations are available at the **Old Faithful Inn Dining Room** and the **Lake Hotel Dining Room** with corresponding hotel bookings, or up to one-month in advanced for non-guests.

Fast-food may be the best solution if the dining rooms don't suit your family's taste buds or budget. Kids will feel right at home at the no frills Old Faithful **Geyser Grill** and Mammoth's **Terrace Grill**. On the other hand, for a "twist," try out one of the pop-

ular **general store's 50's style diners** complete with continuous counter tops and "swiveling" bar stools. The food is simple, but quick, and youngsters will enjoy "hanging-out" and watching the high-paced service unfold in front of their eyes.

Ranger Pete's® Additional **CHILDISH WISDOM**

1. Before your trip watch a **Yellowstone DVD** or **television special** to amp up the pre-vacation excitement.

2. Purchase a membership to **Yellowstone Forever (YF)**, the official, non-profit partner of Yellowstone National Park. For a minimum donation members receive seasonal lodging discounts, special educational program discounts, and a **15% discount on merchandise** at YF Park Stores, the YF on-line store, Yellowstone National Park Lodges gift shop, and Yellowstone General Stores. It's a no brainer because purchasing a few park souvenirs will pay for the membership. Visit www.yellowstone.org for details.

3. To heighten your Yellowstone adventure, try your luck with the **Ranger Pete® Yellowstone Trivia**, before, during or after your visit.

4. Acquire a **set of binoculars** for each child to spot, or safely view, the park's wildlife. Better yet, allow

the use of an inexpensive **digital camera or video** for children to document their trip. Later, let them share the pictorial log with family and friends.

5. Count the number of descending stairs on **Uncle Tom's Trail** located on the canyon's south rim.

6. Pick a **favorite geyser or thermal feature**. Favorite **waterfall, hike**, etc... Explain why?

7. Count all the buffalo in a **Bison Jam**.

8. See how many of the park's **67 mammals** you can spot during your travels.

9. Keep a list of all the **state license plates** you see inside the park or while on your road-trip.

10. Before you leave **Purchase a postcard** to send to a family member. Mail the card before leaving the park so it will be postmarked "YELLOWSTONE."

RP NOTE: A **complimentary postcard** is in each of the park's hotel rooms stashed in the guest services booklet.

Additional children activity ideas are located on page 12 of the **Ranger Pete® CHECK-OFF ITINERARY**.

Ranger Pete's® Favorite Yellowstone & Teton **PLACES TO EAT**

In my opinion, the **Lake Hotel Dining Room**, offers the best dining experience in Yellowstone. The food and the hotel's elegance, combined with a panoramic Lake Yellowstone sunset are unmatched within the park. Meanwhile, the **Old Faithful Inn Dining Room** gets bonus points for being located inside the historic **Old Faithful Inn**. Merely walking through the inn's spacious log lobby is a visual appetizer before

any mealtime. Guests can either order from the standard menu or select the crowd-moving, all-you-can-eat buffet, which is not elaborate, but tasty. To eliminate disappointment, patrons need to survey the unchanging, nightly selections before ordering the buffet.

Located south of Yellowstone in Moran, WY is **Jackson Lake Lodge**. Even if you are not planning to spend the night, stop,

use the restrooms and enjoy the patio overlook. While there, if your stomach starts to rumble, you are in luck as there are three diverse dining options within Jackson Lake Lodge. One more reason to partake are the limited food and bathrooms along the road to Yellowstone's Grant Village or Jackson Hole, WY. Either way, north or south, it's about an hour of travel time, but the southward highway has great

mountainous scenery. First, **Jackson Lake Lodge's Pioneer Grill** is a throwback, 1950's style fountain grill with one of the longest continuous counter tops in the United States. This unique diner is fun for kids and offers a varied, less expensive menu than the main dining room or the lounge. The informal atmosphere and barstool seating are a great way to meet other tourists and inquire about their park adventures. The dress code is casual, but the major drawback is the diner offers no view of the Tetons. On the other hand, for a fun, **Ranger Pete®** approved snack, or dessert, try the grill's **Rice Krispy Treats** in the shape of the Tetons with the mountain peaks dipped in chocolate. Second, **Jackson Lake Lodge's Mural Room**, or main dining room, offers gracious, white table cloth dining with a price tag, but the floor-to-ceiling **mountain view windows** are the main course and makes the dining experience special. To no surprise, sunset window seats are coveted and make dinner reservations a serious recommendation (307-543-3463). In addition, since you are paying for the breathtaking view, dine while it's light outside to reap the full benefits. The Mural Room is an upscale establishment and hotel guests tend to dress nicer, but its not required. On the other-hand, children are welcome, but parents may want to factor the cost-to-appreciation ratio. Finally, Jackson Lake Lodge's third food option is **The Blue Heron Lounge**. The lounge, which offers indoor and outdoor seating, is an adult watering hole that commands an extensive beverage list, while the food choices are limited to snacks and finger foods. Although not as

formal as the main dining room, the view is just as majestic. On nice afternoons or evenings, sit outside on the overlook porch and enjoy conversation, people-watching or the amazing scenery. Obviously, the bar room is not kid-friendly, but families can utilize the outdoor patio tables.

Downtown **Jackson Hole** offers dozens of great places to eat, however if you want a local favorite with western charm and a wide variety of local meats, such as buffalo or elk, try the renowned **Gun Barrel Steak & Game House**. Doors open at 5:30 pm every evening to a waiting line of hungry folks. Reservation are heavily suggested and plan accordingly for downtown traffic during peak tourist seasons and rush hour. For breakfast try the family-friendly **Cafe Genevieve**. Conveniently located a half-block east of Jackson's Town Square, this quaint, log cabin cafe has been serving "Inspired Home Cooked Classics" since 2010. Genevieve specializes in homemade dishes for breakfast and lunch and is open daily from 8 am until 3 pm. For starters **Ranger Pete®** recommends a side order of **Pig Candy**, the cafe's signature sugar and spice coated bacon.

In West Yellowstone, MT, **The Slippery Otter** gets the **Ranger Award** for best family lunch and dinner restaurant. Located at 139 N. Canyon Street, the "Otter" features a wide range of food choices with a focus on specialty burgers and pizzas. Prices are reasonable and parents with young children will appreciate their practical "Pup" menu.

The vote for **Ranger Pete's®** "Best Family-Style Breakfast" is a toss-

up between the Running Bear Pancake House in West Yellowstone, MT and the Yellowstone Grill in Gardiner, MT. **Running Bear Pancake House** is a local mom and pop business that started in 1965, and although the ownership has changed over the years, every "pancake proprietor" has taken great pride in serving delicious pancakes and homemade baked treats in a friendly environment. Meanwhile, in Gardiner, MT, the **Yellowstone Grill** is a "rise and shine" favorite. Opened 2013, the family owned "Grill" is a mis-matched decor eatery that features an array of tasty, and affordable, breakfast and dinner dishes. Located on Gardiner's main thoroughfare, Highway 89, the Yellowstone Grill has quickly become a favorite of the locals and returning park guest. Seasonally open for breakfast 7 am-11 am, Tuesday-Sunday and for dinner 5 pm-8 pm, Thursday-Sunday, the Grill also offers a simple children's menu. For those with a hearty appetite, try the **Tower of Pancakes**.

A final Ranger Pete® Food for Thought: Young or old, there's always room for **Huckleberry Ice Cream**.

Final Piece of Advise: **MAKE IT A TRIP OF A LIFETIME**

by downloading the
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